

THE TANKER THAT FOUGHT A COMMERCE RAIDER

In June 1942, the Panamanian-flagged tanker SS *Stanvac Calcutta* was involved in a sea battle with German auxiliary cruiser¹ *Stier* (which means “Bull” in German), about 500 miles (800 km) off the coast of Brazil. Eventually sunk by the commerce raider,² the survivors were rescued by the German ship, only to be subsequently transferred to the Japanese – except for one man who ended up in a prison camp in Germany.



The *Stanvac Calcutta* was a tanker of 10,170 tons, and carried a crew of 42 merchant marine personnel, mostly from the US, and was commanded by the Master, Gustav O Karlsson, plus nine Armed Guards supplied by the US Navy to man its defensive armament, and commanded by Ensign Edward L Anderson.

She had been built for the Socony-Vacuum Company³ and registered under the Panama flag.⁴ She was 487-feet (148.4 metres) long and had been built by the Bethlehem Steel Company in Quincy, Massachusetts and launched in April 1941.

¹ The term “auxiliary cruiser” simply refers to installing relatively heavy armament on a civilian ship, to either boost available numbers of vessels, or to create a commerce raider. This process had been used since the time of sail but, while, as late as the 1930s, some civilian vessels would be adapted during construction to carry weapons in wartime, the fact that such ships lacked the armour and other self-protection systems found on warships meant that World War 2 would be the last time they would be widely used. The vulnerability of the modified vessels, not just to enemy warships, but even other armed merchantmen, is illustrated by the fate of the *Sier*.

² Both Italy and Germany used converted merchant ships as commerce raiders, alongside warships, aircraft, and submarines to attack their opponents’ shipping.

³ The Socony-Vacuum Corporation, which could date its heritage back to 1866, was formed in 1933 as a joint venture by a merger of Vacuum Oil, which had been part of Standard Oil from 1879 until that company was broken up by anti-trust action in 1911, and Standard Oil of New York (Socony), another former component of Standard Oil. It was then the third-largest oil company in the world. In 1955, the company became Socony Mobil Oil Company, and in 1966 it was renamed the Mobil Oil Corporation (later just the Mobil Corporation, and now ExxonMobil).

⁴ She was one of five of the company’s vessels under the Panama flag to be lost during the war. Following a change to Panamanian in 1916, its flag became one used by those owners seeking to escape costs or other problems. In 1925, its shipping registry had become an “open registry”, and in the 1920s this was the first such registry to be given full legal recognition. It is said that the incentive was largely supported by the US Government, providing the ability for US shipowners to employ cheaper labour. As an open registry, Panama has to inspect vessels for registration and faulty operation, comply with international regulations and

In January 1942, the US Navy established the Naval Armed Guard to man the defensive armament mounted on US merchant vessels. The gun crew were usually led by a junior naval officer and lived alongside the ship's civilian crew. The gun crew would also help train the civilian crew in the use of the guns. By the end of World War 2, there were 144,857 men serving in the Navy Armed Guard on 6,200 ships. The guns carried would typically include older 4-inch or 5-inch guns, machine guns and, later, 20mm Oerlikon cannon. The guns were intended to deter or defend against attack by aircraft, U-boats or surface raiders – though only twice did defended ships actually engage in gun battles with the latter, in both cases involving the *Stier*, with the outcomes mentioned in this piece.



In April 1942, the US War Shipping Administration (see below) requisitioned the ship whilst she was at Coveas in Colombia. The Petroleum Shipping Company, a Socony-Vacuum holding company subsidiary in Panama, operated the vessel under a time charter agreement.⁵

Its defensive armament consisted on a World War 1-vintage 4-inch (102 mm) naval gun in the bow, and a single 5-inch (127 mm) anti-aircraft gun mounted aft, and which also dated from the previous war.

In contrast, the *Stier*, commanded by Kapitän zur See Horst Gerlach, boasted 6 x 150 mm (6-inch) guns as its main armament, supported by a 37 mm (1.5-inch) gun and 3 x 37 mm cannon and 2 x torpedo tubes. She also carried a pair of Arado Ar 231 single-seat

investigate corruption and accidents. Before 1925, Panama had nationality and residency requirements ship owners had to fulfil to register their vessel, which was the more usual requirement for national shipping registers.

In 1939, the US Government signed a treaty with Panama whereby profits from shipping were exempted from taxes, which made it attractive to US shipowners to take advantage of freedom of employment while obtaining tax benefits.

Panama's neutrality at the start of World War 2 saw shipowners from the US and elsewhere take advantage to trade under the Panamanian flag. For US shipowners, this avoided problems with the Neutrality Acts. Over 100 US-controlled ships traded under the Panamanian and Honduran flags during the war.

⁵ <https://www.maritime.dot.gov/history/gallant-ship-award/ss-stanvac-calcutta>

A time charter is a contract where a shipowner rents out a ship and its crew to a charterer for a set period of time; and the charterer has control over the ship's schedule, route, and cargo handling.



Horst Gerlach

lightweight floatplanes for scouting for targets, these being an experimental design of which only six would be built, and their use on the *Stier* was something of a test for the type, with the two carried by the ship being two of the six prototypes.⁶



Designated *Schiff 23* ("Ship 23") by the Kriegsmarine, the Royal Navy knew her as "Raider J". She was the last raider to successfully break out into the Atlantic.

The *Stier* had been built by Germaniawerft in Kiel as the freighter *Cairo* for the Atlas

Levant Line, and had been launched in 1936. Of 4,778 gross registered tons, she displaced 11,000 tons and was 44 feet (134 metres) long. She was requisitioned by the Kriegsmarine in November 1939, initially for continued use as a transport before conversion to a minelayer. Earmarked for use in Operation *Sea Lion*, the planned invasion of Britain, after this was abandoned she was converted into an auxiliary cruiser in April 1941 at the Wilton shipyard in Rotterdam, and latterly Oderwerke in Stettin and by the Kriegsmarinewerft in Gotenhafen (as the former Gdynia in Poland had been renamed).

She left Germany in May 1942, via Royan in Occupied France – having been involved in an engagement in the English Channel that saw a British motor torpedo boat (MTB) and German E-boat sunk. From France, Gerlach (then a Fregattenkapitän) took the ship on its mission into the South Atlantic, which would last four and a half months and saw her sink just 29,409 tons of Allied shipping.

⁶ Testing is said to have revealed it to be fragile, underpowered, and difficult to fly even during calm weather. development was abandoned in favour of the Focke Achgelis Ga 330 gyroglider, which would be used by U-boats.

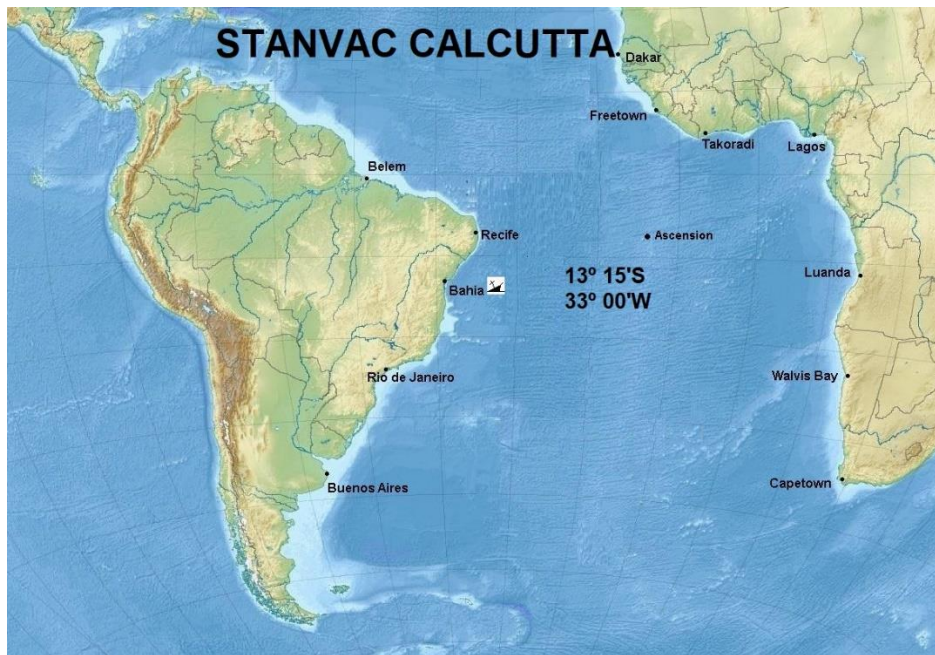
The *Stanvac Calcutta* had departed Montevideo, Uruguay on 29 May. She was travelling in ballast, heading for Caripito in Venezuela, where there was a Standard Oil refinery.

The *Stier* had also departed Montevideo a day after the *Stanvac Calcutta* and a week later intercepted the tanker around 500 miles (800 km) east of Pernambuco. The weather was poor, with rough seas, and the *Stier* appeared out of a squall, heading for the tanker and signalling for her to stop. However, in a preplanned move, Karlsson turned to bring its guns to bear, and it opened fire. One shell from the 4-inch gun disabled one of the *Stier's* 150 mm guns. However, the German ship was able to make use of its greater firepower.

The 5-inch anti-aircraft gun suffered several misfires due to old ammunition, and meanwhile, after some 15 minutes of fighting, several men on the tanker had been killed as it was hit several times. The dead included the captain. However, the 4-inch gun continued firing even after it was damaged by shrapnel.

The *Stier* then fired a single torpedo, hitting the tanker on the port side, and the vessel began to sink, and was abandoned. The German ship lowered boats and began picking up survivors.

During the brief battle, the *Stier* had fired 148 rounds, plus the torpedo, whereas the *Stanvac Calcutta* had fired only 25.



Site of the fight⁷



Cadet-Midshipman Edwin J O'Hara was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal posthumously for his part in the action.

Of the crew and Armed Guards aboard the tanker, 16 had been killed, but 37 survivors were picked up, 14 of these being wounded (one of whom later died). Only two German sailors had been wounded. On 2 June, one of the wounded survivors, an Ordinary Seaman named Martin Hyde, died of his wounds and was buried at sea with honours, and with a US flag draped over him.⁸

⁷ <https://www.sixtant.net/2011/artigos.php?cat=ships-hit-panama-13&sub=panamanian-ships-lost&tag=12%29stanvac-calcutta-%28raider-stier%29>

⁸ <https://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?131825>



*MS Charlotte Schliemann*⁹

On 12 June, the *Stier* rendezvoused with the supply tanker, MS *Charlotte Schliemann*,¹⁰ and 17 of the rescued crew, plus seven Armed Guard, were transferred. They were subsequently transferred once more, this time to the freighter *Doggerbank*, which took them to Japan, via Batavia (modern day Jakarta) and Singapore, where they remained for the rest of the war in Camp Fukuoka on Kyushu, where some 200 of the more than 1,000 US, British, Dutch, Australian, Canadian and Norwegian inmates died during the war.¹¹



*The Doggerbank under her former name Speybank*¹²

⁹ <https://www.sixtant.net/2011/artigos.php?cat=raiders-uboats-&-supply-ships-in-south-atlantic&sub=ships-tankers&tag=3%29supply-ship-charlotte-schliemann>

The MS *Charlotte Schliemann* had been built in Denmark in 1928 and operated by a Norwegian company until sold to a German one in 1939 and given a new name.

¹⁰ Between February 1942 and February 1944, she supplied various raiders and U-boats in both the South Atlantic and latterly the Indian Ocean. However, in February 1944, a Catalina flying-boat operating from Mauritius sighted her and, on the 9 February, the destroyer HMS *Relentless* caught up with, and sank her south-east of Mauritius: <https://uboat.net/forums/read.php?20,58737,58741>

¹¹ Fukuoka POW Camp #1 - *Kashii* (Pine Tree Camp), Kyushu Island. See: http://mansell.com/pow_resources/camplists/fukuoka/fuk_01_fukuoka/fukuoka_01/Page01.htm

The *Doggerbank*, which had been a British ship called *Speybank* and captured by the German navy in the Indian Ocean by the commerce raider *Atlantis* in February 1941. She had sown mines on the approaches to Cape Town until sent to Yokohama, to bring back a valuable cargo as a “blockade runner”. However, she was torpedoed by a U-boat on 3 March 1943, with just 15 survivors escaping – but only one of these was still alive when the boat they were on board was picked up by a Spanish vessel 26 days later:

<https://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?30842>

¹² <https://uboat.net/allies/merchants/ship/2707.html>

On 27 July, the *Stier* met with the *Charlotte Schliemann* again and took on more fuel. This time another 10 men were transferred from the *Stier*, and these would eventually be landed at Yokohama in October, to spend the rest of the war at Camp Osaka.¹³

Those transferred to Japan are said to have been held in the hold of the ship, with only bales of straw for bedding. The Germans left 100 prisoners with the Japanese in Singapore (where they would be employed on the notorious Burma railway project). Those taken to Japan itself, as the *Stanvac Calcutta* survivors were, are said to have been put to work loading ships, planting rice, and building dams; working five days a week the first year, and six days a week the second year, and the seven days during the last year. They were fed rice, pickled radish, seaweed, and tea.¹⁴

The *Stier* continued its mission, but sank only two more ships before, on 27 September, it came up against another armed merchant vessel, the *Stephen Hopkins*,¹⁵ with both ships being sunk in the resulting fight – the *Stier* suffering such damage that she was scuttled.¹⁶ Among those rescued after the battle was one of the *Scanvac Calcutta* crewmen, who had been the most seriously wounded and had therefore not been transferred previously. The German supply ship, *Tannenfels*, which had meeting with the *Stier* when the *Stephen Hopkins* had come along, took this crewman to Occupied France, where he continued his recovery before being transferred to German prisoner-of-war camp Milag Nord, near Bremen.

It was only when this survivor wrote to the Socony-Vacuum Company from France in March 1943 that the company and the War Shipping Administration discovered that there were survivors of a ship that failed to arrive, with the crew having been declared dead.¹⁷ In fact,

¹³ Osaka Main Camp, Chikko Osaka. One crewman died in the camp in March 1944. See: http://www.mansell.com/pow_resources/camplists/osaka/chikko/warcrimes_report.htm
The main camp, established in 1942, when the first British arrived from Hong Kong. It was bombed in Jun 1945 and evacuated to various other sites nearby.

¹⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20220119203142/http://www.usmm.org/pow.html>

¹⁵ Only launched in May 1942, this US-flag *Liberty* ship was on its first cargo run, from Cape Town to Surinam, and was under charter to the WSA. It was the only US merchant vessel to sink a German surface combatant during the war.

¹⁶ All but two of her crew survived, and returned to France on the German supply ship *Tannenfels*, which was accompanying *Stier* at the time of the action.

¹⁷ <http://www.usmm.org/calcutta.html>

in November 1942, death certificates had been issued by the War Shipping Administration for all crew members and benefits paid to next of kin. The, in May 1943, the company was informed by the US Government that 27 crewmen were prisoners in Japan – following which the War Shipping Administration revoked the death benefits and attempted to recoup to get the risk insurance benefits.¹⁸

The *Stanvac Calcutta* was awarded a Merchant Marine Gallant Ship Citation -

*When about 500 miles off the coast of Brazil she was attacked by a heavily armed raider which came up close on her in a heavy squall. Though armed with only a 4" rifle aft and a 3" antiaircraft gun the ship tried to escape in a running fight. On the 5th round fired, the STANVAC CALCUTTA knocked out one of the raiders 15 cm guns but the next round from the enemy guns shattered the pointers scope and sight bar. The crew continued to fight the gun by laying without signs until the ammunition magazine was hit and the ship began to sink. With fourteen dead and fourteen seriously injured, the crew was forced to abandon ship and were taken prisoners. This heroic defense against overwhelming odds caused the name of the STANVAC CALCUTTA to be perpetuated as a Gallant Ship.*¹⁹



The Gallant Ship Award is presented by the Secretary of Transportation to any US-flag or foreign ship “participating in outstanding or gallant action in a marine disaster or other emergency to save life or property at sea”. It was inaugurated by President Roosevelt during World War 2 to recognise excellence and bravery in merchant mariners.

THE WAR SHIPPING ADMINISTRATION

The War Shipping Administration (WSA) was established during World War 2 to acquire and manage civilian shipping that the US required for the war effort. It allocated vessels to the Army, Navy, or civilian requirements.

¹⁸ <https://www.aukevisser.nl/t2tanker/t-tankers-2/id1118.htm>

¹⁹ <https://www.maritime.dot.gov/history/gallant-ship-award/ss-stanvac-calcutta>

Concerns about the availability of shipping had led to the formation of the Strategic Shipping Board on the entry of the US into the war in December 1941. However, inter-organisation differences and other difficulties hindered its effectiveness, and it was superseded (though not entirely replaced) by the WSA in February 1942.²⁰ This new body was separate from the US Maritime Commission, established in 1936,²¹ which oversaw design and construction of merchant type vessels, including the famous *Liberty* and *Victory* mass-produced merchant ships – though cooperation was helped by both having the same Admiral in charge.

The role of the WSA was as a *“temporary war agency responsible for acquiring control over and operating all American merchant vessels other than those assigned to the Army and Navy”*. The WSA took control of and coordinated the use of all offshore merchant vessels under various charters - such as the time charter under which the *Stanvac Calcutta* operated. It also instituted a new ship-building program to replace the Liberty ships with more agile Victory ships.²² The cost of building and operating the US wartime merchant fleet reached a grand total of more than \$22,500,000,000.²³

The WSA also worked closely with the British Ministry of War Transport to make the most efficient use of available tonnage, by means of the Combined Shipping Adjustment Board. The WSA also included the Recruitment and Manning Organization (RMO) which was tasked with providing the necessary crewmen.

By VJ-day in 1945, 733 American merchant vessels of over 1,000 gross tons had been sunk, this equating to more than half the tonnage of the prewar Merchant Marine. A total of

²⁰ <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-9054-establishing-the-war-shipping-administration>

²¹ The Maritime Commission had been created to revive the US merchant fleet, with a shipbuilding program to design and build 500 modern cargo ships to replace those dating from World War 1 that comprised the bulk of the merchant marine at the time, and to administer a subsidy system to offset the cost differential between building in the US and operating ships under the US flag. It also formed the US Maritime Service for the training of seagoing ship's officers to man the new fleet.

²² <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/merchant-marine-world-war-ii>

²³ *The United States Merchant Marine At War: Report of the War Shipping Administrator to the President* (War Shipping Administration, 1946): <https://www.maritime.dot.gov/sites/marad.dot.gov/files/docs/outreach/history/vessels-maritime-administration/9761/theunitedstatesmerchantmarineatwar.pdf>

5,638 merchant seamen and officers were dead and missing, and 581 had become prisoners of war. In fact, in the first part of 1943, casualties among sailors were greater proportionately than in all the armed services combined.

In 1948, WSA functions were returned to the Maritime Commission.

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

28 December 2024

WRECK SECTION N. 359 12052 c.

REPORT OF TOTAL LOSS, CASUALTY, &c.

No. 52756 in R. B. Wreck No. 14460 Date of writing this report 10/10/42

Vessel's Name *S. Tanker Stanvac Calcutta of Panama* Tons Gross 10169 Net 6114

Built at *San Francisco, Mass.* When 1941 Casualty notice sent to Owner Owner's reply

Owner's Name *Calcutta Shipping Co. Ltd.*
 Address *c/o Standard Vacuum Oil Co. Incorporated
 26 Broadway, New York, U.S.*

Case previously before Date Particulars of Classification
 Classing Committee. Last Minute +100A1 +400A1
 2,42 2,42
 Changing petroleum in bulk
 Killed for oil fuel 4,401 FT above 150°F

Date of Casualty *6 October*

Précis of particulars of Casualty *Left Montevideo on the 29th May, 1942
 for Trinidad and has not been heard of since.
 Closing entries made at Lloyd's on the 30th
 September, 1942.*

3-6

Suggested Record /
 Date of Committee 13 OCT 1942
 Committee's Minute *Noted*

Character Assigned *As now
 Subject*

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 W1193-0186

Lloyds Register Report of Total Loss of the Stanvac Calcutta²⁴

²⁴ <https://hec.lrfoundation.org.uk/archive-library/documents/lrf-pun-w1193-0186-w>