

Stoker J.R.Wheeler - Royal Navy

Stoker James Richard Wheeler was the son of Francis and Helen Wheeler (nee Fawcett) of Lowlands Farm, Newchapel, Lingfield. James' mother died in 1929; his father later re-married and had seven more children. The family later lived at Durrants Farm, Westcott. James was serving on *HMS Curacoa*, a 4,200 ton light cruiser which was engaged in convoy defence duties when it sank in one of the worst accidents of the Second World War.

On 2nd October 1942 *Curacoa* was detailed to escort the 81,000 ton liner *Queen Mary* carrying 10,000 American troops across the Atlantic to join the Allied forces in Europe. The two ships were about 40 miles off the northern coast of Ireland heading towards the Clyde estuary. The *Queen Mary* was steering on an intermittent zig-zag course to reduce the risk of a U-boat attack, but *Curacoa* could not match *Queen Mary's* speed and her Captain opted to forgo the zig-zag in order to maintain a position to provide the most effective cover.

Shortly after *Queen Mary* turned to begin another zig-zag, the converging course of the two ships was misjudged. *Queen Mary* cut across the path of *Curacoa*, sliced her in two and the cruiser sank in just six minutes. Because of her vital role in carrying troops, the *Queen Mary* was under strict orders never to stop in any circumstances. The liner could not assist in rescue operations and steamed on to her destination with a damaged bow.

Some hours later the convoy's lead escort returned and was able to rescue 102 members of *Curacoa's* crew of 338. A number of bodies were recovered and are buried at Lower Breakish on the Isle of Skye, and at Arisaig and Morar on the mainland. James Wheeler's body was not found. His name is recorded on the Royal Navy War Memorial at Chatham which records the names of 18,600 sailors who were lost in both world wars and have no known grave.

The accident was not made public until after the war. The Navy pressed charges against the *Queen Mary's* owners, the Cunard White Star Line. The High Court ruled that in favour of the latter, attributing two-thirds of the blame to the Admiralty and one third against Cunard. This ruling enabled relatives of those who were lost to press for compensation and prompted changes in Naval policy, including an indefinite suspension of escorts for passenger liners.

James' brother, Francis, who died on *HMS Hood* in 1941, is also remembered on our village memorial.

