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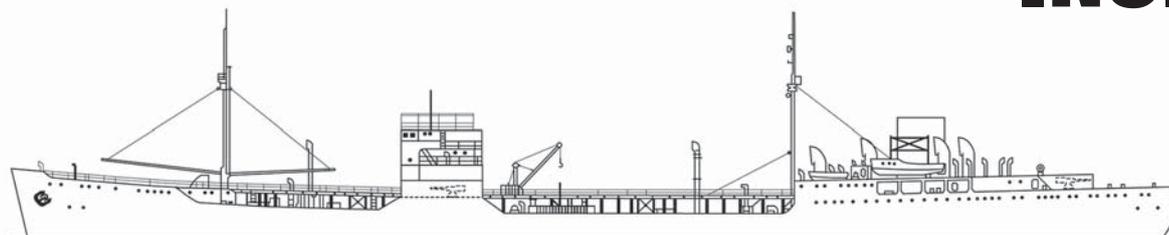
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Editor-at-Large Jonathan Eastland travelled to a HMS Cossack Association reunion to meet men who participated in one of the most remarkable incidents of Royal Navy derring-do at the beginning of WW2, the legendary Altmark Incident.

THE ALTMARK INCIDENT

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Before the 10,000 tons German pocket battleship Admiral Graf Spee was brought to heel off Montevideo, and eventually scuttled on December 17 1939, the raider, under the command of Captain Langsdorff, had spent months pursuing and sinking British merchant shipping in the South Atlantic. He had sent seven merchant ships to the bottom before the Graf Spee was engaged in the famous Battle of the River Plate by the cruisers Achilles, Ajax and Exeter. Langsdorff was a formidable opponent and an old school naval officer who played by the international rules, up to a point. At least before he sank his prey, he transferred their crews to his support ship, an armed merchant tanker called Altmark, which shadowed the pocket battleship's voyage around the vast southern ocean. Under the rules of international law, Langsdorff released the senior British merchant ship officers he had held prisoner on the Graf Spee before she was scuttled. They immediately gave the British Consulate in Montevideo a complete description of the Altmark - and the fact that British merchant mariners were being held aboard her - all of which were in turn telegraphed to the Admiralty in London. The prison ship was nowhere to be found, however, and another two months passed before Altmark was finally sighted by a long-range RAF Coastal Command

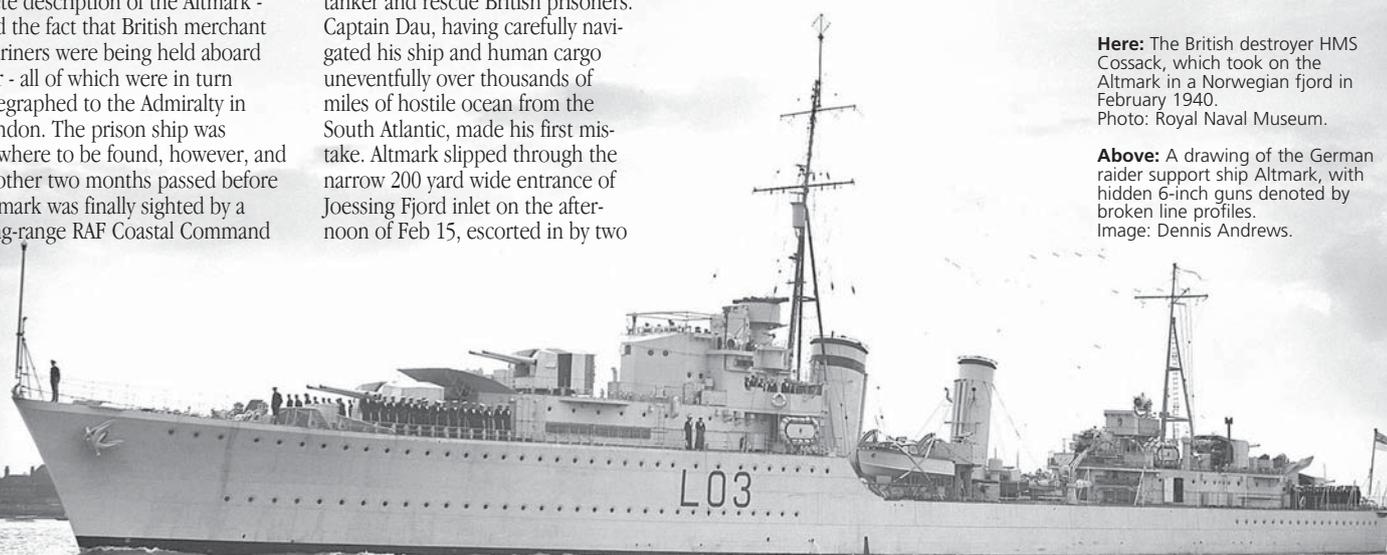
reconnaissance patrol dispatched to find her. She was steaming in territorial waters off the northern coast of Norway. Three aircraft flew on this mission and, according to an eyewitness account of the time, every mile of coastline was examined with binoculars. Two ships were spotted within seconds of each other. The second, a grey-hulled vessel with cream painted upperworks and an aft funnel, was given a closer inspection. All three planes dived on the target, aircrew straining to discover her name. And there it was, in foot high letters across her stern: Altmark. According to the same report, the British pilots went 'wild', diving lower still to fly in circles across the German ship at funnel height. Only one man was on deck; there was no other sign of life and not a single shot was fired by the vessel's hidden guns. The ruthless Nazi Captain Dau knew it was imperative he find a hiding place. The Admiralty sent a destroyer flotilla under the command of Captain P.L. Vian, in HMS Cossack, with explicit orders to enter neutral waters, search the tanker and rescue British prisoners. Captain Dau, having carefully navigated his ship and human cargo uneventfully over thousands of miles of hostile ocean from the South Atlantic, made his first mistake. Altmark slipped through the narrow 200 yard wide entrance of Joessing Fjord inlet on the afternoon of Feb 15, escorted in by two

"I took a quick look as the action started and found myself literally looking down the barrel of a 6-inch gun"

HMS Cossack veteran Fred Court

Here: The British destroyer HMS Cossack, which took on the Altmark in a Norwegian fjord in February 1940. Photo: Royal Naval Museum.

Above: A drawing of the German raider support ship Altmark, with hidden 6-inch guns denoted by broken line profiles. Image: Dennis Andrews.





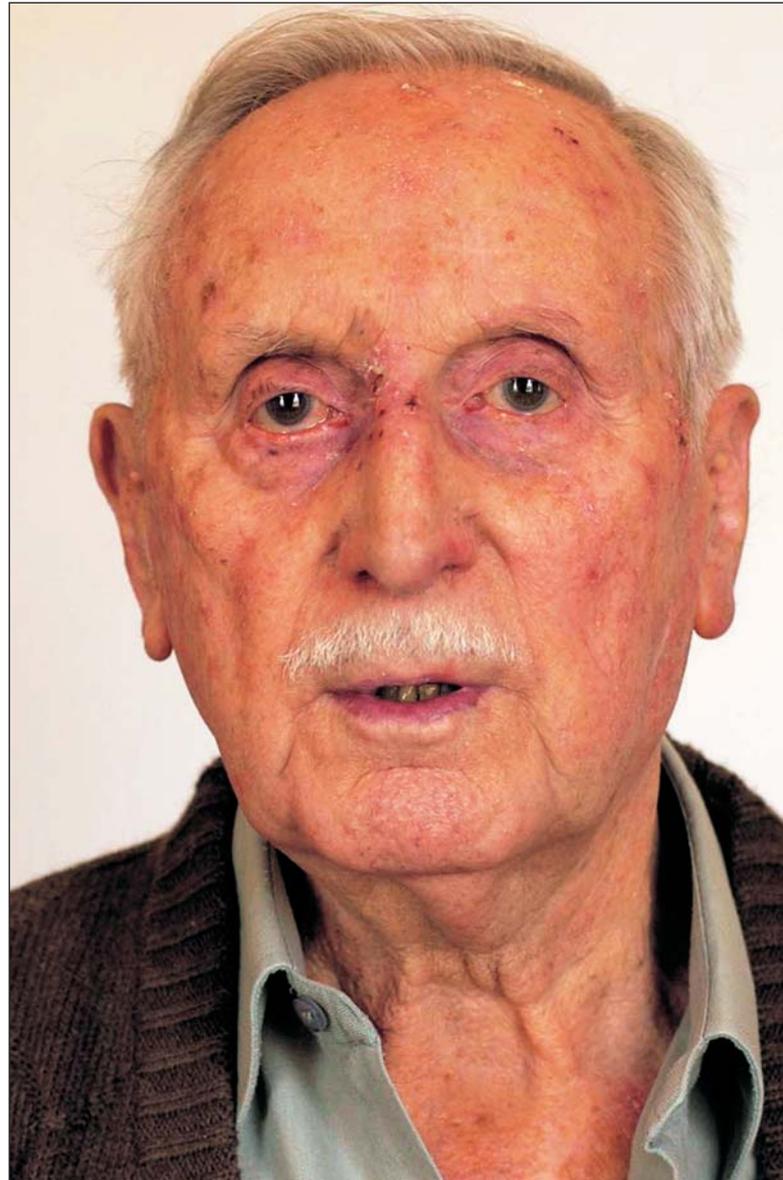
Norwegian gunboats. It was a good hiding place, but it was also a dead end. On February 16, Cossack followed, receiving assurances from a Norwegian commander that the German ship was unarmed and that, following searches in Bergen 24 hours earlier, no prisoners had been found on board. Cossack withdrew, but the British Admiralty knew the truth. Vian's force entered the inlet after dark, with full authority to ignore any obstruction. From Cossack, Vian went aboard the Norwegian patrol boat Kjell where he proposed to her

commander that Altmark be taken to Bergen under Anglo-Norwegian escort to settle the matter under international law. But the Norwegian captain rejected this suggestion, repeating the previous assurances that the tanker had been searched twice and that no prisoners were found. At this point, Vian made it clear he had every intention of boarding Altmark, inviting the Norwegian to join him. Kjell's captain at first agreed, but just as quickly backtracked. Very soon, Cossack was under way and heading for Altmark, now hemmed

in by ice at the top of the inlet. Dau, realising his predicament, attempted to break free and ram the British destroyer as Vian was manoeuvring to grapple alongside. Fred Court, who was 19 at the time, recalled that the destroyer received some damage as the heavier tanker heaved astern, scraping the full length of Cossack and, according to Fred Court, "ripped off our upper deck guardrails and wrecked two of our boats." Cossack, with searchlights blazing, was alongside but the Altmark still had sternway and ploughed into the rocks, grounding the ship. Things happened quickly in the next half hour. Lieutenant Commander B. Talbot Turner was in charge of a boarding party of 30 men and two officers. Turner took a flying leap across a six-foot gap and landed on Altmark's deck. He hauled up a Petty Officer behind him and the two managed to make the two ships fast. Another member of the party missed his footing in the jump but managed to scramble back up the side to Cossack's deck. When Turner arrived on Altmark's

bridge, the German captain was thrust aside from the ship's telegraph, for he was still attempting to manoeuvre his ship to put Cossack on the rocks. Fred Court recalled: "I was in Cossack's wheelhouse on the starboard telegraph. There was a single porthole nearby but you couldn't hear much except orders and you could hardly see anything. I took a quick look out as the action started and found myself literally looking down the barrel of a 6-inch gun on Altmark. That was the moment when his engine was going full astern and he was scraping along our side. I saw Turner make the jump and then I heard Capt Vian's voice on the bridge above shouting 'I'll have no bloody Germans on my ship!'" Up to this point, all guns were quiet, but then a shot out of the shadows severely wounded a British gunner in charge of the after boarding party who had been busy trying to round up Altmark's crew.

• *We conclude our look at the Altmark Incident in the next edition.*



Above: The German pocket battleship Graf Spee, which Altmark was sent out to support and in the end survived. **Right:** Cossack veteran Fred Court who witnessed the drama of the Altmark Incident. Photo: Jonathan Eastland/AJAX.