

# V A N I T Y F A I R

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## Germany and Navy Traditions

*By Frederick James Gregg*

**S**OON after the destruction of the *Lusitania*, Dr. Dernburg, formerly German Colonial Minister, and, at the time, the Kaiser's unofficial representative here, made an address in New York defending the sinking of the vessel. A distinguished Irishman, who happened to be present, turned to a young Teutonic editor sitting next him and said: "I cannot understand how a gentleman, an officer brought up in the naval service, could sink a non-fighting ship full of passengers." The other man replied: "Nonsense! Why, I would do it myself." "Ah, but I said a gentleman," was the retort.

That ended the dialogue.

An American commander of the old navy, discussing the question whether or not a certain line of action was permissible under the regulations, burst out hotly: "Hang it, it isn't done: rules or no rules. And never could be by a man of honor."

Capt. Paul Jones succeeded in doing what the German submarines have failed to do in the present war. That is to say, he dislocated British trade. From Glasgow to Bristol, merchants were terrorized by the ubiquitous Yankee. But, in spite of the fact that his capture was more desired than that of any other sea rover, the first hero of the American navy never put in peril women, children or non-combatants; never took life illegally or unnecessarily, and never had occasion to offer the excuse that shortness of time, or his own risk, had compelled him to ignore the rights of neutrals, or even those of a beaten adversary. When he set out to bring the British to book for unfair treatment of Americans who had been taken prisoner, he set an example of courtesy and chivalry that will ever be memorable in naval annals. He decided to seize some Englishman of high station, and hold him as a hostage, to assure better treatment for those who had fallen into the hands of the enemy. Sailing up to St. Mary's Isle, the seat of the Earl of Selkirk, near Kirkcudbright, he hoped to seize that magnate. But fortunately for himself, his Lordship was away from home. Jones' officers and crew were disappointed, and insisted on some sort of reprisal. Their commander directed them to take the Earl's family plate. He allowed his men to sell it, and later on bought it back and returned it to Lady Selkirk, writing her a letter which throws more light on American navy traditions than hundreds of pages of history could do.

The first indication the world had of the ways of the new German navy was furnished in Manila Bay, in the course of our war with Spain. The commander of the Kaiser's fleet, ignoring what Admiral Dewey regarded as the rules of naval etiquette, finally drew from our admiral an ultimatum, in enforcing which the American commander would have been supported by the British Admiral then in that neighborhood. Thus, actual war between the United States and Germany was made possible through persistent disregard of mere naval etiquette—an etiquette which really lies at the base of all the rules of International Law relative to the sea.

**I**N the same war the American rule—also the general navy rule—that mercy and kindness must be shown to the helpless was notably exemplified after the sea fight of Santiago. As soon as the ships of Admiral Cervera had been driven ashore along the Cuban coast, the sailors of the victorious fleet took to the boats in a mad rush to save the survivors. The Spanish commander was re-

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ceived with full honors on the American ship to which he was taken, and when brought to the United States was made the object of official and private solicitude. They praised him to his face for the gallant Spanish sailor that he was.

The German navy dates only from the present reign. It was intended to defend the colonial system which came into existence towards the close of the Bismarck *régime* and to protect the German foreign trade which



**HIGH ADMIRAL VON TIRPITZ**

began to spread through the Seven Seas in the period after the Franco-Prussian War. It was to make secure German concessions—so-called—in the Far East; German possessions in Africa, and German islands in the Pacific. At the present moment all these territories, with some trifling exceptions, have passed under foreign flags.

When the Great War broke out Grand Admiral Von Tirpitz, the guardian angel of the submarine, was an Honorary Admiral of the British Fleet. That his views on the subject of maritime warfare, and his theory of its lack of limitations, are quite recent, may be demonstrated without any difficulty. Up to 1914 Germany professed, time and time again, with passionate earnestness, her adherence to the Naval Traditions of the United States, Great Britain, France, Holland, and the other countries possessing a distinguished history afloat. Having no traditions of her own, she proclaimed her adherence to those of the civilized world.

**BARON** Marshal Von Bieberstein, at the Hague Peace Conference of 1907, made this voluntary declaration: "The officers of the Germany Navy—I say it with a high voice—will always fulfil in the strictest manner the duties which flow from the unwritten law of humanity and civilization. . . . As to the sentiments of humanity and civilization, I cannot admit that any Government or country is, in these respects, superior to that which I have the honor to represent."

Relatives of the Americans lost with the *Lusitania* will wonder to what extent the Baron spoke for the Navy Department of the Empire.

In July of 1914 at Kiel, Grand Admiral von Koester, a sailor whose advice was highly prized by the Kaiser, supplied an argument against the convenient, if questionable, theory that new inventions, in guns and ships, have done away with the old traditions. "Nelson," said he, "is dead, but *his spirit lives to-day in those seamen who place honor and glory before the material advantages of their service.* The German navy looks up to Nelson with awe and reverence, and its highest ambition in the hour of its

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*destiny will be to live up to his noble example."*

Less than a year later the United States was protesting to Berlin against the murder of its peaceful citizens by submarines operating in the trade lane against unarmed merchant and passenger ships. No neutral and no noncombatant ever feared Nelson.

**FOR** what was the Nelson tradition? It was the same thing as the tradition of Decatur, of Villeneuve, of Van Tromp, and of the rest. On the morning of Trafalgar, Nelson, in the cabin of the *Victory*, wrote down a prayer for success, adding: "May no misconduct in anyone tarnish it; and may humanity after victory be the predominant feature in the British fleet."

The only order given by Nelson, after he had been severely wounded at the battle of the Nile, was one directing that all the boats available should be despatched at once to aid the crew of the French Admiral's ship, the *Orient*, which was reported to be on fire and in danger of blowing up. No wonder his old Spanish foe Gravina, as he lay dying, expressed the hope that he would meet in the other world the man whom he had found a chivalrous and noble opponent, "almost the greatest hero the world ever produced," as he expressed it.

The Von Tirpitz way of living up to hallowed navy traditions is too familiar to review here.

The most conspicuous exception to the new German rule is to be found in the case of Capt. Carl von Muller of the cruiser *Emden*. In all the operations that made that ship famous everywhere, it was shown by her dashing commander that great success was not incompatible with a strict observance of each and every rule of the game. When Muller made his wonderful raid into Penang Harbor, he risked the loss of his vessel by stopping, on his way out, to pick up part of the crew of a French gun-boat which he had sunk, and he halted again to send in, by the captain of a neutral merchant ship, a message to the municipal authorities of the town, expressing his regrets if any of the civil inhabitants had been injured, since there had been no desire on his part to do any damage, or cause any loss of life, but such as was of a strictly military sort.

**WHAT** was the result? Though the *Emden* was notorious for her exploits, though she had a high record for the destruction of property, there was no animosity—indeed there was nothing but admiration for her crew and skipper—among their enemies. So great was the curiosity about Captain Muller that when he was finally captured he was taken secretly to a place of detention in England, as it was not considered desirable to give the British populace a chance to applaud an enemy who had lived up to the best naval traditions. Whether or not there is, as has been alleged, an order or not, there is, as has been alleged, an order signed "Von Tirpitz," expressing commendation for Muller's successes, but disapproval of his polite and old-fashioned method of winning them, it is impossible to say. We shall not know that until all the records spring to light, after the struggle is over. And there must be many others in the German Navy like von Muller, gallant men and gentlemen, who, if they had had the good fortune to be away from the immediate influence of the Staff of the German Navy, would have shown how strong is the sailor's professional sense of duty which leads him to resent the suspicion of dishonor, as a man resents an insult.

**NAVY** traditions are stronger than army traditions, even if Robert Louis Stevenson did consider Grant's order "all officers to keep their side arms," issued at Appomattox—by which he avoided taking Lee's sword—as the finest example in history of the fighting-man "as gentleman." Behind the law of the sea is the *cliquette* of the sea. Indeed the unwritten law of the sea has developed into the written law. Custom widens out into legality. Not to recognize either is to sink into the class of the pirate, whose hand is against every man, just as every man's hand is against him.

Soldiers are not brought into constant contact, as are navy men, with the officers of other nations. In the one case, as in the other, there has been no such chance for a common set of understandings to spring up. The commander of a naval squadron, or of a ship,

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**N**O chapter in American war history appeals more to the imagination than the record of the Privateers of the War of 1812. The sea-faring men of New England had reason to resent the contemptuous maritime oppression of England and the tricky tactics of Napoleon. Through English law, American sailors had been impressed and American trade throttled. Through Napoleon's decrees American ships had been seized and sold in French harbors, the Emperor pocketing the cash.

The motto of the owners who fitted out more than forty clipper ships in Salem, in Massachusetts; of the skippers who commanded them, and of the crews who sailed them was "Freedom to Trade, and Sailor's Rights": The most famous of all these craft was the *Privateer*. With her crew of one hundred and fifty, and twenty-two guns aboard, she was capable of a speed greater than that of a modern cup defender. She could show her heels to any ship afloat. She even took prizes in sight of the British coast, and almost in the presence of British frigates. Under Joseph Ropes, John Kehew, and James Chever, Jr., her captains, she won the respect and admiration of the enemy. When, at the close of her last voyage, she was made fast to Crowninshields wharf, in Salem, on April 18, 1814, she had sent safely into her home port no less than twenty-seven rich British vessels, to say nothing of the captures lost in storms, and so on.

As in the case of that other wonderful ship the *Grand Turk*, none of her commanders was ever charged with misconduct. These seamen waged lawful warfare to cripple the merchant marine of the nation's enemy. They were men who conducted prayers with the same earnestness that they brought to gunnery practise. Captive crews were treated always with humanity. Though the contrary might have been expected—in view of the previous provocation—revenge or hate was not cultivated by the captains out of Salem, and their logs are as modest as they are absorbing. These heroes lived up to a fine naval tradition, and carried it on. Horribleness they left to the Indians.

**A PIRATE** has no flag but his skull and cross-bones rag. He is under the rule of no nation. He is responsible to no authority. Everything is his prize which he can capture, by *any means*. He has no use for prisoners. Booty first and then safety, is his rule. To resist him, or even to attempt to escape, is to invite massacre. But at any rate he is never a sea lawyer. He never tries to argue about his methods. He knows that if he is caught he will swing for it. His game is one without rules, and he plays it so.

On the other hand, there is a strict responsibility if, under the directions of any *Government*, a national flag is made to stand for lawlessness. To say that a new machine justifies a suspension of the regulations of civilization is to substitute outlawry for legality; to assert that when it is convenient the end justifies the means, is to return to the period before law.

The last cynical development occurs when it is proclaimed boldly that God approves of what gentlemen in all ages of the world have regarded as murder.