

DEATH OF A SEA WOLF

To the commander of the great Nazi battleship, the merchant ships of Convoy JW-55-B were like fat sheep in the Arctic night, just waiting for slaughter. What he didn't know was that there were thirteen steel-clad guardians waiting, too

BY LIEUTENANT THADDEUS V. TULEJA, USNR

The following narrative of the sinking of the German battleship Scharnhorst is authentic in every detail. To assist Lieutenant Tuleja in the preparation of this article for TRUE, Captain Helmuth Giessler, executive officer of the Scharnhorst until shortly before her last raid and later senior German naval officer under the Allied Occupation, consulted the wartime records of the German Admiralty and made available the eyewitness reports which he had personally collected from the repatriated survivors. Here, for the first time in English, is the full, accurate story of one of Germany's major naval defeats in World War II.

—The Editors

It was Christmas Day, 1943, when the German battleship *Scharnhorst*, after months of idleness, prepared to slip away from her moorings at Altenfjord, her secret lair on the coast of Norway, 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle. She lay in darkness, though it was only late afternoon, for the sun never climbed above the horizon during winter in these high northern latitudes, and the day's brief twilight had long since faded into night.

At the *Scharnhorst's* masthead a white banner, bearing a black German cross and two black disks, snapped angrily in the crisp glacial wind. It was the flag of Rear Admiral Erich Bey, who stood on the bridge of his flagship and glared with deep misgivings at the cold canopy of dark sky and the frigid seas rolling into the bleak, high-walled Norwegian fjord.

He had just been ordered, along with the *Scharnhorst's*

skipper, Captain Julius Hintze, to get up steam and go out hunting for a fat British-escorted convoy, the JW-55-B, which German Intelligence had learned was moving slowly at 8 knots across the Norwegian Sea, headed for the Russian port of Murmansk.

The message from the German Admiralty made the purpose of the sortie quite clear. Sinking the convoy would not only knock down the flow of war material to Russia, but would bolster the sagging morale of German troops on the Eastern Front, now reeling in retreat from the monstrous blows of the Soviet "lend-lease" Army.

After a hurried evening meal, Bey nodded to Hintze to get the 26,000-ton warship underway. Ship's officers and men, leaving their warm living compartments, which they had decorated with Christmas trees and makeshift trimmings, climbed out into the cold and took their sea stations.

Chains rattled through the hawsepipes as broad-fluked anchors were hauled in, dripping with clods of sand and clay. The ship's huge geared turbines, powered by mighty boilers, began to turn her three shafts slowly, and the *Scharnhorst*, with a thin bow wave trimming her forward waterline, glided away from her Nordic sea canyon like a ghost.

Joining the battleship were five fast German destroyers, collectively called the Fourth Destroyer Flotilla. With this striking force, known as the "Nordmeer" group, Bey could hope to accomplish his mission without too much difficulty. While the destroyers acted as a protective screen, the *Scharnhorst*, with her deadly main battery of nine 11-



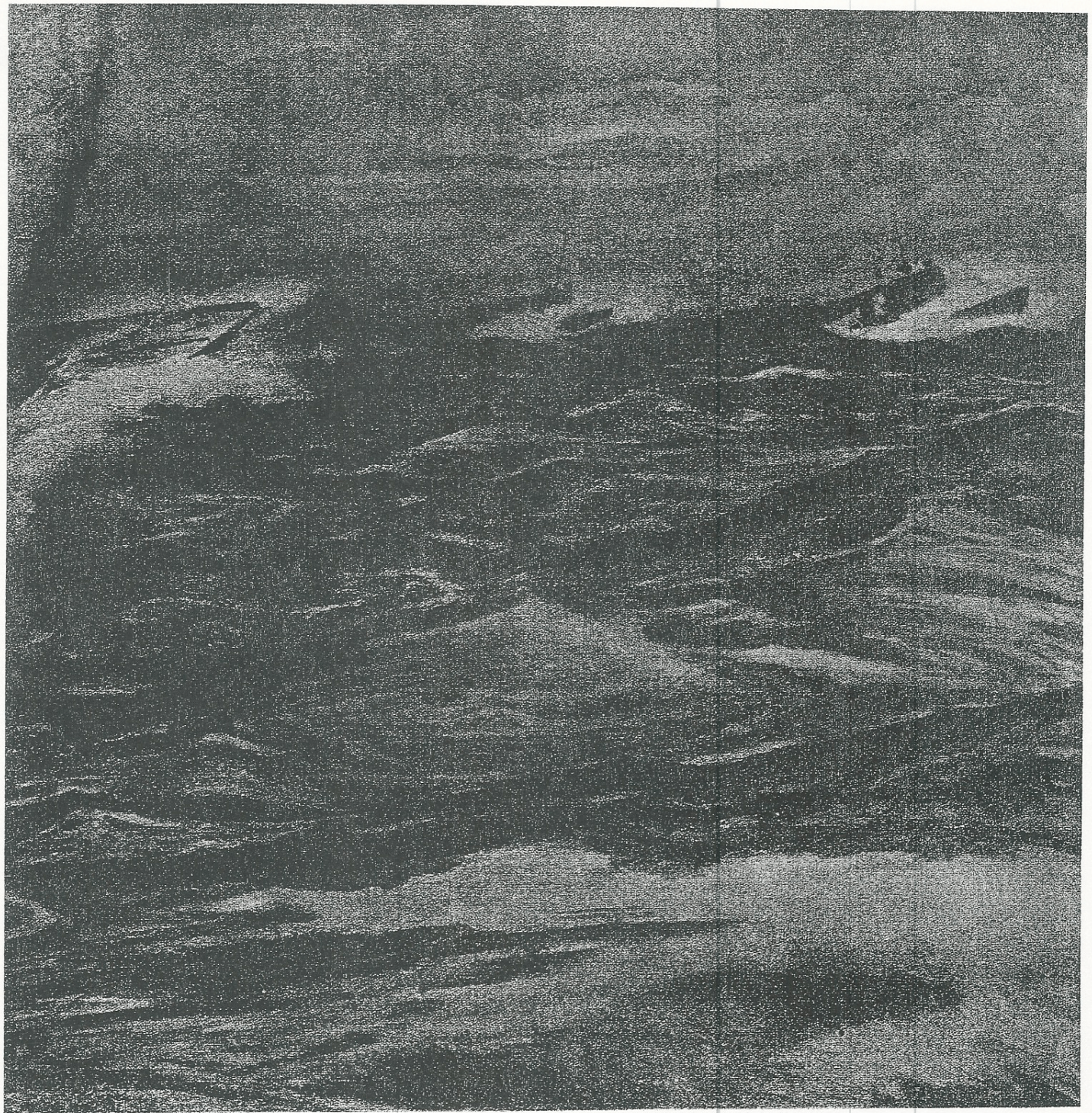
The victors, firing point-blank, circled the dying *Scharnhorst*. A searchlight beam through the darkness bared her doom.

inch guns and her secondary battery of twelve 5.9's, could slash into the convoy like a wolf slaughtering a flock of sheep. And her full speed of 32 knots would enable her to pull away from any battleship or cruiser the British had at sea.

But Bey had some problems he couldn't dispose of. Out of the ship's 1,900 officers and men, about 100 were raw recruits, fresh from a *Kriegsmarine* boot camp. Eighty others were midshipmen who had reported on board, not for a grim sea battle, but for naval training. They were no substitute for the scores of experienced crew members away on Christmas leave.

By 8 o'clock the *Scharnhorst* had passed through the interior nets of Langeljord and was steaming seaward through the Stjernesund channel with one of the destroyers a mile ahead guiding the way. About midnight she and her consorts cleared the fissured coast and headed into the mounting seas that sent freezing spray arching over their bows.

Bey ordered his ships to come about to the right and set themselves on a northerly course. By 1 o'clock in the morning of the 26th, the *Scharnhorst* was well at sea, burrowing into the turbulent wake of the five destroyers in a V-shaped screen ahead of her.



Illustrated by Edward A. Wilson

Bev and Hintze studied the situation. A German reconnaissance plane had spotted the Russia-bound convoy on the 23rd when it was about 250 miles east of Iceland, headed on a northeasterly course. It was Bev's plan to intercept it at 10 o'clock on the morning of the 26th just when the convoy should be turning due east to round the North Cape at the tip of Norway.

To spy for Bev, the German Admiralty had ordered eight U-boats to form a barrage patrol between the North Cape and Bear Island, a desolate, rock-strewn piece of land wedged in the ice floes 260 miles farther to the north. It was virtually impossible for the convoy to escape detection.

Nobody, though, had counted on the weather. Out of the southwest a howling wind tore across the sea bringing snow and hail with it. The planes from Norwegian bases, which Bev hoped would be able to scout for him, were grounded. His destroyers began to yaw badly as they traced a tortuous, corkscrew pattern over the crazed sea. And he also guessed rightly that the eight patrolling submarines would find it hard at periscope depth to hold contact with the convoy.

Bev's grim resolution underwent a subtle change as his ships took the full blast of the storm. He knew his destroyers could hardly hold course and [Continued on page 81]

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speed, let alone fire effectively in that raging sea. And prowling around the ocean without them was inviting trouble.

It was the concern he felt for the destroyers that nudged him into committing his first mistake. He broke radio silence to send a dispatch to the *See-Kriegsleitung*, Germany's bureau of naval operations, advising them of the brutal storm.

Immediately the British Admiralty got a bearing on his signal. It didn't take long to figure out where it had come from. Within twenty minutes the news that the *Scharnhorst* was probably at sea was flashed to Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser, commander of the British Home Fleet. He had left Akureyri fjord on the coast of Iceland two days before and was now steaming eastward to overtake the precious twenty-two-ship convoy before it entered the dangerous approaches to the Barents Sea.

Fraser, flying the banner of a British full admiral at the mast of the battleship *Duke of York*, was accompanied by the cruiser *Jamaica* and four destroyers, the *Savage*, *Saumarez*, *Scorpion*, and the *Stord*, the last of which belonged to the Norwegian Royal Navy. These ships, the guardian angels of the Russia-bound merchantmen, made up what the British called Force Two.

Fraser lost no time in capitalizing on the German admiral's imprudent signal. First he offset Bey's calculations by ordering the convoy to reverse course for three hours. Next he ordered Vice-Admiral Burnett, who was overtaking a returning convoy, the RA-55-A, to put himself between convoy JW-55-B and the *Scharnhorst*. Then he signaled the escort commander screening RA-55-A to detach four of his destroyers and send them at their best speed to Burnett, who was riding in the cruiser *Belfast*, in company with two other cruisers, the *Norfolk* and *Sheffield*. These ships made up Force One.

So Burnett coming from the east and Fraser from the west were moving in on the *Scharnhorst* like a pincer. And that is how things stood in the early hours of the morning.

All through the night the German ships steamed northward with their sterns to the waves. About 8:30, with the added speed given him by the following sea, Bey had brought his force 40 miles southeast of Bear Island. When he found no signs of the convoy he figured he had come too far north, so he turned his force around and sent the destroyers 10 miles ahead of him to form a scouting line.

The wind had increased and was now whipping sea spray off the crests of high waves and flinging it across the dark, surging water in long streaks. The course change brought the ships head-on into the teeth of the storm.

By 9 o'clock the German destroyers had been swallowed up by the dim half-light of the gray horizon to the south. Now the great ship was on her own, twisting her prodigious weight into the

swollen sea. A veil of bronze haze slipped from the lip of her funnel and spilled thinly over her ice-covered stern. Captain Hintze squinted with uncertainty at the storm while the admiral studied the navigational charts spread out before him. The way he had it figured out, the convoy could not yet have passed east of Bear Island and he was bound to intercept it within the hour.

Admiral Bey, a large-framed man with a tired, kindly face, militantly concealed the apprehension mounting in him with each passing minute. But thoughts of shattering the convoy and sending to the bottom thousands of tons of military supplies destined for Russia sobered him. He told Hintze to make the ship ready for action. The order was flung to the guns in clear, crisp tones. Huge shells weighing over 600 pounds were rammed home in the 11-inch guns and the breeches locked. Smaller shells were fed to the 5.9's, and within seconds 3 tons of projectiles were poised rigidly, waiting to scream across the cold, dark sky.

Fifteen minutes passed. The sky had not brightened. Lookouts, bracing themselves against the heavy motion of the ship, squinted into the stinging wind. But snow flurries intermittently spread a curtain across the mournful horizon, cutting visibility to less than 100 yards.

At twenty minutes after 9, three faint radar-echo "pips" showed up on the scope from the northeast. The range was 10 miles. Clenched tension swept over those standing watch on the bridge. Orders were shouted through the ship's

phones. Then the *Scharnhorst's* long guns, fixed in three heavily armored turrets, rose silently and pointed in the direction from which the radar echoes were coming. The range closed rapidly to 8, to 7 miles. Minutes ticked away heavily on the bridge clock.

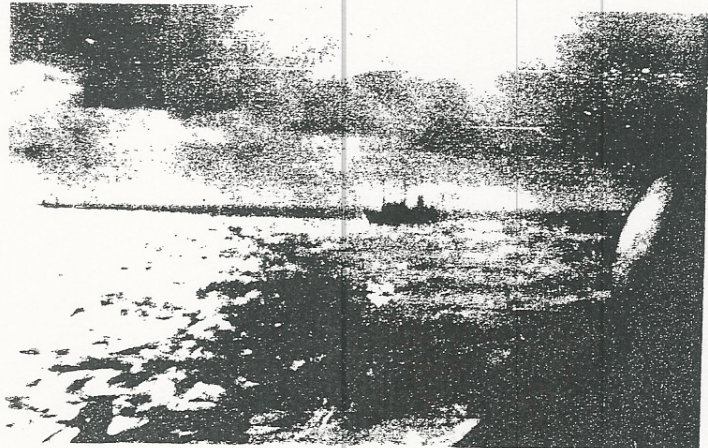
Then, at precisely 9:24, it happened. The air above the ship cracked sharply. An exploding star shell, spilling its burning fragments into the howling wind, let go a small flare which flooded the ship with an eerie light.

As the admiral pushed his heavy body from the pilothouse to the open bridge on the starboard side, Captain Hintze ordered full left rudder to put the ship on an easterly course for a broadside.

Shielding their eyes against the light of the flare, they saw the first orange flashes of enemy guns on the dull horizon. Hintze called a sharp command to the turrets and the ship's nine big guns jerked in recoil, spitting out ragged spears of flame. The gray smoke twisted like shredded scarves over the sea, and the thunder lost itself in the screech of the wind.

Nearby, the enemy's first salvo splashed wide and Hintze turned the *Scharnhorst's* bow south again to offer the smallest possible target.

The range now was just over 6 miles. An instant later there was a second string of flashes on the horizon, then a third. In a few seconds the *Scharnhorst's* topside watchstanders could hear the whine of heavy projectiles passing low over the ship. Other shots dropped short into the



MURMANSK CONVOY DEC. 1943 R.S. PULEA

lashing sea with a muffled thud, sending up pillars of water that bent over like palm trees in a hurricane.

Bey, trying to make out the outline of the enemy ships each time they fired, guessed he'd met more than the destroyer screen of the convoy. The size of the splashes from the enemy's near misses was a better clue and convinced him he was right.

"Cruisers," he said, turning to Hintze.

Just then there was a crash which jolted everyone on the bridge. Slivers of twisted metal and bits of wood were flung against the ship's superstructure as smoke poured out of a jagged hole in her main deck, port side. The British shell had hit the *Scharnhorst* amidships, torn its way forward and buried itself in the bulkhead of the forward crew's compartment. It did not explode. Together Bey and Hintze closed their eyes in relief.

Some bits of wreckage were still spinning in the air when another hit shattered the top of the foremast, showering the bridge with steel fragments. At that moment the radar operator reported his scope had gone dead.

Given better conditions, Bey would have fought it out with the lighter ships. But for the present he decided there was an easier way to get at the convoy than by plowing through a force of cruisers. He explained his plan briefly to Hintze. They would retreat to the southeast for about a half hour and then, using a full-power run, sweep around the cruisers and try to approach the convoy from the north.

Hintze rang up full speed. Despite the

mountainous seas that tumbled over the ship's bow, the *Scharnhorst* rolled south-east at a good 30 knots. One of the cruisers kept up her fire for another fifteen minutes and the retreating *Scharnhorst* answered with her stern turret. At 9:40 all fire ceased, and the British ships turned north.

It was at this time that Chief Wibbelhoff climbed the mast to examine the damage. His report was alarming. The British shell had smashed the radar antenna beyond repair. The ship was now virtually blind.

But Bey and Hintze weren't ready to give up, especially since a U-boat just before 10 o'clock reported sighting the convoy. Plotting its position on their chart, they found they were only about 50 miles east of their quarry and somewhat to the south. Bey turned north. It would be a wide, sweeping maneuver calculated to put the *Scharnhorst* far out in front of and above the convoy.

With the radar gone, Bey's revised strategy had to come off without a hitch. This time, sneaking down from the north, he planned to hit the convoy at noon when the sun, although still several degrees below the horizon, would reach its highest ascent. His five destroyers he kept far to the south to fight a rear guard action if he got into trouble.

But as Bey started his swing northward, the four British destroyers detached earlier from the returning convoy were taking up their positions in Force One under Admiral Burnett. That meant there were thirteen British warships looking for the German battleship.

The British could cancel out all the *Scharnhorst's* advantages but one: her speed. For this reason the *Duke of York*, with her heavier 14-inch guns, couldn't hope to deliver a killing blow in a running battle. And although the British destroyers were faster, the *Scharnhorst's* guns could smash them into a mass of sinking wreckage before they got close enough for a torpedo run. That was the theory, anyway. Sometimes, though, a combination of poor gunnery and suicidal heroics can neutralize any theoretical advantage.

For the next two hours the *Scharnhorst* held her course as the freezing wind cut across her port quarter. In spite of the overcast and the occasional snow and hail, the sky to the south began to brighten. By noon the horizon was clearly visible. It was time for the *Scharnhorst* to turn south for the attack.

Following Bey's instructions, Hintze ordered left rudder and reduced speed to 20 knots. Slowly the ship swung around to the south. Great gray waves curled over the bow, throwing bits of ice onto the forecastle. A quarter of an hour passed. Everyone topside with a pair of binoculars or a long glass was searching for the convoy.

At twenty minutes after 12 a starboard lookout reported the appearance of some objects on a westerly bearing. The ship's turrets drifted to starboard. Bey and Hintze, holding their glasses on the reported bearing, saw the horizon flash with a row of salvo bursts. The *Scharnhorst's* guns barked back.

Bey could make out a lone destroyer firing ineffectively but courageously in the pounding sea and, farther off, other destroyers and several heavier ships.

Hintze kept his glasses intently on the heavier ships. "More cruisers, Admiral," he said. "Two, three of them. . . ."

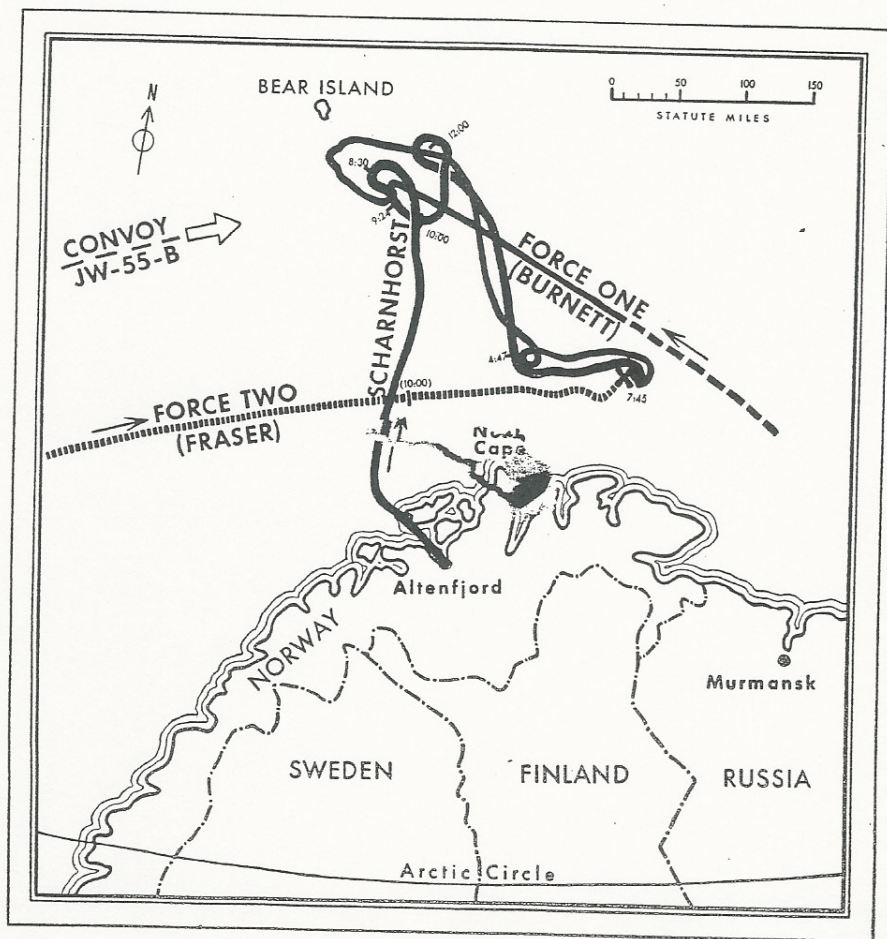
Again white plumes of water rose out of the sea from British near-misses, and the *Scharnhorst's* thundering salvos sent shock upon shock rattling through the ship.

At 12:33 a bright explosion was seen on the superstructure of one of the cruisers and cheers broke out on the *Scharnhorst's* bridge. But a moment later the admiral could see that the hit was more spectacular than damaging, for the cruiser was still firing. Although the engagement lasted for sixteen minutes, the *Scharnhorst*, with all her superior fire power, scored only one hit.

Bey's face was inscrutable, but behind his stern eyes a furtive doubt was laying claim to his determination. Altenfjord was more than 250 miles to the south. He had no radar and in a few more hours it would be pitch-black again. If more British ships moved in on him from the east or south, he'd be lost. For they could track him down in the black of night with their radar while he'd have to wait for their fire to tell where they were.

He decided the odds against him were too great. At 12:36 he told Hintze to break off the engagement. The ship was set on a southeasterly course and speed increased to 28 knots. He had given up all ideas about sinking the convoy.

The five destroyers patrolling about 30



miles to the south were ordered to return to their base. Bey advised them he'd follow.

The crew began to relax. Buckets of hot soup were brought to the battle stations, but some of the young recruits, already prostrate with seasickness, turned their greenish faces away. The wind continued to increase while white-crested waves welled over the ship's bow, sending clouds of spindrift against the bridge. By half past 2 the southern horizon was already darkening.

Now Bey and Hintze noticed something foreboding. After the morning battle, when the German battleship beat a quick retreat to the southeast, the British cruisers, after dropping behind, turned away. This time they were following with their four destroyers.

Bey didn't know that Burnett was sending the *Scharnhorst's* course and speed to Admiral Fraser.

At 3:30 it was quite dark again, but during periods when the snow stopped, it was just barely possible to pick up Burnett's force far astern. It was about this time that a radio operator brought a message to the bridge which told about several enemy warships, approximately 100 miles west-northwest of the North Cape, on course 070°. That location was about 150 miles southwest of Bey's present position. The only trouble was that the ships had been sighted by a German plane, which had courageously penetrated the thick weather, at 10 o'clock that morning—five and a half hours ago. While Bey damned the German Admiralty for withholding the information so long, he wasted no time in plotting it.

The penciled line, representing the projected movement of the unknown force if it continued in the same direction, crossed his course. That much was ominous. But the message had said nothing about the speed of the unidentified ships. Increasing his speed now might be just as bad as decreasing it. So with nothing else to go on, he decided to let things stand as they were, trusting that the ship's luck would hold out.

For the next half hour Bey searched astern with powerful glasses. The British ships themselves could not be seen clearly, but the billowing spray their bows threw up now and then stood out against the inky atmosphere. He judged that the range was opening slowly, but the fact that the pursuit was still on gave a new and terrible significance to the message from the German plane.

Bey concluded that his pursuers were hanging on astern in that foul sea for only one reason—the arrival of reinforcements. He looked at the chart again. With the seas crashing over his starboard bow, it would take another five hours before the *Scharnhorst* reached the Norwegian coast.

If those unidentified ships to the southwest, sighted six hours earlier, were the reinforcements the pursuing cruisers and destroyers were waiting for, then the *Scharnhorst* was steaming into a trap. Bey and Hintze felt a sense of imminent danger. The captain cautioned the lookouts to exercise extreme vigilance, all the officers and men stayed at their battle stations, and the ship was kept ready for

immediate action. At 4:17 Bey sent a message to the German Admiralty:

"I am being followed by enemy ships."

For about thirty minutes after he sent the message nothing happened. Then an orange flash in the north, followed by a high burst, brought Bey and Hintze to the open bridge. Their eyes darted back and forth over the spread of dark sea around them. Abruptly the *Scharnhorst* emerged from the darkness as a star shell shed its brilliant light over the ship. Suddenly from the southwest now there came more flashes. Bey had steamed into the jaws of the British trap. There was only one avenue of escape: the east.

"Full left rudder," Hintze cried. "All engines ahead full speed!"

The *Scharnhorst* was coming about when the whole sea to the west lighted up with a thunderous barrage. Heavy enemy projectiles plowed into the water near the German ship. The *Scharnhorst's* salvo spoke back, sending a quiver through her decks. At that moment the pursuing cruisers opened fire and the northern horizon was studded with bright bursts. The *Scharnhorst* was caught in the cross fire as a flickering festoon of star shells floated over her.

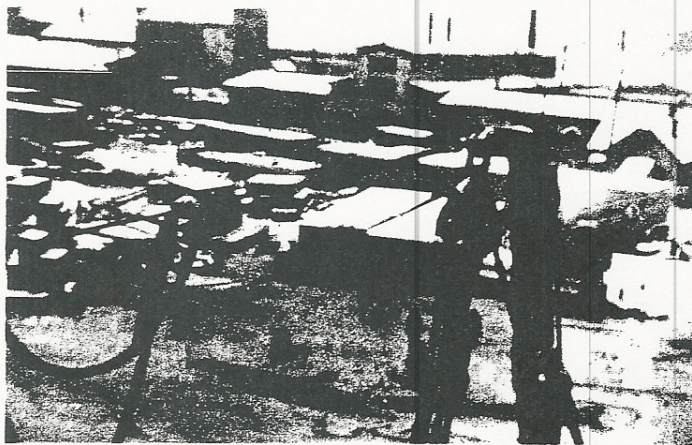
As the German battleship raced to the east, a deafening crash made the whole ship tremble. Turret A forward had

taken a direct hit. Smoke and flames poured from a gaping hole where the British shell had struck. The shell had not penetrated to the powder-handling room below, but the turret was out of action, and the broken, burned bodies of the gun crew were scattered among the twisted wreckage.

The fire was still burning when another shell struck the ship's deck and passed through the armored walls of Turret B just forward of the bridge. On the deck level directly below the guns, new fires broke out. Some burning splinters dropped through the wreckage close to the powder room deep in the ship. The turret was flooded immediately to prevent an explosion, and in a few seconds Turret B's ammunition rested under several feet of sea water.

The three 11-inch guns of Turret C at the stern of the ship, plus all the 5.9's that could be brought to bear on the target, kept up a steady fire over the *Scharnhorst's* wake. Hintze then fired his own star shell over the British force attacking from the west.

Bey swept his binoculars across the wide arc of lighted sea. His eyes fell on the *Duke of York*. He studied her silhouette, watched the flames belching from her guns, and marked the size of the columns of water her projectiles sent



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up around the *Scharnhorst*. Then he sent a scribbled note to the radio room addressed to the German Admiralty: "I am engaged by a battleship."

A moment later the *Scharnhorst* shuddered violently as one of the *Duke of York's* 14-inch shells hit the ship just above the waterline. It ripped a hole in the armor plating and struck one of the boilers. Men screamed as the escaping steam scared them. Others, groping through the clouds of vapor, stumbled over the wounded and the dead.

Steam pressure dropped. The speed indicators on the bridge fell off rapidly from 20 to 10, to 8 knots. The British closed in, but the *Scharnhorst's* luck held. Her engineers, König and Von Glass, with sweat pouring down their faces, were spinning valves to isolate the ruptured boiler from the main steam line. In a few minutes pressure was restored and the ship's speed crept back slowly.

Through the blackness Bey kept plotting the movement of the enemy ships by their gunfire. The ones that had followed him during the whole afternoon had turned east and were now on a parallel course, less than 10 miles to the north. Astern were the *Duke of York*, a cruiser, and four destroyers. Both forces kept up a continuous fire, and the clangor of steel vibrated throughout the ship.

At this time the *Scharnhorst's* speed was only 22 knots, the best the ship could do with her ruptured boiler. But Bey saw that the British force south of him which was trying to cut off his retreat

was falling back. By 6:20 the *Duke of York* had ceased fire.

Admiral Bey supposed that the British battleship had suffered a crippling blow. If so, there was still a chance to escape. He looked over the navigational chart for a coastal haven between his base and the North Cape. He was certain that the British, fearful of the German Air Force, wouldn't follow him into the deep Norwegian fjords. His face brightened. Another half hour east, then south again. By midnight he'd be entering the Rolv-søysund, which linked up with the *Scharnhorst's* base at Altenfjord.

About 6:30, strengthened in his belief that the British battleship was hurt, the captain flipped on the ship's loudspeaker and gave lavish praise to his gunners, the damage-control parties, and the engineers who had kept the ship going.

The *Scharnhorst* had taken a terrible beating. Two-thirds of her main and about half her secondary batteries were out. The radar was dead. Her decks and superstructure were punctured with shell holes. But she wasn't shipping any water, and her big stern guns were still in working order. As she pulled away from the British, the faint smile tracing itself on Hintze's lips broke into a broad grin.

Ten minutes passed. Then, above the singing of the wind, a lookout's voice cried, "Ships approaching from the port quarter!"

The captain grabbed his binoculars and spotted the bow waves of two destroyers. These craft were the *Savage* and

Saumarez. The *Scharnhorst's* stern turret opened fire, then her 5.9's. Splashes mushroomed up all around the approaching ships, but still they came on. The range closed rapidly. Three miles. Then two. Bey could see them now, bouncing among the columns of water the *Scharnhorst's* shells kicked up. They were moving in at better than 30 knots as if nothing would stop them.

The *Scharnhorst's* gunfire was erratic, and the destroyers pressed the attack defiantly. As the range closed to one mile, everybody on the bridge forgot about the starboard side, astonished as much by the inaccuracy of the ship's gunnery as by the audacity of the destroyers. It was then 6:50. Another voice called out: "Two ships on the starboard bow!"

Hintze tore across the bridge. Now he saw the *Scorpion* and the Norwegian *Stord*. With two destroyers overtaking him from the northwest, two others heading him off from the southwest, and cruisers waiting for him in the north, there was no choice. He'd have to gamble. "Right full rudder!" he yelled, as some of the *Scharnhorst's* remaining guns were shifted to the new targets.

Everyone on the bridge noticed that the great ship was answering her rudder sluggishly. Over the rumbling of the guns, Hintze's voice ordered the starboard screw stopped to bring the ship around more smartly. He had to break his course sharply. But he was too late.

At that moment the *Scorpion* and *Stord* turned north. As they passed the *Scharnhorst* at the incredible range of one mile, eight glistening torpedoes from each destroyer slapped the water.

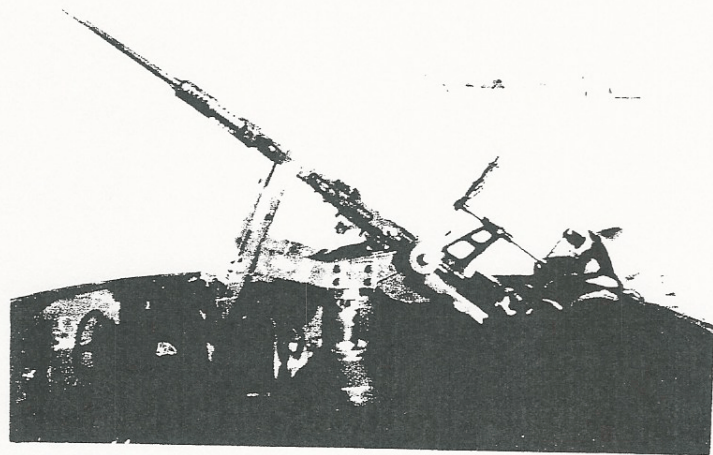
Two minutes passed. Then it came. One lone torpedo out of the sixteen that were fired hit the *Scharnhorst* just forward of the bridge, sending up tons of water that glowed with the explosion. The percussion wave shook the ship from keel to masthead.

Below decks men were running forward, their feet splashing in the freezing water that poured through the holed armor. They slammed shut watertight doors, closed off the flooded spaces, and shored up the bulkheads with stout timbers.

But as the *Scorpion* and *Stord* raced away, the *Savage* and *Saumarez* also closed the range to within one mile in the teeth of the *Scharnhorst's* desperate fire. Swinging away to the north, the *Savage* let go a spread of eight torpedoes, the *Saumarez* four. Of the twelve, three found the mark. One hit the bow, another tore into the *Scharnhorst's* engineering spaces, and the third shattered the stern, opening several compartments to the sea.

The triple shock lifted emergency lanterns from their brackets and dropped them to the deck. Steam and smoke filled the passageways. Fires began to break out all over the ship as aviation gas and fuel oil caught fire. Men fighting the fires reeled backward as hot blasts of flame engulfed them.

The bow and stern hits were partially blocked off. The hit amidships was a different matter. A thick jet of icy sea water shot across the after engine room, cascading down ladders and catwalk grat-



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ings. It ran down the bulkheads and collected in the bilges where it sloshed back and forth. By the time the pumps were started, the *Scharnhorst* had already shipped thousands of tons of water and the added weight slowed her down to 20 knots, then less.

The *Duke of York* caught up. At 7 o'clock she opened fire again. Her first discharge of 14-inch projectiles straddled the German battleship. A second salvo ripped through the plane hangar, causing another huge fire. A third splintered the fantail.

Now the *Scharnhorst* was in mortal peril, and as the ship's speed dropped, Bey and Hintze acted upon a single conviction. The captain ordered the destruction of all secret documents and Bey sent a message, his last, to the German Admiralty. It read, "We will fight until the last shell is gone."

All the *Scharnhorst's* remaining 11-inch ammunition was moved astern where it was fed to the last turret of the main battery. Some 5.9's continued to fire, but one by one they were knocked out until only one on the starboard side was left. The whole superstructure was in flames. Everywhere there were dead officers and men. And on the main deck many of the wounded, unable to save themselves, were washed into the sea.

By 7:10 the ship's speed had dropped to 10 knots, and the water in her made her roll deeply. Practically all the recruits, most of the midshipmen, and even a few of the older hands were seasick. Men staggered away from their stations, vomited in a corner, then staggered back. Many collapsed from fatigue and lay, curled up, near their guns.

A minute later a radio operator brought a message to Bey. It was from Grand Admiral Doenitz: "Submarines and destroyers are ordered to scene of action at full speed."

The admiral read the dispatch with tired eyes. He knew the submarines could do nothing in that sea, and the destroyers were too far away.

Burnett's cruisers moved in from the north, keeping up a steady fire, as one of the *Duke of York's* shells hit the stern turret directly. Now all the *Scharnhorst's* guns were silent save the one 5.9 on the starboard side.

The *Scharnhorst's* bow turned aimlessly to the north. The rudder wouldn't answer. Her decks were awash and her speed had dropped to 5 knots. Clouds of heavy, acrid smoke rolled over her as she trembled from internal explosions. One by one her ammunition rooms detonated, flinging sheets of steel and broken bodies into the sea.

At 7:30 there was a series of tremendous underwater explosions as several torpedoes ripped into the ship's stern. The bow drifted off to the left, completely out of control. Now heading south into the storm, the ship developed a heavy starboard list.

The *Scharnhorst* was dying. Admiral Bey held out his hand to Hintze in a last farewell. Then the captain ordered all hands to abandon ship. For several minutes after the order was given, though, the starboard gun kept up its fire. It

didn't stop until the starboard rail was underwater and the ammunition hoist jammed. The gun crew fired the last round, left the turret, waded along the tilting deck, and stumbled into the sea.

From the bridge Bey and Hintze watched the slaughter. The two British forces had joined. The *Duke of York*, three cruisers, and eight destroyers were circling the *Scharnhorst* in a war dance, firing at point-blank range.

Then four of the destroyers from Burnett's force, the *Opportune* and the *Vinago*, followed by the *Matchless* and the *Muskateer*, charged in with their torpedoes. When they hit, men struggling in the water were blown into the air.

Shrouded in smoke, the *Scharnhorst* continued to move southward, now at 3 knots. Her port side was high out of the water, and groups of men, making their way over the rail, were driven back by broken machine-gun fire from the destroyers.

There were hundreds of men in the water, most of them without life jackets. They were swimming through the broad, undulating oil slick which shimmered in the light of the burning ship. Only a few had enough strength left to fight their way through the waves and the drift ice to life rafts floating about near the ship. The others, paralyzed by the cold water, were unable to move their arms and legs. One after another they slipped under and sank into the dark womb of the sea.

Out of the darkness a searchlight played on the smoking wreckage of the German battleship. Her starboard side was completely submerged. Then at 7:45 she rolled over.

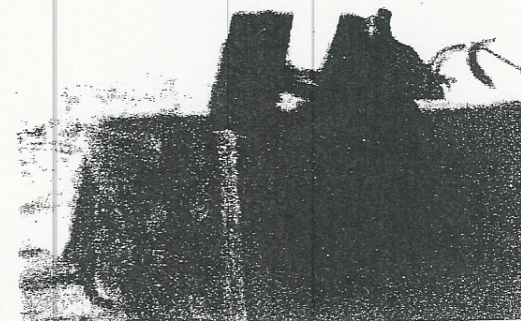
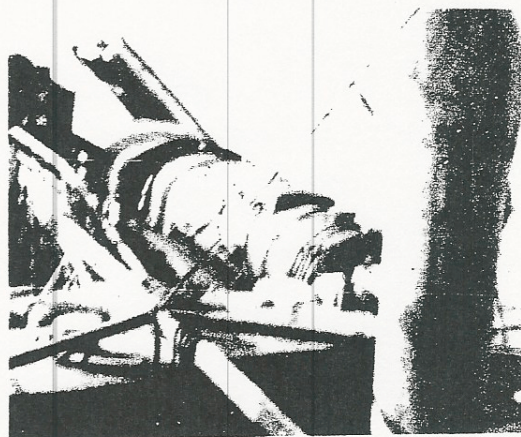
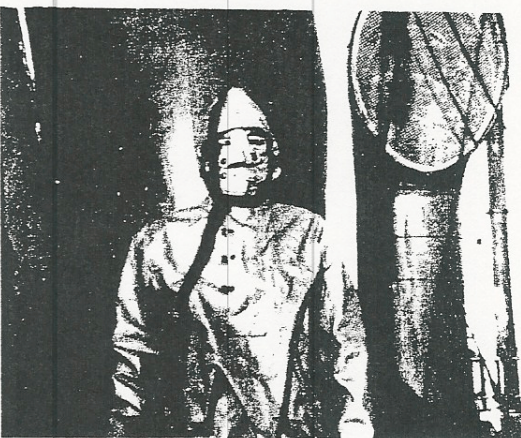
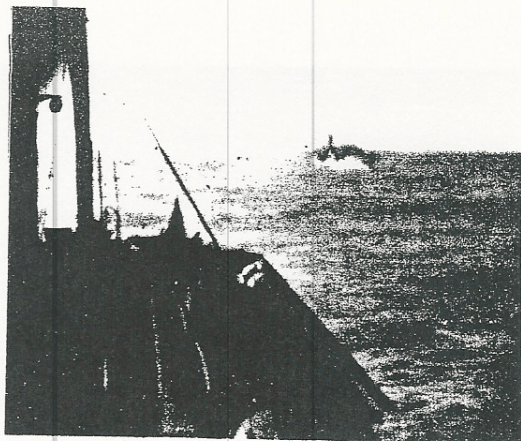
Hintze was thrown clear as the ship capsized. He struggled in the water, but he was doomed. Weighted down by his heavy bridge coat and sea boots, he sank in a field of foam. Bey, caught in the wreckage and debris, was sucked under as the bridge turned into the sea.

The ship's three screws were still turning slowly as the stern rose out of the water. Heavy waves broke over her keel and washed clusters of sailors into the sea. The stern continued to rise for another minute; then, with the roar of a great waterfall, the *Scharnhorst* plunged to the bottom 150 fathoms down. Bits of flotsam bobbing in the oil slick and men trying desperately to get away from the ship disappeared in the boiling maelstrom.

The *Scorpion* and *Matchless*, moving through the gloom to pick up survivors, found only thirty-six shivering sailors clinging to life rafts which rode on the crest of high waves, then dipped into deep troughs. Coming close to them, the British rescuers heard something that now belongs to the ancient chronicles of the sea. In spite of the biting cold and the tragic loss of their ship, the small group of German survivors were singing an old naval song: *On a sailor's grave no roses bloom.*

They were hauled on board and wrapped in warm blankets. Then the British destroyers turned away from the *Scharnhorst's* grave. The battle was over.

—Thaddeus V. Tuleja



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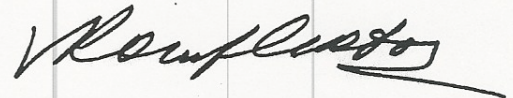
October 10, 1991

Dear Mr. Puleo,

On behalf of President M. Gorbachev I am honored and pleased to inform you that you have been awarded the Commemorative Medal "The 40th Anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War (WW II)".

This award is a token of recognition of your outstanding courage and personal contribution to the allied support of the people of the Soviet Union who fought for freedom against Nazi Germany.

Please, accept our heartfelt congratulations and wishes of good health, well-being and every success.



Viktor G. KOMPLEKTOV

Enclosure: commemorative medal, certificate.

-ooO ROLL OF HONOR Ooo-

JOSEPH C. MILANI
OTTO MICHELS
URPO MONONEN
FRANK MORITZ
ROBERT W. MORRISON
EDWARD J. MALLON
CHRISTOPHER C. MULLER
JAMES L. MURRAY
JACKSON C. NELSON
ERNEST NUKANEN
KENNON K. OWEN
DOMINIC PALAZOLA
ASHLEY B. PIKE
PETER PENNINGTON JR.
EDWARD L. PEREGOY
ROBERT PEARSON
— ROSARIO S. PULEO
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HOMER C. TAYLOR
EDWARD TENTANSKY
CAMILLE TERREAULT
FRITHJOF L. TORSTENSON
WILLIAM THORNTON
HARRISON O. TRAVIS
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WILLIAM N. VIENT
HERBERT C. WAGNER
LEE C. WOODARD
JACK WALTERS
FRANKLIN H. YOUNG
MYLES YANCEY
JOHN P. ZABCHUK
JOHN ZELWAK
USS ALABAMA

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Soviet Medals for U.S. Mariners

By William B. Falk

STAFF WRITER

On the Murmansk Run, 19-year-old Merchant Mariner Hugh Stephens lay in his bunk, trying to sleep, as waves of Luftwaffe bombers dove like birds of prey on his moonlit convoy of Liberty Ships. U-boats bristling with torpedoes stalked them unseen.

"They attacked us every night, all night," Stephens said yesterday of his World War II mission. The night, in the North Atlantic near the Arctic Circle, lasted 22 hours and 44 minutes. "It was mental torture."

The housepainter's son from Minneapolis repeated the Boy Scout oath to block out the drone of propellers, the thud of exploding depth charges, the mental images of another ship swallowed by the black water.

"If you didn't have a way to control your mind, you were gone," Stephens said. "A lot of guys cracked."

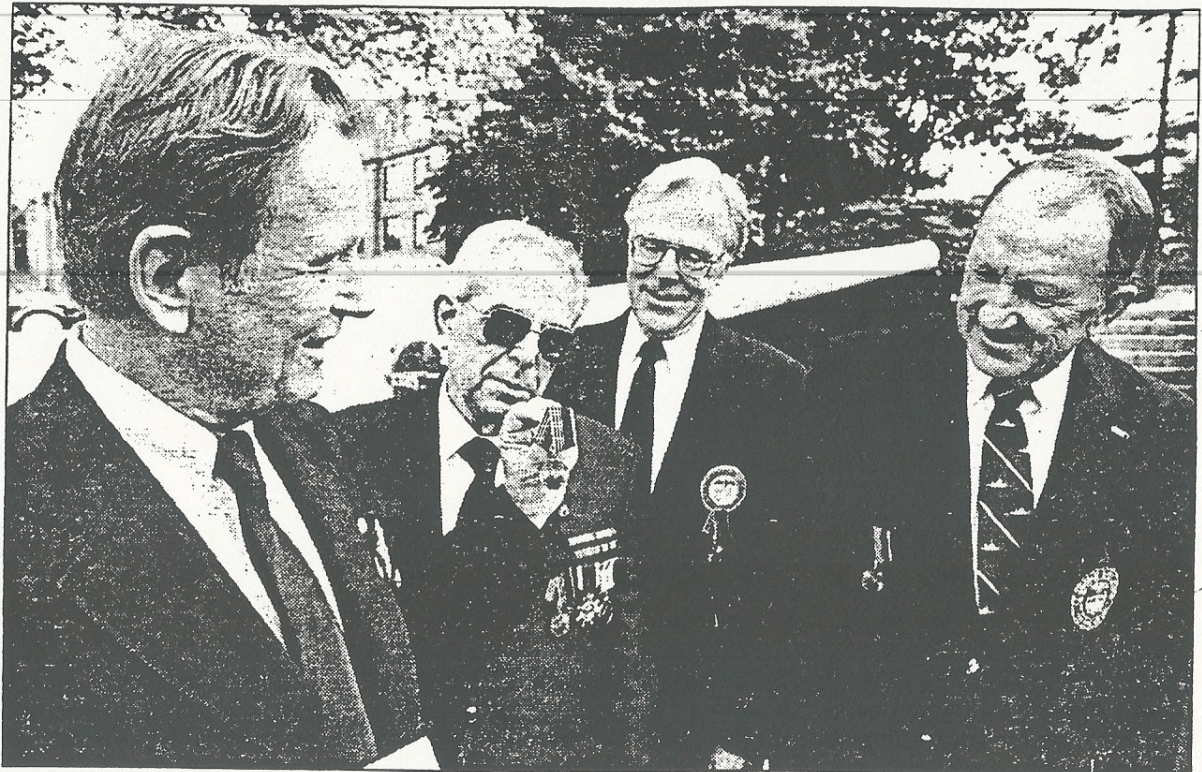
At the end of his 20-day run to and from Murmansk, a Soviet port on the Arctic Ocean just east of Finland and Norway, half the convoy of 30 Liberty Ships was gone. But the Soviets had received from them another load of locomotives, ammunition and food to sustain their struggle against Hitler's army. From 1941 to 1945, 800 Allied ships made the Murmansk Run.

Last month, Stephens opened a brown paper envelope at his Port Washington home and found a bronze medal and a letter from Viktor G. Komplektov, the Soviet ambassador to the United States. On behalf of President Mikhail Gorbachev, Komplektov thanked Stephens for his "outstanding courage and personal contribution to the allied people of the Soviet Union." A 47-year-old debt had been acknowledged.

"It gives you a warm feeling inside," Stephens said. "If we didn't make those runs, the Russians wouldn't have survived, and it might have been a very different war."

Stephens was among more than 250 merchant mariners from the Murmansk Run who were honored yesterday at a ceremony at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point. Six of those honored live on Long Island: Stephens; Karl Aarseth Jr. of Lynbrook; Bernard C. Flatow of Floral Park; Gustave E. Andreassin, of Sound Beach; Rosario S. Puleo of Lynbrook and George E. Kraemer of New Hyde Park.

Several years ago, amid the glow of glasnost, the Soviet Union issued commemorative medals to the British sailors who provided the military escorts to the



Newsday / K. Wiles Stabile

Aarseth holds his medal up for Flatow, Stephens and Kraemer to see yesterday in Kings Point

American Liberty Ships from 1941 to 1945. Reminded of the merchant mariners' participation, the Soviet bureaucracy delayed, but finally issued medals to the mariners last month.

"We had given up, and then, there it was in the mail," Stephens said yesterday, with a laugh.

Like many other mariners at the ceremony yesterday, Stephens is now a white-haired veteran of years of service on the world's seas as a tanker, tugboat and troop-transport captain. Nothing in that time, he said, matched the intensity of the 20 days he spent on the Murmansk Run aboard the Liberty Ship John Ireland.

The Ireland was part of a convoy of 30 Liberty Ships and dozens of military escorts that made the run in the

winter of 1944 from U.S. bases in Iceland and Scotland. Despite constant attacks by the Germans, Stephens' convoy — huddled together for protection — reached Murmansk intact. But on the way back, a fierce North Atlantic storm scattered the ships like toy boats, and divided they fell under the German attack.

Stephens remembers seeing Norwegian refugees picked up on the return trip watching the flash of a bomb hit another Liberty Ship. "These women and children stood there on the deck watching the ship go down, crying. They figured that their husbands and fathers were on that ship.

"At nineteen," Stephens said, "that leaves quite an impression on you."