THE ROYAL NAVY

1815—1915

WHEN, nearly four years ago, this terrible war broke out the British Navy, as a whole, had been at peace for a century. That is to say, we had not once been at war with a great maritime power with oversea possessions, which would have necessitated putting forth our entire naval strength everywhere. And yet hardly a year passed during this long span of time that did not see detached portions of the Royal Navy fighting somewhere on the globe, ashore or afloat.

During this century the navies of the world underwent the most profound changes in ships and their weapons since the long distant days when sails supplanted oars as the motive power*.

It will be of interest to trace both the

* Oars in addition to sails were used in galleys up to the end of the 18th century.

activity of, and these changes in, our navy in the interval between the two great wars.

Hard fighting on land and at sea was still going on in North America and the Atlantic during the year 1815, but so far as the navy was concerned the great European War had come to an end the year before.

Soon after the Peace Lord Exmouth, one of the veterans of the war, was sent out from England with a small squadron to deal finally with the Dey of Algiers and put an end to Christian slavery. Having been joined by a few Dutch frigates the admiral presented an ultimatum on arrival and then promptly engaged at close quarters the numerous forts defending Algiers. These were only silenced after a long day's fighting, lasting well into the night, with heavy losses in lives.

Ships are intended to fight ships, not forts, against which they are always at a disadvantage, which moreover the progress of science has steadily increased. From the first, the British Navy has only attacked

forts when there were no ships to fight, but the results on the whole were not encouraging.

Only once, midway through this century, did the navy do any fighting in European waters and on a large scale*. This war, generally spoken of as the Crimean War, but which was also a Baltic War as far as the navy was concerned, furnished some examples of ships *versus* forts, undertaken *faute-de-mieux*. In both theatres of war the Russian ships found themselves greatly outnumbered by the allied fleets and, not unnaturally, preferred to remain behind the shelter of the guns of Sebastopol and Kronstadt. In the bombardment of Sebastopol, which was the preliminary act of the long siege, the ships got the worst of it.

In the Baltic the Anglo-French fleets, finding Kronstadt too strong, operated against Bomarsund in the first year and the following year attacked Sveaborg. The former was, after a futile bombardment, captured by French troops and naval bri-

* Except the isolated case of Navarino.

gades, whilst the latter was finally destroyed by mortar vessels.

During the Syrian War of 1840 St Jean d'Acre surrendered after a short bombardment by the fleet, which only suffered trifling losses. The guns of the forts had been prepared for a long-range action, and when the ships ran close in the guns could not be depressed sufficiently owing to the embrasures having been filled up from below for safety. The main magazine blew up very soon, after which the defence collapsed. The other coast-towns were taken by assault by men landed from the fleet, which included an Austrian and a Turkish squadron.

The only other bombardment on a considerable scale, by powerful ironclads, was that of Alexandria in 1882. The armament on both sides, except a few very heavy ship's guns, was nearly identical, having been turned out in the same English workshops. The decision was reached not so much by the destruction of the forts, which were poorly handled, as by their evacuation,

after one or two magazines had blown up, and the ships did not suffer much.

During the wars with China and Burmah the navy did a good deal of bombarding, but the forts were mostly antiquated and badly fought. Many of these forts were taken by assault by sailors as well as soldiers. The same applies to the operations in the Paraná River in South America in 1845 and those in Japan in 1863.

The battle of Navarino in 1827 was the only fleet action fought during this long period. Like that of Lepanto in the same waters about 250 years earlier, but on a small scale, it was the battle of the Cross against the Crescent. Its peculiar feature was that it was fought out at anchor, the allied British, French and Russian squadrons having entered the bay where the Turkish fleet and transports lay, merely as a demonstration and not with the intention of attacking, as Nelson did at the Nile and Copenhagen. When suddenly started it turned out to be a very bloody affair; the allies had the preponderance in ships of the

line, the Turks in frigates, but the Sultan's forces were eventually destroyed, and his oppressive sway over Greece was at an end.

Chinese War Junks, both Imperial and piratical, and armed Slave Dhows were after this date the only kind of vessel the navy had to encounter. The latter, mostly off the South East coast of Africa and in the Red Sea, often proved to be formidable opponents to the ships' row-boats, which used to be detached under young officers for weeks at a time from their ships to cruise under sail in search of slavers. This service went on continually up to the end of the nineteenth century and was a splendid school for those who eagerly volunteered for this active service on their own element. The prize bounty of £5 for every slave liberated was an additional attraction.

The navy did much fighting on rivers during these years, using every kind of craft, many of which were specially built for the occasion. Practically every African river and those of Burmah and China were repeatedly the scenes of naval operations.

In the first Burmese War in 1824 a small steamer, the *Diana*, belonging to the East India Company, rendered great services in towing gun- and mortar-boats up the Rangoon River. She was probably the first steamship to be used in war.

The most notable of these river expeditions was that of 1884/5, when Lord Wolseleys's army for the relief of Gordon at Khartoum had to be transported up the Nile with all its stores in hundreds of row-boats. Small steamers were also employed, and these as well as the whale-boats had to be dragged up the successive cataracts with incredible labour.

The most important part of the navy's fighting during the century under review was done by Naval Brigades of Seamen and Marines, operating generally in conjunction with troops. Such brigades fought in three wars in China, three wars in Burmah, two wars in New Zealand, on the coast of Syria, in the Crimea, on the shores of the Baltic, in the Indian mutiny, in Abyssinia and Perak, Egypt and the Soudan, in four wars

in South Africa, and on numerous occasions in West and East Africa. They employed their own artillery in many original ways. These weapons, dragged by human beings and every species of animal, ranged from war rockets, which precipitated the fall of Magdala, to the siege-guns before Sebastopol.

On two occasions naval brigades took their own ships' guns into the field, and these were undoubtedly the forerunners of the heavy guns which have been playing so great a part in the present war in France and elsewhere.

The first occasion was the Indian mutiny, when Captain Peel took his frigate, the *Shannon*, up the river to Calcutta, left her tied to the bank and took his entire ship's company up country to the relief of Lucknow. He took with him six 68-pounders, two 8 in. howitzers and eight 24-pounders, all mounted on improvised carriages. The brilliant share of Peel's brigade in the suppression of the mutiny and his tragic death at the end are too well known to be repeated here.

The second occasion, in more recent times, was the outbreak of the Boer War, when the need for something heavier than an ordinary field-gun at once became apparent. Captain Percy Scott, who had just arrived in Simon's bay, at once set to work mounting 4·7 in., and later 6 in. guns, on carriages which could be dragged by large spans of oxen. The first of these guns took a prominent part in the defence of Ladysmith, the remainder joined the columns in the field. One pair of 4·7 in. guns covered close on 800 miles in 53 marching days, chasing De Wet. After the first year all the naval guns were taken over by the army and played a decisive part to the end.

In addition to all this fighting the navy was frequently called upon to exert moral force, sometimes as mediator, in the quarrels between other states. Naval officers, from Admirals down to Lieutenants commanding gunboats, often had to act on their own responsibility in far off places, and their rough-and-ready diplomacy generally succeeded. Lord Palmerston, when Foreign

Minister, once said that whenever he had a difficult case to deal with he sent a Post Captain with his ship and he generally settled the matter out of hand.

In 1818 the first of the numerous arctic expeditions set out, at first more concerned in discovering the North West Passage, than in reaching the pole. These proved themselves to be campaigns as arduous and as costly in lives and ships as many a war. The uncertainty of the fate of Franklin's expedition led to the despatch of a number of others. Antarctic expeditions were not undertaken until much later, though the shores of the South Polar Continent had been explored early in Queen Victoria's reign, and so had the Australasian coasts. The last of the South Polar expeditions, completed in this century, was to end in the tragic death of its leader, Robert Scott, after having reached the pole.

The natural history of the sea has also been explored by many expeditions. Of these the most comprehensive in plan and the most fertile in results was that of H.M.S. *Challenger*, 1872—1876.