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His dash to the lifeboat station "was like running through an ugly nightmare, with the flames, the smoke and the fumes, the twisted wreckage, the dead and wounded sprawled grotesquely about." Though wounded, he survived the sinking.

At sea for the first time, he wrote home: "This is a big ship. You've got nothing to worry about." During battle he scoffed at the superstition about lighting three cigarettes on a match. He lived, but those who warned him were killed.

DURING THE SUMMER AND FALL of 1940, the Battle of the Atlantic, though not yet christened by Winston Churchill, had already developed into a fearful struggle that threatened to choke the life from a beleaguered Britain. Though the Germans still had relatively few U-boats at sea, their operational effectiveness was greatly increased by the new Atlantic bases acquired at the fall of France.

The Allies countered as best they could but their illequipped naval and air forces were soon stretched to the breaking point. They seemed wholly unable to gain any significant reduction in the terrible price that was being paid in both cargoes and lives.

The toll for June was sixty-one British ships of 282,560 tons; July, sixty-four ships of 271,056 tons; August, fifty-six ships of 278,323 tons; September, sixty-two ships of 324,030 tons; October (when, in three days, thirty-eight ships from three convoys were sunk) 301,892 tons. Then came November, the worst month of all when seventy-three ships of 303,682 tons were sent to the bottom.

For merchant seamen on the North Atlantic convoy routes, the prospects were dimly bleak. If a man's ship were sunk, the odds against his survival were 3 to 2; but there were men who had three and even four ships torpedoed under them. Survivors, picked up from rafts and open boats, were landed daily with arms and legs ripped off, skin burned black and sometimes frozen.

Ashore, merchant seamen revelled with a kind of last-chance determination, but even then they could not escape the haunting fear that the next crossing might be the last. Onto this grim and darkening stage, on Nov. 5, 1940, plodded convoy HX 84, thirty-eight grey ships huddled together as if for warmth on the infinite face of the mid-Atlantic.

Their sole guardian was HMS Jervis Bay, 13,839 tons, fresh from a refit in Saint John, N.B., an eighteen-year-old merchant liner that had been requisitioned by the government and converted to serve. However unsuitable she may have seemed, as an ocean escort.

She qualified as a limited man-of-war chiefly by virtue of her navy company of two hundred and fifty-five officers and men—some thirty of them Canadians and Newfoundlanders—and her seven six-inch guns, all cast around the turn of the century.

The sun was slowly setting as Able Seaman Walter Lloyd Darnbrough, from his lookout position on the port side of the Jervis Bay, peered through powerful binoculars and methodically traced a ninety-degree arc; forty-five degrees left and forty-five degrees right.

Since the convoy cleared Halifax eight days before, Darnbrough had taken his turn on every watch but had seen nothing. Now he was motionless, staring hard into his glasses. What he saw faintly breaking the horizon caused him to imagine an Indian wigwam rising on a distant plain. Jerking up the phone in his steel cubicle, he pressed the button and, speaking quickly, said, "Ship bearing red nine-O."

He had scarcely resumed his study of the far-off vessel, still only a conical-shaped object on the rim of the glistening waters, when the phone beside him buzzed. "Report to the captain on the bridge," a voice instructed.

Though this was his fifth convoy run in the Jervis Bay, Walter Darnbrough, a quiet, twenty-year-old from east-end Toronto whom his British shipmates called Danny, had rarely even seen the captain, let alone stood before him face to face. As he sprang toward the ladder leading to the bridge, two thoughts hung balanced in his mind: Did Captain Fegen intend to congratulate him for his alertness, perhaps tell him he was the first to spot the oncoming ship, or would he tick him off for not being more prompt? He never found out because halfway up he was halted in his tracks by the penetrating clangor of the alarm bells—a strident signal that takes precedence over all other things—and he hurried off to his action station. It was 4:55 p.m.

The events of the next crowded hour—a hellish kaleidoscope of death, fire, fury and frustration—were to send the names Jervis Bay and Capt. Fogarty Fegen pulsating around the globe. Indeed, these same events were to frame in laurel the pledge Captain Fegen gave the crew of the Jervis Bay on April 2, 1940, the day after he took command.

"So far," he said quietly, "we haven't met any real action. But I promise you this much ..." and here he had the attention of his men "... if the gods are good to us and we meet the enemy, I shall take you in as close as I possibly can."

Later in the House of Commons Winston Churchill used the words that probably best describe the way in which Fogarty Fegen honored his pledge—"forlorn and heroic." It was conduct that earned Fegen a posthumous Victoria Cross: his ship and men, a flood of emotional eulogies.

Not long after she tipped into view that late November afternoon, the rapidly approaching stranger was identified as a German pocket battleship. Fogarty Fegen must have known then that his fate was sealed. There could be no thought of flight. His duty was to occupy the enemy

as long as possible while the thirty-seven merchant ships in his care sought to escape.

At forty-nine, Edward Stephen Fogarty Fegen was a controlled, serious man, with deep-set eyes, thick tufted brows and a prominent nose. No matter how hopeless the odds, he was faced with a situation that his whole background, training and character had prepared him to meet.

Though born in the English naval town of Chatham, he came of an old Tipperary family. His relatives, paradoxically, had included prominent figures in the Irish independence movement, but it was for their dedicated service to the Royal Navy that the Fegens were probably best known. His father had been a vice-admiral, his grandfather a captain. One of his ancestors—a namesake, in fact—commanded a frigate at Trafalgar in 1805.

Standing on the bridge in his charcoalgrey dulle coat, Fogarty Fegen signaled the convoy to scatter. As the merchantmen, 220,000 tons of shipping in all, began to twist and turn behind him, he called for full ahead and the Jervis Bay surged toward her antagonist at an all-out fifteen knots.

The pocket battleship Admiral Scheer, ten thousand formidable tons of modern naval architecture, could make close to twenty-eight knots. She was fitted with six eleven-inch guns in massive triple turrets, one forward and one aft. Even her secondary armament was impressive—eight 5.9-inch guns and an anti-aircraft battery. For reconnaissance, she carried a seaplane that the crew called their “parrot.”

The Scheer’s commander, Capt. Theodor Krancke, having established that the Jervis Bay was an auxiliary cruiser of some sort, apparently bent on standing in his way, resolved to dispose of her as quickly as possible. There was not much daylight left and he was impatient to be about the primary business at hand: destruction of the freighters and tankers that were making out in all directions behind a thick smoke screen and the oncoming darkness.

The Admiral Scheer opened fire at eighteen thousand yards. The first salvo fell short by about fifty yards. The bursting shells sent great columns of water spouting skyward, thirty feet above the Jervis Bay’s boat deck. One piece of honed shrapnel sliced through the air and hit a man who was stationed on the No. 1 port gun. It severed his head from his body.

The second salvo passed over the target, striking the water about a hundred yards from the Jervis Bay’s starboard side. The third found its mark; the fore topmast came crashing down, the bridge was hit, the range-finding and directional system were knocked out. A gun was blown over the side, crew and all.

Fires were breaking out all over the Jervis Bay and everywhere could be heard the sound of shrapnel—razor-sharp slivers and jagged lumps of metal—whining through the air and digging into the decks. Walter Darnbrough was at his action station—sixth position in the seven-man crew on the stern gun—when

he and his mates turned to see standing near them a wraith-like figure: a steward or cook, clad only in white pants and shoes, rivulets of blood running from a dozen wounds in his arms and upper body. He gazed mutely at them for a moment, then turned and walked off into the smoke and noise.

While the Jervis Bay shuddered and heaved under the Scheer’s assault, she continued to head toward the pocket battleship. One or two of her forward guns were firing but, with an effective range of only twelve thousand yards, their shots plopped harmlessly into the sea.

In the stern, Darnbrough and the others stood tensely by a gun that was never to fire. One member of the crew had a full-rigged, four-masted schooner tattooed on his chest; Darnbrough remembers it as “the only beautiful tattoo I ever saw.” Somehow, at the height of the Scheer’s bombardment—probably cordite ignited by hot shrapnel—the man was instantly transformed into a human torch.

Quickly seized, he was plunged screaming into the gun tank, a large wooden cask that was used for cooling the head of the rammer. When they lifted him out, the richly detailed schooner was gone, seared off with most of the skin on his body.

While Able Seaman Walter Darnbrough, who had always wanted to be a sailor, was getting this first-hand introduction to the horrors of war, another young Torontonion, Stoker John Smith, was moving cautiously about the burning ship carrying two cartons of cigarettes given him by the first lieutenant, who had told him to keep the gun crews in smokes.

Smith, who had been drafted to the Jervis Bay in a party of Royal Canadian Navy stokers, was at sea for the first time. He had been so impressed with the size of his new ship when he went aboard her in Halifax that he wrote a reassuring letter to his parents. “This is a big one,” he explained confidently. “You’ve got nothing to worry about.” When action stations sounded, he was in the stokers’ mess helping prepare tea. Until the first vibrations of exploding shells were felt, he thought it was just another drill.

After the cigarettes were thrust at him, Smith went doggedly about his assignment, though the futility of it all had become apparent to him. Then on the starboard side of the ship, where there was a degree of relative shelter from the enemy’s fire, he encountered two stewards eager for a smoke. He decided to have one himself and all three hunched down on the deck to get a light.

After the two stewards were lighted, one of them looked at Smith in surprise and said, “You’re not going to take the third light, are you?”

“I’m not superstitious,” Smith replied, bending down to the match. He was the only one of the three to survive.

Meanwhile, Fogarty Fegen, whose left arm had been torn away by shrapnel earlier in the action, climbed agonizingly down from the shattered and flaming bridge and made his way aft. Though pale and blood-soaked, he was still very much the captain as he surveyed his stricken ship. One of the most disturbing sights his eyes settled on was the Jervis

Bay’s ensign, lying nearby on the deck. It had been blown down with part of the gaff from the main mast. Amid bursting shells, a young sailor climbed perilously up the rigging to replace it. There it fluttered until the end, spotted, some say, with Fogarty Fegen’s blood.

For twenty-two minutes and twentytwo seconds, while the convoy dispersed behind her, the Jervis Bay was the Scheer’s exclusive target. Finally, her bridge was gone, her engines dead, her entire superstructure ablaze, the port side of her hull gashed open as if by a gigantic can opener. After Captain Fegen was found lying dead on deck, the senior surviving officer, Lt.-Comdr. G. L. Roe, who had been the Jervis Bay’s chief officer in peacetime, turned to the petty officer at his side and said, “Pass the word—abandon ship.”

When word reached the crew on the stern gun, Walter Darnbrough and another Canadian, twenty-year-old David Hawn of Ottawa, set out for their assigned lifeboat station. After a wild dash two thirds the length of the burning, shellblasted ship, they arrived at their boat, only to find it a charred and riddled shell.

It was like running through an ugly nightmare, with the flames, the smoke and the fumes, the twisted wreckage, the dead and wounded sprawled grotesquely about, the gaping holes in the warped deck and, near the canteen, an incongruous cluster of money—notes and shining silver.

Overlooking the stern area of the ship, Darnbrough and Hawn were about to step on a ladder to join a party of sailors unlashng a raft two decks below when the concussion of a bursting shell hurled them to the deck. They had both been hit by shrapnel splinters; Darnbrough in the hand, back and leg; Hawn in the left arm and temple.

They crawled away to the protection of a steel lookout enclosure and began praying aloud. In a few minutes they were on their feet again and arrived below in time to help heave the raft over the side. Then AB Hawn, tall, slim and dark-haired, climbed atop the railing, stood straight and vulnerable for an instant, and jumped. Darnbrough crawled through the railing, hung from the lower bar by one hand and let go. He struck the water with a shock that took his breath away.

When Darnbrough and Hawn reached the raft, fifteen feet by ten, six or seven men were already on it. Willing hands stretched out to pull them aboard. Soon it was jammed, with others clinging to the sides. John Smith, who had lowered himself into the water by a rope, found a place on a crowded hatch cover but gave it up to swim thirty feet to a raft that looked less burdened.

Like the hatch cover, it was constantly awash, but for the moment at least, there was more elbow room. In fact, he clambered aboard in time to witness a strange sight; a sailor, tortured by fear because he was unable to swim, lay face down on the pitching raft, violently resisting all efforts to make him sit up. Smith watched in horrified fascination until the man drowned with his head in a pool of whirling green sea water.

The Jervis Bay, a great sloping pyre, was slowly expiring. Stoker First Class Warren Stevens knew there wasn't much time. Just then he heard a splash; part of a bunker cover had been thrown into the water. Four men tried to get on it, and when it wouldn't hold them all, they climbed back on the sinking ship.

Stevens knew this was his last chance. The Jervis Bay was now settling fast, stern first, her bow out of the water. He made for the bunker cover, untied the line that secured it to the ship and shoved off.

The bow of the sinking ship rose higher and higher until it stood in the sea like a fiery beacon. Two men w-ho had been desperately trying to free a jammed lifeboat on the starboard side swung back and forth on ropes, like trapeze artists. After a muffled explosion, the Jervis Bay vanished, leaving a mass of eddying debris. Some of the thousands of steel drums that had packed her holds rocketed into the air and came down with a succession of smacks and bobbed there over her grave. It was 8 p.m.

Probably the last man to escape the doomed ship was Stoker Stevens. When she went down he was no more than thirty feet from her bow, alone on a piece of five-by-five bunker cover. Thirtyfour years old, short and sturdy, from Second Peninsula, Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia, Stevens had spent the whole of his working life as a fisherman. He knew the sea and its moods. A sharp wind was rising as he lifted the cowl of his duffle coat over his head, strapped himself to the crude raft with his money belt and prepared for the long night. Off in the distance, the Scheer's searchlights probed the blackness for stragglers from the convoy.

Sitting on a raft, waist high in water, Walter Darnbrough was holding Dave Hawn when his friend's head fell forward and he felt his body slump. "He died in my arms," Darnbrough says. "I didn't know how bad he was. It was his arm. He'd been losing blood all the time. But he never said anything. Maybe we could have put on a tourniquet."

Dave Hawn was given the only burial possible; he was rolled off into the sea. On John Smith's raft, a badly wounded young Newfoundlander died crying for his mother. Still others clung to the pieces of driftwood and the edges of the rafts until they had no strength left, or could no longer stand the paralyzing cold.

One man who never lost his grip was a stocky rating from Lancashire named James (Slinger) Wood. He led the singing on Darnbrough's raft until nobody cared any longer, then he cajoled, encouraged and joked. In spite of serious wounds to both thighs he stood fast against any sign of flagging hope. "They'll find us," he insisted. "We'll be rescued."

The dark shape they saw looked like a ship but nobody could be sure. A young midshipman, the senior executive officer aboard the raft, flashed SOS on the torch that had been brought from the Jervis Bay. Then they heard the sound of oars and a foreign voice called, "How many of you there?"

The lifeboat that soon appeared was one of the Jervis Bay's own, the only one, in fact, that got away. It was manned not by Germans but by Swedes. The reason for this was that at 11 p.m., some three hours earlier, the boat had come alongside a vessel that turned out to be the freighter Stureholm. 4,575 tons, out of Gothenburg, one of the ships of convoy HX 84. After the twenty men in it were taken aboard a party from the Stureholm's crew took over the boat and set out to look for more survivors.

The most seriously wounded were taken off Darnbrough's raft first. Darnbrough himself, completely exhausted, had fallen asleep hours before. A stout, middle-aged Englishman had wrapped

his arms around him to keep him from falling off. They waited for the Swedes to return. Half an hour later Darnbrough opened his eyes on the towering hull of a ship; the raft was against her side, rising and falling with the waves. Darnbrough has hazy recollections of being helped up a ladder and of arms reaching out to him as he stepped onto the deck.

Earlier. John Smith and those on his raft saw a purple light moving through the darkness: they knew it must be a ship because of its height from the water. Weary men with grey faces, eyes redrimmed and bloodshot, yelled and cheered at the top of their lungs, their voices falling away as that marvelous glimmer w'ent blinking off into the night.

Hours later, with the seas growing rougher, the light reappeared and stopped. The raft drifted in on the Stureholm. John Smith scrambled up the ladder and as he swung over the side he was seized with the wild notion that if this were an enemy ship he would leap into the sea.

John Beaman, a twenty-two-year-old stoker from Halifax, had no such reaction w'hen approached much later by the same boat that met Darnbrough's raft. He was long past the stage of caring whether the voices he heard over the water might be enemy or friend.

*** Webmaster's note: The correct name for John Beaman is [George Lamont Osborne Beaman](#)**

There had been six men with Beaman w'hen he drifted away from the sinking Jervis Bay on a hatch cover. Four had been swept off to drown: the remaining two, as far as he could tell, w-ere nearly dead. His own legs were virtually useless as the Swedish sailors in their stocking caps lifted him gently into the lifeboat, half full of water. Stoker Warren Stevens was taken aboard the Stureholm shortly before 5 a.m. He came drifting in on the hatch cover to which he had strapped himself nine hours earlier.

The Stureholm picked up sixty-eight survivors of the Jervis Bay. the only survivors. Three later died and were buried at sea. Those who lived knew they had but one man to thank; a bulky, round-faced mariner named Sven Olander. master of the Stureholm.

When the Scheer had hove into sight. Captain Olander had watched in troubled admiration as the Jervis Bay had steamed off to meet her certain fate. He himself had obeyed orders and slipped away behind the protective cloak of a smoke screen. This w'as not his war, nor his country's, but what he had seen stuck in his mind.

Five miles from the scene of the action Captain Olander had called his crew together, spoken to them of the Jervis Bay s gallantry and said he would like to go back and look for survivors. But he would not do it without their agreement, he had said, and he had asked for a show of hands. Every arm had been raised. Captain Olander had turned his ship around and headed back.

The Scheer, having disposed of the Jervis Bay. had begun to forage for strays from the convoy. Captain Krancke had found it taking far longer than he had expected to dispose of the escort, and the deepening dusk and banks of smoke screen made targets difficult to locate. But some were found.

When it was all over, Captain Krancke believed that in addition to the Jervis Bay he had destroyed seven ships and heavily damaged seven others. He actually sank five. The thirty-two merchant ships from convoy HX 84 that reached port safely included, remarkably enough, the tanker San Demetrio. One of the

Scheer's first victims, she had been shelled and set afire and her crew abandoned her. The next afternoon, sixteen of them reboarded the blazing derelict, fought the fires and. without compass or charts, sailed her into Blacksod Bay. County Mayo, Ireland. They arrived on November 13.

It was in the late afternoon of the same day that the motor ship Stureholm. laden with steel plates, scrap iron and sixty-five survivors of the Jervis Bay, sailed up Halifax harbor. A band played and dockyard workers cheered as the

wounded came down the gangway to the waiting ambulances. Those who did not require hospital care were taken aboard an armed merchant cruiser and issued a double tot of rum. They listened as a British admiral, tears running down his cheeks, talked of Fogarty Fegen, who had served under him as a midshipman, and the glory that was the Jervis Bay.

In London, the captain of the Polish steamer Puck, the smallest ship in convoy HX 84. wrote a letter to The Times. "On behalf of my crew and myself." said Captain J. Piekarski. "I should like to say

how' much we commiserate with the relatives and friends of the courageous crew of the Jervis Bay who lost their lives in this historic action, but who may be proud of the role they have played in the fight for freedom."

In Halifax, from the hospital bed where he was to spend four days before going home. Able Seaman Walter Darnbrough wrote a letter to his family. "Did you see in the paper about our fight with the German battleship?" he asked. "It wasn't really a fight, it was bloody murder for us."