RATCLIFF, Arthur Ernest



Private, T/73927
Royal Army Service Corps
Place of Birth: Lowestoft
Date of Death: Monday, 17th June 1940
Lost at Sea
Memorial: Dunkirk
Aged 23 years

Arthur Ernest Ratcliff was born in Lowestoft in 1917. He was the only son of Arthur Victor Ratcliff and Helen Blowers. Arthur and his younger sister Sybil May spent their childhood in Lowestoft. Before the war Arthur was employed at the factory of Rists Wires and Cables Ltd, who manufactured ignition coils and other motor goods. While working here Arthur met his future wife Iris May Weyman. Iris fondly remembers her work friends teasing her saying "Arthur Ratcliff keeps looking at you Iris. We think he will ask you out". Arthur did pluck up courage and was courting Iris when the war started.

After enlistment, Arthur joined the Royal Army Service Corps as a Private. His army number was 73927.

Iris's family moved to Haverhill as her father was employed at R.A.F. Stradishall. They made their family home in Helions Park Avenue.



Arthur and Iris married locally in 1940. Sadly they had only been married for a month when Arthur was lost at sea,

Arthur was onboard the rescue ship HMT Lancastria when it was bombed by German aircraft close to St Nazaire on Monday 17th June 1940.

The Lancastria was taking part in Operation Ariel, the evacuation of British nationals and troops from France, two weeks after the Dunkirk evacuation.

At 3.48pm, she received three direct hits from German Junkers 88 bombers and within 20 minutes, the 16,243-ton liner sank, taking with her an estimated 5,000 victims.

Iris continued to live in Haverhill and was very active with the Methodist Chapel and The Girls Life Brigade. When her father died in 1956, he was still working at R.A.F. Stradishall. When Iris retired, she and her mother moved back to Lowestoft, settling in Pakefield.

During the war, Rists Wires and Cables Ltd were bombed out and moved the business to Newcastle under Lyme.

RMS Lancastria became HMT Lancastria when she was commandeered for war, and her sleek Cunard lines were transformed with a coat of battleship grey. During the first few months of war she was engaged in cargo and transport duties in the North Atlantic. When the Norwegian campaign began, the Lancastria was set aside for troop-carrying taking part in the evacuation of troops from Harstaad. She returned to Britain with her public rooms crammed with dejected and weary soldiers.

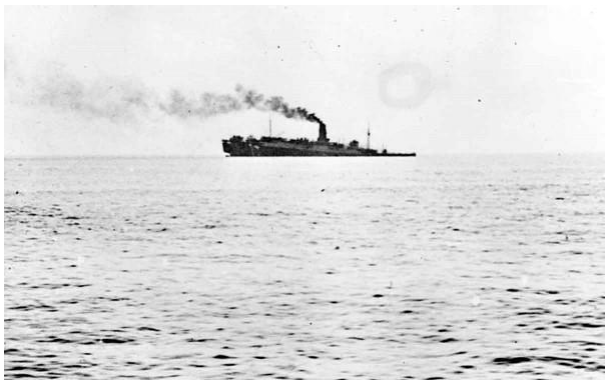


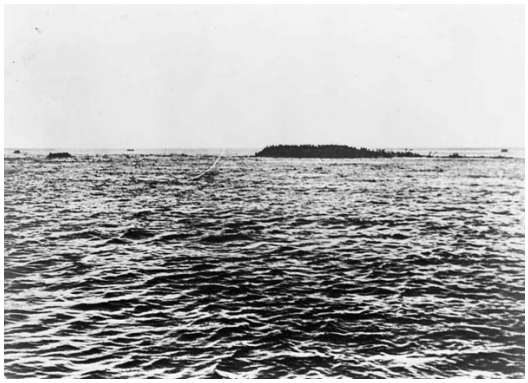
Within hours of berthing at Liverpool, Lancastria was urgently recalled to sea; loud-speaker announcements at the main railway station successfully recalled nearly all the crew members who had just been paid off. Arriving in Plymouth on 15th June they awaited orders. They were sent to Quiberon Bay as part of Operation Ariel to help with the evacuation of the remainder of the British Expeditionary Force which had been cut-off to the south of the German advance through France. This amounted to some 124,000 men, mostly logistic support troops, from various ports in western France. Accompanying Lancastria was the 20,341-ton liner, Franconia. Finding that she was not required for the evacuation from Lorient, Lancastria, under the command of Captain Sharpe, was sent to the port of St. Nazaire, where many more troops were waiting to be rescued. En-route, an air raid damaged the Franconia which returned to England for repairs, leaving Lancastria to continue alone. She arrived in the mouth of the tidal Loire estuary late on 16th June along with approximately thirty other merchant vessels of varying sizes. By 04:00 on 17th June, Lancastria was anchored in the Charpentier Roads, some 5 miles (8.0 km) south-west of St. Nazaire.

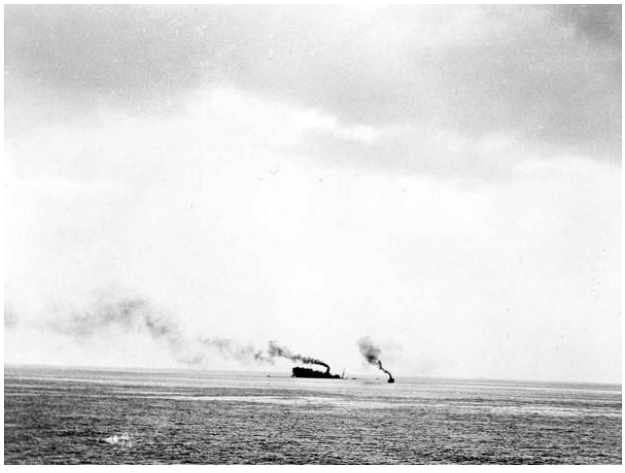
Almost immediately, exhausted troops and some civilians began to board. At about 13.00 hrs the red alert sounded and a dive bomber was seen to attack the Oronsay which was some distance off. Those on the deck of the *Lancastria* must have feared the worst expecting the enemy to return. The ship had taken some 6,000 people on board, soldiers and RAF personnel plus about a thousand of civilian refugees and more kept coming. At around 15.00 hrs Captain Sharpe decided that he could take no more. At about 15.50 hrs the enemy returned. Bombs were seen to straddle the ship, one bomb that exploded close to the port side ruptured her fuel tanks but the bomb that actually sank the Lancastria went straight down the funnel.

There were 2,477 survivors, including Captain Sharpe, who were picked up by HMS Havelock and other ships. The site of the sinking is now an official War Grave protected by The Protection of Military Remains Act of 1986. The loss of the Lancastria was the fourth largest maritime disaster of the war. Captain Sharpe later lost his life when the ship he commanded, the Laconia, was sunk. Under the Official Secrets Act, the report on the Lancastria cannot be published until the year 2040.

So great were the losses that the Government immediately placed a ‘D-Notice’ on news of the sinking, meaning that newspapers and broadcasters were unable to report the sinking, ensuring that the story of the Lancastria remained all but unknown.







The sinking of HMT Lancastria.

Below: Lancastria memorial St Nazaire left; Clydesdale right





Arthur has no known grave and he is remembered on the Dunkirk Memorial.

