

CHAPTER 6

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

BETWEEN the Agadir Crisis of 1911 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the whole of the administrative machinery for placing the Fleet on a war footing was overhauled by the Admiralty, and just before the outbreak of war a special mobilisation test was carried out at the Barracks in July, 1914. As a result the actual war mobilisation in Portsmouth in the August was smooth and rapid. In the space of a few days nucleus crews were raised to full war complements and the many specialist craft, hospital ships, minesweepers and the like, were quickly made ready.

The drafting organisation in force at the time was based on allotting men in advance to those ships and vessels they would join in the time of war. In theory the system was ideal: in practice it had its weak points. In many cases it was necessary to send the first available men to some ship urgently needing a full crew, and often when a particular ship was not immediately ready to receive her crew the men were sent to other vessels. But the biggest problem of all was posed by the Admiralty decision to take over those warships which at the outbreak of the war were under construction in British shipyards for foreign nations. The manning of these ships obviously fell outside the scope of the mobilisation programme and some unusual steps had to be taken to meet the need: the battleships "Agincourt" and "Erin," for example, were commissioned largely by officers and men drawn from Royal Yachts and the Royal Naval Colleges at Osborne and Dartmouth.

In this respect it proved fortunate that there was a larger Reserve personnel than was needed to meet the immediate requirements of the Fleet in the first few weeks

of mobilisation, although, as the following account taken from the 1932 "History of the Royal Naval Barracks" indicates, the Navy's good fortune was not generally appreciated by those working in the crowded Barracks at this time:

"Thousands of Reserve men flocked to the Depot on the issue of the Royal Proclamation and, after filling all drafting vacancies, there were still so many left over that accommodation at the Royal Naval Barracks quickly reached saturation point. The barrack blocks were full, indeed overfull, and the Officers and Petty Officers stationed at the Main Gate had to turn away many latecomers, telling them to go on leave and wait patiently at home until such time as their services might be needed. . . .

Offices were open day and night, the Depot staff were working to the limits of physical endurance, yet twenty-four hours in the day were too short for the accomplishment of all that had to be done. . . .

It is a pyramid of difficulties and troubles, the dust of the Parade ground, innumerable signals, toil and lack of sleep, and the burning sun of August, 1914, which must be placed in the foreground of any picture representing life as it was lived within the iron palings of the Naval Barracks during the first few weeks of the Great War."

Keeping the men awaiting draft in the Barracks fully occupied soon became an important task in itself, and their recreation had to be highly organised. The 1932 History tells us that "Boxing was found so valuable, both as a mental and physical stimulant, that all recruits had to fight a few rounds every morning and afternoon"; football and other games were also played both in the mornings and afternoons on the Depot and the United Services recreation grounds. Regular cinema shows, concerts and sing-songs were organised and many professional actors and actresses, as in the Second World War, gave their services freely. The "Hampshire Telegraph" (14/8/14) records that the townspeople also played their part in keeping up the morale of the Barracks:

"There was a scene of almost unprecedented enthusiasm at the Royal Naval Barracks, Portsmouth, on Sunday evening. At the invitation of the Commodore, the Southsea Salvation Army Band under Mr. J. E. Smith paid a visit and for two hours discoursed an excellent programme of music, finishing with the English and French National Anthems. There were some thousands of Bluejackets present and they cheered the renderings of the last two items to the echo. The Commodore of the Barracks and several members of his staff mounted the bandstand and congratulated the musicians upon their efforts. An impromptu collection realised £7 2s. 8d."

In common with the other south coast towns Portsmouth did not escape the epidemic of spy scares that prevailed in the autumn of 1914. Sentries were posted at the gates of the Barracks fully armed, and extra Metropolitan Police, sent to Portsmouth for the protection of the Dockyard, were for a time housed in the Barracks. There were many false alarms, and the first air raid on the port was anticipated on several occasions, once due to a mistaken view of motor car headlights on the Portsdown Hill road. The raid was actually delivered on September 25th, 1916, when two bombs were dropped, one narrowly missing the "Victory" and the other falling close to H.M.S. "Renown," which was alongside in the Dockyard at the time. In the event of aerial attack or bombardment from the sea the officers and men of the Barracks were ordered to seek the shelter of the near-by railway embankment, but as it happened no attacks were delivered on the Barracks during the First World War.

As the Fleet and its auxiliary services expanded so also did the work of the Barracks. Additional accommodation became a pressing need and to meet this requirement a large camp was formed at Haslar. It was originally intended to accommodate 800 men there, but the camp was subsequently enlarged until it held 2,500. Officers and men slept in tents and wooden huts served as mess rooms. In addition a number of old vessels were added

as tenders to H.M.S. "Victory," and by 1918 the Rear-Admiral commanding the General Depot had the Royal Naval Barracks and its associated Schools, Haslar Camp and H.M.Ss. "Terrible," "Diadem," "Prince of Wales" and "Redoubtable" under his command, in all a total of 22,000 officers and men. The Physical Training School was converted into a convalescent hospital with 120 beds and its capacity was subsequently increased by a further 36 beds when the Roman Catholic Club was acquired as an annex and used for the more serious cases.

On May 28th, 1916, the Barracks had the honour of being inspected by His Majesty King George V, who also visited the Naval Camp at Haslar, where 2,000 men were awaiting draft to the Grand Fleet. Then in September, 1918, His Royal Highness The Duke of Connaught, accompanied by his daughter, Princess Patricia, paid a visit to the Barracks. The Princess was particularly impressed by the smartness of the members of the newly formed Women's Royal Naval Service whom she inspected in the Gymnasium. Her connection with the Barracks was to become very close. In 1919 she married the Hon. A. R. M. Ramsay and ten years later, when her husband was appointed Commodore of the Royal Naval Barracks, she took up residence in Anchor Gate House for two years.

The story of the Naval Barracks during the First World War would be incomplete without reference to the birth of the Women's Royal Naval Service, or the Wrens as it soon became called. The W.R.N.S. was established in November, 1917, under Dame Catherine Furze, the first Director-General, who was immediately responsible to the Second Sea Lord. The first Portsmouth Divisional Director was Miss Johnstone-Douglas. She arrived in January, 1918, and had under her supervision all the Wrens employed in the port as well as those at Southampton, Portland and Weymouth.

Towards the end of February, 1918, local headquarters were opened at 18 Lion Terrace and the Divisional Director and five of her officers moved in. An early venture was the training of Wren cooks and stewards, started

initially in the Barracks under the supervision of the Messman, Mr. J. F. Marshall. The demand for their services grew to such an extent, however, that in June, when the Lion Commercial Hotel was taken over and converted into the Lion Hostel for the W.R.N.S., a separate Cookery School was started there under the supervision of Miss Stevens, an officer qualified in domestic training.

In June, 1918, there were 782 Wrens in Portsmouth and the next month, as numbers were continuing to increase rapidly, Miller's Hotel in Hampshire Terrace was converted into another hostel. Besides acting as cooks and stewards in the Officers' Mess, the Wrens worked in the Barracks as clerks and typists in the Pay Offices, the Drafting Office and the Statistical Office, as well as in the Signal School in such capacities as clerks, store-women, packers, sorters and valve testers. Some W.R.N.S. officers were also trained in the Signal School for coding duties.

At the time of the Armistice there were 1,148 Wrens serving in the port. This total included 156 in the Royal Naval Barracks, 70 of whom were employed in the Pay Office, 60 in the Signal School and 20 as cooks and stewards. The demobilisation of the W.R.N.S. began in Portsmouth in September, 1919, and continued until Miss Davis, a Chief Section Leader who had been the first Wren enrolled by Miss Johnstone-Douglas in 1918 and was the last to be demobilised, finally turned the key in the door of the W.R.N.S. headquarters, at 18 Lion Terrace, on Trafalgar Day, 1919.