



THE SKY SALT

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“Sky skimmers”—that was what 1st Class Gunner Weaver of the U.S. Navy called the seaplanes that patrolled the English Channel. But that was before a certain morning when an old freighter met up with a U-boat in the choppy seas off the coast of France.

*“We sail the seas and drop the shot
To keep old Fritz down,
We ram and shoot and camouflage
To get the diving hound.
When he floods his ballast tanks
To beat it safely home.
Hell hear a load of T.N.T.
Go boom in his microphone!”*



H, YEAH?” drawled the fore-deck lookout, with insulting emphasis. “Yeah!” asserted Clint Weaver, gunner first-class, interrupted in his ditty of the fighting flotillas. Shoving his Navy cap to a challenging angle, he advanced from his perch by the shield of the six-inch gun mount. “Yeah!” he repeated. “That’s exactly wot the Navy is doin’! That’s why they stuck me in this scummy old bucket! To protect pea-green swabs like you, and her worthless cargo, from U-boats!”

The deck-hand opened his mouth for a suitable comeback, then thought better of it and wisely decided to pipe down. He was an ordinary civilian seaman. And the smart U.S. Navy gun crew rated pretty high in a merchant ship like the *Wabash*.

The *Wabash* was a tubby freighter, bound for Cherbourg under a cargo of Liberty motors and airplane parts. As he nosed down Ambrose Channel at half speed, Gunner Weaver had lost no opportunity to impress the lookout with his scornful view on aerial warfare. Convinced that he had won the debate, he returned to the gun breach and resumed his salty song.

*“Away, away with sword and drum.
Here we come, full o’ rum.
Looking for something
To put on the bum—”*

Again he was interrupted. This time it was a hum high over the old freighter’s decks that broke into his melody. Tilting his freckled beezee skyward, the stubby gunner gave a grunt of disgust. For three training Jennies were making wide, wobbly circles over New York harbor. He spit disdainfully over the lee rail and addressed the lookout again.

“Hey, swab! I kin tell from the way your-eyeballs

hang out that you think them airryplanes is doin’ something important!”

“Sure,” the lookout stubbornly maintained.

“Well, they ain’t! I been acrost the old pond three times now on convoy duty, and I never seen one o’ them skimmers do anything useful yet!”

“Oh, yeah? Maybe they ain’t doing plenty at the Front!”

“The Front? What Front? Listen, swab, if it wasn’t for the Navy, they wouldn’t be no Front! And it’s Navy guns, not them rag-and-splinter gadgets, what’s holding the Heinies back! See?”

“Say, gob.” said the lookout. “All I hope is that you can shoot that gun as good as you shoot off your bazoo!”

GUNNER WEAVER could shoot. And he had a chance to prove it eleven days later, as the old *Wabash* wallowed in the long swell of the English Channel. Seven hundred yards off the port beam, under a cold, gray dawn, the foredeck lookout sighted an ugly, slim form rippling the surface of the heaving sea.

“Submarine!” he shouted. “Submarine!”

On a man-o’-war it would have been a gladly expectant cry, but in a vulnerable old packet like the *Wabash*, it was a cry of fate, a dreaded warning. Officers on the bridge leaped to speaking tubes, tense with foreboding. Down in the bowels of the ship a gong beat out the call to general quarters. Like startled rats, the civilian crew scampered over the decks and collided with one another in reaching their assigned battle stations.

It was up to Gunner Weaver and his gun-mates now to make good their boast. All of them had been through the submarine zone before. With the grim calm of seasoned men-o’-warsmen they took their places behind the gun on the foredeck.

Quickly they swung the eager snout of the Navy six-inch onto the low target. It was point-blank range, almost. The rangefinder buzzed, like a rattler about to strike. Gunner Weaver, crouched behind the gun shield, jammed the firing switch into its socket.

A gut-jarring roar shook the ancient freighter’s rusty plates. Loose deck gear leaped and rattled. A black billow of smoke gushed out from the foredeck.

Up on the bridge the *Wabash* skipper, an excitable little man with a fringe of faded whiskers like moss on the ship's bottom, emitted an outraged yowl as he beheld the weather cloth surrounding the *Wabash's* antiquated wheelhouse ripped and tattered by the tremendous concussion.

The high-explosive shell was briefly visible, like a tiny black dot racing with incredible speed towards the target, indistinct in the murky light. It blossomed suddenly into a bloody star as the shrieking metal smote the conning-tower fair-water of the submarine. The periscope sheers snapped, and the open-mouthed *Wabash* crew saw the U-boat's eye hurtle a hundred feet into the air.

Hoarse cheers sounded. The lookout even joined in. It was a spectacular bit of marksmanship, but it came too late to save the *Wabash*. Before the ammo-handlers could shove another red-nosed powder bag into the breech, a thin streak of foam drew a deadly line straight towards the freighter's broad, heavy belly.

The skipper jangled the engine-room telegraph and hurled the steering indicator hard apart. Before the slow hull could swing, the torpedo struck with terrific impact.

A geyser of sea water rose alongside, higher than the funnels. The bottom plates ripped open, and a cargo of American wings intended to command the skies of France sank slowly to the ocean's floor.

There sounded now that hopeless cry of the sea.
"Abandon ship! All hands, abandon ship!"

THE ship's officers, pistols gripped in white-knuckled hands, raced for the boat-falls. Seamen fell on slippery decks. From out of the stricken vitals of the ship the black gang crawled—what was left of them—on oily ladder rungs, wreathed in rising steam, dragging scalded, helpless shipmates with them.

Brief as the time had been, the decks already were canting steeply. The portside falls were useless. On the starboard side, only one boat was successfully launched before the sea rose over the mid-deck and slapped in fast-rising circles around superstructure bulkheads.

The death-scent of German T.N.T. still hung in the breeze as forty-three survivors pushed off from the sinking *Wabash* in a lifeboat designed for a capacity load of twenty-eight men.

It was one of the lifeboats to which the Navy gun-crew had been assigned. Therefore, Gunner Weaver was one of its hazardous burden. Up in the

dangerously deepladen bow, he found himself squatted alongside the lookout. He forced a grin of bravado at the other's white, tense face.

"You here, swab? I figgered ya might be back there, ridin' one o' them junky airypalanes—to the bottom!"

"Yeah?" chattered the lookout. "Well, right now would be a good time for a plane. There lies Fritz, unable to submerge. Man, what a couple of sky-bombs couldn't do to that pig-boat!"

The *Wabash* skipper seemed to share the lookout's hopeful viewpoint. Strapped in a life-jacket three sizes too large for him, the skipper squatted in the stern sheets, beside the steersman.

"Rest oars, men!" he ordered. "The Limeys have a duck patrol in this area. They'll find us! They'll find that U-boat, too!"

"A duck patrol, huh?" grunted Gunner Weaver under his breath. "Well, of all the no-good skimmers cluttering up this war, the worst of all is seaplanes! It proves exactly wot I told ya, swab! In a scrap, nothin' counts but guns. And the best gun wins!"

A silence fell over the boatload of chilled, fearful survivors. Gradually the gloom of early dawn gave way to the light of a gray, cheerless day on the Channel. And the threatening presence of the crippled U-boat by no means lifted their depressed spirits. If the undersea Boche had time to make quick repairs before British help came, they might yet become prisoners.

Gunner Weaver had started to hum a few bars of song, preparatory to lifting his voice in hopeful song, when a steady drone sounded off in the north.

"Silence up there!" demanded the skipper. "Stow that noise!"

Gunner Weaver joined the silence, broken only by the ominous wash of the sea, and the occasional splash of a comber crest into the boat. Forty-three pairs of ears listened. Forty-three pairs of eyes anxiously scanned the sky, off in the opaque world towards the Devonshire coast.

The sky sound grew. All at once the vague form of a low-flying plane burst out of the mist. The little skipper leaped to his feet, waving frantic arms.

"A seaplane!" he shouted. "A Limey flyer! He's sighted us, men. We're saved! Give him a cheer, lads!"

GUNNER WEAVER did not join in the feeble cheer. He was still skeptical of any good to come from aircraft.

"Not yet we ain't saved!" he told the lookout. "Look, that bird's bearing dead onto the sub now! We put the

Heinies' wet-gun out of commish, but he ain't done for yet, by a long shot! There's going to be some more airplane decoratin' the bottom soon!"

Gunner Weaver's prophecy was more nearly accurate this time. From past crossings, he had learned that Germany's *untersee* craft were well able to defend themselves from hostile aircraft. U-boats were equipped with deck-sockets, onto which machine guns could be quickly fitted. Even as he spoke, Boche poured from the battered bridge hatch, lugging a Spandau. Before the British seaplane could get into bombing position, a spurt of tracer glinted up from the submarine's deck.

Engagements between subs and aircraft were not uncommon in Channel waters. But the *Wabash* survivors quickly realized that they were witnessing something more than an ordinary encounter, for their own rescue depended on the outcome. It was something like one hundred sea miles up to the Devonshire coast—and one hundred miles is a perilous and uncertain voyage for a badly overcrowded lifeboat.

The tracer spurted closer to the 70-foot wingspread of the seaplane. It was a Short, one of the pre-war crates operating out of Plymouth, long since withdrawn from the more active waters around Dover. Gunner Weaver's expert eyes observed that it did not carry Vickers mounts with which to answer the submarine's fire. Instead, a clumsy 1½-pounder was mounted on the blunt nose of its nacelle.

Behind the stubby gun, the lifeboat's company saw the figure of the gun-layer stand. He swung the piece, and the 1½-pounder boomed. Once. A splash rose, missing the slim U-boat deck by many yards.

"Rotten!" groaned Gunner Weaver. "But then, what can ya expect with a bundle of rags and matchwood fer a gun-platform?"

The Spandau continued to rake the sky with long, determined bursts, and all at once, just as a pair of light bombs shot down from the Short's undercarriage, between its two pontoons, Boche marksmanship was rewarded. Splinters flew from the pontoons. The gun-layer sank out of view in his cockpit. The seaplane rocked like a hit bird.

"Good Lord, they winged him!" howled the *Wabash* skipper. His face was as gray as his whiskers now. With hands that shook he lifted a pair of binoculars to his eyes to observe the extent of the plane's damage.

The two bombs fell and exploded, far short of their target. On a wing-end, the Short made a long, slanting

dive, its motor sputtering. Wicked spears of tracer followed it down until, a half-cable's length from the lifeboat, the rounded nose went up and it pancaked with a terrific splash.

"Fine fightin' tools, these airy-planes!" said Gunner Weaver.

The lookout had no answer this time. Like the rest of the *Wabash* survivors, he was wondering how long it would be before a surface craft discovered their plight.

The whiskered skipper lowered his glasses and reported.

"The gun-layer, he's done for, that's plain," he said. "Looks like the pilot's hit, too! Blast the luck! But keep up courage, men! We've got another hope, and that's the Channel patrol! That torpedo could have been heard for miles!"

But a peril more deadly than the moody sea sent a new ripple of fear through the crowded, helpless boat's company. The menacing skip-skip of Spandau slugs whipped the sea. One slug spat against the tiller.

"God, sir!" wailed the steersman. "We're direct in the line o' fire! They're still pouring it into the plane!"

"Oars!" bellowed the skipper. "Lively! Lean into 'em for your lives, men!"

A GRUNT from the steersman came with the splash of the first, hasty stroke. Letting go the tiller, he gripped his throat, a dazed expression in his eyes. Red gushed from between his fingers. He swayed an instant, and as the skipper clutched at him, but missed, the steersman pitched overboard.

The men at the oars needed no driving now. The blades swept rapidly to and fro to pull them out of that murderous path of Spandau metal.

Down they went, into the trough between two high-crested swells, offering a brief refuge from slaughter. But as the boat topped the running swell, another hail of bullets whined and crackled across the eddying stern. The skipper gripped the tiller now. Gunner Weaver prodded his lookout companion with an elbow.

"Airyplanes!" he gritted. "Airy-planes! Wot d'ye think of 'em now, swab?"

The lookout had no answer. The argument that had raged between them all the way across the Atlantic, during their long watches of enforced proximity on the foredeck of the *Wabash*, was very much in Gunner Weaver's favor now.

The skipper's voice crackled again.

"The plane's settling! Her pontoons shot full of holes, likely!"

“Her pilot is signaling us for rescue!” sang out one of the men.

But the skipper held his course. A boatload of humanity could not be sent into that zone of merciless slugs to save one life. Even as the lifeboat surged under the sweeping oar-strokes, another burst from the U-boat’s gun, bent on exterminating the plane, ricocheted about them. One leaden fragment spat into the cutwater of the lifeboat. Splinters whizzed. One of them struck Gunner Weaver’s cheek, bringing a trickle of blood.

That leaden fragment turned the tide of the weird battle. The sting on his cheek sent a reckless rage surging through the gunner’s fighting soul. A rage against the Boche, so intent on their kill that they sent their fire into a helpless lifeboat.

He leaped to the gunwale, and stood there balanced for an instant. A bark came from the skipper.

“Grab that crazy sailor! Tryin’ to capsize us, you loon? Down! Down in the bow!”

Gunner Weaver turned. “Aye, aye, sir!” he sang back. “Down it is!”

Down then went his body in a long, sweeping dive.

The icy sea gripped him. His body stiffened with a torturing ache in every muscle. He burst to the surface, ten feet away from the menacing slash of the rapid oar blades. Spluttering and gasping, he saw astonished faces turned on him.

“Carry on!” howled the skipper. “No time now to stand by!”

And stand by they did not. But Gunner Weaver had no intention of being hauled back into the lifeboat. His course of action was determined. Partly buoyed, and as much impeded, by the clumsy life-jacket strapped around him, he struck out towards the sinking plane.

It was not a long swim. The Short had struck the sea near the *Wabash* boat, and the breeze was bringing it rapidly closer. Yet Gunner Weaver was on the verge of exhaustion as he reached the rolling, pitching plane, clambered onto a half-submerged pontoon, and pulled himself, dripping and shivering, onto the nacelle.

The pilot stared at him with a white, tragic face. He coughed once and wiped the blood from his lips with a sleeve.

“No use, Yank!” he said hoarsely. “We’re done for!”

“Done for, hell!” yelled Gunner Weaver, struggling to keep the shiver out of his voice. “Pull your tanks, Limey! Dump ’em! They’ll keep us afloat long enough to—”

He clambered into the gun-layer’s position in front

of the pilot, and as he did so, he saw the crumpled form of the dead gun-layer in the bottom of the fighting pit. He squirmed behind the 1½-pounder and gave the breech a quick inspection.

TO HIS relief he saw that the weapon was the same type as the salute guns used in the American Navy. A row of loops under the mount carried a full row of brass shells, headed with fragmentation shells. Tiny projectiles they were, compared to the ones fired in a six-inch. But skilfully aimed, a 1½-pounder at short range was no piece to be ignored.

The plane sat low now, so low in the sea that the Boche were finding it increasingly difficult to deliver a lethal burst into it across the restless swells that alternately concealed and exposed it.

He spun the muzzle of the 1½-pounder around. Topping a swell, he caught a hurried glimpse of the U-boat, submerged nearly level with the conning tower, the seas sweeping its decks and harassing the Spandau crew. A swarm of sailors labored on the conning tower.

“Trying to plug that busted hatch and submerge!” he told himself. “I’ll show ’em—!”

A sweep of Spandau lead rippled the topwing, inches from his head. He jerked down on the firing pawl. The 1½-pounder emitted an ear-splitting crack, the recoil jarring the frail, shattered structure of the crippled plane.

He fired again on the down slope of the swell, reloading with expert speed. He was unable to see the result of his work, but a spirited yell from the direction of the lifeboat told him that he had made a hit. Up again on the ceaseless roll of the sea, he saw the repair crew carrying the limp body of a shipmate up the bent rungs of the conning tower ladder. He had disorganized their frantic labors.

Again he slammed shut the breech, flipped the breech-lock closed, took quick aim and fired a third shot from the bucking 1½-pounder.

This shot fell short but luck was with him. It skipped and fetched up against the sub’s plates with a metallic crash. The shell burst and the three men crouched behind the Spandau crumpled. Three others leaped from the group on the conning tower. It was a grim struggle for survival now. Once a British patrol craft sighted that crippled hull, it would make short work of it. And the Boche knew their peril.

At the lift of the next swell, the Spandau was manned again, and tracer whipped into the plane. A

strut parted with a loud spang. A wing sagged. Gunner Weaver flung a glance at the Limey pilot, pale but grinning now. The fellow nodded encouragement.

Gunner Weaver fired again, and from the chorus of cheers that came from the observers in the lifeboat, and the crash of metal yonder, he knew he had succeeded in making a direct hit.

"I'm gettin' the hang o' this thing how," he decided. He pressed his face against the sighting tube alongside the clumsy barrel and waited for the heave of the sea to expose the U-boat again. As that moment came, a gasp escaped him and he relaxed his grip on the pawl.

It was a gasp that sounded very much like disappointment.

For on the bridge of the battered U-boat stood an officer. The Boche skipper himself, perhaps. Over his head he waved a staff. And on the end of the staff, which looked like a boathook, fluttered a signal that was the universal language of the defeated foe.

The submarine had raised the white flag!

It dawned slowly on Gunner Weaver that he, practically lonehanded, had made one of the most coveted captures that a man-o'-warsman can hope to make. He rose erect, and from his throat rose the victory cry, the shout of the conqueror, the shrill, challenging yell that has leaped from the lips of fighting men since time immemorial.

But all at once, his voice trailed off into the note of a crowing rooster, then ceased. For Gunner Weaver began to realize that he had lost his argument with the swab of a lookout.

Aircraft had their use, after all!

Of all men, he, with the old Navy's scorn for flying, had engaged the enemy in a detested plane. And he had credited that plane with a U-boat victory!

A new cry rose from the lifeboat. Dazed, Gunner Weaver gripped a wing-edge and scanned the young mountains of sea that separated them. Off in the north, then, he saw the reason for the submarine's amazing surrender. With a flat ribbon of black smoke whipping from her rakish funnels, a British destroyer was bearing down on the scene at full speed!

He felt suddenly weak and dizzy and dropped back to the gun-layer's pit. The pilot was sagging in his harness, eyes closed, blood trickling from his lips and staining his breast. Gunner Weaver became aware of the fact that the sea was invading the bottom of the nacelle. The Short lay low in the water now. Only the buoyancy of the emptied petrol tanks were keeping what was left of its gallant hulk afloat.

"Useless as the buttons on an admiral's sleeve, these lousy skimmers!" he muttered. But deep in his heart, Gunner Weaver felt a grudging admiration for the ripped and riddled seaplane. The salt stung his cheek and he mopped a trickle of blood from his splinter cut. He wondered if he would rate a wound stripe and grinned at the notion.

He was beginning to shiver again, uncontrollably. Maybe a song would warm him. He lifted his voice in the ditty of the fighting flotillas:

*"We sail the seas and drop the shot
To keep old Fritz down.
We ram and shoot and camouflage
To get the diving hound.
When he floods—"*

A ripping yell came from a crest, close alongside. Gunner Weaver swung around with a scowl. Something was always interrupting his song. He saw the lifeboat pulling heartily towards him. At the tiller the *Wabash* skipper stood, spraddle-legged, confidence renewed.

"Ohoy, sailor!" came the hail. "Stand by for rescue!"

The old tradition of the sea now gripped Gunner Weaver—the loyalty that makes any man-o'-warsman ready to fight or argue, as the case demanded, for whatever craft he happened to be in.

"Rescue, the devil, sir!" he retorted boldly. "I'm skipper o' this bucket and I'll have ya know she's seaworthy!"

He saw the faces of the men light up with the glow of hero worship. But no such noble emotion stirred the lookout up in the crowded bow.

"Hey, salty!" he yelled with impish delight. "What you think about airypalanes now?"

Having tasted victory at arms, Gunner Weaver now saw his colors going down in the art of sea-going debate. Worst of all, he was losing an argument to a humble, slightly despised civilian deckhand.

The lookout wore a taunting grin. "How about it?" he demanded. "You still think them rag-and-kindling gadgets are any use in a fight?"

Gunner Weaver gulped. He ran a hand over the coaming of the gun-pit, a gesture that was more than half a caress. After all, a man-o'-warsman had to stand up for his ship, he decided.

"Once in a while," he admitted gamely, "they come in handy in a pinch, swab!"

A cackle of laughter greeted his admission. So he could not resist adding, "As a platform fer a Navy gun! See?"