

# A Brief Overview of some Ships that made Maritime History (Vol 2)

Commentary By

Geoff Walker



Great Bitter Lake during 1967. (Unknown Photographer)

When Ferdinand De Lesseps designed and started to build the Suez Canal in September 1859, and throughout the 10-year construction period, officially opening on 17 November 1869, one can safely assume nothing could have been further from his mind than that it would become a place of entrapment for 14 merchant ships, almost 100 years later.

Left - Ships hipped alongside each other in the

While the canal was the property of the Egyptian government, European shareholders, mostly British and French, owned the concessionary company which operated it until July 1956, when President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized it—an event which led to the Suez Crisis of October–November 1956 and the foundation of the troubles over ensuing years, cumulating in the Arab – Israeli 6 day war in 1967, causing the closure of the waterway to shipping and entrapping a small fleet of cargo ships, for a period of detention which ultimately lasted 8 years.

Political reasoning behind the turn of events between 1956 and 1967 are complex and outside the parameters of this short narrative, however, in 1967, during the brief war that took place from June 5–10, Israel occupied the West Bank, the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula. A ceasefire was reached in less than a week and when the shooting stopped, the Suez Canal was the southern ceasefire line. Egypt ordered a complete standstill of the Canal and made it clear that, if any ships moved or any Israeli ships attempted to enter, they would be breaking the ceasefire. To make sure that no one could use the canal, the Egyptians dumped debris, scuttled old ships, and disseminated sea mines to render it impassable.

As a result, a convoy of 14 ships that had been proceeding through the canal on June 5th, was trapped in the Great Bitter Lake, a 100-square-mile expanse of salt water in the Southern area of the waterway. An American ship the **SS Observer** was separated from the other ships, and it had to anchor in Lake Timsah. The entrapped convoy was made up of commercial ships from 8 different nations: Great Britain, West Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Sweden, France, Bulgaria, and the United States. In the beginning, the crews weren't told anything because there was a complete lockdown on information reaching the ships. Egypt banned them from using radio and imposed a police guard on every ship, listed as follows:-

**MS Nordwind** West Germany, **MV Münsterland** West Germany, **MV Killara** Sweden, **MV Nippon** Sweden, **MV Essayons** France, **MV Agapenor** United Kingdom, **MV Melampus** United Kingdom,

**MV Scottish Star** United Kingdom, **MV Port Invercargill** United Kingdom, **SS African Glen** United States, **MV Djakarta** Poland, **MV Boleslaw Bierut** Poland, **MV Vasil Levsky** Bulgaria, **MV Lednice** Czechoslovakia, **SS Observer** United States (at Lake Timsah)

In the following weeks and months, the shipping companies endeavored to obtain permission to bring their crews home, while the United Nations carried on continuous negotiations to reopen the canal. After three months a compromise was finally reached. The Egyptians refused to reopen the Suez Canal, but did permit the crews that had been trapped on-board the 14 ships to leave and be replaced by other personnel. The men were pleased to go home but, in time, several of them returned to the canal for another tour of duty.

The ships had to be maintained so they could leave at a moment's notice in case the canal was reopened, and they periodically moved around the Bitter Lake to keep their engines fully functional. For the sailors, work was like that on any other ship. There was plenty of maintenance work to be done: on the vessels there was the never-ending job of cleaning, repair work and maintenance, running various machinery, fire safety drills. Fire was a real hazard, because the hot tropical climate - the outside temperature was close to 50 degrees Celsius daily. Working hours for the crew were cut from eight hours to six hours on weekdays and to four hours on Saturday. Sundays were free. This left enough time for reading books, playing cards, table tennis, and board games, and of course not overlooking drinking beer.

After a while the men became discontented because they were always eating the same food. And, since they were in the middle of a lake, in the middle of a desert, in the middle of a war zone, it wasn't easy to arrange supplies and provisions to their ships. Eventually the crews realized that among the stores of the fourteen ships there actually was plenty of food variety. So, they started pooling their resources, which lead to more socializing, since they were mainly young sailors, drinking and partying was the most popular pass time. The ship captains started worrying about finding a way to diminish the amount of idle time on the ships, and to keep their crews gainfully occupied, so they founded the **Great Bitter Lake Association**.



The **GBLA** was a sort of social committee that had been conceived to bring some order to this caretaker community, and to provide a sense of stability in a very unstable location. Thanks to the Association, the men were no longer just individuals on a ship, but members of an exclusive society. Each man was given a specially designed tie and a badge. The badge itself was in the shape of a shield, with a large anchor across the center. At the top were the letters GBLA and at the bottom was the number 14 for the 14 ships in the lake. Running diagonally behind the anchor was a thin blue strip, representing the Suez Canal.

The crews eventually set aside any political and cultural differences, ships were moored alongside each other, forming a sort of floating islands. The 14 ships hipped alongside each other eventually became known as the "Yellow Fleet". The name "Yellow Fleet" originated because of the frequent sandstorms encountered, and the residues of yellow sand that covered the ships following the storms.

Each ship was assigned a special duty. Because of its wide deck, one of the British ships was chosen to become the site of an official soccer pitch, surrounded by netting so the ball wouldn't end up in the lake and used to hold tournaments. The Polish ship **Jakarta** was the Post Office; the GBLA even had its own

hand-drawn stamps. Obviously, these stamps had no postal value so to make sure the letters arrived at their destination; genuine Egyptian stamps were also attached to the envelopes. Nevertheless, some letters reached their recipients with Great Bitter Lake stamps alone. The **Jakarta** also had a doctor, so it became the de facto hospital.

On Sundays, the German **Nordwind** hosted "church" services. In reality, these were little more than a beer party (the Germans received regular supplies of free beer from breweries back in Germany). Apparently, the stranded sailors drank a lot of beer and tossed all the empty bottles into the lake, and so they joked that the bottom was probably covered by five feet of beer bottles.

In 1968, during the Mexico City Olympics, the sailors held their own "Bitter Lake Mini-Olympics," with events in 14 sports, including sailing, diving, sprinting, swimming, high jumping, archery, shooting and water polo. Poland won the gold, the Germans silver, and the British bronze.

The combined shipping companies, who had agreed to moor their vessels in groups decided to reduce the crew sizes to just a skeleton team. In June 1969 there were 200 crew members on the ships in the Bitter Lake, by Christmas only 50 remained. During the 1973 Yom Kippur War the American vessel, the African Glen, was hit by a stray missile and sank but luckily, no lives were lost.

By 1974, an agreement to reopen the Suez Canal was finally reached but by this point most of the remaining ships in the Great Bitter Lake were no longer seaworthy and needed to be towed out of the canal. Only the two German ships, the **Münsterland** and the **Nordwind**, were capable of sailing under their own power, and they were well rewarded for their efforts. They were carrying raw materials like wool, steel, lead, and ore sand for making sandpaper, and these goods had vastly increased in value during the intervening years they had been blocked in the Suez Canal. The two German ships were given a memorable welcome back Germany, where some 30,000 cheering spectators turned out to see them dock at their home port of Hamburg. The **Münsterland** set a world record - eight years, three months, and five days - for the longest sea shipping voyage in history.



The sinking of the Lyttelton to Wellington ferry "**Wahine**" on 10 April 1968 was New Zealand's worst maritime disaster. Fifty-one people lost their lives, another died several weeks later and a 53rd victim died in 1990 from injuries sustained in the tragedy.

The "**Wahine**" was a twin-screw, turbo-electric, roll-on/roll-off ferry. Built in 1964, by the Fairfield Shipbuilding and Engineering Company, in Govan, Glasgow, Scotland for the Union Steam Ship Company's Wellington to Lyttelton passenger/cargo service. The "**Wahine**" was licensed by the New Zealand Maritime Authorities to carry a maximum of 1,100 passengers (or 924 berthed passengers in 380 cabins spread over seven decks), for New Zealand's North and South Inter-Island express ferry service across the Cook Straits. Her principal dimensions were 149 m long, with a beam of 22 m and was 8,948 gross register tons (GRT). At the time she was the Union Company's largest vessel and one of the biggest Ro-Ro ferries in the world.

"**Wahine**" departed from Lyttelton at 8.40 p.m. on the evening of 9th April. There were 734 passengers and crew on board. Storm warnings were current at the time, but rough seas were nothing new in Cook Strait. As it turned out, the "**Wahine**" was about to sail into one of the worst storms ever recorded in the Cook Straits. The ship reached Cook Strait just as tropical cyclone **Giselle** swept south and conflicted

with a southerly front. The combination of warm tropical air and cold air dragged up from Antarctica produced exceptionally violent winds and heavy seas.

At 5.50 a.m. on the morning of 10 April Captain H. G. Robertson decided to enter Wellington Harbour. The wind was blowing at over 50 knots, but vessels had entered the harbour in stronger winds before. Just as the **"Wahine"** reached the narrows of the harbor entrance, however, the wind speed suddenly increased to over 100 knots. Shortly after 6 a.m. the **"Wahine's"** radar failed and a huge rogue wave hit the ship, throwing many of those on board off their feet. Now beam on to the towering waves, the vessel was swept towards the notorious **Barrett Reef** on the western side of the harbor entrance.

For half an hour the **"Wahine"** struggled against the gigantic seas, as Robertson apparently attempted to turn his ship back out to sea in poor visibility. At about 6.35 a.m., unaware of his location, the captain ordered full astern. At 6.40 a.m. the vessel backed into Barrett Reef. The starboard propeller was snapped off, and the port engine stopped shortly after. Initially many of the passengers were unaware of what was happening due to the ferocious battering the ship was receiving from the storm.

With the ship's engines no longer functioning, Captain Robertson ordered that all watertight doors be closed and both anchors deployed. Passengers were now informed that the ferry had run aground on the reef. The signal station at nearby Beacon Hill was notified of the accident as the crew prepared life-saving equipment. Flooding in four compartments and on the vehicle deck, raised serious concerns about the stability of the ship, mainly due to the free surface effect of sloshing water.

The tug **"Tapuhi"** reached the **"Wahine"** at about 11.00 a.m. By 11.50 the tug had secured a line to **"Wahine"**. An attempt was made to tow the ferry to safety, but the line quickly parted. Several similar efforts were made but to no avail. Due to the raging storm the **"Wahine"** dragged both her anchors and gradually drifted further up the harbor past Point Dorset. Despite being close to shore, the severe weather made it impossible for rescuers to reach the ship from land. By 1.15 pm the **"Wahine"** was listing heavily to starboard. The tides, combined with the storm, had swung the ship around which created a lee from the wind and waves on the starboard side. Seeing this small window of safety the captain gave the order to abandon ship. Prior to this the master had resisted abandoning ship for fear that the lifeboats could not be launched, and if they were they would soon be swamped in the towering seas.

Only the four starboard lifeboats could be launched, and crewmen tried to get as many people as possible onto them. One lifeboat was swamped shortly after leaving the sinking ship and its occupants were thrown into the sea. Two of the other lifeboats safely reached Seatoun, the third landed at Eastbourne. Other passengers were forced to jump into the cold, violent sea. Some clung on to inflatable life rafts that had been thrown overboard, but a number of these were punctured by the wreckage or were turned upside down by the heavy seas.

At about 2.30 pm the now-abandoned **"Wahine"** finally capsized in 11.6 metres of water just east of Steeple Rock Light and plunged heavily to the seabed. By this time the first of the survivors had already reached the western shore at Seatoun.

Captain Robertson was the last to abandon ship after checking that no one remained on the ferry. They spent an hour in the water near the wreck before being rescued. Of the 734 people on board, 53 people

died from drowning, exposure to the elements, or from injuries sustained in the hurried evacuation and abandonment of the stricken ship.



A handsome looking ship, the Ro-Ro Ferry “**Wahine**” belonging to the Union Steamship Company of New Zealand.

(Stuff.co.nz)

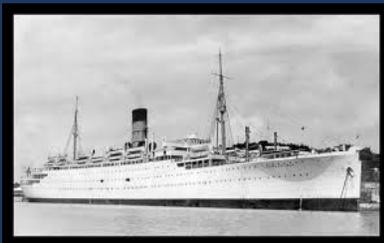
Not long after the disaster, a court of inquiry was convened into the causes of the tragedy. The court found errors of judgement had been made but stressed that the conditions at the time had been extremely difficult and dangerous. The free surface effect caused “**Wahine**” to capsize due to a build-up and free movement of water on the vehicle deck.

The report of the inquiry stated that more lives would almost certainly have been lost if the order to abandon ship had been given earlier, or indeed later. The storm was so strong that rescue craft would not have been able to help passengers any earlier than about midday. Charges were brought against her officers, but all were acquitted of any negligence, by the court.



“**RMS Lancastria**” was a British ocean liner requisitioned by the UK Government during the Second World War. She was sunk on 17th June 1940 during Operation Aerial. Having received an emergency order to evacuate British nationals and troops from France, the ship was loaded more than its official capacity of 1,300 passengers. More recent estimates suggest that between 3,000 and 5,800 people died during the sinking — the largest single-ship loss of life in British maritime history.

The ship was initially launched in 1920 as “**Tyrrhenia**” for the Anchor Line, a subsidiary of Cunard. In 1924 she was refitted for two classes and renamed “**Lancastria**” She sailed scheduled routes between Liverpool and New York until 1932 and was then used as a cruise ship in the Mediterranean Sea and Northern Europe. On 10 October 1932 “**Lancastria**” rescued the crew of the Belgian cargo ship SS *Scheldestad*, which had been abandoned in a sinking condition in the Bay of Biscay.



At the outbreak of WW2 in September 1939, “**Lancastria**” was in the Bahamas. She was ordered to sail from Nassau to New York for refitting as she had been requisitioned by the British Admiralty as a troopship, becoming “**HMT Lancastria**”. All unnecessary fittings were removed, she was repainted in battleship grey, the portholes were blacked out, and a 4-inch gun was installed. She was first used to ferry men and supplies between Canada and the United Kingdom. In April 1940, she was one of twenty troopships in Operation

Alphabet, the evacuation of troops from Norway, and was bombed on the return journey although she

escaped damage. Shortly afterwards, “**Lancastria**” carried troops to enhance the invasion of Iceland. Returning to Glasgow, the captain requested that surplus oil in her tanks be removed, but there was insufficient time before she was ordered to Liverpool for a refit.

Within hours of berthing at Liverpool, “**Lancastria**” was urgently recalled to sea; loud-speaker announcements at the main railway stations successfully recalled nearly all the crew members, she arrived in Plymouth on 15 June to await orders. She was originally sent to Quiberon Bay as part of Operation Aerial, which was the evacuation of the remainder of the British Expeditionary Force which had been cut-off to the south of the German advance through France, amounting to some 124,000 men.

Accompanying “**Lancastria**” was the 20,341-ton liner, “**Franconia**”. Finding that she was not required for the evacuation from Lorient, the captain of “**Lancastria**”, Captain Rudolph Sharp, was sent on towards the port of St. Nazaire, where many more troops were waiting to be conveyed to safety. On the way, an air raid damaged “**Franconia**” which returned to England for repairs, leaving “**Lancastria**” to continue alone. She arrived in the mouth of the Loire estuary late on 16th June. Because the port had to be accessed along a tidal channel, “**Lancastria**” anchored in the Charpentier Roads, about 5 miles south-west of St. Nazaire, at 04:00 on 17th June, accompanied by some 30 other merchant vessels.

Her normal complement in troopship configuration was 2,180 including 330 crew; however, Captain Sharp had brought 2,653 men back from Norway, so he agreed to take 3,000. He was informed that he should take as many as he possibly could, disregarding the limits imposed by International Law. Troops were ferried out to “**Lancastria**” and the other larger ships by destroyers, tugs, fishing boats and other small craft, a round trip of three or four hours, sometimes the ferrying craft were machine-gunned by German aircraft, although apparently casualties were few. By the mid-afternoon of 17th June, she had embarked an unknown number, but estimated to be upward of 4,000 – 5000 personnel. People were crowded into whatever spaces were available including the large cargo holds.

The “**Lancastria**” was under constant air attack by enemy aircraft, mostly Ju 88 bombers. “**Lancastria**” was hit by three or possibly four bombs. Several survivors reported that one bomb had gone down the ship's single funnel, which is possible, given the speed with which the ship sank – about 15–20 minutes. However, another witness claims the bomb landed close to the funnel and entered No. 4 hold. Two other bombs landed in No. 2 and No. 3 holds while a fourth landed close to the port side of the ship, rupturing the fuel oil tanks, though even with this damage, the ship should have stayed afloat for longer unless the report of the bomb in the funnel was correct. As the ship began to list to starboard, orders were given for the men on deck to move to the port side to try and counter the list, but this caused a list to port which could not be corrected.

The ship was fitted with sixteen lifeboats and 2,500 life jackets; but many of the boats could not be launched because they had been damaged in the bombing or because of the ship's list. As “**Lancastria**” began to capsize, some of those who were still on board managed to scramble onto the ship's underside

Survivors were taken aboard other British and Allied evacuation vessels. The ship sank at 16:12, within twenty minutes of first being hit which gave little time for other vessels to respond. Many of those in the water drowned because there were insufficient life jackets, or died from hypothermia, or were choked by fuel oil from her ruptured fuel oil tanks. Throughout, survivors in the water were constantly being strafed by enemy aircraft.

She sank around 5 nm south of Chémoulin Point in the Charpentier Roads, around 9 nm from St. Nazaire. Loss of the “**Lancastria**” must be classified as the Greatest Sea Tragedy of all time. The immense loss of life was such that the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, immediately suppressed news of the disaster through the D-Notice system, to prevent public hysteria.



The “**Herald of Free Enterprise**” owned by Townsend Thoresen, was a roll-on/roll-off (RORO) ferry which capsized moments after leaving the Belgian port of Zeebrugge on the night of 6 March 1987, killing 193 passengers and crew. Designed for rapid loading and unloading on the competitive cross-channel route, the ship was not fitted with any watertight compartments. The ferry departed harbor with her bow door open, and the sea immediately flooded the decks; within minutes, she was lying on her side in shallow water. The immediate cause of the capsizing was found to be negligence by the assistant boatswain, who was asleep in his cabin when he should have been closing the bow door. Lack of attention by the Chief Officer for not having ensured the bow doors were shut and the Captain, for having only “assumed” they were closed and having departed from the port without ascertaining the doors were actually closed. However, the official inquiry placed more blame on his supervisors and a general culture of poor communication and sloppiness within the company.

The design of “**Herald of Free Enterprise**” was also found to be a contributing factor of the capsizing. Unlike other ships, which are subdivided into watertight compartments, the vehicle decks of RORO vessels are normally contiguous; any flooding on these decks would allow the water to flow the full length of the ship, running a high risk of creating “Free Surface” effects, detrimental to the vessel’s stability.

The ship left her berth in Zeebrugge inner harbor at 18:05 (GMT) with a crew of 80 and carrying 459 passengers, 81 cars, three buses and 47 trucks. She passed the outer mole at 18:24 (GMT) and capsized about four minutes later. When the ferry reached 18.9 knots, 90 seconds after leaving the harbor, water began to ingress the car deck in large volumes. The resulting free surface effect destroyed her stability. In a matter of seconds, the ship began to list 30 degrees to port. The ship briefly righted herself before listing to port once more, this time capsizing. The entire event took place within 90 seconds. The water quickly reached the ship's electrical systems, destroying both main and emergency power and leaving the ship in a complete black-out and in darkness. The ferry ended up on her side half-submerged in shallow water 0.5 nm from the shore. Only a fortuitous turn to starboard in her last moments, and then capsizing on a sandbar, prevented the ship from sinking entirely in much deeper water. The vessel was eventually salvaged, put up for sale, and sold to Naviera SA Kingstown on 30 September 1987, renamed **Flushing Range**. It was towed to Taiwan on 22 March 1988 for demolition.



The “**Herald of Free Enterprise**” seen laying on her port side in shallow water, after capsizing.

(Unknown Photographer)

The ferry had been built in 1979 by Schichau Seebeckwerft, Bremerhaven. To remain competitive with other ferry operators on the route, Townsend Thoresen required ships designed to permit fast loading and unloading and quick acceleration. Three vessels of the same class were built for the Dover-Calais-Zeebrugge route. So ended one of maritime history's worst man-made disasters.

In any summary of ships that are worthy of entering the annals of maritime history the courage by the captains and crew of those mighty passenger liners seconded by the British Admiralty during WW2 to serve as Armed Merchant Cruisers (AMC) should never be overlooked. In their primary role of protecting Allied convoys against surface raiders, these ships were themselves vulnerable to enemy fire because they lacked warship armor, and they used local control of guns rather than director fire-control systems, which reduced their effective fire power. Nevertheless, two gallant ships immediately spring to mind, namely, **"HMS Rawalpindi"** and **"HMS Jervis Bay"**.



**"HMS Rawalpindi"** started life as the 16,697 GRT Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O) ocean liner **"Rawalpindi"**, built by Harland and Wolff. She was launched on 26 March 1925 and joined the P&O fleet in September of the same year. She was named after the city of Rawalpindi, a town in what is now Pakistan. She had berths for 307 First Class and 288 Second Class passengers and was employed on the London to Bombay service.

The Admiralty requisitioned **"Rawalpindi"** on 26 August 1939 and converted her into an armed merchant cruiser by the addition of eight 6 in guns and two 3 in guns. She was the first P&O ship taken up for service in the Second World War. Her after funnel was removed. She was set to work from October 1939 in the Northern Patrol covering the area around Iceland. Her sister ships **"Ranchi"**, **"Ranpura"** and **"Rajputana"** were also converted into armed merchant cruisers.

Whilst patrolling north of the Faroe Islands on 23 November 1939, she investigated a reported enemy sighting, only to find that she had encountered two powerful German warships, the battleships **Scharnhorst** and **Gneisenau**, which had been conducting a sweep between Iceland and the Faroes. **"Rawalpindi"** was able to signal the German ships' location back to the Admiralty. Despite being hopelessly outgunned, 60-year-old Captain Edward Coverley Kennedy RN of **"Rawalpindi"** decided to fight, rather than surrender as demanded by the Germans. He was heard to say, "We'll fight them both, they'll sink us, and that will be that".

The German warships sank **"Rawalpindi"** within 40 minutes. But, before sinking she managed to score one hit on **Scharnhorst**, which caused minor splinter damage. 238 men died on **"Rawalpindi"**, including Captain Kennedy. Thirty-seven men were rescued by the German ships, a further 11 were picked up by **"HMS Chitral"**, which was another converted passenger ship. Captain Kennedy — the father of naval officer, celebrated broadcaster, and author Ludovic Kennedy — was posthumously Mentioned in Dispatches. Crew members on **Scharnhorst** and **Gneisenau** were awarded for the High Seas Fleet Badge for participating in the sinking of **"Rawalpindi"**.



(Unknown Copyright)

The Original “RMS Rawalpindi” prior to conversion by the admiralty, still with her original 2 funnels.



(Unknown Photographer)

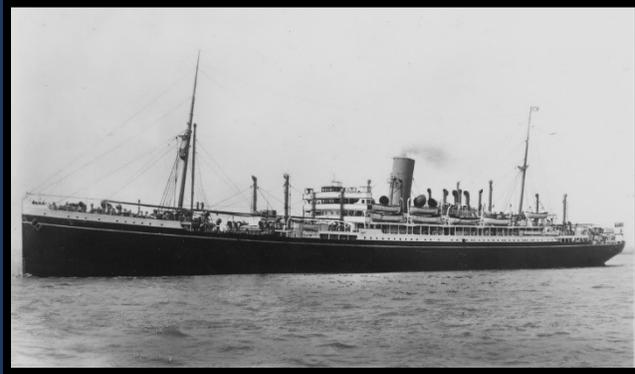
“HMS Rawalpindi” following conversion by the Admiralty, to an Armed Merchant Cruiser, with aft funnel removed.



In October 1940, Captain Fegen was the commanding officer of “HMS Jervis Bay”. The ship had been built by Vickers Limited, and launched in 1922, as a passenger liner of the Aberdeen and Commonwealth Line, and taken over by the Royal Navy in August 1939, when it was converted to an armed merchant cruiser (AMC) and armed with seven ageing 6-inch guns and two 3-inch guns that were even older. Fegen, who had been in the Royal Navy since early in WWI, was promoted to the rank of Captain in March 1940, and assigned to command her.

On October 28, 1940, Convoy HX-84 left Halifax under the watchful eye of the “Jervis Bay”. The following day the convoy was joined by nine ships from Nova Scotia and Bermuda, and the 38 merchantmen settled into formation—nine columns of four ranks each—to begin the crossing. “HMS Jervis Bay” was positioned between the fourth and fifth ranks. As was routine, two Canadian destroyers accompanied the convoy briefly before turning back. When it approached Britain, the convoy would

again be met by escort ships and planes, but for the 10 days of the passage the “**Jervis Bay**” and its obsolete guns would be its only protection. Meanwhile, the Admiral Scheer was loose in the North Atlantic, seeking targets of opportunity and raiding Allied Convoys.



“HMS Jervis Bay” of the Aberdeen and Commonwealth Line, originally built for the England to Australia Service. Pictured in her pre-WW2 colors, prior to conversion to an Armed Merchant Cruiser, by the Admiralty.

(Unknown Photographer)

On 5<sup>th</sup> November, when one of the ships sighted smoke on the port bow and very soon afterwards the foretop of a man-of-war, the convoy had encountered **Admiral Scheer**. The captain of “**HMS Jervis Bay**”, Edward Fegen, ordered the convoy to scatter, by turning his convoy to starboard. “**HMS Jervis Bay**” set a course directly towards the German warship to draw its fire, with guns firing more as a distraction rather than in the hope of doing damage, but he needed to buy time for the convoy to scatter and seek some sort of protection from the approaching darkness. These ships were disposed in columns of four with the columns abeam of each other.

“**HMS Jervis Bay**” was hopelessly outgunned and outranged by the 11 inch guns of the German Pocket Battleship, but Captain Fegen and his crew fought on gallantly until their ship was set ablaze and sunk 755 nautical miles south-southwest of Reykjavík. Captain Fegen, who had been badly injured in the conflict, went down with his ship. Nevertheless, although Admiral Scheer went on to sink five merchant ships out of the convoy, “**HMS Jervis Bay’s**” sacrifice ensured enough time for the convoy to scatter and the remaining ships escape, thus preventing an even greater loss of ships and lives. Sixty-eight survivors of “**Jervis Bay’s**” crew of 254 were picked up by the neutral Swedish ship “**Stureholm**” (three later died of their injuries), which had returned to the battle scene to pick-up survivors.

Captain Fegen was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross because of this action.



The “**RMS Queen Elizabeth**” was launched on 27 September 1938 and named in honor of the then Queen Elizabeth, who was later to become known as the Queen Mother. “**RMS Queen Elizabeth**” was the largest passenger liner ever built at that time and remained so for 56 years thereafter. She also had the distinction of being the largest-ever riveted ship by gross tonnage. She first entered service in February 1940 as a troopship in the Second World War, and it was not until October 1946 that she served in her intended role as an ocean liner for the Cunard Line of Liverpool, in which role she served with distinction until being sold in 1969.

By the beginning of March 1940, Queen Elizabeth was ready for her first voyage as a troopship. Fearing that German spy networks were monitoring the vessel, word was leaked that she would proceed to Southampton to complete her conversion. On the morning of 3 March, the ship quietly left her moorings in the Clyde and proceeded out of the river to sail further down the coast, where she was met by a King's Messenger, who presented sealed orders directly to the captain. While waiting for the messenger, the ship was refueled, the compasses adjusted together with final testing of equipment carried out before she sailed to her secret destination



**“RMS Queen Elizabeth”** in her original splendor. Built by John Brown and Company at Clydebank, Scotland., for Cunard White Star Line, and launched on 27 September 1938 . At over 83,000 GRT she was the largest vessel of her era, 314m long and 25m beam. Powered by 4 Parsons geared turbines, with 12 Yarrow boilers developing 200,000 shp and 4 screws, she had a speed of 32 knots. In peacetime configuration she had a capacity for 2,283 passengers with a crew of almost 1000.

(Unknown Photographer)

The Master of the **“Queen Elizabeth”**, Captain Townley, discovered that he was to take the ship directly to New York in the then neutral United States without stopping, or even slowing to drop off the Southampton harbor pilot who had embarked on at Clydebank, and to maintain strict radio silence. Later that day, at the time when she was due to arrive at Southampton, the city was bombed by the Luftwaffe.

Queen Elizabeth departed the port of New York on 13 November 1940, bound for Singapore to receive her troopship conversion. After two stops to refuel and replenish her stores in Trinidad and Cape Town, she arrived in Singapore's naval docks, where she was fitted with anti-aircraft guns, and her hull repainted wartime grey. Now **“HMTS Queen Elizabeth”** she sailed from Singapore on 11 February, and on 23 February 1942 Queen Elizabeth secretly arrived in Esquimalt, British Columbia, Canada. In mid-March, carrying 8,000 American soldiers, Queen Elizabeth began a 7,700-mile voyage from San Francisco to Sydney, Australia. Initially she carried Australian troops to theatres of operation in Asia and Africa.



The “**HMMS Queen Elizabeth**” pictured in Sydney harbor circa 1942 whilst fitted out for the transport of Allied Troops.

After 1942, “**Queens Elizabeth**” was relocated to the North Atlantic run for the transportation of American troops to Europe.

(Unknown Photographer)

Queen Elizabeth with her high speed, permitted her to outrun hazards, principally German U-boats, usually allowing her to travel outside a convoy. During her war service as a troopship, “Queen Elizabeth” carried more than 750,000 troops, and she also sailed some 500,000 miles.

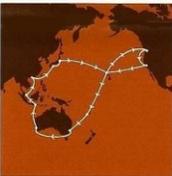
At the conclusion of WW2, the redesignated “**RMS Queen Elizabeth**” returned to the Clyde for a refit by her builders, John Brown & Co., before returning to commercial service on the North Atlantic run, for which she had originally been built, in conjunction with the “**RMS Queen Mary**”. After her refit and sea trials, “**RMS Queen Elizabeth**” finally entered passenger service, allowing Cunard White Star to launch the long-planned two-ship weekly service to New York.

The ship sustained a grounding on a sandbank off Southampton on 14 April 1947 but was re-floated the following day. In 1955, during an annual overhaul at Southampton, England, “**RMS Queen Elizabeth**” was fitted with underwater fin stabilizers, to provide a smoother ride in rough seas. Two fins were fitted on each side of the hull and were retractable when not required.

As passenger numbers declined, due to the introduction of air travel, the liner became uneconomic to operate in the face of rising fuel and labor costs. For a short time, the “**RMS Queen Elizabeth**”, now commanded by Commodore Geoffrey Tripleton Marr, attempted a dual role in order to become more profitable; when not engaged in her usual transatlantic route, the ship cruised between New York and Nassau. For this new tropical purpose, the ship received a major refit in 1965, with a new Lido deck added to her aft section, enhanced air conditioning, and an outdoor swimming pool. With these improvements, Cunard intended to keep the ship in operation until at least the mid-1970s. However, the strategy did not prove successful, owing to the ship's deep draught, which prevented her from entering various island ports, her width, which preventing her from using the Panama Canal, and also her high fuel operating costs. Cunard Line finally sold the vessel in 1969 to American interests.

“**Queen Elizabeth**” was sold to a succession of buyers, most of whom had unsuccessful plans for her, and which did not come to fruition or yield financial viability. The vessel was finally sold at auction in 1970 to Hong Kong tycoon **Tung Chao Yung (aka C.Y Tung)**). Tung, the head of the **Orient Overseas Line**, intended to convert the vessel into a university for the World Campus Afloat program (later reformed and renamed as Semester at Sea). Following the tradition of the Orient Overseas Line, the ship was renamed “**Seawise University**” being a play on Tung's initials (C.Y.'s).

**Announcing  
the Maiden Voyage of SEAWISE  
(formerly the R.M.S. Queen Elizabeth)  
75-day Circle Pacific Cruise.**



**Sailing from Los Angeles  
on April 24, 1972. Rates  
from \$30 a day first class.**

Sailing from Vancouver, B.C. on April 18, 1972

	ARRIVAL DATE	DEPARTURE DATE
Los Angeles	April 24 1972	April 24 1972
Honolulu	April 29 AM	May 2 AM
Shanghai	May 10 AM	May 12 PM
Singapore	May 18 AM	May 20 PM
Perth/Australia	May 25 AM	May 25 AM
Hull	May 28 noon	May 31 AM
Stagman	June 2 AM	June 5 AM
Hong Kong	June 6 AM	June 11 AM
Kobe	June 14 noon	June 18 PM
Yokohama	June 17 AM	June 20 AM
Seattle	June 22 noon	June 23 PM
Vancouver	July 4 noon	July 23 PM
Los Angeles	July 9 AM	July 9 PM

Ports of call and dates subject to change without notice.

As the ship was now under Hong Kong ownership, it was decided to sail her to Hong Kong. This proved to be problematic, for the ship's engines and boilers were in poor condition after several years of neglect. The now retired Commodore Marr and a former chief engineer of the ship were hired by C.Y. Tung as advisors for the journey to Hong Kong. Marr recommended that "Seawise University" be towed to the New Territories in Hong Kong, but Tung and his crew were convinced that they could sail the ship there using just the aft engines and boilers. The planned several-week trip turned into months as the crew battled with boiler issues and a fire. An unplanned mid-voyage stopover permitted the new owners to fly spare parts out to the ship and carry out repairs, before resuming the course to Hong Kong Harbor under her own power.

Above, an advertisement for the intended maiden voyage of the **RMS Queen Elizabeth** in her new guise as "Seawise University" on 24th April 1972, from Los Angeles.

With the £5 million conversion nearing completion, the vessel caught fire on 9 January 1972 whilst at anchor in Hong Kong Harbor. There is some suspicion and speculation that the fires were set deliberately, as several blazes broke out simultaneously throughout the ship. Some speculated that the fires were the result of a conflict between Tung, a Chinese Nationalist, and Communist-dominated ship construction unions.

The ship was completely gutted by the fire, and the water pumped into her to fight the fire by fireboats caused the burnt wreck to capsize and sink in Hong Kong's Victoria Harbor. The vessel was finally declared a shipping hazard and dismantled for scrap between 1974 and 1975. Portions of the hull that were not salvaged were left at the bottom of the bay. The keel, boilers and engines remained at the bottom of the harbor, and the area was marked as "Foul" on local sea charts, warning ships not to try to anchor there. It is estimated that around 40–50% of the wreck was still on the seabed, when, in the late 1990s, the last remains of the wreck were buried during land reclamation for the construction of Container Terminal 9. Position of the wreck was 22°19'43"N 114°06'44"E



A dramatic image of the "Seawise University" well and truly ablaze at Tsim Tsa Tsui anchorage, Hong Kong, in 1972.

(Unknown Photographer)

Two of the ship's fire warning system brass plaques were recovered by a dredger and were displayed at The **Aberdeen Boat Club** in Hong Kong in an exhibit about the ship. The charred remnants of her last ensign were cut from the flagpole and framed in 1972, and still adorn the wall of the officers' mess of marine police HQ in Hong Kong. The Parker Pen Company produced a special edition of 5,000 pens made from material recovered from the wreck, each in a presentation box, which today are highly sought-after collectible items.

So ended the life of one of the world's most famous ships.

End

References: Numerous accounts of various corporate archives and summary of the events covered, wiki, various online data from which much information on the various captions have been sources.

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