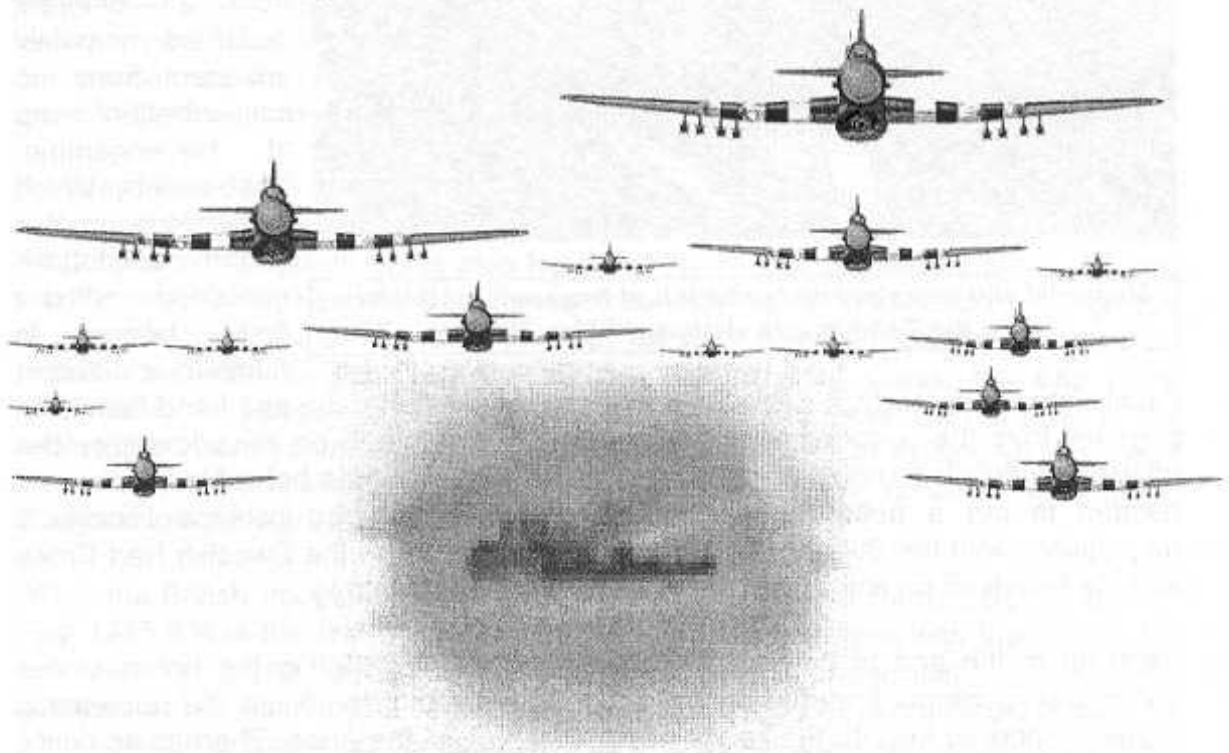


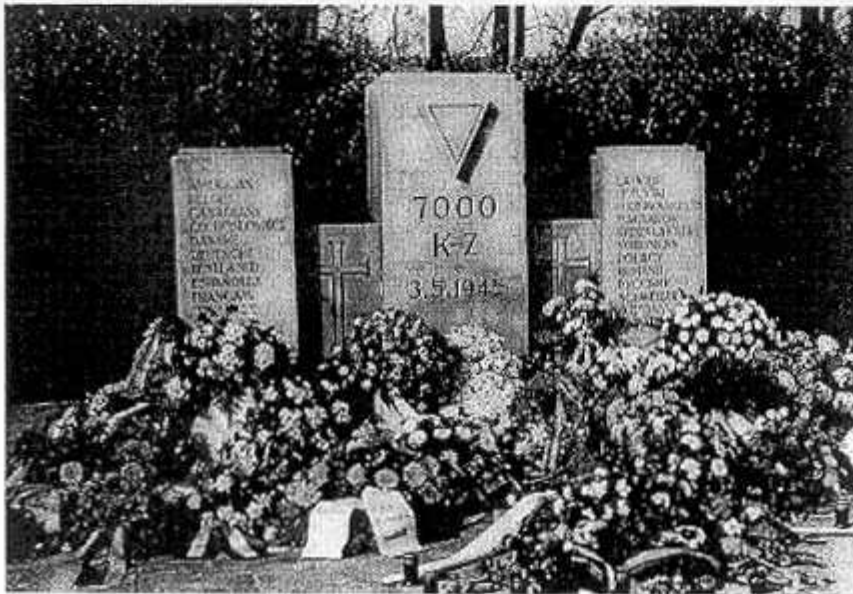
CAP ARCONA



Summary of the CAP ARCONA disaster in the bay of Neustadt on 3rd May, 1945 - on behalf of the town of Neustadt in Holstein, written by Wilhelm Lange

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Memorial and cemetery on the beach of Neustadt in Holstein for the CAP ARCONA victims, 3rd May 1995

Shortly before the war ended one of the largest disasters in shipping history claimed more than 8,000 victims in the bay of Neustadt. The victims were from 24 different countries, mainly prisoners from the concentration camp at Neuengamme. The events which preceded this tragedy cannot be explained without first taking a number of different

details into account which came to light during research. On the one hand the death marches from the surrounding concentration camps have to be considered, on the other hand detailed knowledge of the action of those involved behind the scenes is needed to get a better understanding of the events, for instance Himmler's negotiations with the Swedish Red Cross or the information the Swedish Red Cross and the British air reconnaissance received before 3rd May 1945.

Right up to the end of the war the Nazis succeeded in hiding the horror of the concentration camps from the public. It was obvious that the Nazis did not want a single prisoner to fall into the hands of the enemy, i. e. the Allies. There is no doubt that this order came from Himmler himself although during the last weeks of the war it was the general course of action by the leading Nazis according to instruction given at a number of courses in Posen.

As early the autumn of 1944 initial preparations to evacuate the concentration camps to so-called *Ausweichlager*, which were camps set up to avoid contact with the enemy, were made. In order to withhold the cruel truth about the concentration camps from the Allies, the documents of the camps were destroyed, mass graves

were removed and the places of execution were destroyed before the Allies entered the camps. The concentration camp at Neuengamme was empty when it was handed over on the day of Hamburg's capitulation on 3rd May 1945.



Memorial for the concentration camp in Wöbbelin

If the concentration camp prisoners had been killed beforehand, their bodies would have been removed, if they were still alive, they would be on death marches to the main camps or to the so-called *Ausweichlager*. This kind of 'camp' could have been a barn as well as a quarry or a mine, an empty P.O.W. camp or a ship, just to give a

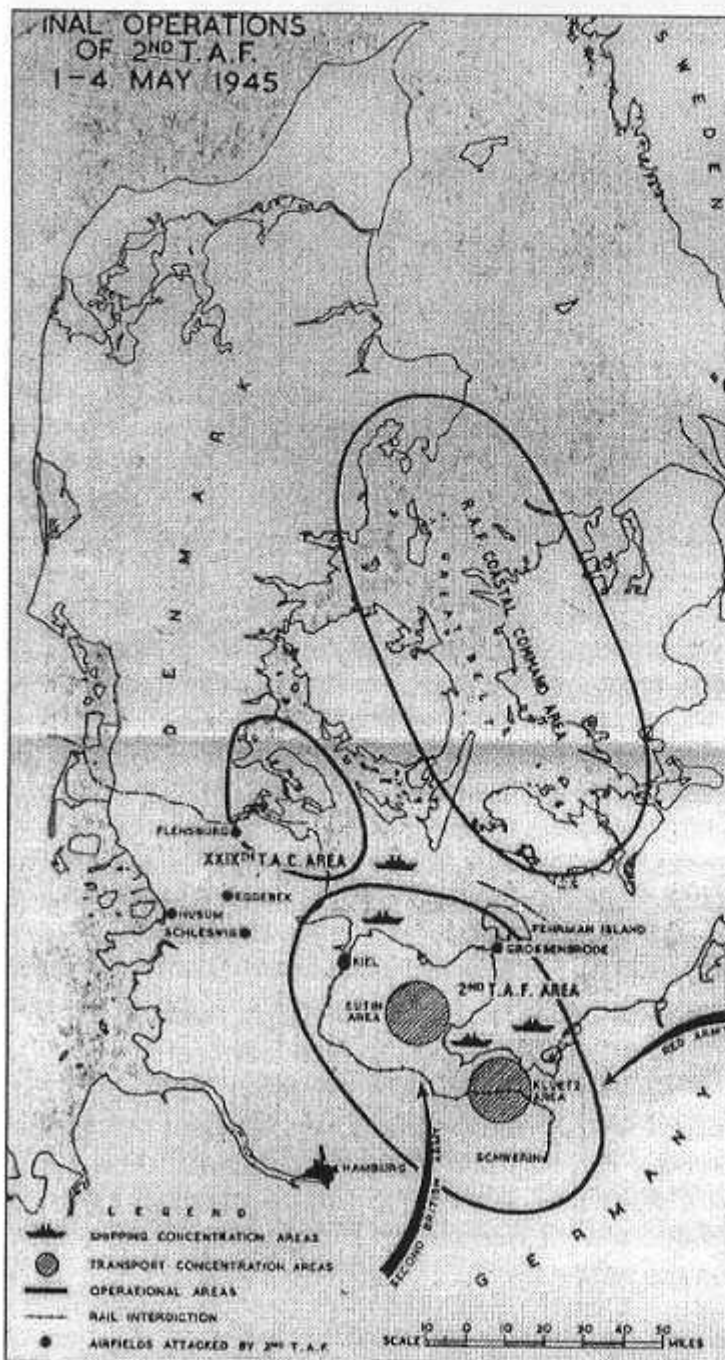
few examples. That is why it was a plan doomed to failure because the allied military reconnaissance were not able to detect where the concentration camp prisoners were. With the war almost over, the Nazis failed to keep these horrors a secret.

By May the death marches had claimed many victims. Himmler's orders to exterminate witnesses, i. e. the concentration camp prisoners, is not only proof of the despotism of the system but is also typical of the Nazi leadership at the end of the war. Consequently, Himmler tried to negotiate with the Allies about selected groups of prisoners in order to find a way out of his own hopeless situation. Apart from negotiations with the representative of the Swedish Red Cross, the Earl Folke Bernadotte, in Lübeck concerning the rescue of the Scandinavians from the concentration camps and the proposal to surrender in part - this proposal was made without Hitler's knowledge - Himmler met a representative of the Jewish World Congress on 25th April 1945.

When the British troops liberated the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen on 15th April 1945 it was the first time that they had come face to face with the horror of a concentration camp. Because of these revelations the decision was made to advance as fast as possible because it was hoped a rapid advance would rescue the prisoners (DP's, forced labour convicts, P.O.W.s and concentration camp prisoners). The British intelligence report of 28th April 1945 shows that this plan turned out to be quite difficult while the Nazis defended the KZ Sandbostel stubbornly and the British troops did not succeed in liberating the prisoners.

During the war the Allies had three methods of planning and preparing an reconnoitring operation: first, espionage by members of resistance groups together with reconnaissance patrols at the front; second the analysis and deciphering of

signals and third air reconnaissance. By the end of the war the remaining headquarters of the northern part of the Reich and its civilian government had assembled in and around Neustadt in Holstein. The town of Neustadt in Holstein was itself overcrowded with civilian refugees and wounded soldiers who were accommodated in several military hospitals. In addition to this the navy had an important submarine training base at Neustadt and the secret Signals Experimental Establishment was in Pelzerhaken. This was the situation when the convoys of evacuated concentration camp prisoners from different camps reached the town and the naval base. From there launches took them to the floating concentration camps.



In Lübeck the negotiations of the Swedish Red Cross were led by Dr Arnoldsson. On 29th April 1945 he received information about the horrible situation of the Neuengamme concentration camp prisoners, thanks to an anonymous letter, who were at that time in the harbour of Lübeck.

The rescue of the Scandinavian prisoners concentrated in Neuengamme was led by Earl Bernadotte of the Swedish Red Cross. By 21st April 1945 this operation had been completed. The remaining 10,000 prisoners from other countries had either been brought by train to the Vorwerker Industriehafen in Lübeck or had been forced to join the death marches. Later, the SS requisitioned the launches which were to take the concentration camp prisoners to the CAP ARCONA and other ships. Once on board these ships the concentration camp prisoners were again tortured by the ever present SS, and several hundred prisoners were killed. The civilian crew had to take the dead to the launch ALMA, which then brought the

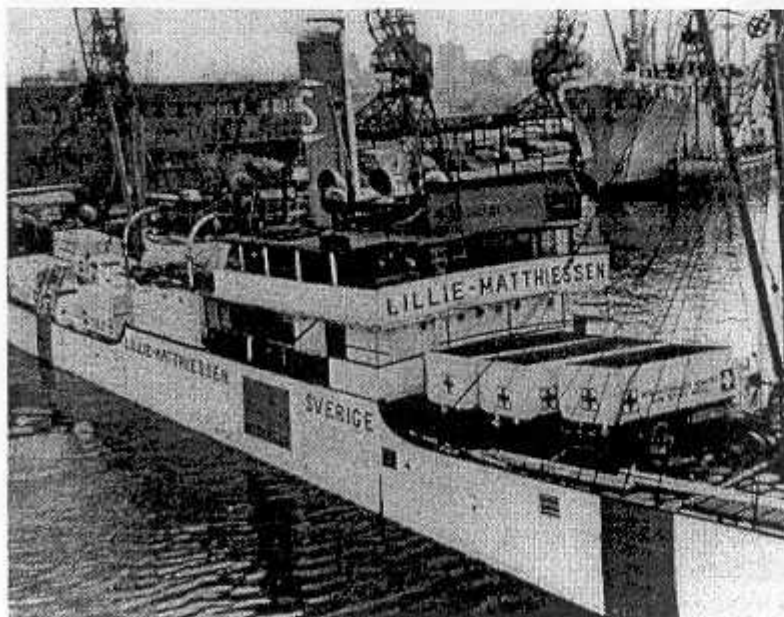
corpses to the harbour so that they could be buried in mass graves in and around Neustadt. The conditions on the ships were appalling - there was hardly enough to

eat or drink, no medicine or bandages for the sick, and the Soviet prisoners were squeezed into one room on the CAP ARCONA without light or fresh air. Reichskommissar für Seeschifffahrt (for sea shipping) and Gauleiter (Reichsstatthalter of Hamburg) Karl Kaufmann was the man responsible for assembling this fleet of floating concentration camps. He requisitioned the ships as he wished to surrender Hamburg without any fighting and wanted to avoid any inconvenient inquiries. That is why he did not want to have any concentration camp prisoners in Hamburg.



A representative of Folke Bernadotte, Dr Arnoldsson from Göteborg, dealt with the concentration camp prisoners in the harbour of Lübeck and talked to the SS-Hauptsturmführer, who was in charge of the ATHEN with its 2,200 prisoners. Dr Arnoldsson offered to have a few hundred of the concentration camp prisoners who were ships LILLIE MATTHIESSEN

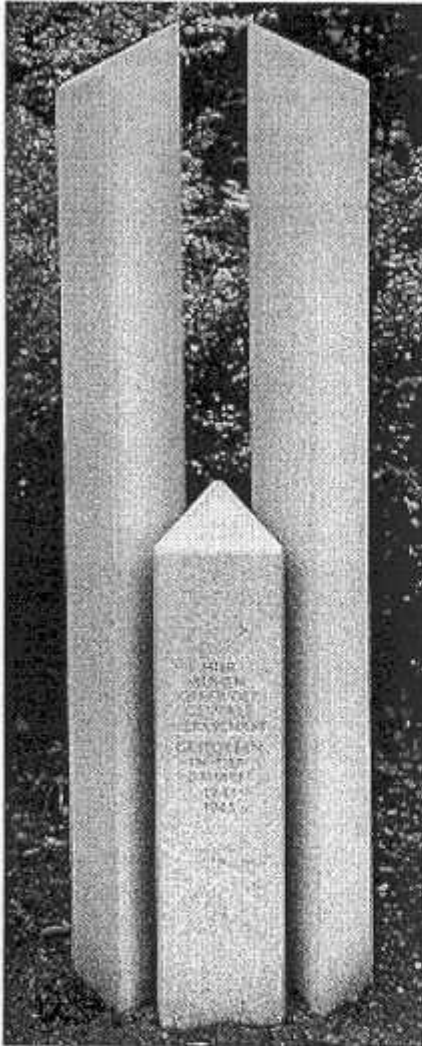
suffering the most brought to Sweden by the Red Cross and MAGDALENA.



On 30th April 250 prisoners, who were in better health, were ready for transport. There had been delays as the Germans wanted the prisoners to be dressed in civilian clothes. The SS-Hauptsturmführer said he did not know what to do with the remaining concentration camp prisoners. Dr Arnoldsson explained that he would not have enough room for all the prisoners who were on

board the ATHEN. He therefore advised the SS Hauptsturmführer to wait for the arrival of the British and to leave the surrender of these people to him.

In the afternoon of the same day 300 concentration camp prisoners who were quartered in a barn in Süsel were rescued by the Norwegian Björn Heger, who took great risks. This was when a German officer told Dr Arnoldsson about the prisoners who were already on board the CAP ARCONA.



Vorwerker cemetery in Lübeck

On 2nd May 1945 Dr Arnoldsson went to the ATHEN to prepare the surrender of the concentration camp prisoners to the British, but the ship had already gone to Neustadt to join a fleet of ships, which also had concentration camp prisoners from Neuengamme on board. Late in the afternoon of 2nd May 1945 the British air reconnaissance spotted two military convoys with at least six destroyers, some U-boats, escorts and large transport ships. They had just left Neustadt in Holstein and one ship had come under fire.

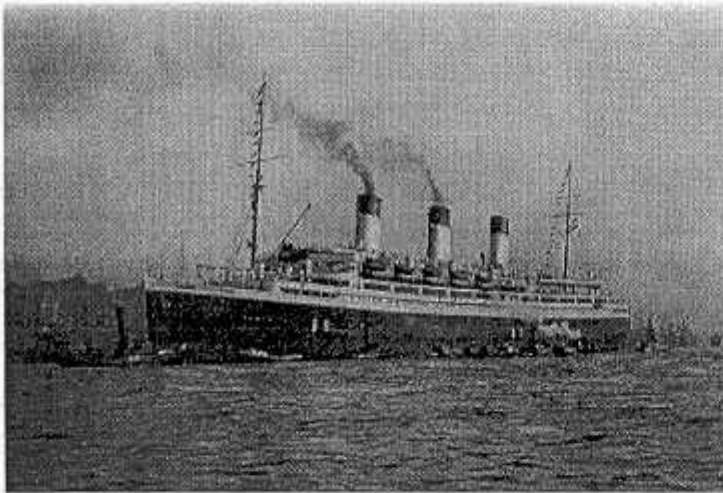
In the evening another ship heavily protected by warships was sighted off the coast of the island of Fehmarn.

Because it was not possible to immediately attack the convoys, the British decided to postpone any operation in the Baltic until the next day. The convoys were heading for Denmark and Norway. As the fleet of unmarked concentration camp ships and destroyers lay in the bay of Neustadt, it became obvious that the Nazis had set a treacherous trap for the Allies to attack these targets and annihilate the prisoners.

By making clever arrangements the captains of the floating concentration camps succeeded in keeping the number of prisoners comparatively low on board their ships. Furthermore, the rapid advance of the British ground forces could stop the death marches

from the concentration camp Sachsenhausen. On board there was a discussion about hoisting white flags in good time and illuminating the ships to avoid an attack. But as the warships were so close and the SS could have easily intervened nothing was done. Furthermore the order of 3rd April 1945 stated that a heavy collective punishment would be imposed if white flags were used.

On the morning of 3rd May 1945 Dr Arnoldsson told British headquarters that he had received information that there would be air raids over the bay and town of Neustadt, which would expose the prisoners to grave danger.



CAP ARCONA (before the Second World War)

He had no knowledge of the horrible things which happened on the beach between Neustadt and Pelzerhaken in the early hours of 3rd May. More than 200 people - including many Jewish women and children - from the concentration camp Stutthof near Danzig were murdered by SS and the Security Service (SD) after their barges had reached the shore at night and after they had hoped to be rescued. Some of the prisoners who

were still in good health had tried to find help ashore. Dozens of further executions took place at other places while other armed units rounded up the scattered prisoners. These 1,600 persons had reached the quay of the naval base on their barges the day before. For days on end and without food and drink at sea the concentration camp prisoners had been crowded together on the barges WOLFGANG and VATERLAND which had been towed by the tugs ADLER and BUSSARD. They had tried to find something to eat in the dustbins on the quayside, but the marines had forced them back on board the tugs, from where the SS had tried to transfer the prisoners over to the concentration camp ships, but without success. The tow ropes were then cut and the barges abandoned. Only the seagoing tugs reached the safety of the harbour, while the barges drifted to the shore during the night.



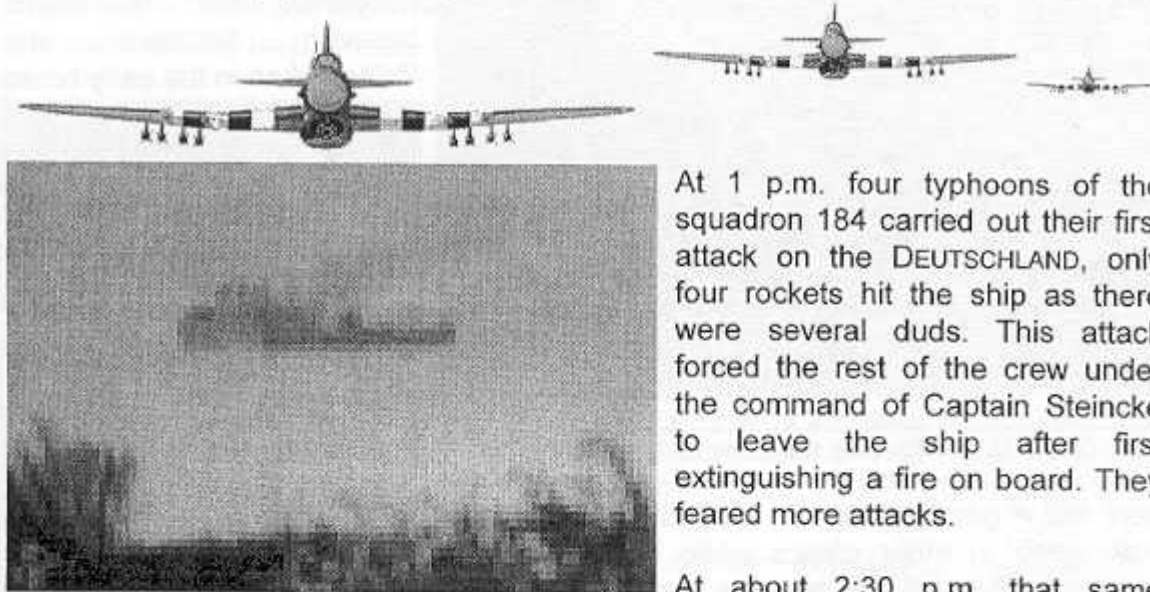
Mass grave for the concentration camp prisoners of Stutthof on the beach of Neustadt in Holstein

In the afternoon of 3rd May 1945 two British officers went to the office of the Swedish Red Cross in Lübeck to ask Dr Arnoldsson about the details of the ships. After hearing his report, they promised to act at once.

Unfortunately, it was already too late to stop the British operation in the bay of Neustadt.

Four squadrons of British Typhoon fighter-bombers of the Second Tactical Air Force had already taken off to attack their targets in the bay of Neustadt. These single-engined planes with their powerful engines of 2,600 horse power were all armed with four 20 mm automatic cannons and with eight 60 lb rockets or with two 1,000 lb bombs for this particular naval action. Their bases

were airfields in Hustedt (squadron 184), Ahlhorn B. III (squadrons 263 and 197) and Plantlünne B 103 (squadron 198).

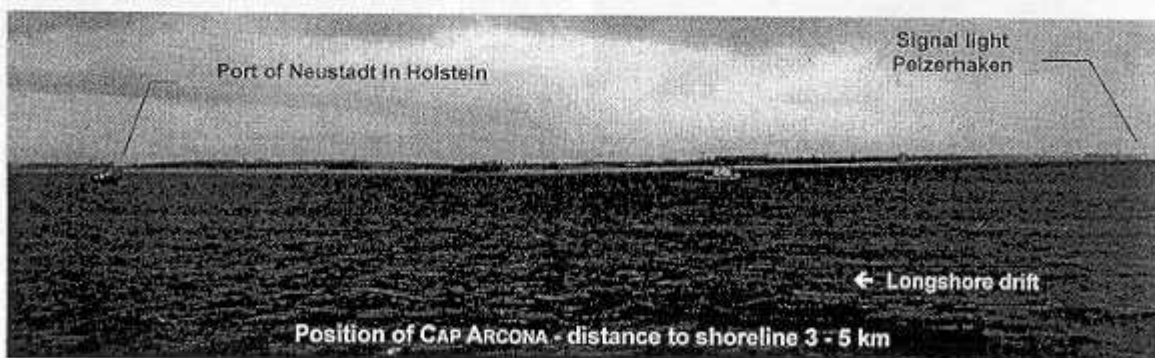


**CAP ARCONA (in the background) and THIELBEK,
3rd May 1945, 2:30 p.m.**

At 1 p.m. four typhoons of the squadron 184 carried out their first attack on the DEUTSCHLAND, only four rockets hit the ship as there were several duds. This attack forced the rest of the crew under the command of Captain Steincke to leave the ship after first extinguishing a fire on board. They feared more attacks.

At about 2:30 p.m. that same afternoon nine typhoons of the squadron 198 attacked the CAP ARCONA and the THIELBEK. Five

planes concentrated their fire power on the passenger ship CAP ARCONA which was grey. The cargo vessel THIELBEK sank immediately with about 2,800 people on board while the CAP ARCONA with at least 5,000 prisoners on board was ablaze from stem to stern. The combination of these deadly weapons and the cold Baltic meant that there was very little chance of the prisoners surviving. The fuel left in the tanks exploded and tore the ship apart, causing it to sink quickly. There were only about 50 survivors from the THIELBEK and about 450 from the CAP ARCONA who managed to escape from this hell.



In a third wave nine fighter-bombers of the squadron 263 again hit the DEUTSCHLAND and she caught fire.

In a fourth wave eight typhoons of the squadron 197 caused the DEUTSCHLAND to capsize after their bombs had hit her.

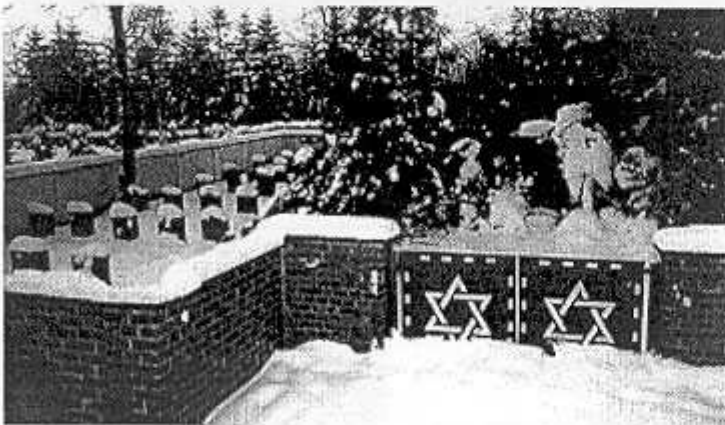
During these raids U-boats in the harbour entrance were also sunk and other warships were hit by aircraft cannons. The RAF squadrons suffered three losses, one plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire.



British tanks on the market-place in Neustadt in Holstein on 3rd May 1945

On land (Am Holm) British armoured forces went into action and came under fire from the guns of the ATHEN. This ship was alongside the quay of the naval base and had 2,000 concentration camp prisoners on board. Miraculously, no one was killed. The ship caught fire a little later and had to be towed out of the harbour into the bay as there was ammunition on board.

In Neustadt panic broke out and the German departments could not organize a rescue operation to save those who were fighting for their lives at sea.



Jewish cemetery in Neustadt in Holstein with victims of the CAP ARCONA, THIELBEK, and the Stutthof-barges

At around 4 p.m. the British (Sqn/coy of 23 H and 8 RB) marched into the town and encountered no resistance. The British were shocked to find so much misery and expected to find a concentration camp. But there were no reprisals. Helping the survivors from the ships was the first priority. People from Neustadt had to feed and to clothe them.

All those in need were given accommodation in civilian and military hospitals, or the empty marine barracks depending on how ill they were.

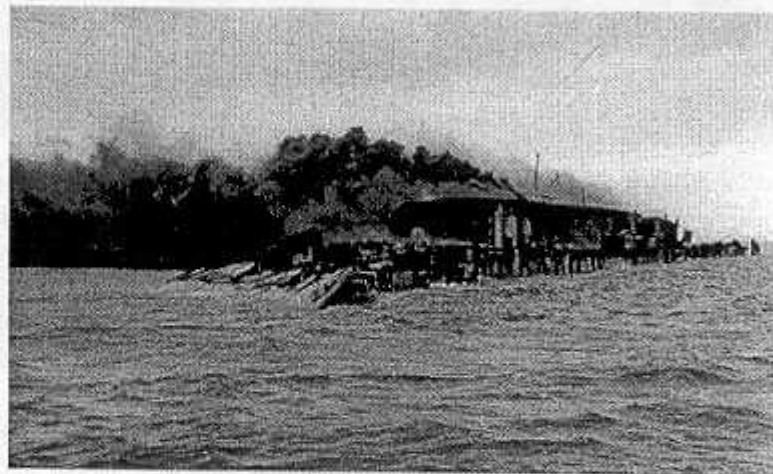
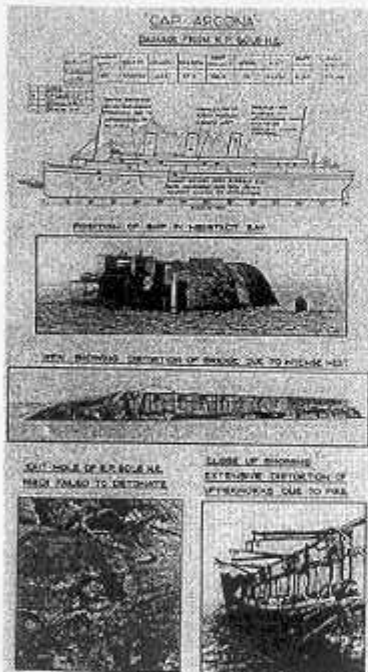
In the evening a boat was finally sent to the CAP ARCONA to rescue the remaining survivors. The British ordered that the corpses which had drifted ashore to be immediately buried on the spot. As a result, many of the graves were not very deep and well marked.



There were no major problems during the period of occupation. The murder of a young girl by a British soldier during the night of 5th to 6th of May remained an isolated case.

Most of the survivors of the disaster returned to their countries as soon as possible without worrying about the part the Germans or the British had played in this tragedy.

Today there are 14 large cemeteries along the bay of Lübeck to remind us of the tragedy and every year services are held in memory of the 7,000 concentration camp prisoners who died on 3rd May 1945, victims of a tyrant's war and an evil war.



A team of shipbreakers dismantling the CAP ARCONA in 1948

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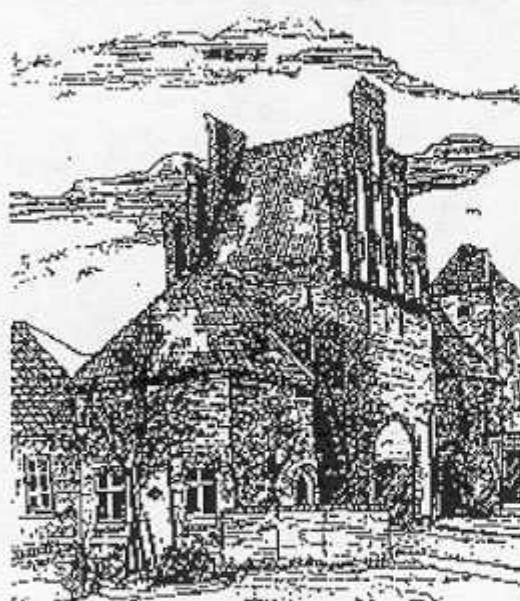
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The CAP ARCONA Museum of the Municipality Neustadt in Holstein



Kremper Gate, in the CAP ARCONA museum

Directions: Neustadt train station or Bundesautobahn A1, exit at Neustadt and proceed to the city center.

Hours: April, May, September, October: Tuesday - Saturday 3 p.m. to 5 p.m., Sunday 10 a.m. to 12 p.m., closed Mondays.

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Year round tours available to groups and individuals by prior arrangement.

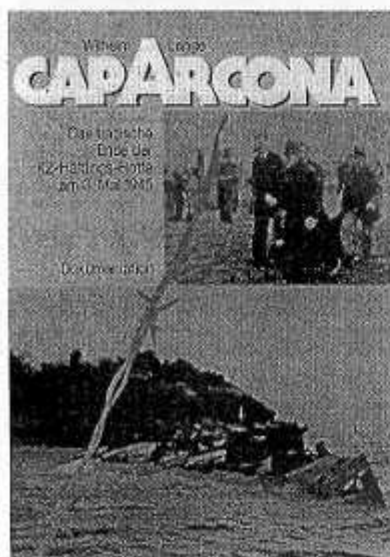
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