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# HEROES DIE HARD

By HENRY GADE

THE United States Coast Guard cutter *Bertram* plowed through the black, rolling valleys of the North Atlantic. Water, breaking over her rail, froze in frosty, white layers on the deck, and welded the depth bombs into a solid chunk of ice. It was after midnight. To the starboard, stodgy tramps and the sleek new freighters of the convoy were struggling to keep up. The sea was so rough that the starshells showed only endless, rolling mountains of water. They hid the convoy from friendly as well as enemy eyes.

Somewhere, the wolfpack was waiting. Submarines ready to discharge death from their snouts the instant they could slip in under cover of darkness and pick off a fat prize of the merchant marine.

Captain Wells Arthur of the *Bertram* came topside swathed in heavy, sheepskin-lined boots and helmet. A pipe, short and well chewed, hung from his mouth. His eyes, though twinkling, held the tempered edge of a man who had fought the north seas for months, and thus far won every battle.

The *Bertram* was running heavily to port, zig-zagging along the outer edge of the convoy. Perhaps half a mile away, a blinker signal started its light message across the void. Captain Wells Arthur found his way to the bridge. He consigned the pipe to his pocket and waited until the signalmen finished with their work. The wind screamed about him as though the sea resented man's intrusion.

A red-faced, well-padded man turned from the signal lamp. He grinned at Captain Arthur, leaned close to his ear and shouted loudly above the storm.

"Little nasty tonight, sir. It's that English cutter, the *Hamstead*. Signals there's a sub somewhere astern. Want to turn and have a crack . . . ?"

Arthur shook his head.

"As first mate, Briggs, you'd have me all over the ocean every time a Nazi pokes his nose above water."

His eyes were laughing but his words carried weight.

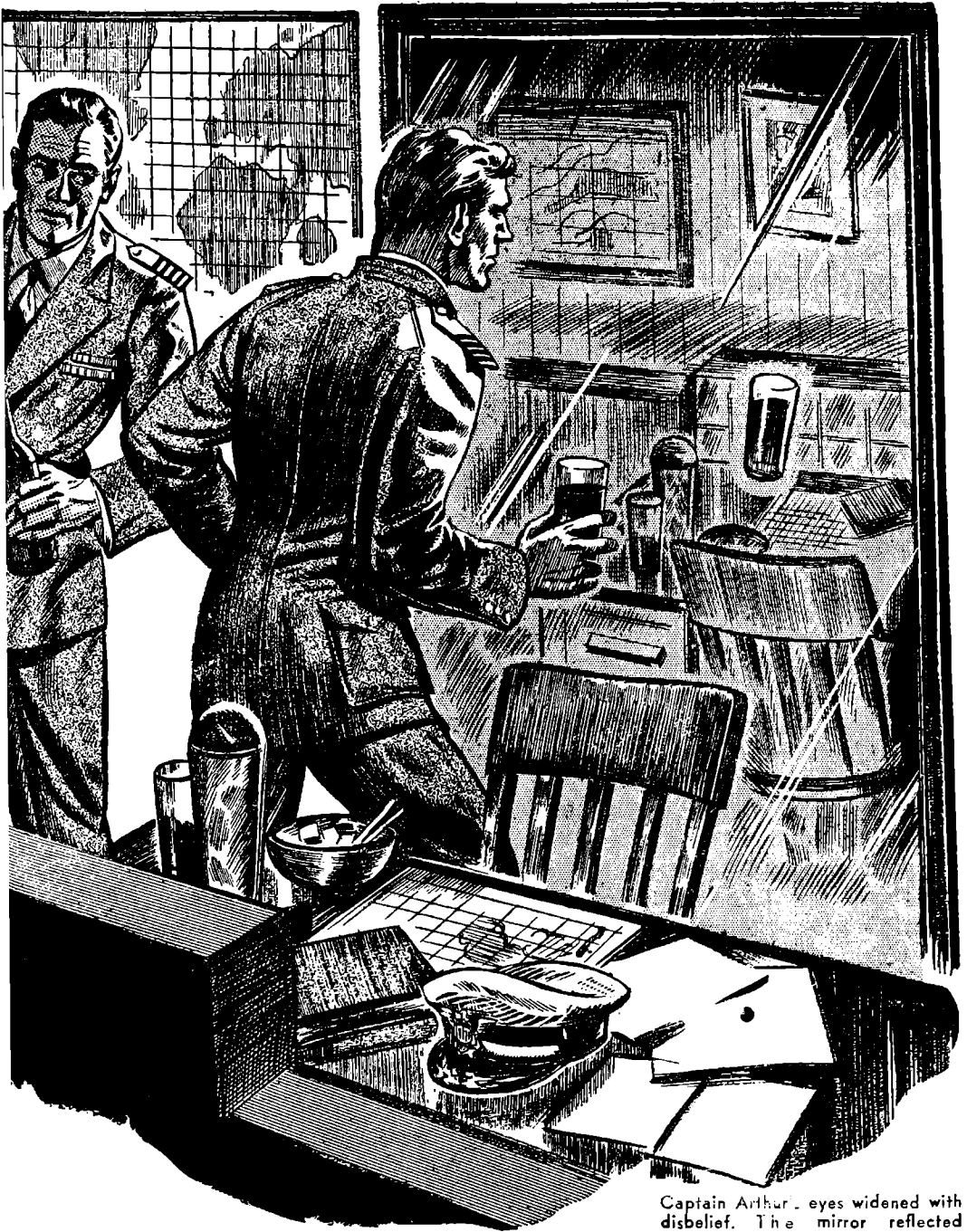
First Mate Eram Briggs grinned back at him.

"Hate to leave all the fun to the *Hamstead*, sir," he said, and turned once more to the sea. With his night glass, Briggs studied the mountains and valleys of water that rushed in limitless confusion beyond the steel bulk of the *Bertram*.

For five minutes no human voice interrupted the howl of the storm. Then, to the east again, a new series of star shells went up. They broke with dazzling light high in the sky, spaced evenly over the convoy.

Briggs, his eyes scanning the surface, froze to attention. He studied the water, bracing himself against the rail, then whirled toward Wells Arthur. This time there was no mistaking the excitement, the ill-concealed joy in his expression. Briggs was waiting for another crack at a German sub.

"Take a look, sir," he said eagerly. "Just to the starboard. A sub, or I'm



Captain Arthur's eyes widened with disbelief. The mirror reflected everything—except him!

**The Coast Guard cutter Wallace had been reported sunk by enemy action. How, then, was she able to aid a sister ship?**

an Irish potato."

Arthur took the glasses quickly. For a long time he watched the horizon. When he lowered the glass, his face was pale. Not the white of fear, but the bloodless, unreal look of one who has seen a dead man stir in his grave.

"Briggs." The glasses were limp in his gloved hand. "Briggs, take another look and tell me I'm loony."

**B**RIGGS seemed to fathom what was in his captain's mind. He took the night glass as though it were something holy. He hesitated, then studied the horizon. But not for long. When he turned again, his lips were in a straight, hard line. The once red cheeks were washed clean of color.

"It don't look as though we'll get a crack at that sub."

Wells Arthur shook his head.

"You—saw what I did?"

Briggs nodded, then stiffened as though determined not to believe what his eyes had revealed.

"But—it's not right, Captain Arthur. It *can't* be the *Wallace*! She went down six months ago."

Arthur shrugged.

"That's what I keep telling myself," he said grimly. "Yet we both saw that sub sink just now. We might try to tell ourselves that it was shelled by the *Hamstead* . . . ?"

Briggs looked as though he wanted to be sick.

"Yes, sir," he said, "if we hadn't both seen the name *Wallace* painted across her bow. You did see it, didn't you?"

Wells Arthur nodded.

"Twice," he said. "I stood by the rail during that first trip out and saw the *Wallace* go to the bottom. Yet, on two occasions since that night, we've seen a ship of her type dart in for the kill."

For a while neither of them spoke.

Then the signal light on the *Hamstead* started to blink again.

"*Sub sunk by another cutter. Shall we stand by?*"

"What shall we tell 'em, Captain?"

Wells Arthur frowned.

"What *can* we tell them? To proceed at full speed and keep their eyes open. We can't start talking about a phantom ship."

"Yes, sir." Briggs turned to the signalman who had missed the entire conversation. Wells Arthur leaned over the rail and waited until Briggs returned to his side.

"It—it can't be the *Wallace*, can it?" Briggs wanted to believe in something solid—anything to clear his mind of doubt.

Wells Arthur smiled softly.

"No," he said, "it can't. Just remember that when you're around the crew. Whatever else we believe, we have to be sure that the cutter we saw tonight wasn't the *Wallace*."

He turned abruptly and went below. The *Bertram* sped ahead, mist floating coldly over her decks, congealing into a heavy crystal camouflage.

First Mate Briggs removed his gloves and blew on his fingers. He stomped up and down the deck, stopping occasionally to stare back at the empty, plunging sea behind him. Once he shook his head, as though trying to convince himself that the German sub had gone down of its own accord.

It might have crash-dived. It could have been his imagination that brought a swift, clean-lined ghost ship into his line of vision.

**C**APTAIN WELLS ARTHUR had a tough job and he knew it. The convoy to Murmansk had twenty days of sailing before it would anchor in the slushy ice of the Russian port.

It wasn't possible to get every pound

of cargo safely across. It *was* possible to see that Hitler's wolf pack didn't get more than a small share of booty, and that at a high price.

He sat below, wondering what the day would bring. Nights were the worst. At night the subs surfaced, crept in among the freighters and picked them off before they were spotted. Last night one of the cutters had got a sub. He arose from his breakfast and went on deck.

Yes, last night he had even imagined that the lost cutter *Wallace* had returned for the kill. With the sun cutting a cold, hard pattern through the clouds, and hundreds of freighters in sight, spread out across a dark sea, last night's thoughts were hard to collect.

Not that Wells Arthur hadn't thought of the *Wallace* after retiring. He had thought and dreamed of little else. The *Wallace* and his friend Captain Howard had turned in a good record. That is, before Jim Howard had stood on his own bridge and gone plunging to the bottom with half his ship blown away by a German torpedo.

Wells Arthur noticed Briggs coming toward him along the frozen deck. He returned Briggs' salute.

"Good morning, sir." Briggs' eyes were red from lack of sleep. "We got most of the ice cleaned away, and the guns are ship-shape. Haven't seen a thing since daybreak. Thought I might get forty winks."

Arthur wanted to talk about last night. There was a loneliness within the big man that brought him close to the mate. Briggs and he alone shared a secret that was becoming more and more troublesome in his mind. He decided against any further discussion.

"By all means," he said. "I'll call you if anything happens. Turn in for the day and rest up."

Briggs started to leave, hesitated,

and stared hard at the captain.

"About last night, sir. You don't think we ought to check up and find out if any of the other cutters might have taken a crack at that sub?"

Wells Arthur shook his head.

"Is it necessary?" he asked.

Briggs' chin stiffened ever so slightly and his answer was low.

"No sir, I think not."

He turned and moved slowly down the deck.

THE convoy went smoothly enough that morning. Shortly after noon First Mate Briggs came on deck, avoided the captain, and took his post on the bridge. A few freighters had fallen behind during the night. Now they managed to catch up. The sun was fairly warm but the water retained that frosty whiteness that partly veiled its green depths.

At two in the afternoon the *Hamstead's* blinker started to signal urgently from the opposite flank of the convoy. Briggs stood alert behind the signalman, then, with the message decoded, hurried to the captain's side.

"The *Hamstead* has picked up a sub motor somewhere near," he said. "They're going to toss a few cans over and try to knock her out."

Wells Arthur forgot the *Wallace* then. That sub wouldn't be alone. They hunted in packs, and there must be a number of them to chance a daylight attack.

"Signal the cutters to keep a sharp eye." He strode quickly to the rail. "Come about and cross the *Hamstead's* stern at about three hundred yards. Perhaps we can pick up what they miss."

Briggs moved swiftly into the wheel house. Every man was at his post. The K guns were loaded and the fuse box ready for business. The *Bertram*

swung about in a wide circle and zig-zagged far behind the *Hamstead*. Ten minutes—fifteen. Three depth charges went overboard from the *Hamstead*. Water shot into the air in geysers of roaring, pounding hate. No oil on the surface. The *Hamstead* moved back into its course, protecting an exposed flank.

The *Bertram* was zig-zagging skillfully, listening, waiting.

"Periscope dead ahead!"

The cry came from a loader somewhere on the forward deck.

"Bring her about," Wells Arthur shouted. "Keep a sharp eye for . . ."

"Torpedo dead across the starboard rail." The cry held no fear, only a plea for urgent action.

"Give her all the speed she'll take. . . ."

Every man was alert now, wondering where it would hit.

The *Bertram* dodged cleverly, like a trained thing, alive and vibrant in every plate. Wells Arthur watched the periscope dip and disappear below the waves. He saw the *Hamstead*, at least he thought so at the time, slip in swiftly across his bow. Then a splitting, blinding roar of sound and flame. The *Bertram* leaped into the air and keeled over sharply. A cry went up all along the deck. Then a second explosion. In spite of his own ship and the apparently hopeless condition it faced, Wells Arthur couldn't take his eyes away from the ship ahead of him.

The other cutter had slipped across in front of the *Bertram*, so close that he could see the men on her decks. It hit something hidden just under the surface of the water. Then everything was confusion.

The black, oily entrails of a Nazi submarine spewed up to the surface. The other cutter hesitated, its bow breaking clean out of the water, then

slid backward. The sub, or what was left of it, bounced lazily to the surface. The conning tower was crushed and broken open like a badly smashed tin can. It rolled over on one side and sank again, this time to its grave.

Wells Arthur watched the cutter that had rammed the sub as it stopped its backward motion, gained speed and zig-zagged swiftly away. At that instant he was completely unaware that his own ship had been put out of action. He had forgotten that this was his problem, his hour of decision. Words formed on his lips. Words of mute understanding.

"The *Wallace*," he whispered. "And I'm God damned if *that* was any ghost ship."

THE torpedo had been well placed.

The *Bertram* was sinking slowly. Yet, throughout that cold gray afternoon, Captain Wells Arthur couldn't give up his ship. He warned the *Hamstead* and other cutters to stay well away from the limping *Bertram*. All pumps were working and the cutter moved ahead at half speed. It was useless. The entire center section of the *Bertram* had caved in. The plates were torn apart beyond even temporary repair.

Interwoven with his own worries, Arthur couldn't forget that almost magic appearance of the *Wallace*. Oddly enough, none of his crew noticed just what cutter had rammed the sub. They took it for granted that the *Hamstead* had been there when needed. The rush of work during the long afternoon discouraged any further discussion of the incident.

It was during that dead, exhausted period before sundown that Captain Arthur made his decision. First Mate Briggs came to him in the tiny cabin that served as sleeping quarters and

general office for the commander of the *Bertram*. Briggs opened the door softly.

"The men told me you just came down here, Captain. I think we'd better give her up as lost."

Wells Arthur raised a tired head from his desk and nodded.

"I know," he said. "Signal the *Hamstead* to come alongside just as soon as it's dark. We'll send the crew aboard her. I—had to have a minute alone." He started to stand, then, drunk with exhaustion, he sank back, head on his hands. "It's—hard to give up . . ."

Briggs put a calloused hand on the captain's shoulder.

"I know, sir. We all hate like hell . . ."

He turned, without finishing his sentence, and bolted from the cabin.

ALL hands were on deck, life jackets tied, when the cutter *Hamstead* came alongside. The Atlantic was once more a heaving black blanket of water. Captain Arthur watched his men as, one by one, they slid across the life rope to the restless deck of the English boat. Briggs waited until the last.

"All the men are over," the First Mate said. "You'll—be coming behind me, Captain?"

His was an anxious question. He knew that Wells Arthur hated to leave the cutter. Knew that he might never consent to abandon his ship.

Wells Arthur nodded. His head was heavy. His eyes were barely opened slits, red with grief. Still, his shoulders remained erect and his feet were spaced well apart, firm against the slanted deck.

"I'll follow," he said, and turned away.

Briggs slipped into the life belt, fastened himself securely and waved

for the crew of the *Hamstead* to haul away.

It's doubtful if Captain Wells Arthur would have left his ship had he a choice. No such choice was left to him. Before Briggs was half way across the gap of wild water that separated the two cutters, the *Bertram* heeled over sharply, and a moan of wind and water went through her empty vitals. Water, tons of green, slush-filled water, poured over her deck and she plunged below the Atlantic.

Briggs was hauled upward out of the sea and stood gasping for breath, watching the *Bertram* sink. He was sure that Captain Wells Arthur was at the rail for a minute, holding on tightly, his head thrown back as though defying the elements. Then the *Bertram* was no more. A crushed, battered lifeboat floated idly at the spot where the cutter had vanished.

Briggs choked and turned away.

CAPTAIN WELLS ARTHUR took hours to wake up. At first, drifting upward out of pale green water, he was aware of a new warmth that bathed his body.

His heavy sheepskins were gone. He opened his eyes slowly, to find that he was clad only in rough pajamas and tucked securely into a warm bunk. He stared around, bewildered to find that, with his own ship gone, someone had been able to save him from death.

The cabin in which he was lying was small, not unlike his own aboard the *Bertram*. For one wild moment he wondered if he had been dreaming. If the cutter was still intact, able to float.

Then the door opened and any thought of his own ship died with the words that came to his lips.

"Jim Howard!" Wells Arthur lifted himself weakly on one elbow and stared at the stout, warm-eyed man who had

stepped inside the door. "For God's sake, I thought . . ."

Captain Jim Howard of the cutter *Wallace*. Then the *Wallace* hadn't gone down! She was alive, fighting with the rest of them!

And Jim Howard was here, pipe in his teeth, a broad grin on his face.

"H'lo, Wells." Howard crossed the tiny cabin and took Wells Arthur's hand. His grip was firm and warm. "Saw you going down. Figured I could use a man like you aboard the *Wallace*."

Arthur was sitting up now, questions flooding his mind. All the grief and misunderstanding were gone.

"By the gods, Jim!" He watched as Jim Howard sat down easily, applied a match to his pipe and started to puff. "I—I can't believe that you're really alive."

Jim Howard returned the smile, his lips curling slightly, whimsically. A frown creased his forehead.

"I'm here right enough," he said. "Damned good hunting this trip, wouldn't you say?"

It was Wells Arthur's turn to frown.

"For all but the crew of the *Bertram*," he said. "It's some comfort that we all got away safely, though how I managed, I still don't know."

"Fished you out of the water, that's all," Jim Howard said. He stood up, crossed the room and fumbled around in a locker. "Here's a bit of port I saved for such an occasion." He poured a glass of the stuff and held it for Arthur.

Wells Arthur's eyes were not on the glass or the liquid in it.

On the far side of the cabin a full length mirror had been built into the panel. Jim Howard was in a direct line with that mirror. He, Wells, was also in line with it.

*Yet, staring straight at that mirror, he could see neither of them. Just an empty bunk. An empty bunk where he was supposed to be lying.*

He was almost sure now. Not quite, but almost.

He stared at Howard, eyes wide with wonder. The ruddy captain stared back, the same unworried grin on his face.

"Jim . . ." Arthur hesitated, then blurted it out in one breath. "Jim—I thought you and your crew were lost—dead. Good lord, Jim, I *saw* the *Wallace* go down with my own eyes."

"You felt the *Bertram* go down under you, and you went with it, didn't you?" Howard asked the question softly, almost gently.

"But—that was a miracle, I know. You—Jim, I'd have sworn that I'd have to die before I ever would see you again."

Captain Jim Howard of the cutter *Wallace* leaned over and placed the glass on the table. When he turned once more the frown was gone. A soft smile parted his lips. He put a firm hand on Wells Arthur's shoulder.

They stared at each other, and Howard's lips formed a single word. He drawled it in a lazy, questioning voice.

"Well?"

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