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Friday, June 14th, 1895.

Captain Sir JOHN COLOMB, K.C.M.G., late R.M.A., in the Chair.

SUGGESTED LINES OF CONVOY IN WAR TIME, WITH A SCHEME OF COMMERCE PROTECTION.

By Lieut. W. C. CRUTCHLEY, R.N.R.,
AND
H. L. SWINBURNE, Esq.

SUGGESTED LINES OF CONVOY IN WAR TIME.

Lieut. W. C. CRUTCHLEY, R.N.R.

IN bringing forward before this audience the subject with which I am about to deal, I may premise my remarks by saying that I do not for one moment suppose that this subject—of the very highest importance as it is—has not received attention at the hands of the proper authorities. Speaking, however, as a shipmaster, I can confidently affirm that there is not a merchant vessel afloat whose master knows even of what nature is the scheme which has been formulated for the protection of his trade. Is he to travel in convoy, or is he to travel over prescribed routes, the safety of which will be secured by patrol, or has some other method been adopted by which his safety is to be secured? Again, is he to trust entirely to the war-ship for protection, or is he going to be asked to assist in protecting himself? If this latter, surely he should be told what he will be expected to do, and in what way and by what means he will have to do it. We see figuring in our Navy List a long string of vessels bearing the imposing, if somewhat long-winded, title of "Royal Naval Reserved Merchant Cruisers." Will anyone venture to assert that the gentlemen who command these vessels, or the owners to whom they belong, have any accurate idea of what their ships will be called upon to do when the demand for their utilisation arises? It may be urged that no plan of action can be formulated unless we just know who our enemy is. But that argument is fallacious. No single naval Power can harm us. But a combination of naval Powers might. Only one such combination is within the bounds of probability, and we all know what that combination is, and how powerful it would be. Consequently, it is necessary only for us to formulate such plan of action as will cover the contingency of our having to meet in hostilities a Franco-Russian alliance; it will then cover any eventuality that can possibly arise.

Before proceeding further, I would here like to touch briefly on a question which, though not an integral part of the subject with which I

am dealing, is one that is so closely connected with it that it demands reference. I refer to the question of insurance. It is my belief that under war conditions our trade will have to be carried on under a national guarantee, and my reasons for this belief are these. Our trade *must* be encouraged by Government, for if it is allowed to be hampered we shall be playing the enemy's game for him. Not only our food, but the raw material that supplies our industries *must* come into the country, as serious cessation of trade will injure our fighting power. Finally, if victorious, it is not we who will have to pay the bill. That will be met by the war indemnity that we should exact from our vanquished enemy. If defeated, "the subsequent proceedings will interest us no more," and the sum total for which we shall be bankrupt will only be slightly the greater. I allude to this question because, with a system of national insurance the control of trade under convoy will be rendered a much easier matter. In the old days there was always great complaint of the disobedience and bad behaviour of the masters of merchantmen sailing in convoy, and it is impossible not to believe that such complaint was well founded. Merchant skippers undoubtedly did not obey orders and carry out their instructions properly. Those who commanded fast sailing ships grew impatient at having to regulate their pace by that of the slowest sailing vessel, and frequently seized an opportunity to part company and trust for safety to their own heels. The slow sailers, on the other hand, knowing that their speed regulated that of the others, frequently took no pains to carry canvas as they should have done, and the consequence was that a very great deal of unnecessary friction was created, the task of the war-ships was made one of increased difficulty, stragglers were cut off by privateers, and heavy loss was entailed on the underwriters who had insured them. Now, if a system of national insurance were in vogue, this state of things would no longer be permitted, as it would be a condition that disobedience of orders would invalidate the contract. The disobedience of the shipmaster would be the loss of the shipowner, and the latter would most certainly convince the former of the absolute necessity of strict obedience to all orders issued from the officer in charge of the convoy. My excuse, then, for digressing to this topic is that if national insurance is to a greater or lesser extent adopted, it will probably render the system of convoy one best suited for, at any rate, the protection of our slow steam trade.

Assuming, then, that convoy will be required for the protection of some, at any rate, of our trade, I will divide our merchant ships into two classes: the fast steam trade, *i.e.*, with a sea-speed of 14 knots and upwards, and the slow steam trade, with a speed of less than 14 knots. Taking just the former, I am of opinion that convoy is not necessary for its protection. For it is evident that a fast ship can easily, and without unduly increasing mileage run, take, when in the open sea, such a diversified route as will ensure to her comparative safety, until such time as she converges into what must necessarily be the common track of ships, *i.e.*, on leaving her port of departure or approaching her port of destination. At these points she must expect to find safety. Take our home ports for

instance. If we kept clear of the enemy a radius of 60 miles from the Lizard, and a similar distance from the Smalls, we should keep open the entrances to the English, Bristol and Irish Channels. It would, moreover, be necessary to close with torpedo-boats the entrance to the latter between Cantire and Rathlin Island. If this were effectually done, then our trade could continue, even though our Eastern ports were suffering from a scarcity of shipping. Similarly, other localities would have to be protected, so that approach to our principal and foreign ports would be rendered as secure as possible. It is, moreover, essential that it should be well and widely known to all the ships in our fast steam trade where protection is to be found under the guns of a British war-ship. Here I may point out that there must be no mistake about the meaning of a sea-speed of 14 knots. It must be an average sea-speed, and a list of such vessels as have this sea-speed would be prepared whose performances at sea are taken from their own log-books. Many of these vessels are already subsidised, and their performances well known, and, at the risk of reiteration, I will again say that they should be placed in such a condition as would enable them to sink a similar enemy with an improvised armament.

Turning to the slow steam trade, we must seek a method for its protection by a system of strict convoy. It would be impossible for me within reasonable limits of length to deal with more than one, our principal, trade route. I will, therefore, confine myself to a consideration of the trade which finds its way past the two great Southern Capes, either coming into the Atlantic Ocean on its way to Great Britain, or requiring to be seen safely on its way down South. It is apparently the opinion of many of our leading naval experts that in the event of war arising between Great Britain and France, our route to the East through the Suez Canal would not be practicable for our commerce. They think that in view of the comparatively restricted line of this particular trade route, and the possession by France of so many effective points on the north coast of Africa, our ships would be exposed to such attack by torpedo-boats or otherwise all along the line in such a manner as to render the route entirely impracticable, at any rate until we had gained and held an absolute command of the sea. In the meantime our trade has to continue—we cannot afford to stop it, or even to have it materially checked; and it will, therefore, be necessary to devise means by which it may be diverted to such routes as we can effectively control. At the most we can only hope that the Suez Canal will be kept open for the transit of our war-ships, though this question will doubtless be largely influenced by the result of the first great naval battle, and it is, therefore, necessary only to consider the alternative route. In years to come the opening of the Panama Canal or Nicaraguan Water-way may put a very different complexion on this problem, but at present the consideration before us is the fact that 75 per cent., or more probably all, of the trade now passing through the Suez Canal will have to be diverted to the Cape of Good Hope or Cape Horn routes. Without going into detail with regard to figures, I will work on the assumption that seven vessels each day pass through the Suez Canal either way, and this cannot be considered an

excessive estimate, when we consider that it represents our traffic with China and the Eastern Seas, India, Australasia, and the East Coast of Africa. With the Canal once blocked by accident or otherwise; unless immediate steps were taken ships would run up the Red Sea and probably remain there for some considerable time with empty bunkers—in safety, perhaps, for doubtless we could hold the entrance, but none the less to all intents and purposes absolutely useless for our requirements. It must be borne in mind that vessels nowadays cut their bunker capacity to its very lowest limit, and that a margin of two days' coal is generally considered an ample allowance with which to reach a port. It is then permissible, perhaps, to ask what arrangements have been made for the diversion of this enormous traffic on the outbreak of a great war. To the audience I am now addressing it is unnecessary to point out what even seven vessels a day collecting in any roadstead means.

Assuming, then, that the route will be changed, the most vital point will be the question of coal. Even then many vessels at the commencement of the war will be stuck up in the Red Sea for want of this essential, as many vessels will have left port before the declaration of war, and will not have in their bunkers a sufficient supply to take them to the Cape of Good Hope. These will, doubtless, in course of time be relieved by steam colliers from Australia, whose collieries will receive an enormous impulse from this state of affairs. When, however, we turn to Table Bay itself, it is not easy to feel comfortable in this matter. The coal-fields in the Cape Colony are not in a state of what may be considered as forward development. Their working—if I may be allowed to use a sporting metaphor—may be best described as of an amateur nature, though undoubtedly they will develop into experienced professionals in the course of time. Natal is also busily engaged in developing her coal industries, although her plant and resources are still limited. Even, however, with her aid, I doubt if South Africa would be equal to meeting the demands that would be made on her. For this demand will amount to asking her to successfully coal half our trade. Moreover, we must not lose sight of the fact that if the Canal is closed to us, it is very probable it will be closed to neutral ships as well, and although we shall, of course, look after ourselves first, still, if foreign vessels belonging to a friendly or perhaps even an allied Power wanted coal in Table Bay, it would look bad if we did not give them somewhat of that which we possessed, the more especially as they would be willing to pay, and pay well for it. Undoubtedly, a long war will develop the resources of the Cape in a manner that nothing else would do, but the fact remains that at present the greater part of the coal supplied to vessels in Table Bay is exported from Great Britain, and this supply would probably cease on the outbreak of war.

Turning to our Australasian Colonies, we find that the coal-fields of Australia and New Zealand are practically inexhaustible, and the facilities for shipping coal at all the large Australian ports are also very

complete. With regard to this latter point, this is not so to the same extent in New Zealand as it is in Australia; but, even so, much can be done by that country. It is true that large vessels, as we understand them, could not enter the West Coast coaling ports of New Zealand, but they could be loaded from smaller ports at a suitable place in the locality, say, one of the many bays to the southward of Cape Farewell. I believe, therefore, that a very large trade in coal, carried in sailing ships, will spring up between Australasia and the Falkland Islands and Table Bay, and that it is feasible. I have little doubt, and for these reasons:--If we assume that the main strength of the enemy will be kept in those European waters where the decisive battles must be fought, they should not be able to come into those waters on the other side of the world in a strength greater than our fleets on the foreign stations could cope with. Moreover, I also assume that the entrances to our far-distant ports will be kept secured, as I have already outlined with regard to home waters. This, being the case, our sailing colliers would be safe over the guarded Australian waters until they reached the westerly winds, from whence there is a fair probability that they would reach in safety the equally secure waters in the vicinity of Table Bay or the Falklands, according to which was their destination. I say this advisedly, for the weather down South is not such as to encourage much raiding attack in that vicinity, and the despatch of one of our own mail steamers along that route in a leisurely manner would doubtless meet all the requirements for defence that would be necessary. St. Helena and Ascension could be supplied by vessels towed from Table Bay in company of convoy, even though they should be abandoned, or anchored for good, on their arrival at those ports.

I think I am right in saying that this work will provide occupation for a great number of our finest sailing ships. Arrived in Table Bay, they would there discharge, be towed, if necessary, to Cape Point, and then again run down their easting to Australia in ballast, with again a reasonable prospect of their doing so in safety. As regards these sailing colliers, I take it that the passage could be made from Australia to the Falklands in twenty-five days, from New Zealand in five days less, although this estimate is perhaps a rather favourable one. Forty-five days also may be taken as an average passage from Australia to the Cape of Good Hope, as large iron sailing ships do very good work indeed in the westerly winds. Neutral sailing ships also would be, doubtless, glad to embark on such a trade, covering their risk by insurance, as the profits would be large. In this connection, I would here like to ask a question of those versed in international law. Assuming we were at war with France, and some hundreds of miles to the westward of either the Capes a French war-ship overhauled a German sailing ship carrying coal and bound for one of our ports, what would happen? Coal is contraband of war. Would its possession by a neutral secure it exemption from forfeiture or capture? By this I mean, what would happen in practice—not theory? Coal is supposed to be contraband of war, but is a coal cargo liable to seizure if war is being waged? If not, where is the line

drawn? And if coal belongs to a neutral, it is scarcely within the power of an enemy to blockade *our* ports, and so render it liable to seizure.

Turning to another important coaling point on this route, we find that the geographical position of Sierra Leone is such that it would not be possible to supplement its coal supplies in this fashion. Fortunately, however, it is not at such a distance from us as to preclude the use of steam colliers, and its importance is easily recognised when we realise that it is the only coaling port of any size which we possess to the southward of Gibraltar. Madeira, Cape Verde, and the Canaries might perhaps be used on occasion, but it would certainly be unsafe to rely on them absolutely in war time; in fact, it would, in all probability be better to improvise a coaling station in Arguin Bay. Any interference with it, it would be possible to check by a small display of force, and such a station might be of extreme value to us. Generally speaking, Sierra Leone would supply the wants of the Merchant vessels, while we could rely on St. Helena, Ascension, and the temporary station inside Cape Blanco to meet the coal requirements of war-ships with small coal endurance.

On the western side of the South Atlantic we have but one coaling station, the Falkland Islands, and, considered as a harbour for steamers, it would be difficult to find a place more suitable for our use. Here there might be a dozen different coaling depôts established; and though it is true that the harbours are not protected, they could easily be defended by submarine mines, and they will at any rate be well taken care of by sea. This depôt can, as I have already shown, be supplied with coal by sail from Australia or New Zealand, or by steam from the west coast of South America, through Magellan Straits. The quantity that is wanted at the Falklands would of course be governed by the consideration of how far our Merchant steamers would be permitted to coal at the neutral ports of Buenos Ayres, Rio, and Bahia or Pernambuco; and we must not lose sight of the fact that those ports are principally supplied with coal by British sailing vessels, a trade the interruption of which will have to be reckoned with. Taking this into consideration, it would appear as though preparation must be made for doing the great bulk of coaling required at the Falkland Islands. Port Stanley is, it is true, small, but Falkland Sound is in reality one great harbour, and there are plenty of nooks and corners where coaling can be carried on with very little difficulty. Arrangements would of course have to be made for the towage of sailing vessels, as the tides run strong almost everywhere in the vicinity. I am assuming therefore that on this route we have only two secure coaling stations, Sierra Leone and the Falklands, and that our plans must be laid accordingly; but at the same time I would like to point out that there are a number of places on the east coast of South America where coaling could be carried on by preconcerted arrangements, and it may perhaps even be that neutral ports will permit of our war-ships laying-in a limited amount of coal on emergency.

In conclusion, I would briefly summarise the course that our trade on these routes would take. Keeping 40 miles clear of Ushant and about 80 of Finisterre, they would shape a course for the Canaries, either outside or

through the islands. This would take them down a line within a radius of about 400 miles from Gibraltar, and, consequently, ships with a limited coal endurance, say, from 1,200 to 1,400 knots, would, with that port as a base, be able to pick up the convoy and see it well on its way to the Canaries. Precautions would, however, have to be taken between the Canaries and Sierra Leone, as there would be great danger from torpedo attack. It would therefore be a great advantage to us to hold Cape Blanco and Arguin Bay. (It is unnecessary to discuss Goree and its possibilities.) At Sierra Leone, the convoy would break up, and those vessels for the Cape would proceed under guard of vessels, some of which will have Ascension and St. Helena as their coal bases, as far as 20° S., where the Cape ships would meet and take them into Table Bay. With Madagascar in French possession, to see our Eastern trade still further under convoy is a contingency that we may some day be called on to face. From Sierra Leone the Western trade would form convoy to Pernambuco and thence south to the Falklands, picking up and dropping ships at Rio and River Plate, at which places station ships would be placed to look after marauders in their vicinity. Fast ships would be necessary to keep the patrols and coaling bases in touch, and for this purpose large, fast Mail steamers of high coal endurance would be of the utmost service. Moreover, I would suggest that certain of our best 13 to 14-knot steamers should be armed, and in each convoy one of these should be associated with ten others, such eleven ships to constitute a single unit, I do not think that any scheme of commerce protection can be complete which does not include the assistance of our Mail steamers. At the present time we are as badly off as ever we were on the subject of signalling and communication between them and men-of-war, and that fact alone is sufficient to justify me in having again touched upon this most important subject.

A scheme for a convoy of war-ships has, however, been worked out in detail by Mr. Swinburne, and he will now give you his ideas on this subject.