

# SOME THOUGHTS FROM SEA

BY

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Shortly after joining H.M.S. *Newcastle* some time ago I received a suggestion that I might feel able to contribute an article to the *Journal* based on my experiences as the Engineer Officer of a cruiser. Bearing in mind the number of officers who, in their day, have served as Chief of a cruiser and the fact that most of them have already had their say, my first impression was that there was nothing more to add. There can be little of technical importance that has not been reported and considered officially already, and items of general interest are sufficiently described in the 'Notes from Sea'. The daily routine of life on board allows little time for forming observations of a general nature. At the moment of leaving a ship, however, one feels an urge to make some comment.

My first impression after five continuous years ashore was 'how quickly it all comes back'. My last is 'how quickly one can forget again'. Now that sea-going appointments have become less frequent, the speed with which one can lose touch with practical realities is a very real danger, not only to the Engineering Branch, but to the Navy as a whole. If this applies to peace time sea-going, how much more is it true of war experience! To the rising generation even the youngest officer with war experience must seem to be an old fogey, whose hazy and unreliable recollections are clearly inapplicable to conditions of the future. It is nevertheless necessary for the old fogey to continue to plan for the future, in the light of past experience.

More attention is, very properly, nowadays being given to the question of maintenance. My recollections of the last war are that, so far as small ships were concerned, in the early days there were not enough, so they just had to keep going, and later on, when there were enough, the end of the war was in sight and they were regarded as expendable and consequently were not refitted unless it was absolutely essential. In my own experience, it is very rarely that machinery breaks down of its own accord. It is the men who fall over first. The bearing melts, not due to an inherent defect, but because it is short of oil or the sump is full of water. The boiler primes because the evaporator has been turning out bad water and no one has noticed. A serious breakdown is generally the outcome of accumulated neglect on the part of a chain of people, any of whom could have caught it in time if he had been sufficiently alert. In deciding the 'availability factor' for a ship in time of war, perhaps we should first decide how many days a month a man requires in harbour to enable him to remain reasonably efficient while he is at sea, and then plan our machinery maintenance to suit this number of days. In the last war, boiler cleaning provided a respite for all except the Engineering Department and even for them this period usually afforded some relaxation from strain. Now that the permissible steaming hours have been so greatly extended, it is more than ever necessary that regular intervals should be provided for the maintenance of the machinery and the rehabilitation of the men.

A fallacy, directly attributable to the forgetfulness which overtakes officers who find themselves employed ashore, is their belief that there is little to do at sea. Their fancy conjures up a happy progression of forenoons drinking gin, followed by afternoons spent in repose. It is true that life on board contains a number of items such as Captain's Rounds, Requestmen and Defaulters, Divisions, Church and ship's sporting fixtures, participation in any, or all, of

which can be evaded by the Engineer Officer without causing undue comment but it is only by taking part and showing an interest in all that goes on, that one comes to be accepted as part of the community. It follows therefore that an appreciable amount of work has to be done after dinner and at other odd times. Watchkeeping officers are even more fully occupied by watches, days on, departmental and divisional work and games. It is all the more to their credit that they manage to take on so many additional activities. No one, however, can do his job properly by attending to it only during normal working hours. It is appreciated that to keep the Engineer-in-Chief's Department in touch with practical seagoing matters, many reports must be called for from ships, but requests for information should be kept to a minimum and expressed as unambiguously as possible. I would personally prefer that such requests should normally be made through official channels as this naturally tends to limit their number and to ensure precision in their drafting. Semi-official letters on an 'old boy' basis create an extra burden of work, unrealized either by their writers or by the powers that be. Replies to such letters can rarely be quoted officially and, if the information supplied is of any value, it is usually necessary to follow up with an official letter of enquiry and an official reply before use can be made of it.

What is the general opinion of the new titles for engine room ratings? As might be expected, they have been the subject of considerable good-humoured chaff between members of the Engineering Department and other parts of ship. At football matches the cry is still 'Come on the Stokers'. 'Up the Engineering Mechanics' does not sound so good. The ratings themselves have accepted the changes without much comment. They feel that their titles may sound more dignified, but that the basic nature of their work remains unaltered. Older ratings agree that the new names should have a greater recruiting pull but the mechanics still take pride in the fact that they joined as stokers. Perhaps a new title is now required for the mechanics themselves. Engine room artificers feel that the term 'engineering mechanic' implies a higher degree of training and skill than is actually possessed by such a rating. To attract and retain engineering mechanics, their work must be made as technically interesting as possible, but care will also be necessary to avoid discouraging the entry of artificer apprentices.

And what of the men themselves? Still good stuff, even if they do marry earlier and leave the Service sooner. A smaller proportion than formerly comes from the Home Ports and many of the shore jobs available are away from these ports. Once married therefore, there is a tendency for them to go outside at the first opportunity in order to obtain employment in their home town, or in the town of the girl they have married. An appreciable number of engine room artificers marry Scots lassies they met during their training in *Caledonia*. This raises an additional problem. Are they to transplant their wives to their Home Port or to their own native town? In one case the girls will be away from all home links, in the other, they will be left for much of their time with only their husband's relatives for company, an arrangement that does not always work. So an additional strain is thrown on the marriage and an additional incentive to leave the Navy is created.

These scattered thoughts seem a pretty slender bunch for eighteen months at sea, but they are those which have come first to mind and if not written down now, are unlikely to be put down at all. I have thoroughly enjoyed my time at sea and the sense of that wider companionship which one feels in a ship, although I too am not altogether insensible to the call of family and now look forward to the prospect of returning 'to enjoy the blessings of the land'.

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