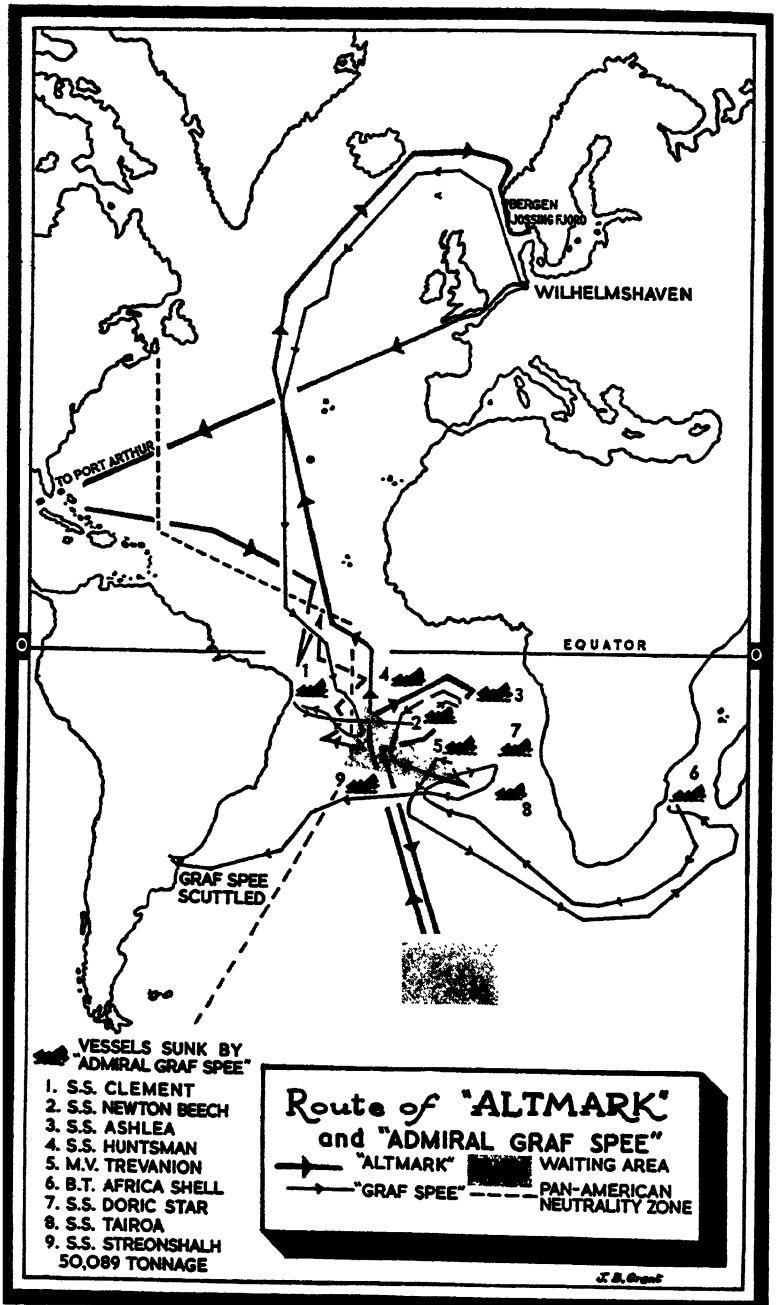
THE ALTMARK AFFAIR


BERGEN
JOSSING FJORD
WILHELMSHAVEN
TO PORT ARTHUR
EQUATOR
GRAF SPEE
SCUTTLED
VESSELS SUNK BY
"ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE"
1. S.S. CLEMENT
2. S.S. NEWTON BEECH
3. S.S. ASHLEA
4. S.S. HUNTSMAN
5. M.V. TREVANION
6. B.T. AFRICA SHELL
7. S.S. DORIC STAR
8. S.S. TAIROA
9. S.S. STREONSHALH
50,089 TONNAGE
Route of "ALTMARK"
and "ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE"
"ALTMARK"
"GRAF SPEE"
WAITING AREA
PAN-AMERICAN
NEUTRALITY ZONE
J. B. Grant

The Altmark Affair

by

WILLI FRISCHAUER

and

ROBERT JACKSON

NEW YORK

The Macmillan Company

1955

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST PRINTING

Published in England under the title
"The Navy's Here!"

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Of the many people consulted, the authors are especially grateful for help given by the following:

Tom Barnes; Geoffrey Craven; A. A. Creer; R. Cudbertson; R. A. Curtis; F. Edwards; Mr. and Mrs. Goss; W. T. Hair; W. H. Harrison, Officers Merchant Navy Federation; G. A. King; Captain Hector MacLean; Wing Commander C. W. McNeill, R.C.A.F.; T. W. Mallinson; J. Neaney, Air Ministry, Historical Branch; F. J. Paterson; W. H. Platten; Cyril Smith; S. Smith; Admiral of the Fleet Sir Philip Vian, G.C.B., K.B.E., D.S.O.; F. Wall.

The plates opposite pp. 128 and 160 are reproduced by courtesy of the Imperial War Museum (British Crown Copyright); opposite p. 129, by courtesy of Messrs. William Parry & Son, Ltd., South Shields; opposite p. 161, by courtesy of *The Illustrated London News*. The copyright of the photographs opposite pp. 64, 65, 192, and 225 is owned by the United Press; opposite pp. 96, 97, and 224, by Wide World Photos.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

PLATES

SKETCH-MAPS

"Their rescue at the very moment when these unhappy men were about to be delivered over to indefinite German bondage proves that the long arm of British sea-power can be stretched out, not only for foes, but also for faithful friends. And to Nelson's immortal signal of one hundred and thirty-five years ago, '*England expects that every man will do his duty*', there may now be added last week's no less proud reply: '*The Navy is here*'."

WINSTON CHURCHILL

CHAPTER I

SOGNE AT SEA

AUGUST 6, 1939 was a pleasant summer day and only a few ripples in the English Channel reflected the sun on playfully scintillating waves. No clouds obscured the sky as the children on the Kentish coast splashed on the beaches without a care in the world. Holiday-makers lazed in deck chairs along the coast and hardly glanced at the newspapers, which dwelt on the visits of French and British military missions to Moscow, reported briefly on a controversy between the Polish Government and the Senate in a remote place called Danzig.

But all the way from North Foreland to Dungeness alert eyes were scanning the horizon. It was two in the afternoon at Dover when from the haze northwards the silhouette of a big ship began to emerge into view. Soon she was sailing serenely through the English Channel, using the lane near the English coast—a grey ship with a black funnel aft. Three pairs of binoculars were focused on the vessel which carried the black-and-white flag of the German "Reich Service", and, in bold, two-foot-high letters, the name *Altmark*. She looked very much like a tanker, but then . . .

Word of her passage was quickly passed to London and presently at the Admiralty in Whitehall, officers of the Naval Intelligence Department were flicking through the reference books to trace her particulars. The *Altmark* was not listed in the naval men's bible, *Jane's Fighting Ships*. She did not seem to be a warship even though the "Reich Service" flag designated her as the property of the German State. There was no trace of her either in Lloyd's *Register of Merchant Shipping*—curious, very curious.

But wait! Here she was: "*Altmark*, Call Signal DTAK," it said in the *List of Coast and Ship Stations* published by

the International Union of Telegraphic and Wireless Communications of Berne—a body sponsored by the International Postal Union. The name *Altmark* sounded unfamiliar; it had turned up in the list for the first time towards the end of June. A hurried entry in the Admiralty's *Diary, Foreign Ships* recorded her passage.

Slowly the *Altmark* sailed out of view, out of mind.

. . . . .

Sunday, September 3. For over a week now the *Altmark* had been steaming eastwards. Having passed the English Channel she had made for her destination, Port Arthur, in the Gulf of Mexico, where she had taken on a full cargo of diesel oil. Rotterdam, as far as the ship's officers were aware, was her next port of call, but there was tension, uneasiness on board as Captain Heinrich Dau entered the wardroom with all officers standing to attention.

Dau, a dapper little man with jerky movements, his weather-beaten face tracing a lifetime at sea in a hundred wrinkles, an old-fashioned beard now turning to grey camouflaging a rather weak chin, with cunning, lively eyes tending to contract into an unpleasant stare, was not popular with his own officers. "A lifetime at sea . . . !" He would say it again and again, smothering all argument, reinforcing the unquestioned dictatorial authority of a German sea captain which made him Lord and Master over every hand on board. It was impossible to feel at ease in his company and his rare, stilted attempts at good-humoured, sea-dog conviviality embarrassed his men, who knew that they must not allow themselves to be goaded into a response in kind.

For a moment he stood to attention. Then he sat down with studied ceremonial. The conversation was stilted, slow. "I wonder when it is going to start?" First Officer Paulsen, a tall young man, ventured to say. It was the first time war had been mentioned on board in the presence of the Captain. Two days ago a wireless message had been received from the *Seekriegsfuehrung*, the Naval High Command in Berlin, announcing formally that "The Fuehrer had given orders to the Wehrmacht to repel the Polish aggressors!" It was war with Poland and ominously the wireless signal to Captain Dau had added the instruction—pre-arranged many weeks ago

for exactly this contingency—that the *Altmark* was to avoid henceforth the official shipping lanes and prepare for the "call to duty".

"Excellent, really excellent . . ." commented Herr Schleusner, the first engineer, hoisting an outsize bit of the roast veal on his fork. "The cook is improving."

"About time, too," came the answer from Dr. Tyrolt, the thirty-year-old, tall, thin, ship's doctor, the man who had had a hundred jobs, they said, who had put his hand to many other tasks before finding an outlet for his restless nature in service with the *Altmark*.

"It'll all be over in a few weeks."

Dau looked sternly in the direction of the speaker who had cut through the thick atmosphere with the subject which had been on all their minds. Yes, no doubt, the punitive action against Poland would be just a promenade to Warsaw. What else?

"I sincerely hope," said Captain Dau in measured tones, "that Britain and France will be clever enough to let the Poles stew in the juice which they prepared for themselves . . ."

He did not believe a word of what he said. Dau flattered himself he knew the British. As he put it—though only to himself—Britain would never tolerate any addition to Germany's power. Often before he had thought about 1914—it had not been different then!

"Yes," he said in a low voice now, as if talking to himself only, while the men at the table around showed respectful attention: "It's twenty-five years now since the last war started. I was forty then . . ." From his desk job in the nautical department of the North-German Lloyd he had been called to the command of a frigate.

"We were happy, we were jubilant when war broke out in 1914 . . ." he reminisced.

Franz Bremer, the steward, approached with a deferential bow: "*Herr Kapitaen* . . . if the *Herr Kapitaen* would be kind enough . . . the wireless operator requests . . ."

With unusual alacrity Heinrich Dau wiped the last trace of gravy from his bearded lip, jumped up and stumped out of the wardroom. Two minutes later, having torn a de-coded message from the hands of the silent, startled wireless operator, he was in his cabin. This was it!

He lifted the ship's telephone: "Paulsen," he barked his order now, "I want the ship's company assembled on deck in ten minutes . . ."

"They are having their meal, *Herr Kapitaen* . . ."

"On deck . . . in ten minutes!"

. . . . .

With a sheaf of documents in his hand, Captain Heinrich Dau marched on to the deck:

"Reporting, the ship's company!" Paulsen said in clipped tones.

Dau cleared his throat theatrically. He glanced around him like an orator on the platform: "England and France have declared war on the German Reich," he said slowly, deliberately hammering in every single word. The crew stayed silent. "I am now in a position to acquaint you with the task which the Fuehrer had allocated to the *Altmark* . . . Alas we shall not have the privilege of entering ourselves actively into the fight. The task which the Fuehrer has selected for us," and he waved the secret orders which he had extracted from a sealed envelope, "is to act as the indispensable, floating supply base for a German battleship which is going to make the high seas dangerous, uncertain, nay, deadly, for the enemy. . . . According to my instructions we have to see that the battleship *Admiral Graf Spee* will be supplied as expertly and quickly as possible. . . . Our store rooms are bursting with supplies . . . we have oil . . . and food—yes, and ammunition. It belongs to the *Graf Spee.* In the meantime our orders are above all else—to survive . . . to survive not for our own sakes, but to preserve ourselves for the *Graf Spee.* In the long run we shall only be able to accomplish this task by incessant, untiring watchfulness from the look-outs, the men at the machines."

How different it was from August 1914. The *Altmark* crew stood silent. Not a word was said in response. A young sailor from Wilhelmshaven looked at his pal. He was to have been married in three weeks. . . . The elder men who had been hoping against hope that it would not happen kept their thoughts to themselves. Weichert, who had been a Nazi sea cadet, looked bewildered. There had been no war—whatever the doubters, the weaklings, had said—when Austria was returned to the Reich, followed by the Sudetenland,

Czechoslovakia. The Fuehrer's genius had guaranteed a peaceful aggrandisement. Why should *they* want to fight for Poland? "Incredible stupidity!" he whispered.

"What did you say?" someone asked him.

"They'll pay for this . . . we'll teach them!" Weichert said through his teeth, which were grinding together as if they were chewing up the British Empire.

Below, tension began to relax when an old hand pushed his sailor's cap back and said: "Hope we've got enough prunes aboard . . . My digestion . . ." They all laughed. Only one struck a different note: "Prunes! I hope we shall have enough to eat!"

There was yet no news from the *Graf Spee*, which had left Wilhelmshaven on August 21, and had reached the North Atlantic without attracting attention. Captain Dau retired to his cabin to study the *Graf Spee*'s instructions, a copy of which had been attached to his own secret orders.

The political preamble indicated that Russia would remain neutral, but that only Spain and Japan, among the neutral countries, could be expected to adopt a benevolent attitude. Support, if at all, would be available only in the harbours of these two nations. "Respect neutrality" was the definite order laid down by the Nazi Naval War Staff.

Slowly Captain Dau re-read the cardinal section of the orders, according to which *Graf Spee* was bound to be operating already. "Disruption and destruction of Enemy Merchant Shipping by All Possible Means" summed it up. In the beginning merchant warfare to be waged according to prize law . . . Warships and supply ships to keep out of danger zones to avoid attack by German U-boats, owing to mistaken identity. Enemy naval forces, even if inferior, to be engaged only if it furthered the principal task—war on merchant shipping. To create uncertainty by frequent changes of position in operational areas, including temporary departure into distant areas. If the enemy should protect shipping with superior forces—that fact alone will greatly impair his supply situation. Encounter with independent non-convoyed enemy ships can be expected. They are valuable targets of attack . . .

"Action Stations!"

The command on Dau's orders rang through the loudspeakers. Hiding their excitement behind jokes and casual

remarks the crew scrambled on to the deck. It was the first time the *Altmark* re-echoed to the ringing of the bells—one long, three short, which meant: "It could be serious!"

"Boat drill!" came the next order. Clattering, the lifeboats rumbled down. The men grabbed the ropes, lowered themselves quickly. "That'll be cutting your nice white hands to ribbons," Weichert said ironically to the doctor.

"Don't you worry." Dr. Tyrolt, who had been a deckhand and a labourer in his day, showed his powerful hands. They were as hard as cement.

"Paulsen." Dau addressed his first officer. "Explain to everybody that we are not here to fight. If we are sighted, we make off."

The *Altmark*, with her four nine-cylinder M.A.N. diesel engines, giving 21,400 h.p., was capable of 21 knots, which was fast for a vessel of 11,000 tons gross. She was well built, seemed more spacious than her 178 metre length and 22 metre beam seemed to suggest; her loading capacity of over 14,000 tons was fully reached and she lay sound and deep in the sea.

"Instruction One," Dau commanded. Paulsen ordered every one of the one-hundred-and-thirty-four-men crew who could be spared to the task. The *Altmark* was going to get a new face: "All hands to the paint pots." The ropes held the swaying stages in place. Forward, over the side, a sailor was busy obliterating the ship's name. Even before the new light yellow colour had dried on the spot, he was scrutinizing the sheet of paper on which the new name was drawn for him to transfer, magnified a hundred times, to the high bow: *SOGNE*. Below, in smaller size, was a new port of origin for him to copy: OSLO.

"It's my ship now . . ." remarked Sorens, a Norwegian. The *Altmark* had, indeed, changed not only her colour, but her nationality.

"Light yellow," said Harmer, a third mate; "that means we are going south—where the sun is hot and bright."

On deck, as the *Altmark* cruised on the southern edge of the North Atlantic, the men settled down to the last few days of ease. They knew what was in store for them, for the majority of the crew had been in the *Altmark* ever since she was commissioned from the Hochwaldt Wharf in Kiel in November 1938. Those who had joined her later had been told all about

the "manœuvres" off the Spanish coast earlier in the year when *Graf Spee* operated under war-like conditions—indeed, it was war—in support of Franco's forces against the Republicans.

Below, in his cabin, Captain Dau was in deep conversation with his first officer. Slowly emphasizing every word, he acquainted his first officer with every detail of his technical instructions. "We must not fool ourselves," he told Paulsen gravely, "the position of our Navy is difficult. I have myself had an opportunity to discuss the position with officers of the Grand Admiral's staff. It would have been better if war at sea could have been avoided for another two years . . . two more years and we should have been really invincible."

In the seclusion of his cabin, hidden from the view of his crew, Dau, the severe, surly, aloof disciplinarian, relaxed a little. "Here," he demonstrated to Paulsen, stretching out the glazed linen map on the table. "This is the spot where we shall meet her." He pointed to a place midway between Dakar and Trinidad.

"That is in an area between points 23°N., 38°W.; 28°N., 27°W.; and 25°N., 40°W.—right?" asked Paulsen.

"Correct. Captain Langsdorff will be impatient, I know," Dau continued. "His instructions are to lie low . . . to make no move. Actually, Paulsen, you know . . . the *Graf Spee* has not yet received orders to go into action."

The sea was calm with a slight haze shrouding the horizon. "Let's go on the bridge, Paulsen," Dau said. "Within four or five hours the *Graf Spee* should be coming into view." He was buttoning up his tunic, pulling his peaked cap further down over his face when the ship's phone purred on his desk.

"Ship ahoy!" came the voice of the first officer. "Lookout reports smoke north-north-west!"

Dau and Paulsen rushed to the bridge.

"Bring her round . . . full speed . . . give her everything you've got! Away! Away!"

Dau was calm now. It was impossible, he thought. This could not be the battleship. "Wireless operator—attention!" The smoke on the horizon began to recede into the distance. The *Altmark* was steaming away fast. Discovered by the enemy . . . so early? "They must not get us!" Dau swore under his breath.

For a few minutes it looked as if the menacing ghost in the distance had been shaken off. There is no place to hide like the immense expanse of an ocean. Nowhere else could one disappear so fast into almost limitless nothingness. The *Altmark* now—and every man on board—was shuddering under the power of the engines racing in disciplined rhythm, with the bow of the ship trying to escape from the gushing, green-white swirl of water, riding high as if ready to jump from its narrow, velvety track.

"Masthead in sight!"

Again the call from the look-out shattered Dau's sense of satisfaction at the tremendous speed of his ship. There was the pillar of smoke again . . . the very same pillar, growing, darkening, getting closer: "Hoist Flag Two!" Dau ordered. Up went the Norwegian flag. There was no escaping the other vessel which was clearly hot in pursuit. If it was a British cruiser only a ruse could save the *Altmark*.

Five officers were leaning over the bridge, binoculars at their eyes, trained on the apparition aft which was taking on shape and size. What size! And what speed!

"They're signalling—in Morse, *Herr Kapitaen*," said Paulsen. A powerful beam of light behind shutters which closed and opened rhythmically was just visible in the distance. "I cannot make out what they are saying . . . wait, look!"

Captain Dau's eyes were nearly bolting from their sockets. Long experience enabled him to shut out the blinding irritating reflection of the sun from the sea, the thousand little sparklets which seemed to be flying up out of the water. Above the glitter of the dancing lights, emerged the clipped, staccato blinking of the distant signal. Letter by letter Captain Dau repeated what he saw:

"G-U-S-T-A-V . . ."

"They're signalling GUSTAV, *Herr Kapitaen*!" Paulsen confirmed.

A sigh of relief escaped from Dau's tight lips. The signal continued and now Paulsen was repeating the letters:

"S-O-P-H-I-E. . . ."

"*G*ustav *S*ophie . . . *G*raf *S*pee!"

It was the pre-arranged signal of recognition. A cheer went up from fifty throats but it sounded thin in the emptiness of the ocean.

"Stop engines."

The *Altmark*'s Morse, quite unnecessarily, burst out in a repetitious "A . . . A . . . A". Twenty minutes later the *Altmark* was lying still just a few hundred feet from the compact, proud *Graf Spee*.

Every man of her company rushed to the deck. Many of them had their cameras at the ready to capture the great moment of the first meeting. In the brilliant sunshine the films registered the impressive picture of the pocket-battleship—a British-coined word which had long become currency in the German language. There was the menacing gun-tower and, above the bridge, the war-mast; beyond the powerful superstructure the crane rose towards the sky—the crane which was there to recover the *Graf Spee*'s catapult reconnaissance plane from the sea whenever it returned from a mission. Now that the heavy diesel engines had stopped only slight yellow vapour rose from the funnel.

Captain Dau walked to the side of his ship where a party was already preparing to lower his boat, but even before it had hit the water below, other boats had begun to move between the two ships. One was dragging the six-inch heavy pipe-line through which the *Altmark*'s oil would soon be refuelling the battleship; another was carrying the chief storekeeper with his long list of supplies from which his opposite number on the *Graf Spee* could choose. Visitors from the *Graf Spee* were coming across to inspect "Mother", as they called the *Altmark*, or the "Mother-ship", on which they would henceforth rely to feed the *Spee* with the lifeblood of oil for her veins, to bring meat to strengthen the limbs of her sailors, and shells to send a hundred British ships to the bottom of the sea.

The company of the *Graf Spee* greeted Captain Dau with full honours. Throwing out his chest, looking the parading *Spee* sailors straight in the eye, he marched towards the steel door, accompanied by the *Spee*'s chief supply officer, passed it and walked along the gangway towards the captain's cabin. In the door, the elegant, slender Captain Langsdorff stood to attention.

"Glad to see you, Captain Dau," he said, adding carefully, to give practical meaning to the formal greeting: "Very glad we met . . . according to plan!"

Dau was not the man to be easily impressed by a fellow-sailor. The younger ones who had come up in the disastrous inter-war years did not seem to be made of the same tough fibre as the men of his age group, who had represented a Germany with a real navy. Always Dau had thought that Langsdorff was a little too sophisticated, too refined, too much the eternal naval cadet. But—by heavens!—what a sailor, what an expert strategist. What a sensitive brain to control the concentrated power of this unique floating man-o'-war. The Fuehrer has chosen well when he appointed Langsdorff, Dau kept telling himself. But he refused to acknowledge in his own heart how Langsdorff also almost imperceptibly kept him in his place. He would not recognize the tinge of irony and condescension in the younger man's voice, the air of authority which he introduced into every technical discussion—as if he were gently lecturing the older man.

"Cigar, *Herr Kapitaen?*" Langsdorff asked.

"Very kind of you," Dau acknowledged, "to remember my favourite brand. I am still not allowed to smoke anything heavier . . . the heart, the heart . . ."

Langsdorff quickly cut short Dau's outburst of familiarity. Big maps had been spread out in readiness for Captain Dau's visit. Langsdorff turned to them abruptly to explain that his orders for action had as yet not arrived. But here was a list of British ships which the *Seekriegsfuehrung* in Berlin expected to be roving in the South Atlantic before long . . . information from agents on the coast of Africa and South America plus inspired guesswork, compounded by German naval intelligence from knowledge of British shipping and the study of charts. "We shall not approach convoys, of course," Langsdorff said.

"Shall we meet again on 25th of September?" he asked, his casual tone disguising his command as a suggestion. "Wattenberg," he said to his chief navigation officer, "give Captain Dau the chart—we shall be cruising southwards and I expect you will be following me at close quarters. But, of course," he added to Dau, "radio silence must be strictly observed between us. By the way," he said in his slightly patronizing tone, "I am detailing two of my wireless operators to assist your men."

For a full day the hustle of traffic between *Altmark* and *Spee* seemed to turn a small sector of the vast Atlantic into a market

square. Commands pierced the air; the sailors' rough humour spiced the event. Quite a few were swimming in the calm sea. The war seemed millions of miles away.

Standing on his own bridge again, Captain Dau could not resist giving the order which he had long planned: "Hoist the Fuehrer's flag!" And as the heavy diesels of the *Spee* began to hum there appeared high on the mast of the *Altmark* the *Reichsdienstflagge* and the Swastika side by side. Then the *Graf Spee* turned gracefully to move southwards.

On the *Altmark* deck all hands were busy clearing the debris of the supply operation. Once more, it was like the evening of market day with brooms sweeping the decks, porters carrying away the empty crates.

"Get that wooden plank out of the water!" an officer barked. Quickly a boat was lowered into the sea. They did not intend to leave any trace behind—it was bad enough that nothing could be done about the deep dark patch of oil on the water, a tell-tale clue to enemy aircraft which might happen to fly low across the Atlantic.

Graf Spee had disappeared from view. The *Altmark* was following slowly, leisurely. These were lazy days during which the captain himself thawed a little, strolling across the deck to watch the games going on in every part of the ship under the hot sun. His bare-chested men, with beards beginning to frame their faces in hazel, vivid dark brown, red, were really enjoying the cruise. The older sailors were explaining what would happen to the greenhorns, soon to cross the Equator for the first time. The first flying fish rose from the sea, soaring away for a few hundred feet at a time, propelling themselves on to the deck and starting a wild fish chase, with the winner triumphantly carting his prize to the galley. Soon there were hundreds of fish to implement the meals which were now restricted to war-time rations.

Twice, from the lookout, where Erickson, a Norwegian, was on duty, the shout went up: "SHIP AHOY!" to be followed by Captain Dau's instantaneous: "Action Stations," and Paulsen's order: "Total preparedness."

The navigator came down to the crew's quarters. "Tomorrow around noon we shall be crossing the Equator."

"What a mass Christening it will be," someone said. "What fun!"

Over a dozen novices were due for the sport, the traditional ceremony which sailors of all nationalities observe. The youngest men were up early next morning. They were not sure what form the Christening would take, but none wanted to miss the fun. "Neither shall we *let* you miss it!" old Gaertner said. He had crossed the Equator over a dozen times before.

"Masthead!" Once more the warning from the look-out pulled the men up. It was 11 a.m. and the shout caught the crew like a bunch of schoolboys just about to start a football match during the break when the teacher calls them back to class. Captain Dau himself was giving orders for evasive action. "There is going to be no Christening ceremony today," he decreed sternly. "This area seems to be swarming with ships!"

Eyes were on the navigator who was shrugging his shoulders in silent submission: "*Now!*" he said looking up from his charts and his compass. Sailors nudged each other—staring out to sea, not knowing what they were expecting to see. Captain Dau's stern glance kept them in their places and at the job in hand. There was no shout, no acknowledgment on the great occasion. Twice within three hours ships were sighted and each time the *Altmark* turned tail.

As night settled over a hectic day the navigator joined a group of young sailors: "Well, boys," he said, "today you have crossed the Equator three times." To avoid an unwanted and untimely encounter with a British vessel, the *Altmark* had zig-zagged her course across the most celebrated invisible line in the world.

The *Altmark* was now passing through the notorious bad-weather belt and heavy cloud came down to meet the sea and drenched the ship in a flood of water. When she had left it behind, the sun was again hot and strong, burning down perpendicularly at noon.

The atmosphere on board the tanker was deceptively calm. Captain Dau realized that the days of waiting were coming to an end. Twice a day he walked purposefully into the wireless operator's cabin where pad after pad was being filled with the criss-cross of news and instructions as messages came over the air. He had donned the earphones himself one day at 2 p.m., which was the pre-arranged time for him to receive the signals from Naval H.Q. The signals, when they came were

as clear as a bell. Even the singing Morse seemed to enhance the importance of the coded message. Before the wireless operator had deciphered it he knew what it was: "*Graf Spee into action!*"

It had been arranged that, in the event of the signal arriving, the battleship would slow up and make contact with the *Altmark* once more. Dau ordered a double look-out and, when night came, retired to his cabin. He did not take off his clothes but settled on his bunk for a few hours of uneasy rest. By dawn he was on deck again, just in time to see the *Spee*, rocking gracefully near his ship. Her diesels were still but Dau almost jumped out of his skin as a piercing drone hit his ear drums. It came from the deck of the *Spee* and it took him several seconds to recognize the source. It was the *Spee* observation plane whose engines were being warmed up.

The *Altmark*'s launch had already been lowered to take tobacco to the *Spee*, a hurried operation which left time only for a quickly whispered conversation with two sailors of the *Spee*.

"We had a wonderful day crossing the Equator," one of them said. "We dressed up, we cut the line and Neptune marched across . . . there was a lot of ducking and horse-play. It was great!" The *Altmark* boys had nothing to say; the mate pressed them to return to their ship. "The bastard!" one of them whispered under his breath. "If they could have their ceremony, why couldn't we? Officious, humourless old bastard . . ." It doused spirits on the *Altmark* when the news got round.

But there was no time now to dwell on Dau's merciless disciplinarian methods. The motor-boat had no sooner returned to the *Altmark* than the *Spee*'s aircraft was seen, apparently jumping from the deck as it was catapulted into the air with tremendous power—a most impressive spectacle. Soon it was circling overhead before making off straight into the sun. Flag signals from the *Spee* invested the incident with ominous purpose. The flags spelled out one word: DANGER! All eyes in the *Altmark* were focused on the *Graf Spee*. The minutes ticked away slowly. Captain Dau was on the bridge when Erickson signalled urgently from the look-out:

"Ship fine on the starboard bow!"

"Inform the *Spee*!" Dau ordered. Over there, clearly visible with the naked eye, things were beginning to happen. A quarter

of an hour later there was a gentle humming in the air and, like a dark star, the *Spee* aircraft appeared on the horizon. There was much to do on the *Altmark*, but few hands could resist watching the intricate manœuvring as the aircraft landed on the water behind the *Spee* and was hoisted aboard by the big crane. Through his glasses Dau could see the pilot jumping from the cockpit and running towards the big steel doors.

"Personal message from Captain Langsdorff to Captain Dau: British cruiser sighted approximately thirty miles north-north-west. Preparing for action. Keep alert!"

Dau's excitement was tinged with a feeling of utter helplessness—nay, uselessness. If there was to be action—what could he do except shelter behind Langsdorff's powerful battleship. Until recently the *Altmark*'s armament had consisted of two miserable 2-cm. A.A. machine-guns, and, if pitted against an enemy warship, even the additional three 15-cm. torpedo-boat cannons, which Captain Langsdorff had sent across for mounting behind the superstructure amidships, would be of little avail. Under attack the *Altmark* would be a sitting duck.

Enviously Dau, flanked by Paulsen and Weichert, was watching the big ship preparing to meet any possible threat. A vivid rainbow, it appeared, had prevented the *Spee* pilot from making out the exact nature of the mysterious ship from his height. The pilot had flown purposely at a great height to avoid detection.

On the *Spee* the rails were being taken down, the torpedo mounts were performing their ominous circular movements, swinging around gracefully before being focused into the quarter from which danger would come. The crew was fast disappearing behind the steel shield. For a while the *Spee* looked like a ghost ship, idle and deserted. Infected by the manœuvres across the water the *Altmark* crew to a man tensed themselves—forgetting that their specific task condemned them to virtual inactivity however serious the position might become.

"If we could only fight . . . !" It was the *Altmark*'s doctor speaking, but Dau, seeing the *Spee* rumbling into movement, turning and putting on speed, returned to reality with a harsh: "Nonsense . . . there'll be no fight! We are taking course due south . . ."

"Between Scylla and Charybdis," remarked Dr. Tyrolt, conscious that the *Spee-Altmark* unit was now virtually flanked by two ships which could hardly be otherwise than hostile. There was going to be no action but *Altmark*, following close behind the *Spee*, remained on the alert as they were making due south at full speed.

Though they were nearing the narrowest strip of ocean between West Africa and the eastern coast of South America they were intensely conscious of the loneliness in the vast wastes. Somewhere away to port was Freetown, the British base from which, they knew, Allied merchant shipping would sally to provide game for their hunting mission. The weather was fine, the air relaxing.

The date was September 26 when the *Spee* hung back and indicated that it was time for a final meeting before things began to happen. While the supply operation was under way Captain Dau took advantage of the new opportunity to visit Langsdorff again. He found the *Spee* captain in no mood for idle talk. Detailed orders to begin what the Naval High Command described as "restricted action against merchant shipping" had reached Langsdorff early that morning and, though his warship had long been in a state of complete readiness, the imminence of operations cast a dark shadow on the sensitive officer.

Dau's patter, as on all such occasions, spiced with the verbiage of the Third Reich, with the Fuehrer's name thrown into conversation at every opportunity, with the far-fetched references to "national duty" and "German mission" jarred on Langsdorff. His practical mind rejected such artificial mouthings—more so now when things were becoming serious, desperately serious. Briefly, almost brusquely, he told Dau that his immediate plan was to remove himself as far as possible from Africa where British naval forces would be close at hand, ready to pick up any signal by a merchantman under attack. His plan was to approach the coast of South America about the latitude of Pernambuco. "Until we meet again . . ." Langsdorff said in a voice full of meaning as he took abrupt leave from Captain Dau.

Back on the *Altmark* Dau was impatient, irritable. Every free moment—most of the day, in fact, and often late at night—he sat expectantly before the loud speaker of the short-wave

wireless set. The *Graf Spee*, stocked up to bursting point, had just disappeared from sight after a full day's refuelling and provisioning, when the crackling and booming of the set formed itself into intelligible sound of music and song. From Germany the strains of the Nazi Horst Wessel song were reaching out into the South Atlantic.

Officers of the *Altmark* were crowding around their captain, who relaxed sufficiently to permit a familiarity of which they rarely took advantage. He knew as well as they did that the rendering of the song was bound to precede a portentous announcement—and he could not restrain himself from joining in. "Lift up the flag!" he hummed. And then came a few clipped words spoken in a voice which seemed choked with joy:

"The High Command of the Wehrmacht announces the surrender of Warsaw!"

"This means that the Fuehrer has triumphed," Dau said ponderously. As his officers listened silently he discoursed briefly on the political situation arising from this glorious victory.

"With the imminent defeat of Poland there is a possibility of the war coming to an end," he lectured. "The object of the Western powers' entry into the war has disappeared. But . . ." and he seemed to measure his words carefully, "we must not relax our preparedness. A few hefty naval blows at the British Empire just now may decide the issue and bring them to their senses. We are part of the instrument which can strike this blow. Victory in Poland will be followed by the hammer blows of the *Graf Spee*—Sieg Heil!"

"Sieg Heil!" echoed the men around him.

CHAPTER II

"YOU ARE DAMNED EARLY, GENTLEMEN"

"THE WAY I see it"—the speaker was the *Spee* wireless-operator, who had been put on board the *Altmark* to reinforce the ship's regular service with the specific task of maintaining contact with the pocket-battleship—"things are going to get very hot . . . very hot!"

The *Altmark* crew was inclined to listen to him with respect because, though he was a young man, he had brought the prestige of the "German navy's pride" with him to the tanker.

"*Spee* is going into action," he mused. "That means that she is going to attack . . . that means hell will be let loose once the enemy know there's a raider about in these parts. They'll be hunting us . . . the whole ruddy British Navy will be on our tail. Am I glad there's so much ocean around!"

His gloomy forecasts, clearly correct, damped the high spirits which news of the German victory in Poland had roused. Captain Dau, it is true, was always speaking of his regret that the *Altmark* was not really a fighting ship, but there were less than a dozen men in his crew who would not gladly have forfeited glory and gone home—in peace such as the end of the war in Poland looked like bringing about.

But the *Spee* operator was already back in the wireless cabin trying with a pre-arranged signal to make contact with the *Spee*. Captain Dau came down to join him at 2 p.m. (German time) every afternoon in case the Naval High Command had news or orders. It was a hazardous, unsatisfactory arrangement. The secret route outlined on the map which Langsdorff had handed to Dau was taking the *Altmark* dangerously close to the eastern shore of South America. They were only 600 miles away from Pernambuco when a signal, crisp and loud in spite of atmospherics, indicated that *Graf Spee* had scored her first success.

"What a prize she has caught!" was all the wireless-operator would say at first. But he honoured one of his personal pals with a confidential hint, then wrote out in careful longhand what he heard emerging from the mutilated coded signal; and what he wrote started a wave of hilarity on board the *Altmark*, greater than the understandable satisfaction about the first success of the operation seemed to warrant.

"They've sunk a ship called *Clement*. And you know what? . . . She had a troupe of famous chorus girls on board—the Ziegfeld Girls, I think . . . they'll soon be billeted on us!"

"Hurray!"

Boys of the *Altmark* were forming mock-chorus lines, kicking their legs in the air, dancing . . . and smacking their lips in anticipation. It was September 30 and they had been at sea a long time—far from wives and girl friends, never near any port. The atmosphere became heady as every conversation —sooner rather than later—turned on the subject of the girls. The slap-stick jokes were heavy with meaningful allusion.

It was Eichert who first acquainted the captain with the news: "Do you know, *Herr Kapitaen*," he asked with a serious face, "that *Spee* has captured a lot of chorus girls . . . ?"

"How on earth do you come to think that?"

"It's true, *Herr Kapitaen*, is it not . . . ?"

The mess-room soon reverberated with the agitation of the officers, who were arguing about billeting arrangements for the ladies. "At long last there'll be a little life on board," one of them said.

"Surely," Dr. Tyrolt retorted, "as ship's doctor it will be my job to look after them . . . they may be sick or worried . . . suffering from shock."

"They'll get a shock all right!"

"Enough, gentlemen," Dau said sternly. "The hard facts are that the *Clement* is liable to mean trouble for us, even if she has by now hit the bottom of the ocean."

How right he was!

He did not yet know the dramatic details of the action which transformed their activity at sea from a sedate cruise into a murderous game of hide-and-seek.

Cruising close to the South American coast off Pernambuco the *Graf Spee* launched her aircraft to scan the sea for suitable

prey. Returning, the pilot reported that he had seen smoke rising from a ship not far out of Pernambuco.

She was, in fact, the British s.s. *Clement*, a 5,051-ton tanker carrying 1,200 tons of paraffin from New York. The *Clement*, Captain F. C. P. Harris, was bound for Capetown.

Hardly had the pilot finished his report than Captain Langsdorff had given the order: "Full speed ahead!" and the well-oiled machinery of the *Graf Spee*'s attacking power was set in motion. Gun crews were ordered to their battle stations, signallers sent to their posts.

Furiously, as soon as the *Clement* came in view, *Spee* signals sent out a succession of orders in English—and the orders were still going out thick and fast when a shell from one of her eight-inch guns cracked viciously across the bows of the *Clement*.

"Absolute radio silence! Not a sound or we shall sink you without further warning! Absolute radio silence!" the signals repeated sternly.

"Stop! Stop! Make no move! Absolute silence!"

Spee's big launch was lowered with a strong prize crew and a unit of naval sappers carrying explosives. From the *Spee* it could be seen that there was intense movement on board the *Clement*. Before the *Spee*'s boat had even come alongside the *Clement's* three boats had been lowered fully manned. Captain Harris had told the crew that there was no point in waiting for the Germans and ordered them to row in the direction of Pernambuco as fast as their oars would take them.

Only Captain Harris and Mr. W. Bryant, his chief engineer, remained on board. The code-book and secret papers had gone overboard in a weighted bag and the British captain did not refuse when the *Spee* officer in charge of the prize crew demanded the brief-case he carried. It contained only maps and a few unimportant letters. Captain Harris, though deeply shocked by his encounter with the powerful German raider of whose presence the Admiralty had given him no warning, was quietly rubbing his hands in silent glee.

Before the *Spee* had signalled her instructions Harris had ordered his wireless-operator to send out an S O S and as many details as they had gathered about the nature of their attacker.

"You have used your wireless?" the German commanding the prize crew asked.

"Of course we have!" Harris replied defiantly.

Twenty minutes later he repeated his admission on board the *Spee* in front of Captain Langsdorff.

"You have defied my orders!" Langsdorff said.

"Indeed, I have . . ."

To Harris' surprise Langsdorff shrugged his shoulders: "I strongly disapprove," he said in fairly good English, "but, then, I should have done the same thing . . ."

Leaving his two captives, he gave instructions that the Brazilian naval authorities at Pernambuco were to be signalled that three boat-loads of British sailors were making for the coast: "Take any measures for their safety which you think fit," his message concluded. It was signed *Admiral Scheer.*

Later in the day the *Admiral Graf Spee* ordered a Greek steamer to stop: "We are Greek . . . we are neutral . . . we are carrying wheat to Belgium . . . another neutral country!" came the frantic signal of the Greek.

"Caramba!" the *Spee* replied in Spanish. "You'll take two British merchant seamen with you . . . !"

"No fear . . . this isn't our war. We're neutral."

"You take them—or I'll sink you—neutral or not!"

An hour later Harris and Bryant were on their way to Europe in the Greek boat. But the two men did not command the persuasive power of the *Spee*'s big guns and they were unable to obtain the captain's permission to radio even an outline—far less the details—of their grim experience to London.

But already the Admiralty's First Lord had received news from Pernambuco where the *Clement* crew had scrambled ashore, happy to have escaped with nothing but their lives. And the news truly "electrified" the Admiralty. The First Lord—"a former naval person", as he was to become—was none other than Winston Churchill who, as he later said, was glad to receive the signal for which he had been waiting.

It was the first definite indication that a German raider—the *Admiral Scheer*, it was believed by those who took Langsdorff's deliberately deceptive signature at its face value—was operating in the South Atlantic. Since the outbreak of war uncertainty about the whereabouts of the marauding pocket-battleships had already imposed a severe strain on the Royal

Navy. Not only was there not a British cruiser capable of matching their power single-handed, but the pocket-battleships' successful evasion of the British naval security cordon had added to the Admiralty's anxieties.

Now one of them had struck. At once the Admiralty began to form naval hunting groups, comprising (in Mr. Churchill's words) "all available aircraft-carriers, supported by battleships, battle-cruisers and cruisers". Each group consisted of two or more ships to assure superiority in case of a head-on encounter with the concentrated power of an enemy pocket-battleship. It was the beginning of an operation in which, as the months went by, twenty-three ships, organized altogether in nine battle groups, were to take part. Mr. Churchill thought it prudent to order the reinforcement of major convoys by two or three battleships and cruisers. No wonder he noted that "these requirements represented a severe strain on the resources of the Home and Mediterranean Fleets, from which it was necessary to withdraw twelve ships of the most powerful types, including three aircraft carriers."

Every base in the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean was on the alert. Though the *Altmark* was but a floating annex to the *Spee*—being the food and ammunition as well as the oil store of the raider—Captain Dau was well aware that his ship was a prize second only to the *Spee* herself; and she was on the wrong end of the biggest sea-air hunt in history. His patient study of all the known facts of British naval strength enabled him to guess a few of the units which would be chasing him. But both his pride and his apprehension would have been greater still, had he realized that such naval giants as Britain's aircraft carriers *Eagle*, *Glorious*, *Ark Royal*, *Furious* and *Hermes* were the spearhead of the chase which was rapidly gathering momentum.

The *Hermes*, supported by two French eight-inch cruisers, was near—in terms of naval warfare in the vast expanse of ocean she could even be said to be desperately near. The battleship *Strasbourg* with the cruiser *Neptune* and French support was not far off either. *Ark Royal* and the battle-cruiser *Renown* were operating from Freetown, but Mr. Churchill was not content with purely naval preparations and, characteristically, moved into the diplomatic field to secure the rear of his men-o'-war. Quickly he communicated with the President of the

United States to point the obvious conclusions from the sinking of the *Clement* on the doorstep of the American hemisphere. Would it not be a good thing, he suggested, to keep the war away from the shores of the Americas by declaring an American security zone—say, from three to six hundred miles from their coasts?

At the same time he told President Roosevelt that, should he take such a measure in conjunction with the American Republics, Britain would at once agree to conform—provided all other belligerents accepted the provision. Of course, the United States Navy—and not some weak neutral—would have to patrol this zone. He argued that such a measure might well deter German raiders from penetrating American waters. On October 3, the Pan-American Conference of the twenty-one Republics adopted Mr. Churchill's suggestion and decided to set up a three-hundred-mile security zone.

While, with the speed of lightning, these moves were set in motion, on Mr. Churchill's initiative, the death of the *Clement* at the same time, was much slower than anticipated.

Captain Langsdorff had regarded the raid on the *Clement* as a trial run, and while the enemy had been forced to capitulate before his superior power, it did not prove so easy to deal the death blow to the gallant little British ship. The *Spee*'s naval sappers had planted massive explosive charges in strategic positions all over the *Clement*. They had set the fuses, hurriedly, returned to their motor-boats and made for their ship with the utmost speed.

From the bridge Langsdorff, stop watch in hand, was waiting for the explosion which would put an end to the *Clement*. Slowly the seconds were ticking away.

"How much have you given her?" he asked his gunnery officer.

"I have just had a word with the men, *Herr Kapitaen*," was the reply. "She should have blown up four minutes ago!"

Langsdorff's strained, nervous features showed signs of impatience. He was clearly angry. Another five minutes passed. "Obviously faulty detonators," he diagnosed. "Have the charges been examined recently?" He did not receive a reply.

"Torpedo One," he said briskly now. "Make ready to sink her!"

"Very well, *Herr Kapitaen*." The torpedo officer realized that

it was not a decision which Captain Langsdorff would make gladly. Every single torpedo was of value; early instructions were clear and to the point that any unnecessary expenditure of ammunition must be avoided, especially "eels" (as torpedoes are called in the German Navy), which should be used with strict economy. And this most certainly was a waste.

There was hardly a man on board the *Spee* through whose head such thoughts were not passing when the calm surface of the sea was broken by a gentle ripple in the water, a dull thud and a burst of white waves. Hundreds of eyes followed the path of the torpedo which had just been launched. Now, just now, it should have hit the *Clement* amidships with a tremendous explosion. But nothing happened.

"Ignition failure," whispered the torpedo officer wringing his hands.

"Makes you vomit . . . !" Langsdorff commented with unusual vehemence. The *Clement* was rocking jauntily on the waves, heaving to and fro as if mocking the gigantic concentration of power facing her, shaking a little as if the torpedo had done no more than tickle her ribs.

It seemed almost funny. But the superstition of the sea began to cast gloom over the *Spee*'s company.

"Things are going wrong," a whisper went round the *Spee*. "We can't even sink a sitting duck . . . what's going to happen if an engagement is forced upon us?"

The whispers did not reach the bridge. There Captain Langsdorff, who had regained his composure, said calmly: "We'll have to learn our lesson the hard way, I suppose. Get the guns ready," he ordered.

The gunnery officer was hilarious. He would show the torpedo wallahs . . . ! The gun crew went to the task with glee . . . target practice on the real thing. That was something to write home about.

With a mighty roar the eleven-inch gun went into action. The first salvo crashed into the belly of the *Clement*. Two minutes later the ship's medium artillery followed suit. Three eight-inch guns spat their destructive metal towards the *Clement*. Through field-glasses the *Spee* crew, crowding along the rails, could see the jagged holes torn in the ship's side above the waterline. But the *Clement* continued to ride high. Not a shot had missed her, yet the *Clement* remained afloat.

On the bridge Langsdorff was in hurried conference. "Too heavy, this stuff, for such a small boat. At this distance we should not have used it!"

"May I suggest we try with the 10·5 cm. A.A. artillery?"

"Agreed . . . no, look! We'll remember that for next time."

As Langsdorff was speaking a thick, black cloud of smoke had burst through the deck. One of the many salvoes had hit the compartment of the *Clement* where the paraffin was stored. A few seconds later the *Clement* was listing to port. The smoke was growing thicker, flames were beginning to shoot up . . . the ship was an inferno. Now the *Clement* was shaking. Part of her seemed to sag and collapse, throwing up her bow clear of the waves in a cheeky, little gesture. As the steamer split in two it almost looked as if two fingers were pointing contemptuously upwards. Silently she sank.

Langsdorff heaved a sigh of relief: "East now, due east!"

"Africa, here we come," someone said. It sounded boastful. The *Graf Spee* was, in fact, making for the African coast. The *Altmark* by that time was already speeding across the ocean.

. . . . .

The Royal Navy on October 5 was converging on the coast of South America to hunt down the *Admiral Scheer*—as it was thought—while the *Spee* was already scanning the waters more than half-way across the South Atlantic. The German Naval High Command's bulletin had told Captain Langsdorff that the sinking of the *Clement*—"by *Admiral Scheer*"—had been announced in the British Press, giving impetus to the *Spee*'s impatient anxiety to add new names to the battleship's roll of honour. The *Spee*'s position had just been pinpointed at 09° 35′S. and 06° 30′W. when the look-out reached for the telephone to advise the bridge:

"Ship ahoy!"

A signals officer, two pairs of binoculars dangling from his neck, joined him aloft. It was 06.30 hours, but every hand without an immediate duty was clambering on deck to witness what promised to be an exciting action.

"First boarding party fall in!" the command rang over the ship's loudspeaker system.

As yet the *Spee* could see no more than a cloud of smoke in

the distance. Slowly the masthead came into view. Now the whole superstructure was clearly visible.

"It's a Tommy!" someone shouted. "A 10,000-tonner."

"Not on your life . . . she's barely 8,000 tons . . . should not be surprised if she is only 6,000," an elderly officer retorted.

"Looks miserably small," said the boarding-party officer as he and a dozen of his men scrambled into the launch. Straining his eyes as the boat was being lowered, he added: "She has a gun on board . . . careful, *Jungens* (boys)! The *Englaender* is capable of doing any piece of dirty work."

From the deck of the *Spee* the name of the British ship could not be clearly discerned. But from the bridge, someone spelled out slowly: *Newton Beech* and said the name was painted over with grey paint. A ladder was hanging over the side of the ship. "Yes, dear *Newton Beech*," a young German sailor mused. "We are going to examine you in order to see whose spawn you are."

The *Newton Beech*, 4,651 tons of the finest shipping that Tyneside can produce, was nine days out of Capetown, carrying 7,000 tons of maize to Newcastle. A crew of thirty-five hard-bitten sailors were fully aware of the hazards of the voyage but accepted the risks with the traditional fatalism which the lonely restricted life of the sea breeds. The four-inch gun fitted in Capetown had been tested in Capetown Bay and gave the seamen confidence.

Stewart Smith, an engineer, was in bed in his cabin when young George Worsey, the galley-boy, burst in, tugging at his blanket: "Third!" he shouted in his lilting Geordie voice, "get up quickly, come up and have a look at this here battleship."

Third Engineer Smith rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "Go away!" he said, turning over lazily.

Two minutes later the cabin door opened again. It was Len Miller, the bosun: "Get up, Third! Hurry!"

It sounded serious. Smith tightened the cord of his pyjama trousers as he jumped out of his bunk. "Good God," he exploded. Right in front of him, framed in the porthole, was a pocket battleship.

In an instant Smith had pulled his trousers over his pyjamas: "O.K., Bosun. I shan't be a tick," he said. But the door had

hardly closed when it was flung open again. A German sailor, in blue uniform, hat on the back of his head, was sticking a revolver into Smith's stomach: "*Komm,*" he said. The band on the German's cap said *Graf Spee.*

He had no English, but his gestures were clear. The revolver pointed upwards. Smith clambered up on to the deck where most of his thirty-five comrades had already arrived, similarly summoned with gestures, reinforced by menacing revolvers. The red ensign had been hauled down and in its place a German naval ensign fluttered in the morning breeze.

The revolver of Smith's German was now pointing in the direction of *Newton Beech*'s ammunition boxes, which were lined up on deck. The "Third" did not need detailed instructions. It was obvious that the German wanted him to lend a hand to his mates who were already throwing shells overboard as fast as they could to keep in time with the constant bark of German commands. "*Schneller!*" he seemed to hear, and, though he could not understand, he gathered that he was expected to get a move on.

It all went very quickly. "What's happened?" Smith asked Captain Robison, the master, who was just walking by with the German in command of the boarding party. "I think their plane spotted us . . . I am afraid we've had it, Smith," he said.

"What's up?" Stewart Smith approached a German sailor whom he had heard giving instructions in fairly good English.

"You will be going to Hamburg, *Englaender*!" was the reply.

When the fortunes of war turn in such sudden and spectacular manner there is little time to think. Smith gritted his teeth: "If it's got to be Hamburg," he thought to himself, "it'll be Hamburg, then!"

To the Germans, the quiet, unspectacular resignation of the British crew seemed incredible. They saw most of the men standing along the railings, in silent contemplation of the *Spee.*

"They look as if we were a party of visitors—and not a prize crew," a German remarked. He came from the Sudetenland and this was his first trip in the famous battleship. He had anticipated greater excitement.

"All hands parading on deck now." He repeated the instructions from his officer in English.

The *Newton Beech* radio officer, Mr. Prior, was the only

one who seemed perturbed. He looked as if he had been in a fight. He had been at his wireless, tapping out a succession of S O S, when a revolver in his back had forced him to put up his hands. As he came on deck his earphones were still clamped in position.

"*Herr Kapitaen* . . ." said the German officer.

Captain Jack Robison, master of the *Newton Beech*, was yawning: "You are so damned early, gentlemen!" he said with a wry smile.

"I am so sorry, *Herr Kapitaen*," was the reply, in mock-politeness. "Will you accompany me to my ship?"

The Germans of the boarding party were ranging all over the *Newton Beech*, examining every corner.

"*Ein* tramp!" one of them said. In the cabins there was evidence of hurried packing, each man having tried to gather his most valuable belongings together, but having been interrupted by the order to assemble on deck.

"May I fetch my certificate from below?" asked Mr. Byrne, the third mate.

"Naturally," the German replied. "But there's no hurry . . . we are not going to sink you . . ." he said slowly. A puzzled look came into the eyes of the British sailors who heard him. They glanced at each other before they caught the last word of the German's sentence, spoken after a pause as an afterthought: ". . . yet!"

"But," said Captain Robison, "isn't that the idea of the exercise . . . to sink us?"

The German shrugged his shoulders, as if he found the point tedious. "You can have your choice, *Herr Kapitaen*," he said. "You can take to your boats and hope for the best after I've sunk your ship. Or you can follow us around, for a while. You see," he said with a patient smile, "your ship is not the only one we expect to capture . . . not . . . not by a long chalk."

Captain Robison looked at his chief officer, John Coutts, and then at his men. "What chance should we have of making land in open boats? We're hundreds of miles away."

He turned to the waiting German. "Since you give us a choice," he said, "we'll follow you around."

Captain Robison was taken to the *Spee*. In a pleasant, small cabin, guarded by a naval rating with a short carbine on his shoulder, he was told to wait. After a few minutes a tall

officer, with a dark bushy beard and three gold rings around his cuff, appeared in the doorway.

"Kay," he said in the snappy German manner of introduction. "*Kapitaen* Kay," he added, as he saw the British captain's puzzled expression. "I have Captain Langsdorff's instructions for you . . ."

The instructions were for Captain Robison to return to his ship and keep her on a steady course due west at 9·2 knots. A prize crew of twenty-two well-armed officers and men would be sailing with him. Detailed orders would be given when necessary. "I cannot deny," Kay said in his precise, superior voice, "that it has given us great satisfaction to corner you . . . we should have preferred you to be a ship of . . . er . . . bigger dimensions and greater value . . . however, there are bound to be bigger fish in this great pool. *Auf Wiedersehen!*"

As he turned on his heels the sentry motioned Captain Robison to follow him on deck and into a small launch, which was soon on the way back to the *Newton Beech*. There the prize crew had mounted a machine-gun on the bridge. Three Germans had settled down in the engine-room, two stood guard near the boilers. They were waving Mauser revolvers around with the same air of unconcern as a schoolmaster waving his pointer.

Captain Robison returned to the bridge, a German officer by his side. "Are we going to Germany . . . ?" The answer he received was just a shrug of the shoulders.

The "Third", like every other member of the *Newton Beech* crew, was studying the Germans. Clean fellows, he concluded. Not bad, these lads. Orderly, grim-faced but polite. Not as bad as he expected.

"We could hit these fellows over the head and throw them overboard . . ." someone whispered.

The "Third" pointed to the machine-gun on the bridge: "Don't be daft, boy!" was all he said.

"Keep her hard aport," commanded the German.

The crew of the *Newton Beech* had not in the meantime been idle. They had used their time to spruce themselves up. When they came on deck again it was in clean clothes and they were washed and shaved. They were just in time to see the *Graf Spee* taking her leave with a shrill whistle. A French flag had been run up.

On the bridge Captain Robison quizzed the German: "Why should you want to capture a ship like mine?" he asked. "You cannot use a cargo of maize."

"Look here, old man," was the reply. "You English have begun to make war on German women and children. You are trying to starve our families to death. The blockade now affects foodstuffs as well as war materials. That is not fair. So we shall teach you a lesson."

"Politics, politics," retorted Robison. "Why did you want to start the war in the first place . . .?"

"Quiet now! You are under my orders. You are a German auxiliary from now on . . . I want no argument. *Verstanden?*"

Feeling depressed and abandoned, the crew of the *Newton Beech* went about their tasks glumly, but no man on board was glummer than Mr. Prior. After an uneasy night, the radio officer had been summoned to the wireless room by the German officer in charge of the prize crew.

"This wireless," he said, ominously waving his revolver at the British set, "why does it not work? It must be sabotage."

"But," said the young German operator, taking off his headphones to answer, "how can it be sabotage? The *Englaender* has been under close watch every time he has been down here. It's just that it's a new sort of set that I haven't ever seen before."

"Silence," roared the German angrily. "I suspect sabotage. And if it is, we'll make short work of *you*," he said to Prior. "You'll be shot . . . out of hand."

At noon the *Spee* returned and a launch carrying an officer and a guard sped over to the *Newton Beech.* "Orders from *Kapitaen* Kay," the officer shouted to the watching sailors. "*Kapitaen* Robison and the radio officer will report to him immediately on the *Graf Spee*—with the ship's wireless set."

Under Prior's supervision, the wireless set was dismantled and handled carefully into the launch. "If you have damaged this set, it will be so much the worse for you," Kay told the two British officers grimly.

He left them under guard and returned an hour later. "A circuit failure, our experts report. A normal fault. Lucky for you that you spoke the truth," said Kay, as he saw them off to the *Newton Beech*, taking with them a set of German manufacture as a replacement. "The punishment for sabotage is death!"

Prior shrugged. "Lucky for *me*," he said as the launch approached their captured ship once more, "but not lucky for someone else."

"What do you mean?" asked Robison.

"Well, lots of ships will recognize that transmitter. Suppose the Jerry sends out a faked S O S in our name and a British ship answers. She gives away her position straight away and the *Graf Spee* will soon make short work of her."

The days passed slowly. One evening at 6 p.m. smoke appeared on the horizon, approaching rapidly. The *Newton Beech* men did not blink an eyelid as they noticed it. The Germans, too, saw it, and remained strangely calm. Within ten minutes the reason for their self-assurance was evident. It was the *Graf Spee* cruising by at high speed—just keeping an eye on her prey.

The Germans did not thaw. Mechanically they went about their business issuing instructions, checking "Moses", the mechanical compass which kept the ship on her course. The next day passed without a single incident to interrupt the routine. At 6 p.m. the *Graf Spee* put in a brief appearance but soon disappeared again. The Germans shared the British food. They did not comment but their expressions betrayed their dislike of the menu.

"What do you call this?"

"Stew . . . Irish stew to us."

The *Graf Spee* was making closer towards the African coast. The sun was high in the sky. It was hot and the bare, oiled dark brown bodies of the sailors glistened. Langsdorff was quite content to operate the Capetown-Freetown lane which was bound to yield new victims. He was positive that the *Newton Beech* had been unable to send out a warning S O S. Nobody could possibly guess that the *Spee* was about.

. . . . .

It was 9 a.m. on Saturday, October 7, when Captain Charles Pottinger went up on to the bridge of the s.s. *Ashlea*, another Newcastle-on-Tyne ship, ten years old, a 4,000-tonner, heavily laden with raw sugar. He had taken her from Liverpool to Archangel, then to Lourenco Marques in Portuguese East Africa, where news of the war's outbreak had reached him. His orders were to proceed to Capetown, take on the cargo of

sugar and return to Liverpool. Captain Pottinger commanded a crew of thirty-four—eight Africans among them—a happy little band, who were confident that their small vessel would pass unnoticed and soon be home again.

The *Newton Beech*, he had been told, had set out from Capetown only a few days earlier . . . there was no indication that danger threatened in this part of the world, but he was issued with a gun just in case . . .

A week out of Capetown. "Freetown here we come . . . !" one of his crew was humming to the tune of "California . . ." He was not to see Freetown . . . not on this trip, anyway.

The captain had no sooner settled down on the bridge than smoke appeared on the horizon. It was Bob Goss, the tough, confident second officer, who spotted it just after he had relieved the third mate, who had gone below for breakfast.

"It's a battleship, sir!" he shouted. Captain Pottinger was soon focusing his binoculars on the ominous column in the distance. "Can't make out her flag . . . !"

"Maybe a Frenchman looking for the ship that sank *Clement*?" said Goss.

As they watched they discussed the silhouettes of British and French battleships: "It's impossible to tell . . . I haven't any drawings to check on."

His agitation was tinged with quiet despair. Yes, there was no doubt. Fluttering gaily from the stern of the ship as she came into focus was a big swastika. "This is it," Captain Pottinger said quietly.

On the *Spee*, too, there had been guessing. No doubt this was another "Tommy"—it looked almost as big as the *Altmark*. Yet the closer the battleship moved in, the smaller paradoxically the British ship turned out to be. "She's not even the size of the *Newton Beech*," was the final verdict.

Captain Langsdorff ordered a big signboard to be mounted on deck. In huge black letters it said in English:

DO NOT USE YOUR WIRELESS.
STOP ALL ENGINES.
IF YOU DISOBEY—WE FIRE!

Captain Pottinger was losing no time. He did not wait to examine the enemy at close quarters as she moved nearer. In his cabin he packed two heavy stones into the pouch with

his codes, his sailing instructions and the rest of the ship's papers. Within a minute he had flung it overboard.

Already the *Spee* launch with a boarding party was coming alongside. "Might as well get it over with quickly," Captain Pottinger said. "Get the ladder down . . . let's see what they are like!" It was 9.10 a.m.

His neat and clean uniform impressed the Germans, who had been commenting on the scrappy appearance of the *Newton Beech* ship's company. As they clambered aboard, one of the Germans spotted the West Africans: "Negroes," he said, "huh . . ." He shook himself with contemptuous disgust.

The faces of the *Ashlea* crew were set and grim. The officer in charge of the boarding party was on board now, a revolver in one hand, a sheet of paper in the other. He saluted smartly and Captain Pottinger returned the salute. Then the German, his men standing close behind him, began to read from the paper:

"The German Government," he read in good English but with a strong guttural accent, as the British sailors listened in mounting amazement, smiles soon breaking up their taut expressions, "the German Government wishes ardently to live at peace with the English people. There are no questions which could not be solved and settled by negotiations . . ."

"Proper little Goebbels . . ." a gruff Geordie voice interpolated.

"*Wie bitte?*" the German asked, reverting to his native language. He was baffled to see his words received by a row of grinning faces, coughed nervously and continued to read: "But because your government declared war I am obliged to take over your ship as a prize. From reasons of humanity I will do all I can to save the lives and personal property of your crew. It will be possible only on one condition . . ." He was now raising his voice and emphasizing every word: " You will have to obey without active or passive resistance all orders given by the German officers I will put on board your ship to take over command. In case of any resistance I will regret to be forced to destroy your ship instantly. In that case I refuse all responsibility for any injury or loss. That responsibility will be exclusively yours. *Heil Hitler!*"

He had hardly finished when one member of his party produced a flag and made for the mast. "He's hauling down our

jolly old 'blood and thunder'," someone said. The swastika went up over the *Ashlea.*

"You have ten minutes to get a change of clothing and your blankets," the officer said.

"Look who's here!" said an English voice and all eyes turned to the *Graf Spee* from behind which a familiar sight came into view. It was the *Newton Beech* which had been obscured by the bulk of the battleship. "Into your boats, gentlemen," the German officer said before the ten minutes ran out. "Row over to the British ship." The boats were lowered hastily and in the scramble to reach them Chief Engineer Strong broke an arm and Chief Officer A. Miller sprained his ankle.

The German working-party was getting busy on the *Ashlea.* Every cabin and corner of the ship was thoroughly examined. "*Herr Kapitaen,*" a German politely addressed Captain Pottinger in flawless English, "may I advise you to take warm clothing?"

"Very kind of you to tell me, I am sure!" Pottinger said. It's best to respond if they behave decently, he thought. "I am obliged for your kind treatment . . . goodbye . . . and perhaps, we shall meet again!" The German was not sure how this was meant, but Captain Pottinger himself was aware of the double meaning. Perhaps, he said to himself, the position will be reversed one day soon.

The captain glanced around his ship for a last time. German sailors were busy lashing down everything loose . . . there must be no wreckage. German sappers were opening the hatches, selecting suitable points to place the explosive charges. Heavy boxes disappeared in the bowels of the ship. Soon the fuses would be set.

Captain Pottinger got into the last boat and quickly approached the *Newton Beech.* The *Ashlea*'s boats were hauled on deck and stowed on the main hatch. Coming on board, Captain Pottinger was greeted by Captain Robison:

"Nice how-do-you-do!" he said. The two captains shook hands, their crews got together to exchange experiences. It was a melancholy occasion.

"They're taking us back to Germany!" A *Newton Beech* sailor volunteered information which he had picked up when two Germans were talking. He had a smattering of German

and clearly heard them say what he repeated now. Already the curse of captivity, the anxious listening-in, the curiosity born from uncertainty, the creating and circulating of rumours was beginning to confuse the situation. To some captives it was a welcome exercise of the mind, a relief from the dull pressure of helpless inactivity; to others it was to become a nerve- and soul-destroying vice which spread its infection and grew out of all reasonable proportions.

Events, however, were to leave little time just then to indulge in the double-edged pastime. On the *Graf Spee* Captain Langsdorff was conferring with his chief supply officer.

"My plan was to take these ships along with us to the meeting with the *Altmark*," he said. "It would have meant a prize crew on both . . . and on others we shall come across before long, no doubt. I have thought it over carefully . . . it cannot be done. *Meine Herren* . . . I assume you agree with me that we cannot spare the men and the constant attention against all eventualities which such a procedure would impose on us. We shall have to sink the ships . . ."

"And the crews?" Kay asked. "We shall have to put them into their own boats and let them take a chance."

Langsdorff shook his head gravely. "*Herr* Kay," he said sternly, "you know my views . . . you know that I have accepted my part in this war reluctantly but without reservations. I am prepared to raid the British Merchant Navy right into Hell . . . but I will not kill civilians . . ."

"*Herr Kapitaen* . . ."

"Nothing . . . I know what you want to tell me. Yes, the *Englaender* are making war on civilians, too, they are blockading our country . . . but as far as I am concerned, whatever they do does not alter my own standards. I shall not kill civilians if I can avoid it!"

"So what are we going to do with the crews?"

"Bring them aboard."

"We have decided to sink your ships now," said a *Spee* signals officer who had gone across to the *Newton Beech* to inform the British captains. "The *Ashlea* will be sunk at once; the *Newton Beech* later. *Kapitaen* Langsdorff has decided against taking them to Germany."

Captain Robison could not suppress a smile: "Obviously," he commented.

"What do you mean?" the German asked him.

"Well, you know," the British sailor replied with a broad grin, "we were not born yesterday . . . none of our ships carry more fuel than necessary to take her to the next port of call . . . Unless the *Spee* has a lot of surplus gravy how could she get us back to Germany?"

At eleven o'clock, the *Spee*'s launch drew away at high speed from the *Ashlea*. The fuses had been set. Before the demolition crews were back on the battleship the charges exploded with muffled thuds. The *Ashlea* heeled over on her beam ends, and died as quietly and unspectacularly as she had lived.

That evening the crews of the *Newton Beech* and the *Ashlea* were ordered to take their turn in the rowing-boats and move to the *Graf Spee*. Into the tight battleship—her living space was so limited that some of her war-time crew were forced to sleep in alleys—crowded the weirdly assorted seamen of all ages and sizes, in clothes that ranged from the smart and tidy uniforms of the *Ashlea* officers to boiler-suits hastily donned on top of pyjamas.

The *Spee* men received them without fuss: "*Rechts, bitte!*"—to the right, please—was the direction which the master-at-arms gave them. A little awe-inspired by the gleaming metal of the impressive battleship, the British sailors made their way in a long crocodile towards a mess-room which, it was explained to them, would be their temporary quarters until more definite arrangements were completed.

"*Bitte* here—*bitte* there!" one British youngster aped the Germans but without malice in his voice. "Blimey—they are treating us as if we were their guests!"

CHAPTER III

THE *HUNTSMAN* IS HUNTED

"*Achtung*, ATTENTION, PLEASE!"

A gruff German addressed the captives who were huddled together in the strange, strained silence which delayed-action shock often produces during wartime.

"Officers and engineers—hands up."

When they had been herded into a corner, the officers and engineers were taken to another wardroom measuring about 28 feet by 20 feet. A door led to a pantry with a washroom. There were over thirty of them and after hammocks had been slung, there was very little room to move. Those who could not find a place to sling a hammock, slept on the table or the deck.

Deadlights were secured over the ports and when, that evening after dark, the thuds of several salvoes penetrated the thick steel plates they knew that the bell was tolling for the *Newton Beech*.

Someone crossed himself. One seaman knocked loudly on the door, and a German sailor's head appeared.

"Are you sinking our ship?" Smith asked him.

The German nodded, threw up his hands as if to say, "What else did you expect us to do?"

"May we go up on deck?"

The sentry disappeared. After a few minutes he returned, motioning them to follow him.

They went up and stood by the rails. A few hundred yards away they saw the *Newton Beech*, strangely still. Nobody spoke. A few seconds later there was an explosion and the *Newton Beech* rocked and shook from bow to stern. Even in the darkness they could see smoke. Flames shot up and subsided. Within ten minutes it was all over. Silently the men turned and followed their guard below.

"What now?" a meek voice said.

"Food—I hope!" came the answer. After the shock there was hunger. Already the prison mentality had begun to take possession of many minds, restricting the sailors' mental range. Whatever their hopes or fears, thoughts quickly returned to the pressing, basic problem—food.

Six Germans arrived bringing cans of watery cocoa, black bread and butter, sausage and ham. The ham was raw, cured and spiced in the German fashion. It was tough but tasty. The first meal in captivity is always hard to swallow, however great the hunger. There were many sailors that October night with lumps in their throats to contend with—lumps which came up from aching hearts and threatened to bring tears to dry eyes.

Some of the men had watched the Germans carrying away the *Newton Beech* provisions, including pork and beef from the refrigerators. "Wish they'd give us our own food," said one of them.

"Into the gangway. Line up everyone!"

There was no time to shed tears. Outside their quarters the prisoners were ordered to stand in a row.

"Medical inspection," a guard announced. The *Spee* doctor, a young man with a thin, fair moustache, sauntered along.

"*Hosen herunter* . . ."

"What . . . ?"

"Let your trousers down . . . !"

It was an incongruous picture, a row of men, their pants down, shirts up. It brought the first smiles to the sagging faces of the captives. Yes, everyone was fit and healthy. No danger of infection here . . . The doctor marched along the line, pointing to shirts which had not been lifted sufficiently, nodding as he passed each man, motioning him to restore his trousers. Within five minutes the medical inspection was almost over.

"I'd like my arm attended to," said Chief Engineer Strong.

"And I my ankle," said Chief Officer Miller, hobbling forward.

The doctor examined them both. "To the hospital," he said, calling an orderly to escort the officers.

The first "incident" in captivity dominated the conversation for some time. Then, wearily, after a hectic, trying day, which had sealed their fate, the men prepared the hammocks and rocked themselves to sleep.

Sunday morning brought the first real awakening to their fate. A *Spee* officer addressed them in sharp and brisk words:

"We expect you to behave properly—and you will be all right. But I warn you—misbehaviour we regard as sabotage and shall punish accordingly!"

When he left them a babel of voices broke loose.

"Wonder what they are going to do with us?"

"Taking us to Germany . . ."

"No fear . . . these lousy Nazi bastards! They'd rather shoot us!"

"They haven't been too bad so far . . ."

"So far . . ."

Bill Guthrie, radio officer of the *Ashlea*, looked confident: "At least I got a message away!" he whispered.

Smith, of the *Newton Beech*, put his fingers to his lips in earnest warning: "Careful—don't let them hear you—you never know what they might do to you!"

"I don't care—by now the Navy's on her way to get us out of this. I signalled that we were under attack by an unknown warship. The Navy'll liberate us."

"That's what you think . . ."

The futile arguments of captivity were beginning, each man contributing according to his temperament. The *Spee* was now going full steam ahead and making due west—away from the African coast. Her erratic course, dictated by the contingencies of her mission and the danger from the Royal Navy, was hardly less involved than that of the British merchantman whose unlucky star was taking her towards the setting sun of Tuesday, October 10.

The *Huntsman*, a four-masted freighter of over 8,000 tons, was built on the Clyde, but belonged to Liverpool. She was carrying a mixed cargo of Smyrna-type carpets, jute, tea and tropical equipment and had touched Colombo and Port Sudan on her voyage home from Calcutta. Captain A. G. Brown, a pale-faced, well-set-up sailor had charge of a mixed crew of eighty-four Englishmen and Lascars and was taking his ship towards the Mediterranean. But when she was two days from Suez he was stopped by a patrolling cruiser.

"The Med. is closed for shipping," morsed the cruiser to Captain Brown. "Afraid your route home must be round the Cape."

Wearily the captain thanked the cruiser and turned the *Huntsman* about for the long voyage which would take him via Aden and Mombasa to Durban. There his owners wirelessed orders for him to make for Freetown.

The *Huntsman* had been at sea for ten days and was two days south of the line—about 08° 30'S. and 05° 15'W.—steaming serenely northwards. Most of the crew were just settling down to tea with nothing to threaten the routine of the voyage. There had been no indication in Durban that danger was lurking in the South Atlantic—the Royal Navy was roaming the northern lane in search of the *Scheer*—and, though Captain Brown realized that he might have a "rough passage" before he could bring his ship safely home, the "sticky stretch"—as he called it—seemed as yet very distant and remote.

Only Chief Engineer Frederick Edwards seemed obsessed with the idea that the *Huntsman* would run into a raider. "It can't be long now," he kept telling Mr. Creer, his "Second". But Creer, a ruddy-faced, stocky Manxman, took it as a joke; and each day when he ran across Edwards he would ask: "Where's your famous raider, Chief?"

It had become quite a joke on board, but nobody linked it with the appearance, due east, of a dark silhouette, her superstructure rising like a menacing finger to the darkening blue sky. Through his binoculars Captain Brown spotted the French flag fluttering from the mast. It was nearly seven o'clock. "Slow" he rang down to the engine-room. But he had hardly taken in the impressive outline of the bulging battleship, when he saw the French flag being hauled down. In its place a swastika was run up. "STOP—full astern" was his next signal.

Below, in the saloon, Chief Officer A. H. Thompson and Wireless-operator B. C. McCorry had just been warned of the approach of the strange vessel by Len Frost, the third engineer, who said: "I don't like it!" With a touch of understatement he repeated: "I don't like the look of her!"

The chief engineer joined them and seemed to grin as if he was pleased with himself: "What's so funny, Chief?" Mr. Thompson asked. Mr. Edwards stopped grinning, but everybody was thinking the same thing. Edwards' prediction had come true, but now the joke was turning sour on all of them.

Edwards felt far from happy. He was certainly not in the mood to say, "I told you so."

Mr. Creer climbed around the hot engine-room, putting on an air of unconcerned self-assurance as he passed a group of his Indian firemen. He knew they were watching the white officers closely. Their reaction would be determined by the attitude of the sahibs. Out of the corner of his eye Creer noticed with great satisfaction that his behaviour was reassuring the Indians. They rolled their flashing, searching eyes away from him and went on with their jobs.

Only a few minutes had passed but already the German party had boarded the *Huntsman*. They struck Mr. Creer as a martial lot—fully armed with hand grenades in their belts, looking straight and grim as they trooped behind their petty officer, obviously an engine-room artificer. The revolver in the German's hand seemed to be pointing straight at Creer who was worried in case it went off accidentally. He did not consider whether the German intended to use it intentionally.

Revolver still at the ready, the German asked Creer to stay just where he was on the manœuvring platform. The boarding party disappeared below.

"They are worried that we have opened the valves. Do they think we're going to scuttle ourselves right out in mid-ocean?" someone said.

Captain Langsdorff seemed anxious to get the *Spee* and the *Huntsman* away from the scene of their first encounter. In his cabin he received Brown and Thompson.

"You'll find quite a number of your compatriots on board," Langsdorff said quietly. There was no tone of triumph in his voice. He gave the impression of a man who was doing an unpleasant duty as best as he could. He left no doubt that it was an unpleasant duty.

"We have no room for your men on the *Spee*," he continued. "I shall have to ask you to operate to my instructions until I find accommodation for you . . ."

The significance of his remark was not lost on either Captain Brown or Mr. Thompson. But neither of them asked Langsdorff to amplify what he had said. Did he plan to put them ashore in a neutral country? That was unlikely. Did he harbour a cruel scheme behind a smooth and polite front—to put

them into their boats in mid-ocean and leave them to a certain death?

On his map the *Spee* captain briefly outlined the square in which he proposed to operate for a while. The *Huntsman* was to follow. Brown and Thompson were returned to their ship, where they found the German boarding party of twenty-eight men, heavily armed, busily inspecting the ship and distributing themselves to places from which to control the crew.

Mr. Thompson explained the position to fellow-officers. From the *Spee* a barrage of signals descended on the *Huntsman* laying down procedure for every eventuality. The Indians were restless, edgy, looking at their officers with a mixture of fear and reckless anticipation. Mr. Creer thought he knew what was in the minds of his white colleagues, especially the younger ones.

"Look, boys," he said, "we haven't so much as a water-pistol in this ship—and you know it!"

The officer commanding the boarding party approached Edwards: "I am Lieutenant Skuliman," was what Edwards understood him to say. He noted that the German spoke perfect English. "What speed can you make?"

"She'll do eleven knots," Edwards replied, though he knew the ship was much faster.

"Good," said the lieutenant. "Your captain and chief officer have received their instructions on the *Graf Spee*. I expect you all to obey me without questioning . . . Give her all you've got!"

Following precise instructions, the *Huntsman* began to steam in the wake of the *Spee*, tracking her as closely as a new-born foal treads on the heels of his dam. The ships made an incongruous couple. The German crew fell into the free and easy comradeship of the sea where nationalities meet and mix and part again without much ado. They were signalling to the *Spee* and when asked by the British seamen what it was all about, the Germans readily replied to the queries: "She's making off . . . she's leaving us for a while."

"Hunting some more British ships down, I suppose?"

"Maybe."

It was Thursday, October 12, when on the *Spee*, which was now almost out of sight, Captain Langsdorff called in his

navigation officer to make a last check of the intricate arrangement by which the *Spee* rendezvous with the *Altmark* had been fixed. The system had worked out well, but the operation was more hazardous now that the *Spee* had been in action and had roused the Royal Navy.

Two days later the *Spee* look-out signalled the appearance of the *Altmark* in the distance. Arrangements had gone according to plan and soon Captain Dau was in the launch on the way to his regular mid-ocean conference with Captain Langsdorff. One glance up the *Spee*'s massive superstructure and he knew what had occurred in the interval since he and Langsdorff had parted. From the mast of the *Spee* he saw four flags fluttering—and they were British flags.

"Congratulations, *Herr Kapitaen*!" Dau greeted his comrade-in-arms, as if, in sinking four near-defenceless merchant ships, he had performed a glorious naval feat. Dau in his joy dispensed with all naval ceremonial and even omitted to salute. His heart was bursting with pride. Anxious to hear every detail of the *Spee*'s operations he was framing a hundred questions in his mind, but Langsdorff curtly accepted the proffered good wishes and quickly turned to serious business.

"We have made many prisoners," he began. Dau could not restrain his surprise. "Was that necessary?" he asked, interrupting. "Was it inevitable?"

Langsdorff appeared not to have heard the remark—or did not want to hear it. "You know already," he continued, "that we have been able to dispose of the *Clement* crew to Pernambuco . . . But we have the men of the *Newton Beech* and of the *Ashlea* with us on board—and I am not happy about it!"

He explained that he had also the *Huntsman* crew to think about—including a number of Lascars—because his original plan to take the captured ships to Germany could not be carried out under the circumstances. "They have only limited fuel—we should have thought of that," he admitted. It was inadvisable to invest their precious oil in so doubtful and hazardous a venture.

Altogether, Langsdorff said, there would be over one hundred and fifty British captives. "What do you propose to do with them?" Dau asked apprehensively.

"I am afraid you will have to accommodate them in the *Altmark*." Langsdorff's words seemed to stun Dau. This was

much worse than he had expected. But the tone in which Langsdorff communicated his decision made contradiction out of the question. Dau was going to mention that his own crew numbered only one hundred and thirty-four busy men; he contemplated putting forward the hint that such a great number of prisoners might constitute a grave danger to the safety of his ship. He did not have to say it because Langsdorff had clearly anticipated his objections.

"*Herr* Kay," the *Spee* captain said, turning to his first officer, "kindly arrange for one of our officers and ten men to transfer to the *Altmark*. They will be responsible to me personally for the British prisoners. I want them to be treated strictly—but fairly. Stand no nonsense from them. They are prisoners of war."

"But they are merchant seamen—civilians," Dau protested.

"I have taken them prisoners in the course of a legitimate naval encounter. This is part of the war—they have become prisoners of war."

The captain's own short-wave receiver was producing a clamour of distant voices. For an instant there was complete silence from the set, followed by a harsh crackling noise. Langsdorff turned it on to its maximum volume. A triumphant German voice trumpeted across the cabin.

"A U-boat of the German *Kriegsmarine*," said the announcement, "has penetrated the innermost defence of the English enemy and has sunk the battleship *Royal Oak* inside Scapa Flow!"

As the strains of the Deutschland song, following the portentous announcement, came clearly over the ether, Langsdorff, Dau and Kay solemnly rose from their seats and put their hands to their foreheads in silent salute.

"*Heil Hitler!*" Captain Dau said.

"*Heil* . . ." Langsdorff and Kay repeated under their breath.

Already Langsdorff was again bending over his maps. "I must take my leave now," he said. "We shall be meeting again in three days' time. Here . . ." he added, pointing to the spot.

Captain Dau returned to the *Altmark*. Together with Weichert and Dr. Tyrolt—the only man on board for whom Dau had a sneaking respect and whom he liked to have near for consultation, even though Tyrolt was no sailor—he went on an inspection of the *Altmark*.

Meticulously, he examined the parts of the *Altmark* which stamped her as something more than an ordinary tanker—the four decks forward and aft, originally painted white and designed as store-rooms, about ten feet high and electrically lit. He was panting in the heavy air. "Ventilation working?" he asked without expecting any reply. He touched the steam pipes which were cold. "Could be heated . . ." he commented. "We'll put the prisoners into these holds!" he decided.

Word soon went round the *Altmark* that British seamen would be billeted on them. "The Ziegfeld girls . . ." someone said, and for a long time this was how the crew incongruously referred to the captured "Tommies"—the usual name which the Germans gave Englishmen, soldiers and sailors alike, during the war.

It was now October 16, six days after the *Huntsman* had been caught and she was still in the hands of the *Spee* prize crew. Feeling aboard was friendly. The officer in charge did not object when he saw a dart-board being put up on deck outside the saloon. Soon a number of Germans were watching the British players with undisguised interest.

"Want to try it?" Quartermaster Goldstein asked. His name and background were reason enough for him to hate and fear the Germans, but if he felt either emotion, he disguised it completely. The German petty officer gave him a long, quizzical look. "Yes, why not?" he replied after a pause.

Soon the captives were industriously instructing their masters. One by one the Germans learned the intricacies of the scoring; but the mumbo-jumbo of the game, coloured by rhyming slang allusions, puzzled and confused them completely.

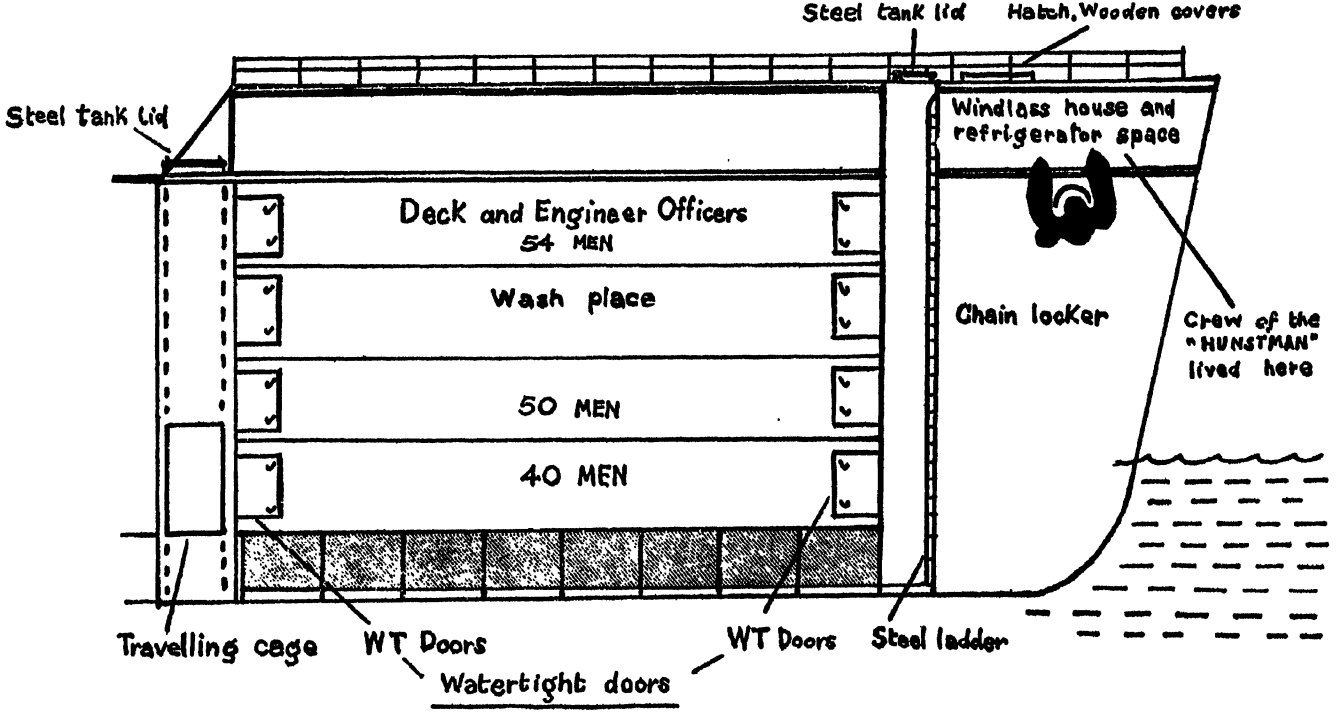
"What's 'two Piccadilly's'?" one of them asked.

"Two fours—Piccadilly whores, see?"

He could not see it. And in the lonely world between the sky and the sea, Piccadilly and war seemed very far away. That evening the *Spee* returned, approaching at great speed, looking beautifully frightening to every sailor's eye, strong, almost overwhelming. War had returned again.

"Take your dart-board down!" Lieutenant Dettmann of the boarding party ordered sternly. "Everybody to his quarters!"

"I beg your pardon," Edwards spoke up. "We have had



The *Altmark*'s hold, drawn from a sketch by Mr. F. J. Paterson, third mate of the s.s. *Tairoa*

a little talk . . . you have been good chaps and you've begun to like darts . . . well, we'd like your men to have the dartboard as a souvenir."

"That's very kind of you," Dettmann said in a friendly tone. "I shall ask my captain for permission to accept it."

He instructed Edwards to hold himself available for fresh orders. Edwards could guess that something important was about to happen. "Chief," said Dettmann, adopting the British seaman's easy manner, "you are about to be transferred to another ship . . . no, not the *Graf Spee.*"

Dettmann hesitated before he continued: "No, when the time comes for the crew to be mustered on deck . . . I want you to lock all doors and throw the keys overboard. Understand?"

Two officers from the *Spee* came aboard as the next day dawned. The *Huntsman* was carrying a big load of carpets and jute and instructions were for the men to take as much of it as possible with them—apart from their own belongings and blankets. "They'll come in very useful . . . I assure you!" a German petty officer said.

The *Huntsman* was like a beehive. The derricks were busy all day long, hoisting cargo from the holds to the *Spee's* three launches. Even copper pipes and other useful engine parts were cut away and loaded. In fact, everyone was so busy preparing the crew's departure that hardly anybody noticed the appearance of the big tanker, painted a dull yellow, which had quietly manœuvred herself close by. Edwards was standing on deck with a group of mates, trying to make out her name.

"It says *Sogne* . . . of Oslo," he announced.

"A Norwegian!" a joyful chorus resounded. It seemed fairly obvious now that they were to be put aboard a neutral boat and liberated at a neutral port. "They are sending us home!" It sounded excellent—almost too good to be believed.

The prize crew were busy putting time-bombs down the bilges. The men of the *Huntsman* were lined up on deck, carrying their belongings in sacks and bundles. "I expect they'll pinch everything we've left!" somebody said.

"No," Edwards retorted reprovingly. "I have locked all doors and thrown the keys overboard . . . that's their own orders. There'll be no looting of our personal things; let's be fair, even if they are Jerries."

His charitable view of the Germans was not very popular. An angry rumble of voices went down the line as they stood there, facing the *Altmark*—the *Sogne*, as they thought—where the German crew was crowding along the rails brandishing cameras.

There had been excited anticipation on the *Altmark*—no fewer than forty-eight men owned cameras and every one of them was determined to snap the historic occasion.

The first boat with the prisoners, moving slowly towards them, caused shrieks of joy. From the distance it looked indeed gaily colourful—bright enough to revive the Ziegfeld myth. Dr. Tyrolt facetiously straightened his tie. The men exchanged significant glances.

Looking at the approaching boat, the *Altmark* men certainly took in an unusual picture. The boat was carrying Indians in their coloured turbans—sixty-seven of them: "Look, coolies!" Tyrolt exclaimed. To the men of Hitler's Germany, taught to regard coloured people as strange, sub-human beings, it was a great joke.

Captain Dau himself could not restrain his curiosity; he viewed the strange arrivals earnestly. "They don't look too bad," he commented grudgingly. "But they are thin—very thin."

Just then a powerfully-built Indian was scrambling on board, his muscles bulging, his shoulders like rocks. "Not so thin that one . . ." Weichert ventured to suggest. They came to the conclusion that he was the serang, the leader of the Indians. The German officers stared open-mouthed while each Indian bowed as he passed them. "Salaam!" one of the Germans mockingly returned their greetings.

"We shall not have much trouble with them," Dau concluded.

"I quite agree, they seem a subdued lot. I suppose they are fatalists!"

"The white men do not seem to worry much either . . ." said Weichert, whom Dau had instructed to deal with all questions arising out of the prisoners' presence. That these British prisoners showed no outward signs of despair, that they did not wring their hands, weep copiously, or tear their hair remained a constant source of surprise to Weichert.

It was an attitude beyond the comprehension of most Germans. When, among the first boatloads of prisoners, Mr.

Thompson of the *Huntsman* came aboard, calm, completely composed, concerned only with the welfare of his crew—as best as he could safeguard it under the circumstances—Weichert called Paulsen, his chief officer, aside and whispered: "I think we can win him over to our side."

The prisoners had boarded the *Altmark* on the weather deck, climbing up short jacob's ladders. The skilled British seamen saw quickly how low the tanker was lying in the water, indicating that she must be nearly fully loaded with fuel.

Thompson coolly approached the group of *Altmark* officers. Dau stood stern and aloof—contempt and even hatred for everything British bursting from his pig-like little eyes. Paulsen looked interested, curious; Weichert was puzzled and not a little apprehensive about his new duties.

"If I can be of help in marshalling my men," Thompson said, "call on me."

Weichert responded with a sly side-glance at Paulsen.

"Get order into this chaos . . . !" Weichert replied.

"Come on, boys." Mr. Thompson urged on the men who were clambering on board, sweating under the loads of carpets, hessian and their own haversacks. "Get a move on."

The Germans looked pleased. Here, they thought, was a man who was chivvying his own compatriots. Instinctively they compared Thompson's behaviour with what their own reactions in similar circumstances might have been.

Thompson was anxious that none of his men should be left behind on the *Huntsman*, which now was obviously doomed to an early end at the bottom of the sea. "Here is a list of my crew," he told Weichert. "And here are the *Ashlea* and *Newton Beech* lists, which I was given on the *Spee*. It will simplify roll-call."

"Scruffy lot . . ." Dau said, as he saw the victims of the *Spee*'s last three attacks lining up on deck. Some of them, indeed, had come in their boiler-suits, some wore old hats, others cloth caps. The get-up of the Indians was variegated. In the rush some suits had been torn. Albert Creer himself was aware of the contrast between his own uniform and the spotless tropical white of the *Spee* crew.

Later that evening Tyrolt told Dau that his inspection had been a melancholy affair. Even the British seamen were thin—not much bulkier than the Indians. "I suppose they exist on

starvation rations in these tramps," he said. "And two of them were actually lousy."

The prisoners had not been aboard the *Altmark* long before it became obvious to them that this was no neutral ship about to take them to freedom and repatriation. While there had been few complaints on the *Spee* the atmosphere on the *Altmark* was oppressive from the first moment and her captain's icy, hostile attitude cast a grim pall over the captured men from which they never escaped.

"*Herr Kapitaen,*" Weichert said, "I want to introduce Captain Brown to you . . . he's the captain of the *Huntsman* . . . that is—he was!" Weichert added with a cruel grin.

Dau looked straight at Brown without saying a single word.

"Glad to meet you," Captain Brown said, an indulgent sardonic smile playing around his lips, "but frankly, Captain, I do not think that I shall be long with you . . . The Royal Navy is bound to be combing the sea. It won't be long before they'll get the *Spee* and your ship, too."

"*Frechheit!*"—Cheek!—Dau said, turning his back. He went off, running straight into Captain Pottinger of the *Ashlea* who briskly averted his head and looked the other way. So far Captain Dau had shown no inclination to enter into any conversation with his captives. Here was at least one prisoner who certainly did not want to talk to him—or any other German either.

Slowly, the busy triangle in the sea—formed by the *Spee*, *Altmark* and the *Huntsman*, with traffic meeting and passing as often as trains at Clapham Junction—was quietening as the transfer was nearing completion. The last stores from the *Huntsman* had been taken on the *Altmark*. *Spee* sailors were rowing back to their battleship with supplies for their canteen. The evening had come again and the operation was drawing to an end.

In his cabin Dau was giving final instructions about accommodation. Captains and senior officers among the prisoners were to be segregated from the crews. Dau allocated the top forward "flat" for them. The Indian crew of the *Huntsman* were to have their own quarters, aft. The store-room below the officers was to be used as a wash-room, fifty men to be accommodated below and another forty just above the *Altmark*'s double bottom.

It was all very haphazard at the moment. "Make sure these recalcitrant, rebellious elder men have no chance of instigating trouble among the younger men . . ." Dau instructed Weichert.

"The *Spee* guard will see to that, *Herr Kapitaen.*"

"You will be responsible to me . . ." Dau retorted sternly.

It was 6 p.m. before all prisoners had been accommodated in the allocated holds. They were still grappling with the carpets, looking for the best places to settle down when the steel doors on either side of the "flats" were banged and locked.

On deck the crew of the *Altmark* crowded the rails, ready for the event they had every reason to expect. The *Graf Spee* was making ready to send the *Huntsman* to the bottom of the ocean.

For weeks the *Altmark* had basked in the reflected glory of the *Spee*, by proxy sharing the battleship's exploits with the frantic interest of a maiden-aunt living on the fringe of her family circle. Discussion about the details of the sinkings which the *Spee* had to her "credit" had been interminable but the reports were all second-hand, obtained from sailors who had chanced to have direct contact with the battleship's crew.

Now, as they rushed to the deck, to watch the spectacle, cameras again at the ready, they were to be in at the death—their first opportunity to participate in a "triumph". Nobody was more conscious of the occasion than Captain Dau.

With an eye on history, which his crew's cameras would record, he turned the *Altmark* round so that she and the eager cameramen should have the sun behind them. From their position, which would give them perfect pictures, his men excitedly watched a boat from the *Graf Spee* moving close to the *Huntsman* to fix the charges below the water-line—and retreating as fast as their engine would take them away.

One of the *Spee* guards, mingling with the *Altmark* men, broke the tense silence of anticipation.

"Never thought I would see this," he said. Loudly he recalled the six days in May 1937, when the *Graf Spee* had taken part in the naval review at Spithead to celebrate the Coronation of King George VI. "Never thought then that I would be enjoying this thing much more," he added.

Spouts of water went up as the charges exploded one after another. The noise and the sprouting pillars of water roused the audience on the *Altmark* to shrieks. But nothing happened.

In spite of the grievous wounds in her port side the *Huntsman* did not sink.

"Obviously the ship is taking on water only slowly," said an *Altmark* sailor. "It may be hours before she sinks!"

It was 6 p.m. when the *Spee* first went into action against the helpless British freighter. The sun set on the horizon, the evening mists were settling on the sea when, disappointed to the verge of dejection, the *Altmark*'s crew gave up all hope of witnessing the death of the *Huntsman*. By then it was too late and too dark to take pictures.

By 9 p.m. the deck was empty. Those who were not busy with the engines or in the galleys had retired to their bunks.

They woke up next morning to be told that the *Huntsman* had sunk at midnight.

CHAPTER IV

FREE RIDE TO GERMANY

"ROLL-CALL!"

Dawn had hardly broken on October 19, the prisoners' first full day in the *Altmark*, when the order rang down the holds to rouse men from their uneasy slumbers. They had dropped off to sleep on the deck, more or less where they had first stopped. It was a cramped, uneasy sleep for most of them.

Chief Engineer Fred Edwards with a few others had been even more unlucky. They had been allocated a place out in the open on the fo'castle and had spent the night with only loosely-woven, flapping burlap to protect them from the cool night breeze.

They heard the call of their captors first and joined their comrades who were clambering up the ladder in the trunkway. The Lascars, yawning noisily and rubbing sleep from their eyes, ambled along leisurely, apparently without a care in the world, from their hold on the starboard side.

"*Eine, zwei, drei, vier* . . ." The roll-call count proceeded in two languages: "One, two, three, four."

The prisoners, sullen and apprehensive, were facing a small group of Germans for the first time with mounting hate in their hearts. But their hate and weariness did not prevent them from taking stock of their situation.

"Bewhiskered bastard!" someone whispered loudly enough for everybody to hear as Captain Heinrich Dau strutted up to them. Dau threw out his chest but was obviously nervous and pulled agitatedly at his small goatee beard.

"Knitty Whiskers!" said a rasping Liverpudlian voice. Even in the half-light, it raised a chuckle. From then onwards Dau was always "Knitty Whiskers."

By his side stood Weichert, to whom Dau kept up a running flow of brisk instructions for the "prison officer" to pass on to the *Altmark's* prisoners. Dau did not trouble to disguise the fact that he regarded it as below his dignity to address his captives personally. In the background stood the young *Spee* officer, detailed by Captain Langsdorff to command the guard —heavily armed ratings from the battleship. His young, rosy face was flat and shining and wore such a permanent smile that it made him look like a country boy.

"Proper babyface!" remarked Edwards, nudging his neighbour.

The counting progressed—the prisoners replying in English and the Germans echoing the figures in their own language until the numbering reached one hundred and fifty-three.

"Instructions about accommodation will be issued later. No one is allowed to remain on deck for the time being." Weichert faithfully repeated his captain's instructions.

Dau stalked off to a conference in his cabin. He seemed to feel that the occasion warranted a detailed programme which he began to develop. His Germanic love of order and hatred of the British seamen carried him into a lengthy oration.

"There will be a daily sick parade—at 10 a.m.," he stipulated. "Dr. Tyrolt and *Herr* Weichert are the only members of my crew who will talk to the prisoners. Nobody else will have contact with them—nobody—*verstanden*?"

Paulsen nodded and made a note to instruct the crew accordingly. "I want no fraternization of any kind," Dau continued. His small audience sat glumly as he warmed to the subject. "Let's treat them correctly . . . but no more."

He was anxious to make his attitude quite clear. These men, he discoursed, belong to the nation which has declared war on the Fatherland. "These men are our enemies," he said sternly, "who are out to annihilate us. They may not like being our prisoners . . . but we cannot help that. That is no reason why we should sympathize with them. War knows no pity!"

There was silence when Dau asked for comments, so he continued to talk. "The chief thing is to maintain absolute secrecy about our movements. Do not let these men draw you out. See that none of the crew talks." It seemed inconceivable at that moment that such a thing *could* happen, but the

proximity of so many ordinary people—German and British—in the confined space of the *Altmark* would obviously soon make close personal contacts inevitable.

Weichert was aware of it but, ignoring his instincts, decided to raise more immediate and urgent points. "What are your instructions with regard to food, *Herr Kapitaen*?"

"Well," Dau snapped. "I have spent last night studying the position as regards international law. There is no provision for this contingency at all—as I see it."

But clearly, Dau continued, the principle to follow was that the prisoners would get less than the German civilian population at home. "Why," he thundered as arguments occurred to him with which to fortify his illegal proposition, "the *Englaender* have begun to blockade the Fatherland, they are thus making war on our women and children . . . the enemy's navy is responsible for untold hardships which our German people must suffer . . . we shall certainly not deprive ourselves of provisions to fatten these men up."

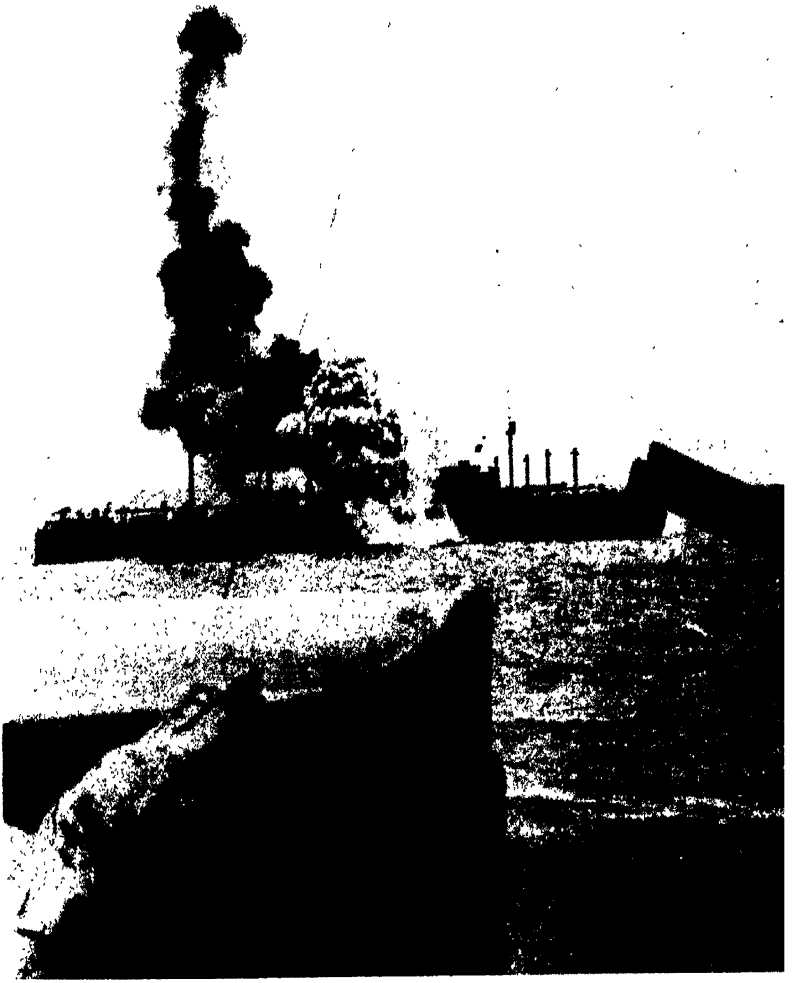
He called old Schwill, the North German cook of the *Altmark*, and Treibel, the baker. "Here is a list of maximum allocations per day," he said severely, handing them scribbled details on a piece of paper. "If you cannot manage, various items will have to be reduced."

The list enumerated the daily ration of each prisoner: ½ pound of bread, 4 ounces of meat, 1½ ounces of fat, 3 ounces of dried peas or beans, rice or other vegetables, ⅔ ounce of coffee, sugar and tea according to supply, 1½ ounces of bread-spread and 1½ ounces of dried potatoes.

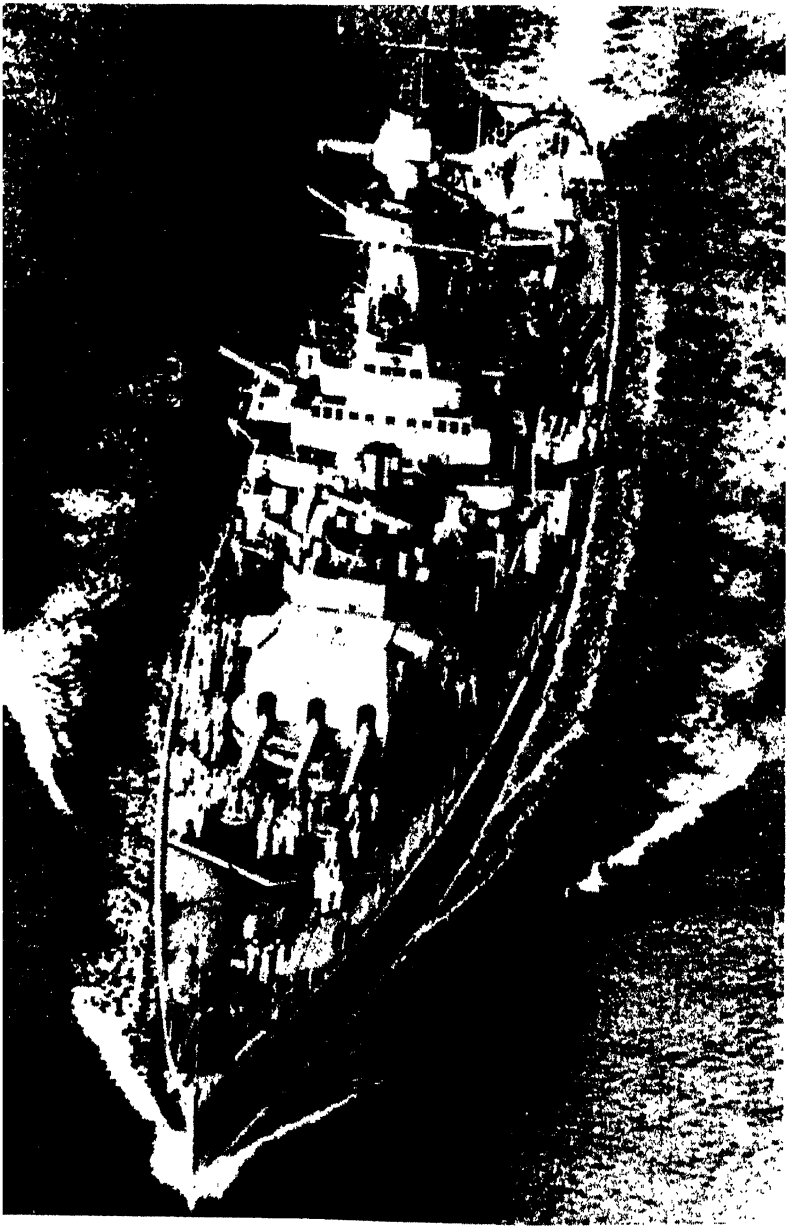
"I want you to keep a prisoners' diary, recording every single incident," Dau informed Weichert, cynically. "I order you to start it by entering these figures. I won't have it said that we did not do our best." The diary was the only place where the rations were allocated. Dau's tone of voice had made it clear enough that he was more concerned with theory than with practice.

On this first morning the *Altmark* officers and men left the prisoners much to themselves. Dr. Tyrolt's medical inspection was perfunctory. "I understand you have already been examined on the *Spee*," he remarked to one of the engineers, waving him away.

But irresistible curiosity drew the Germans to the quarters



S.S. *Doric Star* exploding after a torpedo from the *Graf Spee* had found its mark



The *Graf Spee* setting out on her raiding expedition in the South Atlantic

of the Indians. Cook Schwill passed on to Weichert the request of their grizzled Serang—the head Lascar—that they should be allowed to prepare their own food. "Obviously these dark fellows want nothing to do with the Englishmen!" was Schwill's simple verdict.

With suspicious wonderment he watched the Indians cooking their ration of mutton. "They don't eat pork," he reported, gathering his information from a conversation which was carried on in pidgin English on both sides. "Quite like the Jews—the Fuehrer has always said they are the same."

That evening Schwill informed Dau that the Indians wanted rice—much more rice than there was on board, although the Indians had brought a fair quantity away from the *Huntsman*. "And, *Herr Kapitaen*, you should watch them baking a sort of pudding in boiling fat . . . the antics they perform when they cook it!"

Dau looked interested. "I tried it, *Herr Kapitaen*," Schwill continued. With a crude gesture he demonstrated how he spat it out in disgust. "Horrible!" he said, "I think they called it chupati."

Down in the holds where the white prisoners were huddled together the activity was frenzied. The *Altmark* had neither blankets nor mattresses on board and the *Spee*'s captain had refused to allow any of his hammocks to be transferred.

As the *Altmark* leisurely steamed westwards, the British seamen began to make themselves comfortable. They took carpets and jute looted from the *Huntsman* for bedding and staked out claims for bed-spaces in the narrow, humid, dingy store-rooms. At the head of each bed-space, the sailors kept their pathetic bundles of personal belongings. "Drawing-rooms" were curtained off by carpets.

The German carpenter descended the ladder in the trunkway which led down to the holds from inside the fo'castle. Pointing to a heap of old ammunition boxes he indicated that tables and other furniture could be made from them. He motioned one man to follow him and took him to the lowest hold in which empty forty-gallon oil drums were stacked in the corner.

"Make tops—and you have your *Klosett*!" he said.

Only after much bewildered consultation and indelicate pointing did the man guess the carpenter was demonstrating how the *Altmark*'s sanitary installations were to be produced.

At the same time, Lieutenant "Babyface" Schmidt, accompanied by two guards, arrived in the prisoners' "flats", to stick up sheets on which Captain Dau's typewritten instructions were set out in English and German. This henceforward was to be the routine in the prison ship:

7 a.m., turn-out and wash; 7.45, breakfast; 8.30–9.15, on deck for fresh air; 11.30, dinner; 2.30–3, fresh air on deck; 5.30, tea; 9 p.m., lights-out.

The instructions laid down that the Lascars were to have their exercise on deck at different times from the rest.

"Possession of matches," said the notice, "and smoking is strictly forbidden and will be severely punished."

Dau was to tell Weichert time after time that he was to show no mercy on this point. "We are carrying fuel oil," was his reiterated theme, "and any uncontrolled smoking could be the death of us all."

The first appearance of the Indians on deck brought Dau from his cabin. Somewhat embarrassed by his own curiosity, he stole on to the bridge to watch the Lascars, who seemed to exercise a strange fascination over him. Almost childishly he drew Paulsen's attention to the Moslems preparing for their daily prayers, as they guessed the direction of Mecca, laid out their mats and prostrated themselves.

Dau's *naïveté* puzzled Paulsen, who knew that his captain had travelled all over the world as a merchant seaman. "See those men over there . . ." Dau nudged Paulsen, "they are not praying . . . they're Hindus. Do you know anything about their religion?"

Paulsen did not know. Dau turned to Dr. Tyrolt, who had made his first medical inspection of the Indians that morning. "What do you think of them?" he asked.

Tyrolt's opinion was that the Indians were surprisingly clean people. "They are always washing." Everyone laughed as Tyrolt told Dau that he had also found the Indians extremely modest. "They would not undress for medical inspection . . . modest like little virgins. I had to shout at them before they could be persuaded to take off their clothes."

Dau smiled smugly. "You don't seem to know anything about these fellows. Some of them worship the genital organs. That's why they would not let an outsider inspect them." Chuckling to himself, Dau walked off.

The Indians remained the favourite topic of conversation at the captain's table. They were apathetic, hostile to their English comrades, never looking at anybody. Tyrolt discovered that one of them—his name was something like Siblas—really hated the English. He had been disciplined by Mr. Thompson, the *Huntsman*'s chief officer, only a few weeks previously for some minor offence and tried—successfully—to ingratiate himself with Tyrolt by telling him what he thought of all Englishmen. As Tyrolt recounted: "He made a gesture with his hands which indicated that he was quite prepared to strangle them all."

"Let's make use of the man," Dau suggested. "Paulsen—take him on to assist our stewards. They could do with some help."

"One of the Indians is always alone . . . a sort of outcast," Weichert reported.

"Obviously an Untouchable," Dau concluded. "Just like these people to carry their outlandish system into captivity."

During the day the white prisoners, adaptable and phlegmatic as most British seamen are, began to find their feet in the floating prison.

"Let's look over this hell-ship," said a well-built Hull seaman, named Harry Holland. The third hold from the deck, which they later described as "C" flat, reverberated with the hammering of captured "chippies" or carpenters, who were making tables from ammunition boxes. Already some boxes had been converted into chairs and in a bantering mood, most of the seamen took turns testing them. The humour was robust.

Along the sides, carpets and jute were being cut up into lengths, and laid on the steel deck for beds. Some of the older men, apparently resigned to their fate, were resting with their eyes closed. But they were not asleep. The noise the younger seamen were producing made them wince, though it was not yet the torture it became later as time dragged and nerves tautened.

There was a busy traffic up and down the ladder in the trunkway. Sailors were moving about freely, inspecting other holds, "visiting" friends in lower flats and their officers in "A" flat. Slowly order began to emerge from the chaos. Men were shrugging off their intolerable position and

were still cheerful. Perhaps it was as well that the prisoners did not know what Weichert entered into his diary on the evening of October 20: "This was the first day," his entry said, "which passed according to the routine as laid down. All decks are now equipped with carpets and jute. The lack of cups has been remedied by turning tins into tumblers."

Two or three groups of prisoners were playing cards quietly and unconcerned amid the bustle. From the corner of "C" Deck a tune wafted gently through the big hold. It came from one of the half-dozen portable wireless sets which seamen had salvaged and brought with them into captivity.

This was a day of stock-taking. Belongings were sorted over, though most men knew how pitifully little they had. Many took a sentimental glance at pictures of wives, children, mothers, in their wallets, hurriedly counted cigarettes and cheroots, or patched a few extra items of clothing. Then, at long last, they were allowed up into the fresh open air on deck for the first precious three-quarters of an hour of exercise.

The battleship had disappeared, but there was plenty to observe and explore in the "Hell-ship". She was about 600 feet long, 75 feet beam, the crew figured. A big, clean ship.

"I should think her draught is about 30 feet," said Edwards.

Soon imprisonment was forgotten in a babble of technical discussion about the ship, her role and company, her engines. An *Altmark* engineer, who had overheard the conversation as he passed them, surprisingly volunteered information. "Four double, nine-cylinder M.A.N. diesel engines with Vulcan coupling," he said, translating the German technical terms into his best English. "Twenty-one thousand four hundred horse power," he added proudly.

Quickly the men who had a smattering of German translated this information into something the others could understand. But there was no stopping the German. He seemed eager to tell them more about the *Altmark*. "At fourteen knots she has a radius of fifteen thousand sea miles," he said boastfully.

A circle of interested men, chiefly engineers, crowded around him. "Enough to take us half around the world," someone commented, "if what he says is true."

Weichert appeared on deck and his disapproving glance scared the German sailor away.

"Move, please!" Weichert insisted as the sailor scuttled off. Weichert looked as if he was afraid that the prisoners might mob him. Posted on deck the *Spee* guards, feeling very superior with revolvers in their holsters, smiled indulgently.

The prisoners resumed their leisurely promenade. The keen eyes of a deck officer noticed six anti-aircraft machine-guns—"At least three-inch," he said. Three bigger guns, probably six-inch, protruded from the screens in the superstructure.

"Torpedo-boat guns, those fellows," he said.

"Shouldn't like to see them blazing away at us . . ." remarked someone.

It was meant as a joke, but it fell flat. The men stood silent. Some of the older, more depressed, men were returning to the hold even before their time was up. The melancholy of their position was like a blanket.

Down in the hold, Hughes, the *Huntsman* "chippie", gave a little whoop of joy. As other men crowded around him there came, faintly but clearly on his radio, the one o'clock news of the B.B.C. Overseas Service.

" . . . and this is Alvar Lidell reading it," they heard. Britain and France had signed a treaty with Turkey, he said.

"So Turkey'll be coming in with us!" said Mr. Lidell's most appreciative listeners. "Not before time."

"Quiet . . . not so loud."

The announcer continued reporting that Western Poland had been incorporated in the German State. A Jewish ghetto had been established in the Polish city of Lublin.

"Wonder what's happening at home just now . . ." The question was to remain unanswered for the time being. Never had Alvar Lidell's voice sounded more soothing. Now atmospherics drowned it. The precious contact with home was severed as suddenly as it had been established.

The *Altmark* was obviously cruising leisurely. She seemed to be going in a circle. While they were taking exercise, deck officers had carefully noted the position of the sun, and with lifeboat charts, were working out the position of the ship. They had been moving south, no doubt.

"I make it 15°S., 15°W., as near as damn it!" Goss announced. He was the second officer of the *Ashlea*. The

deck officers argued for a while, as the engineers, out of their depth, joked and jeered. There was no doubt Bob Goss was right.

The apparent aimlessness of the ship's movements added to the endless futility of the prisoners' existence. The day had dragged on with leaden slowness.

"I wonder what that damned *Spee* is doing now . . . ?"

The same question was asked with equal curiosity in Captain Dau's cabin, where news from the battleship was overdue. But there was no answer for either the prisoners—now complaining bitterly about the smell from the drums on the staging outside each flat—or for their captors.

In the holds life was becoming organized. Each flat worked out a "peggy" system under which a different prisoner assumed responsibility for daily rations and meals on his flat. At the shout of the guards, the "peggy" would climb the trunkway and join the Indians, who carried the food from the galleys. The "peggy's" task was to see that his "flat" got a fair share of all the food there was.

Personalities began to emerge. During the early days few of the prisoners had been able to tell one German from another. But slowly, each of the *Spee* guards, and many of the *Altmark* crew, began to be recognized by the British sailors, who were not slow to assess their varying characters and attitude.

Most important to the prisoners was "Babyface"—he said his full name was Lieutenant Otto Schmidt. He boasted that he knew England well, and talked familiarly of English towns and life. All the men agreed that "Babyface" was by no means a bad fellow. He was easy to approach and ready with a reasonable response to any question. There was Fritz, one of the guards, soon semi-affectionately called "Fritzi", and he too was always ready for a friendly chat. To the prisoners, these *Spee* men seemed reasonable human beings.

The short encounters with the guards relieved the pressing monotony in the flats. All the prisoners could do was to move laboriously from one snatch of radio news to another. Time was killed slowly by card games and endless discussions about the uncertain future of them all. The optimists expected the Royal Navy any day; others set their hopes to a belief that the *Altmark* would take them to a neutral port. "They

can't cope with us in the long run . . ." they tried to persuade themselves.

There was a third school of men who were darkly convinced that nothing could save them from a terrible voyage to Germany—and more monotony in a prison camp until the end of the war.

"And we'll be lucky if we live that long!" said Bert Saville, a South Shields engineer, who had nursed engines in calm water and stormy all over the world.

"What do you mean?"

He soon made himself clear and his matter-of-fact explanation cast gloom over the entire flat. Wasn't it just as likely, he queried, that the Navy would track down the *Altmark* and send her to Davy Jones' locker?

"I hope they do find us," said Bob Goss, another Tynesider. "At least it will give us a chance to get away."

Edwards tapped his forehead and shook his head. "If they do we stand every chance of going down with her—sunk by our own lads."

It was not an encouraging prospect. They decided to raise the matter with "Babyface" when he came on his round. One of the engineers tackled him. "What are you going to do with us if you are attacked?"

Lieutenant Schmidt thought deeply. For once the smile disappeared from his face. His little Adolf Hitler moustache almost disappeared as he pressed his lips together before he replied.

He had gone fully into that question, he explained. All preparations had been made for the prisoners to be released as quickly as possible.

"There are sufficient boats and rafts to take everybody . . . my guards and the *Altmark* crew are fully drilled in emergency action."

"But what exactly are your plans?" Edwards pressed him.

A commotion broke out. Several officers shouted: "You are going to let us drown!"

"I am a German officer," Schmidt said ponderously. "My duty is not only to guard you—but also to protect you. If there is any danger at sea—if attack is imminent . . ."

"Tell us—have you a plan?" a voice shouted.

Schmidt seemed hurt and he was goaded into saying more than he had really intended. "Actually we do not propose to let things go as far as that—*if* there should be an encounter with a British vessel."

The plan said Schmidt as he was hemmed in a corner, was to send out a radio warning that there were prisoners on board, that the ship was being scuttled, but that the prisoners would be given an opportunity to take to the boats—providing no attack was made on the *Altmark*. "You will be in the same position as I am myself!"

When Schmidt had left, the dissension started again. The plan, said some, did not sound convincing. Others insisted that "Babyface" could be trusted to carry out his promise: "But will Knitty Whiskers let him have his way?" inquired an officer.

Next morning Schmidt returned—his exuberant smiling self again. "You should not have worried about your Navy sinking us. The boot is on the other foot," he said triumphantly.

The *Altmark* had stopped. The hatch at the top of the trunkway, usually half-open during the day to allow a little air and daylight into the holds, was shut with a bang as soon as the German had reached the deck again. Something was happening—everyone sensed it. Noise from the winches re-echoed through the big steel compartments.

"The *Spee's* back!"

That was the verdict in the top flat where officers and engineers had agreed to pool every bit of information. Nothing was too small to be ignored, a hint by a guard, an observation during the exercise on deck, or sound and noise from above them.

The *Altmark* was still heavy with supplies and lay deep in the water. The sound the officers now heard was clearly the winch that unleashed the thick oil tubes. The *Altmark* was preparing to refuel a ship and no doubt it must be the *Spee*.

Shouts rang out and reached the prisoners' ears, though the shouting was muffled by the thick steel deck. Every "event" was a relief from the monotony of imprisonment. But the officers knew that most "events" were more likely than not to be unpleasant. They waited apprehensively.

Three hours later the prisoners heard the creaking of the hatch as it was opened again. Everybody crowded towards

the trunkway and the ladder on which figures soon began to appear and descend nimbly. Holland, an able seaman of the *Ashlea*, looked long and hard as the first man stepped off the ladder into his flat:

"I know you," he said, wrinkling his eyes in thought. "Let's see. Yes—it's Mr. Cudbertson."

Cudbertson, dressed as if going ashore, in a smart flannel suit, looked at the seaman. "Holland," he said.

Cudbertson dropped the pillow-slip in which he carried his belongings, and mate and seaman shook hands. The last time they had met was in their home-town, Hull, just before the outbreak of war. Cudbertson was having a small celebration—he had just received his second mate's ticket.

"Well, you're a mate—but we're both prisoners," said Holland. "What was your ship?"

The new arrivals were blinking in the weak artificial light as they pushed past the Hull men. The old hands were extracting bitter consolation from an unusual break in their routine.

"*Trevanion*," Cudbertson replied. "Hain Steamship freighter from London. We were shelled and captured. There were thirty-three of us—but they kept the captain and chief officers on the *Spee*."

Questions were fired in quick succession: "What's happened?" someone asked a slim, slightly bald man, who limped down to the flat occupied by *Huntsman* and *Newton Beech* officers. It was "Bill" Platten, the second mate of the *Trevanion*.

"Well, it was a bit hot," he said quietly. The men split into groups, recalling the dramatic events, each contributing his own experience to complete the picture of the *Trevanion*'s fate.

The ship was a sturdy tramp, about 5,000 tons. They had left Liverpool in January, routed to British Columbia and San Francisco and from there the Samoan Islands, Tahiti, New Caledonia. "All over the place . . . tramping around the Pacific." They had been in Port Pirrie in Australia when war broke out. The crew painted the ship grey and they waited for a few days for a gun to be fitted on board.

"To sink the *Spee*, I suppose?" someone joked. "Where did you run into her, anyway?"

Well, they had reached Capetown on October 17, and five days later off the coast of South West Africa it had happened.

The Captain—Jimmy Edwards—knew that a Nazi raider had sunk the *Clement*. He was worried that the raider would catch up with them, too, sooner or later.

"She turned up all right—flying a French flag!" Cudbertson recounted.

"She hasn't changed her tactics, then," said a small chorus; "it was the same with us."

" . . . and she was signalling furiously," Platten, in his soft, almost gentle voice, took up the story again. He had been on watch and had rushed below for a flag book in order to read the signals. "Heave-to," Mr. Platten had spelled out letter by letter. "Sending boat. Don't wireless!"

The same words in large letters were on a huge board which could clearly be read as the battleship moved in closely. But, in a burst of temper Captain Edwards refused to be intimidated. He rushed to the wireless cabin.

"We had a young 'sparks'," Platten said. "Martinson, 'Nancy' Martinson. His initials were 'N.C.', see? The captain ordered him to send out urgent distress signals."

There was now a chorus of voices, all eager to ask questions. Well, the *Spee* had heard the message and opened fire.

"It was pretty nasty . . . her gunners were obviously searching for the aerials," said Platten, "because the first salvo crashed into the wires on the hospital at the after-end of the boat-deck . . . but these were aerials of private sets. The real aerial was under the navigating bridge."

There had been several more bursts until the woodwork was smashed, iron scuppers buckled and ladders torn away. One shell had landed right on the wireless table. It was a miracle that "Nancy" escaped with his life. The *Spee* had kept up the signals: "Stop your engines immediately!" Platten translated for his captain. Edwards finally had blown three short blasts on the ship's siren to tell the battleship he was going astern.

Platten saw the *Spee*'s large launch coming alongside from the navigating bridge and threw a pilot ladder over the side. But before this, said Platten, with shy East Anglian humour, he had jumped down the ladder from the navigating bridge—only the ladder was not there. It had been shot away and he had crashed to the deck.

"That's how I got my war wound!" he said, smiling wearily and pointing to his injured foot.

The *Spee* officer was a real sailor—considerate to another sailor in trouble, said Platten. He had made no secret of the fact that the *Trevanion* had been spotted at dawn by the *Spee* plane.

"You did not hear the plane?" he had quizzed Platten.

"Not a sound."

The German had taken Platten down to his cabin and advised him in a friendly way to gather together as many of his belongings as he could carry. "I brought pretty well everything except my stamp collection," said the *Trevanion*'s second mate.

But not all the ship's company had fared as well. Tubby Tommy Morgan, the cook from Cardiff, had dashed on deck dressed in a clean white jacket and carrying a small suitcase—just in case. A German officer would not let him go below again. "You're all ready for the trip, my friend," he said. "Wait over there by the gangplank."

Another German had seized Jimmie Edwards' sextant, painstakingly making out a receipt.

"What's that good for?" demanded Edwards, furiously.

The German grinned. "Churchill will give you a new one when you show this to him," he replied, as he left the bridge with the sextant under his arm.

The men of the *Trevanion* had been taken on the *Spee*. "Nancy", the "sparks", had received a severe dressing-down and been interrogated several times. But, on the whole, the prisoners had no complaints to make against the *Spee*. On October 28 the *Altmark* turned up out of the blue.

"And here we are," Platten summed up. "What's the drill?"

The prisoners' first impression of the *Altmark* had not been a happy one. Before they were ordered to join their fellow-prisoners, Captain Dau, angered by Captain Langsdorff's order to take on a further formidable consignment of prisoners, had had the men lined up on deck.

To the younger seamen, in particular, Dau looked like a *Daily Mirror* caricature of a Nazi. His face was red. He was clearly in a temper and a spray of saliva accompanied his words as he spat them from his mouth. As he barked at them his little "Imperial" beard moved ridiculously forward and upwards.

"You are not prisoners of war—but prisoners of circumstances! You will be treated as German prisoners are treated in England!" Few of the sailors, far away from home, and out of touch with any news could make out what he meant.

"I do not like you—I do not like the English," Dau repeated. It seemed fairly obvious. "I have no reason to love the English. Britain will be crushed . . . Take them below!"

"I think the feeling's mutual," said eighteen-year-old apprentice Peter Watson-Filcek, as they turned to go. It was a day they would always remember—October 28, 1939.

CHAPTER V

"OUTLOOK BLEAK"

CAPTAIN DAU'S VISIT to the *Spee* had not improved his temper and after his return to the *Altmark* the atmosphere on the bridge or at his table during meals was almost as oppressive as that in the holds below, where the prisoners jostled each other in their cramped flats.

In the *Spee*, Captain-Lieutenant Kay, as usual, had accompanied Dau from Langsdorff's cabin to the boat. He told Dau that signals from the *Trevanion* were most likely to bring the Royal Navy on the track of the *Spee*.

"That wireless-operator ought to be shot," Dau had expostulated to Kay, who shrugged his shoulders. "You know Langsdorff does not believe in that sort of thing," said Kay.

The hard fact, which Dau half guessed, was that the *Spee* was preparing to put as much distance between herself and the scenes of her raiding activities as possible. It stood to reason that the British Admiralty must be already rushing all available units into the areas from which attacks had been reported—towards the South American coast where the *Clement* had been sunk and along the Cape-Freetown route where other overdue ships would be presumed to have been destroyed by German raiders.

Dau was never happy when he had no exact information about the *Spee*'s activities. Now, as far as he had been able to gather from Langsdorff the battleship would go off on a lengthy and distant evasive mission. The *Altmark* would be alone—unprotected.

It depressed Dau to think of it as he set a leisurely course due south and prepared for a long, weary wait. It would be at least a fortnight before the *Spee*, re-equipped with fuel and ammunition would make contact with her supply ship again.

Only Dr. Tyrolt succeeded now and then in penetrating the morose aloofness of the captain. The tall, thirty-one-year-

old Austrian liked to delve into the rich experience of his earlier youth and to entertain Dau with tales of his three years in South America as a trapper, hotel head-waiter and farm labourer.

Dau was even now interested to hear of Tyrolt's return to Austria to study medicine. He had joined the illegal Nazi Party and had soon landed in prison.

"Yes, Doctor," Dau would say, "you can be proud of your sufferings in the cause of the Fuehrer."

Tyrolt, more expansive than most of his comrades on the *Altmark*, who were largely North Germans, was quite as loquacious during his daily round of the prisoners' quarters. He constantly asked questions and encouraged conversation.

"Food all right?" he asked on one occasion.

"Don't you worry about us, doc!" an old seaman replied. "What we'd like to know is how much there'll be to eat in Germany this winter?"

"What do you mean?"

"Our blockade is not doing badly—another 60,000 tons of German shipping sunk last week, we hear."

"Do you!"

"Yes, doc . . . and tell us whether it's true that you Germans have invented pills against hunger."

"Boys," Tyrolt said good-humouredly. "If such pills *are* ever invented—you may be sure a German will invent them and not an Englishman. But don't worry. There's enough food in Germany for many years. And we can feed quite a few more prisoners like you."

"Say, doc," a voice challenged him, "you don't really think you can win the war? Did you hear what Churchill said two days ago?"

"Never mind Churchill . . . the sooner you kick him out the better for you."

The conversation was taking on an acid tone and Tyrolt decided to break it off. That evening he thought the conversation would amuse his gloomy captain. He was surprised when Dau flared up angrily:

"They are listening to their wireless," he shouted. "I am not having any of this vicious anti-German propaganda broadcast on my ship . . . Weichert! *Herr* Weichert! Fetch Lieutenant Schmidt at once!"

The captain worked himself up.

"All wireless sets are to be confiscated forthwith," he screamed to Schmidt and Weichert. "Take the full guard down and search the prisoners' quarters."

"That doctor! That stool pigeon! Just like a Jerry to come all friendly and then sell you down the river!"

The prisoners were in a dangerous mood. The appearance at this unusual hour, of the prison officers and the guard, sent a wave of anger through the brooding men in the flats. Angry shouts went up as soon as Lieutenant Schmidt explained his mission.

"You've already taken our cameras," said young Filcek, who was with the officers in the top flat. "Can't we have a little music at least?"

Listlessly, but methodically, Schmidt and Weichert carried out a search of all the flats. They even inspected the wash-room below the decks. The prisoners were sullen and hostile.

Some of them never looked up as the Germans searched. An elderly sailor from the *Newton Beech* was busy chipping away at a chunk of wood. "What are you making?" Weichert asked him. The sailor did not trouble to reply.

That evening the "peggies" brought down from the galleys a can of dark sweet soup which seemed to consist of dried prunes, figs and apricots boiled with bacon and other fats.

"Sweet soup! Would you believe it!" It was difficult to swallow. Doughy dumplings swimming in it did not improve the taste.

"Can't stick this sort of thing for long," said young Peter Warren. He was a cadet, high-spirited, normally cheerful, a youngster, who had been as popular in the *Ashlea* as he was with the older officers in the top flat.

After dinner Warren and Filcek decided that it was not too early to begin to think of a way out of the floating prison: "Let's try and get a message away," Warren suggested. "Anybody got a bottle?"

Many of the younger officers thought it was a good idea. Some of the mates had kept a note of the *Altmark*'s movements and quickly produced details of her position as far as they had been able to work it out. There were suggestions about the text of the message.

"But how shall we get it away?" Filcek wondered. The guards and look-outs were watching all the time during their exercise on deck. It was impossible to throw a bottle overboard unobserved.

"Put it in a latrine drum," said someone, "then it will go overboard when the drums are cleared out. Nobody comes near us then."

That evening the young men started work. First the message, then a water-tight wooden stopper for the bottle. "Gently does it," the elder men cautioned. They had agreed to the plan but were anxious to consider every aspect of it before making a move.

It seemed a small project; but that night, when lights went out, there was a more hopeful atmosphere in the holds. More than one man imagined the message floating in the ocean, the waves carrying it towards a British cruiser . . . visualized a boat being lowered from the cruiser, saw sailors retrieving the bottle, taking it to the captain, and heard the ship being ordered full speed ahead towards the position they had given and the *Altmark*!

"Here we are, here we are," a sleeping man's shrill voice pierced the darkness.

"Quiet, quiet. Let's get some sleep!"

The dream was ended.

Next morning, as he came on his rounds, Dr. Tyrolt faced a stony silence:

"Anybody sick?"

There was no answer. "Just as well," he said glumly. "I am running out of medicine anyway."

When he had left, the young prisoners could not sit still. Their youthful energy demanded an outlet. A good-natured rough-house developed and soon feet were flying and bodies crashing on to the steel floor. The noise was deafening. A guard put his head down the trunkway. "Stop that noise," he said. The answer was a loud "raspberry".

It was not easy for the less energetic prisoners to keep out of the way, but gradually men grouped themselves according to their common interests and inclinations. Cudbertson, a tall, level-headed sailor's son, thought the *Huntsman* officers snootily kept themselves apart from the rest. Maybe they imagined themselves a cut above the rest because they came from a

bigger ship. They were certainly turned out more smartly than most of the others, but what was the difference? They were all prisoners in the same stinking boat. Some of the young Geordies called them "the aristocrats".

Something had apparently gone wrong with the bottle plan. The wooden stopper had probably come out or the bottle might have broken. Anxious eyes that had followed the unsavoury operation of emptying the latrines failed to spot the bottle going overboard. Perhaps it was just as well—the guards were keeping their eyes watchfully on the sea just then. Did they suspect anything?

As the midday meal was being taken down one of the "peggies" brought the news that the fresh water ration had been cut.

"That's grim!" young Ritchie, the *Ashlea* cabin boy commented.

"That's good!" Cudbertson enlightened the young sailor. If the *Altmark* was running short of water, he said, there was reason to hope that she would be anxious to get rid of surplus mouths to feed. "Maybe she'll dump us in a neutral port soon. We could get to Mexico," he speculated.

Fritzi, the most popular of the guards, was quite as ready to speculate as the men he guarded. "After all," he said, "we are as much prisoners as you are. What's the difference which side of the fence you are on—as long as you can't escape?"

From what his petty officer had said, Fritzi was convinced that the *Altmark* would remain in the South Pacific for a few weeks and then make for Germany.

"Not on your life," said Platten. "She'll never get through our blockade. And if she tries it—we'll be blown to bits."

"We can only hope and pray," said Cudbertson.

Someone asked him whether he prayed while shells were falling all over his ship. "I prayed like hell that they wouldn't hit me," Cudbertson said. Silently men were praying that they would soon be out of their prison.

From many minds nothing was further than prayers. Two youngsters were ragging one of the *Trevanion* crew. They had removed all his clothes, and he was pleading playfully for them back. His friends jeered and made remarks about his skin and body.

"Anybody listening to you boys," an older man said, "would think we're all bi-sexualists. Pack it up for heaven's sake."

The language had been crude, the thoughts behind it the first upsurge of frustrated feelings among the younger men.

Not far away, equally noisy, a game of knock-out whist was in progress with shrieks of protest going up whenever someone was suspected of cheating, which was practically as every hand was dealt.

Life was not easy in this atmosphere in which personalities and differences in character and inclinations were beginning to emerge clearly after weeks of captivity.

A number of men were now recording the day-to-day life in the prison ship in diaries. The diaries were really letters, some unconsciously, some consciously addressed to a loved one; and some merely serving as a means of gathering thoughts and taking stock.

His captain, "Jimmy" Edwards, had given Ronald Cudbertson a big pad which he treasured like a friend. In minute writing so as not to waste a scrap of space, Cudbertson addressed pretty Marjorie Hall, the young librarian from Hull, to whom he would have been married if he had not been caught and imprisoned in the *Altmark*.

. . . . . .

November 3. Marjorie dear, Remember John Buchan's book, *Thirty-Nine Steps*? To go on deck we have to use an iron ladder, a vertical one, and from our flat to the top there are just thirty-nine steps. It always comes to my mind as I start climbing the ladder and I can't help counting them. Wish I were holding your hand. When I left the *Trev* my hands were smooth and soft, but now there is hard skin across my palms and fingers from climbing up or down the same ladder. It's always up or down . . . life or ladder—what's the difference?

November 4. How rumours get around! So much talk, so few facts. The one authentic piece of news today is that one of the *Altmark* crew had a row with one of the German guards and rather heavily tapped the boy's chin. It must have caused quite a bother among the officers of the guard.

Some of us like the *Spee* guards and hate the *Altmark* crew. I

say that the crew are in sympathy with us, but I don't like the guards. Apparently what happened was that the guard who was hit was a nasty blighter and the incident cheered us up no end. What a boon if the sailors fell out with the guards and turned on them and we could step in, take over the ship and bring her back to England. Some hope!

November 5. Shave day today. You should see the clean faces—quite unusual! I only shave once a week. As I have only two blades I can't afford to do it more often and normally look quite disreputable. Quite a few have stopped shaving altogether and are sprouting young beards.

We are steaming south—as far as I can make out. They took my sextant away which cost £20. It won't stop me from going to sea again even if the government doesn't give us enough money to fit ourselves out again. Nowadays one can buy a sextant on hire purchase.

November 6. The sailors have been bringing out and stacking stores on deck. There is much activity all round us. It can only mean one thing—the warship is coming in the very near future. I don't know what it portends but it is my birthday today and it may mean some surprise! Well, I am twenty-seven years today! What will the day bring? One chappie, a Welshman, was very put out when he had his twenty-first the other day. Our own "sparks" comes of age before the end of the month.

Some boys who always get bits of news from the guards and from the crew were talking last night of the capture of a fairly large British ship and one hundred and eight prisoners. I think it's one of those "wait-and-see-if-it's-true yarns".

It's 3 p.m. now and we are rather puzzled. All these preparations for the arrival of the *Graf Spee* and she doesn't look like turning up. They've put all the stores back below, put down the derricks and bolted them as if they were not going to be used for a long time. Most popular guess is that the warship is being chased and that she will meet us when she has a breather, put some prisoners on board, after which we shall go to port.

It's a lovely day again, fine and warm.

November 7. I wish I knew what this ship is doing, sometimes heading this way, sometimes that, main part of the time at only five or six miles an hour, but sometimes much faster

during the night. We can feel that. I woke last night and she was trembling a lot which denotes great speed. They say this tanker can do twenty-five. I wonder where the *Graf Spee* has got to? Well, the longer she is away the more oil she and we are using. We shall have to fill up sometime, somewhere, before long.

There has been a rumpus just now. The "peggy" reported that there is to be no more tea at dinner-time. It's hard to say whether this is because tea or water is short. Things are getting a bit worse every day. First they cut down on the bread and now the tea. It makes you feel weary. All hands lay down after dinner today and are still lying there—not even bothering to go up on deck for a little spell.

One of the officers has not been up on deck for two days now, not for fresh air nor his morning wash. He hasn't had a bath since we arrived here. I shall make it my job to get him up on deck tomorrow morning.

Oh this bread! Most people have blisters from cutting it during their turn as "peggy". Our knives are not too sharp and the brown bread has an awfully hard crust. One can hear each mouthful drop in the stomach with a dull thud.

Somebody has "news" again. The warship will not be back for another fortnight. They have fixed the openings to our places so that we cannot possibly get out if we touch land. I also hear that the captains, chiefs and lascars, who've been on deck under canvas, will be coming below in a few days. I don't know why, but I can only assume that she is making for the trade route and the canvas houses on deck would arouse suspicion.

November 8. Everybody is on their feet. There is a rumour that a ship's smoke has been seen astern. Just a rumour!

I have lingered over my bath as long as possible and was the last one of our lot to go below. If you work it right you can get to the ladder just as the next lot is coming up and have to wait on deck another five minutes until they are all out. Stealing a little extra air, you might call it.

Remember my old American silver dollar? I have carried it in my coat pocket ever since I got it. Today I've had to part with it. Up to now I have had neither a toothbrush nor toothpaste and had to use ordinary soap and a rag. But

they told me that money can buy things even here. The silver dollar was the only money I had so I slipped it to the cook, who passed it on to someone else and—hey presto!—back comes a new brush and a tube of paste. What a racket!

Something must be up. They were like hawks watching the men who were getting our stores so they could not talk to the crew. But a few chaps have had a glimpse of the ship from which the smoke came and were sent off the decks. One of the sailors from the flat above us was going up on deck but when he'd reached the thirty-ninth step and put his head through the opening on top, the guard almost crowned him and chased him back below.

Tea was terrible tonight. Usual amount of bread and butter, but the piece of polony was much reduced in size and there was only a minute piece of cheese. It's all uphill from now on, I guess.

November 9. Thursday today. My whole body aches. Others are complaining too. I have decided not to lie about so much during the day as I can't sleep at night. It's either that or that I am getting thinner and cannot rest with my bones on the hard bed!

It's pouring with rain. Washing wasn't very pleasant, as it was chilly too. Altogether some of us are beginning to look a little pale. After our three slices of bread and jam this morning I felt I could eat a really good meal.

Everybody's fed up. Not even a card game this morning. I suppose it's getting monotonous. But the guards have been quite communicative. One of them told us that the sailor who hit the guard the other day has been in the tank ever since. It's an empty oil tank which is used as a prison cell—prison in prison!

November 10. You should have seen us last night! More rough-and-tumble, then an "exhibition" in which we all joined with a mock funeral and a wedding. Surprising how daft you get when you are hard up for a little entertainment. In the end everybody was fagged and excited. We sat around, had a sing-song and a slice of bread and jam.

This morning it's cold and damp with a lot of fog. That's why they did not allow us on deck for our morning walk—in case a ship came upon us suddenly before we could be put out of sight again.

The crew has been clearing a deck two floors below. That's where they are going to put the captains and chiefs. . . . During last night she's been taking some water over on deck and the canvas house. A couple of skippers were nearly drowned, which is why they are being put below.

Thinking of home . . . but it's difficult to make out what our chances are. The *Altmark* "chippy"—carpenter—who is a Norwegian, came down and said that he expects to be home for Christmas. But "Babyface" said he could not tell how long we would be here.

My head aches. There are only a few places between the girders where I can stand upright and my head is still a mass of bumps from the first week when I was walking unwarily. We have all got bumps on the head. Just the same, we played high cock-alorum last night.

What makes the bad food even worse is that people will talk about what they could just fancy to eat. It makes you feel desperate!

November 11. X . . . did not wash after all. So rather than let him get the bread and butter ready with his dirty fingers I did it myself. Some of the fellows are beyond the pale!

The ship was going like hell this afternoon. Obvious conclusion: we are getting out of the way of a British patrol. Somehow old "Knitty Whiskers" must be getting good information to dodge like this.

It looks as if we shall be here for some time yet.

November 12. Cold, wet and miserable morning. A damp fog. I am sure we are edging southward all the time, maybe a little east as well. We must be somewhere near South Africa again. I have a feeling we shall land up in the Indian Ocean for a while and be put on some other ship—or maybe ashore in Portuguese East Africa.

I was thinking this morning . . . what a sight we must be from the bridge every day; nearly two hundred half-naked men washing in little tin basins, first captains, then officers and then the white crews and the natives. Quite an assortment of nudity!

One chappie this morning burst out: "Isn't this bloody awful. I wish I was a woman and then I could have a good cry." Impossible to imagine that fellow crying—he's in a

grubby shirt and pants, bare feet, hair all over the place with a week's growth of beard and a moustache.

November 13. I hear the purser has told somebody that we shall be home by Christmas. Our "Fifth"—George Barrett—overheard the guards speaking, swears he understood them saying that the *Graf Spee* will be coming back on Wednesday. "Babyface" just said to one of the captains that all ships which have been sunk have been reported—except the *Trevanion*!

Wonder where we are! There is no wind, yet a nip in the air. As it is summer in this half of the world, we must have edged a good way south for it to get so cold.

It was three weeks yesterday since that blasted battleship popped over our horizon—it seems ages! All around me there are people who have no book to read or do not play cards. They just sit for hours staring and thinking . . . thinking, I suppose, where they might be. I don't know but considering our situation—what right have we to hope that they will let us loose at all?

November 14. Outlook bleak. Yet only this morning I realized that I have not seen darkness for over three weeks now—not a really dark night with stars and the moon above. I never thought a time would come when I'd be missing darkness!

But in here it is so dim that others who have also taken to writing letters are perched on top of shell racks to be nearer the light. For some reason or other the dynamo must be running low today.

I suppose it suits people like the "Hermit". That's what we call Ted Elcock, our third engineer. He sits by himself most of the time with his pipe. He has let his beard grow to match his uncut hair. Altogether he presents a sedate and benign picture—like a Santa Claus. He is only twenty-four, but he looks at least forty.

One sailor on the deck above us, an elderly chappie, has also grown a beard and looks exactly like the pictures of King Edward VII.

November 15. A rather strong breeze has kept a lot of our fellows below today. It's Wednesday—but I doubt whether we shall see "Pluto"—that's what some of us call the warship. There's a rumour that she has sunk five more ships but this

has yet to be verified by a reliable source. Five tramps would make at least one hundred and fifty men to be planted on board this ship. Hardly conceivable!

I am getting weary. For the elder men I think it's not all that bad. They seem resigned to their fate. Two boys of under sixteen are with us—and they regard it all as a great lark. But for us "in-betweens" it is getting very hard.

Sex has reared its ugly head. There is a rumour that one of the galley boys is a ciss. . . . Don't be alarmed! I am sure it is not true. No matter how long we are here we shan't reach that stage.

Just before we came below in the afternoon the ship stopped and turned round. We were wondering what was wrong when we heard a burst of firing from the deck—just the type of bangs we heard on that fatal Sunday three weeks ago.

We could see the shells travel and they must have dropped a target in the water. The guard was telling us to go below but we took no notice.

Just now the cook said that his lot was rattled. They are housed near the gun with an empty tank on either side. One man grabbed a lifebelt, another made a bolt for the ladder but was turned back by the guard, who threatened to shoot! The cook was having a nap and had taken his glasses off. He could not find them and could not see. Everybody was dressing hurriedly and one had his suitcase packed and was hanging on to the foot of the ladder . . .

There is excitement about . . . something is happening.

. . . . . .

Wafts of smoke were hanging over parts of the flat. Cudbertson was sniffing the air polluted by smoke from those lucky enough to have cigarettes.

"You chaps will get into a lot of trouble," he warned. "It's not wise to light up at all times—even if you do not mind wasting your few cigarettes this way."

The hatches on top were flung wide open just then and Lieutenant Schmidt, flanked by two of his men, came down.

"Who has been smoking here? You know the captain has strictly forbidden it."

He followed the smoke, caught Will Venables, the *Trevanion*'s first mate, by the arm: "Were you smoking?"

"Yes."

"Come with me."

On deck Schmidt handed the mate over to Weichert, who took him before Dau.

"Smoking? Smoking?" screamed Dau. "Do you admit it?"

The answer was a shrug of the shoulders.

"Three days bread and water!" Dau breathed. "Take him to the tank."

The mate was given a loaf of bread and some water and taken to the empty oil tank.

"We'll collect you in three days!" were the parting words of the guard.

Fritzi told the prisoners what had happened to the mate. "It's not pleasant in the tank," said Fritzi. "One of our men has had the same experience. He did not like it at all."

Cudbertson was sorry for the mate. It could not happen to me, he thought. He did not have a cigarette. Captain Edwards had given Symons, the steward, five thousand cigarettes from the *Trevanion* to be shared on a basis that each man would have two cigarettes a day for two months. But many of them had smoked continuously and stocks were already running low.

There was not much time to ponder the incident. Something was going on. The prisoners did not know what but they knew it was something.

Captain Dau climbed jerkily down the ladder looking brighter and happier than he had appeared before. Was it, some of the men wondered, that he was, after all, expecting the *Spee*? Had he news of further *Spee* exploits?

"Good morning!" he said, sticking his bearded chin out. "I thought you might like to know what I have heard over the wireless from Germany. The war on the Western Front —one single German officer has captured a dozen Frenchmen in their dug-out! It happened three times during one single raid into the French position . . ."

"Yes sir!" said Mr. Miller, the mate of the *Ashlea*. "I saw that done myself once—by Charlie Chaplin in *Shoulder Arms*. Only he surrounded them!"

Dau frowned. He looked hurt. But he let it pass. Perhaps he did not quite understand the joke.

"The rate of sinkings to the credit of our U-boats is going up steadily," he continued.

"When is the *Spee* coming back?" he was asked.

Dau smiled in his infuriatingly superior fashion but did not reply.

"Goodbye!" he said, turned sharply and went up the ladder, followed by Schmidt and Weichert. He looked as if he had work to do.

CHAPTER VI

"ARE YOU FRIGHTENED?"

FOR OVER A week now Captain Dau had been under the impression that things had gone wrong, terribly wrong. He imagined the whole of the Royal Navy was converging on his ship.

When the *Graf Spee* did not keep the arranged rendezvous a feeling of utter loneliness descended on Dau. Langsdorff, during their last meeting, had told him he was planning a diversionary action to throw the British off his track—just that and no more.

There had been no news from the battleship since. The rare signals from Naval Headquarters, though in code, had scrupulously avoided mentioning the *Spee*. The possibility that the *Altmark* might find herself deserted and thrown on her own resources, which were her speed and anonymity, and no more, had been ever present in Captain Dau's mind. It looked as if a catastrophe had happened.

Dau had not discussed his anxiety with his officers, but they felt instinctively that their captain was worried, when they saw him turning to his wireless receiver even more frequently than ever before, twisting the knobs in a determined attempt to glean information somehow, from somewhere.

On the morning of November 17 Dau called the doctor excitedly to join him as a Portuguese voice came over the air. It was faint but just intelligible. Tyrolt put his ear to the set. He knew Portuguese well and quickly translated into German the gist of what he heard.

Captain Dau listened, his whole body quivering with excitement.

"It is now confirmed," said the pattering Portuguese voice, "that the ship which was seen sinking off Inhambane on Thursday was the small, twin-engine motor tanker *Africa Shell*,

600 tons, belonging to the Shell Company of East Africa Ltd., built in England last February . . . the wreck is between Inhambane and Chai Chai (Vila de Joao Belo) . . ."

Already Captain Dau had spread out a map of the East African coast and the Indian Ocean and was frantically scrutinizing the area around Lourenco Marques to pin-point the spot. Tyrolt continued his translation: ". . . News came through gradually, and eventually an alarming story was unfolded of the steamer's fate—it was sunk by a German raider!" No wonder the voice expressed alarm; war had come to neutral Portugal's back doorstep.

Tyrolt looked knowingly at Dau whose features were alight with satisfaction. Portuguese words tumbled from the set too fast now for the doctor to keep up his running translation. As the news faded out he told the captain the rest.

A message from Capetown had been mentioned, according to which it had been officially announced that the *Africa Shell* had been sunk by a German raider inside Portuguese territorial water, one hundred and eighty miles north-east of Lourenco Marques. There was no exact information available regarding the identity of the German raider, but a Durban report suggested that it was a big 10,000-ton ship, possibly an armed merchantman. Rumours that it was a pocket-battleship were authoritatively discounted.

To Captain Dau the news meant that the *Graf Spee* had ventured out into the Indian Ocean, far from the scenes of her earlier exploits. He would have preferred to hear that the suspicion for sinking the *Africa Shell* had fallen on a pocket-battleship. That, at least, would have induced the Royal Navy to switch their attention away from Dau on to the distant Indian Ocean.

That, in spite of the inspired reference to "an armed German merchantman" was what happened. Convinced that the German raider which had played havoc with British shipping in the South Atlantic had sailed around the Cape, the Royal Navy focused on the Indian Ocean—but did not want the German Naval High Command to know. In a desperate game of blind man's sea bluff, however, the *Graf Spee* was already doubling on her tracks and making for the South Atlantic once more. Langsdorff had outwitted the Admiralty.

Dau was elated. His orders were clear. He was to cruise in

a designated square until the prearranged alternative date for a rendezvous with the battleship fell due. He was now convinced that the *Spee*, her diversionary excursion into the Indian Ocean completed, was racing towards their meeting place as fast as her powerful engines would carry her.

Unable to disguise his relief on one of his regular tours of inspection through the prisoners' quarters, Dau was more talkative, less grimly aloof than usual. The prisoners, especially the officers, their instincts roused by the slightest digression from routine, quickly noted Dau's unusual mood. They did not know exactly what had happened—and neither did Dau, in detail. The captain's change of mood was also felt by his own crew. They passed on news of the change to the guards, whose hints and allusions, boasts and exaggerations conveyed to the prisoners that the *Graf Spee* had sunk several powerful British merchantmen. The rumours flew thick and fast.

The truth was less than the prisoners imagined. Yet Captain Langsdorff, taking the *Graf Spee* back towards the South Atlantic, was pleased.

When he was making for the Indian Ocean his movements were guided by invaluable snatches of wireless signals between the British Admiralty and units of the Royal Navy, picked up by his patient operators. Langsdorff had been unable to discover the identity of the British ships even though, advised by his Naval Headquarters, he had long ago broken down the British secret code.

But, just as he had arrived in the distant Indian Ocean, the code was changed and he was left without a clue as to the movements of British merchantmen. He signalled to Germany a request for his own code to be changed, and this was done.

When Langsdorff's officers told him that the crew were disappointed about the meagre—indeed negative—result of his Indian Ocean cruise, he explained to them that he had, in reality, not gone East in search of new victories, but merely with the intention of leaving his visiting card in another ocean.

Langsdorff had sunk the tiny *Africa Shell* and left the crew to make for the shore in their own boats. He had taken only the captain, Patrick Dove, with him as prisoner. Convinced that he had shaken off the Royal Navy, Langsdorff was now making for the meeting with the *Altmark*.

The prison ship cruising quietly in a wide circle awoke on November 26 to a fine day. The sun was already climbing into the sky at 8.30 a.m., when the guard pulled back the hatch on top of the trunkway to call down to the prisoners.

"Up," he shouted, "up, up."

The welcome cry echoed round the holds below as the first batch appeared on deck for the daily bath. They had just begun to strip when Mr. Miller, mate of the *Ashlea*, gave a warning shout and pointed to starboard.

The bathers looked up. There in the distance, about two miles away, they saw the battleship gliding over the smooth surface of the sea. The men had hardly taken in the impressive picture when the guards, noisy and excited, rushed towards them.

"*Zurück!*" they shouted in German. Everybody understood. It was the order to return below.

At 10 a.m. the *Altmark*'s engines stopped. From the deck came the harsh grinding sound of turning winches, of shouts and guttural greetings. Soon the bumps and knocks re-echoing in the steel chambers below told the sailors that the now familiar operation of victualling the *Spee* was in progress. The humming, whining noise of oil sucked through long tubes indicated that the *Spee* was refuelling.

Activity was intense all day and the prisoners were not allowed on deck. Lieutenant "Babyface" Schmidt went below to mingle with the prisoners. He was all smiles and spoke with familiarity. No, he admitted, when he was questioned, the *Spee* had not made a great haul.

"Actually," he confided to them, "she has only one British prisoner on board—the captain of the ship she has sunk!"

"Which ship?"

"Babyface" shrugged his shoulders. Either he did not know or he would not say. But the war was going well for Germany he told everybody. The Allies were having a bad time on the Western Front. U-boats were sinking British ships right and left.

"What's going to happen to us, Lieutenant?" Cudbertson asked him. "When are we going to get out of this . . ."

Lieutenant "Babyface" was not sure. "Maybe two weeks, maybe three weeks . . ."

"I want to get home quickly," Cudbertson said glumly, "before someone takes my girl away from me."

"Same here!" the lieutenant replied feelingly in perfect colloquial English.

Early next morning the *Graf Spee* was still taking on fuel but the guard motioned the men to come up on deck for their exercise just the same.

"See what I see?" someone asked, pointing to the battleship. She was sporting a dummy funnel aft and one of the gun turrets looked different.

Miller said it. "It's phoney." The *Spee* had been cleverly camouflaged. On her starboard side in big letters the name *Deutschland* was painted.

"Who do they think they are fooling?"

Overhead the *Spee* aircraft was circling to make sure that the bunkering and supply operation was safe from enemy interference.

Below, in the *Altmark*, the excitement was intense. One of the guards had caught a group of men smoking. Prison Officer Weichert rushed below, red in the face.

"Who was it?" he asked.

The guard pointed to a seaman, defiantly leaning against a stanchion.

"Three days," Weichert said, instantly.

He was just leaving when the guard told him that four other men had committed the same "offence". Weichert "sentenced" them too on the spot—the sentence to be served when the first seaman was released. There was room for only one at a time in the punishment tank. Their offence had been to light up in the smoking-room, which had been set aside; but smoking was forbidden during the refuelling operation, though nobody had told them.

There was no time to discuss the incident.

"Roll-call!" the order rang down the trunkway. "Everybody on deck!"

What did it mean? A score of voices put forward suggestions. It could mean early release. Or it could mean transfer to the battleship. On deck Weichert faced the line of prisoners with a sheet of paper in his hand.

"The following men are to pack their belongings and hold themselves ready by noon tomorrow."

He was reading out the list: "Robison J., Coutts J. L., Prior M., Bell C. B., Pottinger C., Miller A. . . ."

Agitated whispers went through the ranks of the prisoners. Soon it was obvious what was happening. The names the German was reading out were those of captains, first officers, engineers and wireless-operators. But it included also men who needed medical attention—two cases of severe toothache and the injured men of the *Trevanion*, whose wounds had not responded to treatment. Altogether the list contained twenty-seven names.

"They're going to chop off our 'eads!" someone jested. It was soon made clear to the prisoners that all potential leaders were to be transferred to the battleship.

In the flats, the officers debated furiously whether it were better to go on the *Spee* or remain in the prison ship.

"I'd take my chance on the *Spee* if I could wangle it," said Platten, a second mate, whose name was not on the list. "Anything rather than this stinking hole."

Prior, the "sparks" of the *Newton Beech*, suspended his packing. "Do you mean that, Mister?"

"I do."

"Well, I don't fancy that steel man-trap—not when our boys get after her. Tell you what; let's change places."

Platten was eager to try, but was doubtful whether it could be done. "Risk it," said Prior. "What can they do to you if they find out?"

That evening, the men on the list were paraded and Platten, his belongings in a suitcase, took Prior's place. The names were checked off.

"Prior M.," Weichert read out.

"Present," answered Platten.

Weichert stopped reading and looked up. "You're not Prior," he said accusingly. "You're not the man we interrogated after we sank the *Newton Beech*.

Platten had to admit that he was not.

"Then go below," shouted Weichert, "take your belongings with you, and send up Prior. I'll deal with you later," he added ominously.

On the afternoon of the next day the transfer was effected. "I expect to be back in ten days," said Captain Edwards as he left the flat. "See you later, lads."

A water tank, a rough table and curtains made from carpets were the only home comforts in one of the *Altmark* holds

Captain Hans Langsdorff taking leave of members of his crew after he had ordered the trapped *Spee* to be scuttled

It was an emotional moment. During their imprisonment, whenever there had been tension among the prisoners, the captains and mates had put their heads together to smooth things over. When quarrels arose they had tried to make their influence and authority felt. There had been clashes. Seafaring men dislike authority and some, with grievances to work off, had tried to say that there were no ranks and distinctions in captivity. More than once there had been angry remarks by youngsters who had never known the harsh discipline of the old days. They were "not going to take any orders from the captain or nobody".

But in the moment of parting all antagonism disappeared. It was as if a tightly-knit community, welded together by a common fate, was being wantonly broken up. For while the men left behind did not know what was in store for them, the future was even more hazardous for the officers being taken away in the *Spee*'s big launch. There were handshakes, patting of shoulders, words intended to be funny. The men who shouted rough goodbyes from the flats felt curiously lonely. So did those who went off.

The big, powerfully-built man with the small black moustache who greeted the officers as soon as they had been taken below on the *Spee* looked rather like a German even though he wore English-type, neatly pressed Red Sea kit.

He seemed anxious to be friendly with the newcomers, but they ignored him.

"What's the matter with you chaps?" he exclaimed in his Irish accent. He seemed disappointed and hurt.

"You—English?" Captain Pottinger asked him. The *Ashlea* skipper did not feel in the mood for jokes with Germans just now—however good their English. Nobody was pleased to be back on the *Spee*.

"Of course I am," the big man replied. "My name is Patrick Dove and I am the captain of the *Africa Shell* . . . that is, I was," he added with a wry smile.

The officers quickly crowded around him and asked a dozen questions.

"I was sunk on the 15th—off Lourenco Marques," said Dove.

"But that's on the other side of Africa. . . . Anybody else on board?" asked someone.

"None of our chaps . . . my ship is all they've sunk in a month. She wasn't very big, but she was a fine ship."

It was crowded in the compartment. But curiosity triumphed over discomfort. What was the latest drill? Captain Dove told them as quickly as he could. Langsdorff, whom some of the captains had met, was still the good chap they thought. He had entertained Dove to drinks almost every evening. They had had many interesting conversations and Langsdorff had talked freely of the battleship, which was equipped like no British warship. "See my outfit?" Dove asked. "Been pressed by a Chinese—they have a complete Chinese laundry on board. And cobblers, tailors, a hospital, a dentist, a surgeon—everything."

"We know all about this ship," said a captain slowly.

"Of course," said Dove, "you have heard that the *Rawalpindi* was sunk three days ago?"

That certainly was news. Dove gave them full details of how the ship had fallen victim to the combined attack of the *Gneisenau* and the *Scharnhorst*, Germany's biggest battleships. Now the Navy was chasing *them.*

Dove repeated what Langsdorff had told him. But Langsdorff did not know—nor did the Royal Navy then—how close one of the foraging destroyers, the *Cossack*, had come to meeting the powerful units of the Nazi Navy on that occasion.

"How long before our chaps get this *Spee* bastard . . . ?" They sought Dove's opinion. His amiable contacts with Langsdorff were more recent and had enabled the alert, intelligent tanker captain to form an up-to-date picture of the position.

"Langsdorff says we've only three ships which can make life unhealthy for him—*Repulse*, *Renown* and *Hood.* He is sure they can't find him while every sea in the world is his hunting ground."

Dove reminded them about Kay, Langsdorff's right-hand man, a queer mixture of devil-may-care sea-dog almost in the British tradition, yet a Nazi disciplinarian who seemed to have little love for his cosmopolitan captain; of Commander Meusemann, "a very fine chap"; of Wattenberg, the navigation officer, "first-class sailor".

"This raiding operation," said the talkative Dove, "must have been thought out very carefully in advance . . . the *Spee* officers have been specially selected for their local knowledge.

Each one specializes in a different coastline and part of the vast operational area. There are men who have spent a lifetime in the South Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, around the African coast."

But equally, Dove had noticed the weakness of the *Spee*. "Time after time she's making an absolute beast of herself," he explained, "rolling and heaving as if the power of her engines was too much for the hull."

Dove's new companions in turn soon told him of their experiences. He heard about the *Altmark* for the first time.

"It must be hell," he commented.

That was exactly how the men in the dim holds of the *Altmark* were beginning to feel.

The warship had disappeared from sight and the *Altmark* was putting on speed: the engineers reckoned a good twelve knots. There was a temporary feeling of elation as the idea got around that she was now making for shore—perhaps to put them all on neutral territory.

Yet, just as suddenly, the engines slowed down, the ship stopped and turned . . . and "There is the blasted *Spee* again!" someone exclaimed. The men had been forward, the *Spee* directly astern and they had been unable to see her, though she had been in company with the *Altmark* all the time.

During roll call next evening Weichert told the prisoners to put their watches back one hour. He seemed upset about it and told them with a show of reluctance. It was clear that Weichert was as disappointed as the prisoners. Putting the clock back meant that they were going West.

"You can't get to Hamburg by going west!" Cudbertson said.

Shortages had begun to add to the discomfort. There were very few cigarettes about and men felt a craving for tobacco far greater than that of heavy smokers. It was a sign of deteriorating nerves. Some of the seamen made such a fuss about the shortage that the "sharks" among them were ready to cash in.

It amazed the non-smokers how some seamen had managed to hoard cigarettes and how cigarettes became currency. A fine new shirt went for five cigarettes. A pair of shoes—eight cigarettes. Half a dozen prisoners seemed to have an inexhaustible supply—as long as they could get a bargain in exchange.

The guards were soon in the racket. One or two of them could produce almost anything—at a price.

"Look here," one of the Germans said. "We're all prisoners together. Why not let us make the best of it all round?"

Daily rations were getting smaller every day. The *Altmark* officers waived complaints away contemptuously.

"I have told the captain of your complaints," Weichert said, "and I have a message from him." It was that they should be satisfied with what they had. It was far more than they would get at home. Britain was already starving, Dau let them know.

The men from the *Trevanion* worked out that they had now been away from home for ten months. It was December 2 and the *Altmark* was still speeding westwards when the noise from the cargo winches roused the prisoners from their lethargy. A derrick had been shifted into the refrigerating hold. That in itself seemed mysterious. Then daily exercise on deck was cancelled.

Next morning Dau accompanied Tyrolt below.

"What's up, boss?" a seaman asked him.

"You'll get all the news soon enough. There will be company for you before long. No, your own officers are not coming back."

It could only mean one thing. The previous evening Dau had received a brief signal telling him about the *Spee*'s latest victim.

The action had been directed against a 10,000-ton British refrigerator ship *Doric Star*, which was on her way from Capetown to Freetown, where Captain W. Stubbs was expecting to join a convoy for the final stage of the voyage home.

"Lofty" Miller, one of her crew, had just been relieved in the look-out nest by Tom Foley, who, in the hot midday sun, was sitting contentedly leaning against the main mast and watching the blue choppy sea. It was not long since two bells had rung—the one-o'clock time signal—and Foley had returned the signal.

A few minutes later he was shaken by a violent explosion which nearly knocked him from his lofty perch. A U-boat? He could see nothing.

Quickly the explosion was followed by a splash to starboard,

and water spouted up in the air. On the bridge Captain Stubbs prepared for action. The *Doric Star* was a merchantman, but that did not mean he would not fight it out with a U-boat, if he could see it.

The captain ordered his 4·7-inch gun—the only weapon he had—to be slewed round. At the same time he prepared for evasive action in case the U-boat surfaced and attacked.

At that moment several members of the crew saw flashes on the horizon. It meant only one thing—a surface raider was moving in to the attack. This was far more serious than any U-boat. But there was little time to wonder what was happening. Another explosion shook the air and a burst was observed in the sea only a few yards from the ship.

Something hit the deck—either a shell splinter or a bolt loosened by blast. The noise put urgency into deck activity. Captain Stubbs was now assuming that a well-armed enemy was moving in for the kill, although he could see nothing. But the sharp eyes of Chief Officer Ranson could. "I can see her, sir, well on the horizon." The raider, ten miles away, began to close in swiftly.

By this time the four lifeboats were being swung into position and some men rushed to their allotted stations. Others made below for the store-rooms to get food, bread, milk, tobacco—as much as each could carry. Blankets were being stacked on deck; men scrambled to their bunks to get clothes and tools. Foley managed to grab his compass and chronometer.

Sailors, once the frenzied activity abated, began discussing the emergency. Superficial calm disguised their agitation. There had been rumours of a German raider in the Indian Ocean—but what had they run into in the South Atlantic?

Foley noted the exact position. The vessel was about four hundred miles west of Port Loango—at 19°15′S., 05°05′E. It was 1.25 p.m.

"I want a man on the bridge!" Captain Stubbs shouted. Foley went up and was ordered to destroy the ship's papers. Already the captain was on his way to the wireless cabin when he met Chief Engineer "Wilky" Ray.

"We must signal for help," Captain Stubbs told him. Ray passed the order on to "Sparks" Comber, middle-aged veteran of the First War.

The *Doric Star's* S O S went out at once. Almost immediately there was a response from a foreign vessel.

"Under attack . . . S O S!" Comber's Morse-key tapped out his signals again and again.

Already most of the crew of sixty were clambering into the lifeboats, anxiously peering towards a choppy, angry sea, when Simonstown acknowledged the *Doric Star's* signal.

"O.K., 'Wilky'," Captain Stubbs told Ray. "As long as they know what's happening to us. I only wish I knew more . . ."

He had not long to wait. As he emerged on deck he knew the answer. Moving astern of the *Doric Star* in a sweeping curve the big battleship had appeared literally almost out of the blue.

"It's the *Admiral Scheer!*" Captain Stubbs called out. He had been told at Capetown that this German pocket-battleship had already sunk a number of British merchantmen. As the warship bore down on him his first thought was how incongruous it was to call her a "pocket" battleship.

"Scuttle the ship!"

With a dry voice Captain Stubbs gave the order from the bridge.

A few moments later Ray said anxiously: "Suppose they leave us to sink with the ship? I think, sir, I'd better go below and try to close the valves."

"All right, 'Wilky'," agreed the captain.

Below, having received the captain's orders, Ronald Curtis, Fred Wall and the other engineers were already taking off the covers of the valves. The water was beginning to flood the ship and Wall was among the engineers hurrying on deck when Ray passed them. "I'm going down to try and close the valves," he shouted. It was an impossible task.

"Damn it all," said Ronald Curtis, hastily donning his uniform, "only last week from Capetown I cabled my wife I'd be home at Christmas!"

As the crew assembled on deck they stared incredulously at the enemy battleship on which sailors lined the rails. A big brown canvas, fixed up like a signboard, faced them. In thick black letters it bore the inscription:

STOP WIRELESS OR WE FIRE.

The battleship had hardly stopped four hundred yards away before a motor launch, carrying well over fifty men, was

lowered and set off towards the *Doric Star*. As it approached the *Doric Star* lifeboats, which were already in the water, the Germans began to shout orders to the crew to return on board.

Smoothly the boarding operation went under way. Led by Lieutenant Herzberg, the *Spee* sailors showed that they had by now fully mastered the piracy technique.

Lieutenant Herzberg was short and to the point:

"I give you ten minutes to get ready. You are coming with me to my ship."

But some of the crew did not believe him. Before they went below, sailors were fastening explosive charges around the hatches and in other parts of the ship. "God, they're going to let us get below and then they'll blow the ship up—and us with it," said a seaman despairingly.

Well within the allotted ten minutes the crew were back and the boats were being lowered again. Angry shouts went up as the choppy sea began to wet the sailors. Even in acute danger no sailor likes a wetting. An overcoat went over the side and floated away, leaving the owner shivering at the thought of long cold nights ahead. With a dull thud the wireless-operator's typewriter was "lost" at sea.

"It's the *Deutschland*," McManus, a *Doric Star* seaman, remarked as he saw the warship's name on her bow.

"No, no," Foley said. He had observed the tabs on the caps of the sailors in the boarding party. "It's the *Graf Spee*."

On board the *Spee* Captain-Lieutenant Kay, now sporting a wild black beard, with the master-at-arms, Albert Jerichow, at his side, received the prisoners and checked their names from a list which Captain Stubbs had given to Herzberg.

"Below deck—bath, medical inspection," he said in a clipped, Prussian accent.

Sailors of the *Spee*, escorting them, were sneering. "You frightened?" one of them asked Ron Curtis.

"Why should I be?"

"You are in our hands now . . . !" a young German said triumphantly. Curtis did not understand what the lad was driving at.

"If we'd been captured by the British Navy," the young German said, "our lives would not be worth much—eh?"

"What do you mean—you'd be treated as ordinary prisoners."

"Yes—and our hands and feet would be cut off so we'd never be of any use to Germany again!"

"That's nonsense!"

Slowly Curtis and his mates were learning something about the strange Nazi mentality. No doubt the German really believed what he said.

"Hand over!"

Imperiously a German officer demanded that the men hand over the stores they had brought with them—whisky, cigarettes, food.

"The bastard!"

To their surprise, however, he collected all the confiscated goods and distributed them equally among the prisoners.

The cabin to which they were taken was already overcrowded with the captains and officers from the *Altmark*. The encounter was a melancholy one. What was there to say?

The newcomers felt stifled in the oppressive atmosphere. The small cabin now held over fifty men. Shouts went up suggesting a protest to the *Spee* officers.

"Never mind that!" Captain Dove, the "senior resident", told them. "I have seen how crowded the Germans themselves are; just as bad as this! Some have to bunk down in the alleyways at night."

Protests would have been useless. There was nothing anybody could do. Two hours later they were shaken by a sharp crack. The *Spee*'s guns boomed again and again; and the prisoners, locked below, heard an answering explosion in the distance.

"That's the *Doric Star*—that was!" Captain Stubbs said. There was silence. The other captains looked at Stubbs. They knew exactly how he felt.

There was now shuddering and trembling all over the *Spee* as she made off at speed. While she had gone into action against the *Doric Star*, Captain Langsdorff had been on the bridge scanning the horizon, when his wireless-operator reported that distress signals were coming from the British vessel, in spite of the *Spee*'s threats.

"That's a hell of a fellow!" Langsdorff growled. "His confounded signals will bring the whole British fleet about our ears."

His indignation was justified, for the *Doric Star*'s intrepid

wireless-operator had frustrated the whole purpose of the Indian Ocean excursion. Obviously Britain's naval commanders would turn at speed towards the scene of the attack on the *Doric Star.*

"I do not think that the British Navy is anywhere near at the moment," Langsdorff told his officers. "We shall be able to stay here for another day or two . . ."

It was a borderline decision. Alerted by the distress signal, two of the nine British squadrons engaged in the search for the German raider were already making for the spot marked with a big X on every map. They were Force H with the heavy cruisers *Sussex* and *Shropshire* and Force K with the battle-cruiser *Renown* and the aircraft-carrier *Ark Royal.*

But if Langsdorff thought that all British ships on the look-out for him would be lured to the West African coast without exception, he was—as it turned out to be—quite wrong. Commodore Harry Harwood, for instance, in command of Force G, decided not to move his squadron from its position. His four cruisers, *Cumberland, Exeter, Ajax* and *Achilles,* remained at their station off the River Plate.

"Sooner or later," Commodore Harwood argued, "the raider is going to turn up here. All we need is the patience to wait for her."

But before fate proved him right another British merchantman was to appear in the sights of the insatiable *Spee.*

CHAPTER VII

"ABANDON SHIP!"

ONE OF THE ships' wireless sets which picked up the *Doric Star*'s frantic, incomplete distress signals on the high seas was operated by Fred Cummins, the middle-aged, well-built, but agile radio officer of the s.s. *Tairoa*. Cummins was a First War veteran from Liverpool. He had been torpedoed six times and mined twice by the Kaiser's men; he took emergencies in his stride.

Captain William B. Starr, "the gentleman sailor", as his crew called him, had brought the *Tairoa*, a coal-burning, meat, cheese and butter ship of 7,900 tons, from Australia to Durban, which she had left on November 27. Starr knew the journey home would be risky, but apart from mentioning the danger to senior officers he kept his fears to himself.

The *Doric Star*'s signal had given no details—just the position of the ship, which Captain Starr quickly worked out was barely one hundred and fifty miles away; a mere half-a-day's run ahead. He now put the ship's company on the alert and retired to his cabin to consider on what he might do. He had little time to lose, with a Nazi raider so obviously close. The prospect was terrifying—and not only for the *Tairoa*. Barely fifty miles behind, as Captain Starr well knew, the *Sterling Castle* was carrying a large number of women and children; other ships, including the *Ceramic*, were moving along the same trade route.

That night Captain Starr did not sleep much. He donned his white tropical uniform over his pyjamas, and moved constantly between the bridge and the radio officer's cabin to listen to the signals and news that "Sparks" Cummins took down from the wireless set. The choice before Starr was an unenviable one. He could steer towards the African coast about one hundred miles away, which might mean virtually

abandoning the trip, although he would be nearer land if his ship was sunk. Or he could turn westwards in the hope of getting out of the raider's way. He took the latter course. The *Tairoa* steamed west all through the night of December 2.

Danger was nearer than the dauntless, tubby little captain anticipated. Even before the *Doric Star* had been sunk Captain Langsdorff had ordered his aircraft to take off on a rapid reconnaissance of the area in the hope of finding new victims. Nazi agents in South Africa were efficient. The departure of every British ship from Durban and Capetown was wirelessed to the German Naval High Command.

Already the *Spee* aircraft had observed the smoke—no more—of the *Tairoa* and signalled back to the battleship. The pilot's own instructions were to return to his floating base at once. Langsdorff had set course towards the *Tairoa* when he, in turn, was informed of a distress signal which had come from his own aircraft. Engine trouble had forced it down in the sea, and it was floating helplessly several miles away.

"Let's go and pick that fool pilot up," Langsdorff stormed in one of his rare fits of temper. Time was pressing and delay could be fatal. It took two valuable hours before the plane was located and recovered. Hauled aboard, the pilot, however, was unable to add to his brief wireless report.

The day of December 3 was dawning when, with a semi-circular sweep, the *Spee* was cutting through the waves towards the *Tairoa*.

"I want quick action—no fuss, complete wireless silence. If there is any more of that *Doric Star* nonsense, we fire."

Langsdorff was angry and impatient.

It was just after four o'clock when the look-out in the *Tairoa* saw the *Spee* steaming towards her at tremendous speed. She looked as if she were preparing to run the British freighter down. But Captain Starr kept his head. Calmly he gave instructions: "Fred," he said familiarly to Cummins, "send out a signal. Give our exact position. Here you are: 20°20′ S., 03°05′ E. Under attack by enemy vessel." Cummins sped off to his cabin.

His fingers had scarcely left the key when the blast of a shell nearly blew him out of his seat. Once more he repeated his brave signal: " . . . being shelled by enemy vessel," he radioed.

The *Tairoa* was quivering and groaning, and in places on fire. Cummins did not know it, but the first shell had hit the spare cabin off the saloon in which Kean, an officer of the Shaw Savill Line, returning on leave and technically a "supernumerary mate", was sleeping with his legs mercifully drawn up to his body. If he had not been in this position, the shell would have torn the officer's legs away.

Cummins was still at his post. He was sending out a third message when another shell hit the ship, bursting in the captain's cabin and wrecking his desk. With hardly a pause a third shell went through the sandbags in front of the chart and radio cabin. It tore through the wall and wrecked the set Cummins was using, but Cummins scrambled away unhurt.

Reaching the deck he saw the captain on the bridge, standing like a rock, flanked by "Pat" (Francis John) Paterson, the third officer and Chief Steward John Cyril Smith. With his face white, a seaman was hanging on to the wheel.

"Beat it!" Paterson said unceremoniously, when he saw the youngster. Paterson himself took the wheel.

Langsdorff's fury was unleashed on the *Tairoa*. Four hands, hit by splinters, were writhing on the deck, one with a jagged hole in his thigh. As Captain Starr's roving eye caught sight of them another shell whined across the bridge in front of the big brass telegraph at which he and his officers were standing.

"My God!" Starr said. He snapped out an order to the men standing ready on the deck. "Lower the boats." Starr was a deeply religious man. Nobody before in the *Tairoa* had ever heard him use an oath. "I think it's time we went, too," he said to Paterson and Smith.

The *Spee* had moved in close. From one mast the French flag was flying, but Captain Starr's glance was fixed on a tattered standard on which he could just make out the swastika. The *Spee* had not finished yet. As Starr quickly came down from the bridge her double-barrelled three-inch pom-poms began to spatter the *Tairoa's* side with bullets, riddling all except two of the lifeboats.

Paterson acted quickly. Even a murderous Nazi raider would surely not continue to fire at a surrendered ship. In a few nimble leaps he was back on the bridge and had lowered the ensign.

"Abandon ship!"

Starr, on the deck, reiterated his order with a heavy heart. The two undamaged lifeboats were being lowered now with a suggestion of panic. Still the firing continued. Some men tried to give aid to the injured and to get them into the boats. John Bammant, a young, rugged, six-foot, fourteen-stone fourth mate, was bleeding profusely, but limped around apparently unconcerned to lend a helping hand wherever he could.

Under the hail of bullets the *Spee* boarding party had reached the *Tairoa* in two launches, one from aft and one forward. Chief Steward J. C. Smith, whose initials inevitably gave him the nick-name "Jesus Christ" among the irreverent, had come down from the bridge with his captain. They and several others had been too late for the boats, which were now well away from the stricken ship. Smith, in trousers and singlet—his cabin had been set on fire by the shelling and all his belongings burnt—was attending to one of the wounded young deck hands, a lad of barely seventeen who came from Glasgow. The boy's bloody hand was hanging limply by his side. The first shell had shot away three of his fingers.

As Smith bent over him trying to fit his own lifebelt around the injured lad another shell exploded on the deck. The blast blew Smith against the rails and his eardrums began to bleed. He was stunned and holding his ears in agony when he felt a revolver prodding into his back. Turning round, the dazed chief steward faced the officer of the boarding party.

"What's down there?" the German asked, disregarding the bleeding youngster. He was pointing to the door of one of the refrigerating holds. There were 20,000 pounds of prime lamb and many Christmas turkeys in the hold. Smith could not hear what was said but he could guess the German's question.

"Coal," he answered. Instinctively he put his hand in his trousers pocket to clutch the keys to the store-room. But the German was satisfied.

By this time, one of the *Spee*'s launches had overtaken the *Tairoa*'s boats, and the officer, flourishing his pistol, had ordered the men to return to their ship. "Back!" he barked.

The men were shocked and truculent. The shelling had stopped but smoke was pouring from the *Tairoa*. They took no notice of the German's order.

"Don't be daft, lads. Do as he says," Paterson admonished them. It was no time for foolish heroics. Slowly the boats returned. "Set them adrift," the German ordered Paterson as soon as the men had climbed aboard.

The crew was lining up on deck when an officer of the boarding party addressed the captain:

"Your orders are to follow the battleship. For information —what is the speed of your ship?" he asked.

"Eleven knots!" was the reply.

"Stand by."

The information—a considerable underestimate—was signalled. A few minutes later came a change of plan.

"Never mind," Langsdorff signalled back to his men on the *Tairoa*. "Give the *Englaender* ten minutes to pack and bring them here."

Officers and men, carrying an assortment of suitcases, holdalls and kitbags, were returning on deck when Paterson rushed below for a second time. He was closely followed by an armed German. "Halt!"

"Money," growled Paterson. "I forgot my money."

The German smiled, waved him onwards and waited until Paterson had found and counted thirty shillings—all the cash he had in his cabin.

Back on deck the commander of the *Spee* boarding party turned to Chief Officer F. M. Murphy, who was known to his men as an officer with a strong sense of humour.

"Ze papers!"

"Certainly," Murphy replied. He knew that Captain Starr had thrown the *Tairoa*'s papers overboard as soon as he realized that he was being attacked by a German. Motioning the commander to follow him below Murphy descended to his own cabin. In the hope of giving his mates a few more minutes in which to pack, he rummaged among his own things while the *Spee* officer stood by beating the desk with his fingers.

"Here!" Murphy said with a disarming smile. "Ze papers!" He held out several packets of cigarette papers. Angrily the German knocked them out of his hand.

Now it was time to leave the *Tairoa* to her fate. The Germans ordered Captain Starr into one of their launches and the crew followed. The white-haired captain looked calm and dignified in spite of his predicament and his unorthodox clothes, his

pyjamas still showing under his uniform. Sad but defiant, the brave men from the *Tairoa* climbed aboard the *Spee*.

"Look," said Bammant, to his senior, when they were lined up amidships, "there's the name of this damned raider." He pointed to a name-plate on the superstructure: *Von Sheer*.

Paterson looked around cautiously. After a while he gave his verdict. "No," he said, nudging Bammant. "It's a blind. That's the ship's real name." Looking upwards, the officers saw under the "Viking top" on the mast the words: *Graf Spee*.

"Down below, everybody."

The order was given while the *Tairoa*'s crew were shuffling into position. "But we've only just got on deck. Get on board. Get on deck. Get down below," grumbled a sailor. "Why don't you make up your minds."

"Captain's orders," said the German. "You don't want to see your old ship finished off, do you?"

The dull thud of torpedo tubes had no sooner stopped shaking the *Spee* than the battleship turned westwards towards the *Altmark*, which had reached a point half-way between South Africa and South America. The *Altmark*'s prisoners were aware that their floating prison had been cruising in circles for some time. Obviously the tanker was waiting. But waiting for what?

Incidents, small in themselves, soon added up to a general belief that something was afoot, and the prisoners began to engage in their favourite pastime of guessing what might happen. All day long they compared notes of what they had seen, passed on snatches of conversation they had heard, interpreting the smallest hints from "Babyface" or Dr. Tyrolt.

Two prisoners one morning saw "Knitty Whiskers" leaning out over the bow to make sure that every trace of his ship's real name had been obliterated. Was he preparing to make port?

Cudbertson, whose common sense rejected most of the rumours as wild and impossible, pronounced his view firmly. "This going round and round in circles can only mean one thing," he said. "She is waiting for the *Spee*."

"That means some more poor devils have caught it in the neck," was someone's rejoinder. The thought depressed the entire flat.

Wednesday, December 6, was a particularly fine day, but the bright sun tended only to deepen the fears of some prisoners.

"They said we were bound to be sunk, anyway," Platten reminisced gloomily as he paced the deck during morning exercise. "There was a hoodoo on the *Trevanion* from the start."

He recalled a rumour that two men had been killed when the ship was built in 1937. Platten was not sure whether the story was true, but it set tongues wagging.

"When that happens to a ship, it should be scrapped."

"Don't talk nonsense."

Tempers were getting frayed. The guessing and arguing stopped abruptly after a scrappy dinner of near-raw bacon such as Germans are very fond of, but which most Englishmen find indigestible—if they can swallow it at all.

The rumbling of the rolling winches, the activity on deck were unmistakable signs that told the prisoners of the *Spee*'s imminent arrival. At 7.30 p.m. she was suddenly there.

From a crack at the top of the trunkway Carpenter H. Hughes of the *Huntsman* reported to the prisoners below that the *Altmark*'s boat was being lowered. Pompously Captain Dau was trying to stand upright in it and looked like a puppet as he swayed and bent nearly double rather than sit down.

In a second boat he recognized Dr. Tyrolt with three men from Þ deck who needed medical attention. Dau was quite satisfied with the *Altmark*'s little hospital, but Tyrolt was well aware that it lacked most of the essential equipment for serious and urgent medical cases. It had no equipment even for dentistry and none for X-ray examination.

Tyrolt had not found it easy to persuade his captain to let him take his patients to the *Spee*.

"All they want is the rum they get after treatment . . . they won't get any rum from me," he had muttered.

With an angry glance in the direction of Tyrolt's boat close behind him, he boarded the *Spee*, acknowledging on the deck the salutes of Captain Langsdorff's men. The Master-at-Arms, Albert Jerichow, received him and conducted him to the captain's cabin.

"The position is not easy," Langsdorff told Dau after a quick exchange of pleasantries. The new prisoners would have to be transferred to the *Altmark*—yes, there were a lot of them,

but there was really no choice about it. And that was not the main point.

"My ship," Langsdorff said slowly and deliberately, "needs overhauling. We have been at sea for a long time. The engines require attention, more than we can give them under the circumstances. Other repairs are due also."

"I understand, *Herr Kapitaen*," Dau replied. "I understand all the better because, frankly, my ship is in a similarly precarious condition."

The only thing to do, Langsdorff indicated, was frankly to acquaint the Naval High Command with the facts.

Langsdorff looked straight at Dau. He was about to say something which he knew would not fall on favourable ears. The *Spee* captain was a sailor, first and last. Politics were distasteful to him. Dau was known to share the Hitler Government's all-pervading fanaticism which often disregarded the cold facts of war. Langsdorff regarded Hitler's as an unprofessional, purely political approach to naval strategy.

"They will not appreciate the position," he said slowly. "They may think we have had enough of all this. They are not taking kindly to bearers of bad news. But I feel in duty bound to advise them that it is time for them to recall us to base."

Dau's reaction was a silence that spoke volumes. His sly glance at Langsdorff suggested that he had begun to regard his senior compatriot with—to say the least—political suspicion.

"It's up to the Fuehrer," Dau said finally.

"Nonsense!" Langsdorff burst out. "It's up to the Naval Chief of Staff. It's up to the Grand Admiral. Raeder knows these things. Only a sailor understands."

After this exchange, current business was transacted in a cool, impersonal manner. Number of prisoners, charts, routes . . . The two old captured captains, Brown of the *Huntsman* and Starr of the *Tairoa*, it was decided, should stay in the *Altmark*. Langsdorff thought it was expedient now to change the *Altmark*'s waiting area and the spot for the next rendezvous. He said: "I suggest two hundred miles west of Tristan da Cunha, which will at least bring us south of the tip of South Africa."

Dau pleaded for a less distant meeting-place.

"The fact is, I agree that your fuel supply is low and I shall have to make contact sooner or later with our tanker *Tacoma*, which will be loading up in Montevideo. However," Langsdorff conceded, "let us make an alternative arrangement.

But you must understand, *Herr* Dau, that I shall have to go west as fast as possible and if anything unforeseen happens we shall have to revert to the original plan."

The interview ended. Dau believed he had noticed a defeatist attitude in Langsdorff's manner. That evening for the first time the *Altmark* captain wrote in his personal diary—which rarely corresponded with the official record he kept—about the flaw he was positive he had detected in the *Spee* captain's political outlook.

Already while he had been on board the *Spee* the transfer of one hundred and forty-four new British prisoners from the warship to the *Altmark* had been set in motion. They were sent over in three launches and although a fresh south-east trade wind was blowing and there was a moderate sea, the operation did not take long.

The newcomers, most of them in warm clothing, were being lined up on deck as Dau retired to his cabin. Weichert was conducting the roll call, counting and recounting the men. It was dusk before he told the guards to conduct them to the holds. Apprehensively the prison officer found himself in the middle of a crowd of jostling British sailors. He felt uneasy.

"*Hinunter, vorwaerts!*" he shouted in German. His voice betrayed his agitation.

"Step down this ladder, gentlemen," "Babyface" Schmidt repeated in English.

A rough shout went up as the men in the hold crowded towards the trunkway ladder to welcome the new arrivals. The old prisoners pushed forward, holding out helping hands, completely oblivious of Weichert, who was unable to extricate himself from the sailors swarming all around.

Weichert spoke English well. But his voice was lost in the noisy exchange of greetings, the meetings of friends, the shouts of excitement, as the two parties of prisoners, now three hundred strong, mingled together.

The German's cheeks were flushed. Now there were shouts addressed specifically to him; he could not mistake the threats and insults uttered in a dozen rasping English dialects. Later

he confessed that at that moment he was near panic. His trembling hands clenched into fists. He tried to turn round, but felt caught. He made towards the ladder but many noisy moments passed before he reached it. Like a monkey he ascended to the trunkway head and the deck. He had no doubt that he had only just escaped physical attack, maybe death.

"*Herr Kapitaen,*" he reported to Dau, still flushed and tense. "Revolt is brewing in the holds." He was breathing heavily. "Am I glad to be up here again. They have been threatening me!"

"Tell me exactly what happened."

"They have been crowding me. Those in the background were most insulting . . ."

"What did they say?"

Weichert hesitated. Dau made a gesture encouraging him to speak. Slowly the prison officer wrung the words from his lips.

"Nazi bastard . . ."

"Well, the main thing is that they let you go and that you are unhurt. Obviously these men are as arrogant as all Englishmen. Perhaps there is more to this than meets the eye."

He called Paulsen to his cabin. After all, he reckoned quickly, the number of prisoners was now twice that of the crew. Might they not plan to take over the ship? Could this not have been a first attempt to test their strength?

"I shall put a stop to this before they get out of hand. I want all the prisoners on parade first thing tomorrow morning."

It was to be Dau's great moment, a psychological masterstroke to crush the revolt before it could spread or even start.

"*Herr Kapitaen,*" Weichert addressed him ceremoniously at 8 a.m. next morning, "I have the honour to report—all prisoners on parade."

"I have something to say," Dau began, glancing up towards the bridge on which he had posted twelve guards, with rifles at the ready. The sight reassured him. It had taken him half the night to prepare his speech. Now he cleared his throat.

"A great number of you," he said harshly, looking over the prisoners' heads into the air, his goatee beard thrust out and quivering, "a great number of you do not seem to know what precisely is your position on board this ship . . . do not seem to realize that we are at war . . . a war which was instigated

by England to reimpose on Germany the kind of slavery which my *Vaterland* suffered after 1918 . . . chiefly through England's fault. Now let me tell you—this war will not be won by England—as surely as I stand before you . . ."

There were mutterings, grins, the hint of a challenge. Dau was fully aware that hardly a single prisoner believed in the possibility of a German victory. Angrily he glared at the captains, whose sunburned features gave no hint of what they thought.

"I have not assembled you here to discuss these things with you," he continued incongruously. His voice rose: "My purpose is to make you realize that you should not expect me to harbour any feelings of friendship for you. Why, only yesterday, I heard on the wireless how cruelly Germans in South Africa are being treated by the English authorities. As a German I am reluctant to vent my spite on defenceless prisoners. This ship was not originally intended to take prisoners on board and we have been forced to use what facilities we have—the ammunition holds in which you have been accommodated. Happily we have found jute and carpets on the *Huntsman* which have enabled us to make the holds tolerable. I shall do what I can to make you as comfortable as possible—anyway."

"Hear, hear," the prisoners responded ironically. There was some derisive clapping.

"You can skip your approval," Dau said harshly, once more misinterpreting the prisoners' sarcasm. "What you think leaves me completely cold. You will be treated as prisoners are treated everywhere as far as conditions permit. For the rest—it entirely depends on your attitude whether supervision is to be mild or strict. But if you think you can challenge me . . ."

Many of his words trailed into nothing. The phalanx of unwavering looks facing him was clearly throwing him off his stroke. Abruptly he broke off his lecture and departed.

Without troubling to watch his strutting figure, the prisoners dissolved into small groups and returned to the holds.

Dau was dissatisfied with himself. Obviously, with the *Graf Spee* within hailing distance, there could not have been a calamitous revolt. He had allowed his temper and his hatred for everything British to carry him away. His speech, he felt, had not gone down well and might possibly even have damaged

his authority. The contemptuous smiles, which he had noticed just before he left on some prisoners' lips, haunted him.

He was waiting for a signal from the *Spee*, whose gunnery officer had requested his assistance in a short series of target-practice and distance-measuring tests. The *Altmark* was to have put out the targets. But the morning of December 7 had hardly dawned when the *Spee* signalled cancelling the exercise. Soon the pocket-battleship was steaming off westwards.

Dau hurried to the bridge to see the *Spee* disappearing in the distance. The string of signal flags spelled out: "*Auf Wiedersehen.*" It was the last he saw of the warship. But at that moment he did not dream that he would never see the *Admiral Graf Spee* again.

The prisoners knew that the *Spee* had gone almost as soon as Dau. They had organized, with the help of the newcomers, a regular look-out "watch" and at first light had taken turns at the top of the trunkway. When word was passed round that the *Spee* was departing and they had given the warship a mock send-off "with all the worst wishes", they, like Dau, did not think they had seen the last of the battleship.

During roll call, some of the officers tried to compute their total numbers. Twenty-seven men—captains, senior officers, radio officers and sick men—they knew, had been taken to the *Graf Spee*. The captains left were Starr and Brown, to whom Dau had allocated a compartment with two beds. Including the two captains, the Indians and West Africans, the officers calculated there were over three hundred prisoners aboard the *Altmark*.

The eight West Africans had now superseded the Indians as the favourite topic of conversation at the *Altmark* captain's table. Dau said his worst view of Englishmen was confirmed when he was told they had raised no objection to the West Africans sharing their quarters. On board their own ships they had done so. Why not in captivity? a Geordie had asked.

Dr. Tyrolt contributed to the fun by telling his captain how fond the Africans were of castor oil, which they forever asked him to prescribe as a remedy for their digestive troubles. "The fact is," Tyrolt sneered, "these fellows love to drink oil and will go to any length to get it!"

The following evening Weichert was ready with another tale. One of the white prisoners had been involved in a fight

with a "coloured gentleman", but an older white-haired nigger—a sort of foreman—had separated them and made peace.

"I should have killed the nigger," Dau commented.

From his bridge, during the exercise periods, he always watched the powerfully-built West Africans carefully. At lunch one day he described contemptuously how he had watched them taking part in deck sports—tug-o'-war.

"They were cheating," he said. He had seen them attach their end of the rope to a deck capstan so that their opponents could not pull them across the line. But he had missed the fun and good-humoured banter when the deception was discovered.

As always happened when *Spee* and *Altmark* met and exchanged news, the prisoners' grape-vine—the "rumour factory" some called it—soon began to hum. The men of the *Spee* were always better-informed. They would pass on scraps of information to the *Altmark* crew, who in turn gave snatches often distorted beyond recognition to the captives.

It was John Bammant, bubbling as ever, on his day as "peggy", who brought back from an excursion to the *Altmark* galley one explanation for the undercurrent of apprehension which had preceded the *Spee*'s last meeting with the supply ship.

"Our battleship *Rodney* has been chasing the *Spee*—and nearly caught up with her. That would have been the day!"

"Good for the Royal Navy."

"Well, chaps," Bammant doused their enthusiasm, "she got away that time. But the next time, oh boy!" Even the restless Bammant was quiet for a time contemplating the fate of their enemy.

CHAPTER VIII

GRAF SPEE CORNERED

THE *Graf Spee* still had her ninth and last victim to kill. Langsdorff turned westward, partly to avoid the avenging ships of the Royal Navy and partly to prey, as a final fling, on the rich shipping always to be found, in peace or war, steaming along the River Plate–Freetown route.

The s.s. *Streonshalh*, 3,895 tons, registered at the little Yorkshire port of Whitby, was six days out from the South American coast when she met her doom. The small ship had made the outward journey with a cargo of coal, in convoy, but for the return trip with grain was taking her chance alone.

News that a raider was ranging the South Atlantic had not reached the master, J. J. Robinson; and when he saw the *Spee*, flying a French flag, at tea-time on the day after the *Spee* and *Altmark* had said goodbye for the last time, he did not worry.

Langsdorff followed his well-tried plan. Half a mile away, he hauled down the tricolour and replaced it with a swastika.

Captain Robinson had sprung to action before the change-over was completed. "Take the ship's papers below and burn them in the boiler," he snapped to one officer. He rang down "full astern".

"German raider. Lower the boats. Prepare to abandon ship."

The ship came to life in seconds. Four boats were lowered and the crew were rowing furiously from their unlucky ship before the *Spee*'s launch was in the water.

"May be either a long row or a long sail for us, lads," the captain had told his men as they pulled away.

But it was neither. Ten minutes later, menaced by *Spee* sailors, thirty-three members of the *Streonshalh*'s crew were climbing the rope-ladder on to the battleship's deck. Their imprisonment had begun. The fate of their ship had been sealed by ten six-inch shells fired from almost point-blank range.

"Your men will not be here long," an officer told the captain, as with Chief Engineer Jeffries, he was led away to a separate cabin. "You will stay here, but we have another home for them—on our supply ship." Between six and seven o'clock they met the rest of the British captains and officers in the *Spee*.

. . . . .

That same evening, as the *Streonshalh*'s crew, under their chief officer, T. W. Mallinson, were drawing a meal of coffee and black bread, Bammant, in the *Altmark*, said:

"If they catch any more of our boys we shall be packed as tight as these sardines."

He was smacking his lips over a luxury special issue of sardines. Only a few minutes before he had been using his penknife—like most of his comrades he had ignored a German order to surrender it—to dig a piece of shrapnel from his leg. It had been embedded since the shelling of the *Tairoa* and had only just found its way to the surface.

Bammant's jokes, while he performed the painful operation, had kept a big, interested audience amused, even though his blood was flowing freely.

"Going to put some oil on my wounds . . ." he joked, juggling the sardine tin.

George King, the stocky engineer of the *Doric Star*, who came no higher than Bammant's shoulder, demurred.

"Why waste it, boy?" said he in his sing-song Welsh voice. "Look, if we collect all this oil, you never know how it would come in useful." He moved his head from one side to the other, and continued, as if thinking aloud:

"For instance, these water-tight doors are bolted on the outside every night and we can't get from one flat to t'other; now, if we oil the hinges we can force out the pins and get the doors open from the inside. Let's save all the oil from the sardines, boys, and try it out." That night the hinges were forced.

The accumulated experience and ingenuity of three hundred seamen began to produce many more ideas. The deck officers were especially active. Evans, the *Doric Star*'s third mate, had secreted in his kit a magnetic variation chart of the world and used it to plot the *Altmark*'s course. Every day, ten minutes before noon, one of the mates would climb to the top of the

trunkway and with a piece of string weighted with a button would mark out on paper the maximum shadow made by the string.

"What's it for?" echoed Paterson, who had devised the method. "It gives us the noon altitude of the sun. Helps us to work out where we are, when we've got the longitude at sunset to go with it."

"Can't expect you ignorant engineers to understand such things," quipped one of the younger mates.

One of the *Altmark*'s sailors showed himself helpful to the prisoners in many ways. He had just come down to E flat with a few cigarettes and was beginning to pass them round when 'Fritz', the smooth-faced *Spee* guard, his eyes screwed up, burst out in rapid German:

"*Was machst du hier?*"

Some of the Tyneside seamen had a fair smattering of the German language, picked up in Hamburg and other German ports before the war. They followed the angry exchange.

"He is threatening to tell old 'Knitty Whiskers' . . ." one of them translated.

Some of the men felt inclined to sit back and enjoy the quarrel between the two Germans. Others angrily prepared to go to the aid of the friendly *Altmark* sailor. The altercation grew. Noisily the two Germans returned to the deck.

Next day the swastika flag was run up on the *Altmark*. The prisoners thought it was a curious sight—considering the prison ship was still posing as the Norwegian vessel *Sogne*. But soon grim news filtered along the grape-vine—the flag was flying because a court-martial was in session. The *Altmark* sailor, they heard that night, was sentenced to eight days in the tank.

Tempers shortened as the days went by. One morning Johnny Wright, a fireman of the *Doric Star*, picked up a piece of canvas on deck to bind his disintegrating boots to his feet.

"*Zurück!* Put that back!" a guard ordered.

"It's only a rag."

The guard made a threatening gesture. "Don't argue," he shouted and moved as if to strike Wright. But Wright was quicker and struck first.

Captain Dau was fuming when Wright was brought before him the following day. From a torrent of abuse the savage sentence emerged: twenty-one days solitary confinement.

Already at the end of his second day in the dark, evil-smelling tank, Wright was dismally chewing his black bread when another German entered. Without a word he handed over five cigarettes.

"What's the gag?" Wright asked, suspiciously. Remembering a more easily intelligible German word he repeated: "*Warum?*"

The German sailor explained that he, too, had been in the tank for smoking in a prohibited place. He had just been released and wanted to get rid of his cigarettes so as not to be tempted to repeat the offence.

Unaccountably to the prisoners, the atmosphere on board grew more and more oppressive among the German crew. A *Spee* guard one day, in a talkative mood, told a group of prisoners that the *Altmark* crew were getting restless. Perhaps it was the approach of Christmas. He shrugged. Dau had tried to pacify them and told them they could expect to be home in January. The *Altmark* crew knew that oil stocks were growing lower every day.

The ship's course was still due south. Routine was changed and the daily turn-out and bath was put forward to 6 a.m. The water ration was getting perceptibly smaller. The southward course was reflected in the cool air. The prisoners began to shiver on deck. Then it grew colder in the trunkway, and in the stuffy airless flats.

Attempts to pass the time with games often broke down. One day a spelling bee was organized; it kept some of the prisoners interested for a time. A pack of cards and a few enthusiasts induced another group to try the "cissy" game of bridge. But it was all haphazard and the men were hard to rouse from their listless mood.

On Monday, December 11, it started to rain. Cudbertson was one of the men who had saved up a little water to wash his trunks. He hung them up to air. A few minutes later they had disappeared. He knew it would be hopeless to search for them.

"It wouldn't be so bad if I had another pair," moaned Cudbertson, "or if I hadn't first wasted precious soap washing them!"

Other comments, especially by some of the older officers, were harsher. "Thieving hounds," they muttered. "Must have

been one of our boys. Stealing from their own kith and kin—the bastards. Worse than the Nazis."

Men ground their teeth but anger was wasted. Anxiously they scanned the horizon every time they had a chance to go on deck.

"Wonder where the *Spee*'s got to?" someone asked.

Captain Dau wondered, too. There had been no news from Langsdorff for a full week. Neither, in spite of a twenty-four-hour watch, had the *Altmark* succeeded in picking up a single British wireless message. To Dau it was an ominous indication that radio silence was being observed all over the South Atlantic. And that meant one thing. The Royal Navy were out to avenge many innocent British merchant ships.

It was December 13, not much after 5.30 a.m., on the sort of grey day which favours hunting warships, that the *Altmark* master's premonition was confirmed. Dau's radio officer stormed into his cabin just as he awakened.

"*Spee* signal to the *Seekriegsfuehrung*"—the German Naval War Command—he reported. He had just picked up Captain Langsdorff's short report, according to which the *Spee* was being engaged by a British cruiser.

The one thing that Dau feared was happening. He knew that Langsdorff would never willingly steam into battle; it was contrary to his basic orders. The Royal Navy's radio silence obviously heralded a carefully prearranged manœuvre which, he believed, could only be directed against "the German ghost ship", as the *Spee* had been described in previous messages.

Danger was bound to be present where he assumed the *Spee* was hunting for booty—near the Argentine and Uruguay trade routes.

. . . . .

Battened down in the midshipmen's quarters of the *Spee*, the imprisoned British merchant officers were trying to guess what was happening, when five short bursts on the alarm buzzers roused them. Captain Dove was first to recognize it as an urgent alarm signal—much more urgent than the call to battle stations which he had previously heard when the warship had attacked a merchantman.

"I believe *he's* caught something this time," Dove said intuitively, sensing that a battle was imminent.

"I hope these Germans get a damned good hiding," said Captain Edwards, master of the *Trevanion*, as he roused himself on his locker-top. "Suppose it's the *Renown*—she'll blow this tin can out of the water."

There were twenty-seven British prisoners in the room—twenty-four captains and officers and the three wounded lads from the *Tairoa*, who had just been discharged from the *Spee*'s hospital, although some shrapnel splinters still remained in their bodies. Old men and young tensed themselves to face the tremendous events which—not one of them doubted—were about to unfold on the deck of the battleship above them.

Patrick Dove, calm in this decisive moment, glanced round the crowded room. The *Doric Star* chief officer, Mr. Ranson, was carrying on with his morning ablutions; he was gargling without any outward sign of concern. Others were quietly lashing and stowing their hammocks. A few were shaving. The *Newton Beech* first officer, J. L. Coutts, was carefully cutting up his tobacco to stuff into his pipe.

"Listen!"

The engines of the *Spee*'s plane, which had been warming up for its daily early morning reconnaissance flight, suddenly stopped. For an instant there was complete silence. But the silence did not last long. It was followed by the frantic clatter of boots along the steel alleyways, by the rattling of ladders as bodies hurled themselves one after the other to action stations, by the rumbling commands crackling and distorted over the loud-speaker system.

All eyes were turned on the corner of the cabin and the wires which converged on the electric alarm. Suddenly it emitted a series of three shrill rings. The prisoners had never heard this sound before.

Mr. McCorry, the *Huntsman*'s radio officer, rushed to the peep-holes—screw apertures in the door—which had often enabled them to see what was happening outside. Through the tiny holes he could just see parties of German sailors unloading shells as they came up the electric elevators.

"This can only mean one thing," deduced Dove, "a big battle."

Behind the locked doors the prisoners paced their quarters. They felt trapped, like animals in a cage. The three wounded boys shuddered as the *Spee*'s diesels were opened out.

Crisis below, crisis on deck. On the *Spee*'s bridge, high above the prisoners, there was crisis too. Captain Langsdorff was in vital conference with Lieutenant-Captain Kay, Navigation Officer Wattenberg and the gunnery expert.

A little earlier Langsdorff had risen to find that the *Spee*, in accordance with his instructions, was moving away from the coast of Brazil. The previous evening he had been within a hundred and fifty miles of it. Now, his plan was to take his ship astride the shipping lanes which led from the north and north-east to the River Plate, Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Once in position, his aircraft could range in a wide semi-circle in search of new victims.

Look-outs were scanning the horizon with tired eyes at dawn when a sailor, more alert than the rest, reported the appearance of a tiny needle of a mast at the limit of his vision. No sooner had his telephone report reached the bridge than Wattenberg fixed his own position: 34°22′ S., 49°14′ W. The strange mast, just visible, belonged to a ship which was over fifteen miles away.

The signal started an urgent argument among the *Spee*'s three senior officers as far as Langsdorff ever allowed a conference with his officers to lapse into controversy. They were deliberating whether the distant ship could possibly be a merchantman, when a signal from another look-out suggested that it was suspiciously like a cruiser. Whether it was light or heavy could not yet be seen, but it was probably hostile. Soon two other masts were reported. The cruiser was apparently accompanied by two destroyers.

For a moment Langsdorff appeared to hesitate.

"We can still avoid contact," Kay suggested. "They may not have spotted us. We can still evade action." He was thinking of the Naval Command's orders.

"Evade action?" Langsdorff repeated rhetorically.

Reports were now flashing up to the bridge. All indications were that the enemy ships were continuing on their course right across the *Spee*'s route. Kay expected his captain to give orders to halt the *Spee* on its course. In this way, he was convinced, the enemy would pass the ship unnoticed.

"I believe we are dealing with a valuable convoy protected by a few destroyers," Langsdorff said. "The escort can be

nothing like a match for us in range and power. We shall attack it."

That was as far as Captain Langsdorff was prepared to explain to his officers. "Stay on course," he ordered decisively. His plan was to engage the escort vessels and destroy them.

"*Herr Kapitaen . . .*"

Once more Kay tried to demur. He raised his voice in protest, but he had no opportunity to say any more.

"*Los.*" Langsdorff interrupted him. "Let's go."

The chain of command was already in motion when Kay left the bridge, shaking his head gravely. The nerve-rattling buzz of the alarm mingled with the drone of the engines. The *Spee* was moving full speed ahead towards the unknown enemy.

If Langsdorff had known more, his actions would have been far different. The "enemy" was, in fact, H.M.S. *Exeter*, an eight-inch cruiser, called by Commodore Harry Harwood, Commander-in-Chief, South America, from patrol over two thousand miles away to join his flag-ship, the smaller New Zealand six-inch cruiser *Achilles*, in a hunt for the German "ghost ship". In company with the two was another six-inch cruiser, H.M.S. *Ajax*.

For ten days now this was the moment for which Harwood had planned. He had guessed where the *Spee* would turn up after sinking the *Doric Star*. But when his officers reported that the *Spee* was actually closing to meet him at full speed, Harwood could not believe his ears. He had expected the enemy ship—whoever she was—to run for her life.

Langsdorff, quietly chewing his unlighted cigar-end, as usual, on the bridge, nodded when the gunnery officer approached him.

"Distance twenty-six thousand metres," said the officer. "Have I permission to fire?"

Through his glasses the *Spee* captain saw the flamboyant battle ensigns on the masts of the three British ships. Slowly they fluttered in the morning breeze. Langsdorff's challenge had been accepted. The British warships were advancing at full speed. The *Spee* had not shirked a fight. Neither had they.

"Permission to fire granted," Langsdorff said.

There were no British merchant ships in view anywhere to which the British squadron might be acting as escort. But the

Spee officers were too pressed to reflect whether their captain had miscalculated or whether he was seeking battle for reasons he had not disclosed. *Exeter* was clearly within range when the order to fire was given.

"Fire," repeated the gunners.

The *Spee*'s first salvo of eleven-inch shells from her main guns shook the ship. Second and third salvoes followed. Seconds later the shells plunged into the sea close to the *Exeter*. Water rose in great cascading fountains.

There was a distant flash. The *Exeter*'s smaller guns from nineteen thousand four hundred yards were going into action. Tense moments passed until their shells hit the water ahead of the *Spee*. A second salvo moved nearer. The gunners were getting the range. The pace of the exchange quickened with *Ajax* and *Achilles* joining in from the east. Salvoes followed one another across the calm expanse of sea, which was being ploughed up by bursts all round the ships.

Now Captain Langsdorff was no longer in doubt that he had underestimated the enemy. For a moment he considered whether it would be possible to slip away. But it was too late. There was nothing left except to fight it out.

The *Exeter*'s shells now found their mark and Langsdorff saw that he must damage her irretrievably before the two lighter cruisers could close with their smaller guns. His position before the battle had been in progress many minutes was precarious. The *Spee* was in shallow water with the coast to starboard.

At this moment Langsdorff's heavy guns found *Exeter*. Direct hits on the bridge and one of the gun-turrets almost put the British cruiser out of control, and killed many officers and men. But while *Exeter* took her punishment, *Ajax* and *Achilles* had moved into more favourable positions—and nearer—between the battleship and the coast. Their smaller guns began to pound the *Spee*.

While the *Spee*'s eleven-inch guns poured shell after shell into the stricken *Exeter*, Langsdorff's gunners were trying frantically to range their small armaments on *Ajax* and *Achilles*. Shell splinters damaged *Achilles*, but *Ajax* was more fortunate. Shells from the *Spee*'s smaller guns fell short; those from one of the *Spee*'s big guns straddled but did not hit the speeding cruiser.

The battle had now been in progress nearly half an hour and both sides had wounds to show. The British, with *Achilles'* controlling wireless out of action, were firing blindly. *Exeter* was hit, badly damaged, listing and on fire. But Langsdorff had no time to congratulate his crew. Almost as soon as he observed his success, shells from *Ajax* wrecked the *Spee*'s control tower, which housed the direction-finding instruments for his heaviest guns.

The *Exeter*'s sacrifice had not been in vain. Rapid inspection showed that before her guns were put out of action she had done major damage. Big gaps yawned in the hull of the *Spee*. The casualties among gunnery officers in the battleship's control tower were heavy. Many members of the crew had met their death when a shell had penetrated one of the compartments just above the water line.

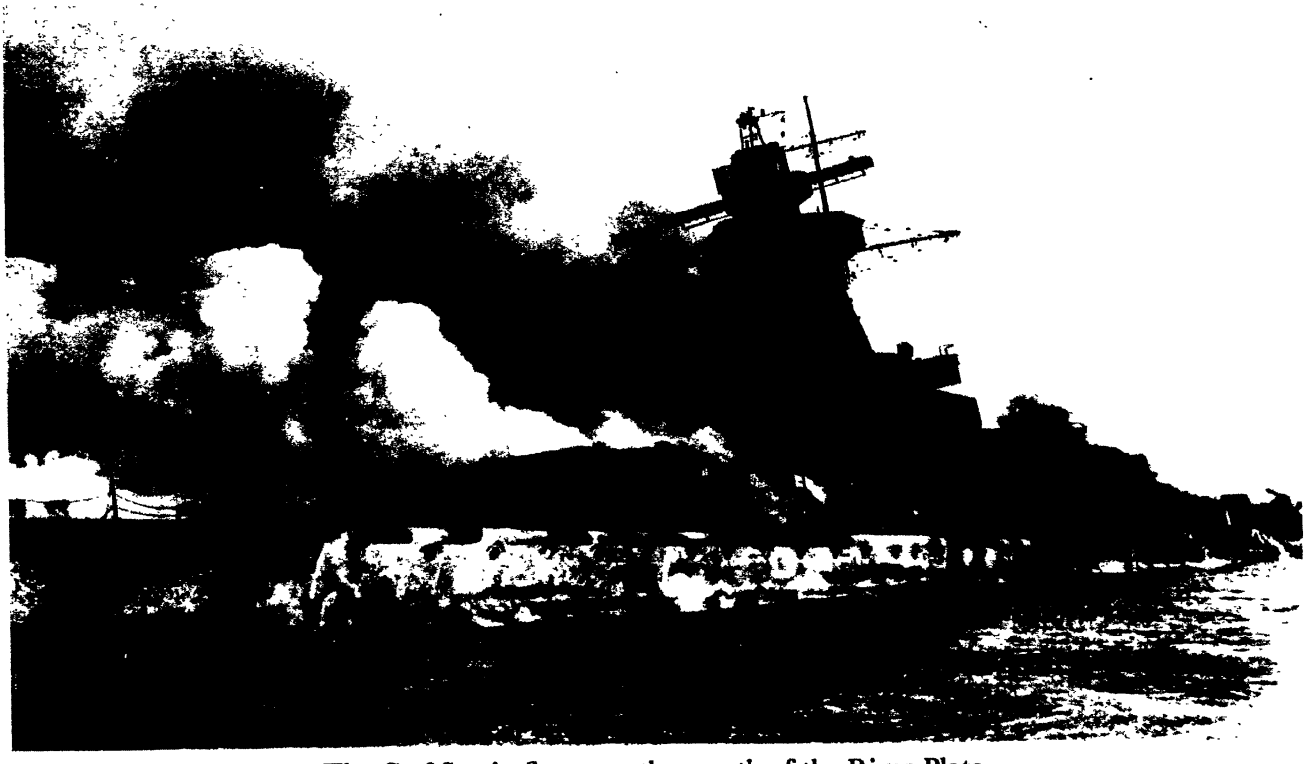
"Smoke!" Langsdorff ordered. He was anxious to break off the engagement for the time being and obscure the position until he could attack the British ships from a better point. Before he turned north-west he saw with satisfaction that the *Exeter*, his most powerful enemy, was limping away in the direction of the Falkland Islands. Her guns had fired only spasmodically for some minutes and no further danger could come from her. She had been hit a hundred times.

But Harwood was still full of fight and the size of his enemy did not frighten him. Boldly he led *Ajax* and *Achilles* into the *Spee*'s smoke screen. Ignoring the battleship's heaviest guns, the light cruisers closed nearer to the *Spee*.

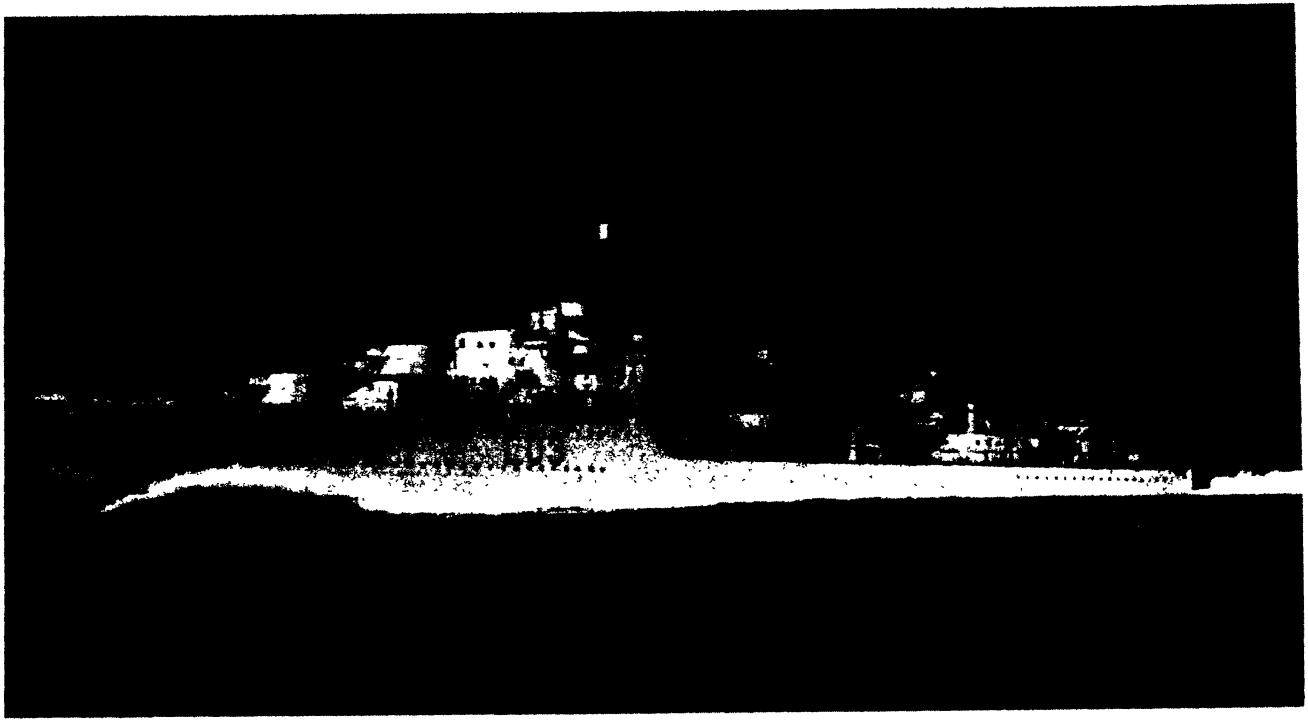
If Langsdorff had had it in his mind to pursue *Exeter* and send the crippled cruiser to the bottom, the lightning approach of the two daring cruisers foiled it.

Their six-inch guns began to fire as soon as they were through the screen and the first salvo hit a gun-turret of the *Spee*, killing the entire crew. Harwood boldly moved so close that the *Spee*'s eleven-inch guns could not be brought efficiently to bear on his ships. When the big shells were on target, they cut over the cruisers and did not explode until they had reached the sea on the other side.

Smoke, black and menacing, now covered the entire battle area as Langsdorff tried desperately to manœuvre out of range. From time to time he stopped to fire at the worrying cruisers, and two direct hits smashed both *Ajax*'s after-



The *Graf Spee* in flames at the mouth of the River Plate



H.M.S. *Cossack*

turrets, silencing the guns at once. Another hit did damage to *Achilles*. But the smaller ships fought on and one of their shells left a hole six feet square in *Spee*'s starboard plating.

Things were getting serious—for Harwood no less than for Langsdorff. Out-gunned, the British were short of shells and had suffered many casualties. Both commanders decided to change tactics again—Harwood to lay smoke to cover his movements and Langsdorff to try once more to shake off the cruisers as he ran for South America. Now, as he sped westward, he called for urgent reports on the damage which the *Spee* had suffered.

The crew's galley had received a direct hit and was completely destroyed. Part of the torpedo compartment and the crew's living-quarters had been badly damaged. Mast and bridge had been hit and the munitions elevator serving the forward six-inch guns was out of action. Two of the boats were riddled by shell splinters. Sixty-one sailors were wounded, forty of them seriously. Many were in agonizing pain. Thirty-six sailors were beyond help. Their bodies were laid out on deck—casualties of the first fierce battle of the war.

The British ships were turning away and prudently were keeping just out of the *Spee*'s range. But, though their light guns were useless at the range, the *Spee* captain needed all his skill to avoid the torpedoes which the cruisers kept firing.

The morning wore on. The wounded were succoured and order of a tattered sort was restored. Captain Langsdorff was on the ship's telephone, hearing reports from his signallers, who were listening in on the wavelength of the British ships. At regular intervals the *Spee* picked up signals which gave the exact location of *Ajax* and *Achilles* as well as the course and the speed of the *Spee*. Langsdorff believed that the signals were being sent to strong British naval reinforcements which no doubt were speeding to the scene of the battle from all over the South Atlantic.

Kay reported to the captain with a sheaf of papers in his hand. Without a word he handed them to Langsdorff. They contained a calculation of the *Spee*'s remaining stock of ammunition. Expenditure during the brief but decisive battle had been great. The *Spee* at no time had intended to join action against enemy warships and logistically relied on ammunition

supplies from the *Altmark* to maintain a narrow safety margin. What now remained in the ammunition lockers on this fateful day was not enough to meet another emergency.

Slowly, with mounting dismay, Langsdorff read the ominous figures, and Kay, watching him closely, had no doubt that the *Spee* captain was facing the crisis of his career. What would he do? As he watched he became convinced that Langsdorff would never listen to advice. His thoughts seemed to be far away, his features were tense, his free hand clenching and unclenching.

He might, Kay thought, be considering the possibility of an escape into southern waters before the Royal Navy could collect a force strong enough to attack him. But the gaping hole in the *Spee*'s hull would obviously endanger the ship in rough waters. True, the vital parts of the warship—the engines and the heavy artillery—were intact or could be repaired, but it was clearly impossible to replace torn and mangled plates.

Langsdorff came out of his trance and quietly asked about the possibility of repairs.

"We cannot carry out such major repairs at sea. Welding and other equipment is wrecked."

"And the flour's drenched, sir," the second officer reported from the cabin door. His interruption sounded incongruous. Nevertheless, the destruction of the *Spee* bakery, on which he was reporting, was also an important matter.

"The ship and the men need respite—the wounded must be put ashore," Langsdorff said at last. "I am taking her in."

In the midshipmen's quarters the British captains and officers held their breath as the uncanny silence above, following the fury of the battle, posed the puzzle: What had happened?

The prisoners strained every nerve to interpret the muted sounds, to understand the loudspeakers' crackling orders. The battle, at first intense but diminishing after the initial violence had passed, had lasted a long time. The first hits on the *Spee* had sent crockery flying among the prisoners, and even in the locked wardroom they could feel the shell blasts. But a cheer went up, confident and unafraid. The prisoners knew that the British shells were not meant for them.

Through their spy-hole McCorry and Dove had seen

wounded sailors carried from the elevators; they passed on the news in a graphic running commentary when, within their view, a shell struck a gaping hole on the deck and was halted only by a thick steel beam. Through their hole they saw the guard collapsing.

"If that had struck the plating between the beams . . ." Captain Dove said.

Everyone understood. A few inches the other way and the shell would have reached their quarters and burst right among them. They were about to shake off the dust and the wooden splinters which the shell had sent flying when they discovered that one of the wounded boys had crumpled up silently in great agony. A stray shell splinter had hit him and gashed his arm. Another flying fragment had narrowly missed Fred Edwards of the *Huntsman.*

The manœuvring of the *Spee* had caused the prisoners great discomfort; zig-zagging, the battleship had heeled over constantly, throwing the men, without warning, into confusion. A hit had damaged the electric wiring system and put out the lights, though later the engineers managed to get a solitary bulb alight again.

Then came the silence which oppressed the helpless prisoners as they waited, while their own fate and that of the *Spee* hung in the balance. During one lull a German sailor appeared in the door. "Are you all right in there?" he asked.

He brought water but refused to answer questions.

There was nothing for it but to try and clean up the mess the battle had left in the wardroom. It did not dawn on the prisoners for a long time that the battle was over.

There was a mess of a different sort in the compartment forward where Chief Officer Mallinson and his men from the *Streonshalh* were quartered uncomfortably. When the battle began, the door of the compartment was flung open and an armed guard was thrust into the room with the prisoners. Then the door was locked again.

The guns began to boom, crack and thud according to calibre. Presently an engineer tapped Mr. Mallinson on the shoulder. "Look at him," he said, pointing to the guard. Head in his hands, the German was sobbing convulsively. After some minutes, Mallinson could stand it no longer. He banged on the door and shouted for the guard commander.

"For heaven's sake take him away," he said, seizing the still weeping guard by the shoulder and propelling him through the door. "He's upsetting my men."

The compartment door was locked again. A moment later a shell crashed on to the deck above and water began to trickle down the plates. The trickle grew into a flood.

"That one hit the lavatory," said Mallinson, as he watched the water cascading down. "Here, lads, start baling or we'll be drowned before we're killed by shells."

The running fight had taken the combatants far towards the shore of Uruguay. Moving in as close as seemed prudent—which was some distance away—Captain Fernando Fuentes, commanding the Uruguayan cruiser *Uruguay*, watched the final stages of the dramatic struggle. An entry in his diary recorded that it was 8.42 p.m., more than fourteen hours after the battle opened, when he saw the last flashes from the guns.

Langsdorff had made his decision. The cold staring eyes of his officers told him they did not approve. If they were thinking of a death-and-glory battle to the finish, he did not propose to oblige. Outwardly as reticent and uncommunicative as ever, he was still not unaffected by their attitude.

"Cypher Officer," he called.

There was now no longer any need to maintain radio silence. His position was only too well known to the enemy. He wrote out a short signal, explaining his position, enumerating the damage to his ship and the casualties among his crew.

"To the Naval High Command," he ordered.

He knew that he could not expect a reply with definite instructions because Grand Admiral Raeder had always insisted that battle decisions should be left to the captain on the spot. In any case, which commander-in-chief would offer advice to a captain and ship in such a desperate situation? Without awaiting for a formal answer, Langsdorff began to consider the complicated manœuvre necessary to take him to the nearest port.

The choice was limited. It must be either Buenos Aires or Montevideo. But Buenos Aires was a hundred and thirty-five miles up-stream, while Montevideo stood on the tip of the wide mouth of the River Plate. Argentina was certainly more friendly towards Germany than Uruguay, but without much thought Langsdorff knew than Montevideo was a safer bet.

Ajax and *Achilles* were still at his heels, keeping out of range but determined not to let their prey slip away. Though Langsdorff knew that they dared not attack him they spelled deadly danger to him as the watchful eyes of approaching reinforcements.

In *Ajax* Commodore Harwood was wondering what Langsdorff would do. He hoped to be one jump ahead whatever the German did. The Admiralty had informed him that *Cumberland*, *Renown* and *Ark Royal* had been directed to join his force, but the ships were as yet far away. Would Langsdorff try to run for it?

"Close in," he ordered. But no sooner did *Achilles* venture within range than the *Spee*'s guns fired again.

From Punta del Este, the Uruguayan Lido, where a fascinated crowd was watching the approach of the warship, it looked as if the battle might well be resumed on Montevideo's doorstep. But the noise died down quickly and the night lights began to come out until the hillsides were ablaze.

Commodore Harwood, reviewing his position, now calculated that Langsdorff might possibly try to move his ship from the harbour under the cover of night. He took *Ajax* towards the mouth of the River Plate to cut off the *Spee*. His radio officers reported that Langsdorff was in touch with the German Naval High Command, but there had been no time to decipher the code. Where was Langsdorff steering?

The German Naval High Command's reply was as expected. It was up to the captain of the *Graf Spee* to take responsibility for a course on which he was already well set. The *Spee* had reached Uruguayan territorial waters. *Achilles* fell back and joined *Ajax* on watch. They saw the *Spee* steaming into the harbour of Montevideo, where she dropped anchor. Her engines stopped.

Below deck, British officers and men were still, too. Each was wrestling with a thousand racing thoughts, whispering from time to time to his neighbour in the stillness, trying to guess what the utter silence might mean.

The sound of a key turning in the lock brought the men to their feet. Lieutenant Herzberg, accompanied by two guards, entered. He tried to smile.

"Gentlemen," he said, "we are in Montevideo harbour. Tomorrow you will be free."

"Are we anchored?" Patrick Dove asked him. Herzberg nodded.

Dove joyfully shook his hand. In their joy the others, too, rushed forward to shake his hand—to shake with each other, with everybody who was within reach. Herzberg did not mind their questions. Briefly he told them what had happened.

"We have badly damaged the *Exeter*, but we could not stand up to three of your ships."

It was midnight but nobody thought of sleep.

CHAPTER IX

THE *ALTMARK* ALONE

"I'M THIRSTY. IN fact I'm damned thirsty!"

George King, the *Doric Star*'s second engineer, woke up with these words on his cracked lips. It was 6 a.m. and exactly eleven days to Christmas. There had been no drinking water on the previous day. The *Altmark* seemed to have put on speed at last and was steaming in a northerly direction, but even that did not make the prisoners much more cheerful.

"Wonder whether our folks know that we are alive," Foley pondered. A group of sailors were discussing whether Red Cross regulations applied to prisoners in a ship like the *Altmark*. Had they any rights? More important, had the ships sunk by the *Spee* been reported to the British authorities.

The *Altmark* prisoners were worried about their own fate, but, far worse, they had for weeks lived with the depressing thought that families and friends were probably mourning them as dead. To think of a wife giving way to hopeless despair, or a mother's tears, or the choking sobs of a little boy at home was more painful than imprisonment.

The *Altmark* carpenter had worked on Tyneside for some years before the war and often—it seemed sometimes that he liked to show off his crumbling knowledge of English—he would join the prisoners in conversation. Now, during a break, he had slipped down for a chat with news for the men in the bottom flat.

"There's been a big naval battle," he said. "We have just heard it over the wireless."

The "chippie's" information had not always proved reliable in the past and few men in the flat paid much attention. According to the tale he told with relish, the *Spee* had been in action against a superior British naval force. She had gallantly attacked and crippled a British . . . "How do you say: *Kreuzer?*" he asked.

"A cruiser, you mean?"

"Yes . . . the *Exeter*. That's the name."

The news could be true—but perhaps it was not. It could not in any case make an immediate difference to the prisoners, and they changed the subject.

But later that day, as George King picked his way around the flats, a thought struck him. He stared long and hard at Lieutenant "Babyface" Schmidt and from the lieutenant his sharp glance travelled to one of the armed guards. There was something unusual about him, and King could not make it out at once.

"Of course," he murmured. The German had removed his *Spee* cap-band.

The prisoners and the crew were all in a curious unsettled mood. For no apparent reason the two captains, Starr and Brown, were moved from their little compartment to new quarters amidships.

"We're going back to Germany," said the "chippie" when he came down next time. The *Spee* rumour was gaining ground and many of the prisoners were inclined to believe the carpenter's latest story.

"Lay anyone ten to one in slices of bread against getting there," Cudbertson offered, sportingly.

Still the *Altmark* was heading north and increasing her speed every hour. During the morning exercise on deck the sailors noticed that cases of beer were being brought up from a store-room.

"I say," Bammant scrambled down shouting, after he had been to the galley. "I know the whole *Spee* story."

The battleship, the *Altmark* cook had told him, had been in action against British warships. She had sunk two but was so badly damaged herself that a third had to take her in tow.

"Sounds like a lot of nonsense," Cudbertson commented.

The older officers argued that a warship like the *Spee* would never allow herself to be captured. She would do exactly what the British would do—scuttle herself. It was common sense—the thing was not worth arguing about. Everyone lost interest in the *Spee*.

But there was another, more immediate problem to be solved by most of the prisoners: soap. A big naval battle

might or might not have been fought and important things might or might not soon be happening, but there was no soap to be found anywhere in the *Altmark* and that was really down to earth. It was not easy to wash with a square half-inch of soap, which was the most anyone had. Sticky bodies made uneasy minds. And there was a shortage of tooth-paste, too. Many prisoners had run out, without hope of buying more.

A bad taste in the mouth was depressing, especially when the cigarettes had run out, as well.

More moving around gave rise to more rumours. This time it was the Lascars, who were directed from the deck space to a store-room below. It obviously meant, said the wise ones, that the *Altmark* was going north and into bad weather.

North . . . south . . . fast . . . slow—who knew what the *Altmark* would do?

Captain Dau, too, was in a quandary. His last two days had been spent mostly in the wireless cabin where his signallers were tuned in to the *Spee* wavelength, and to Naval High Command and German stations. The German propaganda machine was making big play of a "victorious battle". But the news of the *Exeter*'s "defeat" failed to give Dau the feeling of triumph which German victories would have roused under normal circumstances. He was anxious to keep his doubts to himself and to dispel among his officers and men any fears which might spring up about their future.

"*Besantschot an!*" he ordered—the German version of "splice the mainbrace". But it was a synthetic celebration. Beer was distributed instead of the usual schnapps. When they met as they went about their duties, his closest collaborators, Paulsen, Weichert and Schmidt, seemed to be engrossed in their own thoughts. Each was obviously trying to imagine what had happened to the *Spee*, and each was baffled as he wrestled with his own thoughts.

From the *Spee*, on the morning of the day after he had fled for sanctuary to Montevideo, Captain Langsdorff requested facilities for repairs. He wanted favours. Through the German Embassy he asked the Uruguayan Government to allow him to stay more than the normal twenty-four hours which, under international law, any combatant ship is permitted in a neutral harbour.

The Uruguayan attitude to the German request was cool

and correct, but Langsdorff soon learned that local sympathies were with the Allies. He could expect few concessions.

Ship-repairers, he was soon told, were "too busy at the moment" to undertake any work. But if he wanted an extension . . . why, certainly, that could be arranged.

"You know why they are letting us stay?" he said to Kay with a bitter smile. "Because British reinforcements are coming up. Every hour longer means that we have less chance to get away."

"Set the prisoners free," he ordered.

All night long the prisoners had been gaping in wonder at the multi-coloured lights of the Uruguayan metropolis. When morning came they had passed the time clearing up their quarters. It was 4.30 p.m., and some of the exhausted men were dozing fitfully, when the *Spee* master-at-arms entered their compartment.

"Can you be ready to leave in twenty minutes?" he asked.

Twenty minutes! Within twenty seconds the officers and men were stamping their feet impatiently at the door. A few moments later they were filing on deck, past the coffins in which the *Spee*'s dead sailors had been laid to rest. Gravely they saluted the German flags which covered them.

As they moved forward the British seamen saw with amazement the extent of the damage which the British attack had wreaked on the warship. Now they fully realized how close they had come themselves to death. The *Spee*'s port side and bow were riddled with holes. Two of the forward eleven-inch guns sagged in their mountings—out of action. The barrel of a six-inch gun touched the deck and was cracked and splintered.

The battleship's seaplane, which had spotted so many of their ships, was a charred skeleton, without skin or wings. The small gun-deck abaft the funnel was a heap of scrap iron. The galleys had been blasted into wreckage.

In war sailors fight sailors, and many of the British prisoners harboured bitter feelings against the Nazis. But as the prisoners took leave of the *Spee* some could not suppress seamen's sorrow at the wreckage of a proud ship, though it had destroyed their own and been their prison.

The reception which awaited them ashore, however, soon dispelled any upsurge of sympathy. Members of the British Embassy met them on the quayside. From a big crowd of

Uruguayans a mighty cheer of welcome went up. But before they could celebrate, the officers had work to do.

"Hundreds of British seamen are on the *Spee*'s supply ship," one of them explained to the naval attaché who was on the quay to question them. "There were no fatalities, but three hundred men are prisoners on that hell-ship *Altmark*."

"The *Altmark* ?" It was the first time a British naval officer had heard the name. But soon messages were flashing across the world. A detailed description of the tanker was composed and the signal given top priority to the Admiralty. In carefully worded interviews the news of the floating prison was circulated to the world.

As the *Spee* prisoners went to sleep that night in the soft beds of a Montevideo luxury hotel, Winston Churchill in London, engrossed at the Admiralty in the minute-to-minute news of the Montevideo drama, gave orders that this "hell-ship" must be traced at all costs. No effort was to be spared, he signalled to his warships, to liberate the captured merchant seamen.

There was no sleep for Captain Langsdorff, either. Nor did Commodore Harwood close his eyes. Observation from the shore by naval experts had revealed the extent of the damage to the *Spee*. Information from the prisoners had completed the survey. But Harwood still had plenty of cause for worry. The Admiralty had informed the Commodore that only *Cumberland* was immediately available to join the damaged *Achilles* and *Ajax*. It would be many days before the *Spee*'s British equals—*Renown* and *Ark Royal*—could reach Montevideo.

Harwood decided to bluff. "Take this message to the city authorities of Montevideo," the Commodore instructed his secretary. In the message the Commodore requested adequate police measures to avoid incidents when he gave general shore leave to the crews of *Renown* and *Ark Royal* immediately after their arrival at Montevideo on December 16.

The secretary's well-disciplined eyebrows shot up. Commodore Harwood laughed. The Germans, he said, could be trusted to have an efficient intelligence organization in Montevideo. No doubt his request would immediately be passed to them and they would assume that the arrival of reinforcements was imminent. Langsdorff would be informed.

When the information duly reached Langsdorff he regarded his freedom of action as desperately narrowed. There were additional hints that the French battleship *Dunquerque* was also approaching. The apparent accumulation of enemy sea-power outside Montevideo Harbour was overwhelming.

Ajax and *Achilles*, strengthened by the arrival of *Cumberland*, now began to perform mysterious manœuvres in the distance to give the illusion of numbers. To the *Spee*'s chief observation officer on look-out in the anchored warship it seemed as if the whole Royal Navy were gathering for the slaughter of the *Spee*.

The *Spee* hummed with activity as the crew frantically tried to patch up the battleship. Friday night fell and the ship's hours of grace were running out.

"Do everything you can to keep the *Spee* here," Harwood urged the British Ambassador. But Uruguay had stretched the provisions of neutrality far enough. The Government set a final time limit: seventy-two hours.

That evening a British freighter in the harbour weighed anchor. The 8,000-ton *Dunster Grange* slowly steamed out to sea. A coincidence? Or was it? According to the Hague Convention no warship of a combatant power can leave a neutral harbour within twenty-four hours of an enemy merchant ship —a provision designed to avoid attack within neutral territorial waters.

Thus, the departure of the *Dunster Grange* automatically forced the *Spee* to stay on. Nervously Langsdorff studied press reports from every corner of the world. They all agreed—faithfully echoing British Admiralty information—that the most powerful British naval forces were ready to finish off the *Spee*.

"To the German *Seekriegsfuehrung*!" Langsdorff dictated.

His dispatch was brief and to the point.

"In view of presence of *Ark Royal* and *Renown* in close blockade, escape impossible. Suggest permission to try break-out towards Buenos Aires. If break-out impossible without opportunity to damage British units please decide whether ship to be destroyed in spite of insufficient depth of River Plate mouth or whether internment preferred."

Promptly the reply arrived:

"Try with all means to gain time for consideration. Permission for attempts to break-out towards Argentine granted.

No internment in Uruguay. If scuttling inevitable destroy ship thoroughly."

It was signed "Raeder, Grand Admiral", and was sent after a conference with Hitler.

Next day the funeral of the dead *Spee* sailors took place. The released British captains and seamen attended, and laid wreaths on the graves. Captain Langsdorff was present, quietly praying and white-faced.

While the dead were being buried the minutes were slowly ticking away for the living. The hour of decision approached. It was midnight on December 16 when the captain gathered his officers around him and informed them of his plan. At dawn next morning they began to put it into operation.

Thousands were crowding the quayside, their eyes riveted on the *Spee*. British naval, military and diplomatic experts, with powerful binoculars slung casually round their necks, mingled with the sightseers. All Montevideo—and all the world—knew that a great drama was about to unfold.

To the watchers, it seemed that nothing was happening as the damaged battleship rode at anchor in the harbour, impotent yet still an impressive sight. But below deck, away from prying eyes, frantic sailors had started to carry out Captain Langsdorff's instructions.

The secret documents were consumed in a bonfire. Piece after piece of delicate mechanical apparatus—the eyes and ears of the battleship—were quickly destroyed. Heavier equipment disintegrated as electrically detonated grenades were exploded in it. Only six torpedoes were left in the *Spee*. Two were fixed in the engine-rooms, the others buried in the munition holds, and connected to a plunger.

Slowly the German tanker *Tacoma*, which was to have supplied the *Spee* on the high seas when the *Altmark*'s oil and ammunition were exhausted, moved alongside. From the shore it seemed a puzzling move. The onlookers saw banana crates taken from the tanker to the battleship. It looked as if the warship were taking on provisions for her voyage.

But Langsdorff had worked out a ruse. From the shore it was impossible to see that, as each boat unloaded its crates, a group of *Spee* sailors boarded it and were transferred to the *Tacoma*. The unobtrusive operation went on for nearly twelve hours. The crowd did not realize what was happening. But

Commodore Harwood, scanning reports of every single move, was not deceived. He was sure the end was approaching.

By early evening nearly one thousand sailors had left the *Spee* and had been swallowed up in the holds of the *Tacoma*. Following Langsdorff's instructions some of his specialist officers boarded a launch and slipped ashore to the German Embassy.

The *Spee*, which they had left, was no longer a fighting battleship, it was a disembowelled ghost of a vessel, in which only the engines had been left intact. Next a small boat loaded with sailors' kitbags made for a tug which took the gear on board and steered towards the inner harbour. Slowly, while the watchers still puzzled out what all the moves meant, the *Spee* began to move down-river. With the *Tacoma* by her side she was making for the open sea.

The procession was joined by two freighters, which came alongside the *Tacoma*. The British knew they had steamed up from Buenos Aires. Rapidly the *Spee* crew were transferred to them. The *Spee* engines stopped.

Like a concentration-camp victim forced to hover over her own grave before death, the *Spee* came to rest. It was now half-past eight and in the twilight the *Spee* was difficult to see from the shore. The commander's launch and a second boat carrying a demolition unit, were just specks in the distance as they moved away. The two boats made towards the *Tacoma*.

Hardly had they reached her when a pillar of smoke rose from the *Spee* and billowed into a huge black mushroom. A thunderous explosion followed. There were other smaller but still shattering explosions in quick succession. In Montevideo the windows rattled.

Captain Langsdorff had been the last to leave his ship. He was just being received aboard the *Tacoma* when a final explosion tore through the warship's stern, hurling three big guns bodily into the air. Fire darted from oil tanks and from the oil which poured across the deck. High to the sky rose a frightening glow, shot through and enveloped in thick black smoke. It wanted a few minutes to nine o'clock, December 17, when the *Spee* began to burn and a circling aircraft reported to Harwood waiting in *Ajax* that the *Spee* had destroyed herself.

She was still burning on the morning of December 19 when Captain Langsdorff and his crew reached Buenos Aires

and internment in the local Marine Arsenal. For the last time the captain gathered his men around him: "I am sorry that it had to end like this," he said. "But conditions of internment will not be bad."

There was a large German colony in the Argentine, Langsdorff told them, and their compatriots would do everything to make life pleasant during internment.

"No doubt," said Langsdorff, "there will be public discussion whether the scuttling of the ship was justified or not, whether it would have been more courageous to take up the challenge and fight it out to an honourable seaman's death. We might all have died such a death. There will be ample opportunity for me to prove that I was not lacking in personal courage."

He bowed stiffly and left them. They did not appreciate the significance of their commander's last sentence.

That evening, though under detention, Langsdorff was permitted to give a small dinner which was attended by the German Ambassador to the Argentine, members of the Embassy staff and officers of the *Spee*. Langsdorff engaged them all in animated conversation. They left him at midnight.

Next morning he was found in his room—dead with a bullet through his head. On his desk was an envelope with a letter he had addressed to the German Ambassador.

"Your Excellency" (said the letter):

"After a long struggle I have decided to destroy the *Admiral Graf Spee* to prevent her falling into the hands of the enemy. I am firmly convinced that this was the only possible decision after I had led my ship into the trap of Montevideo. With the remaining ammunition any attempt to reach free and deep water in battle was doomed to failure. And only in deep water could I have sunk my ship without letting it fall into enemy hands after a brave fight. I decided not to fight but to destroy the installations and to sink the ship.

"It was clear to me that this decision might be misinterpreted intentionally or ignorantly by people who do not know my reasons, based, as they are, wholly or partly on personal views. That is why, from the beginning, I was determined to bear the consequences of this decision; for a commandant with a sense of honour need not be told that his fate cannot be separated from that of his ship. I have delayed my intention

only as long as I was bearing the responsibility for the welfare of my crew.

"After internment by the Argentine Government I can do no more for my crew. Neither shall I have an opportunity of taking an active part in the current struggle of my Fatherland. I can only prove by my death that I am prepared to die for the honour of the flag. I alone bear the responsibility for the destruction of the Panzer ship *Admiral Graf Spee*. I am only too happy that I can banish every conceivable shadow on the honour of the flag with my death. I am facing my fate in the firm belief in the just cause and the future of our people.

"I am, your Excellency, writing this letter in the quiet of the evening after objective consideration to enable you to inform my superiors and to contradict rumours, if that should be necessary.

"Signed: LANGSDORFF, Captain at Sea.

"Commandant of the Panzer Ship *Admiral Graf Spee*."

. . . . .

On Sunday night, in the *Altmark*, Ronald Cudbertson turned back the pages of his diary and re-read the entries of the last few days:

December 13, Wednesday. The cook says all the prisoners on his deck have been stopped going on deck for three days. Two boxes of matches were found concealed under the carpets and no one would own up about it.

There was a general search on that deck later. Imagine what they found! A brass name-plate from the *Graf Spee*. It was among the belongings of our general servant. He received a proper dressing-down and was told that he would be transferred to the *Spee* when she comes and have to answer for it.

They have started giving us drinking water again. There's a rumour that the captain has told his crew they would be in Germany in January.

December 14. Extra bit of speed petering out. Still heading northerly direction. Nothing much happening.

December 15. There was some commotion about cigarettes as someone was willing to sell two hundred cigarettes for a suitcase. It would be interesting to find out who had so many cigarettes as we have all reached rock bottom. Surely they must have been originally the Old Man's cigarettes and should

be shared out? My suggestion nearly caused a riot. Everybody denied all knowledge of the cigarettes.

December 16. There is general moving around. It is getting colder.

December 17, Sunday. The crew did not do any work yesterday afternoon. All day today—Sunday if you please—they have been working like mad.

They have been painting the whole ship grey. Everybody took a hand except the guards and the "boss". Even the doctor and the purser and every spare man apart from the prisoners gave a hand. We were on deck for our morning exercise. But after twenty minutes we were chased below again. I cannot work out any reasonable idea for this.

. . . . . .

In his cabin Captain Dau, his little beard moving rhythmically up and down as he ground his teeth, read the de-coded wireless message from the O.K.M. over and over again.

"*Oberkommando der Kriegsmarine*"—(High Command of the War Marine)—"To D.A.T.K." (call-sign of the *Altmark*):

"Announcing with regret that Panzer ship *Admiral Graf Spee* has been scuttled in face of superior enemy forces. *Altmark* to return to home waters. Observe total radio silence."

As the tanker's position was not known to the German Naval High Command, instructions concerning the homeward passage were indefinite except for firm orders to avoid the Cape Verde Islands and the Azores in the North Atlantic. From 15°N. and approximately 40°W. *Altmark* was to make for the southern point of Greenland.

Dau called Paulsen into consultation.

"Some good these instructions are," he grumbled. It was a new experience for the first officer to hear his captain quarrelling with Naval Command orders. "How are we going to get to the North Atlantic in the first place?" Dau asked.

He did not wait for Paulsen to answer his question. "I shall go as fast as I can to the south-east of the Cape and signal to the O.K.M.," he explained.

Paulsen looked at him questioningly. Were the orders not to maintain absolute wireless silence?

"It will give the Grand Admiral some idea of our position," Dau said, "and at the same time deceive the enemy into

believing that we are en route to the Indian Ocean. Then we can turn round in a wide sweep and make for home—provided O.K.M. approve."

"The engines are very worn, *Herr Kapitaen*!" was all Paulsen replied. His captain's plan did not appeal to him. Obviously the British naval forces, released by the defeat of *Admiral Graf Spee* would turn on the heat. "Many squadrons will be searching for us."

His guess was not far wrong. Britain's First Sea Lord, Winston Churchill, was already reviewing the new situation arising from the elimination of the menace of the *Spee*. His signal to Commodore Harwood included a passage: ". . . it would be very good if all returning forces could search and scrub the South Atlantic on their way home for the *Altmark*."

Over the wireless Dau heard the description of his ship repeated over and over again. For an instant he smiled confidently as the English words came over the air: "Yellow funnel . . . white deck houses . . . black top sides!"

Sunday's painting had altered all this. Several canvas structures, painted grey like the whole ship, had been erected on deck on his orders to alter the silhouette of the *Altmark*.

On Monday morning when the first batch of prisoners reached the deck for exercise they quickly noted that the name *Sogne* had disappeared and had been replaced, in bold black letters, with *Hangsmund*.

As they stopped to discuss the change "Babyface" Schmidt appeared on deck. Whenever they had seen him before he had always been immaculately turned out, his rosy cheeks smooth, his lively eyes shining. Now he was unshaven, his collar was dirty, his tie awry. His eyes were dull and tired. Guessed someone: "'Babyface' has been up all night."

The ship was rolling badly. "She's getting empty. No more oil," concluded Bert Saville, one of the *Newton Beech's* engineers. He knew that empty tankers always roll badly and the *Altmark* was rocking like a toy boat. It made life unpleasant even for experienced sailors.

"What's happened?" young Wall, a *Doric Star* engineer, asked Becker, of the *Altmark*, when they had gone below again.

"Haven't you guessed? The *Spee* is gone . . . yes: gone, sunk, *kaput*!"

The German shrugged his shoulders. He did not seem to care much. Somebody pooh-poohed the idea.

"It's true. This time it's true."

Excited groups gathered in the flats when the news spread. From the bottom flat men came up to join the officers, seeking further information.

"It means we are going home," said one of them hopefully.

"We are heading east-south-east," Cudbertson retorted. "That's not where Germany is."

A spasm of optimism gripped the prisoners. If the Navy had struck down the *Spee*, surely it would not be much longer before it caught up with the *Altmark*.

"Let's rush the bastards!" John Bammant suggested enthusiastically. Still bursting with strength and confidence in spite of small rations, lack of water and inadequate exercise, the young giant called in the whole flat to join him.

"There are three hundred of us—and only one hundred and thirty of them," said Bob Goss.

Many of the younger men agreed. If Lieutenant Schmidt and his two guards could be overwhelmed during their daily tour their weapons could be seized and used against the Germans on deck.

"Don't talk nonsense," one of the older men warned. "How do you know that the rumours about the *Spee* are true."

"We can trust Becker."

"We can trust no one."

The excitement did not die down for a long time. Already in the corner of Flat B four men were bending over a tin. From the deck officers one of them had learned the position of the *Altmark* and he was writing out a message in big block letters:

"S O S 18.12.1939. WE ARE 300 SEAMEN OF BRITISH SHIPS SUNK BY GRAF SPEE. WE ARE NOW ON THE GRAF SPEE SUPPLY SHIP ALTMARK OF HAMBURG AND SOMEWHERE SOUTH OF THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT WE SHALL BE MOVING TOWARDS GERMANY SOON BUT WE ARE NOT SURE. WE ARE QUARTERED IN HOLDS FORWARD AND AFT. THE ALTMARK HAS SUFFICIENT OIL AND PROVISIONS FOR THE VOYAGE."

A roll of tin-foil appeared. It had been used to line a cigarette case which was empty except for three small butt ends. The

message was rolled in the tin-foil and put in the tin, to which a short stick of wood was attached. Someone brought out from his belongings a tiny Union Jack. Next morning the tin was dropped overboard.

Several men had warned against this attempt to attract attention. It was futile, hopeless, dangerous, they said. It could only cause trouble. For a few hours the project had split the prisoners into two camps, the cautious prisoners arguing against the impatient.

Now Captain Dau and the officers on watch on the bridge were staring at the object floating in the backwash of the *Altmark*.

Angrily Dau gripped the telegraph, threw the handle to STOP. A few minutes later the tin with the little flag gaily waving from it was fished out of the water. "Break it open" Dau ordered.

Carefully, slowly, he read the message.

"Find out who is responsible for this," he shouted. "I shall have the man responsible shot. It's espionage. It is an outrage! I am not going to have these English swine sabotaging me!"

Weichert and Schmidt were in charge of the interrogation. Their heart was not in it. They knew it would produce no results. It did not. Dau was prepared for their report.

"The size of groups for exercise on deck will be halved," he ordered. It was a severe penalty for men cooped up for most of the day and night.

"What did we tell you?"

The feeling of hope, followed so soon by new restrictions and a tightening of discipline, caused despondency among the prisoners. Some men refused to talk to those whose frustrated efforts were responsible for their added hardships.

"I could kill that fellow," Bammant muttered whenever he set eyes on Captain Dau.

The men could not agree on anything now. "He's not so bad," said someone, "he has to protect his ship."

The sun was warm and continuous and, though many of the prisoners on short rations had lost weight, short spells on deck turned their bodies brown. Most of the prisoners looked as if they had just spent a holiday on a summer cruise.

But all the indications were that the *Altmark* was preparing for bad weather. Becker brought down with him a shipmate

named Popp who spoke some English and said that he was a machinist. With them was a stoker, who did not open his mouth and never looked at the prisoners.

Becker said they had orders to fix strong wooden covers over the trunkway hatch. "They don't want you to get wet," joked Becker.

Next morning the sky was cloudy and it looked as if the fine weather had come to an end. The *Altmark's* position was estimated as well south of the Cape latitude—between 35° and 40°.

"We are approaching the territory of the 'brave west winds'," Becker volunteered.

"The 'Roaring Forties' is what we call it," said an officer. The sea was indeed roaring. Waves swept over deck. The tanker was pitching badly as she struggled in the heavy seas. But the noise could not drown a discordant note.

"Something's wrong with those diesels. I know—I've worked on them." George King's trained ear had detected an odd sound as he listened to the rhythm of the engines.

It was December 23 and the *Altmark* had reached a point 30°W., 45°S. It was pouring with rain.

"*Herr Kapitaen,*" Paulsen told Dau. "We shall have to attend to the engines."

CHAPTER X

FINIS 1939

IT WAS THE turn of the engineers to do the thinking for the prisoners. For some time they had felt themselves pushed out of the picture by the deck officers, whose calculations were of absorbing interest even though some of the engineers mockingly professed to disbelieve the results. But now, in the fog and driving sleet, the fate of the *Altmark* and her prisoners depended more on engines than navigation and the *Altmark's* engines were doing little more than idling for most of the time.

"Can't understand these fellows," grumbled George King, when he returned to the flat one day just before Christmas, after a visit to Dau's cabin to complain about the cold and damp in the prisoners' quarters, "they must want us to know they're overhauling the engines. They haven't much sense of security."

"What makes you think that?" said someone.

As one of the two officers liaising with the Germans, King's view, seldom expressed, was always heard with respect.

"Well, there are pistons and liners lying all over the deck. What else could it mean?"

King's view was confirmed the same evening. Some of the prisoners, who had no drinking mugs, clustered round Schmidt during his rounds, holding up the tin cans they had been using for drinking. "Look what we've come to," said Whelan, a tough trimmer from the *Tairoa*. "Your engineers have plenty of time and you're always boasting how well-equipped the ship is. Can't you ask them to solder handles on our tins?"

Schmidt was sympathetic, but his reply was unhelpful. "Sorry," he said, shaking his head, "our engineers are far too busy just now."

The engineers were now convinced that once an overhaul was complete, the *Altmark* would make a dash for home. One

suggestion was that Dau might try to reach the Pacific, put into a Russian port and make for Germany through the Arctic Ocean.

"If you ask me," interjected a voice grimly, "it could not be colder even in Siberia."

The prisoners were shivering and few spent the whole of their short allotted time on deck, across which the wind ceaselessly drove icy sprays of water. Roll call was rushed through and even the Germans in their heavy leather jackets trembled with cold.

The day's "peggy", Cyril Smith, the *Tairoa's* chief steward, returned from the galley to the top flat.

"They have a Christmas tree," he reported. "For a trunk it has the handle of a big broom, the branches are wire, and the whole thing's painted, with lots of little parcels and things hanging from it. Sentimental devils."

"What a way to spend Christmas—in this cold and stinking hole."

But a quiet, contented smile appeared on Smith's pallid face and it grew into loud chuckles. Bad-temperedly, one of the officers asked: "What the hell is there to laugh at, Cyril?"

Smith looked around the flat. "Who'd like a nice fat chop, instead of this muck?" He jerked his thumb towards the container of soup.

The joke was going too far. "Come off it Smithy," said a rough voice, "get on with dishing out the grub."

But Smith shook his head, dived into his pocket and produced a large pork chop, well-done and still sizzling. "The captain's dinner," he said, with pride, as all eyes gazed hungrily and with astonishment at the meat. "I pinched it when cook's back was turned." He looked quickly round the flat. "Here," he said to Bammant, handing over the meat, "you've got a pretty big frame to fill. Eat it."

Bammant began to protest that he could not take Smith's prize, but the chief steward cut him short. "Eat it, lad," he said, kindly, "eat it quickly. When the guard comes, he won't find it—if it's inside you."

But though Smith's daring theft heartened the prisoners for a while, the mood did not last long and depression oozed with the fog through the flats.

Nor did the festive season find the *Altmark* crew in a much happier frame of mind when Dau ordered all hands to assemble in the prisoners' shelter on deck. Below, in the holds, the prisoners could hear stamping and murmuring.

"My first duty," Dau told his men, "is to pay homage to my great comrade, *Kapitaen zur See Langsdorff*, who has died a hero's death. Fate has ordained that he should not live to celebrate this Christmas."

He paused solemnly before he continued.

"To us at sea Christmas means as much, if not more, than to those who are spending it surrounded by their families . . . We did not expect to spend Christmas at sea . . . but we are doing our best."

As usual his speech petered out in platitudinous nothings. Each man was given a parcel containing half a slab of chocolate, three cigarettes and a few peppermints. In some of the parcels were soap, toothbrushes or braces.

"Any special orders with regard to the prisoners?" Weichert asked.

"Christmas Eve as we know it, means nothing to the English. But give them roast mutton this evening, anyway."

He wrote out a notice to be posted in each of the flats early next morning:

NOTICE TO PRISONERS

ABOUT ALL SHIPS SUNK BY THE ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE UNTIL THE END OF NOVEMBER INCLUDING THE DORIC STAR AND TAIROA. IT HAS BEEN MADE KNOWN IN ENGLAND THAT THE CREWS WERE SAVED.

DECEMBER 24TH, 1939.

The guard they called "Fritzi" slipped below.

"We had a glass of beer and a glass of punch each," he told the prisoners. "Most of our celebration consisted of a speech about Langsdorff."

He repeated what Dau had said in his speech. Another *Spee* guard—all of them were now minus their cap-bands—joined in the conversation. The British Navy had used poison-

gas shells, he said, looking evilly at the sailors. "We'll pay you back," he threatened.

Lieutenant Schmidt went among the prisoners next morning. Many now called him "Cherub", which seemed to fit his personality well, and he was again his usual self, smiling and cordial. He supervised the posting of the captain's notice and stood by as the men burst out, spontaneously and joyfully at this piece of authentic news.

"Merry Christmas, Lieutenant," some shouted.

"Merry Christmas to you."

There was another visitor during the morning. Captain Starr, white-haired and benign as Mr. Pickwick, had sought permission from Dau to give his officers and men his own good wishes. In the top flat, he produced a small parcel and handed it to his chief steward, Cyril Smith, who was shivering in the only clothes he had—trousers and singlet. "A Christmas present for you, Cyril," said the kindly captain. It was a pullover. "Take it. I insist," Captain Starr cut short his steward's protests, "you need it far more than I do."

The atmosphere was transformed. Even unemotional and sceptical prisoners like Cudbertson, who had fiercely disciplined their wants, felt the urge to splash out. The distribution of cigarettes among the *Altmark* crew had immediately put new supplies in circulation. Cudbertson decided that the day warranted a little extra luxury. He approached one of the known "black marketeers" and quickly arranged the transaction. He sold his last shirt for ten German cigarettes. Other deals of the same sort were going on all round.

For dinner there was chicken broth, macaroni, rabbit stew and tinned fruit. Several men were smoking openly. The guards looked in at the door and could not have missed such a flagrant breach of the rules. But they just grinned and looked the other way. Or so the prisoners thought.

Dau sent for Schmidt, whose smile disappeared when he saw his angry face. "It has just been reported that a prisoner has been seen smoking," Dau began quietly. "It so happens that this man—Smith—was orderly when a chop was stolen today. Never mind the chop—we've no proof about it. He will be tried for smoking—now. Bring him in."

Wearing his new pullover, Smith stood disdainfully before Dau and several other officers flanking him. The guard gave

his evidence. "Were you smoking?" demanded Dau, his eyes bulging.

"'Fraid I was."

Dau banged the table furiously and looked round to the other officers. "See how these pigs defy me?" he almost screamed. "I sentence you to forty-eight hours solitary confinement. And when I get you to Germany, I'll make sure you get further punishment."

Smith stood his ground. "You'll never get me to Germany," he sneered.

For a time Dau could not speak for rage. "Another twenty-four hours for insolence," he shouted beside himself. "Take him away."

When he had with difficulty recovered his composure, Dau took out the ship's diary and made careful note of the difficulties created by the worn condition of the *Altmark*'s engines.

There could be no thought now of carrying out his original plan for an elaborate manœuvre in order to mislead the British naval authorities. That was in the past. He had already picked up another signal from his own command to the effect that the Royal Navy was, indeed, gathering the strong forces freed by the defeat of *Spee* to hunt him down.

Dau saw clearly that his only hope lay in remaining in this distant, lonely area until the engines had been overhauled and the passage of time had, perhaps, wearied his pursuers. It was an unpalatable decision and having made it, the old acute feeling of helpless loneliness came over him again. His tormented mind turned viciously on the prisoners.

"Herr Weichert," he called his fourth officer with a formality that presaged evil. "I have decided to take sterner measures."

The prisoners, he explained, had obtained information about the fate of the *Graf Spee*. Therefore it was a first essential that those members of his own crew responsible for the leakage—"those fraternizing traitors!" he called them angrily—should be brought to book.

"I want an immediate investigation and your early report on the result," Dau said harshly.

Next he produced a new notice to be copied and put up in the prisoners' quarters. He had drafted it himself:

NOTICE TO PRISONERS

HEREBY IT IS FORBIDDEN AND WOULD BE TAKEN FOR A SERIOUS MISDEMEANOUR TO THROW OVERBOARD (OR TRY TO DO SO) WITHOUT SPECIAL PERMISSION ANY FLOATING OBJECTS, WHATSOEVER, SUCH AS BOTTLES, TINS, PIECES OF WOOD, ETC.

DECEMBER 27, 1939.

SIGNED: DAU, COMMANDER.

Finally, there was to be no exercise at all until further notice for the prisoners of the flat who were on deck when the surreptitious message was thrown overboard.

"No deck exercise—no washing water," Dau barked. "No exception—for seventy-six hours."

Weichert and Schmidt talked over the captain's order. It was an instruction which they were not anxious to carry out. The mood of the prisoners was getting grimmer; it was developing into a devil-may-care attitude of bravado, especially among the youngsters, who seemed to think that conditions were so bad that they could not possibly be worse.

For the first time the Indians had begun to give trouble, too. In the past nothing could be said to dissuade Dau from his view that the Indians were potential anti-British fifth-columnists of whom the Germans should make as much as possible. He had decreed preferential treatment for them and, announcing that it was strictly in accordance with international law, had ordered them to receive payment for the duties they were performing for the *Altmark* officers.

But "these fools", according to Dr. Tyrolt's report, persisted in washing in the open in all weathers and quite a number of them had caught severe colds. Many were laid up with high temperatures.

"They will infect the crew," Dau stormed at Dr. Tyrolt.

Originally, he had not meant the "no washing" order to apply to the Indians, but now he instructed the doctor to put an end to the practice. "Tell them that we have no medicine—and if they don't take care of themselves we shall have to let them suffer. I do not really care if they die."

That evening, the tall, athletic Dr. Tyrolt, returned to the

captain's cabin with grimly-set features. He was alarmed by the worrying discovery he had just made.

"One of the Indians is seriously ill, *Herr Kapitaen,*" he said in a manner which made it clear that he was preparing Captain Dau for worse news to come. "I have isolated him in the accommodation, which the two British captains have recently vacated."

"What's the matter with the fellow? Come! Speak up!"

"It's very serious, *Herr Kapitaen,* very, very serious," Tyrolt answered. "I have carefully considered my diagnosis and I suspect he suffers from . . ."

"From what?"

"Leprosy!"

Dau went very pale. "What can be done?" he asked.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. There was nothing that could be done in the ship. Strict isolation, he said, was the only prophylactic measure under the circumstances.

"The man ought to be shot and buried at sea," Dau flared up. Dr. Tyrolt did not reply. It was impossible to say whether the captain was serious or whether it was just another temperamental outburst.

"I am responsible for a crew of nearly one hundred and forty men."

"*Jawohl, Herr Kapitaen,*" Tyrolt answered softly, "and for three hundred prisoners."

"Exactly. Keep this entirely to yourself, Tyrolt. No one aboard must know—no one."

In the prisoners' flats the atmosphere was fetid when Tyrolt went on his tour of inspection.

"It's sixty-four hours since we last had a wash," George King told the doctor in the top flat. "If this ban is not lifted soon there'll be an epidemic."

King never knew why the doctor winced at his words. "Epidemic" had an ominous ring to Tyrolt. But he decided not to rouse the captain further by telling him about King's complaint.

The prisoners' nerves were clearly on edge and they did not take kindly to it when the angry captain ordered the guards to make more and more surprise visits to the flats to catch prisoners who were smoking. Twice during the morning the guards burst into the flats so suddenly that they nearly caused a riot.

In the afternoon "Babyface" Schmidt descended the steel ladder, followed by four guards.

"Got a fag, *Herr Lieutenant*?" a wisecrack greeted him.

Schmidt was not in the mood for jokes. He was stern and silent as the guards searched every square inch of the flats.

"What are you looking for?" a voice asked sourly.

"Bottles, tins, wood—things like that," he said. "I am damned if I am going to be caught by your Navy as a result of your messages."

New notices went up about deck exercises. A new washhouse on the deck had been prepared while the men had been kept below.

"You'll be allowed up tomorrow," said a member of the *Altmark* crew who had come down for the first time.

"Hey, you," Foley asked him. "Where's Becker, the carpenter. You know?"

"*Eingesperrt!*" he said. "Locked up!"

Weichert had narrowed his investigation into the *Spee* leakage down to two *Spee* guards and the carpenter. The three had been seen talking to the prisoners. The testimony of the two ratings, anxious to exonerate themselves, had incriminated the carpenter.

"Which two 'shopped' the 'chippie'?" asked a seaman.

"I'd like to be sure it was a German and not one of us," said another.

There had been an investigation in the prisoners' flats, too—the question was whether someone had given the carpenter away. But few had any doubt that the denunciation was the work of the tall, squinting, slit-eyed sailor who often seemed to linger in the prisoners' quarters much longer than was necessary. For a long time, the observant officers had suspected the man as an eavesdropper and tale-bearer. Either he was the captain's spy or a Gestapo man. He had been asked whether he understood English. "Not-so-much," was his reply.

"For my money it was 'Not-so-Much' who split on the 'chippie' and who put Smith in the cooler," King said. "I'll get him for this. Don't worry, boys, our time will come."

It was snowing when the prisoners were allowed on deck again, but in spite of the cold, the *Altmark* crew were sweating. Schleusner, the chief engineer, was supervising work on the

engines and even on deck the clatter of hammering could be heard.

From below a shout went up. An Indian, who nosily went to investigate, came back with information: "One of the Germans has been injured," he reported.

The ship was rolling heavily. A cylinder, it turned out, had been hoisted out of its housing for inspection and in falling had broken an *Altmark* sailor's leg.

"First casualty of the *Altmark*," said John Bammant. "One of the heroes of the war. He will get the Iron Cross from the *Herr Fuehrer*, no doubt." Bammant was one of the very few whose spirits were still not damped.

The cold was so intense that it was decided to ask for protective clothing. Many prisoners wore singlets only. Few had overcoats. Tyrolt agreed to pass on the request and Dau ordered a few bales of hessian to be taken down to the flats so that the prisoners could make them into sleeping bags.

As the men stitched them together Bammant quickly gathered up enough snippets to make a football. Soon the young men were engaged in a boisterous game. It helped to keep them warm. But their noise and the careless way they tumbled against the others caused irritation. Hard words flew across the holds. One man flared up: "I'll break your bloody neck if I get hold of you."

"Boys, boys!" Creer, King, and a few of the senior officers tried to keep the peace. "Look here," said King grimly, "we all know it's bloody awful—and getting worse every day. But think of it sanely. We can't get out and walk home, can we? And now that the *Spee* has gone we are really better off. We must be liberated soon. The old so-and-so can't keep the ship here for ever. Supplies are getting short or they wouldn't have cut our sugar again today. And once she starts sailing towards Germany, the Navy's bound to get her."

King's little speech sounded reassuring.

"Well," he was asked. "What can we do?"

For several days past King had been discussing matters with some of the older men. It was time, they all agreed, that the prisoners organized themselves more tightly. Creer, the stolid, sensible second engineer of the *Huntsman*, suggested that the most important thing was to prepare for liberation.

"That's easier said than done," grunted an officer.

But Creer stuck to his point. Liberation would not come by way of a fairy godmother opening the doors. There might be a battle. They might be at the wrong end of the right attack. Liberation was most likely to come as the climax of some fast and furious event. The main thing was to work out a routine for the great moment, so that they would not be caught unprepared.

The idea caught on rapidly. Talk and thought of liberation stimulated hope. The old year was coming to an end—the old, bad year. The new year would be the year of freedom.

King co-operated with Creer in working out a scheme. Cheerfully Creer accepted the fact that he would actually be the last man to leave the floating prison.

It was not easy to spread news of the arrangements agreed on by the officers to the men, or to be sure they would be acted on. Merchant Navy discipline has always been looser and more flexible than in the Royal Navy, depending on personality as much as on a fixed code. Separated from their men—even by no more than a few feet of German steel—many officers felt that traditional discipline had been weakened by the conditions of their imprisonment. Sometimes, when they were together, men blamed their officers for their predicament. The question was: Would any arrangements made be carried out?

In spite of doubts, Mr. King went ahead. He noted the exact details of their position and distribution.

"There are fifty-five officers in the top flat," he calculated. "We shall be last to get out except for the two apprentices, who can go as soon as they like. First to come up will be the oldest of the forty-eight men from the bottom flat on D Deck. Next—the fifty-four from C Deck below the washroom. Oldest out first again."

The rest, including the *Huntsman* crew, were aft. The Indians were in their separate compartment.

But all the plans naturally revolved around the true fate of the *Graf Spee*, which remained a recurring topic of conversation long after the first report that it had been sunk. Half the captives were quite satisfied that their information about the warship was correct.

The remainder were ready to debate at any hour any argument that was raised, though news of the carpenter's misfortune turned many prisoners to the belief that the *Graf Spee* was no longer afloat.

"I am sure the *Spee* is interned in Montevideo," Cudbertson argued. For him, as for most others, it was an unalterable conclusion and made further talk futile.

"Still foggy and cold. FINIS 1939," Cudbertson entered in his diary as a hectic year drew to a close.

The prisoners had stayed up late to see the New Year in. Melancholy voices joined in a sing-song, ending up with near-tearful "Auld Lang Syne" as the bells of the alarm clocks in the flats, ingeniously set at midnight, chimed out simultaneously.

Next morning, New Year's Day, Ronald Curtis, *Doric Star* engineer, woke up early. For a moment as he lay still under his solitary blanket, rolled in one of the *Huntsman* carpets as protection against the biting cold, a warm glow ran through his body. "Happy New Year, Gracie," he whispered to himself, as he thought of his wife far away in Barking. "Happy New Year to you and to our son Roger."

A steady patter of voices came across the room. George King was miserable as the day of stock-taking dawned.

"What a rotten business to spend New Year in captivity," he said to Hughes, the *Huntsman* carpenter.

The two hardened sailors began thinking and talking of home, their voices almost breaking, tears near to their eyes. A sailor is used to being away from home and does not often feel homesick, but many prisoners were homesick that day.

From below, as if hell had been let loose, came the noise of banging tin plates and metallic thuds as bulkheads were battered with every conceivable object—a riotous, raucous greeting to the New Year from the younger prisoners.

"Not so much noise," a guard shouted down. A chorus of oaths and abuse answered him. The *Altmark* sailors looked glum, almost hostile, chilling the cold atmosphere still further. It was a pleasant change when Dr. Tyrolt came down with a hearty: "A good year for all of you!" which he said as if he really meant it.

Mr. King sat up when he was told that the clock was to be advanced one hour that night to bring the ship's time in line with G.M.T. He did a quick calculation.

"We must be between 7½°W and 7½°E.," he concluded. "And I estimate about 46°S."

Smiles broke out everywhere. The Germans could not be so smart or they would not reveal when they put the clock on,

Captain Vian on the bridge of H.M.S. *Cossack*

The *Altmark* prisoners try to attract the attention of the Norwegians. Drawn by C. E. Turner under the supervision of R. Pittam of S.S. *Tairoa*

especially as they were always careful to keep the *Altmark*'s position a closely-guarded secret. Perhaps they would slip up on something even more important before long.

Rain was turning to sleet and the "promenade" on deck, extended to fifty minutes as a privilege, was an ordeal rather than a pleasure. The crew and the prisoners seemed to be settling down to a despondent aimlessness with nothing to relieve the monotony.

The arrival of meal time was greeted regularly with a roar of applause when the food looked palatable. It turned to shouts of disgust at the sickly "sweet soup"—beetroot—or other German "specialities". Whatever the fare, however, there was always an unruly scramble for any second helpings that were going.

"Is there any wonder we are just like animals in a cage?" King asked one day.

The economy of shortages began to operate with inevitable incongruity. Talk was about a young cadet, never a heavy smoker, who said without boasting that he just could not do without cigarettes now that they were practically non-existent.

"This stupid lad has been saving up things for months," Ronald Curtis told one of his friends. "Now he has given everything away for cigarettes which would not be worth more than half a crown ashore. Imagine a shirt, a suitcase and a blanket for ten fags."

Curtis was chatting with Burrows, second engineer of the *Trevanion*. They had never met before, had hardly exchanged words since they were prisoners. Now it turned out that Burrows' uncle was the next-door neighbour of Curtis's father.

"Of course, I recall him now," Curtis said. "He's the headmaster of Abbey School in Barking."

Below there was a commotion. The guards were pompously solemn as they descended on Lieutenant Schmidt's instructions. One of them, particularly, looked self-conscious—as if he had much on his mind.

Curious glances followed them as they escorted two young sailors towards the deck.

"Where are you taking them?" one man inquired as the guard passed.

"To the hospital." He tapped his forehead with his finger.

The incident sent a shiver of uneasiness, a feeling of awkward embarrassed anger through the crowd of captives. There had been talk about the habits of the two sailors for some time.

"They have gone off their heads, those two lads," one of the guards suggested.

"Nonsense," someone snorted, as they mounted the trunkway; "they're a couple of nancies."

The incident left an ugly taste behind. But nobody ever knew what had really happened or why the two sailors were so solemnly removed—to the tiny ship's hospital it was discovered later.

One day early in the new year, Dau called for a report about the engines.

"It will take us another two weeks at least, *Herr Kapitaen,*" said Schleusner.

They both knew that if the *Altmark* came under attack with her engines virtually out of action, she would be a sitting target. The prisoners might suspect it, but Dau was determined not to let them know that the engines had been completely dismantled. It took all his skill to manœuvre this floating ship so that he avoided the worst battering by the pounding waves.

"Herr Wegener," Dau called on the administrative officer. "I want you to take a complete stock of all our supplies. It may be March before we get home. Work out a daily menu for crew and prisoners. Yes . . . for every single day till March. There should be plenty of Indian tea from the *Huntsman* and our macaroni supplies will last out easily. That's the main thing. Bottled fruit three times a week. Can we manage that?"

After Dau's warnings to his crew, few cared to risk imprisonment by passing on any news and Schmidt remained the prisoners' major source of information.

"What's the news, Lieutenant?" the officers would ask him.

"Not so good for you chaps," he replied once, with a smile.

He had been listening to the wireless and told the prisoners that the British merchant fleet had been virtually driven from the seas by U-boats. Britain was starving as a result of the U-boat blockade. Some of the prisoners remembering their own predicament, were inclined to believe him. Others laughed.

"Nazi propaganda," was their verdict.

"But there's a bit of good news for you after all," said Schmidt.

Eagerly they crowded around him. "Hore-Belisha has been kicked out of your government!" he said solemnly.

The men did not appreciate the importance which he seemed to attach to the fact. They were amused when he explained that Britain was after all coming round to Hitler's views on Jews.

"When did it happen?" he was asked by an officer, who wanted to find out how up-to-date his information was.

"The day before yesterday," Schmidt replied.

The date was January 7. There had been a minor reconstruction of the British Government on January 5.

The conversation appeared to link the prisoners with home, and they felt brighter. The link was slight and the prisoners had little interest in Hore-Belisha's resignation, but somehow the scrap of news seemed to bring embattled and distant England closer.

It was exactly one month since they had last set eyes on the *Graf Spee*. Whenever they had been on deck they had seen nothing but water and sky.

But below, there was water, too. Water was everywhere. Condensation produced by closely packed human bodies and creeping, penetrating fog made the steel stancheons and plates in the flats sweat. Fifty-five men were eating, sleeping, living in the same compartment. The air was foul. It was dripping inside as well as raining outside.

"Look at it," Bob Goss stormed at Schmidt one day; "where I come from we wouldn't keep animals in such conditions. Why can't be have more sacking—there's plenty in the stores looted from the *Huntsman*."

Several of the older officers tried to calm Goss down, but he shook them off. "It's disgusting," he said.

"Perhaps you would like to see the captain," said Schmidt, ironically. "It can be arranged, you know."

"I will."

Later in the day, Goss stamped into the captain's cabin, flanked by several armed guards and repeated his request for sacking so that the moisture could be wiped from the dripping bulkheads. Dau was in no mood to listen.

"I am tired of your complaints," he said, spitting out his words. "I shall make an example of you. Five days' solitary confinement when the cell is free." Before the enraged

Goss could leap at Dau, the guards had hustled him on to the deck.

Permanent lassitude, due partly to inadequate food, to lack of exercise and to plain hopelessness now began to overtake the prisoners. As soon as the lean meals were eaten, officers and men lay around with eyes closed in a dreamless daze. Only the very young maintained any interest in games and noisy spells of cock-alorum, with its jumping, kicking, rolling, on the ground only made the older men more bitter.

The younger officers did not give way to despair except for short periods. They were insolent and truculent. Their itchy fingers sometimes seemed almost to reach out for the guards' waists as they strutted past, with revolvers and bayonets dangling from their belts.

"One day if I catch a Hun with his holster undone, I'll jump on him," Curtis vowed to his friends, Nick Watson and the bearded engineer named Smith from the *Newton Beech.*

Curtis and his friends counted fifty men, *Spee* ratings and *Altmark* crew, mainly concerned with guard duties. On the bridge he had seen racks of rifles. And there were the machine-guns. There might be little chance of overpowering the guards but it was always a possibility.

The prisoners could never make out with certainty exactly how many guns the *Altmark* carried, but they never missed a chance to learn. On one occasion when King was marched under guard to see Captain Dau, the captain was called away and for a minute King was alone outside the cabin. He strolled forward casually and noticed a sliding section on each side of the bridge.

"Those sections could take a twelve-pounder gun each," he told Creer and Paterson, when he returned.

From the ship's wireless came the strains of the *Deutschland* song.

"If they play that damned tune, it means a German victory."

When asked, the guards sneered in a superior non-committal manner. They said nothing. There was nothing to say. But, feeling as isolated and despondent as the prisoners, it was one of their few diversions to tantalize the prisoners.

During one morning "life" appeared in the vicinity of the *Altmark* for the first time after a long interval, although it was bird life. Flights of albatrosses were accompanying the

ship. The big, clumsy birds hovered over the ship with sharp eyes on the look-out for whatever morsels of food the impoverished prison-ship had to spare.

The German sailors were throwing bits of bacon into the sea and amusing themselves watching the birds pouncing on them—"Like Stukas," they shouted. Stukas were the *Sturzkampf*-planes of the Luftwaffe, which, the crew explained, descended on British targets like birds of prey.

The meagre diet began to take its toll. Chief Steward Smith, of the *Tairoa*, who had never been robust and still suffered with his ears, which had been damaged by shell-fire, was one of the first to report sick.

"I have no medicine," Tyrolt told him. But the doctor promised to arrange for a special diet.

There was one case of suspected appendicitis, but it was not acute. It was fortunate for the sailor, because the *Altmark* carried no operating instruments.

But, in spite of everything, acts of generosity occasionally heartened the men. One day, the New Zealander, Colin Watt, produced a big packet of cheroots from his haversack and distributed them without accepting anything in exchange. Black-marketeers glowered as a dozen men happily puffed away at the small cigars, without a thought of prying guards.

That did not happen often. Nothing seemed to happen. Even the diligent diarists, wrestling with their shortened stubs of pencil, began to record ever more frequently:

"Nothing of interest today."

"Issue of soap," Lieutenant Schmidt called out one morning. Everybody got into an orderly queue. "It's the last piece we can give you. Make the most of it," said Schmidt.

"When that's gone we shall be home," Cudbertson said. It was a weak joke. But everything, everybody, was getting weak.

On deck the *Altmark* crew was assembled to hear an address by the captain. His voice cut through the air sharply. Two prisoners who understood some German scrambled to the top of the stairs to listen for clues—anything that might abate the dismal uncertainty of their life. They returned without news. They had not been able to understand what he was saying.

"Any news?" Paterson asked Schmidt later that day.

Several men roused themselves to their elbows to hear his reply: "No news—we are waiting for a signal from the *Graf Spee.*"

He was puzzled when his answer was greeted by a gale of laughter. Embarrassed he withdrew. For several days after that he would not talk to the prisoners.

The hilarity did not last long. Nerves were frayed, and temperaments clashed constantly. Weak though they were, the prisoners were in fighting mood and their anger was not solely directed against the Germans. Small arguments often quickly developed into angry quarrels. More than once every day fists were raised. The peace-makers had to be quick on their feet to prevent fights.

Some of the men had not been on deck since Christmas. What was the use of it? they argued. Far better to conserve energy against the time it would be needed.

It was midday on January 16 when a buzz of excitement ran through the holds. Everybody jumped up. Even the permanently apathetic took notice. Agitated groups formed. The senior engineers motioned the men to keep still—quite still. A hush fell over the flats.

Clearly in the silence the rhythmical hum of the engines could be heard. Slowly they revved up and gained power. It was the first time it had happened for many long days. George King, the only engineer with experience of M.A.N. diesel engines of the same sort as the *Altmark*'s, held up his hand.

"They sound fine to me," he said. "Seem to be in perfect condition."

It was difficult to keep the men quiet. The guessing game began again, interrupted from time to time by urgent requests for silence. "Let me listen," King pleaded.

"She is making at least eighteen knots," Cudbertson said. The engineers agreed with the mate's guess. The *Altmark* was cruising, changing course, manœuvring. The engines seemed to be running at full speed.

"We're going home," shouted a lad.

A whistle blew somewhere. It was a cheerful sound.

For two hours the *Altmark* steamed on, gathering speed, her engines turning at full power. Then, as suddenly as they had started, the vibrations died down. Faces fell. It had been no more than a trial run.

The disappointment increased the tension among both the prisoners and the guards. One of the guards hustled Tom Foley as he was getting down from exercise.

"Don't push me," Foley said defiantly.

"Why not—what's going to happen if I do?" the guard said hoarsely.

"If you push me again—I'll crown you."

"You try." The guard laughed contemptuously, but prudently moved out of the way.

Hopefully some men were making mental notes of the guards' behaviour. The time would surely come when they could pay them back in kind. First to be dealt with would be the convinced Nazis. High on the list was the fellow they called Hans, an Austrian, who constantly sneaked on everybody, reporting to the lieutenant every move that was made.

But there was one man, nick-named Blondie, who behaved well. Several times he had by "accident" dropped a handful of cigarette ends among the prisoners. When the word "Nazi" was mentioned, he hardly troubled to disguise his contempt and hatred.

Looking over the side during deck exercises some of the men noticed that the name of the ship had been changed again. It was *Chiriqui* of New York.

On January 19 the engines started up again. It was midday and the men below were as usual idling, or sleeping.

Suddenly they were startled by the boom of guns. They tried to rush on deck. Roughly, the guards pushed them back.

"Obviously practice shooting," decided the senior officers, "but it's a sign that something's going on."

The men who had been predicting for the last few days that the *Altmark* was about to leave the distant waiting area and move on were jubilant. Captain Brown, the old, urbane *Huntsman* skipper, paid a visit to the senior officers' flat. He agreed with their conclusion.

"We'll soon be off to Germany," he said.

CHAPTER XI

APPROACHING ICELAND

THE MEN OF the *Altmark* continued to be as restless as the prisoners. They too were busy with their diaries. Willi Rademacher, a young North German, impatiently studied what he had written before. "We have been rolling around for exactly a month," he worked out. "Got down here the day before Christmas. We could be home by now—if we'd been steaming towards Germany."

"What day is it?" George Cerch, his companion, asked.

"January 20."

At that moment, Captain Dau's voice came over the loudspeaker, calling the crew together for an announcement.

"Must be important," Cerch said, "or he would not call us personally."

The *Altmark* officers, driven to desperation, had finally reported to their captain on the low state of morale aboard. They had told Dau of the bouts of home-sickness, the general irritation on board, which was resulting daily in acrimonious exchanges with the prisoners.

"The atmosphere is getting explosive," Paulsen had told him.

Dau took the bad news calmly. He knew that his announcement would swiftly change the mood of the ship. What he had to say was what his men were most anxious to hear.

"I have decided," he harangued them, "that the time has come for us to sail home again. But wait, there is no cause for you to cheer, my men. No reason at all. This operation will be neither easy nor without grave danger."

He repeated his conviction that the enemy would no doubt try everything in his power to catch the *Altmark*. Her size and silhouette were bound to be familiar to Allied patrols by now, in spite of the camouflage.

"We shall have to be lucky," Captain Dau concluded, "to get through unrecognized. But, as always in life, luck is with those who remain alert and at their posts."

In the privacy of his cabin, Dau expounded his operational plans in greater detail for the benefit of his officers. For some days past—as they well knew—he had disregarded all wireless signals from the German High Command who were in complete ignorance about the *Altmark*'s fate.

"The Allies are bound to listen-in and any reply I made would only lead them to our trail. Rather than reassure the *Seekriegsfuehrung* about our safety, I propose to remain silent and alive as long as possible."

Watchfulness, he added, was the key to their success. Twelve look-outs were to be at their posts at all times.

"The most difficult area through which we shall pass at the beginning of our voyage is on the Natal–Freetown route in the region of the equator, where Africa and South America are closest.

"The North America–Europe lanes present another grave danger and here we must fear most the convoy-track from Halifax to England. Then there is the tricky Iceland area. You see how difficult it is going to be."

On the map before him Dau surveyed the familiar scene—Freetown, Britain's main base in the central Atlantic; Dakar, near Cape Verde, the French base. He enumerated the chain of British and French bases on the other side of the Atlantic—the West Indies with Trinidad, Barbadoes, Martinique, Guadeloupe.

According to Dau's reckoning, the French, on British instructions—as he put it—would have advanced their submarine patrol lines on both sides of the Atlantic. He assumed that the Natal–Freetown lane would be under constant surveillance by air patrols. Special vigilance would be needed to avoid the heavy Allied cruisers or even an aircraft carrier which he strongly suspected might be stationed near St. Paul's Rock or in the vicinity of Fernando Norohna Island.

In the strategic picture which unfolded in the German captain's mind, his ship was the centre piece of the biggest naval hunt in the history of sea warfare. Egotistically, though with reason, he saw the whole British Navy concentrating on Target Number One—the *Altmark*.

"The prestige of British naval power is involved, deeply involved," he told Paulsen again and again. "Not only does the defeat of the *Graf Spee* remain incomplete without our destruction, but we are carrying prisoners whose liberation would be Churchill's ultimate triumph."

It sounded as if the problem had narrowed down to a personal conflict between Captain Heinrich Dau and Winston Churchill. "We must not fail," Dau said with great emphasis.

"No," echoed Paulsen. "We must not. Our *Altmark* must never be allowed to fall into enemy hands to augment British tanker tonnage."

Dau, mumbling now and then to himself rather than to Paulsen, was by no means confident that the *Altmark* could really pass through the Atlantic completely unnoticed. But there was one thing he was sure of. Never would he allow his tanker to fall into enemy hands. "Rather die—we shall all rather die than allow such a thing to happen."

He reached for pencil and paper to note the phases of the moon—times of rising and setting on every single day for a whole month ahead—and to these times he related the speed and direction of the *Altmark*.

The "hurdles", as he called all areas in which danger of discovery by Allied ships was greatest, would have to be passed during the early February new moon period.

Dau's weary spirits rose visibly at the prospect of this hazardous voyage. He began to revel in it, as a new sense of purpose unfolded with his charts; it was a chance to show his mettle in a great naval manœuvre. He would be making history. The responsibility for every move, which Langsdorff had so rudely assumed in the raiding operation, was at long last restored to Captain Dau.

He was almost lyrical as he told Weichert that his *Fingerspitzengefuehl*, which Germans mention so often, but possess so rarely—that mysterious, intuitive feeling in the finger tips—was as acute as the instinct of a migrating bird.

"Charts and maps and mathematical calculations," he lectured his surprised but silent navigation officer, "are just subordinate to a real seaman's sixth sense."

His own sixth sense—his *Fingerspitzengefuehl*—would see him safely through, he was firmly convinced. Almost jauntily he

set out on his tour of inspection of the prisoners, climbing down to the lowest flat and working his way up to the top.

The senseless noise of a hilarious card game was the only greeting he received in the lower flats. It was some time before the men took notice of him—Jack Flanagan, Billy Riley, Sam Flowers and Tom Foley, the "four inseparables", playing knock-out whist, were not the sort of British seamen to be impressed by a strutting German captain's presence.

With studied interest he inspected the work of Arthur Underwood, *Doric Star* cook, who had spent weeks carving out a model boat from a chunk of wood.

"You are making a model of the *Altmark*, yes?" Dau beamed. "Very good."

Underwood did not trouble to contradict him. He was making a model of the *Doric Star*.

A hasty shuffle of papers did not escape Dau's attention as he reached the top flat. As he bent over the rough table to look beyond the shoulders of the mates grouped round it he smiled benevolently. "Very good, my friend," said Dau, "you should leave the sea and become an artist." Platten was showing him the shapely figure of a scantily-dressed girl which Evans, third mate of the *Doric Star*, had drawn in bold strokes. Cuddbertson, sitting next to him, looked up at Dau.

The captain moved on. When he had left the flat there was a sigh of relief. The officers had only just had time to turn over their chart of magnetic variations, salvaged from a lifeboat, with the help of which they had been making the same calculations which had occupied the *Altmark*'s captain. The shapely lady was on the back of the chart.

Dau had marked spots along the *Altmark*'s route to Europe with a mental "danger signal". But on the prisoners' carefully kept lifeboat chart the spots appeared as beacons of hope. At any of these points the Royal Navy might turn up to challenge their jailer, inspect his ship and liberate them.

Every day the deck officers and engineers conferred about the tanker's position. They were sure that their home-made instruments gave them accurate data. It was true they had not a chronometer between them and could never be sure of the exact time. But within limits, the officers were certain they knew where they were.

"Let's put this down—it's as near as we can go," said Evans.

It was noon on Saturday, January 20, and the engineers had estimated that the ship was doing sixteen knots. There was no doubt she was steaming north-west. Evans placed the ship about two hundred and forty miles S.S.W. of Tristan de Cunha.

"Maybe she's making for a neutral port, after all," Curtis said optimistically. In the same breath he drew a cheerful deduction from the monotonous appearance of the same sort of soup every day. Surely supplies were getting desperately low and if there was one thing that would speed the *Altmark-Chriqui* into port, it was shortage of food.

"Not necessarily." Paterson quickly reversed hopes that seemed to be based on sound reasoning. "Who knows whether another raider has not slipped out from Germany? If it has the whole business might start again."

Next day the clocks were put back one hour. "That," observed Cudbertson, "brings us back to exactly the same longitude as a month ago."

The *Altmark* was travelling N.N.W., when Paterson, King and two or three others were plotting her course three days later. It was Wednesday, January 24, and the *Altmark* was steaming slightly more slowly, but still making about fifteen knots. It was getting noticeably warmer.

"Clocks back one hour," Lieutenant Schmidt announced once more on his rounds.

"That makes us two hours behind G.M.T.," King reasoned, "and puts us bang in Zone Two." Just as Dau had divided his route into danger areas, so the prisoners had marked off their chart in liberation zones.

The tanker's steady steaming on the same course, plodding at 12 knots during the day, but opening up to twenty-three knots at night, pointed to a definite, fixed object in view.

"She's going home," said Goss jubilantly.

"You mean she's going to Germany," grunted an older man.

Everybody had a theory about the ship's destination and most theories differed but every knot which reduced the distance to Europe was cheered. For the first time in many days the men joined in a sing-song.

"Wonder what my wife thought when she heard that the *Doric* was sunk," Curtis mused. The married men all asked the same question. The northward voyage increasingly brought back thoughts of families and friends at home.

But day-dreams were often interrupted. One day, the clatter of the pom-poms jolted the prisoners back to reality. Obviously "Knitty Whiskers" was preparing for all eventualities. Practice shooting went on for some time and the prisoners' look-out reported that two-centimetre-calibre guns were firing tracer shells. The guns quickly fired about two hundred rounds.

Schmidt and the guards had lost their affability and were always taciturn. They shrugged off questions without uttering a word. A prisoner joked that it was almost impossible to obtain any definite news. The hell-ship was clearly in a state of siege.

But rumours still cascaded round the holds. Several officers made up their minds to trace each rumour to its source. They went about it methodically, asking each rumour-monger where he heard his news and following the trail. It made nonsense of many stories. Yet still rumours continued.

"Italy's entered the war against us," was one day's "sensation". "Russia's attacked Germany," someone pretended to know.

Confusion increased when the Russian news item turned out to refer to the Russo-Finnish War.

"Wonder whose side we're on?" asked someone.

The guards had new instructions every day. Their latest duty was to supervise the disposal of the fish tins after meals. They ordered a hole to be cut in each tin, before it was thrown overboard.

"Not-so-much" was in charge of the operation and he did nothing to appease the hatred which his words and movements aroused. The *Trevanion* crew were after his blood. Often he had pretended to know "not-so-much" English, but the prisoners knew he constantly listened-in to conversations and reported them to his officers.

"I'll stick a bayonet into him and make him goose-step for twenty-four hours once we're free, the sneaking bastard," threatened Wilkins, a *Tairoa* storekeeper. "I'll still have strength to do it." Wilkins had the build of a policeman.

Palmer, the *Trevanion* cook, manœuvred one of the guards into a corner: "Are we going into port?" he asked, confidentially.

"Maybe you'll be seeing something in a week's time," was the German's reply.

"Land?"

There was no answer.

If land was sighted, the position of the prisoners would be considerably brighter. Creer, King and other senior officers began to discuss what plan of action could be adopted. Bammant and other young officers clamoured for drastic action as soon as they could even smell land.

"If it's ten miles away when I see land, I'll jump and swim for it," he asserted. "I don't want to end up the war as a 'Geffy'." The prisoners, sometime before, had discovered that "*Gefangene*" was the German word for prisoners, and the shortened form had passed into everyday use.

"I am with you there, John," said Keith Brown, a *Tairoa* engineer.

"And me," agreed Wells, another young engineer.

The young men were determined to take a chance, but older officers counselled caution. "Wait awhile," said one of them, "our time will come. Why throw your lives away?"

Some of the *Huntsman* men going up on deck for exercise one day, observed the finish of a boat drill by the *Altmark* sailors, complete with gas masks and armbands denoting each man's station in an emergency. It was a pointer that gave more hope.

"Let our friend King organize action when the time comes," Creer suggested. He and King were now the acknowledged leaders among the prisoners, who at once agreed to his suggestion. There was a spirit of optimism and confidence about. King bowed gracefully and accepted the honour. Then he went off—it was his turn as orderly.

The prison-ship was running at full speed, and half the crew seemed to be on look-out. Perhaps, thought King, moving along the catwalk, the idea of land and liberation was not as far-fetched as it seemed. Two men at the top of the main mast never put their binoculars down for an instant. The *Altmark* crew were as glum as the prisoners were cheerful. They did not appear to rate their chances of a break-through very high.

"Cherub" Schmidt was as morose as the crew. He did not seem to regard the possibility of dramatic events as very remote.

"Yes, yes," he said when challenged by prisoners in the top flat. "I have already told you that you will be given every chance to get clear if we should meet up with one of your

warships. Yes, I personally assure you that we shall signal to any man-o'-war that there are prisoners aboard."

Wistfully he added: "It's in our own interests, isn't it?"

The gist of this short exchange was soon common knowledge. When the lieutenant reached the bottom deck he was surprised to see men already busily packing their belongings. Some of those who had no bags were hastily stitching up hessian into make-shift sacks. The optimism was so foolishly infectious that by Sunday morning—January 28—there was not a prisoner who could not have picked up his kit and walked off the ship at a moment's notice.

That they would get off the *Altmark*, most of the men were sure. But how? Cudbertson thought that they might run into a British cruiser at almost any moment.

It was Cudbertson's turn to collect the daily rations from the stores and, passing the cabins under the bridge, he saw one of the *Altmark* officers packing his bag. They, too?

Loud voices came from the bridge where Captain Dau and Lieutenant Schmidt were engaged in furious argument. Their strident shouts—Schmidt interrupting his captain in an unheard-of manner—made it clear that a first-class row was in progress.

"Their nerves must be rather ragged," Cudbertson reported to his friends. On deck the crew were busy getting out the pilot ladders in readiness to reach the boats. They were obviously nervous and apprehensive.

. . . . .

Captain Dau called his officers together as the *Altmark* approached the equator. He had navigated his ship so that the *Altmark* would cross the line about 22½°W. and so cut through the narrowest part of the ocean at right angles.

With a ghost of a smile he apologized for speaking of the "Straits of Natal". The vast expanse of the ocean between South America and Africa, he agreed, hardly warranted a description of "straits". But the speed of modern cruisers and air patrols, he explained, had narrowed the passage tremendously since the days when he had first crossed the equator forty years before.

Dau had been counting on the rain and fog prevailing in the area most of the time to help him pass through the "straits"

unobserved. But it was dry and warm and unusually clear during the day. He did not dare to take off his clothes to sleep. Restlessly he wandered up to the bridge at night, to make sure that the look-outs were alert. As soon as dawn broke he reached for his binoculars, to scour the horizon.

Never before, even when he was waiting for his first rendezvous with the *Spee*, had he experienced such nerve-racking days. He was jumpy, irritable, explosive, withdrawn, thoughtful, all in one morning. The prisoners watching him noticed that he was ageing before their eyes.

Their own nerves were not much better. Soon after midday on January 31, deck officers working out the tanker's position, agreed they were about 3° or one hundred and eighty miles south of the patrol line which they expected the British Navy to have flung from Dakar to Pernambuco. The change of course to north-west to enable the *Altmark* to cut across the line at right angles had not escaped their attention.

That morning, Curtis and his friends were making ready to climb on deck for exercise when the hatch was clamped down.

"You'll stay below today," a voice came down from the top. "The exercise has been cancelled."

"Hope to heaven she's been sighted!" Curtis said.

The hatch was battened down all night. Few men found sleep and their only consolation was that "they"—the pronoun used by the prisoners for the Germans in the ship—must be just as anxious. This was to be the night—the night which would end with the dawn of liberation.

"The guards are scared—I am sure they're scared!" King said when the daily inspection was over. "Keep your fingers crossed, lads!"

Night fell and amid whisperings, grunts and wheezings, the prisoners tried to sleep. So it was for several nights and days.

February 10 was an agonizing day that few of the men would ever forget.

All through the morning the prisoners incessantly asked only one question: "Where's the blasted patrol?"

A disappointed sailor offered a casual explanation: "You bet your life they've been on the booze all night in Dakar and the bloody Admiral is away with his girl friend."

They were all standing up, their hands full of gear. The rumbling voices in the flats had risen to shouts. But there was

instant silence as the hatch was opened and Schmidt appeared. He looked apprehensive as he surveyed the prisoners.

Ostentatiously he gripped his revolver. If they were thinking of breaking out . . . if they tried to take advantage of the difficult geographical position . . . if they were hoping to get succour from the British Navy . . .

Schmidt's glance and gesture made it clear that he knew what the prisoners were thinking.

"Three men to the galley, no more than three," he said.

The number of "peggies" going aft to fetch the meals had been increasing steadily. It was always a good chance to look around and the Germans had not troubled to check the practice. Schmidt himself had not minded. But Dau had noticed there were far too many prisoners on deck and had ordered him to cut the number down drastically. The men were quite capable of attempting a revolt, he said.

As King retired to his carpet-bed that evening he summed up the feelings of his fellow-prisoners in three words in his diary: "Still not caught."

Cudbertson called it a day more forcefully. In the dim light he pulled out his pad and wrote: "To hell with the British Navy."

The prisoners had faced disappointment before and though it grew harder to endure, they still had a reserve of optimism. Fortunately, the unceremonial crossing of the line was followed by permission to go up on deck again. True, the "privilege" was extended to no more than fifteen men at a time but it was a welcome escape from the damp atmosphere below. Against that, the pessimistic prisoners pointed out that it meant the *Altmark*'s danger was ending. They might as well abandon all hope of rescue.

"Well north of the line," Captain Dau entered in the ship's log.

"We can breathe freely now—one of the most critical points lies behind us," he said, in a pep-talk to his crew. "While I am grateful for the alertness of all officers and men I should like to remind you that vigilance must not abate. Any ship on the way to the West Indies or Central America could still cross our path."

Up in the wireless cabin, the operators dared not stop listening to the signals that filled the air. The *Altmark* radio operator

could pick out the various Morse notes clearly even though they did not make sense to him. But what was important—the *Altmark*'s officers could determine the positions of ships in the vicinity. On three occasions the *Altmark* set a zig-zagging course hurriedly to steam out of harm's reach. Dau did not want to be seen even by unarmed merchant ships.

Only a day or so ago it seemed that the ship could never again settle down to the old wearisome routine. Yet it had happened. Apathy returned and all day long the prisoners reclined idly on their make-shift beds, propped up by lifebelts, and stared into space.

Once or twice, a flash of temper would show that all hope was not dead. "You wait. The Navy will get you yet and you'll be in the same position as we are now," growled a young officer to an arrogant guard.

But the threat sounded a little hollow. There was little conviction in his voice and the other prisoners did not even join in the argument.

One of the guards had complained that his coat had disappeared. A thorough search was ordered and it stung the prisoners to life.

"Do you think *we* pinched it?" a group of prisoners asked the searchers mockingly. "What would we want with a guard's coat? The boot's on the other foot. You're all a pack of thieving hounds."

The prisoners' quarters were turned upside down. Nothing was found except a box of matches in the Indians' quarters. Dau's friendliness for the Indians vanished. Next day he gave six Indians three days each in the imprisonment "cell".

Once more the guards clambered down for a full-scale search. It was another surprise visit and only Captain Brown, of the *Huntsman*, knew why a search had been ordered.

During his morning walk on deck, Dau had approached Brown and told him that Chief Officer Thompson's trunk had been burgled. Many of his belongings were missing.

The *Huntsman*'s officers had been more fortunate than the rest. They had been allowed to salvage most of their belongings before their ship was sunk. But Thompson, like most of the captains, chief officers and engineers and radio officers, who had been transferred to the *Graf Spee*, had had to leave his baggage behind on the *Altmark*. During the frenzied preparations

for liberation near the equator, Thompson's baggage had been moved about by the prisoners. More out of boredom than viciousness, they had broken open the lock and rummaged through Thompson's kit.

Dau did not care what had happened to Thompson's goods. It was a heaven-sent opportunity to scourge the prisoners and pay them back for their impudent confidence in the hours of his great anxiety. He ordered Weichert to carry out a thorough investigation.

"There are thieves among those Englishmen," he said. "And no thief is worse than an English thief."

During dinner he went into a rambling analysis to prove his point. The crews they held prisoner, he said, had been hired indiscriminately in British, Australian, Chinese and Indian ports.

"Riff-raff!" he exploded. "Altogether a sorry lot." Some of the prisoners, he said, were warm and cosy in woollies, scarves, heavy coats. Would they share their garments with others who had only brought singlets or boiler-suits along? "They would not," announced Dau in his ignorance.

"Weichert," he instructed the prison officer, "point out to these fellows that they do not know the meaning of good fellowship. We must educate them."

According to Dau's careful reckoning the *Altmark* was now approaching the Halifax–England convoy lanes, which meant great danger for her. How close she was to danger emerged from an urgent, early-morning summons by the radio officer, who reported that he had overheard a loud wireless conversation in the immediate proximity—in English.

"Must be a large convoy," pronounced Dau, in the wireless cabin.

It was pitch dark. Dau never knew whether it was an east-west or west-east convoy with which he had almost collided. He had not expected the Atlantic traffic to be so frequent at this time of the year. But Dau was as gullible as many Nazis. He had accepted much of Goebbels' propaganda broadcasts at face value. According to Goebbels the U-boats had long since driven the British Merchant Navy from the high seas.

He had eaten his breakfast and was preparing for a nap on his couch after a sleepless night when his telephone roused him again. Within a minute he was on the bridge which was just above his cabin. The look-out reported: "Ship at 75°."

Already, on the instructions of the officer-on-watch, the *Altmark* had turned away from the unknown ship. Through his binoculars Dau observed a ship with two masts, a funnel and an impressive superstructure, steering on a south-westerly course. Rapidly he ordered the *Altmark* into a stern-to-stern position to hide her silhouette from the stranger. He clenched his fists. This might be the moment he had feared.

Three men with ear-phones clamped over their heads listened anxiously to discover whether a wireless signal would report their position. They heard nothing.

In their holds the prisoners were aware that something unusual was happening, although their look-outs could see nothing. The blustery weather seemed to favour their prison-ship. It was misty and the sea was rough.

"She's jumping around so fast and so suddenly," Cudbertson thought aloud, "that she must be on the run from something. We must be in the Atlantic traffic lanes now."

This was the *Altmark*'s most anxious day since she had set sail for Germany. On the evening of February 7, Dau recorded in his diary that they had sighted six enemy vessels. "The *Englaender* seem to have diverted the traffic from the North Sea which usually passes through the English Channel. Everything seems to be coming by way of the Faroe Islands . . ."

Again that night, he was roused from his sleep. The ship seemed to be a bedlam with prisoners banging excitedly on the hatch at the top of the ladder.

"Ignore them . . . they are only trying to make trouble," he told Weichert, who appeared with his greatcoat over his pyjamas. The banging continued.

In the bottom flat a British sailor had thrown a fit. To seamen without medical knowledge, he seemed to be dying.

"Quiet, quiet," the guards admonished, shouting down the trunkway. They, too, feared a riot. Peering through the grating the guards suspiciously inquired what the noise was about when the prisoners continued to shout.

"The doctor . . . get the doctor," implored someone.

Tyrolt was the only German who did not fear the prisoners. Called by the guards, he calmly opened the hatch himself, stepped down and attended to the sick man.

Next morning Dau issued orders that the "peggies" were to collect four days' rations all at once.

"I don't want to see any of the prisoners on deck," he decreed.

The look-out was calling him again. Dau braced himself for bad news, but ignoring the shouts Tyrolt pressed for an immediate hearing. Below, the prisoners were surly and openly rebellious.

"Doctor, quickly, what is it?"

"The Indians look sluggish, *Herr Kapitaen.* I wonder whether there is any infection?"

"Examine the lot," said Dau, ruthlessly.

Weichert appeared on the bridge: "There is talk of leprosy among the prisoners in the bottom flat—what shall I tell them?"

"Tell them to go to hell," said Dau, impatiently.

"Approaching Iceland, *Herr Kapitaen,*" Paulsen reported.

Dau looked as if he was praying. The hour of supreme crisis was approaching. He was sure that every single British captain had been ordered at all costs to capture the *Altmark.*

Through his glasses the officer-on-watch observed a tiny speck on the horizon.

"Looks like a warship of the British North Atlantic patrol," he said.

The weather had cleared up to make Dau's calculations more difficult. He was working out course and speed so that he would pass through the critical area at night. The moon was due to set at 21.00 hours and he knew there was bound to be darkness until five or six o'clock at least. The evening hours dragged with leaden slowness.

"Our last hope," Ronald Curtis recorded in his diary, "is the vigilance of the Navy on the Iceland–North Sea patrol. Like all hands, I pray to God that we are caught and saved and spared endless days of captivity in Germany."

The moon had disappeared below the horizon. But it was not dark. A clear North Light illuminated the night. It was a rare, a beautiful sight. The prisoners in their holds never saw it. The luminous beauty of the scene sent a shiver of fear down the spine of every member of the *Altmark* crew.

CHAPTER XII

BRITISH BLOCKADE—ASLEEP?

THREE HUNDRED MEN waiting, wondering, hoping, in a ship that rolled worse than a Panama tramp in a typhoon. In the stagnant atmosphere of the flats few men could sleep that night. An air of expectancy pervaded the *Altmark* which the prisoners now knew was fast approaching the end of her voyage. Home . . . but for whom? Among the prisoners, every man conjured up a different mental picture.

Ronald Curtis expounded his belief that the *Altmark* would pass through the Denmark Straits, but had no more paper on which to commit his thoughts. He was confident that the next seven days would at least decide his destination one way or another. Lying awake on his hard bed-space he thought of his wife and son at home in Barking, waiting, not knowing that he was steaming nearer and nearer to them, although he might land far away in a German prison camp.

George King, leafing through his diary, worked out that this Saturday, February 10, marked the beginning of his tenth week in captivity. He said a silent prayer and hoped his imprisonment would not last much longer.

"Getting close to freedom," noted Cudbertson laconically that evening.

Up on deck, the crew of the *Altmark* were gripped by a strange uneasiness. It was acute enough among the sailors, but it crept below too, among the men who were watching the engines. If the British Navy found the *Altmark*, and opened fire they knew their chances of escape would be as slight as those of the prisoners.

The chief stoker diffidently approached Captain Dau to request permission to join the look-out on night watch. He concealed the fears of his men with a specious excuse. "Four eyes see more than two," he said.

Paulsen reported that nearly half the crew had approached him with similar suggestions; he had posted a few of them below the bridge. Captain Dau ordered him to send the men back to their allotted stations. Already he had two look-outs in the crow's nest on the foremast, one on the mainmast and three on the bridge. "Too many eyes see more than is necessary," he quoted.

The engines were now full out and the *Altmark* vibrated as her yacht-like bows cut through the bright night at well over twenty knots. Some of the German sailors crept on to the blacked-out deck and were thinking sentimentally of home, when a sharp shout from the look-out made moonshine of their dreams.

"Mast in sight."

John Bammant moved cat-like for all his bulk, up the thirty-nine steps of the ladder in the trunkway and peered through a gap in the hatch. There was little to see. The guard seemed to have moved away a few steps, but voices came from beyond the door. He could not make out what was said but there seemed to be no doubt that the *Altmark*'s crew were extremely agitated.

On the bridge with his binoculars to his eyes, Captain Dau tried to penetrate the night. He was convinced that the unlit ship, which he saw gliding along in the strange light before dawn, was a British cruiser. He dare not take any chances.

"Hard to starboard," he ordered.

"Hard to starboard," the man at the wheel repeated.

The captain's commands followed in quick succession and were acknowledged by the officers. One officer received the instructions to keep the unknown ship in view. The rest of the look-outs were visited to make sure they were alert. If one warship was in the area, there might be another and Dau did not want to be taken unawares from any direction.

The *Altmark* was steaming away fast—well off course but safe for the moment. Officers held their breath as they watched the ghost ship disappear into the night.

Below, the prisoners settled down uneasily to rest. They were unaware how close their floating prison had been to discovery. The long arm of the Royal Navy, groping in the darkness, had nearly found them.

Day dawned. It was another day like so many pointless, dreary days that had gone before. Discussion among the prisoners was fixed by the conviction that the *Altmark* was on the run.

"Up here, this damned tanker will have to turn and run from every dirty old tub she sees," said an officer. The sudden change of course during the night had not escaped the notice of the prisoners. The *Altmark* might be on the run, the senior men agreed. How else could the manœuvre be interpreted, after all the commotion on board during the night.

The younger men still full of vitality, in spite of privations, were puzzled by the serenity of the older prisoners who, though the crisis approached, settled down to the fixed routine they had now followed for many weeks. Their iron indifference to the ordeals made the younger sailors marvel. "Don't they really *care* what happens?" burst out a young officer.

As if he was on a pleasure cruise, old "Pop" Kean, of the *Tairoa*, who had signed on as a supernumerary mate, so that he could get to England and retire, called his friends to their daily game of bridge. Harry Gandy, the *Doric Star*'s chief steward, George King and "Pat" Paterson, of the *Tairoa*, were always ready to make a four.

"I think I heard one engine cut out last night," King said casually. "And she is still not going. Three hearts." He bid almost in the same breath.

"We must be right in the middle of the blockade," said Paterson, hunching his spare frame into a more comfortable position. "Three spades."

The game went on. Furiously, the opponents were outbidding each other, but at the same time their minds were never far from the more serious game between the *Altmark* and the Royal Navy, on which their lives and liberty depended.

Paterson and King made three spades and put the cards down. "On Sunday," said King, "we were about five hundred miles to the north-west of Ireland. Things are getting very, very hot."

"My guess," said Paterson, judicially, "is that she'll make for the Denmark Strait. That's what the *Moewe* did—remember the first-war raider?"

The *Altmark*, in spite of engine-trouble, was still steaming at close on twenty knots.

"To think that a week today I shall be in Hull," Cudbertson said, as if there were no alternative. That night was stormy, and at one o'clock a big sea broke over the *Altmark* with such a roar that everybody woke up. "Thought I heard a gun," mumbled Paterson half asleep. The prisoners were expecting to be rescued day and night and no one now ever slept without his shoes.

On Sunday the clock had been advanced an hour and the ship was worked on G.M.T. Food was scarce, but even food did not interest the prisoners much. They fed on hope. The *Altmark* was turning east again, stopping and waiting during daylight and steaming fast in darkness.

"Rolling home, rolling home . . . by the light of the silvery moo-oo-oon!"

Loud and clear the words came from below. The prisoners in the lower flats—the seamen—were singing at the tops of their voices. Any hour, any minute, deliverance. Two sailors cheerfully made cigarettes with toilet-paper and the remnants of their tobacco.

In the officers' flats, John Bammant and his friends were talking over plans for a break-out as soon as land was sighted. They were sure it could not be long whether it was Greenland, Iceland, or Germany.

"When the guards come down, I shall take on the 'Cherub', and you can take on . . ." The talk went on for hours.

The sun was setting and the guards came down wearing steel helmets and gas-masks and looking very martial. Silence fell instantly as they entered the flat. The prisoners were not quite ready to carry out their plans, and wanted no trouble—yet.

"Now, gentlemen," said the German banteringly, "where is your British blockade? Asleep, eh?"

"Just you wait," Tom Foley countered. "You haven't got to Germany yet, have you? We'll be changing places before long—you'll be sitting below and me on top."

"Never," the German retorted indignantly. "When you wake up one day we shall be in Hamburg."

So it was Hamburg? Had the guard been stung into revealing the *Altmark*'s destination? Did he really know where the ship was going?

Mr. King was battling with his own doubts. The hours of

waiting and hoping were beginning to tell on everybody. There had been a short spell of exercise on deck and one man had reported to him that on the bows of the ship the name *Altmark* had reappeared. It was ominous.

There was yet another fact that seemed to point in one direction only. When the time came for the rations to be issued, the "peggies" were turned back at the top of the trunkway and the German guards themselves brought down another three days' rations.

"We must be approaching land," someone said.

"Should be," King agreed. He was turning over the pointers in his mind. First there was the cocky confidence of the guards and their sneers at the British blockade. Then the putting forward of the clock to Central European time. Surely, the facts proved that the Germans were confident that they would get through.

"Curse them," he said despondently.

One man returned to the hold from the hospital, where he had been detailed to act as orderly. "Any news?" King asked him.

"Trouble over there," he replied. "Seems to be an infectious case. Somebody's been isolated but I couldn't find out who it is."

"We'll be in Hamburg soon," said a voice. "Why worry?"

Hamburg was uppermost in the mind of Captain Dau, during the long sleepless night he passed. It was six months almost exactly to the day since he had taken the *Altmark* to sea. He had not seen or even approached land once all that time. Suddenly a feeling of almost uncontrollable excitement came over the cold, calculating master.

The night of February 13 would never be obliterated from his memory. It was pitch-dark on the bridge, and in the chart-room the light was dim. Bending over his maps, with a protractor in his hands, he called his first officer.

"Paulsen," he said, "there is news. We are in Norwegian territorial waters."

The two Germans looked in thankful silence at each other. Safety—at last.

Paulsen broke the silence with a question. "And now, *Herr Kapitaen*?"

"Well," Dau said slowly, "it is exactly 5 a.m. I think the

worst of the heavy weather is over. If the weather had continued rough and had not looked as if it would be clearing up properly, I should have preferred to make for the West Fjord and Narvik. But it looks clear along the Norwegian coast."

"So?" Paulsen asked.

"Steer for Halten Lighthouse. We will make for Trondheim."

Below, the long restless night was coming to an end. It was very cold but the first men looking out from the top hatch called down:

"Beautiful weather. Just right for our rescue."

A youth named MacMillan nearly fell down the ladder as he turned from the top to shout to the group below.

"There's some signalling going on."

Fifty voices responded all at once: "We must be near land." "We are approaching the German coast," Sam Flower could be heard saying above the noise.

Tom Foley was inclined to believe that land was near, but surely not the German coast?

Bob Goss, the *Ashlea*'s athletic second mate, was waiting impatiently to climb the trunkway. "Come down," he roared to the seamen on the ladder, "get out of it and let someone up who knows the coastline." From his youth Goss had often sailed out from the Tyne to Norway. He was back within five minutes, still sniffing appreciatively. "No doubt at all about it," he said to the officers. "Norwegian air smells better than any other in the world. We're steaming along the Norwegian coast."

"How can you be sure?" someone asked.

"Want to take a bet?" asked Goss with conviction.

"The Navy'll get us out—wherever we are," a voice said bravely. It sounded confident. But hopes and fears alternated with confusing speed. From above came the sound of tramping feet, and the prisoners heard the hatch go down with a clang.

When Goss climbed up again, he could see nothing. Not even a glint of light came through cracks that had been widened by the prisoners. The guards had placed a canvas across the hatch. The prisoners shuddered; it was as if the lid had been nailed down on their coffin. Some felt sick with excitement. The atmosphere grew heavier, as no air could seep through the covered hatch.

"Maybe we're in Kiel!" a young sailor suggested in the bottom flat. He had not heard Goss's confident report.

"It's Hamburg. They said we're going to Hamburg!" came a dispirited response.

. . . . . .

While the prisoners continued to argue, Dau, up on the bridge, heaved a sigh of relief.

"We can relax for the time being," he told Wegener, his administrative officer. He looked eastwards towards the dawn and in the bright morning light it was easy to recognize the contours of the coast.

"Our voyage is virtually over," Dau asserted. But it did not sound like a dogmatic statement; it was as if he were trying to reassure himself. "We are now protected by Norwegian neutrality. Our German Fatherland is so close that we can almost reach it with our hands. Once we have crossed the Skagerrak, we shall be there," he said.

"We have made it, *Herr Kapitaen*," Wegener said. "Haven't we?" he asked as an afterthought. There was no reply. "Home in three days," Wegener continued, "home to my wife and children." He had four sons. His chatter and that of other officers, who had come up on to the bridge, began to irritate Captain Dau.

"Wait a moment," Dau held up his hand commandingly. "This is the position. We were not discovered as we passed between Iceland and the Faroe Islands. The British North Atlantic patrol did not observe us in the North Sea. I consider the English can have no idea that we have passed their blockade lines. . . ."

He stopped in the middle of his sentence, almost afraid to continue. He knew that although the *Altmark* had so far escaped detection, she had not the slightest chance of passing through Norwegian waters without her presence being reported to the British Naval authorities.

At Kristiansund, if nowhere else, the resident British Consul would be alert. Whatever happened after that there was bound to be a delay while Admiralty instructions passed along the complicated chain of command. If the *Altmark*, could reach the Skagerrak by the following night, it was more than likely that the Royal Navy would be too late to catch her.

Aloud Dau said: "Home in six days. No, no. Let us say —home in eight days, *Herr* Wegener."

For once, as he climbed down from the bridge, Dau did not object to the crew crowding around him. He smiled, but did not reply to one of his sailors who asked loudly: "Shall we get Easter leave, sir?"

"Leave . . . but then what?" said another.

"Up and at it again," a grumpy German declared bitterly. "They won't keep the *Altmark* in port for long."

The *Altmark* had come to a full stop near Halten Lighthouse.

"Request pilot," Captain Dau signalled.

He went to his cabin and turned on the wireless. A London news broadcast was saying that all British merchant ships in the North Sea were to be armed. He switched to Germany. On the Hamburg wavelength came an announcement of the German Naval High Command that all British merchant ships would be treated as warships in future.

Dau switched off and sat back to wait for a Norwegian pilot.

. . . . .

Darkness had fallen at Port Edgar, the Royal Navy's bleak base near Rosyth in the Firth of Forth, and a thousand hardened British sailors were settling down to a quiet evening. Among the ships in port was H.M.S. *Aurora*, a cruiser, which was being fitted with degaussing equipment, as protection against the magnetic mines which the Luftwaffe had begun to scatter in the shipping lanes around Britain.

Even though the war had been going on for less than six months, it had been tough for the *Aurora*. German bombers had attacked her and she had spent long spells on patrol in remote waters looking for the elusive German Navy. *Aurora*'s men were not on leave, but they were standing easy. Degaussing equipment took some time to fit and officers and men were wondering whether it was worth while asking their wives and girl-friends to come up for a few days.

Petty Officer Tom ("Barney") Barnes, a quiet, round-faced, well-built Regular, was one of *Aurora*'s men who was looking forward to a restful evening with a book. It was 6 p.m. and he had just stripped for a bath when the tannoy loud-speaker system crackled:

"The following will report on the quarter-deck," crisply ordered a voice. Barnes looked at the calendar. It was February 13. "Unlucky thirteenth. I'll bet I'm in on this," he thought, as the announcement continued: "Petty Officer Barnes, Petty Officer Meadows, Able Seaman Bennett . . ."

Barnes counted twenty-one names in the group and, while he was hurriedly dressing, other groups of twenty-one names were recited in the same deliberate manner.

On the quarter-deck, when they had fallen in, an officer gave instructions that were short and to the point. Those whose names had been called out were to report back at 19.30 hours to go to ships of 4th Flotilla Group. Orders were to get their steaming kits—only the most essential personal things, one change of underclothes.

"You are leaving for temporary duty on a short-term inter-ship transfer. When your duty is finished you will return here. I know that whatever happens you will not let *Aurora* down," said a senior officer, wishing the men good luck.

The ship to which Tom Barnes had been allotted was H.M.S. *Cossack*, which also had already fought the Germans. She had recently been on escort duties in the North Sea and had taken part in the abortive chase of the German battleship which had sunk the *Rawalpindi*. Though a small ship, the flotilla captain, Philip Vian, flew his flag in her.

In *Cossack*, Vian, a fierce, outspoken sailor, with a reputation for aggressiveness, was cursing fate. A minor epidemic of influenza had laid low half the crews of the flotilla's ships just when a signal from Home Fleet had ordered him into action.

"What's it this time?" a young fellow-officer asked Geoffrey Craven as they went aboard the *Cossack*.

"Ice recce in the Skagerrak," said the tall, dark, temporary paymaster sub-lieutenant, who was Captain Vian's assistant secretary, a "Sunday sailor", as he described himself defensively, whose wide knowledge of North European languages had been of great use to the flotilla already.

Craven had been on patrol in the North Sea with the *Cossack* since the beginning of the war and had joined many a boarding party to examine ships on the high seas. He now took things as they came. "Routine," he said, "but, of course, anything may happen."

The cruiser *Arethusa*, the destroyers *Sikh*, *Nubian*, *Ivanhoe* and

Intrepid, were all under sailing orders and launches were passing busily between the ships. Before ten o'clock that night, under the orders of Lieutenant "Nosey" Parker, Petty Officer Barnes and other *Aurora* ratings, carrying rifles, bayonets, steel helmets, and webbing, had joined their temporary ship the *Cossack*.

They were a formidable-looking group standing on the seamen's mess deck waiting for orders when *Cossack*'s "Jimmy-the-One", Lieutenant-Commander Bradwell Talbot Turner, came forward to address them. Turner, a tall, slender naval officer, quiet and serious in manner, struck them as a bookish type rather than a man of action. But his first brisk words dispelled their illusions.

"Boarding procedure will be as follows," he said, outlining two alternative plans. One envisaged boarding by boat and the men were allotted to positions in various boats. "But," said Turner, "if there is a boarding direct from the ship, you will take up the following positions." Each man was told exactly from which point on *Cossack* he would jump on to the enemy vessel and was given his specific task.

In the early hours the flotilla, led by *Arethusa*, sailed line ahead into the North Sea and set a course due east. Craven went below to the wardroom and joined the big Irishman, Lieutenant L. Burkett, who was the captain's first secretary.

"I'll wager things are likely to happen on this trip," Burkett said. "This is going to be more than an ordinary ice recce. The Old Man is only waiting for further orders."

The newcomers to the *Cossack* were equally convinced that the ships now heading into the cold dawn had not been suddenly reinforced with *Aurora* men just to see how far the ice extended in the Skagerrak. Often, previously in wardroom and mess deck, men of the Home Fleet had talked of action in Norway. Surely Britain could not afford to let Hitler get in there first and take control of the vast coastline, with its fjords and safe anchorages and inlets, from which raiders could harry the shipping between Britain and the Baltic countries?

The units of the flotilla were splitting up. As the morning dawned each was sweeping a wide area in a pre-determined pattern which left no square mile of the ocean uncovered.

"Wouldn't be a bit surprised if we were after that Nazi hell-ship with hundreds of our blokes aboard . . . you know

the ship I mean! What was her name?" said a *Cossack* petty officer.

"*Altmark*. You mean the *Altmark*," said Barnes.

Earlier in the month the Navy had heard a report that the *Altmark*, carrying over three hundred British merchant sailors, as prisoners, had reached her home port of Hamburg. But there had been a swift Admiralty denial and in many of the warships of the Northern Patrol the topic of the *Altmark* prisoners cropped up continuously.

"Would be just the job to run into this *Altmark*. She must be coming through here somewhere," said Burkett.

In the bright sunshine Vian continued to direct a sweep of the ocean, edging eastward all the time.

. . . . . .

About nine o'clock on the morning of Wednesday, February 14, George King went down to the washing deck and brought up a bucket of dirty washing water. Schmidt had given strict orders that no one was to attempt to get on deck, but the wily *Doric Star* engineer convinced the guard that the water must be dumped.

"We can't wash. It's bad enough in the hell down there. We are suffocating. We must have a rinse to freshen up."

"Well, quickly, then . . . *schnell, schnell*!"

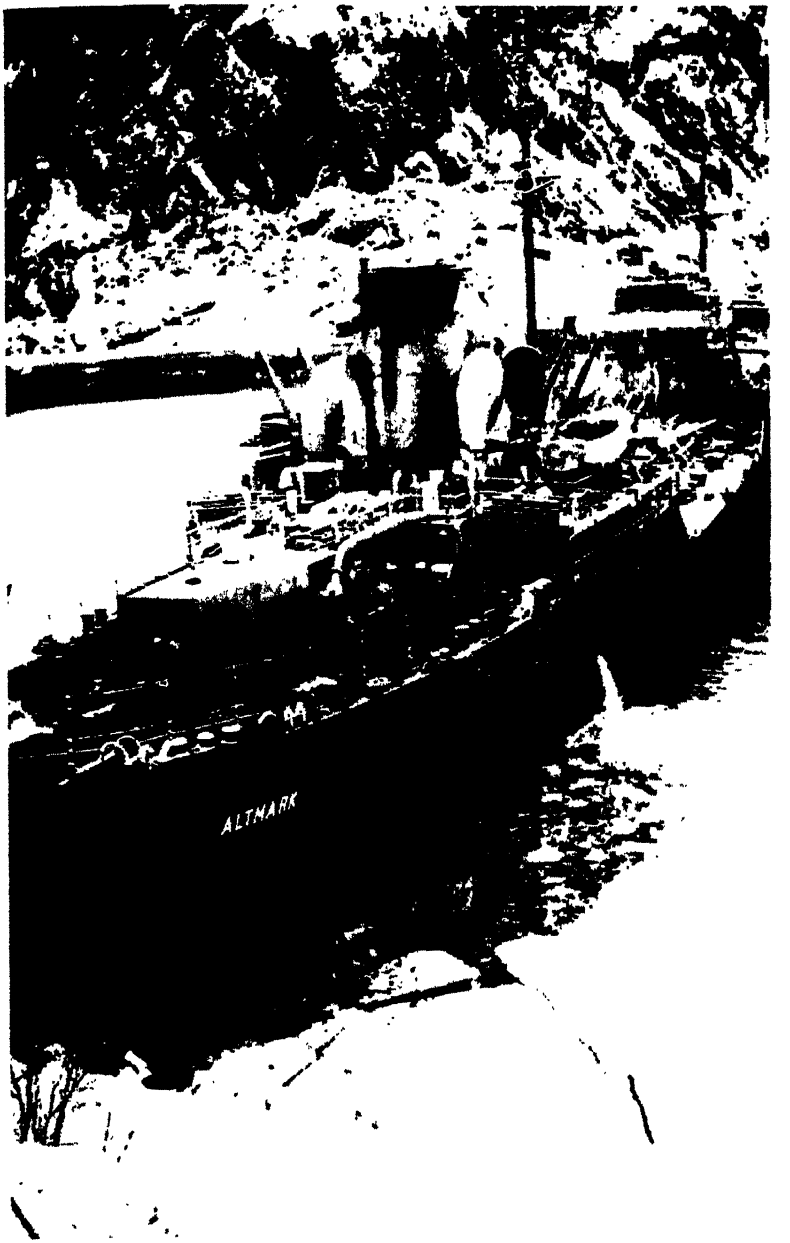
King was on deck for only a minute but it was enough. There to port, snow-covered, but still there, was land—the first he had seen for many weeks.

"Land! I have seen land!" King was unable to keep back a shout when he returned to the hold. It was impossible to say where they were. The *Altmark* was lying well out at sea. "But it's land—land, I tell you."

Goss went quickly up the trunkway, but was back again almost at once. "You're right," he shouted jubilantly. "It's the Norwegian coast. I've seen it scores of times."

His shout was taken up and grew into a mighty roar. All through the flats there was singing, screaming, whistling. The whistles, discordant at first, soon began to keep time in a methodical S O S.

"Quiet down there, absolute quiet." The guards were becoming panicky. Quickly they opened the hatches to send down tea and take up the lavatory drums. "It will be the last time we shall have to do this dirty work for you," one of them hissed.



The *Altmark* aground in Jossing Fjord

Captain Heinrich Dau

Lieut.-Commander Bradwell Turner

"You bet it will be," a chorus replied. The hatch was replaced, with more threats, but the shouting continued.

"Keep those fellows quiet—whatever you do," Captain Dau ordered Weichert and Schmidt. They could see that the captain was in a vicious mood. As they had entered his cabin a Trondheim port official was leaving. He had arrived in a pilot's boat and had been in conference with Dau for some time.

"The swine," muttered Dau as the pilot's launch cast off.

Paulsen thought he was talking about the prisoners. "We'll keep them quiet, *Herr Kapitaen.* Don't you worry."

"*Nein, nein!*" Dau retorted. Words cascaded from his lips and his little beard jumped angrily up and down as he repeated what the Norwegian had told him. There were only pilots for the passage into Trondheim. But, said Dau angrily, he was not going to walk into this trap. If he went to Trondheim the British might force the Norwegians to interpret his arrival as a landing in a Norwegian port—which was different from cruising in Norwegian waters.

"No coastal pilots before Kristiansund!" Dau dismally repeated the Norwegian's words. "We shall have to coast along as best as we can. I have sent a request to Kristiansund. Now," he added wearily, "I shall rest a while, Paulsen. Please take over."

"*Herr Kapitaen, Herr Kapitaen . . .*" Rudely the call roused Dau half an hour later. "Torpedo boat astern."

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes like a child, Dau hurried to the bridge. A Norwegian ship had moved in close, and Dau, his eyes now open wide, could see her name without difficulty: *Trygg.* From the *Trygg* a flag signal gave the order: "Stop." Her siren whistled.

"What do you want? *Verdammt!*" Dau expostulated. "We have no time to lose. Every minute counts with me."

Below, the *Tairoa*'s second mate, Robert Costa, heard the *Trygg*'s siren and called loudly for silence.

He listened intently. "Got it," he said. "That's the letter K."

"What's that mean?" asked an engineer.

"International signal," said Costa, looking round for confirmation from the other mates. "Some ship is telling the *Altmark* to stop."

Costa was right. Already a boat was on the way carrying a Norwegian officer to the *Altmark.* His request to inspect the

ship was polite but firm. Dau, not to be outdone in courtesy, conducted him to the bridge and showed him the navigating cabin. "We are an unarmed tanker," he insisted.

The Norwegian officer was satisfied and saluted Dau as he left to return to the *Trygg*. "Two things *Herr Kapitaen-Leutnant*," Dau stopped him. "I should be grateful for a certificate saying that you have searched us. And, what about the pilot I have requested?"

The Norwegian made an entry in the ship's diary.

"*Ja, ja* . . . I am afraid there is no pilot here, though you may be able to get one at Alesund. But if you would accept the help of one of my men? He has no certificate, but he knows these waters well."

Dau was full of gratitude. The Norwegian sailor came aboard and, easier in his mind, Dau ordered the *Altmark* to steam on the next stage of her voyage.

When the tanker approached Alesund, Captain Dau, back on duty peered from the bridge at the *Trygg*, which followed in his backwash like a faithful watch-dog. He had only just rung down "Slow", when a rowing-boat drew alongside.

"Ah, the pilots," Dau said. He seemed relieved; but his relief vanished when he found that the pilots, on whose knowledge of the coastline he intended to rely, were accompanied by a Norwegian naval officer.

Peremptorily, the officer demanded full details about the *Altmark*.

"I have already given all necessary information," Dau protested.

"That may well be so," the Norwegian insisted, "but my orders are to take details."

"These are not British orders?" Dau asked, facetiously.

The Norwegian disregarded the German's sarcasm. Quietly he followed Dau around the ship asking questions, making notes of what Dau said. No, there were no guns on board. Prisoners? Certainly not.

"The *Altmark* is a tanker, not a warship," Dau tried to work up indignation. "I cannot understand why all this is necessary. Surely I have every right to sail in Norwegian waters ?"

"Maybe . . . but you are approaching the fortified base of Bergen and are not permitted to pass it in darkness."

He was turning to go when the captain caught him by his sleeve and kept him in his cabin. "One moment, *Herr Kapitaen-Leutnant.*"

From below Dau had heard a significant rumbling. He left his visitor unceremoniously and called to Paulsen urgently.

"Turn on the winches to drown that noise. No violence now, but keep the prisoners quiet," he ordered, in a whisper.

From the look-out post at the top of the trunkway, John Bammant had seen the *Trygg* officer aboard the *Altmark.* If a Norwegian officer was aboard, his boat must be near. Bammant called for action. "All together, lads," he shouted. "Give it all you've got."

The next moment pandemonium broke out. Bammant picked up a wedge of wood and started beating the big lavatory drum. Officers and men followed his example. Everybody hammered on the steel plates and stanchions and flakes of white paint spattered in all directions. Feet drummed on the iron deck, heels kicked against steel doors. The din was indescribable.

Bammant, Brown, Goss, Cudbertson, Wall and other young officers were not satisfied with noise. As he looked around, Bammant's eye fell on the heavy steel girders which kept ammunition in position before the prisoners were quartered in the holds. It did not take the powerful young man long to wrench one from its fitting. Raising it aloft, he staggered with it towards the trunkway. Willing hands grasped the girder and sent it thudding against the hatch. The noise had now become frenzy.

"Can't you hear us?"

The girder shot upwards, battering and splintering the heavy wooden hatch in places. But it was heavy work for the weakened young men and one after another was forced to rest. Over part of the hole the prisoners could see a guard seated on the hatch in order to keep it in position.

"I'll shift him," promised Bammant.

He seized a jagged tin can and, standing on a lavatory drum, thrust it at the guard. An anguished cry told the cheering prisoners that Bammant's jab had gone home. The girder was lifted in position again.

"Heave," roared Bammant.

The hole in the hatch grew bigger and the hatch itself now threatened to disintegrate. Thoroughly alarmed, a guard

looked down into the holds at the shouting prisoners. His pistol was drawn. "Stop, or I fire," he yelled menacingly.

On the *Altmark* deck, the freight winches were turning on their rumbling cogs. Every winch on the tanker was in operation when Dau returned to his cabin to release the impatient Norwegian.

"My ship is empty," he said with a pious smile. "The crew find it very cold after our stay in the South Atlantic. I have given them permission to generate heat with the winches."

The Norwegian was already leaving the ship and returning to the *Trygg*.

"They are still trying to break out, *Herr Kapitaen*." Pale and agitated, Weichert reported on the bridge.

"Put the hoses on them. But no shooting, not here, anyway," Dau ordered. "This is revolt," he added under his breath. "Turn out the lights down there," he shouted.

The German with his revolver withdrew and the hoses were inserted in the holes in the hatch. Now, in the darkness, water hissed down into the flats. It flooded the lavatory drums and drenched the prisoners. The stench was overpowering.

A few men still trying to scramble towards the hatch were beaten back by the rifle butts.

Lieutenant Schmidt pushed his way through the guards. He too had drawn his revolver. "Another move and we shoot without further warning."

It was 2 p.m. when the Norwegian had boarded the *Altmark*. Now it was 6 p.m. and the tanker was under way again. There was no hope left of a break-out. The chance had not been missed—it had never really existed. The noise died down. Once or twice pocket whistles spelled out desultory S O S signals again. But the prisoners, tired and dispirited, knew they were beaten.

They were in complete darkness except for the tiny lights from a few torches which had escaped detection in spite of many searches. In the past some of the older men had filled up oil barrels with water, as a protection against fire. Now their foresight was rewarded.

Oil was rising in a thin film to the top of the water and some men dipped rags into it so as to make crude lamps. But pungent smoke from the "lamps" poisoned the atmosphere, and the prisoners decided it was better to remain in darkness.

The stillness was broken by the sound of the hatch being pulled back. Weichert appeared, followed by Schmidt and twenty guards. Silently they pinned a sheet of paper on the notice board. It said:

NOTICE TO PRISONERS

ON ACCOUNT OF TODAY'S BEHAVIOUR OF THE PRISONERS THERE WILL BE BREAD AND WATER ONLY TOMORROW INSTEAD OF REGULAR MEALS.

FURTHER I HAVE GIVEN THE ORDER THAT NEITHER PRISON OFFICER NOR DOCTOR WILL MAKE THEIR REGULAR ROUNDS. ANY SEVERE CASE OF SICKNESS CAN BE REPORTED ON OCCASION OF HANDING DOWN THE FOOD.

AT SEA, FEBRUARY 15, 1940.

DAU, COMMANDER.

CHAPTER XIII

"ENGLISCHE KRIEGSCHIFFE!"

OUTSIDE, THE NIGHT was clear and cold and the stars sparkled. Dau, uneasily pacing the bridge, talked nervously and incessantly to Paulsen about his plans. Several times within the hour, Paulsen had tried to go to his cabin, but Dau detained him. While the *Altmark* ploughed across the ocean, he had been strong and self-reliant. But now near land, he seemed to need the support of his strong and steady first officer.

"Permission or no permission," he repeated, "I am going on. Tell the pilots that I relieve them of their responsibility for our safety. Please go and tell them, Paulsen," he said. "No, wait! I shall tell them myself."

But when he did so, the senior pilot replied: "That makes no difference. There are hundreds of fishing smacks about—a whole fishing fleet between here and the coast. You could not pass them in darkness without running them down."

"But it is not quite dark," Dau protested. "I can steer round them."

"As you wish," the senior pilot shrugged, "but that means leaving Norwegian territorial waters. If I were you I should drop anchor here."

Dau did not reply. By this time he had decided that the sympathies of the two pilots were certainly not with the German Reich or any of her ships and captains.

"They're British agents," he whispered to Paulsen. "Watch them. Not an unguarded word in front of them."

Dau thought it wise to pretend to fall in with the pilots' wishes. He instructed his first officer to manœuvre as if he were trying to drop anchor.

"If we do as they say," he added, "they have lured us into a trap. We shall have violated international law. But we shall be all right while we cruise along."

Paulsen understood. With a stentorian voice, loud enough for the listening Norwegians to hear, he reported to Dau that the anchor winch was frozen up. There was nothing they could do except carry on.

When he had made his report, Paulsen pulled Captain Dau aside.

"One of the pilots has told Wegener that ours is a futile endeavour altogether. He said England would win the war anyway and that would be the end of Germany."

"Facts will soon disabuse you gentlemen of your silly notions," Dau said patronizingly to the Norwegians. They looked Dau up and down and smiled tolerantly.

The *Altmark* had now turned away from the rugged towering coastline which she had followed closely since dawn. Leaving a large fishing fleet on her port, the tanker put on speed, and was soon gaining the open sea. The *Trygg* dropped back.

"Good riddance," Paulsen commented, as he saw the Norwegian gunboat disappear in the darkness.

But the words were hardly out of his mouth when he saw the flash of a signal lamp. It came from another Norwegian torpedo boat which had appeared suddenly out of the night. Now, it was so close that he could already see the name—*Snoegg*.

"Full astern," Dau ordered. His face was red and he could not disguise his irritation. The commander of the *Snoegg* came aboard and said brusquely that he had orders to question the *Altmark*'s master.

"Really—I must protest. I have been asked these questions twice already," Dau flared up.

The Norwegian cut him short: "Orders," he said.

He asked his questions and Dau answered bad-temperedly. The Norwegian did not stay long. But when he had gone Dau noticed with annoyance that the *Trygg* had taken up the *Altmark*'s trail once more.

With a tired smile he left his charts and went out to look to port. The *Altmark* was passing Sogne Fjord. Sogne . . . the name he had adopted which had served to camouflage the *Altmark* for so long. Dau was still well north of Bergen and estimated that he could pass into the Skagerrak in the following night between 2 a.m. and 7 a.m. so long as he could continue on his course at full speed and without interruption. In his own

mind, there was no doubt, it was his last chance to reach Germany.

"Ship to port." Paulsen's call shook him out of his reverie.

Dau peered to port. He could see a destroyer churning up the water as it approached. Its lamp was signalling unmistakably: "Stop."

Paulsen said: "It is *Garm*, a destroyer of the Royal Norwegian Navy."

"*Jetzt wird's mir aber zu dumm!*" Dau nearly screamed. The whole business was getting too stupid.

While the destroyer approached, he wirelessed the nearest coastal station requesting that a telegram be passed to the German Embassy in Oslo.

"Have just been ordered to stop for the second time (he wrote out) by a Norwegian destroyer after Norwegian officers already on three occasions have been given all the information they requested. Must protest energetically against this repeated delay which in my opinion is a breach of neutrality."

As Dau had finished drafting his signal the *Garm*'s captain was coming aboard the *Altmark*. He was taken at once to Dau's cabin. He hardly nodded his head.

"I must protest," Dau began. "This interference is bound to have disastrous consequences for my ship. I have already protested through my embassy."

"I have orders to search your ship," interrupted the Norwegian. "No ship of any nationality is allowed to pass the fortified Bergen naval area without prior search."

"I am sorry," Dau retorted. "The *Altmark* is sailing under the flag of the German Reich Service. Therefore, I am unable, on principle, to permit a search, but if you are concerned with her armaments, I can give you an assurance that the *Altmark* carries no armament at all."

"I am afraid that I cannot personally accept your proposition," said the Norwegian. "My admiral is on the *Garm*. I shall consult with him."

The consultation did not last long. He was back on the *Altmark* within twenty minutes.

"Since you refuse us permission to search your ship," he told Dau stiffly, "you will have to leave the fortified area at once. Further, I am instructed to advise you that permission

to use telegraphic facilities cannot be granted. Your best course is to use the Feje Osen passage. Goodbye."

Dau saw there was nothing to be done except rely on the two pilots to show him the way. He explained the position.

"No, sir . . . not us," they said at once. They were smiling at the German captain's discomfiture. "We shall have to leave you now."

The noose was tightening around the *Altmark*. As a last desperate expedient, Captain Dau gave orders for one of his officers to hail the *Garm* through a megaphone. Would the captain of the Norwegian destroyer consent to transmit a message to the German Embassy in Oslo.

The captain would. "But it is requested that the master of the *Altmark* bring it across in person!"

Dau called his officers into consultation. There could be no doubt at all in his mind now that the Norwegians were acting in concert with British interests. It was clear to him that his earlier telegram had never reached its destination and it might be already in the hands of British agents. Obviously this was a new trick—Dau let his imagination coast on. Perhaps, he said, there was a British Secret Service man on board the *Garm*, luring him into a trap. "I should not be surprised at all," he said.

The officers looked at their captain in astonishment. They did not doubt that he was talking nonsense. Dau quickly pulled himself together as he noticed their expressions of surprise.

"Signal to the Norwegian that I am prepared to go on board."

Dau climbed into his launch and set out. To his surprise, the traditional whistles piped him aboard the Norwegian destroyer.

"Captain Dau—may I introduce you to the Commander of Bergen defence zone," the *Garm* captain said.

Speaking in fluent German the Admiral explained the international law as he interpreted it. "I am afraid I cannot accept your version of the status of your ship," he said politely. "There is no provision in international law for a ship such as yours. The flag of the Reich Service is a nebulous thing. You must appreciate this, *Herr Kapitaen.*"

"But, Admiral, you must realize what it means if I cannot pass the Skagerrak tonight. Tomorrow I am bound to run into British naval forces."

"Tonight . . . tomorrow night," the Norwegian said stonily, "I do not think it makes much difference."

Dau did not miss the Norwegian's meaning and inflection. The argument was pointless and, he considered, was being drawn out unduly long. It was getting late, very late . . . too late. He was ready to return to his ship.

"Well," the Norwegian said, concluding the fruitless conversation. "You may carry on a little longer." He said it with the air of a man who was conferring a great favour.

Dau laughed bitterly as he took his leave. There was no longer any hope of making up for the delay. The Skagerrak—and safety—seemed farther away than ever.

"Bureaucrats—sticklers," Paulsen said when the captain repeated the gist of the lengthy conversation with the Bergen admiral.

"They're all in the pay of the British," Dau thundered. "Gangsters, hirelings. The Fuehrer will punish them. We shall make them pay." He stumped off to his cabin.

In the darkness of the *Altmark*'s evil-smelling holds nobody thought of sleeping. They were near the Norwegian coast, neutral and forbidding, but at least it was not Germany—not yet. With luck, the prisoners never would see Germany.

The lights had come on again, and George King bent low over his diary with his stubby pencil poised. If he could only make a few notes about this memorable exciting day. Calmly King began to sum up:

"15.2.40. Vessel running at full speed from 6.30 a.m. but still in the fjords. Still locked down here. Ship stopped at noon and launch came alongside. We made brave effort to get out. Then, an hour later, we were pulled up again and two destroyers and two gunboats examined the ship. Another effort was made but we were repelled by hoses and lights out. Tried S O S on whistles. What an awful position. Ships right alongside and still not rescued. The ship was held up for hours, then under way again. Still we are not at Kiel yet or Hamburg and in God we trust. We were given tea about six o'clock. Nearly too disappointed to write."

As the lights went out a voice said despondently in the darkness: "We've been forgotten." It expressed the thoughts of most of the prisoners.

But they had not been forgotten. As the prisoners huddled

miserably together in their holds the diplomats were busy, and no one slept in the Admiralty. From the First Lord of the Admiralty, down the naval ranks to the ratings, thoughts that night centred around the *Altmark*.

Britain had many friends in Norway and as the *Altmark* passed the approaches to Bergen, an alert watcher observed the vessel and deciphered her name. Within half an hour the dramatic news was in the office of the British Vice-Consul, who quickly informed the British Embassy in Oslo.

From the Naval Attaché to the Admiralty went the coded signal: "ALTMARK STEAMING TWO MILES OFF NORWEGIAN COAST NORTH OF BERGEN."

The First Lord himself set the hunt in motion. The Admiralty alerted ships of the Northern Patrol and the R.A.F. warned its aircraft to watch for the *Altmark*. Naval Intelligence had been expecting the prison ship to approach Northern Europe for days. Officers had noted with derision the clumsy attempt of the Goebbels propaganda machine to mislead them by a wireless news report, according to which the *Altmark* had returned to her German base on February 2. It had been taken up by the whole Nazi Press. But the Admiralty was not deceived.

British Naval Staff officers had been wise to send Captain Vian's flotilla on "ice reconnaissance" into the Skagerrak. The position of the ice in the strategic straits would obviously have an important bearing on the final lap of the *Altmark*'s voyage. It had proved impossible to trace her in the Atlantic. But with a strong flotilla cruising and searching, positioned carefully in a striking poise, the *Altmark* would find it hard to escape detection once she neared her home port.

Out in the North Sea that night Vian in the *Cossack* received from the Admiralty the news from Bergen—and a new objective. Find the *Altmark*. Every effort, Vian was told, would be made through diplomatic channels to prevent the prison ship, clearly a Nazi auxiliary war vessel, from sheltering behind the security of Norwegian territorial waters.

Churchill, angered by the *Altmark*'s flagrant violation of international law, had at once realized Norway's dilemma. He knew that any violent Norwegian reaction might rouse the German High Command. It was not enough for Norway to be strictly neutral. Her insistence on the letter of international

law would probably be interpreted as a sign of hostility against Germany. It could serve as a pretext for an attack on Norway.

His instructions to the First Sea Lord for transmission to Captain Vian were as clear as they could be. The *Altmark* was an invaluable trophy. "Find her, edge her into the open sea, board her and liberate her prisoners."

The signal included a rough "fix"—the estimated position at the time the *Altmark* was reported. When Captain Vian gave his officers the news, it threw the destroyer in a turmoil.

"If I only knew what I am looking for," Vian said in exasperation to his flotilla navigator, Lieutenant-Commander Hector MacLean.

"Don't you, sir?"

It was a difficult, an incredible situation. A cruiser and five destroyers were racing to meet a prison-ship with three hundred British merchant seamen on board, but the flotilla commander was without a detailed description of the ship he sought. It did not help Vian to carry out his orders.

Every day, wily Nazi vessels hid their identity behind Scandinavian flags to escape the attention of the Royal Navy while they carried vital Swedish iron ore supplies to Germany. On the Northern Patrol *Cossack* had learned how difficult it could be to frustrate such ruses. The Admiralty's latest information was that the *Altmark* flew a German flag. But suppose, once she had left Norwegian territorial waters, that the ship changed her nationality again.

A junior officer of the *Cossack* hurried to the bridge proudly waving the ship's newest copy of the *London Illustrated News* that he had found in the wardroom. It was the issue of February 4, and here for all to see was a picture of the *Altmark*.

The senior officers crowded round the magazine. "Is that the *Altmark*?" asked somebody.

"There. Just where I've got my thumb."

The officer looked incredulous. "That thing, a tanker of 20,000 tons?" he enquired. "Must be a mistake somewhere."

By eight o'clock on the morning of February 16 the *Altmark* had covered a hundred miles in a leisurely, uneventful night cruise. Captain Dau, who had dozed for an hour or two in his cabin, went up to the bridge.

"Position, *Herr Kapitaen*," Paulsen reported. The *Altmark* was off Kopervik, south of Hagesund and just north of Stavanger.

"The pilots are changing."

Suspiciously, the *Altmark* captain, officers and crew, watched the Norwegians come aboard. The Norwegians greeted each other but wasted no words on the Germans.

"Your instructions?" one of the new pilots asked the German captain.

Dau decided he must be careful. A whole—and very critical day—was in front of him. There was nothing the *Altmark* could do except to steam slowly along the rugged coast and watch the steep rocks, the hidden and picturesque little islets drop behind.

A hundred miles ahead were the deep waters of the Skagerrak. Late that night the *Altmark* would make the dash across the Skagerrak towards the Danish coast and, with luck, to Germany.

In the sharp, dry cold wind the crew shivered, in spite of greatcoats and leather jerkins.

"What's the position below?" Dau asked Weichert. Neither Schmidt nor Dr. Tyrolt had visited the prisoners' quarters since the previous afternoon. Guards, heavily armed, had taken the ship's biscuits and water down—the punishment rations prescribed by the captain. Beyond that, there had been no personal contact with the prisoners.

"They are worse than ever, *Herr Kapitaen,*" Weichert reported. The guards, he said, were frightened by the menacing attitude of some of the prisoners. They had been assailed with threats and shouts, angry and ironical.

"They probably thought their hour had struck when we stopped," Dau decided. "Now that we are steaming ahead I am sure they will lose their confidence."

Dau was almost right. The leisurely progress of the ship puzzled the prisoners. She had been nearly stationary when it was Cudbertson's turn on watch at 4 a.m. After that she had drifted slowly along the coast and all Cudbertson could see was a red light nearly astern. It was the Norwegian gunboat still tagging on to the *Altmark.*

The men were too tense even to talk. They were sure the day would bring great events, but how or when they did not dare to think. Logically, only a miracle could deflect the *Altmark* from her course—from her "march to Germany", as the German sailors called it. But miracles had happened before

and most of the prisoners believed a miracle would save them ere the day was out.

. . . . .

By 10 a.m. *Cossack* was far to the south of some of the ships of the flotilla when her look-out reported a ship that resembled the *Altmark*.

"We'll go and inspect her," said Captain Vian, jauntily.

But as *Cossack* approached the ship, it became obvious that she was a Swede. An hour later the destroyer bore down on a ship carrying the Norwegian flag, steaming a few miles from the coast.

"Question her," Vian instructed Craven, who requested details, addressing the ship in Swedish through the megaphone. Swedish and Norwegian voices replied. The assurances they gave were satisfactory and Captain Vian let her go. The same thing happened several times during the morning. The area was alive with shipping, but there was not a sign of the *Altmark*.

Nor had anyone seen her. "No, no tanker, sir," said a Dutch trawlerman, when Lieutenant Parker rowed over in the *Cossack's* whaler, "but we've had some very good fishing today. Take some back with you for supper."

The fish tasted good but it was a poor substitute for the missing prison-ship.

Earlier that morning around 7.30 the crews of two Hudsons —"F. for Freddy" and "K. for King"—were called to the briefing room at Thornaby Station, Tees Bay, on the borders of Durham and the North Riding of Yorkshire. The time had come for the R.A.F. to take a hand in the hunt for the prison-ship.

Pilot Officer C. W. McNeill, a Canadian, P.O. Lawry, a New Zealander, his co-pilot, Leading Aircraftsman Sheekey and Rear Gunner Corporal Hugill, the crew of "K. for King", listened attentively as the intelligence officer outlined their mission, which was to be undertaken in co-operation with "F. for Freddy".

Somewhere along the coast of Norway—maybe either in the North Sea or the Skagerrak—a German tanker was making for Kiel or Hamburg. Their mission was to locate the tanker, identify her, photograph her, give her position and direction as speedily as possible.

"Here is a sketch of this ship. The name is *Altmark*," the briefing officer told McNeill and his crew.

From the rough sketch they gathered that the *Altmark* was a ship of bold and distinctive outline. Her upper decks were likely to be painted black and white and her tonnage fairly large—around 20,000 tons.

"The ship must on no account be attacked." The airmen looked puzzled. "She is carrying hundreds of British seamen as prisoners," said the briefing officer. "Note her exact position and report. In code, of course."

By 8.25 a.m. the two Hudsons were airborne and had crossed the coast. The day was brilliantly sunny and the sea looked as blue as the Mediterranean. Soon, on a track about ten miles north of the strongly fortified Heligoland, the German coastline came into view.

Diving low, with "K. for King" leading, the Hudsons inspected all shipping along the Danish coast and the Skagerrak as far as Skagen. There was plenty of it but no sign of a tanker. The aircraft turned out to sea again and, as they did so, noted that pack ice was drifting away on the horizon. In the fine weather they reckoned they could see as much as fifty miles ahead.

At Thornaby wireless operators were listening in for news from the two aircraft but it was 12.52 before the message came. "F. for Freddy" sent it: "Tanker steaming southwards on a coastwise course."

Within minutes, the top priority message had been relayed by the Admiralty to *Cossack*. Vian was too far south to act himself and signalled a warning to *Arethusa*. Her look-outs were just deciphering the name of a ship when to their surprise they saw her crew taking to the boats. The name was *Baldur*, a tanker of about 6,000 tons. Before *Arethusa* could reach the ship the *Baldur* had begun to sink. Her crew had panicked and scuttled her.

McNeill in "K. for King" had heard the message passed by "F. for Freddy" but still kept his attention on the vast coastline.

At 12.55 p.m., fifteen miles north of the course of his flight, he could see a dark shape which grew into a ship as he approached. She was steaming southwards, he estimated, at about eight knots. McNeill made a big sweep to get a better

broadside view and a minute later they could make her out quite clearly. She was a big, grey tanker.

"Could be," he said on the inter-comm to his crew, as he roared down to deck level. The ship was not black and she had no white deck tops. He flew so low that he went under her bow. There, clear as noon-day, was her name: *Altmark.*

A call on the inter-comm alerted Corporal Hugill and L.A.C. Sheekey.

"Sheekey," MacNeill asked, "is 'F. for Freddy' transmitting?"

McNeill knew that "F. for Freddy" had seen the ship and he was sure that his fellow-pilot was going through the long process of enciphering a message on his hand-held machine.

"That job," McNeill snapped to Pilot Officer Lawry, "is bound to take too long."

McNeill thought quickly. He estimated that at this latitude the sun would be setting and dusk beginning to descend within an hour. He was certain that if the *Altmark* were not intercepted that evening she would be safely through the Skagerrak by morning.

A coded message must be decoded before it could be passed to the Royal Navy, and that would take time—too much time. Yet his instructions that code must be used were clear and definite.

The *Altmark* was steaming at eight knots. Her exact position was 58° 17'N., 06° 05'E.

McNeill made his decision. He wrote an "enemy first sighting" report in self-evident code.

"Bang it out, Sheekey," he instructed his wireless-operator. He was sure that anybody engaged on the *Altmark* search would understand the message immediately. British naval units in the area could intercept the signal and act at once.

McNeill, his mission finished, turned for home. He had barely enough petrol in his tank to reach the English coast. "Returning to base" he advised his station. His message was picked up at Coastal Command's Leuchars base, which at once sent other aircraft to keep an eye on the *Altmark.*

McNeill was received coldly when he returned to Thornaby. His commanding officer put on a show of anger. There had been a good reason for the instruction that any message about

the *Altmark* was to be sent in code. McNeill, said the station commander, had not set a good example by deciding for himself whether to follow instructions or not. For days to come McNeill worried and wondered whether his judgment had been right.

He need not have worried. His wireless message had been intercepted by the *Cossack*. Without losing a second—and long before a signal through ordinary channels could have reached him—Captain Vian gathered his flotilla. *Intrepid* and *Ivanhoe* were at the time nearest to the *Altmark*. They were ordered to intercept at full speed, covered by the cruiser *Arethusa*. But the whole flotilla quickly assembled.

On the *Altmark* bridge Captain Dau had watched the British aircraft with mounting agitation. "There are three of them," he said, unable even to count. As they circled above he tried to keep them in his binoculars. "They are photographing us," he said, plaintively.

The wide turns of the aircraft carried them inland after they had dived on the *Altmark*. As the aircraft reappeared from the direction of the shore Dau shouted angrily: "Criminals —they are violating Norwegian neutrality."

Paulsen frowned. "Don't worry about the aircraft," Dau said. "They will not touch us. But it proves that the *Englaender* must have known about us ever since we passed Kristiansund. I am not going to be bluffed into interrupting our voyage once more."

He scanned the sea as the aircraft turned away. There must be no further interruption. Full steam ahead towards the Skagerrak. And tomorrow—Germany.

It was an hour later—at 2.45 p.m.—when he gave a startled little shout. On his starboard to the south-south-west the silhouettes of three ships moved menacingly into his view. The look-outs' warning was superfluous. Paulsen, Wegener, Weichert stood near the captain without a word.

"*Englische Kriegschiffe*," Dau said. They were British warships. He was sure he could recognize from the silhouette that one of them was a cruiser. Majestic, in spite of her dull camouflage paint, *Arethusa* was steaming on a parallel course with the *Altmark*. *Intrepid* and *Ivanhoe* were approaching.

"They have seen us, *Herr Kapitaen*. They are coming towards us."

Vian's ships were beginning to close in. From *Arethusa* came a Morse signal: "Steer west. Steer west."

"They want to get us out to sea, *Herr Kapitaen.*"

Dau did not reply at first: "They are already in territorial waters," he said, turning to one of the Norwegian pilots.

"Just like German U-boats," the pilot replied. He did not trouble to suppress a smile.

"Paulsen." Dau's warning just restrained his first officer, who had raised his fist to strike the pilot. The pilot turned away, still smiling.

"Calm, Paulsen, calm," Dau repeated. Then he said wearily: "We can do nothing but carry on. Continue at half-speed. They will not dare touch us."

CHAPTER XIV

"THIS IS JOSSING FJORD"

IN LONDON PRIME MINISTER Neville Chamberlain called a Cabinet meeting to discuss the position of the *Altmark*. In Oslo Norwegian Foreign Minister Koht was at his desk studying the report of the Admiral in Command of Bergen defence zone. At his field Fuehrer headquarters Adolf Hitler considered signals to the German Naval High Command being passed on by Grand Admiral Raeder.

But in the noxious holds of the *Altmark*, the prisoners, powerless pawns in the international turmoil, were ignorant of the attempts being made to liberate them.

Only once during the long morning was the strong wire removed from the hatch top; it had been wound round the trunkway head the previous evening after the riot had been quelled. Lieutenant Schmidt with four guards and several *Altmark* sailors in attendance climbed down to the lowest deck to busy themselves with the bilges.

Goss, Bammant and a group of youngsters watched the Germans suspiciously. What were they doing in the ship's bottom? Were they making preparations to scuttle?

"What are you up to now?" someone asked Schmidt. "Getting ready to scuttle?"

Schmidt said: "If your Navy attacks us we shall certainly have to destroy this ship. We are unarmed. We can't resist."

"And what about us?" asked King, who had joined the group.

"I have told you a hundred times that we shall unfasten the hatch in good time. After that it will be every man for himself."

Schmidt and the guards left and the hatch was battened down. But through a crack the guards could be seen outside. Some had keys in their hands, others revolvers at the ready.

The prisoners were overjoyed when the lookout reported that they were looking skywards.

The drone of an aircraft, flying very low, could be heard in the holds. But whose? The sound roused a rumble of voices; everybody was fully dressed. Belongings long ago had been gathered up and packed in cases, bags or bundles.

. . . . .

For the last half-hour—it was now 3.15 p.m.—Captain Dau had not taken his eyes from the British warships. The two destroyers were now moving in very close.

The *Altmark* was going half-speed and a new Norwegian gunboat, *Skarv*, had taken over from the *Trygg* and was following closely in her backwash.

"Signal this message to the Norwegians," Dau ordered, passing his hand wearily across his forehead. "The English are sailing in Norwegian territorial waters. Their ships are warships. It is the duty of the Norwegians to stop them."

As they drew closer, Dau could see clearly on the side of the nearest destroyer the marking D.10. Hurriedly he asked an officer to consult the reference books and find out what class the ship was. D.10 he was told presently was the description of the destroyer H.M.S. *Intrepid*.

The *Altmark* was now approaching a narrow channel of water formed between the coast and a few small islands. On her port was a small fjord, the waters of which were glistening with ice. Dau's original aim had been to steer around the islands. But with the destroyers on his starboard he moved inside.

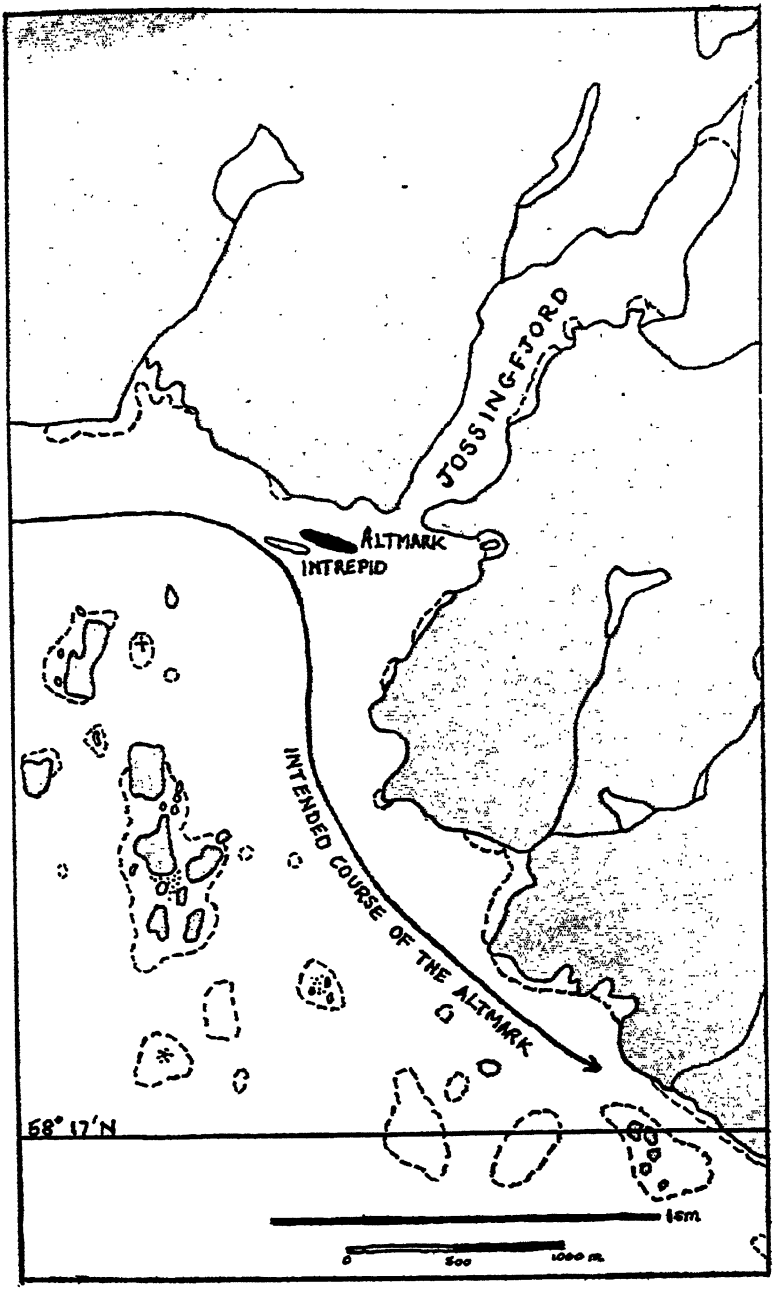
In *Intrepid*, Commander R. C. Gordon prepared for action. He ordered a boat to be lowered.

"Boarding party—fall in." The first lieutenant sharply repeated the captain's command and a party of thirty doubled to take up positions along the ship's rails.

"Repeat the last signal," Captain Gordon ordered.

The flags went up with the command: "Heave to." Dau ignored the signal and the *Altmark* slowly steamed on.

"Put a shot across her bows." The gunnery officer sprang to obey his captain's order. There was a flash from the destroyer's four-inch gun and the sound of the shell reverberated round the mountains.



The situation outside Jossing Fjord

"Damn!"

The curse echoed across the deck of the *Intrepid*. Owing to the high-speed manœuvring the shot had fallen wide of the *Altmark* and had landed squarely on Norwegian soil.

"Another round, but for God's sake aim across her bows."

A second warning shot cracked out and the captain saw the *Skarv* approach, her commander shouting through his megaphone.

The *Intrepid*, unperturbed either by the mishap or the Norwegian's approach, continued on her course. If she could interpose herself between the *Altmark* and the coast she could force the prison-ship out to sea or, at worst, board her on the fringe of the three-mile limit. But the *Skarv* was in the way and seemed bent on frustrating the *Intrepid's* intention.

With despairing resolution Dau turned the *Altmark* to port and made for the entrance to the fjord at full speed. Not many yards separated *Intrepid* from the *Altmark*, but between pursuer and pursued were the protecting Norwegians.

"Full ahead," Dau commanded again. There was nothing else he could do to give his ship respite. The thick ice covering the waters of the fjord groaned and cracked as the powerful engines of the *Altmark* pushed her through, leaving behind grooves of dark-green water, filled with ice chippings.

"This is Jossing Fjord," said Wegener. "I know it. I have been here before."

Dau did not care where he was so long as the tanker was undamaged. The impact of the *Altmark* against the pack ice had made the ship shudder. On deck, it hurled the sailors against each other. Below it threw the prisoners into struggling heaps.

"She's run aground," one of them shouted.

Cudbertson climbed up the thirty-nine steps of the ladder. Through the hatch he could see that they were in a narrow inlet.

"We're in a creek," he reported to the prisoners. "It must have been the R.A.F. we heard. They've driven old 'Knitty Whiskers' inland . . ."

There was a wild scramble for a view of the scene outside. Watchers said that the *Altmark* crew were in a state of agitation and fright. Fully dressed, with life-jackets in position, their sea-bags in their hands, they ran blindly from one side of the ship to the other.

The ship was still now, though large blocks of floating ice crashed continually against her sides. The prisoners nibbled their biscuits, moistened their cracked lips with the remains of their drinking-water and waited. They did not know what had happened or what would happen. It was enough for the moment that *something* had happened.

For Dau, the final test had come. He admitted ruefully to himself that his calculations had been wrong. He had been positive that the Royal Navy would not dare attack him so close to the Norwegian coast. His main fears had centred around the night dash through the Skagerrak, where he could have pitted his speed and navigational skill against all that the Navy could send against him. Speed, skill—and darkness—would have helped him through.

There was no hope now of reaching the Skagerrak that night. He looked around at the fjord in which he was trapped. The snow-covered mountains towering high above him gave him a sickening feeling of claustrophobia. On several occasions during talks with his officers on the long voyage home, he had hinted that Captain Langsdorff had been a fool to allow himself to be trapped at Montevideo. Would they say in turn that Captain Dau was a fool too, to fall into the trap of Jossing Fjord?

His thoughts turned from distasteful speculation to professional matters. He estimated that, at the point where the *Altmark* had come to rest, the fjord was about four hundred yards wide. Behind him he could see the *Skarv* following in the water groove he had churned up. The Norwegian stopped about three hundred yards away. A second Norwegian gunboat appeared and he read her name: *Kjell*. Lying side by side they reminded him of watchdogs, at the entrance to a rich man's mansion.

"That's good," Dau said to Paulsen, pointing to the Norwegians. "The English cannot touch us now."

The sight of the gunboats made Dau feel better. Their presence meant he had time to consider his future. He was well inside Norwegian territory. He had managed so far to hide the fact that he was violating international law by carrying prisoners. He reasoned that if the Norwegians did not know—or preferred not to know because they feared the Fuehrer's wrath—right was clearly on his side.

However, a final decision about his next move would have to come from the *Seekriegsfuehrung*.

"Signal to the Legation in Oslo," he said to the wireless officer. His signal included a hurried description of his position. "I request instructions," he ended.

"We can help you no more," the Norwegian pilots told Captain Dau. They signalled to the *Kjell* for a boat to take them off. The boat arrived with a visitor—a Norwegian customs officer: "My instructions are to stay on board your ship while you are in this fjord," he said.

Through the narrow entrance of the fjord Dau could still see the two British destroyers which had tried to intercept him. But out of sight *Cossack* had also arrived off the fjord.

Vian had expected to fight—he was eager to board the tanker—but he had not expected to be involved in an international incident. He had his ships disposed around him in fighting order. If the tanker was an innocent merchant ship, why had she failed to heave to? There was only one answer: the tanker was hiding something and the something was obviously prisoners.

But Vian knew he must act carefully. The *Altmark* was without question in Norwegian waters. And—so signals he had just received said—she might be armed with two six-inch guns, which would make her very dangerous. The fjord was narrow, and movement inside would be restricted. "Going in alone," he signalled to his captains.

He steamed between the tiny islands and the coast and ordered Craven to hail the gunboats. It was tea-time and the steward brought mugs of hot tea on to the bridge.

"Good. No point missing our tea," said Lieutenant-Commander MacLean. The tall navigating officer of the 4th Flotilla rarely lost his sense of humour. "Unless she's going to interfere."

He pointed to a motorboat from the *Kjell* which was chugging towards *Cossack*. "They can't have heard what I was saying," said Craven. "They're coming over to see."

The Norwegian captain came aboard and stiffly saluted Vian on the quarter-deck. Vian received the Norwegian coldly. But for the actions of the Norwegians, the *Altmark* would already have been searched and the business would be finished. He spoke bluntly. "That tanker's got British seamen on board

according to our reports. She is violating your neutrality. I must find out whether our reports are true."

The Norwegian replied slowly: "The *Altmark* has been searched three times. The Admiral in command of the Bergen defence zone assures you that she carries no prisoners. My instructions are to resist your entry."

They were pacing the starboard quarter-deck and their voices began to rise. "The captain's having a real argy-bargy," an A.B. reported to his mess. Vian pointedly looked towards the *Kjell*. His glance could not be misunderstood. It was as if he had laughed and said: "You will prevent me—with this?"

From a respectful distance the officers of the *Cossack* were watching the two captains, wondering how much longer Vian would wait before giving them the word to go in.

The argument was coming to an end. "Did you hear what I heard?" Craven asked. The officers were overjoyed to hear Vian angrily telling the Norwegian to get off his ship.

The Norwegian had hardly gone when MacLean noticed intense activity on board the *Kjell*. Several of the crew seemed to busy themselves with the torpedo tube on the upper deck.

"Do you think, sir," a junior officer asked him, "they're going to launch that thing at us?"

"Looks like it!" MacLean said uneasily.

But Vian was unconcerned when the incident was reported to him. He was busy drafting a signal to the Admiralty, summarizing his conversation with the Norwegian. Craven enciphered the message and despatched it to London. He asked for instructions.

From the bridge Vian saw the *Kjell* moving towards the *Altmark*. Dau, too, had been watching closely. What did it mean? The *Kjell* came so close that her captain's voice could clearly be heard on the tanker's bridge.

"How many men have you on board?"

"One hundred and thirty-four men," Dau instructed Paulsen to answer. "Tell him that this information is not to be passed on to the English."

"He wants your assurance that we carry no prisoners," Paulsen reported. Dau had heard himself.

"You can give him that assurance," he said quickly.

The *Kjell* moved off and once more anchored by the side of the *Skarv*.

In the Admiralty's map room Vian's latest signal was in the hands of Mr. Churchill. This was more than a naval matter—it involved diplomatic considerations as well. He telephoned Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary. It was imperative that the prisoners be rescued, Churchill insisted. There were certain risks. The Norwegians might resent it, but there was no alternative. The Foreign Secretary agreed.

Time was pressing. It was 5.25 p.m. when the First Lord, ignoring subordinate commanders, dictated a personal order to Captain Vian:

"Unless Norwegian torpedo-boat undertakes to convoy *Altmark* to Bergen with a joint Anglo-Norwegian guard on board, and a joint escort, you should board the *Altmark*, liberate her prisoners, and take possession of the ship pending further instructions. If Norwegian torpedo-boat interferes, you should warn her to stand off. If she fires upon you, you should not reply unless attack is serious, in which case you should defend yourself, using no more force than is necessary, and ceasing fire when she desists."

The message was on its way to the *Cossack* when Lieutenant Bradwell Turner called his men together.

"We shall probably have to board her," he said. "Every man knows his position. Any questions?"

There were none.

"Expect we're waiting for confirmation from London," Petty Officer Barnes told the men under him. There was nothing to do except to carry on. They went below to the mess-deck for the supper they had collected earlier from the Dutch fishermen, and were still eating when Lieutenant Turner looked in. He told them gravely: "Those prisoners will be rescued whatever the cost."

. . . . .

In Jossing Fjord darkness had fallen but it was easy to see by the reflected whiteness of the snow on the mountain-sides. The *Cossack* had steamed out to sea again and Dau had no idea where the British warships had gone. For over a week he had not taken off his clothes and it was thirty-six hours since he had slept. His eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot

and his legs seemed shackled as he dragged himself from the bridge to his cabin.

He did not think he had seen the last of the British but he did not expect anything more to happen that night. A knock on his door shattered his hope of a few hours' escape from his burden.

"Ship entering fjord, sir," the look-out reported.

Yes, they could make out its name. It was a Norwegian patrol boat called *Firern* and it was making fast to a small landing stage on the east bank of the fjord.

"That's all right," Dau said. "The more Norwegians the better. I shall go to sleep now. Good night."

"Good night," said the officer. Dau looked at his watch. It was 7.30 p.m.

. . . . . .

In *Cossack* Captain Vian, after studying the First Lord's fighting message, sent for the flotilla's navigating officer.

"How long will it take to get back where we were this afternoon?" he asked Lieut.-Commander MacLean.

"About twenty minutes, sir."

"Right. We're going in."

Turner alerted the men under his command. "Stand by to board," he ordered. There was no question of boarding from boats. It was to be a full-blooded ship-to-ship affair.

Officers and men, hurriedly buckling on webbing, took up their stations on deck. All eyes turned towards the coast where lights were flickering from the windows of the little houses.

"Funny," Barnes said. "At home there's blackout. Seems odd to see all those lights at night. I'll bet they go out quickly enough once we move in."

At that moment, Hector MacLean's was the hardest job in the flotilla. All evening he had kept his eyes fixed on a green light on which he intended to set his course. It was his beacon and he had not let it out of his sight for more than a few seconds. But the *Cossack* had been steaming towards it for well over twenty minutes. A full moon lighted land and sea brilliantly, yet Jossing Fjord was nowhere in sight.

Captain Vian looked at his watch. "Your twenty minutes are up, MacLean," he said. "What's happening? Why haven't we arrived?"

"Perhaps we are a bit farther off than I thought, sir," said MacLean. It seemed obvious that the *Cossack* was not on course. The destroyer stopped and turned.

"Switch on the searchlights," Vian ordered.

The beam lighted up the cliffs and MacLean swore softly.

"Sorry, sir," he told Vian. "We have been making for the wrong green light. That's the right one—over there." He pointed towards the cliffs.

Tension eased all over the ship. "When they report this action," an officer remarked laughingly, "they'll say we went in with our searchlight blazing. No one will believe that we had to switch it on to find our way about."

"Go right in," Vian ordered. The *Cossack* did not hesitate as she reached the entrance to Jossing Fjord.

Craven was nonchalantly expounding his theory about the imminent action. He had joined the boarding party as Swedish-speaking interpreter as usual, though he was fully armed and ready to take his part in the fighting. "All we've got to do is to get her out of here," he explained, "and take her back to Bergen for inspection." He was thinking to himself that if he went into Bergen on the *Altmark* he would not cut a very dashing figure in his old blue burberry.

In the fjord itself a view of great beauty unfolded before the sailors. Apart from the lights, there was no sign of life, either on land or sea.

"It's just like fairyland," said an officer. The houses round the fjord looked like toys. Snow glistened from the fir trees, and sparkled on the mountain sides. But the ethereal beauty of the scene concealed dangers.

"Pack-ice to starboard," the look-out warned. His cry swiftly brought the boarding party back to harsh reality.

The destroyer was now approaching the Norwegian torpedo-boats. The passage was not easy. During the evening the temperature had dropped and there was far more ice in the fjord than in the afternoon. It drifted about in blocks and crunched against the sides of the destroyer.

From the *Kjell*, as the *Cossack* came alongside, a voice hailed the British destroyer.

"You are requested to leave Norwegian territorial waters."

"Let's start talking sense," said Vian through his mega-

phone. "My orders are to ask you to join us and take the *Altmark* to Bergen for inspection. Come on in with me."

"I am no ice-breaker, Captain," was the Norwegian's reply. He pointed to the ice-floes all around.

The *Cossack*'s company was standing close by, listening delightedly to the exchange. Every man on board considered that from the moment the Norwegian had appeared on the ship in the afternoon he had been covering up for the Nazis. It was a pleasure to hear the captain speak his—and their—mind.

"Anybody could get alongside her," they heard Vian reply. His temper was running out. "Perhaps they are going to play after all," he added to officers on the bridge, as he saw a small launch bringing a Norwegian officer towards *Cossack*. But when the Norwegian had come aboard it did not take Vian long to discover that he did not mean serious business. He dismissed the Norwegian peremptorily.

"Half speed ahead," Vian ordered now. "We're boarding." Slowly the destroyer was moving towards the *Altmark*.

. . . . .

It was 10 p.m. and in Captain Dau's cabin the telephone gave two short buzzes—the danger signal. Dau scrambled into his jacket and overcoat and ran to the bridge. A strong searchlight coming from the entrance to the fjord nearly blinded him. The light played half-way up the fjord's banks, and reached out like a threatening arm towards the *Altmark*. Before Dau could shield his eyes to discover its source, the light went out.

"A Norwegian patrolling the coast," Dau reassured the officer on watch. The officer's nerves were even more on edge than Dau's. "I am going back to my cabin. If there is anything else, let me know."

Wearily he slumped on to his bed once more and closed his eyes. A frantic knock at his door roused him within a minute. "A ship is entering the fjord, sir," reported a rating.

Dau climbed slowly back on the bridge and in the reflected light of the snow could easily make out the shape of a ship, slowly steaming up the fjord. Her lights were doused, but it was difficult to believe that she was an enemy.

"Put on the searchlight," Dau ordered. In the strong clear

beam he saw one of the Norwegian gunboats go alongside the stranger. "A conference," he said, "the ship must be another Norwegian after all."

The strange ship stopped, lying seawards at an angle to the Norwegian gunboats. A Norwegian? Or an enemy? Dau felt he must make sure.

On his instructions the *Altmark*'s lamp was directed on the stranger.

"What ship? What ship?" he queried.

The signals officer in *Cossack* read the signal but did not answer.

"What ship?" the *Altmark*'s signal repeated.

"Ask the Norwegians," Dau sighed. "Ask them what ship it is."

The light went out. The Norwegians did not answer.

Dau was on the bridge with his officers around him. But he felt old and alone and his men, watching him, thought he was ready to give up. But, suddenly, as they watched he squared his shoulders and summoned energy. A signal was coming from the stranger. What did it say, demanded Dau impatiently.

"Drop your jacob's ladder," flashed the Morse lamp from the dark invader of the fjord.

"Must be a Norwegian," Dau said almost to himself. "Don't reply," he said aloud. "Repeat our signal: What ship? I want to know her name."

CHAPTER XV

"ANY ENGLISHMEN DOWN THERE?"

"I HAVE HAD enough now," Vian said, looking at his watch. It was 22.58 hours.

"Ask him to heave-to or we fire," he told MacLean.

On deck Bradwell Turner and his men were tensing themselves for action. For all his size, even in his steel helmet, the *Cossack*'s first lieutenant did not look very bloodthirsty as he stood on the ship's starboard rail. "Brad", the former Christ's Hospital boy, was an intellectual sailor rather than a man with a gun. When he went through the naval colleges he had always been top in the most difficult subjects. He had liked games and was good at them, but his brother officers admired him most for his staff work and his ability to grasp detail.

Yet he inspired confidence as he passed quietly along the thirty men lined up on the destroyer's deck. While he waited he had a cheery word for everyone. He checked the assignments he had given to each man once they should be aboard the prison-ship. Since he was to be a raider, he would go about it in a scientific, methodical manner.

The destroyer's rails had been let down so that the boarding party could leap unimpeded on to the *Altmark*. In the last anxious minutes Turner found time to lean over the destroyer's side to make sure that her "fenders", hazel rods secured with wire, were in place. It was an important detail. When the ships crashed together, the fenders would save *Cossack* from serious damage.

In the lambent moonlight Vian on the bridge could see Turner in a final conference with Lieutenant Parker and J. J. F. Smith, the burly commissioned gunner. At a respectful distance behind him, stood Barnes, Petty Officer Norman Atkins and one or two others.

The destroyer began to move. Vian had given the order to board. The ice cracked briskly, like the grinding together of so much crockery into small pieces. Above the sound of the engines sharp orders were rapped out. It was past eleven o'clock.

. . . . .

In the *Altmark* the entire crew was standing by. Earlier in the day when the ship had entered the fjord it had been wedged insecurely in the ice but the freezing night had formed more ice, which now gripped her tightly.

Dau gave the order to start the engines and the powerful diesels began to push the ship clear. Slowly the *Altmark* moved another two hundred yards into the fjord.

Dau's plan was to position his ship at a slight angle to the bank of the fjord so that, unobstructed by the funnel, he could get a better view of the fjord and the sea beyond. The *Altmark* was still moving when a lamp from the stranger flashed out:

"Heave-to or we open fire."

No longer could Dau deceive himself that he had a Norwegian to deal with. He directed his searchlight on to the bows of the *Cossack*. In the glaring light he saw the destroyer cutting through the water towards him purposefully, menacingly. The time was 23.12 hours.

"*Es ist ein Englaender*," he called out. "It's English."

The *Altmark* siren screeched an alarm.

"The Norwegians will not permit him to attack us," said Paulsen. "It would mean war between Norway and Germany."

"Maybe . . . maybe not," said Dau between his teeth. "Final operation." His fears and indecision had dropped from him. He was composed, and talked and moved with the air of a dedicated man.

"But *Herr Kapitaen* . . ." Paulsen for once queried his captain's orders. Final operation, they had agreed long ago, was the scuttling of the ship. But the plan had been devised before there were any prisoners on board. It could not be put into operation now. Quite apart from that, it was unlikely that the *Altmark* would submerge in the shallow waters of the fjord.

"What about the prisoners?" Paulsen asked.

Dau had dreaded the question. He had told Lieutenant Schmidt that the prisoners were to be released if the ship

Lascar members of the *Huntsman* crew after their liberation

The liberated seamen arriving at Leith on board H.M.S. *Cossack*

faced a superior enemy against whom it was hopeless to fight. But it was one thing to allow them on deck on the high seas where their fate was bound up with that of the *Altmark* crew. It was quite another to release a horde of enemy prisoners who could easily overpower the *Altmark* men on deck.

"He is closing in," Dau said quickly. "Keep the prisoners down there. I shall make one last effort to save the ship. I shall throw the destroyer on to the bank. I can do it. We have the advantage of weight."

He had formulated his plan as the destroyer swept towards him. He must try to prevent the British from coming alongside.

"The main thing is," he said, when he had given his orders, "that my manœuvre cannot be interpreted as a warlike action. This is going to surprise the world. We are going to make history, but we must not put a foot wrong."

. . . . .

On the *Cossack* the destroyer's only passenger decided that it was time for him to go. The captain of the Norwegian warship stumped worriedly up to the bridge.

"I did not come to see a fight, Captain," he said to Vian. "I go back to my ship at once." He called for his launch and climbed down the ladder.

The *Altmark*'s searchlight caught him before it was turned back on *Cossack*'s bridge, blinding the British officers in its swathe of light; but on a lower level the boarding party could see. To them, it looked as if the *Altmark* was moving astern towards the destroyer.

"She's going to ram us," someone shouted in alarm.

But Vian understood Dau's plan. His command rang out clearly. The *Cossack* swung round as neatly and swiftly as if she had been a sailing yacht. The full force of the blow at the *Cossack* was warded off and the two ships crunched together, locked for a moment in an uneasy embrace, and swung apart again.

Turner, on deck, countered Dau's cunning manœuvre. The boarding party had been ready to jump from starboard. Quickly he ordered them over to the port side as the *Altmark*, moving faster than the *Cossack*, came at the destroyer from an angle of about thirty degrees.

Now she was no more than yards away. In a few seconds she would hit the destroyer amidships with the full force of her weight driven at power by her great engines.

The boarding party had to act quickly. By the time the *Cossack* was alongside the tanker's poop deck four or five feet separated the ships and the distance was growing every moment.

"Come on," Turner shouted. "What the hell are you waiting for?"

He took a great leap outwards and upwards and officers on the bridge gave him a cheer as he grasped the tanker's rail, steadied himself and looked round for his men. He had drawn his revolver. Parker was over beside him and rifles thudded on the deck as petty officers and ratings followed them.

Most of the first small group were across and ready for action when Turner saw Atkins hanging on to one of the lower guard rails. Unable to take a run, he had failed to grasp the *Altmark's* top rail when he jumped, and was trying desperately to get his footing as he swung. Turner leaned over the side, grabbed him by the collar and the seat of his trousers and hoisted him aboard. "Thanks, sir," Atkins said breathlessly.

The ships had moved too far apart for jumping, but the men who had leaped were not left alone on the *Altmark* for long. Before the *Cossack* had slid past the tanker her forward drift had been checked and Vian was manœuvring his ship alongside again.

"Stop both engines."

"Half speed ahead starboard."

"Stop port."

With a dozen crisp orders Vian drew near the tanker, which towered above his ship, her upper deck ablaze with light. The boarding party began to jump, some from a standing position, others taking a little run before they launched themselves across the gap.

Lieutenant Craven took no chance. He did not wish to end his war in the cold, ice-flecked water that was lapping and foaming between the two ships. He climbed nimbly up the *Cossack's* torpedo davit, which brought him on a level with the *Altmark's* deck. Just as he prepared to jump, the ships met and the impact tore away parts of the destroyer. The davit

was crunched but Craven did not care. A second before, he had jumped and had landed safely on the *Altmark*'s deck.

. . . . .

Schmidt, the *Altmark* third officer, stormed up to the bridge where Dau, well out of sight of the officers on the destroyer, kept watch. He could not see the boarding party from where he was standing but shouts were audible, in English and German. Schmidt was breathless with excitement. "They have boarded," he gasped. Dau carefully looked out and saw three men in steel helmets, with rifles in their hands, running across the catwalks which spanned the after deck.

"Take care of those men," he ordered Schmidt. Dau was still convinced that no more than a handful of British sailors had managed to reach his tanker. "We'll soon finish them off," he promised.

Turning round, his eye caught several of his own men about to launch a boat on the *Altmark*'s port side. "Hey, you . . . Stender, Path, Bremer . . ." he roared angrily. "*Zurück*—come back."

The men paid no attention to Dau, who now saw more British leaping from the destroyer, shouting and fixing bayonets. Anger surged within him. He realized with dismay that his tactics had failed and he was dealing with a strong boarding party against whom resistance was useless. He jumped, as above the shouting the sharp crack of shots rang out. One of the frantic *Altmark* sailors who was trying to escape had fired a shot at the boarders. Two of the *Spee* guards had their rifles to their shoulders.

A hail of bullets from the boarding party answered the German firing. The mountains threw back the echoes and every light on the hillside went out, as if controlled by a master switch.

Stender, the steward, screamed in agony as a bullet hit him. As he stumbled, another steward, Bremer, collapsed. He too, had been hit. Near them Path, the stoker, was bleeding profusely from a wound in the leg. Groups of men were scuffling, cursing, lunging all over the catwalks and the fo'castle.

Leaning out from the bridge Dau could see some of his men desperately grabbing at ropes as the boat that held them crashed on to the ice below. A stray British shot had severed one

of the ropes and the men lay in the bottom nursing their broken limbs. The *Cossack* searchlight was scouring the ice between the *Altmark* and the shore as other Germans who had slithered in turn down the ship's side were making towards the bank, some sliding, some running, some on hands and knees, firing as they went.

Shots pursued them over the ice. Stoker Rothe, his thumb shot off, still scrambled on. He was the first to reach land and to disappear in the darkness. Stoker Schuller gave a guttural whoop of joy as he reached the road running along the fjord's bank. It was the last sound he ever made. The next moment a shot fired from the deck of his own ship hit and killed him.

Dau's favourite mess orderly, Steffen, had fallen into the water and was holding on to the ice. Trying to evade the fusillade he lost his grip and sank. The raid had been in progress just on a quarter of an hour.

. . . . .

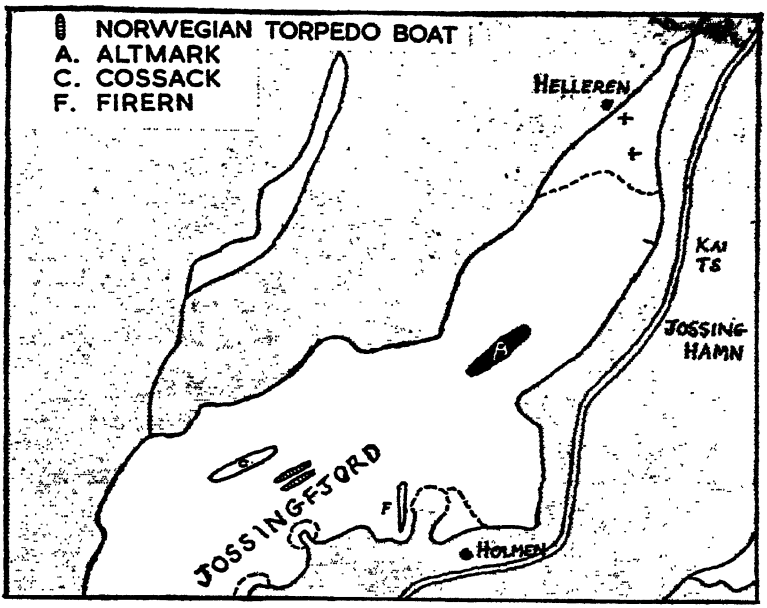
Tall and powerfully built, Able Seaman James Harper, one of *Cossack*'s electricians, had jumped with the second wave of the boarding party and the shooting had begun almost at once.

Disregarding the shots which whistled round him, he passed along the port catwalk where *Altmark* men were already face to face with solid British rifle butts. Vigorously, he pushed his way through the mêlée. Although the *Cossack*'s searchlight was shining, it was too dark to distinguish friend from foe and he kicked out at both indiscriminately.

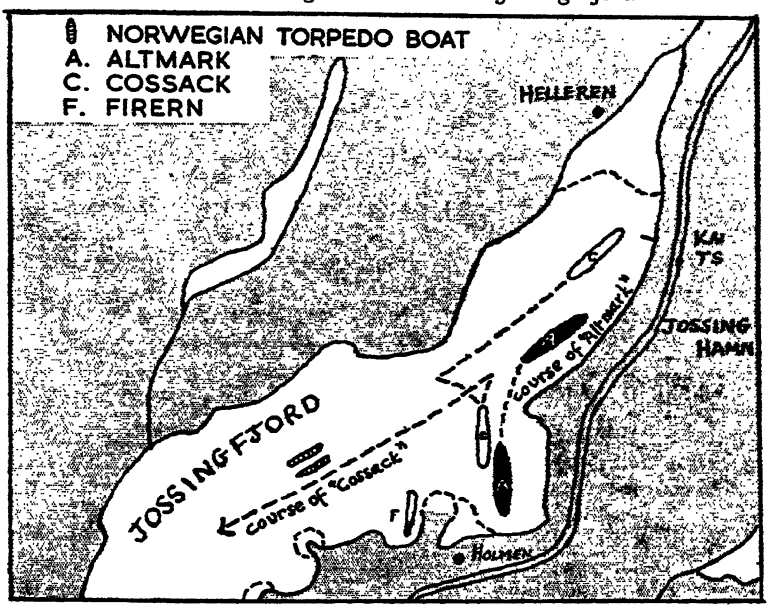
Harper was plodding on, gritting his teeth, yet a smile lit up his face: "Nice birthday, this!" he said to himself as he ran along. He was thirty that day.

His specific task allotted by Lieut.-Commander Turner was to find the main switch and prevent the Nazi crew from plunging the ship into darkness. Expertly he found a hatch; unafraid, he dived down.

The ladder led to the steering compartment and he was forced to retrace his steps. He was putting his foot over the coaming of the hatchway when a bullet tore into the deck a few inches away. His excitement was so intense that he did not notice that a splinter had slightly wounded him.



Cossack following the *Altmark* into Jossing Fjord



Cossack's course in Jossing Fjord after Captain Vian had given the order to board the *Altmark*

A German was rushing at him. From the corner of his eye he saw three of his own shipmates under cover to escape the bullets which came from the boat deck.

He aimed with his own revolver but the hammer fell on an empty chamber. The German was on him and there was nothing for it but to hit him with the butt of the revolver. The German groaned and went down with a thud and the wooden handle of the revolver fell in a hundred splinters on the deck.

Harper's foot hurt, but as he stood up the wounded German had come to and was asking for water.

"Hey you!" he called out. One of the German sailors was rushing by. Harper addressed him, speaking English very slowly. "One of your men is asking for water," he said.

The German shrugged his shoulders: "It's not in my hands now, I can do nothing. It's in the hands of your people!"

Harper did not linger. The *Altmark* lights were still on and he went to find and guard the main switch.

"Brad" Turner, as leader of the boarders, had set himself the most important objective on the German ship: the bridge. He had detailed a small party, under "Barney" Barnes, to go with him in case the *Altmark*'s captain showed fight. But when he saw that the boarders must be split into two groups Turner did not wait for the others. As soon as he had hoisted Atkins on to the deck he ran forward along the catwalk towards the superstructure with Barnes close on his heels.

They reached a water-tight steel door barring the way to the bridge and saw that it was fastened by eight steel clips.

"Get them off," he said to Barnes, who struck at them with his rifle butt. Turner knocked off several with his revolver butt.

The door swung open. "Come on," said Turner.

Barnes refixed his bayonet and prepared to follow. But as he looked up he saw a German above him taking aim from the wing of the bridge. He had just time to lunge upwards with his bayonet. There was a strangled scream and the German disappeared.

By this time Turner had jumped through the door as if he had springs in his heels and disappeared down an alleyway towards the accommodation ladder to the bridge. Barnes was about to go after him when another German barred his way

with a revolver in his hand. The sight of Barnes's determined face and his bayonet quickly changed his mind.

"Get in that corner," Barnes shouted, passing through the door. The German threw his revolver down. His voice brought three more Germans from their cabins in the superstructure.

"Stand over there." Barnes motioned to them with his bayonet. "Hands up!"

More and more Germans crept from their cabins.

"Hands up!"

He ordered each one briskly to join the group of Germans in the corner who stood meekly with their hands raised high. There were more than a dozen of them.

Barnes heard the shooting on the deck but was unconcerned. The rest of the party must now have boarded and could look after themselves. The Germans were in a shaky state.

"Can we smoke?" one of them asked.

"Shut up. Keep your hands above your heads or else . . ."

The threat in his voice was unmistakable, yet one of the Germans moved forward.

"Get back or I fire," Barnes shouted.

He was steady and sure of himself, though for all he knew any of the Germans might have a revolver. If they had rushed him he could have shot one and clubbed another, but they could easily have overwhelmed him. Yet looking at the dejected enemy he realized that they had no fight left in them.

Above him he could hear Commander Turner's voice and hoped that his leader was all right. He dare not leave the Germans he had captured until someone relieved him. He heard voices on the bridge but no shots—the shooting, he was sure, came from other parts of the ship.

No one barred Turner's way as he climbed the slightly moist shiny steel ladder to the bridge. The boarding operation had gone almost according to plan, and though he was alone Turner knew that thirty stout British sailors were on board to back him up. There was no guard at the head of the ladder and the first person he saw on the bridge was a little man in a shabby blue suit.

"Egaad," said the little man.

It sounded Norwegian to the commander and momentarily it surprised him. If he and his men were to hold up Norwegians

at the point of a gun in a Norwegian fjord, the international balloon would really go up.

"Egaad," said the man again—it was the Norwegian customs officer whose name was Egaad.

Turner was relieved when the frightened officer scampered down the ladder without any further attempt to complete a formal introduction. The other men on the bridge who now glowered at him looked square-headed enough, but as he glanced round Turner wondered whether any were Norwegians.

Outside, somewhere on deck, Turner heard a loud crash. He was tempted to turn and see what had caused it, but until the Germans ran to look he did not do so. When he edged to the port side Turner could just make out some of the *Altmark* sailors running off over the ice.

Six against one. Turner, with such odds against him, gave the Germans his whole attention. But were they Germans? Or were they Norwegians? He faced them but they did not say a word. They stared, open-mouthed, waiting for Turner to move.

"Hands up," he ordered, swivelling his revolver.

As they raised their hands reluctantly Turner heard solid footsteps. Craven appeared, followed by a rating with a bayonet fixed to his rifle.

"Thank God you've come," said Turner, still covering the six men. "I'm not sure whether these chaps are German or Norwegians. Ask them, will you? Let's get them sorted out."

Craven sized up the situation at once. "Any Norwegian officers please step to this side of the bridge," he said.

Nobody moved. Paulsen, who had left the bridge when the shooting had begun, returned and was ordered at revolver point to join the others. A bullet had whistled through his hair, but he was uninjured.

"There are no Norwegians here," he said in a quavering voice. "We are all Germans."

Schmidt, the *Altmark*'s third officer, was standing near the telegraph, almost hiding it from the British officer. Roughly, Turner pushed him on one side, seized the handle and heaved the pointer to Stop with his left hand.

He stepped back. Insolently, Schmidt used his elbow to return the lever.

"Do that again and I'll . . ." With his free hand Turner caught hold of the German's coat and thrust him away. "Over there—and hands up."

Dau, one among seven, was making himself as unobtrusive as possible, though his years and air of authority made him stand out from the rest. "Are you the pilot?" Turner asked him.

"Yes, I am," Dau lied.

"The pilot?" Craven was not sure. Something was wrong. "Are you the Norwegian pilot?" he asked in German.

"No," Dau answered slowly. He pushed his chin forward and tried to look dignified. "I am the German pilot. I am the captain of this ship."

"Keep your hands up," Craven shouted at him as Dau stepped forward, protesting. He was a captain, he said—and an officer, he added after a pause. A captain was never required to put his hands up. It was an outrage.

Craven thought he was an old man who should be at home tending his garden instead of being on the bridge of a ship. He softened. "All right," he said, "as a concession you may rest your hands on your head. But the rest of you keep your hands up."

There was a sharp bump which made Craven and the Germans stagger, though it was not severe enough to throw them off balance. The *Altmark* shook slightly once or twice as if seeking a firm resting place. She had run aground on rocks at the opposite end of the fjord.

"We'd better stop the engines," Dau said, with a supercilious smile.

Turner was angry at the delays. "Keep them under control," he told Craven.

He turned to Dau: "Where are the prisoners?" he asked.

Dau stepped forward to conduct Turner from the bridge. He noticed Weichert standing in the line with this hands in the air. "Your permission to take this officer along?" he requested. Turner nodded and motioned the two Germans to show him the way.

Craven settled down to wait, his Smith and Wesson ·45 pointing at the remaining men. At his side a young *Cossack* rating stood rigidly with his bayonet in the "on guard" position. Except for sporadic shots, the fighting had died down

everywhere and Craven was relieved to hear that all the shouts and orders were given in one language—English.

"Keep your hands well up," said Craven.

"But," said one of his prisoners with an anguished look, "we tire . . . it is so long."

Craven saw their point. They had been standing with hands up for nearly ten minutes. If the *Altmark* was under over-all British control he could relax a little, though he must still take care. He ordered the rating to frisk the Germans and found two automatics, but obviously they had no other weapons.

"All right," he said, "you can put your hands down now."

But with their hands down, the Germans still seemed nervous. The face of one of them twitched continuously and another could not control his tremors. "Aren't you taking us off?" he burst out.

Craven looked at him curiously. What was the hurry to be taken prisoner? To leave the safe neutrality of a Norwegian fjord? Unless . . . Craven cursed himself for not asking the question before—the routine question he had always put whenever he had boarded a ship on the Northern Patrol. "Is this ship fitted with scuttling charges?" he demanded.

The spokesman bit his lip. For all his nervousness, he did not seem prepared to give anything away. "How should we know?" he said. "It is a matter for the captain. We are only merchant seamen."

"Well," said Craven, speaking slowly in German, "if she blows up we shall all go down together." It was exactly 11.35 p.m.

. . . . .

Once the boarding party were safely on the *Altmark* the destroyer stood off three or four ship's lengths from the tanker, ready to deal with the Norwegian gunboats if they tried to interfere. On the *Cossack*'s bridge the officers could hear the shots and shouts of the boarders and the *Altmark* sailors. They peered anxiously at the small black figures picked out by the searchlight as they swarmed along the catwalks.

The raid had not been in progress for many minutes before the signals officer brought serious news to Vian. "They're using their wireless, sir," he said. "They're calling Germany asking for ships and aircraft to be sent. They say they're being

fired on and that their sailors are being murdered. It looks," said the officer, with a grin—"it looks as if our boys are doing their stuff, sir."

The news worried Vian, but it was not his only problem. In the short time the ships had been grappled together for the boarders to get over there had been no time to find out exactly what armament the *Altmark* carried. Pom-poms had been seen, and they could do plenty of damage fired point blank. But if the tanker carried six-inch guns, as the Admiralty believed, and if they were fired without warning, the *Cossack* would be blown out of the water.

While Vian watched and wondered a lamp on the *Altmark* began to flash a message. Among the boarding party was a young signalman named Donald Davies, lent for the raid by H.M.S. *Afridi*. Davies had fitted up his lamp and had already signalled that the operation was going well. But now he had a serious, frightening message. "*Altmark* captured and now in our charge," the officers on *Cossack*'s bridge read from the flashes. "Reported due to blow up at midnight."

The officers looked at each other with dismay. The message bore the hall-mark of truth. "Just the sort of thing Jerry would do," said Hector MacLean. "And if he blows her up, trust him to do it precisely at midnight."

It was clear to Vian that the whole action must be speeded up. Even without a hitch, it was doubtful whether the boarding party could liberate the prisoners by midnight, but they would have to try. He looked around at the Norwegian gunboats, but he could see no sign of activity. Of the ships in the fjord, only they were quiet. It was improbable that they would interfere now that the boarding had taken place. Vian gave the order: "Back to the *Altmark*."

The tanker loomed large and black against the white snowy background and Vian was almost alongside when a shout went up.

"Man overboard."

"Who on earth is it?" demanded Vian. Now that every minute counted, a mishap of this sort could jeopardize his own ship and all the prisoners.

"Man from 14 Mess, sir," a petty officer called back.

"How can you tell that?" snapped Vian.

"Officers have recognized him, sir."

"Get him with grappling irons!" Vian shouted instantly. "Nobody is to go over the side after him."

His order was too late. Already Tony Ormsby, lieutenant-commander and anti-submarine officer, and Lieutenant Burkett, had dived into the icy water and were swimming strongly towards the unfortunate seaman. Each took a hold on the man and propelled him back towards the *Cossack*. Ratings threw down lines and hauled the three men up; the sailor was unconscious, the officers shivering.

"Blimey," a petty officer called out as he bent over the rescued man. He examined his identity disc which said: A. Berndsen, *Altmark*. "This isn't one of our blokes. It's one of theirs." It was a German sailor who had jumped overboard from the German ship. Berndsen was dead.

. . . . .

The prisoners in the holds had sunk into deep apathy. So much had been happening for more than twenty-four hours and it had made no difference to their plight. But now a low, ominous scraping sound almost sent the trunkway look-out headlong down the ladder; it brought the inert prisoners to their feet. The noise came from the after end of the ship.

"She's run aground," said Smith above the confused mutterings. "If she holes we've had it down here. We'll die like rats."

The *Newton Beech* engineer's words roused the prisoners and everybody began talking hysterically. The ship had stopped but her bottom was grinding over either rocks or gravel and she was bucking slightly, as if unwilling to settle without several fathoms of comforting water below her.

"She's in trouble," said someone, in a nervous, high-pitched voice.

"She?" came a reply. "You mean us. We're in trouble."

There was no panic, though men crowded instinctively towards the door. King pushed his way through to the entrance. "Keep your heads, lads," King shouted. "Let's hear what's happening."

In the silence the prisoners could hear confused voices on the deck. "They're opening the hatch," reported King, exultantly. "Now don't panic. Remember the routine. Bottom flat first. Follow me."

His foot was already on the ladder to lead the prisoners to freedom—if this was the moment for freedom. He was looking up but the light from the flat behind him was dim, and above it was too dark to make out the shape of the faces that peered down. The hatch had now been removed completely and the prisoners could hear shouting and the crackle of shots.

King was half-way up the trunkway when a strong, clear English voice, uninhibited by weeks of imprisonment, rang out. For as long as they lived, not one of the men battened down below would forget the words they heard.

"Any Englishmen down there?"

Three hundred voices swelled into a mighty chorus. "Yes, we're all English down here."

"Come up, then," the man at the head of the trunkway called out. "Come up . . . THE NAVY'S HERE."

The Navy's here! The words echoed through the holds and were repeated at first with disbelief, then reverently, joyfully, with glorious abandon.

"Hurrah! God bless the good old Navy." An earthquake of sound rumbled up the narrow trunkway.

Strong British arms grasped King as he reached the top. Quietly, hardly daring to trust himself to speak, he shook Turner's hand. "Am I glad to see you," he managed to stammer, as other prisoners pressed behind him.

Beyond Turner, standing by the hatch-cover, were Dau and Weichert. King slapped Weichert on the back. He was breathing in the good cool air in great gulps. He was so happy that he wanted to shake hands with everybody in sight. He did not even mind when he found Captain Dau holding him by the hand and shaking it.

"I am sorry," Dau said. "I had to keep you below on bread and water—but you will understand."

In the press of prisoners, tumbling out of the hatch, King was swept away. He was not listening to the German captain.

Hard on each other's heels, not caring that their fingers were bruised by misplaced feet, the prisoners poured out . . . Bammant squeezing through the hatch with difficulty . . . Goss, lean and long-legged . . . Cudbertson trying hard not to shout with joy . . . Paterson, wiry and agile . . . Platten rubbing his head . . . young Wall . . .

Smith, the steward, shivering in trousers, singlet and pullover, caught sight of Dau standing in the shadow. "Well, Captain," he said ironically. "So you didn't get me to Germany, after all."

"Hurry up . . . hurry to the gangplank . . . quick as you can." As fast as the prisoners climbed the ladder, ratings directed them towards the *Cossack*'s brow which was already in position between the two ships. The stream of prisoners seemed never-ending.

King was still standing by the hatch cover, hilarious in his first few moments of freedom, when, among the Germans lined up nearby, he saw the guard "Not-so-Much".

"I promised this would be the first thing I would do when I got out of here," he said, more to himself than the men around. Then his fist shot out and he caught "Not-so-Much" on the chin. "That's settled one score," he said, as the German crumpled.

"Well, we're free," said Smith, the *Newton Beech* engineer. Still the prisoners spilled out, lurching uncertainly against a *Cossack* rating.

"But how do we get away from here?" someone said.

"Don't worry, chum," was the reply, "there's a whole bloody battleship to take you off."

Smith saw Turner, guessed he was a British officer, and grinned. "Got any fags, sir?" he asked. After he had filled his lungs with air it was the most important thing he could think of.

"You English?" Turner asked incredulously. Smith, with his beard and trench-coat over his overalls, looked more like a tramp than a Merchant Navy officer. Smith was indignant.

"What the bloody hell do you think? And where have you been all this time?" Smith laughed. Turner laughed too and gave him a packet of cigarettes.

They were tumbling over each other, clogging the doorway and the catwalks. "Hurry, chaps," one of the prisoners was told by a *Cossack* rating. "Go quickly. They've laid charges. They're going to blow her up."

Still the British seamen danced across the deck, fooled with each other, shouted, sang and cheered. They came up in all sorts of dress, but those who lacked warm clothes were not bare-backed for long. One sailor had emerged in a singlet only.

Now he came from an *Altmark* cabin in a fine brown suit and wearing a feathered homburg.

A tall Australian, whilst he queued to go aboard *Cossack*, suddenly noticed Dau, who had been moved on to the fo'castle.

He ran to a British officer. "Lend us your revolver," he demanded, excitedly. "I want to shoot this bloody captain. He's a bastard and a Nazi."

Ratings crowded round him, hustled him off to the gangplank. "Leave him to us, mate. Hurry along. There's not a moment to lose."

. . . . .

Barnes was too preoccupied with his prisoners under the superstructure to pay much attention to what was happening on deck. He heard the sound of running footsteps and shots; he heard curses in German and English; he heard screams and the sharp smacks of fist-fighting. Men came and went through the superstructure door and some looked in and vanished without venturing any further.

Presently, he became aware that someone had tottered to the door and was standing there, breathing heavily. Barnes let his attention wander for an instant. Mr. Smith, the *Cossack*'s commissioned gunner, in duffle coat and white polo jersey, was being held up by a rating. "I'm afraid I've been hit, Barnes," he said weakly.

Barnes left his post and called to another rating, who was standing outside. "Take charge of this lot," he said.

He opened Smith's duffle coat and put his hand under Smith's right arm, where his jersey was stained red with blood.

One of the Germans, ignoring the rating's bayonet, stepped forward. "I am the ship's doctor," he said. "I have treated your prisoners on the voyage."

Smith slumped down against the bulkhead and Barnes, looking at his own hand, red with the wounded officer's congealed blood, was violently sick. "Sorry, sir," he apologized. He could not hide his embarrassment. "Give him first aid," he ordered Dr. Tyrolt.

Between them they lifted Mr. Smith into Tyrolt's nearby cabin. He had lost consciousness when Tyrolt examined him. "Shot through the arm. An artery has been severed," the

doctor diagnosed. Already he had applied a tourniquet and was bandaging his patient.

"Hurry up," someone shouted into the cabin. "We've got to get out."

"But it's dangerous to move him," Tyrolt protested.

"It may be more dangerous to leave him here," a *Cossack* petty officer said. He had arrived with a stretcher and ordered the bearers to take Smith back to the *Cossack*.

Barnes returned to his uneasy prisoners and told a rating to march them to the fo'castle. On the way he noticed that more German sailors were frantically lowering another boat on the port side. They had nearly succeeded and five or six of them were holding on to the lifelines to steady the boat as it hit the ice. Barnes decided it would complicate the operation if more Germans escaped to land. He leaned over the side and put his rifle to his shoulder.

"*Kamerad, Kamerad.*" German voices trembling with fear came up from the water.

He fired twice into the bottom of the boat and saw water beginning to seep through the holes made by the bullets.

. . . . .

From *Cossack*'s bridge Vian saw the prisoners crossing to his ship in a steady stream. Well over half had left the *Altmark* but many stood in a bunch near the gangplank, waiting their turn to step to freedom.

"Hurry up, everybody," he urged. His shout was taken up by the officers on the bridge. Quarter of an hour to safety.

The German crew had been rounded up on the fo'castle head. Some of the British prisoners detached themselves from the crowd and made for the superstructure. For more than three months they had been held on the ship and had seen nothing except their holds, their exercise space, the catwalks and the galley. Their only wish had been to get off. Now it seemed as if they could not tear themselves away. In a few moments the last chance to look her over would be gone for ever.

Prowling round the cabins, Tom Foley saw Dr. Tyrolt and waved to him. The doctor had always treated the prisoners well and Foley bore him no ill will.

"Goodbye, Doctor," he said.

"*Auf Wiedersehen*," said the doctor, sadly.

On the *Altmark*'s bridge, isolated and insulated from the noise and turmoil, Craven and his rating still kept guard over the prisoners. Time had passed slowly. Craven was without news and he dare not let the seaman go below to find out what had happened. But he did not worry, he was sure that the British merchant seamen must have been released.

Suddenly, a loud-hailer's distorted message reached him on the bridge. The boarding party would rejoin *Cossack* at once. The order did not mention prisoners, but Craven made his own decision. "We'll take them along with us," he said to his rating.

Britons and Germans climbed down from the bridge, the seaman leading and Craven shepherding the prisoners from above. When they had reached the deck, one of the prisoners made a request: "A new overcoat I have in my cabin," he muttered. "May I get it?"

"Sure," said Craven. "Go and get it quickly." As he waited patiently for the German to return, Captain Dau passed on the way to his cabin. Behind him stalked a rating with his bayonet fixed.

"Captain," said Craven, addressing Dau in German, "I thought you said the Norwegians had examined your ship; curious they did not find any prisoners, wasn't it?"

"*Mein Schiff is* be*sucht worden—nicht* unter*sucht*," Dau said. He was explaining that the *Altmark* had been *visited*, not *examined*.

The German officer returned with his new coat and the young sub-lieutenant marched his prisoners in single file towards the fo'castle to join the rest of the German crew. But a loud shout made him change his mind. Vian's roving eye had caught sight of the strange cavalcade.

"Craven, you fool!" he said. "Leave those chaps behind and come back at once. Leave all the Germans behind. I don't want them."

Craven was more than glad to obey. He waved the prisoners towards the rest of the Germans on the fo'castle and stood in the dwindling queue behind two ratings carrying an Indian wrapped in a blanket.

"What's the matter with him?"

"He's sick, sir. Leprosy, they say," was the answer.

"Hurry up, everybody," an officer ordered on the loud-hailer. "Step lively, now."

It was ten minutes to midnight when Captain Dau was marched the length of his own ship under an armed guard to find and surrender his ship's confidential papers to a boarding officer.

"May I get my own things, too?" he asked as they entered his cabin. Dau assumed that the order to the boarding party to return to the *Cossack* meant that he would go with them as a prisoner of war.

The light was on in his cabin when Dau turned the handle. A prisoner was rummaging through Dau's desk, looking for a souvenir. He held up Dau's big paper weight which was decorated with a swastika. "May I take this?" he asked, with mock courtesy.

"Take it," Dau said angrily. The prisoner put it in his pocket and left the cabin. "Bandits! Thieves! Criminals!" Dau shouted after him.

Prisoners were darting in and out of all the cabins under the superstructure. One emerged from Paulsen's cabin triumphantly swinging a swastika-decorated dagger in the air. "I could run this right through these swine," he shouted.

Dr. Tyrolt returned to his cabin to find an engineer removing the badge from his spare cap. The man was determined to have a small memento of his unforgettable experience in the prison-ship.

"Ah, you want a souvenir?" said Tyrolt. The engineer put cap and badge down. He was embarrassed and went off.

The stragglers were joining the thinning queue at the gangplank and King and Creer were making a last check to see that no one had been left behind. The shouting had become no more than loud talking and already some of the prisoners who had been first on board the *Cossack* were down in the mess-decks ready to eat their first good meal for weeks.

Grouped on the fo'castle, not daring to move though the *Cossack* guard had left them, the *Altmark* crew looked bewildered. They did not know whether to hope they would be taken off as prisoners or fear they would be left behind to blow up with their ship—if the *Altmark* was to blow up.

Vian took a last look round from *Cossack*'s bridge. The *Altmark*'s deck, which a few minutes before had been alive

with movement and noise, was still. The searchlight swung the length of the tanker for the last time.

"Is everybody aboard?" Vian shouted.

A petty officer cupped his hands. "All prisoners and boarding party aboard, sir," he replied.

"Right. Cast off."

It wanted five minutes to midnight when willing hands pulled up the gangplanks and *Cossack* moved slowly out of Jossing Fjord to carry the liberated prisoners of the *Altmark* towards the open sea on their voyage home.

AFTERMATH

THUS THE "DASHING rescue", as *The Times* triumphantly reported two days later, "a story of a kind to delight the authors of *Treasure Island* and *Westward Ho!*", was accomplished.

Vian signalled a report of what had occurred, uncertain whether his brief and brilliant intervention had met the requirements of the First Lord. Should he have taken the *Altmark* crew prisoners; should he, as commander, have tried to bring the *Altmark* home; if not, should he have left the *Altmark* without making sure that she would blow up? Churchill, already preoccupied with the diplomatic consequences of the dramatic naval action, responded by congratulating the Royal Navy on the double achievement of rescuing a German sailor from drowning and liberating the British seamen from their floating prison. (The rescued German seaman had, of course, died almost as soon as he was pulled from the icy water.)

The *Altmark* affair constituted a heartening relief from the disappointments of the "phoney war"; it was a glorious climax to the victory in the Battle of the River Plate. But it turned out to be something more. It marked one of the first turning-points of the war. It ended stagnation on several fronts.

The few shots which rang round Jossing Fjord that night became the signal for Hitler's all-out assault on the West. Guns were soon to flash louder and longer, but the diplomatic incident, which resulted from the double violation of Norway's territorial waters by Germany and Britain, threw a dark shadow, which was to linger for many years on Anglo-Norwegian relations.

We know now that Hitler had decided on the invasion of Norway already on December 14, 1939, and had given orders for the necessary naval and air preparations, but the liberation of the British seamen by a strong British naval force convinced him—rightly or wrongly—that Britain had taken off the gloves;

that there was now no more hope of a negotiated peace; and that, moreover, he would have to attack and conquer Norway forthwith or Britain—"prepared to ride rough-shod over neutral rights to rescue a few miserable seamen"—would anticipate him and secure the invaluable Norwegian coastline for herself.

On February 17, at his Fuehrer Field H.Q., Hitler received Grand Admiral Raeder in the presence of Commander Putkammer, his naval liaison officer, and ordered him to proceed with "*Weseruebung*" the code-word for staff plans for the German attack on Norway.

From Jossing Fjord the *Cossack*, with the destroyers *Nubian*, *Sikh*, *Intrepid* and *Ivanhoe*, steamed west to take the released British sailors to Leith, where a joyfully tumultuous welcome awaited them. The physical condition of the prisoners was better than had been expected and the ambulances which had been sent to receive them were needed only for the leper and to carry away one middle-aged officer, who was unwell and overcome by the excitement of the occasion. When the prisoners stepped on land, however, the diplomatic wires were already humming and the *Altmark* affair had grown to be a major incident.

Norway was apprehensive. It was easy to guess what Hitler's reaction would be. Norway's only hope lay in an attempt to put all blame on Britain. The Storting met in a nervous atmosphere to listen to Foreign Minister Professor Halvdan Koht reporting about the events in Jossing Fjord and Norwegian naval activity preceding them. The Norwegian Minister in London, M. Eric Colban, was instructed to go to the Foreign Office and hand to Lord Halifax, Britain's Foreign Secretary, a protest at "this grave violation of Norwegian neutrality", which, said Colban, had caused "strong indignation". He quoted a Norwegian Royal Proclamation on September 3, 1939, that during the war Norway would maintain complete neutrality; and he demanded that Britain should "hand over the prisoners and make due compensation and reparation".

But, though the Norwegian government would be aware of the emptiness of this request, they continued strenuously to justify the position they had taken up. Once more Colban was ordered to call at the British Foreign Office to propose

arbitration to settle which interpretation of international law was right. Admitting that they could "understand British feelings", the Norwegians stressed that "a neutral state cannot interfere between belligerent powers or in their disputes".

In the House of Commons Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain said that the rescue of the prisoners, an admirably conducted operation, represented a notable addition to the Royal Navy's annals.

In a pugnacious mood in the House of Lords, Lord Strabolgi, a retired naval commander, compared unfavourably Nazi piracy, the murder of sailors on the high sea, the vile crimes committed by German warships and aeroplanes with the rescue of the British merchant seamen, every one of whom, he said, had been illegally captured in the first place by the *Graf Spee*. Strabolgi said each of the nine British ships should have been taken before a prize court; every seaman was, therefore, illegally a prisoner. Whatever the Norwegians might say, this was certainly not a case for Germany to complain.

A week later, on March 15, Lord Halifax finally rejected all Norwegian protests in a note in which he established Britain's legal position and refuted Norway's assertion that nothing was known of the presence of prisoners on board the *Altmark*. His stern epistle was tempered with an understanding for Norway's difficult position—"made worse by the shameless mendacity on the part of the German officer concerned"—Captain Heinrich Dau.

Before Professor Koht had time to reply to Lord Halifax's note, Germany showed her hand by invading Norway, which the Wehrmacht subdued in spite of heroic resistance.

The "German officer concerned" had been left on the *Altmark*, raving and on the verge of despair. He counted seven dead—including Berndsen—six gravely injured and five slightly wounded members of his crew. Goebbels instructed him to go to the microphone to describe for the benefit of German listeners, the "act of British piracy" which caused him to lose his prisoners. He was followed by his third officer, who accused the *Cossack* boarding party ludicrously of having fired dum-dum bullets, which mutilated the German seamen in a horrible manner.

Stoker Hugo Horst, of the *Altmark*, whose thumb had been severed by a shot, was photographed and his picture circulated

throughout the German press. The funeral of the *Altmark* dead at the tiny cemetery of Sogndal, above the fjord, with coffins draped with swastika flags, was turned into a spectacular propaganda demonstration.

Dau supervised repairs to the *Altmark*, which was refloated and, with the help of three tugs, reached the open sea. The *Altmark* returned to Kiel Harbour on March 28. The reception which Nazi Germany gave the defeated Dau provided no comfort for him. He was relieved of his command and unceremoniously retired. The *Altmark*, of evil memory, was renamed *Uckermark*, placed under new command and sailed the seas several more times as a supply ship.

On November 30, 1942, she was in Yokohama Harbour, made fast by the side of the German auxiliary cruiser *Thor*, which she had been sent to supply with munitions, fuel and food stores, when a terrific explosion shook both ships. The *Altmark* was in the process of being cleaned with chemicals at the time and the suggestion was made that gas fumes might have caused the explosion. The German Naval Command on the other hand, suspected sabotage by "Japanese in the pay of the Russians". But, apart from a short exchange of discreet notes between the two partners of the Berlin-Tokyo Axis, the incident was hushed up. Fifty-three of the *Uckermark* crew were killed—the majority of them had shared the *Altmark's* notorious cruise—and almost as many were gravely wounded. The evil star of the *Altmark-Uckermark* had fallen.

But bitterness in Germany and Norway over the *Altmark* affair has lingered. Captain Dau took his life on the day of Germany's defeat in May 1945. His three sons, one of whom, like his father in his youth, is employed by Germany's major shipping line, and another an instructor at the merchant seamen training school in Travemunde, regard Winston Churchill as a war criminal, who caused Grand Admiral Raeder to be imprisoned at Spandau as an act of revenge "because he anticipated Churchill's sinister plans against Norway" of which the attack on the *Altmark* was symbolic. "Contrary to the position in Germany," Rudolf Dau wrote, "the people of England have not gained the distance with the events of the last war . . . The time has not yet come when it is possible to publish a really objective report about the cruise of the *Altmark*"—objective, that is, from Captain Dau's point of view.

Surviving officers of the *Admiral Graf Spee* still smart under the memory of her defeat. First Officer (Reserve Captain) Kay regards Heinrich Dau as one of Germany's outstanding sailors, but, like most men associated with the *Graf Spee*, is silent about Captain Langsdorff and the part he played in the Battle of the River Plate. One of the *Graf Spee* officers, Captain Meusemann, is actively concerned with the reconstruction of the new West German Navy. He is an officer of the Blank Organization in Bonn.

. . . . .

The British Admiralty has not yet released Captain Vian's despatches about the *Altmark* incident and many British sailors engaged in the action have proved worthy members of the Silent Service. It has nevertheless been possible to build up a complete picture as a result of over thirty interviews in Germany and Britain, with members of the *Spee*, *Altmark*, and *Cossack* companies and, mainly, with the merchant seamen prisoners, some of whom kept diaries of their experiences, of which the authors have been able to make use.

The prisoners of the *Altmark* were luckier than many merchant seamen in those first years of the war. Not a single man from the nine ships sunk by the *Graf Spee* died as a result of their encounter with the German pocket-battleship.

But after the shortest of leaves—many took less than a month—most of the prisoners returned to the sea and the toll was heavy, especially among the brave young men who had been undaunted in the *Altmark*'s darkest hours. Bob Goss, second officer of the *Ashlea*, was lost the next time he went to sea again in June 1940. John Bammant, the Harwich harbourmaster's son, was blown to bits when the ammunition ship *Zealandic* was attacked and sunk. Quintin Bell, chief engineer of the *Newton Beech*, was torpedoed in 1941, picked up; but lost his life when the ship that picked him up was torpedoed, soon afterwards.

Some of the prisoners had not seen the last of the Germans when they were rescued by the *Cossack*. In a German prison camp, Albert Creer, second engineer of the *Huntsman*, and one of the leaders of the *Altmark* men, met O. S. Walker, the *Tairoa*'s chief engineer, who said wryly to him: "So I wasn't the only fool to go to sea again." Another German raider caught

Walker's ship on his next voyage while Creer's ship was sunk off Crete and he was taken prisoner when the island fell to Germany.

There were few men who did not see action again. Ronald Cudbertson, now a mate, still sailing from his home port of Hull, spent two years in an ammunition ship at Gibraltar. Fred Wall, a waterworks engineer near Great Yarmouth, was sunk in a Malta convoy and spent the rest of the war dangerously in tankers. T. W. Mallinson, of the *Streonshalh*, now Lloyd's agent in Whitby, was bombed and wounded at sea with his old captain, J. J. Robinson, who is still a master.

Captain J. N. Edwards, of the *Trevanion*, now works on the fringes of the sea as chief salvage officer of the Port of London Authority. Captain Patrick Dove, of the *Africa Shell*, has retired to Cardiff. But most of the other masters are dead. Some of the officers have ships of their own and others have moved up in rank, including William Platten, a captain, with a home a couple of miles from Fred Wall, just outside Great Yarmouth; A. H. Thompson, master of the *Biographer*; and George King, chief relieving engineer of the Blue Star Company.

The sea continues to call many of the old prisoners. Fred Edwards is still a chief engineer, Cyril Smith a chief steward and Ron Curtis a senior engineer; but some have settled down to a shore life. "Pat" Paterson, *Doric Star* mate, has become an optician in Liverpool. Albert Creer has left the sea, but he is still of it as his old company's engineering superintendent in Liverpool.

The men of the *Cossack* lived to play an important part in the war, though the gallant ship herself was torpedoed and sunk with sad loss of life and injury in the Atlantic in 1941. Captain Vian, who received the Distinguished Service Order for his daring leadership in the *Cossack*, fought the *Bismarck*, ran Malta convoys, commanded British ships on D-Day and ended his war in command of the British Pacific Fleet aircraft carrier squadron. He was Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, when he retired in 1952 to become a banker.

Lieut.-Commander Bradwell Turner—also awarded the D.S.O.—the naval officer whose first incursion into Norwegian waters was so rudely rebuffed by the Norwegians, is now made welcome as the British naval attaché in Oslo. Geoffrey Craven,

a pre-war bank clerk, was in *Cossack* when she was torpedoed, and he was wounded again in H.M.S. *Afridi*. Like Gunner Smith he was decorated with the D.S.C. Banking did not appeal to him after the war and he now travels Europe as a steel export manager. Hector MacLean followed his career as a naval officer, and, a captain, he holds an important Admiralty appointment. Lieut. Burkett unhappily was killed in a sloop later in the war and Tom Barnes, a time-expired Regular, has settled down in "civvy street" as a telephone official in Brighton.

They have all lost touch with each other, but the memory of the glorious *Altmark* incident lives in a million stout British hearts.

NAMES OF PRISONERS TAKEN BY *ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE*

S.S. *STREONSHALH*

Released at Montevideo from *Graf Spee*: J. J. Robinson, master; T. W. Mallinson, chief officer; W. W. Gatenby, second officer; C. W. Stuart, third officer; N. G. MacDonald, radio officer; F. H. Jeffries, chief engineer; R. G. Dunn, second engineer; T. Sanderson, third engineer; A. M. Robertson, apprentice; D. B. R. Roberts, apprentice; G. A. Barker, fireman and trimmer; D. Blenkiron, o.s.; F. Brewster, fireman and trimmer; S. Burton, steward; H. Dixon, sailor; J. E. Dobson, sailor; J. Foulis, carpenter and A.B.; J. H. Gill, A.B.; W. Idle, donkeyman; J. Laurenson, bosun; T. R. Leck, fireman and trimmer; R. W. Locker, galley boy; W. Marshall, fireman and trimmer; F. C. Netherton, sailor; J. Purvis, ship's cook; J. Raine, deck boy; J. Richardson, fireman and trimmer; W. J. Vasey, cabin boy; T. Verrill, fireman and trimmer; R. Wale, fireman and trimmer; B. Wilson, mess-room boy; G. J. Wrighton, A.B.

S.S. *NEWTON BEECH*

Released at Montevideo from *Graf Spee*: J. Robison, master; J. L. Coutts, chief officer; M. Prior, radio officer; Q. B. Bell, chief engineer.

Released from *Altmark*: W. M. Woodman, second mate; G. H. Byrne, third mate; H. Saville, second engineer; S. Smith, third engineer; T. Northey, fourth engineer; T. W. Hunter, apprentice; R. Atkinson, cadet; A. Abel, donkeyman; E. Angus, fireman and trimmer; G. Beattie, chief steward; J. Bell, fireman and trimmer; W. Bowler, fireman and trimmer; W. Campbell, o.s.; W. Gilleard, fireman and trimmer; P. Hanlon, A.B.; H. Holland, A.B.; G. Johnson, fireman and trimmer; A. Martin, ship's cook; L. R. Miller, bosun; A.

Moody, A.B.; D. Morrison, fireman and trimmer; M. O'Connor cabin boy; C. M. S. Reay, deck boy; F. C. Smith, fireman and trimmer; J. Swaby, A.B.; A. Wardell, fireman and trimmer; A. W. White, sailor; G. S. Williams, carpenter; G. D. Worsey, galley boy; L. F. A. Zerk, mess-room boy.

S.S. *ASHLEA*

Released at Montevideo from *Graf Spee*: C. Pottinger, master; A. Miller, chief officer; G. W. Strong, chief engineer; W. M. Guthrie, radio officer.

Released from *Altmark*: R. Goss, second officer; R. K. Miller, third officer; A. S. Jacks, second engineer; W. T. Hair, third engineer; A. E. Walker, fourth engineer; P. M. J. Warren, cadet; D. L. Aadahl, assistant steward; T. B. Benjamin, head fireman and trimmer; N. Bevan, O.S.; E. A. Borge, donkeyman; S. J. Campbell, fireman and trimmer; T. Davies, fireman and trimmer; G. Dixon, fireman and trimmer; W. L. Dumble, A.B.; S. Earl, galley boy; T. A. Everitt, A.B.; J. K. Francisco, fireman and trimmer; J. Guy, O.S.; T. Harris, fireman and trimmer; L. B. Jusen, fireman and trimmer; M. McAlinden, O.S.; J. T. McCaffrey, A.B.; D. McRitchie, A.B.; C. Mangun, carpenter; J. B. Ocran, fireman and trimmer; T. Old, ship's cook; R. Ritchie, cabin boy; G. Robinson, sailor; J. W. Rockett, bosun; W. W. Talbot, mess-room boy; C. Young, chief steward.

S.S. *TREVANION*

Released at Montevideo from *Graf Spee*: J. N. Edwards, master; W. Venables, chief officer; N. Doye, chief engineer; N. C. Martinson, radio officer.

Released from *Altmark*: W. H. Platten, second officer; R. Cudbertson, third officer; H. J. Burrows, second engineer; E. C. Elcock, third engineer; J. C. Scott, fourth engineer; G. C. Barrett, fifth engineer; E. Spiers, sixth engineer; P. W. Filcek, apprentice; A. N. Smith, apprentice; R. Baker, cabin boy; R. Burns, carpenter; W. Faland, A.B.; J. T. Flanagan, A.B.; G. C. Howell, assistant cook; L. J. Hunt, donkeyman; M. Kennedy, donkeyman; W. Lafferty, sailor; J. A. Leigh, bosun; W. Lery, O.S.; J. Mannesson, A.B.; T. Morgan, general

servant; I. G. Palmer, ship's cook; W. Riley, donkeyman; P. Rogers, mess-room boy; W. J. F. Stewart, A.B.; T. Surtees, O.S.; J. Q. Symons, steward; F. Thomas, A.B.; T. D. Warwick. O.S.

S.S. *DORIC STAR*

Released at Montevideo from *Graf Spee*: W. Stubbs, master; S. Ranson, chief officer; W. Comber, radio officer; W. Ray, chief engineer; J. C. Hutton, chief refrigerating engineer.

Released from *Altmark*: A. E. Willis, second mate; W. M. Evans, third mate; G. A. King, second engineer; R. A. Curtis, third engineer; T. G. Leighton, assistant refrigerating and junior third engineer; H. W. Jones, fourth engineer; P. J. Bowie, assistant engineer; L. R. Vandome, assistant engineer; F. Wall, assistant engineer; A. J. Walls, assistant engineer; N. Watson, assistant engineer; A. C. Watt, assistant engineer; J. Allen, donkeyman and greaser; E. J. Ashton, deck boy; L. G. Baker, assistant steward; A. Bloom, assistant steward; F. Bones, carpenter; A. Clerk, fireman; L. W. Clark, O.S.; P. J. Craig, A.B., Q.C.; W. Curtis, fireman; A. Dolphin, assistant steward; J. Dykes, donkeyman and greaser; S. Ferguson, A.B.; S. G. Flowers, refrigerating greaser; T. D. Foley, sailor; H. E. Gandy, chief steward; C. Garwood, boatswain; P. Grimes, assistant steward; E. Hall, fireman; R. Harris, second cook and baker; J. Hood, donkeyman and greaser; T. K. Hyde, refrigerating greaser; T. A. Jenkins, cleaner; J. Killross, sailor; D. Kingston, galley boy; J. Lovely, A.B.; J. E. Lovely, fireman; G. J. Lynch, A.B., G.L.; C. McGinley, greaser; A. McKay, assistant cook; W. McManus, A.B.; N. McSween, sailor; R. L. Marshman, deck boy; D. Miller, A.B.; J. H. Mitchell, A.B.; K. Moffat, refrigerating greaser; A. Pilskala, lamps and A.B.; C. Plummer, engine-room storekeeper; W. J. Roberts, O.S.; H. V. Robinson, second steward; C. Soderblom, A.B.; J. Softley, fireman; J. Turnbull, A.B.; A. F. Underwood, ship's and chief cook; B. G. Ward, steward's boy; W. Wheeler, A.B., W.G.; J. Wilkinson, cleaner; J. Wright, fireman.

S.S. *TAIROA*

Released at Montevideo from *Graf Spee*: F. M. Murphy, chief officer; O. S. Walker, chief engineer; E. J. M. Angell, chief

refrigerating engineer; P. J. Cummins, radio officer; A. D. Dixon, deck boy; J. E. Farmer, sailor; J. E. Leedale, deck boy.

Released from *Altmark*: W. B. S. Starr, master; R. A. Costa, second mate; F. J. Paterson, third mate; J. R. Bammant, fourth mate; F. L. Kean, supernumerary mate; J. L. Naylor, second engineer; C. W. Taylor, third engineer; N. K. Brown, fourth engineer; I. F. Hunter, fifth engineer; A. C. Ketley, sixth engineer; T. W. Rowell, second refrigerating engineer; W. F. Wells, seventh engineer; L. Adamson, fireman; D. W. Arter, trimmer; J. Bannon, refrigerating greaser; G. Barker, greaser; W. E. Blakeman, o.s.; J. Blithe, fireman; P. J. Connaughton, second steward; D. W. Cook, trimmer; J. A. Daly, supernumerary deck hand; R. Downey, fireman; G. K. J. Evans, trimmer; A. Gant, trimmer; J. Gordon, fireman; D. Gosling, lamps; T. C. E. Grant, trimmer; N. F. Guthrie, steward's boy; C. J. Hall, A.B.; J. W. R. Hansen, chief and ship's cook; F. G. Hill, trimmer; M. J. Hoban, fireman; J. Keating, fireman; E. Langhelt, bosun; H. Langley, A.B.; A. Lindberg, greaser; J. McCarthy, refrigerating greaser; T. C. MacDonald, trimmer, D. McLeod, A.B.; D. McMillan, engineers' steward; W. E. McMinn, fireman; S. McWhinney, scullion; T. Matthews, greaser; W. G. Miller, refrigerating greaser; J. Moran, fireman; A. Newton, fireman; D. W. Nicholas, A.B.; J. E. Oakley, greaser; P. O'Brien, trimmer; F. Olsson, greaser; M. O'Toole, trimmer; T. Payne, A.B.; S. Pemberton, deck boy; V. R. Phelan, second cook and baker; R. Pittam, trimmer; H. Poysden, fireman; N. J. G. Purvis, engineer's steward; J. Quigley, greaser; J. Reynolds, fireman; W. C. H. Robinson, trimmer; H. E. Rodgers, o.s.; S. J. Rowsell, trimmer; H. Shorland, trimmer; J. C. Smith, chief steward; L. C. Southeard, deck boy; F. C. Stark, trimmer; R. H. Stone, sailor; J. Summers, fireman; H. T. Tanner, trimmer; T. Tynrmouth, carpenter; J. G. Webb, trimmer; A. J. Whelan, trimmer; T. Wightman, assistant steward; J. Wilkins, engine-room stores.

S.S. *HUNTSMAN*

Released at Montevideo from *Graf Spee*: A. H. Thompson, chief officer; F. Edwards, chief engineer; J. H. Beazley, assistant engineer; B. C. McCorry, radio officer.

Released from *Altmark*: A. H. Brown, master; A. A. Johnson, second officer; L. Frost, third officer; A. A. Creer, second engineer; E. S. Hall, third engineer; F. Clooney, fourth engineer; P. A. Lyons, assistant engineer; P. Appleby, chief steward; J. McCallum, Q.M.; A. J. Goldstein, Q.M.; H. Hughes, carpenter; G. McIntyre, Q.M.; H. Wreight, Q.M.

Indian members of the crew: Aledool Jolill, Mahdmeah, Wasiur Rahman, Ana Meah, Ali Ahmad, Amir Ali, Sultan Ahamode, Syed Ahmad, Umoor Meah, Munshi Mian, Abdul Wahale, Sultan Ahamad, Reazuddin. Noor Ahmad, Ali Hussian, Badsha Mian, Sultan Ahmad, Kanai, Abdul Ahmad, Sorafathali, Reazulla, Thacoordhone, Somodeali, Nuntazuran, Jaburulla, Massimulla, Meadon, Zaulia Abdin, Monroozulla, Komoreallee, Eusuphulla, Sumshireullah, Pasadullah, Asmanali, Tormoozullah, Forasatulla, Edrisulla, Luckmanullah, Khurshidali, Konaullah, Munsoorali, Ramjanali, Woolfatulla, Noimoolla, Yeasimullah, Reasutulla, Mansoorali, Untorali, Arfanulla, Hashmatullah, Harisulla, Harishmeah, Mofizali, Sekandar Mian, Sunaulla, Somodeulla, Gonoomirar, Sherazeol Hawk, Shakuroollah, Asadulla, Kala Mian, Abdul Azis, Sahebali, Mungli, Radiuzzaman, Hahd Essack, Sk. Edoo.

S.S. *AFRICA SHELL*

Released at Montevideo from *Graf Spee*: P. Dove, master.