HENRY TAPRELL DORLING

THE 'PIRATES'

"It is not possible to prevent the occasional appearance of enemy submarines within the range of our shores, but I can give an assurance that the measures which have been and will be taken are such as to render proceedings of this sort increasingly dangerous to the submarines."—DR. MACNAMARA, Financial Secretary to the Admiralty.

They looked an orderly little squadron of six as they steamed jauntily out towards the open sea in single line ahead through the grey-green, tide-ripped waters of the most thickly populated river estuary in the world.

They were prosaic, snub-nosed-looking little craft, short and squat, with high, upstanding bows, prominent wheelhouses, and stumpy mizzen-masts abaft all. They hailed from many ports and still bore the letters and numbers of their peace-time vocation: F.D. for Fleetwood, G.Y. for Grimsby, B.F. for Banff, and P.D. for Peterhead. They were steam herring drifters in the ordinary, common, or garden, piping times of peace; little vessels which went to sea for days on end to pitch, wallow, and roll at the end of a mile or a mile and a half of buoyed drift-net, in the meshes of which unwary herring, in endeavouring to force a way through, presently found themselves caught by the gills.

But now, each one of them flew the tattered, smoke-stained apology for a once White Ensign, and they were men-of-war, very much men-of-war. They had been at the game for nearly twenty-four months, and, through long practice, they elbowed their way in and out of the traffic with all the fussy, devil-may-care assertiveness of His Majesty's destroyers.

Their admiral, a Royal Naval Reserve lieutenant, who, in peaceful 1914, was still the immaculate third officer of a crack Western Ocean passenger liner, looked out of his wheelhouse windows and surveyed the potbellied, lumbering cargo carriers steaming by with all the kindly tolerance of the regular man-of-war's man. He, though he did not look it, for they had been coaling an hour before and he was still grimy about the face, was the only commissioned officer in the squadron, fleet, flotilla, or whatever you like to call it. All the other craft were commanded by skippers, ex-peacetime-captains of the fishing craft, who were used to the sea and its vicissitudes, and knew the ins and cuts of their vessels far better than they could tell you. The men, for the greater part, were also fishermen enrolled in the Reserve, with here and there an ex-naval rating in the shape of a seaman gunner or signalman.

They may have lacked polish. They knew little about springing smartly to attention and nothing whatsoever about the interior economy of a 6-inch gun. Their attire was sketchy, to say the least of it. Even the admiral wore grey flannel trousers, a once white sweater, and coloured muffler, and it is to be feared that an officer from a battleship might have referred to them collectively as a "something lot of pirates." Pirates they may have been, but at the best of times a strict adherence to the uniform regulations is not a fetish of those serving on board the vessels of the Auxiliary Patrol. They are, it is perfectly true, granted a sum of money by a paternal Government wherewith to purchase their kit, but brass buttons and best serge suits do not blend with life on board a herring drifter at sea in all weathers. Sea-boots, oilskins, jerseys, and any old thing in the way of trousers and headgear are far more fashionable. Indeed, one may occasionally happen upon a skipper wearing an ancient bowler hat when well out in the North Sea and away from the haunts of senior officers who might possibly take exception to his battered tile.

But they all took their job seriously, though, like most sailor folk, light-heartedly. They were inured to the sea and its hardships; many of them were part owners of their own craft, even the man in the red Salvation Army jersey tittivating the six-pounder gun in the last little ship of the line.

Exactly how they "strafed" the immoral and ubiquitous Hun submarine it is inexpedient to say. They had their little guns, of course, but were full of other 'gilguys' evolved for the same laudable purpose during a period of nearly two years of war. Moreover, the men were experts in their use, and that their 'gadgets' often worked to the detriment of Fritz may be deduced from that gentleman's extreme unwillingness to be seen in their vicinity, and a casual inspection of the records of the Auxiliary Patrol probably locked up somewhere in Whitehall. Some day these records may be made public, and then we shall read of happenings which will cause us to hold our breath, and our hair to bristle like a nail-brush. Who has not heard the story of the unarmed fishing boat which attacked a hostile periscope with nothing more formidable than a coal hammer, or the ex-fisherman who attempted to cloud Fritz's vision with a tar brush?

Striving to encompass the destruction of the wily submarine is by no means a one-sided game. Our small craft generally manage to have a credit balance on their side, but Fritz is no fool, and is not the sort of person to go nosing round an obvious trap, or to walk blindfold into a snare. Sometimes he mounts larger and heavier guns than his antagonists, and may come to the surface out of range of their weapons and bombard them at his leisure. In such cases the hunters may become the hunted, and may perchance be 'strafed' themselves. Then there are always mines, contact with one of which may pulverise an ordinary wooden drifter into mere matchwood.

The work is fraught with risk. It is every bit as dangerous as that of the mine-sweepers, and casualties, both in men and in ships, are simply bound to occur.

But little is made of them. A few more names will appear in the Roll of Honour, and in some obscure newspaper paragraph we may read that "on Thursday last the armed patrol vessel ——— was blown up by a mine" or was "sunk by gunfire from a hostile submarine," and that "— members of her crew escaped in their small boat and landed at ———." That is all; no details whatsoever, nothing but the bare statement.

But the game still goes on.

The men who cheerfully undergo these risks in their anxiety to serve their country, were not professional fighters before the war: they are now; but in the palmy days of peace they were fishermen, seamen through and through, who, year in and year out, fair weather or foul, were at sea in their little craft, reaping the ocean's harvest. Their life was ever a hard and a dangerous one, and the hazards and chances of war have made it doubly so.

They have none of the excitement of a fight in the open. Much of their work in protecting the coastwise traffic is deadly in its monotony, and, as we have become used to it, has come to be looked upon as a matter of course.

Their gallant deeds are rarely the subjects of laudatory paragraphs in the newspapers, and the great majority go unrewarded. Even if we do happen to meet a man wearing a little strip of blue and white ribbon on his coat or jumper and ask him why he was decorated, he merely laughs, wags his head, and says —— nothing.

It is very unsatisfactory of him.