

A Christmas Battle

One would like to write at Christmas time about some of mankind's camaraderie and spontaneous good humour. Unfortunately, however, Christmas, especially in war time, can bring its share of violence, tragedy and sudden death, and it is of such an occasion that I would remind readers in this article.

On Christmas Day, 1943, in the far north of Norway, at Alten fjord, inside the Arctic Circle, word reached the German battleship 'Scharnhorst' that a large Allied convoy had been detected bound for Murmansk in Russia. Now, while Christmas truces could be and often were arranged on land or in the air, no such luxuries could be afforded by any navy; lost opportunities at sea rarely, if ever, re-occurred. Immediately word was received down came the Christmas trees, candles, bunting and fairy lights; orders rang out, and Christmas was over all too quickly. 'Scharnhorst', commanded by Captain Hintze, set sail, accompanied by five destroyers, the whole force under Rear-Admiral Bey.

This beautiful German warship had, together with her sister ship 'Gneisenau', been commissioned in 1939. She displaced over 31,000 tons, (rather small for a battleship), had a top speed of 31½ knots, and when she sailed on that fateful Christmas Day, one thousand, nine hundred and sixty-eight men sailed with her. Her heavy armament consisted of nine eleven-inch guns backed by twelve 5.9 inches ones. With her sister ship, she had twice broken out into the Atlantic in the early war years, and together they had accounted for one hundred and fifteen thousand tons of Allied shipping.

The two 'lucky sisters' as they became known, together with heavy cruiser 'Prinz Eugen', took part in the famous Channel Dash in February 1942, when all three in broad daylight, right under the noses of Coastal Command, Home Fleet and Coastal Artillery, successfully sailed from Brest up the English Channel to home and safety at Wilhelmshaven. Not since 1588, the year of the Armada, had enemy warships accomplished such a feat in war-time. Ordered to north Norway later, together with the much larger and newer 'Tirpitz', their very presence in these northern waters resulted in many sleepless nights at Whitehall, headquarters of the British Admiralty, even if many there had never put to sea.

Now on Christmas Day, 1943, stripped of all festive trappings, 'Scharnhorst' sailed into the freezing waters off

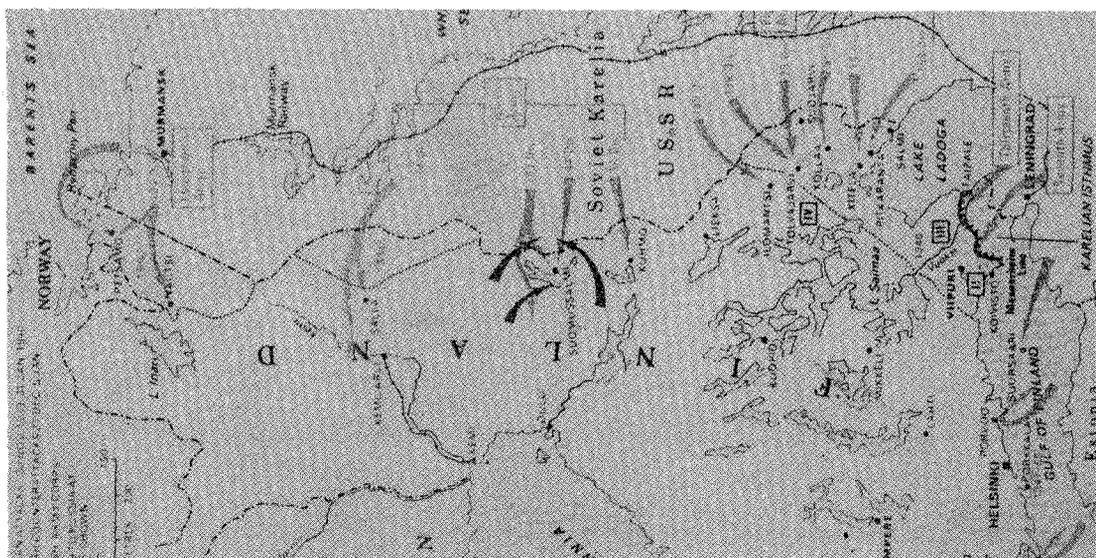
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North Cape to seek and destroy the ships carrying aid to her Russian enemies who were harrying the German Army on the Eastern front. Shortly after nine a.m. on St. Stephen's morning she was engaged by the British cruisers 'Belfast', 'Norfolk', and 'Sheffield' and she turned away to avoid them and reach the more valuable and certainly more vulnerable convoy. Again in the afternoon the cruisers pluckily engaged and again 'Scharnhorst' side-stepped and made off to the north west under smoke. Meanwhile, she had been located at over thirty-six miles distance by Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser in H.M.S. 'Duke of York'. The latter remained undetected aboard 'Scharnhorst' because of radar damage suffered in the cruiser action.

Just after four p.m. the 'Duke of York' engaged 'Scharnhorst' and now it was a different story. Fraser's fourteen-inch guns were a far cry from the cruiser's 8 inches, and on top of this 'Scharnhorst' could now no longer disengage as the 'Duke of York' was as fast as herself. For the next two and a half to three hours she took a fearful mauling, but only reduced speed once, and that only for less than five minutes. Fifty-six torpedoes were fired by the cruisers and eight destroyers, eleven of which hit and accomplished what Fraser's heavy stuff could not. 'Scharnhorst', firing to the last, capsized at seven-twenty p.m. and as her stern rose high before the final plunge, her screws could be seen still revolving madly in the air, an indication of the efficiency of her protective armour. Only thirty six of her near two thousand men survived, and Captain Hintze and Admiral Bey were not among these.

Rescuers from the boats of the destroyers listened in amazement to the haunting strains, sung in chorus by the survivors as they clung, half frozen, to wreckage and rafts, 'Auf einem seemansgrab, da bluh'en keine rosen' (On a seaman's grave no roses bloom'.)

Two days later Sir Bruce Fraser in tribute to a gallant foe, threw a huge wreath overboard on the spot of 'Scharnhorst's' resting place. Such was the end of a gallant ship and brave crew, thirty-eight years ago.



...bound for Murmansk