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Lieutenant P. Kekewich R.N.

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AN ACCOUNT OF THE STRANDING AND RE-FLOATING OF THE ITALIAN CRUISER "SAN GIORGIO."

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By Lieutenant P. KEKEWICH, R.N.

COMMANDED by Captain A. Cacace, and flying the flag of Rear-Admiral V. Cagni, commanding the Second Division of the First Squadron, the cruiser "San Giorgio" went ashore on the evening of November 21st on the coast near Cape Peloro in the Straits of Messina, close to Saint Agatha. The ship was proceeding from Reggio in Calabria to Naples.

Admiral Cagni and Captain A. Cacace are two of our most able officers. The former is widely known and highly esteemed in recognition of his great accomplishments and exceptional merits, and Captain A. Cacace has quite lately confirmed in Libya his reputation as an excellent sailor and able tactician.

It is easy hastily to assign a reason for such an accident, but one should be careful in condemning anyone and in influencing public opinion. We say this, for the work which has been done towards re-floating the "San Giorgio" deserves very high praise, though of course it has been considerably facilitated by the short distance which separates the stranded ship from the shore. To quote a report from a pilot, the first information which came to hand: "We will mention two other spots, suitable as anchorages, to the south of Cape Peloro, one close to the shore of Saint Agatha, slightly to the north-east of the conspicuous fort of Saint Martin, about 2.7 miles from the Cape, the other. . . . A ship lying in this anchorage should lay out her anchors parallel to the shore, for otherwise the anchors will drag when the wind turns to the west." This shows how the coast can be approached with safety to within a very short distance on account of the steepness with which it shelves.

The re-floating operations are in charge of Admiral Cagni. The Ministry has given him every possible facility, but the operations must take several days, as it is necessary to lighten the ship considerably.

In the meanwhile, an enquiry has been ordered to be carried out by Vice-Admiral Amero, Commander-in-Chief of the second squadron.

The Grounding of the "San Giorgio" in the Straits of Messina.

Messina, 22nd.—Another serious accident has befallen our Royal Navy. Yesterday evening, 21st, when the cruiser "San Giorgio" was proceeding through the Straits of Messina at about 16 knots, and had arrived off the beach of Saint Agatha, close to Ganzirri, she went ashore, running up for about a hundred metres of her length; that is as far as the after funnel.

The grounding took place at 6.30 p.m., while it was yet quite light.

Considering the perfectly calm sea and the spring-like clearness of the atmosphere, it is difficult to conjecture the cause of such an accident. The vessel is stranded at a distance of about 25 metres from the beach, bows on, and with her ram about five metres above water and heeling over slightly.

On the spot are the armoured cruiser "Ferruccio," which arrived to-day, the destroyer "Perseo," the tender "Roma," the "Audax" of the Salvage Service, the "Salvator," "Vindex," and other smaller vessels that are to assist in the salvage operations. The re-floating operations are under the direction of Rear-Admiral Cagni, who was on board the "San Giorgio" in the capacity of Commander of the Second Division of the First Squadron. They started to lighten the vessel at 5 p.m., by placing the ammunition in lighters, while waiting for other vessels of the squadron before attempting to re-float the ship.

The "San Giorgio" is commanded by Captain Cav. Adolfo Cacace. She came from Taranto, and had been lying off Reggio, Calabria, for two days, whence she had sailed on the 21st at 5.30 p.m., an hour before she went aground.

Within the memory of man no vessel of war has gone ashore in the Straits, least of all on the shore of Saint Agatha, which is but little exposed to the current.

As it is not yet possible to discover the exact cause of the stranding, any supposition can but be mere guess-work.

Messina, 23rd.—From the investigations carried out by the divers, it is discovered that the "San Giorgio" lies with one portion of her starboard side on a sandbank and part of her port side on a bank, which is called by our seamen "Marmorino."¹ There are two holes, one of which is about two metres in length. They continue to get out the coal into lighters, and those foremost water-tight compartments which were flooded are being repaired.

¹ A deposit of limestone.

The "Filiberto" and the torpedo boat "Orione" arrived to-night to assist in the re-floating. Vice-Admiral Leonardi Cattolica was on board the latter, and on his arrival he at once repaired on board the "San Giorgio." They are expecting the "Brin," "Dandolo," and several tugs and destroyers. A lighter capable of lifting 150 tons has left Taranto, and a tank fitted with a pump has left Naples, both probably arriving to-morrow.

The "Roma," of the Servizi Marittima, after trying to tow her off, and parting several cables, has left for this port.

As far as can be learnt at present, the accident is attributed to the fact that the navigator, Lieutenant Degli Uberti, heard a blast which he attributed to a steamer which was ahead of them and would have meant, "I am altering course to starboard," a manoeuvre that would have been fatal to the vessel. It seems that the whistle was that of a steam-tram going from Ganzirri to Messina.

Messina, 24th.—The work of removing the superstructures of the "San Giorgio" progresses apace. Parties are starting on the work of dismounting the turrets of the 254 mm. guns and the midship turrets. The repair ship "Vulcano" has supplied the men to assist in the work of lightening the stranded vessel. Forward, three divers take it in turns to go down to examine the hull, while the firm of Miloro, with powerful shears, is employed in taking off the hoods of the 180 mm. turrets.

As a total result of yesterday's work, the "San Giorgio" was lightened by about 140 tons weight, and they state that it is necessary to remove a few more thousand tons before the work of re-floating can be started.

From official sources it seems certain that at the moment of grounding Rear-Admiral Cagni and Captain Cacace were on the bridge. The navigating officer was Lieutenant Degli Uberti, and the officer of the watch Lieutenant Gamberini.

It is stated to-day that the grounding was due to the fact that the order for the alteration of course was not given at the correct moment when rounding Cape Faro; others say that an abnormal variation of the compass occurred at that moment.

Yesterday's arrivals were the battleship "Vettor Pisani" and several destroyers, all of which have been put under the orders of Rear-Admiral Cagni to assist in the re-floating.

Messina, 25th.—The total extent of the damage has not yet been determined; but divers of the Salvage Company have repaired one of the principal holes by means of baulks of timber secured to the hull by wire hawsers and made watertight by a padding of canvas. The ship's own pumps are being used to keep her clear of water until more powerful means arrive.

The Work of Lightening the "San Giorgio."

Messina, 26th.—The work of lightening the "San Giorgio" is being carried out by the men of the firm of Miloro, who have at their disposal all the latest and best mechanical appliances and the necessary lighters. Already the two guns from the foremost turret have been dismantled, and the roof of the conning tower has been removed. It is calculated that up to now 1,000 tons of material have been taken out of the ship, including coal.

The "Audax," of the Societa Salvataggi, carries a dredging apparatus, to draw the sand from under the hull of the "San Giorgio," while the divers continue the work of stopping the existing holes. Further examination shows that the keel is buckled for an expanse of about five metres in length and three in breadth.

The divers from the dockyard of Naples arrived to-day.

During yesterday, Rear-Admiral Corsi and the captain of the "Varese" visited the ship. Yesterday the battleship "Brin" arrived, flying the flag of Vice-Admiral Amero d'Aste, also the Royal ships "Vulcano," "Titano," and "Ercole," which have taken on board the stores of the "San Giorgio." About 80 hands from the firm of Armstrong, at Pozzuoli, are employed in the work of lightening and re-floating the ship. A 150-ton crane, two tugs, and a supply of wire hawsers are expected from Taranto.

The Enquiry, Messina, 26th.—The Commission of Enquiry into the causes and reason for the stranding of the "San Giorgio" arrived yesterday. It is composed of Vice-Admiral Amero d'Aste, Vice-Admiral Presbitero, and Rear-Admiral Corsi. The Commission commenced its sittings at once, independently of the work of re-floating, in order that they may in no way delay the operations.

The condition of the "San Giorgio" does not change. Yesterday it was very rainy, to-day is cloudy, the sea is calm.

The Approaching Re-Floating.

Messina, 28th.—The latest news is most hopeful of the speedy salvage of the "San Giorgio."

Yesterday evening the two foremost 254 mm. guns were hoisted out by means of the 150-ton crane, the last of the trio being hoisted out after nightfall by illumination of electric light. Part of the reef which has pierced the skin and is holding the ship has been removed by blasting. From reliable intelligence, it seems that only one hole of uncertain size remains to be filled. The work of the divers, being carried on with feverish haste, has been largely concerned with the holes near the bows, and it is expected to get these repaired by the end of another day's work. My informant assured me that in

two or three days, if nothing unforeseen occurred, they would be able to attempt the re-floating. It would be carried out in the simplest manner. After the freeing of the bows, by the placing of caissons to lift the ship, availing themselves also of the rise of the tide and of the help of the torpedo craft and tugs now lying in the spacious waters of Saint Agatha, the ship would slip off as easily as she ran upon the fatal shore.

Cav. Antonio Serra, who worked with so much success to rescue the "San Giorgio" in her first accident, arrived last night from Rome. He has been sent by the Minister of Marine, and will remain while the operations are in progress.

This morning in the early hours there was some rain, which prevented the men from working on the upper deck; all hands were turned to work between decks, especially to the dismantling of the foremost turret. At 8.0 a.m. the big steam crane started to hoist out the midship turrets, which had been unriveted. The furnaces of the ship have been lit up once again.

The Condition of the "San Giorgio."

29th.—The two 254 mm. guns and one 190 mm. casemate gun were hoisted out and placed in the lighter "Bigà," Up to yesterday evening 1,100 tons had been taken out of the ship. The work of repairing the leaks in the skin proceeds. Weather fine. Forecast favourable.

Messina, 29th.—Despite the rainy weather the work of lightening the "San Giorgio" was re-started at 8 a.m. The divers proceeded at once with the clearing away of masses of seaweed and sand, which had been forced into the aperture made in the bows when the ship grounded. During yesterday's work the hood of the after turret, weighing 12 tons, and the last two remaining 190 mm. guns, weighing 45 tons, were hoisted out.

As soon as some more weight has been removed from the after part, Captain Cacace and Admiral Cagni propose to try to get the ship off with her own engines, and to anchor in this port (Messina). After all the holes have been securely stopped and the ship prepared for the passage, they hope to proceed to Naples.

Up to to-day the "San Giorgio" has been lightened by some 1,500 tons, including two 254 mm. guns, two 190-ton casemates, and the foremost 250 mm. turret.

The ship rests on the sandy bottom for about 40 metres of her length, the rest of the hull being quite clear of anything which will prevent her from being re-floated.

Messina, November 30th.—Already the "San Giorgio" is virtually afloat. All to-day the workmen have been removing some armour plates from the bow, and the divers have been repairing a leak found near the bows, which extends for about

fifteen metres; but, though an attempt at re-floating the ship would probably be successful, it would, in fact, not be tried if there were the slightest chance of failure.

The following is the plan of action: the "San Giorgio" will haul herself off the beach, with the help of anchors laid out near the stern, and using her own main engines. The "Benedetto Brin" will stand by ready for any emergency. The ship will remain at Messina for such time as may be necessary to put her in a condition ready for sea, when she will proceed to her destination.

To a question by Deputy Cavagnari on the subject of the re-floating of the "San Giorgio," the Minister of Marine replied in the following terms:—

"The cruiser 'San Giorgio,' at sunset on November 21st last, left the roads of Reggio to return to Naples, passing through the Straits. The captain of the ship intended to take advantage of the passage in doing a trial to train the stokers, and thus the speed was gradually increasing. The night was clear, the navigation was proceeding well.

The courses to be steered were laid off on the chart, and the spot at which the ship should alter from the first course to the second was determined by a bearing of the lighthouse at Point Pezzo, in Calabria.

The navigating officer, whose duty it was to observe the exact instant that the ship arrived on this bearing, mistook the lighthouse of Point Pezzo and observed instead the lighthouse of Cape Peloro, the extreme northern point of Sicily.

The captain, occupied in the meanwhile with avoiding the approach of steamers that were passing through to the south, did not immediately perceive the error of his subordinate; when, after he had passed the second steamer, not thinking he was so far on or so close to the Sicilian coast, he altered course; but it was already too late, and even though he reversed the engines and went astern, the ship ran upon the shore of Saint Agatha, as has happened to several steamers while making this passage.

Default: It appears to me there is; and I will submit for the sanction of the cabinet and the Sovereign the steps necessary to deal with the case; until after the careful examination of the results of the enquiry that I have ordered, I am neither able nor willing to give notice of them.

The ship will be salvaged, excluding any unforeseen circumstances, very shortly; we expect the news of it any day, but I preferred to sacrifice rapidity to certainty in the operations—and I can assure you that the reports appear to be very satisfactory.

The damage reported is much less than that incurred when she went ashore at Gajola, and in a few months the 'San Giorgio' will be repaired and ready once more to take her

place in our navy in a state of complete efficiency and none the worse for her accident.

The work of salvage, of lightening the ship, and of repairing the holes has been carried out with every care and all despatch. The smoothest running of the operation has prevailed, and even those who might at this time have felt the bitterness of the moment have shown a devotion to duty and a total absence of personal feeling which I have not seen equalled for years.

S. Cavagnari has asked me what steps I intend to take, what modifications I am going to introduce into the regulations to avoid the repetition of a similar disaster. I answer that I do not consider any change necessary.

The regulations in force already provide for all cases, and this second accident of grounding which has occurred to the 'San Giorgio' will remind each one of our seamen of the necessity of never relaxing the utmost care in all that applies to the navigation of our ships, in order that the error of one single man may at once be detected.

I am not going to seek excuses or show extenuating circumstances for the accident; and, as I have already said, I will first make my proposals to those whose duty it is to settle who was to blame, according to the amount of responsibility borne. I only say that those who are accustomed to "go down to the sea in ships" can always remember certain cases when collision or grounding has only been avoided by pure luck, even when they have exercised the greatest care in the performance of their duty."

S. Cavagnari replied shortly :—

"I beg to add that the accident to the 'San Giorgio' at Messina is in no way due to any flaw in the discipline, but to a fatal error. The strictest discipline has always been observed in our fleet, for discipline is the most essential requisite, whether it be the navy or mercantile marine."

The Final Stages.

All the four 254 mm. guns and the eight 190 mm. guns have been hoisted out, and several more armour plates removed.

Two vain attempts to tow the ship off were made on December 6th, but since that time the sea has become so rough that the ships standing by had to shift billet to Paradiso Road.

The Re-Floating.

(Official communication.) Messina, December 10th.—This morning at 11.10 a.m., the "San Giorgio" was got off under her own steam.

Two cylindrical caissons had been placed amidships and two at her bows yesterday, and at 11 a.m. to-day they were pumped out. The bow was thus raised and, the engines being put to full speed astern, the ship drew herself off the beach.

After weighing her anchors she proceeded under her own steam to Messina, where she will be refitted sufficiently to enable her to proceed to Taranto where she will be docked.

* • * * *

As a result of the inquiry Admiral Cagni and Captain Cacace have been placed on the unemployed list, while Lieutenants Uberti and Gamberini have been placed under open arrest.