

# DEATH of an EMPRESS

**She was the first purpose-built luxury world-cruise ship, and the largest ship ever to have travelled between all the major ports of the Commonwealth. A vessel of her size and speed would have played an important role as a troopship, capable of operating without escort. Yet, as Chris Goss relates, *Empress of Britain* became the largest British merchant ship to be sunk in the Second World War.**

**B**uilt between 1928 and 1931, in her time *Empress of Britain* was the epitome of luxury. Having been converted to all first-class accommodation, she cruised the world as no other ship had before.

Unlike the great liners which crossed the Atlantic, *Empress of Britain* was built so that she could navigate the Panama and Suez canals. At 42,348 tons, she was the largest ship capable of making such journeys and it allowed her to carry her wealthy passengers around the globe. *Empress of Britain* boasted swimming pools, Turkish baths and massage rooms, cinemas, concert halls, gymnasiums, squash courts, a full-sized tennis court, hairdressing salons, beauty parlours, an ultra-modern dental surgery and the most fully equipped hospital ever to embellish a passenger ship.

She was built for the Canadian Pacific Steamship Company by the John Brown shipyard to provide a scheduled service between the United Kingdom and Canada from spring to autumn and in the winter time to conduct world cruises. The outbreak of the Second World War, however, saw her requisitioned by the Admiralty for service as a troopship and, with a top speed of twenty-four knots *Empress of Britain* would be able to sail by herself, unencumbered by a sluggish convoy. Much could be expected of this magnificent vessel.

*Empress of Britain* had sailed from the UK on 2 September 1939, the day before the declaration of war, bound for Canada. She reached Quebec on 8

September. There she was painted grey, being requisitioned as a troopship on 25 November. She was fitted with a six-inch naval gun and a three-inch high-angle gun on her after deck and, on 10 December, she sailed back to the UK, arriving in the Clyde seven days later.

After a voyage to and from Australia and New Zealand, *Empress of Britain* departed for South Africa on 6 August 1940. On her return voyage back to the UK, she left the Cape unescorted, and was due to reach Liverpool on 28 October.

By 09.20 hours on 26 October, *Empress of Britain* was little more than sixty miles from the north-west coast of Ireland when she was spotted by the crew of Oberleutnant Bernard Jope's Focke-Wulf Fw 200 Condor of 1./KG 40. The sighting was highly fortunate for Jope as

**MAIN PICTURE:** Oberleutnant Bernard Jope's Focke-Wulf Fw 200 Condor, F8+BK, pictured having landed back at Bordeaux-Mérignac following his crew's attack on *Empress of Britain*. The *werke* number for this aircraft is not known, though it is recorded that it carried the name *Sirius* on the nose. (All images courtesy of the author unless stated otherwise)

there was low, dense cloud over the sea.

What the crew of the Fw 200 saw was a large ship with three funnels. Fearing that he might lose her in the poor conditions, Jope took the Condor down to about 300 feet and ran towards the ship from astern. Jope's under-fuselage gunner opened fire on the ship whilst Jope dropped one of his 250kg bombs.

The gunners on *Empress of Britain* were quick to respond. Able-Bodied Seamen Henry Petch was amongst the DEMS (Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships) gunners on duty at the time and it was he that first spotted the German aircraft swooping down out of the clouds some 3,000 to 4,000 yards away. Petch pointed it out to his colleagues. The aircraft was on the port quarter, at an angle of sight of five degrees.

At such an angle and distance it was difficult to identify the type of aircraft but the sharp-eyed Petch was in no doubt. "It's a Jerry, Chief!" he called, just as the first bomb was released.

This gave the gunners a chance to bring their guns to bear on the attacker as it closed upon the ship. Lieutenant Commander Charles Garrett, who had taken over responsibility for the gun crews, later reported: "My gun crew opened fire almost simultaneously with the first bomb ... I left D deck, ran the main staircase and found a fire raging on the lounge deck. The lights had gone out. There were several further explosions about this time."<sup>1</sup>

The gunners had in fact hit the Condor and had damaged its bombsight. Jope, however, pulled round to circle the ship for a second attack. Once again the Condor attacked from astern but due, no



**ABOVE:** A SC250 (*Sprengbombe Cylindrich* 250) bomb being loaded onto a Focke-Wulf Fw 200 Condor of KG 40. The Fw 200 could carry a 2,000lb bomb load or a similar weight of mines. It is stated that between June 1940 and February 1941, Fw 200 Condors sank 365,000 tons of Allied shipping despite a rather basic bombsight.

**BELOW:** Focke-Wulf Fw 200 Condor F8+BK pictured on the compass swing at Bordeaux-Mérignac whilst the aircraft's compass is calibrated.

doubt, to the damage to the bombsight and the fact that the rear half of the ship was already clouded in smoke from the first attack, the bombs missed.

Jope turned again, this time to attack from ahead. He released two more bombs. One hit the deck near the six-inch gun but it failed to explode and it simply rolled off into the sea. The other, though, exploded on the open promenade deck behind the third funnel and the three-inch High Angle gun was put out of action, starting yet another fire. The German crew also machine-gunned the whole length of the ship before turning away.

However, the Condor did not survive the attack unscathed as it was hit at least twice, with a shell striking one of its engines which began to lose oil. As

by this time the fire on *Empress of Britain* had clearly taken hold, Jope could feel satisfied with his work. He switched off the damaged engine and headed for home. "After the attack my radio operator reported success to our base," Jope later recalled. "We did not know immediately what vessel we had hit and our assessment of the size of the ship was completely wrong. I reported as follows: 'General location fair sized trading vessel, approximately 20,000 tons attacked successfully, there will be losses, listing, the boats are down.'"<sup>2</sup>

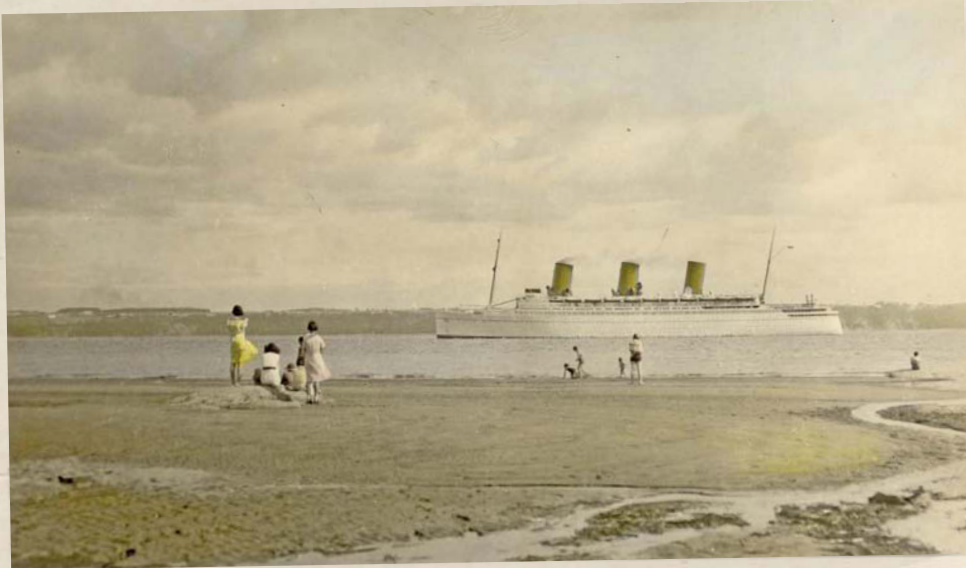
The attack had been so destructive, that the skipper Captain Charles H. Sapworth, CVO, ordered *Empress of Britain* to be abandoned at 09:50 hours, just twenty minutes after the first bomb had struck. A member of the crew, J.P. Donovan, of Southampton, watched the disaster unfold from his place on the forecastle: "When the bombs began to drop about 40 or 50 of us lay down on the deck. Then the lights went out in the forward part and we made our way towards the forecastle by torchlight. The stench left by the bombs was terrible.

"Finally about 300 people were gathered in the forecastle, including a number of women and children. About half an hour after the attack some of the boats lowered from the starboard side came up forward and we got all the women and children into them.

"When these boats were full we still had about 140 on the forecastle. In case there should not be enough boats for us we began to make rafts from all the wood we could find – cabin doors, between decks and awning spars.

"Owing to the fire spreading a number of the boats had to be got away with





"We kept the engines running for about three-quarters of an hour after the attack, but the smoke and fumes were so bad below that we had to wear our gas masks as we went about our jobs. The lights were on, but we needed electric torches as well to see what we were doing."

One of the ship's stewards, James Cameron, was injured in the attack: "I went down the rope to get into [a] boat, but when I got into the water the boat had disappeared. I hung on for a time and it was then that my hands were hurt. I then found an empty lifebelt box floating about. I was wearing my lifebelt, but I can swim only a few strokes."

"I managed to get to the box, and then it overturned and I was trapped inside it below the water. How I managed to free myself I do not know ... I have

a vague memory of a pal of mine appearing from somewhere with a boat hook, but I don't remember being pulled into the lifeboat."<sup>3</sup>

Another crew member was subsequently reported as saying: "She [the Fw 200] machine-gunned the bridge heavily, and a machine-gunner who was stationed there fought back very bravely. I heard Captain Sapsworth commending him highly. The skipper himself was very cool. He stayed on the bridge until it was burning under his feet, and he was

on the fore part till the very end."

Mrs A. Speaston, who was returning home to Glasgow with her eight-years-old daughter Elizabeth and her soldier

**ABOVE:** A view of *Empress of Britain* in more peaceful times. Taken on 10 July 1937, this image shows the liner passing through the Saint Lawrence River near Quebec.

**RIGHT:** For his part in the sinking of *Empress of Britain*, Oberleutnant Jope, seen here, was awarded the Knight's Cross on 30 December 1940. Jope had enlisted in the *Luftwaffe* on 1 April 1935, having undertaken a course in aircraft construction. Prior to this he had almost completed his flight training at the German Air Transport School.

**BELOW LEFT:** A map showing the general location where *Empress of Britain* was attacked by the Fw 200 flown by Oberleutnant Bernard Jope.

**BELOW RIGHT:** Another view of a *Kampfgeschwader 40* Focke-Wulf Fw 200 being bombed-up at Bordeaux-Mérignac. Churchill once referred to the Fw 200 as the "Scourge of the Atlantic" due to its contribution to heavy Allied shipping losses. Note the globe in a ring emblem of KG 40.

ship and it was not long after till we were all away. It was then the middle of the afternoon, between five and six hours after the attack.

"All these hours the flames had been spreading forward, and when we got away the ship was burning within 10 feet of the bows. In a few minutes we would have had to take to the rafts. Just before we got into the boats a flying boat came along and signalled that rescue ships were on the way. The rescue ships came up about three-quarters of an hour after, and we got into the boats. The Navy men were grand."

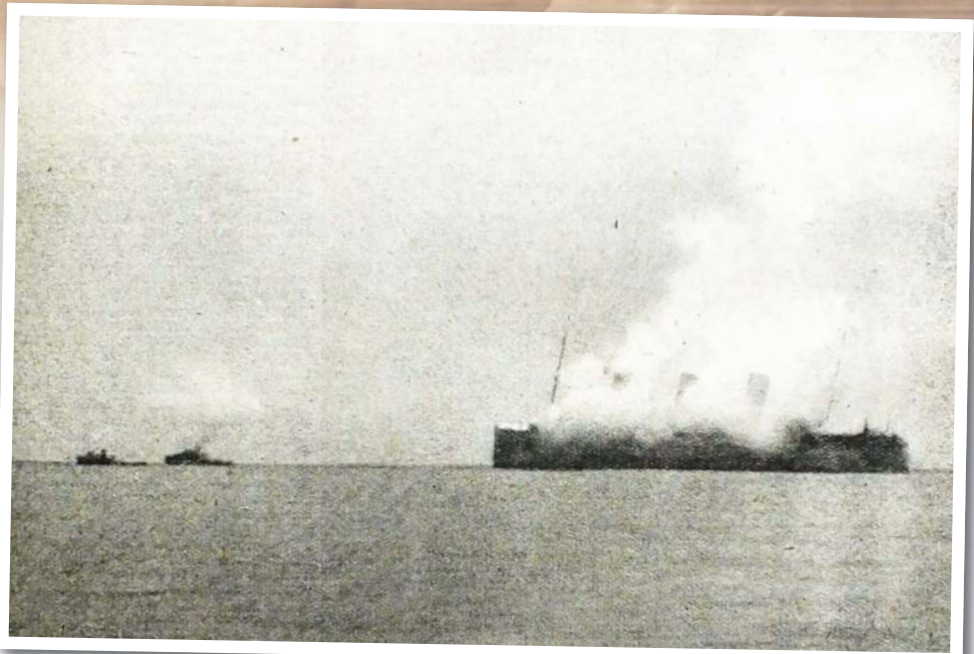
Such was the intensity of the fires, noted one survivor, that the "foremast was red hot and the paint was falling off like strips of canvas". One of the officers in the engine room stated:



only four men in them, the idea being to get them safely afloat and then get the people into them. The trouble was that four men could not row those heavy boats, and then the motor-boat which could have towed them to where they were needed got a knock when it was being lowered and the engine would not start.

"An assistant bo'sun named McKinnon and an RAF officer did a good bit of work between them in getting the engine going. After that it was easy. The motor-boat towed the empty life-boats up to the





husband, later stated: "I was on the promenade deck when the air-raid warning sounded. I heard machine-guns, and bullets thudded against the decks. I was starting to run to the deck below when a great explosion hurled me down the stairs. I scrambled to my feet. My first thought was, of course, to find my little girl. But I was half dazed, and they took me to the boat deck. I found her there."

The youngest passenger was 11-months-old Neville Hart. He was saved by being lashed in a blanket to the back of a sailor, who slid down a sixty foot rope into a lifeboat. Beryl Hart, his 19-year-old sister, said: "I was in a cabin next to mother's when the first bomb struck the liner. There was a great noise and her cabin was wrecked. I heard mother calling and scrambled to her through the wreckage. We could hear fire crackling near us, but there was no panic and Neville was as good as gold."<sup>4</sup>

The behaviour of Sapworth and his crew was praised by many and in fact

most of the 416 crew, two gunners, and 205 passengers (mainly military personnel and their families) were picked up by the British and Polish destroyers HMS *Echo* and ORP *Burza* which had been escorting two troopships heading for the Clyde from Gibraltar. Further help was later provided by the anti-submarine trawler HMS *Cape Arcona*.

*Empress of Britain* had been successfully abandoned, yet she was still afloat. Though badly damaged there was still a chance that the great luxury liner might be saved. Disaster though it had been, all might not be lost.

Bernard Jope still had no idea which ship he had attacked until he reached his base at Bordeaux-Mérignac, where he was received with wild enthusiasm. A telex was sent from there to German Supreme Headquarters, which was intercepted by British intelligence. It read

**ABOVE LEFT:** *Empress of Britain* pictured underway at Greenock having completed a trans-Atlantic voyage carrying the first batch of Canadian soldiers to arrive in the UK.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** A grainy view of *Empress of Britain* still burning in the aftermath of the attack by Oberleutnant Bernard Jope's crew. As well as the passengers on board, the liner also carried a cargo of 300 tons of sugar and 300 tons of government stores, the latter including an unspecified quantity of gold. The first salvage attempt on the wreck of *Empress of Britain* was reported to have been attempted in 1949. In 1995, divers found the *Empress* upside-down in 500 feet of water. As recently as 24 August 2012, a team of deep sea divers reached the wreck, achieving less than ten minutes on the liner's remains before having to endure 4.75 hours of decompression. The wreck is largely upside down, though the bow is twisted off and resting on its port side. (HMP)

**BELOW RIGHT:** A line-up of KG 40 Focke-Wulf Fw 200s at Bordeaux-Mérignac. Oberleutnant Bernard Jope's aircraft, F8+BK, is second in line.



as follows: "Success report. *Flieger Korps* IV. 1 FW 200 from I/KG 40 took off 0409 hrs. Attacked at 1030 steamer 'Empress of Britain' (42,000 tons) in Quadrant 1676/25 West (about 140 km west of the isle of Aran) on an easterly course with 6 x SC 250 bombs. 2 x SC250 hit their target. Ship caught fire and lay there with a list. Destruction can be expected. After the bombing the ship gave out an SOS and it was heard that they were going to the boats. From the ship there was light Flak and MG defence with several hits scored on the aircraft. The Commander of the crew was Oberleutnant Jope."

Jope, though, had not actually sunk the great ship. There was still a job to



**ABOVE LEFT:** Oberleutnant Bernard Jope's crew pictured beside their aircraft at Bordeaux-Mérignac. It is believed that Jope himself is the individual bent over with back towards the camera.

**RIGHT:** One of *Empress of Britain's* sister ships, *Empress of Japan* (renamed *Empress of Scotland* in 1942), pictured whilst operating as a troopship. On 9 November 1940, *Empress of Japan* was also attacked by Luftwaffe aircraft in a location close to where *Empress of Britain* had been fatally hit just two weeks earlier. Two bombs struck the *Empress of Japan* but were deflected off the stern rail and the lifeboats into the sea, causing some minor damage to the fixtures and fittings. During the attack, Captain J.W. Thomas and Ho Kan, the Chinese quartermaster, remained at their posts in the wheelhouse, steering the liner to take evasive action. In the face of the attacker's machine-gun fire, Ho Kan calmly carried out his captain's instructions from a lying position at the wheel. Both men were later decorated, Captain Thomas with the CBE and Ho Kan the BEM. (Imperial War Museum; FL10685)

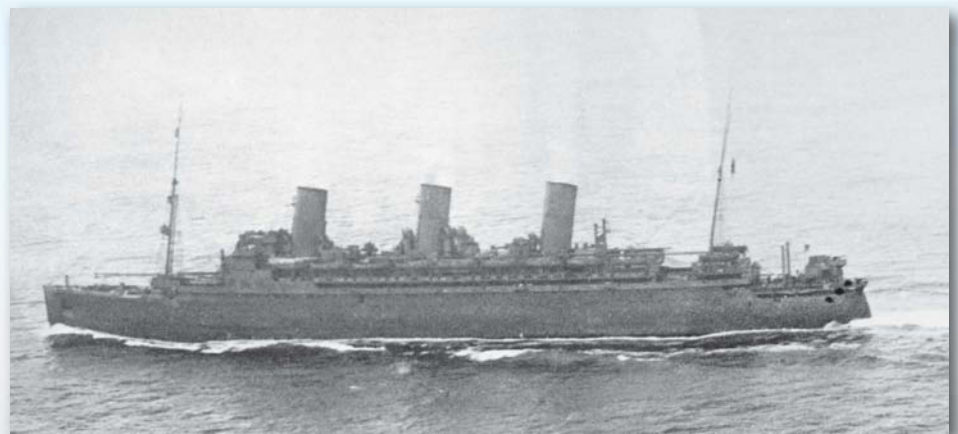
**BELOW:** A Fw 200 pictured over the Bay of Biscay whilst returning to Bordeaux-Mérignac. By 1943, the Fw 200 Condor found itself increasingly vulnerable to Allied fighters based on catapult-equipped merchant ships (CAM ships), merchant ships with small flight decks (MAC ships), or small escort carriers, and the newer long range aircraft of Coastal Command.



do. At sea were two U-boats, U-31 and U-32. Oberleutnant zur See Hans Jenisch, in command of U-32, had picked up the success signal on the evening of the 26th, and later that same night he received an official message confirming that *Empress of Britain* was on fire, abandoned and adrift. Jenisch took no action at this stage as the cruise-liner was virtually a wreck and he knew that the convoy escorted by *Echo* and *Burza* was in the area and might

prove a more worthwhile target. The next morning, however, he received another message which stated that *Empress of Britain* was still afloat and on an even keel. There was activity in the vicinity of the ship indicating that she might be taken in tow and returned to port. Jenisch realised that he had to act quickly otherwise what seemed like a great German success might amount to little real profit.

The Royal Navy was indeed busy trying





**LEFT and ABOVE:** Ground crew preparing Focke-Wulf Fw 200s of Kampfgeschwader 40 prior to undertaking further missions over the Atlantic, Bay of Biscay or the waters around the British Isles.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Bernard Jope being interviewed at Bordeaux-Mérignac during 1941. Later in the war, Jope led Kampfgeschwader 100 in the attacks on the Italian battleship *Roma*, the Royal Navy's battleship *HMS Warspite* and cruiser *HMS Uganda*, and the US cruiser *USS Savannah*.



to save *Empress of Britain*. The light cruiser *HMS Cairo* and the destroyers *HMS Broke* and *HMS Sardonyx* had arrived on the scene to relieve *Echo* and *Burza*. They were joined by two tugs, *Thames* and *Marauder*, which began to tow the ship towards Greenock at a steady four knots, the destroyers circling to screen for enemy submarines.

*U-32*, meanwhile, had travelled on the surface until, late in the afternoon of the 27th, Jenisch spotted the masts of *Empress of Britain*. He dived, following the little convoy and watching the movements of the destroyers carefully.

At dusk, Jenisch surfaced but lost sight of his prey. Having submerged again, his

crew soon located the convoy once more. By midnight he had *Empress of Britain* in his sights again. Jenisch waited until he saw his chance.

At around 01.50 hours he surfaced inside the destroyer screen slightly ahead (about 500 yards) of *Empress of Britain*. At 02.00 hours *U-32* fired two torpedoes. One malfunctioned, exploding prematurely. The other missed. The explosion gave away the submarine's presence. Jenisch had only moments to act before the nearest destroyer, *Sardonyx*, would be upon him. He fired a third torpedo. This one hit *Empress of Britain* amidships.<sup>5</sup>

*U-32* disappeared astern. Nine minutes later *Empress of Britain* also disappeared as what had been, just a few months before, the most luxurious cruise-liner the world had known heeled slowly to port and sank. There was no-one on board.

\*

*Empress of Britain* was the largest British merchant ship to be sunk during the Second World War. Yet the crew of

*U-32* did not revel in their glory for long. Just two days later, on 30 October 1940, *U-32* was herself hunted down and sunk; the depth charges that sealed her fate were dropped by *HMS Harvester* and *HMS Highlander*.<sup>6</sup> ■

#### NOTES:

1. TNA ADM1/11180, *Sinking of RMS Empress of Britain by Enemy Air Attack: Board of Enquiry*.
2. Robert Seamer, *The Floating Inferno: The Story of the Loss of the Empress of Britain* (Patrick Stephens Limited, Wellingborough, 1990), p.25.
3. *War Illustrated*, Volume 3, 22 November 1940, p.555.
4. These reports can be found in *War Illustrated*, Volume 3, 8 November 1940, p.502.
5. This is the account given by Seamer, *op. cit.*, p.146. However, Kenneth Wynn, in his *U-boat Operations of the Second World War, Volume 1: Career Histories, U1-510* (Caxton Editions, 2003), p.23, states that two of the torpedoes hit *Empress of Britain*.
6. Along with thirty-two others, Jenisch was taken prisoner. He then spent six and a half years in British captivity before returning to Germany in June 1947.

