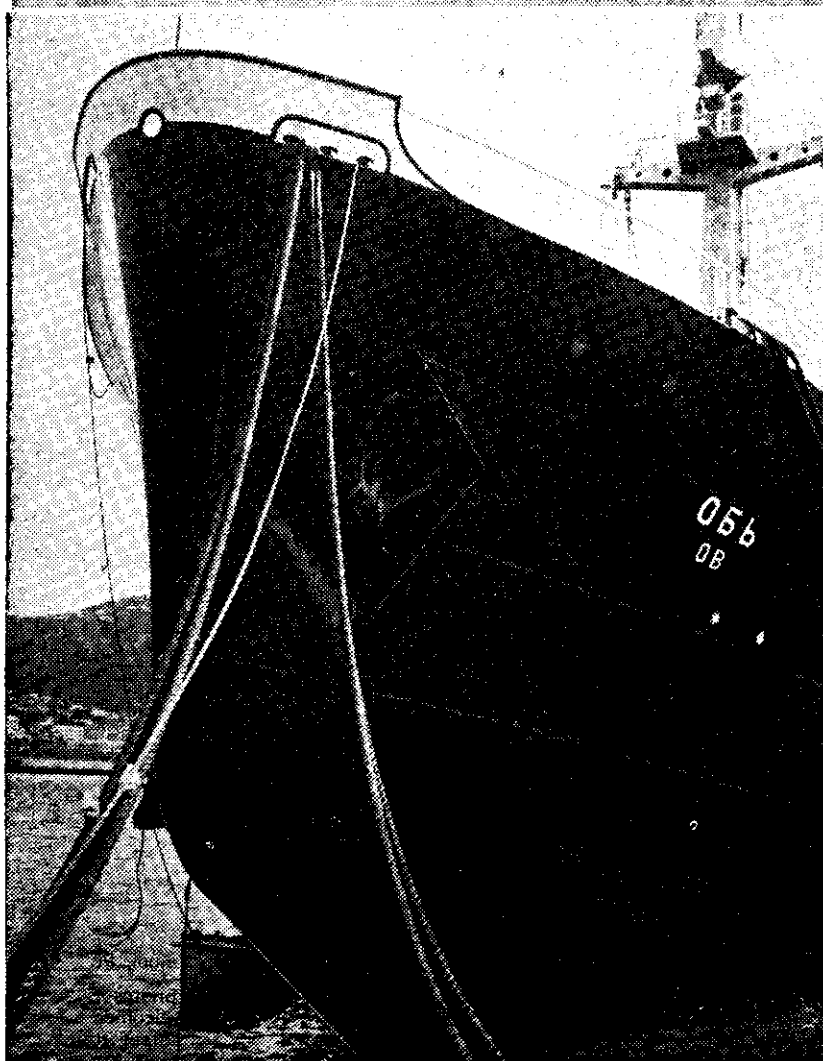


ON BOARD -



- THE OB



WHEN we first stepped on the deck of the Ob the Polovtsian Dances from *Prince Igor* were being played over the speaker system and the air smelt of Russian cigarettes, diesel oil and cooking. We flowed through with the throng to the seamen's dining saloon, a large, comfortable room with ports looking out over the fore'd hatch. Hanging on the bulkheads were portraits of Lenin and Stalin and framed photographs of Marshal Bulganin and Mr. Krushchov. On the central table was placed a pad welcoming visitors to record their impressions. A small boy was hanging over this, his head leaning on one hand, chewing a stub of pencil and gazing in furious concentration at the portrait of Stalin. Turning reluctantly from this study in creation we tried to find someone like a crew member in the surrounding crush. This was difficult as 90 per cent. of the people present were dressed in blue suits with identical cameras slung on their shoulders. We at last made ourselves understood via a series of interpreters and were taken below decks to the oceanographical laboratory. Here were the charts of information plotted on the voyage by the scientists of the Ob on every aspect of oceanography—salinity, temperature, plankton distribution, sedimentation, and the geology and depths of the ocean floor.

Instruments of all sorts took up every available inch of space, some, like the microscopes, with functions discernible to the layman, others reflecting the complex and specialised nature of modern science. A scientist present explained what they had been doing during the

recent voyage. Following the fixing of their main base site (to be called Mirny after one of the sloops on the Bellingshausen-Lazarev expedition) both the Ob and her sister-ship Lena unloaded the supplies and equipment for the base, including helicopters, tractors, dogs and sledges, and dozens of small tubular-shaped houses with portholes instead of windows. Then, clear of the ice in the Davis Sea the Ob sailed east on a wide-sweeping course to the Balleny Islands, at one time going "across the land for a hundred miles" as the scientist jocularly put it near a wrongly-charted shore. Owing to the steepness of the surrounding ice-cliffs, no landing was made at the Balleny Islands because they had brought no alpine equipment—a strange omission in what seemed an otherwise admirably organised expedition.

From the laboratory we went topside to the bridge. Here as elsewhere, one was surprised by the size and spacious-

V.P.S. photographs

ness of the ship, after an opposite impression gained from the wharf. Several sections of the glassed-in front of the bridge were mounted with steam circulation pipes and wipers, for clearer vision in blizzard conditions. The bridge telegraph (marked Robinson and Evershed, Liverpool) gave us to hope that similarly, down in the engine room, one of the solemn looking Slavs would turn out to be the usual dour Scot. But here precedent was flouted, though we did not actually *scratch* the sole engineer in sight. The diesel-electric engines with which the ship is powered are ideal for this type of ship, giving her for long periods of time the independence from refuelling required when continuously subject to ill chance and storm.

And the Ob had her fair share of bad weather. On the voyage back from the South; in one particularly fierce storm, the instruments used for studying the dynamics of waves indicated a wave height of 16 to 17 metres (50 to 55 feet). This is equal to the highest measurements yet made in the worst of Atlantic storms.

From the engine-room we moved on to the third main section of the ship, whose inhabitants usually claim, with some logic, premier importance in the scheme of things. For after all, even the most dedicated explorers must eat, and eat well. That good food was prepared in this galley was evident in the gleaming pots, the well-scrubbed deck and the rubicund face of the cook. He was engaged in buying off the persistent admiration of several small visitors at a packet of biscuits a head, and we wondered why it is that cooks, no matter whence they come, are so much alike. Plato's theory of universals would probably apply here—that somewhere there is the Prototype

LEFT: The cutaway forefoot of the Ob.

N.Z. LISTENER, APRIL 27, 1956.