

British people tended to forget that the Merchant Navy was the jugular vein of our nation, not so the Germans. Mindful of the near thing in 1917, the Nazis' war plans embodied an immediate all-out onslaught against British and Allied merchant ships and seamen. Commerce raiders and U-boats were already at sea when Great Britain and France declared war against Germany on September 3, 1939. Barely eight hours later U-boats claimed their first victim—the British liner "Athenia"—which was torpedoed without warning and sunk off the coast of Ireland with a loss of 127 lives. During the first four weeks U-boats sank thirty-four ships totalling 138,000 tons, the "Admiral Graf Spee" of inglorious memory sank another off the coast of Brazil, and enemy mines accounted for three more in British waters.

That was the beginning of Nazi Germany's total war at sea by means of which Hitler hoped to sever the jugular vein of the nation. U-boats, surface raiders, long-range bombers, contact mines, magnetic mines, acoustic mines, all were employed in ever-increasing numbers against the merchant ships of Great Britain, her Allies, and the few neutrals—the Merchant Navies which President Roosevelt, in another apt metaphor, described as the "life-line of democracy." Over and over again Mr. Churchill reminded us that we must regard the struggle at sea as the foundation of all efforts of the United Nations, and that if we lost that, all else would be denied to us. And it was Mr. Churchill who definitely assessed the depredations of the U-boats as a far graver menace to the British war effort than the great German air blitz on London and other British cities.

But nothing daunted the merchant seaman. None failed to sign on and take the ships to sea for fear of any devilish weapon the enemy would use against them. Again and again to the stormy North Atlantic, again and again to the wild ice-strewn routes of the North Russia convoys, again and again through "bomb alley" on the way to Malta, again and again on any voyage called for, he went unflinching. If there was any fear in his heart, it was not on his

own account, but dread of what Nazi bombers might do to his people at home. The veteran master of one New Zealand liner who was counting his last voyage before retirement under the age limit arrived out here to be greeted with a cable message telling him that his wife had been killed when their home was wrecked by a Nazi bomb. An engineer in another ship arrived in Wellington to learn that his wife and two children, his mother and father and two sisters had been killed during a German air raid.

From the beginning of this war to the end of 1943 the proportion of seamen hailing from the British Isles alone who have been lost at sea on their vital duty has been about one-fifth of the average number engaged in this service. The casualties suffered by the Merchant Navy in this war are more than double the number of the war of 1914-18. Up to August 31 of this year 29,629 British merchant seamen had lost their lives at sea through enemy action and 4,173 had been taken as prisoners. Thousands more sustained injuries of many kinds, and hundreds suffered from exposure and hunger and thirst while adrift in boats or on rafts. There is no available record of casualties suffered by the brave American, Norwegian, Danish, Polish, French, and Belgian merchant seamen who threw in their lot with us, but they number in thousands.

The number of British merchant ships lost from all causes to the end of 1943 totalled 2,921, Allied merchant vessels 1,937, and neutral ships some 900,

