

Transport goes to War

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THE OFFICIAL STORY OF BRITISH TRANSPORT, 1939-1942

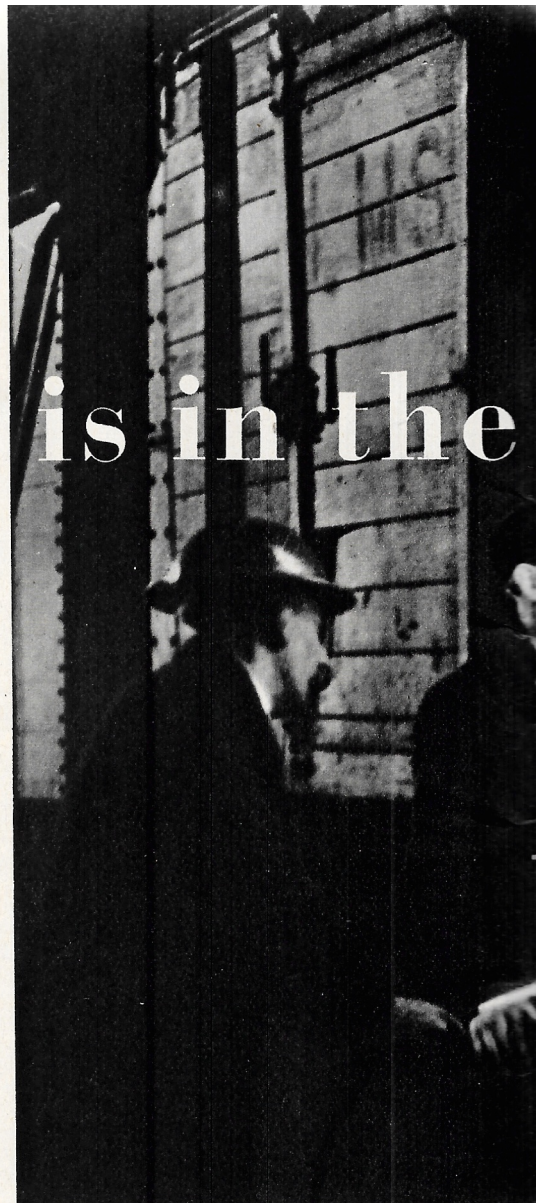
Transport is in the

CHAPTER ONE

IT was on Liverpool's bad night of the 3rd-4th May, 1941, the middle of the bad week. The moon was in its first quarter. The Luftwaffe must have heard that some interesting cargoes were in the Mersey at that time. On the railway down at Breck Road there is a signal-box, and the signal-man got his first tip that something unsavoury had been hit when he heard the familiar scream, and the next moment was blown off the top of the signal-box steps down into the embankment. An ammunition train which was standing in the sidings had been caught, and the contents were going off wagon by wagon.

Injured in the leg by his fall, the signal-man crawled up to the damaged signal-box. The glass had gone but the telephone looked sound. But the line was dead; it was down and out. So he limped outside to get help, and especially with the idea of having the people in the neighbouring houses warned and removed, before the full blast of the bombardment started. Meanwhile other volunteers had been called to go to the yard.

There were a shunter, a couple of goods guards, a driver and a fireman—a very representative and well-balanced team when you



study it. A young shunter used to chasing trucks, choosing the exact moment for his pole, adept and quick among the signal wires and points, with eyes at the back of his head for the sudden on-coming train, is by nature a man who likes a nip of excitement; there is a ready-for-anything reliability about guards, a touch of the jack-of-all-trades in them; drivers are precise and expert, trained to be unflurried; and if, as one suspects, there is



Battle

more temperament in firemen, it is of the go-anywhere, do-anything kind.

Up the siding, using the lines of wagons in the siding as a screen or a system of deep trenches, these men went in the darkness towards the exploding train. It was not a matter of single shells going off—some of the men say, anyway, that there were sea mines in the wagons—but truck loads at a time. Which wagon was going up next? Three other men,

working from another direction, met the party. One of the guards, as one would expect, took the lead. The driver and fireman brought an engine up, the guard began uncoupling the burning wagons as a push from the engine slackened the couplings—rather a nice shunting operation this—and the engine drew the wagons off.

The other guard went up to the damaged and empty signal-box to see what could be

done about the points, for the signal-man, as we have seen, was out on his own job. The guard had never set points in his life and the interlocking system is like a chess problem for those who do not understand it. He studied the diagram in the box and, at last, he hit upon the right combination. And so for the rest of the night the team worked, isolating the explosions, getting out whatever could be moved where the track was left. Bombs are bad enough, but this was like working in a barrage. They got 70 wagons of food-stuff safely out. In the morning, they saw they had been working on the edge of a crater, if you can call it that, 120 yards long. The official record begins with the narrative of one of the party, a model of understatement.

“Myself and the undermentioned therefore proceeded, with caution. . . .”

“I wish to report that on the morning of May 4th whilst on Home Guard duty the Goods Guard clerk came down to the lamp room” (where the engine and wagon lamps and the shunting lamps are stored) “and told us he had been informed that the ammunition train at Breck Road was on fire and asked for volunteers to try and save it. Myself and the undermentioned therefore proceeded, with caution. . . .”

So transport is in the battle. To the fighting man transport is not, indeed, the fighting arm and fist, but it is the blood circulating from the body into that fighting arm and fist. And if bringing down coal from Newcastle or sending the trucks of red ore through the Yorkshire junctions is not as exciting as a dog fight, there is something grave and momentous about this life-blood pumping more rapidly from the heart through the arteries and veins, as this country squares up to fight its enemies.

On 180,000 miles of British road, on 20,000 miles of railway track, on 2,000 miles of canal and on the waterfront of 50 principal ports, the circulation flows. In a war of workers

and technicians, transport is in action. Its strategy is not casual; it is planned. Planned at central and regional headquarters. Its hourly tactics are handled by the Harbour Boards, the 900 railway liaison officers with Government Departments and the Government road transport officers; in the noisy offices and loading bays of the road operators, in the Committees that have arisen out of the needs of the war, in the underground control centres, the goods yards; and, by no means last, by the driver on the train, the station-master at the junction, the lorry driver losing his night's sleep to get out on the road.

At first sight, there might not seem to be a large difference between transport in peace time and transport for war. A glance at the map soon puts an end to this impression. Look at the roads and railways. A military strategist would laugh at them. It is true they were adapted for war requirements, and maintained and improved in some cases with the possibility of war in mind. But the last thing they were planned for was modern war. They were built for the habits of free commerce and for pleasure. Before the war, charabancs thronged the towns and took holiday makers in thousands to the sea. Buses and trams went further and further out into the country to bring in to their work people who had gone there for pleasure. Traffic ran for the sacred week-end and the sightseeing tour.

Rival companies were scrambling for the job of carrying you to the Welsh mountains, the ruined Yorkshire abbeys, the Essex greyhound tracks and the lush hotels of the south. You travelled like a lord—and swore like a lord, too, when some convoy of lorries cut off the view you were looking at, or when some ugly thing backed out of a yard with a load of bricks and held up the stream of pleasure. And the quarrel between the road and the railways gave a zest to those journeys. You felt you were, indeed, the sacred passenger.

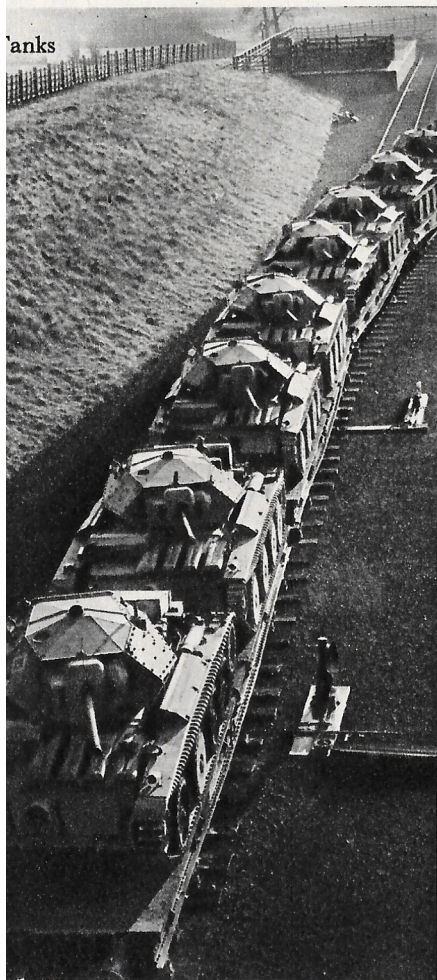
It is not intended to deride the sacred passenger, but merely to point out the conse-



THE SACRED PASSENGER . . .

quences of giving him his halo. If the passenger was sacred, the goods had to be profane. What happened to the goods? Were there any? There were. Millions of tons of them in a year, leaving the ports and arriving at them, not to mention the factories, the warehouses and the mines. On the railways, merchandise traffic was always the greater and more important: but so skilfully was it planned and so cunningly moved that the passenger might reasonably have supposed the railways existed mainly for his benefit.

There were serious oddities like the Broccoli Specials from the south-west, the Rabbit Specials from Devon, not to mention the Fish Specials, the Strawberry Specials, running in before sunrise to catch the markets, or the Horse Specials sporting along to Newmarket, Newbury and Epsom. A few of these trains ran in the day time—"Held up by a goods!"—you remember the outraged passenger's cry—and really, there was something boring in the sight of a goods train clanking its awful industrial nakedness in broad daylight. If by

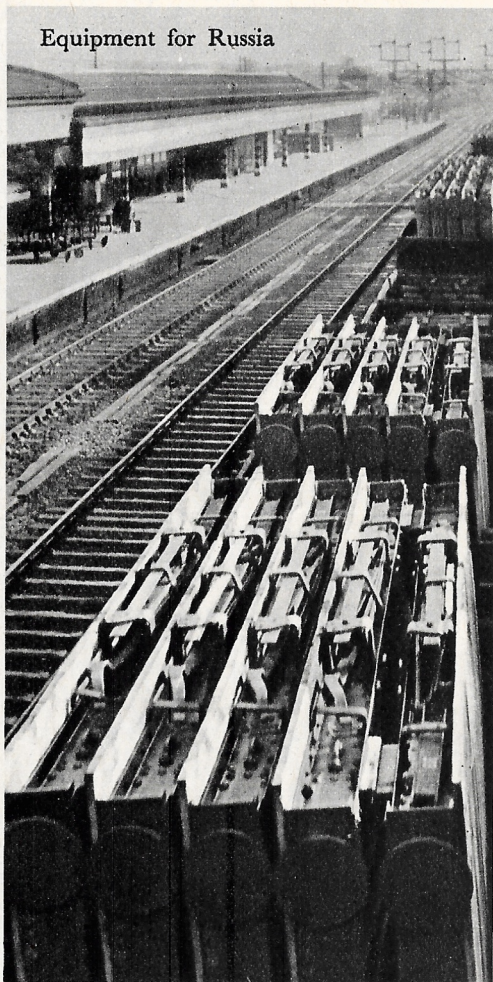


... GIVES WAY TO THE NEEDS OF WAR

accident the passenger had spent even a few minutes in the station-master's office, and had caught a glimpse of transport in its dressing room, so to speak, he knew that the companies regarded the goods traffic with the respect all workers feel for other people's work; but outside, on the platform, they were the servants of the travelling public. The passenger came first.

And here we come to the first act in the battle of transport; the reversal of that order. Deliver the passengers, yes; deliver the work-

ers and the troops, of course; but, above all, deliver the goods. That is what September, 1939 meant to British transport. To-day, you stand in the corridor of a train which is already an hour late because, when you get down to it, you have lost your halo. Coal, ore, steel, sugar beet, timber, meat, even soap flakes, wire netting and boot polish have become more important than you. The battle requires the constant speed, the continuous flow, faster loading, faster turning round, faster unloading, an acceleration of work and



Equipment for Russia



Coal

process. You were standing about to-day on a draughty platform or a wind-swept street, looking in despair at the clock, not because the confusion of war had muddled transport and made it forget its record-breaking traditions, but because, in fact, it is breaking records far more important than the old ones.

At this point we come to a matter which might at one time have been explosive: the question of co-operation between road and

ROAD HELPS RAIL, RAIL HELPS ROAD. One of the 500 buses from the Provinces which joined the London road-rail pool during the blitzes.



rail. Despite all the posters which used to entertain the passenger in the days when he had his halo, the tendency to co-operation between the young and older form of transport was already working before the war. The far-seeing knew it was the only way, and the war has confirmed that direction decisively. When road and rail worked together on the civilian evacuation and after Dunkirk, they were simply developing a technique which had already existed before the war, but one which became vital during the blitz and in the dispersal of industry that has followed. In London, where road and rail formed one complete pool, the railway companies would ring up the bus control officer in the middle of the night at his underground post and call for help. There were at one time 600 buses working for the railways in London; and on one spectacular evening the buses got 12,000 people out of Cannon Street station in four hours.

Towards the end of October, 1940, in the blitz, Londoners saw strange buses with their outlandish provincial colours, working down Holborn and Eastcheap with the cough cure and drapers' advertisements of the provincial cities on their bodies. They brought something of the zest of the "pirate" days to people mooching glumly among the obscene ruins of their streets. An SOS had gone out all over the country and 500 of these "pirates" had come down in response. They ran for months and gradually through the spring and summer of 1941 they trickled back, each one bearing a laconic plaque "London 1940-41". That inscription will mean a lot as time goes on. And London has repaid that debt since by loans of buses to the provinces to help them in their difficulties.

In the same way you saw this unity of transport in the blitz when the lorries and motor coaches were doing the work of the evening trains among the crowded suburbs of London or in Liverpool's terrible week of May, 1941. There have been astonishing notices—astonishing, that is, in the light of pre-war history

—in which bus companies ask their passengers to go by train, and railways companies ask the passengers to go by bus.

These are not veiled hints to the passenger that nobody wants him. The true explanation is, once more, that transport is at war, not with itself, but with the common enemy; and that, as the flow of goods changes and increases at the ports, as the new factories get to work and the old ones expand, road and rail have to work together and relieve each other of the new strains. Men are called up,

once idle cross-country lines are congested, petrol is more and more reserved for those who can show they are doing war work and working with the team.

Co-operation is inevitable. The process which began with evacuation has gone on. It is useless getting the goods into the ports unless they are taken out of the ports; it is useless filling the factories and making new ones unless the workers are taken there and brought back with as few hours of travel as possible to add to their overtime.



SO THE LIGHTS OF PEACE CHANGED TO . . .