

WAR DIARY

THE AUXILIARY NAVY

(By "Tafrail," in "London Calling")

WITHIN the last week or two, I've been on board, or at sea in, various ships of what may be called the Auxiliary Navy. The first was an armed merchant-cruiser, a well-known ex-transatlantic liner converted into a warship, manned largely from the various naval reserves, and with guns mounted, she has been employed in northern waters practically ever since the beginning of the war.

How many thousands of miles she may have steamed, since, I don't pretend to know; but all through the gales, snowstorms, and long, dark nights of the northern winter her normal routine had been eighteen to nineteen days out, followed by five days to a week in harbour, for refuelling and storing. Her officers and men enjoyed about three days' leave every six weeks, and well they deserved it.

The ship presented a strange contrast to the time when I was last on board

her, before the war. Her public rooms had been stripped of their panelling and tapestries. Silken hangings and curtains had disappeared from her private suites. The children's playroom had been converted into a shelter for guns' crews in bad weather, and whole ranges of cabins demolished to form mess decks. All the elaborate fripperies had been discarded for the grim purpose of war.

It's a far cry from an armed merchant-cruiser of nearly 20,000 tons to a ship of just over 700; but at another port I went on board a boom defence vessel which, with others of her type, has the task of watching the lines of buoyed nets and booms which protect most of our naval and commercial harbours. She was provided with her own motive power for steaming from place to place; but most of her time she spent stationary on the boom, using her winches to open the "gate" to admit traffic, closing it again after the shipping had passed.

Bad Weather, Good Work

Apart from that, she had the job of laying and maintaining the heavy anchors, buoys, and a regular cat's cradle of nets and wire hawsers. It was no sinecure in the fierce tides and blowing weather which usually prevailed; no joke at all when buoys and barrels broke adrift in the midst of a pitch-black, squally night and had to be rescued.

When they were new to the game, steamers unacquainted with the neighbourhood sometimes came charging through the boom at midnight, to wrap fathoms of wire hawser round their propellers and to find themselves hitched up by the stern. Vituperation flowed through megaphones, one indignant tramp skipper demanding: "What's this blinkin' boom doing here?" — except that his language was more impolite than that. The boom defence officer retorted with interest.

The men of that little ship were a hard-bitten lot, some belonging to the various naval reserves, the others enrolled for the war. The boom officer was a retired lieutenant who'd earned the D.S.C. in the last war; the skipper an ex-trawlerman; and the engineer had served for many years on a railway in India.

At another port I saw several of the private yachts taken over by the Navy for patrol and anti-submarine purposes. One of these was commanded by a captain of the Royal Naval Reserve whom I'd last seen in command of a famous Atlantic liner. The liner's tonnage was something over 45,000, and her length more than 800 feet. The length of the yacht was little more than double that of a cricket pitch, and her tonnage round about a hundred.

Later on I went to sea, minesweeping in a paddle-steamer belonging to a railway company which used to take crowds of excursionists to the local beauty spots and watering places. Transformed into a man-of-war, she'd a complement of fifty officers and men, a gun or two, and the usual double Oropesa mine-sweep, with all its paraphernalia of winches, floats, otters, kites, and fathom upon fathom of wire. The torpedo-shaped floats with their red and green flags had their names painted on them—Joan and Pat. I was told that the minesweeping personnel had the privilege of taking turns in christening them, so the names changed fairly frequently. Once they'd been Rose and Gertie, which, like Joan and Pat, were young ladies living in the neighbourhood of the base.

Over 20,000 Miles a Year

The average number of days a month spent at sea by that little ship was round about twenty-three, in which period she covers about 1,794 miles. This means that in a year of war she'll have done 21,582 miles.

Two trawlers in which I also went to sea on patrol had also done much arduous service since the war began. The skippers of both were Scots fishermen. The group officer in one was a retired lieutenant-commander, R.N., whose peacetime employment is with the Mersey Dock and Harbour Board, while the other was a lieutenant-commander, R.N.R., who'd left the sea before the war and was qualifying as a doctor when recalled for service afloat. The bulk of the crew was made up by fishermen; but among them were a Metropolitan policeman, a paper-hanger and an employee in a furniture and upholstery business.

The wartime Navy, with its manifold tasks and functions, has need of all these men and of the ships in which they serve. They're all doing arduous service in the face of no little risk and danger.

"MINGAN" JOINS AIR FORCE

Known throughout New Zealand Scouting as a popular Camp Fire leader, and for his Scout sessions from 22B, "Mingan," who is John J. Fox, recently resigned from the NBS programme staff to train for a pilot in the R.N.Z.A.F.

A scoutmaster for seven years, "Mingan" gained the highest qualification, the



JOHN J. FOX

Scout Wood Badge, four years ago, and would have led the Camp Fire Entertainments for the postponed New Zealand Jamboree.

In radio, he was responsible for various children's sessions, including the unusual series for college boys, "Young Ideas." He was a 2YC announcer, took part in radio plays, and organised various 2YA programmes.

Mr. Fox was educated at St. Patrick's College, Silverstream.

INDEX

Among the Records	17	Letters	4
Art of Jestng	12	Listenings	13
Aunt Daisy	45	MacDonell's Death	8
Books	11	Napier Remembers	7
Boxing Notes	10	Programmes:	
Editorial	4	National and Commercial	18-40
Extracts from Talks	5	Overseas	47
Film Reviews	16	Sowing Wild Oats	14
Game of Bowls	10	Things to Come	6
Lessons in Morse	9	Women	41-44



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