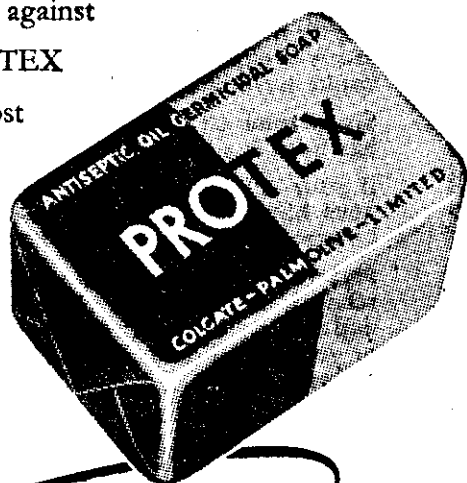




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## Remember the Merchant Seafarers

(Written for "The Listener" by DAVID K. MULGAN, who served throughout the war in the British Merchant Navy)

THIS war, like the previous one, focused public interest on the Merchant Navy. People realised that without a merchant fleet the armed forces of the allies could not be supplied, nor even civil populations sustained with the bare necessities of life. This can be appreciated when we remember how major allied offensives were delayed for months or years because of the relentless havoc wrought on our shipping by the enemy.

Britain is the greatest maritime nation in the world. Not only has she the largest merchant fleet, but the traditions behind it are old and secure in their foundations. Paradoxically, though, the average Briton is far from sea-minded. He has a vague sort of idea that Britain has a navy, whatever that might be. The most he usually thinks about merchant shipping is when he sees tantalising advertisements for Mediterranean sunshine cruises. For the usual work-a-day shipping, the tramps, the freighters, the tankers and the rest, he has probably never given them a thought.

When the war started, Merchant Navy officers began wearing their uniforms on shore. This was natural, as most men of military age were then in uniform, and one obviously wished to gain respect by wearing a uniform to which one was entitled. This particular uniform was a new sight in public places and, to illustrate the extent of general ignorance about the service, uninformed servicemen used at first to salute the wearer. Ratings in the service had no official uniform and so a very unpretentious little badge was struck and issued to them to wear. This, combined with the daily news of torpedoings, gradually made the man in the street aware of the Merchant Navy.

[It is sadly ironical that it takes a war to arouse any interest in a service which is just as vital to the life of the Empire in peace as in war. Without it Britain could not import the food she needs, or the raw materials for her industries. Without it New Zealand could not ship her produce to her customers

overseas. Most of the overseas ships we see in our ports are of United Kingdom registry and manned by English, Scots and Welsh seamen. Shipping is part of the life-blood of Britain's economic structure, indeed one of her most important industries. It is also one of her most neglected industries.

The mining industry has a cabinet minister of its own to watch over it. Shipping, with its many-sided ramifications, has hitherto had to be content to be cared for as a sideline of the Board of Trade. The war saw the birth of a Ministry of Shipping, but this has since been merged with the Ministry of Transport to become the Ministry of War Transport.

What then of the merchant seafarers, the men who ply the seas for a living? What to-day are their conditions, their outlook, and the causes thereof? This month in Seattle, U.S.A., representatives of shipowners, seafarers and governments of a number of nations are meeting under the auspices of the International Labour Office to try to set minimum standards of pay and conditions on ships of every nationality. Britain is, I regret to say, very much behind some countries in the matter of such standards on her ships. This is due largely to public ignorance and apathy to which I have referred.

LESS than a year after the 1918 armistice, seafarers' wages were reduced to nearly one-half their wartime level. Shipping became slack and thousands of men found themselves "on the beach." Competition with heavily subsidised foreign shipping became keen so that British shipowners cut their operating costs to the absolute minimum. It was the crews of the ships who got the thin end of this wedge. Crews' quarters were overcrowded and unhygienic. Their food was often of shocking quality. The Pure Food and Drugs Act does not, even now, apply to ships' food. Consequently foodstuffs that have been condemned under this Act have been bought up cheap by ship-chandlers and sold to ships.

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