

(continued from previous page)

"First we get the ammunition off and then we unship the guns. Both guns and ammunition go to the naval armament depot, where they are checked over and stored. And, of course, there are the 'naval stores' to be checked and returned."

"Such as?"

"Such as range-finders, binoculars, telephones and so on. Here, for example, is a list of equipment to come off one of the ships we are working on now."

He passed over what looked like an invoice-pad. It revealed that the vessel had on loan from the Navy an imposing array of ready-use ammunition-boxes, gun-covers, lamps, grease-guns, electrical wiring, thermometers, gun sights. As we turned the pages the list grew progressively more abstruse and technical.

Many Novelties

"What," we wanted to know, "are these AWD's and FAM's and PAC's?"

He swallowed slightly before answering. You can't train yourself to a habitual reticence and then talk reasonably freely without making an effort.

"Well, they're all defensive devices. The PAC, for example—that stands for 'parachute and cable'—was a gadget which fired a wire vertically into the air above a ship. These wires were usually put up in pairs, one to port and one to starboard, if the ship were attacked by aircraft. Parachutes kept them suspended for enough time either to damage the aircraft or force it to turn away.

"The FAM is a modification of the PAC (FAM stands for 'fast aerial mine'). It is fitted with an explosive charge at the top of the suspended wire. If a plane struck the wire, a parachute opened at the lower end and the resistance of this 'chute, along with the impetus of the plane, pulled the explosive charge down and a trigger mechanism exploded it against the wing or fuselage. Ingenious, but it had its drawbacks. There was always the danger that, with a change of wind or course, the wire might foul the ship instead of the plane. Then you'd be hoist with your own petard, as it were."

For What the Bell Told

"And the AWD?" we asked.

"That's the Acoustic Warning Device, used before radar was generally introduced. It was fitted to the masthead and rang a bell on the bridge whenever the receiver picked up the sound of approaching aircraft."

The main disadvantage with the AWD, we learned, was that it was too acoustic and not nearly selective enough in its reactions. It was rarely possible to say for what (or whom) the bell tolled. One toot on a siren would do the trick, or even the roar of a high wind. And when a motor-ship joined the convoy it sounded like all the engines of the London Metropolitan Fire Brigade going to an incendiary blitz.

Another weapon now being removed from some ships was the "pillar-box." This was a rocket projector having a mounting vaguely reminiscent of a pillar-box, with racks on either side. Designed to fire 20 rockets simultaneously it was a good weapon against low-flying aircraft.

Turning to the question of the passive defences used by merchantmen we were told that British ships still had to take precautions against magnetic mines

and that none had yet been "degaussed."

But though degaussing equipment and radar installations were being left on the ships, how long these would be retained was a matter of Admiralty policy and therefore one on which our friend the Lieutenant would not express an opinion. Later on there might be more news, and if there was we would be welcome to come and get it—provided always that we didn't come on a busy day.

Being always ready to take a good-humoured hint, we thanked him for his patience and took our leave.

He grabbed his cap and left along with us—it was one of his busy days and he had to see a man about a gun.

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