Switzerland's ships sail the high seas

Switzerland's Ships Sail the High Seas

(By John Trevor)

The Swiss Navy? A big joke! But it's true—Switzerland does have a navy comprising 300,000 tons or so of shipping operating on the high seas. Since 1921 landlocked countries have been able to fly their own maritime flags, but it was not until 20 years later that the Swiss Navy came into being to carry supplies for a neutral Switzerland cut off by the war.

In the far-off days when I was a sailor myself, we used to think it was funny to talk about the Swiss Navy. In our minds it conjured up a picture of a mythical organisation staffed by officers in gorgeous braid-laiden uniforms who had reached high rank by following Gilbert and Sullivan's advice to "stick at your desk and never go to sea".

It was a long time before I found out how wrong I and my shipmates had been. But even when I was told there really was a Swiss Navy I imagined it consisted of those trim steamers that ply between the resorts scattered round Switzerland's lakes, and perhaps also included the cargo barges working on the river Rhine between Basel and Rotterdam.

Vital Link

So I was surprised when I eventually learned that the Swiss Navy forms a sizeable fleet of merchant vessels—at present 31 ships which total more than 300,000 dead weight tons—that shows the Swiss flag on all seven seas. That's no joke and it actually puts Switzerland 50th in the list of 106 countries with merchant vessels.

Switzerland's Navy legally came into existence in 1941, at a time when Switzerland, as a neutral country, was cut off by the war from normal trade and was surrounded by nations taking part in that war.

But the idea of a Swiss Navy is much older, going back more than a century to a time when it was thought that Swiss ships could be used to transport Swiss immigrants, to avoid their being exploited by shipping companies.

The idea was dropped but the suggestion was revived in 1864 when the Swiss community in the then Austrian port of Trieste asked Parliament to get the Government to approve a Swiss mercantile flag. This attempt also failed. The Swiss Government did bring the matter up with seafaring nations, but they laughed at the idea, partly because Switzerland was a landlocked country and partly because in those days it was thought that merchant ships could only be operated by countries which could protect them with warships.

Flying Own Flag

Anyhow, the matter was not really urgent, for plenty of other ships were available to carry the supplies needed by Switzerland—until the First World War, when mercantile freight rates rose, ships were torpedoed or captured, and the Swiss had difficulty in chartering vessels. Progress was made in 1921 when an international conference in Barcelona recognised the right of any inland country to fly its own mercantile

flag, as long as its ships were registered at one single place in the country.

But the Swiss Government made no move to take advantage of this right, although when the Second World War broke out it had already taken precautions by arranging with a Greek shipping firm to charter vessels totalling 120,000 tons.

But later, Greek merchant shipping movements were restricted because of the war and goods intended for Switzerland began to pile up in various harbours. The creation of a Swiss Navy became vital.

Within the space of a few weeks a draft decree was drawn up and was put into force by the Government on April 9, 1941. Soon afterwards the first two ships to fly the Swiss maritime flag were entered in the shipping register. A small fleet, largely manned by seamen of other neutral countries, was built up and helped to transport Switzerland's supplies for the rest of the war.

The lesson had been learned, and after the war it was decided to keep up a Swiss merchant fleet that could be enlarged in times of crisis if necessary.

For national defence and provisioning purposes, it is estimated that a fleet of at least 300,000 tons is needed. Although this tonnage is available now, there is a danger that it could drop if units have to be withdrawn from service because of age and cannot be replaced.

So last year the Swiss Parliament approved Government guarantees for loans to finance the renewal and maintenance of the fleet.

Legal Provisions

The legal seat of Swiss navigation is Basel—a city with a river port in which none of Switzerland's highsea vessels can tie up. This unique situation was highlighted a few years ago when there was a case of alleged smuggling on a Swiss vessel. As stipulated by Swiss law, a Basel legal official investigated the case, interviewing the crew on the high seas, and eventually it was a Basel court that dealt with the case.

Other stipulations are that the capital invested in the ships must be entirely Swiss and that the shipping companies that own them must be domiciled in Switzerland and be purely Swiss in character.

Seven Seas

This is not nationalism but just caution. Otherwise it might be possible in times of war for belligerent nations to allege that Swiss vessels were a cover for enemy intersts and confiscate or even sink the ships.
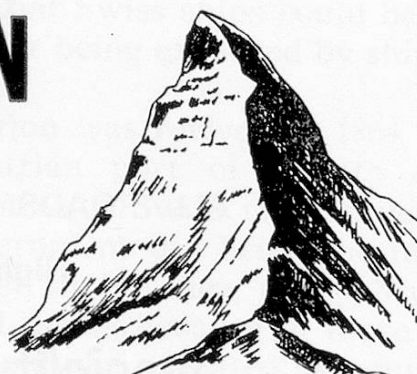
The crews that man the vessels total about 900 men, of whom nearly 500 are Swiss, many of whom have passed through a training school at Basel.

A Swiss carabaret artist used to sing an entertaining song about the captain of a lake steamer who once dreamed of romantic far-away places but now spent his days calling at the little towns along the Lake of Zurich. But Swiss sea captains do exist: more than 40 Swiss hold masters certificates entitling them to skipper ships that sail the seven seas.