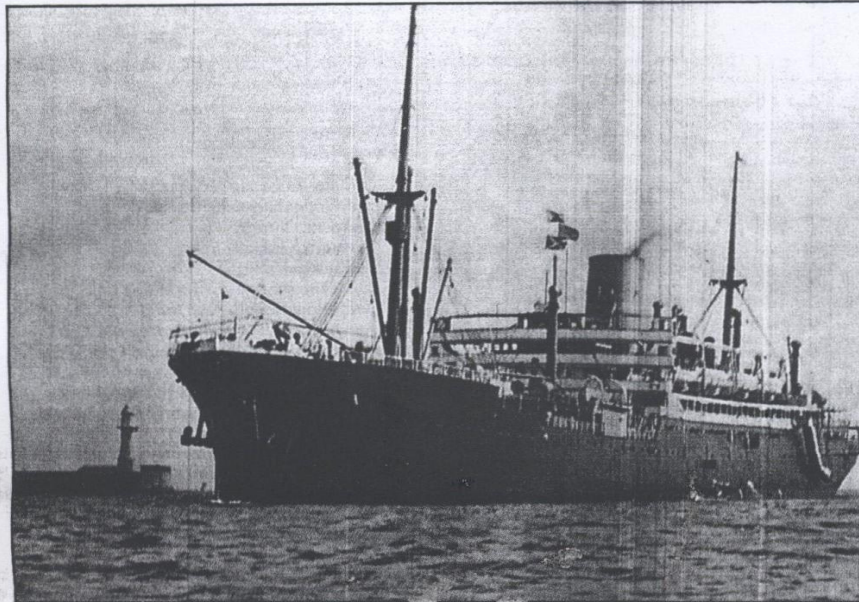


# Atlantic



Beyond the call: Sam Patience, above, took the wheel of the Jervis Bay, left, the ship the captain sacrificed to save the convoy

the funnel. They were still speculating when the first salvo whistled over their heads and exploded in the sea about 100 yards' away. Nobody had even considered that this might be a German warship. All of the large German ships were supposed to be bottled up in the Baltic, and had been for months. But not the Admiral Scheer, which had sneaked out of Brunsbüttel unobserved on October 27.

Up on the bridge, they typed out a sighting report and ordered the convoy to scatter to starboard. Action stations! Patience handed the wheel to another sailor and went to man the forward port gun. The crew were told to throw smoke floats over the side — big containers like dustbins. They pulled the stoppers out and hurled them over, generating a satisfyingly thick black screen that was meant to protect the convoy as it dispersed. Then the Jervis Bay steamed to port, away from the smoke and straight towards the

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Sam Patience had joined HMS Lincoln as quartermaster for her Canadian sea trials. The first few days were enough to put him off. The four funnels made her look top-heavy, and the slightest Atlantic swell confirmed the impression. She was barely watertight. In a bar in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Patience met another quartermaster from a liner called the Jervis Bay which had been converted into an Armed Merchant Cruiser. The man wanted to get home in a hurry and the Jervis Bay had to wait for a convoy. The Lincoln was now ready to leave. How would Sam fancy a swap?

As a boy, Patience had dreamt of steering an ocean liner. He said yes immediately, the two captains agreed to their deal, and Sam Patience bade HMS Lincoln a not particularly fond farewell. Now, as he stood at the wheel of the Jervis Bay, he wore the smile of a man who'd achieved his life's ambition. She was armed with seven six-inch guns the newest of which was dated 1896. There were three either side and one up on the high poop in the stern which could be trained in either direction.

The Jervis Bay was the only escort for Convoy HX84, which comprised 38 ships carrying gasoline, kerosene, fuel oil, crude oil, steel, pit props, scrap iron, lumber, trucks, newsprint, wool and maize. They sailed from Halifax on October 28. Sooner or later there would probably be submarines below or Condors above such a tempting target. On Guy Fawkes day, Sam Patience's eighth at the wheel, they saw a battleship. When she appeared on the horizon at 4.55pm Patience was midway through the first dogwatch. The chief yeoman signalled with the Aldis lamp to the unknown warship. There was no reply.

The crew looked through the eyesights of the guns. They could see the silhouette plainly. Someone suggested it was an 'R'-class, friendly battleship, but Patience explained that it couldn't be because they had a distinctive 'tiddy-top' on

## Shells arrived with horrific velocity. The next one had to kill him, Patience thought

Admiral Scheer. The second salvo fell short, but shrapnel from an exploding shell decapitated the man standing next to Patience. The Germans were about 25,000 yards away and firing 14in guns. The range of their own six-inch guns was about 10,000 yards, but they never got a chance to fire them.

The third salvo caught the Jervis Bay amidships, smashing the wireless office and much of the deck superstructure. Captain Edward Fegen ordered full steam ahead, and steered straight towards the enemy. More explosions rocked the liner. Patience looked up to see the bridge alight and the captain with one arm partly severed. There were fires everywhere now. Men were on fire, too. Screaming, they jumped over the side. The next salvo blew the gun opposite Patience right off the forecastle, along with its mounting and its crew. The shells arrived at a horrific velocity. The ship bucked and rolled under the impact. The next one had to kill him, Patience thought. Instead, its blast blew him off the gun platform and down on to the well deck, dazed but only slightly injured. The sick bay was on fire and a leading seaman said, 'Get that bloody hose and try and get in there.' Another sailor picked the hose up by the nozzle and Patience held it up



behind him as they aimed the jet. Another shell came over, the doors slammed shut, and Patience was left alone, holding a severed hosepipe. 'It just happened like that. Wood-work, steelwork and him as well, all got blown to pieces.' There was a terrible smell of cordite and burnt flesh.

The shelling went on and on. In the past, Armed Merchant Cruisers, not designed to withstand shelling, had sunk so fast that their crews hadn't had a chance to escape. Now their holds were filled with empty barrels to increase buoyancy in an emergency and it was the barrels that saved the convoy, every bit as much as the courage and quick thinking of Captain Fegen and his crew. The ship stayed afloat for a long time and, while it did, the Admiral Scheer was strangely immobile, sending shells into her useless hulk long after it served any military purpose. Meanwhile, the rest of the convoy was steaming away in every possible direction.

Almost all the officers on the Jervis Bay were dead. The chief officer, George Roe, hobbled forward with a bad injury to his leg and shouted, 'Abandon ship. Every man for himself!' Patience did not see him again. Some of the life rafts were on fire, but they stopped burning when they hit the water and the men threw themselves in after them.

Like a lot of sailors, Patience couldn't swim: 'I thought, well I've got to make a decision here: I either go down with the ship or get over the side.' He found a lifebelt in a shattered glass casing. He took it to the side. He put the lifebelt around his neck and slipped down what he took to be a rope. It turned out to be a wire hawser and when he reached the sea 40ft below he had cut his hands to the bone. Until he hit the water he had thought that with the lifebelt he would be strong enough to survive until the morning. But he soon realised that he could not last the night. 'It was so cold, it was bitter bloody cold.'

Flames from the Jervis Bay lit the scene for a while and then, with a great sucking glug, she sank. For an hour and a half, Patience was thrown about by the huge seas, feeling colder and weaker all the time. The German battleship was now chasing after some of the convoy members and firing at them. As he rose up the sides of the waves, Patience could see distant flashes. He was convinced he was going to die.

Fifty years later, long after he'd met and married Rosie Lee and they'd had their family and they'd all grown up and left home, Sam would kick his wife out of bed just thrashing about in his sleep: fighting the Germans, staying afloat, keeping his head above the waves.

Suddenly, a lifeboat had appeared. One of the ship's own boats had not been smashed and had got safely away. The other survivors had dragged him aboard, lifebelt and all. They drifted for another hour or two and then in the distance they saw a vessel. They took it for a German prison ship, following up after the battleship, and when they heard foreign voices from the boat it seemed their fears were confirmed. Then suddenly a Scottish voice rang out, 'You're all right now lads!'

Captain Sven Olander of the Sturholm had reckoned that his ship, laden as she was with steel and scrap, would be too slow to escape. So when all the other ships scattered, he had stayed put. He had hidden in the Jervis Bay's smokescreen for four hours until the



away. Then he'd crept out and not long afterwards had seen a small torch signalling SOS. He'd put his Scottish stoker on the ship's boat to communicate with survivors.

'Magnificent, oh they were brilliant,' Patience remembers. 'They carried me up to the officer's quarters and they laid us down on the deck. Filled us with a tot of vodka or rum and they put raw iodine on me hands and me burns and bits of shrapnel wounds I had.' All but five ships in the convoy escaped. The tale passed immediately into legend, the epic of the Jervis Bay. A propaganda film was made about them all. Captain Fegen was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross and became an icon of duty and self-sacrifice.

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By November, London was running out of money fast. There was just about enough left to cover outstanding orders for the rest of the year. After that Churchill would have to place himself entirely in President Roosevelt's hands. To remain in this war, Britain needed American help. On November 5, Roosevelt won the American presidential election, which meant he had another term in office and no longer had to pay such close regard to the large section of the population fiercely opposed to giving Britain aid. He was now preparing to launch a credit scheme that would attach the anaemic British to the drip-feed of American economic support. The world would come to know this as Lend-Lease.

Arms and materials would soon flow in ever increasing quantities, billions of dollars' worth. America would become, in Roosevelt's own ringing phrase, 'the arsenal of democracy', and take another step towards entering the war.

Meanwhile, in Britain's cities, the bombing had become routine. The mornings had a terrible sense of continuity — more streets flattened, the water system in ruins. Commuters



on Waterloo Bridge passing groups of exhausted, dull-eyed firemen. The river full of sewage, chemicals, the occasional corpse. Rescue workers struggling to drag people out of collapsed buildings before they drowned in the rising water from a burst main. Swimming pools used as mortuaries again. Londoners had awoken to many mornings like this since early September. As autumn turned to winter, many other ghastly dawns would be faced in Coventry, Sheffield, Hull, Swansea, Southampton...

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Denis Wissler clambered out of his Hurricane as a WAAF with a tractor and tanker approached to refuel it. 'Nothing there, sir?' 'No, nothing.' One-and-a-half hours over the convoy, just circling round. Why did the Jerries never send over unguarded Stukas when he was flying, only when his mates were up there without him? They got a small fire going in the dispersal hut and huddled round it. The squadron leader outlined the plan for the next patrol. Denis would lead Blue Section.

'Scramble.'

In Saffron Walden, Essex, WAAF plotter Edith Heap, who had fallen in love with Denis

## Fifty years later, Sam would thrash about in his sleep — fighting the Germans, keeping his head above the waves

Wissler and just become engaged to him, looked up through the glass roof of the control room. Her man would be up there soon. She took a new sheet of tracing paper, fixed it to the grid map and marked the start point: Martlesham Heath, 11.45am, November 11, 1940. 'Show me the bandit plot,' said the controller. 'Right. They must be heading for the convoy. We should get them off Burnham. Vector 190 Angels 20, Red leader.'

Every five minutes Edith plotted the fighters. Her friend Winifred plotted the enemy. The two lines were converging towards the mouth of the Thames. 'You should be over the convoy now, Red

Battling the Blitz: Weary firefighters take a