

How Victory at Sea, Once Nearly Lost, Was Finally Won

Admiral Sims Describes the Situation at the Time America Entered the War

By W. F. Fullam
Rear Admiral U. S. Navy (retired)

THE VICTORY AT SEA. By Rear Admiral William S. Sims. Commander of the American naval forces operating in European waters during the great war. Published by Doubleday, Page & Co.

IN THE preface of his book Admiral Sims makes the following explanatory statement:

"This is not in any sense a history of the operations of our naval forces in Europe during the great war, much less a history of the naval operations as a whole. That would require not only many volumes, but prolonged and careful research by competent historians.

"The interest of the public in such a story is due to the fact that during the war the sea forces were compelled to take all possible precautions to keep the enemy from learning anything about the various devices and means used to oppose or destroy the underwater craft. This necessity for the utmost secrecy was owing to the peculiar nature of the sea warfare.

Kept Germans in the Dark

"The enemy submarines sought to win the war by sinking the merchant shipping upon which depended the essential supplies of the Allied populations and armies, and it was the effort of the Allies to prevent this and to destroy submarines when possible that constituted the vitally important naval activities of the war.

"By means of strategic and tactical dispositions and various weapons and devices now no longer secret, such as the depth charge, the mystery ship, hydroplanes, mine fields, explosive mine nets, special hunting submarines, etc., it was frequently possible either to destroy submarines with their entire crews or to capture the few men who escaped when their boats were sunk, and thus keep from the German Admiralty all knowledge of the means by which their U-boats had met their fate.

Allies Couldn't Tell

"Under such unprecedented conditions of warfare it is apparent that the Allied navies could not safely tell the public just what they were doing or how they were doing it. But now that the ban has been removed it is desirable to give the relatives and friends of the fine chaps who did the good work sufficient information to enable them to understand the difficulty of the problem that was presented to the anti-submarine forces of the Allies, the manner in which it was solved and the various means invented and employed."

And again it must be plain that this requirement of secrecy which Admiral Sims rightly emphasizes as the most important element in successful anti-submarine warfare could best be secured by selecting one central place in one of the Allied countries and by organizing one staff or Allied council at the selected headquarters from which Allied naval operations could be coordinated and directed. A school-boy should understand this principle. If each of the Allied navies was independently directed from its own national capital it is manifest that the correspondence and cabling necessary to get any measure of coordination or cooperation would be prohibitive and secrecy would be reduced to the minimum.

Co-ordinating Allied Navies

In considering this vital subject of cooperation it is proper to note in this review of Admiral Sims's book that he advocated and fought for the principle of hearty and complete coordination of the Allied naval forces from the minute he reached London and was made acquainted with the appalling truth—that the Germans were at that time winning the war! And it is to the discredit of his critics that they should have attributed Sims's plea for heartiness of cooperation and for centralized control of Allied naval operations to his ambition, or should have entertained the silly suspicion of pro-British feeling on his part. They utterly failed to realize or to support the one sound principle that organization

and cooperation were the absolute essentials of Allied success. It was simply a case of one closely knit Allied force versus four separate naval mobs.

Sims and Jellicoe

In the latter part of March, 1917, shortly before we declared war, Sims was ordered abroad to report upon the situation. His account of his meeting with Admiral Jellicoe is both interesting and important.

"On the day of my arrival in London I had my first interview with Admiral Jellicoe, who was at that time the First Sea Lord. Admiral Jellicoe and I needed no introduction. I had known him for many years, and for a considerable period we had been more or less regular correspondents. I had first made his acquaintance in China in 1901. At that time Jellicoe was a captain and was already recognized as one of the coming men of the British navy. He was an expert in ordnance and gunnery, a subject in which I was greatly interested, and this fact had brought us together and made us friends. The admiration which I had then conceived for the admiral's character and intelligence I have never lost.

Simple and Direct

"Simplicity and directness were his two most outstanding points; though few men had risen so rapidly in the royal navy, success had made him only more quiet, soft spoken and unostentatiously dignified; there was nothing of the blustering seadog about the admiral, but he was all courtesy, all brain, and of all the men I have ever met, there have been none more approachable, more frank and more open minded."

This picture of Jellicoe invites a brief note of Sims's personality. He is tall and very erect, thoroughly democratic, always approachable, never austere; bluff and jovial, the personification of energy, both mental and physical; tireless and zealous, honest and aboveboard; aggressively outspoken, absolutely fearless and with one ever-controlling determination—to hit the target for the credit of the navy and for the glory of his country.

War Nearly Lost

Admiral Jellicoe took a paper from his desk, giving the record of tonnage losses for the last few months.

"It is expressing it mildly to say that I was surprised by this disclosure. I was fairly astounded, for I had never imagined anything so terrible. I expressed my consternation to Admiral Jellicoe.

"Yes," he said, as quietly as though he were discussing the weather and not the future of the British Empire. "It is impossible for us to go on with the war if losses like this continue."

"What are you doing about it?" I asked.

"Everything that we can. We are increasing our anti-submarine forces in every possible way. We are using every possible craft we can find with which to fight submarines. We are building destroyers, trawlers and other like craft as fast as we can. But the situation is very serious, and we shall need all of the assistance we can get."

"It looks as though the Germans were winning the war," I remarked.

"They will win unless we can stop these losses—and stop them soon," the admiral replied.

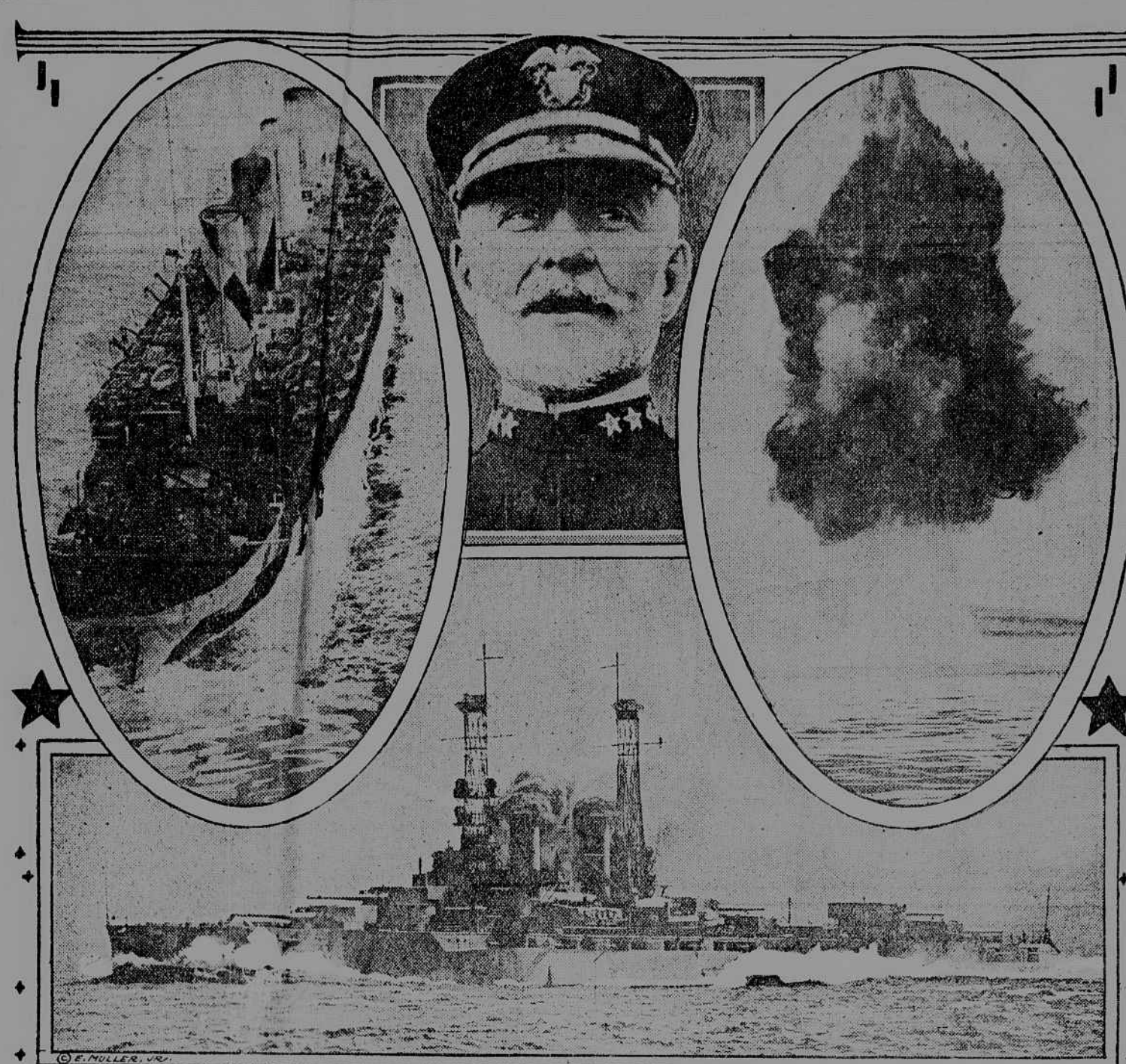
"According to the authorities, the limit of endurance would be reached about November 1, 1917; in other words, unless some method of successfully fighting submarines could be discovered almost immediately Great Britain would have to lay down her arms before a victorious Germany."

"What we are facing is the defeat of Great Britain," said Ambassador Walter H. Page, after the situation had been explained to him."

Sims Acts Promptly

It was proof of Sims's intelligence that he should at once have been impressed with the absolute necessity of complete cooperation with the Allies if Germany was to be defeated, for at this time the Germans seemed confident of winning.

About four days after reaching London Sims sent a cable to the Navy Department giving an accurate report of the seriousness of



REAR ADMIRAL WILLIAM LOWDEN SIMS
author of *The Victory at Sea*

UPPER LEFT, the *Olympia* loaded with troops, photographed from the air

UPPER RIGHT, exploding a German mine

CENTER, the U. S. Battleship *Wyoming* doing 23 knots

the situation and making the following recommendations:

"To accelerate and insure defeat of the submarine campaign immediate active cooperation is absolutely necessary.

"The issue is, and must inevitably be decided, at the focus of all lines of communications in the eastern Atlantic; therefore I very urgently recommend the following immediate naval cooperation: Maximum number of destroyers to be sent, accompanied by small anti-submarine craft, the former to patrol designated high seas area westward of Ireland, based on Queenstown, with an advance base at Bantry Bay, latter to be an inshore patrol for destroyers; small craft should be of light draft with as high speed as possible, but low speed should be also useful.

"At present our battleships can serve no useful purpose in this area, except that two divisions of dreadnoughts might be based on Brest for moral effect against anticipated raids by heavy enemy ships in the Channel out of reach of the British main fleet.

Warned of Raids

"It is very likely the enemy will make submarine mine-laying raids on our coast or in the Caribbean to divert attention and to keep our forces from the critical areas in the eastern Atlantic through effect upon public opinion. The difficulty of maintaining submarine bases and the focusing of shipping on this side will restrict such operations to minor importance, although they should be effectively opposed, principally by keeping the Channel swept on soundings."

Thus in a few days after Sims reached London our Navy Department had sufficient information upon which to act. Sims advised "immediate active cooperation"; the issue would be decided in the eastern Atlantic; the vessels most needed were specified; the necessity for keeping the Grand Fleet intact was noted; the department was warned not to fear German operations on our coast.

A few days later Sims sent another and longer message to the Navy Department emphasizing his previous recommendations as to the necessity for immediate assistance, inasmuch as the demands upon the British fleet were excessive. In this second dispatch Sims again advised concentration of effort in or near

the English Channel. He advocated the convoy, but was told England lacked the necessary warships. They were at first compelled to adopt dispersion. But he personally opposed the policy of arming merchantmen as inefficient and insisted upon the convoy as the only solution:

"The evidence is conclusive that, regardless of any enemy diversions such as raids on our coast or elsewhere, the critical area in which the war's decision will be made is in the eastern Atlantic at the focus of all lines of communications."

In these early dispatches—and there were many of them—our Navy Department was constantly warned. In one he said:

"Briefly stated, I consider that at the present moment we are losing the war."

And Ambassador Page on April 27 backed up Sims by a most urgent message to the State Department, as follows:

"There is reason for the greatest alarm about the issues of the war caused by the increasing success of the German submarines. . . . What ever help the United States may render at any time in the future or in any theater of the war, our help is now more seriously needed in this submarine area for the sake of all the Allies than it can ever be needed again or anywhere else. . . . There is no time to be lost."

Could it have been made plainer that it was the first duty of the United States to throw every available naval craft into the war zone at once?

Our Destroyers Arrive

On the morning of May 4 six American destroyers entered the harbor of Queenstown under command of Commander Taussig and reported to Admiral Bayly, of the Royal Navy.

"When will you be ready to go to sea?" asked Admiral Bayly.

"We are ready now, sir," replied Taussig.

The commanders of these six boats were Commander Taussig,

Commander A. W. Johnson, and Lieutenant Commanders Ward K. Wortman, Arthur P. Fairfield, Rufus F. Zogbaum and Fred H. Poter.

When Our Ships Arrive

The conditions at this time had been described by Sims as follows:

"Six days before our destroyers put in at Queenstown I sent this message to Mr. Page:

"Allies do not now command sea. Transport of troops and supplies strained to the utmost and the maintenance of the armies in the field is threatened."

"Such then was the situation when our little destroyer flotilla first went to sea to do battle with the submarine."

On May 17 a second division of six destroyers arrived at Queenstown, and by July 5, three months after we entered the war, the number was increased to thirty-four.

The story of these destroyers and their splendid work is delightfully told. Their cooperation with British forces was an object lesson in efficiency. Great credit is given to Captain Pringle, Captain Berrien, Commander Carpenter, Commander Porterfield, Commander Hanrahan and others for good work at sea.

Sims Urges Convoy

In the mean time Sims had urged the adoption of other measures, including the convoy, as being vitally necessary. He had opposed the arming of merchantmen as futile. What was his amazement when informed by the Navy Department,

despite his sound argument to the contrary, that it considered the arming of merchantmen to be the most effective plan.

On June 28 and again on June 29 he most respectfully condemned the arming of merchantmen as a means of defense, and again urged the adoption of the convoy.

"We are dispersing our forces while the enemy is concentrating his. It therefore seems to go without

A GERMAN submarine surrendering to an American destroyer off Queenstown

mention that the only course for us to pursue is to revert to the ancient practice of convoy.

"I again submit that if the Allied campaign is to be viewed as a whole there is no necessity for any high sea protection on our own coast.

"The British navy is already strained beyond its capacity and I therefore urgently recommend that we cooperate, at least to the extent of handling convoys from New York.

"The dangers to convoys from high sea raiders is remote, but, of course, must be provided against, and hence the necessity for escorting cruisers or reserve battleships. The necessity is even greater, however, for anti-submarine craft in the submarine war zone."

A study of Sims's report and suggestions during the first three weeks will show that they were always most respectful, they were unerring, and it may be said that every one of them merited immediate and favorable consideration.

The Navy Department's Policy

On July 10, 1917—three months after we entered the war—Sims received a letter from Secretary Daniels, stating that "the department is preparing to announce its policy in so far as it relates to the Allies," as follows:

"First, the most hearty cooperation with the Allies to meet the present submarine situation in European or other waters compatible with an adequate defense of our own home waters. Second, the most hearty cooperation with the Allies to meet any future situation arising during the present war period. Third, the realization that, while a successful termination of the present war must always be the first Allied aim and will probably result in diminished tension throughout the world, the future position of the United States must in no way be jeopardized by any disintegration of our main fighting fleet.

To this letter Sims sadly replied as follows:

"1. The department's cablegram of July 10, 1917, quoting a letter which had been addressed to the Secretary of State concerning naval policy in relation to the present war was received on July 10.

"In view of the nature of certain parts of the policy set forth therein I wish to indicate the general policy which has heretofore governed my recommendation.

"2. I have assumed that our mission was to promote the maximum

A Frank Discussion of Our Policy as Directed by the Secretary of the Navy

cooperation with the Allies in defeating a common enemy.

"All of my dispatches and recommendations have been based on the firm conviction that the above mission could and would be accomplished, and that hence such questions as the possibility of post-war situations, or of all or part of the Allies being defeated and America being left alone, were not given consideration; in fact, I cannot see how we could enter into this war wholeheartedly if such considerations were allowed to diminish in any way the chances of Allied success.

The Obvious Idea

"3. The first course open to us which naturally occurs to mind is that we should look upon our service as part of the combined Allied service, of which the British Grand Fleet is the main body and all other Allied naval forces disposed throughout the world as necessary branches thereof.

"This conception views our battleship fleet as a support or reserve of the Allied main body (the British Grand Fleet), and would lead to utilizing our other forces to fill in weak spots and to strengthen Allied lines, both offensively and defensively, wherever necessary.

"Such a course might be considered as a disintegration of our fleet, and it is only natural, therefore, that hesitation and caution should be felt in its operation.

"4. I have felt, however, that it was possible to accomplish our mission without in any way involving the so-called disintegration of our fleet as a whole.

"In the first instance I have assumed that our aim would be to project, or prepare to project, our maximum force against the enemy offensively.

It is impossible for lack of space to quote all of the five printed pages of this remarkable letter, in which the department's policy is analyzed and respectfully, though justly, condemned in nearly every paragraph.

Admiral Sims's Comment

Reviewing the whole subject, Sims comments as follows concerning the vital points of cooperation and organization:

"14. The department's policy refers to willingness to extend hearty cooperation to the Allies and to discuss plans for joint operations and also to its readiness to consider any plans which may be submitted by the joint Allied admiralties.

"15. I submit that it is impossible to carry out this cooperation, to discuss plans with the various admiralties, except in one way—and that is, to establish what might be termed an advance headquarters in the war zone composed of department representatives upon whose recommendations the department can depend.

"16. The time element is one of the most vital of all elements which enter into military warfare, and hence delays in communications by written reports, together with the necessity for secrecy, render it very difficult to discuss plans at long range. The enemy secret service has proved itself to be of extraordinary efficiency.

An Unsafe Plan

"Moreover, I believe it to be very unsafe to depend upon discussion of military plans by cable, as well as by letter. The necessary inadequacy of written cable communications needs no discussion. The opportunities for misunderstandings are great. It is difficult to be sure that one has expressed clearly one's meaning in writing, and hence phrases in a letter are very liable to misinterpretation. They cannot explain themselves.

"It is unquestionable that efficiency would be greatly improved if any one of the Allies—Italy, France, England or the United States—were selected to direct all operations, the others merely keeping the one selected fully informed of their resources available, and submitting to complete control and direction in regard to the utilization of these resources.

"I wish to make it quite clear that up to date it has been wholly impossible for me, with one military aide, to perform all of the functions of such an advanced branch of the department.

"As stated in my dispatches, it has been evident for some time that I have been approaching a state in which it would be physically impossible to handle the work without an increase of staff.

He then outlines the organization of the necessary staff to assist him in his work.

Sims vs. the Navy Department

It is very necessary to a correct understanding of this vital subject of cooperation to give careful attention to this letter of Secretary Daniels and to Admiral Sims's reply thereto. It will be noted that the Navy Department was willing to cooperate, with reservations, as follows:

1. "Compatible with an adequate defense of our home waters."

2. "The future position of the United States must in no way be jeopardized by any disintegration of our main fighting fleet."

3. "Willingness to send its minor fighting forces in any number not incompatible with home needs."

4. "Unwillingness as a matter of

policy to separate any division from the main fleet."

5. "Willingness to discuss more fully plans for joint operations," etc.

Advocated Co-operation

On the other hand, Sims advocated the fullest and most hearty cooperation, with no reservations as regard ships and organizations; that our surest defense was to throw ourselves into the war zone without delay and with the maximum force that could be used; that this policy would best protect us during the war and after the war. In this Sims followed Mahon's sacred teachings—use your fleet not for coast defense, but to fight the enemy fleet; "war, once declared, must be waged aggressively, relentlessly; the enemy must not be fended off, but smitten down."

Thus at the end of three months—the critical months of the World War—our Navy Department was "preparing to announce its policy." We had thirty-four destroyers in the war zone, and Sims was in London with one aide!

Comment is left to the reader.

The Convoy Adopted

Sims had insisted upon the convoy from the start. The English had convoyed 20,000,000 men back and forth across the Channel, infested with submarines, and had sent thousands of men long distances in some cases, but they had insufficient ships to adopt the convoy everywhere. But with Sims's assistance, and after we entered the war, Admiral Jellicoe decided to adopt the convoy, and on July 21 Sims reported to Washington: "The success of the convoys so far brought in shows that the system will defeat the submarine campaign if applied generally and in time."

Space forbids more than a brief reference to the various naval operations described in Admiral Sims's book. He gives good accounts of Rodman's division serving with the Grand Fleet, Admirals Fletcher and Wilson in France, Admiral Niblack at Gibraltar, Admiral Dunn at the Azores, Admiral Strauss, Captain Belknap, Mr. Ralph C. Browne and Commander Fullinwider with the mine barrage. Admiral Rodgers and his division at Bantry Bay, Captain Cotten and Captain Leigh with the "sub" chasers, and Captain Nelson and Commander Bastedo with the gallant little flotilla in the attack on Durazzo.

Individual Credit

In treating these different operations Admiral Sims mentions the names of nearly all the commanding officers, and gives them generous credit for duty well done. He pays just tribute to the members of his staff, Captain Twining, Commander Babcock, Captain Cone, Commander Edwards, Captain Schofield and Captain Long; to our submarine flotilla, under Commander Grady, and to our naval air force, Captain Craven and Commander Whiting. He mentions the fine work of Admiral Gieves in transporting 1,000,000 men to France, and credits Admiral Plunkett for his work with our big naval guns on the battle line in France.

Sims gives well deserved praise to the naval reservists and to the "college boys and 'sub' chasers."

"Those boys can't bring a snip across the ocean!" some one said to Captain Cotten, who commanded the first squadron to arrive at Plymouth. "Perhaps they can't," replied Cotten—himself an Annapolis man, who admires these reservists as much as I do—but they have!"

"If there is any man," says Sims, "who doubts what the American system of education is doing in our country he should have spent a few days at sea with these young men. That they knew nothing at first about navigation and naval technique was not important. The really important fact was that their minds were alert, their hearts filled with a tremendous enthusiasm for the cause, their souls clean and their bodies ready for the most exhausting tasks."

Praise for the Navy

In conclusion it must be emphasized that Admiral Sims in this book and in all his subsequent writings and all his acts praises the navy to the skies. He has never criticized the navy. He has criticized our policy at the beginning of the war—our failure to give the navy a chance to fight promptly and with full force immediately upon the declaration of war.

There can be no question that Sims was right in urging complete cooperation. Admiral Jellicoe sends him for his generous and fearless support. And word comes to the writer of this review from an unbiased officer of high rank who served abroad that history will someday give Sims great credit for leading the Allied Council in methods of hearty coordination.