

The Greatest Game in the World

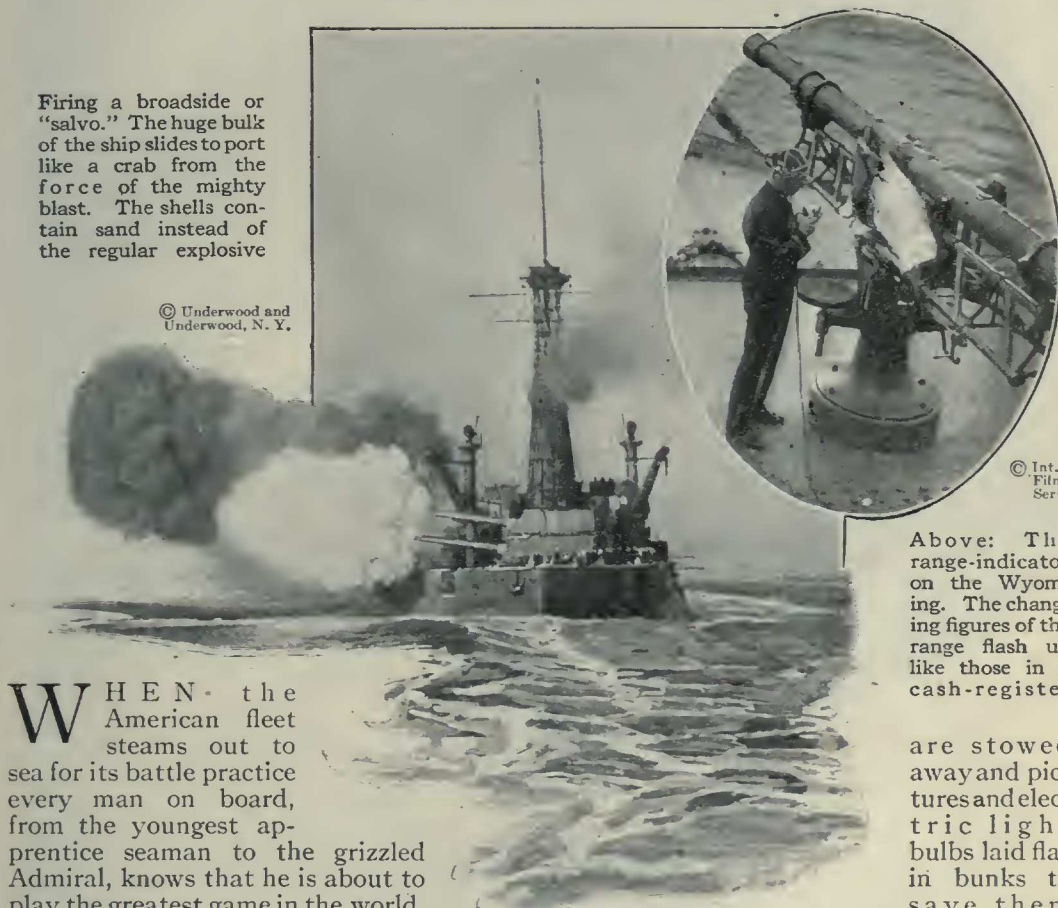
How the fleet at battle practice hits the target at seven miles

By Captain Frank E. Evans

United States Marine Corps

Firing a broadside or "salvo." The huge bulk of the ship slides to port like a crab from the force of the mighty blast. The shells contain sand instead of the regular explosive

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Above: The range-indicator on the Wyoming. The changing figures of the range flash up like those in a cash-register

WHEN the American fleet steams out to sea for its battle practice every man on board, from the youngest apprentice seaman to the grizzled Admiral, knows that he is about to play the greatest game in the world. Back of it lies a wealth of tradition. No other game can approach it in science, in the millions invested, or in thrills. It is played with the gray steel tubes of twelve-and fourteen-inch guns that serve up thousand-pound projectiles.

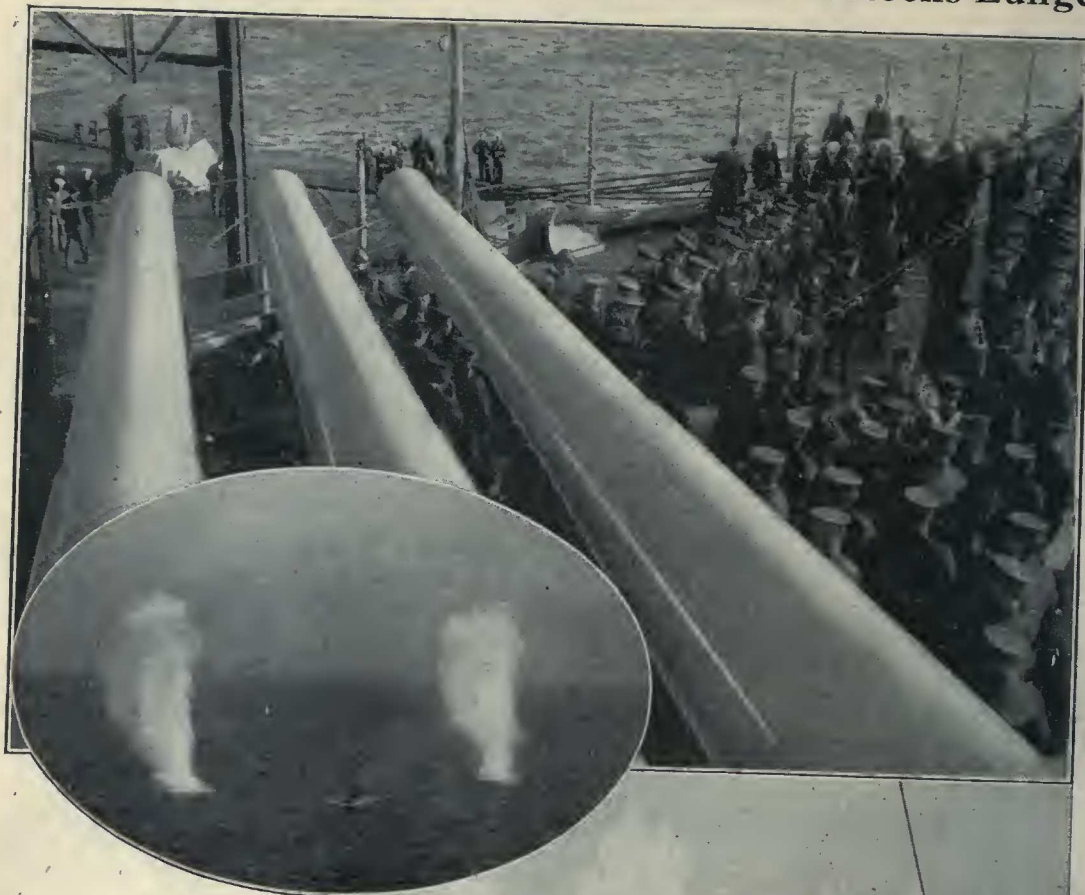
The game is the culmination of months of patient practice. The reward is the privilege of painting a three-foot white E, meaning "Excellent," on the winning turrets and, for the champion of the fleet, a red pennant with a black ball in its center to be flown at masthead for a year.

When the fleet steams out past the Capes of the Chesapeake to its favorite playing ground, rails and stanchions are unshipped, ladders housed and life-lines rigged along the bare decks. Cabin doors

are stowed away and pictures and electric light bulbs laid flat in bunks to save them from the guns. Boats are swung inboard and "nested," the smaller ones in the larger ones. If you walk about the decks, you will see vegetable lockers, boats, crates and all wooden gear tagged "overboard." And over they would go in a real battle.

The quick tattoo of battle gongs clang noisily, insistently, when the teams line up for the final practice, calling them to "general quarters." From the wardroom the "spotters" come storming up the ladders. Glasses to watch the splash of the shells are strapped over their shoulders and chin-straps hold on their visored caps. Some are in dungarees. The members of the gun crews drive past you at the double quick to their stations; bluejackets inside the turrets, bandsmen to the sick bay, the

The Great Twelves and Fourteens Lunge



At top: The greatest game in the world is played with gray steel tubes of twelve and fourteen-inch guns that serve up thousand-pound projectiles. These travel at one half mile a second and throw up cascades of white water that can be seen nearly ten miles away

in oval above: The shell splashes into the water just short of the target and tosses a whirling column of white spray into the air. You can easily follow it (picture on right) as it tumbles along, striking the water again and again, and skimming across the sea in great bounds



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and Roar as Though the Battle Were Real



Above: Behind her each battleship of the defending division tows a target at eight knots. The target is a scant four hundred yards astern—uncomfortably close when the big fourteen-inch guns are trained on it. Two targets are towed by this ship



In center above: Although the big shells are striking just four hundred yards astern, the errors in the range are either "shorts" or "overs." Lateral errors are rare. The photograph shows a sailor signaling to the range-finder a shot "short" of the target

Picture continued from opposite page. Two vivid flashes from the enemy ship and two shells "straddle" the target, one just short and the other just over—a perfect shot for range. After striking the water the shells ricochet and bound two hundred feet in air

pay clerk to his assigned post, bluejackets and marines to the ammunition passages and their hoists. There is not a man aboard who has not his post, and down in the hull of the ship are the men of the engine-room force ready to give her every ounce of needed power.

Every man who passes has a patch of fleecy cotton peeping out of his ears and as you dig in your pocket for some, a blue-jacket halts long enough to caution you to pack it in lightly and not to hold your hands over your ears.

The turn of your ship to fire at its target has not yet come, but off to port or starboard you see a vivid sheet of flame leap out from the turret gun of another ship that is on the range. A cloud of smoke hugs the water alongside her and a great roar grows with each second. It is like the thunder of railroad engines, racing at full speed over a bridge. You see her shell strike the water and throw up a geyser of white foam. On beyond it other and smaller geysers rear their white columns when the shell ricochets, skimming across the sea in bounds as a stone thrown by a lad skims across a mill pond.

A still more thunderous roar comes across the water when a salvo, or broadside, is let loose and each shell, as it strikes, sends up its whirling column of water.

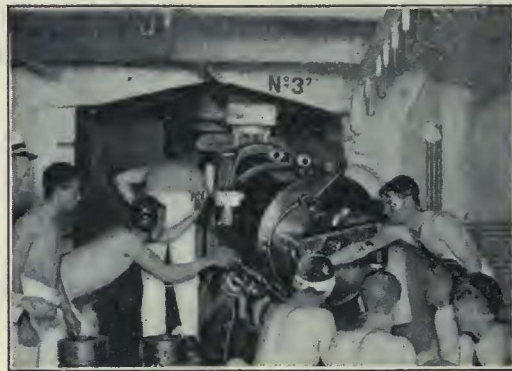
So far you are but an idle participant in the great game, watching it at a safe distance. Your ship is at last on the range and the order to fire has been flashed to one of the turret guns. A mighty blast rocks the mass of steel beneath your feet and it slides to port—from the drive of it. The military masts, for all the world like inverted waste baskets, whip over to one side like a bent fishpole and you grin and try to affect the calm of a true sailorman. If you have been alert you have caught fleeting impressions of vivid white sheets of flame, great blurs of orange-colored vapors, and you grasp the nearest support and strain your eyes toward the target.

The "spotters," with eyes glued to their

glasses watch for it too, and pass below their judgment of the range. If the range is good the first salvo will tear the water near the target into boiling geysers. A hit will pass through the screen of netting and cloth and will add its bit to the fight for the gunnery honors. Now and then when a two-gun turret launches its shells simultaneously, and the range is perfect, a "straddle" shot is the result, one just over and the other just short of the bobbing target. Field artillerymen call it a "bracket" and it is rarely that two shells fired at exactly the same range will not show this dispersion.

Other ships are firing, loosing their eight, ten, twelve or fourteen-inch shells at their targets. It is a deep-sea spectacle that would have driven Nero or Barnum into hiding for pure shame. Wherever you look towards the targets you see flying jets of water, churning green sea to white. The air is filled with lightning-like flashes and the rolling clouds of vari-colored smoke. The dull boom of big guns plays through it all.

If you were privileged to enter one of the big turrets you would carry away with you a jumbled impression of its activities—



Stripped to the waist the casemate crew keep the big guns bellowing at the target as it moves through the water miles away

a gun crew stripped to the waist with the light of battle in their eyes; an interior white as a hospital ward and just as clean; a gunpointer with his eye placed against the rubber eye-piece of his telescopic sight with the cross wires centered on the target. In recent practices our ships have fired at ranges and broken world's records that a few

years ago were hardly dreamed of.

The turrets are far from the noisiest part of the ship, for the walls of armor deaden the deafening roar that greets you on deck. It is quiet in the interior of a big turret, with its whirring, smashing, clanking fury, its snakelike hiss of compressed air that blows unburned particles of powder and powder bag lining out through the muzzle before the breech is swung open, but quiet only when compared with the racket on deck. And it would, if you could enter it

through the trapdoor at its bottom, fasten the lure of the game on you so that you would never forget it. You would wonder if there could be another spot where so much energy is crammed into the flying seconds.

The fire control station, down below where the armor belt shelters it from harm, would rival it if you could visit its sacred precincts. Here comes word of the varying fortunes of the game, from turrets and tops, from bridge and engine room. Out from it go the changing range and the orders that shake the big fighter from stem to stern, from truck to keel, with the roar and thunder of salvos.

The game takes on an even sterner phase when the umpire, from another ship, plays his part. In actual warfare the ship might meet with distressing casualties besides the loss of men struck by shell fragments. A big gun might be put out of action and she would have to fight with the remaining ones. So the umpire plays the part of the enemy's shells and the ship must play the game as he orders it.

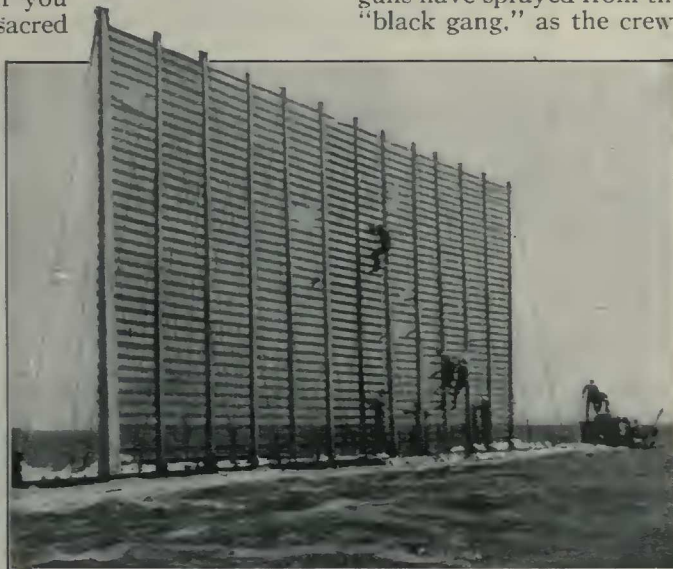
When the game is at its height tons of steel are rushing towards the luckless target at the rate of half a mile a second, and their sudden and almost simultaneous departure creates an immense vacuum. From the depths of the lower decks and the engine rooms below them the air rushes out to fill that vacuum. The sharp blast assaults your ears and tears your cap off your head if you are not vigilant. And when "Cease firing!" shrills out of the bugles you welcome their music. It is strangely quiet now but the ship still bustles with life.

Bluejackets and marines are shipping ladders and stanchions, rigging out boats and sweeping down. Uppermost in their

thoughts is the picture of a shell-torn target, and news of hits, rumors of a winning salvo, stories of a turret's guns obscured by flying spray at an unlucky moment, are told and retold. The decks are thick with cinders and dotted with white sticks that look like toothpicks. They are the unburnt shreds of smokeless powder that the guns have sprayed from their muzzles. The "black gang," as the crew calls the engine

room force, come up on deck in little squads, hungry for news and a draught of fresh air.

Fifteen years ago the greatest game of them all was no more like the game you have watched than the first practice of a college eleven is like the championship match that winds up the football



The deep keel of the target is all that saves the craft from toppling over when the twelve-inch shells from the enemy fleet pepper it

season. Ordnance itself made seven-league strides from the days when the red-turbaned pirate of the Spanish Main squinted an eye along the barrel of his Long Tom at a gold-laden galleon but, except for the advance in gun, sights and projectiles, the gunners who swept two Spanish squadrons off the seas in 1898 had made but little progress. Both had relied on their native skill in firing at the moment when the downward roll of the ship would bring the gun to bear on the target.

To-day the American gun pointer, the best in the world's navies, lays the crossed wires of his sight on the heart of the target as soon as it can be seen, and holds it there indifferent to the pitch or roll of a heavy sea. Minute after minute, as the range narrows by thousands of yards, he holds his sight until the bugles end the game.

The men who survive this last test make the turret their home for the rest of the cruise and work like a railroad president to cut down the loading time and the firing interval by the fraction of a second. They are the kings of the Fleet.