

PROTECTING THE WHALING FLEET DURING WORLD WAR II

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ABSTRACT. Early in 1941 the *Queen of Bermuda*, an armed merchant cruiser, was sent to South Georgia, the Weddell Sea and the South Shetland Islands to protect the British, Norwegian and Argentine whaling ships. The account in the ship's log book has been supplemented by Admiral Sir Geoffrey Hawkins, who kindly added his memories of the voyage during which no ships were lost.

THE experience of the 1914-18 war had taught the Admiralty the danger of commerce raiders and, since the whaling fleet was essential to the supply of oils and fats, arrangements were made early in the 1939-45 war for the Antarctic seas to be searched for German raiders.

The fear was well founded, for at one time in 1942 the German navy planned to set up a meteorological and radio station on Iles Kerguelen. In January-March 1941, three German raiders using Iles Kerguelen as a base were effective as commerce raiders in the South Atlantic and South Indian Oceans. In January of that year, the German raider, 33, intercepted the Norwegian whaling fleet about 360 miles south-west of Bouvetøya, taking two factory ships, one supply vessel and 11 whale catchers, and only three catchers escaped.

In December 1939, H.M. Submarine *Olympus* (Commander H. V. King) had been dispatched to examine the Prince Edward Islands and Iles Crozet for enemy ships. In 1941, H.M.S. *Neptune* (Captain Rory C. O'Connor) made a search of Marion Island, Prince Edward Islands, Iles Crozet and Iles Kerguelen (Roberts, 1958).¹

Later in the year, H.M.A.S. *Australia* was brought in for a further search. Two ships which had been specially built for service in Antarctic waters were unfortunately not available. These were the *Discovery II* which had been taken up by the Admiralty as an armed boarding vessel, and *William Scoresby* which was employed as a minesweeper.²

In 1939, a few days before the start of the war, the Admiralty hired one of the liners owned by Furness, Withy & Co. Ltd., the *Queen of Bermuda* (Fig. 1), 22,575 tons, and fitted her out as an armed merchant cruiser with seven 6 in. guns and two 3 in. H.A. guns. In October 1939, when the captain of the *Queen of Bermuda* went sick, the command was given to Captain G. A. B. Hawkins, who had entered the Navy in 1914 as midshipman and had been given command of the *Tedworth* in 1918 when he was only 22 years old.† After experimental anti-torpedo work, he went on patrol off the coast of South America where there were a number of German ships. As those who knew of the fate of the *Jervis Bay* were well aware, command of an A.M.C. had attendant risks which were unavoidable at that stage of the war.³

Commander Stanley Burns, R.N.R., ex Staff Captain, was appointed navigator. He had no charts of the area they were to visit and had to make his own, and in addition had to cope with the wandering of the compass when well to the south of South Georgia. He seldom saw the sun (perhaps 1 or 2 days a week) and fixing the position on home-made charts and a wobbly compass was not easy. Windage made it difficult to keep the *Queen of Bermuda* on a course and on one occasion, with a beam sea, she was 10° off course. Captain Hawkins had a Royal Navy first lieutenant, two officers ex the *Queen of Bermuda*, R.N.R. lieutenants, a sub-lieutenant and two R.N.R. midshipmen and other merchant service officers. The three paymasters were all ship's officers like most of the engineers, the boatswain and eight of the seamen. He had three

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† Between the wars, Captain Hawkins was attached to the Prince of Wales, who was visiting South Africa and Rhodesia. Before the war started he was sent to the Admiralty to set up an operational and map room to keep record of ships all over the world, and especially enemy submarines. He also had experience of mine clearance duties in the North Sea.

¹ Public Record Office (P.R.O.), ADM 173/15828, Log book of H.M.S. *Olympus*. P.R.O. ADM 173/114770-781, Log book of H.M.S. *Neptune*.

² Anonymous, 1947, p. 402-03. Colledge, 1970, p. 104 and 392.

³ *Lloyd's Register*, 1939. P.R.O. ADM 53/114914, Log book of *Queen of Bermuda*, January 1941. Information from Admiral Sir Geoffrey Hawkins. *Navy List*, *passim*.



Fig. 1. *Queen of Bermuda*. (Photograph by courtesy of Furness Withy & Co. Ltd.)

R.N. petty officers, six reservists and R.N.V.R. petty officers. The ship had a complement of 450 men—"altogether a very good lot", said Captain Hawkins.⁴

In 1940 the *Queen of Bermuda* was refitted at Durban, and in 1941 was sent to the Weddell Sea to cover the whaling fleet against enemy attack, although she was not protected against ice.

During the voyage, the weather varied, an occasional fine day, calm and bright, but mainly overcast with snow, sleet and wind; there was little fog except in the Weddell Sea. It was always very cold but, apart from the upper deck, the ship was warm inside. South of South Georgia there was brash ice and icebergs were always in sight; each day, at about 16.00 hr., the midshipmen had to plot all the icebergs in sight so that the ship would be safe during the dark hours when she would lie under the lee of a large iceberg.⁵

Captain Hawkins left Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands for South Georgia on 20 January 1941 (Fig. 2). The passage was quick and he sighted South Georgia at 08.00 hr. 2 days later, passing the rugged outline of Cape Buller, Black Head, Cape Saunders and Jason Island, reaching Cumberland East Bay where he found the factory ship, *Thorshammer*. On 23 January, close to Leith Harbour, he saw the *Ernesto Tornquist*, another factory ship. He then proceeded south and east to pass Clerke Rocks and Green Island, two islands off the southern extremity of South Georgia, named by Captain James Cook. On 24 January he took a south-westerly course to lat. $58^{\circ}15' S.$, long. $40^{\circ}20' W.$, passing icebergs during the course of the day, before putting about for South Georgia which was reached at 05.30 hr. on 25 January. After a brief call at Cumberland East Bay (which was not fully charted) he passed Cooper Island.⁶

At noon on 26 January, the *Queen of Bermuda* was about 150 miles south-south-west of South Georgia on a south-westerly course for the South Orkney Islands. After passing through brash ice, growlers, bergy pits and icebergs, Captain Hawkins saw the peaks, ice cap and cliffs of Laurie Island at 13.45 hr. on 27 January at a distance of about 40 miles. In the evening he sighted the settlement on the neck of land of Uruguay Cove, which had been established by the

⁴ P.R.O. ADM 53/114914. Information from Admiral Sir Geoffrey Hawkins.

⁵ Information from Admiral Sir Geoffrey Hawkins.

⁶ P.R.O. ADM 53/114914. Information from Admiral Sir Geoffrey Hawkins. Hydrographic Department, 1961, p. 100, 104 and 111.

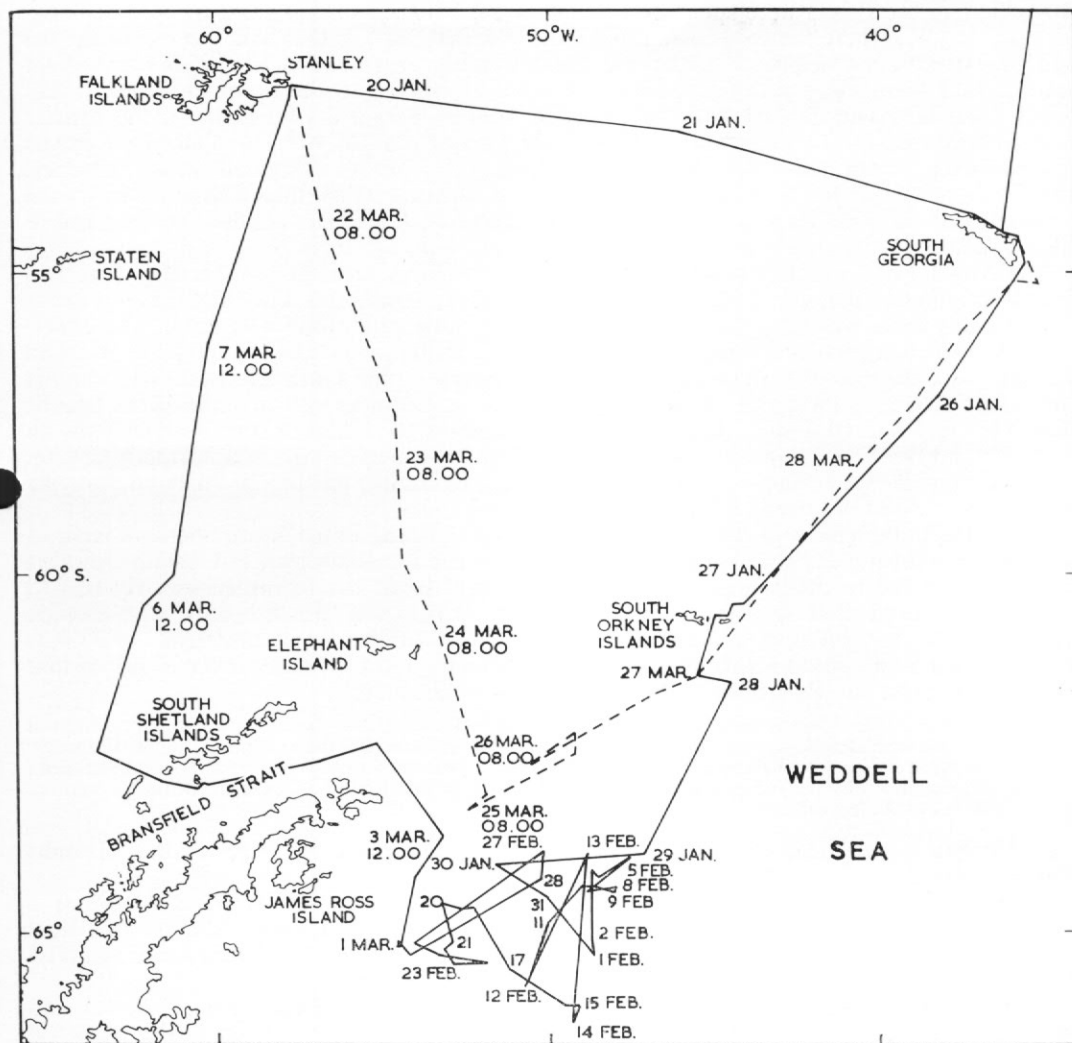


Fig. 2. Track chart of the *Queen of Bermuda*, 20 January–29 March 1941.

Scottish National Antarctic Expedition, 1902–04, under the leadership of Dr. W. S. Bruce, and since then maintained by the Argentine government and was the first permanent weather station to be established south of lat. 60°S. Captain Hawkins got no reply to his morse signals and did not land. The bay was full of brash ice and growlers. On 28 January the *Queen of Bermuda* was off Cape Faraday, Cape Valavielle and Cape Dundas on Laurie Island. This was an anxious time, on an inhospitable coast, imperfectly charted, with winds of force 6 and 7, icebergs and pack ice.⁷

Captain Hawkins then made for the whaling grounds. On 29 January he found the *Southern Empress* (12,398 tons) and the *Ernesto Tornquist* in about lat. 64°S., long. 47°W., and next day, about 100 miles farther west, came within sight of another factory ship, the *Svend Foyn* (14,795

⁷ P.R.O. ADM 53/114914. Hydrographic Department, 1961, p. 248. Information from Admiral Sir Geoffrey Hawkins.

tons). The next 12 days were spent in a limited area, between lat. 64° and 65° S., and long. 48° and 50° W., where the cold current from the Weddell Sea together with the rise in the sea bed to 246 fathoms helped to make it a good whaling area. The *Queen of Bermuda* kept station with three factory ships, sending the medical officer* to the *Southern Empress* and oiling from her. The *Ernesto Tornquist* left for South Georgia on 6 February; the catcher *Sobkra* was seen on 12 February, in lat. $65^{\circ}39'S$, long. $50^{\circ}28'W$.⁸ The *Southern Empress* moved farther south and was in lat. $66^{\circ}04'S$, long. $49^{\circ}08'W$, when sighted on 14 February. For the next 3 days she was in sight of the *Queen of Bermuda* which then moved off westward to an area about 90 miles east of Erebus and Terror Gulf, James Ross Island, keeping out of sight of land.⁹

The *Svend Foyn*, which was working this latter area, was seen on 18 February. The two vessels were in company for a week, during which the *Southern Empress* was sighted once more. Occasionally there was fog with pack ice but on the whole conditions were good. The *Thorshammer* with catchers under lee was seen on 27 February in lat. 64° S., long. $50^{\circ}W$., and she kept with the *Queen of Bermuda* which made a course to the south and west. The whaling ships were fishing to the north of the Weddell Sea, about 90 miles east of James Ross Island; they were met one after the other, the *Southern Empress* on 1 March, the *Thorshammer* on 2 March and the *Svend Foyn* on 3 March, when Captain Hawkins was on a northerly course. The *Queen of Bermuda* then rounded Trinity Land [Peninsula], passing 20 miles off Joinville Island, and crossed Bransfield Strait.¹⁰

On 4 March, the *Queen of Bermuda* was off Livingston Island in the South Shetland Islands, and on the following day she arrived in Port Foster, Deception Island, where Captain Hawkins had been ordered to destroy all amenities which could be of use to the enemy. He had to negotiate Neptunes Bellows, the channel leading into Port Foster, which is only twice as wide as the length of the *Queen of Bermuda*, and through which currents were running at 1 or 2 knots as well as winds which blow through that funnel. Nobody had previously taken a ship of that tonnage and draft into Port Foster. Captain Hawkins recalls that:

"The entrance is very narrow with a pinnacle of rock in the middle of the channel. We had no chart of the entrance except for a two-inch square let-in on a large chart, but the captain of one of the factory ships gave me a drawing and advice on how to get in. It was *not* funny. When we arrived off the island the entrance was blocked by a small iceberg and we had to wait until it drifted clear before we went in. It was extremely difficult."

He set fire to a large heap of coal, blew up the supply and discharge pipes of the oil tanks which he punctured, but he left the buildings untouched.¹¹

Sending a party ashore took no more than a few hours, and Captain Hawkins then took a west-north-west course through Boyd Strait (between Smith and Snow Islands) and then bearing northward crossed Burdwood Bank, making Stanley in the Falkland Islands again on 8 March. There he picked up mail and took provisions on board.¹²

After spending 2 weeks at Stanley, the *Queen of Bermuda* weighed anchor on 21 March and bore up south and south-south-east for the whaling grounds. From lat. 60° S. the *Queen of Bermuda* was in company with the factory ships *Lancing*, *Thorshammer* and *Southern Empress* and eight catchers. In lat. 62° S., long. $52^{\circ}W$., 61 icebergs were in sight during the afternoon watch, and pack ice was seen on the following afternoon in lat. $63^{\circ}30'S$. On 14 February, the *Queen of Bermuda* had been within sight of the Antarctic Circle, in lat. $66^{\circ}04'S$., but in this part of the voyage her farthest south was lat. $63^{\circ}24'S$., which was reached on 25 March. This and the following day were spent in a limited area in company with the *Lancing* and *Thorshammer*. When Captain Hawkins was off Clarence Island he found its charted position to be wrong by a

* The medical officer, a general practitioner from Crief, who had not seen an operation for some 10 years, successfully operated on a cook in the *Queen of Bermuda* for appendicitis, with the help of the Captain's Secretary, and a chief petty officer sick bay steward, and a former railway man, St. John Ambulance trained.

⁸ P.R.O. ADM 53/114914-5. *Lloyd's Register*, 1939. Information from Admiral Sir Geoffrey Hawkins.

⁹ P.R.O. ADM 53/114915, Log book of *Queen of Bermuda*, February 1941.

¹⁰ P.R.O. ADM 53/114915-6, Log book of *Queen of Bermuda*, February-March 1941.

¹¹ P.R.O. ADM 53/114916, Log book of *Queen of Bermuda*, March 1941.

¹² P.R.O. ADM 53/114916. Information from Admiral Sir Geoffrey Hawkins.

mile. Late in the afternoon of 27 March, Captain Hawkins closed on the *Southern Empress* and proceeded north-east for South Georgia, passing 10 miles east of Cape Dundas.¹³

Green Island, at the southern end of South Georgia, was sighted on the morning of 29 March after an uneventful passage, and the *Queen of Bermuda* anchored in 16 fathoms in King Edward Cove, Cumberland East Bay, where there was a good well-sheltered anchorage with radio station and government buildings.¹⁴ During the week that was spent there the whale catchers *Sigfra* (Fig. 3), *Narval*, *Foca* and *Busen 9* came in and out of King Edward Cove.

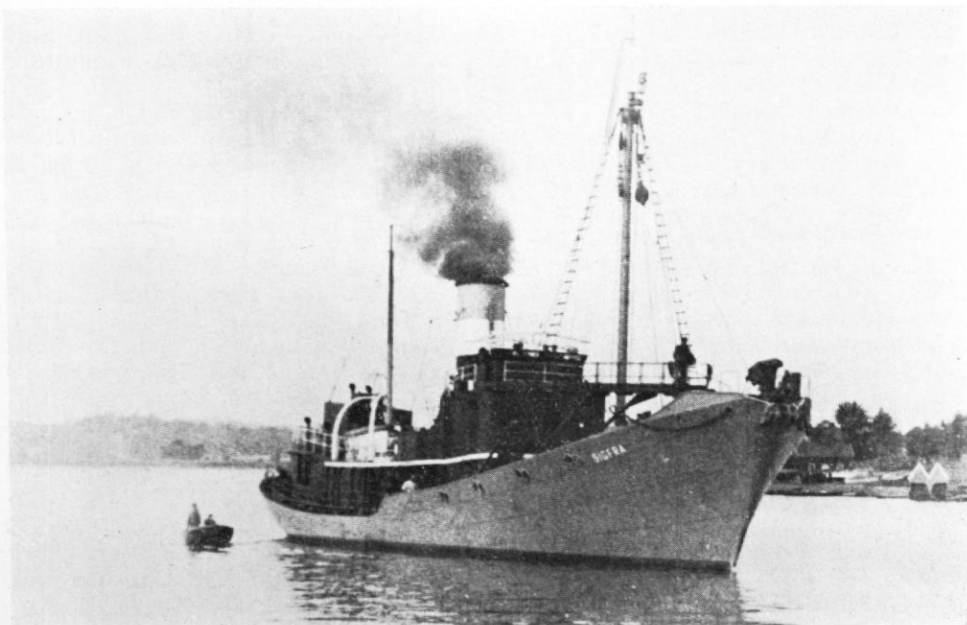


Fig. 3. The whale catcher *Sigfra*. (Photograph by courtesy of Christian Salvesen (Managers) Ltd.)

The port anchor was weighed on 5 April and early in the evening the *Queen of Bermuda* met the *Southern Empress* and *Svend Foyn*. The *Queen of Bermuda* and three factory ships then kept company on a direct course for Freetown which was reached on 23 April. Since they were approaching dangerous waters, the factory ships practised zig-zags in case of enemy submarine attack, and after a while they became quite good. At Freetown, Captain Hawkins* was piped ashore and Captain A. T. C. G. Peachey took over the command.¹⁵

The log books of the factory ships and the catchers have been destroyed but this voyage indicates the position of the whaling grounds at that time. It was comparatively uneventful because of the Royal Navy's command of the seas.

MS. received 30 October 1973

* Admiral Sir Geoffrey Hawkins, M.V.O., D.S.C., C.B., retired some years after the war, having commanded H.M.S. *Victory* and served at the Admiralty and in Malta. After his experience in the Antarctic and on the Russian convoys, he could not understand why anybody should choose to go there without reason. The author is grateful to him for supplementing the log book with his memories of the voyage. The *Queen of Bermuda* was broken up in 1967.

¹³ P.R.O. ADM 53/114916.

¹⁴ P.R.O. ADM 53/114916-7, Log book of *Queen of Bermuda*, March-April 1941. Hydrographic Department, 1961, p. 110.

¹⁵ P.R.O. ADM 53/114914-7. *Navy List*, *passim*.

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APPENDIX*

Vessels mentioned in the text (tonnage, classification, builder, owner, dimensions, engines)

- Queen of Bermuda.* Quadruple screw. 22,575/13,107/12,777 tons; +100 A1; Vickers Armstrong, Barrow, 1933; Furness Withy & Co. Ltd.; 555.4 ft. \times 76.7 ft. \times 39.0 ft.; two steam turbines, 4,274 h.p. Cruiser stern.
- Ernesto Tornquist.* Whaling factory. 6,547/5,865/4,028 tons; C. Connel, Glasgow, 1897; Compañía Argentina de Pesca; 450 ft. \times 52 ft. \times 30.7 ft.; 583 h.p. Registered in Buenos Aires.
- Lancing.* Whaling factory. 7,866/7,256/4,561 tons; 100 A1; C. Connel & Co., Glasgow, 1898; Hvalfanger A/S Globus, Larvik; 470 ft. \times 57.2 ft. \times 32.9 ft.; 737 n.h.p.
- Southern Empress.* Whaling service. 12,398/9,543/7,644 tons; +100 A1; William Doxford & Sons Ltd., Sunderland; Southern Whaling and Sealing Co., Ltd., Unilever Ltd.; 525.5 ft. \times 66.5 ft. \times 33.9 ft.; 925 h.p. Registered at Stanley, Falkland Islands.
- Svend Foyn.* Twin screw. Whaling service. 14,795/10,272/7,951 tons; Furness Ship Building Co. Ltd., Teesside, 1931; St. Helier Ship Owners Ltd.; 997 h.p.
- Thorshammer.* Whale oil factory. 12,215/9,622/7,414 tons; W. Doxford & Sons Ltd., Sunderland, 1914; A/S Bryde & Dahls Hvalsfangerselskap, Sandefjord; 526 ft. \times 66.5 ft. \times 41.5 ft.; 795 n.h.p.
- Busen 9.* Whaler. 384/362/137 tons; Oslo, 1929; A/S Tonsberg Hvalfangeri; 137.6 ft. \times 27.1 ft. \times 14.2 ft. 118 n.h.p.
- Foca.* Whaler. 281/259/99 tons; Oslo, 1930; Compañía Argentina de Pesca; 119.3 ft. \times 24.4 ft. \times 13.9 ft.; 101 n.h.p.
- Narval.* Whaler. 280/260/97 tons; Oslo, 1929; Compañía Argentina de Pesca; 118.9 ft. \times 24.4 ft. \times 14.0 ft.; 101 n.h.p. Registered at Buenos Aires.
- Sigfra.* Whaler. 356/321/126 tons; Tonsberg, 1937; South Georgia Co. Ltd. (Christian Salvesen & Co.); 141.5 ft. \times 26.3 ft. \times 15.1 ft.; 163 n.h.p. Registered at Middlesbrough.
- Sobkra.* Whaler. 433/405/160 tons; Smiths Dock Co. Ltd., Middlesbrough, 1937; 148 ft. \times 27.6 ft. \times 15.7 ft.; South Georgia Co. Ltd. (Christian Salvesen & Co. managers); 148 n.h.p. Cruiser stern.

The Southern Whaling and Sealing Co. Ltd. owned two factory ships and 16 catchers. The South Georgia Co. Ltd. owned 61 ships in all.

* From *Lloyd's Register*, 1939.