

A WORTHY SHIP

H.M.T. 'MOOLTAN'

His Majesty's Troopship, which carries us on our way to what, for most of us, will be our first experience of overseas service, has a proud record in the present conflict. In fact she bears the scars of battle, and the curious will be able to find on her hull evidence of the effects of a near miss from an enemy bomb aimed at her in an attack off the Irish coast in 1940. In that episode—the closest threat she has survived during the war—she was holed in several places above the waterline, and, before the day ended, she beat off three more enemy attacks without suffering further damage.

Built at Belfast for the P. & O. line by the famous shipbuilding firm of Harland & Wolff, our transport is now 21 years old. Until the outbreak of war, she carried passengers and mail between the United Kingdom and Australia, and in that service she acquired so high a reputation for her sailing qualities that passengers who were subject to the agonies of seasickness frequently made a point of arranging their journeys so that they could travel on her. She is, in fact, one of the best sea boats the Company has ever owned. Her gross tonnage is close to 21,000, her length is 625 feet, and she has a beam of 82 feet.

It was a tribute to the worthiness of the ship in which we travel that she should have been chosen by the Admiralty immediately on the outbreak of war for service as an armed merchant cruiser. Commissioned in October, 1939, and equipped with a formidable armament, she went to sea substantially changed in appearance, for her "dummy" after-funnel had been removed. Subsequently, however, it was replaced for purposes of ventilation. It is worth while also to interpolate at this stage that she has not always had a single mast. The removal of her after-mast was also one of the changes wrought in her appearance during her service as an armed cruiser.

The ship's early war service was given in convoy duty between West Africa and the United Kingdom. Three years ago she was converted for duty as a transport. She began this phase of her war service with several trips to the Middle East via the Cape, and then she was selected as one of the transports employed in the historic North African landings. On this occasion she carried American troops to a point near Oran, forming one of a convoy of about 50 vessels. No major incident occurred during the week in which she remained there, but those on board had their share of excitement on the return journey when an enemy air attack was made on the convoy. She remained unscathed, though ships all around her were ~~hacked~~. In her subsequent career as a transport, she is said to have carried troops of all warring nationalities except the Japanese. She made her first trip to New Zealand to embark this reinforcement.

The master of this vessel is a man whose very appearance inspires confidence. He began his training for the subsequent 35 years of his seafaring career in H.M.S. "Conway" in 1906, and has been for 32 years in the service of the Company to which his ship belongs. He served throughout the last war, and in this war, just 18 months ago, and was torpedoed off the South American coast.

His troops officer had a similar experience in this war on a ship carrying troops. The master has with him a number of officers and men with eventful war careers, and one of his junior engineers wears the ribbon of the M.B.E. which was awarded to him for sailing one of his ship's boats for a period of 13 days after she had been torpedoed.

It remains to be said that our transport, with her continued decks is well adapted to the purpose which she is now serving. Her value in this service is also great in view of the losses of vessels of her type and the importance which amphibious warfare has assumed. If there is a tendency to allow thoughts to dwell upon congestion below decks, some consolation may be found in the fact that there have been occasions when the ship has carried many more troops than are at present on board.

J.L.G.