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I RODE A GERMAN RAIDER

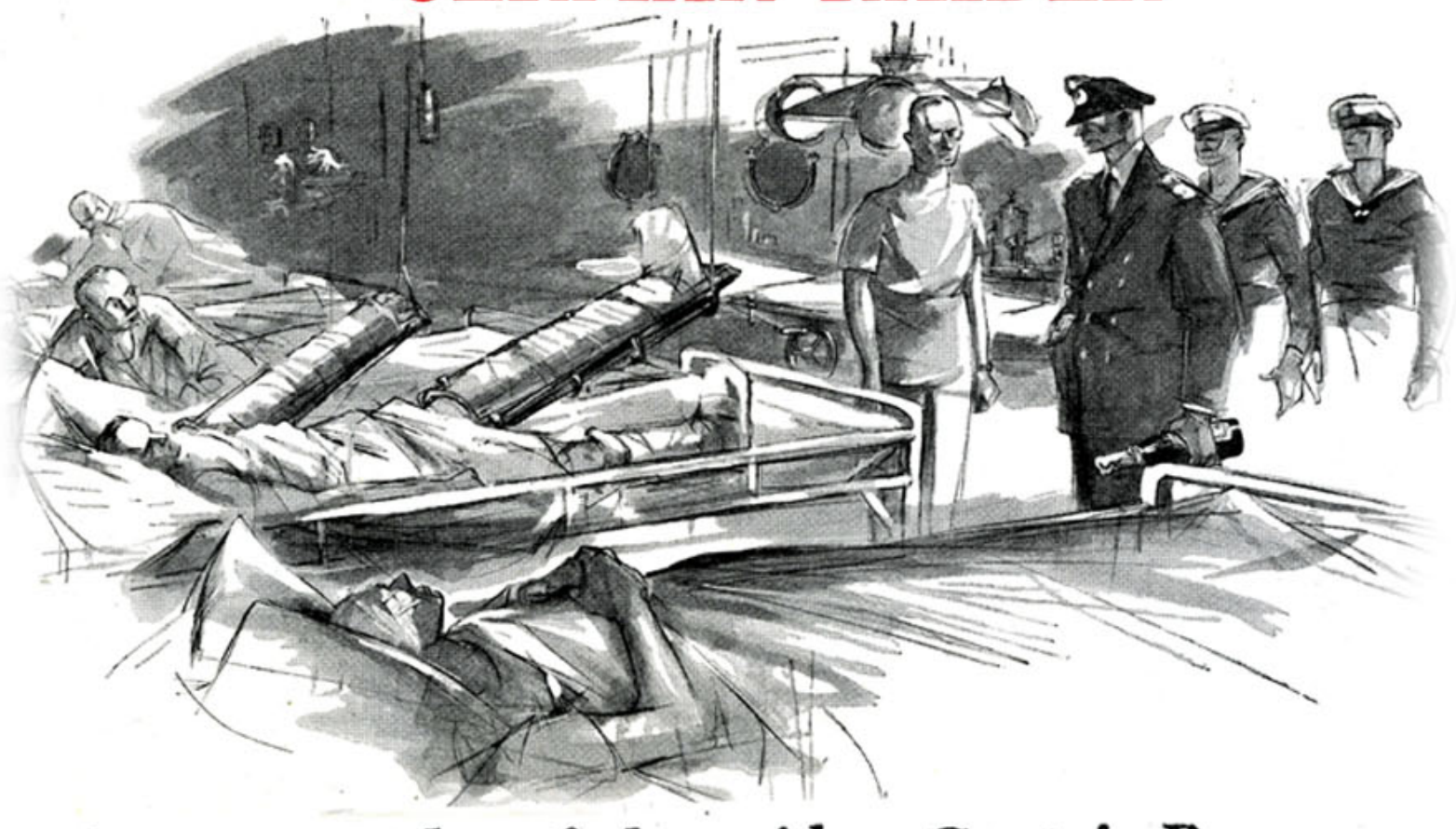
BY FRANK VICOVARI AS TOLD TO LUCIAN CARY

Frank Vicovari was the leader of a group of American ambulance drivers who sailed for Africa on the neutral ship Zamzam in April, 1941. Just before dawn one morning in mid-Atlantic, a German raider, with no warning, attacked. A shell smashed both of Vicovari's legs. He was taken aboard the raider and received expert care in its hospital. For the next eight months, he was a helpless "guest of the German Navy" while the raider, disguised as an innocent merchantman, prowled the Atlantic and Indian Oceans sinking unarmed Allied ships. Finally a British cruiser caught her and blasted her to the bottom. Vicovari was transferred to a Nazi submarine and taken to France. For more than two years, during which he was scarcely able to get around on his crippled legs, he stagnated in a German prison. At last he was sent to Lisbon to board the exchange liner Gripsholm, and on the way had a close view of what Allied bombers have been doing. Still unable to walk without help, Vicovari landed in New York last March. His story is told in a series of three articles, of which this is the first.

TWENTY-FOUR of us sailed aboard the Zamzam in the spring of 1941 to drive ambulances, under my leadership, for the army of the Free French in North Africa. We were sent out by the British-American Ambulance Corps and we had the best equipment.

The ambulances, twenty-two of them, had two-way radios, which I'd asked for after my experience in driving an ambulance in France the previous year. A two-way radio saves a lot of driving when there is a battle on and sometimes it makes the difference between being captured and not. In addition to the ambulances, we had two trucks, a staff car, a rolling kitchen and enough spare parts and medical supplies to last a year. Each of us had, besides his uniforms and regulation kit, an assortment of those things that kindly people give young men on these occasions—sweaters and wool socks and wrist watches and lighters.

GERMAN RAIDER



The commander of the raider, Captain Rogge, came down to see us one evening with a bottle of champagne

The Zamzam was no luxury ship, but she was a break for us. She was the only ship we could find that would take all of us and our equipment to Africa; and though Charles McCarthy (another driver) and I had learned in France what the Germans are like, we had little doubt that we would get to Mombasa, on the east coast of Africa, safely. The Zamzam was an Egyptian ship and therefore neutral. She carried two hundred passengers, more than half of them women and children. Most of the rest were missionaries. There was no chance for the Germans to make an honest mistake. The facts about the Zamzam's sailing had been published in the newspapers. Besides, the Zamzam stopped in Pernambuco, Brazil, which was then crowded with Axis spies, and the passengers spent the day ashore sightseeing.

I told the boys on April 16th, when we were three weeks out of New York and ten days out of Pernambuco, that every man should keep a knapsack with spare clothes and cigarettes handy, but that was routine.

I was asleep in a hammock on the starboard deck the next morning when I was wakened by a shell whistling overhead. It landed in the sea beyond the ship. My watch said five minutes of six. I jumped out of my hammock and ran along the deck and down to my cabin on the port side amidships. The shelling was continuous.

Willie Wydenbrook, who was scheduled to lead the group in case anything happened to me, was in the cabin dressing calmly. I got the steel box containing my papers and dropped it through a porthole. The papers weren't of great importance but they included some letters from the Free French that I didn't want the Germans to know about.

I pulled on trousers and a coat over my pajamas, picked up my knapsack and took a look through the porthole. I could not see the ship that was firing on us. I could see nothing but little puffs of smoke on the horizon. I started down the passage. Just as I reached the end of it, I heard an explosion behind me. The lights went out, I felt a hefty slap on my back, and my legs buckled under me. I said what so many men say. I said, "Good God, they got me!"

McCarthy came aft, yelling, "That was the last shell—they've stopped."

I wanted to get out in the air. The odor of TNT, or whatever the Germans use in their shells, was choking, and the dust from the debris around me was stifling. McCarthy saw me and called out, "It's Vic," and dragged me down the passage toward daylight. He tried to keep passengers from running over me.

The ship lurched to starboard, and I thought she was sinking. I told McCarthy to leave me, but he wouldn't. He got

3

GERMAN RAIDER

ILLUSTRATED BY
WILLIAM VON RIEGEN

Our attacker loomed over us. German sailors let down a stretcher and I was tied in it and hauled up topside

some morphine tablets from a doctor and gave them to me. Passengers were still running past. Wydenbrook tried to stop the bleeding of my thigh. I looked down and saw a mass of bloody flesh with bones sticking out. I thought it would be a good idea to die. I did not want to go through life all smashed up.

Several of the ambulance men carried me up on deck in a blanket. Somebody handed me a lighted cigarette and I felt better. The lifeboats were away. Jimmie Stewart, another of our group, yelled at one to come back to me. They tied a rope under my arms. Stewart picked me up and held me over the rail.

The sky was a pale blue, and the sun was just coming up over the horizon, flooding the scene below me in brilliant light. The lifeboats dancing on the water made me think of a picnic. I was being lowered. I kicked against the side of the ship with my right foot as I went down, and then I was hauled in over the stern of a boat. For the moment the pain was bad. It wasn't a picnic—not for me, anyway. It may have been a picnic for the enemy to shoot fifty or sixty shells at a defenseless neutral ship that—as they well knew—would have stopped if they had asked her to.

Then I saw our attacker looming over us. She was a German raider and was lowering her flag. I took it for a Dutch flag until I saw the Swastika in the corner. The German sailors let down a stretcher and I was tied in it and hauled up topside and carried into the raider's hospital and laid out on the floor. An ugly redheaded German in purple shorts grinned at me with a mouthful of gold teeth.

The German doctor came in, and I asked for a cigarette. He said in English that no smoking was allowed in the hospital. Somebody gave me an injection of morphine. They were bringing in other stretcher cases. Ned Laughinghouse, a tobacco buyer from the Zamzam, was walking around though his head was split wide open. And then I was on the table and they were giving me ether.

It must have been late afternoon when I came to. The glare of the overhead light was reflected by the white sheet around me. It hurt my eyes. I was all tied up. My left arm was in a splint suspended by a cord from the deck overhead. My left leg was in an angular splint with wires and dangling weights. I was surprised to find that my

right leg and foot were in a plaster cast. I hadn't known until then that the shell broke my right ankle as well as my left thigh.

McCarthy came in the next morning and told me that all the Zamzam passengers were being taken off on a German supply ship. A doctor came in to tell me that I couldn't be taken off but that I would be put aboard an American vessel in a few weeks. I did not believe he would keep his promise. I had learned in France that it is a habit of the Germans to make promises they have no intention of keeping.

Somebody said he had just seen the Zamzam go down. I thought of all that beautiful equipment in her hold—the twenty-two ambulances and the two trucks and the rolling kitchen and all the supplies. I went to sleep.

When I awoke again, I saw that Robert Starling was in the bed next to mine and that Laughinghouse was in the bed next to his. Starling was an Englishman who had studied chiropractic in Iowa and who was on his way to Cape Town to open an office. He was hurt in much the same way I was, though not so badly. Ned Laughinghouse, the American tobacco buyer, was also on his way to South Africa.

The Captain Offers Regrets

In the course of a few days I got used to my surroundings and to the doctors and the orderlies. Doctor George Reil, the chief, was a genial German, a clubman type. Doctor Hans Sprung was a harsh and severe person. I could not eat the black bread and greasy sausage they gave me. I finally asked Doctor Sprung for an apple. He said that the apples on board were reserved for the crew. If I had known enough to ask Doctor Reil for an apple, he would have given me two. But though I did not like Doctor Sprung, I must admit that he knew his business. I have been told by American doctors within the last few weeks that the operation Doctor Sprung performed three years ago was a good job—that I should have lost my leg if it hadn't been.

The commander of the raider, Captain Rogge, came down to see us one evening with a bottle of champagne. He was a tall, rather good-looking man of forty-five, but his smile was much too smug for me. While we drank the champagne he told us that he was interested in yachting. He said that he and Doctor Reil had been together at the yacht races at Cowes before the war and that, while there, he had seen a vessel that looked like the Zamzam and he thought the Zamzam was a troop carrier. The lie did not go down well. Neither did his regrets that we had been hurt. He said he was sorry but "This is war." It was difficult to be polite to him.

The orderlies went on celebrating after the captain left. I found out later that they were drinking to Hitler's birthday and I felt bitter over having drunk their champagne.

Death of an Innocent Bystander

It was about ten days after we had gone aboard the raider that Starling told me Laughinghouse had died while I was asleep. Doctor Sprung said that the commander would hold burial services at sunset. In the late afternoon I broke down and cried. Laughinghouse was a man I had never seen before I boarded the Zamzam, but he was an American on a business trip aboard a neutral ship. The Germans murdered him without the slightest excuse.

The captain and all his officers came trooping down after the funeral, all wearing their white dress uniforms and their medals. I could hardly look at them. I wanted to mow

them all down. The captain said again that he was sorry but "This is war." It wasn't war, so far as Laughinghouse was concerned. It was a little different with me. I had volunteered for service in a war, and if I got wounded contrary to the laws of war before I reached the front, I could shrug my shoulders. But Ned Laughinghouse was an innocent bystander.

Life aboard the raider was monotonous for a month, and then one night Doctor Sprung came down to give Starling and me sleeping tablets. He said there would be action shortly and we would be better off asleep. I refused to take my tablet because I wanted to know what went on.

The alarm buzzer sounded just as Sprung left. I could hear the rush of feet overhead. One orderly hurried in to get some life preservers. The ship put on a burst of speed. Another orderly was hauling out stretchers and first-aid kits. Suddenly the guns opened up. The fire was continuous. An orderly came back. He was giggling—probably from nervousness, but he made me furious. I could guess what was happening. The raider was shelling a merchant ship. It was killing people needlessly. I was tied down. If I could have moved, it would have been easier.

The guns ceased firing. The raider slowed and stopped. I could hear the launch going over the side and putt-putting away. Presently it came back, and the stretchers began to come into the hospital, bearing men covered with blood and oil and coal dust. Sprung and Reil put on their surgeons' aprons and washed their hands. The smell of burnt flesh was nauseating. The wounded men were spitting and coughing and crying for water.

I heard a burst of machine-gun fire. I know now that the raider was firing into the captured ship's lifeboats in order to sink them, so they would not drift ashore and reveal the fact that the ship they came from had been sunk. Then the raider put on a burst of speed and got out of there.

I could not go to sleep. I did not want to watch the doctors at work, but I could not help myself. The hospital beds were filled one by one. Two men died and were carried out. I went to sleep finally out of exhaustion.

When I awoke, I thought at first it was all a bad dream, but the smell of burned flesh and blood lingered. I knew I hadn't been dreaming. Doctor Reil came in and told us he had found an orderly for us among the prisoners. He was an Englishman named Fred—a clean-cut young man in ragged clothes and bare feet. He went right to work and served breakfast, and I got a chance to talk to him.

His ship was the Rabaul, a British freighter of about five thousand tons. They were changing watch when they heard firing; a shell hit some chemical they had stored on deck, and the ship was almost instantly afire from stem to stern. The captain ordered the crew to abandon ship. Fred was in his bunk. He was the naval gunner. He went to the gun, but it was surrounded by flames. He couldn't get near it. So he ran to the mast and hauled up the flag.

"At least," he said, "she went down with her flag flying."

Fred had not told the Germans he was a gunner. On the contrary, he had said he was a steward. He had thus escaped being confined below with the other prisoners, except at night, and he laid himself out to take the best care he could of the wounded in the hospital. He was incomparably better than any of the German orderlies. Indeed, with one exception, Fred was the only really kindly person I met in seven and a half months aboard the raider.

The exception was a German who worked in the galley adjoining the hospital. His name was Teddy, and, as he is now dead, I

may say how simple and human and thoughtful he was, without running the risk that any harm will come to him. Teddy had been a farmer before the war. He had a wife and two children and he wanted nothing in the world except to take them to the United States. He had no more use for Hitler or the Nazis than any good American, and out of his simple warmheartedness he did what he could to make life easier for us. He was always sneaking food to us. He neither asked nor expected anything in return. He knew we had nothing to give him and that we did not even receive the forty pfennigs a day to which Captain Rogge's aide had told us we were entitled.

It wasn't long after the sinking of the Rabaul that we noticed that the crew of the raider was feeling high. They told us that the Bismarck had sunk the British heavy cruiser Hood. We didn't believe it. Doctor Reil came down to the hospital and gave us the whole story.

"This," he finished, "is a great victory for us."

Members of the crew came in to shout the news to us. It is the well-known fate of liars that they aren't believed when they tell the truth, but the Germans were so happy that we could not doubt they believed the Hood had been sunk. We began to believe it in spite of ourselves.

The crew wasn't so happy the next day. Men went about their work quietly, talking in whispers. Doctor Reil came down and told us why.

"The British Navy has sunk the Bismarck," he said. "For us, it is a great loss —a great tragedy. The Bismarck was our best and largest battleship."

Of course we tried to retaliate for the day before. We asked every German who appeared if he had heard the great news, but we didn't get far. No German stayed long enough to hear the rest of it.

The Raider Makes a Killing

Two nights later, the alarm buzzer suddenly went off. It was the same performance as last time. We heard running feet overhead; an orderly came in to take our life preservers, and another to get first-aid kits. Doctor Reil came down to tell us there would be some action. The raider put on a burst of speed and fired a broadside. When she ceased firing and stopped, the launch went over and brought back two stretcher cases. Both men died before they could be put on the operating table.

I lay awake afterward, wondering how I could put the German ship out of action. Many fantastic ideas went through my head. But I could not think of anything that would work—not as long as I was tied down in a hospital bed with weights hanging from a steel pin through the bone in one leg, and the other leg anchored with a plaster cast. I had to admit that I was helpless. I could not hope to do anything until I could walk.

When Fred came up in the morning, he told us what had happened the night before. The raider had shelled the Trafalgar, a small British freighter from Liverpool, without warning. Several members of the crew were missing, but the only known casualties were the two men who had died in the hospital.

It was exactly two months after the sinking of the Zamzam that Doctor Sprung took the weights off my leg. Starling and I were carried up to the boat deck. Doctor Reil gave us each a package of cigarettes. The weather was mild and the sun hot. I had a book that I pretended to read, but of course I was busy seeing what the raider was like.

She was well designed for her purpose. As a matter of fact, I think she was intended to be converted into a raider when she was

built as a merchant vessel, shortly before the war. She had Diesel engines, so she left almost no smoke trail. She carried four 5.9-inch guns forward, hidden under a flush deck. Aft, she had a 6-inch gun hidden by a series of wooden panels hinged together to look like a pile of wooden crates when in place; but they could be pulled away quickly.

The raider had two thwartship torpedo tubes, hidden by hinged panels. Up forward was a large box containing machine guns. On a kind of after bridge, there were two antiaircraft guns hidden by canvas panels, so they could not be seen except by an airplane over the ship.

The port and starboard lights were rigged so they could be reversed, thus showing a green light to port and a red light to starboard, and creating the impression at night that she was going when she was coming. The ship had one funnel, but there was a second funnel of canvas supported by steel rings, that could be erected in a few minutes. Finally she had a pair of searchlights that could be raised and lowered. When attacking, the searchlights were let down as near the surface of the sea as possible in order to give the victim the impression that the raider was a submarine.

There was a small seaplane under the No. 1 hatch, forward. The plane carried a 20-millimeter cannon, a rack for small bombs, and a steel grappling hook on a cable. The hook was designed to catch and break loose the wireless aerials of ships, so they could not send messages telling where and when they were attacked.

The crew of 300 had been specially picked. I learned while I was aboard that the raider had been out for more than a year. She had sunk sixteen ships before attacking the Zamzam, besides laying a mine field off the coast of Cape Town.

A Surprise for the Germans

It was a good three weeks after the raider sank the Trafalgar before she caught up with another ship. The raider's plane had been out a good part of the day, but it wasn't until eight o'clock at night that the alarm buzzer sounded. We knew then that the plane had found something and that the raider had been following it. We heard the rush of feet overhead, and then two broadsides, but after that there was silence. One of the orderlies came into the hospital, muttering under his breath, and carried out some life preservers. Then Doctor Reil came in. "What do you think they did?" he asked. "They fired on us!"

He took out a cigarette. It was the first time he had ever taken out a cigarette in the hospital. His hand shook as he lighted it.

"What do you think?" I asked. "Is this a one-way war?"

The raider put on speed and opened up with every gun she had. She fired broadside after broadside, while the whole ship shook, and dishes fell off the tables and jars off the shelves. After ten minutes of firing, she stopped. The launch went over the side as usual. Presently one wounded man came in. He was just a boy of seventeen, with one arm shattered. Doctor Sprung went to work to perform the amputation.

We could hear the swish of air as the raider fired one torpedo after another to sink the ship that had been shelled, and then the sound of the machine guns sinking the empty lifeboats. The raider departed at top speed.

We learned the next morning that the ship which had fired back was the British freighter Tottenham. Her gun crew had been practicing that afternoon. When the ship was fired on, the gun crew went into action without waiting for an order from the captain. The raider sent up flares and rockets, lighting the sea in order to get a clear view

of the target. The British captain immediately gave the order to abandon ship. I couldn't help wishing he'd had more nerve. If he had let his gun crew go on firing, they might have done real damage to the raider. But he was outgunned and probably thought he was being attacked by a submarine.

A week later, the alarm buzzer sounded again about six o'clock in the morning. Again the raider put on her burst of speed and opened fire. This time the casualties were high. When the launch came back, wounded were sprawled all over the place. The hospital looked like a slaughterhouse. One man leaned against my bed, and the red stains crept up the white covers. Two of the men died, and that left room for two more. Toward noon Doctor Reil was busy working over a British fireman named Ferguson whose leg had just been amputated, when the radio blared out that Germany was at war with Russia. Doctor Reil held up his bloody hands and moved over to the loud-speaker.

"I thought I heard that we were at war with Russia," he said to me. "Is that true?"

I nodded.

"That is terrible for us," he said.

Doctor Reil sent an orderly up on deck to verify the report. The orderly came back to say that the report was true.

Captain Rogge came down to see the new victims after dinner, but he no longer wore his smug smile. He was furious with the Russians. "The Fuehrer told us and wrote in his book that we could never trust the Russian Bolshevists," he said.

I was happy to see him so angry and so worried. After all, it was not the Russians who had declared war on Germany. Hitler had declared war on Russia.

Fear Hits the Nazis

Later in the day, the Germans aboard the raider had recovered themselves. The gunnery officer, Lieutenant Kasch, came in.

"It will only delay the war three months at the most," he said.

He spoke too late. I had seen the first reaction of Doctor Reil and several of the others to the news. They were afraid of the Russian campaign. They saw for a moment what it might mean, what we all know now it has meant, to Germany.

We learned the next morning that the ship the raider had sunk was the small British freighter Balzac. She was coal-burning and she left a long trail of smoke that the raider's plane had spotted.

There were many signs that the raider was not hunting blindly in the South Atlantic. Captain Rogge must have had reliable information from spies telling him where to look. On one occasion, he asked a British captain how it happened that his ship was a day late in reaching the point where it was attacked.

The raider headed south after sinking the Balzac, probably hundreds of miles south of the Cape of Good Hope, and into the Indian Ocean. It is likely that having sunk four British vessels, besides the Zamzam, in the South Atlantic, it was time for the raider to go somewhere else. British warships were undoubtedly looking for her.

She sailed for weeks without finding any more victims, though she did meet a German supply ship. We crossed the international date line on August 10th. A month later, the raider stopped the Norwegian freighter Silva Plana. The Norwegian captain got off three radio messages, expecting every moment to be fired on. But the Germans wanted his food and stores. They boarded the Silva Plana, held a gun to the radio officer's head and forced him to send a denial of his previous messages.

Captain Rogge decided to send the Silva

GERMAN RAIDER

Plana back to Germany with a prize crew. He put Starling and the other prisoners aboard her. Up to the last moment I thought I was going too, but the Germans found a copy of an American news magazine aboard the Norwegian ship. It mentioned my name in connection with the Zamzam. They decided I must be a more important person than I admitted. Keeping me aboard the raider was, of course, illegal. The United States was still neutral. I could not be a prisoner of war. Therefore, I was a guest of the German navy.

My only consolation was that I was now alone in the hospital. I could smoke as much as I liked, regardless of the regulations. My hope was that the raider might meet a British cruiser and be blown to bits.

Collier's

(To be continued next week)