

THE VICTORY AT SEA

By Admiral William Sowden Sims

THE TRANSATLANTIC TRIP IN WARTIME



CONVOYING ships in the stormy fall and winter waters, amid the fog and rain of the eastern Atlantic, was a monotonous and dreary occupation. Only one or two incidents enlivened this particular voyage. As the Parker, commander Halsey Powell, was scouting ahead at about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, her lookout suddenly sighted a submarine, bearing down upon the convoy. Immediately the news was wireless to every vessel. As soon as the message was received the whole convoy, at a signal from the flagship, turned four points to the left. For nearly two hours the destroyers searched this area for the submerged submarine, but that crafty boat kept itself safely under the water, and the convoy now again took up its original course. About two days' sailing brought the ships to the point at which the protecting destroyers could safely leave them to return unescorted to America; darkness had now set in and, under its cover the merchantmen slipped away from the warships and started westward. Meantime the destroyer escort had received a message from the Cumberland, the British cruiser which was acting as ocean escort to convoy "HS 14." "Convoy is six hours late," she reported, much like the announcer at a railroad station who informs the waiting crowds that the incoming train is running late. According to the schedule these ships should reach the appointed rendezvous at 6 o'clock the next morning; this message evidently moved the time of arrival up to noon. The destroyers, slowing down so that they would not arrive ahead of time, started for the designated spot.

Sometimes thick weather made it impossible to fix the position by astronomical observations and the convoy might not be at its appointed rendezvous. For this reason the destroyers now deployed on a north and south line about 20 miles long for several hours. Somewhat before the appointed time one of the destroyers sighted a faint cloud of smoke on the western horizon and soon afterward 32 merchantmen, sailing in columns of fours, began to assume a definite outline. At a signal from this destroyer the other destroyers of the escort came in at full speed and ranged themselves on either side of the convoy—a maneuver that always excited the admiration of the merchant skippers. This mighty collection of vessels, occupying about 10 or 12 square miles on the ocean, its formation so skillfully, was really a beautiful and inspiring sight. When the destroyers had gained their designated positions on either side, the splendid cavalcade sailed boldly into the area which formed the favorite hunting grounds for the submarine.

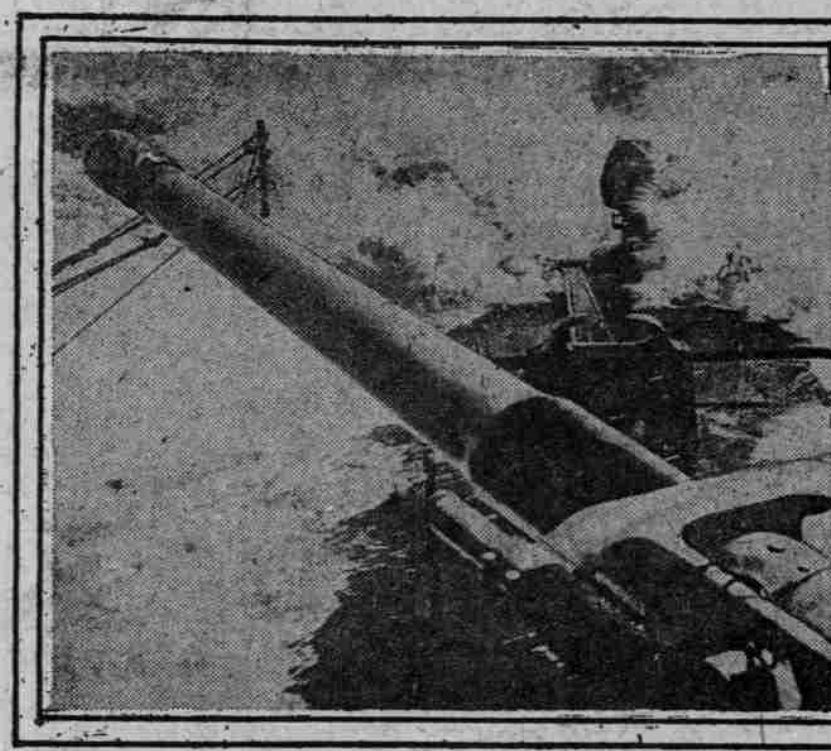
In the Danger Zone.
As soon as this danger zone was reached the whole aggregation, destroyers and merchant ships, began to zigzag. The commodore on the flagship hoisted the signal "Zigzag A," and instantaneously the whole 32 ships began to turn 25 degrees to the right. These ships, usually so cumbersome, made this simultaneous turn with all the deftness and even with all the grace of a school of fish into which one has suddenly cast a stone. All the way across the Atlantic they had been practicing such an evolution; most of them had already sailed through the danger zone more than once, so that the maneuver was by this time an old story. For 10 or 15 minutes they proceeded along, in this course, when immediately, like one vessel, the convoy turned 20 degrees to the left and started in a new direction. And so on for hours, now a few minutes to the right, now a few minutes to the left, now again straight ahead, while all the time the destroyers were cutting through the water, every eye of the skilled lookouts fixed upon the surface for the first glimpse of a periscope. The zigzagging was carried out according to comprehensive plans which enabled the convoy to zigzag for hours at a time without signals, the course and the time on each course being designated in the particular plan ordered, all ships' clocks being set exactly alike by time signal. Probably I have made it clear why these zigzagging evolutions constituted such a positive measure. All the time the convoy was sailing in the danger zone it was assumed that a submarine was present, looking for a chance to torpedo. Even though the officers might know that there was no submarine within 200 miles, this was never taken for granted; the discipline of the whole convoy system rested upon the theory that the submarine was there, waiting only the favorable moment to start the work of destruction. But a submarine, as already said, could not strike without the most thorough preparation. It must get within 300 or 400 yards of the target, would stand little chance of hitting the mark in a vital spot. The commander almost never shot blindly into the convoy, on the chance of hitting some ship; he carefully selected his victim; his calculation had to include its speed, the speed of the boat and that of his torpedo; and above all, he had to be sure of the direction in which his intended quarry was steaming; and in this calculation the direction of the merchantman formed perhaps the most important element. But if the ships were constantly changing their direction, it is apparent that the submarine could make no calculations which would have made such practical value.

A Wireless Story.

In the afternoon the Aubrietia, the British mystery ship which was sail-



LIEUTENANT-COMMANDER (NOW CAPTAIN) A. W. JOHNSON.
Commander of the Conyngham, one of the destroyers in the first American flotilla to reach European waters.



AN AMERICAN DESTROYER OFF THE COAST OF IRELAND.
This kind of weather was almost continuous in the winter months.

ing 30 miles ahead of the convoy, reported that she had sighted a submarine. Two or three destroyers dashed for the indicated area, searched for it thoroughly, found no traces of the hidden boat and returned to the convoy. The next morning six British destroyers and one cruiser arrived from Devonport. Up to this time the convoy had been following the great "stank line" which led into the Channel, but it had now reached the point where the convoys split up, part going to English ports and part to France. These British destroyers had come to take over the 20 ships which were bound for their own country, while the American destroyers were assigned to escort the rest to Brest. The following conversation—typical of those that were constantly filling the air in that area—now took place between the American flagship and the British:

Conyngham to Abates: This is the Conyngham, Commander Johnson. I would like to keep the convoy together until this evening. I will work under your orders until I leave with convoy for Brest.

Abates to Conyngham: Please make your own arrangements for taking French convoy with you tonight.

Abates to Conyngham: Please make do you propose leaving with French convoy tonight?

Conyngham to Abates: About 5 P. M. in order to arrive in Brest tonight. Devonport commander in chief to Conyngham: Proceed in execution admiralty orders, Abates having relieved you. Submarine activity in Lat. 48-41, Long. 4-51.

The Aubrietia had already given warning of the danger referred to in the last words of this final message. It had been flashing the news in this way:

1:15 P. M. Aubrietia to Conyngham: Submarine sighted 40-30 N 6-8. Sighted submarine on surface. Speed is not enough. Course southwest by south magnetic.

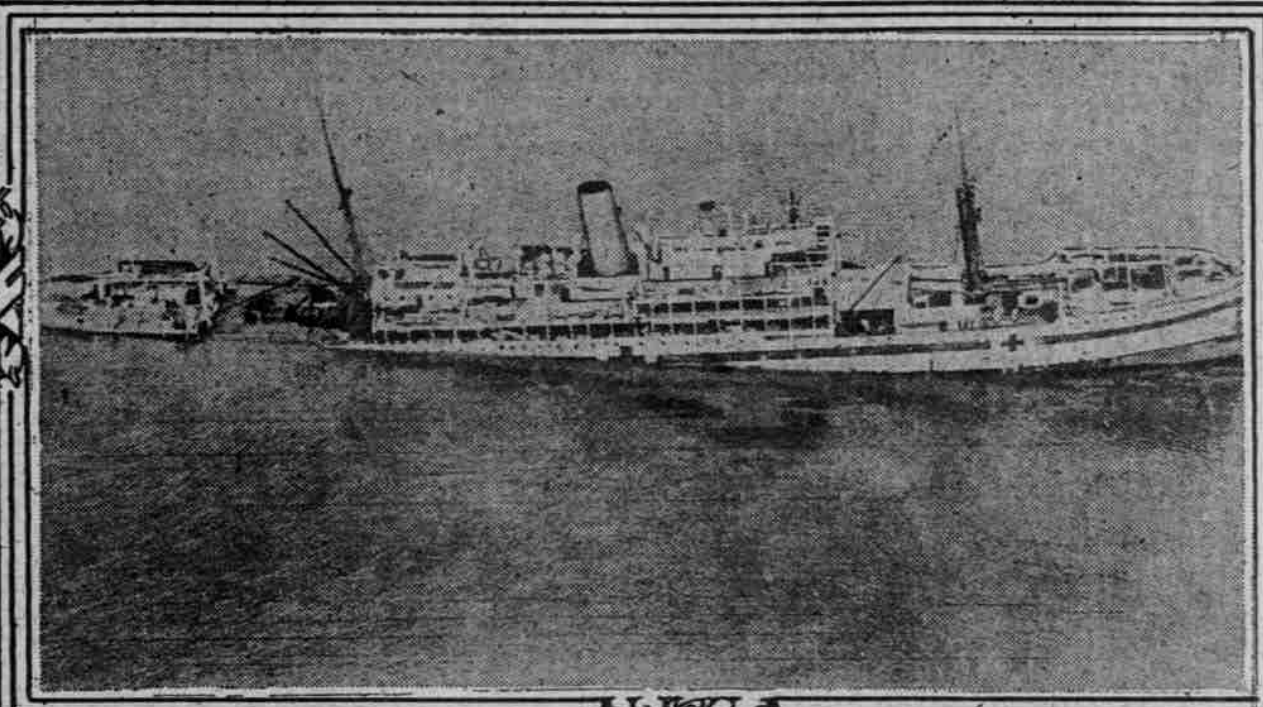
1:30 P. M. Conyngham to Abates: Aubrietia to all men of war and Land's End. Chasing submarine on the surface 49-30 N-68. W. course southwest by south. Waiting to get into range. He is going faster than I can.

2 P. M. Aubrietia to all men of war: Submarine submerged 49-20 N 08-13 W. Still searching.

The fact that nothing more was seen of that submarine may possibly detract from the thrill of the experience, but in describing the operations of this convoy I am not attempting to tell a story of wild adventure, but merely to set forth what happened 99 out of 100 times. What made destroyer work so exasperating was that, in the majority of cases, the option of fighting or not fighting lay with the submarine. Had the submarine decided to approach and attack the convoy, the chances would have been more than even that it would have been destroyed. In accordance with its usual practice, however, it chose to submerge, and that decision ended the affair for the moment. This was the way in which merchant ships were protected. At the time this submarine was sighted it was headed directly for this splendid aggregation of cargo vessels; had not the Aubrietia discovered it and had not one of the American destroyers started in pursuit, the U-boat would have made an attack and probably would have sent one or more ships to the bottom. The chief business of the escorting ships all through the war, was this unexciting work of chasing the submarines away; and for every underwater vessel actually destroyed there were hundreds of experiences such as the one which I have just described.

The rest of this trip was uneventful. Two American destroyers, escorted H. M. S. Cumberland—the ocean escort which had accompanied the convoy from Sydney—to Devonport; the rest of the American escort took its quota of merchantmen into Brest and from that point sailed back to Queenstown, whence, after three or four days in port, it went out with another convoy. This was the routine which was repeated until the end of the war.

The OU-17 and HS 14 form an illustration of convoys which made



A SINKING HOSPITAL SHIP
The Red Cross being clearly visible. The ship contained hundreds of wounded men besides scores of nurses. In the early part of 1917 the Germans officially notified the allies that they would sink hospital ships on sight, if encountered within certain specified areas. The Germans' reason for this policy was that it would force the allies to protect hospital ships with destroyer escorts and in this way make such destroyers unavailable for warfare on the German submarines.



A CONVOY ZIGZAGGING.
As soon as the massed ships entered the submarine zone, they began to turn from side to side in accordance with pre-arranged plans. This in itself was a great protection against submarines, which had to know the direction a ship was steering in order accurately to aim a torpedo. If the ships were constantly changing their course such calculations became very difficult.

part of the destroyer's duty was to rescue merchantmen that were being attacked by submarines; this Luckenback incident vividly illustrates this point. Had the submarine used its torpedo upon this vessel it probably could have disposed of it summarily; but it was the part of wisdom for the submarine to economize in these weapons, because they were so expensive and so comparatively scarce, and to use its guns whenever the opportunity offered. The Luckenback was ransacked, but the fact that the submarine's guns easily outranged hers made her armament useless. Thus all the German had to do in this case was to keep away at a safe distance and bombard the merchantman. The U-boat had been doing this for more than three hours when the destroyer reached the scene of operations; evidently the marksmanship was poor, for, out of a great many shots fired by the submarine, only about a dozen hit the vessel. The Luckenback was on fire, a shell having set aflame her cargo of cotton; certain parts of the machinery had been damaged, but in the main, the vessel was intact. The submarine was always heroic enough when it came to shelling defenseless merchantmen, but the appearance of a destroyer anywhere in her neighborhood made her resort to the one secure road to safety—diving for protection. The Nicholson immediately trained her guns on the U-boat, which on the second shot disappeared under the water. The destroyer despatched men to the disabled vessel, the fire was extinguished, necessary repairs to the machinery were made and in a few hours the Luckenback had become a member of the convoy.

The Luckenback's Fate.
On the morning of October 19 Com. Commander Johnson's division was escorting a great convoy of British ships on its way to the east coast of England. Suddenly out of the air came one of those calls which were daily occurrences in the submarine zone. The J. L. Luckenback signaled that she was 90 miles ahead of the convoy and was being shelled by a submarine. In a few minutes the Nicholson, one of the destroyers of the escort, started to the rescue. For the next few hours our ships began to pick out of the air the messages which detailed the progress of this adventure—messages which tell the story so graphically and which are so typical of the events which were constantly taking place in those waters, that I reproduce them verbatim:

8:50 A. M. S.O.S. J. L. Luckenback being gunned by submarine. Position 48.08 N. 9.31 W.

9:25 Conyngham to Nicholson: Proceed to assistance of S.O.S. ship.

9:30 Luckenback to U. S. A.: How maneuvering around.

9:30 Luckenback to U. S. A.: Am far are you away?

9:40 Luckenback to U. S. A.: Code books thrown overboard. How soon will you arrive?

Nicholson to Luckenback: In two hours.

9:41 Luckenback to U. S. A.: Look for boats. They are shelling us.

Nicholson to Luckenback: Do not surrender.

Luckenback to Nicholson: Never.

10:01 Nicholson to Luckenback: Course south magnetic.

12:36 P. M. Nicholson to Conyngham: Submarine submerged 47.47 N. 10.00 W. at 11:20.

1:23 Conyngham to Nicholson: What became of steamer?

3:41 Nicholson to Admiral (at Queenstown) and Conyngham: Luckenback now joining convoy. Should be able to make port unassisted.

I have already said that a great

miralty citation for this decoration reads as follows:

"At 5:50 P. M., H. M. S. Orama was torpedoed in convoy. Conyngham went full speed, circled bow of Orama, saw submarine between lines of convoy, passed right over it so that it was plainly visible and dropped depth charge. Prompt and correct action of Commander Johnson saved more ships from being torpedoed and probably destroyed the submarine."

"Slacker" Merchantmen.
One of the greatest difficulties of convoy command, especially during the first months the system was in operation, was the "slacker" merchantmen; these were vessels which, for various reasons, fell behind the convoy, a tempting bait for the submarine. At this time certain of the merchant captains manifested an incurable obstinacy; they affected to regard the U-boats with contempt and insisted rather on taking chances instead of playing the game. In such cases a destroyer would often have to leave the main division, go back several miles and attempt to prod the straggler into joining the convoy, much as a shepherd dog attempts to force the laggard sheep to keep within the flock. In some cases, when the merchantman proved particularly obstinate, the destroyer would slyly drop a depth charge, near enough to give the backward vessel a considerable shaking up without doing her any injury; usually such a shock caused the merchantman to start full speed ahead to rejoin her convoy, firmly believing that a submarine was giving chase. In certain instances the merchantman fell behind the convoy because the machinery had broken down or because she had suffered other accidents. The submarines would follow for days in the track of convoys, looking for a straggler of this kind, just as a shark will follow a vessel in the hope that something will be thrown overboard; and for this reason one destroyer at least was often detached from the escorting division as a rear guard. In this connection we must keep in mind that at no time until the armistice was signed was any escort force strong enough to insure entire safety, which added to the very heavy responsibility upon escort commanders.

What the Christabel Saw.

One late summer afternoon the American converted yacht Christabel was performing this duty for the British merchantman Danae, a vessel which had fallen eight miles behind her convoy, bound from La Pallice, France, to Brest. It was a beautiful evening; the weather was clear, the sea smooth and there was not a breath of wind. Under such conditions a submarine could conceal its presence only with great difficulty; and at about 6:30 the lookout on the Christabel detected a wake, some 600 yards on the port quarter. The Christabel started at full speed; the wake suddenly ceased, but a few splashes of oil were seen and she was steered in the direction of this disturbance. A depth charge was dropped at the spot where the submarine ought to have been, but it evidently did not produce the slightest result. The Christabel rejoined the Danae and the two went along peacefully for nearly two hours, when suddenly a periscope appeared about 200 yards away, on the starboard side. Evidently this persistent German had been following the ships all that time, looking for a favorable opportunity to discharge his torpedo. That moment had now arrived; the submarine was at a distance where a carefully aimed shot meant certain destruction; the appearance of the periscope meant the submarine was making observations in anticipation of delivering this shot. The Christabel started full speed for the wake of the periscope; this periscope itself disappeared under the water like a guilty thing and a disturbance on the surface showed that the submarine was making frantic efforts to submerge. The destroyer dropped its depth charge, set to explode at 70 feet, its radio meantime sending signals broadcast for assistance. Immediately after the mushroom of water arose from this charge a secondary explosion was heard; this was a horrible and muffled sound coming from the deep, more powerful and more terrible than any that could have been caused by the destroyer's "ash can." An enormous volcano of water and all kinds of debris arose from the sea, half way between the Christabel and the spot where it had dropped its charge. This secondary explosion shook the Christabel so violently that the officers thought at first that the ship had been seriously damaged, and a couple of men were knocked sprawling on the deck. As soon as the water subsided great masses of heavy black oil began rising to the surface and completely splintered wood and other wreckage appeared. In a few minutes the sea, for a space many hundred yards in diameter, was covered with dead fish—about ten times as many, the officers reported, as could have been killed by the usual depth charge. The Christabel and the ship she was guarding started to rejoin the convoy, entirely satisfied with the afternoon's work. Indeed, they had good reason to be; a day or two afterward a battered submarine, the U-50, crept painfully into the harbor of Santander, Spain; it was the boat which had had such an exciting contest with the Christabel. She was injured beyond the possibility of repair; besides, the Spanish government interned her for "the duration of the war"; so that, for all practical purposes, the vessel was as good as sunk. (Copyright, 1919, by the World's Work. Published by arrangement. Another article will appear next Sunday.)