

Memories of the Civil War

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everything before they retreated. Syndicalists were burning a few of the churches here and there and bitterly denouncing the priests as traitors to the Spanish cause. Other bodies, such as the General Workers' Union and the United Brothers of the People, were remonstrating with them for using just those methods for which the Fascists were attacked, and perhaps bringing down more recriminations on Republican heads. Again we managed to get out, pick up a cargo of foodstuffs at Rotterdam and make back this time to Ribadesella, as Santander was expected to fall at any time. We got up the river scraping our keel at several places and were astonished to find "Potato" Jones with his much larger boat tied up there. Here we took off another load of one thousand five hundred refugees.

Out in the Country

I had the chance at this port to see something of the Asturian countryside. My brother and I walked out inland and stopped at cafés chatting with the people. In one café a bunch of militiamen had just returned from the Oviedo front. They told us to sit down and drink. They were curious about the British attitude toward the Spanish war and plied us with questions. I told them that many of us were deeply convinced of the justice of their cause, but we were not responsible for the British Government's foreign policy. One fellow, a captain from Mexico, a good looking fellow six feet tall, showed us his silver mounted walking stick, red with bloodstains. "With this," he said, "I have led men over the top shooting the Fascist dogs and then bashing their brains out with this weighted stick."

It was a beautiful evening as we made our way back to the port. In the distance we could hear the rumble of the desperate battle for Santander that was going on. Some of the militiamen walked back with us, and as they went they sang Spanish songs of love and of war and of the tragedy of Spain. I felt that this was not only Spain's tragedy but the beginning of a tragedy that would shake the whole world.

"Ten Minutes, or I Blow You Up!"

We took that load of refugees to France and then our skipper, "Toughie" France, brought us right back. If ever there was a man convinced of the justice of Spain's cause he was that man. He decided to go to Santander for orders, Fascists or no Fascists. About thirty miles from Santander one of Franco's armed merchantmen approached and asked us our destination. Captain France replied that he had no cargo aboard and was going to Santander for orders.

"I know where you are going," Franco's man replied, "follow me." When we drew ahead of his boat he signalled to us to stop until he had caught up. This continued until the evening. "We are done now," said one of the men. "They can sink us after dark and no one will be any the wiser." We didn't feel too happy as we looked at that armed merchantman, with guns fully manned and trained on us. Suddenly, out of the blue, the British cruiser H.M.S. Camperdown raced up. With the megaphone to his lips the

commander asked in his best Oxford accents, "What the devil do you mean by taking a British ship outside the three-mile limit?"

"She is my prisoner," replied the merchantman.

"I'll give you ten minutes to get to hell out of here, if you're not out I'll blow you out."

The crew of the Stanbrook cheered lustily as the merchantman beat it. All the same Santander fell soon after and we blockade runners stood out to sea helpless, prevented by the navy on orders from Whitehall from going further. Men, women and children swam out to sea, and some were picked up by small boats and brought out to us.

Bombed and Filmed

Another experience that I will not forget in a hurry was the occasion when we were attacked by Fascist planes. They dropped about six bombs. Two missed and the rest dropped amidships and blew the bulkhead of our forward quarters right in. The sailors escaped but three firemen were killed. With a number of others I was injured and knocked unconscious. When I came to I found that I had a twisted iron locker and some boxes and shrapnel on the top of me, and around I could hear the groans of my comrades. My brother had a tracer bullet in his foot but was otherwise all right, though the firemen on either side of him were dead. The bridge and the midships was blazing like a bush fire. None of us had boots or socks on and so could hardly bear the heat of the blazing decks. The Norwegian non-intervention officer was walking slowly down the deck. He died on the wharf. A roll was called and three men found to be missing. I went down with two others to look for them. We found them under a huge heap of debris and got them ashore where the Scottish ambulance looked after them. Meanwhile the Republican planes were battering the Fascists overhead and they shot the plane that got the Standwell. The crew, German and an Italian, bailed out and were taken prisoner, and interrogated. Months afterwards in London I accidentally ran into an "Aid to Spain Programme" and saw, all in the same film, not only myself and my pals in the hospital being interviewed after the incident, but also these same pilots who had shot us up.

Other Memories

These are just a few of the things that we saw and experienced. There were many others. There were also the people whom we saw. La Passionara, the woman Communist, seemed to be in every port before its fall ready to arouse new enthusiasm in the people. I took a camera shot of her speaking at Cartagena on one of the Republican cruisers. At Valencia I was in almost at the last when Franco was entering the city; the consul put us on one of the last ships to leave. But perhaps I remember best just what were my feelings when some of us were interviewed by the well known reporter Sefton Delmer.

"Some of the crew are finished with Spain, are you?" he asked.

But my brother and I both replied without hesitation, "While Spain fights on, so will we."

Items From The ZB's

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