

# DESTROYER'S WAR

*A million miles by the  
Eighth Flotilla*



A. D. DIVINE, D.S.M.



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To  
THE OFFICERS AND MEN  
OF  
H.M.S. *FIRE* *DRAKE*  
AND  
THE EIGHTH FLOTILLA '

*First Edition . . . December 1942*

*Reprinted . . . . December 1942*

*Reprinted . . . . March 1943*

Made and Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner Ltd., Frome and London

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attack. For the fourteen days before the war began it was engaged on vast "exercises," great sweeping movements of the fleets that covered the water between Cape Wrath and the coast of Iceland, between Iceland and the territorial waters of Norway, between Bergen and the North Sea. It was a time of watchfulness, a time of preparation, a rehearsal for the campaign that the Navy knew, and most of the world knew with it, must surely come.

It served us well, though with the destroyers of the Eighth—the "Fighting Eighth" as they were to be christened in the hard ceremony of war—there was small need for this schooling. Ever since its ships had been launched in the period about 1935, the Eighth had seen the edges of war. Palestine and Spain, recurrent crises, had moulded them to its usage.

Their flotilla leader was—is—H.M.S. *Faulknor*. Its ships were *Firedrake*, *Fury*, *Fortune*, *Foxhound*, *Foresight*, *Fearless*, *Forrester*, *Fame*—ships of thirteen hundred tons, sound, well-built ships, good to look at, magnificent to work with. In these two weeks of vigil, these days of waiting, they were "Fleet destroyers." They worked with the bigger ships, *Nelson* and *Rodney*, *Hood* and *Renown*, the ships of Britain's line of battle.

Mostly their work was that of the anti-submarine screen. In long lines they ranged ahead of the battleships and on either side in the rigid patterns of the "screening diagrams," their *Asdics*—the strange device that has played so tremendous a part in the war against the submarine—searched always the waters ahead and on either side. Their look-outs searched equally for the tell-tale feather of spray from a periscope or the grey line of a torpedo's wake.

They and the other destroyers of the Fleet played their part in making sure that no treacherous surprise overwhelmed us.

Slowly the tension grew, slowly it became apparent that there would be no second Munich. In the ships it was apparent already. At the end of the waiting days they came back to Scapa Flow.

## III

There was a strange and utterly British absence of drama about the Navy's change from peace to war. In *Firedrake* they were oiling ship at eleven o'clock that Sunday morning, made fast to the black squalor of the oiling jetty.

I asked the coxwain how the lower deck took it.

"Well," he said, "they were all crowded round the loud-speaker listening to the old boy's speech, and when he finished somebody said, 'About bloody well time too.' That was all."

In the wardroom they may have been a little more decorous. I do not know, I was not there—till many months later—but I doubt it. They had a glass of sherry, and the First Lieutenant went on deck to "organise" a small party to paint out the white flotilla bands on the funnel "in execution of previous orders."

Ribald comment on the lower deck—a handful of men painting over a funnel in the cheerless monotonous of a Scapa Sunday—the Navy was at war!

They completed oiling, went to a buoy, made fast and received their orders. Without ceremony, without boasting and vainglory, without fuss they went to sea. The fight was on.

The first act of war of the British Fleet was a wide sweep of the waters of the North Sea's gates, a sweep that covered every exit by which the German raiders might try to break from the North Sea to the Atlantic and the shipping lanes of Britain's lifeline. The *Graf Spee* was through already. We know now that well before Germany marched on Poland she had slipped out in cover of night and the autumn mists of the north, and had got clear away. The sweep found nothing save a belated merchantman or two scurrying for neutral safety. The sea was empty. But already the air was full of sound. The *Athenia* was sinking somewhere away to the south-west. West of them U-boats were making ready for fresh attacks. Well to the south fresh U-boats were getting into position.

And for every move there was already in being a swift

countermove from the magnetic central point of Britain. All down the seas that feed her the patrols were coming into action : destroyer patrols along the coast, minesweepers in the shoal waters, anti-submarine trawlers covering the North Sea, cruisers standing by to cover the small craft, cruisers sweeping down the ocean lanes where the convoys were already coming into being—naval vessels off Canada and Newfoundland, in the narrows of the Atlantic, by the Cape Verde Islands, off St. Paul's Rocks and the Abrolhos Reef, off the River Plate, the Cape of Good Hope, Ceylon and Singapore and the Pacific Islands. The vast movements that were designed to cover the whole world of British trade, to cover eighty-five thousand miles of ocean routes and the three thousand ships that Britain has at sea on every hour of every day, were in being.

To-day the world knows how brilliant was that planning, how successful its development, how splendid its execution. We carried it out, we achieved that first success against the blows that Hitler had prepared for us, under the protection of that great fleet that swept towards the north.

They were at sea for the first Monday and Tuesday of the war. On the Wednesday they came back to Scapa Flow and its quiet. Some of them have told me that they felt a sense of anticlimax. They had been to sea in time of war, they had carried out a wide and complicated operation in waters where they might reasonably have expected to make contact with the enemy—and they had seen nothing, heard nothing, come back with nothing done.

"It was just like peace-time," said one of the lieutenants to me.

It is difficult for those who play the game to see its outline. They could not see the vast precautions up and down the world that took place behind the screen they made. They could not see behind them an Empire making ready for the fight. They saw only the empty northern seas and the grey calm of Scapa Flow.

But within this first week of the war they had their taste of action. From Scapa they went out in the pallid light of

the dawn, the screen forming up on the great line of the battleships of the Fleet as they cleared the entrance channels. At seven-thirty in the morning they were heading north through the swept channel. At seven-thirty the Asdic operator below reported with a sudden urgency indications of a submarine. On the bridge they heard the indications repeated in the hollow staccato note of the loud-speaker. Instantly they turned towards it. Through the ship alarm bells rang.

In peace-time they had done this a hundred times, racing at imaginary targets, thrusting at the invisible buffs (the little red fishermen's buoys towed by a target submarine). But this was war. Somewhere under the grey water there was an enemy ready and waiting. They came closer and closer. They were over the target. In the ordered ritual of the attack, the quiet urgent antiphonal exchange of command and reply, the pattern was dropped. They raced on. And then astern of them, across the broad white roadway of their wake, the sea broke suddenly in the tumult of an explosion. Under their feet the ship jerked a little. And again the sea broke—first a shuddering dislocation of the surface, then the sledge-hammer blow of the explosion, then the enormous uprushing thunder of the spray . . .

The attack went through its appointed course. When it was done there was a patch of oil upon the water, oil that spread, and with the movement of the tide trailed slowly in a long and shining pathway down the surface of the sea.

They saw no wreckage, they recovered no bodies. And because they have other laurels and to spare, they do not claim that submarine. But Germany a little later admitted the loss of the submarine U 12 about that time—approximately in those waters! They rejoined the Fleet and pressed on north.

#### IV

The new sweep brought them nothing that was tangible. But the air about them this time was less full of the clamour of wireless. Already the first defeat of the U-boat was under

way. The graph of our shipping losses within the first weeks of the war is a declining curve. On September 10th they returned to Scapa, refuelled, and by the next morning were at sea again. All this first month it was to be like that, little more than a handful of hours in harbour at the end of days of sea-keeping—of incessant activity, of endless vigil.

They left Scapa and this time they went with the Fleet out into the Atlantic. They were settled to the routine now, to the ordered rhythm of Fleet destroyer life. At dawn they took up the day cruising stations, settling themselves to the screening diagram that was signalled by the flagship in a stutter of brilliant light, or the coloured iridescence of a signal hoist. They took signals from the Guide of the Fleet, or from their flotilla leader, a constant interchange of order and of question. Sometimes they took, too, the swift rebuke of "Pennants"—the number of an erring destroyer hoisted in coloured wisps at the flagship's yardarm. A destroyer will get her "Pennants" for making smoke—for smoke, plumed above a clear horizon, betrays a fleet to an enemy countless miles away. She gets her "Pennants," too, for bad station keeping—for getting ahead or astern of her allotted position.

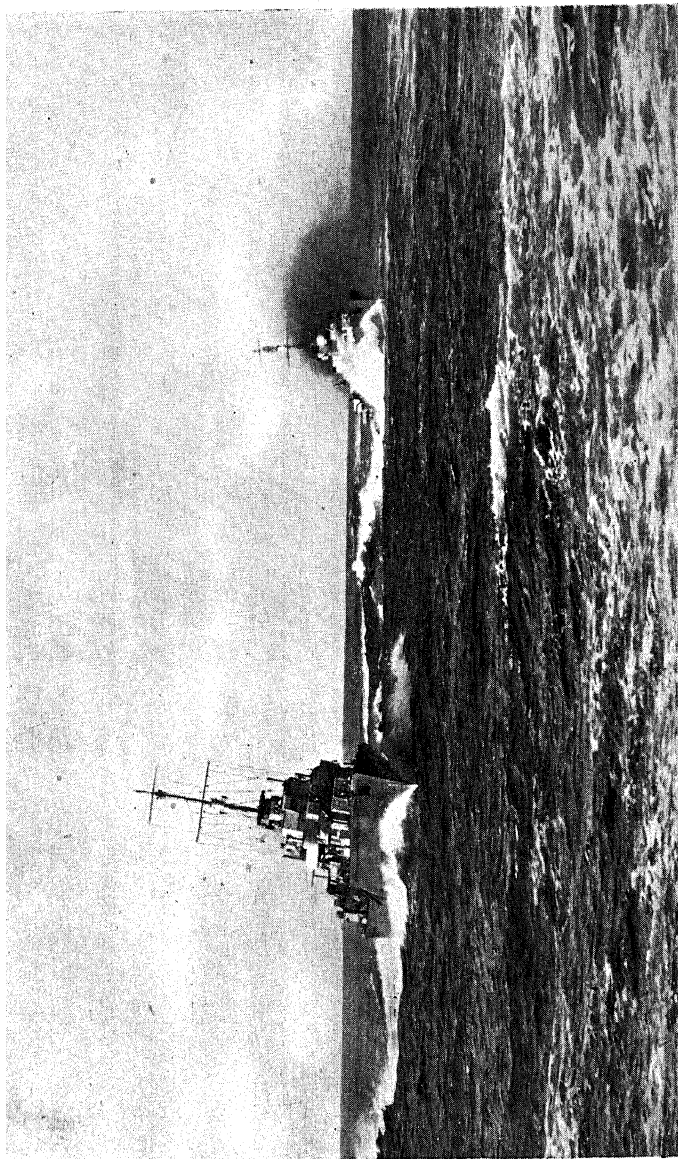
There were the sudden emergency "turn-aways" as somewhere on the screen came the report of a possible submarine. There was the elaborate and particular complexity of attendance upon an aircraft carrier. In this operation they had *Ark Royal* with them. When it had been in progress for some little while they were detached with her to the southward in search of submarines.

## CHAPTER II

### END OF A U-BOAT

**T**HE work of a destroyer attendant upon an aircraft carrier differs in detail from that of the normal Fleet destroyers. An aircraft carrier has more elaborate needs.





*Destroyers of the Eighth at speed*



*End of U 39*

At dawn she must turn—bows into the wind—to fly off her reconnaissance patrol, her anti-submarine planes, her fighters if there is reason to suspect the possibility of enemy attack. At dusk she must turn to the wind again to take the last of them once more on to the broad level of her flight deck.

Between those times she has to manœuvre in obedience to the wind whenever patrols complete their routine, or reinforcements of fighters need to be flown off or new pilots require flying practice. There is a constant changing of formation, a constant alteration from the line of course.

*Firedrake* and her fellows took their swift part in these manœuvres. With her fellow destroyers she took her turn in falling back as crash boat in case a plane met disaster at flying off or flying on.

They worked by slow degrees down to the north-west of Ireland, to that area two hundred miles or so west of the still Islands of the Hebrides where in the dusk of the first Sunday evening of the war the Donaldson liner *Athenia* was torpedoed—and the Germans, giving no warning, making no provision for the safety of passengers and crew despite their sworn promise, committed the first act of piracy in this new war.

The weather was calm, clear, with the long easy roll of the Atlantic swell. There was bright sun. Down through that peaceful afternoon the *Ark Royal* and her six destroyers carried out the search. Just before three in the afternoon the great carrier about to turn into the wind to fly off her Swordfish anti-submarine patrol, made a sudden violent turn to port and as she did so two torpedoes passed astern of her.

Instantly the destroyers turned, spread on a line of search, and raced in the direction of the estimated position of the submarine. The *Ark* herself turned away from the attack and made full speed from the scene of action. Big ships may not linger in the presence of a submarine.

The sea that had been peaceful was alive suddenly in the menace of war. Over the long, oily Atlantic swells there were scored now the six harsh furrows of the destroyers' wakes.

The surface of the sea itself was ripped with the double turning of the ploughshare bows. The "F"s were together—*Faulknor, Firedrake, Foxhound*.

*Foxhound* made the first contact. In the wind of her passage the attacking flag raced to her yardarm. She turned a little, increased her speed and stormed in to the kill. From *Firedrake* and *Faulknor* they watched the swift attack. They saw the first charge drop over the stern, they saw the throwers break in a little puff of smoke, and following thunder. They saw the depth charges hurl up into the air and the stems behind them tumbling over and over in a wild, unsteady arc.

There was a second attack. Again the calm sea broke in a wild, tumultuous anger. Still there was no sign of the submarine, nothing but the thin voice of the Asdic. There was no sign of damage or destruction. Again they wheeled. They were like sea eagles over a lesser bird, like the great skuas wheeling in to flash upon the hidden fish.

*Firedrake* hoisted the attacking flag this time; her charges were set to explode deep. Astern of her the sea was silent. Apart from her wake, apart from the double chevrons of her bow wave that rippled lazily across the sea, there was nothing but the two diminishing pools of the throwers' charges—the fading splash marks—to show what she had done.

On and on—and still the sea astern of them was silent. Before, the great canisters of T.N.T. had thundered when they were scarcely clear, but now they waited till they reached the pressure level to which they had been set. Then suddenly the sea shattered again, a quick heaving motion, a tumescence on the surface, fissured like ice that is veined with streaks and cracks and bubbles of air. The break came later, not this time the huge fantastic fountains of the shallow charges, but a more sober bursting, a less exuberant spray.

And with it came the U-boat. She surfaced level, her conning tower first and then the whaleback of her hull, almost the motions of a normal emergence, save only that she was not surrounded by the white, stertorous pother of blowing tanks. Caught in the gigantic upward swell of the explosions she was swept, helpless as a leaf, in the tumble

of a millrace. They learned afterwards that her gauges had been wrecked in the violence of the explosion. At first she did not know even that she *was* upon the surface, but *Firedrake* was turning already to come in for the new attack. She opened fire with "B" gun. The shell missed narrowly, sending up a tremendous fountain beyond the long grey hull. *Faulknor* opened fire. *Firedrake* opened with "X" gun, the two guns firing on the beam. *Faulknor* hit on the casing of the U-boat—they saw the red flash of the shell burst, the smoke cloud, the flying debris. *Foxhound* was racing in to ram, her bow wave high, her stern set down in the tumult of her wake.

And suddenly they saw figures on the conning tower of the U-boat, figures of men, their hands held up. U 39 had thrown up the sponge. Another submarine was done. As more and more men tumbled out, leapt to the narrow deck, jumped, some of them to the water, *Foxhound* turned away and slowed. *Faulknor* and *Firedrake* closed that battered hull. Along the main deck the bosun's mate was shrilling the urgent pipe, "Away sea boats crew." In his path the hands ran aft to man the falls. The crew jumped for the whaler, the Sub-Lieutenant was there. The boat dropped to the water, pushed off, crawled beetle-like across a sea to which stillness and calm had once again returned.

*Faulknor* and *Foxhound* had been nearer to the kill, their boats were first in the water, they picked up the bulk of the prisoners, forty-five of them all told. *Firedrake's* whaler picked up eight, turned, and came crawling back across the sea with them.

The U-boat sank, going down bows first. As she disappeared there was a sharp explosion—scuttling charges going off. They took the prisoners on board, and with the inevitable kindness of the seaman to the beaten foe, they fitted them out with dry clothes and cigarettes. Most of the Germans were wearing the German variant of Davis escape gear as they came aboard. There was one officer with them, an Oberleutenant zur See, and with them also was the engineer. With a curious blend of arrogance and

nerves, the Oberleutenant demanded to see the rest of the prisoners before they were taken for'ard. They were fallen in upon the quarter-deck. One of them, a wireless operator, was slightly injured by cuts and suffering from shock. When they had fallen in and were standing at attention the Oberleutenant walked sharply forward, lifted his hand in the Nazi salute, and barked out, "Heil Hitler!" From the ratings who had assembled about the quarter-deck to watch the proceedings, from the crews who still stood by the guns, there was a burst of derisive laughter.

## II

The sweep ended, and *Ark Royal* and the Eighth Flotilla went back to port—but not to rest. *Firedrake* had one day in and the next on anti-submarine patrol outside.

The last days of September make her log look like the record of an "in and out" weather predictor in an uncertain April.

She grew to know every rock, every current swirl, every tide-race of the Pentland Firth. She grew to know the angry headland of Cape Wrath, the high cliffs of the western face of Hoy, the whalebacks of the lesser isles. She grew to know the strange Northland names, Stroma and Sule Skerry, Papa Westray and Swona, Stronsay, Sanday and Rousay.

There is a devil in those waters, a cold harsh devil whipped into fury by winds from west and north and east. It always blows off Scapa—there is a tradition that it is always misty. It is known that the seas are never calm.

She was called out of Scapa in a high wind to go to the help of *Faulknor*—sub-hunting in a north-west gale.

She felt the wind as soon as she left the shelter of the South Walls. Even off the west of Ronaldshay there was a high sea running. The Firth was angry.

They went through it in a howling darkness, the sea rising with every minute they ran towards the east, and in the First Watch—somewhere about ten o'clock—they got a contact.

The ship was rolling heavily with the swift, irresponsible motion of a destroyer in a seaway. As they circled to attack she stood almost on her beam ends. They increased to attacking speed, and the wind of their passage and the wind of the gale roared through signal halyards and funnel guys, drummed every fragment of loose canvas, shrieked through the steel angles of the bridge structure, and carried everywhere the driven spray with it.

They came over the target, blind, reeling, hardly able to stand in the fury of the waves, and dropped the pattern.

As they circled, pitching heavily for a little as the sea came ahead, rolling again as it came on the beam, they saw, far in the darkness, the pin-point light of a red flare.

Even while they tried to fix its position it flickered out. The darkness closed again, they were alone with the wind and the furious movement of the sea.

All through the night they carried on the hunt. Conditions remained bad, the wind rising slowly, the sea rising with it. They lost the contact and found it again, and again the flares pricked up, far away, scarcely visible in the darkness. They never saw them long enough to determine what they were, or their position, and below them they believed they had a submarine, a U-boat trying desperately to escape, pumping below in the darkness with the violence of the sea, turning and twisting and reeling to the shock of the depth charges.

All night they hung on tenaciously, losing and finding, searching, groping, hardly able to see each other in the narrow confines of the bridge; thrown against the screen as she pitched; flung between the compass platform and the welter of instruments as she rolled; wet, cold, cut across with the cold autumn spray—but always intent upon the chase.

When the dawn came they had lost it finally. Possibly it was sunk—they make no claims at all for that night's work.

But with the dawn they saw the flares again, and as the light came they turned towards them. With the first light they sighted a ship's boat, down-wind of them, lying to a sea-anchor head to sea.

commander of *Spearfish* decided to try to get to periscope depth to discover his enemy, but immediately after a second and nearer explosion sent him down again.

He stopped engines and lay "doggo" while round them the enemy exploded depth charges, explosive sweeps and electrically controlled bombs.

The ship was shaken and battered by repeated near misses. It was plain that she was suffering more and more damage, but it is on record that her crew, lying quiet to conserve oxygen, organised a sixpenny sweepstake on the time at which the next explosion would occur.

In the second hour of the attack the explosions averaged two a minute. It became difficult to keep the "sweepstake" up to date.

At tea-time they heard the scrape of a wire against the hull.

They had endured much by then—and there was still more to endure. The wire passed them and did not catch, but immediately after there was a shattering explosion. The lights went out, the crash of broken glass filled the place and was succeeded by the noise of water running and the hiss of air escaping from the high-pressure pipes.

Working desperately in the terrible silence of the darkness, they got the auxiliary lighting into commission, stopped the worst of the leaks and surveyed the damage.

The engines were out of commission and one of the electric motors. They could test nothing; they could only guess at the rest of the damage.

And then darkness came.

As soon as they were certain of its coming they determined to get to the surface—if the ballast tanks would blow.

They did.

They surfaced. The air pressure was so great inside the hull from the leaking pipes that the Captain had to take special precautions to avoid being shot out when the hatches were opened; but when he reached the conning tower he had his reward. The sea about them was empty.

The periscope was gone, the communications were wrecked,



the engines were out of action, there was only one motor that was any use—and it was certain that they could not dive again.

Still they were cheerful—as cheerful as men are who have escaped the apparently inevitable.

They got the wireless to work and they sent out a call for help.

They also, after terrific labours, got the starboard engine to turn round again, and then the port. And before daylight came they started to limp home.

All next day they struggled along on the surface. Enemy bombers came, and missed them, returned, and missed them again.

And help came too. From the north-west a strong division of the Fleet came down to cover the withdrawal of that gallant ship. There was a chance that a portion of the German Fleet might have come out in search of it. Escort was very necessary.

*Firedrake* came with the destroyer screen.

*Nelson*, *Rodney* and *Ark Royal* were the big ships of her division, *Hood* with *Aurora* and other cruisers were in support.

The air attack came early in the afternoon. A Heinkel 111 came in low—air attack on ships at sea was still in its infancy—and dropped her bomb from less than 4,000 feet.

The Fleet put up a tremendous barrage, mostly short. Barrage fire too was still in its infancy as far as fast modern air attack was concerned.

The plane that selected *Ark Royal* as a target, ran in in a shallow dive and let go a 2,000-lb. bomb.

From *Firedrake's* bridge they saw it falling, a pin-point against the fleecy grey cloud. They saw it begin, they saw it grow. They saw *Ark Royal* turn abruptly; under full helm, heeling over until her flight deck was clearly visible. They saw the smoky black fountain of a tremendous explosion.

But when it cleared the *Ark* was still there. Still undamaged. Still serene.

That was the first and most famous of the many sinkings that were to be visited upon her by Dr. Goebbels before the waters of the Mediterranean closed over her.

There was a fresh attack. This time one German plane swooped close over *Fame*, of the Eighth Flotilla. She opened fire with the quick-stuttering multiple point-five machine-guns. She believed that her shots hit. The plane disappeared.

In a little while the first air raid on a fleet at sea in this war was over.

They went on. *Spearfish* went on too. She got home safely, was repaired and went out again to gallant action.

The Fleet went back to harbour, its mission over. On the way fog fell on them, the blind impalpable fog of northern waters.

The Fleet had separated. Now, as they approached the coast, portions of it came together again. Portions of it came almost literally together—for on *Fire Drake's* bridge they heard suddenly the deep blast of a diaphone foghorn, and instantly on its booming they saw above them the bows and the monstrous superstructure of the *Nelson*.

Somehow they dodged that knife-edge and saw in the fog beside them the tremendous perspective of her sides. Then she vanished, swallowed in the fog, and they heard the boom of the horn again.

They got in safely—everybody did, though it is of this "party" that the jest is whispered in the Fleet about two divisions of the "Tribal" class destroyers mistaking each other for the enemy in the darkness, and opening fire. It is not considered safe to talk about this to the Tribals . . .

There were many times now when she put into the still anchorage only for long enough to go alongside the oiling wharf, collect her victualling supplies from a store ship or the N.A.A.F.I. boat, and slip away to sea again. This day she went out, ran an A/S patrol off the Scapa approaches, and was back again next morning.

She came back to "top up" her fuel supplies urgently and at speed.

Away to the southward reconnaissance planes of the coastal command of the R.A.F. had reported a German naval squadron at sea to the south-west of Norway.

The Fleet raced out of Scapa in pursuit.

It was a long chase, far to the eastward and far down to the south. The Fleet did not make contact with the enemy. Under cover of darkness the German squadron, which had turned, escaped into the protection of the Skagerrak.

It was assumed by the public at the time that the cruise of the German squadron had been a demonstration, staged to impress neutrals. We know now that it was almost certainly designed as a diversionary operation to permit the pocket battleship *Deutschland* to slip up the eastern side of the North Sea and so, by way of the Arctic Circle and its darkness, out into Denmark strait and down to the Atlantic.

It succeeded ; and the Germans had a secondary purpose as well. As in the last war they had tried, by "trailing their coat" on the very edge of safety, to draw our Grand Fleet out over well-devised submarine traps, so now they tried an air trap.

On the Monday, the day following the turn away of the German squadron, a bomber force roared in to the attack.

Once again, despite the lack of practice of our anti-aircraft armament under actual war conditions, and despite certain technical defects which were beginning to show themselves for the first time, we suffered no loss.

But an hour or two later a German plane—one of three flying southward along the Danish coast—was seen to be in difficulties. Immediately afterwards it came down on a strip of beach between Ringkoebing and Esbjerg.

When a party of Danish hunters came up to it it was in flames.

Apparently hits in the petrol tank had shortened its endurance.

Within a few minutes another was down, this time to a pancake landing on the island of Fanøe. One of the crew of this machine was wounded.

They had left their base aerodrome at Luneburgger Heide,

in Prussia, according to their own statement, at eight o'clock in the morning—roughly, that is, at dawn. They had chased and found the British Fleet at its estimated position. They had attacked it—and now two were out of the war for good and all. There is presumptive evidence that others also had not returned. But the Fleet was still on its way home, unharmed.

*Firedrake* went back, not to Scapa this time. She actually had the best part of two days in port, but when she went back to that strange lagoon amongst the islets, she went in a hurry.

For the Navy had suffered its second great loss of the war. H.M.S. *Royal Oak*, lying by herself up at the far end of Scapa Flow in the gunnery exercise area, had been sunk at anchor by a German U-boat.

*Royal Oak* had gone down with more than eight hundred men, and *Firedrake* came back to the Flow in time to take part in the last phase of the abortive hunt for Prien's submarine.

It was a heavy loss, as heavy in a different way as the loss of H.M.S. *Courageous*. The aircraft carrier had been sunk a little while before in the course of an anti-submarine sweep on the same lines as that in which *Firedrake* had taken part with H.M.S. *Ark Royal*; her planes searching for U-boats, her destroyer escort sinking them.

Even so might *Ark Royal* have been lost to U 39 had it not been for the endless vigilance of the Eighth.

Prien's U-boat was clear of the Flow long before *Firedrake* arrived there. It became apparent early that there was no hope of immediate revenge—that was to come a long time after. Meanwhile there was other and immediate need for the destroyers.

On October 13 the British ship *Stonegate* was sunk by the German pocket battleship *Deutschland* in the North Atlantic. The following day she sank the Norwegian vessel *Lorentz W. Hansen*. A few days later she captured the American *City of Flint*—and began the long comedy of diplomacy and counter-diplomacy which ended in the American frigate's release.

Nothing in those first days was known to the public of her activities, but it is evident that the Admiralty had a shrewd idea of possibilities.

The Eighth Flotilla put to sea to screen H.M.S. *Rodney* and a battleship force in a long sweep that was designed to cut off her return from the foray.

The sweep took them far from our outermost bases. For the first time since the war had begun, *Firedrake* fuelled at sea, taking the oil from *Rodney* through a flexible pipe as a suckling takes its sustenance from the sow. The language used during the operation had, I am told on reliable authority, something of a porcine quality also.

For more than a week they carried out a wide search of the extreme north of the Atlantic. Luck was not with them. They saw only the tremendous silhouettes of the "waggons" as the irreverent called the battleships—they saw no sign of the towering streamlined superstructure of the *Deutschland*.

Finally, on October 22, they returned to harbour.

They returned to hear that Germany had tried a new attack in their absence. Stung possibly by the failure of the two raids on the Fleet at sea, they had tried their hand on ships in harbour.

The first attack of the war on an important naval base took place on the afternoon of October 16 at Rosyth. The raids followed a morning reconnaissance, and were heaviest in the area immediately about the Forth Bridge, on which a determined and entirely unsuccessful attack was made.

The cruiser *Southampton* was slightly damaged, there were casualties from splinters aboard H.M.S. *Edinburgh*, and the destroyer *Mohawk*, coming in from convoy duty, was badly sprayed with fragments from a near miss, and had 25 men killed and wounded.

The Germans as usual advertised heavy successes.

This looked as if it might be the beginning of a long and determined assault. When the following day there was an attack by fourteen planes on Scapa Flow, it seemed certain that that was the case.

The raid on Scapa began at about 10.30. The planes

made repeated runs over the harbour, and in the course of the attack H.M.S. *Iron Duke*, Fleet gunnery training and depot ship, was damaged by three near misses.

"Units of the British Battle Fleet," said the German communique, "were successfully attacked."

The Battle Fleet—and *Firedrake*—were far out to sea at 10.30 on the morning of October 17.

Four planes were brought down over Scapa or on the way home. It is probable that others did not reach their bases.

It is not possible to say what passed in the mind of the German High Command, but something seems to have gone wrong. Either the failure of the reconnaissance, which sent planes over to bomb a largely inadequate target, or the loss of aircraft seems to have discouraged them. There were no more raids on Scapa for a long time.

*Firedrake* and the other destroyers went back to routine duties.

Her scene changed a little, for most of her work for the next couple of months was on the west coast of Scotland. Immediately after her return from the long sweep she went down to the Clyde with H.M.S. *Furious*.

There was nothing very dramatic in the next weeks. Exercises, screening duties, short runs took up her time until the first week of November. She learned the approaches to the Clyde as well as she had learnt to know the waters about Scapa Flow.

And in the first week of November she went into dock for a brief refit. She had been at sea under war conditions for almost three months, steaming hard all that time, without rest, without pause. She had scarcely ever been in harbour for a full twenty-four hours on end. She had been at sea on occasion for more than a week at a time.

Destroyers are frail craft, lightly built for the sake of speed, enormously powered for their slender hulls. Between the wardroom and the bridge of a destroyer there is packed machinery that would power a good-sized factory. There is electrical gear enough to supply a small town with light. There is a fantastic ordered confusion of auxiliary machinery.

Of feed pumps and fuel pumps and bilge pumps, of dynamos and Diesel engines, of special and delicate gear for wireless and Asdic, for a hundred purposes, secret and known.

And all of it, every single part, is built to co-operate, to fit in with the breathless rhythm of full-speed running. Thrown about in heavy seas, jolted by gunfire, swung and bucketed about by the hard usage of war, it has to stand strains beyond the contemplation of even the most vigorous of peace-time engineers.

In the first months of the war our naval vessels set up records in steaming that, from battleships down to the meanest auxiliaries, will stand for all time.

Their endurance is a tribute beyond all vocal praise to the men who ran the engines—and to the men who built them.

#### CHAPTER IV

### THE "CHRISTMAS FLAP"

SHE came out of dock on November 20, and on November 22 she moved down the river in which she had refitted and oiled at its seaward end.

Immediately she was involved in trouble again.

She had hardly completed with fuel and ammunition when there was an alarm in the Firth of Clyde.

The Firth of Clyde is a broad waterway for those who go down to the sea in an orderly manner. It is an admirable stretch for sailing and even for motor-boating. It is not perhaps the best place for full-blooded Fleet destroyers to riot round in the darkness of a November night.

But somebody had reported the presence of a submarine—and strange things have happened in the Clyde this war. The destroyers raced out to reinforce the regular A/S patrol. *Firedrake* went out with them.

I am told by those who were there that a good time was had by all.

From Toward Point, where the Firth narrows, to Fort Matilda, which is Greenock, there is nowhere where a ship may lie more than a mile and a half from the nearest land. A destroyer at speed covers a mile and a half in three minutes . . .

There was in that black darkness a wild weaving and intertwining of wake and bow wave. Ships loomed up, sheered away and returned, ships circled about each other. Destroyers dodged Asdic trawlers, and trawlers raced away from armed yachts. There was language from unseen bridges and oaths from invisible mouths.

"It was a party, that," said one of the seamen to me. "I remember I kep' wondering if I'd finish up on the beach at Dunoon or Gourock or Helensburgh—or just go out quiet, with the tide."

Nobody "went out quiet." There was no collision throughout the proceedings—that stands to the eternal credit of the look-outs and the captains during those hectic hours. *Foxhound* of the Eighth ran ashore, but she slid off again and nobody seemed to worry very much.

There was no submarine.

Everybody agreed about that afterwards—it was the only point of agreement.

*Firedrake* went to sea next day. Nobody said so, but the impression stands that she went out to seek safety in open waters.

She went back to the old routine. At sea with the big ships, back to harbour, time to fuel and out to sea again.

She was coming back from one of these trips, screening H.M.S. *Nelson*, when there was the thud of an explosion.

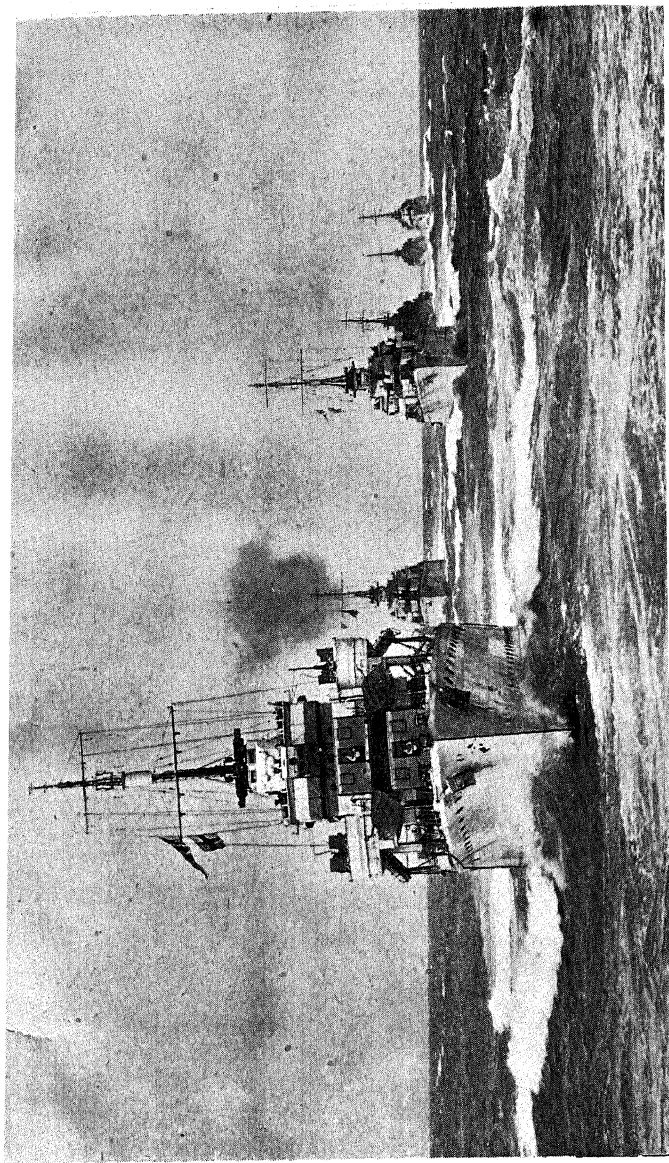
It was not loud—on the bridge they scarcely heard it. In the wardroom the officers off duty heard it better, felt it too, an explosion not very far off.

That was the beginning of the best-kept secret of the early part of the war.

*Nelson* had set off a mine.

At the time they could not be certain. Signals fluttered at once to her masthead—there was the possibility of a torpedo.





*The Eighth flotilla at sea*



*“ We slammed into a sea that towered higher than the bridge ”*

The destroyers elaborated their sweep, probing the water, hunting.

The big ship arrived in port and at once complicated measures began for maintaining secrecy. No whisper of the affair slipped out to the outside world.

*Nelson* was repaired and back in the Line before the Germans knew she had been damaged.

On Christmas Eve *Firedrake* ran down to the Clyde again with the prospect of Christmas in harbour.

Fate and the Staff were with her most of the way. She had her Christmas in—most of it.

The log entries on Christmas Day are interesting.

07.00 Hands to breakfast and clean.

07.40 Out pipes, hands to mess-deck brightwork stations.

08.00 Hands fall in. Clear up decks.

09.00 Secure. Colours.

09.30 Captain returned on board.

10.00 Hands to prayers aft.

It goes on much the same way throughout the day. The normal routine of a small ship on Christmas morning. They paused and were still for colours, they stood in the windy waist of the ship, heads bared, for prayers. They ate their enormous and indigestible Christmas dinners—and at 13.30 there is the entry "Leave to port watch 13.30 to 22.30."

The Port Watch went ashore—was it not Christmas? It went ashore to enjoy itself.

It did.

The Staff also enjoyed itself.

According to the junior officers of destroyers—anywhere—the principal objective in the life and work of the Staff of the Captain (D.) is to make life as uncomfortable and outrageous as possible for the destroyers. This, it is firmly believed, is the only thing which gives the officers of the Staff an interest in life—apart of course from golf and long week-ends in the country and, naturally, gin.

This is an act of faith, and not to be shaken in any way. It is also of course a gross libel, but not one that worries the Staff to any particular extent.

On Christmas evening the Staff—the junior officers said inevitably that it was because they had hang-overs combined with indigestion—ordered *Firedrake* to sea at little more than an hour's notice.

The officers who were aboard, having finished dinner, were cheerful. The small detail that half the ship's company was ashore, and a percentage of the officers also, only made things interesting. I am not sure that they actually sang hymns in praise of the Staff. Actually I doubt it.

There is no reliable record, for the log entry merely says :

21.30 Duty part muster on fo'c's'le. Shorten in.

22.00 Weighed.

At "twenty-two hundred" *Firedrake* put to sea in obedience to supplementary orders from Captain (D.).

The Port Watch had leave until half-past ten, but most of them were on board before she sailed.

There is in that simple statement a wealth of information for those who know the sea and ships. The sailor is not lightly to be won from his leave at any time. At a time of festival . . . The brief notice that was all a harassed Staff could allow *Firedrake* did not permit of a proper search of the town—did not permit of the patrols going ashore, of the recall being passed in cinemas and theatres, in restaurants and public-houses.

Yet most of the Port Watch were back on the ship.

Somehow by word of mouth, by rumour, by hearsay, by the everlasting miracle of a lower deck "buzz" the news went round. And by the everlasting miracle of a good ship's company, the men came off of their own free will.

And they came alongside with song. Somehow they had got a drifter to bring them off, somehow they had improvised their own "pier-head jump" arrangements and they came alongside singing that fine old traditional song of the lower deck that has for refrain :

Roll out the *Nelson*, the *Rodney*, the *Hood*,  
This two funnelled bastard is no — good.

*Firedrake* was already under way when they came aboard ;

it was blind dark. I will not say that the Watch also was blind—but there is a special providence that watches over drunken men and sailors—and a whole army of archangels that puts in overtime looking after drunken sailors.

The officers of the Watch were certainly blind—to a multitude of small happenings. For instance, it is on record that the O.A., or it might be that it was the E.A., or even perhaps the E.R.A., had jumped clean from the jetty into the very middle of the crowd of men in the waist of the drifter. But that, after all, is a reasonable manner of coming off when the leave is cut on Christmas night.

Christmas comes but once a year. *Firedrake* went to sea.

She had unfortunately set a precedent . . .

On Boxing Day she was well out in a calm, December drizzle. On the third day out she saw smoke on the horizon. In a little while she saw ships, a destroyer first, then merchant vessels, big ships, transports, ship after ship, rank after rank of them, an army of ships, the ships of an army.

They had met the second Canadian Convoy coming in to England on the last leg of a brilliant run.

They ran up to them and turned, taking up their appointed stations in the screen, and, zig-zagging meticulously according to the orders, they steamed solemnly back the way they had come.

The "Christmas Flap" for 1939 was almost over.

On December 29 they met a French Squadron at sea.

On December 30 they were off the Clyde.

On December 31 they were in, only to be turned round again and sent racing round to Devonport.

There had been no ease of living for them in 1939—fittingly they saw the Old Year out at sea.

## II

In the first four months of the war—the four months of 1939—we had two heavy blows at sea: the loss of the *Royal Oak* and the aircraft carrier *Courageous*.

In December there was added to these the splendid sacrifice

of the armed merchant cruiser *Rawalpindi*, which sank with her guns still firing against the infinitely superior weight of armament of the pocket battleship *Deutschland*.

In addition to these we lost three destroyers, *Duchess*, *Gipsy* and *Blanche*, and we lost also nine trawlers and a drifter.

Compared with the losses of 1914 our sacrifice was small. To counterbalance them we had the knowledge that the combination of under-sea and air—of U-boat and long-range bomber—had been defeated at its first onset, and though we knew that that onset would be renewed with fresh ingenuities and fresh determination—we felt already that we could handle anything that was to come.

We had, too, the remarkable success of *Exeter*, *Achilles* and *Ajax* against the much-vaunted *Graf Spee*; we had sunk the *Leipzig* and a cruiser of the *Königsberg* class, between thirty and forty U-boats, and some seven auxiliaries.

By every reckoning the first round of the sea war was to us.

The second round began.

The winter of 1939-40, mild while the old year lasted, turned early in the new year to a brutality such as we seldom know in Britain.

We in the South saw and suffered the great snows of January and February. In the North they endured a grey hell of cold and storm. They knew every bitterness of snow and sleet and icy gales. They knew decks piled with frozen spray that had to be chopped from guns and gun-shields, that had to be chipped from the reeling decks. They came in to harbour with rigging and stanchions bearded with icicles. With ladders and deck plating suicidal under foot, with gear jammed and whistles frozen up, bridges masked in snow and men frost-bitten and exhausted with cold.

To most of the men who served from the northern bases in that atrocious spell, January and February and March are a grey succession of bitter days. They remember little. With the Fleet Destroyers it was an endless round of sea duty. Even when the big ships came in to rest—and that was not often—they were driven out again to do A/S patrols.

They came to crave the spell of boiler cleaning that gave

them a stretch ashore ; to bless the engineer who could produce an "engine-room defect" that would give them all night in.

Lest any man think I exaggerate in this matter of sea time, let him re-read the Admiralty statement of February 2, 1940.

" Battleships averaged 25 days at sea a month for the first four months of the war, steaming anything from 8,000 to 10,000 miles in most cases.

" One cruiser covered 28,000 miles in the Atlantic in the first three months. Another did 12,000 miles in a month. A third was at sea for 103 days continuously, at speeds of from 15 to 25 knots.

" When the *Graf Spee* went to her end, *Exeter* was one year overdue for a refit. *Achilles* had steamed 124,000 miles since she was last refitted."

Of the destroyers the statement said : " Some have been at sea for over 100 days, steaming from 25,000 to 30,000 miles in these four months."

They went on steaming.

Into Scapa, or the Scottish ports, refuel, store up, out again with the "waggon."

Little happened. There were no battles in this period of ice and snow to waken up the blood and fire the spirit. There was no enemy to see—only the constant enemy beneath the water.

Mostly from the New Year to the spring the weather was too bad for German aircraft to make the long flight to the North. There was not even that interest. The days ran into one another in an endless grind of sea-keeping.

It was hard for all ships. It was hardest of all for the destroyers and the minesweepers. Hardest for them because they were small, comfortless, cold, full of a wild and wicked motion in the sea, always wet.

They endured it. They were even cheerful. There were times when they could see the joke of things.

But this was January. They arrived at Plymouth on the 1st. They left on the 3rd, they were at Greenock on the 4th,

oiled, slipped and proceeded to sea with *Rodney* and *Repulse*. Came to an anchor again on the 11th, and were at sea by the 14th with *Warspite* and other ships of the Fleet. They reached Scapa at 10.15 on the 17th, and slipped and proceeded to sea at 15.00—four and three-quarter hours in port. They were away at sea with the Battle Fleet until the 24th.

So it went on.

February was like that too.

But they do remember one thing in that period. There was another submarine attack.

They were in the North Sea then, with the battle cruisers. The battleships were ahead, with their own screen. About two o'clock in the afternoon a torpedo was fired at the *Repulse*.

This may be one of the many occasions when *Repulse* was sunk by Goebbels over the radio.

The torpedo did not hit *Repulse*. *Fortune* and *Firedrake* and two of the Tribal destroyers were detached from the screen to hunt the sea-wolf.

They hunted for nearly two and a half hours. *Fortune* got the first contact. They watched her pattern explode, saw the crashing fountains of the spray and went into the attack themselves. From the first pattern there were no results. *Fortune* found again and went in like a hunting dog, hot and eager on the scent.

They dropped pattern after pattern. *Fortune* dropped five in all, then *Firedrake* went in for the second time. Her pattern dropped where the instruments marked the quarry. They heard the thud, saw the water break, watched the spray.

They then saw oil come to the surface in a dark swirl, and spread; they saw it flow away down to leeward with the run of the tide; they saw it grow and grow until it was a trail a hundred yards wide and stretching out, flattening out the sea, glossing over the little tumble of the waves, until it disappeared from sight.

No wreckage came to the surface.

No bodies.

They do not claim a submarine. But . . .



## III

There was little of drama—in the accepted sense of the word—for anyone in the northern waters in these months.

It was as if the heroic last stand of the *Rawalpindi* had rung down one curtain—and the play was waiting on another.

It may be that the end of the *Graf Spee* and the obvious failure of the *Deutschland's* cruise sickened the German High Command for a while of these adventurings, but more probably the need for conserving materials and ships for the Norway adventure, as yet unguessed at by us, was the primary reason for this spell of quiet.

There was talk in uninformed quarters of a "phony war."

Whatever the conditions on the French frontier, no man can say this North Sea war was "phony." If Hitler was not prepared to risk his surface vessels, he was still eager to use every means in his power against the British Fleet. Submarine and magnetic mine were used ingeniously, and daringly. If they got in this period no big results, the little ships suffered none the less.

In the last week of January we lost the *Grenville* with half her complement; we lost the *Exmouth* with every soul on board. Destroyers go quickly when their time is come.

A week or so later we lost the fleet minesweeper *Sphinx*.

There was nothing "phony" here.

Oddly enough, since Norway was the cause of Germany's inaction on the surface, it was from Norway that the first bright drama of the New Year came.

H.M.S. *Cossack* leapt straight to the heart of the British public when she ran into Joessing Fjord and took from the stranded *Altmark* the prisoners of the *Graf Spee*.

*Firedrake* and the "F's" were out with the "waggons" when that happened.

For a month after the affair of the Joessing Fjord, the public heard little from the North. But the work went on. In every weather, at every hour, the patrol of Germany's sea approaches proceeded. We maintained a distant but absolutely effective blockade of Western Europe—little slipped through the net.

We maintained constant patrols against the possibility of fresh German surface units stealing out to take up the work at which the *Graf Spee* and the *Deutschland* had failed.

And in middle March Germany was suddenly stung to attempt air action against our northern bases again.

Fourteen planes raided Scapa Flow.

*Firedrake* was lying at anchor at the time. As usual, the aircraft warning signal had been given some time before the raid began. She was ready. But there was a long delay; those officers who were not required at anti-aircraft stations were in the wardroom—it was about 7.30 in the evening, just on the edge of dusk.

To them came the quartermaster. He was a new quartermaster, not yet perhaps versed in the intricacies of naval procedure. "He came—" said one of the officers to me, "He came and stood in the doorway, a little bashful, and he said, 'The aeroplanes have arrived, sir!'"

Could anything be neater? Could anything be more expressive?

The wardroom finished off its pink gins and went on deck.

"The aeroplanes" came in at ten thousand feet, etched clearly against the last of the light. They attacked indiscriminately, dropping their bombs amongst the anchored shipping and on the farms and villages of the islands.

*Norfolk* was hit and slightly damaged. She had seven casualties. Bombs fell fairly close to the *Iron Duke* again, not close enough to do any harm.

Nothing else was hit.

On land five cottages were damaged at Bridge of Waith, and James Isbitser had the melancholy distinction of being the first civilian to be killed in an air raid in this war.

The German bombers were diving at times to about 4,000 feet. Against them Scapa was putting up the fiercest ack-ack barrage of the war. Streams of tracer climbed into the night, pin-points of light against the coming dark.

They saw from *Firedrake*, as the destroyers and small craft got under way, one plane caught in the searchlights, and

they watched a fighter go in and finish it off. They thought two others went.

Then the raid was suddenly over. The barrage died down, the guns were silent, the flicker of the lights in the sky gave way to peace.

The second attempt on Scapa had failed in its turn.

The destroyers went back to the elaborate monotony of work.

An elaborate programme of exercises designed to meet every possible contingency that might arise had been devised. It was broken at intervals by urgent calls to submarine attacks. Calls that brought the destroyers racing out of the Scapa channels to hunt industriously about island and cape, in strait and bay for the elusive and often illusionary U-boat.

They made the acquaintance of Punishment Bay, that grim backwater of the grim Flow that destroyer officers allege was made known to the staff of Captain (D.) by the personal devil. They say worse things than that, in point of fact.

And then, when they were growing to loathe Hoy and the Mainland, the South Walls and Sulla Voe, they were suddenly released from Scapa.

They slipped out of the Flow in a gusty westerly wind, and punched their way to Cape Wrath through the wicked head seas of the Pentland Firth. But the moment they turned Cape Wrath their troubles passed, for they were going on the first spell of real rest since the war began. And even the weather became kind to them.

There is little in Britain so lovely as the Western Isles on a bright winter's day, with the snow on the high mountains inshore, the brown stain of the withered heather, the silver of the waterfalls and the dark green stretches of the pines. The Small Isles were etched in purple as they passed, and they "in dreams beheld the Hebrides."

Even the names are lovely—Col and Tiree and Tobermory, Lismore and Lorne : they run like silver from the tongue.

That passage ran like silver. They said to me : "It was like peace." They went to the Clyde, and eight hours later they were at Milford Haven. They de-oiled there, reversing

the process that had so often and so rapidly sent them to sea, and the next day they went to their re-fitting port. The war was seven months old. They had had only the urgent repairs of November. This was a longer refit. This meant proper leave.

## IV

I am told that they enjoyed their leave. The stories of what they did on it are not the story of *Firedrake*. That began again on April 28th when, rested and fresh, they went to sea again, back to the Clyde. And on the day of their arrival there happened one of the tragedies of the war.

They were at lunch in the wardroom—under orders to proceed shortly to sea—when they heard a heavy crash close at hand. The first officer to get on deck found that the ship next to them, a big French destroyer, the *Maillé Brézé*, lying at anchor two-and-a-half cables from them, had, by the supreme mischance of fortune, torpedoed herself. She was a ship of more than 2,400 tons, almost a light cruiser, one of the heavy destroyers of the "Aigle" class.

Her torpedo tubes were not in the centre line, but staggered on either side of the ship. They were trained fore and aft in the normal rest position, and by some almost incredible accident one of them had fired. The torpedo had slithered along the main deck, hit the break of the fo'c's'le under the bridge structure, and the safety mechanism had failed. The explosion which they had heard in the wardroom had wrecked the whole-forepart of the ship, fired the oil fuel and everything combustible in the centre portion, and ultimately fired the forward magazine. Many men were killed by the first violence of the explosion. Many others were trapped by the wreckage of exit and entrance to the mess-decks and by the violence of the flames which followed.

On *Firedrake* there was no moment's hesitation. Both whalers were in the water almost before the first shock of the explosion had died away. The First Lieutenant took the one, the Sub., the Doctor and the coxswain took the other. There were men on the deck of the fo'c's'le of the *Maillé Brézé*

and one whaler went to the bows to take them off. Fifteen men slid down the hawse pipe and were taken to safety that way. The Doctor's boat went alongside amidships, and the coxswain hurled the medical chest in one tremendous heave from the whaler to her deck. They went aboard. There were dead and dying on the deck, and wounded men. What they could do in emergency treatment was done there.

The First Lieutenant's boat took survivors to *Firedrake* and came back with every portable fire-fighting appliance in the ship and with smoke helmets and other gear. The fire had not yet taken charge; there was still a chance of saving her. They began to fight. All this time there was the probability that the whole ship would blow up as the fire reached the magazines—blow up without warning. They worked desperately, helping terribly mangled men at one end of the ship, fighting the fire at the other. But the flames gained on them with the brutal swiftness of oil fuel blazing. It became clear that the men trapped in the mess-decks were doomed. Help came. Other boats came after them, but the crisis developed with a rapidity beyond all control. They could see the men by the scuttles of the mess-decks thrusting their arms out. Those that they could they helped with morphia from the boats alongside. The *Maillé Brézé* went down with thirty-eight.

Since that day escape hatches have been fitted in the mess-decks of all small ships.

They were recalled to *Firedrake* before the end. There were plenty of helpers now and they were under orders to put to sea. She sank as they stood out for Norway and the next great chapter in the history of the little ships.

## CHAPTER V

## NORWAY

IN the small hours of April 8th we laid three minefields along the western coast of Norway: one between the northern tip of the Lofoten Islands and the mainland, one off Bodö, one off Stadland, which is close to Vagsö and the Helle Fjord.

German shipping had consistently used the Norwegian coastal route—territorial waters—from the Skagerrak to the ore port of Narvik. German war vessels also had, we claimed, used that route. The *Altmark* case two months before was still fresh in everybody's mind. Moreover, it was apparent from the activity in the western Baltic and along the German coast that some move with regard to Norway was in the course of vigorous preparation.

On the same day the "G" class destroyer *Glow-worm*, returning from the minelaying, was intercepted by German warships off the coast of Norway and sunk.

On the morning of April 9th Norway was invaded. Oslo, Arendal, Christiansand, Stavanger, Bergen, Trondhjem and Narvik were almost simultaneously the scenes of German landings. Denmark fell without a struggle. Norway fell through treachery.

But before she fell she made a gallant fight. She had lived for a century and more in a tradition of neutrality; wars had swept by her; international catastrophes had not involved her, save only upon the sea. She had an army; she had a small navy: a few old coast defence ships, a handful of modern miniature destroyers, a few submarines, torpedo boats, fishery protection vessels and the like. She had nothing to stand against the powerful units of the German Navy that were flung into the combat in the certainty of protection through treachery, and in the hope of quick and bloodless victory.

Yet this navy which had never expected to fight, this army which had never fought, struggled desperately against odds that were hopeless from the start.

The two heavy coast defence ships that they had in commission (they were nearly forty years old) were attacked virtually without warning with torpedoes and sunk.

Some of the little destroyers were overrun in the first surprise by an enemy that had passed defences which had been emasculated by the fifth column—that small fifth column that practically disrupted Norway from within.

Ship after ship they lost in gallant but useful fights. There was the *Aeger* that destroyed three aircraft in an overwhelming attack before she herself was sunk. There was the *Draug* that captured a German ship only to have her sunk by planes. There are a dozen other stories.

On the day after the invasion five British destroyers, standing off the minefield outside Narvik, went in against the heavily superior German forces within. The world knows that story. How Captain Warburton-Lee was given the right to decide the dangers and difficulties of the adventure, and how he chose to stand with the great ships of the past.

We lost H.M.S. *Hunter*. H.M.S. *Hardy* ran aground. But one German destroyer was torpedoed, three others were set on fire, seven store ships—vital to the German defence of Narvik—were sunk.

On that day—the 9th April—*Firedrake* was lying in dry dock, her engines stripped, her gear down, undergoing the first stage of her refit. She stayed in dock.

She was there still when *Warspite* and the Tribals, with *Foxhound* and *Forester* of her own flotilla, went in and destroyed even the memory of the first battle of Narvik. When they left the fjord there was nothing afloat. The whole German destroyer force, left perilously up in the air by the extraordinary decisions of the German High Command, had been utterly destroyed.

The terrible story of Norway went on—the pursuit of King Haakon and his Government. From Elverum and Hamar

on Lake Mjøsa to the Gudbrandsdal, from the Osterdal, and from Trondhjem the news became hourly more serious.

And then on April 15th it was announced officially that British troops had landed at a number of points.

For a while the situation seemed to be in hand, then we began to hear whispers of German air superiority; we began to hear of withdrawals and retirements. Gudbrandsdal was lost. The Dombaas-Stoeren railway was lost. And at Stoeren the two sections of the German Army made contact on April 30th.

On April 30th *Firedrake* was at sea on her way to join in the confused, fantastic campaign of the fjords.

She left the Clyde and the sinking *Maillé Brézé* on the evening of April 29th. With her were ships filled with troops for the reinforcement of our hard-pressed army of the south. North of the Minches she joined up with another section of the convoy from Scapa Flow, and began the crossing to Norway.

It was uneventful. Already Hitler's navy had suffered shattering blows in the Norwegian campaign. Two cruisers we knew for certain had been lost, *Karlsruhe* and *Blücher*. Other heavy ships we knew definitely had been damaged—possibly lost. Seven of Germany's biggest and most modern destroyers had gone at Narvik. Others had gone in the south. Numbers of small craft and transports had been destroyed. Actually, the Norwegian campaign had cost Germany the effectiveness of her navy. The losses we now know were so heavy, the damage so difficult to make good, that when the time came at which that small but compact striking force might have been used vitally for the invasion of Britain, it was disrupted.

Now, while the convoys went across to Norway, they could play no part in their interception. They could not help their army there.

*Firedrake's* convoy went to Mø. They arrived off the Norwegian coast early on Wednesday, May 8th. In the short time between the departure from the Scapa area and their arrival off the Norwegian coast, the situation had



changed. Throughout those days it was utterly fluid, changing as flood water changes on a level countryside when the river banks have burst. It was impossible to provide definite information for ships approaching; they were only told that possibly the Germans were already at their destination.

*Firedrake* was ordered to investigate.

She went up the Ranen Fjord with her crew closed up at the guns, ready for instant action. At any corner, at any bend, from any islet or hillside or beach, they knew the enemy might open fire.

As she approached this place of many dangers she passed the destroyer *Veteran*, and got from her that signal that is virtually a tradition—a traditional joke—in the Service: "Good luck! Wish I was coming with you." It is made by the ship that stays in safety, and it is held, amongst junior officers especially, to convey the highest possible level of hearty insincerity.

The approaches to the Norwegian coast in that area are sown with rocks and "blindings"—reefs, that is, that lie just below the level of the water and show upon the surface no sign of their existence.

They could not be certain of sea marks, of buoys, of lights, in the fantastic conditions of the time. They had to navigate themselves, pilot themselves, smell out, almost, the way from the Skerries to the town. They found that way.

On the trip up the long fjord they passed a small ship, one of the typical ships that plies about these narrow waterways. The British called them puffers, and as puffers they were known throughout the Service from the beginning of the campaign to the end. This one was loaded with soldiers and girls who were escaping. From them they got fragments of news.

They left her behind, opened a fresh reach of the fjord and, racing on, approached Mō (a little town nestling along the edge of the fjord) and as they closed it saw a light flashing at them.

Challenge?

They watched it stutter as it began to spell the words of its demand, the guns ready trained on the point from which it came.

It spoke in English. It said nothing of challenge. It demanded no name. It asked for no nationality.

It said bluntly, abruptly, urgently: "Have you any whisky?"

The British Army was still at Mö, and it was very thirsty. Just to the southward was the vanguard of the German forces, but the Army knew the resources of the Navy's wine-cellar.

They sent off the whisky by boat with the Sub-Lieutenant, and he came back with the information that the Army was making ready to leave. Mö was untenable.

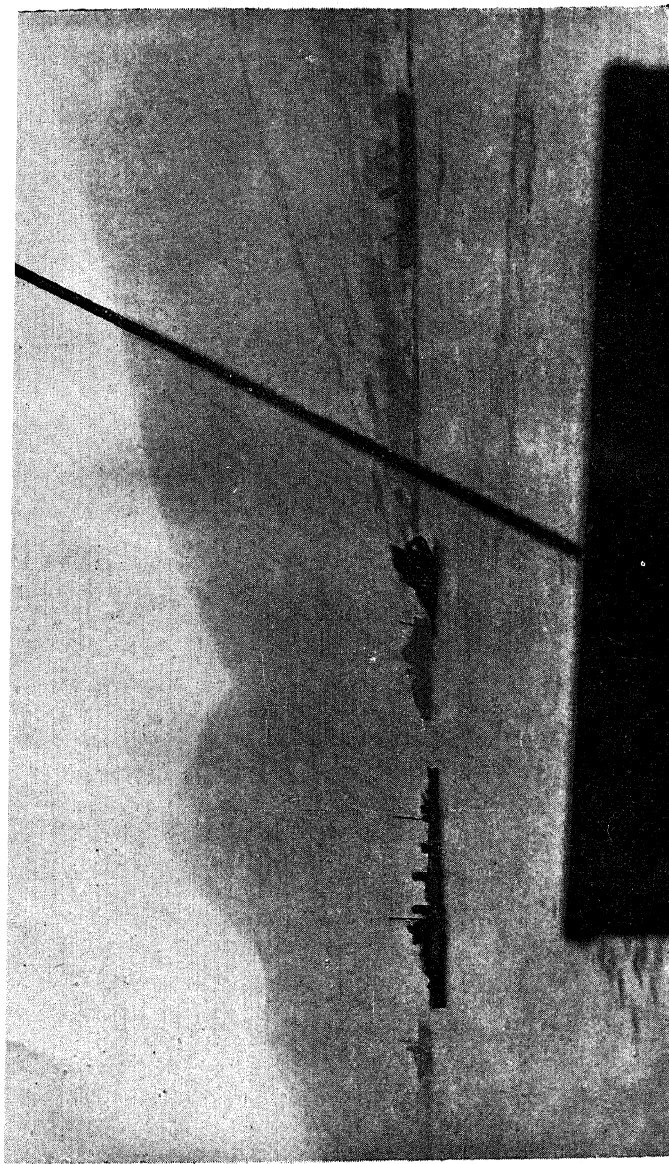
They went out again, down the long fjord to the sea.

The Ranen Fjord lies just on the very edge of the Arctic Circle, three degrees above Trondhjem—two-thirds of the way, that is, between Trondhjem and the Lofotens.

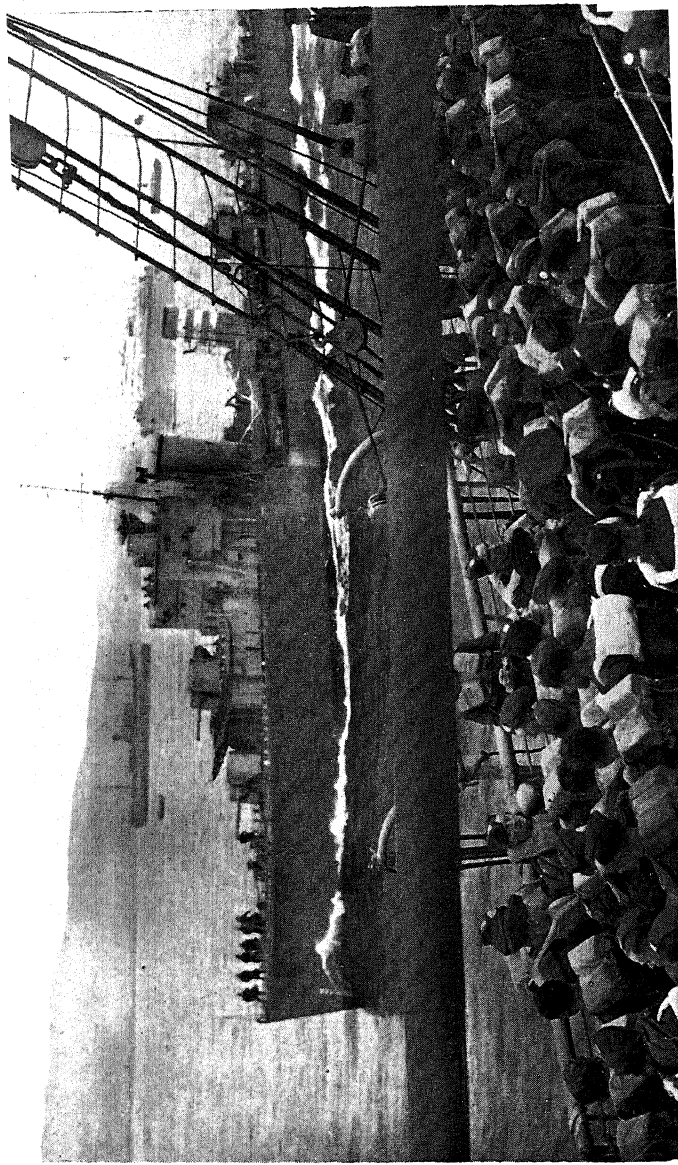
*Firedrake* was running short of oil now, and it was imperative that she should refuel before she took up her work with the convoy again. She went down the long stretch of the Ranen Fjord to the sea and the islands that lay along the edge of the deep water. Mö itself is so far inland in this complex of the fjords that it is almost within hailing distance of the Swedish frontier.

On their way they met another puffer. This time it had aboard it three survivors of the British Asdic trawler H.M.S. *Chelyuskin*.

Further down they met a third puffer. It had aboard it a most incongruous party of Norwegian policemen, two officers of the Norwegian Air Force, one Air Force rating, one British soldier, and a number of German women refugees. They came crowding aboard *Firedrake*, the women with them. Two of them even came up to her fighting bridge to argue—surely the only time German women have been upon the bridge of a British warship in time of war! Politely, but firmly, they were taken back to the puffer. The crew was left with her. The rest of her complement *Firedrake* kept aboard.



Forester at "Second Narvik"



*The convoy comes into Norway*

Oddly, the midshipman they had with them had rescued the brother of one of the airmen out in the Atlantic. He was the second mate of a tramp steamer, one of the sixty merchant vessels that Norway had lost to Germany's piratical campaign before the seizure of the capital.

When they reached open water they steered a course for Skjel, where it had been reported that there was oil.

But instead of oil they found only *Vindictive*, *Penelope* and *Esquimaux* damaged by enemy action. This was *Firedrake's* first sign of the real war, of the dynamic, nerve-racking war of aircraft against ships in the fjords—so terribly narrow some of them, that ships could not manœuvre, could not dodge the fall of bombs.

We had much damage along the Norwegian coast. We had, astonishingly—little loss.

She went from Skjel through the narrow fjord of Tjelsundet, always seeking for an oiler, the fuel level dropping in the last remaining tanks, falling always lower and lower so that presently, unless she found an oiler, she must be faced with empty tanks and immobilisation.

And at last, at Holl, so short of fuel that her engine-room ratings said that she was running on the smell alone, she found a tanker.

She went alongside at ten o'clock. At 12.56, according to her log, she cast off and was under way again, back down Tjelsundet, back round the intricate inner channels between the Lofoten Archipelago and the mainland, back past the mouth of Ofot Fjord that leads to Narvik, to Bodö, which lies in Nordland at the mouth of the Skierstad Fjord.

We were moving now from fjord to fjord, trying to hold the northern coasts of each in turn against the upward movement of the invader.

The north and south roads end in this wild sector of the Norway coast. Traffic goes by water. It was impossible to apply a scorched earth policy to that water. Impossible to deny to the Germans the use of the hundreds of little fishing boats, the scores of trawlers, the dozens of little transport coasters, of ferry boats and passenger boats, and small craft

in general that used to supply the villages and the towns of northern Norway.

With those that were left the Germans ferried an army, moving up in jumps from place to place. And before them we fell back. Bodö, at the end of the road, was the last place we were to hold before the Ofot Fjord, and while we held grimly on to it, we were still fighting the campaign for the recapture of Narvik.

*Firedrake* went down through the opening seaway between the Lofotens and the mainland, and came back to Bodö on the 9th.

She picked up her convoy in the open sea outside, and steered in again towards the land. Bodö is protected against the sea by a maze of rocks and reefs and shoals. They had charts that covered the approaches, they had tide tables and pilotage books, but all the charts and all the books cannot cover the strange and wild eccentricities of a Norwegian tideway. Bodö was protected by her reefs almost as if by batteries. It was impossible to take the convoy in at speed.

*Firedrake* went in first, searching the way. It was so tortuous, so elaborate, that she lowered her boat, and with that in the lead, feeling its way in by hand, she took the convoy in: the first ship carrying the Independent Companies and the Royal Marines. It was pretty pilotage, admirably carried out. No ship suffered damage. Within an hour the operation was complete. We had our forces at Bodö. We were ready for the next move in the game.

And that for *Firedrake* was the end of her first run to Norway. She saw no enemy; she suffered no attack, save only the old enemies of the seaman—uncertain tides, blind rocks, and mazy channels.

And on the 10th she weighed, and with *Nubian* of the Tribals, made her way back to England. At 21.30 on the 11th she was back at Scapa Flow.

## CHAPTER VI

## THE TAKING OF NARVIK

THE Norwegian campaign was a time of strange contrasts, as strange as the rugged mountains and the smooth waters of the fjords.

*Firedrake* came back to battle that was as grim and as insistent as anything the war had seen so far. Mō was captured. Mō stood on the north-south road. Bodō was bombed, savagely laid waste by the Luftwaffe. Bodō stood at the end of the north-south road. After that there were only waterways. Bodō was the place of the last stand that was designed to hold back the enemy while we took and laid Narvik waste.

They had had a whole day in Scapa. On the 13th, in the early morning, they left again.

Shortly after leaving with their half of the convoy to meet the southern portion, they attacked a submarine contact. There were no observable results, but there was no damage to the convoy.

With the old "V" and "W" destroyer *Walker* and the sloops *Stork* and *Bridgewater*, they took a dozen ships towards the north. Again the voyage was quiet. Germany had nothing to spare for the convoys that were racing across to the reinforcement of the attack at Narvik. They arrived at Harstadt on the 17th.

The Lofoten Islands have come much into the news since those days of the Narvik battle. They lie between the 68th and 70th parallels of latitude—well inside the Arctic Circle that is—and they stretch off the Norwegian coast something after the manner of Skye and the Small Isles down as far as Col and Tiree.

At the south there is Vest Fjord, wide between Mosken and Bodō, narrowing where Hinnoy, the main island of the group, comes close in to the mainland at the two-cable-wide channel of Tjelsundet. At that point, much as Loch Duich

comes inland from Kyle Rhea, so the Ofot Fjord comes inland to Narvik.

This convoy went northabout round the top end of the Lofotens, and stood down through And Fjord to the town of Harstadt, which lies on a small bay on the north-east corner of Hinnoy.

Harstadt was the main base of the operation that extended up the Ofot Fjord and down to the mouth of the Vest Fjord. It was full of tugs and repair ships, damaged ships and sunk, warships and merchantmen, small craft of all sorts. And it was constantly bombed.

On the 18th *Firedrake* and *Walker* took troops from the troopships, piled them somehow on deck and in the mess-decks, and, covered with a brown and khaki overlay, raced down to hold the defences of Bodö.

They went down the inside passage. It was late May now and there was here no night, only a thin twilight that spread itself in the long hours and finished with the small.

They went down, open to any bomber and to any attack of the enemy, but nothing happened. And when they got to Bodö they landed their troops in peace, and came away.

They headed back up the Vest Fjord and into the narrows of Tjelsundet. And as they got to the most exiguous portion of that exiguous channel a heavy bomber—a big four-engined plane—came over them. It seemed to go slowly with a sort of dispassionate vindictiveness, working itself imperturbably into the attacking position in the eye of the sun.

They could do nothing about it.

At the height and at the angle at which it flew they had no gun that could hope to reach. The main armament would not elevate sufficiently to deal with high-flying planes. The o's were for dive bombers. They had to "take it."

And as the sights came on they saw the stick of bombs fall clear of the plane, a cluster of dark specks, and come racing down through the clear, crisp air.

The channel was too narrow for them to turn. They were close to the famous bend that is there no wider than a canal.



The bombs came down.

They crashed between *Walker* and themselves, diagonally across the wake, so close that the fountains of spray seemed higher than their mast-heads.

The plane wheeled like a soaring pelican, and came in to a second attack.

This lot fell abeam of *Walker*, a hundred yards away on the starboard side. The second attack had failed. The big Junkers wheeled once more and made off, disappearing to the south.

*Firedrake* and *Walker* went on. They came back to Harstadt on the 19th, and on the 20th they were bombed in that crowded harbour.

The scene there during that raid was described to me as being much like the swimming affair in *Alice in Wonderland*. Everything in harbour got under way, moved round in strange circles and curves and spirals. On shore oil tanks were hit, and as the blaze spread to the wharves, two small ships lying alongside were lost. The canning factory was hit too. There was damage to other ships.

The whole thing went on in a thunder of anti-aircraft guns and small-calibre ammunition.

*Firedrake* fired her "X" gun at a raider that came sweeping low towards her in an endeavour to make a mast-head raid. The gunner's mate saw her coming just in time.

She dropped her bombs, but they landed well clear. There was no damage.

The last attack came. The last of the raiders turned, climbed, and moved swiftly down towards the south; and the sky was clear again.

*Firedrake* had a few moments' rest, then she was sent out to what came to be known as "B" patrol in Vaags Fjord, which lies between Harstadt and the islets off the mainland, and is part of the inside channel that runs most of the way along the Norwegian coast. Broadly speaking, it was safer in Vaags Fjord than in Harstadt—but not much.

She went to Narvik for the first time on May 22nd.

As she turned the corner by Barroy in Ofot Fjord—that

roadway of the first gallant Norway battle, that triumphant approach to the second—they were dive-bombed. This was the first real low-level attack that had been made on them.

They fought it off with the 0.5's. Two men were wounded by machine-gun fire. The bombs failed to hit.

Twice more between Barroy corner and Narvik they were attacked. Nothing hit.

Narvik itself was still standing when they got there. There was ground strafing going on, low flying bombers and artillery fire. They could see little for smoke. There was a French destroyer there which had been holed by artillery fire from the shore, and *Fame* of their own flotilla. *Fame* was damaged too.

*Firedrake's* captain went off to her in a boat and there was a brief consultation. Army officers came after them, and they commenced a quick bombardment of the railway lines.

Machine-guns opened at them from 1,500 yards. They turned their fire on the guns. This was something near their own meat now. No longer the silent endurance of the attack from the air, no longer being hit by an enemy at whom they could not hit back: this was a straightforward battle of thrust and counter-thrust—their first bombardment of the war.

*Fame* was hit again in the P.O.s' mess and in the chart-house; a steam pipe was fractured.

*Firedrake* had no damage, only scars on the deep-grey of her paintwork. But in the height of the brief action "A" gun was damaged through a defect. Three men were badly burned.

Their duty now was to escort the puffers that the Army used for moving men and materials, fuel and munitions, from the lower fjord up to the troops in Rombåks Fjord, the ultimate continuation of Ofot Fjord past Narvik's promontory towards the east—the fjord up which German destroyers had fled in a last desperate madness during the second battle of Narvik to scuttle themselves.

There was no rest now in all this working. They were almost constantly under a sort of irritating, mosquito-like fire.

Rifle bullets, machine-gun bullets, came at them without warning and apparently without reason, from the shore. Nowhere is the fjord wide enough to be out of range of some sort of gun.

The worst thing they remember of all that long-drawn working was the lack of sleep. There was no darkness in which to sleep save the artificial darkness below decks. There was no peace. There was hardly even the benison of silence except for a brief spell between two and four when even the German aircraft seemed to rest.

They took their sleep in snatches, coming off watch and dropping where they settled. In the mess-decks they lay on benches and on tables, and on the cold steel of the deck itself. In the wardroom the chairs and settees were occupied almost always by tired men who took two hours of "shut eye," and went back to the bridge or to the guns again.

It had been like this now since they had arrived off Andenes on the 13th, ten days ago. It was to go on like this for weeks to come.

To disentangle all their movements from the wild skein of the Norway operations is hardly possible. The log entries were the brief, staccato notes of tired men—the names of a town, a time, the mention of a bombing attack, the passing of a headland. Out of such cryptic acknowledgments to history must be made the story of her little war.

They were still escorting puffers on the 23rd, and the raids on that day began early. They seemed to go on all day, one raid lapsing into another so that the gaps between them were barely perceptible—six of them altogether. They seemed never free of the shrill whistle of descending bombs, the crump of their explosion. The fjord that ought to have been still and silver in the spring sun was treed like a forest with the monstrous columns of the bombs.

They were just past the narrows of the inner section of Rombåks Fjord (that are hardly wider than the entrance to a dock) when nine planes attacked them. They turned at once and put on speed in an endeavour to get back through the narrows and out into the broader waters of Ofot Fjord

The planes turned swiftly with them, roaring down one after the other to the attack. Dodging like a snipe, they used what little water there was.

One plane came to 2,000 feet in the dive. The rest attacked from the level high up.

They opened fire on the one. The others they could not answer.

One stick of bombs fell astern. Some fell on the beam—some fell ahead. One stick fell almost alongside.

They heard a clang and shriek of torn metal. Decks were drenched with the spray of the bursts. Their ears were driven in, deafened by the noise.

But when the smoke and the spray and the stench of it had gone, they were still afloat. They were holed in the engine-room, in the Captain's cabin, in the cabin of the Lieutenant (E).

The Chief was in his bunk at the time. Close to his head was a whole year's collection of Admiralty Fleet Orders—those meticulous and discursive records of everything the Board of Admiralty and its innumerable departments thinks, wants, wishes, desires or intends. One splinter went through the ship's side, tore in at the end of the row, and finished up close to the "Chief's" head in the very last issue of the year.

"This," said the wardroom unanimously afterwards, "is the first time we have ever found a use for A.F.O.s."

In the wardroom a splinter went through the side, came through the back of the settee, passed clean through one of the heavy wardroom chairs, ricocheted out of that up to the deck-head, and tore through the save-all below the ventilator.

She carried those honourable scars through the leather, the steel and the brass for a year afterwards. The wardroom used them cheerfully for "shooting a line." Was it not concrete evidence within the very compass of the wardroom and the pantry bell?

Nobody was hurt.

Only the Quartermaster suffered indirectly, and afterwards

when, in the comparative peace that followed the raid an hour or so later, he went into the mess-decks and with his call—the little silver pipe that quartermasters carry—made the crescendo whistle of a falling bomb. It was, I am told, a very excellent imitation! But what the mess-deck did to him will not be recorded here.

Late that night they were bombed again, this time by four planes flying in a diamond formation and releasing their bombs simultaneously. With a sudden increase from their slow cruising speed to twenty-five knots and a swift turn away, they escaped that threat.

On the 24th they went back to Harstadt to make good their damage. Even here there was no rest. They repaired the holes while under way, circling round and round the confines of the bay. Their own people and men borrowed from a repair ship in the harbour, herself moving constantly all the time, did the job, hammering wooden blocks into the smaller holes, botching the plates together at the bigger, making all weatherproof against return to the fray.

They took in fuel under way too. Everything was done on the move. There was a queer feverishness about it. It was like the nightmares that good officers have of things that cannot happen on the sea. They happen none the less.

Harstadt's anti-aircraft defence was almost non-existent. There was safety only in continuous movement. They moved.

They left Harstadt for Narvik again on the 26th, and off Narvik they were duly bombed once more. There was no damage.

It is on record on the unanimous assertion of all the officers who were with *Firedrake* at that time that during these raids and during most of the firing from the shore the captain retained sufficient detachment to examine the coastal levels carefully for possible sites for golf courses!

## II

Narvik lies, as has been said, on the Ofot Fjord. Actually, at the bend of the Narvik promontory, the fjord splits into three :

Herjangs Fjord runs up to the north-east, Rombäks Fjord runs behind the promontory down to the east and Beis Fjord runs down to the village of Fagernes to the south-east.

Narvik itself occupies most of the end of the peninsula between Beis Fjord and Rombäks Fjord, and from it the invaluable ore line to Sweden runs up past Rombäks at the fjord head.

The French occupied the peninsula between Rombäks and Herjangs Fjords; the Poles the corresponding peninsula opposite Narvik on the other side of Beis Fjord. The Germans held the upper end of that peninsula, round to the head of Beis Fjord, down to Narvik, and up the other side to Rombäks and along the railway line.

The final battle of Narvik began roughly at midnight in excellent visibility and plenty of light.

We had *Southampton* of the "Town" class cruisers, *Coventry*, *Cairo* (two old "C" class cruisers converted to anti-aircraft work), *Havoc*, *Walker*, *Firedrake* and other ships.

*Firedrake's* first position was to the west of the town, a little more than 1,000 yards off shore. Her first target was a gun taken from one of the British merchantmen that had been sunk in the bay, the gun that had been mounted on her stern against the threat of submarines. The Germans had salvaged it, mounted it on a railway truck, and used it in one of the many tunnels along the steep fall of the Rombäks Fjord. Its fire was harassing at times. Now *Firedrake* concentrated for a little on its site. She silenced it!

In the town itself there was a pom-pom position which was very irritating. She shifted target on to that.

There was a surge of confused thunder now as one after another the other ships joined battle. *Southampton's* 6-inch salvos were crashing into the German positions in the hills, making brilliant barrage cover for the advance of the Poles from the south towards the head of Beis Fjord, smashing away at everything German that could be seen or even guessed at. Amongst the high hills the salvos rolled like long-drawn thunder that was never still. On the shore they saw the flash of the bursting shells, the tremendous flames of the explo-

sions ; they saw earth flying, and rock, and fragments of buildings.

And all the while out to them came the German return fire, the flash of bullets and tracer shells—bullets that skipped like stones along the plating of every ship, shells that whirled, and sang and danced past them.

They shifted position after half an hour. Already the French had made a landing on the northern coast of Narvik.

They shifted position and went down off Ankenes where the pom-pom that was bothering them was more readily observable. They landed here one of their signalmen to act as liaison between the advancing troops and themselves.

The battle here was fluctuating. Swift move and counter-move followed each other. All the while they pumped their shells against whatever targets they could see. The smoke cleared on the shore and they saw the Germans retreating, the Poles advancing, a French tank leading them.

The smoke closed down again.

At four o'clock the battle was still raging fiercely. Somewhere about then the smoke lifted again, and they saw their signalman between the lines, signalling calmly with an Aldis lamp. The Poles had fallen back temporarily, and he was almost midway in no-man's land. He finished his message and got back.

And at four o'clock the German bombers came back to the rescue of their hard pressed comrades.

The raid came almost without warning, the planes coming over the high hills unheard in the fury of the bombardment, and unobserved.

The first salvo dropped close to *Southampton*, and she broke off firing to turn and twist away from the assault. The first big stick of bombs fell very close to her. It was a heavy raid, the Germans using all they had to try to check this assault in the final minute of the eleventh hour.

They failed.

*Cairo* was hit, and the bomb burst set the ready-use pom-pom ammunition alight. She gave a Brock's benefit display for a while, but she was not seriously damaged.

Other ships were hit by splinters. *Havoc* was racing round in narrow circles. *Southampton* had two men killed by splinters or near misses.

For a while things looked serious. They looked as if in the very moment of victory we might be faced with heavy loss. The crash and crump of the bombs was heavier than had been the thunder of the shells. For a little there was hell in the tangle of fjords outside the town.

And then the attack petered out. The last bombs were dropped. The last plane made its run in, and went away.

No ship was sunk. No ship was even put out of action.

The bombardment went on to its predestined end, and round the coast of Beis Fjord the victorious Poles went shouting in on the first step of their revenge for their Fatherland.

The French Foreign Legion came down from the north.

Narvik fell in a haze of smoke set through with the red tongues of the flames and the acrid smell of burning and of powder.

That which had been planned was done, and Narvik was again in Allied hands. The long process of preparation, the painful work of the destroyers and the little ships, the ardent efforts of the puffers, had come to their full fruition.

But even now Narvik was not healthy. The sea was ours, but the air above it was not. *Southampton* and the anti-aircraft cruisers went out to sea, their task completed. *Fire-drake*, her ammunition lockers almost empty—was left behind. The signal, I am informed, read: "Sorry, but somebody had to remain." This, at any rate, was a variant on "Wish I were coming with you." They appreciated it as such.

Some of them had a little sleep after this—some of them, but not all. Half the crew was closed up all the time at anti-aircraft stations.

### III

The episode at Narvik was not yet done, but the central phase was at least complete. Narvik was in our hands—but it was to be in our hands only for demolition. We could not hold it.



Already the Germans were just outside Bodö. Their planes had now complete and absolute mastery of the air despite the desperate efforts of our fighter pilots on thawing lake tops and the wild and impossible improvisations that passed for landing-grounds.

Down to the southward the Navy was adding an imperishable wreath to its laurels off the shoals and low sand beaches of Dunkirk.

By the Low Countries, by Amsterdam and Antwerp, Flushing and the Scheldt, by Boulogne and Calais and Gravelines, they had come to the last great scene of all—the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force. The old “V” and “W” destroyers, built for the last Great War, ships that had survived long peace, to be taken in the urgent need of this new sea struggle into service again, were building for themselves an undying name. *Westminster*, *Valentine* and *Wanderer*, *Whitley* and *Vimy* and *Vortigern* were among the hardest worked of that great team of destroyers that saved the army.

We could spare no help for advance there in the Arctic Circle. We could only withdraw, withdraw, withdraw.

*Firedrake* spent the 28th of May in the fjord off Narvik. She was never still. She could not be still in the knowledge of the strength of the German bomber force.

On the 29th she went down towards the sea again. She joined *Southampton* there, and they turned to use Tjelsundet for the passage through to Harstadt. The information came that Tjelsundet was blocked, and they turned again to use the outer passage.

Instantly they were bombed again. The German Air Force was pursuing our ships with the relentlessness and the ferocity that goes only with the knowledge of swift and easy victory. Norway was all but theirs. They wanted but to clear up the last fragments of resistance.

*Southampton* and *Firedrake* dealt with that raid, and they went round the islands and reached Harstadt unharmed.

The destroyer refuelled at once.

In the afternoon she left for Bodö to evacuate—always to evacuate now.

To the south in the warmth of the calm days off the north French coast the destroyers were running in again to Dunkirk pier to get the last of the valiant rearguard away.

At Bodø they picked up the demolition parties and some of the Independent Companies that they had taken there. I say at Bodø, but I mean at the place that was Bodø—for there was nothing there now but a smouldering ruin. The wreckage of chimneys sticking up above the battered earth, the charred rafters that here and there had survived the flame showing like wrecked ships above the surf.

Bodø had been dealt with by the German Air Force. There was no Bodø left.

*Firedrake* took them to Borknes in the outer islands, and raced back to Harstadt. Miraculously they were unbombed this passage.

Again they fuelled on the move, and went straightway out to patrol. There was the ever-present possibility that a submarine might come round from the north of the islands and stand in through And Fjord to attack that crowded anchorage. There was rich prize there for any U-boat. Strangely it was not attempted.

They were called from the patrol suddenly and sent to Kirknes with orders to demolish the jetty there.

The gunner went ashore and met with voluble expostulation. The gunner's Norwegian was strictly limited. From the shore they watched him and saw him disappear up the jetty.

And then a girl came out. They watched him more closely. They saw the girl take him by the hand—the gunner denies this, but there is ample evidence upon the other side—and lead him to a house.

All the officers wished to be sent ashore immediately to demolish the jetty.

The gunner went inside and found the Norwegian officer in charge, in bed. He didn't want the pier demolished. He argued this at length while he put on his trousers and various

other articles of equipment. There was an air of comedy over the whole affair.

They went from there to Draug and issued stern warning against assistance being given to the Germans by the pufflers.

They went back to Barrøy, and up once again past Narvik into Rombäks Fjord. They were bombed as usual.

For a day or so they worked, patrolling off the town and round the fjords.

On the Sunday afternoon there was another raid. Narvik, like Bodö, was given to flame.

Narvik in the north was burning, and down in the south Dunkirk threw up flames that could be seen from the coast of England in the night. It was almost time to go.

On the afternoon of the 3rd she was sent down to Ballangen. The battered hull of H.M.S. *Hardy* showed torn and twisted above the surface of the water. At midnight they picked up troops there and set out for the ships that were lying in the And Fjord.

Humour crept in always in these desperate days. The element of farce was very near the surface.

It was a mad passage in every way. They were crowded with their strangely assorted cargo, 500 of them altogether with 130 or so of the ship's company—a vast crowd for one little ship.

The Poles were on the mess-decks and in the alleyways. They were along the decks and their officers were in the wardroom. They were everywhere.

There were with them fifty Frenchmen, half a dozen of our gunners who had been ashore with them, four German prisoners—one of them wounded. These last were put in the office flat with a special sentry over them. They were airmen who had been brought down by a Gladiator close to Ballangen.

Half-way through the passage the Poles discovered their presence. There was a concerted attempt to get at the office flat. It was checked by firmness and good humour. But the

Poles were not easy. No man is easy whose country has suffered as Poland has.

The voyage lasted five hours or so, though they went through Tjelsundet, which was not blocked after all. They were five hours of close-packed excitement that did not come this time from the enemy, save only indirectly.

In the And Fjord they discharged their cargo to the troopships that lay there, and, when the last man had gone aboard them, they took up the anti-submarine patrol about the convoy.

In the evening they went with it out to sea. At that time there had gathered evacuation ships from a dozen points along the coast, and they and other ships went out as escort and took it clear of bombing distance from the land.

They were back in the And Fjord the next day, carried out an anti-submarine patrol, followed the old routine to Harstadt, went through there to Barrøy, patrolled again until the evening—that was still as light as day—and went to Narvik, again for a heavy load of troops.

These days were all the same. They packed their decks, their accommodation, every place that could take a head, with the weary men who had fought a campaign in the snow of Narvik, the men who had won Narvik despite every effort of the German Air Force. And they took them down through the tangle of the fjords to the big ships at sea.

And so they came to the 7th.

On the 7th they went in for the last time. At midnight they were full of the strangest cargo of all—the last men of Narvik: the Vice-Consul, Captain Gibbs, R.N., the Naval Liaison Officers, Royal Engineers who had done the last of the demolitions, Poles again, and men of the French Foreign Legion.

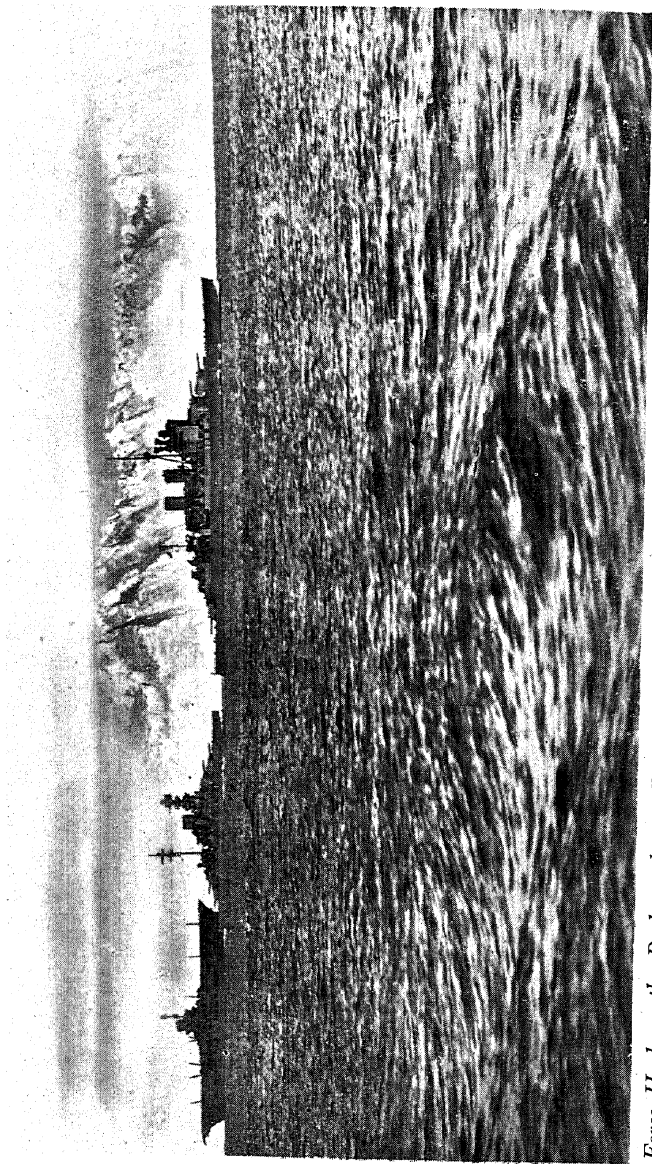
And so with H.M.S. *Walker* they went down the Ofot Fjord for the last time, and on to Tjvs Fjord and the ships.

On the 8th they fuelled in Norway for the last time—still under way.

And on the 8th they put to sea with the convoy that brought the last from that most sorely battered little country.



*Bombed in a Norwegian fjord*



*Force H clears the Rock at dawn—Renown, Barham, Ark Royal*

Norway, after the first shock of the assault, had dared much and had lost all save her honour. That she had kept; by the right of those who fight gallantly and without despair against the heaviest of odds.

Norway was lost, but Norway was to live again over the cold water of the sea. And in the long months of conquest Norway was to put up the silent fight of sabotage and non-co-operation, her people were to start a new saga of small boat voyaging (as they escaped from German tyranny), that matches the voyages of Erik the Red. Her sailors, escaping some of them with this convoy, some of them in these small boats, were to start a new navy that was to win laurels for their lost homeland. Before the war was ended some of them were to see these cold Lofoten Islands once and again in the magnificent raids that were to come.

Meanwhile they did not know they would get safe back to England, for the German Navy, in a desperate throw to cut this last of England's sea-lines with the Continent, had sent out two of its biggest ships in a long raid to the north.

They sank H.M.S. *Glorious* with those two heroic destroyers *Acasta* and *Ardent*.

*Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, Germany's latest battle-cruisers, heavily armed, heavily armoured, the two most modern fighting ships at sea—they sank *Glorious* almost with the first salvos. She had no chance. They sank the two little destroyers that flung themselves forward in a tragedy of heroism to try to save the aircraft carrier, and they went on their way.

And on their way they fell in with H.M.S. *Renown*. They met her, virtually by herself in shocking weather conditions, and they had, as every student of the war game knows, an unparalleled opportunity.

But *Renown*, that great ship, rose like her predecessors to the great occasion.

With magnificent gunnery she scored hits in the very first minutes of the encounter. *Scharnhorst* was hacked through and through.

*Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* broke off the action, and disappeared in swift retreat to the south.

In this last venture *Firedrake* had run for three weeks without dropping anchor, for three weeks without making fast. She had been under way all the time—fuelling under way, taking in stores under way, re-ammunitioning under way. They had had no rest. She had been bombed almost without ceasing, and now she went home to the Clyde with wooden plugs showing like cloves in a love-apple in her sides.

They were desperately tired now for they had had sleep only in fine irregular snatches in all this time. They were bowed down with the incessant work, exhausted with endless necessity for watchfulness—strained and bent with it.

And one of them at the Base Office on the day they came in said, half jestingly :

“What about a spot of leave?”

“You so-and-so's are always here worrying us about leave,” said the Base Office brusquely.

Sometimes I am not sure that the feeling between destroyer officers and the Base is wholly playful.

## CHAPTER VII

### SOUTH

**N**ONE the less they got their leave.

They got it not because tired bodies and still more tired minds needed it, but because, once again, hard steel had broken down before the harder men. They had to go into dock for ten days while engine-room defects were made good, boilers were cleaned, “A” gun was repaired, and the holes from the bombing were patched up and her sides made sound against the sea again.

There was five days' leave for each Watch. They made the most of it.

On June 23rd, a Sunday, they were still completing their repairs, the dockyard mateys working through the Sunday.



They were at "eight hours' notice." The boilers were cold and half the ship's company was ashore on Sunday leave. Almost they were at peace.

And suddenly they got orders to make steam with all dispatch, and proceed to sea. Eight hours' notice is the long term for destroyers. It means that they are not likely to be required. Even when a destroyer is in dry-dock with her propellers off she is hardly ever put at anything but eight hours' notice. It is the ultimate relief. Even four hours' notice means shore leave of sorts. Two hours' notice means readiness. Half an hour means urgency is round the corner.

*Firedrake* was at eight. She was shipping an anti-aircraft gun, a new 3-inch on which she set much store. The platform was not yet complete. The gun itself was still on the quayside.

But *Firedrake* had pride. In four hours she slipped and was away to sea. One of her sisters, *Fame*, had come by some mischance. She had to take her place. The honour of the flotilla was at stake.

In four hours she had steam up as ordered. She had completed the last of her defects, the men working feverishly in the confined intricacies of the engine-room. The gun had been swung up and bolted home, and she went down river with a crew of dockyard mateys breaking trade-union rules in a desperate effort to botch the platform round it so that it might be used.

She was fifty men short, fifty men who, with all-day leave, could not be traced in that brief time—men with whom the grape-vine of the lower deck had not yet established even its swift contact. They borrowed ratings from other ships, bringing them aboard in boats.

The last bolt of the platform was driven home, the last nut made tight. They dropped the mateys at the river mouth and with *Punjabi* of the Tribals they ran north, covering the transport of troops to Reykjavik in Iceland.

They plunged at once into heavy seas and they slowed down to seven knots, punching into the steepes of the North Atlantic. Even in summer there is small peace there.

This was not the taking of Iceland. That had been done already, made vitally necessary by the swift penetration of Denmark and the trampling of Norway. We had to have Iceland. And we took it. This was a reinforcement.

They had oiled from *Argus*, coming up alongside the great sheer of the aircraft carrier's sides. The order "Scandalise the yards" was given that day. It cannot have been used in His Majesty's Service since the days of stick and string.

They left for home again upon the 2nd. And on passage they heard over the wireless the tragic calling of the *Arandora Star*. She was far away but there was a chance that they might be diverted to the rescue. They got the spare bedding out of the central store, overhauled their medical supplies, made ready in every way for the survivors of that queer retribution for Nazi inhumanity at sea.

But that strangely macabre panic was over and done with, even then. They were not called. There were other destroyers nearer to the scene.

They came instead past St. Kilda, loneliest outpost of the British Isles—and so to home again.

And, in the Clyde, those things that had been left half completed as they made their hurried departure, were made good. The new gun—"Q" gun—was finally fixed and tested, and the missing men came safely to the fold.

On the 8th at midnight they left for Reykjavik again. It looked as if from the Scapa patrols they had been switched to the Iceland ferry and there was no trouble between the Clyde and Iceland.

But when they reached the northern port they had that frequent sickness of destroyers—condenseritis. They made the trouble good, but it took the best part of five days, and while it was in process some of them got to shore and saw geysers and lakes, and the queer harsh countryside of Iceland. They even fished, one or two of them, in the brawling streams of the island.

There was no hostility from the Icelanders, but only a curious, unwelcoming coldness. It does not seem to have "got them down." They even danced, following the Iceland

custom, at the Borg Hotel—the custom which entails no communication with the partner outside the limitations of the music. You pick your partner when the band begins to play. She turns her back on you when the conductor lays his baton down. It is not easy perhaps to work out the psychological basis for this system—or perhaps it is too easy. “You pays your money and you takes your choice.”

On the 16th they left Reykjavik for sea again, and went back to the Clyde; came up from there with *Coventry* and *Echo* in a frantic hurry; reached Scapa, and went out almost immediately to attack a submarine contact with *Zulu*.

And somewhere in these goings and comings they picked up a rumour that they were going south—south to Gibraltar and the Mediterranean. Probably it started as a lower-deck “buzz.” All the best information comes through lower-deck “buzzes.” Nobody has ever yet traced one down to its source. Men say they are spontaneously generated by the warmth of the confines of the stokers’ mess-deck.

A fortnight went by and they heard nothing more about it. It began to join the limbo of forgotten “buzzes,” the limbo that is composed of rumours of leave and rumours of rising pay, and a hundred other pipe-dreams of the lower deck.

They did a gruelling fortnight of mixed patrols and submarine contacts and escort duties. They even ran a swift minelaying trip, scurrying round the minelayers as they moved to their appointed position.

And then towards the end of this time the rumour crystallised and became certainty. The certainty almost became fact; for on the 21st they left Scapa, having said their good-byes to those who stayed behind, for the warmth of the Mediterranean and the Italian war.

They returned the same day.

Somewhere in the misty origins of the war they had foregathered with a Dutchman, and seeking a useful word for voyages that seemed without purpose and ventures that did not come off, they discovered the word which they say is spelt “sooterkin.” They aver that this in High Dutch

means "abortion." The Gibraltar trip, they said, was another "sooterkin."

And then at 10.42 the next morning, with *Illustrious*, *Valiant*, *Sheffield* and *Coventry*, they sailed. There were no excitements.

## CHAPTER VIII

### MARE NOSTRUM

ITALY came into the war on June 15th. France, broken on the Meuse—but broken long before by internal intrigue, corrupt politics and a materialistic philosophy of life—was reeling under the successive blows of the panzer units as they surged towards the south.

The bridges of the Meuse were like the breaching of a dyke. This was the river flooding out over the low land and engulfing Lille and Amiens, Abbeville and the coastal ports, Rheims, Rouen, Paris itself. One after the other the cities went until the flood reached far into the south to the line of the Loire.

And Mussolini, unable, like all the Continent, to visualise and to grasp the importance of sea power, imagined that the war was done. The jackal came in for his share of the spoils. He had helped by yapping on the heels of the quarry. Now he came in to consume the offals of the carcass.

He struck on France along her eastern borders, but even there, from a beaten France and an army broken down by intrigue, ill-equipped and almost helpless, he achieved no victory. The history of the few days in which Italy fought France are as lamentable and almost as ludicrous as those of Mussolini's later campaigns.

But in one sphere, and in one sphere only, the entry of Italy into the war was important—almost indeed vital to us. The Mediterranean was of major significance to the British Empire.

Its main importance was not in relation to Italy, though Mussolini spoke always of the "mare nostrum." It was not even that of a highway to the east—the artery of Empire as it was often, and so erroneously, called. Its importance was that of a sea barrier to the far east, a place across which we could draw up an army with a moat in front of it as vital as the Channel. Only by having control in some way of Asia Minor could we bar the swift-moving German panzers from the "Drang nach Osten."

We had in Egypt the first position. For, without the Red Sea, the "Drang nach Osten" was a strategist's nightmare. The deserts could be crossed; there was the Baghdad railway; but could an army fight through the hills of Afghanistan, could an army be flung against the Khyber Pass on a single line of rail? The Suez Canal, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Persia were needed if Germany was to realise that drive.

We held Egypt. We held Palestine. France held Syria and Tunisia. And the French and British Navies combined, outweighed handsomely the weight of metal that Mussolini could put on his "Italian lake."

But France was broken. If she could be persuaded to carry on the fight from the Colonies all might yet be well. But France fell and with her we lost Tunisia and the Mareth line that contained Italy's great Libyan army to the west. We lost Syria that linked up and supported Turkey to the east. We lost the French army that might have played so big a part in destroying Italy's and Hitler's hopes in Africa.

We were left to hold the Mediterranean with a British force made stronger, it is true, by Germany's losses in the Norwegian campaign, but still exiguous. We had to bar the gateway to the east a handful of men, ill-equipped, unsupported, almost without hope of reinforcement. Had Italy struck then, stiffened by German panzer divisions, she would have carried, I think, Alexandria and the Valley of the Nile. She would have forced the gateway to the east.

But she could not have the stiffening of the panzer divisions because Germany was using them still for her triumphal progress in the west. They were not needed to destroy France,

for France was destroyed already. They were not wanted to destroy England because the psychological rigidity of the German mind could not believe that England was not destroyed, and could not be seduced from the inflexibility of its plan even for such a glittering prize.

And Mussolini would not fight alone. His soldiers would hardly fight even with a hundred thousand. They waited.

We had breathing-space, and somehow, with the British genius for improvisation, we rebuilt the Army of the Nile. We whistled out of the apparently empty air, tanks and artillery. We held the little local advances, the exploratory patrols that were all that the vastly superior Italian army dared along the Sollum frontier.

And we waited our time. The problem of the Mediterranean became for three-quarters of a year a naval one, a sea problem pure and simple.

The Mediterranean is a double sea that has two enormous basins almost divided at their centre by the long tongue of Italy. Strategically there was never so admirable a deposition. Mussolini's home waters were in the centre. He had adequate and sheltered passage from one basin to the other by the Straits of Messina. He had his actual naval bases disposed almost on the centre line. He had subsidiary bases as far as the end of Sardinia.

He had a fleet of four old battleships and two new, an impressive cruiser force, a large number of very fast destroyers, a submarine force of something like 114 ships, a horde of small craft of the E-boat breed, a large naval co-operation air arm, and a much-vaunted air force.

His problem was simple. He had to cut the narrows of the central Mediterranean.

There are only two passages from east to west: one the tiny channel between the Straits and the Italian mainland, obviously denied to any enemy in time of war; the other the broader channel between the toe of Sicily and the African mainland at Cape Bon—the Straits of Pantellaria, the Sicilian Channel as it has come to be called.

The Straits of Pantellaria are less than 90 miles wide.

They are complicated by the fact that farther to the westward between Spartavento in Sardinia and Cap Serrat, the Straits are still only 100 miles wide. For 400 miles or so the traffic passing through from one basin of the Mediterranean to another, can never be more than twenty minutes' flight for a fighter aircraft from the nearest point of Italian soil. At the Pantellaria narrows a fast bomber could get across from the Sicilian coast in very little more than a quarter of an hour. A destroyer could cross the Sicilian narrows in three hours. If the Italian miracle destroyers could do the speeds they are credited with on paper, they could reach its centre in an hour.

The narrows are further complicated by the fact that most of the water is relatively shallow and suitable for mining—at which the Italians had long since shown themselves expert. Only the comparatively narrow channel in the centre was likely to prove really difficult.

Mussolini's problem on paper was almost incredibly easy. He had to bar a Strait ninety miles wide, one shore of which was occupied by an already beaten enemy, and he had to enable him to bar it, more than ample submarines, more than ample light craft, destroyers in plenty, cruisers to back his destroyers, six battleships as a firm foundation for them all, and adequate air support for every operation.

In theory he held all the cards.

## II

To answer him we had three bases in the Mediterranean. One of them, Malta, was at the end of the Sicilian narrows. The others were at the western and the eastern gateways of the inland sea, Gibraltar and Alexandria. Gibraltar is 1,000 miles from Malta: Malta is 1,000 miles from the Suez Canal—as near as makes no difference: three days' steaming each way, that is, for normal operations. And Malta is only forty miles from the Sicilian coast, and fifty or so from the nearest aerodrome.

In theory, to deal with Mussolini's navy and to force the

use of the Sicilian narrows, we had to maintain a superior force in either basin; for Mussolini could swing his ships from one side to the other with ease and celerity. We needed, on paper, about fourteen battleships and lesser ships beyond all counting, to play the "war game" according to the rules.

We were to hold the Mediterranean for the first nine months, to put such a stranglehold on Mussolini as to break his nerve, his empire and his nation, with forces that together never equalled, even remotely, his single force in the centre, and we were to use the Sicilian Channel almost with impunity.

By brilliant staff work, by superb naval appreciations, by a proper and just judgment of the fighting capabilities of the Italian Fleet, Admiral Cunningham at the east and Admiral Somerville at the west turned Mussolini's navy from the boast of Italy to the laughing-stock of the world.

The western force, under Admiral Somerville, was called Force H. The first year of the war with Italy it consisted of one battle-cruiser—H.M.S. *Renown*, one aircraft carrier—H.M.S. *Ark Royal*, and one cruiser—H.M.S. *Sheffield*. They were screened by the Eighth Destroyer Flotilla. That was Force H.

From time to time if special operations came on the tapis, or as the situation elsewhere permitted, Force H achieved a second battleship, but throughout its fighting career against Italy it never fought with more than two ships in the line. Its maximum cruiser force, loaned and reinforced for a special possibility, was half a dozen.

But Force H never lost for a moment its iron control. The Western Mediterranean was its washpot and over Italy it cast out its shoe.

The eastern basin, the larger section of the sea, was, however, the more important. It was the actual dyke against the "Drang nach Osten," the tank trap of the east.

We had a strong force there. At times, from the reports of action and counteraction, we seem to have had as many as four whole battleships. By joining the two forces we could have made, on occasion, quite an impressive showing, but actually the two forces never were combined. They worked,



instead, flatly against all the laws of naval strategy, as divided sections. When we wished to pass convoys through the Suez Canal, Force H took them part of the way and the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet met them and took them the other half. On those occasions Force H was on one side of the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean Fleet on the other, and the Italian Fleet in the narrows in between. In theory, therefore, the Italian High Command could have attacked either side at choice. In theory it should have attacked the weaker first, destroyed it, and then been ready for the stronger when it attempted to come to the other's rescue. Meanwhile the stronger would have been harassed by torpedo craft, and led over submarine traps and through minefields, and attacked by torpedo-carrying planes and dive-bombers and high-level bombers.

In theory . . .

In actual practice nothing of the sort ever happened. All these individual measures were tried from time to time, but never the grand strategy as a whole.

Mussolini for years before he brought his unwilling people to the edge of the precipice of war and pushed them over from behind, talked of his "triangle of fire"—the great triangle from Cyrenaica to the Straits of Otranto, from Otranto to Cape Bon—that was dominated by his ships, sealed by his aircraft against the bow wave of any enemy.

The time was to come when he could not get his own convoys across his famous "triangle of fire."

### III

But there was an additional complication to the Mediterranean situation.

In that sea when Mussolini capped his jackal existence with his snarling attack on the flanks of the dying France, the most powerful portion of the Allied Fleet was the French.

We had had great hopes of the French Navy at the outbreak of the war. In 1914-18 it had not shone. The French Navy then was in a period of loose ideas and loose command.

Its material was poor, its discipline doubtful, its efficiency of an extremely moderate order. In convoy work it did its share reasonably well, and in certain operations—notably off Gallipoli—it behaved with gallantry and *élan*. But, considered as a whole, the French Navy was not a formidable contribution towards the defeat of Germany's sea power.

In 1939, however, we had reason to expect another and a stouter part. The French Navy had been given in recent years a large quantity of new ships, reputedly excellent in quality and performance. It had received with its new ships a new impetus, a new driving force. Its efficiency was claimed to be up a hundred per cent on what it had been. Its morale was said to be magnificent. Everything was on the side of splendour.

The French Navy did well in the first nine months of the war. Its big ships had no work, but its little ships took their full share of the heavy duty of convoy; its submarines made for themselves a reputation. It played its part.

Then came the *débâcle* of France. Even in this her extremity, we still believed in the French Navy. We who had seen them afloat and spoken and drunk with their people, believed that they at least would carry on the fight though France fell. We had not reckoned with the High Command.

France took her share at Dunkirk. She lost there a string of destroyers, but even on the morning of the last day they were off the coast of the Pas de Calais. I saw a division of them come past me at nine o'clock in the morning, steaming towards the Dunkirk channels.

The French merchant navy worked well there too. I will always remember the Breton fishing vessels with the lovely names—*Ciel de France*, *Ave Maria Grata Plena*, *Jean Antoine*, and their fellows—thudding away towards the flame.

And then came the crash.

France refused that heroic offer of equal citizenship. The ancient and querulous Pétain took control, and the great name of France fell to the mire that lies in the wake of a panzer division. And Admiral Darlan sold honour and dignity, and, worst of all, the brotherhood of the sea. The

French Navy, unharmed, untouched, never—save for its gallant destroyers—in action, was sent tamely to the bases of the African coast, to Oran, to Dakar and across the ocean to Martinique.

The French Navy as a fighting ally was gone from us in the very instant of our direst need.

It was not defeated, for it never fought. It did not go in the shock of battle, for it saw no battle. It went because its High Command chose to use it as a bargaining counter to save the French *rentier*—a navy balanced in the scales against the money-bags of the middle class and the power of the Two Hundred.

There was never a greater indignity, never a sadder yielding. There was not spirit enough in the French Navy of the home ports to defy the High Command and to hold up the sword.

In Alexandria and in the ports of Britain there was a fair proportion of the ships. These perforce we held, three of the older battleships among them ; cruisers, destroyers and submarines. The one modern aircraft carrier, *Béarn*, and one cruiser stayed in Martinique.

This Navy was not an ally now, but a bargaining counter. Darlan would sell it to Germany for a mess of less than potage. Everything we saw of Darlan, everything we saw of Laval, everything we saw of Pétain, confirmed us in that belief—everything we have seen of them since confirms it. We had to prevent that transfer. We had to break the value of that pawn.

We broke it.

Oran and Dakar are not actions of which we will be proud. They will never be limned in gold on the book of honours of the British Navy. They were necessary—more, they were vital. They had to be fought. But they were in every way, and from every point of view, distressful.

Simultaneously we dealt with the problem of Dakar and Oran. We were convinced that Darlan would sell the French Navy despite the solemn pledges of Reynaud and the last legitimate government of France.

On July 3rd Force H, for the one and only time of its career steaming with three ships in the line, appeared off Oran. In conformity with his orders Admiral Somerville gave Vice-Admiral Gensoul, Commander of the French squadron, the option of placing his ships out of reach of the Germans in British ports or at Martinique—alternatives which left Admiral Gensoul with every possibility of honour. We gave him six hours to consider the matter, and meanwhile we sealed the entrance to the docks at Mers-el-Kebir with magnetic mines sown by our aircraft.

At 5.40 p.m. on that distasteful afternoon, Admiral Gensoul having refused the order, having refused to surrender or scuttle his ships, we opened fire.

The *Dunkerque* and the *Strasbourg* were heavily damaged; the *Provence* was sunk; the *Bretagne* was put out of commission. Cruisers, destroyers and a seaplane ship were sunk or damaged.

We had accounted in some measure for all the heavy ships of the French Fleet except the great battleship *Richelieu*, the most modern ship of the French Navy, of 35,000 tons, which was in Dakar, and the *Jean Bart*, still incomplete, which had been towed from France to Casablanca.

Five days later we dealt with the *Richelieu*. The first "battle" of Dakar is one of the most fantastic and astonishing stories of the war. We put a battleship out of action "by hand," using a ship's motor-boat and depth charges. Torpedo carriers of the Fleet Air Arm completed the work.

The heavy ships of the French Navy were sunk, seized, or so damaged as to be valueless for many months to come. Darlan had lost his main bargaining counter at the critical stages of the war. Italy and Germany had lost that reinforcement which might have made our command of the sea, with its enormous responsibilities, its tremendous difficulties of geography, impossible.

We had had one of the most lamentable tasks that has ever fallen to the lot of the Royal Navy. It was carried out with dignity and with the first signs of that ruthlessness that is essential in war with an enemy such as ours, and that we find, as a nation, so difficult to acquire.

The world outside the Axis applauded while it regretted the necessity for the step.

And, to the eternal honour of the French Navy, some part of it was true to us and to its obligations. From the ships that we had seized in British ports, from the men who were still with us after Dakar, from the French colonies about the world, came men to build the new Free French Navy.

## IV

*Fire Drake* took no part in these stirring events. She was in dock in the Clyde—nearly three thousand miles away from Galita Island, that is the southern sentinel at the entrance to the Sicilian Channel—still having patches placed over the honourable scars she had won off Narvik just before Mussolini entered the war. When Oran was fought she was returning from her first run on the Iceland ferry. When the *Richelieu* fell to a motor-boat she was on her way north again.

She left, as has been said, on August 22nd. In the Mediterranean things were strangely calm. Mussolini was not using his navy so far as could be judged from outside. We had virtually abandoned Malta as a naval base—we were to reconsider that position later—but even Malta had not suffered as observers before the war had believed it would suffer. There had been no waves of terrible bombing. There had been no invasion. What air activity there had been was relatively unimportant. The spirit of the Maltese inhabitants of every class was growing from day to day until it reached a lighthearted courage that was to amaze the world.

*Fire Drake* came down with the big ships through a calm summer sea.

“It was like a spring cruise in the old days,” said someone to me. “Yachting, that’s what it was! Yachting.”

And, at the end of the month, she came with them to Gibraltar.

But lest they should think that in this warmer clime, in this Andalusian corner of fascinating Spain, they were to suffer any change of regime—they were to be spared any of

the harsh acerbities of destroyer life, the Staff had waiting for them, the traditional surprise.

They were there about eight o'clock on the morning of the 29th. At three o'clock of the morning of the 30th they had left for Mussolini's "triangle of fire."

## CHAPTER IX

### THE FIRST "CLUB RUN"

THIS was the first of what afterwards were to become famous as the Force H "club runs."

They had a strong force—*Renown* and *Valiant* for their heavy metal, *Illustrious* and *Ark Royal* for the air.

They ran up the Mediterranean, keeping a screen against the possibilities of Italian submarine attack. In the first weeks of the war the Italian submarine service had been active. It did not achieve much, it is true, but it had been about. We got in in those first weeks the blow that shook the morale of the Italian submarine service right at the very start. Something like fourteen submarines were accounted for in the first days of the war in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.

One of them surrendered intact in the famous action with H.M. trawler *Moonstone*, and was towed to Aden! From that blow the Italian submarine service was a long time recovering.

In this first run, Force H had little serious work to do. But it had all the difficulties of readjustment to the new conditions. It had to learn the new water and its ways.

The first "club run" was for the passing through of *Illustrious* and *Valiant* and an important convoy to the "other end." As a by-product of the run they bombed Cagliari with Swordfish planes.

One Swordfish was lost. Swordfish pilots have told me that their planes are so slow "they cannot get out of the

fumes of their own exhausts." This may be an exaggeration, but they are probably the slowest bombing planes in any air force in the world. On the other hand, they have an incredible virtuosity of manœuvre.

One of them, as I say, was badly damaged by shell-fire, and with the superb insouciance of the Fleet Air Arm pilot, landed on the very aerodrome it had already bombed. Its crew was taken prisoner. Later, when Force H had returned home, a message came from them :

"Next time you bomb Cagliari, avoid the police station. We have a flat over it, and are very comfortable."

This bombing was not just impertinence. It was meant to subdue possible air action against our ships at the crisis of the narrows. It succeeded, for they were not bombed. Only an occasional reconnaissance plane hovered at a cautious distance about the Fleet, and two of these the Fleet Air Arm fighters shot down in lengthening trails of smoke.

In fact, Mussolini's "triangle of fire" was a bitter disappointment to them on this first fleeting visit. Nothing happened. They went—they left the other ships—they came home again. The weather was good, the Mediterranean was kind. Everything except the enemy "played." There was no enemy—neither the heavy forces of the Italian Navy nor the light forces, neither torpedo-plane nor bomber came near them.

They came back to Gibraltar a little bored.

On September 6th certain ships left to cover the first movement of the Dakar operation : *Ark Royal*, *Barham* and *Resolution* and some of the Eighth destroyers. *Firedrake* was not to go. She was not present at this the third act of the tragedy of French Africa.

This is not the place in which to discuss the merits and demerits of the Dakar episode. On September 15th it was announced by the Navy Ministry at Vichy that three French cruisers—*Montcalm*, *Georges Legueys* and the *Gloire*—and three destroyers had arrived at Dakar. They had sailed from Toulon with the approval of Marshal Pétain, Admiral Darlan

and the Vichy Government—and presumably, therefore, with the approval of Germany.

On September 24th, in a communique issued from the Headquarters of the Free French Forces in Britain, General de Gaulle stated that owing to the German and Italian infiltration and the assumption of German control of the Dakar air bases, the Free French had decided to invade Dakar.

When the Free French envoys, bearing a white flag, approached the port, they were fired upon. The bombardment of the port followed, and there was a brief action. The attempt was abandoned—most people consider prematurely.

*Fire Drake* was not there. She was out on patrol off Alboran Island, the little speck of land that lies midway between Europe and Africa at the middle of the first widening of the Mediterranean. She attacked one submarine contact during the patrol, but had no luck with it. Otherwise the patrol was quiet.

They were relieved on patrol by H.M.S. *Wrestler*, who made with grim irony to them :

“ When we left, our late Allies had been bombing Gibraltar for two hours.”

It was dusk on September 24th when they got in. In the half light they could see little damage, though the French were claiming to have hit H.M.S. *Renown*, to have dropped over a hundred tons of bombs on the fortress, to have damaged some of the main guns and otherwise to have played havoc with the place.

They made fast at the main wharf half-way along from the Tower, the Headquarters building. An area there was roped off and a dockyard matey said,

“ There’s an unexploded bomb there.”

But inside the dockyard there was little, if any, damage. The harbour was empty. The ships of Force H had gone to sea at the very height of the first attack, choosing to fight it out in deep water rather than the narrow confines of the harbour.

*Renown* had gone through the north entrance with every



anti-aircraft gun of her heavy armament blazing. The men of Gibraltar still speak of that tremendous sight.

The night was calm. There were no alarms.

There were no alarms the next morning either. On the shore people said: "Honour is satisfied—even the incomprehensible French version of the word—they have made their demonstration—there will be nothing more."

They went through the ordinary routine of a ship in harbour, making good their necessities, carrying out the little ceremonies of "Defaulters" and "Request men." They had "Stand easy," and the boatswain's call twittered to the sound of "Out pipes."

It was quite peaceful. Only a faint haze hung over things. There was dust where engineers were pulling down unsafe walls. The place had an atmosphere of "after battle." They gave shore leave as usual to half the ship's company, and they lunched as usual.

And then, at two-thirty, the "yellow warning" came through, the black and yellow bars of the flag fluttering out stiffly from the halyards of the Tower. *Firedrake* answered it with the black and yellow at her own yard-arm. She was the only regular ship of war in the harbour. There was a trawler or two and some small craft, but Force H was out at sea. "Yellow warnings" in Gibraltar were two a penny in those days. This might be another of the false alarms or it might be just a "snooper" coming over, a reconnaissance plane weaving an unpredictable pattern in the sky to spy out the movements of the port.

And almost on the warning came the attack. There were three planes overhead now, high sailing in the cloud. They had come in from the south-west, coming through the cloud almost above the Rock.

The battery to the south of them started up: the battery to the north, Bofors guns, the guns on Europa Point, the guns on the flats of the isthmus. The air was pock-marked with the fleecy bursts of ack-ack shells, unsteady about them with the shock of the discharges, with the answering clamorous echoes from the Rock.

And *Firedrake* herself was at "Ack-ack action stations." Her crew had closed up at the gun on the yellow. She was training it now. She opened fire. This was the first test of her 3-inch gun. The young "Hostilities only" ratings who manned it came to the task like veterans. They got in an excellent burst of fire as the first wave of planes came across.

And then across their fire and the deep staccato anger of the Rock, they heard that noise they had grown to know so well in Norway—the shrill descending whistle of the bombs. The first stick hit in the sea outside the harbour. The old familiar fountains roared towards the sky.

The first wave passed over; the second came in.

This was no token raid. This was another deliberate, vengeful attack upon the Rock, an attack dictated by Vichy uncertainties, by her blind submission to the will of Germany, by wounded pride—above all, by wounded pride.

On the bridge they watched, the fresh attack come in, spotting the fall of bombs, marking them coolly, watching against the possibility of sudden surprise. The second wave came in along the line of the ridge of the Rock from the southward. Again her gun was loud and clamorous over the noise of the biggest batteries of the Rock.

These bombs fell mostly about Roscia Bay. They demolished houses there, damaged the road. They were meant for the dockyard, but their aim was short.

Almost immediately afterwards a fresh attack came in. It was clear that this thing had been planned and even practised.

This attack came over the ridge of the Rock itself from the east to the west, designed apparently to throw off the aim and readiness of the gunners, who had been working in the open approaches from the south and west.

One plane came down with a brilliant run in and loosed a stick aimed apparently either at the Tower or at *Firedrake* herself. They saw the bombs coming, dropping in the long easy curve of bomb flight. Those who were not working the hot gun lay down along the decks. There was no safety

for them anywhere. The bombs fell in a line across the harbour, vast splashes like those of a giant leaping through shallow water, a succession of enormous bursts.

The nearest was thirty yards from *Firedrake*. The last but one hit a little trawler lying alongside the outer wall. They saw the splash of that explosion and the smoke that followed.

And already a fresh attack was coming in from down by Europa Point. These planes were lower than the first. The angle of sight, when they picked them up, was thirty degrees.

They fired before the batteries of the Rock, and saw dark puffs below and the burst of one immediately above her. They saw another follow it—another—another—another : beautiful shooting, dead on the target.

They saw the plane turn suddenly west as if to throw off their fire, and immediately falter, break into a spin and fall. They saw a man bale out and the sudden pure whiteness of the parachute as it fell. There was a clear minute's silence with no guns firing, and through that silence they heard a thin cheer that began to the southward and spread like the crackle of a *feu de joie* along the Rock, an odd tiny note of human voices under the harsh contrast of the clamorous guns.

There were breaks in the attack now, but they were never long. The run in over the top of the Rock was tried again, the run in from the south, the run in from the west.

The bombers were weaving a pattern of destruction in which they were both the shuttle and the warp. But for all their determination and all the grim spitefulness of that attack, they achieved little. As if they realised the inadequacy of their aim, one pilot came in to dive-bomb from the north. He turned somewhere about the Spanish coast, came in a long downward-roaring plunge over the "pockets" at the northern Mole, and raced towards the Tower and *Firedrake*. The 0.5's for the first time came into action, a shuddering, staccato answer. They saw the white brilliance of the tracer streaming from the ship like the hose of a fireman seen in the beam of a searchlight. They saw it hit as if the plane was suddenly a magnet, pulling the bullets towards it. They saw it jerk suddenly away, the smoke coming from it, stagger

uneasily, and fly off towards the Spanish coast. It crashed at Algeciras.

They had a spell of quiet again, and another raid came in. Some of the men had half-stripped now in the September heat. They fought "Q" gun almost in the costume of Nelson's day. Volunteer parties fed the ammunition to the deck. The ready-use supply had long been fired away. The lockers were empty. But from the magazines came up a constant stream.

They left no attack unanswered. They challenged everything. They were first in on every fresh assault.

An hour had gone—another hour went by: a third hour came, and still the French came in. But much of their bomb loads fell in open sea. Stick after stick fell off the end of Europa Point where it seemed as if they could have set their sights on no target at all, as if some of these pilots were unwilling in the last resort to drop the death that had been prepared for Germans upon their Allies. The waters round Gibraltar took that day more than two-thirds of all the bombs they carried. That which they dropped did strangely little harm.

Out of both the attacks there were roughly four bombs that did damage in all the great area of Gibraltar harbour. The old town itself was virtually unscathed save for a bomb or two about the Civil Hospital and one near the upper gate. Both at Roscia Bay and along the Europa road there was damage to houses, and round the Rock Hotel. The Alameda Gardens and the upper slopes of the eastern side of the Rock took all the rest.

The killed ashore were numbered on the fingers of a single hand. The wounded were hardly as many more.

The raid was a supreme example of the mismanagements of spite. It ended at five o'clock, after three hours. Other planes had crashed in the course of that proceeding. Vichy admitted in the end that twelve failed to return. They did no damage to Gibraltar that was worth twelve costly bombers and the lives of men.

*Firedrake's* single anti-aircraft gun—"Q" gun—had had

its baptism of fire, one hundred and sixty-two rounds in the course of a single raid ! The barrel at times was close upon red hot. The men who served it so faithfully through that long afternoon were deaf. Some of them stayed deaf for fourteen days ; one of them was discharged long after with his hearing still impaired.

It had been worse in many ways than Narvik, for they had been stationary, unable to dodge, a sitting target to the bombers. But the men said afterwards that there had been nothing there of that strange helplessness that had been so hard to bear at Narvik. They had hit back. They had known all the while that they could hit back. "Q" gun achieved a sudden popularity.

There was sadness in this affair and grimness ; the sadness of old allies falling out, and the shameful necessity.

But, once again, farce was scarcely decent round the corner. Three of *Firedrake's* junior officers were bathing on the far side of the Rock when the raid began. They did not see the warning, for the flags do not fly along those beaches. They saw a plane and concluded it was one of ours—and the next thing they heard was the whistle of bombs.

There is a famous picture in the Uffizi, "Pisan Soldiery Surprised While Bathing." They were more decent than the Pisan soldiery—but only just ! And it appeared that bombs would fall, unless they hurried, between them and their clothing. They hurried. They described afterwards how long even a narrow strip of beach can seem between the falling of one bomb and the next.

The great raid was over. They did what they could to help the sinking trawler across the harbour, but there was little that could be done. And on *Firedrake* they stowed away the empty shell-cases that littered the deck all round the platform of the cooling "Q" gun.

## II

They spent that night in harbour, resting. The next morning *Firedrake* left, carried out a brief patrol ; came back at four o'clock, and left again at eight.

She was out two days : came back on the 28th, had two and a half hours in harbour, and left for the Azores.

There was at that time a heavy threat along the Pyrenees. It seemed that any moment the German hordes that, like Attila's Huns, had broken across France, might sweep across the barrier of the mountains, and with the connivance—or at the most with the token opposition only—of the Spanish, engulf the Iberian Peninsula.

At the same time there was a possibility—it seems to have been even more than a possibility—that a simultaneous expedition would leave from the coast about Bordeaux to seize the Azores. Their value to the Axis would be immeasurable. As a base for submarines and for long-distance aircraft, their possibilities are almost beyond speculation. Half the Atlantic would be blockaded from there if they could be taken now, and if they could be held. Splendidly placed almost in the very centre of the three-thousand-mile width of the Atlantic Ocean, they were a prize at which the grasping hands of the vanquishers of France might well stretch out.

Rumour piled upon rumour.

We "took precautions."

We sent a force out to cover the approaches along which any armada of invasion might seek to come. It may be that by doing so we stopped it. Nothing happened. For almost ten days Force H was upon the approaches to the islands or cruising within sight of the great shoulders that they lift above the sea. San Miguel, Ponta del Garda, Fayal and Horta—the names crop up, and they remember other days. "At Flores in the Azores Sir Richard Grenville lay . . ." They were ready to treat any German forces even as Sir Richard had served the Dons. And perhaps because of that, Germany did not come. They refuelled at sea once again, and returned to Gibraltar.

They were back at nine o'clock on October 7th and before they had finished lunch they were off to sea again to collect a convoy. As I have said, there was no rest even here in the warmth of the south—even here in the aura of the procrastinations of Spain.

In the next ten days they were hardly in harbour. When they were not taking convoys to sea or bringing them in, they were on patrol.

On the 15th they left Gibraltar for a beat off Alboran Island again. The weather was good, visibility excellent. They slipped lazily up and down the area prescribed, seeing the distant highlands of Africa at one end of it, catching glimpses of the remote peaks of Spain at the other. Alboran Island was always with them, looking often in the dawn light or the half light of dusk like an aircraft carrier silhouetted against the horizon.

And then, in the very small hours of the 18th, they received information that this patrol might perhaps be not like others. At one o'clock in the morning they left the area of patrol on specific instructions to hunt on the possible route of a submarine. Other ships had been brought in on that hunt. At seven o'clock, just before dawn, they were challenged by a destroyer—*Vidette* of the "V" and "W"s. At eight-thirty they were joined by *Wrestler*.

The hunt went on.

At noon they got a contact and attacked, but lost it almost at once. In the afternoon aircraft came—friendly aircraft, operating out of Gibraltar. They watched them circling in the sky, circling the slow water.

They were working west-south-west when the look-outs on *Firedrake* saw suddenly the splash of a bomb on the water and one of the aircraft diving. Instantly they turned towards the plane. She came down like a hawk on a stubble field; sped up again, circled and returned.

The other planes came and dived in their turn. They watched them from *Firedrake's* bridge as, thrusting at speed, they raced across the water lane between them. They saw them grow from insects against the sky to the size of swallows, and from swallows to falcons, and from falcons to the semblance of eagles. They wheeled and dived over and over again with a steady persistence of certainty.

*Wrestler* was coming up towards them also, converging on the target.

The air was clear ; there was no sea, only an easy rocking swell. They established contact almost as they came beneath the still-diving planes, picking up the characteristic indications of a submarine upon the Asdic. She was striving to get away under the clear water ; invisible to them, invisible now even to the planes, but still there for the impalpable touch of the Asdic to search out.

They made contact, and ran in at once to the attack. The pattern dropped. They went on, the little splash marks on the sea behind them. And as they opened the distance the charges went off. This was routine now. They had done it so many times this war.

They turned and came into the attack again ; wheeled and came back to it, always picking up the twisting, turning shape of the ship below them—always dropping charges over the unseen cylinder of its hull.

*Wrestler* came in and joined the struggle, dropping her charges in her turn. Five o'clock passed and six o'clock, and still the attack went on. Pattern after pattern, the depth charges ripping up the very vitals of the sea.

And then, on the very edge of the evening, with the light already fading, *Firedrake's* last pattern brought the enemy to the surface. They wheeled to open fire. *Wrestler* got her shots in first. They joined, but the submarine was surrendering. They saw the crew come tumbling out of the conning tower, dropping to the sea.

She was a big ship, one of Italy's latest type, a ship of the "Pola" class—that class that was named after the easy conquest of Abyssinia. She was one of the first revenges for that conquest.

They closed her and lowered boats. *Wrestler* was the nearest of the ships, her boat was in the water first. She closed the submarine as it lay reeling sluggishly in the swell, lame and helpless on the surface. *Firedrake* sent her boat away in turn.

In a few moments the submarine sank, going down first on an even keel as if she were submerging normally. Then she cocked up suddenly, heaved over and disappeared.



The Sub-Lieutenant and the crew of the cutter saw her go, sliding down into the depths in an aura of phosphorescence, the green ghost of a submarine outlined in pallid light, leaving behind her trails and swirls of cold, green brilliance.

The fight was over. They went back towards the unseen looming of the Rock to land their prisoners. *Firedrake* was at Gibraltar at midnight. In the early afternoon of the next day she was on patrol again. There is no rest in the destroyers even after victory.

## CHAPTER X

## STRAITS PATROL

I REACHED Gibraltar on Sunday, October 27th, ten days or so after the sinking of that Italian submarine. Against the outer wall lay the enormous grey shapes of H.M.S. *Renown* and H.M.S. *Barham*. The "Fleet" was in.

There were three of us appointed to the western forces, and in *Renown* next morning we were given a choice—one of us to live aboard an aircraft carrier, one in a big ship, one in a destroyer. I chose the destroyer, for I love small ships and all that goes with them.

On the very heels of the ceremonial pink gin I left for her in a skimmer from the flagship, a little boat that roared across the still and sunlit waters of the harbour.

"*Firedrake*?—You'll find her in the pockets—down there somewhere."

There was a generous wave of the hand. I found her.

There is something of trepidation always for a writing man in approaching a ship of His Majesty's Navy. There is an ancient feud between the Navy and publicity. It is a feud based on the Navy's part upon much bitter experience.

Destroyers are small ships, carrying, for their size, tremendous crews. There is no waste space within their slender

hulls. For'ard the main decks are crammed in every space where men can sling a hammock or sleep along the settees. The small bridge-housing is like one of those Chinese boxes out of which some new space may always be constrained. Aft in the wardroom and the cabin flat there is—with a war-time complement of officers above the peace-time numbers for which the cabins were designed—scarce room to stow an eel. In a big ship a writing man can be lost. In a small ship inevitably he lives in the very eye of the wardroom—and he *may* live as an irritant rather than as a balm.

They entered my arrival in the log-book. It said, briefly, "Arrived"—not "Joined," not "Come to stay." There is in ships' logs an ancient custom whereby a voyage is described as "towards" a port, not "to" it. Was there a hint of that same caution in that entry? I had "arrived." Whether I stayed depended upon many things!

And yet in the very hour of my arrival they made me feel at home. They plied me with gin and questions about London and the blitz. Very noble is the hospitality of the warships of His Majesty.

One by one I met the wardroom: Number One, short, slight, with a devastating tongue and a complete and devastating efficiency; "The Chief," the Lieutenant (E.), who nursed the frail engines out of one trouble after another; the Quack, from Glasgow University Medical School; the Sub-Lieutenant; the two R.N.V.R. Subs.—one, Holey, a solicitor in private life, the other, The Newt, manager of a building estate company of whose houses, I was told libellously by Number One before the day was out, that they leant at all angles, and that the firm had put up the Leaning Tower of Pisa (this slander persisted for many months in many permutations); "Guns," short, thick-set, the epitome of naval knowledge, who knew what the lower deck was thinking before it thought it and from whom nothing was hid; the midshipman who was loaned from H.M.S. *Renown*, a tall Canadian. Before lunch I had met the captain, Lieutenant-Commander Stephen Norris, D.S.G.

Before lunch was over I knew I had fallen upon "a happy ship."

## II

We sailed next morning. The Staff—I was assured of this by everybody—being in a good temper, we sailed when breakfast was fairly over.

There was a drizzling rain and conditions were not auspicious. Somebody warned me that unless I brought better weather my life would undoubtedly be short. And to my aid the better weather came.

We went on patrol.

It was to them an old tale much told, but to me even that first patrol was full of wonder—the patient zig-zag up and down the square of sea appointed for their watching.

The weather cleared and we saw Ceuta lying under the lap of its mock Gibraltar on the south; we saw Calpe, the southernmost member of the pillars of Hercules; we saw the hills falling back and rising till they became mountains; and the mountains sheering up till they became the long ridged sierra of Er Rif. At the southern end of our beat we could see up to Tetuan. At the northern we could see the houses on Europa Point again.

We moved up and down while in the Asdic cabinet they kept the endless watch.

Small craft slid across the waters; tunny boats coming back to Ceuta, red-sailed and loaded with their nets; their people watching as we steered close past them, neither friendly nor hostile.

The night closed on us and Ceuta came out in a blaze of lights—the citadel crowned and brilliant, the light of El Mina flashing superbly on its spur; and round the base below Ceuta, like a chain of diamonds in the night, always the brilliance of the tunny fleet, the naphtha flares winking in splendour against the soft dark velvet of the sea. Tetuan in the darkness was aglow, a sort of phosphorescence spangled with indeterminate points of light.

There was a strange beauty in that corner of the world. Something of it lies in the sense of mystery and of space beyond the Pillars of Hercules. Something of it lies in this meeting of two continents. Something of it lies in the echoes of history that mount about it to the richness of a symphony : Ulysses going out between the gates to seek the golden apples of the Hesperides ; Hanno, the Carthaginian, slipping past to bring back his ships with the sun upon his starboard hand ; the dark flood of the Moors pouring across, conquering Europe in the name of Allah and his prophet ; halted at Roncesvalles, the horn of Roland echoing to these dark umber hills ; pouring back again before the Christian Kings after the long servitude of Spain.

These Straits saw the Barbary pirates come out to fire the Bristol Channel ; they saw the Sallee Rovers come round to prey upon the rich shipping of the near east ; they saw the Vikings come through on their way towards Byzantium ; they saw Nelson's fleet come out to Trafalgar, and they saw the body of the little Admiral brought back in grief.

All that night in the darkness we kept on bringing the lights of Ceuta large upon our shoulder, dropping them behind us until they were diminished to a glow, weaving the ordered pattern of our search across water through which the porpoise played, lambent in the green fired sea.

At sun up, when I went to the bridge again, the coast of Africa was still upon our beam, the mountains crisply clear in the coming light, and the houses very white upon their flanks. There was a rare and peaceful beauty in that last corner of the inland sea. It seemed so far from war.

And yet we had a reminder of war even through the crisp silence of that morning air. For while we were, most of us, at breakfast the Officer of the Watch heard far away the thud of an explosion. It seemed to come from the Rock. He took small notice—they were always blasting on the Rock.

And then within a matter of moments they heard, in the wireless room, Gibraltar. There was a report that there was a submarine in the Bay.

We followed through the morning the progress of a fantastic hunt. We were not called inshore to join it.

There was no submarine. This was the morning on which the Italians, striving to emulate the successes of 1917 at Pola, attempted to enter Gibraltar harbour with two "strange devices" and attack *Renown* beside the wall. They failed, but the full story of this attempt will not be told until the war is over.

We went on with the sweep. There was no enemy within our area.

On the Thursday we were called in from patrol "with dispatch"—what Cæsar used to call "*cum magna celeritate.*"

There was something in the wind perhaps. At least I thought so. *Firedrake's* people, weary with much knowledge, said merely, "Another sooterkin."

We went in and fuelled hurriedly; took in our stores, and went to sea, screening *Renown* and *Barham* to the westward.

### III

I found always a joy and a beauty in these departures. To leave for sea is in itself an adventure, and we of the destroyers went out before the big ships and carried out a mazy ritual dance around the anchored shipping, down towards the Spanish bight, over by Algeciras and round the Bay. It is a dance begun as a *pas seul*—by a single dancer on the glassy floor of Gibraltar Bay. It became, within the swift second of the destroyers' leaving, a *pas de deux*—became, in the end, a ballet of the whole flotilla.

It had for its object the safe passage of the big ships through the one point at which an enemy might be certain of their passage. They have to leave harbour, and this was the point at which they left it. They had to return to harbour after, and this was the point again. We probed and re-probed and double-probed the last least fathom of the Bay.

And then as we saw the great bulk of the "waggons" go sliding out of the gate, we formed the ordered procession of the screen.

This time we stood out from the Mediterranean into the Atlantic. There was something up—nobody knew quite what. There was a report of four French destroyers coming through the Straits, coming down apparently towards Casablanca or Dakar. The air was crisp with speculation. We never learnt precisely what that movement meant, but only that something was threatened and that again—as off the Azores—something did not happen.

This was my introduction to the screen—the beautiful progress of a fleet of war at sea. All three of the battle-cruisers were handsome ships—the lamented *Hood*, the finest of them all; but *Renown* had beauty, the lines of her hull have a fine free sweep, the long and easy curve that has in it the very heart of speed and power; *Barham*, astern of her, was squat by comparison, but in her squatness was a sturdy strength, a stern and portentous majesty. They were the haft and heaviness of our battle-spear.

We of the destroyers were the spear-point and the barbs. Our flotilla leader, *Faulknor*, guided the Fleet, and as we ran down the Straits towards Tangier we were flung out on either side of her in two slender prongs of silver ships upon a wine dark sea.

Spain was on the one hand and Africa upon the other. There was a gentle swell beyond the gateways. We made out for Cape Spartel, out beyond Tangier. We turned at that white city on the hill and set towards the west-south-west.

All through the day we steamed down to the south, unhurried, waiting. We heard the progress of the French destroyers through the narrows, we heard them turn, off Spartel, seeking the mainland coast towards the south. They were not our game. They were only part of some possibility, some new machination of the German pressure on the men of Vichy.

They were allowed to go.

We climbed easily over the long, very slow Atlantic swell, the big ships nodding to us, lifting their bows as the swells went by and dropping from them the white fringe of des-

ending spray; the effortless cleavage of the water that, because of its effortlessness, was pregnant with the assurance of hidden power.

And then, as the late sun fell off in its descent, we got the hint of a submarine upon our Asdic. The hint became at once more important, became almost a certainty.

Up went the "contact" flag to our yard-arm, climbing the halyards with almost a feverish urgency. Instantly the sharp point of our bows swung till we brought the target dead ahead. It was close to us. There was no time for an immediate pounce attack. We ran over it and dropped a single charge. (Even one charge will keep a U-boat down, unsuspecting him from his target on the big ships.)

We watched the "waggons" anxiously. This was the very point of danger, the very summit of anxiety. At any second we might see the trail of white against the water that spoke the racing torpedo.

And, as we watched, we saw the answering signal on the flagship's yard. Astern of us the single charge went off in a flashing explosion. And, as the signal climbed, we saw the "waggons" turning out of line. The slow ponderous moment of that swinging seemed drawn out to the very edge of time.

And yet they were swift—they were so swift that the white quadrant of their wakes was perfect still long after they had turned stern on to us. It was the emergency turn. We watched our fellows of the screen racing on one side to conform with that movement, their bow waves leaping in the urgency of their going, to high arcs of roaring spray.

And all the time our Asdic was telling us more and more of this possibility in the sea below. We turned, ourselves, and another flag whipped to the yard that stretched across the sky above our heads—"the attacking flag."

We went in like a hound swift-running to the kill. *Fire-drake* had a reputation to maintain. There was no confusion, no excitement even; only the unflurried movement of men sure in their knowledge and certain of their power.

We came in swiftly, with the crisp antiphonal chant between

the Asdic officer and the Captain growing to a climax on the words "Fire One"! The pattern dropped, the depth-charge throwers roared.

I watched the tumbling flight of the charges and their stalks. And then, as we sped over the still-peaceful sea, I saw the surface quiver, leap and break!

Already, beyond us, the big ships were diminishing. They were past fear of harm.

We circled slowly, hunting for the target once again. We had no joy of it. Somewhere in the swirl of water we lost the feel of it, and though we kept the search, we made no new contact.

And then from the battle line that was shrinking now to a child's model of a Fleet, heading south again in the glow of the sunset, we saw a winking light recalling us. We rejoined the Fleet at speed.

The night came on and because whatever was to happen along the west coast of Africa was still not happening, we had the darkness to ourselves in the wide spaces of the sea.

We had night exercises. Three destroyers were detached from the screen, sent away to lose themselves in the darkness, and then come down in "night attack." We went to the southward and, at the appointed time, turned again to meet them. This was mimic war, and yet just over the horizon there might be immediate danger of this very kind. There was a double urgency in our watch that was never present in peace-time exercises.

"B" gun was star shell gun. We heard the clank and clatter of the shells being made ready just below the bridge, and all the time we watched intently in the darkness.

From the searchlight platform came through the report "Light burning behind the shutters." Everything was ready. The moment grew to a swift intensity, more and more urgent.

And then, suddenly and without warning, a searchlight broke like a sword of flame far out on the starboard side of the big ships.

Immediately after we saw the flash of guns. Before the



star shell burst we opened on our wing of the screen. We opened on a fresh target coming in on our starboard side. "B" gun flashed and thundered once and again—and another . . . another . . . another.

And in the sky ahead we saw the star shells burst, dropping like the bars of a fence of light. The sea that had been dark was bright as polished silver, the night was full of the clash of guns, slashed across with the bars of the searchlight beams. We saw in them silver ships spring suddenly to life and vanish. We heard the answering rumble of their guns.

Then the attack was over. It had failed.

On Friday, November 1st, we went back to Gibraltar. Whatever our duty had been, we had done it. No hostile movement had begun.

#### IV

We had, after this, the rest of Friday and all Saturday in. The wardroom was almost gloomy about it. It said it must be an oversight on the part of the Staff, and that if it wasn't, it probably portended terrible things.

There were excitements. The lunch-hour "snooper" came over and fluttered the big ships to a wild activity. There was another rumour of a submarine in the Bay and much activity of the duty destroyers. But we were lying in a strange, portentous peace.

And yet there was nothing of harm in it. The Staff woke from its Sunday morning slumbers in the usual temper and sent us to sea at one o'clock, interfering as much as possible—according to the well-established precedent—with the wardroom meal-time. The wardroom was almost relieved at this return to form.

The weather, by contrast to the last departure for patrol, was perfect. It was pointed out that people in peace-time paid pounds to travel in cruise liners on just such days as these.

"But look at the girls you get on cruise liners," said The Newt despondently.

That afternoon as we worked up and down the old familiar waters, there came through a signal that an Italian submarine—a lame dog—had been chased into Tangier, escaping by use of territorial waters. She had been harried in by the destroyers of the outside patrol and by aircraft of Coastal Command, but she was lame before they spotted her and she had come from the south-west. We had dropped a pattern on a contact as we ran with the “waggons” to the south-west. Was this our wounded bird coming in to shelter? The Captain thought it was. Number One was doubtful. The wardroom took sides about it, and wrangled amicably for the rest of the patrol, while we eavesdropped over the ether and picked up story after story of this comedy of Tangier.

Then, on the Monday afternoon, after erroneous reports that the submarine had sailed, we got, incredibly, an official report that a second submarine had joined her—both Italian.

This was absurd—but it was also true. Thirty miles from our principal naval base, sitting against the wall in an international harbour, there were two of our direst enemies. We could have gone in at any hour of all the days they stayed there and sunk them with impunity. We could have bombed them as they lay there without hope of answer. But we respected the neutrality of Tangier. And we were kept lively on our patrol by almost hourly report of the imminence of their departure.

We were four days on this patrol. Nothing happened. Sometimes at night we would creep up behind a dimly lit ship and turn our light on her. Once it was a schooner going into Ceuta, and the brilliance of the big searchlight brought out for a second the exquisite picture of the white and blue hull and the spreading red sails against the blackness of the midnight sky—lovely inversion of normality.

It was a cheerful time. It might have been lazy except that it is not the custom of The Service to be lazy. There was no war here except for the lurking possibility beneath the water, but there was always the imminence of danger. We kept prepared for that.

At dawn we went to action stations against any enemy

that might have crept in in the night. At six o'clock in the evening we went to general quarters for exercises, and there was variety and ingenuity in that exercise. Parts of the ship were put out of action, the steering gear on one day, the dynamos on another. The after magazine was on fire the next evening. We were broken down completely and exercised "tow for'ard" on the next. Men were wounded on the bridge and lowered on Neil Robertson stretchers; guns jammed, communications failed—the bridge was blown away. We practised and prepared for a hundred casualties of the sea, mastered their emergencies, prepared against their possibilities.

And, during the rest of the daylight hours, the same routine of preparation went always on. Number One's cabin was a lecture theatre that overflowed into the alley and the cabin flat at times; the chart house was another—classrooms for men working for badges, for higher ratings, for men who aimed at the chance of rank in this democratic Navy of the war.

The complexity of destroyer life is as great almost as that of a big ship, and the proportion of staff to deal with it infinitely smaller. There is an impression that a destroyer's life is all action and little else. That impression should be corrected. Anyone who has seen the floor of the Captain's day cabin spread over with a mass of confidential books, the contents of four safes piled in an orderly disorder on chair and table, on settee and bookshelf and writing-desk, on every inch of the carpet so that the musterers could hardly step between, will know something of one side of the paper work that has its being below the steel of a fighting ship.

There are others: charts must be corrected up to date for every possible area where a destroyer may be called upon to go—and destroyers go everywhere. This is not just the war-time business of replaced buoys and altered lights. These have their place, and they are multitudinous through the needs of war. But there are other things. In peace-time a new wreck is marked upon the chart once in a month or so. In war-time there are the wrecks that come from

submarines and moored mines, magnetic and acoustic, the wrecks that come from aircraft attacks, and from the swift assault of E-boats. There are the known areas of enemy mines and the alterations of our own minefields. There are the suspected points where aircraft come in on mine-laying flights and drop their eggs along the channels. There are a hundred corrections in time of war to every one in peace-time.

Those days of peaceful patrol were days of making good. They brought their papers up to date. And on the Wednesday we went in again. There was a convoy coming in as we arrived, and we marked time outside the harbour gate.

At once the "buzz" went round the mess-decks that there was "trouble in the wind."

There was.

All leave was stopped. There was no "liberty."

The next morning there was more evidence of trouble. The Captain was called away for a conference with Captain (D.). The harbour was too full of ships for health. *Ark Royal* was back again, and *Sheffield*, and *Glasgow*, and *Barham*, and the "Town" class cruisers.

We sailed at sunset.

Long before sunset the lower deck had worked it out that we were going on a "club run" to the east—a "flap." They had it almost in detail. They could, I have no doubt, have told the course we were to sail, the object of our journey—and yet no man had been ashore. I have no knowledge of how the grape-vine works. I have never found the logical explanation, except one psychological expert in his cups who told me with great sureness of authority that it was the "synthesis of the combined intelligence of the lower deck-hic." We had another pink gin upon the strength of it.

## CHAPTER XI

## SICILIAN CHANNEL

WE sailed at sunset and, as the lower deck had said, we turned towards the east.

We sailed with *Barham* as our main support, *Ark Royal* as flagship : *Sheffield*, *Glasgow* and *Berwick* of the "Town" class cruisers, four mixed destroyers and three of the Eighth.

We went out with the high mountains of Andalusia on our port hand, and the summits of the Atlas, like a shadow, to the south.

And in the early afternoon of the following day we saw a shadower—a Cant flying boat, low down and far away. We saw *Ark's* fighters, circling round the Fleet, fly off in the sudden straightness of the hunt. She disappeared. She had a long start on the fighters. All Italy knew within the hour that we were in their sea.

The fighters came back. *Ark* turned into the wind and took them aboard again.

In an hour she went off on an errand of her own, accompanied by three destroyers and one cruiser. We watched her huge bulk—like a segment of an ice-barrier ; flat topped, square ended, enormous—move off and diminish to the north.

We were alone now and without air support. And in the evening came another shadower. She came in the cocksureness of immunity close to our Fleet, and hovered impertinently about our going.

And once she came too close. Instantly, along the big ships, there was a ripple of reddish fire. Their upper works vanished for a moment in the flaring of anti-aircraft smoke. We heard the crash of their guns even as we came into action ourselves with the 3-inch astern.

The Cant swung wildly, jerked herself about, and ran like a wounded hare for Italy—like a hare that has come too close towards the hunter for peace of soul.

The night took us, the night when no shadowers come ;

and we wondered what morning light would bring. One battleship, one aircraft carrier, three cruisers and a handful of destroyers—and we were heading forward to a turning point not eighty miles from the Italian base of Cagliari. A third of the Italian Navy could have overpowered us as we stood—in theory. Half of it could have destroyed us utterly—on paper.

They had thirty-six hours and more of warning of our coming. If you count from the hour of our departure (known in its last and most intimate detail to the watchers on the Spanish shore, to the German spy organisation at Algeciras and La Linea—of which it is said commonly that it knows what the Admiral has for breakfast in Gibraltar an hour before he has it) they had two whole days. Even if the main Italian Fleet were at Taranto, it had only six hundred miles to come to meet us against the nine hundred that we had to steam. If they were at Naples they were only three hundred and fifty miles or so away—twelve hours' steaming at thirty knots.

There was nothing on earth to prevent the Italian Fleet being in the narrows between Spartavento and Galita Island six hours before we got there. We had to make the approach to those narrows through twelve hours of daylight—daylight and the exquisite visibility of a fine Mediterranean winter's day. We might well look for trouble with the morrow. We might look for it even with the dawn.

But with the dawn there came the *Ark*. She had been off to bomb Sardinia again, dropping her eggs on base and aerodrome, sending her sentinels of the sky off for news of Mussolini's Navy. She had none. None that mattered.

Then a little after dawn we saw another shadower, saw her as a speck against the sky towards the east—tiny, remote, hostile. She came towards us, pressing home her reconnaissance.

The Cants of the Italian Air Force had not yet learnt, as they were to learn, the lesson of our fighters. We watched *Ark's* dawn patrol come into the attack—three planes whirling across the clouds, three fighters in a hurry. They seemed

to leap from cloud patch to cloud patch, crossing the little intervening lanes of blue as an arrow leaps from the bow towards its target.

We saw through the glasses the Cant turn and begin to hurry back to home. We saw the attack dive home. And then we saw a trail of smoke that began horizontally, curved and then fell like a plummet to the sea.

"It's too easy with those Cants," said one of the pilots afterwards. "Damn it, it's like taking candy from a kid!"

We went on. The sea horizon ahead of us was empty with the strange, remote emptiness of the war-time sea. There was no enemy. There was no friend. There was no sign of life.

The air . . .

We saw suddenly a string of coloured flags climb hurriedly on *Ark Royal's* mast.

"Signal flying to stagger the line," said the leading signalman as our answering pennant rose to acknowledge. We saw the pennants fluttering down the line.

"Executive," said the leading signalman.

We watched the big ships moving out of their strict immaculate order. The line that had been pencilled straight as the haft of a spear upon the sea, was broken as if the spear shaft had shattered into fragments.

We of the destroyers got another order—an order to close upon the big ships. We were already at first degree of readiness for aircraft action.

And now from the wireless rating on the bridge we heard the flow of information.

"Hostile formation approaching so-and-so. Distant so many miles."

"Hostile formation so many miles approaching."

"Hostile formation so many miles . . ."

Each time the miles diminished, each time the enemy was nearer.

We were going into action eight hundred miles from Gibraltar—a long swim home. With me on the bridge the Captain, the officers and the crew were tin hatted, their life-

belts inflated ; the Captain's Gieves waistcoat, pulled on over his uniform jacket, swept out behind him with all the grace and elegance of a Victorian bustle. The look-out on the starboard side was thoughtfully putting an extra puff or two into his "Mae West," letting it run down a little, blowing it up again as if there were some exquisite nicety of adjustment after which he sought.

We were going into action, but there was no tension even on the bridge. The Captain was talking of the restoration of Georgian houses—his house in Kent . . . They were too old in bombing for tension now.

"Half the trouble is in stripping off the old paint, you see. Why people will . . ."

"*Sheffield's* opened fire, sir."

"Aircraft green 90. Angle of sight 45."

"Six—nine—fourteen."

"Where the hell are our fighters?"

"*Barham's* opened."

"*Glasgow . . . Berwick . . .*"

"There goes the *Ark!*"

"Low—they're shooting too low!"

The sky was flecked with the brown and white puffs of the bursting shells, a monstrous smallpox that spread between the planes and the ships—a rash of angry colour against the white of the clouds.

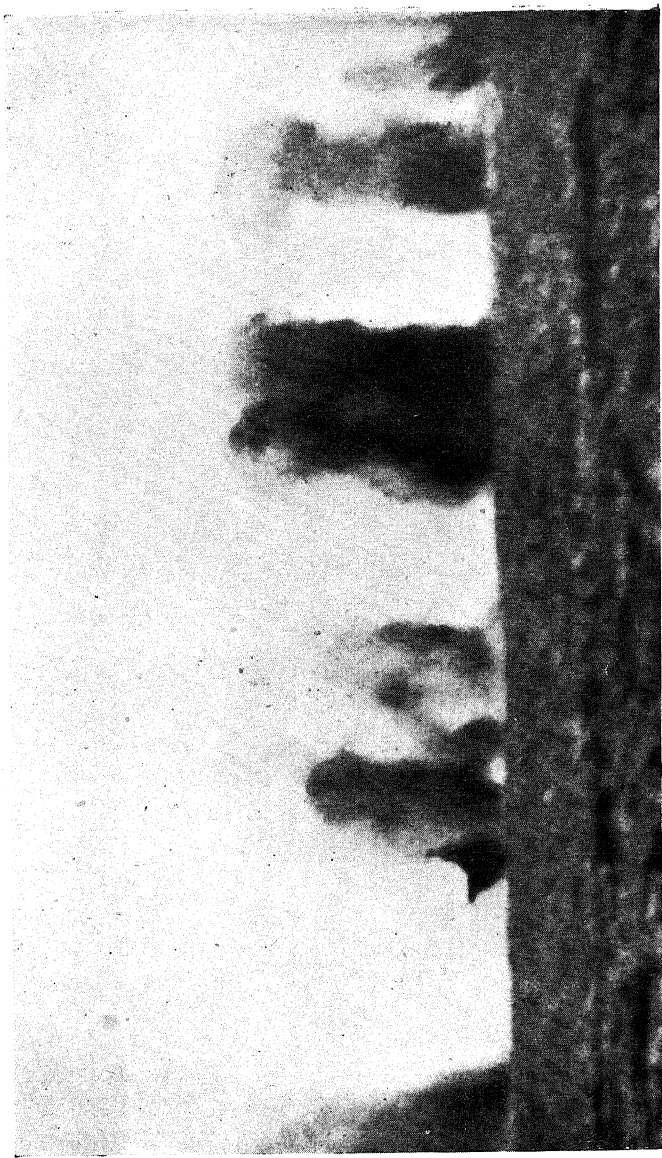
The aircraft were coming in from the sun, taking advantage of the dazzle in the gunner's eyes—in the eyes of the predictors. They came on keeping strangely good formation.

We watched the destroyers on the starboard side of the screen open fire in their turn with their small guns. The pattern of the smoke puffs became more complex, more ragged as their individual appreciations cut across the ordered procession of the predictor patterns. We saw a few bursts high up amongst the planes, saw the formation break up a little, and then close up again.

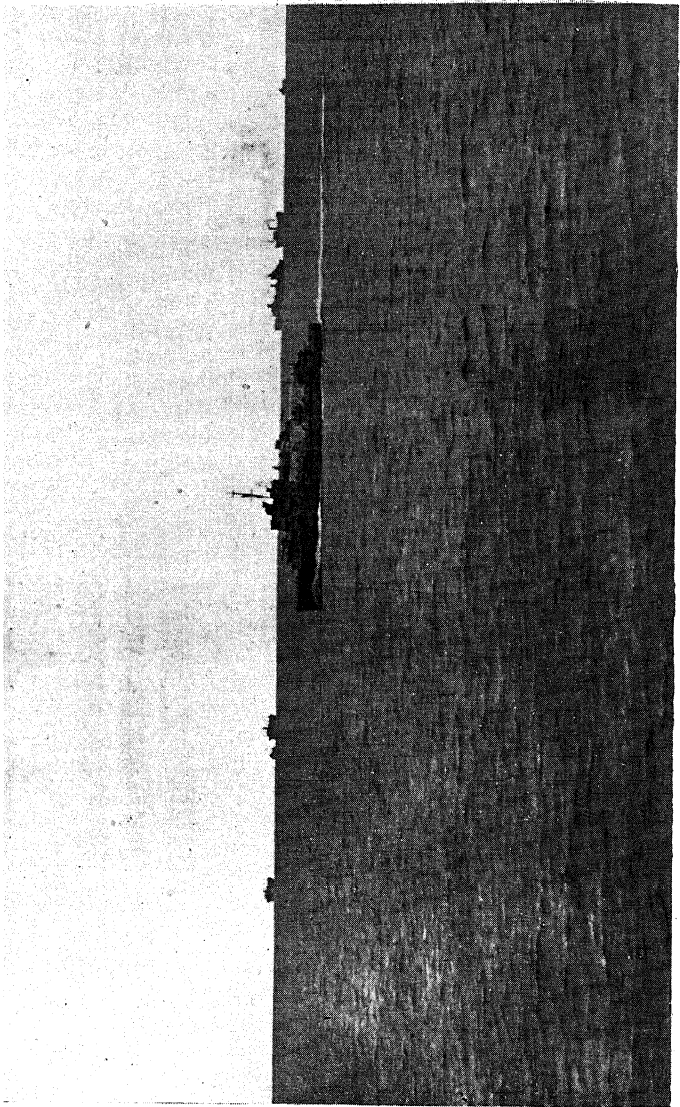
"Bombs!" shouted the Sub-Lieutenant.

We saw far off, two miles or so clear of the nearest ship, three great fountains lift out of the water.





*“ We saw Ark come out of the wild flurry of the descending spray ”*



*The convoy that went through*

The planes came on. These were ranging shots—splashes upon which to correct bomb sights for drift and windage.

The guns were firing in a continuous drum-roll now. The ships seemed crowned with plumes of angry scarlet. The air quivered with the crack of the anti-aircraft shells that answered the deep booming of the guns below. We heard a pom-pom come into action though the range was too great for its effective use, adding its staccato chatter to the deep bass thunder of the guns.

We did not hear the whistle of the bombs. The leading signalman saw them though, his eyes trained to an almost more than human acuteness.

We saw *Ark* disappear from sight in a monstrous uprising of water—not fountains these, but geysers; broad-based, crowned with high whiteness, they lifted as if the whole surface of the sea was lifting against her side.

“By God—they’ve got *Ark*!”

We saw *Barham* straddled, the enormous uprush of water beyond her on her starboard side, another between her and us. To port we saw them fall near *Duncan* of the screen. We saw two fall, straddling our own line.

We saw *Ark* come out of the wild flurry of the descending spray unharmed, unbattered, untouched.

The firing was louder now, more thunderous as guns fired over us. We heard the screech of uprising shells. We heard the slam of our own gun joining in, the water lifted in mocking fountains about us as splinters of the shells fell.

“What goes up must come down,” said the Sub-Lieutenant philosophically, as something clanged against the steel bridge-work and fell metallic to the deck.

The planes passed over.

“They keep extremely good formation,” said the Captain dispassionately.

The pockmarks followed them along the sky. Then the drum-roll faltered, diminished, and died away. The air was clear.

We went on. The wireless rating began to chant again:

“Enemy formation distant so-and-so miles. Retiring.”

"Now my house," said the Captain, "is mainly 1720 or thereabouts, but the older portion . . ."

## II

We went on towards the east and in the late afternoon we sighted, like a brown cloud above the sapphire of the sea, Galita Island, that high-peaked boundary stone of our eastern forays.

From Galita to Spartavento in Sardinia, as I have said before, is a shade below a hundred miles. We were within the narrows of the gate. Here must the enemy seek us out if he were to seek us out at all. The last of his bombing planes going home must have reported us as heading still stubbornly towards the east. They must have information in Cagliari and in Palermo, in Naples and in Rome. Our rash force—the convoy that we were covering—was within the terrible "triangle of fire."

Galita humped itself higher and higher upon the horizon, divided into peak and valley, subdivided into islands, and became from a cloud upon our starboard bow, a long and tumbled ridge.

We passed Galita, thrusting through towards the shores of Sicily. The mountains above Bizerta, on the African mainland, showed deep umber in the dying sun. We saw beyond the corner to the Gulf of Tunis where the land fell away and was lost. Farther and farther—we were right beyond Sardinia now, within the danger zone of Pantellaria, within aircraft shouting-distance of Castel Vetrano in Sicily.

But there was no enemy to say us nay. Here, astride almost of Italy's communications with Tunisia and the Vichy French, here on the very borders of the Tyrrhenian Sea, here in the very heart of Mussolini's "sphere of influence," there was no single ship to challenge us. Nothing moved upon the still calm water.

Honour was satisfied with one high-level bombing attack.

We passed the convoy through.

As night fell we stood up, our bows pointed towards Naples

to impress such far shadows as we might not have seen. At dusk we were headed almost north. At dark we turned towards the west again, the convoy going on to the safe escort of the eastern Mediterranean Fleet across the narrows. At dusk we might have expected torpedo attack from the air, E-boat attack, submarine attack—anything.

We were in the very playground of the Italian Navy—and we saw nothing. For already there was no heart to fight in *Ammiraglio di Armeta*, with his convoluted gold, or the newest ship's boy of the Italian Navy.

We went towards Gibraltar. On Monday, the 11th—Martinmas—we were under the Rock at daylight. And for three whole days we stayed in harbour, for the brickwork of our furnaces was down. As our fellows of the flotilla fuelled up and went out to patrols, we wept crocodile tears and thanked the Chief, and went ashore to eat the enormous—and tradition said sewer-fed—soles of the Hotel Victoria.

We completed on the 13th, and we were not sent on patrol. The "buzz" was round the lower deck again—another "flap" towards the east.

### III

At half-past three on the chilly morning of the 15th we slipped out of Gibraltar harbour and we turned towards the east. There was moonlight between the racing clouds and a queer breathlessness of action once again. There were various objectives for this expedition, and even now they may not be told.

We went towards the east through heavy weather. As the clouds lifted towards Alboran we saw above us towards the north the flank of the Sierras crusted and crowned with snow.

The wind increased beyond Algiers. By the time Philippeville was abeam there was the best part of a full gale blowing. Destroyers can go anywhere—and do—but they cannot go at speed in heavy weather. We raced dizzily in a following sea, yawing wildly from side to side; our bows upflung one

minute till it seemed as if they were climbing towards the clouds, our stern roaring above us in the next.

The locking bar of the depth-charge trap carried away, and two charges shot out and raced across the deck and crashed into the gun-pit of "Y" gun. As the stern swung and reeled and shuddered in the sea, as the seas washed over it, the torpedo party manhandled those depth charges back to the racks again.

Speed was needed for the first part of the operation—speed for thrusting in close up to the enemy coastline, speed for getting out again. We would have had to come out against the full clamour of a head gale. The Admiral washed out the first part of the operation—remained the second.

That we carried through, ending the foray once more off Galita. This time we saw no shadows. We saw also that which we now expected—no surface craft. The sea was empty; the sky was empty also. We carried through the second part of our operation unseen and unknown, and turned for home. And as we turned, we came up against the ancient enemy again—the everlasting enmity of the sea.

By Algiers on the way home there was a full gale blowing. We saw the aircraft carriers (we had *Ark Royal* and *Argus*, with us on this passage) leap and crash down to the bidding of the steep head sea. We saw them lift the spray cloud over their bows and thunder it along their flying-decks.

We saw the big ships smashing through, the for'ard parts lost half the time in a wilderness of broken water, their bows flinging off enormous clouds that rose high over the towering superstructure of their bridges.

We saw our fellow destroyers of the screen, leap clear like dolphins in a wild unseemly sport, their foreparts showing clear, their keels naked as far aft as "A" gun. And we ourselves were all the time as wild as they. There is a shuddering crash as a destroyer that has leapt clear, finds the hard surface of the sea again—a crash that shakes the ship from the bullring in her bows to the very last rivet of the depth-charge trap above her stern. We felt that crash;

felt it until *Renown* cut down the speed ; felt it again as the wind worsened and the sea rose with it : and waited for *Renown* to cut the speed again.

All through the night the gale blew while we reeled under the attack. There is no wilder motion than a destroyer's at speed in windy weather. Our fo'c's'le was white always with broken water. "B" gun platform, high over the fo'c's'le deck, was hardly tenable. On the bridge behind the glass-work of the windscreen we ducked as the solid spray came over, stinging, and whipping, and wetting.

Down in the mess-decks the water was coming through a leaky ventilator joint. The place was a misery of wet clothes and saturated bedding.

To get aft from the bridge was an adventure that even with the life-lines was a thing of peril.

We rolled as the cross-seas hit us and pitched to the head seas. The screw raced as we lifted our stern ; and all the time the wind sang in the halyards and in the steel work of the mast, in the canvas of the wind breaks, and in the funnel guys—an angry, delirious harping through the night.

At dawn we were pounding again, slamming the forepart of the ship down with the wild irresponsible violence of a speedboat in a chop. At daybreak the glass was still dropping, the weather was worse. At noon the sea was white with the wild fury all about us. There was no Mediterranean blue—there was not even green. All the afternoon it raged.

At five o'clock the starboard look-out, staring over the side after a more than ordinarily heavy sea, reported damage on the fo'c's'le deck. Even as he reported it there was another wild fantastic crash. We slammed into a sea that towered higher than the bridge, a sea that blocked out all the horizon ahead of us and lifted out towards the clouds. And as our slender bows lifted again from the crash, shouldering off the dead weight of the water, we saw that on either side the splinter plating on the rails had gone. By searchlight we asked for permission to heave to and make good the damage.

Number One was on watch. He turned over the watch

to the Captain, and went down to organise a working party. Even before we had slowed, even before the Admiral's permission, they were working somehow on the railing—the men with life-lines about them made fast to hand-rails and to stanchions.

We slowed, and the Fleet went on, rolling and pounding and smashing into the sea. We slowed, the movement was less wild now, less delirious; an aimless swinging, a queer uncontrollable gyration in the hard grip of the gale.

And as we swung, heeling to thirty degrees at times on either side, Number One and the working party lay out along the deck and freed the plating. We watched them from the bridge, at times ourselves daped over the water with the swinging of the ship, at times seeing the edge of the deck almost up to the horizon.

Somehow they clung on the slippery foothold of the steel, their fingers holding on the rivet heads, on the edges of the plating, on the rails—and bolt after bolt of the splinter plating fell away.

There was other damage too—wash deck lockers carried away, ready-use ammunition lockers stove in. For the time being we disregarded that. On the port side the splinter plating now had carried so far away that it was smashing against the ship's side with every movement of the seas. They cleared the starboard plating and crossed the deck perilously towards the port.

We slowed still further until we were almost stationary. And, still lying on the plating, some of them half over the side, held only by the thin safety of the life-lines, they cleared the plating out to port. Almost two hours it took them, wet through and washed by the spray that broke over the bows and swirled about them always.

The job was done. Number One came back to the bridge again white with cold, drenched looking, his hair in his eyes.

“All clear.”

We went on again into the grey and furious smother to make contact with the Fleet.



The Fleet itself had slowed to far below the limits of its usage. We found it in the darkness and went on.

On the 18th the wind began to drop. We reached Gibraltar on the 19th.

## CHAPTER XII

## BATTLE OF SPARTAVENTO

WE stayed in Gibraltar. We were told to boiler clean—though we had not completed our boiler-cleaning mileage. This was ominous. *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*. The destroyers are always terrified when the Staff grows kind. Clearly there was something in the wind—the lower deck “buzz” said, “East again.” And—this may seem wisdom after the event, but it was not so—actually at the time the lower deck said, “East—and trouble.”

We wandered at large about the harbour, paying calls after the friendly custom of the destroyer from one wardroom to another; visiting the corvettes—the first batch of the flower-named corvettes, “Mr. Middleton’s Light Horse,” had just come south to the Mediterranean—we searched industriously for H.M.S. *Pansy*. We visited submarines. We planned marvellous schemes for getting at the two submarines of the Italian Fleet that still lay on the west wall of Tangier harbour.

We dined at the Rock Hotel and had tea with the Major-General, and drank bad sherry with Toni in the sub-aquatic cellars of the Bristol.

Three days went by—and four, and five. Sunday, the twenty-seventh Sunday after Trinity, was the fifth. We left at dawn on Monday.

East—the coxswain, who is the mouthpiece of the lower deck, had the rights of it again.

For the second time we were a fleet of power: *Renown*, *Southampton*, *Manchester*, *Despatch*, *Ark Royal* for the air, eight

destroyers—two of them "J" class ships, new, powerful, single funnelled.

The weather was boisterous again without any mist. The glass was rising, the sea following in strict consonance with it. We tramped the now familiar route, swiftly and without fuss, and by the morrow's dawn the weather was radiant again. It was for this passage that Admiral Somerville made the signal, "The Chaplains of the Fleet will pray for fog." Perhaps the chaplains had not yet got into their stride, but the weather this day gave us a clear view for a hundred miles—a hundred miles back to the snow-white cresting of the Sierra Nevada.

In the morning *Ark Royal* exercised her planes. There are some days when luck seems to run badly with the aircraft carriers. This morning she lost one plane on a practice flight—the crew were saved. In the afternoon she had another damaged, crashing in landing on the deck. These things she took in her stride. They did not delay the ordered beauty of our progress. We still steamed on, a straight, inexorable line towards the east.

Later in the afternoon *Manchester* and three destroyers left us on a special duty. We went on through the night. This was the dark of the moon; the nights were very black. We sailed, closed up a little for night cruising stations. The big ships were never more than a faint shadow in the darkness—ghosts, scarcely a fraction more substantial than the dark blackness of the sea and sky.

On the bridge, silent except for the voice of the Asdic through the loud speaker, we watched those shadows, turning where they turned, holding straight where they held straight. There is a strain about night watch-keeping that cannot be put in words. It is compound of the anxieties of pride and the anxieties of necessity. It is so easy to lose even a battleship a thousand yards away; it is easy to lose one's next ahead steaming without even a shaded blue light in the stern.

These night runnings are secret and full of a strange mystery. The bridge becomes remote from the ship, a tiny platform peopled and alive above the silent hull. The rest of the ship

is no more than a murmur coming up through the heat-laden voice-pipe from the wheel-house and a clang of footsteps on the iron ladders : and one thing more—we kept “ B ” gun manned always, some nights its crew would sing, clustered in the exiguous shelter of the gun-shield. There was no limit to the songs they sang, from the strange, bawdy chants of the lower deck to dirge-like ballads never heard ashore.

By dawn—a grey dawn—we were within the danger zone, close enough to Galita for comfort. And with the dawn we ran down on the convoy we had to cover, sighting it strung out across the southern sky in the early first of the light—four large merchantmen heavily laden with most desperately needed supplies for the Army of the Western Desert, the Army that still barred the Italian thrust at Sidi Barani. If we were to continue that holding, this convoy must get through.

As we slowed down to take up day positions against aircraft attack, *Ark Royal* thrust up her bows into the wind and flew off the dawn patrol. We watched them pass us, fighters flying high and steady up towards the north.

At nine o'clock we were passing the convoy, the cruisers in the van, *Ark Royal* and *Renown* well astern, the destroyers in a strange disorder cutting through and about the line of the merchantmen to take up the new screen.

We had been ordered to light the third boiler. The third boiler is the danger signal in destroyers. It means : Stand by for trouble. On two boilers the “ F ” class can reach up to twenty-seven knots—on the third boiler they get full speed. Only in the imminent possibility of trouble is the third boiler lit. Twenty-seven knots is enough for all normal purposes.

At nine-twenty-three we intercepted a signal reporting the presence of enemy warships. The signal came up from the wireless room and was handed to the Captain.

Even in the handing the whole atmosphere of the morning seemed to change. Down the voice-pipe the Captain said, “ Work me out that position on the plot.” And then, a moment later, “ What is the distance ? ”

“ Seventy-five miles, roughly north-east.”

“ Steer 045,” said the Captain quietly. “ Up twenty.”

"Twenty revolutions on, sir," said a voice up the voice-pipe.

There were no orders, no signals, yet. There was only the knowledge that to the northward was the enemy—out at last; surface ships within possible distance of us, surface ships heading south towards us.

We turned instantly, and even as we turned we felt the swift upward swing of the vibrations. Immediately the Captain put on another twenty turns. We saw up the line our flotilla leader turning also. We looked to the south and saw that the first of the "Town" class cruisers had turned. We looked to the westward and *Renown* was turning too.

And, as she turned, the signal flags crept up to form a line with the cruisers in the van, heading north-east. I shall never forget one fragment of that scene and the splendid excitement—never forget the instant leaping of those ships towards the north. They were like well-trained hounds, swinging immediate and eager to the far calling of the horn. We wanted no signal in that morning. There was no need for the whipping flags upon the yard-arm of the flagship.

"Only," the Captain said, his voice dubious, "I don't suppose they'll stay."

We fell into line astern of *Faulknor*, racing straight into the broad tumult of her wake. For a little we were the van itself—two small ships racing towards the north. Then past us came the cruisers, three ships of one class; lithe, eager, very fast, they steamed past us to form their own line well ahead.

*Southampton* slipped beside us on our starboard hand.

The sun was up now, and as she went by at more than thirty knots, she sent up from the calm water a great veil of spray that hung constant and steady as a painted net high above the level of her bridge. As she went past us the low sun shone through it and on its incandescent brilliance picked out turret and gun-barrel, range-finder and cordage, funnel and mast and spars—the beauty of power, the power of beauty. She went by so close we could see the men about her decks as they made fast the last loose thing about them

and cleared the ship for action. We saw her turrets swinging and the guns rising and falling as she tested gear. We saw the signal flags snapping at the halyards with the speed, and the white ensign brilliant in the sun. Then she was by us and the rest came crashing past us into line.

And behind us, far down the long roadway of our wake, so broad now with our pulsing speed, so brilliant white, we saw our fellow destroyers of the "F"s come racing up to us; and beyond them again we saw the great double fan that almost hid *Renown*—the great "V" of spray on which rested her bridge-work and her masts—as she came roaring up to battle.

And as we ran I went down to the mess-decks. They had stacked the kit away and the hatches were open. The whips trailed down to the magazines, the men of the supply parties, hooded in their white asbestos flash-gear, fantastic as monks of some strange order of battle, were ready at winch and slide. The men above the guns were hooded, their tin hats over all. The torpedo party fussed about their duties. The after supply party was ready. The hoses were laid along the decks.

I found one question only round the decks, "Do you think the b—— blanks will stay?"

I went back to the bridge; the wind tore at me as I climbed the ladder, the funnels behind me were quivering and roaring with the drive. The whole hull seemed like a mettled hunter before the race, quivering with anticipation. I got to the bridge.

Another signal—still north-east of us, still heading towards us. Mussolini's navy was out at last. Two battleships, five cruisers, twelve destroyers—this was a fleet. We had to match against it one battle-cruiser—H.M.S. *Renown*, three 6-inch cruisers—*Sheffield*, *Southampton*, *Manchester*, seven destroyers.

Twenty minutes later when that knowledge was common property in the wheel-house, in the low-power room, the magazines, among the gun crews—I went round the decks again. There was a change in the men, a change almost

in morale. We were heavily outnumbered. The enemy had every advantage of nearness to its bases, of numbers and of speed. The change amongst the men was marked—astonishing.

“Perhaps he *will* stay now,” they said. “He bloody well ought to, anyway!”

## II

Even the gods of sea and sky seemed to have conspired to lift this day to heights of drama. We came now as we raced towards the north to a vast arch of still blue cloud—deep, swag-bellied cloud that sprang from the east, curved over to the west and left towards the north a superb Byzantine demilune of sky, Madonna blue and exquisite.

We came beneath the arch and on its pavement we saw mast-heads and funnels and the hulls of ships. And just before we saw them we had warning—this was no enemy.

We have made many brilliant Staff appreciations in this war. There can have been few as brilliant as the decision made before this convoy left to vary the normal procedure of our convoy passing and to send a reinforcement of the Mediterranean Fleet through to the west to meet us. There was luck in it, no doubt—sea fortune smiling once again on England, but there was brilliant Staff work too in this decision.

From where we had consolidated on the convoy in the dawn to where we met *Ramillies* with *Berwick* and *Newcastle*, was half-way between us and the enemy. They turned as they sighted us, heading northwards like ourselves, and we overtook them swiftly.

One light cruiser that had been with them stood down to cover the convoy to the south and join with *Despatch* that had been left behind. *Newcastle* fell in with the three others of her fellows, and we had a division of the “Towns” complete. *Berwick* ran with them also, and we, formed on the quarter of the cruisers, ran past *Ramillies*.

She was magnificent, her great-beamed hull thrusting along, throwing on either side of her enormous bows a fair

half of the middle sea—*Ramillies* driving her twenty-five-year-old engines to unheard-of pressures. Even twenty-five years ago she had a speed of twenty-two knots only. We went past her as a swallow past an eagle. Her guns were trained already, elevated as if they were trying to reach over the barren sea towards the enemy. All the way down her sides the spray leapt high in a succession of angry flourishes. Her wake was as broad and as tumbled as the well-trodden pathway of the "F"s. From her mainmast she flew already her battle flag, a vast white ensign, stiff as a metal banneret upon the wind.

At noon precisely, we saw ahead of us first a faint plume of smoke pillared above the horizon, and then to east of it a single mast etched against the sky. It bore dead to the northward of us.

We took in a signal: "Smoke and mast bearing 000° 12.03."

We had seen that mast-head with the flagship. There was no need to alter course, there was no need to make new dispositions. We had met the enemy where we had planned to meet him, and he had stayed our coming.

We knew now why he had stayed. The full reconnaissance reports had come in. The strength in which he steamed was now apparent—two battleships—one of them of the "*Littorio*" class (probably the name ship herself), the newest battleships in Mussolini's Fleet; the other, one of the converted *Cavours*, rebuilt, completed only as the war began, virtually new ships—with them four 8-inch cruisers, three 6-inch cruisers, twelve destroyers.

We were outnumbered, our metal was out-weighted, and they were still coming towards us. Yet I could see in our crew—closed up now at the guns—in the signal staff, the look-outs on the bridge, the faces of the officers, only a cheerful acceptance of the odds. I have seen more signs of nerves in battle practice—but then the squadron trophy was at stake!

We could not hear the sound of planes, but there were eyes that watched—watched the sea about us and the sky,

every gap between the clouds. We saw, crossing above one cloud patch to another, eleven planes. In the glasses they showed as friendly, our own planes, *Ark's* Swordfish going in to attack the enemy with torpedoes in the brilliant light of noon—the slowest aircraft in full use to-day, thrusting in against a pre-warned foe.

Somebody close to me said, "Poor devils." That was all.

Next to him somebody else said, "Thank God I'm not a bird-man!"

The clouds swallowed them again, flying exquisitely neatly in formation.

Swiftly we lifted the Italian Fleet above the rim. From the slender etching of masts against the sky they grew to towering superstructures, palely grey, lighter than our own hull colour, taking the full light of the sun.

They had turned, so far as we from the bridge of *Firedrake* could judge, and were working eastward with perhaps a little south in their course.

Closer and closer—they were shouting the range now from the director, long strings of figures that meant only that the enemy was still too far for us to tackle.

Closer and closer—the wind that whipped our signal flags seemed now more eager, vigorous. The tiny streamers of grey haze which showed from the funnels of the cruisers seemed to whip back more furiously.

Closer and closer—the cruisers opened first, at twelve-twenty according to my notes. We saw the brown smoke bursts of their guns, the flash; and back to us across the whipping wind came their deep thunder.

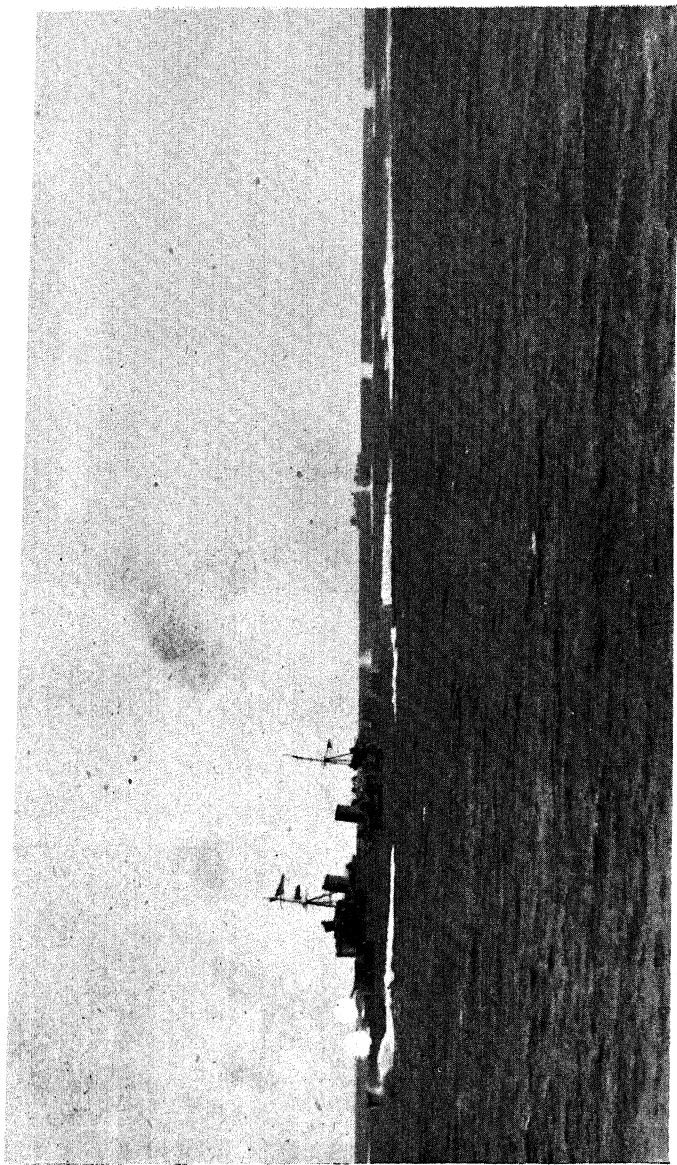
And far away upon the horizon we saw an answering flash as the Italians opened fire in turn.

Twelve-twenty-one—I shall never know longer seconds than those that ran between twelve-twenty-one and the first fall of shot.

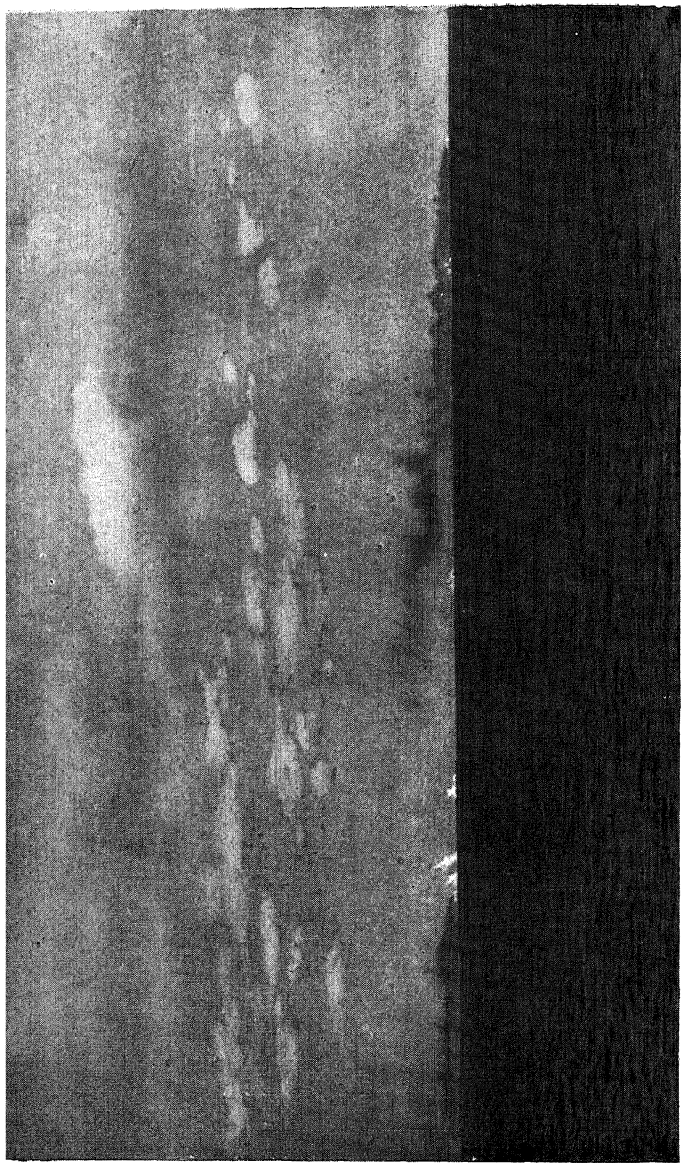
The "Town" class cruisers were firing in line abreast on our starboard bow, *Berwick* was to starboard of them a little abaft the beam. The first salvo fell astern of the cruisers.

"Over!"





*The cruisers straddled as they open fire off Sardinia*



*Our shells burst among the enemy—all we saw of the Italian Fleet at Sardinia*

They fired again, and on the horizon we saw, springing like Lombardy poplars white with the sun, the far-off plumes of our own shells amongst the Italians.

*Berwick* opened, the deeper thunder of her 8-inchers clear over the swift repeated rumble of the "Town's."

And then, astern of us, *Renown* added her deep roar to the wild drum music of the day.

*Ramillies* opened too—*Ramillies* far away from us, far out of the line of battle, dropping swiftly astern with the hot speed of this chase.

The destroyers opened. The higher note of their guns clamoured above the deeper noise. But the destroyers had no reward—there was a line of splashes between us and the enemy. We could not make the range, nor could we fulfil that other function of destroyers—torpedo attack.

But as we watched we saw to the south-east of the Italians the sky flecked suddenly with puffs of brown and white, small balls, soft like the seeds of thistles in a summer meadow. The *Swordfish* were going in to the attack. This was the barrage of the Italian Fleet. Noticeably the accuracy of their heavy gunfire fell off in those few moments. From where we were we saw no hits; we saw no sign even of aircraft shot down, no telltale trails of smoke.

There was no doubt now the Italians were on the run towards the east. The destroyers first and then the cruisers began to make smoke, heavy black clouds that lay along the sea rim like a curtain. Under that curtain rippled the red pin-points of the gun flashes. Over us we heard the whine of shells, saw the huge splashes leap astern of us, saw them answered in the quick exchange by the enormous tree-like fountains from *Renown's* shell-bursts.

The cruisers were fighting superbly. They fought as a division—one might have said they fought as a single ship; their movements so co-ordinated, so coherent that they might have been a single organism. Yet *Sheffield* had been on duty with Force H and the others were fresh come from England or the East. *Newcastle* had joined that morning. This was not the practice of team-mates but the superb efficiency of

the Royal Navy as a whole, this ability to work together in absolute and perfect harmony. This was in both senses "class."

They turned now, for the Italian Fleet was crossing our bows in its swift rush towards the east and safety. They turned to close the leaders at an angle of something near forty-five degrees. It gave their after turrets a chance to open also.

The rate of firing increased. The rate of the enemy's return fire increased.

We saw on *Berwick* suddenly a red flash that was not gunfire. Simultaneously splashes hid her after-part. As she drew clear she trailed a thin brown smoke behind her that was not gun smoke. She seemed to hesitate a moment, opening away from the other ships. Then she came back, firing again—three turrets only.

"*Berwick's* hit," we said.

Between the Fleets, well off on our port beam, we spotted suddenly a thin plume of spray that could not be a shell splash. It might be . . . We waited for an instant to make certain if it was the periscope of a submarine before we turned to ram. It came again—the spout of a whale between the Fleets. We did not ram.

The fight went on, the range closing very slowly as the Italians turned due east and then north-east, on the run!

*Renown* was dropping astern now, unable to make the pace of the runaway Fleet. Her guns still fired, and we still saw from time to time the white columns spring among the Italian ships. But she was already at the limit of effective range, her guns uplifted to the extreme of elevation.

The firing slackened, the song of the shells above us slackened also. There were few splashes now about the ships. Once or twice a salvo fell between the "Towns," but, close as we were to them, we could see no sign of hurt.

Down in the Italian line we saw white smoke above the black. "B" gun's crew cheered at the sight of it. It looked like steam. It might be that it was, but we could not see from where we stood if there were damage or not. Only the

Italians seemed to turn more towards the north again, racing for the shelter of their minefields. We hounded them as they ran.

*Renown* had ceased firing now, and the cruisers and the wounded *Berwick* alone upheld the day. Four 6-inch cruisers and one lame 8-inch ship whipped half the Italian Fleet into its base. This was no pack of hounds upon the tired fox. This was no fox, but only the jackal of the seas.

On board our bridge there was little to do but watch. We were not fighting. The Italian Admiral had made no attempt to throw his destroyers in to change the fortunes of the day. We could not fight at the range that he had chosen. We could only watch.

Once I went below to search for food. The Captain was hungry, though it was only just the normal time for lunch. I found the canteen manager draped in asbestos with the supply party. They and the sick-berth attendant were sitting round discussing, as far as I could judge, women in various aspects. He opened the canteen for me and I went back laden with biscuits and chocolate bars—"nutty," beloved of the lower deck.

We leaned against the binnacle and the standard compass and watched the battle. The Captain had theories about the Italians, not so much as fighting men but as a people. We also, if my memory serves me, talked gardening.

The battle died. Once the "Townes" sheered out of the line of our advance for a little to throw off the enemy's gunlayers. They came back again. The enemy's shooting was growing ragged now, diminishing. The smother of his smoke stained half the northern sky. The van of it was far beyond our van. He had the legs of us and nothing could stay him now—not even honour.

The battle of Cape Spartavento broke off at 13.20 hours, twenty past one—one hour and twenty minutes after sighting the etching of that mast against the sky. Already the Italian fleet was on the edge of the minefields that lie to the south of Sardinia and the defended harbour of Cagliari.

We could not risk those minefields. We had chased the

Italian Admiral to within thirty miles of his own coastline, and to within thirty-five miles or so of his aerodromes. And for the last part of this strange action we had fought him with *Berwick* and the "Towns." We turned south-east now to guard our convoy.

And as the "Cease Fire" went along the line of the cruisers, we piped "Hands to cruising stations."

The battle was over. Number One came stiffly down out of the director and said bitterly:

"Now we'll have to go and eat bully beef sandwiches cut thick."

We went down aft along the ladders. We had slowed to twenty-two knots, and the swift quivering excitement had gone out of *Firedrake*. I walked aft along the deck. There was a curious reaction of laughter down the ship, men making strange jokes on the 0.5 platform and at the torpedo tubes and "Q" gun.

We went aft to the wardroom. The magazines were still open, the whips trailing down into them. The gear was still unshipped, half the bulbs out of the lights, dead lights screwed home over the scuttles—the place was sepulchral.

But the table was laid for lunch. All through the action the cooks had carried on in the galley. There was a hot meal ready at the bell!

Until we had had a drink I do not think we realised the tension that was released in us. It came out in the same odd laughter we had heard along the decks, a sort of irresponsibility as we mock-toasted the vanished enemy in a glass of sherry. We were frivolous again and full of school-boy jest.

I never ate a better lunch!

### III

It is not easy for those who were not there to appreciate the full significance of Spartavento. This, as far as we may come by it, is the tally of the ships.

ITALY

	<i>Tons</i>	<i>Guns</i>	<i>Speed</i>
<i>Battleships</i> (2) :			
Littorio . . . . .	35,000	9 15" 12 6"	30 knots
Conte di Cavour . . . . .	24,000	10 12·6" 10 4·7"	27 knots
<i>8" Cruisers</i> (4) :			
Bolzano . . . . .	10,000	8 8" 16 3·9"	36 knots
Remaining 3 "Fiume" class	10,000	8 8" 16 3·9"	32 knots
<i>6" Cruisers</i> (3) :			
(Probably "Garibaldi" or "Savoia" class)	6,900— 7,900	8—10 6"	35 knots

BRITAIN

<i>Battleships</i> (2) :			
Renown . . . . .	32,000	6 15" 12 5·5" 16 4·7"	28 knots
Ramillies . . . . .	29,150	8 15" 12 6"	22 knots
<i>8" Cruisers</i> (1) :			
Berwick . . . . .	10,000	8 8" 4 4·4"	32·25 knots
<i>6" Cruisers</i> (4) :			
Sheffield	9,000	12 6" 8 4"	32 knots
Southampton			
Manchester			
Newcastle			

APPROXIMATE WEIGHT OF BROADSIDE OF  
MAIN ARMAMENT

	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Britain</i>
Battleships . . . . .	27,000 lbs.	26,820 lbs.
8" Cruisers . . . . .	8,300 lbs.	2,048 lbs.
6" Cruisers . . . . .	3,000 lbs.	4,800 lbs.
	<hr/>	<hr/>
	38,300 lbs.	33,668 lbs.
	<hr/>	<hr/>

These figures, save in the case of the English ships, are approximate, but from all the available records they would appear to be very nearly correct. On paper the Italians had an equality of battleships and an overlap of three heavy cruisers. They were one short on 6-inch gun cruisers and they had a heavy surplus of destroyers—a number of which were of the "*Esplorati*" class, virtually light cruisers.

They had a complete overlap of two cruisers therefore and a heavy overlap in light ships, and an advantage of five thousand pounds in broadside weight. That is the paper strength. That was not the strength in action.

*Ramillies* opened fire, but she opened fire beyond effective range. In spite of the magnificent efforts of her engine-room she could not make the grade. She cannot be considered as having taken part in the action proper at all.

*Renown* opened and her first salvos were well amongst the Italian ships, but she dropped slowly out of range. She would have dropped in any case, for the Italians had all the advantage of speed, but actually *Renown* ran a bearing in the last stages of the chase, and could not make her normal speed.

The first phase of the action was fought between one battle-cruiser and two battleships. The last phase of it was fought by the 6-inch cruisers and *Berwick*.

The Italians were at the start almost within hailing distance of their own coastline. By the finish they were almost within sight of the aircraft, on their own home aerodromes. We were close on nine hundred miles from Gibraltar and the possibility of repair.

The actual weight of metal that could have been brought against us in the last phases of the action was almost incredibly in favour of the Italian ships. But the actual overlap of ships was worse even than the weight of metal. We should have been outranged even as we were outrun.

Seldom has an Admiral gone to battle with so many aces in his pack as had the Italian Admiral upon that day. Had he chosen to fight an action heading slowly little by little down towards the south, keeping just sufficient speed



to hold *Renown* out of it, he must have sunk us one by one.

*Ramillies*, he must have known, could never have taken part in the action since he could dictate the speed, and yet the action must have been maintained had he chosen to head in a circle southwards towards the convoy. He did not choose. He would not fight. He ran without dignity and without honour for shelter—and in due course he sent out his planes to bomb us.

As we finished our sherry in *Firedrake's* wardroom and started on our food, we knew that he would bomb us. We could not understand why we had not been bombed already. It seemed beyond all reason. His Fleet was out. Surely his aircraft were standing by—should have been standing by? He had used torpedo aircraft in the eastern Mediterranean. Why had he no torpedo-carriers here?

We, nine hundred miles from our own base, had thrown air attack into the scales of the battle.

We finished lunch, and still we waited. Two o'clock passed, two hours from the time the Fleets made contact, and still there was no attack. And then at two-fifteen we heard the clamour of the alarm gongs, urgent throughout the ship.

We went up by the swinging ladder—it is unshipped at "Action stations"—to the deck, trailing gas masks and tin hats; someone cursing because his coffee had not come. As we ran forward to the bridge, the crew was coming aft. Force H was in trim again.

*Ramillies* had come up with us, *Renown* was just astern: *Ark Royal* had rejoined.

There was a bombing attack coming in from the sun. We saw the flash of the first sighting bombs long before we saw the planes. Then, a minute or two later as they came through the bright haze round the sun, we saw them patterned against the sky. *Renown* and the cruisers opened.

They came on, pressing home the attack, but the bombing was bad—most of the stuff went wide of any target.

They disappeared, harried by our fighters. We saw far

away the thin and jagged telltale line of smoke. We heard another claimed.

We had a loss too. A Walrus, catapulted from one of the cruisers astern, nose-dived into the sea. We saw her tail thrusting up high into the water.

The attack finished. We took the cotton wool out of our ears, and wondered if this was all that Mussolini could do in the heart of his "triangle of fire."

We went on, curving towards the African coast to meet the merchantmen.

They were with us at four-fifteen when we were attacked again. Once more the Italian bombers went for the big ships, coming over in two waves. This time there was more fighting spirit in their bombing. They pressed home the attack, keeping admirable formation. Once or twice the formation broke with the burst of a pattern of anti-aircraft shells beneath it. But somehow they seemed to regain station. The bombs came screaming down. Again the big ships were straddled, disappearing in the spray. Again our screen was bombed.

Yet, when the tumult died, there was no damage. We passed on unscathed, on towards the east. There was no fresh attack. This was the end. Mussolini's navy had fought its battle, and Mussolini's air force had backed it up.

And still the ships went through.

We took them to the edge of night and left them.

### CHAPTER XIII

#### SECOND "CHRISTMAS FLAP"

**M**USSOLINI'S navy had fought its battle, but its propaganda department—out-Goebbellings Goebbels—had not yet joined arms. As we went easily home, we picked up the Italian communique. Its account of the action was interestingly coloured. Curiously enough it made no heavy claims.

"One British cruiser of the 'Kent' class," it said, "was hit." This was *Berwick*—this was true enough. "Another of the 'Birmingham' class was certainly hit"—not so true. It admitted that one of their cruisers of the "*Fiume*" class was damaged. The destroyer *Lancieri* was severely damaged, and had to be towed to port. The *Lancieri* was one of the "*Averie*" of 1,620 tons.

Then, as if to counterbalance this poor showing, it came to the air attacks :

"Later the squadron was retiring to the south-east when it was overtaken by our Air Force some 120 miles from Sardinia. S.79 bombers and fighters dropped heavy bombs on various ships. An aircraft carrier, one battleship and one cruiser was hit. Five enemy aeroplanes were brought down. During a later reconnaissance by our aircraft it was seen that one British battleship was stopped with a fire on board."

Now our base was far to the westward, and in due course we proposed to go home to it. How, therefore, we could be "retiring to the south-east" I do not know, for a beaten enemy hardly leaves an unbeaten enemy force at a base between him and home when he "retires."

The only aircraft carrier with us was *Ark Royal*. Her casualties were—one picture of Drake detached from the wardroom bulkhead, and its glass broken by shock! No battleship was on fire. We did not even see a battleship get its "pennants" for smoke plumes at the funnel all that day. No cruiser was even scratched.

There was one adventure only as we went on home. We picked up what might have been a submarine contact and dropped a pattern, but as we watched for it again we were ordered to rejoin the Fleet.

Past Alboran we saw the Sierra Nevada again. There had been new snow while we were away. It stretched now in a great white cloud from the invisible foot-hills of the mountains and hung, enormous in the sky, a hundred miles and more along the north.

Our own brief summary of the action came down to us in time by the winking of the lamps ; it said :

“ Subsequently learnt that enemy sustained following damage :—By gunfire—one cruiser, believed 8-inch, stopped firing ; one destroyer, ‘ *Gracale* ’ class, struck astern and listing heavily ; one destroyer struck and listing slightly. Fleet Air Arm attacks resulted as follows :—one direct hit on ‘ *Littorio* ’ class battleship ; one probable hit on ‘ *Bolzano* ’ 8-inch cruiser ; two very near dive-bomb misses on 6-inch cruiser : damage to enemy aircraft—four shot down by fighters. One Fulmar lost ”—this was in addition to the Walrus lost by accident.

The communique made no claims. It said only at the end of a brief description of the action :

“ Enemy ran legs off us and no damage could be distinguished, and battle was discontinued in order to cover convoy.”

Admiral Somerville had fought a thruster's action, throwing the weaker force against an enemy with every advantage. By the very dash and spirit of that throwing he had brought Mussolini's navy once again into dishonour. This was the only Fleet action of the Western Mediterranean in 1940.

No action followed it in 1941. Over on the other side the Italian Fleet ventured out—and the world knows of Matapan. But that was an action where the enemy was tricked and bamboozled into adventure that he had not guessed at. I think Spartavento took the last vestige of fighting heart out of the Italian Navy. To run from the lesser force in sight of home was shame enough.

We docked on Friday afternoon. By noon of Saturday we were off to sea again to patrol off Tangier.

But before we went we had some small celebration ashore. My mind is not quite clear on it—no communiqes were issued—but I seem to remember the incredibly packed bar of the Victoria and the ladies of the ENSA company ; and I have vague memories of the Bristol and the Air Force,

and the Rock Hotel and gilded members of the Staff. I think it must have been a good evening—I know it must have been, for Number One offered to sign the pledge again next morning!

But we had an infallible remedy on board, a remedy in which we had the greatest faith—a Horse's Neck taken at eleven o'clock removes all vestige of the night before. If you say this often enough, or if you take Horse's Neck often enough, the truth of this will become apparent.

We went out through the Straits to the Atlantic, and turned off the white city that runs up to the Kasbah and stretches out in new French suburbs on the plain behind. And up to the north we saw Cape Trafalgar, the headland of immortal naval memory, against the sky, and Cadiz far above it, tiny and very clear.

This was a good patrol. We could watch the city in daylight and surmise its possibilities. The Italian submarines were still there, still tied up against the wall. In the night watches we hatched enormous plans for dropping the whaler and rowing in to the land.

To get the Italian submarines?—Good heavens, no! Night life was our ambition—we wanted a spot of night life. Tangier had a reputation that is international.

The Captain would not "play." We kept to our patrol.

The gulls were friendly in this gateway of the Straits. There were some we recognised time and again as in days to come we came out here anew. There was one that flew with a couple of fathom of cord tied to its leg, the unwilling captive perhaps of some Moroccan boy. It did not seem to incommode him. There was another whose under-carriage gear had stuck—perhaps through rheumatism. He flew with one leg in the landing position, and the other at an angle of forty-five degrees.

Their dive-bombing was astonishingly accurate. The Newt it was who suffered a direct hit on a new uniform. The Sub. had a near miss, near enough to do some damage.

I think it was on the second day of the patrol that I remem-

bered we had invited the ENSA ladies to the ship on Sunday afternoon.

How brutal is the Staff!

All that patrol was quiet. We had a look once at a French convoy that came up from the south. We scared the night lights out of a Spanish coaster by coming close up to him in the dark. And we went back to Gibraltar on the Wednesday.

Twenty-four hours, and we were out again.

On the 8th, another Sunday, we went in again; and at dawn on the Monday morning we left with *Ark Royal* for flying exercises. Well out in the Atlantic we watched the bird-men through their paces. There was an everlasting fascination as the "steam chickens" went off *Ark Royal's* deck. We loved the "string bag" as they called the Swordfish. It was so slow, so sedate, so antediluvian—and yet, as hard experience of war had shown, so efficient for its job. Sometimes an old class of ship or plane has an efficiency beyond the newer breeds. Sometimes it just has a place in the hearts of the men who have worked with it. Sometimes a combination of both these factors makes it a fine weapon for war. The old "V" and "W" destroyers are an example of it on the sea. Their record all through the war has been magnificent. The Swordfish in the air has made miracles.

Those Swordfish bombers we had seen go over off Sardinia had attacked the Italian Fleet at point-blank range in visibility that was perfect. They had flown so low over the destroyers of the Italian screen that they had seen the faces of the men on their bridges. They had gone in almost to the muzzles of the Italian guns and dropped their "fish." They had scored two hits at least, and they had come back safely.

Now we watched them re-trying their hands. We watched them freshening up, watched the new entry trying out its tricks. We towed targets for dive-bombers, and shivered with apprehension as the little practice bombs came down—some of them alarmingly close to us. We made violent criticisms of their pilots, and cowered under the gun-shield

as they dived. I remember all "Y" gun's crew fleeing in mock panic for the shelter of the after-housing as one youngster dropped his eggs too near. Their language was terrific.

On the second day we picked two of them up. The Fulmar that we had seen wheeling like an eagle almost out of sight in the heights, above us, came gliding down and landed neatly and without fuss upon the water. She sank with speed, but we got the sea boat away even as she sank. The Doctor went away with it, and as we stopped, close to the wreck, we saw the pilot swimming lazily and his observer floating on his back. We brought them aboard. The pilot was undamaged, but the observer had his shoulder strained.

The pilot was a young midshipman. He was quite unperturbed.

"Oh, yes," he said, "I've done this before. I'm used to it. I crashed a Grumman in the North Sea months ago. It was a damn sight colder than this. My blasted boat would not open." He came back to this several times, quite indignant. "I wanted to play with that boat," he said.

It was a cheerful rescue, and he was very interested in destroyers.

*Ark* made polite thank-you's to us for the picking up, and the exercises went on. We watched the second half of it with the critical assistance of the Midshipman (A.).

That night we raced through the Straits—*Ark* by herself was always in a hurry—at twenty-seven knots, and went into the Bight of the Spanish coast between Gibraltar and Malaga for torpedo attacks.

And there was another crash. These things are at times inevitable. *Ark* was lucky. Both operationally and in training she lost astonishingly few of pilots or of planes, but this day there was tragedy. In a wicked wind that made it next to impossible to sight things on the surface of the water we searched desperately—three of us—for survivors. It was a Swordfish that had crashed—tipped down to the water as she dived to make the target. A fellow Swordfish had hit her. The second one got back and landed at Gibraltar safely. The first one smashed.

We found the rubber boat, inflated, drifting down the wind empty—we found fragments of a wing, we found the landing wheels and the torpedo floating. That was all. We remembered against that tragedy the glory of the attack at Sparta-vento, the fruit of just such practices as this.

It was the middle of December now. We had a rest through "A" bracket trouble. We had to dock for it. I went to Tangier to enjoy the night life vicariously for the wardroom—not of course upon my own account. The wardroom does not seem properly to have appreciated my self-sacrifice. We did not go to sea until two days after I returned. On the whole I was very glad—I was feeling fragile.

We went back to patrols and stood down once more to the quiet of a traditional Mediterranean winter's day. We could see the Moroccan mountains running from the Calpe to Er Rif in a clear carved succession. There was snow in the Rif country.

That night about midnight we received sudden orders to proceed to the limit of territorial waters off Malaga with all dispatch. There was no explanation of this swift movement.

We raced through the night, the third boiler lit, the ship roaring, the phosphorescence pouring out of our bow wave like sparks from a boiling crucible. Half-way we learned that a German merchantman was proposing to attempt to race from Malaga to Marseilles. We were to intercept her. We closed the Spanish coast at four in the morning, worked up along it, paying due regard to international obligations. There was no sign of the German. There was no sign of any ship.

We worked steadily up the outline of Spain, smelling out the possibilities. Nothing moved. We turned and came down again, past one coasting Spaniard and a fishing schooner—Portuguese. The German had not sailed.

We went back on patrol and began our sedate strolling across the water. Almost as we set to it we got another flash, "Return to Gibraltar with all dispatch."

Again we raced across the water, shot into Gibraltar like



a scalded cat, fuelled—and were then told that there was plenty of time.

That night we dined with the military. That was a festive evening also. I remember a sing-song around the mess piano that developed most bawdily. There are songs—and songs.

And then without any preliminary "buzz"—for once the lower deck was at fault—we sailed the following afternoon towards the east: *Renown*, *Ark Royal* and *Sheffield*, and the destroyers, no extra cruisers this time. We were no longer bothering much about Italy.

This was a party to bring *Malaya* back from the east—*Malaya*, three destroyers and a couple of transports. There were also other objects. Nothing happened. We were not even bombed as far as memory serves me. These journeyings were taking on a prodigious impudence. It was as if, with France neutral, Germany had sent a battleship with an exiguous escort of three destroyers, through the Channel between the Isle of Wight and Cherbourg, with a powerful British Fleet at Portsmouth.

We came back to Gibraltar on Christmas Eve, and on that day came through the signal: "Lieutenant-Commander Stephen Norris, D.S.C., R.N., awarded the D.S.O." Sub-Lieutenant Hole, R.N.V.R., received the D.S.C. and two ratings got the D.S.M. That night was a little damp too. It was raining to start with, but that was only the beginning.

Christmas Day was wet as well—raining in squalls, blowing very hard from the west. Church was rigged on the mess-deck. It was too boisterous to hold it in the open.

After the brief service the Captain, two of the Sub-Lieutenants and I went to the Cathedral. There was a curious beauty about those very male services at Gibraltar. This day too there was a strange melancholy. There is something about the old English carols that, heard far away and in war-time, touches the heart-strings.

And it was in the middle of the carols that the Admiral left, Admiral Sir Dudley North, Commander-in-Chief, North

Atlantic Station. Somebody out of the side of his mouth said, "Trouble!" But the carols went on.

We finished the service in an indefinable air of increasing tension. But there was no recall. When it was over we went across to the Bristol, collected a guest for Christmas dinner, had a glass of sherry and went down to the ship. Still there was no recall.

Somebody remembered the last Christmas with its fine fantastic sea-going. The Captain said grimly, "We may do it again yet." And we heard a ship in harbour blowing off steam. There was smoke over the funnels of the destroyers and, as we crossed the inner ship to reach our own, we heard her fans roaring as she "flashed up."

The Officer of the Watch said, briefly, "Steam at one hour's notice," and we went aft. Trouble was brewing, there was small doubt of that.

The wardroom was convivial.

It was a custom in *Firedrake* that on Christmas Day the petty officers should be invited aft for a drink with the officers. Number One held theories about the meaning of the words "a drink." There was that which would satisfy a small child and, contrariwise, there was that which would satisfy a camel. He strove, after the genius of the English, to find a compromise—and so he invited the petty officers aft at ten-thirty. This was a quarter to one.

I would not for a moment suggest that any of the petty officers were any the worse for what they had had. It is true I did see one with his false teeth in his hand trying to bite his neighbour—but this was mere playfulness, the Christmas spirit.

They were beginning, I think, to sing, "For he's a jolly good fellow," groping manfully for the opening bars, when the duty signalman came in and thrust a signal pad under the Captain's nose. It said briefly, and quite without Yule greetings, "Slip 13.00 hours and proceed to sea." 13.00 hours was one o'clock, and this was ten minutes to one.

The engine-room had been at four hours' notice for steam; that is to say, it had no steam. We were working on "shore

lines"—power from the dockyard system. At half-past twelve the engine-room had started to come to one hour's notice. The boilers had been flashing up, therefore, for twenty minutes.

The meeting broke up—I will not say in disorder. I hold that the order was remarkable. If those much-advertised false teeth *were* used to bite the last-goer's behind in an effort to get him up the steep wardroom ladder, it doesn't prove there was disorder. If, in the last moment, a strange apparition in a kilt made from a plaid rug and bagpipes fashioned from a "Mae West" lifebelt, and a clasp knife as a skean-dhu, appeared suddenly in our midst, no man knew whence or why, this does not reflect on *Firedrake*. He came, I believe, from *Fortune*, which was next door.

The motor-boat was hoisted—the crew strung out along the deck as we bore off from *Fortune*—hoisted to cheers and shouting and much singing, which is not precisely navy fashion. We were going to sea in the teeth of a gale, and we were within ten minutes of our Christmas dinner: six minutes now, and small likelihood of getting it for some while.

The mess-decks were decorated with spare bunting and greenery that had been stolen from God knows where upon the Rock. The festive spirit was apparent. My own idea is that there were saved tots somewhere behind the scenes.

When the motor-boat came up *Fortune's* officers came out on her quarter-deck and watched the progress with an air of kindly hauteur. We loved *Fortune's* officers; but I think they felt a little superior in that moment.

And then they had to hoist their own motor-boat—it was our turn for hauteur.

We went to sea. I climbed up to the bridge, and looked in at the wheel-house on my way. The coxswain in his shirt sleeves, smoking a large cigar with a rich gold band about it, steered us out. There was an assorted gaggle of petty officers about the ladders of the lobbies. They were at peace with the world and even with the lower deck.

And from the flagship came the Admiral's signal: "The number of ships which blew off when raising steam showed

a great keenness on the part of the Force to get to sea—or was it just Christmas Day in the boiler-room?”

We went out superbly—men said, afterwards, at twenty knots. This, I think, was exaggeration. We were out in our appointed ten minutes, and Force H went to sea. The whole Force was seized, I am reliably informed, by this spirit of Christmas, but the whole Force was plunging into the Straits in the teeth of a vicious winter gale within three-quarters of an hour.

Far out to the westward the convoy that was to become famous as the Greek convoy, had been attacked in the grey dawn of Christmas morning by a “*Hipper*” class cruiser, and we were going out to its aid.

*Berwick*, poor old *Berwick* that had taken the blow at Spartavento, was taking, together with *Bonaventure*, the brunt of this fresh action.

By two o'clock *Firedrake* was back to normal. There were one or two uneasy stomachs and a battery of sore heads, but we were in fighting trim again. We went through that vicious sea at twenty-six knots—tumbled and thrown about.

It eased at night, but by the afternoon of Boxing Day it was worse again—much worse. We had to reduce speed. We had to reduce again: but out to the westward the need for cover for the convoy was urgent. *Ark* and *Renown* parted company with us at midnight and went on by themselves. We waited, marking time in the gale.

On the Friday, with *Sheffield*, we made a line of search. The convoy had been scattered. We were to try to find the stragglers and screen them into port. We picked up three and turned east with them. *Sheffield* left us. In the afternoon *Argus* and *Furious*, aircraft carriers, came down from the north-west. We added them to our bagful and went in.

Then *Furious* wished to go ahead. *Faulknor* and ourselves took her into Gibraltar, flat out.

We were in Gibraltar on the 29th in the morning. We left in the early afternoon for the westward again to fetch in *Renown* and *Ark*. We were back on the 30th.

The "*Hipper*" had come on the convoy in the half-light and had opened fire. Her fire had been answered at once by *Bonaventure* with her 5.2-inch guns. The "*Hippers*" are 10,000-ton cruisers armed with 8-inch guns, armoured like battle-cruisers, immensely powerful for their size.

*Bonaventure* got in a hail of hits at the very start. *Berwick* joined in. Almost at once she was hit again. Her luck was thin these days, but she maintained her rate of fire, securing hits in her turn. The "*Hipper*" turned away, disappearing at speed to the south-west. *Ark* and *Renown* in their sweep found no sign of her, and the convoy came through unscathed.

#### CHAPTER XIV

#### MALTA CONVOY

**B***ERWICK* came back on the Tuesday to land her wounded and make good her damage. There was not much. She showed no sign of hurt as she went past us.

This was New Year's Eve. I went ashore. When I came back *Firedrake* had cast off again. I jumped across an already widening gap. We were off again at short notice.

We went out to the eastward—four destroyers in line ahead—no big ships with us, for this was a small-ship operation.

The French convoys were coming in through the Straits, their merchant ships steaming in Moroccan territorial waters, their escorts keeping just outside the three-mile limit. They followed territorial water down the Moroccan coast to Cap Tres Forcas in the Rif towards the end of the Spanish zone. At Cap Tres Forcas the land falls back towards Melilla and there is a deep bight. The convoys cut across this for Oran, coming at once out of shelter.

We went to the eastward beyond the cape in the darkness and doubled back to get them in the early morning; to intercept them and to take them back to the base at Gibraltar

for contraband control, following our legitimate rights as belligerents.

This convoy had four ships, one of them an elderly passenger vessel, one a medium cargo vessel, one Danish tramp and one small tanker. It had for escort an armed trawler.

We came on them from the eastward at speed across a gently heaving sea. They turned away to reach the land, but from the start they had no chance of that. The interception had been well timed. We got in among them, the trawler attended by the flotilla leader of the thirteenth, *Duncan*. *Jaguar* took the leading Frenchman, *Foxhound* took the merchantman, we took the Dane—and there was comedy about that taking.

I am not prepared to say whether it was our boarding-party or not—Courts of Enquiry would not get it out of me—but certainly the first seaman of an armed party getting over the side of one of the vessels reached the top of the jumping ladder and handed his rifle to a member of the crew that he might the more easily climb the rail!

With the first party went the navigator as officer of the prize. He was eager to get away. No sooner did he reach the bridge than he started up the engines oblivious of the fact that the Sub. with the whaler and the rest of the boarding-party was coming off to him. We had the interesting spectacle of the whaler's crew fairly bending the oars in an effort to get up to the moving ship. And from the wheel-house, through the voice-pipe, as we watched, floated up a mildly incredulous voice:

“ — — got his first command and bloody well 'opped it!”

We started back for home, leaving the trawler to go on, bringing the ships back with us. In the night, and with an outrageous, sudden gale, we lost contact with the others. But our Dane came through, creeping at times, barely making headway, but always keeping on; and so we got in to Gibraltar.

The armed trawler had made the signal to the convoy to scuttle themselves rather than be taken, but no captain

implemented it. The Dane had been held virtually prisoner at Dakar since the incident. She was only too glad to get to sea again.

Incidentally her cargo was largely eggs from Casablanca, a cargo that varied in estimate from five hundred thousand to fifteen million. A ribald and slanderous story spread about that, since there had been great shortage of eggs upon the Rock, we had gone out and seized a convoy *propter hoc*. This is a wicked libel—but I know we had eggs for breakfast next morning and for many mornings after.

We came back to find a little ship lying in the Bay. Elderly, disreputable looking, not more than 3,000 tons—she was a Cardiff collier; out with coal, home with iron ore. There was no line of beauty anywhere about her; she was angular, awkward and small. But she had fought off a big Italian submarine.

Coming south she had lost her convoy; one boiler had given out altogether, she was limping along trying to make Lisbon under a whisp of steam from the other. She was making no more than four knots when the submarine rose out of the water and began to shell her. Captain Herbert, her Master, swung his stern to the enemy. He had a gun.

“A kid’s pop-gun,” he called it. “Nothing more.”

They opened fire with that and somewhere about the fifteenth shot they hit the submarine. She showed a cloud of yellow and white smoke. They saw her list, with her bows high in the air, her stern well under water. They left her there, and got away to safety.

We had Captain Herbert aboard to dine on the Friday. He told us the story in the wardroom as one man who has dealt with U-boats to another.

## II

Gibraltar was very full of ships these days. The convoy we had brought in in the “flap” that began on Christmas Day, was still there. There were extra cruisers. The harbour was alive with ships. It was clear that there was a

move towards the east in the wind. It did not need the lower deck grape-vine to make that plain.

On Sunday, 7th January, we left: *Renown*, *Ark Royal*, *Malaya*, *Sheffield* and the usual destroyers. These "club runs" were routine now, but once again this was a vital convoy. It must get through the narrows to the east. We sailed independently, overtaking it with its own escort down the western basin.

On the Monday afternoon we picked it up, and at the same time picked up cruiser reinforcements from the Mediterranean Fleet.

Tuesday was fine, a flat calm with a great ring round the sun that would have swallowed a house, and the glass unpleasant. Early we were shadowed, and the shadower got away, for the patrols that were up were right on the far side of the circle when he was spotted. We expected bombing, and we got it.

At 2.15 a wave of planes came over, their formation ragged this time—two, three and five. They seemed to have been harried before they reached us, which would account for the broken formation. As they went over they seemed harassed by our fire. Some of the best shooting I have seen at high-level bombers was put in that day. Twice we saw planes stagger as the shells burst below them.

And then we saw the fighters come in from the west, saw a streak of flame fall like a shooting star and leave dark smoke behind it. And from the flame we saw suddenly the white sprouting of a parachute. Immediately afterwards we saw another, with thin smoke trailing; like a spider, wind-blown and harried, falling down his thread towards the ground. At the very limit of the fall, the pilot, fighting desperately, regained control. We saw the plane skim along the sea, wondered if perhaps this had been foxing, and even as we wondered there was a brilliant flash: then nothing more. We saw another parachute floating where someone had leapt as she began her dive. The nearest destroyers went to pick up the survivors.

Immediately afterwards the destroyer ahead of us got a



contact. Four of us spent a happy hour circling in the still water dropping charges ; nothing came up.

We went on in the end, the ships safe. In the mock darkness of a brilliant Mediterranean moonlight night we left the convoy plodding steadily towards the east. It had the Mediterranean Fleet cruisers, *Bonaventure*, and destroyers with it to cover it against possible U-boat or destroyer attack. And as we sped back through the night we heard *Bonaventure* calling that she was in contact with the enemy. Two destroyers. It seems uncertain whether they had tried to come in on the convoy or whether they were crossing by the short passage to the Libyan coast. They showed no fight.

On the next day there was tragedy. That was the first convoy to be dive-bombed in the narrows. Hitler had concentrated heavy forces on the Sicilian aerodromes. The next day the convoy, with the division of the Mediterranean Fleet that had picked it up, was savagely attacked by Junkers 88's.

Hour after hour the assault went on. *Illustrious* was damaged by bombs that hit her flight deck. *Southampton*, pounded by repeated hits, had to be sunk.

And still the convoy got through.

It is, I think, a pity that when the news was given to the world it appeared as something of a defeat for us. The full story of that convoy is one of the greatest stories of the war—a story of triumph over innumerable attacks, a story of every device and effort that the enemy could use.

It left England and was attacked by submarines off the west coast of Ireland shortly after it had sailed. The submarine called up the Focke-Wulfs, and the next day it was attacked from the air. The Focke-Wulfs, in turn, gave its position to fresh submarines ; a new attack followed in the night.

It broke through that prolonged onslaught and came away, and on Christmas Day one of the most powerful units of the German Navy, a "*Hipper*" class cruiser, attacked it in the dawn. *Berwick* and *Bonaventure* fought her off. We

raced out from Gibraltar and gathered the scattered ships. This was the third variant of attack.

As we took it on its way, it was attacked by high-level bombers of the Italian Air Force ; almost certainly a submarine of the Italian Navy lay in wait for it and was forced off its attack. Italian destroyers were in the Sicilian narrows, and with the day following our parting, began the most violent and sustained dive-bombing attack that had yet been delivered on a British force by German Stukas. And yet the ships got through.

That convoy found its destination.

Everywhere where it was most in need, the Navy was ready. Everywhere where the attack was heaviest, we had a force to meet it and the strength to thrust it off. Told in its entirety that was a story of naval preparedness, of naval foresight, of brilliant naval dispositions. Our loss was heavy. *Southampton* was a fine, modern cruiser which could ill be spared. *Illustrious* was badly damaged and put out of action for a considerable time. But the order had gone out this convoy must go through. It went through. It completed its part in the tangled campaigns of the eastern Mediterranean. Who shall say that this did not outweigh the loss we suffered ?

### III

We went back through foul weather to Gibraltar. The winter gales were coming in now in a swift succession. We were not sorry when brickwork defects laid us up again. But it is not true that we bribed the Lieutenant (E) to produce them ! This was a libel put out by the flotilla leader when we accused her of spending all her time in harbour. It was easy to provoke her wardroom that way to wrath. With sufficient of their hospitable gin and a little egging on we could make them produce logs to prove that they alone ever went to sea !

We boiler-cleaned at the same time, and I went to Tangier again for a little comic relief. Half the wardroom intrigued desperately for permission but could not get it. They did

not look on me with favour. They looked on me with even less favour when I, snugly in Tangier, watched them go out to sea in the teeth of a westerly gale to nurse a convoy. They were getting tired of gales.

When I rejoined them it was still blowing a furious westerly that curved about the Rock and blew a dozen ways at once.

We were ordered to sea at nine o'clock the following morning on patrol, and for once we could not get out. The wind held us pinned to the quayside, and the danger of damage was too great. We tried again later, got away and could not clear the entrance. A second time we came back and berthed by the weather side of the pockets.

From there, warm and full of tea, we watched *Foxhound* come in from sea and try to make a buoy. She lowered a whaler and it blew away. She lowered another, and it in its turn blew hilariously to leeward. A tug picked it up, but it was out of coal and could not help *Foxhound* to her buoy. We watched from the shelter of "Y" gun-shield, and laughed at the misfortunes of our brothers. It was better, the gunner said, than a play, "certainly better than an ENSA company."

*Foxhound* went to sea again with an angry bone between her teeth, two officers and two boats' crews short. We gave some of them hospitality, but no sympathy at all. It was not safe for some time afterwards to speak of buoys to them.

On the 24th we took up a new patrol—new, that was, to us—in the Straits themselves up and down between Tarifa and Gibraltar Bay. We grew familiar with the new landmarks on the shore.

Little happened. The daily "snooper" came over once or twice. Once he dived close to us, but out of range, in an evolution of *joie de vivre*—though what on earth the Vichy French had *joie* about, God only knows.

On the 28th we were ashore again, and on the 29th we went to sea at dusk—again a destroyer party, but this time something new, so new that even staid captains declared their nerves were ragged. Our own was not amongst these. I never saw his nerves ragged—not even at "rounds" when he found a match end where no match end should have been.

This party was complex. Three destroyers went out first to act as a screen across the entrance to the Straits. Four of us went to tramp up and down the narrows in the night as a striking force against *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*. It was known immediately, and afterwards, as "The Posthumous V.C. Party." *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* were somewhere at sea. There was a chance that they might try to break into the Mediterranean and link up with the Italian Fleet.

We of the destroyers took a poor view of it.

Little happened in the night. *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* were safely far away.

## CHAPTER XV

### GENOA

WE were back on the 30th, but before the month was out we were off to the eastward again. Even at the beginning it seemed as if this run would be different from the others. The lower deck "buzz" said that we were going to bombard somewhere. It based its assumptions on a change of ammunition aboard H.M.S. *Renown*. Out of the chance gossip of a working party they had built a whole structure that, like so much lower-deck rumour, was very near the truth. I don't think, however, that they knew where the bombardment was to be.

We guessed. Guessing was a favourite occupation in the first two days. Many weeks before it had been decided among the junior officers of the flotilla that it would be a "good thing" to bombard Genoa. The possibility of the bombardment became an indoor sport—outdoor also. We used to discuss it for hours on the bridge in the sunny days of patrol. One school of thought held that the Gulf of Genoa would be so mined and so protected as to make the venture impossible. We demolished that school with chart upon chart and learned discussions upon the maximum depth of mining. We went into obscure psychological examinations

of the Fascist temperament and Italian *laissez-faire*. We worked out the distance from which a run in could be made, and parried crashing blows from the air-minded section of the opposition which pointed out that any Fleet venturing so far into the heart of the enemy's country would be shattered from the air.

We even decided on appropriate times. After Taranto was the period most favoured, after Taranto when the Italian people must still be reeling under the weight of the blow against its Navy. Mussolini had declared that Taranto had not impaired the efficiency of his Fleet. If we could carry out a raid in the very heart of Italian waters on one of its two most important seaports, one of its most vital manufacturing cities, would we not break the heart of Italy?

But the weeks after Taranto went by, we whipped the Italians into Cagliari and still there was no attack on Genoa. Christmas came with the eastward runs and the "*Hipper's*" intervention. We were on convoy duty. There was no time for the real purpose of our force.

Yet we were first and last a striking force. We had the fastest and perhaps the most efficient of our battle-cruisers. We had one of the newest aircraft carriers, one of the latest cruisers. We were not meant for the slow though vital work of convoy. Sometimes we chafed a little. There were so many things we would have liked to do. When General Wavell began on his vigorous Libyan campaign we could not help him except by convoy work. Libya was up the other end. The Mediterranean Fleet had all the joy of that campaign, the coastal bombardment of the racing Italian army, the fighting off of counter-attacks from the air, the raids on Italian supply lines.

Derna was captured on our first day out on this new eastward sortie. As Bardia had fallen, as Tobruk went, as we approached towards Derna, we had hoped for some offensive action for ourselves, and we of the Genoa school had hoped that it would be Liguria.

Now we were launched upon it. There was no convoy with this party. We were free to play our appropriate role.

This time we went past the Balearic Islands. They made a change of scenery. Their wild, high tumbled mountains, the long line of ridge and valley was something new in our adventurings.

We passed the Balearics still keeping high in the northern half of the basin, and at dawn on Sunday *Ark* flew off an attack. This was a strange, unusual assault, for she sent off Swordfish with torpedoes—but not to attack a ship. Their target was the great power dam at Tirso, in the north of the island of Sardinia, that supplies most of the electricity throughout its length. Their task was to try to torpedo the great wall of the dam.

It failed.

They made their target. They attacked it in the face of surprising anti-aircraft fire. One of them went down the valley before the reservoir almost upon the surface of the water. Their torpedoes ran true, but something checked them—probably an accumulation of mud, possibly some defensive netting.

They came back safely to the ship. But by that time the weather was turning sour on us.

After this war the whole crew of *Firedrake* is going in a body to one of those travel bureaux which advertise the sunny Mediterranean for winter pleasures, and we are going to beat up that bureau. We are going to break its plate-glass windows and wreck its heavy armchairs: burn its views of Nice and Monte Carlo, and batter its smooth-tongued advocates into insensibility.

The separated divisions of the force rejoined at dusk. We had meant to make the rendezvous earlier, I think the first time was half-past two. But either the flotilla's navigation or the Fleet's fell down. We say the Fleet's—we are prepared to defend that. And as we joined we turned for home.

There was no bombardment. Where his Fleet could not come to Mussolini's aid, the weather had. We went back disappointed and short-tempered. And we went back full of argument. The wardroom was divided. One section said that this meant a wash-out of the adventure. The other

section said that if "F.O.H."—Vice-Admiral Somerville—would take us in, ban shore leave, refuel as quickly as possible, and start out again as the gale blew itself out, we could still bring it off. We waited for a signal to carry this out. But no signal came.

With the mail The Newt's infant arrived—or, rather, the intimation of its arrival came. We christened it vicariously the next morning with half the flotilla aboard, for we were in port and lazy, and the Staff had forgotten to send us out to sea. We were still in port that night.

## II

Even the next morning we had no orders. They came at noon. At 3.15 we slipped.

Eastward?

There was a convoy gathered in the Straits as we began the routine examination of the harbour. As we wove our pattern up and down the Bay we watched it weave its pattern to the west. The big ships came out, *Ark*, *Barham* and *Sheffield*. They made their long, stately swing over towards Algeciras and then out to the middle of the Bay. We formed to them and turned—westward.

The hope of Genoa was over. We had been right. "F.O.H." could not run the risk of a second venture after three days in harbour. The spy organisation at Algeciras, its branches at La Linea, the men who poured across the frontier every day to work in the docks and in the town, must have taken some breath of that first venture back with them. Everything would be waiting for us.

We stood out to the westward past the convoy. A wet day—the mountains black and dank-looking under the light grey cloud; the Straits whipped with rain, a slight sea running.

We went in slow time past the little ships, all ships from Melilla—the Dane that we had freed, was with them—a score or so altogether. They looked very gallant in that doubtful light, gallant with the unending courage of the Merchant Navy that has so well served Britain in this war.

We passed Tarifa with its old walls like tarnished silver in the rain. We passed Tangier, cowering coldly on its hill. We went to sea.

Perhaps the Admirals had news of the "*Hipper*" to the south? Perhaps a pocket battleship was out? Perhaps . . .

Early darkness fell, and suddenly we came to life, we turned to the eastward and began to race. Back through the Straits we went in the thick cover of the night. By midnight we were past Europa, by dawn we were past Alboran. Again we went up by the Balearics, treading a slightly different route from that we had trod before.

There was no doubt about it now—Genoa!

The movement out to the westward had at least won us breathing-space. It had been duly reported to Rome—we knew that. We had received no echo of knowledge of our midnight return.

But during the day a plane approached us—hostile or friendly? It was identified as the Spanish mail plane to the Balearics—probably it was. We do not know yet whether it was friendly or hostile. That was Friday.

On the Saturday the two divisions of the Fleet joined up again. We had been carrying out a long, inquisitive sweep for submarines. On the Saturday evening *Jaguar* of the "J" class, lent to us for this occasion, and ourselves were detached from the Fleet for a special operation down towards the south.

### III

The bombardment of Genoa opened at dawn on the morning of Sunday, February 9th.

Visibility was moderate, a slight mist lying over the land. Over the mist the end of the Ligurian Alps, the beginnings of the Apennines, showed clear and hung like dark cloud banks in the pale primrose of the dawn.

The Fleet Air Arm opened the proceedings, flying off from *Ark* while there was still barely light to see the deck, racing past the Fleet to bomb Spezzia and Pisa and Leghorn.

Force H made the land close to Rapallo; precisely at the



very pin-point of the prearranged landfall they had turned and slipped up the coast—the big ships in line, the destroyers forming a screen that had most of them on the landward side, between the big ships and possible small craft attack from an awakened enemy. The Lieutenants (E.) had much advice on the keeping of a “clean funnel.”

Slowly, almost leisurely, the Fleet moved up the coast. Slowly, inexorably, it came to its bombarding position.

And as it approached it there broke out over Genoa a vigorous display of fireworks. The spotting planes were over, the spotting planes that had flown off *Ark* after the bombing planes had gone, to watch the fall of shot and correct it.

There were, behind this operation, weeks of patient Staff work, elaborate practice. Models had been built, plans made and laid, exhaustive efforts had familiarised the pilots with every aspect of the dockyard from photographs, from drawings and from charts. They knew where every salvo was meant to fall. It was their job to see it fell.

But Genoa greeted them rapturously as a daylight raid. The sky was pocked with shell bursts and the pin-prick of the flashes. The Mediterranean itself sprouted with tiny flames.

The big ships came to the bombarding point and opened fire—*Renown* first, her guns tremendous in the morning. The flames leapt up, the brown rush followed it. The shells screamed out. *Malaya* opened. *Sheffield* took up the tally. The three went on, the guns continuous, never silent—the still air rocking with the sound.

And in Genoa the pin-pricks showed always in the sky. Genoa was looking upward, but had forgotten to look out to sea. These heavy crashings along the docks, along the warehouses, into the shipyards of the sea front, must obviously be bombs. After all, there were planes overhead, men could see them in the dawn light.

Five minutes went by . . . ten . . . the land was still unconscious of the sea . . . fifteen. Then there was a flash under the mist—a brighter flash than before. At last the

shore batteries were opening. The first shells fell well short of the destroyers, a long way from the big ships.

Their smashing, relentless pounding went on. Force H rolled by past Genoa, thunderous with every minute of the passage, the great guns slewing round from forty degrees or so off the bow until they bore thirty degrees or so abaft the beam. And all the while this stream of shells—the big ships' 2,000-lb. projectiles, *Sheffield's* quick-fire 100-pounders—crashed into the awakened city. Fires showed under the haze; great columns of smoke rose.

Then the line turned, the destroyers turning with it, keeping always inside the big ships against the possibility of danger.

It did not come. One ship only moved from the harbour. It was not possible to identify her, but she was a small merchantman of some sort. She was left alone. For the rest as the Fleet ran down again, there was nothing except the thundering of their guns.

The challenge of the shore was pitiful, ill-placed shells bursting impotently between Force H and the target. From the air there came no challenge.

The second run finished down below the city.

Three hundred tons of shells in six and twenty minutes—behind Force H, Genoa's water-front was a smoking ruin. Up the valley where the great Ansaldo works lay, there was fresh ruin. The power works were in flames. The electricity works were wrecked. There were huge fires along the port. The dry dock was badly damaged. Ships on the ways were wrecked, dock facilities ruined, the railway smashed about.

Force H turned out of the Gulf of Genoa at speed and headed for home, waiting for the inevitable vengeance of the air.

It came—two planes: one of them the duty anti-submarine patrol, armed probably with depth charges; the other a stray bomber, manned, so reports said afterwards, by the duty officer and the duty N.C.O. of the nearest aerodrome to Genoa. They flew up, had a look at Force H, dropped

their bombs comfortably two miles away, and flew home—honour satisfied.

Force H put its hands in its pockets and strolled home. The Italian communique said :

“ Early on Sunday morning a British naval squadron, favoured by dense banks of fog, appeared off Genoa. In spite of immediate intervention by the coastal batteries the enemy’s salvos caused heavy civilian casualties, 72 being killed and 226 injured.” (The number of killed was afterwards increased to 144.) . . .

“ An Italian air formation reached the British force in the afternoon, and a British cruiser was hit in the stern.”

*Sheffield* was the only cruiser with us. Many times have I been aboard her, but I never yet walked two miles from her waist towards her stern—and her quarter-deck must have been a full two miles long to take that hit !

#### IV

It is difficult to find an easy parallel to the bombardment of Genoa. Factors are many and varied. Perhaps the nearest to which one can come, is that which I suggested the morning after our return, to Vice-Admiral Somerville in H.M.S. *Renown*. That was that a German Fleet had come out of Bordeaux, made the long passage through the Bay, come past the Scillies, round into the Irish Sea, up to the heart of it, bombarded Liverpool—and got away safely. The distance is roughly the same. The narrowness of the gulf into which it would have to penetrate is somewhere near the same. Plymouth would be as far from its line of approach as Naples was—as far from its line of retirement. There would be aerodromes almost as handy. Southern Ireland might stand for the neutrality of Corsica, and Northern Ireland for Sardinia. The only difference really lies in the mining of the Irish Sea.

That a Fleet could do that and return not only unharmed

but actually unchallenged, that shore batteries could put up such a lamentable show, that Italy's *Regia Aeronautica* could be so pusillanimous, is almost beyond imagining.

Genoa was a triumph of determination, of daring, and of brilliant Staff work. Oran before had shown the quality of Vice-Admiral Somerville's determination, Spartavento had proved his daring. Genoa combined these two qualities, and produced as well most brilliant co-operation between big ships and small, between aircraft and the Fleet. And at the end Vice-Admiral Somerville made a laconic communique :

“ I congratulate all on a first-class shoot under difficult conditions . . . ”

And so we came back to Gibraltar. We made the usual circling of the Bay, searching for hidden dangers. And as we zig-zagged up and down its basins we heard inshore the sound of cheering. There was a light cruiser along at the buoys, one of the “ D ” class ships. We thought that she was giving the flagship a “ Chuck-up ” as she passed, but the cheering went on.

Our own turn came last of all to enter the harbour, and as we came up to the harbour gates we heard a band on the bull head of the north Mole. We saw a clustered crowd of khaki, and as we came in the band struck up the fine old strains of “ Rule, Britannia ! ” And as we thrust our bows inside the basin we saw caps lift in greeting as the Army played us in.

It was a fine gesture, generously conceived and generously carried out. On either side the entrance the Army had gathered to do the honours to the other Service.

## CHAPTER XVI

## AGROUND

WE were at sea again next day. Somewhere in the Atlantic there was trouble again. Raiders, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, were on the convoy routes.

Again the weather was vicious. We were sent back at midnight. *Renown*, *Sheffield* and the *Ark* went on alone. The gale rose, fell, rose again, and on Sunday blew with a violence it had not so far this winter touched. A Sunderland flying-boat lying at moorings in the harbour, parted her cable and drove ashore. A London dragged and went ashore in turn. Lighters, fishing boats, coasters, fetched up along the beach at La Linea.

It dropped on Monday, and we went out with *Malaya*, *Jersey* and *Foxhound* to the westward. We needed battle-ships with convoys now to counter this new threat of Germany. We were out three days this time, and reached Gibraltar in another rising gale. Between the gales there was good weather.

For all February after Genoa we were the Fleet's hand-maidens, taking big ships out to cover convoys, leaving them beyond what was considered the danger area about the Straits, going out again to bring them in, patrolling in between. Some of the patrols we carried out in live gales from the west. Sometimes we got back for a little the old halcyon days—warm sun and a calm sea, when the old arguments came back to the bridge again and we worked lazily up and down our beat of sea discussing every subject under God's good sky and swearing at the hovering gulls. We stayed "a happy ship."

Periodically, rumours arose of a return to England to refit—and leave. When they faded, as rumours fade, there were spells of modified and moderate *cafard*.

At the end of the month, when things were quiet again,

we were sent out on a newly hatched patrol that ran from Tangier to Tarifa and almost to Cape Trafalgar.

Inside the Mediterranean there was fog. The gales had brought into the western basin cold water from the North Atlantic. It had upset the equanimity of the inland sea. The fog reached up to Europa Point, ventured occasionally in streamers almost as far as Tarifa, but never interfered with our patrol. We trod our new triangle up and down and around, thankful that we were not the other side. There was somebody else at work there.

These patrols were more façade than anything else. The Italian submarines used the territorial waters off the Moroccan coast, slipping in and out against all international agreement with impunity. It was on record that they had even from territorial waters twice attempted hostile acts upon our ships. Submarines that had gone into Tangier had gone in by territorial waters and gone out by them again.

We had subversive theories that the Staff kept us at sea to justify its own existence—so many destroyers at sea, so much time, so many miles steamed. But that was only when we hankered after the fleshpots more than usual. We were not hankering after them so much upon this trip, but we did not like the fog.

On the Friday morning we were ordered to return to harbour. Just before the time of our return the order was cancelled. We were told instead to proceed through the Straits.

## II

And the weather report still said, "Dense fog in the Mediterranean." We went through, leaving the kindly sun behind us. The fog lay like a wall across the top of the Rock down to the sea, but thinned past Almina, leaving one clear patch in the inland sea.

It looked, from Tarifa, solid like a harbour mole, not extending very high and with blue sky above it. But as we came to it we saw that it was fissured and channelled like the

great ice-barrier, bergs of fog lay off the edge of it, chasms and crevasses led into it.

We went up one of these with fog on either hand, and took our departure from Almina. Then we plunged in. We were struck at once by a blindness that was complete and absolute. Almost from the start we could see no further than the bull ring in the bows. Look-outs were posted there, shivering, in the very eyes of the ship. They looked out "impotent on emptiness."

And through the fog we ran the prescribed time until we reached our area of patrol. There was no other means of telling it. We saw the destroyer we were relieving just as we entered in the smother. We saw nothing else. We heard nothing either. The Mediterranean was empty and silent with the terrible silence of fog.

We crept now, a slow crawling gait utterly unlike the destroyer's natural urgency. And at that gait we wandered up and down, seeing nothing, hearing nothing. Even the tunny boats were in. This fog had lasted now for days.

There was no change as it went on except that the fog seemed to deepen, to become a darker grey, to take on tints and shades of blueness, until from white it moved in an inexorable melanism to deep black.

The look-out still shivered in the bows. There was no wind. We moved so slowly that there was not even passage wind. But still he shivered. There was a dank bitterness about the fog.

All that night we moved slowly up and down. It was incredibly lonely on the bridge. We had known loneliness before, out by ourselves in open water—detached from the Fleet in the enemy's country. But there was no loneliness in that to be compared with this. There might have been no world, no sea even, for we could not see the water—only this dank weeping blindness of the fog.

The night passed on, the watches changing, the look-outs relieved, the bridge alone alive with the small noises of a warship's bridge at sea—the clicking of the gyro compass recorder as we turned, the soft murmur from the wheel-house

as the quartermasters and the boatswain's mate told interminable stories in the long night watches, the occasional startling clamour of the W/T office bell as a cipher message came through in its complexity of figures. The tiny lights of the bridge—the coloured telltale of the challenge lights, the faint glow from the compass, the screened and hooded glimmer above the chart table, showed vague and distorted with the vapour that streamed about us. Only the bridge seemed alive—that and the lazily turning engines down below.

At dawn, a late dawn—it seemed as if the very day was reluctant to be born into this smother—there was no relief. We could just see the water overside; we could just see the men who stood, lonely and remote, in the eyes of the ship. We could see nothing else. There was no shadow or sign of the fog lifting.

But the routine of the ship went on as always. At nine-thirty the boatswain piped "Sick-bay." At nine-thirty-three, according to tradition, the Quack packed up, work done for the day—that, at least, was how the wardroom affected to regard his efforts. I went forward to the sick-bay myself about a quarter to ten. The Quack was busy then darning a hole across my stomach. We heard a metallic crash, and the Quack said, impolitely, "Some careless so-and-so has dropped a breach-block."

For twenty seconds nothing happened. Then we heard another thud, a scraping, then a whole series of bumps. The ship jerked, quivered, and was still. The engines stopped.

We heard feet running, and we ourselves ran out of the sick-bay on to the forecabin. Overside we could see the water, and through its clarity, weed and shells and the rubbish of the sea's bottom. We were aground.

Already the emergency measures were in operation. We heard the boatswain's mate piping "Away sea boat's crew." One of the petty officers was taking soundings for'ard and astern.

I was not on the bridge when we struck and I cannot vouch for this, but I am told—and it became a wardroom legend—that as we took the first bump the Captain said, "Stop both !



Bring me the King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions!" Certainly that bible of the Service, which provides the procedure for every contingency known to man and beast and the special devil of the sea, was on the chart table when I reached the bridge.

A little later I went aft. There was a knot of seamen talking on the quarter-deck. Argument was in progress. I joined the little group. It was part of the torpedo-party and "Y" gun-crew, and they were in violent dispute as to which continent we had honoured with our stranding—Europe or Africa. If anyone doubts the blindness of this fog, let him take note of that! A strong school favoured Morocco, and talked with the wisdom of the travelled seaman of dancing girls and houris. A less vocal school, however, favoured Spain—with some regret as it was understood that the much-sung-about ladies of Spain were not at present friendly towards England.

The whaler went away, the Sub. in charge, steering for where we knew the invisible land must lie. The boat was lost at once, moving with the quick splash of Navy stroke into a vague, ghostly shape, that vanished suddenly. We heard the Sub.'s voice strangely close, shouting. The boat came back after a little, and we heard the Sub. say, "Look's like Sandy Bay, sir. It isn't far."

Sandy Bay is just behind Gibraltar. It is the beginning of the long sweep of beach that runs past Catalina across the neutral ground and up the Spanish mainland.

He was sent out to get soundings to seaward to see where the deep water lay. On the fo'c's'le they were getting out the wires, making ready for kedging off. We had sent a message back to Gibraltar.

And suddenly, with the perversity of natural objects, the fog began to lift. For a tantalizing instant we saw the ghost of land through it—hillocks, and a glimpse of the back country and the lie of the beach. It closed down again.

For five minutes it went on opening and shutting like a pantomime transformation scene, and then the beach came clear—a ruined tower to the right, dunes fringing a strip of

white sand, a cluster or two of rocks, and on the beach a man bent double, his back towards us. As we watched him through the glasses he straightened himself, turned and saw us. For a moment he stood frozen, apparently with horror, then he turned and ran up the line of the dunes like a startled hare. Whether he thought an invasion had begun or not, I do not know.

Slowly, lazily, the mist cleared while we tried to identify the stretch against which we lay. It was not Sandy Bay, but the tower gave us a chance. It was one of the old watch-towers built by the Moors against the pirates of the Barbary coast. It would be marked upon the chart. It was.

The large-scale chart showed us a ruined tower on every headland up and down the coast for fifty miles—never was there such a plethora of demi-castles. There was one just past La Linea at the beginning of the mainland. There was, conservatively, one to every mile and a half thereafter. The amateurs who collect ruined towers, would suffer from a surfeit down the coast of Andalusia.

The fog lifted, however, and we saw a tiny village. We tried to fix our position by that, by a stream that dropped down the little hills behind us, by a road on which we could see motor traffic in the hinterland. There was a road everywhere along the coast. There were hills everywhere behind it. There was a little village in every third indentation of the beach. And there was no indication in the world of our position.

It was clear that some abnormal set of tidal currents had swept us to the eastward. Normally the current in the northern side of this last corner of the Mediterranean sets out to sea—out to the west that is. But except in the narrows of the Straits themselves there is no strength in it. The Mediterranean is virtually a tideless sea, but in this matter we found what little luck there was, with us. For here at the end there was two feet or so of rise and fall, and we had struck at dead low water.

The preparations went on for kedging off. And we saw a soldier come along the sand-dunes, wheeling a bicycle and

carrying a rifle at the trail. The inevitable small boy tagged at his heels. He stopped opposite us, carefully stowing his bicycle against some bushes on the dunes, and then walked down the beach to view us better. He was still carrying his rifle. After a while he grew tired of that and propped it too against his bike.

The small boy went off importantly to call someone else.

We saw children come out from a cottage and squat on their hunkers watching us.

Two more men in uniform joined our first soldier. They carried no rifles. They looked like officers. The three of them stood in a row and, suddenly producing handkerchiefs, waved to us with a downward sweep. It could only mean an admonition—an instruction to go away.

There was nothing on earth we wanted to do so much as to go away, but we were stuck. An anchor was being prepared now for the work of kedging off. The boats were being made ready to take it. A complicated business—but the crew seemed to enjoy it. Kedging off is not part of the usual war-time duties. It was a change. Variety is the spice of life.

We had variety that day. Fishing boats came up—first one tunnyman, then two more; then dinghys, then more tunnymen.

“Blimey,” said the coxswain, “it’s like regatta day off Margate.”

It had a sort of family resemblance. There was quite a crowd along the beach now. Some of them sat, some of them lay full length. The soldiers still patiently and at intervals waved their handkerchiefs at us. Then apparently the fishermen took pity on them. They went in with a dinghy and picked them off. The soldiers had been shouting in between their waves. Apparently they wanted us to send a boat, but all our boats were busy with the kedging.

They came off and were brought up to the bridge. Various people volunteered as interpreters. After sorting out the different versions, one to each interpreter, and making a synthesis of their notes, we decided that the soldiery wanted

us to go away quickly before the Germans found that we were there and made trouble. And could we let them have some cigarettes? And chocolate, of course, would be welcome.

I had been having a happy time explaining to everybody that internment was the very least of the evils that might be expected to come of all this. But there was no internment here.

The kedge was laid eventually, the motor-boat towing two whalers lashed together with the kedge hanging from a spar between them. There was a good deal of low comedy over that, for the end of the wire caught round a projection on the sea bottom and the current—we could see it moving past us now, a strong and steady set towards the east—swung them unmanageably about. The language used was wonderful. Nothing can match the real long service matlo on a great occasion. The fraternity of boats, the legitimacy of wires, the ultimate ancestry of kedge anchors—a flow incredibly and perversely inaccurate—all this was discussed in terms of warmth enough to dissipate all the fogs on earth.

Whether it was the language only I will not say. Certainly the fog continued to lift. Gibraltar had told us she was sending a tug to our aid. Somebody was coming off with a fast motor-boat, and we were advised that a destroyer would be drafted to give cover to our withdrawal—and where the hell were we, anyway? That seemed to be the tone.

The fishermen did not seem to know with any accuracy, or perhaps our interpreters spoke too rich a Castilian for these provincials of the south. But eventually we gathered that we were somewhere near Malaga. We looked it up on the chart. It was quite right; there was a ruined tower there too. That abnormal, incredible tidal set had swung us fifty miles or so along the coast. Slow speed, the impossibility of correction, the absolute blindness of the fog, had wrecked all possibility of navigation in the repeated tramping up and down athwart the currents.

It was a point of honour now for us to pull ourselves off before the tug came out to us. As soon as it was known among the men the thing became a race, a sporting event.

They watched the sounding line with anxious eyes. They watched every movement of the preparations almost jealously.

I went off with the kedge myself in the motor-boat. The ship looked enormous when we were underneath her bows. When we were at the full scope of the wire she looked strangely forlorn in the greyness of the day. She was not visibly in trouble. She lay on an even keel, her bows just slightly raised above normality.

We began to haul in on the kedge at ten to two. The tide was almost at the flood now ; we had all the water we could hope to get. In the bows a man stood with a deep-sea lead resting on the bottom to mark our movement. There was a cheer as, with the first pressure on the windlass, the bows began to swing. We wheeled around, pivoting on the propellers until our bows pointed to seaward and the deep water. The propellers cleared.

Slowly, grandly, we swung to the tide and came up to our anchor from the north, the motor-boat going ahead of us anxiously like a child before a blind man, feeling the way for us and signalling back the casts. We hove short to the kedge ; swung again with a quirk of the current, and holding our breath—I swear the whole ship's company held it simultaneously—started the engines.

They turned—miraculously they turned. What miracles the "Chief" had been up to in the engine-room, I cannot tell. First on one engine, then on both, we began to back out.

Below, men peered in bottom compartments, searched with the anxiety of beefeaters before a meeting of the House. We were not making water.

We increased speed from the gentle turning and immediately the ship began to quiver. The tug was not yet out, but we could see our escort destroyer far out to seaward. We backed out into deep water, turned and began to move towards Gibraltar—hobbling along, a sort of dot-and-go-one motion, our stern wagging like a dog's tail, glasses leaping on the wardroom table.

But we were off, off by ourselves, moving under our own steam. And under our own steam we made Gibraltar safely.

What the Lieutenant (E.) thought about his bearings and his shafts I do not know. Part of it he said aloud—but that part is unprintable.

We came into Gibraltar and tied up beside the Tower.

## III

Gibraltar hailed us with some small relief. Junior officers insulted us blandly and were answered with insult. Senior officers regarded us with mild disfavour. An enquiry was scheduled. There were enormous debates.

Then a ship working in the area reported that she too had experienced abnormal currents. The destroyer we had relieved reported that she had come right up to the Spanish coast and been saved from our fate by a sudden clearing of the fog. Divers went down and examined our bottom and found no material damage. But one of them reported that the propellers "looked as if the rats had been at 'em."

We went into dry-dock. The diver was right. Certainly the rats had been. The lovely curves of the blades were ragged and chipped and chewed. There was more than that. The tail-end shafts were bent. They found on examination that the starboard intermediate shaft had bent also.

After long trial and error it was decided to send us away. The Court of Enquiry had been held meanwhile and cleared us. Rumour on rumour on so prodigious a scale as even we had never known before, ebbed and flowed through the ship with the speed of the double tides of Southampton Water. The ship divided into two huge schools of thought—one said we were going to repair in America, the other plumped for home.

We went home.

## IV

They had straightened out one shaft sufficiently to make the passage, and we went for the first leg of the journey with a convoy. There was no adventure. And when we left them clear of what was termed "The southern danger zone,"

we headed homeward by ourselves. Our endurance would not permit us to continue with them all the way. We left them with their escort, the corvettes, rolling hilariously on a windy day, and turned towards the north.

We were lone ship all the way to England—lone ship and lame. In Brest were *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, and kind friends had told us, leaving Gibraltar, that they were expected out at any moment. They assured us that the ship at least would get the posthumous V.C. It was an interesting variant of the good old "Wish I were coming with you."

But we saw nothing hostile, only two little fishing trawlers out of Spain whom we investigated gravely as they gyrated in the Biscay sea.

We had been promised air escort as we approached the English coast, but the weather chose to escort us of itself. It was too thick for aircraft operations.

None the less, the air gave us one moment of alarm, for, as we came "Up Channel," we saw ahead of us in the murk of a dirty dawn, a strange pear-shaped object that descended to the water, the sharp end first, and then leapt suddenly skyward again. Clearly this was some secret weapon. It dropped again, touched the sea, and leaped high once more. Apart from this grave war dance it made no overt hostile action. It was perhaps six minutes before somebody cursed it for a barrage balloon broken adrift from its moorings and bouncing on the sea.

We sighted land, a famous headland of the south, and turned "Up Channel" in accordance with our orders. And by the afternoon we lay at anchor at Spithead, and the voyage was all but over.

*Firedrake* was home again after eight months of the endless, vigorous warfare of "The Med." She was to go to her home port for repair and for a long overdue refit as well. The constructional ingenuity of science moves racing in time of war. There were new gadgets to be fitted, new gear, new weapons of offence and defence that in those eight months' absence ingenuity had devised and skill produced. She was to have these.

We sailed "Up Channel" in the late afternoon, and as we reached the open sea at dusk we heard over us the sound of German planes. Inshore of us the searchlights began their stilt-legged dancing in the night. They spread like a fence from the Solent up the coast towards the eastward. We saw the prickle of anti-aircraft shell-bursts in the sky.

And then as we went sedately up the swept channel, we saw flashing across the darkness, very high, the pin-point chain of tracer bullets. Immediately after, there was a bright flame in the sky. It seemed like a parachute flare hanging for a moment high up. Then it dropped, steadied itself and dropped again in a long sickening down-rush of speed. It crashed on the water a mile or two inshore of us, and we saw a bright pool of burning petrol spread across the sea. A German plane shot down almost across our bows.

Welcome to much-bombed England.

## CHAPTER XVII

### BOMBED

**T**HIS is not the last chapter in the history of *Firedrake*. There will be many more before this war is done. But it is the last chapter in the history of the million miles, the almost incredible distance steamed by eight small destroyers in two years of war.

She was repaired, repainted, refurbished and ready for sea on June 24th, and at her home port I rejoined her for a spell. There was not much new to see about the decks, not much at any rate that may be written about. The wardroom had been tidied up: the patches of her scars had mostly disappeared, the chairs that we had so often damaged in the hectic after-dinner brawls were re-upholstered—new again. But the wardroom was not brighter because it could not be. It has always been the smartest wardroom in the Fleet. The brass so polished that one could shave in it—even the after-magazine winch burnished like a lady's mirror



by the "old Navy" pensioner who had come back to sea from bus-driving on the Southend road.

It was full of new faces. Number One, vituperative and superbly bawdy-minded, had gone to the command of a "Hunt" class destroyer. The Sub. had gone as Number One to another of that class. Holey had gone to the corvettes just before we left Gibraltar. "Guns" had got his commission while we lay in dry-dock (that was another great night of celebration) and had gone to "courses." The last of *Renown's* midshipmen had left us to become Sub-Lieutenants. The Quack was gone to a naval hospital ashore.

But the Captain was still there, full of his garden and the nightingales that sang in it, and the beauty of leave in the very heart of the English summer. The "Chief" was still there, full of strange oaths against dockyards; and the navigator.

The Newt was partly with us. The Admiralty was having a parting jest with him and he was dangled between a shore job which his famous night-blindness qualified him for, and the prospect of another spell abroad. "Night-blindness" has moved many men from the destroyers. Recently there have been articles in *The Lancet* on the efficacy of vitamins C and A in dealing with it. Experiments by one most patient worker in research, according to that high authority, show that better than either of these vitamins is alcohol. We have here the explanation of The Newt's wine bills. These were the evidence of a patient endeavour to fit his sight for the arduous duties of watch-keeping. He was one of those modest workers in the realms of scientific research. Perhaps the Admiralty will recoup him for his expenditure in winning the silver *Firedrake* "sinking trophy" awarded for the highest wine bill of the month.

The coxswain still walked the deck with a humorous eye, the latest "buzz," and a fund of stories half against himself. Most of the petty officers were with us still. There were new stewards; the cook who had kept a hot luncheon going through a Fleet action, had not departed—but there were many new faces.

We headed down-channel on the 27th June, and as we left, a tremendous daylight raid passed over us, headed for Germany—our planes, our raid. As we went through the Downs that evening we saw by contrast the French coast waked to an angry pyrotechnics—streams of tracer shells, rockets, bursting H.E., the furious anger of a coast attacked. There were planes over us at times. We saw flares dropped, but nothing came near us.

We called at Portsmouth, and went on down to the west and Plymouth. And there we spent a week at exercises, trying out the new gadgets, trying out the guns, seasoning the new members of the ship's company and the new officers to the needs and customs of the ship.

There was humour in those days. One of the new gadgets was a loud hailer—that monstrous development of the loud speaker that permits the human voice to be carried far beyond the limits to which God intended it. We were exercising with motor launches as it came to working order. It was switched on, made alarming noises, howled like an angry banshee—and came to normal.

One of the motor launches was out of line. The Captain took the microphone, turned over the switch, and said, "M.L. a hundred and—, M.L. a hundred and—, can you hear me? Can you hear me?"

Over the water came a stentorian "Ay, ay, sir."

"Get into position! Get into position!"

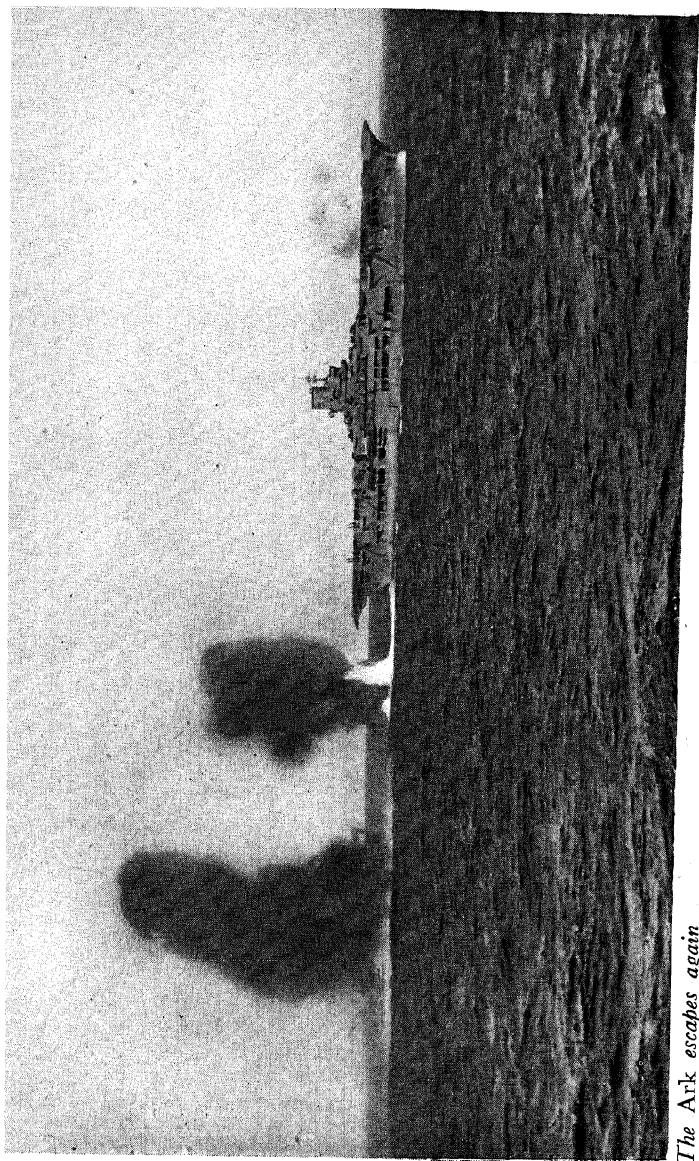
I said, irreverently, "And this is Stephen Norris telling you," and was hounded round the bridge for my pains.

When the harrying was done, the Captain said, confidentially, "I can't make out what the bloody fool thought he was doing."

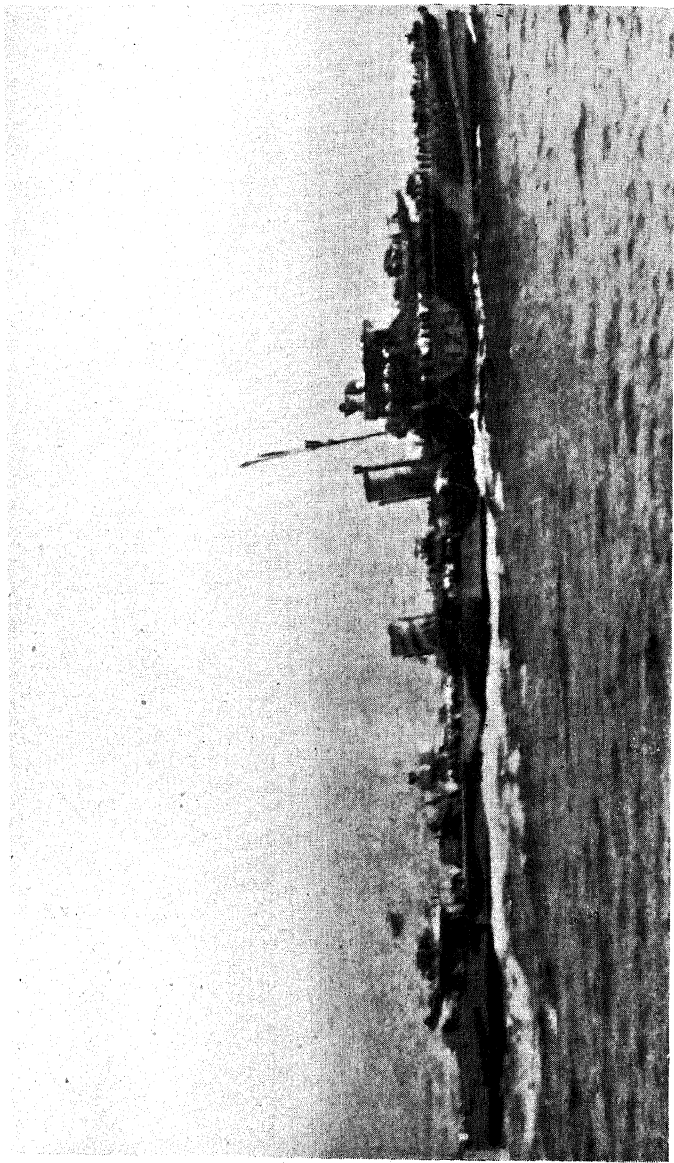
And we heard the echo of his words roaring across the sea.

"Good God!" he said. "I forgot this thing was still switched on." And dropped the microphone like a hot potato.

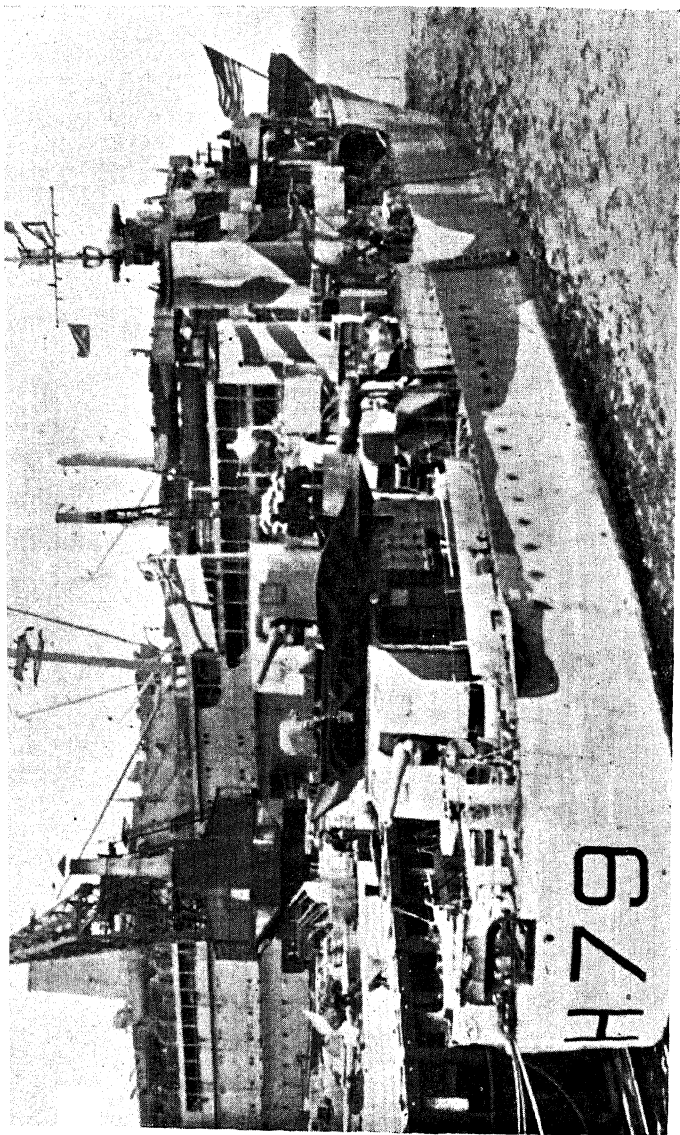
Then there was the first full-calibre shoot. I am no gunner; I do not speak the language. But I gather there are some things called friction plates which are vital in the



*The Ark escapes again*



*Fire Drake limps home. The patch of white spray below the forward funnel marks the hole in her side*



*End of a chapter—Firedrake in harbour at Boston*

matter of the elevation of the guns. We had fired sub-calibre with curious results, and the gunnery officer had asked for one full-calibre salvo just to test the guns—to see, as somebody irreverently put it, “if anything would come out of the spout.”

It came all right. But immediately there was a call from “Y” gun. The next gun followed suit. I went aft to see what was the trouble. The guns had collapsed to maximum elevation, sitting down on their behinds like tired donkeys. The washers of the friction plates, or something like that, had dried in the long days in dockyard. There was a strangely human air of shocked surprise about them—but that was nothing to the shocked surprise of their gun crews!

In the evenings as we lay in harbour Plymouth was bombed three times, not heavy bombings these. But once again *Firedrake* heard the crash of anti-aircraft fire and the shrill whistle of the falling bomb.

And as we worked we heard that *Firedrake* was to take out a flock of motor launches to Gibraltar, she and two other destroyers. We went out one day down Plymouth Sound to exercise with them, heading a long line of these little ships. When we came back a friend, who had known us at Gibraltar and knew the length of our disappearance from the normal scene, said, gently and charmingly:

“Was it an easy confinement?”

I left her at Plymouth; so did The Newt, settled at last to shore.

## II

She went down to Gibraltar with her flock of chickens, and got them there in safety despite a patch of angry weather. And when she got back Gibraltar had not changed. The Rock still stood across the entrance like the prow of a battleship. The old crowd were still there.

She got out in early July and fell again into the old routine—patrols, occasional convoy duties, restless spells in harbour. Virtually she was a new ship, refitted, almost re-born—and as a new ship she went out to the east once more.

This was a giant convoy. The increasing air effectiveness at Malta, the Fleet's own counter-measures, the improvement of anti-aircraft fire, and a dozen other factors, had made the Sicilian Channel not "safe" again, but usable. Convoys were passing through it to the beleaguered east. Von Rommel had settled on the Sollum line. Tobruk was holding out superbly, backed by the undying work of the small ships that kept it fed, supplied and ammunitioned; that brought out fresh men to relieve its exhausted troops, that brought back its wounded, that kept a modern Acre going on the flank of the enemy.

A big convoy gathered in Gibraltar to go eastward, covered by Force H again. There was not much of excitement on the way to La Galita. They were shadowed again, but not till they were close up to the old narrows were they bombed.

This time Force H was going deep into the narrows with the convoy, and in the narrows the Italians launched their first attack. And in that attack the Eighth Flotilla had its first loss of the war, for H.M.S. *Fearless*, the companion of many venturings, a faithful member of the little Fleet, was hit and so damaged that she had to be sunk. She was the first of the flotilla to go. It took two years of war before she went. She had given magnificent service in those years. She had borne her full share of the heat and burden of those many days.

Because of the possibility of mining by the Italians, two destroyers were sent ahead with twin sweeps to lead the long lines of the convoy through. *Firedrake* was one. With the long line of the convoy and the heavy ships astern, she led proudly into the gateway of the Sicilian Channel. And there at dusk, adventure came at last to her as well.

It began with a mistake—one of those inevitable, unavoidable mistakes of war. They saw coming on them three twin-engined planes, low down on the water. End on, and at a distance, one twin-engined plane looks like another. They opened fire with "A" and "B" guns, putting up a barrage against the possibility of torpedo attack. Then, as the planes came nearer, they were recognised as Beaufighters,

the convoy escort coming out to meet them. *Firedrake* and the others ceased fire. The Beaufighters sheered away.

They expected three forms of attack—torpedo bombers, high-level bombers, dive bombers. It was the last that came in just on the edge of dusk—a swift, determined attack from every point. They fought it gamely, hampered by the sweeping gear, unable to turn and twist against the enemy; the 3-pounder thudding, the Oerlikons with which she had been fitted in the spell at home, the 0.5's, roaring as the attacks developed to their end.

Bombs fell about them, some ahead, some on either beam—on the quarters, astern. Plane after plane came in. Again and again the water beside them lifted twice as high as their masts, dark with the smoke of the explosions, lethal with flying metal.

They turned and twisted as they could, always with the great sweeps out behind them.

They say the Captain was magnificent. He was talking of his delphiniums when the attack began. He remembered his delphiniums as it went on. He coned the ship remembering them. They said that at the last he was remarking:

“You can't trust a jobbing gardener with transplanting—I think that one got us.”

It had. It was not a direct hit. It fell alongside of them, abreast of Number One boiler-room, and Number One boiler was not lit. It blew in the side a hole that would have taken a horse.

The bulkhead between Number One and Number Two gave with the frantic inrush of the sea. The stokehold crew came up through the ladders with the water snatching at their heels.

The Lieutenant (E.), who was on the bridge when it hit, was level with the hatches as they came. They went down to Number Three and there, working in darkness with live steam filling the roaring spaces and the bulkhead “bulging like cardboard,” they shored the metal, stiffened it with props and struts, and made it somehow safe.

And on the flagship they were trying to come to a decision.



*Firedrake* was right inside the gateway of the enemy. If she were helpless, she could not be got away. They made a signal to her telling her to prepare to abandon ship, and to another destroyer to stand by to sink her so that she should not fall into the hands of the enemy.

And then occurred the second mistake of the day—a mistake so splendid that I have my doubts of it. The story is that the Captain sent down to the Lieutenant (E.) and said, "Can you make steam?" The telephones were out of action, communications disrupted.

The Lieutenant (E.) said, hoping against hope and gambling on his men, something to the effect that he could get steam in twenty minutes. He meant, he said afterwards, that in twenty minutes he could make some show towards making steam, perhaps get the strained joints and battered steam-pipes under control again.

And somewhere between him and the messenger and, I think, the Captain, that message became "I can have steam in twenty minutes."

The signal was made to the flagship that *Firedrake* would have steam in one boiler in twenty minutes' time. One boiler means seventeen knots. *Firedrake* won her reprieve.

They say it was a mistake. I think it was the very spirit of that gallant ship coming to vocal life in this last, most dire emergency.

She was reprieved. A "Hunt" class destroyer was told off to stand by her and take her in tow if necessary. Force H and the convoy went on to the east—the main attack of the enemy beaten off, no ships of the convoy lost.

And there, in the twilight, the two little ships lay, waiting for a new attack that might fall on them at any moment; while in the wreckage of the boiler-rooms they fought the sea, the hot metal and the strange incomprehensibilities of steam. They passed a tow line, and, as darkness fell without attack, began their journey. Sliding by inside Galita Island, between that and the Tunisian mainland, they crawled to safety.

All night they laboured in the engine-room. The twenty minutes' estimate had been a gesture—they could not trans-

late it into reality, but they would not give up hope. They fought the harshness of circumstance, and with the dawn, hope was alive again.

They lit the boiler, the long roaring flames leaping again beneath it. There was a "cloud"—the silver nitrate in the feed water as they tested it, showed in a swirling cumulus of salt. It was a cloud that would have turned the engineer's hair grey in normal times. They disregarded it while they fought to get the evaporators going again. And just before dawn they thought they had succeeded, at least they had got steam for the auxiliaries, though not for the main engines.

The "Chief," tired to the very fluid of his spine, went aft to his cabin to snatch an hour's sleep before the light came—and the attack they knew must come with it. When the first barren attack—the approach of the Beaufighters—had developed, he and two officers off duty had been having a pre-dinner glass of sherry in the wardroom. He had dashed to his cabin for his cap, and put the glass of sherry down on his desk. Now in the dawn when he came, incredibly tired, from that strange battle beneath the deck, his glass of sherry still stood there unspilled. It had survived the turning and twisting of the fight, the smashing thunder of the bomb. He drank it gratefully and went to sleep.

There was no attack at dawn, though they stood to the guns and waited while the light grew on the sea, while the sun came out over the sea rim chasing them. No hostile plane appeared.

A little after that a "snooper" came by, passing them low on the water and just out of range. But the tow-rope had temporarily disappeared, she could not mark their injury. Nothing followed her, but an hour or so later they heard a destroyer calling. She was announcing attack by aircraft, her position only a few miles over the sea rim between them and the eastward. It may be that she took the punishment sent out for them. It did not matter, for she and the ships with her took no harm.

Later they saw smoke on the horizon astern of them. Once again they stood to the guns. This might be pursuit.

It was hardly credible that surface ships of the Italian Navy would come so far in chase with Force H in their waters, but no one could deny possibilities. They were for thirty-six hours less than a 100 miles from the Italian base of Cagliari. And then from under the smoke, as they saw something of the upper works of a ship appear above the horizon, they spied a winking light. I do not guarantee either the beginning or the end of this story, but it was told to me as sober truth. The winking light said, "Are you British?"

*Firedrake's* Captain is said to have replied, "Very!"

*Se non é vero é ben trovato.*

This was an empty convoy coming back under cover of Force H's presence, from the east. This was the convoy that had been attacked possibly in their stead. It went by in a hurry, obedient to its orders.

The other two went on; *Firedrake* got some fresh water from her escort, and tried again, but for fifteen daylight hours they were in tow in enemy waters. Midday came and the afternoon, and still they were left alone. Night came. And then at 8 a.m. next morning they finally got steam. By noon they were almost settled to the new order, keeping steadily ahead. And still steady, still undaunted, they closed the Spanish coast to get the shelter of the land before Gibraltar.

And there Admiral Somerville did one of those things that have given him his stout name with the men who serve him.

Force H was at sea. They saw it to the south-west climb over the sea rim, and they saw the destroyers of the screen. Then, as they watched, Force H came up to them in a superb sweep, a long perspective of magnificence and power. And as each ship passed *Firedrake*, limping along, the great hole in her side open to the sea, listing a little, battered, worn out and exhausted, the great ships cleared lower deck, brought every man to the open, and cheered her as they went past.

Not often has a small ship had that honour. It was a sign of the Fleet's recognition of a most gallant denial of defeat.

And so they watched the big ships speed away. The story of the million miles was almost done.

They limped into Gibraltar harbour with the dusk, and went—it was too late to go to dry-dock—alongside at the Tower. There were two destroyers in the berth already, *Foxhound* and *Faulknor*, the flotilla leader.

The Lieutenant (E.), unshaven, desperately weary, crossed over as the lines were belayed to ask for lights, so that he could give his weary people rest. *Foxhound's* engineer was not aboard. He was in the next ship, they said, and the "Chief" crossed over there to see him.

As he went in through the lobby and down the ladder to *Faulknor's* wardroom, he heard a cheerful roar. The wardroom was full of people, very full, so crowded they could hardly make room for him. But as he shouldered in they recognised him and shouted. He was not feeling "much like parties," but he asked the reason for the festivity. This was the "million mile" party. *Firedrake* with her voyage had completed the flotilla's million miles at sea.

They filled him up with gin and honour. *Foxhound* came to the rescue with lights. The million miles was over, and *Firedrake* had ended it with a fine gallant story.

Now she was to go out of the war for a little. She could not be repaired at Gibraltar, and so she was sent over to Boston navy yard, patched for the journey, to make good her damage.

But as always, following her established precedent, lest there should be too much of drama, too little of humanity, there crept in once again the little note of farce.

In the dawn of the next morning some of her seamen leant over the rails at the side to regard the hole that gaped wide and fantastic in the still water of the harbour. Looking from it they saw coming towards them a small dinghy pulled by a single man. It came close, and closer still. They could make out the rower; he was clad in a pink shirt and shorts, pulling vigorously. Once or twice he looked over his shoulder, but headed straight on for them.

Closer and closer—he was almost alongside and he showed

no sign of turning. Closer and closer—and suddenly he shot into the hole. They watched, filled with indignation. It was their hole.

The dinghy turned inside. They heard the noise of oars. Then the dinghy appeared again, and headed out to the open water.

"What the blank blank blank do you think you are blank well doing in there?" said a second-class stoker belligerently.

The rower looked up—it was the Admiral!

THE END

LIST OF "F" class

- H. 62 - H. M. S. FAULKNER
- H. 78 - H. M. S. FAME
- ↓ H. 67 - H. M. S. FEARLESS - 7/23/40
- ↓ H. 79 - H. M. S. FIREDRAKE - 12/17/42
- H. 74 - H. M. S. FORESTER
- ↓ H. 68 - H. M. S. FORESIGHT - 8/13/42
- H. 70 - H. M. S. FORTUNE
- H. 69 - H. M. S. FOXHOUND
- ↓ H. 76 - H. M. S. FURY - 6/21/44

↓ - LOST IN WAR.

GRANT E. PRICE  
U. S. N. I. and N. R. C.

NOTE. H. M. S. FIRFDRAKE  
was to be lost west this  
morning came out. She was  
to be torpedoed by U-211  
on Dec. 17, 1942 and sunk.



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