

RUSES OF THE Q-SHIPS

(By 23/762)

ONE of the most amazing stories of the last war concerned the mystery or "Q" ships which ultimately defeated the German submarine menace and cleared the seas of danger. Perhaps, even now, another kind of mystery ship has been devised, but its methods will be kept as secret as those of the former ships until this war is ended.

Rear-Admiral Gordon Campbell, V.C., has left us a vivid account of his adventures on the mystery ships which he controlled. He was the only one of 30 "Q" ship captains who stood the strain for more than a year, for the life was one of the strictest discipline, demanding heroism, patience, and self-control. Time and time again these men had to wait at hidden posts until submarines circling about them came close enough to become certain targets for the concealed guns. Frequently the "Q" ships were shelled and, in order to allay suspicion, parties of sailors known as "panic parties" were sent off in open boats to convey the impression that the attacked ship had been abandoned. Once one of the parties almost gave the game away by laughing as they enticed a submarine nearer the "abandoned" ship.

All Sorts of Ships

All sorts of ships were fitted out to combat a new method of sea warfare which was destroying in overwhelming numbers the Allied merchant fleet and cutting off valuable food and military supplies from Britain and France. Liners, tramps, colliers, trawlers, schooners, barques, smacks, and luggers were called in for service. The fitting up of these ships had to be done in the strictest secrecy, and many and weird were the disguises they assumed. Officers of the Royal Navy took command, dressed themselves in reefer jackets, red ties, bowler hats or anything else which would make them look like tough merchants men. The British ship, *Victoria*, and the French ship, *Marguerite*, were the first to be fitted out, in November, 1914, but it was not until 1916-17 that the "Q" ships began to operate in full force.

A Vice-Admiral's Story

The general idea was to take a merchant ship and disguise her so that all her armaments were concealed. How this was done remained the responsibility of the officer in charge, who was always an officer of the Royal Navy. Vice-Admiral Campbell tells how he treated his own ship—the first of several which he commanded during the war. He took over an old merchant ship which ordinarily carried six officers and 26 men; he had to carry 11 officers and 56 men and he succeeded. He arranged to have pipes puffing steam, to add to the illusion that deck houses concealing guns housed engines. When they came into action the walls fell down and exposed the guns hidden there; the sides of the ship were cut and hinged to open out quickly so that the 12-pounder guns

could fire; other guns were concealed on either side of the bridge, the corners of which were hinged so that they could be pushed aside easily; the wireless aerial was disguised, for in the early days of the last war few merchantmen carried wireless. With large supplies of paint and ready-made frames of all shapes the ship could be quickly disguised each day.

Old Rules Went Overboard

When the ship had been armed, the crew had to be trained. Spick and span naval men had to forget their uniforms, grow beards and dress in the oddest clothes. Such offences as "spitting on the deck," "dirty fingers on paintwork," and "hanging out washed clothes," which are strictly forbidden in the Royal Navy, were encouraged to make the "Q" ship resemble the dirtiest old collier possible.

It was like rehearsing scenes for a stage spectacle. These rehearsals were carried out for some weeks, to be ready for any emergency. Firemen had to lounge about the decks; the mate wandered about in his bowler hat; stewards or cooks had to empty slops over the side. All this was done so that when the ship entered a foreign port the whole show would not be given away to the pilots, who proved to be very annoying people. Even the pilots of British ports had to be deluded and this was sometimes a most difficult undertaking, when all foreign boats were under suspicion.

"Panic" Parties

Then the "panic" parties were drilled and perfectly rehearsed. Here again the plan was to delude the enemy. The idea was this: as soon as a German submarine appeared pandemonium was to break loose. There were to be shouts for help and a rush for the boats. Men were to clamber into the lifeboats, which were to be lowered and put off. Even a stuffed parrot in a cage was used by Admiral Campbell's men to give further reality to the scene. One man always had a cap ready so that he would look like the Master. When the life-boats lay off the ship, she would give the appearance of having been deserted, but in reality all the guns would be manned and ready for the moment when the submarine approached sufficiently close to make her destruction certain.

According to Plan

Admiral Campbell's first success came when he sank the U 68. Everything went according to plan. The ship stopped when ordered to do so; the "panic" party played its part to perfection with the aid of the stuffed parrot. The waiting, for those who were left on the ship, seemed like hours, but slowly the submarine came nearer and by artful manoeuvring the ship got into her best action position. Then, when the U-boat was within 800 yards, a whistle blew, the wheelhouse walls collapsed, the White Ensign was run up, the ship's sides

swung open and in a few seconds three 12-pounder guns, the Maxim guns and rifles were pouring fire into the enemy. The submarine submerged, but was soon seen trying to rise. Depth charges were dropped, and oil and pieces of wood floating on the sea revealed the fate of U 68.

Even More Exciting

Admiral Campbell's next catch was U 83. This proved to be a still more exciting encounter and a great strain on the nerves of those waiting for action. On this occasion the Admiral allowed a torpedo to hit his ship, but turned her to avoid complete destruction. Then the "panic" party went into action, yelling and rushing the boats, one of which was allowed to "jam," but eventually got away with "all" the crew, including the stuffed parrot. As the submarine came close in to examine its catch, the hidden officers and men could see her whole hull under water, with only the periscope above. Then, when she was within 100 yards, the wheelhouse collapsed, the sides fell open, the hen-coup fell with a crash, the guns opened fire. Only one officer and one man were saved from the U-boat. Admiral Campbell was awarded the V.C., but his ship was so badly holed that she had to be towed to an English port and beached.

A Different Trick

By the time Admiral Campbell took his third ship out the Germans were acquainted with the ruses of the "Q" ships, so he set about devising other means of outwitting the enemy. On this occasion he had dummy guns fitted to his ship, as well as other strange contrivances. As soon as the "Q" ship was overhauled by a submarine the sailors went through all the motions of loading their dummy gun and then disgraced themselves by running away, in reality to take up their positions with the real guns. Men in overalls lay flat on the decks, one saying that he was disguised as a lifebelt; the "panic" party went overboard in the lifeboats and pulled away from the ship. Meanwhile the U-boat shelled the ship, severely damaging her, but the hidden men held their fire until the submarine was within 50 yards. That sealed the fate of UC 29. It was the first time in the history of the British Navy that a ship was asked to select a V.C. from among both officers and men, this being done by secret ballot.

Life on the "Q" ships was filled with danger. Storms frequently hammered the vessels and disabled them. The officers and men never knew when they would be attacked and they were never able to reveal their identity until they went into action. Frequently, too, they rescued, as by a miracle, survivors of vessels which had been sunk by the enemy. On one occasion Admiral Campbell's ship found four unconscious men in a small boat which had been drifting for days. But until the submarine menace was overcome, the men of the mystery ships never slackened their vigilance, however difficult the task ahead of them. By their courage and their initiative they wrote another stirring page in the history and tradition of the Royal Navy, history which is being repeated at the present day.

Personal

Colonel H. E. Barrowclough, D.S.O., M.C., has been appointed to command the 6th New Zealand Infantry Brigade. He will leave with the 3rd Echelon. Colonel Barrowclough, now a solicitor in Auckland, served with the Rifle Brigade in the last war.

Lieut.-Colonel N. S. Falla, C.M.G., D.S.O., has been appointed to command the New Zealand Overseas Base. He is chairman and managing director of the Union Steam Ship Co., Ltd. Colonel Falla commanded the 3rd New Zealand Field Artillery Brigade in the last war, and later the 2nd (Army) Brigade.

Lieut.-Colonel A. J. Manson, M.C., Sergeant-at-Arms, is attached to Air Force Headquarters. He served with the Machine Gun section in France, and since the war he has been a territorial officer with the Hawke's Bay Regiment.

Major G. H. Clifton, M.C., has been appointed Brigade Major to Colonel Hardest, 5th New Zealand Infantry Brigade. He will leave with the 2nd Echelon. Major Clifton is a graduate of Duntroon Military College, and served on the North-West Frontier, India, in 1919-20.

Major J. I. Brooke has been appointed Brigade Major to Colonel Barrowclough. He graduated from Duntroon in 1919 and in 1925 he was seconded to the British Army in India for two years. He is at present Commandant of the Army School at Trentham.

Major G. Dittmer, M.B.E., M.C., who is in command of the Maori Battalion now in training at Palmerston North, has been promoted to the rank of Lieut.-Colonel.

Captain C. Shuttleworth, until recently in command of the Army School at Narrow Neck, has been appointed acting-Lieut.-Colonel in command of the 24th Auckland Rifle Battalion.

Captain C. E. Weir has been appointed acting-Lieut.-Colonel and given command of the 6th Field Regiment, New Zealand Artillery.

A. N. Grigg, M.P., of Longbeach, Ashburton, has enlisted for service overseas.

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