

# A BATTLE MOST UNEQUAL

ONE OF THE MOST STIRRING BATTLES OF WWII TOOK PLACE WHEN THE LIBERTY SHIP SS STEPHEN HOPKINS STEAMED FULL SPEED AHEAD TO ATTACK A MARAUDING GERMAN RAIDER

BY L.J. WOJCICKI

It was a fine and warm evening on the 12th of May 1942 and Pier No. 3 at the *Kriegsmarine* base at Kiel was teeming with activity. A Rear-Admiral appeared with a large retinue while newsreel men pointed their cameras at the crew lining the deck of the Auxiliary Cruiser *Stier*.

"Smile now," the photographers called out to the Red Cross nurses and to the girls from the Naval Women's Services as they passed out flowers to the ship's officers. "Good luck and good hunting," said the Rear-Admiral, shaking hands with the *Stier's* captain Hans (Horst) Gerlach. A band struck up the tunes of "The Conquerors of the Ages" and "We Are Setting Sail for England".

To the shouts of "Hurrah" and "Sieg Heil," the *Stier*, better known as *Schiff 23 (Hilfskreuzer)*, slipped her moorings and set out on her epic voyage. Built

by *Germaniawerft* in 1936 as the freighter *Cairo*, she was operated by the Atlas Levant Line (ALL) until being requisitioned for *Kriegsmarine* services in November 1939. Initially, she saw

merchant warfare operations in the Baltic Sea before being converted to a mine layer for Operation *Sea Lion* but after that was cancelled, the Germans had bigger plans for the ship. Horst Gerlach

had joined the Germany navy during WWI but had limited operational service when, early in 1941, he was appointed to command *Schiff 23*. The ship was named after the captain's wife's star sign of Taurus (in German, *Stier* is "bull"). The crew was young and inexperienced and there was little time for work-up.

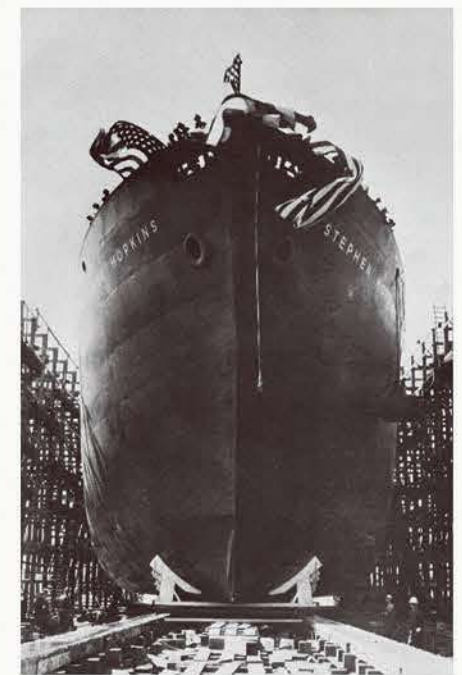
She was a fast, diesel-powered freighter of 4778-tons and underwent extensive alterations and outfitting to prepare her for her new role — that of a high seas predator to become known to British and American naval intelligence as *Raider J*. She

first entered the Wilton shipyard in Rotterdam before going to *Oderwerke, Stettin, und Kriegsmarinewerft* in Gotenhafen. When it was finished, she had become a masterpiece of camouflage and deception.

On 12 May 1942, *Stier* left the Dutch port of Rotterdam in convoy with six motor minesweepers, six larger vessels from the 2nd Minesweeper Flotilla, and four from the 8th Minesweeper Flotilla — all in V-formations — while *Seeadler, Iltis, Kondor, and Falke* of the 5th Torpedo Boat Flotilla boxed *Stier* within a diamond formation. The British could not help but think this formation must have been hiding something important. The darkened ships crept along the French coast but two hours after midnight they were discovered by patrolling Royal Navy Motor Torpedo Boats, who called for reinforcements and gave their position to the heavy gun batteries above Dover, which covered the gap in the coast of France. The German convoy had to contend with heavy fire from the 13.5-inch batteries and MTBs attacking from both sides with machine guns and torpedoes. Two of the escorts were sunk with a large loss of life and one MTB was also sunk. *Stier* escaped

and made the fortified French port of Royan at the mouth of the River Girande to the north of Bordeaux. She sailed from here into the Atlantic on 19 May, the last commerce raider to make this perilous voyage.

Baffles had been fitted to her stack to break up her silhouette. False bulkheads were installed abeam No. 3 and No. 4 hatches to give her the appearance of a long, high midship house. Each bulkhead was hinged to the deck and could be dropped down in a matter of seconds. The bulkheads concealed four heavily armored turrets — two twin mounts in the fore end of the ship and two single mounts aft, mounting six 5.9-in guns. On her bow and stern decks, she carried nests of 40mm and 20mm, anti-aircraft guns, all cleverly hidden behind dummy life rafts. Each battery was connected to a central fire control station on the flying bridge, allowing the weapons to be laid on target and fired either automatically from the bridge or manually at the mounts. In addition, the raider was equipped with two torpedo tubes on the port and starboard



SS *Stephen Hopkins* sliding down the ways on 11 April 1942 as one of the first 50 new Liberty ships. Note the remains of the champagne bottle dangling on the port side of the bow and the temporary concrete block anchor hanging down the port side.

sides and a hydraulic catapult to launch two Arado 231 seaplanes she carried in a hangar concealed behind a false poop. Designed to be carried aboard U-Boats, these aircraft were considered ineffective.

In her holds, the *Stier* carried a multitude of disguises; false funnels, fake bulkheads, booms, name plates, and flags of many nations both Allied and neutral, which could be rigged

The Germans hoped the *Stier's* unwarlike appearance would fool Allied ships.

