



Battleship Ajax, of which the Dummy Fleet's Flagship Was an Exact Duplicate.

Underwood & Underwood.

WAR'S BIGGEST TRICK: "THE SUICIDE FLEET"

British Squadron of Fourteen Wooden Ships, with Wooden Guns, Deceived Germans for Months and Decoyed Them Into the Dogger Bank Disaster

By an Officer of the Royal Naval Reserve

Transcribed by Henry Clay Foster

British censors kept the secret of the dummy fleet until a few days ago, when a cablegram brought word that the Admiralty no longer objected to publication of the facts.

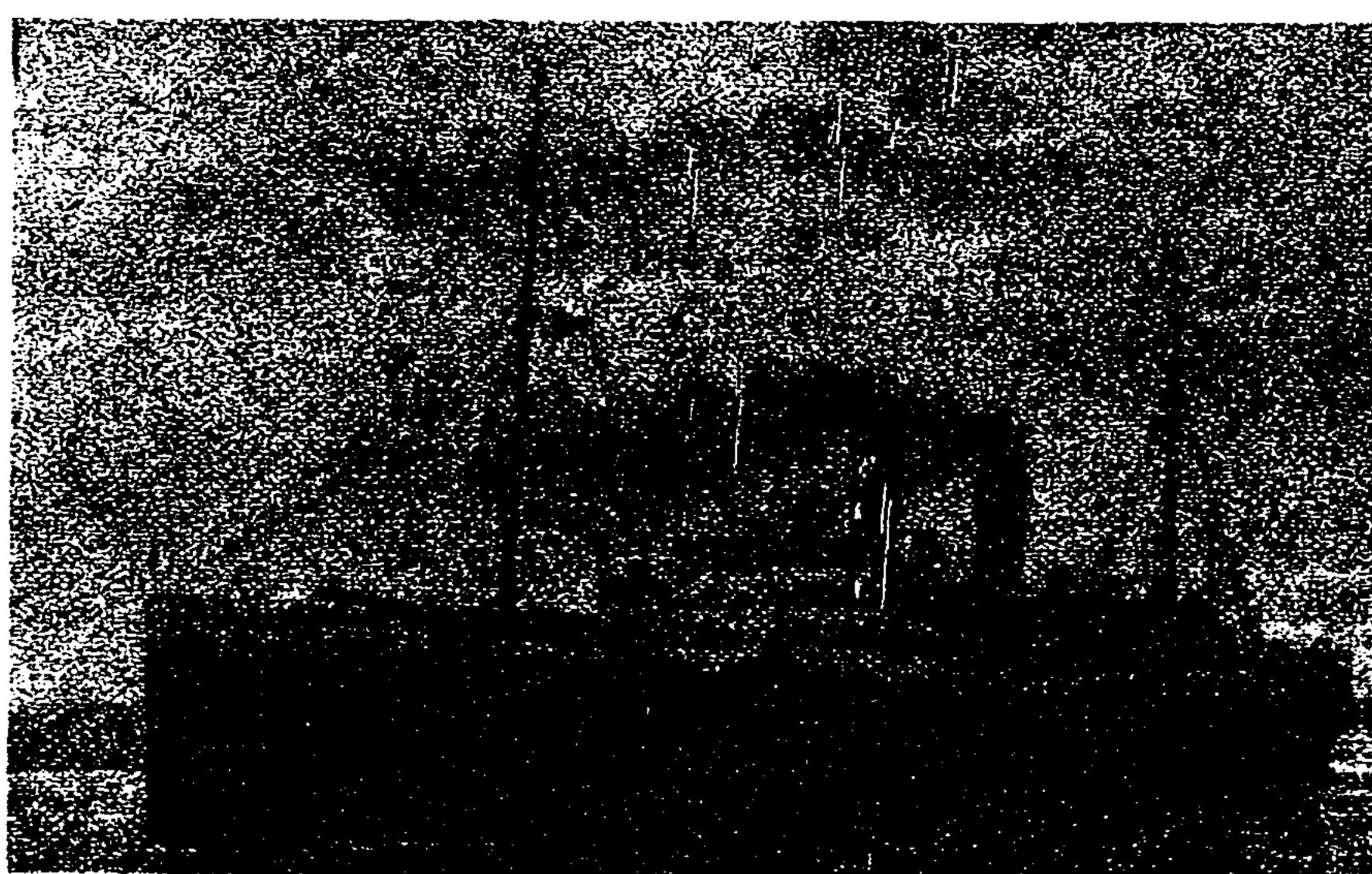
FROM a White Star liner to the flagship of the British "suicide squadron" — the gray armada which never mounted a single gun nor fired a shot, yet patrolled the North Sea, keeping the German Navy huddled behind its mine fields, and played an important rôle in the battle of Dogger Bank—was my experience in doing my bit for the Allies.

No such colossal war jest had been played upon an enemy since the days of the Trojan horse. The British Admiralty tantalized the German Navy with mysterious manoeuvres of a wooden squadron, some of the vessels made of barn lumber, and the Germans were completely baffled for months by the unexpected number of their enemies.

The wooden ships, without a single real weapon aboard—British Navy men called them "mock turtles"—helped Britannia rule the waves during the first year of the war, and the Germans never once suspected that they were aught but what they seemed. The foe did not catch on to the joke even when one of their submarines sank a dummy at the Dardanelles, where it was serving as a mail-ship for the allied fleets. They an-

nounced and rejoiced that "a British battleship of the — class was sunk by one of our submarines," although the huge guns and turrets of the dreadnought floated for days about the entrance to Stamboul!

When tales of a mysterious "special service squadron" of the British Navy were whispered among the seamen of my port, keen interest took possession of all of us, and many and varied were the conjectures we ventured as to its structure and purposes. At that time the



TYPE OF VESSEL USED FOR DUMMIES.
Several of the Wooden "Mock Turtles" Were Canadian Pacific Railroad Steamships Before Their Transformation Into Imitation Warcraft.

fascination of these unknown units of our Grand Fleet was my only thought in regard to them, and I never dreamed that I was soon to serve on the flagship of the squadron.

The whole secret came to me through the company depot steward when he offered to transfer me to that service. The work was patriotic, and the pay was much higher. I accepted, and after becoming a member of the Royal Naval Reserve was ordered to report for duty at a tiny Scotch town on the North Sea.

Its name or location I will not make public even now, as it is still probably in use by the naval forces of Great Britain, although for two years the fleet of dummies has ceased to haunt its waters.

The "special service squadron" made an appalling show of fighting strength as it lay at anchor within the little land-locked harbor which was its base. The ships seemed in trim for any daring venture that the sea in wartime could afford, and I wondered if the tale that they were dummies were not a farce for the consumption of spies. Never have I seen warships with appearance more genuine. Huge gray monsters they were, with double turrets fore and aft, from which great guns protruded; wicker masts with crow's nests and gaunt naval bridges towered above decks stripped for action, and anti-aircraft guns and rangefinders pointed in every direction. All of them had steam up as if ready to dash to sea and engage a prowling enemy at any moment. Not in my twenty years at sea, in which time I have seen the navies of all the powers, have I gazed upon a more formidable squadron, if the eye alone were judge.

But on board the joke was evident at a glance. The fighting turrets were little wooden barns, with bare rafters inside. The great guns were logs, graduated from a sawmill, tapered and bored in exact imitation of naval cannon. Not

a single real gun aboard! We could not have sunk a rowboat!

The deck was covered with tightly stretched canvas, painted gray to represent the smooth steel deck of a man-of-war, so that reconnoitring airplanes would be deceived. A dummy smokestack aft made the ship look more like a war vessel and less like the merchantman she had been before donning this disguise. The bridge was no longer that of a liner, but an exact duplicate of those on battleships. Below deck, all fixtures had been removed save those of absolute importance to the ship in its new rôle. A dining saloon and drawing room adjoined the officers' quarters; below them the crew's quarters, storerooms, galley, and engines—otherwise the hold was vacant except for chunks of concrete used as ballast.

Antiquated merchantmen of about 9,000 tons burden, unfit for sea traffic in ordinary times, were the material out of which the Admiralty constructed the squadron. Some of the old tubs had been in the Canadian Pacific service prior to 1914, carrying third-class passengers across the Atlantic. The flagship, however, was a better bottom than the others. The ironical part of her history was that she was a German boat, and in her best days had been a pioneer in the

to libel. Gun drills were our only immunity. The men had to drill with lifeboats and race with the crews of other ships when in port. At specified intervals we all had to effect a landing on a supposedly hostile shore and charge up a hill in life belt and collar. Incumbered with the heavy equipment, we fat fellows had a tough time of it, always reaching the top too jaded to hurt a toad and too late to serve even as reinforcements to our comrades.

In the Admiralty classification we were not allowed to bear the names of the vessels we duplicated. Our ships were known as "His Majesty's Ship No. 1," 2, 3, 4, and so on. There were fourteen in all. Commodore Haddock, who commanded the squadron, had been for years before the war Captain of the White Star liner Olympic. He has since been appointed Aide de Camp to the King. He was assisted by both merchantmen and naval officers, the latter directing the manoeuvres of the squadron. They were magnificent seamen, keen and quiet when

ing the cruise they would leave us to go on some business that was none of ours, and we would return without them for our dummy pals in port.

At the base of the Grand Fleet we had an assigned anchorage, and in the great panorama of fighting monsters, eternally belching forth clouds of smoke, we felt like the frauds we really were. But even here the dummies held their own. Their disguise was perfect. From our deck the other ships of our squadron looked like fit comrades for the real fighters famed for speed and power.

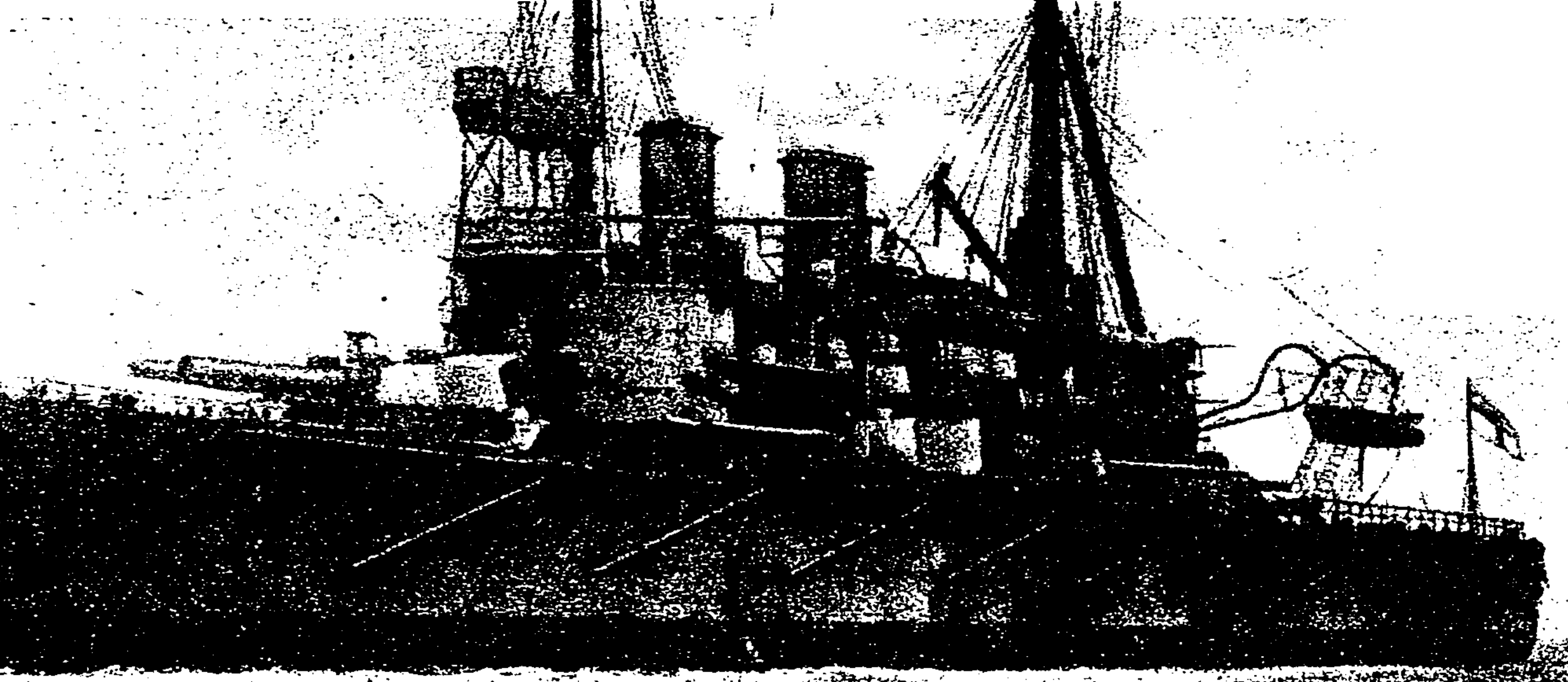
and it was an imposing show of fighting strength we made. On the aft deck of the flagship it was difficult to repress a feeling of power and exultation at the sight, as if we were the real rulers of the seas. One could hardly realize that we were the most harmless ships afloat in those troubled times and that the effective weapons aboard the leader of the battle line consisted of two toy rifles, which their owners kept for sea birds!

We did not have an escort of destroyers, like other squadrons, to ward off submarine attacks. We had to trust to luck. But whenever we put to sea a fast steam yacht always went ahead to scout for us, and to the vigilance of her crew we doubtless owe our lives.

"Submarines!" reported the scouting yacht one day, soon after we had left port, and I asked another officer what the Commodore generally did at such a time.

"Run for it," he answered lightly.

Orders were quickly sent out to the ships to turn back, and "H. M. S. No. 14" set a good example. It hurt to run



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British Battleship Agamemnon, Which the Germans Said They Sank in the Dardanelles. It Is Possible That They Made Their Report in Good Faith After Torpedoing the Wooden Dummy Ship "Number 14."

Kaiser's merchant marine, known in every important port in the world. Previous to the war the Kronprinzessin Cecilie had been serving Germany in the Mediterranean trade; and among the vicissitudes which overtake men and ships alike in war, she was captured during the first week of the struggle, and became the leader of British imposters to frighten her former consorts off the seas.

The dummies were an "Irish joke," according to our chef, who hailed from Belfast, where the ships had been fitted out in garb of war. And it seemed that the Celtic port officials were proud of us, for they continued to send us our supplies in spite of the distance. A small fast boat used to make the trip through the Irish Sea, English Channel, and North Sea every month to bring what we needed.

The Admiralty took few chances of the ruse being discovered, as we ourselves knew precious little of the schemes of the squadron in their entirety. During my whole term of service I never learned what vessels the other dummies represented. Both officers and men were almost prisoners, being allowed shore leave only at the little home port, where no one was allowed outside the reservation. It was a tiny town of ten houses, all inhabited by McKenzies, and there was a little hundred-year-old cemetery at the foot of the hill full of previous McKenzies. Our neighbors were Scotch folk, with countless little provincialisms. They seemed to possess an optimism about their weather that was the marvel of even our hardened tars. For, though it might be raining "cats and dogs," they would greet us on the street with a cheery "Foine marnin'," and in time we learned to assent without debate.

But serving on dummy warships did not mean that our duties and discipline were shams likewise. Sinécures do not exist in the British Navy, and we were part of it. The same rigid system prevailed as upon the vessels we were made

on duty, but they possessed the most marvelous store of oaths I have ever heard. They could make the best talent in the merchant fleet sound like novices, and their accomplishments were the wonder of all on board.

"Destination unknown" is always exciting, and with men in most branches of the service it happens but seldom. With us it was the constant state. We never knew where we were going or where we were when out of sight of familiar landmarks. Like other squadrons of the British Navy, we were continually joining and quitting the Grand Fleet, where it lay at its base ready to dash to sea at any moment. It was the men of the Grand Fleet who named us "The Suicide Squadron"; to them



Captain Haddock of the Dummy Fleet, Formerly of S. S. Olympic.

it was no small thing to venture out upon the sea unarmed and defenseless in the garb of the submarines' legitimate prey. Sometimes, upon quitting the main fleet, we left one or more of our own squadron and brought out an equal number of the "real boys" exactly like them. Dur-

The Grand Admiral of the British Navy on board a dummy flagship sounds like German satire, but it was a fact on one occasion. When we learned that Sir John Jellicoe was coming with his steel marvel of a flagship to inspect our poor, benighted dummy, we grinned. But we were eager to make a good showing because we had heard that Jellicoe objected to the dummies, when proposed, asserting that good men could not be found to man them. We thought it a good chance to show him his mistake, as we were sure he was wrong. In our preparations for the visit we had very little steel or brass to shine, but we tidied up the old hull as best we could and waited for the signal.

The entire crew was drawn up at attention on deck when the Admiral's launch touched at our companionway. A second later Sir John bounded lightly up the steps, followed by members of his staff. He seemed to take in everything with his restless eye as he passed before the ranks of the crew. On the aft deck he stopped and turned to the group of officers behind him, addressing our Commodore. "What ship do you represent, Sir?" he asked quickly.

"The Ajax, Sir," replied Haddock.

"Then that boat doesn't belong there, Sir," returned Jellicoe, pointing to a small skiff suspended amidships.

In some embarrassment the Commodore ordered it removed immediately. Jellicoe turned his attention elsewhere, as though the incident which displayed his marvelous familiarity with every ship in his fleet were already dismissed and forgotten. In the same businesslike manner he expressed approval of the dummy as a whole, and departed. We never saw the Grand Admiral after that.

Our cruises often carried us nosing in and out along the coast of Great Britain, as if we were simulating an ambushade, or seeking to be as inconspicuous as possible for some other reason. But sometimes we steamed out in line of battle,

from the German, but there was nothing else to do. And I soon found myself scanning the water for a periscope. None of the men exhibited any real fear, but I well remember the furtive glances cast out over the sea in all directions by every one on deck as our vessel steamed back to port with all the speed she and her slower consorts could command. I recall taking an extra glance at the lifeboats to make sure that they, too, were not dummies, and felt relieved to note their solid appearance.

For German U-boats or raiders were not our choice for boon companions on the high seas, or even chance acquaintances, with our wooden guns, lack of armor, and zero powers of defense. And from the high command down to the humblest sailor, I am sure none of us was anxious to get into a fight that would not be a fight after all, although there was none who would not have welcomed a brush on equal terms, could we have found a German squadron as lightly armed as we.

Many times during the seven months in which I served on the dummy fleet we had submarine alarms from the scout, but never a close call, thanks to the activity of the chasers along shore. Often, after returning to port, we heard that the motor-boat boys had bagged the submarine. According to the policy of the Admiralty, these incidents did not find their way into the newspapers.

But some of our movements were reported in Berlin, although our identity or fraudulent appearance was not known or disclosed. German official communiques, containing only victories and sops to German national vanity, have become proverbial for their usual manipulation of facts to these ends. So, when the German Admiralty frequently announced during the Summer of 1915, "Our naval scouts sighted a squadron of British warships which fled at our approach," the

(Continued on Page 14)

War's Biggest Trick: "The Suicide Fleet"

(Continued from Page 2)

neutral world, well knowing the British naval traditions, smiled at Teutonic simplicity. This tale was regarded as merely one of the many circulated by official Germany for home consumption. But it was probably true, although the Germans themselves knew no more than the rest of the world, that those British vessels declined battle because they couldn't fight, and were "warships" only to the eye.

We on the dummy fleet felt amply justified in our rough handling of the naval tradition for reasons more obvious to ourselves than to the Germans. Our Commodore undoubtedly had orders to that effect. When we saw smoke on the horizon we took no chances and went about our business with "full steam ahead." But this wariness was not the sole reason why we had no hairbreadth escapes from hostile squadrons. The Germans themselves, for all their real guns and fast ships, evidently did not feel comfortable out in the North Sea, the domain of the Grand Fleet. At least they were content to let us withdraw at our best speed, which was only half their own.

No doubt they enjoyed the belief that one of England's finest squadrons (for so we seemed) was afraid to face them. For them it was an easy victory, and to us not a very serious defeat; and the prospect of a closer acquaintance with our flag evidently did not appeal to them, especially after an exchange of courtesies with David Beatty.

In the battle of Dogger Bank we did not take a very heroic part, so our deeds were not included in the Admiralty report of the engagement. In fact, we ourselves did not learn of our participation until afterward. And, needless to say, we all felt very proud, and tried to feel like real victors, but the earmarks of victory were lacking. We had not a single honorable scar to show for our services to King and country.

It took the Admiralty experts themselves to discover what we really did in the spanking of Germany's prize squadron. David Beatty's famous squadron of battle cruisers, led by the *Lion*, at that time the last word in naval achievement, was inside Harwich or thereabout, and not discernible to scouts in or over the North Sea. The dummy fleet was manoeuvring about one hundred miles north of that point, in easy view, and experts

deduce that the German scouts saw us and reported the way clear for another raid on the English coast. When the Germans came out Beatty appeared at uncomfortably close quarters and offered them a better sport, for which they seemed to have little relish. In the running fight that followed the *Blücher* made port in Davy Jones's locker before the discomfited visitors reached their mine fields. That was the German Navy's last experiment at raiding the English coast, but the Germans did not know that wooden warships helped make it so.

Two of our dummies attained world notice, and even then nobody guessed that they were not real ironclads. One was detached for foreign service, and, with one small gun set up on her deck, was ordered to relieve a cruiser then hanging off Nantucket. The real war vessel was sent away upon business that evidently required real guns.

The dummy took her place off Nantucket, and her commander must have been anxious to use his single tiny gun, for he kept such a sharp watch on the Boston ship lane for German ships that he ruffled Uncle Sam. The United States Government protested to the British Government that "a British war vessel" was hanging too close to neutral shores and making itself obnoxious to neutral commerce. The old tub was so slow it couldn't have caught any ship that entered that harbor if a chase had materialized. It had to get close to shore to make sure that no fast German merchantman should escape. Fifteen knots would have jerked its old engines to junk, and there were ships interned at Boston that could steam rings around it at that. The officials of the British Admiralty must have grinned when they received Uncle Sam's protest about the menace to neutrality. And no apology was ever given more willingly, probably, than their reply.

When at last the dummy came back to us her crew were in rags. They looked like men rescued from a desert island. During the long duty off Nantucket, three thousand miles from their base of supplies, they had exhausted their small reserve of clothing. They got food from Canada, fresh air from neutral shores, and clothes from nowhere. Some of them wore trousers ragged almost to their knees. The hardships aboard the old empty hull, with none of the appointments of a real warship, made them

jolly glad to leave the actual war duty and get back to shamming with the special service squadron. They didn't even brag about their real gun.

Another dummy was sunk, and thus inadvertently gave "comfort to the enemy," although her loss hardly affected the odds on the sea. It was after the special service squadron had been discontinued that "No. 14" came to grief. The remainder of her consorts had been permanently interned at Belfast. What became of the old boats I do not know, except that there was talk of making "No. 9" into a mothership for hydroplanes. But save for "No. 14," Sept. 15, 1915, saw them all lying at Belfast deserted by their crews, who went to other duties in their country's cause. Before disbanding, however, we were told that the Admiralty considered the dummy fleet a success, inasmuch as the Dogger Bank episode was in part our achievement.

The last of the dummies met her fate in the same theatre of war in which I served after quitting the squadron. The Dardanelles campaign—the attempt by land—was in progress, and I was assigned to the transport *Olympic*, which carried troops to storm Gallipoli.

These volunteers were a remarkable set of men, young and clean cut, the flower of British youth of the better classes. The enlisted men, as well as the officers, displayed a lofty patriotism and self-sacrifice in keeping with the best traditions of British gentry. They were gay and eager to take part in the campaign in which so many were to lay down their lives.

It will be remembered that Lemnos was our base, and the allied fleets, with their transports and supply ships, made the Eastern Mediterranean a busy scene. It was during these operations that the dummy, old "H. M. S. No. 14," that had once been the *Marion* of the Dominion Line, was sunk by a submarine. Several submarine raids were more or less successful among the large number of ships assembled there, and the enemy announced the sinking of several British men-of-war, all of which our War Office admitted save one. That one was the dummy, the last of the old scarecrows, and its loss caused no gray hairs at the Admiralty.

"No. 14" was serving as a mail carrier to the men of the fleet, and was sunk well back of the scene of operations. Everybody there knew she was a fake,

couldn't help knowing it, when word came that her big guns and turrets were floating for days near the spot where she went down. But the submarine had gone with its glory, and the Germans at Constantinople heard of a real warship sunk, although it was said that some of the Turks on shore near the scene saw the floating wooden guns and were filled with wonderment. "No. 14's" crew was saved, but the mail she carried went down with her. It was the only actual loss; the men missed their letters from home, but the floating guns furnished them with a joke that compensated in part at least.

Though there is no official authority for the theory, it is possible that the Germans, when they reported having sunk the British battleship *Agamemnon*, referred to the dummy ship "No. 14." At any rate, the sinking of the *Agamemnon* was denied by the British, and the Germans undoubtedly thought "No. 14" was a real war vessel—at least for a day or so after they torpedoed her.

When the British troops made their landing at Gallipoli I was an eyewitness from the deck of the *Olympic*. I shall never forget the sight of those lion-hearted boys charging across the open beach swept by a murderous fire from Turkish machine guns. Whole battalions fell in lines, but their comrades went on and came to grips with the enemy. It turned one's heart sick to see the fine boys we had learned to admire while they were our passengers, struggling and dying like flies on that beach a mile away. I turned my back as I saw others essay the tall cliffs beyond, with Turkish riflemen and machine gunners on every ledge above them. But on they went till they fell, and their comrades behind kept up the advance, finally planting their country's flag on the topmost heights. We could hear their cheers faintly, and we answered with hearts heavy for the heaps of writhing bodies upon the beach between.

But these are well-known events of the war. Every phase of that ill-fated Gallipoli expedition to relieve the Muscovite has been uncovered by press correspondence or Government inquiry, save the incident of the floating turrets of the dummy. This, like every other part of the history of the special service squadron of fake warships, was kept a secret in the inner shrine of British shipping circles. Except for vague rumors, the British public has known nothing of the war's greatest ruse.