

# “AM ENGAGING ENEMY... BELIEVED TO BE ADMIRAL SCHEER!”

THE EPIC BATTLE BETWEEN AN EX-OCEAN LINER ARMED WITH AN ASSORTMENT OF ANCIENT WEAPONS AND AN INCREDIBLE AMOUNT OF COURAGE AGAINST A GERMAN POCKET BATTLESHIP  
BY PAUL BROCK

Cold fingers of fear rippled along my spine as I heard that distant, almost muffled roar rushing from beyond an empty horizon. There was no mistaking the sound. It was the roar of naval shells hurtling through the air in a trajectory aimed at the very ship on whose decks I was now standing. A split second later the roar had rocketed to a ragged whine, and suddenly the sea off our port bow erupted in five huge geysers.

“Eleven-inch guns or even better, judging from these splashes!” shouted Capt. E. S. Fogarty Fegen, skipper of the HMS *Jervis Bay* as he trained his glasses on the ominous upheavals. “She could be the *Admiral Scheer* or the *Lutzow*.”

“Or one of the new Nazi battleisers,”

suggested the First Lieutenant.

I felt a sudden lead-like ache in the pit of my stomach as the Captain and the First Lieutenant guessed at the entity of the warship now shelling us. The names they mentioned — *Scheer*, *Lutzow*, *Gneisenau*, *Scharnhorst* — meant just one thing and that was death for our ship. Every one of those Nazi raiders, alone and unaided, could outshoot, out-maneuver, and literally obliterate us without even trying particularly hard. The *Admiral Scheer*, for instance, was a pocket battleship of about

14,000-tons mounting six 11-inch and eight 5.9-inch guns. Her speed was 26 knots, some ten knots faster than our own. She was capable of shelling an adversary with devastating accuracy from a distance of ten miles.

HMS *Jervis Bay* was merely a 14,000-ton pleasure liner transformed into an armed merchant cruiser with plates less than an inch thick. The shells from a pocket battleship could penetrate her

hull as easily as bullets can penetrate cardboard. Her main armament included seven ancient 6-inch guns, backed by an assortment of 3-inch, Bofors, Oerlikon and Lewis along with four depth-charge throwers.

*Jervis Bay* was built originally as a passenger ship to carry emigrants to Australia. With the build-up of international military forces in the late 1930s, she was taken over by the Admiralty in August 1939 and fitted with our ancient weapons. Painted dark gray, lightly armed, and riding high in the sea, our crew would refer to her — as with so many other refurbished ships — as an “Admiralty-made coffin.”

No wonder my stomach was tying itself into knots!

“Five splashes!” I heard Capt. Fegen calling. “She’s throwing salvos at us.”

He ducked as another clutch of high explosive shells roared overhead and churned up the sea directly astern. If we didn’t dodge now, the next salvo might drop right on us.

“Hard aport!” rapped Fegen, and the seconds dragged agonizingly

Captain Edward Stephen Fogarty Fegen was the son of Mary Catherine Crewse and V/Adm. Frederick Fogarty Fegen of Ballinilty, Borrisoleigh, Thurles, County Tipperary. Born on 8 October 1891 in Knightsbridge, London; Edward Fegen came from a strong naval tradition with both his father and grandfather being naval officers. His Fogarty Irish family history can easily be traced back to the 5th Century, to one Fergus Cearbhall, latter the 133rd monarch of Ireland.

as the ship’s head swung and the deck heeled. “Send a signal to the convoy,” he added, turning to me. “Tell them, ‘Disperse and make smoke.’”

Only that morning, 5 November 1940, “Stripey” Ladd, veteran Cockney signalman with three good conduct stripes, and my relief on the Aldis signal lamp, had predicted that we would reach Liverpool without losing a single ship out of the whole convoy of 38 vessels. “If this dirty weather keeps up,” he said cheerfully, “Jerry can’t do a thing because he can’t bleeding well see us. Only 600 miles to go, me lad, and let’s hope this perishing fog stays right where she is.”

We were escorting Convoy HX-84 and the ships were carrying goods vital for the war. Between early May 1940 and the end of July 1942, British cargo ships were being sunk by U-Boats and surface raiders at an average rate of 66 per month. Between June and October 1940 alone, more than 270



The Victoria Cross.

Not looking at all like a warship, HMS *Jervis Bay* was the sole escort for Convoy HX-84 on the perilous crossing of the North Atlantic.

*Jervis Bay* in service as a one-class liner of the Aberdeen and Commonwealth Line sailing between England and Australia.

