

We'll Meet Again - A little known incident from the Battle of Narvik

By Genevieve Jones (1990)

Who were the two young Norwegians who, on April 12th 1940, in the midst of the battle for Narvik, had come on board the British destroyer HMS Cossack as she lay helpless, aground and on fire, in the Ofotfjord? The boys brought with them information which proved vital, not only to the "Cossack", but also to the rest of the allied forces engaged in the battle.

But who were they? In the heat of the moment nobody had thought to ask their names. Did they escape capture by the Germans after leaving the ship, or did their young lives end in front of a firing squad? These questions had troubled one of the "Cossack's" crew for fifty years.

From his home in Harrogate, N.Yorks. where he is now retired, David Grant DSM (CPO, RN Retd.) related the whole story to the Anglo-Norse Review.

David was proud to belong to the "Cossack" and had been with her ever since she was commissioned into the Royal Navy in 1939. He had taken part in the famous "Altmark" incident when, on Feb 14th 1940, under the command of Capt. Vian, the "Cossack" had chased and finally cornered the German tanker in Jøssingfjord. Brandishing cutlasses, the Cossack's crew boarded the "Altmark" and, with the words "Come on up. The Navy's here", had freed the 300 British sailors incarcerated in the hold. The words echoed around the world and this act of unrepentant piracy (as it was deemed to be by the still neutral Norwegian government) touched the hearts of free people everywhere.

The events leading to the predicament of the "Cossack" in the Ofotfjord had actually started a few days previously when, in the first battle for Narvik on April 9th-10th, the British ships "Hardy" and "Hunter" had been lost. Now, with "Cossack" in the lead, the British were returning in full force to crush the enemy. David Grant had not been at all happy when they sailed from Scotland. His second wedding anniversary would be on April 12th and he had been hoping to spend the day with his wife. Instead he found himself engaged in a fierce sea battle.

The fighting had started in the early afternoon when the British fleet rounded Ankenes Point and had come into view of the Germans in Narvik harbour. Hit several times by the enemy, the "Cossack" lost control of her steering and, shortly after 3pm., ran aground off Ankenes Point. Her boiler room was on fire and she was burning brightly, but the thunder of her guns never ceased. By the end of the afternoon all the German vessels in the harbour had been destroyed without the loss of a single British ship. Before retiring with the rest of the fleet, HMS "Kimberley" had come and tried, unsuccessfully, to tow "Cossack" off the beach.

Now the "Cossack" was alone, her crew waiting to be taken prisoner by the Germans, for Capt. Sherbrooke would never give the order to abandon ship. Unknown to David Grant and the rest of the crew, the British traitor Lord Haw-Haw, had already gloatingly broadcast from Germany - a broadcast David's wife had heard

to her distress - that the "Cossack" was taken and soon the crew would be marched in chains through the streets of Berlin. The "Altmark" was avenged.

Meanwhile, on the "Cossack" the log and other secret documents were being burnt so as not to fall into enemy hands. It was at this point, when the sailors' spirits and the tide were at their lowest ebb, that David Grant spotted two figures skiing down the icy mountain side to the ship. The water was so shallow that the two Norwegian youths were able to wade out to the "Cossack". David Grant remembers chatting with them after they came on board and that they had presented a Nazi flag to the crew as a souvenir. Most important of all, the boys reported that the Germans had suffered heavy losses and were retreating into the mountains.

This meant that the "Cossack" had time, time to wait for the tide to rise and float her off the sands, time to radio another destroyer to come back and help her, time to put out the fire. And so, in the middle of the night, at high tide, the "Cossack" slipped silently out of the fjord, free to fight another day.

After the war David Grant tried several times to trace the two young Norwegians but without success. Earlier this year, the 50th anniversary of the "Battle of Narvik" his daughter, Anne, made one last attempt and contacted Maj. Hans Støvern, Asst. Defence Attache in London. He was immediately interested in the story and eventually, with the assistance of the Narvik newspaper "Fremover", the boys were found.

They were two cousins, Leif and Torstein Hanssen both from Ankenes. David Grant was delighted with the news and to learn that they had both survived the war. Leif Hanssen is today a vigorous 71 year old and still lives in Ankenes but his cousin moved to Sweden where he died in 1976.

Leif now takes up the story. In April 1940 he was 21 and his cousin four years younger. To the young Leif, life in those days seemed to be constantly full of drama and excitement. Only the day prior to his encounter with the "Cossack" a British plane had crashed near Håkvik where Lief and his family were then living. Leif had been the first to reach the wreckage and helped the gunner pull the seriously injured pilot out of the plane before it exploded. The two airmen were later sent south to Vidrek to join the survivors of the "Hardy" who were awaiting rescue there. And now April 12th, from the sound of gunfire coming from the fjord, promised to be just as dramatic. Leif and Torstein decided to ski over to Ankenes and see what was happening. It never entered their heads They watched the battle for some time, cheering every British shell that hit its mark. Then cold and hungry and seeing the "Cossack" lying so close into the land, they decided to ski down to the ship, sure that they would get something to eat there. On board, the two cousins were plied with food and questions. Questions about the strength and positions of the German sea and land forces, questions the two youths could answer in precise detail. And it was this precise information that helped the Allies finally, over the next few days, win the Battle of Narvik.

That was not quite the end of the story. The fjord was, by this time, dotted with sunk and disabled German ships, some submerged so that only their masts showed above water, but all with their flags still flying. Eyeing these flags, the boys

retrieved one of them and gave it to David Grant. The flag now hangs in the Imperial War Museum in London.

The two Norwegians then decided to call it a day and returned to the relative safety of the land, but not without some pot shots being aimed at them before they disappeared out of sight.

Leif and Torstein Hanssen have never received any official recognition for the role they played in the Battle of Narvik. David Grant, however, was invited to the 50th Anniversary ceremonies held earlier this year in Narvik but, because of ill health, was unable to attend. So the two men, although they now correspond regularly, have yet to get together. But, as David Grant say, "Well meet again".

Postscript: David Grant won the DSM (Distinguished Service Medal) when in May 1940, on watch alone and isolated from the rest of the ship by the worst storm he ever experienced, he risked his life, and prevented the Cossack from being blown up, by making secure several depth charges which had broken loose and were rolling about the deck in danger of exploding.

And the "Cossack"? That brave, seemingly invincible ship, met her end in Oct. 1941, hit by a disastrously well aimed German torpedo, just one month after David Grant had left her to join another ship. Had he, perhaps, been her lucky mascot?



David Grant died in November 1993. Lief Hanssen has also since died.