

## 266754 Sister Kathleen Hewison Walker



Kathleen Hewison Walker was born in Saintear House, Westray on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1919, the only daughter of the island's doctor, Ernest Walker and his wife, farmer's daughter Jamesina Walker (née Scott). Kathleen's only brother, Robert, was born on 8<sup>th</sup> April 1924. Both children attended Pierowall School in Westray from age 5. Robert completed his education at Kirkwall Grammar School, but when Kathleen was aged 12 she travelled to Aberdeen and enrolled in the Girls' High School in Albyn Place.

When Kathleen left school she stayed in Aberdeen and took up nursing as a profession, training at Foresterhill Hospital. Aberdeen was the most frequently bombed Scottish city during World War 2, with 178 people killed in a total of 34 air attacks. Most of these were sudden "tip-and-run" attacks by a small number of German planes, often unloading bombs which had been intended for coastal ships.

Kathleen most likely treated people injured in some of the early air attacks and that probably influenced her decision to join Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS) in October 1942 for service overseas.

Kathleen travelled out to East Africa during 1943, probably shortly after she was commissioned as a Sister on 3<sup>rd</sup> April. 1943 was a year of recovery and build-up for the British war effort, which included mobilizing manpower from the African colonies to help drive the Japanese out of Burma. Two divisions were organised from the British West African colonies and one, 11th East African Division, from the five East African colonies: Uganda, Kenya, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), Nyasaland (now Malawi) and Tanganyika (now Tanzania). 150th General Hospital in Colombo, Ceylon was chosen as the base hospital for 11th East African Division, so the nursing staff there had to be increased to care for its wounded and sick soldiers arriving from Burma.

Kathleen Walker was one of 53 QAIMNS nursing sisters and a matron, also 9 Women's Territorial Service nurses, who boarded the troopship *Khedive Ismail* in Kilindi, the port for Mombasa in Kenya in the morning of 4<sup>th</sup> February 1944. By late afternoon *Khedive Ismail* had on board a total complement of 1,511 people, who included 996 officers and men of 301st Field Regiment, East African Artillery, a draft of 271 Royal Navy personnel (including 19 Wrens) to take up postings in Ceylon and the steamship's own crew, 178 strong. All the passengers were issued lifejackets, shown how to wear them and carried out a lifeboat drill while still in harbour.

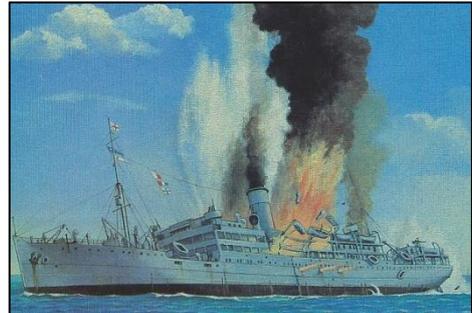
*Khedive Ismail* was built by Scotts' of Greenock in the early 1920s to carry passengers and cargo for a Chilean shipping company and modified during construction to use oil fuel, instead of coal. She was one of five large troopships, carrying a total of 6,311 Army personnel, in Convoy KR8 which sailed from Kilindi at 1.40 pm on Saturday 5<sup>th</sup>. The other troopships were *Ellenga*, *Ekma* and *Varsova* owned by the British Steam Navigation Company and *City of Paris* owned by Ellerman Lines. The naval escort which sailed with the convoy consisted of the elderly 9,800 ton cruiser HMS *Hawkins*, the corvette *Honesty* and anti-submarine cutters *Sennen* and *Lulworth*.

In a pre-sailing briefing Captain Whiteman of *Khedive Ismail*, who was the convoy commodore, had proposed that the convoy would not plot a zig-zag course which made a submarine attack more difficult. The extra mileage would result in the convoy having to spend a night outside Colombo harbour on arrival, as the port closed overnight. Captain Josselyn of HMS *Hawkins* reluctantly agreed, but he stated that zig-zag would be implemented if an Axis submarine was reported in the area. The cruiser took up station leading the port column of three pairs, with *Khedive Ismail* in the centre and *Varsova* on the right, while the convoy steamed at a speed of thirteen knots and made steady progress.

In the early hours of Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> the convoy screen escorts reached the limits of their fuel range, so had to return to Kilindi. The convoy continued eastwards, with HMS *Hawkins* (which was not fitted with ASDIC submarine detection equipment) zig-zagging in front of it as the only warship escort. The convoy crossed the equator in the evening of Friday 11<sup>th</sup>, passing just north of a spectacular tropical thunder storm.

The sky had cleared in the morning of Saturday 12<sup>th</sup>, when at 8am two escort destroyers joined the convoy out of Colombo (defects prevented a third, HMS *Penn*, from sailing). HMS *Petard* and HMS *Paladin* took station ahead of the convoy, zig-zagging and using their ASDIC sets to search for enemy submarines, while the cruiser returned to leading the convoy's port column.

Any feelings of greater safety were shattered only a few hours later, when at 2.33pm two torpedoes (from four launched by the Japanese submarine I-27) slammed into the starboard side of *Khedive Ismail*. The first penetrated the engine room and fractured the forward and aft bulkheads. As Bristol artist Robert Blackwell's painting shows, the ship was already listing to starboard when five seconds later the second torpedo hit the boiler room and exploded all her working boilers.



The serious damage inflicted broke the troopship in half and she sank in under two minutes. There wasn't time to launch any lifeboats, but a few broke loose as she sank. Probably 85% of those on board, many of whom were watching a concert and others playing Bingo, went down with the ship.

While the two escort destroyers reversed course to attack the Japanese submarine, the cruiser lead the other troopships rapidly out of the scene of tragedy. I-27 was larger and more heavily armed than the destroyers, but their team work eventually found and, after a desperate three-hour struggle, destroyed the submarine.

Sadly, the forty minutes of depth charging that it took the destroyers to force the submarine to the surface killed a significant number of *Khedive Ismail* survivors swimming in the water. An insufficient stock of armour-piercing shells forced HMS *Paladin* to try to ram I-27, when the submarine's forward hydroplane tore an 80-foot gash down the destroyer's side that nearly sank her. The inexperienced torpedo officer on HMS *Petard* fired singly six torpedoes which all missed the submarine, before the seventh and last at 5.23pm hit and blew the submarine in half.

When the death toll from the sinking of *Khedive Ismail* was calculated the losses were appalling. The total of 1,297 deaths made it the third largest Allied merchant sea tragedy of World War 2 (exceeded only by those lost in the sinking of the *Lancastria* in June 1940 and the *Laconia* in September 1942). Only six of the 83 women on board were rescued from the sinking of *Khedive Ismail* in the greatest loss of Allied servicewomen in the war. Only 43 of the 252 Royal Navy personnel on board survived, with 22 out of the ship's 178 crew. Only 143 of the 996 soldiers of 301st (East African) Field Regiment survived the tragedy and it did not serve in Burma.



*Khedive Ismail* was the seventeenth merchant ship sunk by submarine I-27 and Kathleen Walker its second Orcadian victim. 3rd Officer John Sutherland of Stromness was the first, killed on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1942 when the Australian steamship *Iron Crown* was the second ship sunk by I-27. The last photo shows Kathleen Walker as a young girl, aged about three. Kathleen probably hoped to have children of her own after the war ended, but she never got the opportunity to do so. Kathleen Walker is remembered on the Westray War Memorial in Orkney and on the Brookwood Memorial in Surrey. She is also one of over 1500 nurses who died in the two World Wars, remembered on a new Nursing Memorial to be dedicated at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2018.