



# *From the Front*

*January 1918*

Last month tribute was paid to our gallant airmen who are not only taking the fight to the Central Powers but are serving to raise the morale of the nation by their derring-do activities. This month it is the turn of the unsung heroes of the War to struggle to bring vital supplies to this country and to the Front Line, I refer to the Merchant Navy and the debt we owe these unsung heroes who risk their lives every time their ship leaves the safety of harbour.

Britain is an island! This truism becomes significant when one examines the



implications behind it. It is arguable that our island status has kept us free from successful foreign invasion for almost a millennium and that alone is a strong argument for supporting our claims to immortality and is the basis of our claim to be amongst the leading nations of the world. Only 22 miles separate us from mainland Europe but how significant in the Nation's development can they be regarded?

Not only has our island status protected us from our potential enemies it has been the source of our wealth and prosperity over the years. The seas around Britain have provided us with an alternative source of food as well as breeding a race of individuals who have come to love and respect the sea, for all its changing moods. The mastery of the

oceans has demonstrated to the inhabitants of this island the importance of using this wonderful asset to explore beyond our shores and establish trading links with a host of nations who will supply the raw materials which our manufacturing industries have managed to turn into objects of trade. Reflect for a moment upon John Masefield's immortal poem "Sea Fever" and the image of a "Dirty British Coaster with a salt caked smoke stack, dashing through the Channel with a cargo of ----- cheap tin trays!"

Man's view of economic prosperity has of course changed throughout history, usually in response to some new phenomena. At the time of the Great Spanish Empire, when the Tudors sat proudly on the Throne of England, the underpinning concept was the "bullion system" in which a country's wealth was calculated in the amount of gold bullion possessed by that country, hence Spain's almost fanatical desire to conquer land in South America which abounded in this precious metal. It caused explorers such as Cortez, Alvarez and Pizzarro to risk their lives to claim territories for the King and Queen of Spain.

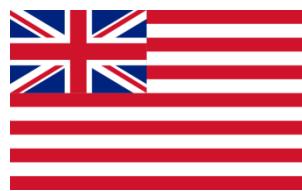


These men acted with great cruelty towards the native population and the Incas were practically wiped out

However, men began to move away from the notion that huge quantities of gold lying in dusty bank vaults did not represent real wealth. Part of the attraction of gold is that it is a metal which does not deteriorate, whilst this is true it should also be noted that neither does this precious element increase by itself, it has to be replenished if part of it is utilised. It was argued that true wealth was reflected in the amount of trade performed by a particular nation as huge profits could be made from either re-selling the basic commodity in a different market place, or by using industrial means to reshape this basic commodity to fulfil a specific need. This was known as the mercantile system or mercantilism.

Britain, being a maritime nation came lately into the scenario whereby trading links were developed by with newly discovered overseas territories, but when it did make its move it was to prove to be an enduring one for it developed into one of the mightiest empires the world has ever seen and even today is legacy of a Commonwealth of Nations could stand the mother nation in good stead in times of economic uncertainty.

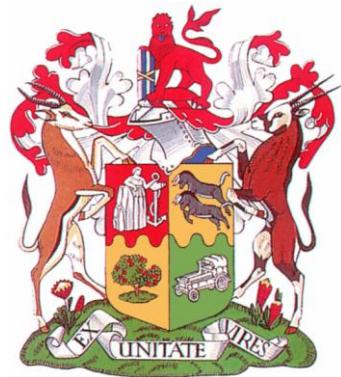
## INDIA



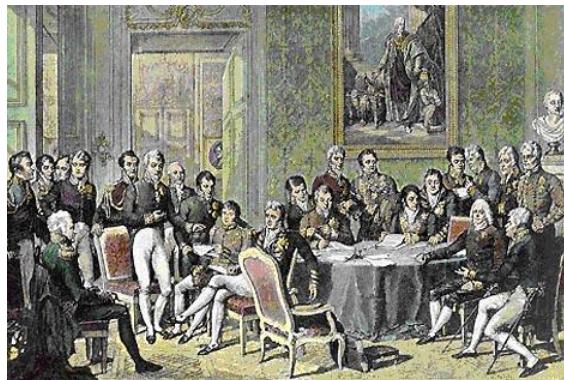
British involvement in India revolved mainly around the activities of the East India Company which was given a Royal Charter to trade in India and the Far

East on December 31<sup>st</sup> 1600. It was based on three regions, Bombay Calcutta and Madras. Later this influence expanded and the British Government were compelled to take over the running of the Country in 1858 following the Indian Mutiny.

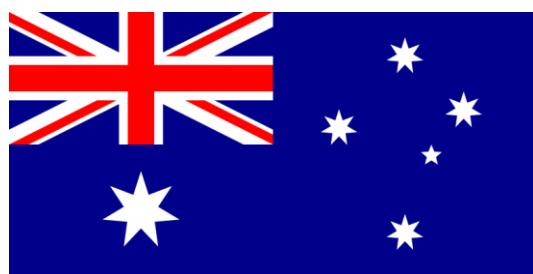
**SOUTH AFRICA.**



South Africa or Cape Province was granted to Great Britain at the Congress of Vienna (1815) as her reward for the part she played in engineering the defeat of Napoleon.



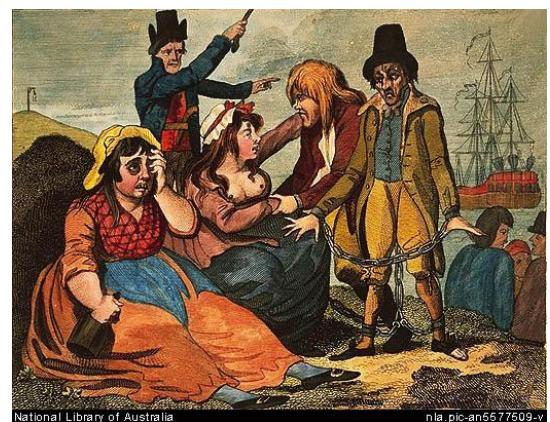
## AUSTRALIA



Australia was first chartered by Captain James Cook in 1768; they were so accurate that they remain the standard model for present day charts

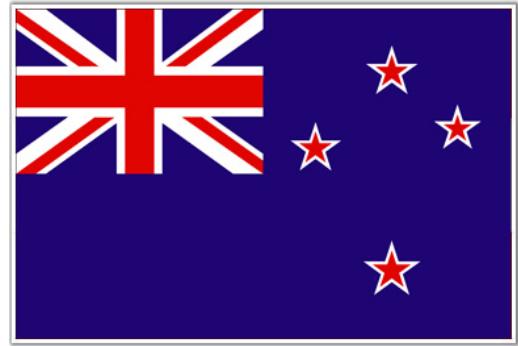


and first settled in 1788 when the convict colony of Botany Bay was established near Sydney.



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### NEW ZEALAND.





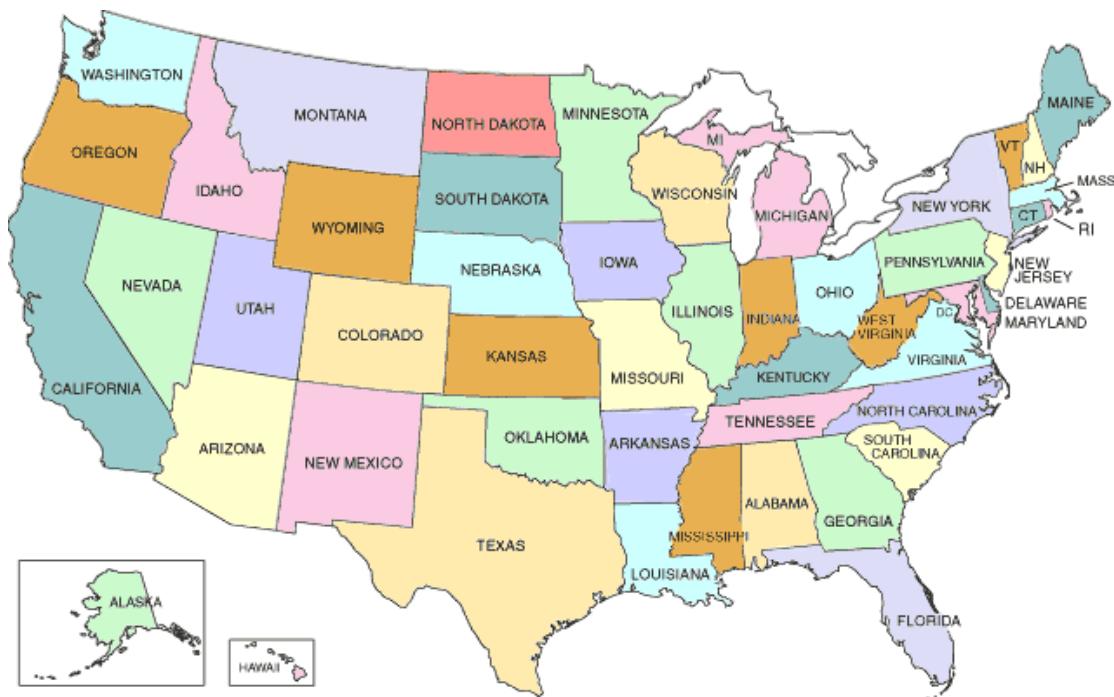
## CANADA.



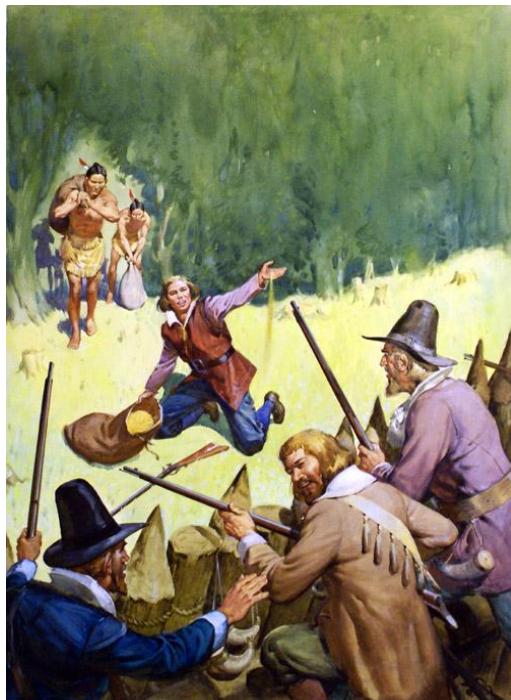
Canada was conquered by the British under General Wolfe in 1757 from the French settlers, although the French have maintained a presence ever since.



### U.S.A.



Emigration began in 1558 but the privations facing the early settlers meant that the first successful settlement was in Jamestown 1607.



America was also a penal colony.

Britain led the world in agricultural innovation from 175 to 1850. The industry was of course protected by the Corn Laws which stated that if the price of grain rose above a certain point then subsidies would be paid to farmers. New methods of farming, crop rotation, use of improved fertilisers meant that Britain was self sufficient in terms of being able to feed itself but as the 19<sup>th</sup> century wore on this position went into decline.

The American Civil War ended in 1865, and by 1875, with new steam-powered railways and ships, the United States was exporting a substantial excess of cereals. At the same time, Britain suffered a series of poor harvests. By 1891 reliable refrigeration technology brought cheap frozen meat from Australia, New Zealand and South America to the British market, and Parliament felt it had to intervene to support British farming.

The Board of Agriculture was established by Act of Parliament in 1889. Although rationing during the First World War was limited to the end of 1917 and 1918, a change of mood arose about food security, and the Ministry of Food was created in 1916. In 1919 the Board of Agriculture and the Ministry of Food were merged to form the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries

All this meant was that Britain, no longer self sufficient was vulnerable should a way of preventing foodstuffs reaching her shores, continental blockades were no new phenomena as they had been tried by Napoleon during the Wars of the early c19 when he introduced his continental system. However this was not successful because the French did not have command of the seas following Nelson's great victory at Trafalgar in 1805. The British then countered by issuing Orders in Council 1807 which proved a very effective blockade for imports into Europe because Britain did have mastery of the seas.

During the First World War there were attempts by both side to starve the enemy into submission through the blockade system but despite the blundering of the Kaiser in creating his High Seas Fleet the German High Command were unwilling to risk its warships on enforcing a blockade and the British took advantage of the situation by enforcing their own blockade and reducing Germany to a severe food crisis level by early 1917.

The Germans retaliated by resorting to a U-Boat strategy designed to sink Allied shipping and this proved effective despite the fact that they ran the risk of alienating the Americans.

The **Merchant Navy** is the maritime register of the United Kingdom, and



describes the seagoing commercial interests of UK-registered ships and their crews. Merchant Navy vessels fly the Red Ensign and are regulated by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA). King George V bestowed the title of "Merchant Navy" on the British merchant shipping

fleets following their service in the First World War; a number of other nations have since adopted the title.

The Merchant Navy has been in existence for a significant period in British history, owing much of its growth to British imperial expansion. As an entity in itself it can be dated back to the 17th century, where an attempt was made to register all seafarers as a source of labour for the Royal Navy in times of conflict. That registration of merchant seafarers failed, and it was not successfully implemented until 1835. British ships were also deeply involved in acts of piracy and armed robbery on the high seas, off the waters of Europe and Caribbean, as ships with British sailors robbed from ships of foreign navies.<sup>[3]</sup> The merchant fleet grew over successive years to become the world's foremost merchant fleet, benefiting considerably from trade with British possessions in India and the Far East. The lucrative trade in sugar, contraband (opium to China), spices and tea (carried by ships such as the *Cutty Sark*) helped to solidify this dominance in the 19th century.



Badge of the British Merchant Navy

On 22 December 1916, Admiral von Holtzendorff composed a memorandum which became the pivotal document for Germany's resumption of unrestricted U-boat warfare in 1917. Holtzendorff proposed breaking Britain's back by

sinking 600,000 tons of shipping per month, based on a February 1916 study by Dr. Richard Fuss, who had postulated that if merchant shipping was sunk at such a rate, Britain would run out of shipping and be forced to sue for peace within six months, well before the Americans could act. Even if the "disorganized and undisciplined" Americans did intervene, Holtzendorff assured the Kaiser, "I give your Majesty my word as an officer that not one American will land on the Continent.

On 9 January 1917, the Kaiser met with Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg and military leaders at Schloss Pless to discuss measures to resolve Germany's increasingly grim war situation; its military campaign in France had bogged down, and with Allied divisions outnumbering German ones by 190 to 150, there was a real possibility of a successful Allied offensive. Meanwhile, the German navy was bottled up in its home port of Kiel, and the British blockade had caused a food scarcity that was in turn causing deaths due to malnutrition. The military staff urged the Kaiser to unleash the submarine fleet on shipping travelling to Britain, Hindenburg advising the Kaiser that "The war must be brought to an end by whatever means as soon as possible." On 31 January, the Kaiser duly signed the order for unrestricted submarine warfare to resume effective 1 February; Bethmann-Hollweg, who had opposed the decision, said "Germany is finished".

Germany had 105 submarines ready for action on 1 February: 46 in the High Seas Fleet; 23 in Flanders; 23 in the Mediterranean; 10 in the Baltic; and 3 at Constantinople. Fresh construction ensured that, despite losses, at least 120 submarines would be available for the rest of 1917. The campaign was initially a great success, nearly 500,000 tons of shipping being sunk in both February and March, and 860,000 tons in April, when Britain's supplies of wheat shrank to six weeks worth. In May losses exceeded 600,000 tons, and in June 700,000. Germany had lost only nine submarines in the first three months of the campaign.

On 3 February, in response to the new submarine campaign, President Wilson severed all diplomatic relations with Germany, and the US Congress declared war on 6 April.

The new policy of unrestricted submarine warfare was initially a success. In January 1917, prior to the campaign, Britain lost 49 ships; in February, after it opened, 105; and in March, 147. In March a full 25% of all Britain-bound shipping was sunk.

At the end of 1917 Allied shipping losses stood at over 6 million GRT for the year overall. However monthly shipping losses had dropped to around 300,000

GRT per month, and never rose to the levels suffered in spring 1917. With the establishment of a comprehensive convoy system, Allied shipping losses fell to non-critical levels, while U-boat losses increased alarmingly. From 48 boats lost in the years up to February 1917, a further 61 were lost by the end of the year

The logical response to the convoy system, which concentrated forces for the defence, was to similarly concentrate the attacking force. The U-boat arm did not succeed in World War I in developing such a response. Just one attempt was made to operate a group, to mount a pack attack on any convoy encountered; 6 U-boats sailed in May 1918 as a group, commanded by K/L Rucker in U-103. They encountered several home-bound convoys and succeeded in sinking 3 ships, but at the loss of 2 of their number, including U-103, which was rammed by the troopship Olympic. Rucker had found it next to impossible to exercise control from his position at sea, and the loss ratio discouraged any further experiments.

By the end of 1918, Allied shipping losses were 2¾ million GRT for the year overall (averaging 323,000 tons through March and declining thereafter) at a cost of 69 submarines, the U-boat Arm's worst year.



In the First World War, the Merchant Service suffered heavy losses from enemy action. A policy of unrestricted warfare meant that merchant seafarers were also at risk of attack from enemy ships. The tonnage lost to U-boats in the First World War was around 7,759,090 tons, and around 14,661 merchant seafarers were killed, few things were so terrifying as the submarine. The German

navy used the Unterseeboot, or U-boat, to sink 5,000 ships. These stark facts do not adequately illustrate what life was like in the merchant navy during the Great War. In addition to the dangers outlined above the sailor still had to contend with the elements of nature and were subject to the dangers of high seas, storms and hours of intense concentration as the ship continued its graceful progress towards a home port. Fire was a constant threat and even if a sailor was fortunate enough to enter the water during an attack he then faced the problems caused by hyperthermia and exposure in the treacherous sea. Unless he was picked up by lifeboat then his chances of survival were slim indeed.

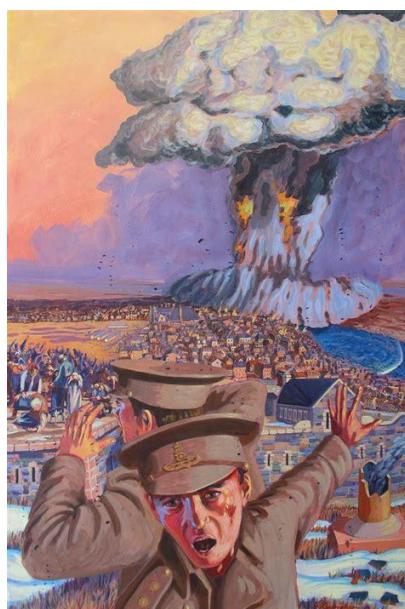
Added to these wartime and natural hazards must come the realisation that the actual cargoes carried in merchant ships is often lethal and the slightest mistake on someone's part can result in a huge tragedy take for instance the case in Halifax Nova Scotia on the 6<sup>th</sup> December 1917.

At 9:05 a.m., in the harbour of Halifax in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, the most devastating manmade explosion in the pre-atomic age occurred when the *Mont Blanc*, a French munitions ship, exploded 20 minutes after colliding with another vessel.

As World War I raged in Europe, the port city of Halifax bustled with ships carrying troops, relief supplies, and munitions across the Atlantic Ocean. On the morning of December 6, the Norwegian vessel *Imo* left its mooring in Halifax harbour for New York City. At the same time, the French freighter *Mont Blanc*, its cargo hold packed with highly explosive munitions—2,300 tons of picric acid, 200 tons of TNT, 35 tons of high-octane gasoline, and 10 tons of gun cotton—was forging through the harbour’s narrows to join a military convoy that would escort it across the Atlantic.

At approximately 8:45 a.m., the two ships collided, setting the picric acid ablaze. The *Mont Blanc* was propelled toward the shore by its collision with the *Imo*, and the crew rapidly abandoned the ship, attempting without success to alert the harbour of the peril of the burning ship. Spectators gathered along the waterfront to witness the spectacle of the blazing ship, and minutes later it brushed by a harbour pier, setting it ablaze. The Halifax Fire Department responded quickly and was positioning its engine next to the nearest hydrant when the *Mont Blanc* exploded at 9:05 a.m. in a blinding white flash.

The massive explosion killed more than 1,800 people, injured another 9,000—including blinding 200—and destroyed almost the entire north end of the city of Halifax, including more than 1,600 homes. The resulting shock wave shattered windows 50 miles away, and the sound of the explosion could be heard hundreds of miles away.



It has gone unfamiliarly quiet on the Western Front. Over Christmas snow has fallen and changed the appearance of the landscape and given the soldiers a respite from the cloying mud which forms the usual surface of the land. This, of course does not mean that there is no activity at all, the ground, recently taken by the British and their Allies represents an eight mile swath through the fields of Flanders, which in effect is crater land having been the location of heavy fighting. The first four miles are under almost continuous



barrage from the German guns. The next four miles are subject to sporadic shelling from the same source. This makes the Allied troubles the same as they were on the Somme last winter i.e. getting vital supplies to the lines and getting shelter and any decency of comfort for the men in the front and support positions. The reality is that men will have to take their turn in what has been described as "This Great Slough of Despond" accompanied by wetness, coldness and misery. Transport Officers will not find it easy to provide these masses with the materials of war and life. They will have to do it using roads which have been laid under fire, broken by shells and laid again by fresh relays of men who have worked like ants getting all the risks and one of the glory. Pack mules will have to be utilised, heavily laden but sure footed winding their way slowly over the blasted country. Also used will be the ration parties who trudge up night after night in pitch darkness, illuminated only by the glare of gunfire, dodging shell bursts and stumbling into shell-pits. They will use transport drivers who will take their wagons to the end of the last tracks and unless their horses are killed or the drivers are hit they will be at the dumps by schedule time. The tasks will be completed by in this wretchedness, redeemed only by great heroism, patience and the spirit of the British soldiers who endure these things with their jaws squared to the task.

By stark contrast to other months the casualty figures for Dewsbury a light. Six men have been killed during the month and two of these were seafarers which reflect the present position of the stalemate on the Western Front.

News from the other areas of conflict is much more encouraging. In November



it was reported that our forces, after a most successful actions at Tekrit on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> remained there until the 8<sup>th</sup> during which time the forces opposing them have all been withdrawn thirty to fifty miles to the north. The clearance of the battlefield and removal or destruction of everything of value having been accomplished our troops returned to their original positions.

Since March 1917 Tekrit has been the Turk's riverhead on the Tigris and they built a trench system seven miles in circumference with both ends on the river. The Turks have now been driven from this position. The elements who accomplished this task were mainly Scottish and Indian troops and apparently the Turks saw the familiar pattern of the tartan did not "wait for the bayonet" The task was completed by the cavalry of the Hussars and Lancers. Two hundred and fifty prisoners were taken and the casualties estimated as very heavy. Before leaving the Turks burnt their aerodrome which contained two machines.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> November General Edmund Allenby had reported that mounted troops had occupied Beitur-el-Tahta a mere twelve miles from Jerusalem.

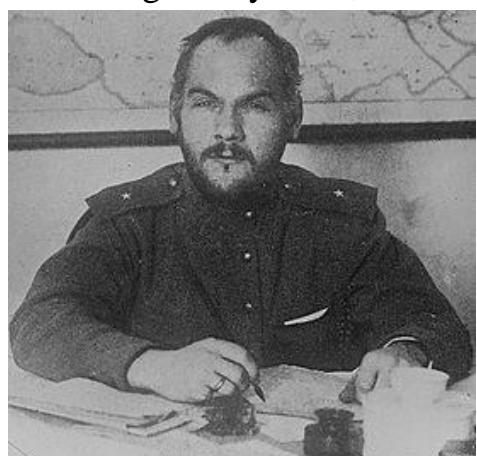
On the 11<sup>th</sup> December it was announced that Jerusalem has surrendered to the British as a result of the brilliant operation carried out by General Allenby and his forces. This action saw the enemy swept back by small successive steps on the whole line from Beersheba to the port of Jaffa, which slowly encircled the entire Holy City and rendered further tenure by the Turks impossible. The news

was announced in the Commons by the Chancellor for the Exchequer Mr Andrew Bonar-Law. The surrender had been made to General Allenby by the Mayor of Jerusalem on the 9<sup>th</sup> December 1917, and the General decided to enter the city formally on the 11<sup>th</sup> and it was noted that the fall of Jerusalem had been delayed by the necessity of avoiding damage to the Holy Places in and around the city. This left Jerusalem in Western hands for the first time since it was surrendered by the Crusaders on the 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1187 to the Ottoman leader Saladin



From Russia emerges the usual conflicting information and reports. Russia is now comprises an incoherent, complex and diverse political units which are neither at war or at peace with each other but are still connected by the old administrative and economic mechanism, but which recognises no central government! Petrograd claims to be the centre of authority but it appears that this is not thought to be the case throughout other cities and regions.

According to Krylenko, the ensign second lieutenant who has been appointed by the Bolshevik Commander-in-Chief, the Germans have officially agreed to enter into negotiations for an armistice on both fronts. Krylenko has therefore ordered a cessation of hostilities on the whole Russian Fronts. He has also ordered the arrest of General Dukonin and all his supporters, who had refused to obey a direct order from Lenin that he should begin immediate pourparlers with the enemy for an



armistice. Trotsky and Lenin have sent out, from the radio station at Tsarskoe Selo an address to the Governments and peoples of the belligerent countries proposing that negotiations concerning a truce and general peace be opened at an early date.

The latest take on the situation is that the Don Cossacks are in open revolt.



Apparently six train loads of troops, containing shock battalions had arrived at Bielgorod. They informed the commissaries that they were being sent to the Caucasus and that General Kornilov was not with them. Their progress was delayed by a lack of locomotives but the troops soon rectified this situation and

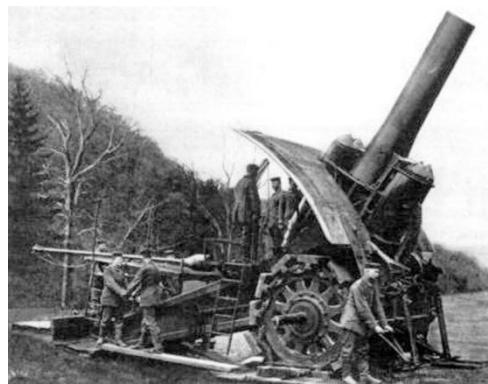
continued their journey. It was then learned that the contingent contained troops from Tekke Turkomans, regular cavalry, engineers and infantry numbering about 9,000. All night on Friday and Saturday a battle raged near Bielgorod between the shock battalions and the Bolshevik forces and an armoured train was sent from the north by Krylenko, who arrived at the



scene during the fighting. Losses were heavy on both sides but, according to a report from the Railways Union the shock battalions were defeated, the situation remains fluid.

In Petrograd there is reported tension as anticipation of tomorrow's opening of the Constituent Assembly, although there is doubt as to whether this will take place. No announcement of arrangements has been made and the Electoral Board is now imprisoned in the Smolny Institute.

Success appears to be the keyword from the Italian Front. In November it was reported that Venice was under threat, but that due to the tenacious valour of the defenders there was a slim possibility that she could be saved. It appeared that



the situation was static and that the enemy were making no great efforts to cross the Piave as previous overtures had been so costly. However, on the upper reaches of the river the Austro German forces are said to be pressing their attacks with desperate vigour, compelling the Italians to yield further ground. Additionally Austro-German

reinforcements were said to be arriving daily. Snow arrived in late November covering the mountains with a whirling blizzard flakes that soon drifted deep enough to make movement of the German

artillery very difficult. This will bring about an immediate stop to the offensive and allow the Italians time to re-group. Moreover French and British troops will arrive in the area, fully equipped and ready to add to the moral support they are already providing. British troops comprising cavalry, artillery and infantry are now presenting a magnificent appearance as

they extend along the road for miles. The infantry has been marching for 16 miles per day and the troops are said to be cheerful, the cavalry are fully kitted out and the Italians are said to be looking forward to sharing the conflict against the Central Powers.



Later in December it was claimed that the Italian determination in this resumed fighting has not only served to check the enemy's advance but has already worn down a considerable number of his best divisions. It was also reported that the Austro-Hungarian artillery fired on the backs of their men in order to force them to move forward at any price against the positions firmly held by the Italians and defended by terrible artillery and machine-gun fire!

The latest morale booster for this section of the conflict is that news that two



small Italian ships gnawed their way through the booms and nets which protect the inner harbour at Trieste and actually sank the battleship "Wien" where she lay at anchor with his sister ship the "Monarch" who lay beside her. These ships, along with the "Budapest" were launched in

1895 and praise has been launched upon the head of Lieutenant Rizzo who put her on the bottom of the harbour. Apparently the Austrians had devised a system of combined nets and mines so that Rizzo was more likely to blow himself up rather than inflict damage upon the enemy. The chief problem was the huge steel cables attached to the nets, however, Rizzo climbed as they proceeded along the pier he climbed the concrete side. He then gave the order for his men to advance and they crawled over the concrete passing cutting tools from hand to hand. These cutters bit their way through strand after strand until at last the weight of the net and its attachments tore the remaining strands asunder, the defences sank and the harbour was open.



Rizzo and his crew crawled back to their boats which then moved like shadows until he decided that he was in position to inflict damage. He signalled the other boat and four long steel devils were sliding though the water. There was a roar a blast of fame, a waterspout raining on the attackers, and then a repeat of this sequence as the Monarch too was hit.

None in Trieste knew from where the attack had come, the sky was filled with bursting shrapnel whilst ships opened with their guns towards the harbour mouth. Shells spouted all around them but none of them hit as the Italian sailors saw the great bulk of the "Wien" list over and sink.

Stop Press: -



The Secretary of the Admiralty has made the following announcement: -

"Vice Admiral Sir Rosslyn Wemyss, KCB, CMO, CCVO has been appointed First Sea Lord in succession to Admiral Sir John Jellicoe GCB, OM, GCVO"

The King has been graciously pleased to confer upon Sir John Jellicoe the dignity of a peerage of the United Kingdom in recognition of his very distinguished services.

During the War Sir John was for two years and four months in command of the Grand Fleet before he came to the Admiralty to take up the position of First Sea Lord, which he has held with distinction for the past thirteen months.



It is hoped that his services and experience may be of use at a later date in another important appointment.

It is understood that the decision was conveyed to Sir John before Christmas and took the form of a bare

intimation that it had been determined to appoint a new First Sea Lord. It has been generally known that he had not been acting in this capacity since Monday last Monday, which had given rise to many rumours.

Today's sensational news will occasion all the more surprise in view of the terms in



which Sir Edward Geddes referred to the arduous work of the Fleet in his two speeches in the House of Commons. In both cases he spoke with measured optimism as to the success of the offensive and defensive measures adopted against enemy submarines, for which it has been stated that



Sir John Jellicoe had been largely responsible, and he also indicated that he (Sir John) a scheme of reorganisation affecting both the Board of the Admiralty and the Naval War Staff. It will be recalled that after his last statement to the House the Admiralty issued a chart showing the gratifying increase in the number of German submarines sunk and the decrease in the amount of British, Allied and neutral tonnage destroyed. It is anticipated that the withdrawal of Sir John will be followed by many changes in the Board of the Admiralty and the naval warfare staff

The new First Sea Lord is comparatively unknown to the public owing to the fact that he has never held either of the principal naval commands afloat and had not administrative experience at the Admiralty until he was appointed Deputy First Sea Lord last summer. But this has provided warning against the assumption that he is consequently unfitted for the position to which he has been appointed. He is one of the most popular senior officers in the Royal Navy.

Sir John will always be remembered as the Commander-in-Chief of the Grand



Fleet at the Battle of Jutland. He flew his flag in the Iron Duke and his published despatch shows that although the British forces fought under disadvantageous circumstances a defeat

was inflicted upon the enemy which narrowly escaped being decisive.

The retiring First Sea Lord is only 58 years of age and was, indeed, the youngest officer ever appointed to that position