

Sunk
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The Dutch vs. U-boats

by

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The U-boat mines have added the Dutch liner *Simoon Bolivar* to the string of victims listed last week. The inhuman brutality of of this type of U-boat warfare was never better illustrated than by this latest victim of U-boat "eggs." An inoffensive neutral liner, bound west from Amsterdam for New York, in no possible way a military menace to Germany, her cargo mainly refugees seeking sanctuary in the new world, the *Simon Bolivar* had the ill-luck to run upon a mine field surreptitiously planted on the high seas by a U-boat, and went to her doom blasted wide open by two separate mine explosions. Some eighty to a hundred helpless passengers and seamen lost their lives.

For the neutral nations in Europe, the situation is tragic. Ironically enough, the outraged Dutch have no recourse except a re-reading of the famous laws of war emanating from their own capital (and agreed to among others by Germany) in which in the Hague Convention of 1907, the major powers undertake that no mine fields shall be laid except on notification to the world and especially to neutrals of the mined areas. In fact, the Hague Convention goes very fully into what a belligerent shall not do with mines, in order to avoid injury to neutrals.

But I am afraid the Dutch, considering the barbarous killing of her seamen and her passengers on the *Simoon Bolivar*, will get nothing but apoplexy from a 1939 perusal of the Hague Convention on the rules of minelaying. Germany's U-boats are paying no more attention to them than her armies paid in 1914 to another famous "scrap of paper" when they overran neutral Belgium.

Holland her neighbor neutrals are in a tough spot. They are not strong enough to make an effective protest to Germany against ruthless murder by U-boat minelaying on the high seas. Their geographical situation (unlike ours) is such that not one of these neutrals can keep its shipping out of the war zone. And their economic situation (also unlike ours) is such that not one of them can keep its ships at home without national paralysis and quick collapse.

Is there anything the neutral states fronting the Baltic and the North Sea can do to protect their shipping from indiscriminate destruction? Fortunately there is, and for its existence the neutrals have to thank a British naval officer, Lieutenant Burney. The Dutch and other neutrals compelled to navigate the seas about Europe, had better go in extensively for the Burney gear.

Like many another weapon used against U-boats, the Burney gear was the child of desperate necessity. During the World War, the British Grand Fleet had to operate all over the North Sea. But the war was hardly well started when H.M.S. Audacious, a new dreadnaught, on Oct. 27, 1914, struck a U-boat mine and foundered.

With a vision of their battleships one by one being sunk by hidden mines, the harried British turned energetically toward seeking some new means of protection from mines, and the then Lieutenant Dennis Burney, after much experimentation, provided them with the answer which bears his name.

Mines float near the surface, submerged from ten to twenty feet, and are held in position by wire cables leading down to anchors on the sea floor. Burney's system of defense hinged about the mine anchor cables.

From the very lowest point on a ship's underwater bow, right down at the keel, Burney towed by a very strong wire a device called

an "otter" or a "paravane". This in general looked like a toy submarine some six or eight feet long, complete with rudders and depth control mechanisms so that it would swim (towed from the wire in its nose) at least as far down as the keel of the ship towing it, steering at the same time to maintain a position about 100 feet off the bow of the ship. The wire from the ship's bow to the otter's nose usually made an angle of 45° with the line of advance of the ship. Two otters were always used, one to starboard, the other to port.

Should a ship towing overboard a pair of otters run into a mine field, the otter towing wires would catch the mine cable between the mine and its anchor, so that as the ship advanced, the mine anchor cable and the mine with it would slide outboard along the diagonal otter towline until the mine was dragged completely out of the path of the ship and the mine cable brought up against the otter's nose. There on the nose of the otter was fitted a stout pair of jagged steel jaws, which promptly sawed the mine anchor cable in half, leaving the mine to float harmlessly to the surface, well clear of the ship, where (if desired) it might be destroyed by rifle fire.

In practise the Burney gear worked with a high degree of reliability in protecting a ship, its only weakness being that if a ship struck a mine squarely with its bow, it could afford no protection. But as a ship's stem is very narrow, that was unlikely to happen, and besides, squarely on her bow is ^{the} spot least fatal to ship in which a mine explosion can occur.

Nowadays large warships are always fitted out with paravanes as a safeguard against mines, although small craft like destroyers (where paravanes may be a nuisance in swift maneuvering) often trust to luck and to their shallow draft to save them. Merchantmen, except troop transports, have rarely been so fitted as presumably they kept to safe waters, but in view of what happened to the Simon

Bolivar, it appears that Germany intends that there shall be no safe waters even for neutral traffic. Consequently it looks as if the Dutch and all their neighbors had better go immediately into a program of installing the Burney paravanes on everything they have afloat from tramps to liners, if they wish to avoid paving the bottom of the ocean with the non-combatant victims of U-boat eggs.