

Seaman James Harcus



James William Moodie Harcus was born in Firth on 17th August 1920, an elder son in the large family of Sinclair Harcus and Margaret Harcus (née Rendall), who came originally from Westray.

Jim took part in two Arctic Convoys as a merchant seaman. He described in diaries two trips to Russia in *SS Ocean Faith*, built in the USA to a Liberty Ship design with a welded hull and a nominal gross tonnage of 7,174 tons by Todd-Bath Iron Shipbuilding Corporation, Portland, Maine for the British Ministry of War Transport and managed by Headlam & Son of Manchester. *Ocean Faith*'s engines were built by General Machinery Corporation, Hamilton, Ohio and her coal fired boilers gave a speed of 11 knots. Jim's diaries make it clear that he became fond of the ship and was proud of her contribution to the war effort.

Jim's first trip was to Archangel in Convoy PQ18, which lost thirteen out of 44 merchant ships in September 1942 at the cost to the Germans of 44 aircraft (38 torpedo-bombers of KG26) and two submarines (U457 and U589). PQ18 was the first Arctic Convoy to include air support from an escort carrier, *HMS Avenger*, also had increased anti-aircraft support with two auxiliary cruisers with significant anti-aircraft guns.

SS Ocean Faith returned to the UK in Convoy QP15, its 28 merchant ships sailing on 17th November. They were scattered by a series of gales, losing a British steamer and a Russian freighter to U625 and U601 respectively, while the remainder reached Loch Ewe in two groups on 30th November and 3rd December.

Jim's second trip was in Convoy JW52, whose Commodore, retired Vice-Admiral Sir Malcolm Goldsmith, was aboard *SS Empire Clarion*. The Germans lost two He115 torpedo bombers of KG406 attacking JW52 on the 24th but it arrived intact in the Kola Inlet on 27th January 1943.

SS Ocean Faith returned to the UK in Convoy RA53, which had a total of 30 merchant ships escorted by the cruiser *HMS Scylla*, 13 destroyers, 4 corvettes and 2 trawlers. U255 sank the American ship *Executive* and damaged Liberty Ship *Richard Bland* on 5th March. The Liberty Ship *J.L.M. Curry* cracked across her after deck on the 7th and sank next day. The Liberty Ship *John H.B. Latrobe* broke down on the 7th, but was towed to Iceland by the destroyer *HMS Opportune*. U586 sank another American ship *Puerto Rican* on the 9th, when U255 torpedoed *Richard Bland* again and blew her in two – the stern sank, but the bow was towed to Iceland.

SS Ocean Faith was bombed and torpedoed off the Portuguese coast on 15th August 1943, but survived the war and was eventually scrapped in Italy in 1962. Jim Harcus also survived the war and continued at sea in the Merchant Navy, also working in the oil industry in heavy-lift offshore vessels. Jim brought up his family in Darlington, where he died in Ashlie House on 12th January 2000, aged 79.

