THE VICTORY AT SEA

By ADMIRAL WILLIAM SOWDEN SIMS

WHAT THE U-BOAT PROBLEM REALLY WAS

It was not the simplest thing in the world to get a submarine out of its base. The Allies were constantly laying mines at these outlets; and before the U-Boat could make its exit elaborate sweeping operations were necessary. It often took a squadron of nine or ten surface ships, operating for several hours, to get a submarine out of its base and started on its journey. So we always knew when one came out; and we knew not only that but we knew which one it was, and we often possessed the name of its commander, and other valuable details. Moreover, we knew where it went and we kept charts, on which we plotted from day to day the voyage of each particular submarine.

"Why didn't you sink it then?" is the question usually asked when I make this statement—a question which, as I shall show, merely reflects the ignorance which prevails everywhere on the underlying facts of submarine warfare.

Eight U-Boats At Work.

Now in this densely packed shipping area, extending, say, from the north of Ireland to Brest, there were seldom more than eight or ten submarines operating at any one time. The largest number I had record of was fifteen; but this was exceptional; the usual number was four, six, eight, or perhaps ten. We estimated that the convoys and troopships brought in reports of sighting about 300 submarines for every submarine actually in the field. We also estimated that, for every hundred submarines which the Germans possessed, they could keep only ten or a dozen at work in the open sea. The rest were on their way to the hunting grounds, or returning, or in port being refitted and resupplied. Could Germany have kept, let us say, fifty submarines constantly at work on the great shipping routes in the winter and spring of 1917—before we had learned how to handle the situation—nothing could have prevented her from winning the war. Instead of having sunk 850,000 tons in a single month, she would have sunk 2,000,000 or 3,000,000 tons. The fact is that Germany, with all her microscopic preparations for war, neglected to provide herself with the one instrumentality with which she might have won it!

This circumstance, that so few submarines could accomplish such destructive results, shows how formidable was the problem which we faced. Germany could do this, of course, because the restricted field in which she was able to operate was so constantly and so densely infested with valuable shipping.

In the above I have been describing the operations of the U-boats in the great area to the west and south of Ireland. But there were other hunting fields, particularly on the east coast of England, in the area extending from Harwich to Newcastle. This was the headquarters of a great trade between the North Sea ports of England and Norway and Sweden, consisting of essential products like lumber and many manufactured articles. Every four days a convoy of from forty to sixty ships left this region for Scandinavia; I use the word "convoy," but the operation was a convoy only in the sense that the ships sailed in bunches, for the navy was unable to provide them with an adequate escort—seldom more than one or two destroyers, or a few yachts and trawlers. Smaller types of submarines, known as UBs and UCs, came out of Wilhelmshaven and the Skager Rack, and constantly preyed upon this coastal shipping. These submarines differed from the U-boats in that they were smaller, of about 350 and 400 tons, and in that they also carried mines, which they were constantly laying. They were much handier than the larger types; they could rush out more quickly from their bases and get back, and they did an immense amount of damage to this coastal trade. The value of the shipping sunk, of course, did not compare with the losses which Great Britain suffered on the great Trans-Atlantic routes, but the problem was a serious one, because the supplies which these ships brought were essential to military operations.

Besides these two types—the U-boats and the UBs and UCs—the Germans had another type of submarine—the great ocean cruisers. These ships were as long as a small surface cruiser and half again as long as a destroyer, and their displacement sometimes reached 3,000 tons. They carried crews of seventy men, could cross the Atlantic three or four times without putting into port, and some actually remained away from their bases for three or four months. But they were very unhandy vessels; it took them a relatively long time to submerge, and, for this reason, they could not operate around the channel and other places where anti-submarine craft were most numerous. In fact, these vessels, of which the Germans had in commission perhaps half a dozen when the armistice was signed, accomplished little in the war. They were used mainly for strategic purposes. One or two were usually stationed off the Azores, not in the expectation of getting much shipping—they sank few merchantmen—but in the hope of diverting anti-submarine craft from the main theatre of operations. In this, however, they did not succeed; in fact, I cannot see that these great cruisers accomplished anything that justified the expense and trouble involved in building them.

This, then, was the type of warfare which the German submarines were waging upon Allied shipping. What were the Allied navies doing to check them in this terrible month of April, 1917? What anti-submarine methods had been developed up to that time?

Everybody Had A Plan.

The most popular game on both sides of the Atlantic was devising means of checking the underwater ship. Every newspaper, magazine, public man and gentleman at his club had his favorite scheme for defeating the U-boat campaign. All that anyone needed was a map of the North Sea and the solution was as clear as daylight.

As Sir Eric Geddes once remarked to me, nothing is quite so deceptive as geography. All of us are too likely to base our conception of naval problems on the maps which we studied at school. On these maps the North Sea is such a little place! I remember hearing a young lady declare that she didn't see how the submarines could operate in the English Channel, it was so narrow! She didn't see how there was room enough to turn around! The fact that it is twenty miles wide at the shortest crossing and not far from two hundred at the widest is something which it is apparently difficult to grasp.

A glance at the map immediately suggested the way to handle the submarines. The plan which was most popular in those days was to pen them up in their bases and to prevent their egress into the North Sea. Obviously the best way to handle the situation was to sink the whole German submarine fleet; as that was apparently impossible the next best thing was to keep them in their home ports and prevent them from sailing the high seas. It was not only the man in the street who was advocating this programme. I had a long talk with several government officials, in which they asked me why this could not be done.

"I can give you fourteen reasons why it is impossible," I answered. "We shall first have to capture their bases, and it would be simply suicidal to attempt it, and it would be playing directly into Germany's hands. Those bases are protected by guns of 15, 11 and 8-inch calibre. The guns are secreted behind hills or located in pits on the seashore, where no approaching vessel can see them. Moreover, those guns have a range of 40,000 yards, but the guns on no ships have a range of more than 30,000 yards; they are stationary, whereas ours would be moving. For our ships to go up against such emplacements would be like putting a blind prize fighter up against an antagonist who can see and who has arms twice as long as his enemy's.

"We can send as many ships as we wish on such an expedition, and they will all be destroyed. The German guns would probably get them on the first salvo, certainly on the second. There is nothing the germans would so much like to have us try."

Why Not Barrage Across North Sea?

Another idea suggested by a glance at the map was the construction of a barrage across the North Sea from the Orkneys to the coast of Norway. The distance did not seem so very great—on the map; in reality it was two hundred and thirty miles and the water is from 360 to 960 feet in depth. "If we cannot pen the rats up in their holes, said the newspaper strategist, certainly we can do the next best thing; we can pen them up in the North Sea. Then we can route all our shipping to points on the west coast of England, and the problem is solved.

I discussed this proposition with British navy men and their answer was quite to the point.

"If we haven't mines enough to build a successful barrage across the Straits of Dover, which is only twenty miles wide, how can we construct a barrage across the North Sea which is 230?"

A year afterward, as will appear, this plan came up in more practical form, but in 1917 the idea was not among the possibilities—there were not mines enough in the world to build such a barrage.

On our side of the Atlantic, and, to a certain extent in England itself, there was a belief that placing guns and gun crews on merchantmen was the most effective means of meeting the submarine. Some of the old British merchant salts held to this view. "Give us a gun and we'll take care of the submarines all right," they kept saying to the Admiralty. The idea was fundamentally fallacious. In the American Congress, just prior to the declaration of war, the arming of merchant ships became a great political issue; scores of pages in the Congressional Record are filled with discussion pro and con; so far as the protection of shipping was concerned, however, all this was wasted oratory. Those who advocated arming merchant ships had simply failed to grasp the fundamental facts of submarine warfare. The quality that makes the submarine so difficult to deal with is its invisibility. The great political issue involved in the submarine controversy, and the issue that brought the United States into the war, was that of sinking merchant ships without warning. It was because the submarines sank without warning that a dozen guns placed on a merchant ship afforded practically no protection.

The lookout on a merchantman could not see the submarine for the very good reason that the submarine was under the water; it was only by a happy chance that he could see the periscope—provided one were exposed. The first intimation which the merchantman usually had that a U-boat was in his neighborhood was the explosion of the torpedo in his hull. In six weeks, in the spring and early summer of 1917, thirty armed merchantmen were torpedoed and sunk off Queenstown, and in no case was a periscope of a conning tower seen. The English never trusted their battleships at sea without destroyer escort, and certainly if a battleship, with its powerful armament, could not protect itself from submarines, it was too much to expect that an ordinary armed merchantman would be able to do so. I think the fact that few American armed ships were attacked and sunk in 1917 created the impression that their guns afforded some protection. But this was policy on Germany's part. She expected, as I have said, to win the war long before the United States could play an effective part in it. She was therefore refraining from any unnecessary acts that would still further embitter the American people against her. She was also playing up to the pacifist elements in our country in order to keep us from using against her such forces as we already had at hand. The reason American armed merchantmen were not sunk was because they were not seriously attacked. I have already shown how easily Germany could sink them when she tried. Besides, the chief argument against relying upon armed ships was that this was a defensive measure, whereas the extremely grave situation we were then facing demanded the most energetic offensive methods. Yet the arming of merchant ships was justified as a minor measure. It accomplished one end—it forced the submarine to submerge and to use torpedoes instead of gunfire. This in itself was a great gain, because the Germans much preferred to sink ships with projectiles than with torpedoes, for their supply of these latter missiles was limited.

Hoisting Admiral SIMS' Flag; in May for two weeks he was the supreme commander of all Forces, British and American, Operating in the Irish Sea,

Sir Edward Carson First Lord of the Admiralty when Admiral SIMS arrived in England in April 1917.

Mines and Patrols, Two Ways of Fighting U-Boats.

In April, 1917, the British navy was fighting the submarine mainly in two ways: it was constantly sowing mines off the entrance to the submarine bases, such as Ostend and Zeebrugge, and in the Heligoland Bight—operations that accomplished little, for the Germans swept them up almost as fast as they were planted; and it was patrolling the submarine-infested area with anti-submarine craft. The Admiralty was depending almost exclusively upon this patrol, yet this, the only means which then seemed to hold forth much promise of defeating the submarine, was making little progress.

For this patrol the navy was impressing into service all available destroyers, yachts, trawlers, sea-going tugs, and other light vessels—almost anything that could carry a wireless, a gun, and depth charges. At this time the vessel chiefly used was the destroyer. The naval war had demonstrated that the submarine could not successfully battle with the destroyer; that any U-boat which came to the surface within fighting range of this alert and speedy little surface ship ran great risk of being sunk. This is the fundamental fact which regulated the whole anti-submarine campaign. The destruction of the submarine was highly probable in case the destroyer could get a fair chance at her. It is evident, therefore that a proper German strategy would consist in so disposing its submarines that they could conduct their operations with the minimum risk of meeting their most effective enemies while a properly conceived Allied strategy would consist in so controlling the situation that the submarines would have constantly to meet them. Frankness compels me to say that, in the early part of 1917, the Germans had the upper hand in this strategic game; that is, they were so dominating the campaign that they were constantly attacking Allied shipping without having to meet the Allied destroyers, while the Allied destroyers were dispersing their energies over the wide waste of waters. But the facts in the situation, and not any particular superior skill on the part of the German navy, gave the submarine this advantage. The British were most heroically struggling against the difficulties imposed by the mighty task which they had assumed. The British navy, like all other navies, was utterly unprepared for this type of warfare, and thus, in 1917, it woefully lacked the surface vessels in the numbers which were demanded, not only for the ordinary purposes of its fleet, but for meeting the submarine warfare as well.

The problem which proved so embarrassing can be stated in the simple terms of arithmetic. Everything reduced itself to a question of destroyers. In April, 1917, the British navy had in commission about 200 of this indispensable type of warship; many of them were old, and others had been pretty badly worn and weakened by three years of particularly racking service. It was the problem of the Admiralty to place these destroyers in those fields where they could best serve the Allied cause. The one fact that apparently rose superior to all others, was that a flotilla of at least 100 destroyers must be continually kept with the Grand Fleet, ready to go into action at a moment's notice. The whole strategy of German naval operations as well as British centered upon this destroyer situation, since it was chiefly the destroyer that could defeat the submarine campaign.

German Policy of Defeating Destroyers.

It was therefore the part of wisdom for the Germans to handle their navy strategically in the way that would best promote this general aim—that is, to resort to every possible move that would keep British destroyers from attacking German submarines. The policy of the German High Seas Fleet, that of keeping the battleships land-locked in German harbors, promoted this end more than any single manoeuvre. Had the German fleet seriously attempted a great sea battle, it would unquestionably have been defeated, and such a defeat would have meant an even greater disaster than the loss of the battleships, for it would have released more than 100 British destroyers which could have been used most effectively against German submarines. By keeping its dreadnaught fleet intact, always refusing to give battle and yet always threatening an engagement, the Germans penned up 100 British destroyers in the Orkneys—destroyers which otherwise might have done most destructive work against German submarines off the coast of Ireland. The mere fact that the German High Seas Fleet had once engaged the British Grand Fleet off Jutland, constantly suggested the likelihood that the attempt might be repeated, and was thus an influence which tended to keep these destroyers at Scapa Flow. Many times during that critical period the Admiralty discussed the question of releasing those destroyers, or a part of them, for the anti-submarine campaign; yet they always had to decide—and decide wisely—against any such division. At that time the German dreadnaught fleet was not immeasurably inferior to the British; it had a protecting screen of about 200 destroyers; and it would have been madness for the British to have gone into battle with its own destroyer screen placed several hundred miles away, off the coast of Ireland.

How Hospital Ships Were Attacked.

Germany likewise practically immobilized a considerable number of destroyers by attacking hospital ships. It was impossible for Americans and Englishmen to believe at first that these dastardly attacks were intentional; they so callously violated all the rules of warfare and all the agreements for lessening the horrors of war to which Germany herself had become a party, that there was a tendency in our enlightened country to give her the benefit of the doubt. As a matter of fact, not only were the submarine attacks on hospital ships deliberate, but Germany officially informed us that they would be made! The reasons for this warning are clear enough. Until we received such warning hospital ships had put to sea unescorted by warships, depending for their safety upon the rules of the Hague Conference.

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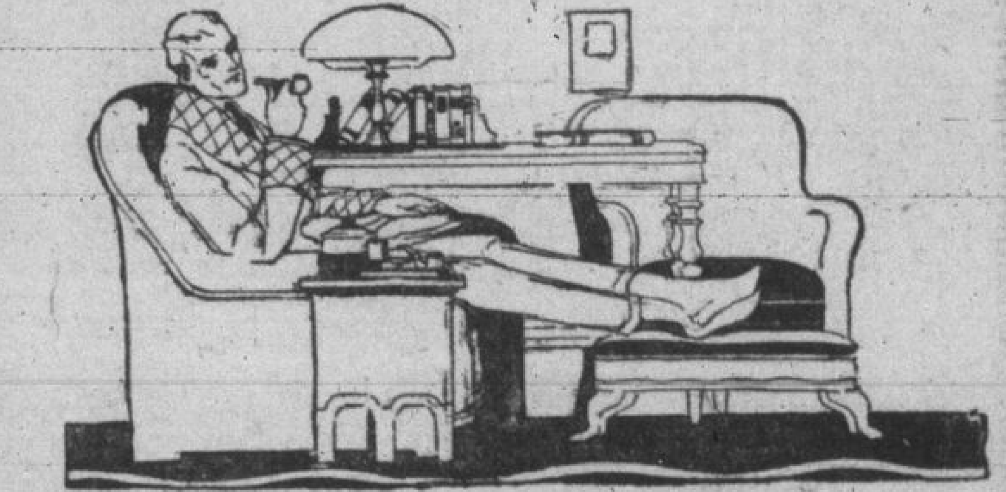

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