

**Editor-at-Large Jonathan Eastland concludes his telling of the legendary Altmark Incident in which sailors from HMS Cossack, under the command of the daring Captain P. L. Vian, rescued hundreds of merchant seamen from imprisonment. In part one he told how, in February 1940, the fugitive German tanker Altmark was cornered in a Norwegian fjord and then taken by boarding teams from the British destroyer.**



More or less simultaneously, some of the Altmark crew were under guard and the search for British prisoners well under way. The Cossack's aft party was, meanwhile, involved in a scrape with some other German sailors trying to escape over the stern of the tanker. The glare of Cossack's searchlights created a surreal theatrical effect as some of these men stumbled across the ice to the shore; as they reached higher ground, a fire-fight ensued and one or two of the enemy were killed. One of Altmark's sailors jumped or fell into the icy water of the fjord. He was rescued by two British officers who went after him but the German died later at sea. Meanwhile, nearly 300 hundred British merchant seamen were found aboard Altmark, battened down in locked shell rooms, store lockers and an empty oil tank. War veteran Fred Court discussed his memories of the Altmark Incident with me when I attended a recent HMS Cossack Association reunion. He told me: "I didn't hear it myself, but the story goes that as the holds were opened, the prisoners heard a British voice yelling 'any Englishmen in here?'. There was an enormous cry of 'yes!', to which our guy responded with a single shot into the air and

yelling down, 'well the Navy's here, so come up out of it.'. After that they were all over the foredeck cheering like mad. It was quite a thrilling half hour but we were soon on our way."

Fred went on: "It was still dark as Cossack left the fjord and a Norwegian mine-hunter torpedo boat made a half-hearted attempt to try and stop us." If navigating the tiny, rock strewn fjord was dangerous, the passage across the glimmering expanse of the North Sea was no less so. It was littered with mines, many of them laid by the allies as they tried to halt German ships carrying iron ore down the coastal waters of Norway.

Recalled Fred: "On the way back, we were met by four Spitfires and naval escorts. They'd report where the mines were and our escorts would then dash off and clear a path. We were all going flat out. It was quite a sight. Those prisoners had been locked up for weeks and months and the skipper just wanted to get home quick!"

Cossack became a legend, her daring exploits in February 1940 providing a welcome morale boost to a nation facing the menace of a rampant fascist Germany, which, having conquered Poland, would soon invade not only Norway but also the Low Countries and France.

**Above:** The HMS Cossack of Altmark Incident fame makes a stirring sight steaming at high speed. Image: Courtesy of the HMS Cossack Association archives.

**Below:** An impressive scale model of the same Cossack, displayed at the 2009 HMS Cossack Association reunion in Worthing. Photo: Jonathan Eastland/AJAX.

# THE ALTMARK INCIDENT

# 70

## MILESTONE WEEKEND FOR VETERANS

With the 70th anniversary of the Altmark Incident falling in 2010, this year is a special one for the HMS Cossack Association. The annual reunion of the organisation, which represents the veterans of all Royal Navy warships named Cossack, is set to take place on the weekend of April 9-11. Held in a Portsmouth hotel, one highlight will be a service at the city's cathedral, where a plaque is displayed honouring the 159 souls who lost their lives in the Cossack of Altmark legend, which sank after being torpedoed by U-563 in October 1941. There will be a small remembrance service and wreath-laying. That evening the current Second Sea Lord, Vice Admiral Sir Alan Massey, will be guest of honour at a Gala Dinner. It is expected that among other guests will be the two daughters of the late Admiral Vian, plus Norwegian representatives from Skondel, Jossingfjord. Association Chairman Ken Satterthwaite revealed: "There will also be four members of the wartime HMS Cossack, who we will be honouring on that evening. Other guests we are expecting include the Officer in Command of the Royal Navy's Board & Search Training Unit whose building is aptly named 'Cossack Building'. We have invited the Norwegian Naval Attaché. We, as an association, have adopted a Sea Cadet Unit based in Southwark London, named TS Cossack and representatives of that unit will also be in attendance." During the weekend, Admiral Vian's daughters will make a presentation to the Royal Naval Museum of notice boards erected by the occupying forces after Norway was invaded, one of which states: 'Here on 16th February 1940 the Altmark was set upon by British sea pirates'. The boards were taken down by British troops, when they liberated the area at the end of the war and presented to Admiral Vian where they have stayed to this day. Also on show during the weekend will be a copper plaque presented by the merchant seamen rescued. Ken explained: "We will also be presenting a diorama depicting the Altmark Incident to representatives from Jossingfjord as they are opening a museum in May. A ship's crest, suitably inscribed will be presented to the Board and Search Unit and furthermore we have inaugurated a new award for the cadets at TS Cossack, called the 'Admiral Vian Award'. This is in the form of a inscribed Bosuns Call, certificate and a monetary voucher which will be awarded to the most improved cadet of the year." Ken added that during the weekend the association will also be remembering Cossack's involvement in the 2nd Battle of Narvik, where, along with other RN ships, she was badly mauled and had to effect repairs in the Lofoten islands to make her seaworthy for the return to the UK. A large number of the association's membership is composed of veterans from the C Class destroyer Cossack built towards the end of WW2. She was sent to the Far East and remained there until broken up in 1960. She was involved in the Korean War, which started 60 years ago, also participating in atomic testing in the Christmas Islands. On the Sunday morning there will be a church service at St Ann's Church in Portsmouth Naval Base, followed by a march past led by the sea cadet band of TS Cossack, weather permitting. The salute will be taken by the Second Sea Lord. Visit the association's web site: <http://www.hmscossack.org>

