

# THE VICTORY AT SEA

By ADMIRAL WILLIAM SOWDEN SIMS



## DEVELOPING THE CONVOY IDEA

Having constantly before my eyes a picture of the Grand Fleet immune from torpedo attack, naturally the first question I asked when discussing the situation with Admiral Jellicoe and others was this: "Why not apply this same principle to merchant ships?"

If destroyers could keep the submarines away from battleships, they could certainly keep them away from merchantmen. It is clear, from the description already given, precisely how the battleships had been made safe from submarines; they had proceeded as usual, in a close formation, or "convoy," and their destroyer screens had proved effective. Thus the logic apparently indicated that the convoy system was the "answer" to the submarine.

Yet the convoy, as used in previous wars, differed materially from any application of the idea which could possibly be made to the present test. This scheme of sailing vessels in groups, and escorting them by warships, is almost as old as naval warfare itself. As early as the thirteenth century, the merchants of the Hanseatic League were compelled to sail their ships in convoy as a protection against the pirates who were then constantly lurking in the Baltic Sea. The government of Venice used this same device to protect its enormous commerce. In the fifteenth century the large trade in wool and wine between England and the Moorish ports of Spain was safeguarded by convoys, and in the sixteenth century Spain herself regularly depended upon massing its ships to defend its commerce with the West Indies against the piratical attacks of English and French adventurers. The escorts provided for these "flotas" really laid the foundation of the mighty Spanish fleet which threatened England's existence for more than a hundred years. By the time of Queen Elizabeth, the convoy had thus become the all-prevailing method of safeguarding merchant shipping, but it was in the Napoleonic wars that it reached its greatest usefulness. The convoys of that period were managed with some military precision; there were carefully stipulated methods of collecting the ships, of meeting the cruiser escorts at the appointed rendezvous, and of dispersing them when the danger zone was passed; and the naval officers were systematically put in charge. The convoys of this period were very large; from 200 to 300 ships were not an unusual gathering, and sometimes 500 or more would get together at certain important places, such as the entrance to the Baltic. But these ships, of course, were very small, compared with those of the present time. It was only necessary to supply such aggregations of vessels with such a small number of escorts to overwhelm any raiders which the enemy might send against them. The merchantmen were not required to sail in any particular formation, nor were they required to manoeuvre against unseen mysterious foes. Neither was it absolutely essential that they should keep constantly together; they could even spread themselves somewhat loosely over the ocean. If an enemy raider appeared on the horizon, the escorting cruiser or cruisers left the convoy and began chase; a battle ensued, the convoy meanwhile passing on its voyage unharmed. When its protecting vessels had disposed of the attackers, they rejoined the merchantmen. No unusual seamanship was demanded of the merchant captains, for the whole responsibility for their safety rested with the escorting cruisers.

conditions apply to a straggling convoy. This explained why, as soon as the merchant vessel or convoy entered the submarine zone, or as soon as a submarine was sighted, it began zigzagging, first on one side and then on the other, and always irregularly, its course comprising a distorted line, which made it a mere chance whether the submarine could get into position from which to fire with any certainty of obtaining results. A vessel sailing alone could manoeuvre in this way without much difficulty, but it is apparent that twenty or thirty vessels, sailing in close formation would not find the operation a simple one. And it was necessary for them to sail in close and regular formation, in order to make it possible to manoeuvre them as a different unit by destroyers; it is evident that the closer the formation the fewer the destroyers that would be needed to protect it. These circumstances make the modern convoy quite a different affair from the happy-go-lucky proceeding of the Napoleonic era.

### Merchant Captains Did Not Like Convoy.

It is perhaps not surprising that the greatest hostility to the convoys has always come from the merchant captains themselves. In the old days they chafed at the time consumed in assembling the ships, at the necessity for slower speed to enable the less speedy vessels to keep up with the procession, and at the delay in getting their cargoes into port. In all the wars in which convoys have been used it has been very difficult to keep the merchant captains in line. In Nelson's day these fine old salts were constantly breaking away from their convoys and taking their chances of running into port unescorted. If the merchant master of a century ago rebelled at the comparatively simply managed convoy of those days it is not strange that their descendants of the present time should not have looked with favor upon the relatively complicated and difficult arrangement required of them in this war, and in the early discussions with the men at the Admiralty it is not surprising that they were almost unanimously opposed to the convoy.

The merchantmen themselves are the chief obstacle to the convoy," said Admiral Jellicoe. "We have discussed it with them many times and they declare that it is impossible. It is all right for war vessels to manoeuvre in close formation, they say for we spend our time practising in these formations, and as they think that it is second nature to us. But they say that they cannot do it. They particularly reject the idea that when in formation they can manoeuvre their ships in the fog or at night without lights. They believe that they would lose more ships through collisions than the submarines would sink."

I was told that the whole subject had been completely thrashed out at a meeting which had been held at the Admiralty on February 2, 1917, about six weeks before America had entered the war. At that time ten masters of merchant ships met Admiral Jellicoe and other members of the Admiralty and had discussed the convoy proposition at length. In laying the matter before these experienced seamen, Admiral Jellicoe emphasized the necessity of good station-keeping, and he described the close formation which the vessels would have to maintain. It would be necessary for the ships to keep together, he explained, otherwise the submarines could pick off the stragglers. He asked the masters whether it would be possible for eight merchant ships, with a speed which varied perhaps two knots, to keep station in line ahead (that is, in single file or column) 500 yards apart, and sail in two columns down the channel.

"It would be absolutely impossible," the ten masters replied almost in a chorus.

Lack of Trained Merchant Captains. A discouraging fact, they say, was that many of the ablest merchant captains had gone into the navy, and that many of those who had replaced them could not be depended on to handle their ships in such formation.

"We have so few competent deck officers that the captain would have to be on the bridge the whole twenty-four hours," they said, and the difficulty was not only with the bridge, but with the engine-room. In order to keep the ships constantly the same distance apart it would be necessary to accurately regulate their speed; the battleships could do this because they had certain elaborate devices for timing the revolutions of the engines which the merchant vessels lacked. The poor quality of the coal which they were obtaining would make it difficult to maintain a regular speed.

Admiral Jellicoe then asked the masters whether they could sail in twos and threes and keep station. "Two might do it, but three would be too many," was the discouraging verdict. But the masters were positive that even two merchantmen could not safely keep station abreast in the night time without lights; two such vessels would have to sail in single file, the leading ship showing a stern



The Allied Naval War College which met at Paris to determine plans for coordinating the efforts of the Allies



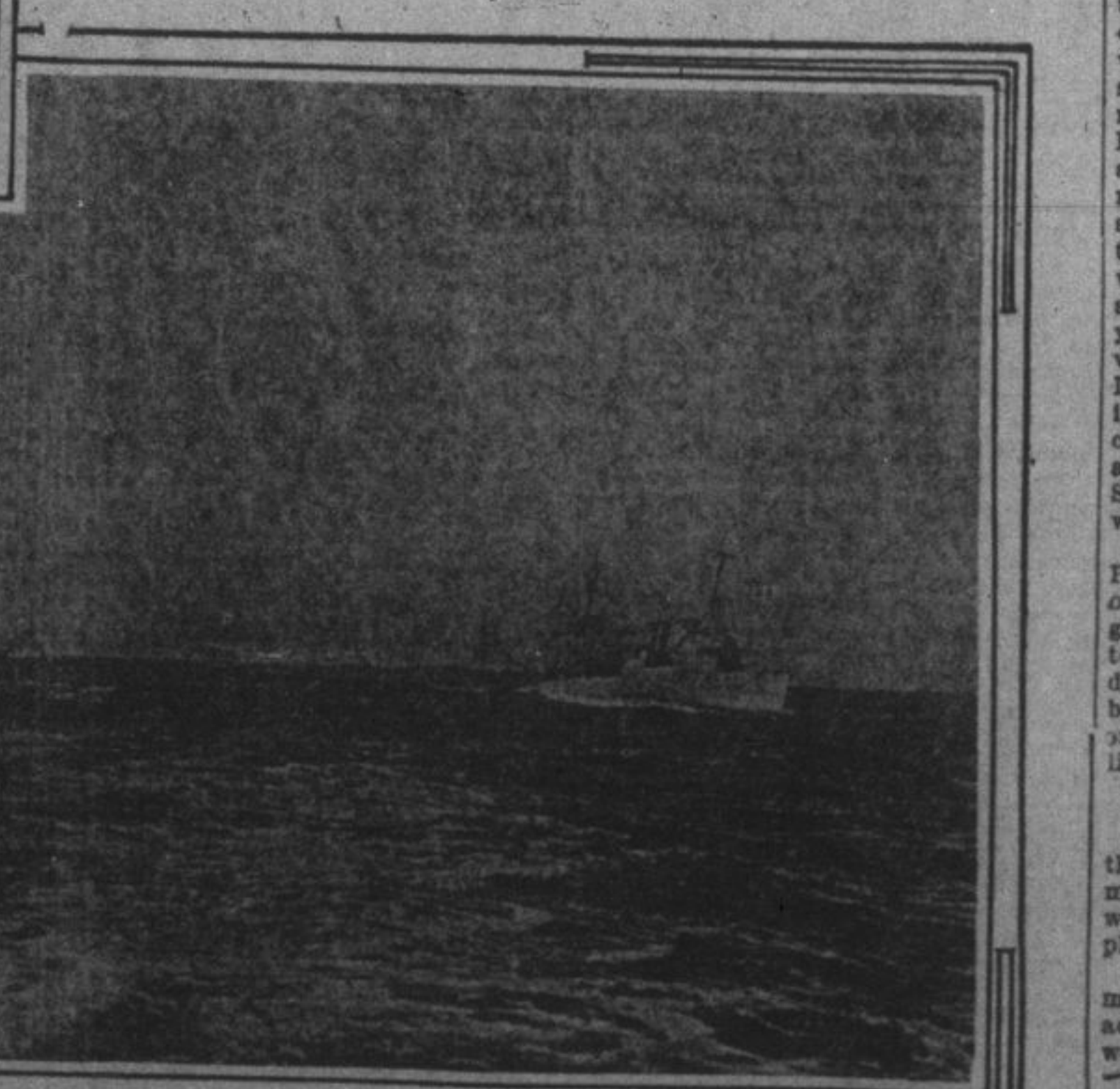
Capt. Twining, U.S.N. Chief of Staff to Admiral Sims.

light. The masters emphasized their conviction that they preferred to sail alone, each ship for herself, and to let each one take its chances of getting into port.

Difficulty in Overcoming Opposition. And there the matter rested. I had the opportunity of discussing the convoy system with several merchant captains, and in these discussions they simply echoed the views which had been expressed at this formal conference. I do not believe that British naval officers came in contact with a single merchant master who favored the convoy at that time. They were not doubtful about the idea; they were openly hostile. The British merchant captains are a magnificent body of seamen; their first thought was to serve their country and the Allied cause; their attitude in this matter was not obstinacy; it simply resulted from their sincere conviction that the convoy system would entail greater shipping losses than were then being inflicted by the German submarines.

Many naval officers at that time shared this same view. They opposed the convoy not only on these grounds; its introduction would mean immediately cutting down the tonnage fit to twenty per cent, because of speed which in the slower average ship owners and directors of steamship companies expressed the same opinions. They also objected to the convoy on the ground that it would cause considerable delay and hence loss of earnings which would be consumed in assembling the ships and awaiting escorts. Yet the attitude of the merchant marines had not

entirely eliminated the convoy from consideration. At the time I arrived the proposal was still being discussed; the rate at which the Germans were sinking merchantmen made this inevitable. And there seemed to be two schools among the Allied naval men—one opposed to the convoy, and the other insisting that it should be given a trial. The convoy had one expert which seemed to counterbalance all the objections which were urged against it. Its adoption would mean taking the offensive against the German submarines. The essen-



American battle ship fleet with destroyers acting as a screen.

As a protection against the submarine boat, the American Navy was committing precisely the same error of our Atlantic coast. As soon as Congress declared war against Germany we expected that at least a few of the U-boats would cross the Atlantic and attack American shipping; indeed, many believed that some had already crossed in anticipation of war; the papers were filled with silly stories about "submarine bases" in Mexican waters, on the New England coast and elsewhere; submarines were even reported entering Long Island Sound; nets were stretched across the Nar-

phases that the patrol system was necessarily unsuccessful, because it made almost impossible any combat with submarines and afforded very little protection to shipping. The advantage of the convoy system, as its advocates now urged, was precisely that it made such combats inevitable. In other words, it meant offensive warfare. It was proposed to surround each convoy with a protecting screen of destroyers, precisely as in the case of the battle fleet. Any submarine which attempted to torpedo a convoyed ship could therefore do so only in waters that were infested with destroyers. Just as soon as the torpedo started on its course and the tell-tale wake appeared on the surface the protecting ships would immediately begin sowing the waters with their depth charges. Thus the Germans would have to fight for every ship which they attempted to sink, instead of sinking them nonchalantly in waters that were free of destroyers, as had been their privilege hitherto. The great advantage of sailing ships through waters that were completely protected by destroyers had been shown in the immune zone which had been established across the Channel from Dover to Calais and from Folkestone to Boulogne. By arranging ships in compact convoys and protecting them with destroyers we would really create another immune zone of this kind, only it would be a movable one. We should establish, say, a square mile of the surface of the ocean in which submarine could not operate without great danger, and then we would move that square mile, along until port was reached.

### The Nervous School Child

Needs Rich, Red Blood to Regain Health and Strength. Many children start school in excellent health, but after a short time home work, examinations, hurried meals and crowded school rooms cause their blood to become weak and thin, their nerves over wrought and their color and spirits lost. It is a great mistake to let matters drift when boys and girls show symptoms of nervousness or weak blood. They are almost sure to fall victims of St. Vitus dance, or drift into debility that leads to other troubles. Regular meals, out-door exercise and plenty of sleep are necessary to combat the nervous wear of school life. But it is still more important that parents should pay strict attention to the school child's blood supply. Keep this rich and red by giving Dr. Williams' Pink Pills according to directions and the boy or girl will be sturdy and fit for school life. The value of Dr. Williams' Pink Pills in cases of this kind is shown by the statement of Mrs. Pearl G. Harrington, Kingsville, Ont., who says:—"I have often felt that I should write you and let you know what Dr. Williams' Pink Pills did for me. At the age of thirteen I was afflicted with St. Vitus dance. The trouble became so severe that I had to be taken from school. I was given medical treatment but it did not help me, in fact I was steadily growing worse. Then a friend advised my mother to give me Dr. Williams' Pink Pills, which she did, with the happiest results, as the pills completely cured me and I was again able to take up my studies and attend school. Again about three years ago I was attacked with nervous prostration and once more took Dr. Williams' Pink Pills, and after using five boxes was fully restored. I cannot praise these pills too highly as I believe they will cure any case of St. Vitus dance, or restore anyone who is weak, nervous or run down. You can safely give Dr. Williams' Pink Pills to the most delicate child, or take them yourself with equally good results when you need a blood tonic. These pills are sold by all dealers in medicine, or will be sent by mail, post paid, at 50 cents a box or six boxes for \$2.50 by The Dr. Williams' Medicine Co., Brockville, Ont.

It is not fair to the wife to have the husband say frequently "I have made quite a bit of money since I was married." "We" should take the place of the pronoun.

In place of positive proof a good many people expect you and me to accept supposition for more than it is worth.

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and more serious complaints are contracted in the most unprotected place.  
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from the first spruce or spruce. Stop it in time and do not gamble with your health, and over 40 years in treating coughs, colds and allied complaints. Everybody buys the Large Size. Montreal D. WATSON & CO., New York