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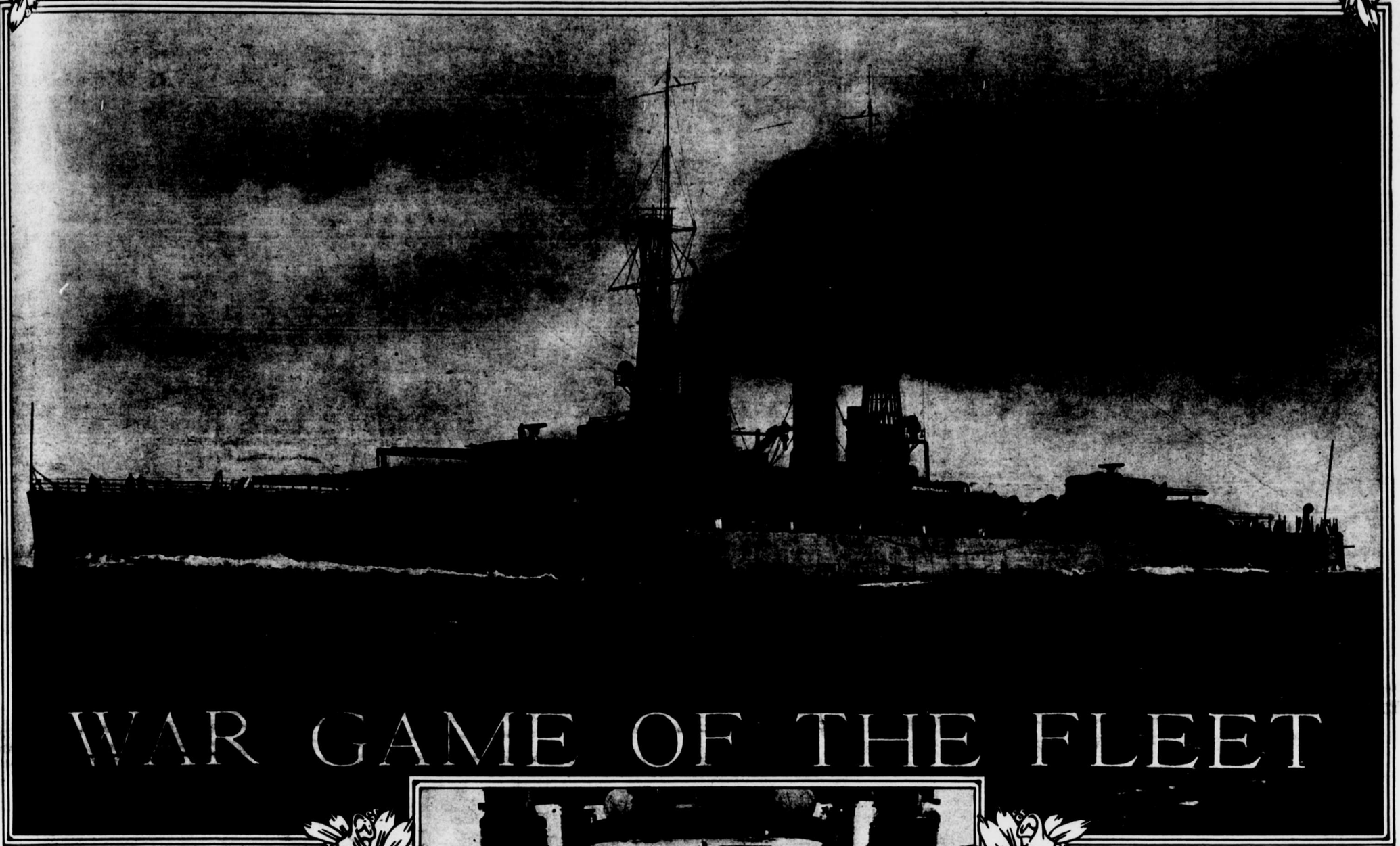


WAR GAME OF THE FLEET

Defence of Eastern Seaboard the Problem That Confronts Admiral Fletcher

THE naval review over, the more serious business of the war manœuvres confronts the fleet. For the better part of two weeks Admiral Fletcher's problem will be to guard the coast from Sandy Hook eastward to the entrance of Narragansett Bay. His task is to intercept and to give decisive battle to a simulated foe seeking to effect a landing at some point within this stretch from which an invading army might be able to advance upon either New York or Boston.

The enemy fleet is commanded by Rear Admiral Frank Edmund Beatty. It will be the latter's aim to elude Admiral Fletcher's scouts and battle squadrons, and through stratagem or surprise to reach some point in the war game district where he can establish an advance naval base within the shelter of which troops, in time of actual war, could be disembarked for aggressive movements. Rear Admiral Beatty knows that the bulk of our ammunition factories lies within the zone flanked by Boston and New York, and his purpose will be to obtain control of Long Island Sound and the adjacent railroads so that he can dominate this region.

The defenders under Admiral Fletcher are known as the "Blues," while the attackers are called the "Reds." The ships at the disposition of Rear Admiral Beatty are few in number and none of them is a dreadnought. In fact, his two prime ships are the scout cruiser Chester and the old unprotected cruiser San Francisco, a relic of the early days of our new navy. In addition there are gunboats, a collier or so, and a small flotilla of destroyers.

To the layman this array for the invader may seem inadequate, but experience has proved that fictitious values can be satisfactorily given to inferior ships of war, so that for the purpose of exercise or drill they may serve as excellent pawns in the tactical and strategic problems of the art of war.

The Chester is the fastest of our three scout cruisers, and she is credited with a maximum speed of a trifle over 26½ knots an hour. She has a displacement of only 4,600 tons when fully laden, but by the rules of the game she is not only a scout cruiser but she may also figure as a giant battle cruiser of anywhere from 25,000 to nearly 30,000 tons.

The San Francisco also appears in a dual light. She is a ship of 4,500 tons and has a speed of 19½ knots. In fact, she is a mine depot ship and a mine planter as well. The average speed of our battleships of the first line is not more than 19 knots when acting in concert and going at full speed. Individual ships can do from 21 to 22 knots, but the slowest vessel sets the pace for the squadron. Now the San Francisco will, for the time being, be rated also as a dreadnought, and at full speed she is quite on a par in this particular with our actual battle giants.

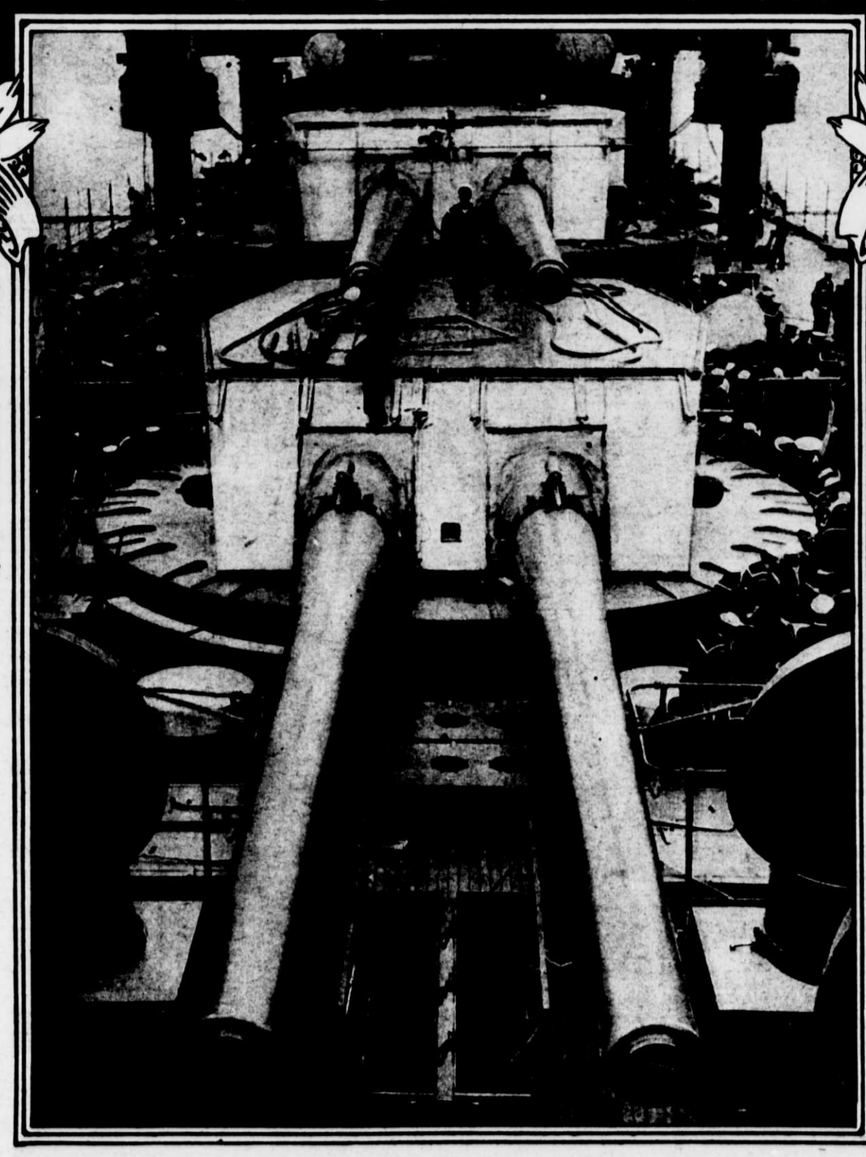
The Chester in the war game represents a whole squadron of battle cruisers, and the San Francisco stands for a sufficient array of enemy battleships. More than this, the colliers and gunboats typify supply craft of all sorts, as well as a fleet of transports carrying an army of invasion and the needful accessories.

But right here is where facts begin to count. The transports must reach some point upon the shore between New York and Boston and they must be there long enough for the convoying ships of war to establish an advance base, and that base must be so secured within a prescribed interval of time that an attacking force of "Blues" shall not be able to disturb the "Reds" effectually. In this problem for the invaders the weather may figure to a great degree, either helping the defence or aiding the invaders.

Rear Admiral Beatty's flotilla of destroyers also has a twofold service to perform; indeed, they may be called upon to play a third part in the game. Primarily they act as scout ships, then as destroyers and finally it may be their duty to sweep for mines to clear the way for the "Reds'" fictitious battleships, so that the latter may either enter a port or make a dash of it past established seacoast batteries for the purpose of attacking those defences in their rear, thus blazing the way for an undisputed landing.

While the "Reds" are thus advancing unheralded from the broad Atlantic, invested with values representing the state of the art abroad, Admiral Fletcher will play his part of the game with realities, the ships of his fleet. The "Blues" can base themselves upon the Brooklyn navy yard and the torpedo and coaling stations within the region set for the war game. So too these defending ships may seek cover behind forts.

It must not be supposed that Admiral Fletcher and his antagonist, Rear Admiral Beatty, bear the brunt of a task set for them on the spur of the moment and left to their unguided initiative for solution. The problem is the outcome of joint study on the part of the General Board of the navy and the Naval War College. Each rival commander starts under sealed orders and each is totally ignorant of the other's instructions. Rear Admiral Austin M. Knight, president of the War College, is the umpire and will watch the operations from afloat, the armored cruiser Brooklyn, a ship of nearly 22 knots, being assigned him for the purpose.



The big guns of the Wyoming. Above—The New York under way. Copyright Underwood and Underwood.

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"Enemy Fleet" Under Rear Admiral Beatty Must Elude the Defenders

The shore to be protected extends over a distance of nearly 200 miles, and the area within which Rear Admiral Beatty's ships may approach reaches out fanwise from this base in an ever widening arc. These waters must be covered seaward by our scouts; first, in the hope of getting in touch with the enemy in time to call up the defending battleships; next, to force the "Reds" to change their objective because of discovery; and, lastly, if their advance is effectually blocked, to compel the would-be invaders to retreat or to join battle. This is by no means a simple problem.

Let us imagine that Rear Admiral Beatty's scouting destroyers are seeking to get in touch with Admiral Fletcher's scouting screen. A "red" destroyer is rushing on right into the driving seas, for she has seen the momentary reflection of a light upon the wake of a "blue" scout somewhere off in the gloom. She is not certain of the unseen vessel's identity.

Shall she slow down or dodge? Suddenly a searchlight shines bewilderingly full in the eyes of those on the bridge of the enemy. A gun is fired commanding surrender, but the commander of Rear Admiral Beatty's destroyer knows how much depends upon him; he decides to take a chance, hoping to outfoot his foe before the rival guns theoretically have won. The "red" destroyer shivers from stem to stern with the racing drive of her propellers and from the boat's funnels clouds of smoke are trailing sternward specked with occasional sparks that tell how hard the engine room force is toiling to keep up the pressure of the steam in the boilers. Seconds count and possibly the fleeing craft may make good.

But the captain of the "blue" pursuer is holding a watch and his brother officer on the bridge or an umpire is throwing dice. No, it is not a game, but it is a gamble. If within a prescribed brief span of time certain combinations of the dice recur just so often then the gunfire of the defender is declared effective and the "enemy" must surrender—doing this by slowing up and turning on all of his lights. If the dice fall otherwise then the speeding "red" destroyer is safe and away.

Actual gunfire might or might not prove effective under wartime conditions, and this element of chance in making hits is determined in the war game by the casting of dice.

The object of the enemy's squadrons will be to avoid combat, and if brought to action the Chester, representing a foreign force of up to date battle cruisers, will take advantage of her superior speed to choose her own position. Here again certain probabilities established by the rules of the game will decide the issue.

Further, this fictitious squadron of battle cruisers may be used to draw our dreadnoughts away from the coast and to give the San Francisco—typifying battleships—and her convoy of transports, represented by a few gunboats, a chance to slip around and into a chosen haven. The "red" battle cruiser squadron must draw the main defence away from our shore long enough for the San Francisco to bring her convoys to anchor and to plant a defensive field of naval mines, and perhaps to land certain rapid fire guns and to mount them behind earthworks, where they will protect the mine fields from the approach of "blue" sweepers.

The defenders will have the benefit of all of the submarines, and this is one condition that will rob the operations of a vital element of realism. Enough already has been learned about German submarines to show that the biggest of these boats might possibly be utilized for an oversea campaign when towed part of the distance.

In another particular we are also lacking in a vital arm of naval strategy. We shall not utilize air craft in the forthcoming manœuvres. Neither Rear Admiral Beatty nor Admiral Fletcher will have seaplanes at his disposal. The aeroplane has shown what it can do abroad, and any foe coming from Europe would be properly equipped with this means of aerial scouting.