

# **CHRISTMAS DAY**

## ARCTIC OCEAN



# NINETEEN

*Barents Sea, Christmas Day, 1943*

And then it was Christmas Day. The first one Frank would spend without his mum.

It didn't feel great and he knew she'd be missing him too, on her own at home. But he tried to comfort himself with the thought that surely the war would be over by next Christmas – if they did what they had to do. Surely next year he and his mum would be together again to celebrate. You had to think like that during wartime.

Christmas dinner on the Arctic Ocean was a bully-beef sandwich and some dried biscuits.



Conditions were too rough for a proper feed. But they'd been promised a real Christmas dinner once the seas were quiet. And – although he fancied some turkey – Frank was always happier when the seas were wild.

HMS *Belfast* and its two sister cruisers were heading south now, having seen one convoy safely into Murmansk but not docking themselves as they had to meet up with and shield the next convoy that was on its way north.

The ship was at second degree of readiness, one level below Action Stations. They knew something was coming. Danger. Conflict. War.

But not yet. For now they needed to rest. And be ready for that something. Christmas Day or not.

An hour to go until the late afternoon watch began, there was a crackle on the tubes and the captain's voice sounded.



Some of the men were already on their feet. Was it time? Frank asked himself. Was this it? Action Stations?

The captain began by wishing them a Merry Christmas, then he asked them to join him in listening to the King's Christmas message that he was going to relay to them live from home by radio.

As the national anthem crackled over the ship's broadcast system, Frank stood, as he had always been told to. Several men joined in, singing in low voices, looking at their feet or hands.

Then, after the music faded, the King's Christmas 1943 message began, his voice faltering, hesitating before going on:

*And once again, from our home in England, the Queen and I send our Christmas greetings and good wishes to each one of you all the world over.*



*Some of you may hear me on board your ships, in your aircraft, or as you wait for battle in the jungles of the Pacific Islands, along the Italian Peaks ...*

*To many of you, my words will come as you sit in the quiet of your homes. But, wherever you may be, today of all days in the year, your thoughts will be in distant places and your hearts with those you love.*

*I hope that my words spoken to them and to you may be the bond that joins us all in one company for a few moments on this Christmas Day ...*

After the speech, men turned to each other and shook hands. But none spoke.

Frank felt shattered but energised too. He was thinking about his mum. At home. Alone. Listening to the speech on the wireless. He knew she would be



thinking of him listening to the speech too.

In the quiet below decks, from one, two, then several places on the ship, they heard singing floating up corridors and down ladders.

*Hark! The herald angels sing,  
“Glory to the new-born king!  
Peace on earth and mercy mild  
God and sinners reconciled.”*

Christmas Day 1943, as HMS *Belfast* ploughed on through the waves. And Stephen added to the hymn with an extra verse.

*Hark! The herald angels sing,  
“Glory to the new-born king!  
Peace on earth, but not on water.  
Scharnhorst, Belfast might have caught yer.”*

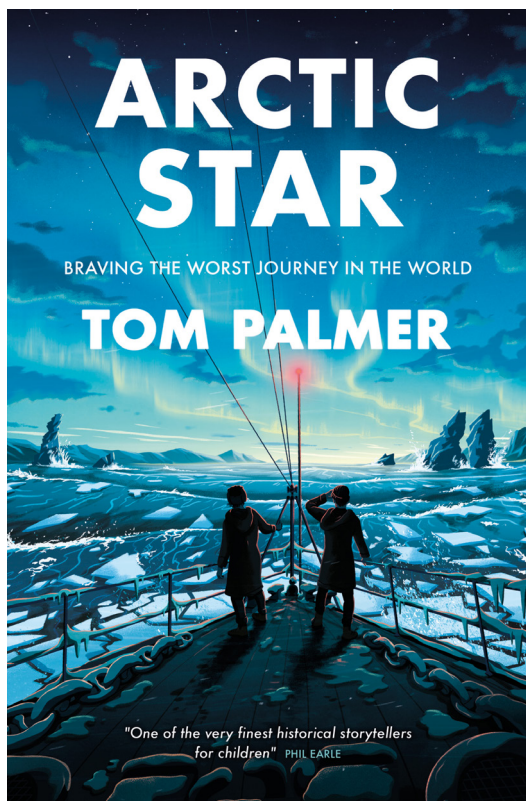


Several sailors laughed at Stephen's song. Frank was glad his friend was cracking jokes again. It was a good sign.

They were all thinking about the *Scharnhorst*. Every man on the ship. But few mentioned it. It lay beneath the surface of every conversation and gesture, like a U-boat biding its time.

Frank was pleased that Stephen could bring it up. Wrapped in a joke or a song. Why not make fun of the fear that was coming your way? Surely the fear would be easier to handle if you'd laughed at it first?





Find out what happened next at the famous 1943 Battle of North Cape by reading **Arctic Star** by Tom Palmer, available at your local or school library and all good bookstores.

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