

## TORPEDOED BY SUBMARINES

MERCHANT seamen the world over, irrespective of nationality, who spent the years of 1914 to 1918 dodging mines and submarines view the gathering war clouds with apprehension.

Following the sea in normal times is no joy ride. The work is hard, the hours long, and the pay none too large. In addition, are the risks of continually battling against nature's elements. Of course, all this goes with the job; but when the unknown lurks every minute of the voyage in the shape of mines and submarines, the continual suspense is nerve-racking. To those who worked in the engine-room or stoke-hold the strain was greater.

It wasn't the actual effect of being torpedoed, or striking a mine, that got one down, but the everlasting waiting for it. Men, who were strong, both physically and mentally, became as time went on a bundle of nerves. Frequently I have seen in the engine-room, when perhaps someone accidentally dropped a spanner, the rest would

jump as though they had been shot.

I happen to be one of the lucky ones that came through without a scratch, although I was twice torpedoed, once chased, and saw other ships blown sky high. Crossing the Atlantic on one occasion, a number of us, just before sunset, were leaning over the ship's rail watching a steamer in the distance. Suddenly, without any warning, there was a terrific explosion, the steamer broke in two halves and in a few minutes had completely disappeared from view. We steamed away from the scene as fast as we could.

Another incident, I remember, occurred just outside the Bay of Biscay. Coming off watch at noon I noticed the captain and most of the crew gazing for'ard at a black speck on the horizon. As we drew nearer we saw what appeared to be a lifeboat filled with men. Our captain was considering whether to stop and lower one of our boats, or swing out a derrick and hoist the entire boat-load on the deck. He decided on the latter. The

shipwrecked men were in such a state of exhaustion that they had considerable difficulty in making the rope fast at each end of the boat. They eventually succeeded, however, and we hoisted them on board; then proceeded full speed ahead, still keeping a sharp watch for submarines.

Nine men were in the boat, and they were in a shocking state from exposure. One, a ship's fireman, was dead. We dropped him back in the sea. We had to cut away the clothes and boots of the others on account of their swollen limbs. It was midwinter, and they had been five days in the open life boat. Their ship was a collier from Sunderland. They had been torpedoed in the early hours of morning, and the ship had sunk in about five minutes.

My first experience of being torpedoed was off the north coast of Africa. We were homeward bound from Bombay and well loaded with a cargo of peanuts. We were steaming along, doing about nine knots. The Mediterranean was like a sheet of glass, and the African coast was only a short distance away. We had just finished dinner, and I had turned into my bunk when there was a muffled

explosion and a feeling as if the ship were dragging its bottom over rocks.

Immediately everyone grabbed some clothes and made for the deck. The captain was on the bridge ordering the lifeboats to be lowered. The S.O.S., of course, had been sent out by the wireless operator. While we were lowering the boats the steamer took a heavy list to port. This caused one of the boats on the starboard side to get badly damaged as it was being lowered to the sea. However, we all got clear away and without a single casualty. About an hour later we were picked up by a French patrol boat. In passing, I might mention that, like all other ships, we had a gun aft, but we never got a chance to use it. One might as well have had a peashooter on a cargo or tramp steamer as a gun.

My second experience was in the English Channel. We had signed on a boat in Hull bound for New York in ballast. We steamed down the North Sea and on arrival outside of Dover dropped anchor to await orders. After two days we proceeded down the Channel. I was in the stoke-hold at the time—it was my watch below. One

bell before noon had just struck, and I was raking over the fire in readiness for my last pitch when we got it. There was a terrific explosion, and I thought the bottom had fallen out of the boat. We all made for the stoke-hold ladder, and on reaching the deck, found that the sailors were already swinging out the lifeboats. There was a heavy, choppy sea running and, being winter-time, it was bitterly cold. One felt it all the more coming from the hot stoke-hold.

Deciding to try and get my overcoat while the lifeboats were being swung I dashed aft where our quarters were. On arrival I found only what was left of the quarters. The torpedo apparently had hit just alongside the propeller. The stern was blown away, and the gun was hanging half over the side. Beds, clothes and men were lying all over the deck. We immediately carried those wounded to the lifeboats. Two of the crew had been killed and nine injured. Eventually we all got clear, and for the next two hours had a rough time, half frozen, trying to manipulate the lifeboat in the very rough sea, before we were picked up by a drifter. They took us aboard, wrapped us in blankets,

gave us rum and hot coffee, and landed us at Dartmouth.

My worst experience was being chased on an oil tanker. My job on this boat was greasing the engines. We were homeward bound from the Mexican Gulf, loaded with a full cargo of benzine, and if a torpedo had struck us we should have gone up like a box of matches, without having a million to one chance.

Again it was near the English Channel. I was on watch and had just finished putting a round of oil on the engines. I had slipped into the stoke-hold for a smoke, and was in the act of lighting a cigarette when the engine-room telegraph rang out. Back I went. The engineer shouted: "We are opening her full out. Submarine in the vicinity. Smother her with oil!"

The continual thought was in one's mind—"Where will she hit? This side or that? Amidships, for'ard or aft?" Not that it would have made any difference where she hit in this case. We were actually chased for about half an hour, although we had the engine opened full out for over three hours.

Being an oil tanker, the engine-room was aft. We could feel the

boat being zigzagged all over the place, and in the middle of one of these swerves we heard a muffled explosion. The tanker half listed over and the stern lifted clear of the sea. This flung us all off our feet, and with the propeller beating air the engine fairly raced until the propeller hit the water again.

We were all certain we had been hit and scrambling to our feet dashed towards the engine room ladder. Then one of the crew at the top shouted it was all right, and a few moments later he came down and told us what had happened. The submarine apparently had fired two torpedoes at us and both had missed. One, in fact, had missed the bows by only a few

feet. The S.O.S. had, of course, been sent out and a destroyer shortly afterwards appeared. The submarine fired the second torpedo only a few hundred yards astern of us. The destroyer saw it being fired, and steamed full speed over the spot, dropping a depth charge. The explosion from the charge not only put the submarine out of business, but being so near to our stern nearly blew us out of the water as well. We docked the following evening in the Thames. Half-way across the Atlantic on our next voyage on this same tanker we received news by wireless that Armistice had been declared.—*Dick Beech, condensed from British Legion Journal.*

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### CREDIT

THERE is a bit of good, sound philosophy in the following sign recently observed in a Chinese laundry:

You want credit,

Me no give.

You get sore.

You want credit,

Me give,

You no pay,

Me get sore;

Better you get sore.—*Scholastic.*