

Introduction

HMS *Penelope*

Motto: *Constantia et Fide* (By constancy and faith)

HMS *Penelope* became very special to her crewmen, to their families and to the nation during World War II. But what was so special about the ship that was described as 'the most bombed and torpedoed ship afloat' and 'the ship that refused to die'?

Perhaps it was the crewmen's fight to save the ship more than her record of having been involved in the sinking of twenty-three enemy vessels as well as numerous aircraft and being the target for the Luftwaffe on more than one occasion. Perhaps it was the excitement and fright in battles which produced 'a very strong bond among the officers and ship's company' mentioned by Captain Angus Nicholl RN, who commanded the ship in 1941-2. Whatever it was, HMS *Penelope* made a world-wide name for herself.

And so shipmates at a reunion asked me to write the full story, although I was in the ship only a few months - during the Norwegian Campaign. I venture to suggest that no fiction writer could have plotted such a bizarre tale.

Ed Gordon *Portsmouth 1985*

PHASE ONE

The Norwegian Campaign April-June 1940

The Secret of 'Cripples' Creek'

On 9 April 1940 news bulletins read: Hitler invades Norway and Denmark. Norwegian Government leaves Oslo. German demands refused. Britain and France are to go to the help of Norway which, with Denmark, was invaded by Germans today.

Prologue

Although the Norwegian Campaign fought in the spring of 1940 was described by Mr Winston Churchill, then First Lord

- of the Admiralty, as a 'ramshackle affair', the Royal Navy hit the German Navy so hard that its effective strength was reduced to three cruisers and four destroyers. This left Hitler without an adequate surface force to carry out his 'Operation Sea Lion' - the invasion of Britain.

But it was a sad occasion for HMS *Penelope* - her first encounter with the enemy. She seemed possessed with a jinx which spelled doom for her commanding officer, Captain Gerald Douglas Yates RN - or was he the Jonah? The cruiser left Scapa Flow on the evening of 7 April, with the Commander-in-Chief (Admiral Sir Charles Forbes) flying his flag in the battleship HMS *Rodney*, having decided to take the Home Fleet to sea to investigate reports by the RAF that German warships were steaming north along the Norwegian coast. The Germans were, in fact, carrying out 'Operation Weserbung' - the invasion of Norway and Denmark - without a word of warning. Hitler was aware of an Allied interest in landing in Norway earlier to aid Finland when she was attacked by the Russians. The plan fizzled out when peace was made in March.

- Hitler stepped in quickly, realizing that a British landing would threaten the Baltic and northern Germany as well as his vital iron-ore supplies for his war machine - and in addition open a second front.

The ore was mined in Gällivare, Sweden, and shipped to Germany from the Baltic port of Luleå. When that port was icebound, it was shipped from Norway's Narvik, which was ice-free - the ore was sent by rail - and thence through territorial waters down the coast to Germany. To force the

German transports into the open sea so that they could be searched for contraband of war, the British Government decided to mine sections of territorial waters known as 'The Leads'.

The morning after the Fleet sortied, the Admiralty announced the completion of mining in one section at the entrance to the Vestfjord which leads to Naryik. Then at 0910 the destroyer *Glowworm* (Lt.-Com. Gerard Roope R~), which had set out on 5 April with the mining expedition and gone adrift when searching for a man overboard, signalled that she had been attacked by enemy ships. She was then about two hundred miles north of the Home Fleet in position of Trondheim. The enemy ships were the cruiser *Hipper* and her two destroyers on their way to Trondheim, and they quickly overwhelmed *Glowworm*. But before she sank, Roope rammed *Hipper*, tearing out forty metres of her starboard plating, which let in five hundred tons of sea, to give her a list.

Admiral Forbes immediately detached the battle-cruiser *HMS Repulse, Penelope*, and the Fleet destroyers *Eskimo, Punjabi, Bedouin* and *Kimberley* to intercept the enemy ships. Despite a Force 7 gale which increased to Force 10 sweeping from astern, they made twenty-nine knots, but with visibility nil and without radar (it was not fully developed then) it was an impossible task.

Meanwhile, eluding the British, ten German destroyers had made a dawn attack on Narvik to land two thousand troops. As the thick mist lifted, their escorts, the battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, waiting outside to shepherd the destroyers home after they had oiled, were sighted momentarily by a sailor in the battle-cruiser *HMS Renown* (Vice-Admiral WJ. Whitworth, commanding the Battle-cruiser Squadron) which¹ had provided distant cover to the minelayers. In a chase through the wild seas, *Renown* scored three hits with her fifteen-inch guns on the *Gneisenau*, causing serious damage before she and her compatriot escaped in the mist.

By 1100 the *Repulse, Penelope* and the [our destroyers arrived to patrol the entrance to the Vestfjord, to prevent enemy ships entering or leaving Narvik. During the day it was broadcast that Denmark and southern Norway had been occupied by the Germans, but the position at Narvik was uncertain. Captain

B.A.W. Warburton-Lee RN, in command of the 2nd Destroyer Flotilla which had provided the minelayers' close escort, was asked by Admiral Forbes to find out. He attacked with *Hardy*, *Hunter*, *Hostile*, *Havock* and *Hotspur* at dawn, sinking two of the five enemy destroyers oiling in the harbour and damaging the other three. While withdrawing, however, the other five attacked as they steamed out of side fjords, and *Hardy* was so badly damaged that she grounded off Vidrik, with Captain Warburton-Lee mortally wounded and her survivors clambering the cliffs to seek shelter in the village. *Hunter* sank in an unfortunate collision with *Hotspur*, which had sustained seven

direct hits from the five-inch shells of the big modern enemy destroyers. When *Hardy* signalled she was withdrawing, at 0645, Captain Yates was ordered by Admiral Whitworth to support the retirement and counter-attack as necessary. Two hours later, when he arrived outside Narvik, the enemy had retired and Captain Yates picked up *Hotspur's* wounded and also the German crew of the transport *Rauenfels* containing the troops' ammunition which *Havock* had blown up. Captain Yates then established a patrol of destroyers a few miles off Narvik harbour to trap the German ships.

At 2012 (IOth) Captain Yates received a signal from the Admiralty, addressed to him personally: 'In the light of experience this morning you consider it justifiable operation, take available destroyers in Narvik area and attack enemy in Narvik tonight or tomorrow morning.'

He replied at 2310: 'I consider attack justifiable although element of surprise has been lost. Navigational dangers from ships sunk today eliminate chances of a successful night action. Propose attacking at dawn on the 12th since operation orders cannot be got out and issued tomorrow in view of escorting ships' dispositions and destroyers on patrol.'

Penelope's task was to clear a path for an Allied landing, for Mr Churchill had made it known that he wanted Narvik 'very much' for a naval base as well as to preserve the iron-ore loading facilities.

That night the destroyer *Icarus* (Lieutenant-Commander Colin Maud RN), one of the minelayers, captured the transport *Alster* laden with the Germans' army transport on her way to Narvik, and requested Captain Yates to supply a prize

crew and embark the German crew as prisoners. The entrance to the Vestfjord off the Lofotens was the rendezvous, and next morning after the exchanges had been completed Admiral Whitworth signalled Captain Yates to 'proceed with dispatch' to Bodo and in the Tennholmen area to capture or destroy enemy shipping reported there. This entailed a trip of some sixty miles south-east across the mouth of the Vestfjord.

The Jinx Strikes

Captain Yates had been on the open bridge since the early hours, and the duffle coat over his stocky figure bore a thick layer of glistening snow so that he was beginning to resemble the traditional figure of Father Christmas. But he was in no mood for the Christmas spirit. For one thing the signal was a complete surprise, for he was still in communication with the Admiralty about the attack on Narvik. For another, the chill of the Arctic cut like a knife after the warmth of Malta, where *Penelope* was based when war was declared on 3 September the previous year, having rejoined the Mediterranean Fleet for her second commission. By 5 January 1940 she had returned to Portsmouth and embarked pensioners and reservists to make up her complement to about six hundred and then steamed northwards to join the Home Fleet.

Captain Yates had put up his four stripes (captain) in December 1936, and *Penelope* was his third and largest command - others were the sloops HMS *Folkestone* (1929-31) and HMS *Fowey* (1931-2) while he was holding the rank of commander. But before joining *Penelope* he had not been to sea for seven years, having had two appointments at the Admiralty (1932-5) and (1937-9) and in between at HMS *Drake* (Royal Naval Barracks, Devonport, 1935-7). He was forty-six and, as with the majority of officers of his era, he had joined the navy at thirteen. During World War I he had served in the battleship *Iron Duke*, the cruiser *Bristol* and the minelayer *Abdiel*.

Since taking over command from Captain F.E.P. Hutton

RN, who had been revered by his crew for a highly successful maiden commission on 16 August 1939, Captain Yates had not enjoyed the best of luck. Twice *Penelope* had grounded under his command - on the battleships' moorings at Malta and then to his embarrassment on the submarine bannes while leaving Rosyth with a striking force to search for the prison ship *Altmark*. The search had led to that famous naval incident that had thrilled the world in February, when armed sailors from the destroyer HMS *Cossack* (Captain Philip Vi an RN) boarded the German transport and released 299 British seamen whose ships had been sunk by the German raider *Gra] Spee*, to the cry

)f 'The Navy's Here'. After those groundings *Penelope* had had . to enter dry dock for repairs to her propellers - and that certainly did not please Their Lordships at the Admiralty.

Yates knew his sailors were critical of his handling of the ship and wondering whether he had a jinx or whether the ship was a Jonah - for sailors are renowned for their superstitions. (A Jonah was a ship to be avoided because of a bad omen before commissioning.) *Penelope*, for instance, had been accepted by the Admiralty from the builders on *Friday the thirteenth* (of November 1936). Even before then, her first appointed commanding officer, Captain H.S. Robertson RN, had been killed on his way to join her at Belfast, when he was in a car involved in a collision with a lorry. The two specialist officers with him, 'Guns' and 'Torps', were too badly injured to commission the ship.

Captain Yates was also aware that some of those daring destroyer captains were critical of his seeming reluctance to agree to an early renewal of the attack at N arvik in the same spirit as Captain Warburton-Lee. One captain considered that O1e signal by Captain Yates to the Admiralty, that an -immediate attack was doubtful since he had to have time to issue operation orders to destroyers on patrol, was 'rather feeble'. Signals can, of course, be intercepted by other ships.

But Captain Yates was 'raring to go' according to *Penelope's* Engineer Officer (Commander James Best RN). He explained that the Captain had expressed his doubts about the manoeuvrability of a ship of *Penelope's* size in the confined waters of Narvik harbour without the benefit of a pilot. Yates also had to consider the reports of 'cruisers', U-boats and

mines in the Vestfjord. In fact the 'cruisers' were the German destroyers - almost twice the size of their British counterpart. 'In the end it appeared that the delay in renewing the attack - with hindsight a fearful error - was caused by orders from a higher authority,' added the Engineer Officer.

Indeed, Admiral Whitworth had butted in during the exchange of signals between the Admiralty and Captain Yates to tell the Admiralty that Captain Yates had been given orders to patrol the Vestfjord. An attack on Narvik would risk further casualties to ships and endanger the plan to prevent reinforcements reaching Narvik.

By 1230 *Penelope*, *Eskimo* and *Kimberley* were steamin[serenely at twenty-nine knots. Then, typical of the Arctic, the snow clouds rolled back to reveal blue skies and a spring sun with a light south-westerly breeze. The off-watch crewmen had the opportunity to see for the first time - none had sailed that far north before - the beauty of that land of enchantment with its rugged coastline and background of majestic mountains and mirror-like fjords, but the majority were 'getting their heads down' (catching up on lost sleep after hours of being closed up at action stations) by stretching out contentedly on the uncomfortable wooden tables, on long, narrow stools, on lockers and in odd corners of those austere messdecks. The matelots boasted they could sleep on a clothes-line ... Fighting fatigue at sea in wartime was something sailors had to live with. With the threat of attack from the air, from surface forces, from U-boats and from the sea itself, the constant watchkeeping was a strain. To combat this as much as possible, three degrees of readiness became the practice. First degree was full action stations, with meals taken there as well. When action was not imminent, the normal routine was defence stations second and third degree of readiness according to the likely threat, air or surface force. But when that action-stations hooter sent out its raucous call, every man Jack would be offT like a flash ...

At 1356 Tennholmen lighthouse, warning of an extensive reef, was passed safely to port, with Bodo and the newly laid minefield on the port quarter. Not one ship, friend or foe, had been sighted when *Penelope* made her first alteration of course 14 degrees to port. Then she went into a sort of zigzag. Had

the navigator lost his way? He did not have the benefit of a local pilot to assist him to steer a safe passage through waters strange to the crewmen - waters strewn with rocks and reefs.

At 1402 *Penelope* reduced to sixteen knots and turned 155 degrees to starboard. Fifteen minutes later she altered course a hundred degrees to port. By then - tracing her course on the chart - she was heading for the rocks at Fleinvaer. The danger appeared to have been recognized, because at 1428 the cruiser was steered violently to starboard at two hundred degrees. At 1438 course was again altered: 130 degrees to port. But the ship was still in the danger area as she continued to steam at ~ixteen knots for three minutes. And danger there was ...

Off-watch men on the messdecks were still dreaming of home when *Penelope* suddenly reared like a frightened horse. As her bows leapt out of the water, she came to a sudden stop, floundering to port then to starboard with her propellers thrashing the air and sea alternately. Then came the ominous sound of metal being torn to shreds. It was like a death cry, and as *Penelope* fought to free herself from the hidden trap, the blood of every man on board ran cold ...

The men so rudely awakened found themselves tumbling off stools and tables and floundering amid crashing crockery and messtraps. Shouts of: 'We've been tinfished!' echoed around the ship. But to their astonishment, on rushing to the upper deck, they saw that the ship was held in a vice-like grip by great junks of rock. She had grounded in barely six feet of water water that was crystal clear.

The officer of the watch on the bridge hastily scribbled in the log: '1441. Struck submerged rock.'

The situation was aggravated when it was learned that the information about the enemy ships, supplied by the

- Norwegians in good faith, was tardy. The ships reported were the tanker *Kattegat* with oil for the stranded German destroyers (sunk by the Norwegian gunboat *Storjidal*) and the *Alster* (already in the bag). With the ammunition ship *Rauenjels* (blown up by *Havock*), all three support ships which had left Germany on 3 April for Narvik had been disposed of.

So Captain Yates had been led on a wild goose chase. In addition, the rock was uncharted. No wonder Captain Yates appeared utterly dejected as he looked aft from the bridge to

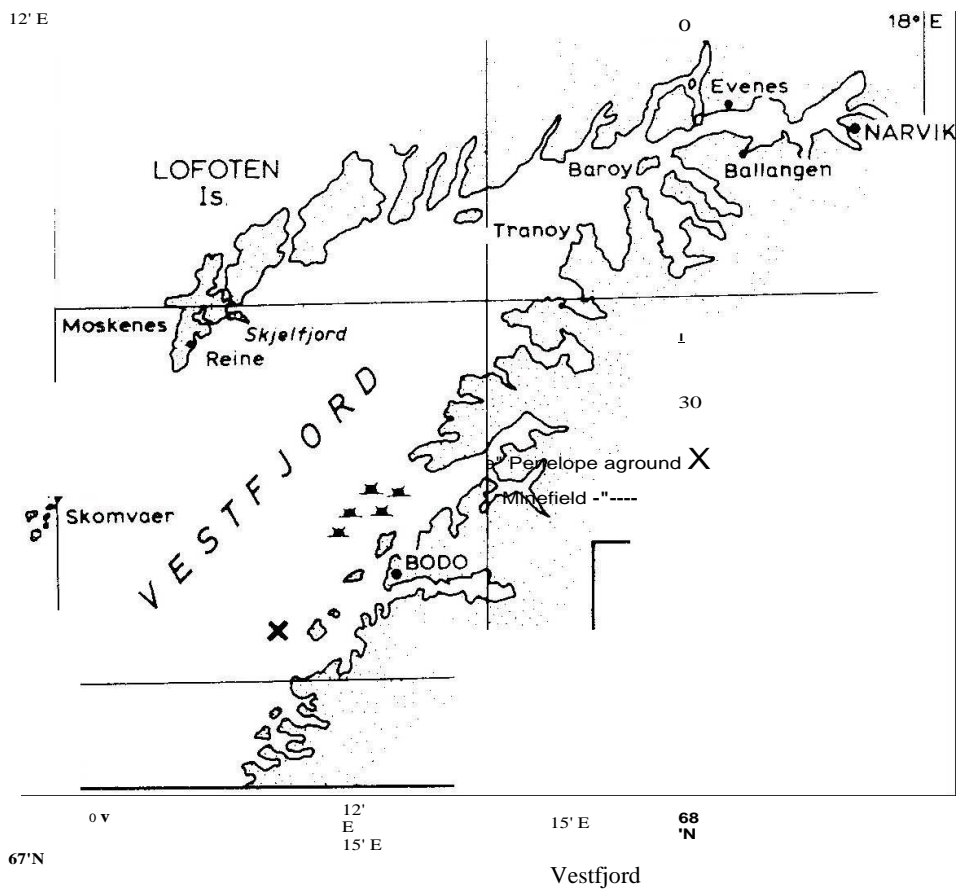
see his ship tearing itself asunder. No other naval captain could have suffered such a mortal blow. The chance of a smack at the enemy destroyers at Narvik had disappeared in a flash. In addition, if he arrived safely back in the UK, he would face the inevitable Board of Inquiry into the grounding.

The only information at the Public Record Office relating to the grounding states that the existence of the rock 'found' by HMS *Penelope* is contained in the Admiralty Notice to Mariners dated 4 June 1940 No. 1415 Norway West Coast, Fleinvaer. This gives the position as Lat. 67°7'45"N, Long. 13°33'E, in less than six feet of water (1.8 metres), south-west of Fleinvaer.

With the unenviable duty of making the decision whether or not to order the destruction of the cruiser, Yates waited rather impatiently for a report on the damage from his 'Chief, the engineer officer.

Commander Best also thought the ship had been torpedoed when he was thrown across the plating of the for'ard engine-room. But to his utter astonishment he saw that rock had penetrated the bilges and among other damage had flattened two turbo-electric-powered lubricating pumps. The pinnacles of rock must have been some twenty feet in length and as sharp as needles to have cut through the keel plating and burst into the bilges. The for'ard boiler-room supplying steam to the for'ard engine-room had been damaged in identical fashion. With the water rising rapidly, Commander Best gave the order to the watchkeepers to make their escape and batten down the hatches. With the sea flooding in through a rock-torn hull from bows to the for'ard engine-boiler unit, more than half the ship was waterlogged. This represented eighteen compartments - eighty per cent of the hold, depriving the ship's company of their entire stock of drinking water all food and reducing the ship's fighting efficiency. Tanks for fresh water, boiler-feed water and oil fuel, ammunition magazines, stores, and vital positions manned at action stations had all flooded, leaving only a small amount of fuel and boiler-feed water and a few shells in the ready-use lockers alongside the four-inch guns.

Men on damage-control duties fought to save the ship by shoring down the platform deck with timber, to prevent flooded compartments collapsing, and pumping out accessible



compartments. Suddenly, as the men worked, the ship gave a lurch to port with a frightening screech of tearing metal which sent the sea washing over the quarter deck and lower scuttles. A mushroom of black smoke erupted from the for'ard funnel. It seemed as though *Penelope* was giving her final gasp.

So it was a grim report that Commander Best made to the Captain. Guns, mines, torpedoes, bombs could scarcely have inflicted more grievous damage. With the chances of saving the ship so slight, Captain Yates gave the order to prepare to destroy the cruiser and to abandon ship.

While crewmen shuffled unwillingly to their abandon-ship stations on deck, the Torpedo Officer and his team prepared the scuttling charges below deck. But Commander Best, after a lingering inspection with the shipwrights and engineers, had a hunch. Rushing to the bridge, he told Captain Yates: 'We can save her!'

There was a hasty conference in which it was decided to get the ship underway by using the undamaged engine-boiler unit (abaft the damaged unit) - although the starboard engine was out of action because of damage to the screw. With a tow from *Eskimo*, they could make for Skjelfjord in the Lofotens, where they had left *AlsteT*. That meant retracing their course. Crewmen slithering on the canted deck awash with a mixture of sea-water and oil had been assembled at abandon-ship stations for half an hour when told: 'This ship's not going to sink ... '

As a precaution in case the cruiser foundered, forty were transferred to the destroyers - twenty to each - with the prisoners and wounded going to *Kimberley*, which immediately steamed off to transport the prisoners to *AlsteT* and wounded to Harstad Hospital, a hundred miles to the north of Skjelfjord.

Although *Penelope* had a chance of being saved, because of the new method of housing the main machinery in units instead of separately (boiler-rooms for'ard of the enginerooms), the designers had, unfortunately for Commander Best, sited the evaporators (for distilling sea-water into boiler feed) in the flooded unit. Because of the damage to the tanks, there was only a small quantity of boiler feed remaining. And so the only alternative was to use sea-water - a horrifying experience for a marine engineer in charge of sophisticated steam-turbine

machinery. As far as Commander Best knew, it had never before been attempted in the Royal Navy.

To counteract the list to port - the side which was firmly embedded in the rocky seabed, the starboard decks were hastily stacked with an untidy heap of baggage, and sailors were unceremoniously jumping up and down as *Eskimo* took the strain of the tow. At 1705 she succeeded in pulling the cruiser clear, but not before everyone had gritted his teeth as metal ground on metal. There was a cheer as the cruiser, rather drunkenly, got underway at about half a knot. Once in deep water she made a steady five knots.

The Magic of 'Snowdrop'

Crewmen became alarmed during the night as a Force 6 south-westerly gale blew up. The steel plating creaked and groaned as angry seas slapped against the hull, showered over the fo'c'sle and swept over the upper deck before escaping through the scuppers. The bows' leaping and plunging threatened to snap the tow line. Now and then came the shriek of trapped steam being let loose as a metal pipe cracked under the strain in a flooded compartment. It all sounded like those creaking doors and rattling window frames of a horror film during a violent thunderstorm - enough to set the hardest sailor shuddering.

It was icy cold, too, with snow squalls swirling around the men on the open bridge and on deck watch. Because of the

~ water shortage there were no steaming mugs of the warming freshly brewed 'ky' (ship's cocoa) to hand to the watchkeepers mumed to the ears in layers of clothing. Ky during the night watches was a naval tradition. It was normally brewed by the old salts to a thick consistency - especially in the engine-room department - with liberal dollops of tinned milk and brown sugar. Old salts delighted in telling youngsters in rough weather - they were already getting green about the gills as heaving seas played havoc with their stomachs: 'It'll warm the

cockles of your heart ... '

Messdecks were as cold and cheerless as a bombed-out Pompey pub on a winter's evening, and the only comfort for crewmen during off-watch breaks was to huddle around the warmest spots in the ship - in passageways around the steaming boiler-room and engine-room. But there was no sleep for anyone - there were too many ominous, ghostly sounds from the flooded compartments.

Then came a shock. The battle to save the ship was slowly being lost. The ship was sinking one inch an hour. And in the boiler-room came drama as Commander Best switched to sea-water for the boilers. His problems were just beginning ...

Steam from sea-water causes the boilers to prime - great gushes of the salty water mingle with the steam to bring auxiliary machinery such as the fuel-pumps almost to a stop, and so the oil supply to the boiler furnaces die down, the steam pressure drops and then suddenly builds up again. This causes the machinery to run erratically. Because of this the diesel dynamo, used when steam was shut off, was preferred to the steam turbo.

After 9+ hours of the voyage the crewmen would most like to forget, the Lofoten Islands were sighted through the half light of early morning. Skjelfjord, used only by fishing vessels, lies in the island of Moskenes at the southern tip of the Lofotens, and the only access is a narrow channel between the mainland and the tiny island of Kunna.

The weather had moderated by 0330, when Captain Yates ordered *Eskimo* to reduce speed and shorten the tow preparatory to entering the haven. In order to negotiate the narrow entrance safely, it was decided that *Eskimo* should slip the tow and secure alongside the cruiser. While this was being executed, the wind freshened to Force 7, whipping the sea into a frenzy. *Eskimo*, prancing like a ballerina as a heavy sea struck her, reared out of control and her bows struck *Penelope's* fo'c'sle a glancing blow. *Eskimo* bounced off, shuddering. Luckily no serious damage was done and *Eskimo* escaped with her sharp stem knocked slightly out of shape.

Captain Yates, deciding the manoeuvre was too dangerous in the gale, anchored at 0450 in forty fathoms about three-quarters of a mile from shore, to ride out the storm. The

effect of the pitching of the waterlogged cruiser in the rising sea together with a drag on the cable gave further anxiety, and Captain Yates decided that the only hope of entering the sanctuary was by using the ship's one engine without further assistance from *Eskimo*.

He telephoned Commander Best in the engine-room to tell him his proposal and added:

'This is the really tricky part, Chief. For God's sake, let us have some steam or we'll be aground!' While Captain Yates was speaking, the steam dropped back as luck would have it - to almost zero. That was what Commander Best had feared - priming. There was insufficient steam ressure to keep the main engine turning.

- He telephoned the Captain: 'We might have to wait until the pressure rises again.'

Snapped Captain Yates: 'If that happens, then we've had it!' Tension was building up on the bridge and in the engineroom department as the ship wallowed helplessly. Scenting further disaster, the sailors on deck blew a few more puffs of air into their lifebelts slung around their waists - they looked more like the inner tubes of bicycle tyres than the 'Mae Wests' of the RAF - to make sure they were fully inflated, just in case ...

With a prayer on his lips, Commander Best watched the boiler steam-pressure gauge on the engine-room dashboard. The prayer was being answered, for at long last the clock-like hand shot upwards, indicating sufficient pressure to enable the artificer to open the throttle. The turbine ticked over and then picked up speed ...

But just as Captain Yates tried to turn the ship into the entrance, the steam dropped back to zero and the turbine topped. It was 0940. For more than six hours Captain Yates had -been trying to negotiate that entrance. In his report he wrote: 'The next two efforts after regaining steam also failed as the ship refused to payoff from the wind and lay rolling gunwhale under in the heavy sea that was now running. The roll was abnormally sluggish but eventually after considerable difficulty the ship was turned and anchored in thirteen fathoms in the fjord at 1057.'

The hazardous journey had taken seventeen hours.

Said Commander Best: 'It was about the most hair-raising trip I ever want to make.'

The fjord extended for five miles to the north and was about half a mile across at its widest. It was flanked by towering, snow-covered mountains. Here and there the warmth of the spring sun had sent thawing snow streaming down in twisting rivulets to reveal the rocky surface beneath. The sailors could only gaze in wonderment at the magic of the unspoilt beauty of nature in that land of the Midnight Sun - a sun that does not sink below the horizon between 26 May and 19 July, and it seemed likely that they would be there to experience that delightful period.

At anchor were the *Hostile*, *Havock*, the damaged *Hostile* and the captured *Albatross*. As ordered by Captain Yates the destroyer *Kimberley* had disembarked the prisoners to *Albatross* - so that the *Albatross's* crewmen were back on board their ship together with the crew of *Ravenfels* - guarded by *Penelope's* prize crew and a number of the cruiser's Royal Marines. At the small wooden pier were a number of fishermen's 'puffers' - dubbed thus by the sailors because the single-cylinder diesel engines which powered them sounded like the 'puff, puff, puff' of the old steam trains as the exhaust fumes were forced through the tall, thin smokestacks and transformed into smoke rings. These useful seaboats were about sixty feet in length, could carry ten tons of cargo in the hold amidships and puffed along at between seven and eight knots with a crew of eight or ten.

It was an unusual harbour to shelter warships but ideal at the time because, with so many islands in the area, it could take some time before the prying eyes of the enemy reconnaissance crews from captured airstrips farther south discovered the secret haven.

The inevitable hungry seabirds were whirling around noisily at mast height, waiting impatiently for slops from the galleys - the ships to be heaved over the sides. It seemed so peaceful that the thought of enemy troops and warships only a short distance away never entered the minds of the crewmen as they whistled happily while undertaking their duties about the ship in the cool, damp air. They were wondering (as one admitted) about the whereabouts of the nearest pub. They were to be disappointed. There were none! But the thoughts of Captain Yates were much more serious. He wrote in his report that he had doubts whether the ship

would stay afloat. By that time the hourly rate of sinking had increased - the pumps were no longer able to stem the flood. So alarmed did he become that he sent a senior officer ashore to look for a suitable berth where the ship could be beached.

Then came the slice of luck that was long overdue. Eager to assist the Allied cause was a young Norwegian named Hartvig Sverdrup, who lived in Reine, the nearby hamlet, and could speak excellent English - and German. He greeted the sailors from his puffer, which drew alongside. Although he had never seen a British warship until the arrival the day before of the

three damaged destroyers, he became *Penelope's* best friend - if not her saviour. He said that *Penelope* looked so big he thought she was a battleship! In Reine he and his partners ran a fish-producing plant and stores, but to the men of *Penelope*, he was a magician, for he was able to produce, at the drop of a hat, it seemed, almost anything - from a bag of cement to a salvage vessel. That was indeed magic to the sailors. For them Skjelfjord was like a wilderness.

Sverdrup, was dubbed the 'uncrowned king of the Lofotens', but later, because the sailors were unable to pronounce his tongue-twisting name, he was known simply as 'Snowdrop'. And that name stuck until this day among the survivors of Narvik who have since met him. And that was the name he always used while working for the SOE later in the war.

Although the ship was slowly sinking, the most essential requirement on arrival was drinking water. The fresh-water pipeline had been severed by the anchoring destroyers, but Snowdrop came to the rescue with several barrels of bubbling spring water from Reine which arrived by puffer.

Although fresh water was transported daily and boiled in the diesel-burning galley, it was strictly rationed 'tea water only' two cups per man per day, leaving only sea-water for the men to wash and shave with. They quickly discovered that shaving was almost impossible. With fuzz on faces, balaclavas pulled well down, plus the variety of garments they were wearing to keep out the cold (although the diesel dynamo provided lighting, there were no electric heaters in the messdecks), they began to resemble Arctic pirates. And it was the same for the captain and officers who lived aft. Although Captain Yates

reported that the conditions tended to lower the morale of the men, there were no complaints from the sailors, for the majority were 'old hands' at the rigours of the Service in those . austere days.

Because of the danger that the cruiser could sink without warning, all kit was transferred to the *Alster* with the aid of the puffers. One skipper caused a laugh. He complained to Snowdrop that his puffer was being loaded with some 'strange weapons' - which turned out to be officers' golf clubs.

Alster was disguised as an innocent collier, even to the extent of having a layer of coke strewn over her upper deck. But in the holds below were the motor transport for the German troop at Narvik - including those Mercedes-Benz open tourers so beloved of the German staff officers. Of great interest to the sailors was the large assortment of goodies for the soldiers.

What puzzled the sailors were the stacks of green-brown slabs they found among the stores. Plastic explosive? No, said the Gunnery Officer. No one seemed to come up with the answer until as a last resort Paymaster Commander W.A. Sharp RN was shown the material. (He was the officer who saw to it that the men's bellies were well filled and that those entitled received their lawful rum ration as well as pay.) He immediately came up with the correct answer. 'It's pea soup,' he explained.

Everyone helped himself to the cargo of ersatz cigars and cigarettes, marching chocolate, tinned cherries and other delicacies that were hard to come by on wartime Britain. And contraceptives, too!

The white-haired German captain described by his guards (from *Penelope*) as 'a dear old man', who boasted of commanding Germany's crack liners of a former era, disclose he had been hurriedly ordered to join the ship at Hamburg and proceed to Narvik with a cargo of coal. He had no idea, he claimed, that the ship was loaded with army equipment. Indicating two Gestapo men on board (secret police of the Nazi regime whose duties were to see that Hitler's orders were carried out), he said: 'Thank God it was the British Navy that captured me.' He was terrified of the Gestapo men, and his remarks implied that he took the view he was fortunate to be a

prisoner of the sailors rather than be at the mercy of the Gestapo and the horrors that might befall him. The guards confirmed that there were frequent troubles between the Gestapo men and the German crew.

At the request of Snowdrop, who ran a telephone communication service from the police house at Skjelfjord, a salvage vessel was requisitioned by the Norwegian naval authorities to assist *Penelope* and other RN ships lying damaged in the little haven. She was the *Skaerkodder*, a small wooden coal-burning vessel of 246 tons which was contacted at Harstad, where the wounded had been taken. Her skipper, Andreas Emblem, teamed through the dark night with the navigational problems -made even more difficult by the lighthouse men being ordered to douse their lights because of the war.

Commander Best, who was unaware of Snowdrop's arrangement, was naturally delighted when the vessel arrived. 'It was a miracle that she should have turned up,' he said.

Before anything could be done in the way of repairs, the divers attached to the vessel had to make an underwater exploration of the damage, and so *Penelope* was moved to the head of the fjord.

On that day, the 13th, Admiral Whitworth transferred his flag to the battleship HMS *Warspite* (diverted from passage to Gibraltar) to replace *Penelope* and lead the second attack on the enemy destroyers at Narvik. In a brilliant but brief gun and torpedo attack (which could have been credited to *Penelope* had Captain Yates carried out orders to attack), the *Warspite* with nine destroyers (including *Kimberley* and *Eskimo* with *Penelope's* men on board) routed the enemy. *Hardy's* survivors were rescued along with British merchantmen and sent back to the - JK, where they received a tumultuous welcome in London.

In those two battles of Narvik all ten German destroyers that had landed the troops were wrecked. Now, combined with other losses during the Norwegian Campaign, there was a huge gap in the resources of the German Navy.

In the meantime a party of seamen had been busy with paintpots and brushes camouflaging *Penelope* under the direction of 'Putty', the artisan painter, in a bid to make her difficult to spot from the air. The design took the form of

oblique daubs of white and brown to hull, upperworks and funnels to merge her with the snowy mountainous background. The white represented the snow, and the brown the streaks of earth in the mountains slopes as the trickling streams washed away the snow. It gave the ship a remarkable appearance and a rare naval disguise. And the painters, as the days slipped by, had to keep pace with the changing face of nature, for with the arrival of spring more topsoil was being revealed with the thaw. The camouflage appeared effective, judging by remarks of crewmen in other ships, such as: '*Penelope* certainly fits in with the scenery ...'

Yapping happily, oblivious of any possible danger, a brow terrier was galloping aft along the passageway below decks as fast as his little legs would carry him. He was clad, too, in Arctic attire - a smart jacket neatly fashioned from a pair of cast-off serge trousers bearing the name Penny in white woolnot the most appropriate name for a 'he' but it fitted. Penny was at the heels of his master, a stoker petty officer, hurrying to the workshop aft.

The dog had been brought on board some months before, and Captain Yates had allowed it to stay as a member of the ship's company. Rated a 'second-class buff' - a nickname bestowed on new-entry stokers - Penny became a well-loved ship's mascot. He also became a favourite of the villagers when taken ashore by crewmen on recreation leave having fun on their rambles around a countryside where time had stood still or trying their luck at ski-ing - with the help of the children.

Commander Best never forgot that tense meeting in the Captain's quarters to hear the report on the underwater damage by the chief diver (Harold Moe). He told the assembled officers that the ship's bottom was split open for three hundred feet - three-fifths of its length - and roughly one foot wide. Splits measuring on average one foot in length and three inches in width riddled the compartments at the stem, and a large hole in an oil-fuel tank just forward of the damaged boiler-room on the stokers' mess deck was unrepairable. The entire length of the hull was badly buckled, especially beneath the flooded engine-boiler unit. In fact the bottom 'sagged like a dog's hind leg', as one engineer put it.

The report also stated that the rudder was bent upwards and that of the four propellers only the port inner was undamaged - the one in use for the trip to Skjelfjord. The A-bracket supporting the starboard inner propeller (of the turbine in the undamaged engine-room) was fractured, which would probably prevent the turbine running. So it meant that at least one engine could be run if the ship could be made watertight for the homeward trip.

Commander Best described the report as 'alarming'. He said: 'Obviously it was an impossible task for the ship's staff to tackle without expert help and dry docking. But those larvellous divers were quite cheerful and optimistic. They explained how they could bung up the splits with wood and then plaster it over with sheep's tallow. This would allow us to pump out and patch up the inner bottom from inside the ship.' On hearing the good news, an officer reported that the spirits of the men 'immediately rose'. After that, as another put it: 'Everyone worked like blazes to get the ship seaworthy.'

The four divers lost no time in getting to work. Trade Union rules? Never! It was an eye-opener for the men in *Penelope* who reckoned that sailors worked all the hours that God made. A day's work for those divers stretched from 0400 until 1800 fourteen hours. And the temperature of the sea was below freezing point. It was fortunate that the Norwegians were only too happy to work for the Allies, for they were not paid until after the war had ended. But they knew that would be so. According to Snowdrop, the work began under Skipper Emblem's conditions - a month without interruption. Explained Snowdrop: 'Skipper Emblem is from Southern More - just across from the Shetlands - where the people are If a special breed. What they promise, they deliver.'

Crewmen were fascinated by the method of repair. When the jagged gashes in the hull had been measured by the divers, carpenters on deck cut timber to fit. The timber plugs were then hammered into the gashes and cemented in with the tallow, which had to be kneaded until it was as soft as fresh putty.

As the repairs progressed, Snowdrop discovered he had a problem - getting sufficient tallow without arousing suspicion,

for the repairs to the ships at Skjelfjord had to be kept a secret. Even his friends were asking awkward questions. Said Snowdrop: 'when I asked the third time for a large quantity of tallow from my friend Bjarme Havde (an agricultural secretary in Bodo), he asked so many questions I became annoyed for I daren't tell him the truth. It was fortunate he trusted me.' Luckily for Snowdrop and other Norwegians, the Germans never did discover the secret of the tallow for the repairs to the ships in Skjelfjord.

Shortly after repairs to *Penelope* began, three more damaged destroyers limped in - the Tribal-class 0,870 tons) *Cossack*, *Eskimo* and *Punjabi*, which had been in action in the secon(encounter with the enemy at Narvik.

With five ships under repair at Skjelfjord, the sailors - so apt at conjuring up descriptive euphemisms, dubbed the peaceful haven 'Cripples' Creek'.

A Sitting Duck

Harstad became the military base, and Captain Yates was appointed 'Senior Officer, Skjelfjord', which became the naval base, and he had the responsibility of organizing repairs to ships and feeding the sailors. The haven was fortified with anti-submarine nets across the entrance, with a look-out station on the tiny island of Kuna at the approaches. Two communication ratings from *Penelope* were sent ashore to man the telephone at the police house, which was renamed th, Signal Station. Paymaster Sharp became Base Accountant responsible for replenishing ships with provisions, but because he had no Norwegian currency, Snowdrop arranged credit until after the war. Not one of his countrymen refused to supply foodstuffs - eggs, meat, butter, fish - otherwise the sailors would have been on a diet of hard tack.

As a result of the association, the Paymaster and Snowdrop became firm friends. Said Snowdrop: 'The Paymaster impressed so much that I decided to follow in his footsteps,

and before the war was over I was myself a Paymaster Lieutenant - Commander.'

Hotspur was the first of the patched-up ships to sail. She weighed anchor on 17 April and was followed a few days later by the *Cossack* and *Punjabi*. When the captains reported to Captain Yates, they found him very unhappy and worried about his ship. So glum was he that he was rarely seen on deck. He had, according to Snowdrop, retired to 'his ivory tower'.

Repairs went ahead by leaps and bounds after the arrival of the destroyer HMS *Jupiter* with special submersible pumps operated by powerful paraffin engines to pump out the four

100 sand tons of oily sea-water from the engine-boiler unit.

They were supplied, at the request of the Admiralty, by Metal Industries Ltd of Lyness, Scapa Flow, the company that had salvaged the scuttled German Fleet of World War I. To assist in the salvage of all damaged ships at Skjelfjord, the Admiralty also sent a Mr Mackenzie, one of the company's salvage experts. Then in steamed the repair ship HMS *Vindictive* (launched as the cruiser HMS *Cavendish* in 1918 in the same yard as *Penelope*), whose artisans assisted with the welding of the metal patches on the inside of the hull in engine-room and boiler-room.

The ship's staff had to tackle the damage in the double-tiered compartments for'ard, comprising tanks below and storerooms above. As there were no double-bottom compartments beneath - as in the engine-boiler units - the gashes were wide open to the sea. But the repair teams devised a novel method of making the compartments watertight. Because the sea merely flowed back when pumped out, the compartments were put under air pressure and the sea was

blown out. Then, with the air pressure still on and the hatches battened down, an engineer plugged the awkwardly shaped tears with oakum and plastered them over with a heap of builder's cement. Said Commander Best, who was in charge of the repair team: 'Everything depended on the cement drying out rapidly so that the poor chap sealed down could be released before he died of claustrophobia. The job could be carried out only at night because of the danger of air raids.'

The biggest anxiety was the two-tiered compartment beneath the stokers' messdeck just for'ard of the damaged

boiler-room, which the divers had found beyond repair. The tank had a capacity of three hundred tons of fuel, and its large jagged tear was wide open to the sea. All that could be done was to batten down the manhole cover, secure the upper compartment with timber shoring - and hope for the best. Crewmen had by then retrieved their baggage from *Alster* and had 'cleaned ship' - although nowhere near the spit and polish of peacetime.

By May Day, with the sun beaming over the mountains still white with snow, preparations began for the trip home. With the approach of the Midnight Sun and with the Allies almost ready for the assault on Narvik, the Luftwaffe would undoubtedly be plastering any naval activity in the Vestfjordf and Cripples' Creek day and night. So it was time to be off, whether the ship was fully seaworthy or not, reasoned the heads of departments.

Snowdrop supplied the necessary three hundred barrels of water - poured straight into the boiler - for the initial task of raising steam to run the resuscitated evaporators to fill the boiler-feed tanks with the regulation distilled water. High-pressure steam could then be used to flush out the salt deposits in the system through steaming on sea-water.

By 8 May *Penelope* was ready. Departure was scheduled for the dog watches the following day. But the jinx continued. With a Force 6 blowing, Captain Yates postponed sailing. Then, at 0617, the weather had moderated when the alarm buzzer sent every man scurrying to his action station. It was another reconnaissance aircraft - an almost daily occurrence. According to Snowdrop, a Russian broadcast had mentioned the presence of warships in the Lofotens. At that time no one knew whether Russia was friend or foe ...

It was payday and by 1100 the crewmen had assembled outside the ship's office aft. Half an hour went by with only the rattle of coins and calling of names breaking the silence until that awesome alarm rattled yet again. This time there came the sharp crack of a gun. It reacted like the 'off at a racetrack meeting. Crewmen knew that the puff of smoke from the anti-aircraft gun of one of the ships in Cripples' Creek by a trigger-happy sailor was the signal the reconnaissance crew had been waiting for. The secret of Cripples' Creek was a secret

no longer. The knowledge sent every man Jack to his station in a seemingly mad scramble, with boots on metal ladders sounding like flying hoofs on tin plating. It was going to be a fight for survival ...

Because of the flooding in the magazines there was only a few hours' supply of ammunition to feed the anti-aircraft battery on the gun deck, so the crewme'n were keeping their fingers crossed. In the secret haven with *Penelope* were the *Vindictive*, four destroyers, two tugs, two armed trawlers and two merchant ships which could make a useful contribution to the anti-aircraft fire.

With the barrels of their guns already probing the sky, the trigger-itching gunners in *Penelope* patiently awaited the usual jargon of firing instructions over their telephones from the team in the transmitting station gathering the necessary data from the team in the high-angle director control tower as the first raider swept over the mountains. The sea birds, scenting what was to come, scattered with a flapping of wings.

Skjelfjord was at war as all hell was let loose in that hitherto peaceful corner of the world. Coloured tracer and puffs of smoke clouded the sky as shells of various calibres burst from the assortment of guns. As the bombs whistled through the air and plunged into the placid water, the snow-capped peaks lit up with the flashes from explosions of bombs and shells.

It was just what the villagers had predicted and feared. Every man Jack on board the ships hoped that the German airmen would not seek vengeance on those innocent Norwegians.

As the first raider was heard zooming overhead, Snowdrop jumped hastily into his puffer, still alongside *Penelope*. It had moved only yards when a bomb splashed just short of the cruiser's stern to explode in a shower of red-hot splinters and sea spray. One splinter chipped the puller's mast - but Snowdrop escaped with just a ducking.

The raiders, identified as Ju 88s, were attacking singly.

Designed as shallow-dive bombers, they were on this occasion flying high to avoid the accurate barrage as they swept over the mountains. Described as the most versatile aircraft to see service with the Luftwaffe, they carried 3,300 pounds of bombs, compared with the Ju 87, the Stuka dive-bomber, which had a shorter range and a bomb load of 1,100 pounds.

Gunners on *Penelope's* four-inch gun battery worked like machines. Breeches slammed as fresh shells were rammed home. When they snapped open, the spent smoking cartridges clattered to the deck. The wall of metal hurtling from one gun caught a Ju 88 as it sneaked over the fjord and disappeared in a cloud of smoke. As gunners cheered, Able Seaman Hinds, who was loading, retrieved three of the empty shell cases for souvenirs. Later they could be seen highly polished adorning his mantelpiece. 'Strange what we hung on to through thick and thin,' was all he would say.

When the bombers made a second circuit - there were less than a dozen - and bombs began to whistle around *Penelope's* Skipper Emblem, deciding it was getting too hot for his crew in *Skaerkodder* alongside the cruiser, cast off and made for the head of the fjord. He reported: 'The bombers kept a high altitude because of the intense flak from the ships but nevertheless the bombing was very accurate. Only three bombs hit the mountains. *Penelope* was definitely the main target.'

In the transmitting station, Commissioned Gunner Dan Godfrey was plotting the course of the bombers sketched on a roll of paper emerging from an electronic machine giving the gunners the estimated point in the sky at which to aim. The shells had to be fused to burst at that point. At the height of the attack the paper ran out. It meant a hair-raising dash under fire for Electrical Artificer Claud Hills to the workshop to get a replacement. He waited cautiously for the lull between attacks before unclipping the heavy armoured door. Then he scampered along the passageway to the workshop. With the precious roll tucked under his arm, Hills made his return dash just as another Ju 88 zoomed across the fjord. It was 1220. Hills heard the shout from a shipwright: 'Down!' to his damage-control team along the passageway. At the command they all flattened themselves full length on the deck to avoid any shrapnel that could burst its way through the ship's paper-thin plating.

The bomber swept through the burst of shells at twelve thousand feet and in seconds was out of sight over the mountains, leaving a stick of bombs falling lazily towards *Penelope's* stern. One bomb exploded in the water with a flash of red and orange some fifteen feet from the port side of the

quarterdeck, to send up a fountain of water and a thousand fragments of metal red hot and as sharp as needles. The fragments sliced through the ship's side as though it were paper for a length of two hundred feet, spattered over the four-inch gun deck, the torpedo tubes, upper-works and boats, and slithered into the flesh of a couple of dozen crewmen. Jagged red-hot splinters ripped through the plating of Paymaster Sharp's cabin at the vital second he was in the process of returning the payday cash to his safe.

The Paymaster, his body riddled with shrapnel, died shortly afterwards. His cabin was a shambles. It was situated above the

Varrant Officers' Mess, which, being the nearest to the -explosion, caught the full impact, but fortunately there were no personnel there at the time. Scattered around the Paymaster were the remains of the men's pay - paper money in shreds and coin transformed into twisted metal balls. His loaded Service pistol, which he kept on a shelf above the safe, had been shattered and the bullets had spattered over the cabin, even drilling holes in his precious gramophone records - the gramophone was something of a luxury in those days. His death was a sad occasion for both Commander Best and Snowdrop. They had lost their best friend.

When the shrapnel burst through the ship's side, Artificer Hills was in the act of closing the armoured door on his return to the transmitting station. Cautiously re-opening the door, he was horrified to find the outside splintered with shrapnel and splashed with blood. He discovered he had missed death only by a second - or by half an inch - for in the passageway close to the door was sprawled the body of Leading Steward Newell, who had been on damage-control duties. He had terrible head mounds. Hills told Dan what he had seen and of his narrow -escape. But the gunner showed no interest. He was far too intent on his plot to keep the guns on target as the messages flowed from the HA director.

On the anti-aircraft gun deck shrapnel had sprayed around like rain. Splinters like bullets had shot through the porthole of a four-inch gun shield and killed Able Seaman Willie Wintle. Able Seaman Hunt, a Royal Fleet Reservist was killed while firing another four-inch gun, and splinters also caught and killed Leading Seaman Harry Housom, manning a

0.5-inch machine-gun.

With Hounsom on the gun near the for'ard funnel were Able Seamen Geordie Reay and Bill Harlow. The latter said: 'There was a ten-ific bang with a red and yellow flash. Then I heard screaming and saw Harry Hounsom had been thrown into the cutter in its davits just below on the boat deck. He suffered terrible injuries and died twenty minutes later. I can never understand - neither can Geordie - how we escaped, because the funnel behind us was full of shrapnel holes.'

Several stokers on damage-control duties in the passageway near the area of devastation also caught the whack of shrapnel. Penny's master was writhing in agony, with splinters in hi neck and the upper part of his body. But he had shielded Penny, who escaped injury.

For the next few hours the medical staff was kept busy tending a score of wounded. An additional casualty not logged was George the goldfish, found dead in his bowl in the engineers' office. He had probably died from shock.

Shrapnel caused an immense amount of damage, too. A torpedo warhead containing 750 pounds of explosive was penetrated, and explosive had melted and spilled over the deck. It was a miracle there was no explosion to cause serious damage and loss of more life. Electric cables had been severed, putting gun communications out of action, and oil and water pipes had been holed, causing flooding.

According to the report by Captain Yates, 'Approximately eight aircraft were involved in single attacks with about sixty bombs of between 250lb and 500lb calibre being dropped from a height of between 12,000 to 14,000 feet.' He reported that at least two aircraft were destroyed by the ships in harbour and several were damaged. The damage to *Penelope* showe" that the harbour would have been untenable had it been observed by the enemy earlier. Wrote Captain Yates: 'The situation was not made easier in view of the shortage of HA ammunition in *Penelope* as the result of the four-inch ammunition magazines being flooded. The majority of the attacks were made on *Penelope* which was anchored at the head of the fjord in narrow waters.'

Luckily for *Penelope*, being the main target and the only ship damaged in Skjelfjord, one of those Arctic mists dropped like a

sledgehammer, and Cripples' Creek was blotted out. At 1410, as the last Ju 88 departed, thwarted by the mist, the Quartermaster piped: 'Stand easy. Hands fall out from action stations.' It was time for tea. Leading Seaman Cook, stirring his strong black brew laced with tinned milk and brown sugar, summed it up for all when he said: 'That fog saved us.'

Those who had not been paid quietly queued again, while the medical team proclaimed that the death tally was five, with sixteen recorded as wounded.

As the shipwrights patched up the splinter holes in the hull, fortunately most of them above the waterline, a seaman found piece of shrapnel embedded in the double top of the Warrant -Officers' dartboard. Boasted the seaman: 'I couldn't have done better myself.'

Snowdrop happily reported that no bombs had fallen anywhere near the village. So all was well as far as the inhabitants were concerned.

Although weather reports were still unfavourable for taking a patched-up ship to sea, Commander Best was eager to take the risk and told Captain Yates: 'In my opinion we must get away immediately. If we hang on any longer, the bombers are bound to attack again. With very little ammunition remaining, we are a sitting duck.'

Captain Yates, who had only rarely been seen by his crewmen during the period at Skjelfjord (one or two had seen him venture from his 'ivory tower' at night for a breath of air) could not agree more. He had been continually urging Mr Mackenzie, officially in charge of the salvage operations, to hurry along and give the word to be *off*. But he always came up with: 'We are not ready, yet.' After the raid, however, he hanged his mind and said: 'You can sail any time you like.' - This amused most of the officers, for they knew Mr Mackenzie's stock reply to Captain Yates. It was the bombing that persuaded him to give his consent!

And so it was arranged. Crewmen were only too willing to obey the bo'sun's pipe: 'Hands to prepare ship for sea!'

It was magic. The four weeks they had been stranded had seemed endless, and there had been so little news from home. Soon they would be 'up the line' (on leave), if all went well. Many wondered, however, whether they still had a home, with

all the blitzes they had been hearing about, especially In Pompey.

Battered and Buckled

Regretfully, Captain Yates decided to transfer the wounded to other ships for the passage home. He would need only fit men to sail a crippled ship. Among those who left were the Stoke Petty Officer and his dog Penny.

There was a further disappointment for Penny's owner. The dog had to be taken ashore. It found a good home, reported Snowdrop, with the family of Johan Høseph, an engineer in the hydro-electric power-station in an isolated fjord at Reine. The engineer had assisted in some of the welding on the damaged destroyers.

The ship was to make for the Clyde - a journey of a thousand miles, with each mile fraught with danger from U-boats, the Luftwaffe and the sea itself - risking all with a patched-up hull and in extreme danger of breaking in two.

Leading Telegraphist Morley, who had manned the telephone receiving naval intelligence at the house of the Police Master during the entire period *Penelope* was at Skjelfjord, was the last man to board *Penelope* in Norway. He had been presented with a magnificent Norwegian hand-knitted jersey by Snowdrop, who said of the communications rating: 'He was very efficient.'

Crewmen just had time to prepare a 'Bob-a-Nob sweepstake - the nearest guess to the time of passing Ailsa Craig (that lump of rock at the entrance to the Clyde), if they got that far - before the bo'sun's pipe sounded at 1900: 'Special sea duty men to your stations. Close all watertight doors and hatches. Cable party fall in.'

Shortly after Commander Best reported: 'Engines ready for sea, sir', Captain Yates climbed to the bridge to join the navigator, the officer of the watch and others on duty at leaving harbour. The merry clatter of the capstan was music in the ears

of the crewmen as the anchor cable jerked through the hawsepipe link by link, with a seaman hosing off the sandy mud of Norway, before it coiled into the fo'c'sle locker.

The tug *Bandit* secured alongside and eased the stricken cruiser gently from the shadow of the snow-capped mountains. But it was 2237 before the engine-room telegraph clanged 'Slow ahead' and the artificer on the port engine aft juggled open the throttle to get the cruiser underway. There was a hiss of steam and a whirr of machinery as the ship was manoeuvred out of the fjord and through the narrow exit, assisted by the tug, with a little more dignity than when she entered.

It was still light, with the season of the Midnight Sun only a

.. fortnight away, as the crewmen bade their farewells to Snowdrop, skippers, divers and other islanders who had been so helpful. There was a cheer from the crowded puffers as the Norwegians reciprocated. They had, in the end, admired the Jack Tars and the Royal Navy. There was mutual admiration from the Navy men. Those who had put in at Cripples' Creek will be eternally grateful to those Norwegians for their work and for their welcome and for their food.

By 2337 on that memorable 10 May, *Penelope* was in the Vestfjord. Three minutes later she had assembled with the destroyer *Isis* (damaged propellers) towed by the tug *Buccaneer*, two small merchant vessels and the anti-submarine armed trawler *St Loman* to form 'the Cripples' Convoy'. Two veteran destroyers, *Witch* (launched 1919) and *Campbell* (launched 1918), provided the close escort. *Bandit* and *Buccaneer*, ocean-going RN tugs launched just before the outbreak of war, displaced 844 tons and had a top speed of 15 knots. Both were equipped with some useful anti-aircraft armament.

By 0800 the wind was gusting Force 7 from the south-west, but the convoy steamed steadily at between five and six knots in the hal flight, steering south-west out of the Vestfjord and into the Norwegian Sea. By then the wind had dropped and it had become cloudy, with visibility poor. As the convoy left Skomvaer lighthouse to starboard just south of the Lofotens at 0900, the klaxons sounded. 'Action stations. Hostile aircraft,' came the pipe over the loudspeakers. The Ju 88s had returned.

The convoy was about fifty-five miles from Skjelfjord, with the Fleinvaer rock well to port, when the look-outs saw a

formation of the two-engined shallow-dive bombers coming over the Norwegian coastline, apparently intent on finishing off what they had started the day before.

Every gun from the ships in convoy cracked out as the first raider began its attack from a height of about four thousand feet. As the pilot pulled out of a shallow dive, a stick of bombs left the rack and whistled through the chilling air. Down, down, down fell the bombs, twisting as they neared *Penelope* and her tug. *Penelope's* luck held. The bombs fell across the towing wire and failed to explode.

Normally a captain would be able to manoeuvre his ship out of the path of the falling bombs as he watched them leave the aircraft, but with the tow this was impossible.

A second bomber commenced its attack from the same height. That also failed. The pilots had no success, either, in attacks on the other ships, which by then had spread out to lessen their chances of being hit.

Although near misses shook the cruiser and alarmed the crewmen, no damage was reported. The effect of the explosions was magnified below the waterline, and as Commander Best observed: 'It was a very uncomfortable feeling below in the engine-room knowing that the bottom was holed and to a degree safety depended on wooden wedges and tallow.'

The alert lasted 2t hours. By then the four-inch shells for the main anti-aircraft battery had been expended. All that remained to fight off further raids were a few practice shells and the efforts of the gunners manning the D.5-inch multiple machine-guns. Crewmen offered a silent prayer: Let there be no more raids.

Approximately twelve Ju 88s had taken part in the attack from a very low height, reported Captain Yates.

Judging by the number of depth-charges being fired over the sterns of the destroyers on their anti-submarine patrol, it was evident that U-boats were on *Penelope's* trail, having been alerted by the pilots of the Ju 88s after their unsuccessful raid in a bid to destroy her.

To save the cruiser, it was essential that the Cripples' Convoy should put on a spurt to get clear of enemy territory. *Penelope*, however, could only plod at six knots and was holding up the

convoy. That was when Commander Best had another of his hunches. He could see no reason why they should not try to get the starboard engine working, despite the report of the fractured A-bracket supporting the shaft and the damage to the propeller. So the engineers set to work, and after a couple of hours or so they managed to get it ticking over. Despite a little vibration from the engine, the ship was able to increase speed to between eight and nine knots. The engine could not be manoeuvred astern, but what was important, the Cripples' Convoy was able to make 200 miles a day instead of 150.

The Arctic Circle was crossed at midnight on 12/13 May he very hour Free French troops with the British made the initial landing in the Narvik area. The next day General Claud Auchinleck took charge when more troops followed and teamed up with the Norwegian Army.

In *Penelope* that night it was noticeable that few crewmen bothered to peel off their clothes when they had the opportunity to climb into their hammocks. Some feared the worst. They had seen Commander Best and the shipwrights checking on the unpatched oil tank in the stokers' mess deck and had guessed his secret. The word had gone round: 'The ship's in danger of breaking in two.'

13 May - it was a Monday - dawned bright and clear. With the Cripples' Convoy still making good progress, the ship's company in *Penelope* prepared for the burial of their five shipmates.

An escorting Sunderland flying boat gave those off watch confidence as they assembled on the quarterdeck at 1125. Five minutes later, as seven bells tolled, the men were at attention and the Ensign was lowered to half mast. Then, bareheaded, Nith the breeze ruffling their hair, they listened to the chant: '... we therefore commit his body to the deep ...'. A sudden tilt of the traditional deal plank stretched over the ship's side and each of the bodies sewn in a canvas shroud by the sailmaker and draped with the White Ensign tumbled into the spume of the Atlantic to the sound of the Last Post by the Royal Marine bugler. In fifteen minutes it was all over.

The five, the first to die in *Penelope* during World War II, were logged as: '... committed to the deep those killed in action'.

As the Ensign was rehoisted, the crewmen carried on with their sea duties. They had a philosophy: 'If your name's on it [the bomb or shell], it's your turn.'

The following evening a squall sprang up. Captain Yates was glum. It looked ominous for the crippled cruiser when it began gusting to a Force 6-7 (thirty knots). As darkness fell, the weather deteriorated with a forty-knot gale of a Force 8-9 shrieking through the rigging, with seas more than twenty feet high slamming over the heaving fo'c'sle, smashing into the turrets and spraying over the oilskinned figures on the open bridge. The conditions were made worse than the outward journey - the foulest weather Commander Best could remember in twenty years at sea - because of the instability of the ship with so many tons of water still trapped in the double-bottom spaces beneath the two main machinery units. His fears for the safety of the ship were confirmed when he checked the expansion gauge on deck (it recorded the movement of the upperworks) and found it to be registering three times the normal figure. That was the highest he had ever seen it. Crewmen, even the hardest shellback, were puffing a little more air into their lifebelts suspended around their chests - just in case.

Despite the buffeting, the ship was making good progress, and Commander Best was thankful that the turbines were standing up to the test. All seemed as well as could be as he sought a little rest at 2300, lying on his bunk fully clothed waiting for the call ... It came an hour later, as crewmen were beginning the middle watch. The shipwright in charge of the damage control party forward reported that he was worried about the unpatched oil fuel tank beneath the stokers' mess deck.

The Commander recalled hurrying forward: 'With the three hundred tons of sea-water still inside, the noise from the tank was frightful. It was like a thousand tins being banged together.' Cautiously opening the hatch, he shone his torch into the depths. The manhole cover of the oil tank in the bottom compartment was secure but the top compartment, used as a store, was 'a horrifying sight'. Such was the fury of the sea that the timber shores were tumbling around like ninepins, and the sections of welded plating, already stretched

to breaking point, were actually moving.

It was very much on the cards that the sea crashing around in the split-open tank would burst through at any moment and flood the messdecks and possibly the whole ship.

Commander Best called Mr Mackenzie from his bunk (he had not been keen to sail in the cruiser, according to the Commander), and together they tried to replace the shores by hammering in the wooden wedges which should have held them tight. But as fast as they replaced the shores, they fell down. They kept at it for an hour - but the sea beat them. As the storm did not abate, 'There was nothing left for us to do but pray,' recalled Commander Best.

There was little sleep for anyone that night, but by 0835 the crewmen discovered that their prayers had been answered. The storm was left trailing astern as the little island of North Rona was sighted to starboard, with the Orkneys to port. The ship was back in home waters.

The first sighting of Scotland - Cape Wraith - came at 1300.

At 2230 *Penelope* and *Bandit* parted company with the remainder of the Cripples' Convoy and headed for the Clyde, passing through the familiar Minches, with Rhum, Eigg and Muck to port. Early on the 16th the Mull of Kintyre, also to port, was left astern. Those were the landmarks well known to the shellbacks, now smiling contentedly. Their thoughts were easy to read: how great it was to be back ...

At 1705, as *Penelope* turned to port into the Firth of Clyde, Ailsa Craig was sighted. This was an exciting landmark as far as the crewmen who had taken part in the sweepstake were concerned. The winner collected his money but what was more important - *Penelope* had made it. She was back where she began her career. For it was around those waters that she had tarried out her sea trials in 1936 after her construction at Belfast.

There were no cheering crowds to greet *Penelope*. Her escapade had to be kept secret and her homecoming too. Everyone at that time was warned that careless talk cost lives. That meant that crewmen could say little about what happened. But it seemed as though someone was welcoming the crewmen home for the clouds suddenly opened to reveal an evening sun with the temperature rising to 52°F. Commander

Best put the thoughts of everyone in a nutshell when he exclaimed: 'What a relief - steaming up the Clyde in lovely May sunshine.'

The First Lord of the Admiralty, Mr A.V. Alexander, looked glum when he examined the extensively damaged ship's bottom from the floor of the dry dock. 'What a 'saste of a good ship,' he exclaimed.

The remark stunned Commander Best, especially as one of the officers accompanying the First Lord, told him: 'You are lucky to have the ship back.'

Commented Commander Best: 'There was not a word of praise for the ship's company who had fought so hard to say the ship.'

Some of the men felt that surely Mr Churchill, who had been elevated to Prime Minister, would have lavished some form of commendation had he remained First Lord especially as the 9550-ton cruiser HMS *Effingham* went aground as well while crossing the Vestfjord to land troops at Bodo and had to be blown up three days later on 21 May.

Alster, meanwhile, still manned by *Penelope's* prize crew with the cruiser's First Lieutenant (Lt-Cdr A.M. Harris RN) in command was playing an important part in the rescue of stranded Royal Marines when the Allies decided to abandon Narvik on 8 June after capturing the port only eleven days earlier. The troops had to be pulled out of Norway to defend Great Britain following the threat of a German invasion after the capitulation of France leaving the BEF to be rescued from the beaches of Dunkirk in an epic episode.

Alster had put in at Harstad to fuel on 4 June after dumping her cargo of German army equipment at Tromso - a new Allied base planned - and loading with iron ore at Kirken (near the Russian border. The marines had manned the Mobile Naval Base Ship, HMS *Mashobra* (a converted liner), which was beached after a bombing attack on 25 May. They had been told they would take passage in the carrier HMS *Glorious* which, with the carrier HMS *Ark Royal*, had arrived with fighter planes to assist the troops to take Narvik.

Lieutenant Jack Clark, one of the marines who took passage in *Alster* for the UK recalled: 'Luck was with us. When *Alster* arrived we were told that half our unit would take passage in

her instead of *Glorious* and the others in a French ship which had arrived. We sailed without escort, disembarking the prisoners on board *Alster* at Scapa Flow before proceeding to Rosyth where the marines landed. But the *Glorious* was sunk by an enemy naval force.'

The force included the battleships *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst* which also sank the two destroyer escorts *Acasta* and *Ardent*. There were few survivors.

Perhaps the Germans had the last laugh over the capture of *Alster* for after the evacuation they were able to retrieve their captured army equipment at Tromsø.

After the Board of Inquiry into the grounding, Captain Yates was loaned to the Royal Australian Navy. The findings of the Board remain secret until the year 2015 - seventy-five years from the date of the hearing - because of the 'sensitive nature of the report', says the Naval Law Division of the Ministry of Defence. Captain Yates was placed on the retired list as medically unfit in 1945 and died in October 1954. He was granted permission to wear King Haakon VII's Liberty Cross for services to Norway (as Base Commander, Skjelfjord). No other medals are mentioned in the biography issued by the MOD (Navy).

Penelope was towed to Palmer's Shipyard at Hebburn-on-Tyne for a refit which took a year. Except for key men the ship's company were paid off and drafted to other ships.