

# SINK THE SCHARNHORST

*HMS Belfast and the battleship Duke of York were the vanguards of two escort groups tasked with hunting down the mighty Scharnhorst. In what became the Royal Navy's last battleship versus battleship action, Eric Grove details how the German raider was despatched to her watery grave on Boxing Day 1943. Additional words by John Ash.*





**LEFT** Some of the ice that formed on HMS Belfast's 'A' and 'B' gun turrets during the winter of 1943.

**BELOW** Sailors chip ice from the deck of HMS Vansittart. More than 200 tons of ice and snow were cleared, but as always, it reformed quickly. (TOPFOTO)

**OVERLEAF** Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser, GCB, KBE, as Commander of the British Pacific Fleet, in 1944. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)



On 26 December 1943 the German battleship *Scharnhorst* was proceeding alone through a biting snowstorm off Norway's North Cape. Her mission was to destroy the ships of two Allied Arctic convoys – RA 55A and JW 55B. But at 9.21am, the hunter became the hunted, as a rain of shells from the Royal Navy's Force 1 battle group indicated.

The British heavy cruiser HMS *Norfolk*, together with the light cruiser HMS *Sheffield* and her half-sister and Force 1 flagship HMS *Belfast*, opened fire at around 13,000 yards (11,877m). The first salvos hit the German ship twice, knocking out her fire control radar, and she began to slip away from the fight. On *Belfast*, Vice Admiral Robert Burnett opted to stay with Convoy RA 55A, but contact with the raider had been made. The trap had been set and would soon be sprung.

### EVER FAITHFUL

The hazardous Arctic convoys saw hundreds of Allied ships sail between the besieged USSR and Britain,

ferrying vital materiel round Norway to the northern Russian ports. The route was fraught with danger – the sea and weather conditions could be the worst imaginable; waves so high they cripple even large vessels. The cold was biting; ice forming on a ship's upper surfaces alone could damage or capsize a ship in fearsome storms. In the winter, near constant darkness left convoy and escort vulnerable to separation or accidents. In summer months, almost endless daylight enabled the Luftwaffe and U-boats to amass a grand total of at least 85 merchant vessels and 16 warships sunk. But the convoys were a necessary statement of intent and support to a Soviet Union that was, at times, on the brink of collapse.

Just the threat of a sortie from one of the Kriegsmarine's major surface combatants could scatter a convoy, so the Allied armadas were typically well escorted. A powerful covering force of capital ships normally provided additional overwatch. But, by the end of 1943, with the *Tirpitz* disabled by midget submarines, the German surface striking force based

in Norway had been reduced to the 35,000-ton battleship *Scharnhorst* and five 3,900-ton destroyers; Z29, Z30, Z33, Z34 and Z38. *Scharnhorst* was a symbol of German national pride; her nine 11in (28cm) guns could sink any convoy ship with ease and were a major threat to the warships in the covering force. The destroyers were more akin to small light cruisers, powerfully armed with five 5.9in guns (four on Z30) and eight torpedo tubes. While this cruiser-like armament mounted to an – albeit large – destroyer looked good on paper, in practice it was less satisfactory and effected seakeeping.

In late 1943, Hitler – his confidence in the German surface fleet repeatedly shaken – demanded the Kriegsmarine sortie against the convoys. Großadmiral Karl Dönitz, made commander-in-chief of the German navy in January 1943, was ever faithful and promised that his ships would sail on 19 December. A successful sortie would repair the Kriegsmarine's damaged image after the defeat of the U-boats in the Atlantic and the failure of its ►

**RIGHT**  
Icy conditions on the deck of a County-class heavy cruiser on the Northern convoy route to Russia.

(TOPFOTO)

surface ships the year before, during the Battle of the Barents Sea. By late 1943, the Arctic convoys had developed a new role in addition to supplying the Soviets – ‘bait’ to draw the German forces, both surface and underwater, into battle. Certainly, the commander of the British Home Fleet, Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser, saw the neutralisation of the German capital ships as important and sought to engage the *Scharnhorst* and sink her.



at Akureyri, Iceland. By the time he arrived, decoded German signals had given indications that *Scharnhorst* was likely to attack the next convoy, JW 55B.

**THE TRAP**

JW 55B sailed from Loch Ewe, Scotland, with 18 British and American merchant ships and a Panamanian-flagged tanker on 20 December 1943. The escort was a powerful force of a minesweeper, two escort destroyers, a pair of corvettes and eight fleet destroyers – the latter sailing from Skálafjørður in the Faroe Islands to join the convoy. JW 55B was also covered by the *Duke of York*, the Crown Colony-class light cruiser *Jamaica* and the destroyers *Savage*, *Scorpion*, *Saumarez*, plus the Norwegian HNoMS *Stord*. The Allied destroyers were smaller and less

heavily armed than their German counterparts, with four 4.7in guns and eight 21in torpedo tubes each (except for *Savage*, which was fitted with an experimental armament of four 4.5in guns). The ships departed from Akureyri on 23 December and, on Christmas Eve, Admiral Fraser’s covering force rehearsed the tactics to be used against *Scharnhorst*, using *Jamaica* as a ‘target’.

Sailing from the east was Vice Admiral ‘Bob’ Burnett, with the covering force for the returning convoy RA 55A from the Kola Inlet. This consisted of the light cruiser *Belfast* as his flagship, with half-sister *Sheffield* and the heavy cruiser *Norfolk*. The latter two had leading roles in the sinking of the *Bismarck* two-and-a-half years earlier. Burnett had also sailed on 23 December. His force was designated ‘Force 1’ and Fraser’s ‘Force 2’. Their



**ABOVE**  
*Scharnhorst* fires her 28cm (11in) main guns.

On 12 December, convinced *Scharnhorst* would sortie, Fraser took his flagship, the *Duke of York*, to sea. The battleship was armed primarily with ten 14in guns and sailed to cover another convoy, JW 55A, all the way to Murmansk. However, nothing happened. So, on the 18<sup>th</sup>, he sailed from the Kola Inlet to the anchorage

**BELOW**  
The German battleship and commerce raider *Scharnhorst*.

**“CERTAINLY, THE COMMANDER OF THE BRITISH HOME FLEET, ADMIRAL SIR BRUCE FRASER, SAW THE NEUTRALISATION OF THE GERMAN CAPITAL SHIPS AS IMPORTANT AND SOUGHT TO ENGAGE THE SCHARNHORST AND SINK HER”**



aim was to seek action while not presenting so much of a deterrent that they scared *Scharnhorst* back to her port.

Just before 11am on 22 December, a Luftwaffe Dornier Do 217 sighted convoy JW 55B and misidentified it as a potential invasion force heading for Norway. A U-boat 'wolfpack' was diverted to operate off Vestfjord while the surface battlegroup further north at Altafjord was put at three hours' notice. The Germans soon realised this was a normal convoy, stood its anti-invasion fleet down and continued to shadow from the air.

Fraser was concerned the Kriegsmarine battleship might intercept the convoy with his supporting forces too far away to assist, so to close the gap he ordered JW 55B to reverse course for three hours while increasing his own speed to 19 knots. The weather conditions were horrendous. John Wass was telegraphist on the destroyer HMS *Scorpion*, part of Force 2. He remembered: "We had green seas pouring over these destroyers, we were ducking and diving through this lot. Terrible conditions, the water was coming over the top of the ship. The water was coming down the ducts and we had two inches of water on the mess deck."



#### ABOVE

The view from the bridge of HMS Sheffield as she traverses heavy seas on convoy JW 53. The cruiser sustained severe damage during the storm and was forced to return to port for repairs.

The environment was as bad for JW 55B. The convoy had been experiencing difficulties keeping formation and Captain James Abernathy McCoy DSO – a highly experienced destroyer commander leading from HMS *Offa* – decided to use his initiative to slow the flotilla to eight knots instead of reversing course as ordered. This placed his ships in the same position Fraser had intended. The signals from Frazer were risky, breaking radio silence might have revealed the presence of a British capital ship at sea and potentially have kept *Scharnhorst* in port. Happily for Frazer, the Germans picked up his transmissions, but misinterpreted them. Thus, sealing *Scharnhorst's* fate.

### THE CHRISTMAS DAY SORTIE

Early on Christmas Day, Fraser realised the convoys would not cross south of Norway's Bear Island as planned. He therefore ordered RA 55A north and out of harm's way, asking its escort commander, Captain Ian Murray Robertson Campbell DSO, for reinforcements. Campbell stayed with his charge, but detached the destroyers *Matchless*, *Musketeer*, *Opportune* and *Virago*.

For British destroyers, the M-class ships had a powerful gun armament of six 4.7in guns, but just four 21in torpedo tubes. *Opportune* had four 4in guns in high-angle mounts and eight tubes, while *Virago* featured four 4.7in guns and eight tubes.

JW 55B had been spotted by the submarine U-601 at just after 9am, this confirmed by a Dornier Do 18 flying boat at 11.15am. The deteriorating weather made further aerial reconnaissance impossible, but the U-boats continued to stalk the convoy despite the attention of the escorts. Soon after midday, the German surface action group was told to be ready to sail in one hour. *Scharnhorst's* company, at first disappointed to have their Christmas ruined, cheered when they heard they were sallying to attack a convoy and morale remained high in what had always been seen as a 'lucky' ship.

At 2.15pm, Dönitz signalled his surface force commander, Konteradmiral Erich Bey to execute Operation Ostfront. Two contradictory orders typically reflected the Kriegsmarine's fundamental weakness – not just: "The opportunity must be seized... *Scharnhorst's* superior fire power affords the best chance of success." But also: "If a superior enemy is encountered, you are to disengage."

Senior German commanders – other than Dönitz – did not share the ▶

#### LEFT

Officer commanding Force 1, Vice Admiral Robert Burnett CB, DSO, OBE., still in his rear admiral's uniform. He was promoted on 9 December 1943, and knighted in January 1944.

(IWM)



**RIGHT**

The battleship Duke of York firing her 14in main guns. (TOPFOTO)



**RIGHT**

The Duke of York in heavy seas en-route to Russia. The conditions were typical of those encountered on the arctic convoys.



enthusiasm of *Scharnhorst's* crew. The unavailability of aerial reconnaissance meant there was danger of a surprise intervention by the Royal Navy's heavy forces. Admiral Otto Schniewind, in charge of Marinegruppenkommando Nord at Kiel, suggested postponement. Both he and Bey put forward using the destroyers against the convoy supported by the battleship. Dönitz disagreed, he wanted a sudden attack by the whole force. Three destroyers would shadow the convoy and *Scharnhorst* and the two others would attack together with the shadowing vessels when visibility improved on 26 December. If the worst happened and British heavy forces appeared, the destroyers would cover *Scharnhorst's* escape.

**RIGHT**

HMS *Belfast* in heavy seas during the winter of 1942-43. (IWM)

**FORMIDABLE BRITISH ADVANTAGE**

The order to execute 'Ostfront' stipulated *Scharnhorst* sail at 5pm on Christmas Day, but it took time for Bey to transfer his flag and his rather scratch staff from the crippled *Tirpitz* to the smaller battleship. At 7pm,

preceded by the minesweepers R121, R56 and R58 and accompanied by Z29, Z30 and Z33, *Scharnhorst* sailed through the Stjærnsundet and soon joined the other destroyers.

The departure of the German ships was reported by the Norwegian resistance to London and thence transmitted to Fraser. The combination of such sources with signals intelligence afforded the British a formidable advantage.

The weather was still bad with a southwesterly Force 8 gale and very heavy seas. The over-gunned German destroyers suffered badly; their weapons were unusable in such conditions and steering almost impossible. They were taking on water and were in real danger. At 9.36pm, Bey reported that "use of destroyer weapons was gravely impaired". This crossed a signal from Dönitz received just before midnight which stressed that "the tactical situation must be exploited with skill and daring, and the attack must not end in stalemate". In his eventual reply to Bey's signal about the destroyers, Dönitz insisted

that if the smaller ships could not keep up Bey should consider *Scharnhorst* continuing alone.

Bey detached his troubled destroyers to increase the search area. He may have decided to accept Dönitz's advice because, when he received indications of the convoy's position from both radar and U-716, he turned north at 8.20am on Boxing Day, and lost contact with his escorts. Bey and *Scharnhorst* were now between the convoy and Burnett's Force 1, which, luckily for the British, made contact first at 8.34am. The *Norfolk*, then *Belfast* and *Sheffield* found the German vessel on radar at 30,000-35,000 yards. Their prey altered course to the south at 8.50am and a minute later, Burnett ordered his ships to intercept.

**BLINDED IN THE ARCTIC DARKNESS**

*Sheffield* sighted *Scharnhorst* in the gloom at 9.21am at 13,000 yards and three minutes later, *Belfast* opened fire with star shells. But these failed to illuminate the enemy. *Norfolk* too failed to light up the battleship, but the fire informed *Scharnhorst* of the danger. The Germans had been taken by surprise, her limited radar capability not being used because of the fear of detection by the superior equipment fitted to some Royal Navy ships. Bey altered course 30° to port but was engaged by *Norfolk* – which had closed to 9,800 yards – at 9.29am.

*Belfast* and *Sheffield* had flashless propellant, reducing their muzzle flash, but *Norfolk* did not. This caused much confusion aboard *Scharnhorst*; her gunnery officers thinking they were engaging a battleship. The impression was confirmed when the cruisers hit *Scharnhorst*, knocking out her forward radar. With her aft set already unserviceable, the German battleship had been effectively blinded in the arctic darkness.

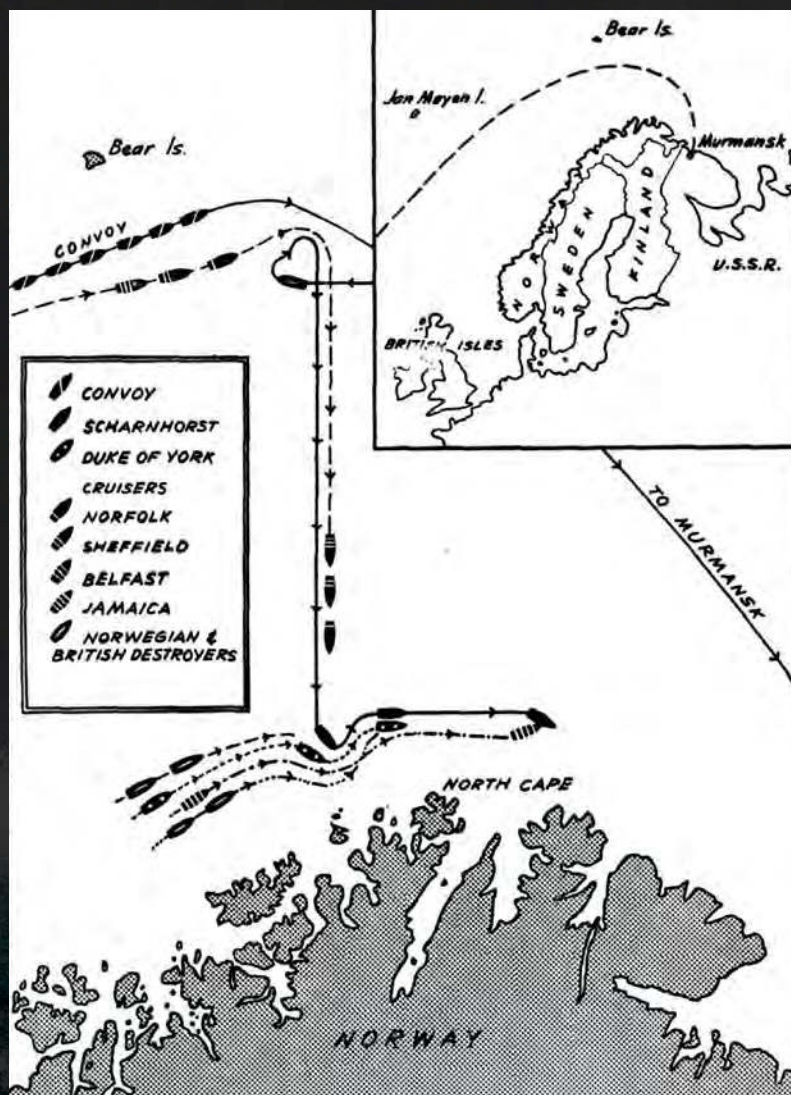


After 16 minutes, Bey disengaged and turned south to draw the hostile ships he had encountered away from the convoy. Burnett, his speed limited by the bad weather, instead turned his charges to protect the convoy, being joined by *Musketeer*, *Matchless*, *Opportune* and *Virago* at 10.24am. Bey – having apparently evaded Burnett – made another attempt to intercept. This actually brought him back into contact with Force 1, *Sheffield* picking up *Scharnhorst* on her radar at 12 miles. The two sides were closing at a combined speed of some 40 knots.

*Belfast* opened fire first while *Scharnhorst's* gunnery officer once again concentrated on *Norfolk's* muzzle flash, disabling both the heavy cruiser's radar and her 8in after turret. Despite this success, Bey decided that the combination of bad weather and strong opposition should lead to his withdrawal. Turning away, he ordered the destroyers to attack, but transmitted a position that was already out of date. The still struggling German destroyers found nothing, although they passed only eight miles from JW 55B at 1pm.

### SPRING THE TRAP

Bey abandoned his mission and at 2.18pm his destroyers were ordered back to Norway. Just over an hour later, Bey confirmed he was also returning to base. Burnett shadowed *Scharnhorst* at a range of seven-and-a-half miles and was able to increase speed to 30 knots. However, Burnett was alone. *Norfolk* and *Sheffield* had engine problems and this left *Belfast* singly chasing the German battleship and her perceived escort unaccompanied. It would have been a one-sided affair should it ever have come about, but *Scharnhorst's* destroyed radar prevented her capitalising on this situation and Burnett was able to shadow his quarry safely.



Fraser was now ready to spring the trap. HMS *Duke of York*, which had the best radar fit of any Royal Navy warship, picked up *Scharnhorst* on her centimetric target indication radar at 4.17pm, at a range of 45,000 yards. Fifteen minutes later, *Duke of York's* fire control radar showed the enemy capital ship to be 29,700 yards away.

The British battleship turned so all her main battery guns were able to

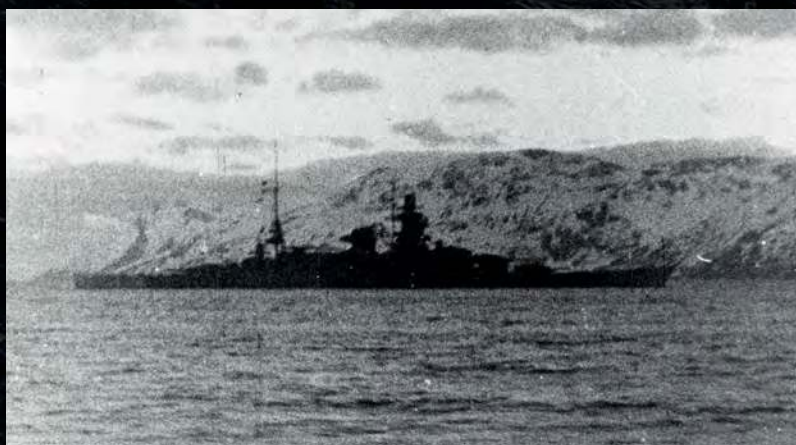
train on her enemy and, at 4.47pm – on Fraser's orders – *Belfast* fired star shells that were once again ineffective. These rounds were followed by four more from *Duke of York's* portside 5.25in secondary batteries which finally illuminated *Scharnhorst*.

The elegant and rakish lines of the German battleship were clearly visible. George Nye was a leading seaman aboard HMS *Savage*, positioned up in the high-angle direction finder. He reflected: "When the first star shell exploded above *Scharnhorst* I was looking out with binoculars. She was a magnificent looking ship, but she was not prepared for action. [In] the exchange between the *Scharnhorst* and the *Duke of York*, *Duke of York* scored quite a few hits in a very short space of time." Bey had been taken completely by surprise and all *Scharnhorst's* guns were still trained fore and aft.

On *Scorpion*, John Wass remembered: "16.40, Fraser signalled, 'Enemy is *Scharnhorst*; bearing 176 degrees, distance eight miles, course 160 degrees, speed 25 knots'. I was ▶

LEFT

A map charting the course of the Battle of the North Cape. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)



LEFT

*Scharnhorst* in the *Altenfjord* in the run up to her clash with Fraser's escort force. (HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS)

**RIGHT**  
Merchant vessels  
in Murmansk  
unloading supplies.  
(TOPFOTO)

decoding messages and I thought – when they opened fire – I better look and see. So, I nipped out the radio office, went down the passage past the watertight door and onto the upper deck. I could see flashes of the two ships, nothing else, just flashes in the darkness.”

The range came down to almost 12,000 yards, this – with radar direction – made the *Duke of York's* 14in guns deadly accurate. Her first salvos, fired at 4.51pm, was a full ten-gun broadside. *Scharnhorst* trained her guns, but a shell hit her foremost main turret, jamming it and killing the crew. A fire resulted in the deliberate flooding of the forward magazine and this put *Scharnhorst's* other forward turret temporarily out of action.

**RIGHT**  
Shell damage to  
the foremast of  
*Duke of York*. (IWM)

HMS *Jamaica* opened fire at 4.52pm, her shells at first straddling the German battleship, but scoring hits with her third 12-gun broadside. Another 14in hit, from *Duke of York's* third broadside, struck *Scharnhorst* ahead of the after turret. This destroyed the aircraft hangar and inflicted considerable damage, killing many of those crewing her fourteen 10.5cm dual-purpose guns. The remaining crews were ordered to shelter, much reducing – perhaps decisively – *Scharnhorst's* capability to fend off destroyer attack.

**BELOW**  
Driftersmen cheer as  
*Duke of York* arrives  
back at Scapa Flow  
after the battle with  
*Scharnhorst*. (IWM)



### 'HEAVY BATTLESHIP. AM IN ACTION'

*Scharnhorst* sailed north, then east, pursued by Force 2 to the south. From the northwest, *Belfast* and *Norfolk* approached with their destroyers. At 4.57pm, Force 1 opened fire once again. *Scharnhorst* – surrounded and alone against more than a dozen British warships – had to choose which target to engage. She shot at *Duke of York* with her six operational main guns, straddling her and endangering *Jamaica*. *Scharnhorst* tried to use her superior speed to escape to the southeast, firing in reply with her after turret and occasionally turning to use her remaining forward 28cm guns. At 4.56pm, Bey desperately signalled: “Heavy battleship. Am in action.”

Although Bey and his flag captain, Kapitän Fritz Hintze, were handling the ship well, the superiority of their enemies could not be avoided. Another 14in hit on the other forward turret put it out of action, yet another shell disabled the forward starboard 15cm twin gun mount. Nevertheless, speed was working; the range had increased to 18,000 yards by 5.42pm.

Fraser's destroyers were ordered to “take up advantageous positions for firing torpedoes. Do not attack until ordered”, followed by “attack with torpedoes at first opportunity”. Meanwhile, *Belfast* was illuminating the target as best it could. At 6.10pm, *Scorpion* received a message from Fraser: “Can you report my fall of shot.” Four minutes later, the reply: “Last salvo, 200 short.” Was recalled: “[*Duke of York*] could only see occasional splashes because of smoke.”

Perhaps *Scharnhorst's* luck was still holding. Two 28cm projectiles passed through *Duke of York's* mainmast, destroying the antenna of the air warning radar and putting the surface warning radar out of action. The British battleship's fire control radar was also knocked out. Once the radar operators recovered from the hit, Lt H R K Bates, *Duke of York's* radar officer, dimmed the lighting and climbed the mast in the middle of the battle. He reoriented the misaligned equipment and replaced damaged wires. Bates was awarded the DSO for this gallantry, but however brave the feat, *Duke of York* disengaged while the repairs



were being made and it seemed as if *Scharnhorst* had escaped.

The British battleship had scored 13 hits, but the range when she ceased fire had grown to 21,400 yards. Fraser had effectively admitted defeat, signalling Burnett: "Owing to superior speed of *Scharnhorst*, I see little chance of catching her. Am proceeding to join convoy." There then followed the decisive moment of the battle. A trio of shells, the last fired by *Duke of York*, hit *Scharnhorst* with one penetrating her armoured belt. The hit disabled her starboard boiler room and reduced her speed to 10 knots. Rapid damage control mitigated the loss and increased speed to 22 knots, but Fraser's destroyers could close in.

"Immediately, us, the four destroyers of our flotilla, had other ideas," John Wass remembered. "We already had the okay to attack at the first opportunity. We attacked from one side, *Saumarez* and *Savage* got around the other."

Leading Seaman Nye recalled the torpedo strike in vivid detail: "We attacked from different positions, roughly from the four quarters. While we were closing in, we were being fired upon. Her 5.25s [sic] opened up on us, her anti-aircraft guns also. How we were positioned split her fire. The shells were whooping across, and you could hear the whistles... We had splinter holes along the side of our ship

from shells exploding near us. I had one up in the HA [high angle] director, fortunately the cover was down, and it embedded itself in there." Nye paused, adding: "Otherwise it would have gone through me."

*Savage* and *Saumarez* drew attention away from *Scorpion* and *Stord*, which launched eight torpedoes and scored at least one hit on the battleship's port side. *Saumarez* in particular was firing hard and fast for more than 10 minutes nonstop while *Stord* closed to just 1,800 yards to carry out her attack. Captain Russell, of *Duke of York*, later reported that *Stord* had carried out the "most daring attack of the entire action". Then *Savage* and *Saumarez* fired 12 torpedoes, of which three hit *Scharnhorst's* port side despite the battleship's manoeuvring.

The German warship was wounded, but still fighting. She threw shells back at the destroyers, which carried out their attacks under fire. Nye reflected: "I remember when the captain gave the order to release the torpedoes. [*Savage*] swung round very fast to get out of range. The *Saumarez*, she got hit. A 11in [sic] shell went right through her wheelhouse and director... It was like four greyhounds attacking a mad bull, we were pumping shells into her. I could see the shells exploding, orange and red flashes, you could see fires right along her upper deck." A 28cm shell had hit *Saumarez*; while it did not



#### ABOVE

The damage to the fire director on HMS *Saumarez*, following a hit from one of *Scharnhorst's* 28cm shells.

detonate, it caused significant damage.

"When we were getting lined up, I thought 'I have to see this' so rushed out onto the upper deck again," remembered Wass. "*Scharnhorst* was sat there about a mile away... A seaman was on the Oerlikon cannons above me, and he shouted, 'we're going alongside the bastard'. She was going through the waves, star shells above her. She looked a pinkie colour, because of the star shells. We went in, fired the torpedoes, our guns opened fire. We wheeled round and started laying a smokescreen, zig-zagging as we went. *Scharnhorst's* secondary armament opened up and shells fell on each side, but we were not hit. ▶



#### LEFT

HMS *Savage* returns to Scapa Flow following the engagement with *Scharnhorst* and the continuation of that convoy.



**BELOW**  
Survivors from the  
*Scharnhorst* walk  
ashore in Scapa  
Flow. They had been  
issued clothing  
donated by the Red  
Cross for rescued  
seamen.

At 6.52pm, *Scorpion* signalled ‘attack completed’ then at 7pm we sent another signal, ‘two hits on enemy’.”

### ‘GRAND. WELL DONE’

The torpedo attacks again slowed *Scharnhorst* to ten knots, allowing *Duke of York* and *Jamaica* to close in to 10,400 yards. They first fired star shells and then *Belfast* added her weight to the heavy bombardment. Hit repeatedly by 14in and 8in munitions and endless volleys of 6in shells from three light cruisers, *Scharnhorst* slowed still further. Bey signalled that his ship would “fight to the last shell. Long live Germany. Long live the Fuhrer”.

At 7.29pm, *Duke of York* ceased fire. At about the same time, abandon ship was ordered in *Scharnhorst* – although some of her guns remained in action. *Jamaica* and *Belfast* fired torpedoes, but did not score any hits. *Scharnhorst* was down to only three knots with her bow submerged, plus she was listing to starboard. To finish her off, Burnett’s destroyers went in. *Matchless* was damaged by the sea, preventing her from completing her attack, but *Musketeer* let off four torpedoes and claimed two hits; *Opportune* lunched four and claimed one hit; *Virago* fired seven, with two hits.

Within three minutes, *Scharnhorst* had been hit by three torpedoes on the starboard side and two on the port side. *Jamaica* then returned to fire three more, two of which hit on the port side. At 7.45pm, there was an explosion aboard the stricken battleship and she went down into the cold Arctic sea. The smoke and darkness prevented the British from confirming the sinking, but a report from *Scorpion* stated they had picked up survivors.

Wass recalled the immediate aftermath of the battle: “We signalled *Duke of York*, ‘a lot of residue on sea – am closing now’ and we edged in. A quarter of an hour later we signalled that we were picking up German survivors... We knew there were U-boats about and we were lit up like a Christmas tree, but we stopped to pick people up.”

*Belfast* continued to fire star shells as the cruiser slowly slipped through the oil, debris and dead, before Burnett finally reported, “Satisfied *Scharnhorst* sunk”. Fraser sent a signal to the Admiralty: “*Scharnhorst* sunk.” The reply: “Grand. Well done.” It was impossible to last long in the freezing waters and just 36 survivors were rescued, 30 by *Scorpion* and six by *Matchless*.

Of *Scharnhorst*’s crew, 1,932 were lost – including Bey and Hintze. British casualties were light; in addition to the 11 men killed on *Saumarez*, another of her crew died of wounds the following month and seven were killed on *Norfolk* with an eighth man later dying of his wounds. One Able Seaman on *Scorpion* went overboard, never to be found.

That evening, Fraser reflected: “The battle against *Scharnhorst* had ended in victory for us. I hope that if any of you are ever called upon to lead a ship into action against an opponent many times superior, you will command your ship as gallantly as *Scharnhorst* was commanded today.”

With his clever trap, Fraser had dealt a massive blow to the Kriegsmarine’s psyche just months after Dönitz had assured Hitler of the viability of his remaining surface ships. Fraser had also greatly reduced the threat to the convoys to and from the USSR. It had been the last major action between the British and German navies and the final gunnery duel between a British battleship and a capital vessel of any other nation – *Scharnhorst*’s luck had finally run out. ☹

**“IT WAS LIKE FOUR GREYHOUNDS ATTACKING A MAD BULL, WE WERE PUMPING SHELLS INTO HER. I COULD SEE THE SHELLS EXPLODING, ORANGE AND RED FLASHES, YOU COULD SEE FIRES RIGHT ALONG HER UPPER DECK”**

