Trawling is Tough, but it Means

HONEST WEALTH FROM THE SEA

Written for "The Listener" by ROBERT SOLWAY

IT was like this: I was strolling along the wharves in Wellington one wet and miserable afternoon recently when I felt an urge to quit the city. As I was about to go through the gates of the Eastbourne ferry wharf I saw an unmistakable man of the sea, and as he looked kindly enough, I opened a conversation. The fierce southerly was blowing hard at us and we moved to the shelter of a telephone-booth, where I shot him a few straight questions leading up to whether he could help get me on a trawler. "So you want to go fishing," he said. To my nod, he smiled. "I will take you," he said, and then introduced himself as John Carndo, the skipper of the Maimai. "We sail at noon on Monday. Put some rough clothes in a bag and be sure to be aboard before noon."

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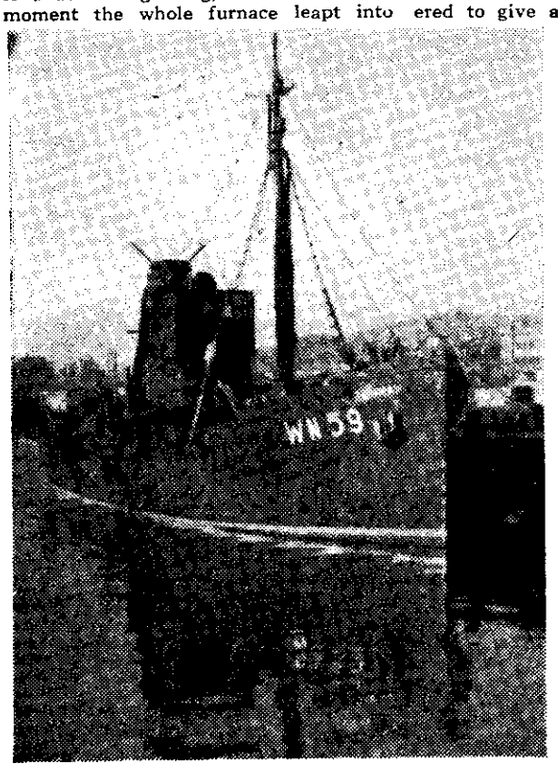
NEXT day aboard the Maimai I was taken up to the monkey-island, a glassed-in platform above the bridge, and was given a comfortable "possie" in which to sleep. Before noon the crew began drifting aboard and soon made me feel at home. Down to the engine-room I went. Jack Sellers, the Chief, who was on watch, gave me a friendly smile. "So you've come for a trip," he said. He was jet black with getting steam up and his heavy wool shirt was soaked with sweat. He showed me the stokehold. Behind three doors were the fires, which, he said, were fed at 10-minute intervals. The heat was blinding. He tossed shovel after shovel of coal into the fires and then seized a long poker which is called a slicer and pushed it under the glowing, white coal. In a moment the whole furnace leapt into vibrant life. He dug down into the coal and swung in still heavier shovelfuls. Next he rushed into the engine-room and after looking at some gauges touched some levers. The bell rang and the ship slid from the wharf. Now he moved even more swiftly, for you see the chief of the Maimai is a fireman as well. From out of the bunkers ran the coal. Jack was a medium-sized man, with pale grey eyes, encircled with a mask of black. His hands that clutched the shovel were as hard as asphalt. He kept raking and scooping. The engines turned over and over while the sweat poured off his body from the furnace heat. "She's a tough life, but it's the money that keeps me on," he commented.



THE MAIMAI: She was built for minesweeping in 1943

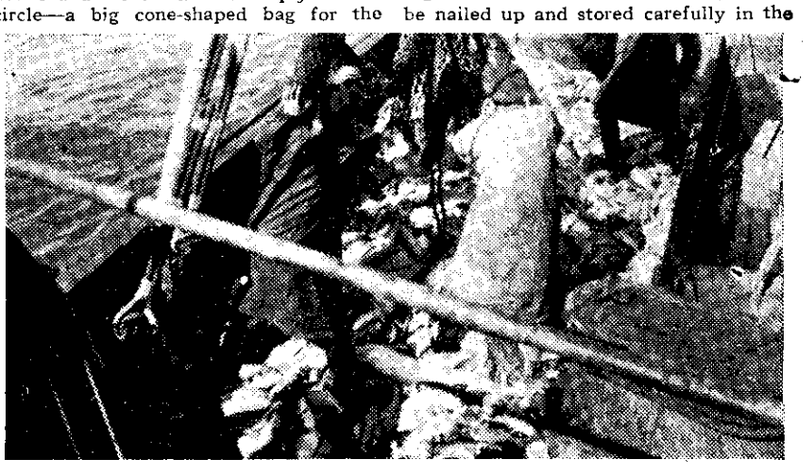
Mending the Nets

On deck again I now saw Wellington receding into the distance. Clearing the Heads the Maimai headed southward out into the open sea. . . . I looked round and saw the deckhands at work. They wore blue jerseys and rough-looking trousers that smelt of tar and the slime of fish. Nets hung like spider webs over the deck. Then the cook poked his head out of the galley porthole. The skipper went over and spoke. When the cook stepped on deck I found that he was a small, quiet man, with slightly-grey hair. One did not have to be told that he had roughed it. Just then the skipper called me over. He was slipping a needle into the net where holes gaped. "You will see how we mend the net. . . . It's quite simple . . . always we watch out for holes . . . we mark these with rope-yarn . . . rocks and wrecks frequently tear them."

As he finished speaking the crew gathered to give a hand with the 120-foot long net. I struggled for some time before I could get the knack of putting on the large glass floats which are tied very close to one another on to the headline. The waves began to darken. Afterwards we were told by the cook that tea was ready. The crew's quarters where we ate were abaft and below the galley; a kerosene tin shaded the lamp. The crew spoke of many things, for all had had a colourful past. The skipper sat with them at table—in the Maimai there is no class-feeling.

At the Fishing-grounds

The meal over, I turned in, but sleep was almost impossible, for early in the night the trawler fought a high sea and rolled. Once or twice I grabbed for the rail. At 2.0 a.m. we reached the fishing-grounds between Cape Turnagain and Castlepoint, and I was suddenly awakened by the sound of winches as the net was shot into the sea. The noise was like a shovel scraping on metal. I rose, dressed, and crawled down the ladder. Outside the crew were moving around the deck in their oilskins. "Tug away aft," shouted the skipper. And the ship shuddered as she steamed furiously dragging the long net behind. The Maimai made a complete circle and then stopped. Boards that looked like two sledges attached to wire were next dropped into the sea with a thud, pressure of water against the boards keeping them apart. The skipper explained to me that when the net is under the sea it is simply a half-circle—a big cone-shaped bag for the fish to swim into. "Shooting the net" takes half-an-hour, and after the net is out it is dragged along the bottom for about three hours.



"Wherever I looked there were fish"

"A Splendid Catch"

Soon after dawn, steam winches started pulling in the equipment until it was time for all hands to drag in the net. The sun flashed over the sea. The skipper leaned far out over the bridge and spoke to the tired figures below, then came on deck himself. Robert Pullen, the mate, had taken up his station astern. I slipped into my gum-boots and was soon heaving with others on the net. We pulled and tugged before it would even start to move, and now and again the ship would roll under the weight of the net as we dragged it in. The cold feeling of the net on the hands suddenly changed into pain that burned incessantly as though one had been rubbing them on a rasp. The creosote in which the net is soaked before use made our hands sticky and brown, but we cleaned them with cotton-waste. As we saw the big bag gleaming with fish coming nearer we pulled excitedly. I felt good, saw the pleased look on the faces of the crew, began wondering how people ashore would feel at seeing such a splendid catch. As the fish were lifted by tackle aboard a gale of sea-gulls followed. The deck was running with water. The second fisherman then went under the bag of fish and untied the codline and the fish came tumbling out as he moved away.

Wherever I looked there were fish. Shaking the net straight again we dropped it into the sea. Next came "gutting." The crew each got a case and with a sharp knife went to work. Blood spilled off the cases. At first, it was a bit sickening. However, after the first haul, I grew accustomed to it. The fish are tossed into a well, where a hose of seawater is kept playing on them, then later the fish are lifted out and are put into selected cases. Each case, containing from 100lb. to 120lb. of fish, has to be nailed up and stored carefully in the freezer. The skipper told me that on the previous voyage the Maimai landed 1,000 cases.

Fish Everywhere

I tried "gutting." As the ship rolled I felt most insecure. I had just opened up the belly of a groper when a wave knocked me off my box in among the fish. I fell face forward. Fish swam over my hair, it seemed, and I caught a crayfish just as it was about to embrace me. Above me the faces were smiling and I was giddy. The men near by went on gutting, and when one of them lifted a big sunfish the size of a tablecloth from the well, I looked in astonishment. Someone commented on the remarkable things which came out of the sea. Occasionally the Maimai steamed near land. Akitito, a small settlement beside some trees, was streaked in sunshine. Cape Turnagain stood out, white, like a sheet on a clothes line. Porpoises jumped clean out of the water and then dived in again. Sticking up through the waves were the black fins of sharks. For hours they skulked round. If any get in the net the crew knife them. Night came and by the light of electric lamps the men worked. Only when there is a moon do they trawl at night.

Some Statistics

Often the men are on deck for 48 hours at a stretch and sometimes the crew work as much as 120 hours a week. The cook is on the job from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., for which he gets £10 a week clear. The boy receives £5. The Maimai has a crew of ten. Expenses are

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