

HALIFAX MAIL-STAR, NOVEMBER 2, 1990

Forlorn hope

The last stand of the Jervis Bay

By Jay White
SPECIAL

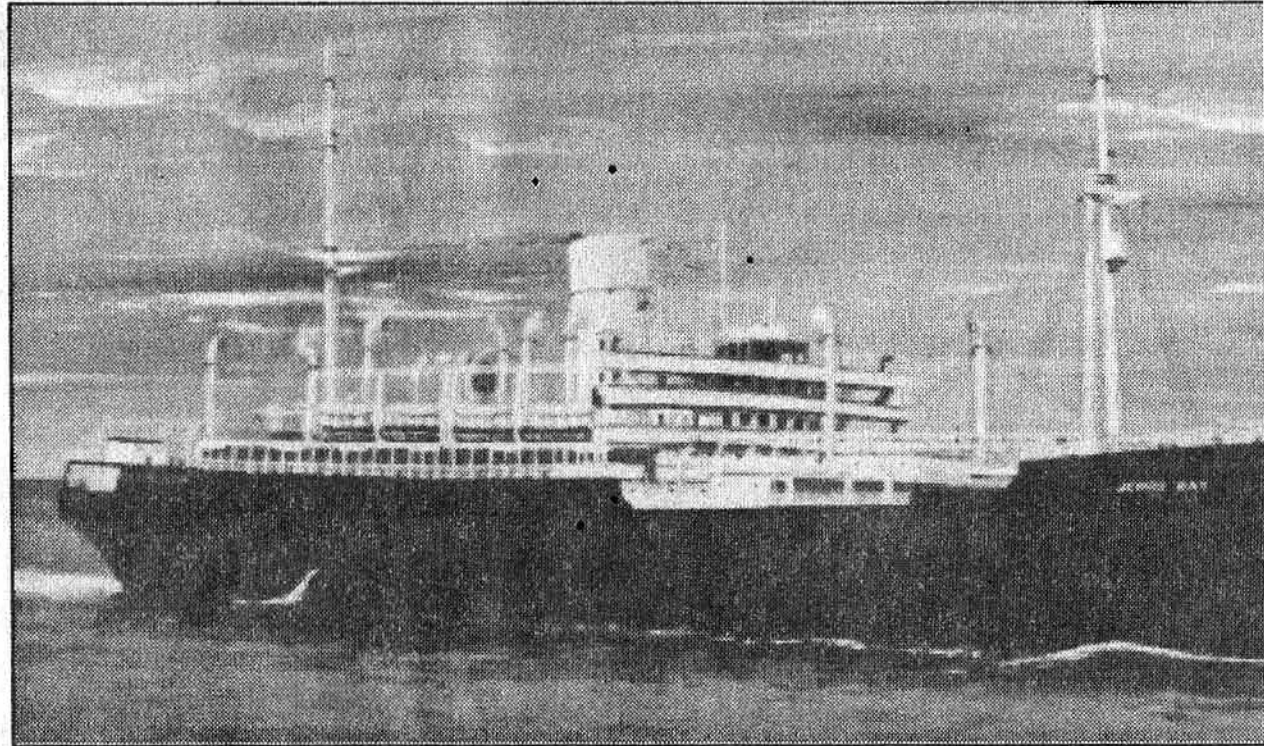
THE EPIC BATTLES and turning points of the Second World War are being commemorated one by one this year. 1990 marks 50 years since the fall of France, the miracle of Dunkirk, and the Battle of Britain.

But 1940 was also crowded with smaller milestones, no less historic. For a select group of Britons and Canadians, Nov. 5 is one such anniversary. On that day 50 years ago, they were aboard HMS Jervis Bay.

Thirty-eight ships with food for you

Thirty-eight ships that must get through;

*Atlantic calm and the dusk of day
And a shell screamed over the
Jervis Bay*



CLOCKWISE FROM
the Jervis Bay by Bill
Jervis Bay survivors
Club, Tobin Street
1940; Survivors (in
crew and Mrs. C. S.
toast Capt. Sven Ola



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*Atlantic calm and the dusk of day
And a shell screamed over the Jervis Bay.*

Named after an Australian inlet about 80 miles south of Sydney, the 14,000-ton passenger liner was built in 1922 to ply the route between Great Britain and Australia.

Just before the Second World War began, the British Admiralty requisitioned the Jervis Bay to shepherd convoys across the icy North Atlantic. Passenger liners like the Jervis Bay were converted into armed merchant cruisers, fitted out with a handful of vintage 6-inch guns — most dating back to the Boer War.

But the Jervis Bay was ill-suited to hostile action.

No armour plating protected her from enemy fire; no watertight compartments would help keep her afloat if hit.

HMS Jervis Bay arrived in Halifax, bustling with activity that summer, to begin North Atlantic escort duty in June 1940.

The Royal Navy met inbound convoys off the coast of Ireland. In between lay a trackless expanse a thousand miles across where a convoy's only protection was often a single escort. At an average speed of 8 to 9 knots, a fast convoy could reach the U.K. in 10 days. Not surprisingly, German U-boats congregated at mid-ocean where convoys were most vulnerable.

Merchant seamen were less likely to survive a sinking in 1940 than any other year of the war. Lifeboats were scarce and inadequately supplied: most vessels — including the Jervis Bay — supplemented their lifesaving gear with carley floats, crude but effective rafts made of 40-gallon drums and wood.

The British crew of the Jervis Bay were well aware of the risks because many were drawn from the Merchant Navy, serving under special articles that placed them on Royal Navy ships without having to join the Naval Reserve. Some were pensioners and fleet reservists who had served in the First World War, while others were volunteer reservists with little sea time: a former London cabbie, a policeman, a college graduate from Birmingham University, an upholsterer

from Yorkshire, a manager from a London biscuit factory.

Thirty Canadians — RCN personnel on loan to the Royal Navy — were among her crew. When John Smith of Toronto first saw the Jervis Bay in Halifax, his nervousness about going to sea vanished. "This is a big one," he wrote his parents. "You've got nothing to worry about." Chris Funge's western Canadian upbringing gave him a familiarity with horses that came in handy when ornery carley floats needed taming. Ken Marginson of New Glasgow was Chief Engine Room Artificer. After the war he went on to become a professor of engineering at Dalhousie University. Six crewmen hailed from St. John's, Nfld.; some of the officers were Australian. In all, there were 254 officers and men.

The Old Man was Captain Edward Stephen Fogarty Fegen, RN, the grandson of a Royal Navy captain and son of a vice-admiral from County Tipperary, Ireland. He entered Royal Naval College in 1904, and by the end of the First World War had commanded a torpedo boat and two destroyers. Between the wars he served as executive officer of the Royal Australian Naval College at Captain's Point, Jervis Bay, New South Wales.

A burly, barrel-chested Irishman, Fogarty Fegen was approaching the age of 50 when he assumed command of HMS Jervis Bay. He was

a bachelor and devout Roman Catholic, raised on Navy traditions, but like being piped aboard, and non-RN crew members. His training-ship commander in patience and tact — useful present on regulation Navy

The crew of the Jervis Bay were well of their master, but he and to them he seemed son Of one thing they were absolute Fegen's pugnacity. "If the and we meet the enemy," I take you in as close as I p

*Thirty-eight ships, full sp
Off with their needed cas
But over there where the
Guns ablaze went the Jervis*

On Oct. 28, 1940 the ship through the anti-submarine mouth of Halifax harbour and two Canadian destroyers

The next day 12 ships in convoy HX-84. On the 31st bound from Bermuda, fell in destroyers turned back for Jervis Bay the sole escort.

The Germans knew that the convoy, HX-83, had put to of the rare occasions when



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Painting of the Jervis Bay by Bill Hawker, Vancouver; Jervis Bay survivors celebrate at the Ajax Club, Tobin Street in Halifax, Nov. 15, 1940; Survivors (in uniform), Stureholm crew and Mrs. C. S. McEwen ("Mrs. Ajax") toast Capt. Sven Olander, centre front.



Courtesy of Isabel Macneill



Courtesy Isabel Macneill

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a bachelor and devout Roman Catholic. Though raised on Navy traditions, he disliked formalities like being piped aboard, and got along well with non-RN crew members. His experience as a training-ship commander imbued him with patience and tact — useful qualities not always present on regulation Navy bridges.

The crew of the Jervis Bay usually spoke well of their master, but he kept his own counsel and to them he seemed somewhat of an enigma. Of one thing they were absolutely clear: Fogarty Fegen's pugnacity. "If the Gods are good to us and we meet the enemy," he told them, "I shall take you in as close as I possibly can."

*Thirty-eight ships, full speed ahead,
Off with their needed cargos sped.
But over there where the warship lay,
Guns ablaze went the Jervis Bay.*

On Oct. 28, 1940 the Jervis Bay slipped through the anti-submarine net straddling the mouth of Halifax harbour with 18 merchantmen and two Canadian destroyers.

The next day 12 ships from Sydney joined convoy HX-84. On the 31st eight more, outward bound from Bermuda, fell into line. The RCN destroyers turned back for Halifax, leaving Jervis Bay the sole escort.

The Germans knew that HX-84 and another convoy, HX-83, had put to sea, but this was one of the rare occasions when U-boats would not be

present to seal a merchantman's fate. Since the humiliating loss of the Admiral Graf Spee the previous December, German High Command had impatiently waited for an opportunity to use its two pocket-battleships against the enemy.

One of them was the 10,000-ton Admiral Scheer. Though smaller than the Jervis Bay, the Scheer was a formidable warship, with six 11-inch guns, a powerful array of anti-aircraft weapons and two torpedo launchers. With a top speed of 28 knots, she was nearly twice as fast as an armed merchant cruiser. An Arado spotter plane — nicknamed the ship's parrot — extended the pocket-battleship's operational range. Five days before HX-84 departed Halifax, the Admiral Scheer began a five-month raiding cruise.

Meanwhile, HX-84 plodded along in nine columns of three to five ships each. As escort the Jervis Bay occupied a station next to the convoy commodore's vessel leading the middle column.

Ten tankers carried fuel of various kinds, loaded at ports in the Caribbean — gasoline, crude oil, and kerosene to be used by industry and the Royal Navy. A dozen or so ships were laden with mixed cargos of lumber, steel and general products. Two vessels transported corn, a commodity strictly rationed in Britain even though it was only used as poultry feed. Another had 700 tons of tobacco, the single luxury item in the whole convoy.

Perhaps the most valuable of cargo was fighter aircraft carefully stowed aboard the Pacific Enterprise and Trewellard.

One-third were of non-British registry — four Norwegian, four Swedish, two Belgian, two Polish and one Greek. Sweden was technically neutral, but Swedish seamen assumed the same risks as their Allied counterparts while sailing in hostile waters.

■ See Forlorn hope/B2

Fegen knew it and all his crew, Buying minutes with lives to pay. Lord, they were men on the Jervis Bay.

The ship's parrot sighted HX-84 at noon on Nov. 5. Then, steaming in the direction of the convoy, the Admiral Scheer happened upon the S.S. Mopan, bound for England with a load of bananas.

Fearing that the Mopan might send out a warning to HX-84, the German battleship captured her crew and sank the luckless banana boat on the spot.

By 4:45 p.m., lookouts on the Jervis Bay knew that the ship approaching quickly from the northeast was a warship. Because a German surface raider on the open Atlantic was such a novelty, most observers assumed that the vessel was British.

At five o'clock came the call to action stations, a precautionary measure that had always been a false alarm. The Jervis Bay issued a challenge to the warship on the Aldis lamp. There was no reply.

The Admiral Scheer was now less than 15 miles away. An officer in the after gun control of the Jervis Bay trained his eyes through binoculars. Finally, he said, "That's a pocket-battleship".

Almost immediately Captain Fegen signalled the convoy commodore in the nearby Cornish City: "Prepare to scatter."

Before leaving Halifax, each ship in the convoy had been assigned a course to take if evasive action was necessary. They were to veer away from the enemy, then scatter in a fan-like pattern to divide the enemy's attentions and fire.

At the same time, the Jervis Bay began dropping smoke canisters over the side to lay down a protective screen between the Admiral Scheer and the convoy.

The first salvo fired at the Jervis Bay fell 50 yards short, the second landed an equal distance on the other side.

From a distance of 12 miles, it took 23 seconds for the third salvo to reach the merchant cruiser. A shell exploded on the foredeck, the topmast crashing down like a giant tree. Another shell hit behind the wheelhouse, wrecking the range finder and all primary fire control gear. The blast severed telephone wires and electric power to the guns, so that each gun could only be aimed and fired independently.

At full speed on a suicide course, the Jervis Bay steamed directly for the Admiral Scheer. It was not recklessness or desperation that drove them on; the battleship was far outside the range of the escort's 6-inch guns. The Jervis



Bay could not hope to inflict any damage unless she closed on the Scheer. At the same time, each minute that she engaged the enemy bought precious time for the fleeing merchantmen. There was simply no other course to take.

*Pounded, shattered, smashed and lame,
Fighting on with her decks
afire,
She sank with the sun at the
death of day,
And a gun still spoke from the
Jervis Bay.*

The Jervis Bay scored no hits. As the din of battle raged around him, John Smith thought of the reassuring words he had written home. His normal duties impossible due to chaos in the engine room, he kept busy by supplying the gun crews with cigarettes. Stopping for a moment, he hunkered down with two stewards to have a smoke himself. Smith shrugged off a warning by one of the stewards about taking the third light from a match. "I'm not superstitious," he said. Of the three, he alone survived.

After taking just 20 minutes of concentrated fire, half of her crew lay dead or wounded, the steering gear wrecked, her guns out of commission and the superstructure ablaze. Capt. Fegen was standing on the bridge when a shell landed nearby; when next seen, he was

badly wounded, his left arm shattered. Climbing down to the main deck, Fegen and the chief yeoman of signals made their way to the after control position. When it too was destroyed, they headed back to the bridge. It was the last time anyone saw them alive.

Shortly after six o'clock the order came to abandon ship.

The Jervis Bay was slowly sinking. The shelling from the Admiral Scheer continued unabated and fires raged out of control.

Most of the lifeboats had been smashed to flinders. The ship's jolly boat, despite a hole in its stern, was launched and about 20 men clambered into it.

Another party manhandled a three-by-five metre carley float over the side and some 40 men eventually scrambled aboard. A second raft, damaged by shellfire, carried 12 more. At least 30 managed to get clear of the doomed ship by clinging to pieces of wreckage or swimming as best they could in bulky lifejackets.

There were men still on the Jervis Bay just before she went down; some were too wounded to move, others had left their lifebelts below and could not swim. Finally, at 8 p.m., the Jervis Bay's blazing prow tipped skyward, paused for a moment as if suspended, then plunged to the bottom.



Jervis Bay survivors and Stureholm crew pose in front of the Ajax Club on Tobin Street, Halifax, on Nov. 15, 1940 for a Fox Movietone newsreel photographer, right. Front centre: Isabel Macneill, Capt. Sven Olander and Mrs. C. S. McEwen (Mrs. Ajax).

Courtesy Isabel Macneill

In the melee that followed the order to scatter, Sven Olander, 60-year-old master of the Swedish ship *Stureholm*, decided to turn his vessel around and head back towards North America. A stocky, balding, round-faced Swede with penetrating blue eyes, Capt. Olander's experience in the First World War told him that attempting to outrun a surface raider was futile. Gambling on his neutrality, Olander secured a large Swedish flag to the bridge and lit it with spotlights. When challenged by the Admiral Scheer, the *Stureholm* replied: "I am a Swedish neutral bound for the United States with a load of pig iron." The ruse worked.

The *Maidan* and her crew were not so fortunate. Headed for Belfast from Baltimore with a mixed cargo, she was sunk with all hands. A similar fate befell the 10,000-ton *Beaverford*, carrying food and munitions from Montreal to Liverpool. The *Beaverford* radioed a poignant farewell moments before she blew up, taking all her crew with her: "It's our turn now. So long."

A total of six vessels were sunk, including the *Jervis Bay*; nearly 50,000 tons of shipping and over 350 sailors were lost. For his

resoluteness in the face of overwhelming odds, Fegen was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross.

*Thirty-eight ships with food for you,
Thirty-three ships came safely through,
But the finest ship that is docked today,
In the Empire's heart is the Jervis Bay.*

One week after the attack, a weatherbeaten tramp steamer loomed out of the fog in Halifax harbour; the signal flags on her masthead announced: "I have survivors."

It was the *Stureholm*.

There were 65 *Jervis Bay* survivors in all, but three died and were buried at sea. Reports vary about who on the Swedish ship gave the order to pick up survivors — some say Capt. Sven Olander was asleep in his cabin at the time. In any event, his crew, terrified that U-boats were lurking nearby, reluctantly began rescue operations.

Warren Stevens of Port Medway held onto part of a broken hatch cover for 10 hours before he was rescued. At about midnight

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"I yelled and they stopped, but I guess they didn't see me." Four hours later, the *Stureholm* returned. "I was wearing a naval duffel coat with the hood pulled down over my head. I threw back the hood and waved. They shone the light on me and then picked me up."

Stevens was lucky. The paralyzing cold waters claimed their share of men who had escaped the infernos aboard their crippled vessels.

News of the battle soon flashed around the world. Winston Churchill paid tribute to Fogarty Fegen in the House of Commons.

On the steps of a sailors' club in Halifax, the *Jervis Bay* survivors, with upturned thumbs and jaunty waves, posed with their Scandinavian saviours for newsreel photographers.

But fate had not yet written the final chapter in the *Jervis Bay* saga.

The smiling faces of the young Swedish crew belied the fact that some later refused to go to sea again with Capt. Olander.

The Admiralty decided that former *Jervis Bay* personnel should replace the insurgents. On her next voyage, the *Stureholm*, her brave captain and everyone aboard — including several men from the *Jervis Bay* — disappeared without a trace somewhere between Iceland and the Scottish coast.

For many years after the war, on the Saturday nearest Nov. 5, a small group of men gathered at the Marylebone Station Restaurant in London to raise their glasses to "our absent shipmates" and "our grand and happy ship." This Sunday, the Canadians among this dwindling fraternity will meet at the *Jervis Bay* Canadian Legion in Saint John.

A similar reunion was held a few years ago. The mood was oddly subdued for a Canadian Legion on a Saturday afternoon. Tom Davison, one of three Britons in attendance, seemed especially sombre.

Taking me aside, he said: "It's no use looking in any of the old photographs — I'm not there." I asked him why. "I just couldn't get over how many men we'd lost," he explained. "That night, the *Ajax* Club threw a big party for us and the Swedish chaps who saved us. I spent the night tramping the streets of Halifax — it just didn't seem right to be celebrating when so many didn't make it."

Bill Hawker travelled all the way from Vancouver to attend the reunion, though he never set foot on the *Jervis Bay*. "I was on one of the ships in the convoy, the *Lancaster Castle*," he said. "I owe my life to these men."