

THE ALTMARK INCIDENT

Since the outbreak of war with Germany ships of the Royal Navy had been trying to find the pocket battleship Admiral Graf Spee and her supply ship. The Altmark had slipped through the English Channel on 6th August 1939 and moved down into the South Atlantic where, for the next 3 months, she supplied Graf Spee with oil and provisions allowing the battleship to make continued forays against merchant shipping. She also became a prison ship, taking aboard survivors from the ships sunk by Graf Spee.



On 13th December 1939, Graf Spee was found and attacked by the cruisers Exeter, Ajax and Achilles but entered Montivideo harbour to avoid destruction. Four days later she was required to leave the harbour and was scuttled in the River Plate rather than face the force which was waiting for her outside.

Altmark remained in the South Atlantic, hove to for some while with engine trouble, and then, having completed repairs, started the journey back to Hamburg. Keeping clear of all shipping, and with not a little luck, she eventually crept round Iceland and reached Norwegian waters on 12th February 1940.

On 13th February men from the cruiser Aurora, being fitted with degaussing equipment in Port Edgar in the Forth, were detailed off in groups of 21 each to report to ships of the 4th Destroyer Flotilla. These ships had been decimated by a minor epidemic of influenza. One group joined Cossack and arrived just before 10.00 pm carrying rifles, bayonets, steel helmets and webbing. In addition to Cossack, the cruiser Arethusa and the destroyers Sikh, Nubian, Ivanhoe and Intrepid were under sailing orders.

Although the official information was that the ships were going out to do an ice reconnaissance in the Skagerrak, the buzz was that they were going to look for the Nazi prison ship. The fact that the group from Aurora was given instruction on boarding procedures once they were aboard only reinforced the rumours.

At midnight the ships, led by Arethusa sailed out into the North Sea and set course due East. The ships then split up to sweep a wide area in a pre-determined pattern.

On the morning of February 14th, Altmark was stopped by the Norwegian patrol torpedo boat Trygg. A Norwegian officer boarded and requested to search the ship. He was conducted to the bridge and shown the navigating cabin but, when the German captain insisted that the ship was an unarmed tanker, the Norwegian officer surprisingly seemed satisfied and left the ship. This action has to be taken in the context of the times. Norway was a neutral country and, although made

aware of Britain's view that the Altmark was carrying British prisoners and therefore breaching her neutrality, was also in fear of being invaded by Germany and therefore did not want to create an incident which could be used to precipitate such action.

Altmark had requested a pilot but as none was available, Trygg lent them a seaman who knew the waters well until they reached Alesund. There two pilots boarded together with another Norwegian officer who asked for the ship's details, looked around but again did not search the ship. The pilots asked Altmark to anchor over-night because of the hundreds of fishing boats along the coastline, the alternative being to leave Norwegian waters. The Captain pretended to attempt to anchor but said that he was unable to do so because of a frozen anchor winch. The tanker turned seawards and the Trygg, which had been following, dropped back. However, another torpedo boat, the Snoegg, loomed up out of the darkness and the commander boarded. Again only questions were asked, no search was made and the officer left.

Altmark once again got underway and again the Trygg followed. At that time the Altmark was still well north of Bergen when she was again stopped, this time by the Norwegian destroyer Garm, and the Captain went aboard to search the ship. The Captain of the Altmark refused to allow this and was therefore told to leave the Bergen fortified area. The pilots refused to stay aboard and left with the Captain of the Garm.

Word got to the British Embassy at Oslo and the Naval Attaché signalled the Admiralty that Altmark was steaming two miles off the Norwegian coast north of Bergen. The fortuitous "ice reconnaissance" being undertaken by Captain Vian's flotilla put them south of Altmark. Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, gave clear instructions to the First Sea Lord for transmission to Captain Vian. "Find her, edge her into the open sea, board her and liberate her prisoners". The signal Captain Vian received also gave the rough position of the Altmark.

The first problem, however, was to find Altmark and Captain Vian's force was split up to search the Leads and offshore islands. Nobody had a very clear idea what Altmark looked like, so every supply ship was investigated - a procedure which took some time if the vessel was close inshore against a background of snow and rock.

Cossack was some way south of some of the ships of her flotilla when at 10 a.m. a lookout reported a ship resembling the Altmark. Cossack approached her but found her to be Swedish and so continued her search. An hour later she bore down on another ship, this time wearing the Norwegian flag, a few miles from the coast. Captain Vian instructed Paymaster Sub-Lieutenant Craven, RNVR, his assistant secretary who spoke several Scandinavian languages, to question her. Again, without luck. This happened several more times that morning. The area was alive with shipping but there was no sign of the Altmark.

Two Hudson aircraft had taken off at 0825 from Thornaby on Tees Bay and one inspected all shipping along the Danish coast and the Skaggerak as far as Skagen and then turned out to sea again. The other, further north, sent a wireless message at 1250 that it had sighted a tanker steaming southwards. Captain Vian, too far south from the reported position, signalled a warning to Arethusa. Arethusa herself had just come across another tanker and while her lookouts were trying to decipher the name, they saw the crew taking to the boats. Before the Arethusa could reach her the ship had begun to sink, scuttled by her crew. She was in fact the Baldur, an iron-ore carrier.

Coastal Command at Leuchars sent another aircraft to keep an eye on the Altmark and Captain Vian ordered Intrepid and Ivanhoe to intercept at full speed, covered by the cruiser Arethusa. The whole flotilla sped to assemble. At 1445 Altmark saw the three ships, Arethusa steaming on a parallel course and Intrepid and Ivanhoe approaching. Arethusa ordered her to steer west but Altmark held her course.

In London a Cabinet meeting was called to discuss the position of the Altmark, particularly with regard to Norwegian neutrality and the effect that any attack on the ship would have on Germany's attitude to Norway. Altmark was in Norwegian territorial waters but her voyage was quite legal if she was a genuine merchant ship. Against that were the reports that she was carrying 300 British merchant seamen, taken by the pocket battleship Admiral Graf Spee from the prizes she had sunk

or captured. If the reports were correct and Altmark tried to carry these internees through Norwegian territorial waters it would be an infringement of Norway's rights. In this case Altmark must therefore release the internees, or she herself must be interned, or she must sail outside Norwegian waters - where she could be intercepted by the Royal Navy. Of course, if she were a genuine merchant ship then the RN had no right to enter Norwegian territorial waters to stop her. It was perhaps legally doubtful whether the RN could enter Norwegian territorial waters even if the Altmark were a regular warship, packed with prisoners, and was there illegally herself.

At 1515 Intrepid and Ivanhoe were quite close to the Altmark, which was near to the entrance of Jøssingfjord. Intrepid prepared for action. She signalled Altmark to heave to. Altmark ignored the order and steamed slowly on. The Intrepid's captain ordered a shot to be put across her bows. Due to high speed manoeuvring the shot went wide and landed on Norwegian soil! A second shot was fired but Norwegian warships hampered the Navy's efforts to force Altmark out of territorial waters and the German tanker slipped into Jøssingfjord - a narrow inlet almost covered in places with quite thick ice. By this time there were three Norwegian warships in the area, the torpedo boats Skarv (which had taken over from Trygg) and Kjell and the patrol boat Firern.

Captain Vian in Cossack arrived at dusk to confer with the Norwegians. A Norwegian officer explained that the Altmark had been searched at Bergen and nothing amiss had been found. Captain Vian reported to the Admiralty and awaited their reply. Presently orders arrived direct from the First Lord of the Admiralty, Mr. Winston Churchill. Captain Vian was to offer to help the Norwegians escort the Altmark back to Bergen to be searched again. If they refused then Altmark must be boarded. If the Norwegians interfered they must be warned off. If they opened fire, it must not be returned unless necessary, and then only as much as necessary.

At 2200 Captain Vian took Cossack into the fiord; his next few decisions and actions might have started a war. He communicated the sense of Mr Churchill's message to Kjell who replied that he could not cooperate because his little ships were unable to force their way through the ice.

At 2312 Cossack, with a boarding party of three officers and thirty ratings ready, approached Altmark. The big tanker switched on her searchlights to dazzle Cossack's bridge personnel and tried to crash her heavy stern into the destroyer's thin plates. Expert shiphandling saved Cossack from damage. As the two ships brushed together, some of the boarding party leapt across. One of those was Paymaster Sub-Lieutenant Craven who had leapt from the torpedo davit just moments before it was demolished by contact with Altmark. Cossack closed again, the rest followed and Cossack backed clear.

Four Germans were killed and five wounded in a brisk action before Altmark was seized. Only one of the boarding party was injured. Two British officers dived into the icy water to rescue a German who had fallen overboard, but he was dead when they picked him up. Other Germans escaped across the ice-floes and reached the shore.

Meanwhile the boarding party had secured Altmark's bridge and stopped her engines, but the tanker's momentum carried her on and she ran aground. Then the search for prisoners began. A hold was opened up.

"Are there any Englishmen down there?" A clamorous rejoinder! "Then come up. The Navy's here."

299 captives were released and transferred to the destroyer. All the Germans were left behind and at 2355 Captain Vian and Cossack sailed out of Jøssingfjord into the world's headlines.

The force returned to the U.K. covered by the Home Fleet, and the released prisoners were landed at Leith. Cossack had to be docked for her propellor and A-brackets to be checked in case they had been damaged by the thick ice in the fiord. They were unharmed, but her stem plating had to be repaired where it had been bumping against Altmark.

The Altmark Incident was definitely an infringement of Norway's neutrality by both Britain and Germany. Neutral countries could no longer be certain of their inviolability in this war. The British were heartened by decisive action during the Phoney War, while Hitler was furious and ordered his plans for Operation Weserübung (the invasion of Scandinavia) to be pushed ahead. After they had conquered Norway, the Germans erected a commemorative board in Jøssingfjord

reading (in German) "Here on 16th Feb. 1940 the Altmark was set upon by British sea-pirates". A photograph of this sign is shown below. The sign, which was double-sided, was 'liberated' by British airborne forces in 1944 and one side given to Admiral Vian. The other side was kept by the airborne force and was on display in the Airborne Museum at Aldershot. On closure of that museum it was transferred to the Imperial War Museum at Duxford but is sadly not on display there. However, Admiral Vian's daughters have made a gift of the other side to the RN Museum at Portsmouth where, once the modernisation and extension of the museum has been completed, it will be on permanent display.