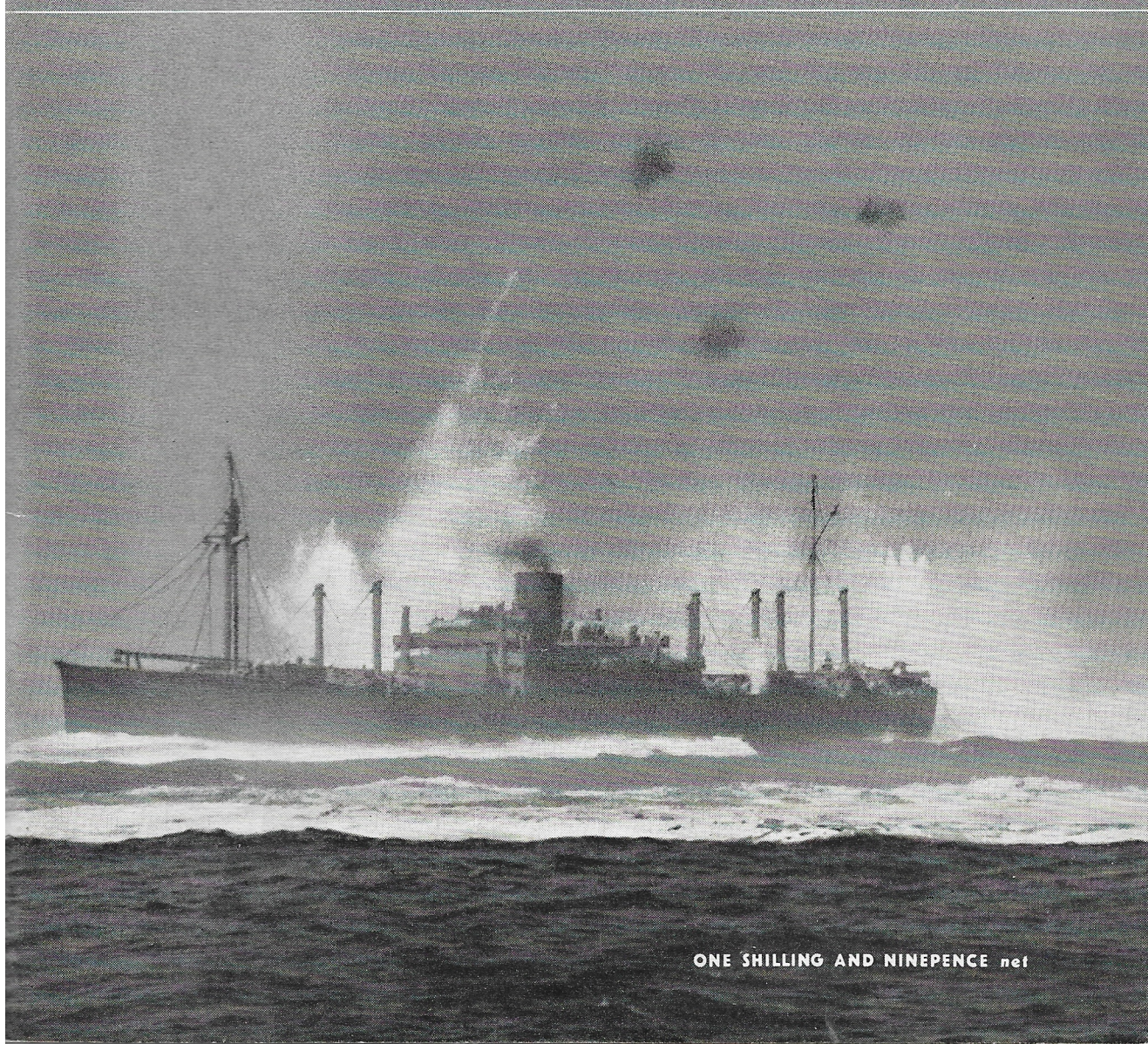


MERCHANTMEN



AT WAR



ONE SHILLING AND NINEPENCE net

THE MEN OF THE MERCHANT NAVY

1. The Sea is their Trade

HE went to sea at the age of $15\frac{1}{2}$, and that was 53 years ago ; he is still at sea. This indeed is his third war spent so, for he was second mate of a troopship when the soldiers hanging over his rail were off to fight the Boers. He is a short, thick-set man, with a face stern of line, but his brown eye has humour in it. He puts his feet down with deliberation, as though he had better be firm with a floor that may shift a trifle as he moves over it. If you ask him whether this war at sea is much worse than the last, he says well, of course, the bombers and torpedo bombers have brought new dangers and problems, and he doesn't remember that the U-boats in the last war worked in anything more than couples, whereas now. . . . But the sea, he says, was always hazardous and these are merely new hazards. The regular merchant seaman is a disciplined man (he says) and takes the ordeals easier than an ordinary man would ; the sea is his trade—he knows nothing else. He himself was at sea when the war broke out and it wasn't

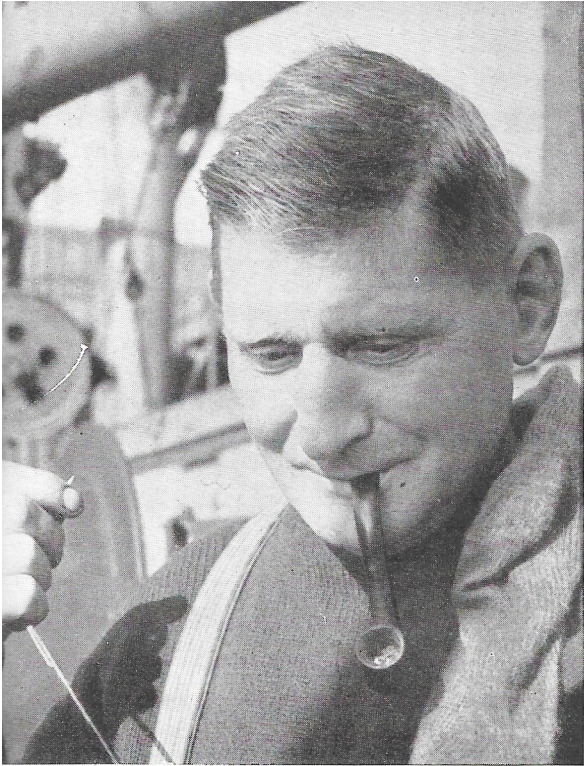
long before. he got word of a ship being torpedoed ; so he steered his ship for the scene, not so much because he thought he'd find survivors, but because he took it that would be a spot the U-boats would have departed from. He was right : he made port. Since then he has crossed the Atlantic many times.

Off his ship you find him wearing a blue serge suit and a blue mackintosh and a trilby hat. He seems a little out of his element ; he is very courteous, and there is a touch of shyness in him, though he has a high opinion of his dignity and importance. There is a fine dryness in his yarns ; the yarn, for instance, about a Master who was fond of saying that a thing is not lost if you know where it is, which led to his steward remarking : “ Well, sir, that makes it easier to tell you where your silver teapot is—I dropped it accidentally over the side ”.

This ship's Master is typical of the merchant service, a service which dislikes fuss of any sort, and takes the war to a considerable degree in its stride. He is of the old school, has his square-rig ticket (not many Masters with this particular distinction are still at sea), and he could tell of boyhood days when a ship's biscuit had thirteen holes in it and a weevil poked its head out of every one.



THESE MEN ARE A BROTHERHOOD. THEY KNOW SHIPS, STORM, ICE, FOG, SUBMARINE, SURFACE-RAIDER, BOMBER, MINE.



THEY KNOW THE SEA.

Our Merchant Navy, however, has as many sorts of Masters as a stock exchange has stockbrokers, and as many sorts of seamen as a coal-pit has hewers of coal. There are the liner crews, proud of their ships and uniforms, and there are men on tramps who'll say: "What? Me on a liner, washing paint all day and dressed-up like a May horse? Oh, no!" But they are alike in this—they're fond of a discussion; they will read an old newspaper and digest a subject and develop an argument about it; they will growl about their grievances as a soldier will, and they will harbour superstitions. The bulk of them nurture a belief in Divine Providence, as is natural enough among men who endure both the malice and the kindness of the sea. But as for describing them, one can do no more than run over those who have fixed themselves in the memory.

There is the old Master in his fiftieth year at sea who said that he was once a marksman at Bisley and finds, when he puts three bullets from his Ross rifle into a Focke-Wulf's cockpit, "She don't stay"; another Master is a youngish man not much bigger than a jockey who said his friends call him Gordon Richards; a third was a Scotsman wearing his gold-leafed cap and a white silk muffler who said with relish, "I'm not a Yes-man, I'm a No-man"; a fourth, Master of a troopship, a giant with a hooked nose and glinting eye, said he always turns into his bed at sea now, though in the war's first year he never did; a fifth, who walked on his ship wearing a brown suit and trilby hat, said he had sailed tankers throughout the last war and this, and until his last voyage had not seen anything of the enemy; a sixth, burly man with eyes almost violet in colour, who has many thousands of lives in his keeping, says he has a jolly disposition but sails keyed up so that he can sometimes hear a whistle on the bridge when nobody else can. There is the Master who says the last war was a picnic compared with this, for the last "had no metal in it to speak of" and once well away from Britain you had no need to worry

about submarines, but now, bless your soul, the farther you are off the worse it is. There is the Commodore captain of 67 who, when asked if he would care to make a voyage or two, replied: "Letter received. Very pleased. Go anywhere, any time".

The Clyde, the north-east coast, South Wales, Liverpool, Whitby, Hull, the West Country—time and time again it is from one of these that our ships' Masters and men have sprung. Any town in the British Isles may produce seamen; but the smell of the sea and the sight of water and of ships have their own inspiration. Men and boys who have stared long hours to a far horizon are likely to be those who seek what lies beyond. Moreover, the phrase "sea in his blood" can be a true one; the seafarer's is a trade—like many another—that runs in families.

The sea breeds a calmness in facing hazards so that our seamen of long apprenticeship are inclined to be imperturbable men; and not only the Masters. There was the tanker's chief officer with eyes as blue and wide open as a baby's—a Newcastle man. He smiled and drank his tea and said: "Now these U-boats—you lose 'em in the morning and they're back at night. They *were* in packs but now they're in schools. Well, you're lucky or you're unlucky—that's how I look at it, anyhow". He sleeps with a small axe at his bedside so that his hand will fall on it, for no man knows when such a tool will be needed. His chief engineer, 30 or so, growing a downy beard, was a man who seemed to be tickled by the way the orders for changing speed come to him—"Five up or five down. Sometimes they'll say, 'Five up,' and that's a sub. away" (meaning we've sunk one). He chuckled again and went on to say those are the best engines he's had—he wouldn't like anything to happen to those engines.

Go from ship to ship and a fair proportion of the men you meet are noteworthy: the troopship chef who says it was so hot in the Red Sea that his wooden spoon was set alight as he made the salmon mayonnaise; the young bos'n of 28 with a

hundred men under him, doing work that is usually done by a grizzled, hard-bitten man of middle-age; the dark, gentle youth who was torpedoed when working as a steward and said at the time: "No more sea for me", but has been getting restive and is off back because, he says, "shore seems tame after a while"; the steward of the *Georgic* who won the D.S.C. at Gallipoli and had been a trumpeter under Bindon Blood in the Boer War and served in the Foreign Legion in between; the apprentice who understudied Sonnie Hale and who entertained the lads in mid-Atlantic over the loud-speaker; the chief engineer of a benzine tanker—a broad-faced man from Sunderland—who said it's really not so bad on a tanker because half her time she's in ballast carrying water in her tanks, and when so she's the safest thing afloat; and there is Willie, the Scots cabin-boy aged 15½, who sailed on Norwegian ships before he tried British. By all the official recommendations Willie ought not to be there at all; boys under 16 should not be taken and, indeed, an endeavour is being made to raise the age to 17. But lads tramp to the docks and tramp round the ships, and men who may have run away to sea themselves are not likely to discourage boys seeking adventure. Our seamen may have changed in appearance, and young men sometimes go up for their officers' tickets wearing plus fours in place of the old-time double-breasted blue jacket and white collar; but lads are still fired by the sea, nor will tales of hardship in open boats deter them. The Shipping Federation receives over a hundred letters a day from boys asking for work afloat.

When the war began, a large number of merchant officers and seamen went at once into the Royal Navy; in all, about 12,000 of them, men who were either in the Royal Naval Reserve or were serving in vessels which became armed merchant cruisers, such as the *Jervis Bay*. The demand for merchant officers was so considerable that the Admiralty was asked by the Board of

Trade to go a trifle slow, if possible, in calling up senior officers.

The translation of merchant seamen into Royal Navy men was, of course, not a new development. The merchant ships and fishing fleets are one of the fighting ships' bulwarks in times of emergency. To-day there is probably no large naval ship that does not number R.N.R. officers in its complement, and at least one submarine is commanded by a former merchant officer, and countless small surface ships as well.

But it will be seen that the Merchant Navy suffered a diminution of manpower so soon as war broke out. The existing numbers were already less than could have been wished to face total war. British shipping had suffered gravely during the years of trade depression between the two wars. We had lived through a period in which some of our rivers and lochs were choked with laid-up ships, and many an officer was glad to go to sea in the fo'c'sle rather than walk the streets; men had left the sea at the rate of 15,000 or more a year. Marine engineers found work ashore more readily than deck officers, and when war broke out hundreds of them were working near Southampton. This reservoir of officers, engineers and seamen proved to be a source of great strength when the need arose.

Men of vision had seen, long before, that a Merchant Navy reserve was desirable in the event of war. In September 1938 the Government asked for volunteers willing to return to the sea if the need arose. The response was excellent; on September 3rd, 1939, the actual enrolments were 12,785 and rose later to 23,107. Then fresh measures were adopted and in the spring of 1941, 59,000 officers and men registered their names as having served on ships since 1936. A host of them returned to the trade of the sea as volunteers. Of those who registered, 3,500 were navigating officers, 7,450 were engineers, 12,500 were deck ratings, 17,500 were engine-room ratings, and 13,500 had worked in catering departments.



FROM BOMBAY, FROM SIERRA LEONE, FROM MOMBASA.

MERCHANTMEN AT WAR

1,000 waiting to enter that training school.

Thousands of men are serving in ships for the first time. Quite often they are shipmates with men who have grown old in the sea's service. Glance through any assembly of ships' articles and you'll find the names of engineers of 60 and over, perhaps a first-mate of 61, an assistant steward of 64, an A.B. of 66, and a fireman of a coal-burning ship of 62. A greaser is at sea aged 75. A steward who lost a leg in this war is back in a ship doing his old job. Other men have gone back to the sea after long absence. A Justice of the Peace growing crops in Orkney and Shetland, who had parted from ships 20 years before, returned to become second mate of the *Empire Dolphin*. The m.v. *Port Gisborne* had among her crew an able seaman who had left the sea while still a youth and, before returning as a deck-hand in this war, had run an hotel, owned hunters, achieved a "B" licence for flying and a 2-handicap at golf, sailed his 25-ton yawl to Monte Carlo and raced motor cars there. A third, who is a graduate of Cambridge, served in the Royal Navy in the last war and was mathematics master at a Perthshire college when he left to become a junior engineer in the Merchant Navy to-day.

The ranks of radio officers have swollen threefold during the war. To-day it is customary for every ship over 1,600 tons to carry three radio officers, some of them as young as 16 years of age. A reputation for devotion to duty, won in peace, has been more than maintained in war. Sometimes they have been the last to leave a ship and have sent out wireless messages to the end. When the *Graf Spee* on one occasion hoisted a notice on her bridge reading "Close your wireless or we shall shell you", the radio was not closed; and when shelling began, and a fragment went through his cabin, the radio officer lay on the floor reaching up to his instrument with one arm, continuing what he had begun.

The crews of our merchantmen are not,

of course, all from the United Kingdom. Men from distant parts of the Commonwealth are alongside our own, rendering the same service, enduring the same dangers and hardships. Among these were 45,000 Indians when the war began. Moreover, there were over 6,000 Chinese and a considerable number of Arab firemen, all of them an integral part of the Merchant Navy. Of a lascar boy named Abdul Rahman in the s.s. *Auditur* (Captain E. Bennet, O.B.E.) the chief officer wrote that in an open boat he kept up men's spirits by telling stories and leading prayer meetings; whenever a repair had to be done, as for instance to the heel of the mast, he did it all by himself; and he kept at least six hours' watch each night. When the limited water ration was doled out, he always waited to the last.

Of Allied and neutral seamen serving with us, mostly under their own flags and laws, there are nearly 50,000.

Within the Merchant Navy itself a Master or seaman who looked back in the summer of 1944 to the war's beginning could see that, while much had remained immutable, much had changed. It was true that a number of ships 40 years old, overdue for retirement even before the war, still sailed the seas with men's quarters and galleys of which no modern eye could approve. But the changes were great, and most of them for the better. On the newly built ships a man gets 32 square feet of sleeping room against the 12 square feet he had prior to 1937; and, indeed, there are ships sailing now on which seamen are berthed two to a cabin, and in one or two ships they have a cabin each.

The training of cooks has kept some good food at all events from being spoilt in the galley, and airgraphs have kept many a seaman in touch with his wife when normal letters would not have done. For his hours ashore, over a hundred new clubs and canteens have been opened in ports overseas from Iceland to Capetown and Vancouver to Sydney. But all these are minor affairs

compared with the improvements in life-saving described in a later chapter. One thing in particular is sometimes said: that the young seaman has come into his own, that he can set a course by the stars, and judge the approximate direction of wind without a compass by taking cloud formations and weather data for his only guides—a thing an older generation could not do. This at least is certain: that many a young seaman or apprentice has acquitted himself nobly in charge of a boatload of survivors; . . . and this, too—that never in history have there been more applications from boys anxious to go to sea.

It has been said that it took the last war to give merchant officers a uniform and a standing they had never possessed before. To-day the British Merchant Navy ranks with any service in the world, armed or unarmed. It is by this time as tried and tested as the Royal Navy and as battle-experienced as either the Eighth or Second Armies.
