

# DISARMING THE MERCHANT NAVY

## No Guns and More Butter on Overseas Trade-Routes

FOR nearly six years the merchant ships of the Allies have crept anonymously in and out of New Zealand harbours. No newspaper items heralded their arrival, or speeded their departure. No house-flags flew, no names appeared on bows or counter, or on the bridge-house, no Blue Peter gave warning of moorings about to be slipped. If the sun shone, there was no answering sparkle from brass-work or port and the long monotony of grey paint was broken only by the travel-stains of salt or smoke or rust. The Merchant Navy was in battledress, relieved only by the ensign at the stern, or a hoist of bunting like campaign ribbons on a dusty tunic.

But Auckland harbour the other morning saw a change. Colour was coming back once more to the water-front.

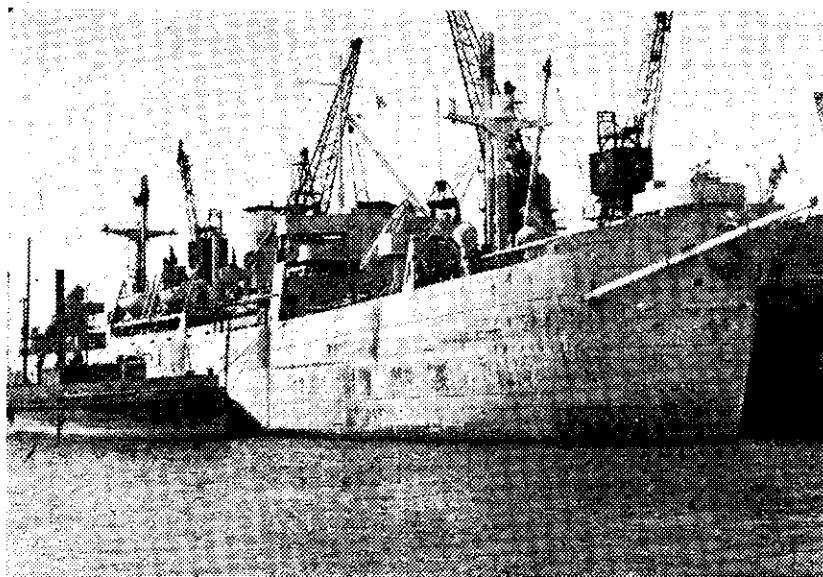
The clink of hammers, chipping away at deep-sea rust echoed from ship to ship across the basins and seamen in dungarees and woollen caps hung precariously on planks and bo'suns' chairs from the tops of funnels, or swayed under the sheer of bows. Across the red roofs of the ferry stagings the fresh yellow of a New Zealand Shipping Company funnel, as yet unblemished by any stain of smoke, rose above one of the Queen's Wharf berths, and against the background of the cool-stores at the Export Wharf the Matua, newly in from the Islands, shone like a debutante in all the freshness of her peace-time tropic whites.

Where sun-bleached grey paint still covered the plates, there was the wink of brass from the scuttles and bridge-work on an American supply-ship, still soberly rigged in horizon blue, a rating whistled as he polished the brass muzzle-plug of a gun.

But anchored in the stream—showing off, as it were, to her sister-ships—lay one of the Port liners in all her "peace-paint." A faint heat-haze flickered above her scarlet-and-black funnel, raked back gracefully, her hull pearl-grey, upper-works new-glistening white, with derricks and samson-posts of buff. No weary rust-stains drooped from her hawse-pipes and where the bows flared up from the forefoot the reflection of the ripples danced erratically across the plates. At the mainmasthead the house-flag—red cross and blue saltire on a white ground—stirred in the light air and the name-plate on the bridge intimated that she was the Port Jackson, and that it didn't matter who knew it.

Yet more significant than the new paint as a sign of the times was the absence of anything resembling armament. No heavy six-inch gun cast its shadow across the taffrail, no quick-firer cocked its nose up from the poop. Of the queer fittings which in war years excited the curiosity of the landmen and provoked long and involved arguments among the blue-water sailors who travelled daily to and fro on the harbour ferry-boats, only the conning-tower-like structure housing the radar-equipment remained.

NO doubt the master of the Port Jackson was glad to be rid of the overburden of guns and ammunition.



AWAITING HER TURN: A merchantman, not yet disarmed, unloads at an Auckland wharf. Notice the all-round protection afforded by the guns (mounted in their armoured "zarebas") at the bows, below the wing of the bridge, on the boat-deck and at the stern.

It is well to go round armed to the teeth when arms are necessary. In the early days of the war, most of the skippers cried to high heaven and the Admiralty for guns, and many didn't manage to get them in time to bring their ships safely home. But to-day armament is a serious liability on a merchant-ship. Not only is there the weight of the guns themselves, and of the ammunition, but where heavy guns (of 6-inch or comparable calibre) are carried, decks have to be stiffened to take the added weight and protective screens, proof against at least machine-gun fire, must be there to protect the gun crews. Even in the case of secondary armament, such as 12-pounder QF guns, Bofors, Oerlikons and Browning heavy machine-guns, where deck-stiffening is in most cases not necessary, these protective-shields—called zarebas—are just as essential and just as heavy.

### More Guns, Less Butter

In the aggregate, then, the armament of a merchantman means a substantial addition to the ship's deadweight. In the first World War, a merchant ship, unless requisitioned by the Navy as an auxiliary cruiser or Q-ship, was not armed forward of the bridge. In many cases the sole offensive weapon was a 12-pounder mounted on the poop. So, too, in the early stages of the second World War, when the enemies were still only the surface raider and the U-boat, and the victim had more chance of running away, stern guns were considered enough. But when France fell and heavy Dornier bombers and flying-boats began to range far and wide over the Western Approaches and the Bay of Biscay, attack came from any point of the compass with little or no warning and guns had to be mounted to meet it.

So there had to be guns forward, aft and amidships, the bridges, wheel-houses and such nerve-centres had to be reinforced with armour. In the later stages of the Battle of the Atlantic, the

average 10,000-ton cargo liner might carry, in addition to passive defence equipment and small arms, a 6-inch gun mounted on the poop, a 12-pounder quick-firing gun forward, a Bofors anti-aircraft gun somewhere aft and at strategic points on the boat-deck and on the wings of the bridge half-a-dozen or more Oerlikons. Many also carried several twin-mounted .50 calibre Brownings. In fact, up to a hundred tons of cargo "lift" could be lost from the weight of guns and armour carried, and where the cargo was, say, butter, the loss in carrying capacity was quite a serious one.

It is natural enough, therefore, that now when guns are no longer more important than even part of the butter, shipping companies should be in a hurry to disarm their vessels.

### Big Job for the Navy

There is, however, more to the disarming of a merchant-ship than unscrewing a few nuts and bolts and you can't just drop a 6-inch gun on the wharf and forget about it. It might get into the wrong hands. All defensive equipment is issued by the Navy and (except in the case of "expendable" stores) remains "on charge" to use the Service phrase. And all equipment on charge must be accounted for.

To get some idea of what work is involved in this local disarmament programme, *The Listener* paid a visit recently to the DEMS office at Auckland. The DEMS office (the initials stand for "Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships") is the Navy's liaison with the merchant service and the branch immediately concerned with the business we were poking our nose into.

It's not an imposing office—when the Navy puts up its shingle, it stays a shingle and never looks like becoming a neon sign—but everything is to the point. Even the mottoes on the wall are pertinent: "You Have Only One Life, Take Care of It," and "A Shut Mouth

Swallows No Sea Water" were two of them.

We had permission from the Naval Base to make the call and ask questions, and we had a cordial enough welcome, considering that the Lieutenant in charge is one of the busiest men on the water-front. But though cordial, he was cautious—the tradition of the Silent Service and the taste of salt-water had no doubt much to do with it. He thawed, however, when it was explained that whatever we wrote would be passed before publication.

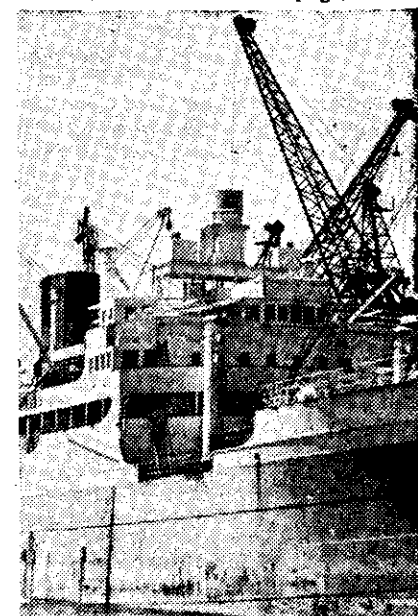
### Labour is a Difficulty

"We're working on five ships here in port at the present time," he told us, "Three of them are cargo vessels in the Home trade and two are inter-Dominion freighters. We'd like to do more but, like everyone else, we can't get enough labour. Heavy guns are moved by the gun-mounting department of the Naval Dockyard, but for other work we have to rely on contractors and they all have their difficulties. Then, too, when we start on a ship we like to finish the job, not leave it half-done. Another of our troubles is that we can't take out guns and armour and the like when the ship's gear is working cargo, and that means that most of our heavy lifting has to be done during meal-hours."

A more than usually troublesome job had been the removal of the armour around the bridges and light gun-positions. Where this was steel it could be cut with an oxy-acetylene flame, but steel was largely superseded during the war for this kind of work by a plastic armour which is not so easy to remove. This plastic—a mixture of bitumen and granite chips—is poured into boxing like concrete and once it has hardened in position it stays hard.

"What is the programme when you get a ship to disarm?" we asked.

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"ONLY the conning-tower-like structure housing the radar equipment remained." The midships section of the Port Jackson, showing the radar-housing directly below the top of the wharf-crane.