

LOSS OF SS HENRY BACON

FIGHTING ITS WAY THROUGH THE MURMANSK RUN, THIS LIBERTY SHIP
WOULD BECOME THE LAST VESSEL SUNK BY GERMAN TORPEDO-BOMBERS

BY SAMUEL J. COX



Few photos exist of the SS *Henry Bacon* — to most, it was just another unglamorous Liberty Ship. However, the *Henry Bacon*, and others like her, were performing a vital role that was dangerous to ship and crew.

On 17 February 1945, the 7177-ton US Liberty Ship SS *Henry Bacon* (one of 2710 built during the war) departed Murmansk, Soviet Union, en route to Scotland as part of Convoy RA-64. Having delivered her cargo of a locomotive and other Lend-Lease supplies, *Henry Bacon* was in ballast on the return trip of the dangerous “Murmansk Run.” The ship, under the command of Capt. Alfred Carini, had a crew of 40 Merchant Mariners and a Navy Armed Guard of 26 men under Lt. (jg) John Sippola. These personnel manned the 5-inch gun on the stern, the 3-inch gun on the bow, and eight 20mm anti-aircraft guns. *Henry Bacon* was also transporting 19 Norwegian refugees, which included 16 women (one “with child”) and children.

The Norwegian refugees were part of a group of 500 that had been rescued in a daring operation by four Allied destroyers from the island of Soroya at the entrance to Altafjord, which had been the lair of the elusive German battleship *Tirpitz* until she had finally been sunk at Tromsø by



A convoy on a bleak North Atlantic horizon. All eyes were watching for U-Boats and long-range Luftwaffe aircraft.

British bombers in November 1944. As the Soviets had advanced across what was then the extreme north of Finland into the most northeastern part of Norway, the Germans had engaged in a brutal “scorched earth” campaign, leaving absolutely nothing that could be of any possible use to the Soviets. Thousands of Norwegian civilians were forced into internment camps, while those who fled faced execution if caught and starvation if not. The civilian population on Soroya resisted and fled into the hills, but, as the winter went on, they became increasingly desperate. The

Soviet advance had stopped after the Germans burned and destroyed everything, so there was no hope of liberation by the Red Army.

When northbound Convoy JW-64 had arrived at Murmansk in February 1945, three British destroyers and one Canadian destroyer had been detached to make a dash to Soroya; two of the destroyers picked up 500 Norwegian civilians from the north and south ends of the island, while the other two provided cover against German interference, which did not materialize. Upon the destroyers’ return to Murmansk, the Norwegians



During the early days of the war, the U-Boat forces were scoring victory after victory and there was a possibility that the life line to Britain would be severed. However, improved anti-submarine tactics and weapons would turn the war against the Germans. Fight until the end of the war, the Germans would pose a threat to any convoy crossing the Atlantic.