

# CHRONICLES

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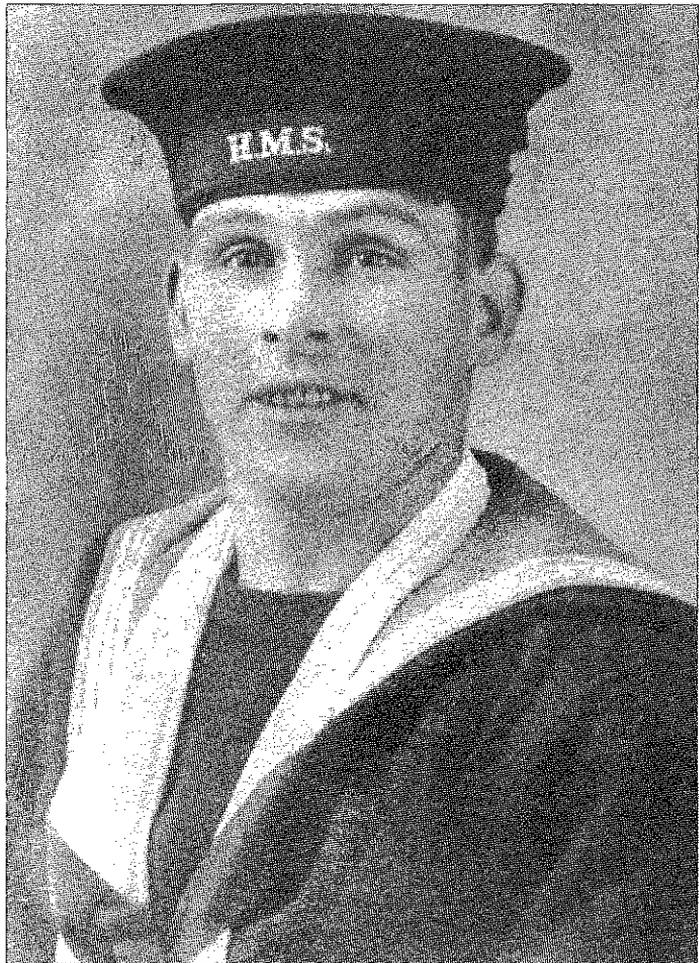
## Every loss a bitter one

We humans get a little bit weird about death. This in itself is weird for death is inevitable. We all hope for a long life and a peaceful passing in our sleep. Anything short of that is a tragedy. I believe that too. My mother was 65 when she died of lung cancer. I was devastated. It turned my life inside-out. My father was in his 85th year when he shuffled off. It was certainly a loss but since his odometer had already rolled over at least once there weren't many miles to go anyway. We celebrated his life at his death!

Even passings that are unrelated to us are sad when we think about them. There is one kind of death that is so common that we have learned how to quantify and qualify it in order to handle it more easily.

Such demises even have their own vocabulary: Missing in Action, Killed in Action, Missing ... presumed dead, Died of wounds, Paid the Ultimate Price, Acceptable Losses and my personal favourite, Collateral Damage (civilians who got in the way!)

Every November we remember some of these. Not all of them because we are only interested in the good guys. To be more particular about it, we only remember the good guys who stayed good after the war.



**Wilson Avery of Long Beach met his end aboard the Jervis Bay.**

Noncombatants who died in the fire storms visited upon Tokyo, Dresden, Hamburg or even Birmingham seem not worthy of a second thought. We don't count the cost in German or Japanese lives. Russians who were Communist don't matter on

religious grounds and we do not even acknowledge that the Chinese were even in the war.

The Jewish people have developed remembrance of their departed loved ones to the level of an art form. They have even co-opted a word

for the attempted genocide of their race that has, through the passage of time, changed that word's meaning; Holocaust. You may think I'm making light of this. Far from it. To me they are doing it right but what of the holocaust visited upon the Gypsies and Homosexuals of Europe by the same Nazi fiends at the same time?

This picking and choosing between the worthy and unworthy during war still goes on today. Almost nightly, the news tells us how many American and British soldiers bought it in Iraq that day. They never mention how many Iraqis went to Allah during the preceding 24 hours.

The classification of death during war with numbers and names is the crutch we are leaning on to prevent us from being overwhelmed by the sheer madness and horror of armed conflict. It insulates us and keeps us at a safe distance. A dead soldier, unless you are related to him or her, means no more to you than the passing of my octagerian father.

Three million Jews, 20,000,000 Russians, 17,000,000 Chinese and so on down the line. But that's war! Right? Did you know that in the year 2000, somewhere around five million people the world over died of the same cause? It wasn't a war so how could you? They were all smoking-related deaths. They were isolated individuals whose passing was every bit as tragic as if they had fallen on the field of battle.

A smoker, a sailor, a soldier a pilot, all leave the same void when they cross over into the next world (wherever that is). They all leave behind grief-stricken loved ones: parents, spouses, siblings offspring, their main squeeze and

possibly lesser squeezes! They also leave behind their future potential.

What they might have turned out to be, will never be. The world may have lost another Nelson Mandella, a Mother Theresa or a Gordie Howe. What may have been is as bitterly missed as what was.

Able Seaman Wilson Avery of Long Beach was just 22 when his ship, the Armed Merchant Cruiser *HMS Jervis Bay* joined in mortal combat with the infinitely more powerful Pocket Battleship *Admiral Sheer* of the German Navy on the evening of November 5th, 1940.

"God damn this ship and all who sail on her!"

He might as well have for even divine intervention could not have saved the poor souls aboard the 22-year-old liner cum warship. Without a hope of their own they valiantly charged into hell in an effort to provide hope for others. It was their intention to buy time so the 37 ships of convoy HX 84 and the sailors who manned them had a chance to get away from the approaching beast bent on their destruction.

The old girl had a crew of 255, mostly naval reservists, from Britain, Canada and Newfoundland. By the time the lopsided battle was finally over and the hapless liner consigned to Davie Jones locker, there were only 57 men left to tell the tale. Seaman Avery was almost among them. He had survived the sinking but died subsequently of wounds received in the battle.

Within a few days the dark cloud of his passing descended upon the once happy family he left behind in Trinity Bay.

The little school in Long Beach got an unscheduled

visit from the minister. After speaking quietly to the teacher it was announced to the students that lessons were over for the day and they were to go home.

Ten year old Emma Avery cared not what the reason was for you never look a gift horse in the mouth. All she thought of was having the rest of the day off. She did think it a little odd that the Minister and teacher seemed to be following her home but thought no more of it than that.

Emma was not the only child at home that day. Her 16-year old sister Emily and little eight year old Eva were in attendance as well. They saw the teacher and the minister go in to see their parents. There was something unusual afoot. Then the blinds went down in the living room window. Someone had died! Their big brother Wilson, whom they had just seen weeks ago on leave from the Navy, would never be coming home again.

The family and the town were devastated by the loss. Wilson was one of six native sons in the Navy. His brother Chester was another. The young trio of sisters looked up to their big brothers and the boys repaid that respect with kindness.

Chester was fun loving and Wilson was family oriented and even sentimental which is a rare quality in a man. Both boys were fishermen with their father and both loved boats. The Navy was a natural choice. Now the sea they loved so much had claimed the family's first born.

Mrs. Avery was inconsolable. In the tradition of the day, she had black mourning dresses made for the girls to wear to church and other spe-

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cial occasions. As a measure of the depth of their grief, these dresses were worn for almost two years after the *Jervis Bay* went down. Likewise the blinds were down for that long too.

Perhaps in the hope of cheering his remaining children, Mr Avery would take his daughters into the woods on Saturdays. Emily, the oldest, would handle the horse. He took to referring to them on these occasions as "my three boys." Whether this was to console himself in the absence of his sons or make his daughters feel proud of themselves is a matter of conjecture. Its effect was enormous though. Emma speaks of the term today as though it was a badge of honour.

Many of those long ago feelings are fresh in her mind. It was just over 54 years ago that she last saw her big brother. She finds it hard to speak of him today without a catch in her voice. She showed me a gift he had brought her on that last visit. It was a golden anchor with the words "Forget me not" wound around it. It was prophetic but very true for he shall never be forgotten by his little sisters.

Able Seaman, Jew or Gypsy, they all matter and their passing prematurely as the product of war is one of the darkest stains on the soul

of mankind. Was Wilson Avery's death and the deaths of 197 of his shipmates a suicidal waste?

After finally dispensing with the *Jervis Bay*, the *Sheer* rushed about in the dark searching for the merchant ships that had scurried to all points of the compass.

She managed to catch and sink only five. Had it not been for the obstinate resistance of the *Bay*, the German Pocket Battleship would have had time to do much more damage.

As it was, she raced off to the South Atlantic before dawn. The Royal Navy was pretty thin down there but so were the pickings of merchant shipping. In all she sank only 14 ships (including the *Bay*) and captured two others.

The *Sheer* and her stable mates were a bitter disappointment to Adolph Hitler. During the same period the much cheaper U-boats were far more effective at sinking Allied shipping. Hitler ordered the big bruisers to stay in Norwegian and Baltic waters and replaced their strongest proponent, Admiral Reader with the U-boat man Admiral Donitz as head of the Navy.

Had it not been for the actions of the *Jervis Bay* the *Sheer's* score would have been much higher. As a result, the old liner was a direct contributor to the

defeat of the mighty Pocket Battleships and so were Wilson Avery and all his shipmates.

## Stranger than fiction

There is another aspect to this story that bears no direct relation to Newfoundland but it was so intriguing I had to pass it along. It concerns a tanker ship called the *San Demetrio*. She was one of the unfortunates caught by the *Sheer* later that night. Extensively shelled, she caught fire and had to be abandoned by her crew. They all got away in two life boats — 16 men in one and 24 in the other. In their haste to get away from the burning tanker full of volatile aviation fuel, the two boats lost contact with each other.

The boat with 24 men aboard was spotted and the occupants transferred safely to Newfoundland. The other 16 spent a miserably cold night, and most of the next day, alone on the ocean. Late in the afternoon they spotted a ship and rowed toward it. It turned out to be their own and it was still on fire.

A debate was held about the best plan of action. Still fearing the thing would blow

up at any second, they rowed away to another frigid night. Well into the second day they began to lose hope of rescue and cursed their timidity in the face of the burning hulk. Late in the afternoon another ship was spotted. With the last of their strength they rowed in that direction. Low and behold, it was the *San Demetrio* again and it was still on fire.

The decision was not so hard this time. Instant death in a warm blast is infinitely more desirable than slowly freezing to death. They climbed aboard and went to work warming themselves on the fires. Actually they were fighting the fires and eventually they prevailed.

The bridge had been obliterated by the shelling from the *Sheer* so there was no helm to steer by. They managed to gerry-rig a steering system below decks and sailed their stricken ship to Ireland. From there they birthed in the Clyde to discharge their precious cargo and get much needed repairs.

Any ship can only have so many horse shoes up its bilge pipe. The *San Demetrio* was sunk off Chesapeake Bay, New England, in 1942.