

and their escorts are subject to ceaseless attack by Axis aircraft flown from shore airfields. Only one thing can save them—protective fighters flown from carriers. From morning to night they are in the air, nearly always outnumbered, and repeatedly returning to their parent carrier for fuel and ammunition. And when their work is done they have to land on the deck of a ship steaming at full speed and with her stern lifting as much as 70 ft. Naval aircraft land from the signals of a deck-landing control officer or batsman, as he is called, who stands with arms outspread and braced against the wind, with bats like ping-pong rackets in his hands, or at night, lights; as the aircraft comes down he runs beside it, concentrating on making its pilot touch down on the exact spot where the arrester wires can catch it and bring it up in a few feet from 80 m.p.h. to a standstill. It is tremendously exciting. The moment it lands, the handling crews waiting in the galleries on either side of the long, flat deck, scramble up, in their wind-jackets and coloured wind-caps and race to the landing aircraft to hustle her out of the way or down to the hangar below before the next one lands. And, when on convoy, the pilots and air gunners tumble into their bunks or hammocks—they have to snatch what sleep they can, with boots clattering in the hangar overhead where the maintenance crews are servicing their aircraft—while loud-speakers blare, in straining, noisy ships constantly at the alert and in danger. And if they are on a Russian convoy in winter they have to live and work under conditions of cold and storm that no landsman can realize.

I have only time to speak of one other of the many jobs done by the men of the Fleet Air Arm. Of all our victories of the past year—more important even than North Africa and the invasion of Italy—probably the most important has been our success against the submarine. It is this which has made everything else possible—the arrival of American aid, communication between the Allies, the very life of this island. In 1940, after the European coast-line fell, our position at sea seemed almost hopeless. Our trade routes were out-flanked on every side. The only way we could protect our convoys was by catapulting aircraft from merchant ships to which there was not much hope of return. But late that year we captured a 5,000-ton German motor-ship, a fire-blackened hull, which we covered with a 400 ft. flight deck and rechristened the "Audacity." From that gallant little ship six Martlet fighters taught the world that with the help of small ships rebuilt as carriers the U-boat could be mastered in the very heart of the ocean. The "Audacity" went to the bottom of the Atlantic, but her soul and her work go marching on. To-day a great and growing armada of converted merchantmen equipped as escort carriers and carrying not only fighters but bombers armed with depth-charges, are teaching the German under-sea men what it is to challenge the resource and endurance of the Royal Navy. And by doing so, in conjunction with the escort ships and Coastal Command, they are not only giving us our daily bread, but creating that absolute command of the sea which is the only possible foundation of successful invasion of the Continent.

