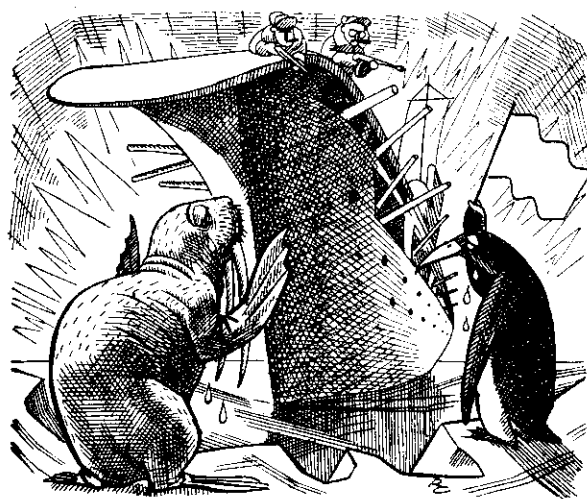


ASSAULT ON ANTARCTICA

Admiral Byrd Dreams of More Than A White Christmas

THE American Navy, which Admiral William F. Halsey said last September would sail where it pleased, is heading South—or at least a not inconsiderable portion of it. At the time of writing, a single cable message was all the news available here of the super-colossal Antarctic expedition about to set sail from the United States, but enough information was available to indicate that post-war exploration was going to be conducted on the Governmental level, and that the Americans had gotten off to a flying start.



"Beating up the ice-cap"

If "getting there fustest with the mostest," and not sending a boy to do a man's job (twin principles of American strategy) make for success in the South Polar regions the job is as good as done. Consider, first, the composition of the task force which spearheads Admiral Byrd's 1947 polar blitzkrieg.

Biggest Ever

The U.S.S. Philippine Sea, which in point of size may be considered the heavyweight in the armada, is a full-blown aircraft carrier of the Essex Class, laid down in 1944 and commissioned in September, 1945, after peace had broken out. At a conservative estimate she is probably the largest ship ever used to explore anything bigger than the atom. She displaces 27,100 tons, or 33,000 with a full load, and is therefore substantially heavier than the *Indefatigable*, which displaced a paltry 23,000 tons, or 30,000 when fully fuelled and bombed up.

The Philippine Sea is 888ft. long between the perpendiculars, and has a beam of 93ft. If she were laid down in Lambton Quay, she would create a traffic jam that would take about two years to clear. In fact, it would be quicker to walk home. Besides carrying about 100 planes (that is the estimate given by *Jane's Fighting Ships*) she has 12 5-inch guns, 72 Bofors-type A.A. guns, and 52 smaller high-angle guns,

all of which should be useful in keeping the penguins and sea-elephants at bay while the 100 planes are beating up the icecap. She cost a frigid 68,932,000 dollars to build, and probably costs a substantial percentage of that, annually, to run.

"Amphibious" Flagship

Smaller than the Philippine Sea, but administratively more important, is the U.S.S. Mt. Olympus. This is a vessel of the Mt. McKinley class, designed as flagships for the amphibious forces operating in the Pacific in the latter stages of the Japanese war. The Mt. Olympus will act as flagship of the expedition—she is a ship of 6,500 tons displacement (about the size of the *Rangitira*), with a designed speed of 15½ knots.

Of the ships which will be travelling with her, two are known to be "attack transports"—the *Merrick* and the *Yancey*. The latter is not listed by *Jane*, but the *Merrick* is apparently of about the same size and speed as the Mt. Olympus. Vessels of her type were familiar enough to Wellingtonians and Aucklanders during the war and were generally characterised by massive "goal-post" masts, high centre-castles and an array of guns which stuck out like quills upon the fretful porpoentine.

Once the pack-ice is reached, the advance guard will be the icebreakers *Burton Island* and *North Wind*. These are both Naval vessels, each is diesel-powered, with electric drive, and each has three propeller shafts—two aft and one forward. They are double-hulled vessels, all welded, and the *North Wind* (slightly the smaller of the two) is designed to crush ice 9ft. thick. She set the U.S. Treasury back 10,000,000 dollars when she was built, just four years ago this month.

Sentimental recollections of Captain Nemo's imaginary voyage to the pole, or perhaps a desire to do better than Sir Hubert Wilkins did with another *Nautilus* at the North Pole, may explain the inclusion in the fleet of another all-welded, double-hulled vessel, the submarine *Sennet* built at the Portsmouth Navy Yard (Va.) during the war. She displaces 1526 tons, which is quite a lot of submarine in anybody's language.

These are the only ships in the fleet which were named in the brief cable message that burst so unexpectedly on the world a few days ago, but from statements made by the naval commander, Rear-Admiral Richard H. Cruzen, at least 10 ships are now sailing, or will shortly sail South. The balance will almost certainly include

Written for "The Listener"
by "E. & O.E."

some sort of fleet train of oilers and supply-ships to maintain the specialist units. Rumors for the 57 frog-men who are expected, in the line of duty, to place underwater demolition charges on the ice-barrier should in themselves be quite an item.

What is the Object?

But what is the object of massing all this imposing armada? Admiral Cruzen said the United States had made no formal claim to any part of the Antarctic continent, and did not recognise the claims of any other Power. Whether any claims were made as a result of the present expedition would be for the State Department to decide. Whatever the position is, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* awards the U.S. a segment of the icecap (James W. Ellsworth Land and Marie Byrd Land) extending from 80 deg. West to about 150 deg. West. Norway's sphere of influence is shown as extending from about 45 deg. E. on the borders of Enderby Land, through Queen Maud Land, Princess Ragnhild Land and Princess Martha Land to a point about 15 deg. W., where a pale pink flush reveals that part of the Empire on which the sun never sets for several weeks every year. *Britannica* (perhaps not unnaturally) gives Britain the lion's share of the last dark continent. Coats Land, Luitpold Land, Hearst Land, Graham Land and other areas of the sector known as the Weddell Quadrant—from about 15 deg. W. to the eastern boundary of James W. Ellsworth Land—are all nominally British despite such un-British names as Joinville, Stefansson, Charcot, Bellinghausen, and Nordenskjöld peppered all over the continental shelf and its island approaches. Nor is that all the area ringed with pink. From the western boundary of Marie Byrd Land right round through about 175 deg. the flag has apparently been shown at some time or another—though without benefit of multiple pom-pom guns. With one small purple exception—a tiny slice (without much icing)—visited in 1840 by D'Urville, named *Adelie Land* (perhaps after the penguins), and credited to France.

Australia May be There

The day after Admiral Byrd let the cat out of the bag, Australia jumped in with a claim for an area of Antarctica equal in extent to about a third of Europe, and believed to be rich in minerals, including uranium. Discussions, said a Canberra message, had reached departmental level on the subject of a polar expedition, and Sir Douglas Mawson had conferred with a special committee of the External Affairs Department. It is expected that this committee will recommend to Dr. Evatt the despatch of an expedition as soon as possible, but it has also been pointed out that the organising of such an undertaking would take 12 months. It could also have been pointed out that Australia has no surplus aircraft-carriers.

Australia is not the only other country re-discovering an interest in Ant-

arctica. The day after Australia had said her piece, a cable from London broke the news of a joint British-Swedish-Norwegian assault, planned for the (northern) winter of 1948-49. This is to be a three-dimensional offensive, like the American one, but on a more modest scale. Jeeps will be used instead of planes to cover the area, but supplies will be dropped by parachute.

But despite Norway's suggestion of an international conference to discuss the question of Antarctic sovereignty (which could almost be described as an attempt to blockade the harbour after the fleet has sailed), sovereignty does not appear to be the burning problem.

It was Admiral Byrd, and not Admiral Cruzen, who revealed what must be the real motive behind the undertaking. Speaking to reporters after farewelling four of his ships at Norfolk, Virginia, he said that the Antarctic contained an



"The U.S. . . . did not recognise the claims of any other Power."

area as big as the United States and Mexico never seen by humans. It contained vast reservoirs of natural resources, including probably enough coal to satisfy United States requirements for 50 years.

That must be the operative phrase. Uranium ore? Bah, that is *vieux jeu*; territorial aggrandisement? Too pre-1939! But coal! There is something which affects everyone. To a nation just emerged from a coal strike in which it had nothing to keep it warm but the heat generated by the indictment of John L. Lewis and the U.M.W.A., the prospect of half-a-century of good coal fires is enough to warrant any expense.

But there is something anomalous in the idea of coal-exports from the Antarctic, something which no one has put a finger on yet. In point of physical fact, carrying coals from the Antarctic does seem almost as fatuous as carrying them to Newcastle.