

THE VICTORY AT SEA

By ADMIRAL WILLIAM SOWDEN SIMS

I--Black Days in the Spring of 1917

In the latter part of March, 1917, I was stationed at Newport as president of the Naval War College, and there I received a message from the Navy Department summoning me immediately to Washington. The form in which these instructions were cast showed that something extraordinary was impending. The orders read to come as unobtrusively as possible; to keep my movements secret; and to this end I was not to appear at the Navy Department, but to telephone headquarters upon arrival. It took only a few minutes to explain why I had been sent for. It seemed probable that we should soon be at war with Germany. Ambassador Page had cabled that under the existing circumstances the American Navy should be represented in England by an officer of higher rank than any of those who were stationed there at that time. The Department, therefore, wished me to leave immediately and to get in touch with the British Admiralty, and learn how we could best and most quickly co-operate in the naval war. Since we were still technically at peace with Germany Mr. Daniels insisted that there should be no publicity about our movements. I was still to remain ostensibly as head of the War College, and, in order that no suspicions should be aroused, my wife and family were still to occupy the official residence of its president. I was to sail on a merchant vessel, travelling under an assumed name, to wear civilian clothes and to take no uniform. On reaching the other side I was to get immediately in contact with the British navy, and to send to Washington detailed reports on existing conditions.

Two days after this meeting in Washington two commonplace looking gentlemen, in civilian clothes, secretly boarded the American steamship Ne York. They appeared upon the passenger list as V. J. Richardson and S. W. Davidson. A day or two out an enterprising steward, having noticed that the initials on the pajamas of one of these passengers differed from those of the name under which he was sailing, reported him to the captain as a suspicious character. The captain, however, had a quiet laugh over this discovery, for he knew that Mr. Davidson was Rear-Admiral Sims, and that his companion with the several sets of conflicting initials was Commander J. V. Babcock, the Admiral's aide.

The voyage itself was uneventful, but a good deal of history was made in the short time that we spent upon the ocean. Two days before the ship reached England, President Wilson had gone before Congress and asked for the declaration of a state of war with Germany. That a state of war existed became apparent as we approached Liverpool, for at the outer harbor our vessel was mined. The damage was not irreparable, but the passengers were transferred to another steamer, and we safely reached port, where I found a representative of the British Admiralty, Rear-Admiral Hope, waiting to receive me. The Admiralty had also provided a special train, in which we left immediately for London.

Submarine Losses Appalling.
Whenever I think of the naval situation as it stood in April, 1917, I always have before my mind two contrasting pictures, that of the British public, as represented in their press and in their social gatherings in London, and the other that of British officialdom, as represented in my confidential meetings with British statesmen and British naval officers. For the larger part the English newspapers were publishing optimistic statements about the German submarine campaign. They generally scouted the idea that this new form of piracy really threatened in any way the safety of the British Empire. These rather cheerful outgivings were accompanied by weekly statistics of submarine sinkings—figures which, while not particularly reassuring, hardly indicated that any serious roads had yet been made on the British mercantile marine. The Admiralty was publishing tables showing that four or five thousand ships were arriving at British ports and leaving them every week, while other tables disclosed the number of British ships under sixteen hundred tons and more than sixteen hundred tons that were going down every seven days. Thus the week that I arrived I learned from these figures that Great Britain had lost seventeen ships above that size, and two ships below; that 2,406 vessels had arrived at British ports, and that 2,367 had left, and that, in addition, seven fishing vessels had fallen victims to the German submarines. Such figures were worthless, for they did not include neutral ships, and did not give the amount of tonnage sunk—details, of course, which it was necessary to keep from the enemy. Consequently these results as published did not seem particularly alarming. The newspapers all over the British Isles were drawing favorable conclusions from these statistics; here and there one of them sounded a more apprehensive note; yet the generally prevailing feeling was that the submarine campaign had already failed. Germany's last desperate attempt to win the war had collapsed, and that peace would probably not be long delayed! These papers found much satisfaction in the fact that the "volume of British shipping was being maintained," and such headlines as "improvement continues," as well as the encouraging speeches of certain British statesmen, tended to quiet popular apprehension. I found this same atmosphere of cheerful ignorance everywhere in London society. The fear of German submarines was not disturbing the London season,

which had now reached its height; the theatres were packed every night; everywhere, indeed, men and women of the upper classes were apparently giving little thought to any danger that might be over-hanging their country.

Before arriving in England I myself had not understood the gravity of the situation. I had followed the war from beginning with the intensest interest; I had read practically everything printed about it in the American and foreign press, and I had had access to such official information as was available on our side of the Atlantic. The result was that, when I sailed for England in March, I felt little fear about the outcome. All the fundamental facts in the case made it appear impossible that the Germans could win the war. Sea-power rested practically unchanged in the hands of the Allies; that in itself was an absolute assurance of their ultimate victory. I had read in the American press all the statistics of shipping losses, and, while such was the destruction of life and property seemed appalling, I could see nothing in these figures that was likely materially to alter the result. Indeed I regarded it as altogether likely that the war would end before the United States could exert any material influence upon the outcome. My conclusions were shared by most American naval officers whom I knew—students of warfare, who, like myself, had the utmost respect for the British fleet and were entirely willing to leave the future of the world in its keeping.

Yet I had spent only a few days in London when all these illusions disappeared. The British Admiralty placed before me facts and figures which had not been given to the press. These documents disclosed the astounding fact that Germany was winning the war, and winning at a rate that meant the unconditional surrender of the British Empire in four or five months.

Jellicoe and I Confer.
On the day of my arrival in London I had my first interview with Admiral Jellicoe, at that time the First Sea Lord. Admiral Jellicoe and I needed

were his two most outstanding points; though few men had risen so rapidly in the Royal Navy, success had made him only more quiet, soft spoken, and unostentatiously dignified; there was nothing of the blustering sea-dog about the Admiral; he was all courtly, all brain, and, of all the men I have ever met, I have known none more approachable, frank, and open-minded.

Physically Admiral Jellicoe is a small man, yet he is as powerful in frame as he is in mind, and there are few men in the navy who can stand up against him in tennis. His smooth shaven face, when I met him that morning in April, 1917, was, as usual, calm, smiling, and imperturbable. One could never guess what was going on in his head by any outward emotion. At this time it is not too much to say that the responsibility for the safety of the British Empire rested upon Admiral Jellicoe's shoulders. I find the absurd notion prevalent in this country that his change from Commander of the Grand Fleet to First Sea Lord was something in the nature of a demotion; nothing could be

further from the truth. As first Sea Lord Jellicoe controlled the operations not only of the Grand Fleet, but also of the entire British navy; he had no superior officer, for the First Sea Lord of the Admiralty, the position in England that corresponds to our Secretary of the Navy, has no power to give the slightest legal order to the fleet—a power which our secretary possesses. Thus the defeat of the German submarines was Jellicoe's direct responsibility. Great as his duty was, and appalling as was the submarine situation at the time of this interview, there was nothing about the Admiral's bearing which betrayed any depression of spirits. He did manifest great seriousness, possibly apprehension, but British stoicism and the usual British refusal to say die, were keeping him tenaciously at his job.

"The Germans Will Win—Unless."
After the usual greetings, Admiral Jellicoe took a paper out of his drawer and handed it to me. It was a record of tonnage losses for the last few months. This showed that the total sinkings, British and neutral, had

reached 536,000 tons in February, 603,000 in March, and that sinkings were taking place in April which indicated the destruction of nearly 900,000 tons. These figures showed losses which were three and four times as large as those indicated by the intentionally inconclusive statements which were then being published in the press.

To say that I was surprised by this disclosure is expressing it mildly. I was fairly astounded; I had never imagined anything so terrible and I expressed my consternation to Admiral Jellicoe.

"Yes," he said, as quietly as though he were discussing the weather and not the future of the British Empire. "It is impossible for us to go on with the war if losses like this continue."

"What are you doing about it?" I asked.
"Everything that we can. We are increasing our anti-submarine forces in every possible way. We are using every possible craft we can find with which to fight submarines. We are building destroyers, trawlers, and other like craft as fast as we can. But the situation is very serious and we shall need all of the assistance we can get."

"It looks as though the Germans were winning the war," I remarked.
"They will win, unless we can stop these losses—and stop them soon," the Admiral replied.

"Is there no solution for the problem?" I asked.

"Absolutely none that we can see now," Jellicoe announced. He described the work of destroyers and showed no optimism over their ability to control the depredations of the U-boats. The stories that were being published concerning the numerous sinkings of German submarines I now found to be untrue. Since the beginning of the war, only fifty-four German submarines were positively known to have been sunk, and Admiral Jellicoe now told me that the German shipyards were turning out new submarines at the rate of three a week. Stories had recently found their way into print about the voluntary surrender of German U-boats; no such surrender had taken place; the str-

general belief in British naval circles that this plan would succeed. With losses approaching a million tons a month it was a matter of very simple arithmetic to figure how long the Allies could stand the strain. The best authorities calculated that the limit of endurance would be reached about November 1, 1917; in other words, that unless some method of successfully fighting submarines could be discovered almost immediately, Great Britain would have to lay down her arms before a victorious Germany.

"What we are facing is the defeat of Great Britain," said an American diplomat, then in London, after the situation had been explained to him.

In the next few weeks I had many interviews with Admiral Jellicoe and other members of the Admiralty. I sat in conference with them every morning, and, for all practical purposes, became a member of their organization. The submarine secret of the British navy, to which, as an American, I did not have complete access. All members of the government desired that the United States should understand the situation completely, so from the beginning they discussed matters with me with frankness. They deprecated the generally prevailing impression that any new invention could control the submarine in time to be effective.

Forty Thousand Anti-Submarine

Those were the days when the American press was constantly calling upon Edison and other great American inventors to solve this problem. In fact, inventors in every part of two hemispheres were turning out devices by the hundreds. A regular department of the Admiralty secreted by Admiral Fisher, had charge of investigating their product; in a few months it had received and examined not far from 40,000 inventions, none of which answered the purpose, though many of them were exceedingly ingenious. British naval projects were not hostile to such projects; they declared, however, that it would be absurd to depend upon new devices for defeating the German campaign. The time element was the important consideration; unless the U-boats were checked in two or three months, the Germans would have won the war; should Mr. Edison or any other great genius invent an anti-submarine device, it would not serve their purposes, because, long before it could be perfected and installed, the shipping situation would have forced an Allied surrender.

I discussed the situation with members of the Cabinet, such as Mr. Balfour, Lord Robert Cecil and Sir Edward Carson. Their attitude to me was very different from the attitude which they were taking publicly, for in their speeches these men naturally would say nothing that would improve the enemy morale; but in their talks with me they repeated practically everything that Jellicoe had said. It was the seriousness of this situation, of course, that sent Mr. Balfour and the British Commission to the United States. What a dark moment that was in the history of the Allied cause! Not only were the German submarines sweeping British commerce from the seas, but the Germans were also defeating the British and French armies in France. When we recall that the high peak of success with the U-boats was achieved at the very moment that General Nivelle's offensive failed on the Western front, we can get some idea of the real tragedy of the Allied situation in the spring of 1917.

"Things Were Dark," Said Balfour.

"Things were dark when I took that trip to America," Mr. Balfour said to me afterward. "The submarines were constantly on my mind. I could think of nothing but the number of ships they were sinking. All that time it certainly looked as though we were going to lose the war."

One of the men who most keenly realized the state of affairs was the King. I met His Majesty first in the chancel of St. Paul's on that memorable occasion in April, 1917, when the English people held a thanksgiving service to celebrate America's entrance into the war. On this, as on several subsequent meetings, the King impressed me as a simple, courteous, unaffected English gentleman. He was dressed in khaki, like sixty other English officers, and his manner was warm-hearted, sincere, even democratic.

"It gives me great pleasure to meet you on an occasion like this," said His Majesty, referring to the great Anglo-American memorial service. "I am also glad to greet an American Admiral on such a mission as yours. And I wish you all success."

On that occasion we naturally had little time for an exchange of views, but a few days afterwards I was invited to spend the night at Windsor Castle. The King in his own home proved even more cordial, if that were possible, than at our first meeting. After dinner we adjourned to a small room and there, over our cigars, we discussed the situation at considerable length. The King is a rapid and animated talker; he was kept constantly informed on the submarine situation, and discussed it that night in all its details. I was first surprised by his familiarity with all naval questions, and the intimate touch which he was evidently maintaining with the British fleet. That was not really surprising. For His Majesty himself is a sailor; in his early youth he joined the navy, in which he worked up like any other British boy. He seemed almost as well informed about the American navy as about the British. He dis-

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King George V



Lord ROBERT CECIL
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The Right Honorable ARTHUR JAMES BALFOUR

British Foreign Secretary.
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In a valiant front and ally
from a comrade in arms

In Dulce

Admiral Sir John R. Jellicoe. A picture given by him
to Admiral Sims.

no introduction. I had known him for many years and we had been more or less regular correspondents for a considerable period. I first made his acquaintance in China in 1901, when Jellicoe was a captain and already recognized as one of the coming men of the British navy. He was an expert on ordnance and gunnery, a subject in which I was greatly interested at that time; and this fact brought us together and made us friends. The admiration which I conceived for the Admiral's character and intelligence at that time I have never lost. He was then, as he has been ever since, an indefatigable worker, and more than a worker—a profound student of everything pertaining to ships and gunnery, and a man who joins to a splendid intellect the real ability of command. I had known him in his own home with his wife and babies, as well as on shipboard among his men, and I had observed at close hand the gracious personality that had the power to draw everyone to him and make him the idol both of his own children and the officers and jacksies of the British fleet. Certainly no man could meet a more comprehensive test than that! Simplicity and directness