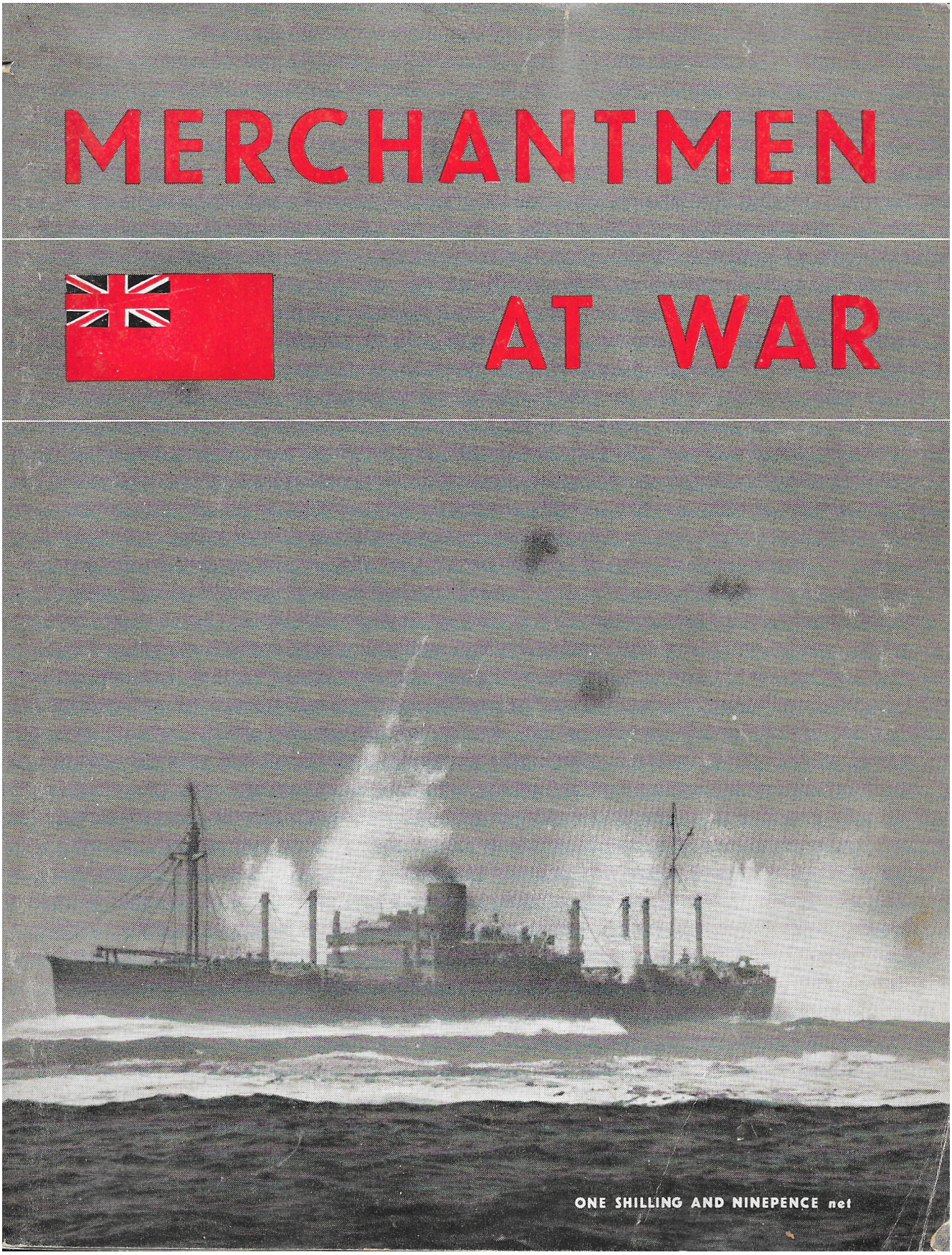
MERCHANTMEN AT WAR

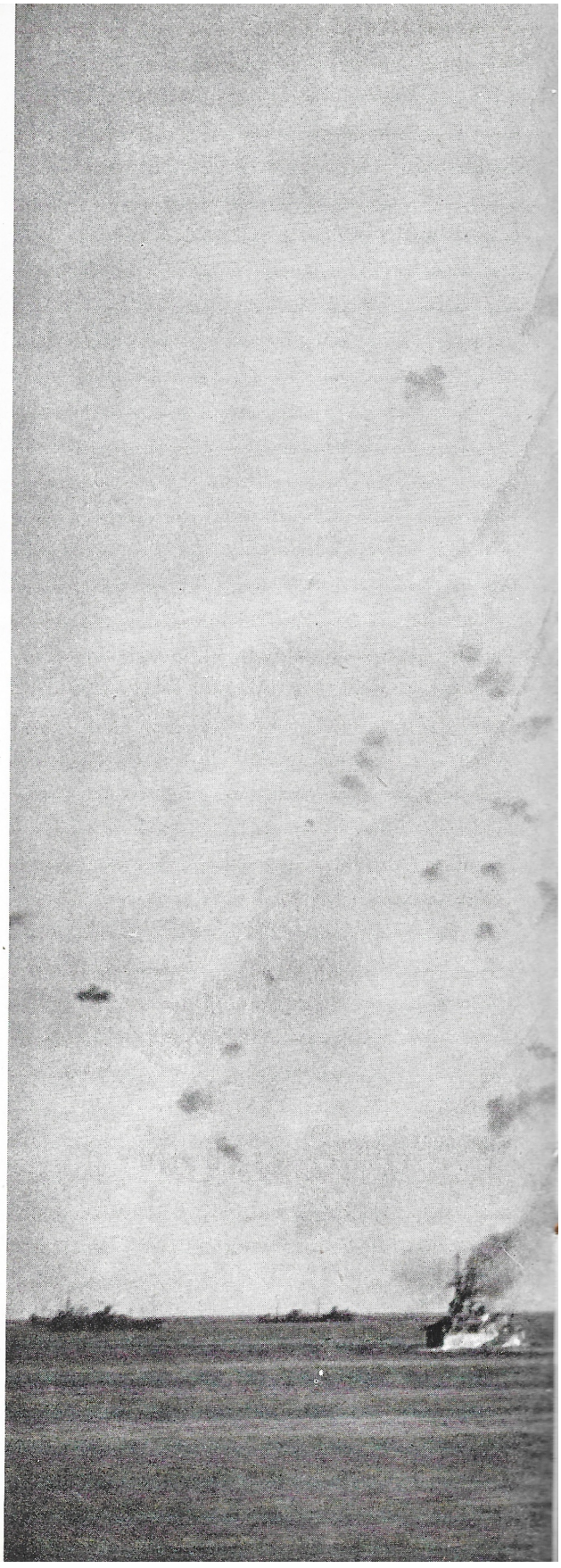


ONE SHILLING AND NINEPENCE *net*

9. Ships in the Thick of it

EVERY British merchant ship has been busily engaged in the war from the day it began—her owners and the British Government have seen to that—but there are some that by nature of circumstance, or by good fortune in avoiding damage, have been in the thick of it more than others.

The purpose here is to record without elaboration the war activities of two or three vessels which can stand as examples of what many other ships have achieved. The *City of Hereford*, for instance, voyaged on the eve of war to Gibraltar and South Africa. After returning to this country she sailed to the United States. From Montreal she made several voyages to Calcutta, proceeding next to Suez where she narrowly escaped being blown up in the canal—the preceding ship hit a mine and lost her stern in the explosion. She now sailed to India and returned thence to Britain to take part in a Malta convoy. In February 1942 she was in the East Indies. After that she attempted to reach Malta from Suez and, on the convoy being withdrawn, sailed to America to bring home cargo " topped off " (in her Master's phrase) " by bombers and explosives". The ship endured many attacks in various seas by German, Italian and Japanese aircraft, and U-boats one of which in the Atlantic she nearly rammed. In Batavia the Master notes : " We took H.M.S. *Rover* (a damaged submarine from Singapore) in tow, and went off to sea in a large convoy for Indian ports". One of her Malta convoys was very lively. A pack of some 20 E-boats delivered at night a rush attack from both sides. Many were sunk by our combined salvos, and our ships sailed into port to the music of the flagship's band playing "A life on the ocean wave ".



The liner *Destro* (Captain Stanley Johnson, O.B.E.) was first attacked in the Ægean Sea in June 1940 ; she continued to work in the Eastern Mediterranean till March 1942. During that time she was attacked by enemy bombers or dive-bombers no fewer than a hundred times, and it may be far more. She suffered near misses on 20 or 30 occasions. Her guns hit an enemy bomber in Salamis Straits outside Piræus harbour, and probably accounted for two more in Tobruk harbour in 1942. In Suda Bay she was continuously bombed for a fortnight ; in Tobruk she endured during one stay 68 bombing raids. At least six times she suffered damage ; once, fires were started on board ; and in Tobruk harbour three of the crew were killed and six wounded. She was attacked by a submarine in convoy and fired at the U-boat ; and she was shelled, by mistake, by our own shore batteries in Crete.

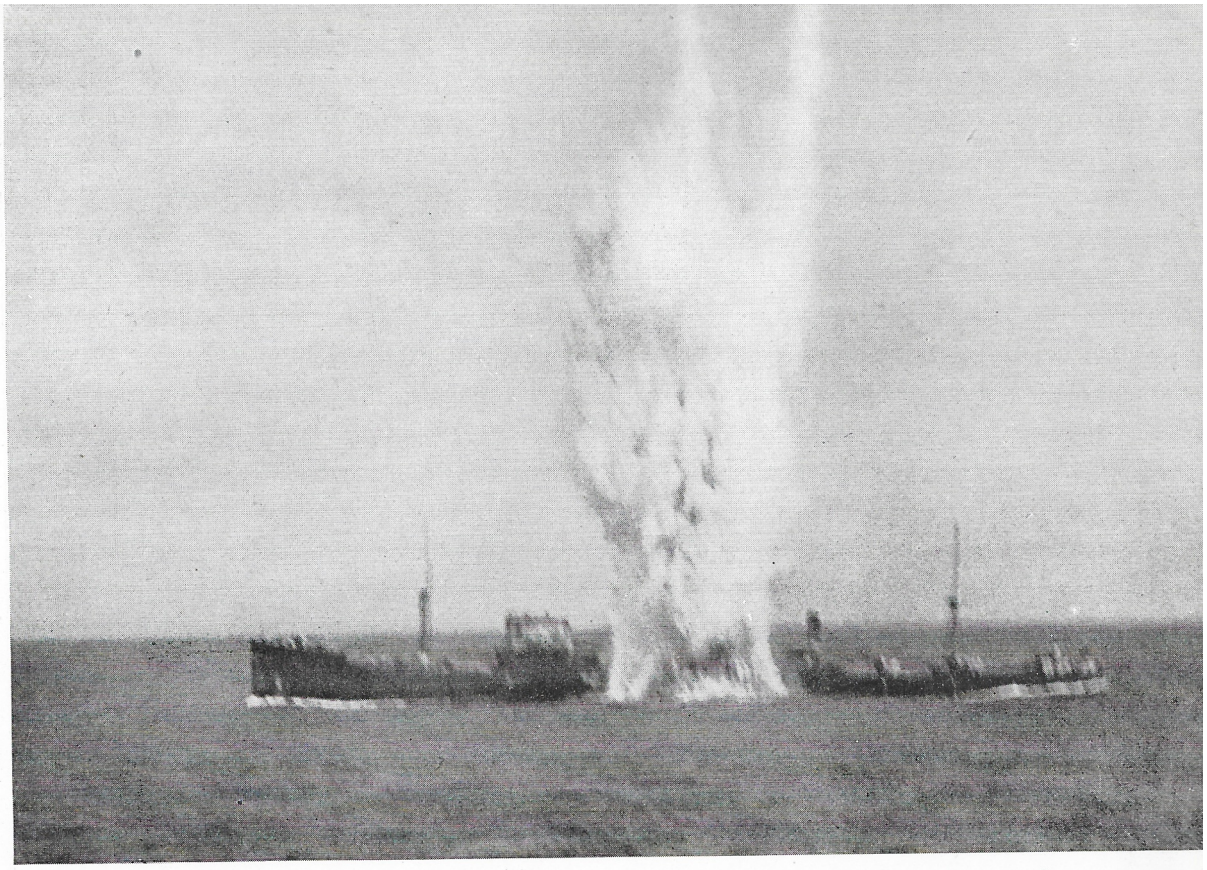
The m.v. *Coxwold* (Captain R. Pratt, M.B.E.), a small ship of 1,600 tons, is a coaster, never meant for the deep-sea trade, but she has been adventuring afar and doing dangerous work carrying cased petrol for the Forces since a fortnight after war broke out. She was at Narvik when the situation was at its gravest and she was busy in the North Africa expedition as far east as Bougie and Bone. She was at one time so far forward along the coast that neither the Army nor R.A.F. had arrived, and the port was in charge of a naval officer whose ship had been sunk. Between Narvik and North Africa, she ran to Iceland at one time and Gibraltar at another.

The *Coxwold* has been in the North Atlantic in the depths of winter, had ships sunk round her and gone to their help, taking off on one occasion the Commodore and his staff. The latter, after being aboard her 15 days, wrote : " I thought she was a wonderful little ship and her behaviour in very bad weather remarkable. I have never known a captain who stuck to the bridge as hers did. I gave up trying to get him to go down and rest".

The tramp ship *Dan-y-Bryn* (Captain Hugh MacLeod, D.S.C.,) had war adventures before her voyages to Murmansk and Archangel. She shot part of the wing from a Heinkel in the North Sea early in 1940, fought a six-hour battle with a submarine in the Caribbean the same year, and scored hits on a surface raider on the way home from Vancouver. During her voyages to Russia she shot down 18 enemy aircraft.

Another tramp ship, the *Briarwood* (Captain W. H. Lawrence, C.B.E.), sailed in one or two of the same convoys to Russia as the *Dan-y-Bryn* and equally distinguished herself in fights with the enemy elsewhere, shooting down two aircraft in the English Channel as early as May 1940, and a third while sailing alone from Gibraltar to New York in August 1941. In convoys to Russia she shot down two more Ju. 88s.

The *Briarwood's* war service began with transporting men and stores of the first British Expeditionary Force to St. Nazaire, but in November 1939 she was transferred to the Narvik trade to carry iron ore. She was one of the last ships to leave that port before the enemy arrived. She was now degaussed and put on the North Atlantic trade, where she sailed in the famous *Jervis Bay* convoy. She made four further voyages in the North Atlantic trade, and saw ships torpedoed. Thereafter she sailed with coal for Portugal and was again attacked both by bomber and U-boat, but not damaged. She now sailed to New York alone, returned to Britain and was fitted for the North Russian convoy—this in October 1941. On leaving Iceland for Russia during a strong gale and in darkness she damaged her bow on an iceberg ; an Admiralty diver plugged the outside and the crew filled the bows with cement and two weeks later she set off once more. In Russia two ice-breakers were needed to get her into port. Two days later two ice-breaking tugs broke the *Briarwood* out of harbour again, but it took 16 days to move 70 miles. No cargo or ballast being available, she drew but 3 feet 6 inches



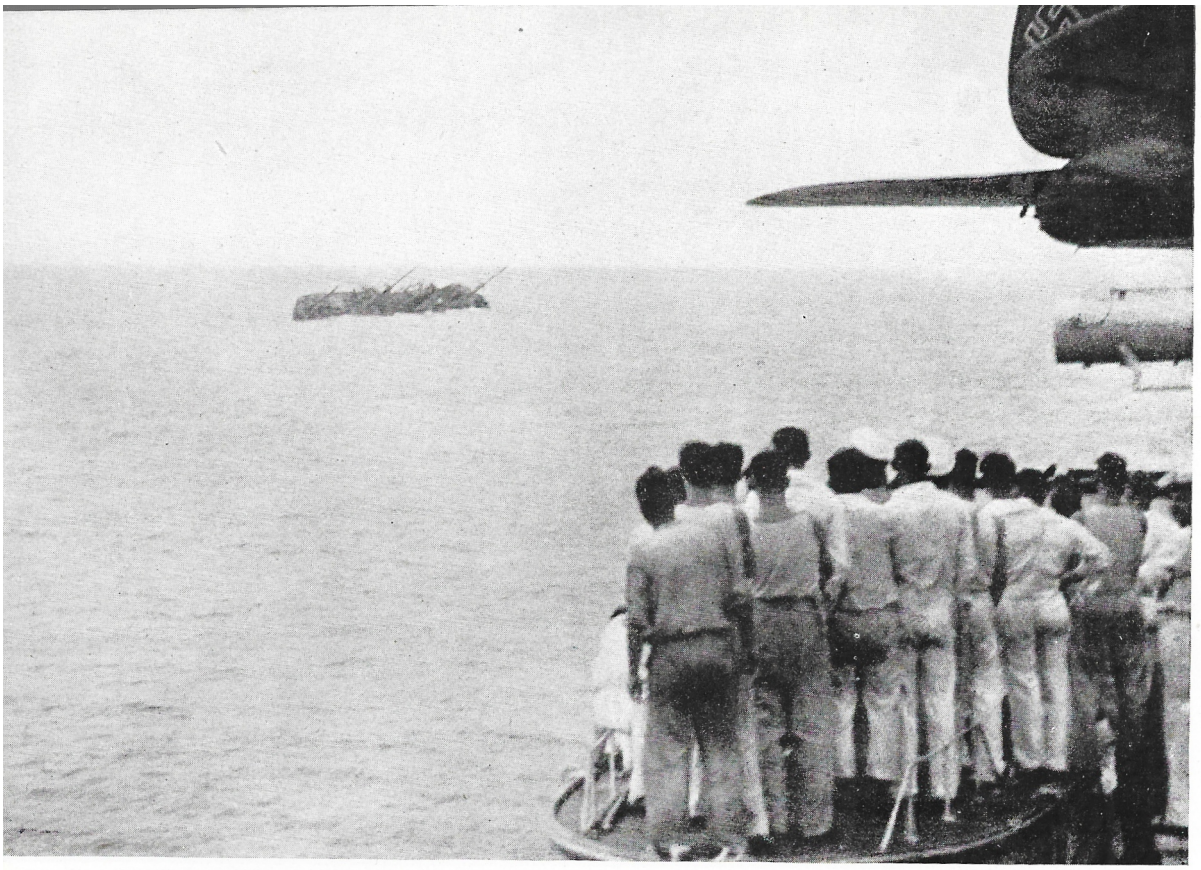
STRUCK TO THE HEART. She has been found alone in the South Atlantic by a surface raider. There is only one end for her. A torpedo, fired from close range, breaks her in two.

forward and 14 feet 6 inches aft, and in order to keep the propeller below the ice her after-hold was flooded with water, which promptly froze in. She had to be dry-docked and repaired before her next Arctic voyage could begin.

In March 1942 she sailed for Russia again, her Master acting this time as Vice-Commodore ; in heavy attacks from the air she shot down an aircraft both on the voyage out and when in Murmansk, the second aircraft crashing on the docks alongside. This convoy completed, the *Briarwood* returned to the North Atlantic to bring from America a cargo of ore. On her return Captain Lawrence was given special Admiralty duties, and Captain J. Shaw took her in convoy on her next voyage to Murmansk, which she reached on Christmas Day, 1942, without incident. The port was raided and U-boat attacks were met on the homeward voyage but the *Briarwood's* good luck held.

Two actions against enemy raiders in Eastern waters may be mentioned here. At dusk on August 20th, 1940, the *Turakina* (Captain J. B. Laird) was attacked by a surface raider in the Tasman Sea. The *Turakina* had only one gun against a well-armed and faster ship, but she fought for two and a half hours before going down with colours flying. Before leaving Sydney, Captain J. B. Laird had said that, if attacked, he would fight to the end. He was killed during the action.

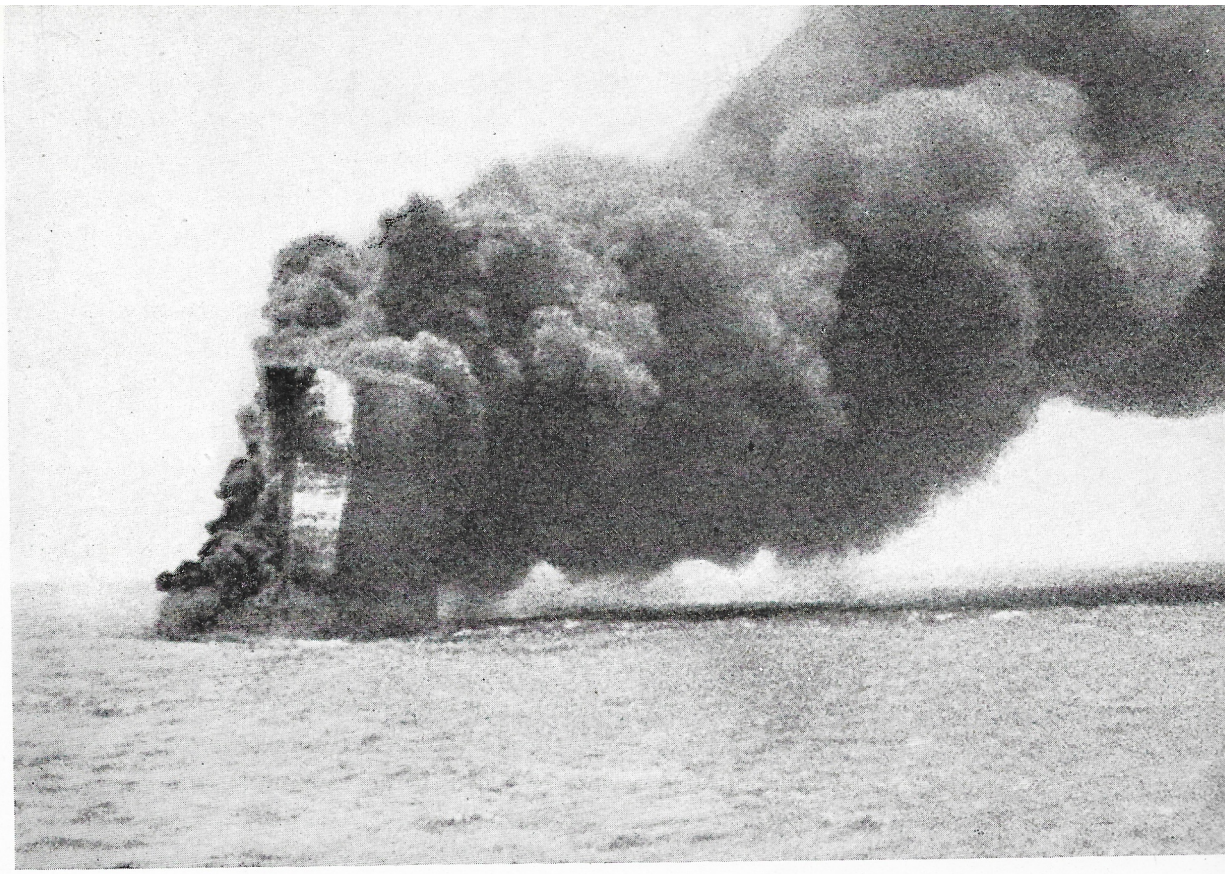
The second action was fought by the m.v. *Ondina* (Captain William Horsman), a tanker of 14,000 tons, in support of H.M.I.S. *Bengal* against two Japanese raiders on November



NOT A CHANCE. In a wide sea empty of help, a British merchant ship goes down before the guns of the battleship *Graf Spee*. Casually the German crew stand watching.

11th, 1942. A few minutes after first sighting the enemy, the *Bengal* ordered the *Ondina* to turn away and proceed independently, giving her a rendezvous for 24 hours later. The *Bengal* turned to port to intercept and challenge. She received a broadside in reply from Raider No. 1, which was rapidly closing range, while Raider No. 2 remained in the background. *Bengal* opened fire but her shots fell short. Five minutes later, the *Ondina* now at 8,000 yards distance, and determined to do what she could, entered the fight with her 4-inch gun, but her shells fell over the target. She thereupon dropped her range by 400 yards and her fifth shot scored a hit, causing a violent explosion, which threw into the air the debris of two aircraft housed on the raider's after-deck and, in addition, causing fire to break out. Raider No. 1, thus stung, divided her fire henceforward between the *Bengal* and the *Ondina*, and soon shot away the *Ondina's* topmast and main aerial. The *Bengal* was, of course, still firing. *Ondina's* shooting became increasingly good. She claimed five hits in swift succession on the bridge, midship superstructure and the stern, and now a violent explosion occurred in the Japanese ship, blowing off the stern completely, and she began to sink; her bows lifted in the air and the ship became almost vertical.

Raider No. 2 now became prominent in the fight, and eventually shifted her fire from the *Bengal* to the *Ondina*. The *Ondina's* ammunition was running short and she used her remaining 12 shots without effect. Being now without ammunition and unable to fight, Captain Horsman hoisted two white



FIRE ON THE WATER. Another ship, upending, and with only her bows in sight, is sucked down through the blazing pool of her own oil into the depths below.

sheets. This did not stop the Japanese from continuing to fire and almost at once shrapnel burst on the bridge and killed Captain Horsman, who had just given the order to abandon ship. Raider No. 2 approached nearer still, firing, and when about 400 yards distant she launched two torpedoes, which struck the *Ondina's* after-tanks. She took a list of 30 degrees to starboard and must have seemed doomed. The Japanese now machine-gunned men in the boats and rafts, killing the chief engineer and two Chinese, and before departing fired a further torpedo and two shells into the *Ondina.*

But the *Ondina* still floated and the second Officer, Mr. Bartele Bakker, who had controlled the 4-inch gun in the fight, accompanied by the third engineer, two A.B.s and three Chinese, returned to the ship to see what could be done to save her. A fire was quenched, the port tanks were flooded to put her in trim, steam was raised, the remainder of the crew taken back on board and six days later she reached Fremantle, 1,400 miles away. Among those who had distinguished themselves was Ah Kong, the Chinese quartermaster, who had been at the wheel during the action. He was awarded the D.S.M.

A large number of actions against submarines have been fought by merchant ships several of which have achieved success. As day broke on April 21st, 1941, Mr. A. Lidguard, chief officer of the tramp ship *Empire Storm,* sighted a suspicious craft on the port bow steering across from port to starboard. Captain G. W. Stephenson, O.B.E., D.S.C., going to the bridge, made her out to be a

"ONE SHIP OF THE CONVOY WAS LOST". Torpedoed at night in the North Atlantic, a Norwegian ship, laden with ammunition, blows up. Top left, fire spurts out the moment the torpedo strikes her. Four minutes later it was growing with the steady persistence of sunrise. In another eight minutes, ship and cargo were destroyed in one shattering explosion.

U-boat 500 feet off and travelling at a good speed. The alarm signal was rung and he tried to ram the U-boat, but she was too fast. Fire was then opened with tracer from the bridge machine-gun and the bullets were seen to bounce off her deck. This gave direction for the 4-inch gun, which was now laid on her. With the first shell the U-boat was struck at the base of the conning tower. The range was no more than 600 yards. She at once dived, but within a few minutes surfaced and appeared to be stopped. More shells were fired and she was hit again, this time at the after-end of the conning tower. The U-boat began to sink by the stern, and 40 minutes after she was first seen her bows rose out of the water and she rolled and vanished at an angle of 50 degrees. Six rounds of 4-inch had been fired and one of 12-pounder. The U-boat did not fire a shot. Two escort ships now reached the scene and dropped depth charges.

Another successful action was fought, beginning at 12.35 p.m. on October 19th, 1939, by the tramp ship *Rockpool* (Captain W. H. Harland, O.B.E.). A U-boat opened fire on the ship's starboard beam, and the helm was at once put over hard a-port. All hands went to action stations and a radio message was dispatched. The submarine fired four or five rounds in quick succession but did not score a hit. The *Rockpool* now brought her gun to bear and opened fire. After her third shot the U-boat submerged. She was not down long. After only a few minutes she surfaced again, and as soon as her periscope was showing the *Rockpool* began to shell her again. A duel of fire now began, shrapnel from the submarine bursting just clear of the merchant ship's bows, and spray from the *Rockpool's* rounds bursting over the U-boat's conning tower. Once or twice she submerged, only to surface and continue shooting. The battle went on for an hour and ten minutes before the *Rockpool* eluded her. But that was not the end. The *Rockpool* had so damaged the U-boat that she could not submerge for long, and a destroyer, which came in answer to the merchantman's signal, sank the U-boat and captured the survivors.

Not all our merchantmen carried a gun in the autumn of 1939. The *Clan MacBean* (Captain E. Coultas, O.B.E.), a cargo-liner,

STORM CAN DESTROY AS SAVAGELY AS A TORPEDO, ROCK CAN REND AS SURELY AS A MINE

had no defence except seamanship when she was attacked. She was sailing independently, since her convoy had been scattered the day before. The U-boat fired a torpedo from three-quarters of a mile away, two points on the port bow. The merchantman's chief officer put the helm hard over and the torpedo narrowly missed the bow. The U-boat now surfaced and tried to reach a position on the merchantman's quarter, but the *Clan MacBean* evaded this and kept her ahead, bringing the U-boat within danger of being rammed. The merchantman steamed to within 200 feet and, although the submarine opened fire with three rounds of shell, every shot missed : suddenly, sensing she was in danger of being rammed, she dived ; her gun crew were left in the water crying out loudly. The merchant ship passed right over the U-boat but she was already too deep to be rammed and was later seen astern picking up such of her men as she could.

In the following month the tramp ship *Hopestar* (Captain J.Steward, O.B.E.) engaged a submarine for six hours about 150 miles off Land's End. The fight began shortly before noon, in a heavy sea with a strong westerly wind. The first torpedo from the starboard quarter missed by five yards owing to helm being put hard a-port. The *Hopestar* now steered an irregular, zigzag course, and opened fire on the U-boat every time she was sighted. All possible speed was made, but two hours after the first torpedo was sighted a second was observed coming on the port bow, bucking on top of the waves ; it missed the ship's stern by only two yards. As a ruse the ship now hoisted a signal by flags saying to an imaginary warship : " Submarine attacking from the stern". An hour and a half after the second torpedo, a third was seen running from the port quarter; again it passed extremely near, a matter of two yards. The *Hopestar's* shells now burst very close to the submarine's conning tower, and she hurriedly submerged. This was the last seen of her ; dusk coming on, and a smoke screen made by dropped floats, enabled the merchantman to elude further attack.

Our little ships, or curious ships, have adventured so far across the sea to such unaccustomed places that those who met them might well have thought them lost or manned by men bereft of their senses.

A voyage of particular valiance was that of the *Al Garna*, a self-propelled steam-crane lighter which sailed from Port Glasgow to the Middle East, occupying 328 days on the way—rather longer than it took Vasco da Gama to sail in 1497 from Portugal round the Cape and discover India. But da Gama had no such particular problems as beset the *Al Garna*. It is unlikely, for example, that his vessel sailed with both fore and aft ends under water, as happened to the *Al Garna* whenever there was any size of sea, or that the discomfort below decks in bad weather was quite so great, for on the crane ship all vents had then to be closed to prevent flooding. Her preparation for the 12,000-mile journey needed much work. She was unwieldy and small and her freeboard very low. The sheerlegs had to be dismantled and additional space found for bunkers, stores and water. The midship section was made watertight, and a V-shaped breakwater 2 feet 6 inches high built forward. Heavy weather met with on the first stage of the voyage damaged both superstructure and breakwater and she had to go into dry dock before proceeding. When the voyage was half over, her Master wrote that the only incentive to carry on was pride of profession and knowing he had never yet failed in anything. Once more part of the superstructure was damaged by seas and the lagging on steam piping to winches washed away. Over the final stage, owing to bad coal, she had to be assisted by tow. But she reached her port, her crew nearly a year older than when they left Scotland.

Ferries and port tugs have made voyages as long in mileage if not in time, usually crossing 2,000 miles of open Atlantic before

reaching the West Coast on their way to more distant ports. Every one of them has reached her journey's end.

One of them was the *Empire Warlock*, a tug of 253 tons, sailed from the Clyde to Suez by Captain R. Geyton. The task was as new to him as the voyage was to the tug, for he is a Master of tankers, but they both did what was required. The *Empire Warlock* worked her passage, so to speak, for she took in tow from South Wales two French submarine chasers, towing them on separate lines. It was a co-operative effort, for during parts of the journey—when nearing Gibraltar or approaching Bathurst—the Frenchmen cast off and acted as escorts to the tug. In the Gambia river, the tug pulled off the *Zouave* (Captain W. H. Cambridge), which had gone ashore, and at Freetown in company with another tug she took a crane barge with a crane 85 feet high to Takoradi, a distance of 933 miles. She arrived at Walvis Bay pulling a lighter. The naval officer in charge remarked that Captain Geyton looked a very superior person to be in command of a tug, to which Captain Geyton replied : " Maybe, but this is a very superior tug". Five and a half months after starting he reached Suez.

These are a handful of the 10,000 small craft which the Sea Transport Department of the Ministry of War Transport has requisitioned or bought during the war for a variety of purposes, from the victualling of naval ships to the provision of water-borne sites for balloons. Others serve as minesweepers, fire floats and in many other capacities. When the threat of invasion was gravest, hundreds of small craft were moored at intervals on the Norfolk Broads and on our large reservoirs, and yet others patrolled Lake Windermere and like stretches of inland water.

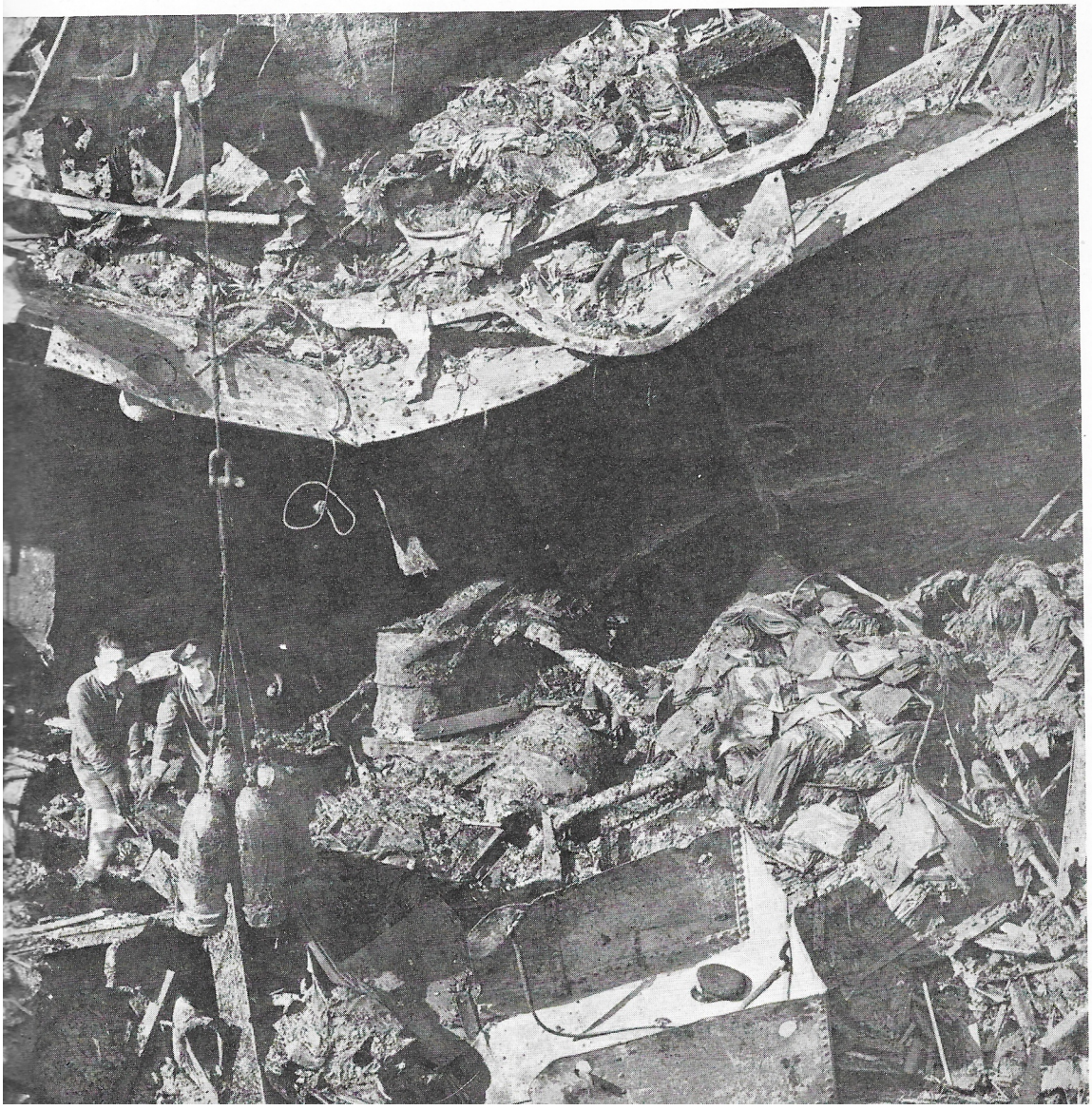
In these small craft scattered over the world 85 per cent. of the crews are still civilians. Their achievements in towing take their place in history. Slowly, through dangerous water assailed by wind and sea, they have tugged and persuaded the blunt and intractable halves of torpedoed ships.

Our hospital ships, of which we have had 55 in this war, are navigated, engineered and manned by the Merchant Navy. It is the merchant seamen's task to take these ships of mercy, with their sick and wounded, their doctors, nurses and other medical staffs and equipment, on their lawful occasions to and from the various battlefronts. They were at Dunkirk, Tobruk, Malta, Rangoon, Algiers, and every other storm centre ; and in most

of them they were shelled, bombed or machine-gunned.

Of the 55 ships, 39 belonged before the war to the British Mercantile Marine, among them passenger liners, cargo-passenger ships and vessels on railway service to the Channel Isles, Ireland and the Continent. Many ships' captains, officers and men who sailed them in peace, have continued to serve them during the war. The Royal Navy has its hospital ships attached to the fleets ; military hospital carriers more usually transport wounded from a battlefront to a base. Quite often wounded have been taken from theatres of war to hospitals in South Africa or Australia or New Zealand ; but from North Africa they have, of course, often been brought home. Not only does the Merchant Navy man the hospital ships, but ships' owners or managers are responsible

THIS WAS A SHIP. Lying in a British port, she was loading explosives for the Middle East. With 350 tons of bombs on board she was hit in a night raid, burned for nine hours and then blew up.



for feeding the patients in accordance with diets laid down, and for providing messing of medical staffs.

Nine hospital ships have been sunk by the enemy—the *Brighton* and *Maid of Kent* in Dieppe Harbour in May 1940, the *Paris* when sailing to Dunkirk in June 1940, the *Ramb IV* when taking 269 sick and wounded from Tobruk to Alexandria in May 1942, the *Centaur* off Australia in May 1943, the *Talamba* off Sicily in July 1943, the *Newfoundland* and the *St. David* off Naples in September 1943 and January 1944 respectively, and the *Amsterdam* off Normandy in August 1944. About 13 others have been damaged in enemy attacks; the *Llandovery Castle* has been damaged twice in five bombing attacks ; the *Somersetshire* has been torpedoed in addition to being bombed three times ; the *Isle of Guernsey* has been shelled by shore batteries, dive-bombed and torpedo-bombed ; the *St. Julien*, and the *St. Andrew* have all been shelled and bombed more than once. Others which have been hit are the *Leinster*, *Worthing*, *Dorsetshire*, *Dinard*, *Isle of Thanet*, *Aba*, *Vita* and the *Karapara*. All these vessels were, of course, flying the Red Cross flag and bearing the customary markings of hospital ships in accordance with the Geneva Convention. A hospital ship bombed and damaged in Tobruk was twice attacked when in tow shortly afterwards.

A note may be added, on the actual events when the *Ramb IV* was set on fire in the Mediterranean on May 10th, 1942. It comes from the chief engineer. " It was her ninth or tenth trip to Tobruk", he said. " We had already brought away about 3,000 casualties. On one occasion we loaded 300 wounded in 1 hour 55 minutes, which was, I think, a record. We did it by barges and by direct loading also. May 10th was a Sunday and we were all at breakfast when the air attack was made. The ship had her big awnings up bearing the Red Cross, in addition to the usual markings. One bomb struck B ward and caused a great fire. By the time it was extinguished nothing was left but white ashes ; even the iron bedsteads had been consumed. Just one tin hat lay there. We kept the ship's head to the wind to prevent the flames spreading. We didn't abandon the ship till midday—not till five of the six tanks had exploded. We estimated that about 180 of the wounded were burned to death."

Members of the Merchant Navy crews have been killed or wounded in these enemy attacks. An able seaman was wounded by machine-gun fire when climbing down a rope ladder to rescue an airman who had baled out.

The *Atlantis* may stand as one example of what a busy hospital ship has done. She has steamed 230,000 miles and carried over 20,000 wounded and sick. Early in 1940 she brought invalids from Alexandria to the United Kingdom ; her next voyages were between Britain and Norway, where she was bombed at anchor both off Skaanland and in Skellesvick Bay. In September 1940 she was again in the Middle East, and in 1941 was operating between the Middle East, South Africa and Bombay. The next year saw her making voyages between Suez, South Africa and Aden, returning to Britain in November 1942 with over 600 sick and wounded. Since then she has twice sailed to New York with American and Canadian invalids and thence to Durban, returning once more to Britain.

Other ships have done fine work but travelled less. The hospital carrier *Isle of Jersey*, for instance, a small ship of some 2,000 tons, has been in attendance on the Home Fleet, anchored most of her time but making occasional voyages to Aberdeen. Of high adventure she has seen little, of bad weather much, of monotony more than her share.

But when the Normandy landings occurred she sailed into the main stream of war. She was one of ten such hospital carriers used in the opening phase. Later there were twelve. The removal of wounded from the beaches was a task for which they were supremely

LAME DUCK. Smoking and crippled, she labours into the harbour mouth. Her steering is gone, she is down by the stern. The rescue tug will take her in tow and nurse her to the quayside.

suited. Not only did the Merchant Navy man them, but they manned also the water ambulances—a quartermaster and two A.B.s to each—which plied between shore and ship across two to seven miles of sea, a strip of water often under fire and at one period swept by a gale. Most of the hospital carriers had six of those ambulances and each ambulance took, as a rule, six wounded on stretchers and a handful of others sitting. Very many journeys had to be made.

Among the hospital carriers off Normandy were the *St. Julien* and the *Dinard* both of which were mined but not severely enough to be out of service for more than a few weeks. At a later stage the bigger hospital ships joined in the work.

10. Crash Landings

It was in November 1940 that the name of the *San Demetrio* was written firmly into the history of the Merchant Navy. Shelled and set ablaze by the German battleship *Deutschland* while sailing in the *Jervis Bay* convoy, the tanker was abandoned. But later on a handful of her crew under the command of Mr. A. G. N. Hawkins, second officer, and Mr. C. Pollard, chief engineer, adrift in a ship's boat, came across the burning vessel, reboarded her, got the engines going, and steering in the fashion known to seamen as " by guess and by God ", brought her to the Clyde. She is the best known of the lame