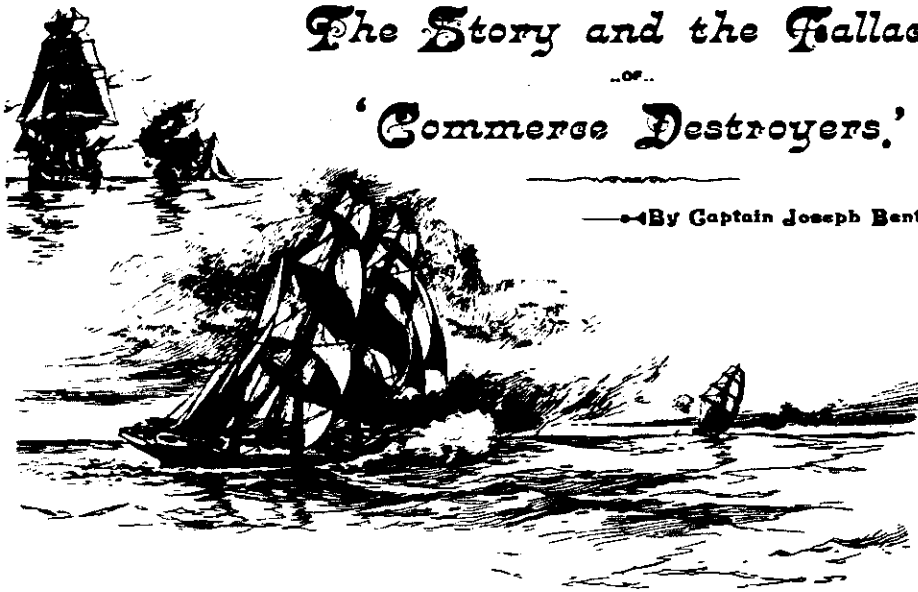


The Story and the Fallacy of 'Commerce Destroyers.'

—By Captain Joseph Bentley.



THE 'ALABAMA' AS A COMMERCE DESTROYER.

According to the popular notion in the United States, commerce destroying is the true weapon for attack and for defence which they should employ. We have nothing to lose and everything to gain in that kind of warfare (says Captain Joseph Bentley, of the American navy). We are safe within our own borders. We have no mercantile marine to protect. Commerce destroying costs but little, for it does not require a large permanent establishment; and reliance can be placed on private enterprise, animated by hope of prize money, to supplement the operations of the regular fleet of commerce destroyers.

So when the question of our sea power is considered at all the demand generally is for fast cruisers rather than for battleships.

But the nation which relies for attack on defence on commerce destroying alone is leaning upon a broken reed, and pursuing a policy which will inevitably lead to disaster. She may irritate her enemy, but she cannot thus permanently weaken her. She may win glittering spoils, but these easy victories will not really affect the result.

There are conditions in which commerce destroying might be an effective weapon for a nation. These conditions are that her coasts should be contiguous to the great trade routes along which her enemy's commerce is conveyed; and that she should have as large a fleet of her own as practically to engage the whole attention of her enemy's fleet, and thus leave the seas open to the commerce destroyers.

But the United States is not in these circumstances. Her fleet is not large enough to meet the fleet of any of the first-class Powers. Her ships of war would be destroyed or penned in their harbours, and the commerce destroyers that issued from her ports would one by one be captured, and American seamen would languish in foreign prisons.

Nor do our coasts lie contiguous to any of the great commercial routes, except those leading to our own ports, and to these in time of war no enemy's ship would think to come.

The case might be altered were the Nicaragua Canal opened. Then our position would be as good as the position of France for harassing English commerce. But in that event foreign complications would necessitate the construction of an adequate fleet. Our splendid isolation would have ceased. Commerce destroying will no longer be even a plausible policy when we have anything to lose that is open to attack. Commerce destroying as the main object of a navy has been condemned by the experience of centuries. Every power that has adopted the policy has hurt herself more than she has hurt her enemy.

The English King Charles II. reversed the splendid naval policy of Cromwell. He decided in 1666 that commerce destroying 'would less exhaust England than fitting out such mighty fleets as had hitherto been

kept at sea.' Within a twelvemonth the Dutch Admiral de Ruyter sailed up the Thames and burned the shipping within sight of London.

In the Seven Years' war the French took many prizes, but one by one the privateers were captured till 25,000 French seamen lay in English prisons, and the French power was broken. They had captured 2,500 ships for the 1,000 that the English captured; but they held only 1,500 English seamen in prison. The French flag in 1760 was hardly to be seen at sea, while the English mercantile navy numbered 6,000 ships, and the annual captures were not more than 10 per cent. of the whole.

Commerce destroying has ever been the recourse of conscious weakness and the source of ultimate ruin. It was the knowledge of the preponderant strength of the British sea power which drove the Republican convention and, later, the great Napoleon himself into the course which led straight to destruction. When the strength and watchfulness of the ever-present British fleet foiled his plans of invasion and the disaster at Trafalgar demonstrated, what he as well as others knew, the supremacy of the English sea power, he turned his whole energies to the destruction of English commerce. England's prosperity depended on her commerce, and England was the carrier of the world. Her ships must pass to London within sight of French harbours, and French privateers captured in the long twenty years' conflict thousands of English ships and won a booty of twenty or thirty millions sterling.

Yet the total loss to England was never more than 21 per cent. of her mercantile fleet afloat. This could not and did not affect the result of the great conflict. English trade expanded in spite of the losses. Her losses by capture were not much more numerous than her losses by ordinary sea risks. The loss was ruinous to the individual and irritating to the nation. But it could not bring down the strength of the conqueror.

French shipping disappeared from the seas and France eventually succumbed to the tremendous pressure to which she could offer no resistance save one which irritated but could not subdue her opponent.

THE WAR OF THE REVOLUTION.

During the War of Independence there was a great opportunity for commerce destroyers. The fleets of the opposing combatants, comprising those of France and Spain with our infantile navy, were nearly equal.

In the years of peace and consolidation of the conquered territories England had allowed her navy to decline. After 1760 the French had come to realise the fatal influence of her naval policy; and then they began to build vessels in every dockyard and arsenal.

The French activity was too late to influence the result of the Seven Years' War, for France was even then beaten. But the ship-building, wisely directed by clear-sighted Ministers,

continued during the peace, while England rested complacently on her laurels.

England's navy declined in strength, and when France came gallantly to succour the cause of American freedom the fleets were nearly equal in strength. With the addition of the fleet of Spain the opponents of England were greatly superior.

England was therefore forced to act on the defensive by sea as well as by land. Had it not been for the daring and the cleverness of the English admiral, the English fleet would have been swept from the sea. The English hardly dared to accept an open combat; but the traditional policy of the allies to avoid wasting their fleets in battle—the policy of subordinating the naval operations to military and political considerations—gave the English time.

Had the allies at the start forced the English fleet to fight it would have been destroyed. Then her commerce could have been annihilated. Then they might have struck at her heart by invading the 'inviolate isle.'

But they lost their opportunity, and the English naval struggle increased as the years of the war went on.

Great damage was done during the early years of the war to English mercantile shipping. The Channel swarmed with privateers. England could spare no ship to guard her commerce, and the privateers preyed unmolested.

As the years passed the greater naval resources of England began to tell. Her ships of war were more numerous, and some protection was afforded to the merchantmen.

During the whole war English privateers were equally active. The attention of the French and Spanish fleets was fully engaged watching the English fleet. French and Spanish commerce were the prey of the English commerce destroyers; and in the end the balance of destruction was nearly even.

The result of that war showed that commerce destroying is a valuable weapon of offence when the fleets engaged are nearly equal—an invaluable weapon when the commerce destroyers are backed by an invincible fleet.

The first condition of successful commerce destroying is the command of the seas. To the mistress of the seas all things are possible; to the inferior naval power an occasional depredation is all that is probable.

THE WAR OF 1812.

The war of 1812 is sometimes quoted in illustration of the advantages of commerce destroying and as a precedent to be followed. But the success in the early months of the war is an illustration only of the advantages of commerce destroying as a secondary operation or when the seas are not held by a superior force.

The declaration of war was delayed too long by the pacific policy of Jefferson. Napoleon was in his last extremities. The British fleet had

choked France and the end was in sight. Had war been declared earlier the consequences to England would have been very serious and her commerce on which her strength depended would have been ruined. But when she was freed from the contest with France it was only a question of time till her tremendous superiority at sea began to tell.

When the war broke out England had 230 ships of the line and 600 frigates and smaller vessels to our 18 vessels. It is true that ship for ship our vessels were better, were more heavily armed, were better sailed and better manned, but in a straight contest there was no doubt of the issue. Commerce destroying seemed to be the national policy, and it was the policy adopted. And at first at least it was a successful policy. Two hundred and nineteen English ships were captured in the first few weeks of the war, and rich prizes were brought into port.

But the success was due first to the fact that the declaration of war was unexpected, and second to the fact that notwithstanding the enormous superiority of the English fleet as a whole, our fleet, small as it was, was superior to the English fleet in American waters.

The great English fleet was tied up in the blockade of the ports in which the French fleets lay. In every harbour, from Antwerp to Venice, French ships of war or ships belonging to the allies of France lay ready to break out. The policy of England was to prevent them breaking out and thus to protect her commerce. It was a policy which was ultimately successful, although it tied up nearly every ship of war which England possessed. Great fleets cruised off the arsenals at Brest and Toulon, and small squadrons and single ships watched the lesser ports.

England had, so far as we are concerned, no fleet at her disposal. Had the authorities followed the desires of the officers of the navy, the English fleet in American waters would have been destroyed or driven away. But the ships were locked up in harbour, and despite their brilliant individual victories did little more than hold the English in check. Yet for the time being they were able to give an opportunity to the privateers and commerce destroyers.

Had the European war lasted longer and our naval policy been sounder they might have worked unheard-of depredations.

But when the English fleet was released our ships were no longer a match for the whole navy of England, and our commerce destroyers ran a short and precarious existence. Our ports were blockaded, our coasts were ravaged, and our cities burned. The Chesapeake was entered and the country ravaged. The Potomac was ascended and Washington was burned. The Mississippi was forced and New Orleans saved only by a miracle.

Our commerce destroyers continued their work. Single ships escaped to sea under cover of tempest or of darkness, and to the end continued to inflict damage on the enemy.

But with what result? The English were not beaten. They did not hold themselves as vanquished when the peace was signed, nor even as men who had been threatened with serious danger. They had lost a number of ships and had suffered in prestige, but they were not brought to their knees. They were not vanquished, and the end of war is victory, not annoyance.

The sum of the damage done was not even in total very great. We had 251 privateers at sea during the war, and the ships of the navy also captured many prizes. Yet in the end the balance of captures was not much in our favour. Not more than 2,500 ships were captured during the war, and of these 750 were re-taken before they reached our ports. The value of the captures and the cargoes was more than \$30,000,000.

But against our successes we must place the captures made by the English, which amounted to 1,323, leaving a balance of three or four hundred in our favour. We had more prisoners than the English took—but ours were largely merchant sailors; theirs were taken from privateers who were really our men-of-war-men.

This was the whole result of the policy of commerce destroying. We did not even achieve as much as the French had done—perhaps because our situation was not so good. Yet the conditions were favourable for