**The Sinking of the City of Benares**

**SS *City of Benares*** was a steam passenger ship built for [Ellerman Lines](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ellerman_Lines) by [Barclay, Curle & Co](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barclay_Curle) of [Glasgow](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glasgow) in 1936.[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares#cite_note-0) During the [Second World War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_World_War) the *City of Benares* was used as an evacuee ship to evacuate 90 children from Britain to Canada. The ship was torpedoed by the [German submarine *U-48*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_submarine_U-48_%281939%29) with heavy loss of life, [[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares#cite_note-1)[[3]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares#cite_note-2) including the death of 77 children. The sinking resulted in the total cancellation of the [Children's Overseas Reception Board](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children%27s_Overseas_Reception_Board) (CORB) plan to relocate British children abroad.

***There were a number of children from Sunderland on the ship***. ***Two of them were Edith and Irene Smith.*** ***There were about 9 children from Sunderland on board .One called Billy Short may have been rescued.***

*City of Benares* was part of [convoy OB-213](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Convoy_OB-213&action=edit&redlink=1), and was being used as an evacuee ship in the overseas evacuation scheme organised by CORB. She was carrying 90 child evacuee passengers who were being evacuated from wartime Britain to [Canada](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canada). Also aboard were [Mary Cornish](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mary_Cornish&action=edit&redlink=1), an accomplished classical pianist who had volunteered as a children's escort, [James Baldwin-Webb](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Baldwin-Webb), a parliamentarian, [Rudolf Olden](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolf_Olden) and his wife, a German exiled writer, and documentary director [Ruby Grierson](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ruby_Grierson&action=edit&redlink=1). The ship departed [Liverpool](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liverpool) on 13 September 1940, bound for the [Canadian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canada) ports of [Quebec](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quebec) and [Montreal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montreal), under the command of her Master, Landles Nicoll. She was the [flagship](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flagship) of the convoy commodore Rear Admiral E.J.G. Mackinnon DSO RN and the first ship in the centre column.

Late in the evening of 17 September, the *City of Benares* was sighted by *U-48*, commanded by Kapitänleutnant [Heinrich Bleichrodt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinrich_Bleichrodt), who fired two [torpedoes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torpedo) at her at 23.45 hours. Both torpedoes missed, and at 00.01 hours on 18 September, the U-boat fired another torpedo at her. The torpedo struck her in the stern causing her to sink within 30 minutes, 253 miles west-southwest of [Rockall](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rockall). On board the liner were 90 children being evacuated to Canada under the [Children's Overseas Reception Board](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children%27s_Overseas_Reception_Board)'s initiative.

15 minutes after the torpedo hit, the vessel had been abandoned, though there were difficulties with lowering the lifeboats on the weather side of the ship. [HMS *Hurricane*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Hurricane_%28H06%29) arrived on the scene 24 hours later, and picked up 105 survivors and landed them at [Greenock](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greenock). During the attack on the SS *City of Benares*, the [SS *Marina*](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=SS_Marina_%281935%29&action=edit&redlink=1) was also torpedoed. *Hurricane* mistakenly counted one of the lifeboats from the SS *Marina* for one of the lifeboats from SS *City of Benares*. As a result, Lifeboat 12 was left alone at sea. Its passengers had three weeks supply of food, but enough water for only one week. In the lifeboat were approximately 30 Indian crewmen, a Polish merchant, several sailors, Mary Cornish, Father Rory O'Sullivan (a Roman Catholic priest who had volunteered to be an escort for the evacuee children), and six evacuee boys from the CORB program. They spent eight days afloat in the [Atlantic Ocean](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlantic_Ocean) before being sighted from the air and rescued by [HMS *Anthony*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Anthony_%28H40%29).

## Legacy

In total, 260 of the 407 people on board were lost. This included the master, the commodore, three staff members, 121 crew members and 134 passengers. Out of the 134 passengers, 77 were child evacuees. Only 13 of the 90 child evacuee passengers embarked survived the sinking.[[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares#cite_note-6) The sinking was controversial, the Allied powers criticised the 'barbaric' actions of the Germans, and there was an outpouring of sympathy and support for those who had lost children in the sinking.[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares#cite_note-Jackson95-7) The Germans defended the attack as being on a legitimate military target, and insisted that the British government was to blame for allowing children to travel on such ships in war zones when the German government had issued repeated warnings.[[9]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares#cite_note-Jackson96-8) They claimed that Baldwin-Webb and Olden were travelling to America with the aim of persuading the United States to enter the war, and that the *City of Benares* would be used to transport war materiel back to Britain on her return voyage.[[9]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares#cite_note-Jackson96-8)

The future of the CORB was already in question after the torpedoing of an evacuation ship, the [SS *Volendam*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Volendam), by [*U-60*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_submarine_U-60_%281939%29) two weeks earlier. 320 children had been aboard, but all had been rescued by other ships.[[10]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares#cite_note-Edwards144-9) The directors of the CORB were hopeful that the programme could be continued, and presented a report into the sinking which made recommendations for future operations, which included the use of faster transports and escorts on the North Atlantic routes, and the concentration of the evacuation programme on routes to Australia, India and South Africa, where the weather was better and there were felt to be fewer enemy submarines.[[11]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares#cite_note-Jackson98-10) The [Admiralty](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Admiralty) pointed out that there were insufficient fast escorts and ships available, and public opinion was opposed to the continuation of overseas evacuation, fearing further tragedies. [Winston Churchill](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winston_Churchill) also opposed the scheme, believing evacuations gave aid and comfort to the enemy.[[12]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares#cite_note-Jackson97-11) The government announced the cancellation of the CORB programme, and all children who were currently preparing to sail were ordered to disembark and return home.[[11]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares#cite_note-Jackson98-10) Though private evacuation efforts continued until their cessation in late 1941, official efforts came to a halt with the end of the CORB.[[11]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares#cite_note-Jackson98-10)[[13]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares#cite_note-Edwards147-12)

Bleichrodt was tried for war crimes related to the sinking of the *City of Benares*, after the war. He denied any prior knowledge of the presence of children, and refused to apologise for the sinking, stating his actions were within the bounds of military policy.[[14]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares#cite_note-Edwards148-13) Several historians have supported the contention that Bleichrodt was unaware of the presence of children, including Kate Tildesley, Curator at the Naval Historical Branch, [Ministry of Defence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry_of_Defence_%28United_Kingdom%29) who wrote 'What was not known by Bleichrodt was that the liner he was attacking carried 90 children ... Only 13 of the children survived, and the understanding that Bleichrodt could not have known which passengers were on board the liner made little difference to his perceived culpability.'[[15]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares#cite_note-Tildesley-14) Several of the crew of *U-48*, including the radio operator, later expressed their shock and regret once it became known that the ship they had sunk had been carrying children.[[13]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares#cite_note-Edwards147-12) They 'reaffirmed the German position that there was no way that the submarine could have known who was on board.'[[14]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares#cite_note-Edwards148-13)



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September 1940. A beautiful, fast and elegant ship sets sail from Liverpool bound for Halifax in Nova Scotia, Canada. She has a crew of 203 and 191 passengers, including 100 children aged 4 - 15, and is in convoy with 19 other ships. The children are sad to leave home but they are being sent away from the very real dangers of war. Most of the children had already experienced such dangers - five children in one family had been bombed out of their home only the night before.

**One fifteen year old girl, Bess Walder, boards the ship with her younger brother. She takes up the story:**

"Once on that lovely ship we all had the most wonderful time. We quickly made good friends with one another, the weather was good, we played all kinds of games on deck, enjoying the gorgeous food that we had not been able to have at home because of rationing. It was like being on holiday and the days went by like a beautiful dream."

Despite the dangers, everyone was having the time of their lives. They did lifeboat drill and knew what to do without panic in an emergency. Four days out, with the *City of Benares* still going at the speed of the slowest ships in the convoy, the weather suddenly changed.

"On the night of September 17th, fierce gale-force winds had whipped up enormous waves; heavy swells and rainstorms. By 10 o'clock most people had gone down to their cabins and the children were fast asleep after a rather tiring day. At about 10.30, with the storm still raging, a huge and terrible explosion occurred, causing enormous damage in the ship's hold and the area below the cabins where the children were sleeping.

The ship had been hit by a torpedo from U-boat 48. The German submarine commander had been tracking our convoy for some time, and chose this moment to attack the largest ship in the convoy, *The City of Benares*. All the other ships in the convoy now quickly dispersed. This is exactly what all convoy vessels had to do at this stage in the war at sea, to save themselves from being attacked by the same submarine. There was nothing they could do to help and they were forced to leave the stricken ship to fend for herself. Crews aboard those ships were appalled and distraught at having to leave *The City of Benares*. But their ships' captains were already moving their vessels away from her. She was in a helpless state and listing very badly... she began to sink very quickly.

From a lifeboat that was already waterlogged, and would soon overturn; like many others, I watched her sink. It was a shocking sight to see this lovely ship go down to the ocean floor. It is still etched on my mind today, as it will be on those of all who saw it happen. A nightmare scenario."

In the night and day that followed, with waves and troughs made worse by the sinking ship, there were many acts of heroism including those by *HMS Hurricane*. Some adults were saved but only 14 children, three of whom later died. Miraculously on September 25th six young boys and a few adults, drifting alone in the Atlantic in an open boat, were spotted by the crew of a Sunderland Flying Boat.

Even more miraculously, of very few children who survived the disaster with Bess, one was her brother!

Sixty years on, Bess and other survivors have just held their last service of remembrance in a London church. How do people deal with memories such as Bess and her co-survivors have had to live with? This is what Bess said at the service:

"We, who were saved, have had to come to terms with a problem of forgiveness. To forgive those who did so much harm to so many people and who have left a trail of misery and horror in their wake is not easy, and to obey Christ's teaching on forgiveness when we say the Lord's Prayer is still, for some, greatly difficult in this context.

Sometime after the war I spoke to the wireless operator of U-boat 48. He told me that when they found out that the ship had been carrying children, many of the crew broke down in tears. Some of them, especially family men, left the submarine service later as a result of the sinking. He said that their consciences were greatly troubled, long after the event. He hoped that we would find it in our hearts to forgive them.

As child survivors... we have each had to tackle in our own way the ethical issue of finding out how to forgive... Forgiveness can be very beneficial to the soul, reciprocal and helpful in healing deep wounds of the mind. It sometimes has to be a long process, one that may never quite be completed. It can continue throughout one's life. But never does it preclude forgetting."