

## Chapter Sixteen

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### TOMORROW'S NAVY

ON May 8, 1950, Her Majesty the Queen graciously performed the launching ceremony that put into her native sea the latest, finest unit of the Royal Navy: H.M.S. *Ark Royal*—the fourth of her name to carry British colours afloat.

It was a thrilling event: a definite milestone in naval history; for as that keen keel cleft the Mersey waters, what might become the flagship of tomorrow's Navy was given a soul. Previously, this massive fabric had been inert and passive, a mere fabrication of steel and wood and a few other metals. She was still rough from her constructor's hands; but as the royal hand crashed the customary bottle of wine against her bows and the dog-shores were knocked away to permit her to slide down into the brisk tidal stream, life came to the ship, she quivered in her real birth-throes, and then, with tumultuous cheers bidding her welcome to her proper element,

tossed herself proudly and became a sea-fighter, and a nation's pride.

H.M.S. *Illustrious* was there at the launching, to form a grandstand for selected eye-witnesses—a notable company of stalwarts; men who had crewed the preceding *Ark Royal*, who were aboard her when she was so deplorably sunk in the Second World War, though, God be thanked, with practically no loss of life. And *Illustrious's* guns fired a salute to the newcomer—twenty-one guns in all—to welcome her to the noble sisterhood of aircraft carriers on which our future at sea may well depend.

H.M.S. *Eagle*, launched from the same ways some time before, sent a special signal which ran: "Be a good girl and you will soon be big enough to come and play with us!"

Yes, it was a memorable occasion. A perfect launching, without hesitation or uncertainty, as if the Queen's benediction had brought good fortune to the latest addition to our sea-strength; the almost countless vessels in the Mersey blowing their frantic sirens in welcome to their gallant sisterhood, bunting flying, bands playing; here was most certainly a royal occasion, and the hearts of all those who beheld the wonderful spectacle of life being communicated to the once inert construction, must have throbbed as mine did, as, I venture to swear, the Queen's did.

The launching of such a contribution to naval strength is momentous. To some extent, it marks a new era in sea history; the vindication of those who believe that the Royal Navy's future lies equally in the air and on the seas, those seas our keels have braved for a thousand years and more. No wonder the air seemed crazy with clamorous

delight! No wonder the bands played their most tuneful airs! no wonder the cheers rang like thunder along the Mersey foreshore! Who knows? It may be that a day will come when the honour of Britain will be in the keeping of the new *Ark Royal*, the lineal successor to the gallant *Illustrious* whose fortunes we have followed in this book.

Ships age and decay, even the wonder-ships of today; and yet, when the proud bones of *Illustrious* are laid to their final rest, I believe fervently that *Ark Royal's* pennant will still be flying proudly in proof that our country continues mistress of the sea and, since the swing of events demands it, of the air as well.

*Ark Royal's* builders and the First Lord of the Admiralty declared her to be "the most up-to-date aircraft carrier in the world." Cammell Laird were responsible for her building to Admiralty design, and they must be a proud firm today. *Ark Royal* is the first of a new class of carrier, though her sister-ship, commenced at a later date, was launched first. Seven good years elapsed between the laying of her keel and this supreme day of her launching, but the fact of her completion bears out the belief that the aircraft carrier is the warship of tomorrow.

After she was serenely afloat, giving no more trouble than a salvage tug, Her Majesty conveyed to the builders and the high dignitaries of the Admiralty and the Royal Navy the King's greetings, congratulations and good wishes, and added that though it was His Majesty's fervent hope that the new ship might never be required to take part in any future war, if she were so compelled, every confidence was felt that she would worthily uphold the traditions of her predecessors.

May 3 was probably Merseyside's proudest day. There

were 50,000 spectators to watch that memorable launching; the occasion went off without a single hitch; forty aircraft saluted the newcomer in a spectacular fly-past, and exhilaration was everywhere. No unit of the Royal Navy has ever been sent afloat under happier auspices; and everyone witnessing the picturesque ceremony prayed, as I did, that nothing but good fortune would attend her on all her occasions, whatever they might be.

*Ark Royal* took the water with all her main turbines, propelling machinery and boilers ready sited on board; and established a record for the weight of a newly launched ship of war. Although only slightly longer than the previous *Ark Royal*, launched from the same slipway in 1937, she is almost double that forerunner's displacement, and infinitely superior in speed and range of action, thanks to her engine-power and bunker capacity. Her armament, especially the anti-aircraft guns—is superior, and she is in a position to cope with practically any emergency that might befall her. To say that she is unsinkable, may be to stretch the point too far; no ship is that; but *Ark Royal* is as nearly immune from such disaster as human ingenuity can make her.

There was a ceremonial lunch, naturally enough, to welcome the new entry; and Her Majesty took that opportunity to recall the histories of the three preceding *Ark Royals*. Lord Howard of Effingham used the first of this name as his flagship when he defeated the great Spanish Armada in 1588. *Ark Royal III* gave the Germans a savage headache in the Second World War; they reported her as sunk almost every other day; but she survived to bewilder them for quite a long time; and her final fate lacked nothing in glory.

And so, some two years hence, this scientific monster

will be fully commissioned and in service, most probably as flagship of the Home Fleet—one of the proudest rôles a ship can assume. She will be able to operate all the new types of aircraft that might be forthcoming in the foreseeable future, as the First Lord of the Admiralty proudly stated, when adding his blessing to that of the King and Queen. And that prophecy includes all the supersonic possibilities of jet propulsion, don't forget.

And what will she find to do when she is not required to make war on an enemy? Watching her proud launching set me thinking about her future occupation. There was the ship, as up-to-the-minute as human ingenuity could make her. Her highly trained crew would be forthcoming once she was formally handed over to the Senior Service, specialists to a man. Here is a noble warship that has cost a fabulous amount of money even thus far along in her construction. She is capable of waging a naval war almost single-handed. All the experience gained through the years since aviation commenced to play so vital a part in naval strategy, has been included in her construction. Compared with this last namesake of one of the most famous ships ever to hoist English colours, even H.M.S. *Illustrious*, despite her modernity, is almost a back number. At a time when surface battleships are being relegated to the Reserve or sent to the scrap-heap, this new carrier is taking the sea; and since my Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty are very wise men, there must be a purpose behind it all.

She answers all the old arguments about the comparative value of the carrier as weighed against the super-dreadnought class of fighting vessel—by her completion she stands advertised as the capital ship of tomorrow.

She will primarily be used as a superior training-ship.

not merely for beginners, but also for those whose knowledge of naval tactics and strategy is various and of a high order. For, in the days of peace, a Navy is always preparing for war, that being its rôle. Not that war with a great Power is imminent, it is to be hoped. And yet, the international situation is so delicate, so hair-balanced, as it were, that the idea of conflict is not so remote as to be ignored altogether. The recent occurrence where a United States aircraft was shot down in the Baltic, a tragedy in which Russia has certainly involved herself in a share of guilt, would, a century or so ago have set all the world Powers at each other's throats in a desperate death-grapple, terrible world-scorching possibilities. But statesmen were more impulsive, hotter-headed than now; and, too, the arbiters of human destiny of that period—and before—had no conception of the cumulative horrors that can arise from war waged on the scale of this present day. A professional Navy and a professional Army did the fighting work, usually in far-distant arenas; and this country of ours felt little of the grim shock of armed conflict. But now, according to the doctrine of total war, everybody is concerned; there is no chivalry—as was accorded to Sir Richard Grenville when the Spaniards offered him all the honours and courtesies of war after his gallant ship, the *Revenge*, had borne the brunt of a wholesale attack by a vast, overwhelming force.

Women, old people, little children, all are menaced by the fiery terror of tomorrow's warfare; and it is this knowledge that teaches patience and tolerance to such as hold the reins of government in their hands.

Yet, even so, despite the most fervent belief that war, as an arbiter, is a great fallacy, something may reasonably happen that necessitates this final recourse to a trial of

strength. For a foreign Power to cut off an imprisoned seaman's ear has resulted in a long, destructive campaign before now.

So H.M.S. *Ark Royal* and her sister ships of the carrier class, will make themselves ready to fight to the death in the unfortunate contingency of a new war breaking out. But the training of all ranks and ratings will be carried out unostentatiously, so as to cause no provocation to "touchy" foreigners, who might see a defiant challenge in any obvious activity of a warlike nature. Peaceful cruises, training cruises, will be the order of the day—and the crews will be taught, and inspired, to make themselves as perfect in their allotted tasks as can be.

From captain down to last-entered boy, everyone aboard will be on their toes. Let us run through a brief crew-list of those who go to make up the complement of such a ship—which, as I have said, differs only in a small degree of modernized perfection from H.M.S. *Illustrious*, taken thus far as a model ship of tomorrow's Navy.

First, then, the captain—sure to be a senior naval officer of outstanding distinction; a man high up on the Captains' List, with every prospect of Flag rank, and possibly, later rank as Admiral of the Fleet and Commander-in-Chief.

Like the captain of the *Illustrious*, he holds the final controlling influence over all aboard. Only in matters of the gravest importance does he ask advice and instruction from his superiors—that is, if he is working independently, as so often happens, both in peace and war. Some part of his duties has already been described. He acts as judge—and jury—when dealing with such major defaulters as the commander deems needful of his wise judgment. To have your name included in the Captains'

List—unless as a request man, of course—is a great disgrace for a rating. But any boy or man who is brought before him on trial for an offence, can be sure of one thing: eminent fairness of treatment. Captains are no longer iron-souled tyrants with a sadistic desire to inflict pain on any and every occasion. A change from the bitter, savage days of Captain Bligh, of *Bounty* fame! Not that the captain is too soft-hearted with regular defaulters. He understands human nature about as much as any layman can. He can size up a culprit at a glance, and realize if he is a bad egg or just a temporary unfortunate. True, the commander, the next senior executive officer, has already weighed the evidence for and against the wrongdoer; and has probably had a quiet, informal chat with the captain about the list of cases needing his attention; but the captain has the final word, unless the offence brought to his notice is too serious for his handling; in which case he sends the papers to the admiral, who may well insist on a court-martial being held. But the commoner shipboard offences, such as overstaying shore-leave, or petty pilfering, or generally insubordinate conduct on board, can be dealt with by this sage, experienced officer; and it is seldom indeed that any offender questions his final ruling; though he can always appeal against it and insist on facing a court-martial. And a naval court-martial is a most impressive business, believe me.

It is usually not long after "Colours" on one appointed day per week that the captain proceeds from his cabin, where he has breakfasted in lonely state, to the seat of judgment. The master-at-arms has the delinquents lined up in order. The proceedings don't take long, unless very serious cases are brought forward.

The commander has himself dealt with the trifling

breaches of ship conduct. He has punishing powers, but generally he requires the captain's approval of the light sentences—such as stoppage of liberty—that he has imposed. A warship at sea must be maintained in the highest state of efficiency and discipline; and it is the commander's business to see that this is so—he is the captain's right-hand man, his "best bower," whose aim and object it is to keep his superior from being fretted by comparatively trifling affairs, thus imposing too heavy a strain on an already over-loaded brain.

There are occasionally grave offences to be adjudicated upon, of course. Drunkenness is one. If a man goes ashore and in course of pleasure-seeking, gets intoxicated, he may be arrested by the picket and returned on board his ship by a selected guard, and there put into "the brig" as the ship's prison cells are familiarly called. I have seen men returned aboard in a desperate condition, so much so that it has been necessary to put them into irons until they sober off sufficiently to see the error of their ways; and when this happens, the sentence imposed on such defaulters is not by any means a light one—deservedly so. For an intoxicated man can create an enormous amount of trouble in the narrow confines of a ship.

Perhaps the sentence for such an offence might have been a spell of shot-drill, to sweat the poisonous alcohol out of the culprit's system; or a few extra fatigues. Some executive officers with a sense of humour make the punishment fit the crime, and so cause the delinquent to appear ridiculous in the eyes of his shipmates.

But, as I have said, the justice of a warship of 1950 is not heavy-handed and callous; and, thanks to the increasing sobriety and good behaviour of warships' crews, extreme penalties are not often called for. As often as not

a good, man-to-man "pi-jaw" does the trick; the defaulter is made to be thoroughly ashamed of himself, no animosity is borne; and it is up to himself to redeem his character by future flawless behaviour.

It used to be the Navy's custom to hold divisions and prayers every morning; but now, attendance at Divine Service is optional, and, as I saw aboard *Illustrious*, in this case everything depends on the chaplain. If the chaplain is prevented from taking the daily service, the captain usually deputizes for him—especially on Sundays, when Captain's Inspection is carried out. This inspection is another of the commanding officer's regular duties. It is very thorough indeed. The captain usually arms himself with a brand-new handkerchief, which he flicks into the corners usually overlooked, to see if he can discover even the faintest traces of grime.

Another of the captain's daily duties is to receive reports from the various heads of departments—including the surgeon-commander, who, with his juniors, has the health of the crew in his keeping. Each day the senior surgeon presents his Daily States, showing how many of the officers and men are sick, how many who have been sick are ready for duty. It is essential for a captain to know just how his crew is faring so far as health is concerned, as the fighting efficiency of the ship depends on the amount of sickness involved. Thanks to modern hygiene and sanitation, the sick-lists are usually brief. But accidents do happen, especially in a modern carrier, and the work of the surgeon is not a sinecure.

Another very important person to report to the captain is the senior engineer—"the chief" or commander (E)—usually an engineer-commander. He is responsible for the work and discipline of all ratings and officers who are

concerned with the machinery; and this machinery is yearly growing more important and more complicated. The engineer-commander is responsible for the fresh water used day by day—most of it is condensed from the boilers. Since an average big ship of carrier-type uses up as much as two hundred tons of water daily, its making is a consideration. Indeed, it has been known for an engineer-commander—in collaboration with the chief shipwright, who is actually the "chippy-chap" or carpenter—to issue strict orders against the too free use of the bathrooms and wash-houses, where "dhobying" is conducted, as well as the cleaning of the human personnel themselves.

A captain has to be informed, and especially at sea, of the amount of fuel expended during the previous twenty-four hours, and the bulk amount remaining in the bunkers. It is the senior engineer's duty to keep him apprised of this state of affairs.

But, to enumerate all the responsibilities and duties of the hundreds of responsible officers and under-officers would make this book as big as the *Encyclopædia Britannica* in its old editions!

There are the reports from the flying personnel to be taken into account: the progress made in training, the quality and condition of the aircraft included in the ship's flight, to say nothing of the experimental models that are incessantly being tried out. The navigational staff have their own problems, too—for the captain's final approval, or the reverse; there are charts—open and secret—to be revised and studied with the closest attention, so that intricate details of half-forbidden waters can be committed to memory—as the gallant commander of H.M.S. *Amethyst* did when bringing that heroic, much-

battered frigate down to safety along the perilous waters of the Yangtze River.

In the event of war, an enemy would do his best to shatter the "brain" of the ship, which is the conning-tower, where secret charts are kept; if an unlucky hit sets this section afire, only the photographic memories of the "pilots" are to be relied on to extricate the hampered warcraft from her dilemmas.

Thus the chain of command continues from the captain—or the admiral himself, if this new wonder-ship be appointed flagship of a fleet—down to the lowest rating; and even this latter has a certain responsibility to assume; and if he fails in his duty, the whole interlocked organization, as precise and beautiful as the works of a watch, might well fail at a critical test.

A prime factor in the future career of the *Ark Royal* is the work of her builders. Shipwrights pride themselves on achieving perfection in their output. House building, shore-engineering, even the construction of important bridges might allow a margin for error; not so the construction of a first-rate warship of tomorrow. Pride of craftsmanship has always dominated our shipbuilders. Exquisite precision in all details comes as a matter of course. There is no section of our working manhood that can outstrip these specialists in honest endeavour; this quality of perfection is inculcated in them from the first days of their apprenticeship; and right worthily do they maintain it, come what might. British shipbuilding is unrivalled anywhere in the world. Our ships have proved it repeatedly, holding together despite the most frantic attacks and the fiercest explosions out- and in-board. Miraculous stories of survival can be told; and they shall be told in the not far-distant future.

So now the new *Ark Royal* has taken the sea, after Her Majesty had broken the accepted bottle of wine on her bows—and in so doing carried on a custom that dates back to the days of the Phœnician voyagers, who spilt a virgin's blood on their new triremes and longships, by way of wedding them to their natural elements—she did so in high pride of perfection, both as to ship and crew alike. Once fitted-out and commissioned, she will carry on the intensive training as followed by her elder sisters—*Illustrious*, *Implacable* and the like; always striving to achieve that fighting perfection which is the Royal Navy's hallmark, and which is, thank God, our surest shield against oppressors or would-be world-dictators. It is not too much to say that H.M.S. *Ark Royal* is, in very truth, the key to international freedom: for if war does come she will be found in the front line, doing sterling duty in the best interests of ultimate peace, when the devil may expect to be chained for a thousand years and the nations of all Christendom be permitted to live together in harmony.

Not that life in tomorrow's Navy is likely to be all work and no play. There is no man alive who so much appreciates a rollicking lark as our jolly Jack 'Tar. He likes his creature comforts; and canteens and various supply organizations work together as a perfect team to guarantee this. Tomorrow's Navy will be well fed; the catering staff will see to that. The time of rotten, stinking salt-horse and weevily biscuit is long since past, may the hygienic gods be praised! A case of scurvy in a King's ship is today unknown—though not so long ago, as naval history goes, it was no uncommon thing for half a ship's company to be incapacitated by the dread disease. Ample refrigerating space, prime viands, skilled ship-cooks—and the old-

fashioned "hash spoiler" is as extinct as the dodo—combine together to fill Navy Jack's stomach with the best the earth can supply. No longer do pillaging "pusser" rob the men of their just deserts to line their own pockets; the system of feeding a company is as meticulously perfect as is her navigation and her behaviour under the assaults of a merciless enemy.

Such as are privileged to sail amongst the crew of this newest wonder-ship will live the life of Riley. If I were a boy again, I'd ask nothing better than to enlist in that band of brothers, well knowing that all the romance, colour and adventure of a thousand years of glowing sea-history awaited me.

A good ship, a good crew, a good service, what more could heart of eager boy demand? The new aircraft carrier carries within her hull all the proud traditions, and all the hope of glory that our sea-beating years have created and promised. Could more be said?

Yes, a few words more. The daily issue of grog will continue aboard this latest keeper of the seas, as it has done since Admiral Vernon. "Old Grogan," first instituted it as a means of keeping scurvy at bay a couple of hundred years ago. The age-old ceremony of the grog issue is an institution of naval life that promises, despite the protests of the abolitionists, to go on so long as the saucy White Ensign continues to brave the battle and the breeze. And yet, though the lower deck is supplied with a tot of heartening rum at one bell in the forenoon watch, the wardroom and gunroom share no such jealousy guarded privilege. The officer element pays for its own liquid refreshment—on a reduced scale, it is true, as compared with such as live ashore, for duty-free liquor is permitted aboard commissioned ships—a small enough

privilege for men whose duty makes heavy demands on their physique and mentality. I am no total abstainer, because I hold to the opinion that a little stimulus of the alcoholic sort does no one any harm, so long as it is kept within bounds of moderation. I have seen men so exhausted with sea-fighting that they could no longer stand fetched back into vigorous action by the drinking of a quick, strong tot of rum. It may safely be said that a swig of alcohol has, indeed, saved many a ship from destruction.

But with a free issue of rum denied to the after-guard, certain old established firms make it a point of keeping the wardroom wine cellars well plished with creature comforts. In my seagoing days we used to say that the Service worshipped twin gods—Saccane and Speed! I hold no brief for these caterers, but I cannot conclude this homely story of the Royal Navy without paying a small tribute to their efficiency through a great period of time. All over the world, from Portsmouth to New Zealand, they have functioned as suppliers of wines and spirits to the Royal Navy, until they are almost as closely allied with the Service as the preventer fore-stay of H.M.S. *Victory* down there in her safe moorings at Portsmouth. I have had many good causes to call down blessings on the heads of this firm's directors—for no minor difficulties of war or peace have ever caused them to neglect the ships in which I have served, big or small. Surprising obstacles have been overcome in pursuit of this leal and useful service; and the commissioned officers of a century and more have reason to be thankful that their wants have been so generously and diligently supplied. They don't need any advertisement from me; ask any member of a naval mess to accord the laurels, and such praise is certain to be forthcoming.

My Lord's Commissioners might work religiously to make certain of the Navy's efficiency in peace and war; may show an almost prophetic instinct in having our warships at the right place at the right time in the right number; but when fighting is over, and stormy seas are beaten, the little drop of liquid comfort so well earned by the Navy is a matter that counts exceedingly in the minds and hearts of those privileged to secure it.

So H.M.S. *Ark Royal* has taken to the element for which she has been so thoughtfully designed; and she carries with her not only the high responsibility of maintaining hoary, glorious traditions, but also the prestige of the uncertain future, which is loaded with such vast import to human-kind. Be sure she will worthily carry on her exacting, her vital service. I was not exaggerating when I said that she stands as the key to world-freedom: her future actions—the result of careful, earnest and enthusiastic training—may well swing the scales of fate in such a direction as to win the final victory that may result in permanent peace.

God bless her and send her safe voyaging, wherever her lines are cast!

THE END