

U.S.S. CORNUCOPIA

C.S. FORESTER

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: U.S.S. Cornucopia

Date of first publication: 1945

Author: C. S. Forester (1899-1966)

Date first posted: Oct. 27, 2018

Date last updated: Oct. 27, 2018

Faded Page eBook #20181045

This eBook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, Howard Ross & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

Grim as war is, it has its lighter moments. This is the story of one of them.

U.S.S. CORNUCOPIA

BY C. S. FORESTER

ILLUSTRATED BY A. LEYDENFROST

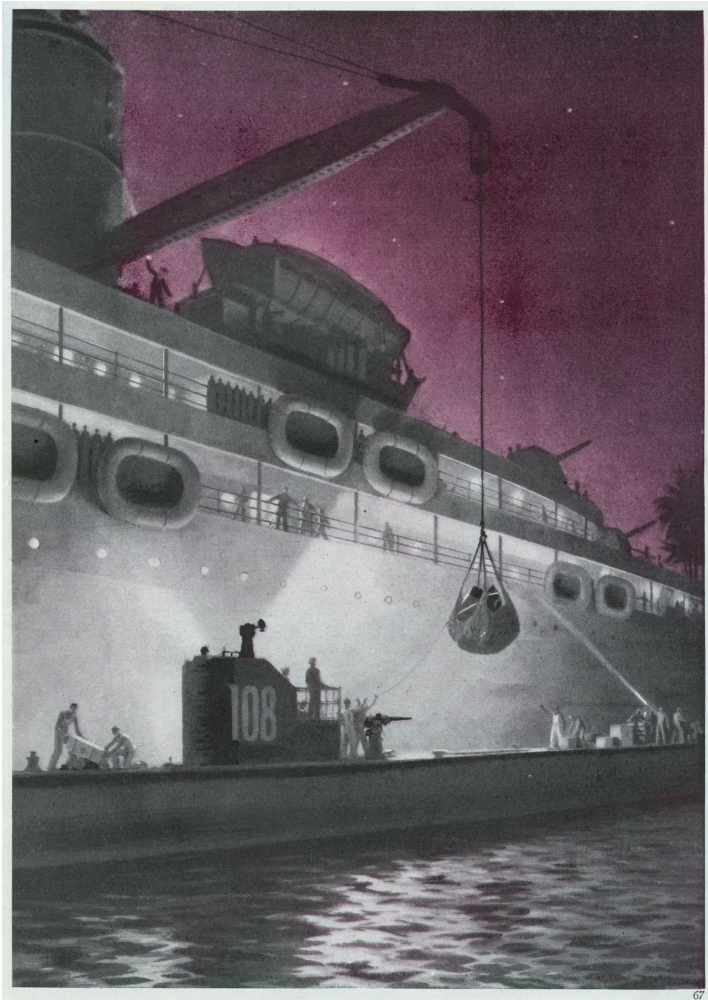
The identity of the individual who decided on the name Cornucopia for the Submarine Depot Ship in which the supply officer served is hidden deep in the recesses of the Navy Department, but the name is startlingly appropriate, for she is a fount of plenty. Men who do not serve in her think her the ugliest ship that has been designed since Noah went into the business, and they may be right. On the after end she carries a couple of monstrous cranes that never fail to call forth bad language from the signal ratings on the superstructure forward when they try to read signals from the ship following her; and whenever the captain puts his engines astern he has to rely on Providence—as well as on an officer stationed on the fan tail with a telephone—to keep her tail out of mischief. Her silhouette bulges here and there as if streamlining had never been thought of, and it is only when one realizes that she is capable, literally, of inflating balloons at one end while refueling less capacious ships at the other end that one forgives her unsightly lines.

Far more than a thousand blue-jacketed men live on board her, and far more than half of them are skilled mechanics trained to use the precision machines set up in the workshops which take up a great deal of her cubic capacity. Her boast is

that she can do any repair job she may be called upon to do, supply any part, replace any consumable stores, with special and particular reference to submarines.

The theory that dictated the construction of U.S.S. Cornucopia and her ugly sisters—Proteus and others—is that she should constitute an advanced naval base in herself. In the dark days when the Japanese were moving southward down the Pacific, capturing island after island, somebody had the vision to foresee that the tide would turn, and the moral courage to make preparations for that moment. So the Cornucopia was ready as soon as islands began to be reconquered; she steamed in before even the Seabees could begin their work of constructing shore installations and could take up her work of servicing and repairing the moment her anchor touched bottom in coral lagoon or malarious roadstead.

Not merely that, but as Uncle Sam advances, as he proceeds not merely to reconquer but to conquer, to tear from the Japanese hold islands which have long been treasured possessions of the Rising Sun, Cornucopia can go forward with him. There is no need to leave anything behind; she has everything inside her already, and it is only a matter of hauling up her anchor and proceeding north-westward under the protecting shield of the sea power which, like a gigantic boa constrictor, is slowly crushing the life out of the Japanese Empire.



The circle of Japanese domination grows smaller while it grows weaker, but there still remains a wide area into which the surface ships of the United Nations can only penetrate spasmodically if at all, and it is in this area that the Japanese are most sensitive to attack, for it is over these waters that their lines of communication run, dependent upon their attenuated mercantile marine and their rather rapidly dwindling escort vessels.

Submarines are delicate pieces of machinery; parts wear

out and break down, and even if the crews can stand the strain of operating them and can maintain them in seagoing condition, there comes a time when the last torpedo is fired or food and fuel begin to run short and they must return to fill up. The less time they spend on passage the sooner they are back at work again; and now, happily, Pearl Harbor and Australia are far from the waters in which they operate. So instead of bringing them back to Honolulu, Uncle Sam moves Honolulu out to them—at least, not Honolulu, but U.S.S. Cornucopia and her sisters, which, according to the proud boast of the men who man the depot ships, is just as good.

And this brings us to my friend the supply officer, whom I mentioned in the first sentence of this story and have since neglected in favor of a digression on the sea power which it is his duty to put into practice. No one looking at him, at his rosy cheeks and innocent spectacles, could imagine that in him sea power is embodied. His appearance never sets one's mind running on Nelson or Mahan. No one, for that matter, would believe him to be forty-five, which he is, and no one observing his unwrinkled brow would ever credit him with the vast experience which he possesses in the ways and tricks of submarines, their habit of burning out the most unheard-of accessories, and the habit of their captains of demanding stores and spare parts in quantities that would make a less experienced man gasp and of a nature that would stagger one less familiar with the contents of his store-rooms.

Twenty-six thousand items the supply officer is prepared to supply; twenty thousand that may be in demand by any ship in the Navy, and six thousand peculiar to submarines. Twenty-six thousand items, from the things that anyone could think of, like battery acid and fuel oil and torpedoes and shells, like baking powder and preserved milk and canned fruit, down to recondite

things like "Hinges, Butt, Marine-use Type B 2030 D (full surface fast)" and Salinometer Pots and Portable Continuous-acting Tachometers. Twenty-six thousand items, from washers to gyro-compasses. Submarines never casually throw rubbish overboard—it might float and reveal their presence. Instead, they tie it up in burlap bags and sink it overside, and the supply officer has to see to it that there are burlap bags for the purpose; and as in a submarine everything is precious and there is nothing casually to hand which could be spared as a sinker, the supply officer has to supply sinkers in the form of lumps of concrete.

He not merely has to have these things, but he has to be able to lay his hands on any one of them at a moment's notice; they must be not merely card-indexed but labeled and stored in exact order so that sea power is not hampered by the necessity of waiting while a storekeeper hunts through his stock. A department store is no more complex than a submarine depot ship; far less so, in point of fact, for a department store never has to up anchor and start out to sea in the face of typhoons, and especially never has to be constantly ready to fight off enemies in the air, on the surface and under the sea. Moreover, the department store is never five thousand miles from civilization, as a submarine depot ship frequently is—as she is intended to be—and if a department store happens to run out of stock it can always send out and buy whatever the exacting customer demands. But if the depot ship runs out of stock of any item she has failed; her supply officer is disgraced in the eyes of the men whom it is his duty to supply, and sea power may have to wait until the deficiency is remedied from a source on the other side of the world. He has to decide maybe a year ahead of time on everything he is likely to be asked for, and having put it into stock, he then has to see to it that it

remains in good condition until it is needed.

"But of course," said the supply officer to me, "anything we don't have we can make. That's what our repair shops are for. We cannot merely repair ships, but by golly, we could build 'em if necessary!"

"Did you ever fail?" I asked. "Have they ever wanted anything you couldn't supply?"

In the supply officer's pink baby face a struggle was clearly evident, presumably between the desire for effect and natural truthfulness.

"Be honest," I urged. "Let's hear about it."

So the supply officer told me about the time when U.S.S. Cornucopia blotted her copybook. "It was all the result of enemy action," he said in sturdy self-defense.

The enemy action occurred when Cornucopia was on her way to an atoll designated as her future anchorage. She is not the sort of ship to court trouble. Despite the guns that bristle on her upper decks, despite her elaborate gunnery-control arrangements and the patience and care which have been devoted to training her gun crews, she must be kept out of harm's way if it is possible; but this time it was not possible. To reach her destination, far forward in the seas which the Japanese for years have thought their own, she and her escort had to pass within range of another island to which the Japanese were still clinging desperately, maintaining it as a base until it should, in the expressive words of an American Admiral, "wither on the bough." As the Cornucopia went rolling over the blue Pacific, in "condition two," with half the men resting while the other half manned the guns and the lookout stations, the alarm suddenly pealed through the ship.

"All hands man your battle stations."

Men came pouring up from below, with helmets and lifebelts and gas masks, racing to their battle stations. Each station sent its brief report in over the telephone—"gun one manned and ready," "damage control manned and ready" and so on—and the last report had hardly come in before the Japanese planes were hurtling upon her, and her guns were bellowing in her defense. The blue sky was pockmarked with puffs of black as shells exploded, and red tracers glowed faintly in the dazzling sunshine. Cornucopia went through ungainly antics as she swung first to one side and then to the other to disconcert the Japanese aim, and the placid Pacific day was shattered by the roar of the barrage thrown up by escorting destroyers.

In ten minutes the Japanese planes had come and gone, had made their swoop and disappeared, and Cornucopia was once more plodding doggedly toward her destination. But she was on fire. A shell from one of the cannons mounted in a Japanese plane had pierced her unprotected side just above water line close to Frame 84 and, as luck would have it, had started a fire in a compartment crammed with highly combustible stores.

"It might have been a whole lot worse," said the supply officer.

I knew that; Cornucopia carried great numbers of torpedoes (how many is a military secret) and mines and ammunition, to say nothing of oil and other combustibles. She might have been blown into tiny fragments—the explosives she carried could lay all Manhattan in ruins. As it was, she had only this one small fire, which blazed furiously for a few moments among those combustible stores before it was put out by the damage-control party. She reached her destination without further incident.

Some Pacific bases have been bitterly disillusioning to the

Americans who have garrisoned them, but this atoll was everything a coral island has ever been said to be. There were the dazzling white beaches, the wide circle of coconut palms, the astonishing sapphire-blue of the lagoon in contrast with the paler blue of the surrounding ocean; the sun was not too crushing, the rain not too searching, and mosquitoes were nonexistent. For men with time to spare there was fishing; there was the finest surf bathing in the world—everything heart could desire except home. But the crew of Cornucopia never had time to spare, because the moment she dropped her anchor inside the lagoon the submarines started coming in, clamoring for attention after their long and dangerous patrols in Japanese waters.

Their crews had nothing to do while they were in—they had hardly laid themselves alongside Cornucopia when they were dispatched to the shore to enjoy the fishing and the bathing, the fresh food and the fresh air, and above all, the freedom from the imminent presence of death. Men need rest when they have spent months at a time in the knowledge that they may be killed the next moment, and when every minute of those months they have been thrusting themselves into deadly danger. Not even the elaborate arrangements in a modern American submarine suffice to keep the crews in health on active service; not even the sun-ray lamps and the air conditioning and the carefully planned food.

So when a submarine came into the base her crew could wash their hands of all responsibility and rest on the coral beaches in the shade of the palms, while a substitute crew supplied by Cornucopia took charge of their boat. Those enormous cranes which the signalmen so detested would lift them out of the water for repair and cleaning and repainting; skilled ratings would test every bit of the complicated

apparatus; worn parts would be replaced and stores renewed. With infinite care fresh torpedoes would be hoisted into the submarines. Shells would be passed down to replace those fired into Japanese shipping, so that by the time the crew was rested and restless again their boat would be ready to go back into Japanese-held waters, to ravage the very coasts of Japan itself, ready for anything.

The twenty-six thousand items Cornucopia carried were available to replace any part that had been damaged by wear or by the action of the enemy, and when the unpredictable boats managed to demand something not in stock the Cornucopia's mechanics made it for them. With a supply of every possible metal on board, she could melt her own alloys in her own electric furnace; she could cast the part, and then in her machine shops she could machine the castings.

But there was one thing missing. Only one, but it was something of the greatest importance, and something—as the supply officer admitted with a lopsided smile—which the Cornucopia could neither replace nor make. The original supply had been destroyed in that little fire, and nothing could compensate for the loss.

According to the supply officer, that island paradise was nearly rent asunder by the recriminations of the submarine captains when their requisitions could not be filled. Some of them talked in a lofty tone about morale and the effect of the loss upon the well-being of the crews. Some merely cursed on the grounds of their own personal inconvenience, but in either case their complaints nearly drove the supply officer frantic. They looked on him as personally responsible, and indeed he was—it was no excuse in the eyes of the Navy that that unlucky shell should have landed in a compartment full of highly combustible materials. He could supply anything or he

could make anything, so he said, yet here he was denying them an item whose absence could wreck esprit de corps.

"I couldn't supply it and I couldn't make it," said the supply officer pathetically. "That damned shell burned out our whole stock. Twelve thousand rolls of it. Four hundred miles of toilet paper."

[The end of *U.S.S. Cornucopia* by C. S. Forester]