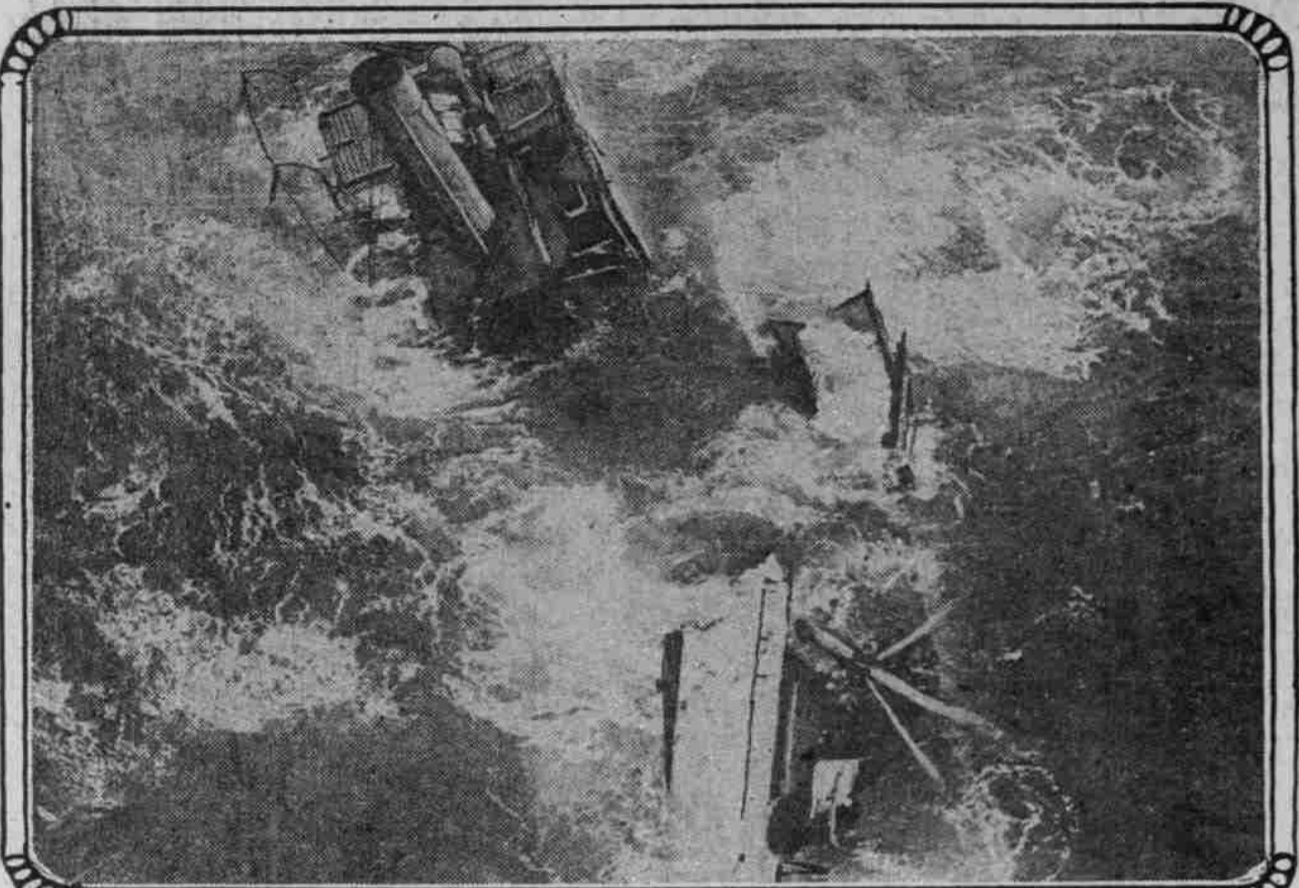
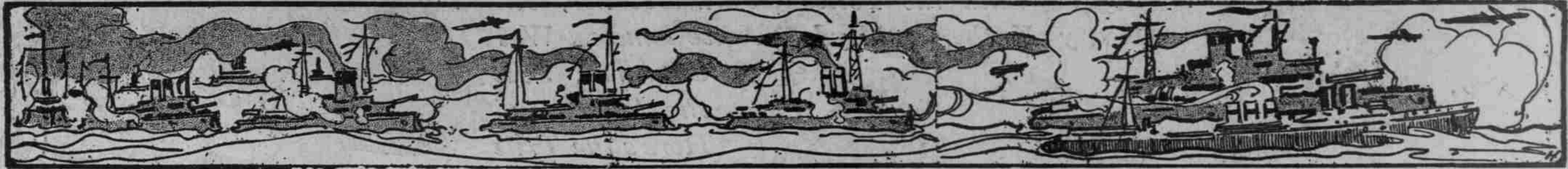


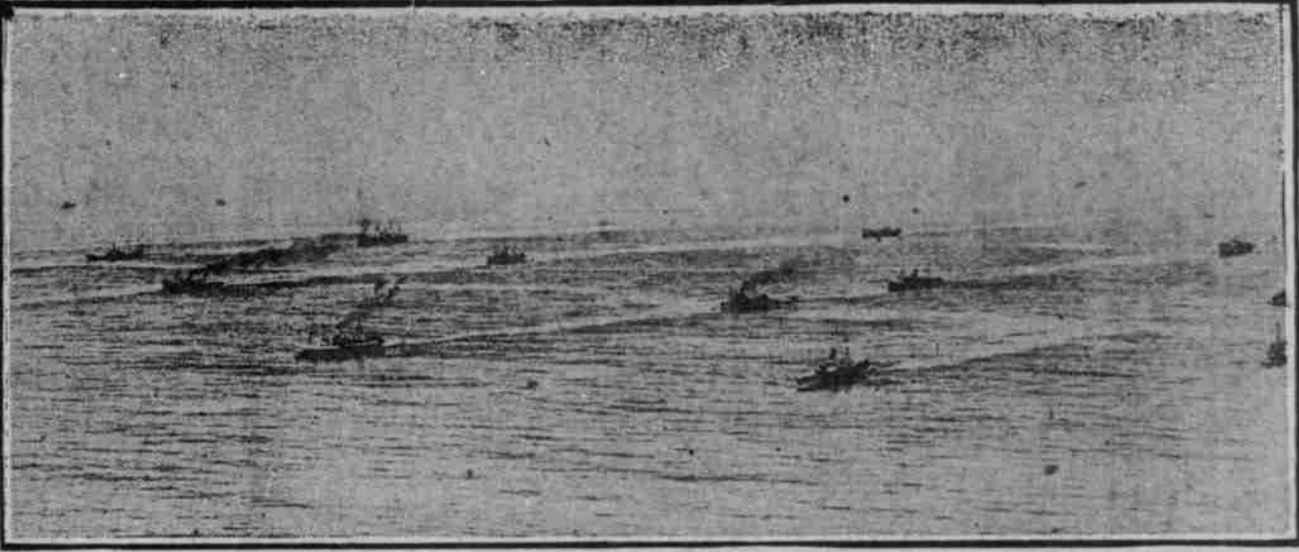
THE VICTORY AT SEA

HOW THE CONVOYS SAILED

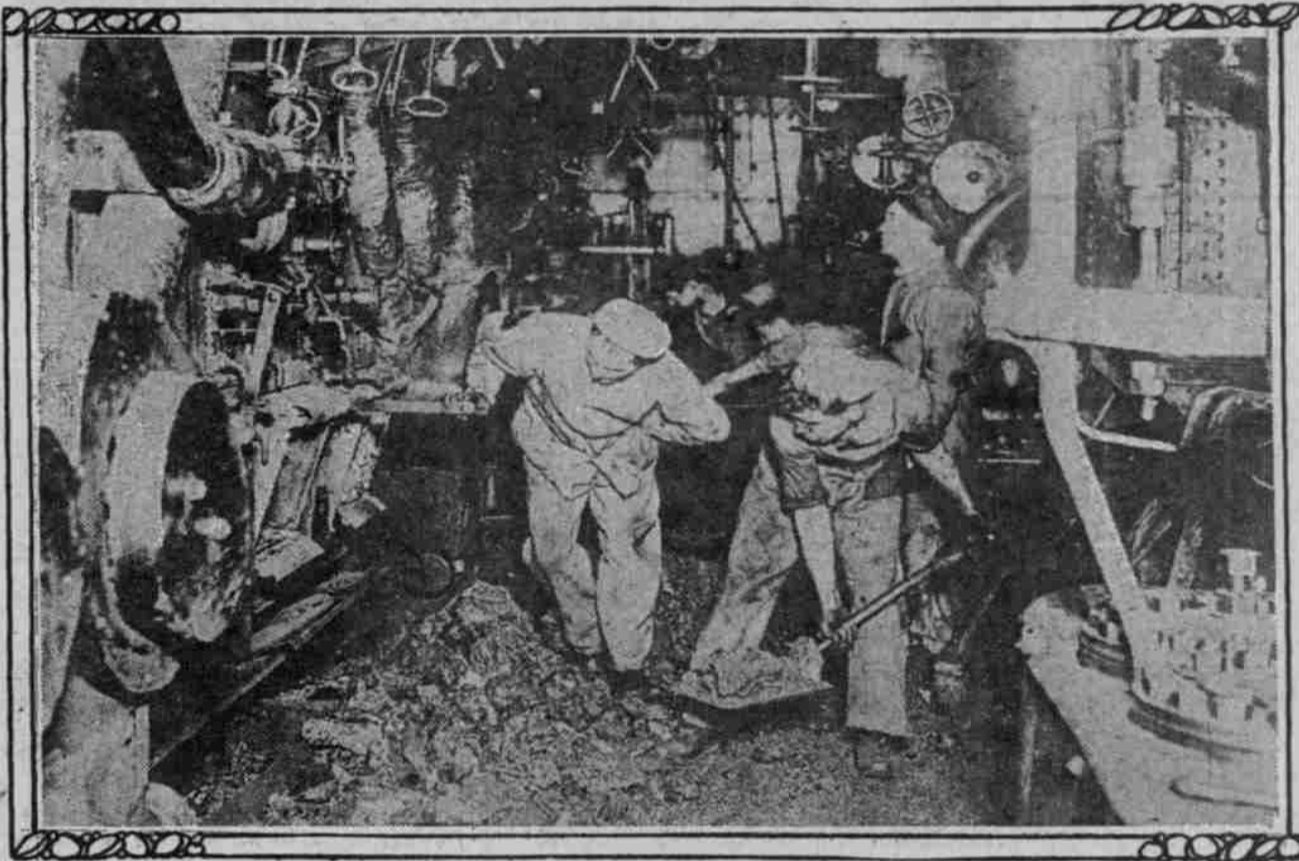
By Admiral William Sowden Sims



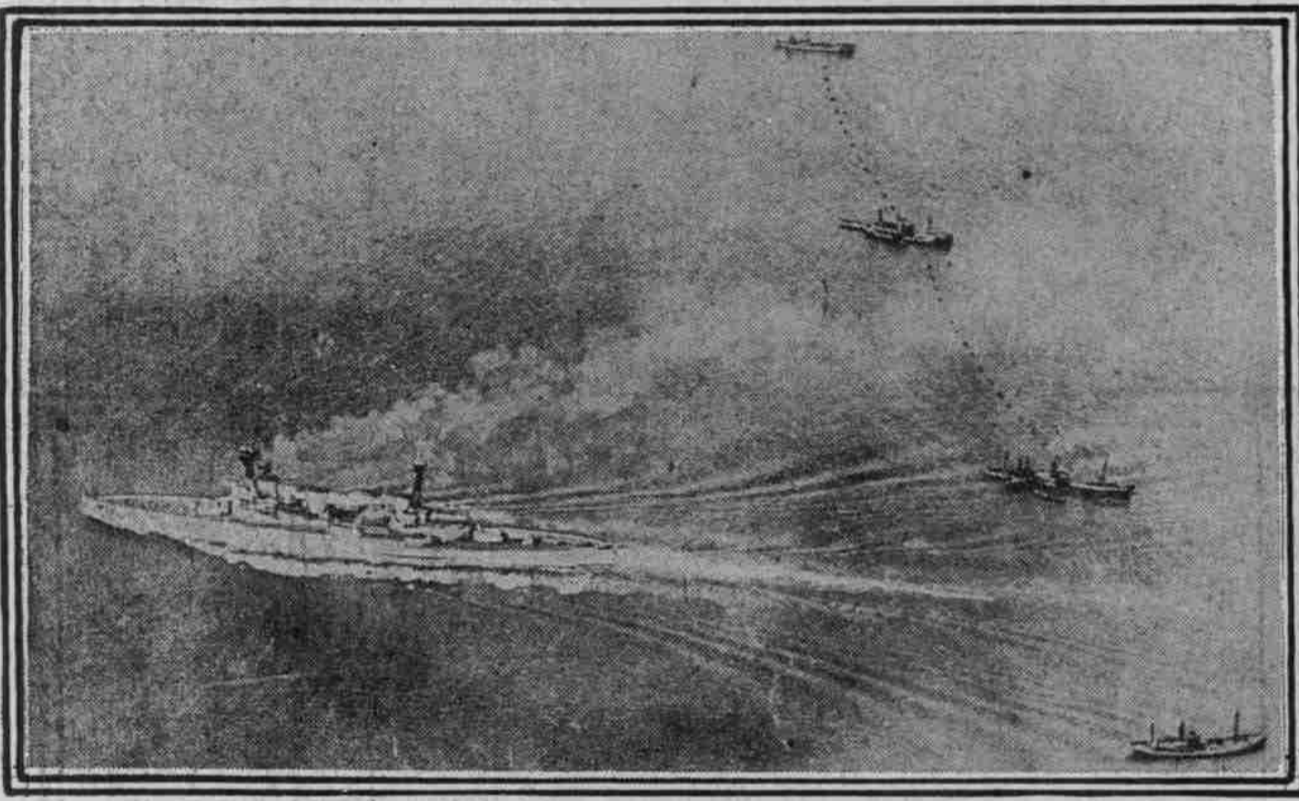
THIS SHIP WAS SPLIT IN TWO PARTS BY A TORPEDO.



A CONVOY AT SEA. This system of sailing ships in groups, protected by destroyers, was the chief method of conquering the submarine. Eventually, between 91 and 92 per cent of all merchant ships sailed in convoys. The losses of convoyed ships were less than one-half of 1 per cent.



SILENT WARRIORS AGAINST THE SUBMARINE. These stokers in the merchantmen's fire rooms ran almost the greatest risks of all men engaged in submarine warfare. The torpedo was always aimed at the ship's engine and boiler-rooms, and these men were thus constantly facing death under particularly terrible circumstances. They are among the greatest heroes of the war.



A WARSHIP COMING INTO A HARBOR FROM THE OPEN SEA. This harbor, like all in the war zone, was protected by nets; this picture shows the gateway in the net through which ships made their way to the ocean.

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THE admiralty in London was a central nervous system of a complicated but perfectly working organization which reached the remotest corners of the world. Wherever there was a port, whether in South America, Australia, or in the most inaccessible parts of India or China, from which merchantmen sailed to any of the other countries involved in the war, representatives of the British navy and the British government were stationed, all working harmoniously with shipping men to get their cargoes safely through the danger zones. These danger zones occupied a comparatively small area surrounding the belligerent countries, but the safeguarding of the ships was an elaborate process which began far back in the countries from which the commerce started. Until about July, 1917, the world's shipping for the most part had been unregulated; now for the first time it was arranged in hard and fast routes and dispatched in accordance with schedules as fixed as those of a great railroad. The whole management of convoys, indeed, bore many resemblances to the methods of handling freight cars on the American system of transcontinental lines. In the United States there are several great headquarters of freight, sometimes known as "gateways," places, that is, at which freight cars are assembled from a thousand places, and from which the great accumulations are routed to their destinations. Such places are Pittsburg, Buffalo, St. Louis, Chicago, Minneapolis, Denver, San Francisco—to mention only a few. Shipping destined for the belligerent nations was similarly assembled in the years 1917 and 1918, at six or eight great ocean "gateways," and there formed into convoys for "through routing" to the British Isles, France and the Mediterranean. Only a few of the ships that were exceptionally fast—speed in itself being a particularly efficacious protection against submarines—were permitted to ignore this routine system, and dash unprotected through the infested area. This was a somewhat dangerous procedure even for such ships, however, and they were escorted, whenever destroyers were available. All other vessels, from whatever parts of the world they came, were required to sail first for one of these great assembling points, or "gateways," at which places they were added to one of the constantly forming convoys.

Thus all shipping which normally sailed to Europe around the Cape of Good Hope proceeded up the west coast of Africa until it reached the port of Dakar or Sierra Leone, where it joined the convoy. Shipping from the east coast of South America—ports like Rio de Janeiro, Bahia, Buenos Aires and Montevideo—instead of sailing directly to Europe, joined the convoy at this same African town. Vessels which came to Britain and France by way of Suez and Mediterranean ports found their great stopping place at Gibraltar—a headquarter of traffic which, in the huge amount of freight which it "created," became almost the Pittsburg of this maritime transportation system. The four "gateways" for North America and the west coast of South America were Sydney (Cape Breton), Halifax, New York and Hampton Roads. The grain-laden merchantmen from the St. Lawrence valley rendezvoused at Sydney and Halifax. Vessels from Portland, Boston, New York, Philadelphia and other Atlantic points found their assembling headquarters at New York, while ships from Baltimore, Norfolk, the Gulf of Mexico and the west coast of South America proceeded to the great convoy center which had been established at Hampton Roads.

On the appointed day the whole convoy weighed anchor and silently slipped out to sea. To such spectators as observed its movements it seemed a rather limping, halting procession. The speed of a convoy was the speed of the slowest ship, and vessels that could easily make 12 or 14 knots were obliged to put on the brakes, much to the disgust of their masters, in order to keep formation with a ship that made only 8 or 10; though whenever possible vessels of nearly equal speed sailed together. Little in the newly formed group suggested the majesty of the sea. The ships formed a miscellaneous and ill-assorted company, rusty tramps shamefacedly sailing alongside of spick-and-span liners; miserable little 2000 or 3000-ton ships attempting to hold up their heads in the same company with silver ships of 10,000 or 12,000. The whole mass was sprawling over the sea in most ungraceful fashion; 20 or 30 ships, with spaces of 900 or 1000 yards stretching out between them, took up not far from ten square miles of the ocean surface. Neither at the stage of the voyage did the aggregation give the idea of efficiency. It presented about as desirable a target as the submarine could have desired. But the period taken in crossing the ocean was entirely devoted to education. Under the tutelage of the convoy commander, the men comprising the 20 or 30 vessels went every day to school. For 15 or 20 days, upon the broad Atlantic, they were trained in all the evolutions which were necessary for coping with the submarine. Every possible situation that could arise in the danger zone was anticipated and the officers and the crews were trained in meeting it. They perfected themselves in the signals, and they learned the art of making the sudden maneuvers which were instantaneously necessary when a submarine was sighted; they acquired a mastery in the art of zigzagging; and they became accustomed to sailing at night without lights. The crews were put through all the drills which were prepared them to meet such crises as the landing of a torpedo in their engine room or the sighting of a submarine. They were thoroughly schooled in getting all hands safely into the boats. Foribly an occasional scare on the way over may have introduced the element of reality into these exercises; though no convoys actually met submarines in the open ocean. The likelihood that they might do so was never absent, especially after the Germans began sending out their huge mauler-water cruisers.

The convoy commander left his port with sealed orders, which he was instructed not to open until he was a hundred miles at sea. These orders, when the seal was broken, gave him the rendezvous assigned by the commander in London. The great chart in the convoy room at the admiralty indicated the point to which the convoy was to proceed and at which it would be met by the destroyer escorts. This particular New York convoy commander was now perhaps instructed to cross the 30th meridian at the 52d parallel of latitude, where he would be met by his escort. He laid his course for that point and regulated his speed so as to reach it at the appointed time. But he well knew that these instructions were only temporary. The precise point to which he would finally be directed to sail depended upon the movement and location of the German submarine at the time of his arrival. If the enemy became particularly active in the region of this tentative rendezvous, then, as the convoy approached it, a wireless from London would instruct the commander to steer abruptly to another point, perhaps a hundred miles to north, or south.

"Getting Your Convoy" was a searching test of destroyer seamanship, particularly in heavy or thick weather. It was not the simplest thing to navigate a group of destroyers through the tempestuous waters of the North Atlantic, with no other objective than the junction point of meridians and parallels, and reach the designated point at a certain hour. Such a feat demanded navigation ability of a high order; and the skill which our American naval officers displayed in this direction aroused great admiration, especially on the part of

the merchant skippers; in particular it aroused the astonishment of the average doughboy.

Many destroyer escorts that went out to meet an incoming convoy also took out one which was westward bound. A few mishaps in the course of the war, such as the sinking of the Justicia, sailing from Europe to America, created the false notion that outward-bound convoys were not escorted. It was just as desirable, of course, to escort the ships going out as to escort those which were coming in. The mere fact that the inbound ships carried troops and supplies gave stronger reasons, from the humane standpoint, for heavier escorts, but not from the standpoint of the general war situation. The Germans were not sinking our ships because they were carrying men and supplies; they were sinking them simply because they were ships. They were not seeking to destroy American troops exclusively; they were seeking to destroy tonnage. They were aiming to reduce the world's supply of ships to a point that the allies would be compelled to abandon the conflict for lack of communications.

It was therefore necessary that they should be escorted by a destroyer force as strong as that which was going out, as well as the crowded and loaded ships, which were coming in. For the same reason it was necessary that we should protect them, and we did as far as practicable without causing undue delays in forming outward-bound convoys. The Justicia, though most people still think that she was torpedoed because she was unescorted, was, in fact, protected by a destroyer escort of considerable size. Escorting outward-bound ships, increased considerably the strain on our destroyer force.

The difficulty was that the inbound convoy arrived in a body, but that the ships could not be unloaded and sent back in a body without detaining a number of them an undue length of time—and time was such an important factor in this war that it was necessary to make the "turn-around" of each important transport as quickly as possible. The consequence was that returning ships were often despatched in small convoys, as fast as they were unloaded. The escorts which we were able to supply for such groups were thus much weaker than absolute safety required, and sometimes we were even forced to send vessels across the submarine zone with few, if any, escorting warships. This explains why certain homeward-bound transports were torpedoed. This was particularly true of the homeward-bound convoys to the western ports of France. Only when we could assemble a large out-going convoy and dispatch it at such a time that it could meet an incoming one at the western edge of the submarine zone, could we give these vessels the same destroyer escort as that which we always gave for the loaded convoys bound for European ports.

American Escorts Returned.

As soon as the destroyers made contact with an inward-bound convoy the ocean escort, the cruiser or dreadnought, if an American, abandoned it and started back home, sometimes with a westbound convoy if one had been assembled in time. British escorts went ahead full speed into a British port, usually escorted by one or more destroyers. This abandonment sometimes aroused the wrath of

but also subject them to the least danger; and this is the reason why, in the recent war the destroyers were usually concentrated at these points. I have already compared the convoy system to a great aggregation of railroads. This comparison holds good on its operation after it had entered the infested zone. Indeed, the very terminology of our railroad men was used. Every convoy nearly followed one of two main routes, known to convoy headquarters as the two "trunk lines." The trunk line which reached the west coast of England usually passed north of Ireland through the North Channel and down the Irish sea to Liverpool. Under certain conditions these convoys passed south of Ireland and thence up the Irish sea. The convoys to the east coast took a trunk line that passed up the English channel. Practically all shipping from the United States to Great Britain and France took one of these trunk lines. But, like our railroad systems, each of these main routes had branch lines. Thus shipping destined for French ports took the southern route until off the entrance to the English channel; here it abandoned the main line and took a branch route to Brest, Bordeaux, Nantes and other French ports. In the channel likewise several "single-track" American routes to various English ports, such as Plymouth, Portsmouth, Southampton, and the like. The whole gigantic enterprise flowed with precision and a regularity which I think it is hardly likely that any other transportation system has ever achieved.

A description of a few actual convoys, and the experiences of our destroyers with them, will perhaps best make clear the nature of the mechanism which protected the world's shipping. For this purpose I have selected typical instances which illustrate the every-day routine experiences of escorting destroyers, and other experiences in which their work was more spectacular.

One day late in October, 1917, a division of American destroyers at Queenstown received detailed instructions from Admiral Barty to leave at a certain hour and escort the outward-bound convoy "OQ 17" and bring into port the inbound convoy "OQ 17." These detailed instructions were based upon general instructions issued from the Admiralty, where my staff was in constant attendance and cooperation. The symbols by which these two groups of ships were designated can be easily interpreted. The "OQ" simply meant the convoy "No. 17"—the seventeenth which had left that port—was outward-bound from Queenstown, and the "17" signified that convoy "No. 14" was homeward-bound from Sydney, Cape Breton, Queenstown during the first few months, was one of those convoys which had ships, having discharged their cargoes, assembled in groups for dispatch back to the United States. Later Milford Haven, Liverpool, and other ports were more often used for this purpose. Vessels had been arriving here for several months at ports of the Irish Sea and the east coast of England. These had now been formed into the "OQ 17," they were ready for a destroyer escort to take them through the submarine zone and start them on the westward voyage to America.

This escort consisted of eight American destroyers and one British "special service ship"; the latter was one of that famous company of decoy vessels, or "mystery ships," which, though to all outward appearances they were unpropelled, really carried concealed armaments of sufficient power to destroy any submarine that came within range. This special service ship, the Aubrietia, was hardly a member of the protective escort. Her mission was to sail about five miles ahead of the convoy; when observed from a submarine, the "conning tower" of a submarine, the Aubrietia seemed to be merely a helpless merchantman's vessel, and as such she presented a particularly tempting target to the U-boat. But her real purpose in life was to be a decoy for the submarine. The "mystery" in a vessel's side, the submarine usually remained submerged for a period, while the crew of its victim was getting off to a start. The "mystery" in a vessel's side, the submarine usually remained submerged for a period, while the crew of its victim was getting off to a start. The "mystery" in a vessel's side, the submarine usually remained submerged for a period, while the crew of its victim was getting off to a start.