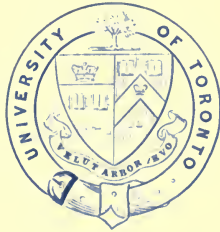


FLAT-TOP

THE STORY OF AN
ESCORT CARRIER

F. D. OMMANNEY



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FLAT-TOP

By the same author

SOUTH LATITUDE

NORTH CAPE

THE HOUSE IN THE PARK



FIGHTER PILOT

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FLAT-TOP

*The Story
of an Escort Carrier*

Francis
F. D. OMMANNEY *by*

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FLAT-TOP

THE STORY OF AN ESCORT CARRIER

WE were not very proud of her at first. It was difficult to think, looking at her ugly outline, that we should ever get to feel about her as men do feel about the ships they sail, live and fight in. For, indeed, she hardly looked like a ship at all.

Try to imagine a ship cut off along the line of her deck and covered by a rectangular box with a flat overlapping lid. You climbed up a gangway and entered the box by a hole in the side. There were no funnels or masts such as a ship ordinarily has and the smoke came belching untidily out from two tubular vents, one on each side under the lid. On the starboard side a little irregular house was perched. It bristled with an assortment of masts and gadgets and was known as "the island." It was all there was in the way of upper-works. It contained the bridge, chart-room, wheel-house and all that impressive nerve-centre of a ship that is usually forbidden to strangers and labelled "No Admittance. Ship's Officers and Crew Only."

The lid which covered the whole ship from

stem to stern was the flight deck, a small ship-borne landing-ground. Under it, inside the rectangular box which seemed to have been clamped upside down over the ship, was a great echoing space, the hangar deck, where the aeroplanes were stored and serviced. It was really a floating garage. It communicated with the flight deck above by means of two lifts, one forward and one aft, each large enough to carry one aeroplane. And from the hangar you went down through narrow hatchways, as though into a luminous metallic underworld, into the living and working quarters in the hull of the true ship beneath.

No. She did not look like a real ship at all. When you climbed up the gangway and entered the hangar you did not feel the live spirit of her as you do when you step on to the quarter-deck of an old man-o'-war. You did not feel that this was an invincible old warrior with a soul compounded of the courage, faith, endurance and devotion of hundreds of men who had sailed in her. Nor had you the impression of stream-lined efficiency, slick and deadly, which you might get in a warship of newer vintage. We did not feel that she could ever win our affection, so tinny and metallic, mechanical and soulless, was our flat-top.

But now we are not so sure.

It was night and the ship was quiet—quiet as a ship ever is at sea. Many indefinable noises seemed only to add to the hush, the whine of pumps somewhere below, the hammering of steam in a pipe, the continual clink and knock as the ship rolled in the heavy Atlantic swell.

In the hangar the high white lights burned with a hard, insistent brilliance, but below only dim blue lights lit the alleyways, where a cat or two stole along, close against the side with tail erect, busy on mysterious nocturnal business. But a band of bright light shone out of the wardroom door and from the pantry opposite where a steward, with hair tousled and eyes full of sleep, was laying an early breakfast—very early for the time was only four o'clock. Presently four young men in battledress and yellow "Mae Wests," two pilots and two observers, came along the alleyway and sat down in silence at the wardroom table which the steward was laying. Their eyes, too, were sleepy as, in a silence appropriate to the hour, they ate bacon and toast and drank tea in large gulps among the empty glasses and overfilled ashtrays left from the evening before.

A sentry, wearing a yellow skull-cap as a sign of office, paced the hangar deck between the aircraft. They stood there in rows, like giant insects asleep, their wings folded and their

yellow-tipped airscrews motionless like antennae. They dripped softly an oily dark excretion upon the metal trays between their legs. They were tethered to the deck by steel spring-stays and lashings, in case, one might imagine, they should suddenly take flight of their own accord and buzz angrily about in the hangars like bees disturbed. They had that look of potentiality that great machines have when at rest, and seemed to be waiting with a kind of mindless patience for a hand to start them into the terrific action of which they sensed themselves capable and for a hand to guide them. They creaked gently with each movement of the ship.

As I ducked beneath their up-turned noses and skirted round their tails, I wondered sleepily, not for the first time, why everything in war must always take place so early in the morning. Perhaps, since war is an un-Christian thing, it is fitting that it should take place mostly at an un-Christian hour. I passed across the hangar, between and under the aircraft, and climbed the steep companion-ladder on to the "cat-walk." This was a narrow grilled gallery which ran along the length of the ship on either side of the flight deck. Sixty feet below you could see the water frothing and creaming past the ship's side.

At first it took your breath away to come out

into the dark night. It was like plunging into cold water. And you could see nothing but blank darkness. But presently there were the huge white clouds above you with dark centres and inky lakes between them filled with stars. The moon seemed to flit as though in urgent haste from one dark lake to the next, and all the whole changing geography of cloud and starlight reeled and plunged and spun above the flat plane of the flight deck. Soon there was visible the straight edge of the deck cutting now the night sky and now the dark horizon. From time to time, like a chill veil, a shower of sleet swept across and went hissing into the night over the flecked and shadowy sea.

But one by one, until there appeared to be a host of them, there grew out of the darkness dim castle-like shapes all around us, apparently motionless, yet urging forward, one knew, with steady purposeful motion through the night—the Liberty ships of a north-bound Russian convoy. We, in our flat-top, were its heart and centre and on us depended the safe and timely arrival of this precious moving city built upon the sea.

Under the flight deck, at the after end of the ship, there was a room like a small lecture theatre. There were rows of leather arm-chairs and blackboards along the bulkheads. This was

the air-crews' "Ready-room," where the crews waited before they manned their aircraft, where they were briefed sometimes and where, with more or less attention, they listened to talks and lectures from their superiors. Here, for the most part, they spent their time at sea waiting and again waiting, as in war one so often must. Now, at night, the "Ready-room" was lit by dim red lights so that the crews who waited there could, should the alarm sound and the need arise, go straight out on to the dark flight deck without wasting precious minutes while their eyes became accustomed to the darkness. The room was empty, but presently six young men came in, our two pilots and two observers, sub-lieutenants, and two telegraphist-gunners in ratings' uniform, also wearing their "Mae Wests." They had finished their silent early breakfast below and now, still in sleepy silence, they began to search about among the gear that littered the "Ready-room" for their flying-suits. There were flying-suits everywhere, on the deck and draped over the seats, flying-helmets, observers' plotting-boards in their cases, flying-boots lined with lamb's-wool, scarves, torn magazines with the pin-up girls extracted, old copies of *The Aeroplane* and *Flight* and *Aircraft Recognition*. There were books and books and books which told of the many idle

hours of waiting that were passed in this place—*Death in This, Death in That, Murder in the Other*, and, strangely enough, face downwards on one of the seats, *A Shropshire Lad*.

At this almost pre-natal hour of day they seemed very young. Their usual rather brassy assurance seemed to be no longer there, as though it were a garment that in their haste they had forgotten to put on. They yawned and swore softly as they pulled on their flying-suits. This seemed to be a moment of unawareness for them. One realized that only a year or so ago they were at school.

“Flying Stations!—Flying Stations!”

It was the clipped, terse voice of the Commander (Flying)—known as “F” for short—through the loudspeakers which carried his orders to every part of the ship.

“Range two Swordfish—F for Fox and C for Charlie—Arm with R.P.’s.”

This meant that two Swordfish—usually called affectionately “Stringbags”—were to be brought up from the hangar and made ready on the flight deck to take off, armed with rocket projectiles.

“Oh, God! What time is it?”

“Four-thirty.”

“What’s the weather like?”

“Bloody.”

“Apart from that, I mean.”

“Dunno. But twenty miles away from here it’ll be something cold and lonely.”

Now, from the hatchways that led up from the crews’ berthing-space to the hangar deck, there emerged, like troglodytes from their underground dwelling, a long procession of strange beings. They wore overalls and leather jerkins with thick gloves. On their heads were tight-fitting blue skull-caps, which strapped under the chin like divers’ helmets. This was the aircraft handling party, whose job, one of the toughest in the Navy, was to push and pull the aircraft about the flight deck in all weathers. Hence the skull-caps, for headgear which might blow off in the wind and so cause accidents to aircraft in flight or get mixed up in airscrews was forbidden. It was the job of this crew of cheerful toughs to manœuvre the aircraft into position to take off, to man-handle them to the fuelling points or down into the hangar again when they returned. Much depended very often on the promptness and efficiency with which they carried out their drill, for if they were clumsy or slow it might cost the life of a ship from the convoy, or even of the carrier herself, by giving a U-boat time to fire a torpedo or an approaching bomber time to make his run or launch a glider-bomb before a fighter could get up. It was a job in which every second counted.



" OUR FLAT-TOP "

" SMALL SHIP-BORNE LANDING GROUNDS "





" THIS PRECIOUS MOVING CITY BUILT UPON THE SEA "

BRIEFING IN THE READY ROOM



The constant rolling of the flight-deck, the often violent and, in these latitudes, always icy winds, made the job of the aircraft handling party one of the tough ones of the war. They were equal to it. As they came up one by one through the hatchway into the hangar you knew that these were indeed those familiars—the Elizabethans—whom England always finds from somewhere when she wants them. Always they have grinned and blasphemed, grumbled and done the job, fought and died. And when it was over, their names have been remembered by a few—they were Loftie and Shortie, Pincher and Knobby, Blondie and Sandy.

They came tumbling up into the glare of the electric lights and formed up in two irregular lines awaiting orders.

“Coo! Roll on me bowler-'at!”

“No more bleedin' gettin' up at four-thirty when this lot's over. Nine o'clock for me and breakfast in bed!”

“Yes, I know yer. Lie in bed readin' *Tit-bits* while the missus does the grates.”

“C'mon there! Get fell in!”

They undid the spring-stays and lashings from under “F for Fox” and began to push her slowly towards the great square lift-shaft. “F for Fox” seemed to move reluctantly as though she resented being disturbed.

“Come on now, lads! All together! One—two—six!”

So first “F for Fox” and then “C for Charlie” rode up majestically in the lift into the upper air and were pushed quickly to the after end of the flight deck. Here “F for Fox” was placed fair and square at the stern end in position to take off first and “C for Charlie” a little behind and obliquely, so that when “F” had gone “C” could be swiftly moved into position. There their folded wings were spread and rockets fixed beneath them. Mechanics turned the starting-handles and soon, with a splutter and a cough, “F for Fox” and “C for Charlie” were crackling and roaring together on the heaving end of the flight deck, with little blue feathers of flame flickering at their exhausts.

Meanwhile the Captain and the Commander (Flying) were holding a brief conference in the narrow and overcrowded space of the bridge. Except for an hour or two on the bunk in his tiny sea-cabin, where he had lain only half asleep and fully dressed, the Captain had been on the bridge all night. And all the night before and several nights before that. But there he was, keen and cheerful on this bitter North Atlantic night, as though he had just got out of a hot bath and was about to have a cocktail before

dinner. He was a young man with a ready smile and a continually unruffled demeanour. Nothing seemed to disturb his composure and only rarely did his quiet voice become an abrupt bark. With him on the bridge was the Officer of the Watch—a slow, deliberate and humorous young man from Lancashire. Everyone on the bridge, Captain, Officer of the Watch, Chief Yeoman of Signals, Signalmen, Look-outs and the young Bridge Messenger, who ran frequently to and fro with cups of cocoa, was swathed in scarves and duffel coats, so that each man occupied about twice his normal amount of space. When “F” joined them there was barely room to turn round on the tiny compass platform. When I myself squeezed into that box-like space there was literally no room at all.

“Well, Met.? What do you make of the weather this morning?”

“North-west wind, force five, sir—moderating slowly to force four. Squally snow-showers but good visibility outside the showers.”

“Sort of showers a chap can dodge?”

“Oh, yes, sir. I think so.”

“No chance of a veer of wind?”

“No, I don’t think so, sir. More likely to back a bit to-night.”

“Blast! Can’t you coax it round to the north?”

I feel a bit naked pulling out of the convoy just around here.”

To fly off or land on her aircraft the carrier must steam dead into the wind at a speed sufficient to get a wind over the flight deck of about twenty-five knots. With the convoy on a north-easterly course and a north-westerly wind, this meant that she must turn round within the convoy and double back on her tracks. Astern of and outside the convoy she must turn into wind again and then, having flown off her aircraft, catch up with the convoy and reoccupy her position in the middle of it. A destroyer would detach itself from the escort to screen her while she did this, but she would, nevertheless, for about twenty minutes, become relatively exposed in the open sea to any lurking U-boat that might have slipped through the escort and be sniffing along awaiting just such a chance on the tail of the procession.

“Well, right you are,” said the Captain. “But I must say I think it’s a poor show when the Met. man can’t order the weather we want. Chief Yeoman, make the turning signal and request ‘Gentian’ to screen.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“Carry on, please, ‘F’.”

Then the voice through the loudspeakers all over the ship, in the engine-room among the

hum of machinery, along the mess-decks, in the workshops and in the sick-bay, in the ward-room, in the sleeping spaces.

“F for Fox to Readiness Able. C for Charlie to Readiness Baker.”

This meant that the crew of “F” were to man their aircraft and be ready with engines turning to take off instantly at the given signal. “C” was to be at the second degree of readiness, with the crews in the Ready-room below ready to man their aircraft.

During this short conference on the bridge the Lieutenant-Commander (Operations) had been briefing the crews in the Ready-room. They were fully dressed in their flying-suits now, with their “Mae Wests” over them and flying-helmets strapped beneath their chins. They were taking hurried pencilled notes in front of the blackboards, their eyes moving rapidly from the blackboards to their note-books and back again. They were noting the course and speed of the convoy and its position by dead reckoning from the last fix, the speed of the wind at two thousand feet, the course they were to fly on and a stream of disjointed information which the Lieutenant-Commander was supplying to them in short staccato sentences.

“Mean line of advance of convoy 015 degrees.
Mean speed of advance eight point five knots.

'F for Fox' patrol ten miles ahead, 'C for Charlie' ten miles astern, twenty miles either side of mean line of advance—forty miles in all. Ready to land on in two and a half hours' time. Taking off at oh-five-double-oh, that means landing on at oh-seven-thirty. Now, items of interest. Practically nil. Bloody dull. There's a straggler fifteen miles astern—engine trouble during the night. Or finger trouble or something. 'C for Charlie' go and visit her once or twice just to make sure she's O.K. No other shipping expected—if you see anything go and have a look but not near enough to have anything flung at you. And challenge if in doubt. Keep a good look-out for enemy aircraft—there'll probably be snoopers about to-day. We entered the danger zone at midnight. Aircraft recognition signals you've got already—yes, that's right. And—er—any U-boats seen attack at once, of course, with all available resources. Right, carry on. Man your aircraft!"

And then, as though exhausted by so long and official a speech, he turned a knob on the radio and did a dance-step round the Ready-room and out of the door.

The air-crews climbed out on to the cat-walk and on to the flight deck where the two aircraft rode up and down against the now fading stars and flying clouds.

"Ah, not a bad morning. Heavy swell, though!"

"Yes. Bit twitchy landing on in this."

"No funny business to-day. I shall come on from well astern. Don't care what 'F' may say."

"Why? What does he say?"

"Well, he gave Tony a hell of a bottle yesterday for approaching from too far astern. Said it wasted time landing on. Said we all ought to turn in quicker."

"And prang into the round-down, I suppose. Not for this baby."

"Nor for this one. Where's that ruddy O-type of mine? Come on Joe, for Christ's sake, we must get cracking."

The cold, reluctant dawn was just beginning to draw a faint line of light beneath the eastern clouds. The Liberty ships could now be clearly seen, row upon row of them, all exactly alike, forging ahead all around us with a slow, regular lift and fall of their bows, foam breaking away ahead of them. The flat-top was turning now to get into the wind and, as she passed down the lines of the convoy to get clear astern of them, the ships seemed to race past in the opposite direction with exaggerated speed.

The crew climbed into "F for Fox" and sat in their places as in a giant bath with wings. The Swordfish is a cumbrous and old-fashioned

machine in appearance, useful though it has been. They made final adjustments to their flying-helmets, chin-straps and goggles. Two men, lying prone on their stomachs, held the wooden chocks under the aircraft's wheels. "F for Fox" suddenly broke into a stuttering roar. The three-bladed screw became a disc of gauze. The machine trembled as though impatient to be away but held in check by a power stronger than her own.

Now the carrier was astern of the convoy, naked in the open sea, her satellite destroyer dipping across the waves to meet her. The convoy was a mile or two away and you could look down the long lines of it as though down broad streets. Slowly the flat-top turned again up into the wind. You felt the wind come round as she did so from astern round to the starboard side, slowly edging to ahead and seeming to increase as it swung round. Now the wind-vane on the island amid the forest of other masts and antennae of various sorts was pointing dead-ahead in the fore and aft line of the ship. The pointer of the wind-speed indicator on the bridge crept up to twenty-three knots, twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six.

"Right, sir!" said the Officer of the Watch.

"Right!" said the Captain.

"Right!" said Commander (F) and, leaning

over the edge of his pulpit on the after side of the island, he stuck a green flag in a socket. An officer holding aloft a green flag on the flight deck let it fall. The prone figures drew away the chocks from under the wheels of "F for Fox" and threw themselves sideways out of the way. Roaring, her tail-flaps down, "F for Fox" ran forward eagerly. When she came opposite the island you saw that her tail was off the deck and her bath-like body horizontal. Forward of the island you saw that her gouty wheels, though still busily spinning, were no longer in contact with the deck. She was airborne. Now, from a cumbrous and ungainly contraption that was pushed and pulled about the deck, she changed instantly before the eyes of all beholders into a bird, a thing of majesty and grace and power, soaring aloft over the grey sea. Those diminutive knobs projecting from her body amidships were the heads of her crew. You forgot, for it seemed so improbable, that they could be the masters of "F for Fox." You saw only the great roaring bird, suddenly possessed of life, sweeping into the clouds in a steep curve. Soon she was a speck far off lost in the immensity of the sky.

"Range two Wildcats for catapulting! Readiness Able."

Now that we were in the danger zone two fighters must be kept in constant readiness during daylight hours. We could expect, any day now, that snooping Focke-Wulfs would come sniffing round at what seemed a safe distance to have a look at us, vanishing again into the clouds like evil shadows after reporting us, as their mission was, to the prowling U-boats they served. Or, instead, we might be attacked by aircraft with glider-bombs. There was a hot debate in the ward-room about whether Ju. 88's or F.W. 190's could reach us on our present course. I, knowing nothing whatever about it, swore that they couldn't. "Ridiculous, old boy, out of the question—have another beer."

But there were few of us, in the fifth year of the war at sea, who had not had at least some experience of this sort of "party," as it was called. We knew how it would be. First, there would be the tiny distant speck weaving to and fro on the horizon, the reconnaissance aircraft having a look, probably an F.W. 200. He would seem harmless and innocuous enough all that way off. He might be there all day, weaving about among the distant clouds, now glimpsed for a moment and now gone again.

"There he is! See 'im? Under that white cloud!"

“That? That’s a Catalina. One of our own chaps—a Cat, that’s what that is.”

“Go on! Cat, my foot! That’s a real live Jerry, you fathead!”

There is the story of the senior officer of a convoy escort who, tiring of his visitor’s presence throughout a whole day, spoke to him on the radio-telephone.

“Come a bit closer, chum, and have a good look at us!”

“Thanks,” came the prompt reply in perfect English. “Don’t mind if I do.” And he did.

But I must confess that whenever I saw these birds of ill-omen, like vultures hovering on the distant horizon, I felt just the smallest chill, an icy hand laid for a moment on my heart.

And when, the story goes, the speck vanished about dusk, the senior officer of the escort spoke to him again.

“Nice to have seen you. Hope you’ll come again, closer next time. We’ll arrange a little party for you.”

“Sorry I shan’t be able to,” came the reply. “But my pals would love to.” And they did, though some of them did not return.

Then there would be an interval after he had gone—several hours, a night or half a day, perhaps. But presently they would come—the

others. They would be heard of at first only as reports from the Air Plot, where the position and course of all aircraft around the convoy was plotted on perspex discs.

“Unidentified aircraft, a hundred and twenty degrees, forty-two miles. Appear to be several aircraft, closing.”

“Unidentified aircraft, a hundred and fifteen degrees, thirty-five miles. Appears to be a large formation, closing.”

Then the alarm-bell, the thud of running feet everywhere, the helmeted and goggled figures at their posts, the guns with their barrels upturned like probing snouts feeling the air this way and that.

“Here they come! There! And more over there!”

“Steady, boys! Wait till you see the whites of their eyes.”

Yes—one had known it all, and was glad of the two Wildcat fighters ranged for catapulting. You felt happier when they were there.

The catapult was a sling worked by compressed air. It ran in a groove like the third rail of a sub-surface tramway along the port side of the flight deck. It literally threw the aircraft into the air over the forward end of the flight deck. The pilot had to keep his head pressed back against the padded cushion of his seat during

this jerk forward for otherwise the sudden violent acceleration might cause injury or even dislocation of the neck. I could never watch this performance without a slightly nightmarish feeling. It was as though the young pilot inside were about to become the victim of some dreadful, ruthless, mechanical monster which required human sacrifice for its proper functioning, as though he were about to undergo some horrible ritual in which his death was merely incidental. And the spectacle of the pilot afterwards at lunch or dinner, cheerfully drinking gin at the bar, obviously entirely undisturbed and unharmed, could never quite banish the nightmare or rid me of the Frankenstein-and-the-Monster sensation which overcame me at the sight of him being shot into the air as though from a rocket.

The fighter boys were rather different from the Swordfish crews. They were younger, if that could be. They had a jargon of their own and tended rather to stick together in a clique. At sea, or when action was in prospect, they were extremely abstemious. You have to be, one of them explained. "If the old brain isn't ticking over clearly you've had it." But they relaxed with exuberance when they got back to port. Many of them were New Zealanders—one meets many New Zealanders in the Fleet Air

Arm—tough, racy and happy-go-lucky, open-hearted, affectionate and passionately loyal.

Mac was a New Zealander, a square stocky youth from Hamilton, North Island. He was a man of few worries and no complexes. His aims in life were simple and mostly easily achieved. But the principal one, to his chagrin, had so far eluded him. It was to shoot down a Jerry. Now he was chafing because he had had to endure weeks of inaction at a Fleet Air Arm station ashore. On this trip, he thought, there might be "fun and games." Climbing into his Wildcat as it stood over the groove, which was all you could see of the catapult, he said:

"Boy! I hope we get some fun to-day. I get proper browned-off sitting in this thing all day doing F.A." And he raced his engine till it roared.

But Victor, in the second Wildcat, ranged behind Mac's and ready to take its place instantly on the catapult when necessary, was a very different character. He had left Oxford two years ago to join the Fleet Air Arm.

"No idea how it happened, but I just found myself in the Fleet Air Arm before I knew where I was. Before I could object I was in the air in a Seafire! And wearing the most ridiculous clothes!"

Nevertheless, the ambition which had so far

eluded Mac had already come to Victor for he had shot down two German aircraft and wore the D.S.C. The award said, "For skill, daring and resource in attack when on convoy duty in H.M.S. ——"

"I was absolutely terrified," was all he ever said about it.

This morning Mac and Victor did not have long to wait. Down in the Air Plot beneath the forward end of the flight deck, a rating, wearing headphones, was busy making a series of crosses on a large perspex disc in front of him. Assuming the convoy to be at the centre of the disc, his latest cross was eighty-five miles away, bearing 098 degrees true.

"Oh-nine-eight degrees, eighty-five miles," said the rating, repeating into the mouth-piece what he had just heard through the phones.

"Oh-nine-two degrees, seventy-nine miles." And he made another cross.

Radar, the ship's electric eye, had contacted an aircraft.

The job of the ratings in the Air Plot was one which naturally involved long and wearisome hours, even days, of waiting. During these there was nothing to do. For everyone, war consists largely of long spells of unutterable boredom, punctuated by brief interludes, if not always of

hell, at least of subdued excitement, suppressed anxiety, contracting occasionally to fear. For the sailor, perhaps, these hours of waiting and watching are more trying, more exacting and more boring than for anyone else. Vast expanses of sky and sea are all that meet his eye, but he knows that sudden danger may spring out of them and he may not relax. And for the men in the Air Plot there were not even the sky and sea to occupy the mind and engage the eye, only blank discs of perspex and the headphones filled with a variety of strange noises and contending voices. Into the midst of these at any moment a sudden summons to attention might strike like a hammer-blow.

“What’s the time, Sidney?”

“Hullo, Bert, that you? Thought you was dead, you’ve been silent so long.”

“I’ll spring to life again come eight o’clock. What’s the time now?”

“Half-past six. Time the tea boat came round.”

“Coo! Don’t the time fair crawl when you’re on watch? . . . Hullo! What’s this? Hold on a minute. . . . Echo bearing oh-nine-eight degrees, eighty-five miles. Got that?”

“Aye! Fair enough. Hold it.”

The Fighter Director Officer, enthroned on a

high metal chair, before a table covered with switches, leant over to a speaking-tube.

"Air Plot!, Compass Platform!"

"Compass Platform!"

"May I speak to the Captain, please?"

"Speaking."

"Unidentified aircraft, sir. Oh-nine-eight degrees, eighty-five miles. Closing fairly rapidly."

"Right! Watch him and inform the escort."

Two other ratings, also wearing headphones, sat in front of radio telephones. Into these they now began to chant slowly, quietly and confidentially, almost confidingly, in a curious low toneless voice.

"Hul-lo, Birdseed. Hul-lo, Birdseed. This is Cakewalk. This is Cakewalk. How do you hear me? Over."

In the ships of the escort this sounded from the instruments as a harsh metallic roar. And like this the reply came back.

"Hul-lo, Cakewalk. Hul-lo, Cakewalk. This is Birdseed. This is Birdseed." (These were the code words for the names of ships.) "Hearing you loud and clear, strength five. Over."

"Hul-lo, Birdseed. Hul-lo, Birdseed. This is Cakewalk. Here is a message for you. Unidentified air-craft oh-nine-eight degrees, eighty-five

miles. I say again, oh-nine-eight degrees, eighty-five miles. Closing. Am holding. Over.”

“Hul-lo, Cakewalk. Thank you. I have contact and am holding also. Out.”

This meant that the escort had also made contact with the aircraft and was following its progress too.

The crosses multiplied into an irregular row under the outstretched arm, tattooed with a pierced heart, of the rating who marked them off across the perspex disc. Presently they made a long trail to a point on one radius of the circle due north of the convoy. Then they turned and began to zig-zag to and fro, getting nearer to the centre.

“Air Plot! Compass Platform!”

“Compass Platform! Captain speaking. What news?”

“Oh-oh-five degrees, sir. Twenty-seven miles.”

“Right!” said the calm voice at the other end of the speaking-tube.

“Ah!” said the off-duty ratings, leaning over the disc and watching the crosses multiplying across it. “Spotted us now. Sniffin’ around, see?”

The aircraft handling party were standing by, at instant readiness, on the flight deck. A few squatted on their haunches in the lee of the island, sheltering from the biting wind. They



" SWORDFISH WERE APT TO DO THE SPLIT

THE ELIZABETHANS





SWORDFISH PILOT

crooned gently to themselves, each one a Bing Crosby in his own ears, or just squatted there with a vacant look on their faces, their minds obviously in a state of abstraction. I have noticed that those whose work is hard and manual have this capacity for mental withdrawal which is almost Yoga-like. These men's faces were now quite expressionless, but their lower jaws worked rhythmically up and down upon their chewing-gum. But others, unable to remain long physically inactive, were obeying the British working-man's most primitive instinct, his compelling and undeniable urge. They were playing football. They had screwed up some rags and cotton-waste into a ball, had arranged four aircraft chocks as goal-posts, picked sides and were now playing with all the grim determination they would normally bring to the game at home. Their mouths were open, their breathing was sharp with exertion, their bodies ducked and lunged.

"C'mon now! Pass, Loftie! Pass!" The goal-keeper, with knees bent and attention braced, lunged out and caught the flying bundle of rags, kicking it into play again. Mac and Victor looked on from the cockpits of their machines—a grandstand view.

"Scramble two Wildcats! . . . Scramble two Wildcats!"

At the sound of the loudspeakers the game stopped at once. Mac and Victor, strapping on their flying-helmets and oxygen-masks, drew the hoods of their cockpits over their heads and turned their attention to their dashboards.

“Now!” said Mac as he shut himself in.

“What a bore!” said Victor.

They started their engines. They were robots now, Wellsian beings from another world.

The groove of the catapult ran about a quarter of the length of the flight deck. A hook attached to a steel cable travelled in this and was attached to the underpart of the aircraft between the wheels. It would become disengaged at the forward limit of its run and almost literally fling the aircraft into the air.

Mac's machine was now moved exactly into the required position astride the catapult and the hook was attached beneath it. Two of the aircraft handling party lay flat on their stomachs holding the wooden chocks beneath the wheels. Another lay ready to release the spring clip which held the tail down to the deck. An officer with a red flag stood at the forward end of the flight deck. Inside his transparent dome the masked robot which had been Mac five minutes ago braced its helmeted head back against the cushion behind him. He lifted his gloved hand to show that he was ready. The officer raised

aloft his red flag and moved it slowly with a circular motion above his head. Mac slowly opened his throttle and his engine roared, spitting blue flame from the exhausts below it. The roar rose to a crescendo that deadened the senses. The air was sucked back by the now invisible screw and tore across the flight deck behind the plane as a minute hurricane. It seemed to press down on to the deck the prone bodies beneath the plane. They hid their faces upon their arms, protecting their eyes from flying dust, their clothes flattened upon them like bathing-suits by the rush of air. Mac's Wildcat seemed to strain and tremble with pent-up fury. When the roar of her engine reached a high-pitched scream the officer suddenly swept his flag downwards. And, all at once, with a bump, the fighter was soaring away ahead of the ship—an insect in purposeful flight. The angry and thwarted scream of her engines had become a contented drone. She drew her legs up comfortably beneath her and began to circle the ship. In two minutes Victor had followed. Now there were two insects, hornets, droning vengefully above the convoy.

"This is the Air Plot broadcasting," said the loudspeakers. *"An unidentified aircraft has been contacted and is now about twenty-five miles away to northward. Two Wildcats have just been cata-*

pulted and are in pursuit." This was for the benefit of those below decks, who could not see what was happening but were as much concerned to know what was going on as those luckier ones in the upper air.

Now the swishing sound of the ship's bows cleaving the water, that ceaseless rhythm of a ship at sea, had supplanted the screaming roar of engines. It seemed like silence. There was a moment of anti-climax as we stood in groups upon the flight deck and watched the two insects vanishing into the distant clouds. They had become quite impersonal, not Mac and Victor but suddenly just two Wildcats off to the kill—or so we hoped.

A fighter aircraft is simply a gun, or series of guns, to which an engine and wings are attached. It is guided on to its target from its land base, or from its sea-going carrier, by the Fighter Direction Officers who are in touch with the pilot all the time by radio telephone. In the same low, distinct, confidential voice, such as was always used in radio communication, a Fighter Director Officer was now talking incessantly and steadily into a microphone before him. He was giving the fighters the course they were to follow, and the range, course, speed and height of the enemy, or any other details that might be useful to the pilot behind the gun rushing through the clouds.

A special code was used for this, which converted ordinary English into almost a foreign language.

Then suddenly there was a cry from the flight deck.

“Enemy aircraft in sight! Enemy aircraft in sight! There 'e is! Look. See 'im?”

And, sure enough, far away to the north, we could see, high up among the clouds, poised and apparently hovering, a tiny winged speck. As usual, it looked harmless enough. Yet it was growing and before many seconds had taken on the form of a large twin-engined aircraft. It enlarged towards us rapidly. And where were our fighters?

Soon there came the sound we had all been expecting—the Action Alarm. In all baby flat-tops the action alarm is a rather weak and tinny-sounding gong. We called ours “The Temple Bells” or “Victory Celebrations in Scotland.” Many attempts had been made to devise some better and more resonant noise with which to stir us into action. Yet, in spite of all attempts, nothing had been found more characteristic, unmistakable or penetrating than this unimpressive tintinnabulation. “Ting-ting-ting!” it went. “Ting-ting-ting!”

“*Action stations! Action stations!*” Now the flight deck was a maze of hurrying figures, pulling on their anti-flash hoods and gloves and their

round American-pattern steel-helmets. They ran to the guns, whose upturned probosces began nosing the air, turning swiftly this way and that like the snouts of blind and vicious reptiles seeking the moment to strike. They ran to their fire-stations carrying out lengths of hose. They clanged down the watertight hatches to shut off the hangar completely from the ship beneath. They slammed shut the hangar ports, blocking out the daylight and bottling in the white glare of the electric lamps.

Nothing could be more remarkable than the obvious pleasure with which these signs of approaching battle were greeted by the sailors. Reserve and shyness vanished. The rigid distinction between officers and men was suddenly no more. "Now for Fun and Games!" they said.

"Fun and Games" is the sailor's name for battle, for action. It is for this that he has been training and waiting all these months, it may be years. Subconsciously it is for this that he has been longing, in spite of all his grouses and his "drips." It comes as a tonic to him and changes him suddenly into a new man. It stimulates his nerves, braces his muscles and stiffens his sinews. The blood of his ancestors races in his veins. It is his name for battle and fire and sudden death. It is his fulfilment—"Fun and Games."

The enemy aircraft was enlarging rapidly and

was now a great three-headed bird wheeling ahead of the convoy. The ships had drawn together somewhat, compressing the lanes between them. We could see the men in the Liberty ships manning their guns. "Good old Yanks!"

But where were our two fighters? The Jerry seemed to be riding the sky alone ahead of the convoy with perfect impunity, weaving around out of range of the guns. Then suddenly out of a cloud two specks shot downward like bullets. The great twin-engined machine, suddenly aware of her danger, put her nose up and soared swiftly into the cloud from which her attackers had come. Too late! The buzzing specks swept upwards again, circled and, like wasps, buzzed in again from opposite sides. We heard the distant rattle of their guns. Just before he reached the shelter of the cloud the enemy seemed to slip sideways and then began to spin downwards, round and round like an autumn leaf, trailing twin trains of black smoke, one from each engine. He fell into the sea like a broken toy, small and distant. From where he struck the water a smudge of smoke blew away upon the wind, a charcoal line upon the sky. Remorselessly the convoy passed on and soon even the black trail of smoke was gone. As the fighters came over the convoy, roaring in triumph, they gave the victory roll.

“*Secure Action stations!*” There would be no “Fun and Games” after all.

“*Stand by to receive two Wildcats and two Swordfish!*”

“F for Fox” and “C for Charlie” had finished their patrol and were coming home. If you searched the sky beneath your arched palm ahead and astern of the convoy you could just see them. They seemed almost motionless, crawling like grubs against the white domes of the clouds.

It was breakfast-time. The ward-room presented a formidable and, indeed, terrifying spectacle as ward-rooms do at this sacred hour. Rows of officers at the tables bent over their porridge, entrenched behind magazines and newspapers a fortnight old. No one spoke, except to say “Morning!” on sitting down. Or “Butter, please,” or “Marmalade, please.” And some, excessively polite, said, “Excuse me,” when they got up. For one of the unwritten rules which the citizen war-time navy has taken over from the regular peace-time navy is that which forbids conversation at breakfast. One is supposed to have a liver as becomes an officer and a gentleman. Another is the rule which permits reading at the breakfast-table and at tea, but forbids it absolutely at luncheon or dinner. There were, however, occasional serious

transgressions of the latter rule when an old copy of the *New Statesman*, the *Spectator* or the *Sphere* would appear at the luncheon or dinner table. "Deplorable!" the Commander would be heard to say. "Never heard of in my day!" But the white-coated stewards bustled around the sideboard or hurried in and out of their pantry from which came a heartening clatter and rattle. For in there no such rules held good.

"One porridge, please!"

"Two breakfasts comin' up—and where's them two teas? Hurry up now—chop-chop!"

Into this busy clamour and into the formidable hush of the ward-room itself, the loudspeakers broke with their peremptory command:

"Stand by to receive two Wildcats and two Swordfish!"

"Damn!" said the Deck Landing Control Officer, and he and two or three others, answering the call of duty, left the table and their unfinished toast and marmalade. The rest—paymasters, engineers, watch-keepers off watch—went on munching in silence behind their stale periodicals.

Watching aircraft landing on held a kind of macabre fascination. Each time one witnessed this slightly hair-raising spectacle one vowed not to do so again, for the catch of the breath, the tense moment of anxiety, the sense of approaching catastrophe and of disaster narrowly

averted was too great a strain. "Will he do it? Or will he crash? Has he made it or has he missed it? Yes, bravo! Or, no—round we go again!" No, really, not another time—it is too much. The nerves cannot stand it. And yet, every time, there I am again upon the cat-walk, holding my cap in my hand so that it shall not blow off in the wind which musses the hair and brings water to the eyes. I often used to wonder, with a kind of shock of self-disgust, whether the attraction which drew me and so many others to the flight deck time after time when aircraft were landing on was not a subconscious hope that one would witness a disaster. I am sure it was the possibility of catastrophe which drew these crowds of spectators to the cat-walk whenever the loudspeakers said "*Stand by to receive . . .!*" For, in answer to that summons, there came crowding on to the narrow galleries not only those whose duty required their presence but also a host of assorted onlookers, stewards, engineers, firemen, seamen off duty and others whose presence there was not necessary at all. They yielded regularly as clockwork to the fascination of the spectacle. To them it was what the motor-cyclist roaring round his "Wall of death" is to the circus crowd. Thus, whenever aircraft returned to the carrier, they landed between two long lines of faces turned towards

them forming an avenue like the crowd lining the fairway at a golf match.

Sometimes it happened that the rows of blank faces watching were rewarded for their patience—if that was indeed what they were waiting for. For accidents did frequently happen, though fortunately not often fatal ones. Seafires were apt to come roaring home, beautiful as buzzing sawflies, and then, on landing, break their under-carriages and finish ignominiously with their tails sticking up vertically in the air. Swordfish too, when the motion of the ship was severe, were apt to do the splits and end up without dignity flat on their bellies. Or sometimes a plane would overrun the wire barriers that stretched amidships across the flight deck. Its screws would hit the wires with a twanging sound and come to a sudden stop as ribbons of twisted metal. This would cause a ripple of laughter from the human flower-bed along the cat-walk. For nothing is more laughable than a lordly and proud machine, possessed apparently of a life of its own transcending human nature, revealed suddenly by accident as nothing more than a few interlocking bits of fabric, wood and metal, reduced to impotence by the failure of a few small parts. But sometimes the pilot would be helped out of his cockpit and the doctor, always present on the flight deck when flying was in

progress, would hurry forward. Then the laughter was silenced and the spectators would ask one another anxiously, "Is he hurt?" It is a shock to be thus reminded of the frail flesh and blood that is the master of the machine. And, again, sometimes still more dreadful things would happen. On one occasion, when two fighters were approaching to land on, one of them turned too quickly to approach, missed the deck but hit the round-down—the turned-down stern-piece of the flight deck. There was a bump which shook the ship, a burst of flame, a splash and a horrified silence. Then there was a gasp and a long-drawn "Ah!" from the on-lookers. Another time a Swordfish, returning from patrol, crashed into the island with its array of masts and gadgets and, with a splintering crackle of tearing fabric and bending metal, collapsed into the sea alongside the ship. When all those nearby, who had thrown themselves on their faces, got to their feet there was the helpless wreck floating in the sea a quarter of a mile away, with three small figures clinging desperately like lice in a widening yellowish green patch of dye from their rescue device.

Across the flight deck amidships there stretched two barriers of wire rope. They divided the flight deck into two halves—an after and a forward half. Except when aircraft were landing

on, these barriers lay flat on the deck. But at the word "*Prepare to receive aircraft,*" the arms that held these barriers rose up vertically on either side of the flight deck. Their purpose was to make it impossible for a machine to overrun the length of the deck. It would run into the barriers first and perhaps break the screw or even shock the engine, but it would be the lesser of two evils. The barriers also made it possible to park machines at the forward end of the deck while others were landing aft.

At intervals of about half a dozen paces the after section of the flight deck, the "landing on" section, was crossed at right angles by horizontal arrestor wires. A hook, let down under the tail of the landing aircraft, caught hold of one of these arrestor wires as the machine touched down so that it lost way at once and its impetus was checked. When aircraft were about to land, steel arms raised the trip-wires about a foot from the deck so that the hook could engage. As the hook caught the wire it pulled the wire out from spring drums beneath the flight deck into a long loop like a piece of elastic and brought the machine gently to rest. When the hook disengaged again, after the aircraft had come to a standstill, the wire straightened itself again, slithering back into its taut position, a beautiful and precise action which it was a delight to watch.

At the after end of the flight deck, on the port side, there was a small platform with a canvas windshield which, at a touch, could be suddenly lowered. This was the batsman's platform. The batsman, or Deck Landing Control Officer, was one of the most important people in the ship and one of the hardest-worked. Wearing yellow armlets and a yellow skull-cap, to make him plainly visible, he had to guide each approaching aircraft on to the deck by signalling to the pilot with large yellow discs like ping-pong bats. By means of a series of simple signals, made with outstretched arms, he had to indicate to the pilot the height, direction, angle of approach and correct speed for a safe and true landing. For instance, arms, holding the bats, raised above his head meant "Up! More height!" Arms lowered meant "Down! Less height!" One arm waved in a circle meant "No good! Go round and come on again!" Very often the pilot could not see the flight deck as he approached it because the nose of his machine was in the way. This was the case in the Seafire but not in the Wildcat, for which reason, among others, these sturdy though rather slow little American fighters were more popular with the boys than the more beautiful wasp-like Seafires. On the skill and judgment of the batsman, therefore, the safety of the machine and its crew

largely depended. His signals were orders which the pilot had no option but to obey. The slim overalled figure with its yellow skull-cap and round bats bore a responsibility which was enormous. But Bill was an exceptionally good batsman. The pilots had learnt to rely on him and knew that they owed him their lives, especially when the flight deck was rising and falling fifteen or twenty feet every few minutes. His job always seemed to me to resemble that of the conductor of an orchestra. He controlled the movements of machines by poetic and commanding motions of his hands and body just as a conductor controls the instruments before him. He knew from experience the different responses that each kind of machine would make to his gestures. He knew what particular response he must call forth from each kind of machine to make it land on fairly and squarely, truly and beautifully, like a bird coming home to roost. He told me that to land on a Swordfish is quite different, for instance, from landing on an Albacore, and landing on a Seafire different from landing on a Wildcat. And before he had to land on a machine of a new and unfamiliar type he felt nervous and keyed up like a musician about to play an unfamiliar piece. And often, listening to him talking about his job, I would wonder what use this accomplishment and skill, half inborn

gift and half the result of careful study, could possibly be to Bill when the war was over and young men were no longer required to guide aeroplanes on to the heaving decks of aircraft carriers at sea. Bill, I saw, would be a small fragment of a gigantic post-war problem. But I need not have worried on Bill's account anyhow. He is dead now.

Now, at the command from the loudspeakers, "*Stand by to receive two Wildcats and two Swordfish!*" Bill, with his yellow skull-cap, his yellow armlets and his bats, took up his stand on the little platform facing aft. The aircraft handling party were assembled ready beneath the island. The fire squad was there too, with a Bibendum-like figure in a heavy fireproof asbestos suit and talc face-piece, scarcely able to move. The fire squad sometimes practised lifting pilots out of planes which were supposed to be on fire. I always hoped, watching them, that the man in the asbestos suit would never have to lift a pilot from a real fire, so sloth-like, fumbling and deliberate became his movements in his grotesque chrysalis. The doctor was there with his first-aid party. The human border of upturned faces sprouted on each side of the flight deck; stewards taking a breather and their first glimpse of daylight for hours, still in their white coats; writers with pencils behind their ears; firemen up from



" CUT YOUR ENGINES ! "



" SHE SEEMED TO HOVER "

" SNOW SWIRLED AND FLURRIED UPON THE FLIGHT DECK "



below in their singlets, strangely impervious to cold as is the way of their breed; gunners at the Oerlikon and Bofors guns; and I myself, capless, the wind blowing my hair into my eyes.

The two Wildcats were humming round the ship. They must wait for "Fox" and "Charlie," since the carrier was streaming the orange and red pendant which was the landing-on pendant for the Swordfish. So the fighters amused themselves by roaring round the convoy, racing above the Liberty ships almost at masthead height, away out over the sea and back again. The carrier was turning swiftly once more back down the long lane of ships to the open water astern. Then she turned into wind and "Charlie" approached. The deck was heaving up and down on the swell and, as you saw the horizon rise and fall, it seemed impossible that the machine, apparently poised now above the stern of the flight deck, could possibly land on it. Then there was that moment of apprehension, that catch of the breath, which may have been the main justification for our being assembled there at that moment. Bill, on his platform, his arms wide apart, lifted his bats up a little . . . up a little! . . . more height! The Swordfish rose slightly and then seemed to hang poised like a box-kite on the end of an invisible string. All at once, it seemed, the string was swiftly wound in and she

dropped on to the deck, alighting delicately and precisely. Bill lunged forward as she touched down and made a swift downward slicing movement with his bats. Cut your engines! The hook caught the arrestor wire neatly and pulled it out into a long forwardly directed V. "Charlie" came to a spluttering standstill. The aircraft handling party ran forward. The barriers were lowered and "Charlie" was wheeled forward—a cumbrous and lifeless contraption once again—to the fore end of the flight deck. Even as the pilot and observer were climbing out the barriers rose again behind "Charlie," and "Fox" hung poised for her landing. Bill took up his position once more with arms outspread on his platform. Up! he indicated. . . . Up! More height! But "Fox" did not respond. It was obvious that she was coming in too low. Bill waved his arms in circles down and up over his head. "No good! Go round again!" Then "Fox," with roaring open throttle, soared up over the flight deck. We saw the anatomy of her under-parts as she swept close above our heads and round to try again. She made it the second time, but it was not such a clean sweet landing as "Charlie" had made. She came down heavily with a bump on the deck, overran several of the trip-wires and came to a stop only a foot or so from the barriers. "That was a near thing!" everyone said. But

near things were common enough. Life in a carrier is full of them. The crew climbed out as calmly and as little concerned as I should out of the Scottish express.

Now the fighters approached, banking round swiftly astern. It was a lovely and aesthetically satisfying sight to see them land. Every time a fighter landed neatly there was a little appreciative murmur of applause from the audience. "Ah! Good show! What a beauty!" For she seemed to hover like a humming-bird before a flower and to touch down lightly as an insect on the lip of a cup. She wore blue feathers of flame beneath her like the flash on a jay's wing and you saw her sturdy little legs spring to the shock as she met the deck. Her whirring engines stopped and she was wheeled forward. Mac and Victor climbed out and removed their flying-helmets, suddenly becoming human beings again.

"Jolly good show, Mac!"

"Well done, Victor!"

The Swordfish pilots went to the Operations Room to make their reports.

"Nothing to report, sir. We took a dekho at the straggler and flashed her. She replied she was making ten knots and hopes to be up with the convoy by sunset."

"Right. Make your W/T reports in the log."

“Aye, aye, sir. And now, I think, a spot of beer. It’s about lunch-time.”

The convoy crept northward and the days lengthened. In a week there was no night and the daylight, pale and attenuated but indubitably daylight, lasted for twenty-four hours. The Swordfish patrolled the vacant ocean around the convoy ceaselessly, two always taking off before the preceding patrol landed on, day after day. The weather became colder and colder and the aircraft handling party, muffled to the eyes in their duffel coats, swept the snow laboriously from the flight deck all day long. Steam-jets were used to prevent the arrestor wires from icing up and trails of white vapour fled from us upon the Arctic wind. Few of us slept much, and those who did dosed down anywhere in their overalls and duffel coats in the hangar or along the alleyways, ready for instant action. For the Jerry whom Mac and Victor had shot down had told his pals about us before they got him.

In the Operations Room there was a huge map which completely covered one bulkhead. A tape marked the track of the convoy across this map and every day a flag, denoting our position, moved slowly northward along the track. But now it was becoming surrounded by red-headed pins, which indicated the probable positions of U-boats. On the day after Mac and Victor had

made their kill two pins made their appearance near the flag. By evening there were two more. The following day there were six pins. They were still some fifty miles away, but by the next day there were nearly a dozen of them. The U-boats were massing for an attack. That was all one knew and all one saw of the lurking peril. Those were the only signs of approaching battle, about a dozen red pins stuck in a map. Outside the convoy ploughed sedately on over the troubled sea and the great clouds sailed above it. Presently there were nearly twenty pins stuck in the map around the flag, which represented us in our flat-top and those fifty Liberty ships we had to guard. Now we had four Swordfish in the air together and they took off and landed on every two hours with clockwork regularity. But they saw nothing. Occasionally there would be a series of harsh, metallic blows on the bottom of the ship, as though a giant boot had kicked her. Running out on deck you would be in time, perhaps, to see great eruptions of foam, like evanescent bushes, sprout suddenly in the sea astern of one of the escorting destroyers. She was turning and racing like a bloodhound on a scent. You knew that she had made a contact.

But nothing else happened. The Swordfish came and went and the carrier sped continually down the lane of ships to fly them off and land

them on again. We slept in our clothes and got up again at intervals throughout the night to find the daylight still there. Stubble began to bristle round faces. Snow swirled and flurried down on to the flight deck and was patiently and persistently swept away again.

Then, suddenly, in the long midnight twilight something did happen. One of the Liberty ships fell to bits before our eyes. The two sad, up-tilted bits of her smoked upon the wintry sea for a few minutes and then vanished. And we thought of the men in her. There was only a big patch of foam left with some dark wreckage which passed astern as the convoy ploughed unhesitatingly on. That happened suddenly before our eyes in spite of Asdic and Radar, in spite of patrolling aircraft, in spite of our inner and outer screen of destroyers and corvettes. They were all there to prevent just this, and yet it happened. Daring, skill and patience were equally matched.

Then all the Liberty ships opened up with their stern guns, firing point-blank into the sea at imaginary periscopes. The moving city of ships flickered and twinkled with the flashes of guns and puffs of smoke wreathed the stern of every ship.

“Scramble two Swordfish! ‘H for How’ and ‘B for Baker’ at Readiness Able. Scramble!”

Two Swordfish were kept parked at the after end of the flight deck at Readiness Baker in addition to the four already in the air on patrol. These, armed with rockets and depth-charges, could be flown off immediately in an emergency. The call "*Scramble!*" meant that these two spare machines were to fly off immediately to deal with the U-boat which was near at hand and had just torpedoed the Liberty ship. The aircraft handling party raced down the flight deck to "H for How" and "B for Baker." The crews, hastily strapping on their flying-helmets, came up from the Ready-room within a few seconds and clambered into their machines, whose engines were already roaring.

As the carrier moved back down the length of the convoy to the open water astern in order to fly off "H for How" and "B for Baker," a school of black porpoises appeared, cutting the waves like the wheels of some submerged machinery among the Liberty ships. Sea-serpentine they danced and curved with little snorts, throwing up tiny fountains, from one ship to another. They chose a bad moment for their visit because the gunners in the Liberty ships evidently mistook them for submarines—of a new and midget design perhaps. There is no end to the devilish ingenuity of the German mind. So they opened up on the innocent and

sportive beasts with their Oerlikon and Bofors guns. Tracer went streaking in all directions in the feeble half daylight and sometimes perilously close astern and ahead of the carrier as she made for the open water.

“Go it, Yanks!” the sailors yelled, and laughed as the porpoises went gambolling on, apparently unconscious of the shower of flame that was descending around them.

Then suddenly everyone’s eyes were turned in another direction for, even while we were watching the porpoises dancing amid their rain of bullets, another ship got one far off on the edge of the convoy. We saw a flash split her sides and she became a hideous black and increasing mushroom that rose and propped up the clouds. We felt more naked than ever now turning round outside the convoy, knowing that there were U-boats actually prowling inside the escorting screen. And the long regular lines of ships moved on, leaving that great column of smoke to fall astern with two destroyers racing towards it.

“Bit lonely out here, F,” said the Captain. “Let’s get this strike off as quickly as possible and get back in our place where it’s nice and cosy. What d’you say?”

“All in favour myself, sir.”

“Good God! What the——?”

The Captain’s gaze had become suddenly

riveted upon the sea two hundred yards away on the starboard beam. For there a patch of the grey water was slowly but surely breaking into a white swirl. A thing rose up deliberately before his eyes, a black monster trailing tattered veils of spray. A sea-serpent? No—too short. A whale? No—it carried a kind of tower on its gleaming back. Its dripping snout pushed up, ribbed with white foam.

“Crikey! A U-boat!”

“Bloody sauce!” said the Captain, and he pressed a button near him on the bridge.

The action alarm rang its tinny, penetrating summons throughout the ship. Once more there was the urgent sound of running feet everywhere.

“What’s up? What’s cooking?” they said as they came up on deck, pulling on anti-flash gear and steel-helmets. The guns now turned their snouts down towards the dark shape in the sea now falling astern of us.

“Blinkin’ U-boat. Surfaced alongside very nearly! Look! There!”

But whatever the enemy’s intentions may have been he was evidently as much surprised as we. For, dropping astern of the carrier now as she swept on up wind, he was slowly disappearing again in the swirl of foam from which he had arisen.

"Garn! Windy, that's what he is!"

"So'd you be if you came up for a breather and found yourself in the middle of a ruddy convoy."

"He ain't in the middle. He's just in the right spot to let us have a fish."

"H for How" swept into the sky with a roar. In record time—never had the toughs in the aircraft handling party done their job with such dispatch—"B for Baker" followed. The two machines banked round astern of the carrier and we saw them diving repeatedly over the vanishing swirl where the U-boat had been, saw the white mountains rise up in the sea where they dropped their depth-charges, heard the muffled thump of their explosions and then the metallic mule-kick against the ship's bottom.

Tommie was in "H for How." He came from Edinburgh and had a lock of hair which fell forward over one eye when he was excited. This happened whenever we pulled his leg about being so Scotch so we did it often.

"Tommie, must you be so Scotch?"

"And why should I no? It's no sich a bad thing tae be."

"No, I suppose not. But I do think there should be limits."

Now Tommie's keen, pale Scottish face, peering down from his cockpit, saw the long, dark shark-like outline break the surface again

below him amid the fading rings made by the depth-charges. Ahead, "B for Baker" swept upwards from the attack. The U-boat, forced to the surface by the depth-charges, was preparing to make a fight for it. Tommie could see figures running to the gun. And soon enough a thin stream of flame squirted upwards, followed by the defiant rattle of the gun. Tommie put his nose down. The tracer rushed up towards him in a thin spray and the long dark shape from which it rose enlarged. He pressed a button. As he swept up again out of the dive two tall white columns sprang up, one on each side of the shape, and then slowly subsided into widening swirls. For a moment the U-boat seemed paralysed, inactive. The figures at the gun were no longer there. Then, slowly, horrifyingly, she began to lift her dripping snout. It rose into the air, the nose of a dying monster dripping foam and revealing its hidden outlines. She hung poised obliquely for what seemed a long time. Indefinite figures were struggling minutely in the conning-tower. Then, very slowly and deliberately, she began to slip backwards and downwards, sliding, slipping backwards foot by foot into the boiling unregarding sea. Sea birds hovered over her as she died, as over the corpse of a dying whale. Circling round, Tommie saw the waters cover her. A seething disturbance

marked the place where she had been. Slowly this flattened out into an oily smear which spread and thinned upon the sea, rounding the edges of the waves. Thus, terribly, for Fatherland and Führer and for the Greater German Reich, as for other ideas in the past, men die.

It was a clear crystalline evening when we dropped anchor in Kola Inlet. The endless day weakened only slightly about midnight. The long procession of Liberty ships had preceded us up the sound and now we were anchored here in a little bay, alone except for the other ships of the escort around us. There was something terrier-like and solid and very British about the appearance of these lithe little grey ships in these surroundings.

All round the bay were low snow-covered hills with a sparse growth of scrub, like the bristles of a worn brush—all very bleak and desolate. There was a harbour round a low headland with some wooden buildings. Some warships of antique appearance were anchored there. This was Russia, that monstrous, unfathomable, unconquerable land, the birthplace and the grave of hope. Knots of sailors gathered on the flight deck and gazed questioningly towards the white distances or down at the small craft which occasionally came alongside.

The Hammer and Sickle fluttered at the stern of each. There were great strapping women aboard them with high cheek-bones and enormous teeth—so unlike women as we knew them that the whistlings and tongue-clicking that usually accompany the appearance of the opposite sex after weeks of segregation were abashed into silence.

We felt that we must at least be able to say that we had been ashore in Russia, so for an hour we climbed about the steep, untidy streets of the settlement, among the ramshackle wooden houses. Women with wide faces and shawls over their heads were busy with domestic chores, which seemed much the same as the chores which women busy themselves with at home. Small boys of Tartar-like appearance grinned at us from among piles of packing-cases marked, "This side up. Detroit, Mich., U.S.A." Soldiers with the same broad faces and huge teeth passed us grinning. They wore long greatcoats and pointed caps decorated with the Red Star. But presently the snowy slopes rang with an unaccustomed and un-Russian sound. It was the British. They were playing snowballs.

Returning from our trip ashore in Russia we ran under the stern of our flat-top in the motor-boat and looked up at the Ensign floating from her island. We felt there was something homely

about her. She hadn't done badly on the way here. The total was one enemy aircraft shot down and four U-boats sunk. A convoy of fifty ships, heavily loaded with supplies for Russia, had been brought into port with the loss of only two in the teeth of persistent "wolf pack" attacks lasting over a week. We were not so sure now that we didn't feel quite proud of our flat-top. And now for the trip home.

Life in the Navy gives you sudden, unexpected wrenches. You live for many months with the same faces and the same voices. They become part of your life. Some may infuriate and annoy you but, nevertheless, they become part of you, like irritating spots which you cannot get at. For months you live in the same surroundings, grumbling and cursing them. As a standard joke everyone says, "When's my relief coming?" And each time the mail comes on board you say, jokingly, "Expect my draft chit's among that lot." But you know, of course, that it isn't. And then suddenly, out of the blue one day, it does come. Someone at the Admiralty decides one day to pick you up between finger and thumb like a pawn on a chess-board and move you to a different square, to pull you up by the roots like a seedling suddenly removed from its crowded box in the greenhouse. And then, before you know what is happening, you are on

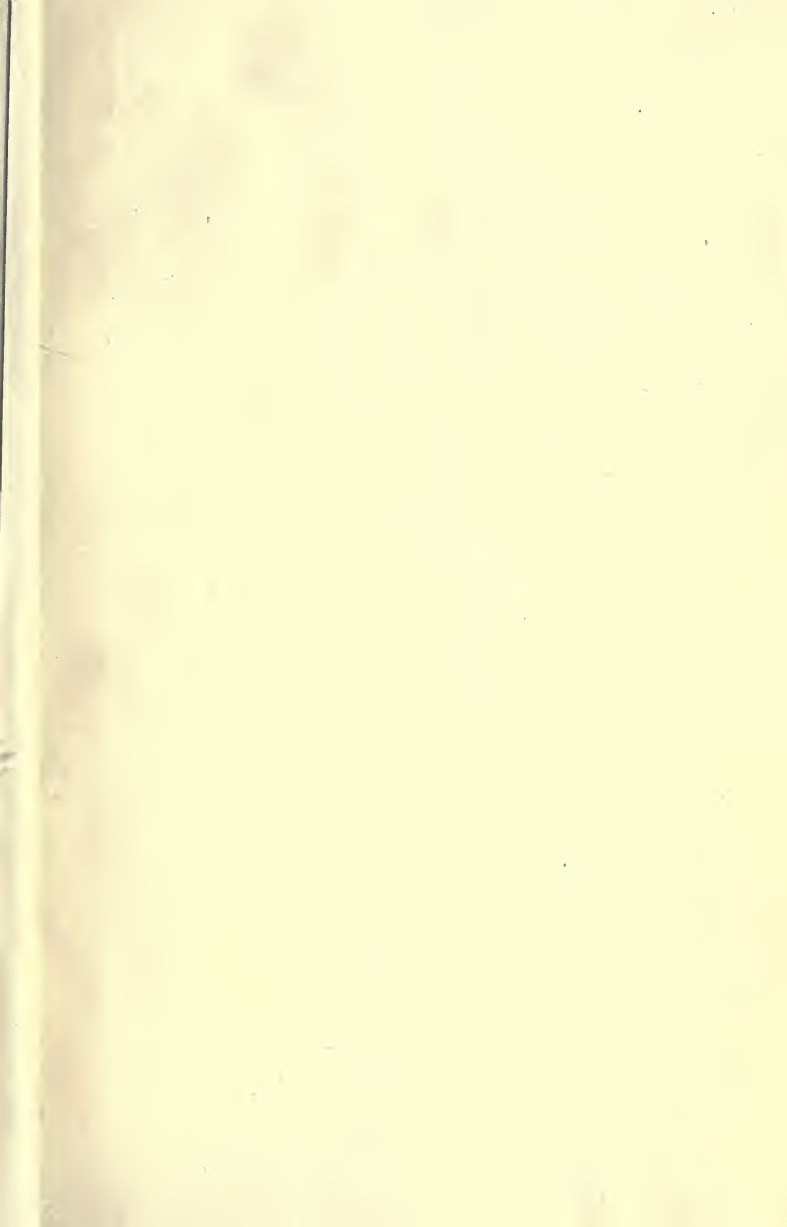
board a drifter which is taking you ashore from your ship for the last time. A space of oily water widens between the drifter and the grey-blue camouflaged shape you know so well. Familiar figures wave from the gangway. You will never see them again. In a few minutes they will have gone for ever out of your life into the gulf of memory and time. They wave and laugh. Some of the sailors leaning over the rail lift their hands too.

“Good-bye, old boy! Good luck! God bless!”

“Good-bye, sir. All the very best.”

And you go round to the other side of the drifter's deck, where they can't see you, and blow your nose twice very hard.





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