



WAVE



Number 183

“the ship comes first”

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The Newsletter of the Barque *Polly Woodside* Volunteers Association Inc.



Narrows Boat on an English Canal Picture sent by Richard Barber

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Chairman's Chat..

Polly Woodside Volunteer's Work Time for 2023:-933 Hours

Our Tuesday Gang of volunteers consists of Mike Ridley, Mark & Neil Thomas, with Campbell coming down whenever he can.

Roger Wilson is coming in again when he can, and you can feel the difference this makes to all of us. He has also started teaching sail making to Mark and some of the facilitators while Mark is videoing it. The visual record is fantastic and it could well be a valuable asset in the future for the 'Maintenance of Polly Woodside'.

Our Bosun Jeff was with us for 2 weeks in November, then off to U.S.A. for his son's wedding. He returned to Australia, to be immediately off to W.A. to join his ship.

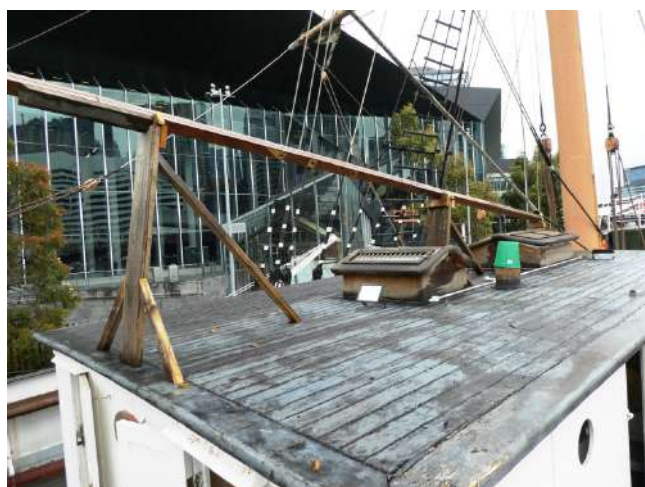
Also we have welcomed Wayne Bette back for a few weeks, unfortunately no Richard.

The Deckhouse

We thought we had its roof in hand, the leaking points were treated with Sikalick, which cured the leaks then.- remember those hot days we had, followed by the heavy rain? Apparently the timber on the roof had dried out and shrunk with the heat, and the heavy rain poured in.-YUK! - Deckhouse and its contents have since dried out, so it was back to the drawing board.

FLASH -The problem has been remedied.

Mark acquired an 8 X 5 metre Heavy Duty Army Truck Cover from a friend for an excellent price, which he sold to Nat Trust for the same price. With the idea to cover the roof, but let its timbers dry out in preparation to their recondition, and restoration, a frame is to be constructed to support the canvas for this drying period. This has now been constructed from the timber left over after the dismantling of the museum, and on the Tuesday 19th December (hence the delay on the late Wave) the cover was installed by Mike, Mark and me, adjusted and tethered. **DONE !**



The frame is set up.



The Canvas in place

Pictures by Mark and Neil Thomas



FRANCE FOR 'SAIL'

My wife Sandra and I have visited France annually, except during Covid years of course. Often this has been to a coastal city or town. On some of these holidays I have been fortunate to be where there are sailing ships, either in museums or, better still, afloat. The Musée Maritime in La Rochelle, Cap sur la Charente and Honfleur were three of the best. This year we went to Bayonne, upriver from Biarritz, on the Bay of Biscay and close to the Spanish border. Although not known as a home for a sailing ship, I discovered that just downriver from the city centre, a major refurbishment was taking place on quite a well-known vessel – the Hermione.

I decided that it must be visited and spent most of the day there! What an incredible undertaking. An enormous covered dry-dock and slipway on the river's southern bank, and a welcoming museum and shop built especially for visitors while this massive undertaking was going on. I photographed just about everything in the museum before going on-board. As one of only a dozen visitors, there was no pressure to keep moving. So here's a potted history.

The Hermione was built in 2014 as a showpiece replica of the original 1779 French Frigate (which carried General La Fayette to America) and had sailed around many locations worldwide. The decision was made last year to carry out a complete and comprehensive overhaul. An old dry-dock on the river between Bayonne and Biarritz was prepared especially. At present, the masts are lying full-length at the head of the dock and Hermione is chocked up at the other end. At 69 metres this was an amazing sight. The whole ship was stripped back to the timber, both inside and out, before refurbishment began. The inside has been 90 percent completed and much work is now taking place on the deck and outer hull.

Most of the work is done by volunteers in the accompanying enormous workshop.

Perhaps a few of the many pictures is better than 'a thousand words'. So here they are following this write-up.

If there is sufficient interest, I'll add some more in the next Wave.

I hope this was of some inspiration for the 'Polly Volunteers team!'

Campbell



The Altmark Incident

By Michael Ridley

The 'Altmark incident' took place in a Norwegian fjord in the early months of the second world war when Norway was a neutral country. Although Hitler intended to invade Norway at some time, the Altmark Incident was said to have given Hitler the excuse to bring Norway into the war. The German ship *Altmark* had been a tanker, now converted to be a supply ship for oil and provisions for the *Admiral Graf Spee*, at the same time taking on board allied Merchant Navy prisoners, including many Australian and New Zealanders, picked up by the *Graf Spee*.

The Admiral Graf Spee



Figure 1 The Graf Spee -
German 'heavy cruiser'
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/
German_cruiser_Admiral_Gra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_cruiser_Admiral_Gra)

A few months before the start of WWII, an immensely powerful warship, the German (Deutschland-class) cruiser, the *Admiral Graf Spee* slid out of a German port into the Atlantic to await further orders. With a speed of 28.5 kts and armaments that would be difficult to match, the *Graf Spee* was a formidable enemy. The British called her, at 14,000 tons, a 'pocket battleship'. In September 1939, as war started, merchant ships sailing alone from South Africa to UK, not in convoy, were easy targets for the *Graf Spee*. To confuse the enemy the *Graf Spee* would change its appearance to resemble another ship, so intelligence reports became unreliable – was the ship the *Graf Spee*, or some other vessel? On 30 September 1939, the first merchant ship to be sunk was SS *Clement* off the coast of Brazil – in all the *Graf Spee* sank nine merchant ships and captured two ships before the 'Battle of the River Plate' took place.

Three British cruisers looking for the *Graf Spee* found the 'raider' in the Southern Atlantic. Although the cruisers were no match for the *Graf Spee*, with her superior range and fire power, they engaged her and inflicted sufficient damage to require the German ship to head towards Montevideo for repairs. Casualties from the British side were substantial, HMS *Exeter* being so badly damaged that the ship was fortunate not to be sunk; the other two ships, HMS *Achilles* and HMS *Ajax* suffered damage but not sufficient to withdraw from the battle.



Although the *Graf Spee*'s Captain Langsdorff had requested two weeks in Uruguay for repairs, this was denied, and he was compelled to leave within 24 hours. Fearing that a much larger force was waiting for him outside Montevideo, on 17 December, Langsdorff sailed, with a skeleton crew, and outside the harbour he scuttled the ship. Her sinking was a defeat for the Nazis but the loss of face in Germany was less than had the British sunk the ship in battle. Captain Langsdorff committed suicide two days later.

Figure 2 The Graf Spee sinking outside Montevideo harbour, Uruguay

What was the Altmark?

When the *Graf Spee* attacked a merchant ship, Captain Langsdorff would warn the target to heave-to, stop sending any emergency distress signals and abandon ship. The *Graf Spee* would pick up the survivors and then sink the cargo ship with gunfire or torpedos. Captain Langsdorff would then have the crew from the cargo ship added to the *Graf Spee*'s ship's company. Needing fresh supplies of armaments, fuel and food the *Graf Spee* required a supply ship – this being the *Altmark*. Commanded by Captain Dau the *Altmark* would meet the *Graf Spee* at a pre-arranged spot where the two ships would transfer oil and supplies to the *Graf Spee* and transfer the Merchant Navy prisoners to the *Altmark*.

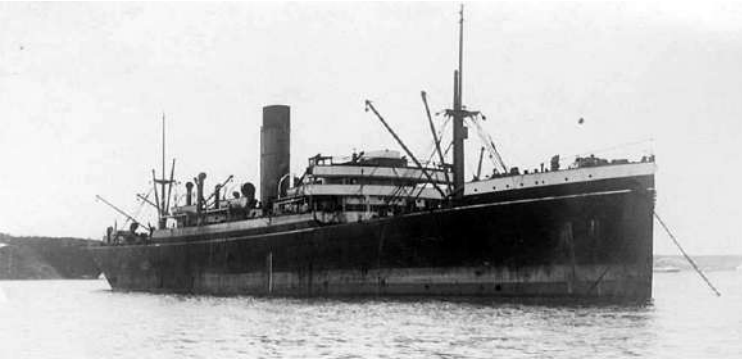


Figure 3 *Tairoa* - the second merchant ship sunk by the *Graf Spee* in the Atlantic (Ernest G Best collection, State Library NSW)

Once the *Graf Spee* had been scuttled outside Montevideo harbour, the *Altmark* stayed in the southern Atlantic waiting for the opportunity to return to a German port with 299 allied merchant crews of the nine merchant vessels as human trophies. In early February 1940, the *Altmark* was returning to Germany having successfully avoided any British or French warships and had reached northern Norway.

At this point it is worthwhile noting that Norway was neutral and anxious to remain that way; furthermore, Norway was of strategic importance for the Allies as well as Germany. For the Allies, a neutral Norway would mean a much safer route for convoys to Russia. For Germany, Norway was a staging point for aircraft and ports for submarines as well as access to Swedish iron ore.

On the final couple of steps to a home port in Germany, the *Altmark* sailed close to the Norwegian coast to avoid British surveillance; however, the British knew the *Altmark* was somewhere along the Norwegian coast and despatched several warships to the area. On 14 February, an RAF Lockheed Hudson spotted the *Altmark* and relayed her position to HMS *Cossack*, sailing north from the Baltic sea. At this time the Norwegians had stopped the *Altmark* twice to search the ship for allied prisoners – Captain Dau denied that any prisoners were aboard the ship; nevertheless, the Norwegians were reasonably sure this was not the case. To add to the complicated situation, the Norwegians had a restricted coastal zone and refused access to the *Altmark*. Owing to the very delicate situation, the Norwegians eventually reversed their decision and allowed the *Altmark* access but with an escort. Norway was very anxious to avoid any excuse for Hitler to invade Norway. Sailing down the Norwegian coast, a group of islands forced Captain Dau to make a decision – should he sail out to sea with British destroyers ready to attack or take refuge in a fjord – he took refuge in Jøssingfjord.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

PD3626.C17

Figure 4 *Altmark* in Jøssingfjord

After a brief search of the coast, Captain Vian of HMS *Cossack* realised that the *Altmark* had slipped into Jøssingfjord. Two Norwegian patrol boats were at the entrance to the fjord trying to prevent any intervention by the British Navy; however, HMS *Cossack* managed to avoid the patrol boats and steamed up the fjord to discover the *Altmark*.

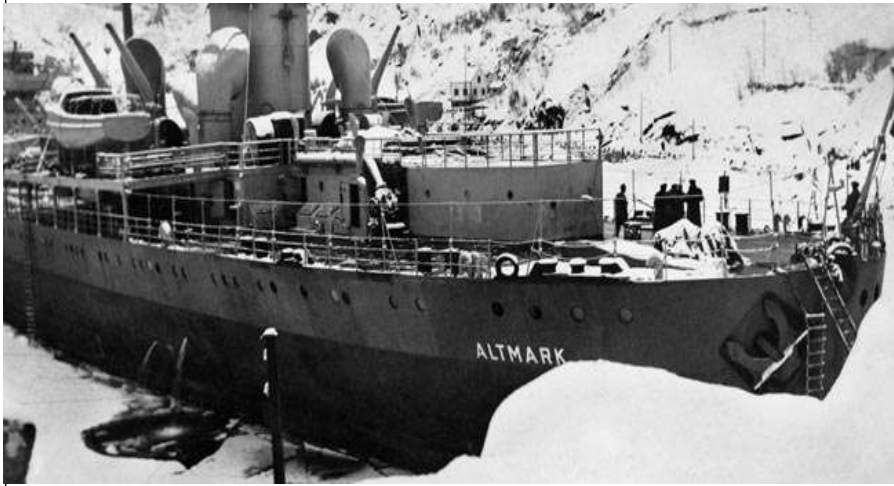


Figure 5 *The Altmark in Jossingfjord*

searched for the Altmark prisoners.

Meanwhile the prisoners aboard the Altmark realised that help was on the way and proceeded to make as much noise as possible to attract attention. John Bammant, 4th Officer of the *Tairoa*, had managed to find a peep hole where he could give a running commentary of the skirmish. Eventually the boarding party found the hatchway and a welcome voice shouted, 'Any merchantmen down there? Come up, the Navy's here?'

Merchant seafarers, 299 to be exact, from a number of allied countries, were rescued and were taken to UK. Among the rescued were 'Wally' Wells, seventh engineer (from Hobart) and John Bammant 4th Officer (UK), both of the *Tairoa*.

After the Altmark rescue, John Bammant returned home to Dovercourt, Essex, England and took some leave before he joined another ship of the Shaw Saville and Albion line, the *Waimarama*, for a voyage to Australia. On arrival at the Australian ports, the local press was very interested in 'The Altmark Incident' and took time to interview John Bammant and 'Wally' Wells. John Bammant returned to England on the *Waimarama* and then joined the MV *Zealandic* as 4th Officer.

In 1942 the *Waimarama* took part in 'Operation Pedestal' a convoy to supply Malta which was under constant attack from German aircraft. Unfortunately, German aircraft sank the *Waimarama* before the ship reached Malta with the loss of 83 crew.

John Bammant's ship the *Zealandic* left Liverpool, England on 28 December 1940 for a voyage to Brisbane via Panama.

Captain Dau attempted to ram the *Cossack* but ran aground in the process. On 16 February, a naval boarding party jumped from the *Cossack* onto the *Altmark*. A minor skirmish followed, shots were fired and a number of the *Altmark* crew were killed whilst the boarding party



Figure 6 *Tairoa shipmates - John Bammant (left) and 'Wally' Wallis F Wells (right) after the Altmark incident*



Figure 6 MV Zealandic launched in 1928 and sunk 17 January 1941

On 17 January 1941 the German submarine U106 fired a torpedo that struck the *Zealandic* ; she slowed down and sent out a distress call. Two more torpedos eventually sunk the ship, roughly 230 nautical miles WNW of Rockall, but not before the crew managed to abandon ship and launch three lifeboats. The German submarine observed the launching of the lifeboats, but they were never seen again. The weather in the North Atlantic in winter would have been rough, low visibility, misty and offering very little chance of survival. All 67 crew and 6 passengers died that night.

Why so much interest in John Bamant? He was my uncle. My grandmother said, “John was never the same after the Altmark”.

Further reading:

‘The Navy’s here’, Willi Frischauer and Robert Jackson, London, Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1955. (In America, titled ‘The Altmark Affair’.)

‘Hunt the Altmark’, Richd Wiggan, London, Robert Hale Ltd., 1982.

(Both books include ‘imagined’ dialogue.)

Many contemporary newspaper reports, interviews, etc, are in Trove (<https://trove.nla.gov.au/>)