

E. Andrew Wilde, Jr., Editor

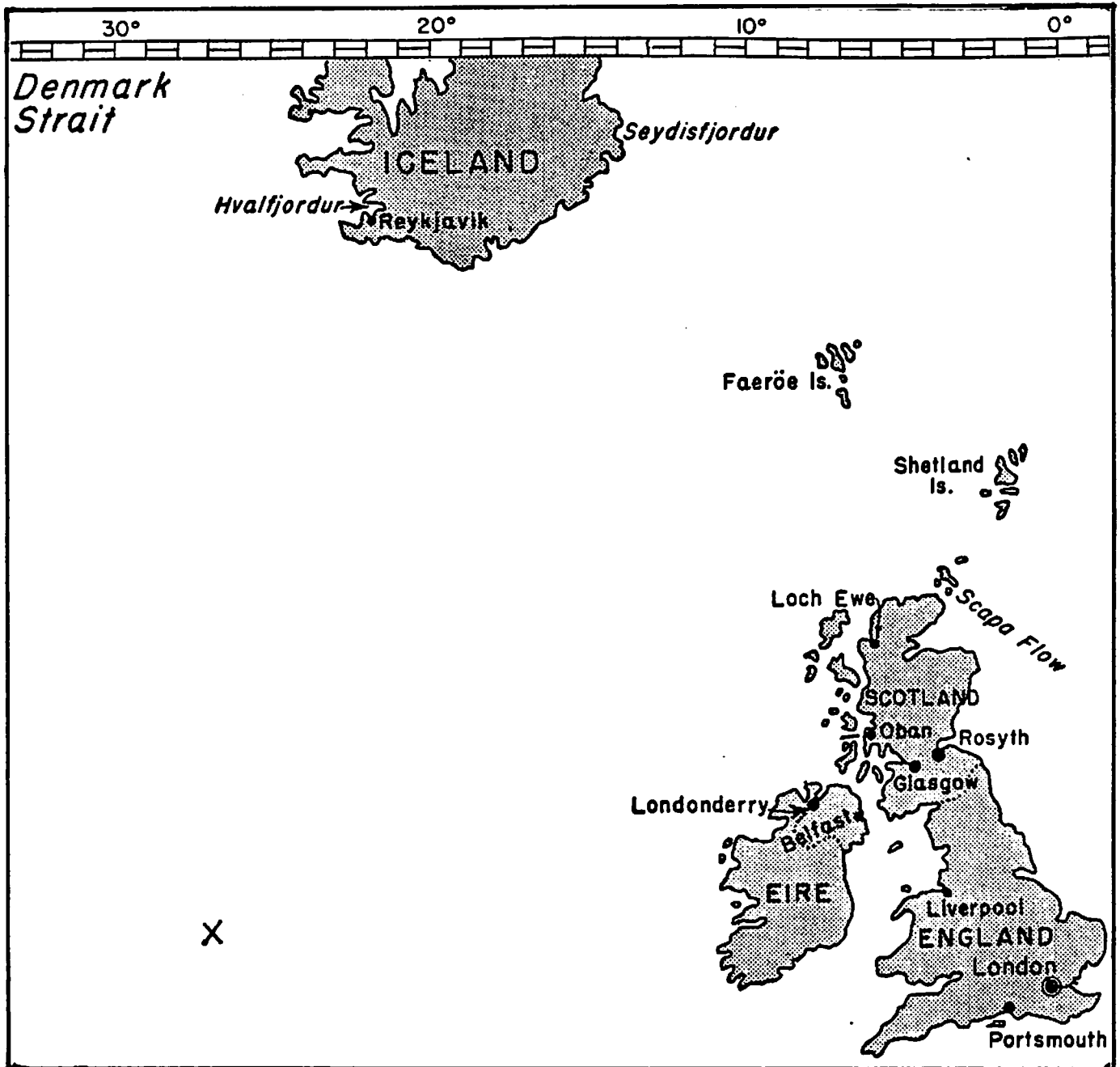
**The U.S.S. *Reuben James* (DD-245) in World War II:  
Documents**

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U.S.S. Reuben James (DD-245) in World War II



USS Reuben James (DD-245) became the first U.S. warship lost in World War II when she was torpedoed and sunk by a U-boat about 670 miles west of Ireland (at X, above) on October 31, 1941. The ship, commanded by Lt. Cdr. Heywood L. Edwards, USN, had been an escort for the east-bound Fast Convoy HX-156 (Halifax to United Kingdom). Although the United States had not yet entered the war, the Navy was already escorting convoys to the meridian of Iceland where they were handed over to the Royal Navy. Only 45 crewmembers survived the sinking of the Reuben James. All seven of the officers and 93 enlisted personnel were killed.

E. A. Wilde, Jr.  
July, 2007

Office of Naval Records and History  
Ships' Histories Section  
Navy Department

### HISTORY OF USS REUBEN JAMES (DD 245)

America's first direct Naval loss of World War II was inflicted off the shores of Iceland a month before Pearl Harbor day when the USS REUBEN JAMES (DD 245) was torpedoed and sunk.

One hundred men, including all of the ship's officers, were either killed as the torpedo struck or perished in the freezing waters after abandoning ship. Only 47 were rescued.

Although the sinking was held in strict secrecy for some time, it was reportedly this incident that hurried a war-time consolidation of the Coast Guard with the Navy and inspired an order establishing armed guards on all merchant ships.

On October 31, 1941, a convoy of 42 was steaming off Iceland in the North Atlantic with the weather overcast and visibility hazy. The REUBEN JAMES, one of the escorts, was steering a straight course on the quarter of the convoy. Zig-zagging was abandoned for fear of collision with unity of the convoy which were having difficulty keeping station.

At 5:30 a.m., that morning, a lookout on the escort commander's ship, USS TARBELL (DD-142) reported that there had been a large flash followed by a deep explosion on the port quarter of the convoy in the direction of the REUBEN JAMES. Immediately, all escort vessels were called by radio; everyone answered with the exception of the JAMES.

Two ships were sent back to investigate the JAMES. The rescue vessels soon discovered that on the water where the JAMES was on station was a large expanding oil slick. Several men pulled out of the oily waters told the story of the loss of the JAMES.

The destroyer was steering a steady course abeam of the center of the convoy. A sound contact was reported and zig-zagging was immediately ordered. Before the JAMES could start on the first leg of her zigging pattern, a torpedo struck her port side abreast number one stack, breaking the ship in half. The forecastle sank immediately and the after part went down a few minutes later. Explosions accompanied the sinking and concussion killed many of the men who managed to leap into the water.

Rescue operations were hampered because escort vessels could not afford to stop long enough to present a "sitting" target. While men were being picked up, two ships reported sound contacts and were forced to get underway.

Attacks were conducted on several contacts that were possibly submarines; although no signs of hits were indicated. The convoy proceeded the rest of the way unharmed.

It is believed that the torpedo probably was aimed at the JAMES by a submarine either stopped or cruising on the surface. It was very easy for the German raider to go undetected because only one of the ships was equipped with radar.

There was only one definitely heard explosion which appeared prolonged, and it therefore was believed that a single torpedo did the job.

A few minutes prior to the torpedoing, the escort commander received a report that a vessel was sending numbers and long dashes close aboard; this procedure was at that time a standard call for U-Boats summoning other subs in the area to assist attacking a convoy.

On the afternoon of the sinking, English Corvettes joined the convoy and reported visual contact with two submarines about ten miles ahead of the convoy. They were engaged with gunfire but submerged before any damage could be inflicted. Nine attacks were made on possible submarines and an estimated total of 41 depth charges were dropped.

Built by the New York Shipbuilding Corporation, Camden, New Jersey, the REUBEN JAMES was commissioned in 1920 by Miss Helen Strauss, Washington, D.C., daughter of Rear Admiral Joseph Strauss.

The vessel was named in honor of an early Naval Boatswain Mate, Reuben James. Bos'n James was active in the Tripolitan War, wounded in a naval battle with a British squadron, and taken prisoner by the British. He was released at the war's end.

The "four-piper" destroyer had the following dimensions: length, 314 feet; beam, 31 feet; depth, 21 feet; and displacement, 1,700 tons.

A destroyer escort, REUBEN JAMES (DE 153) was built to replace the lost vessel. It took an active part in the war with Germany.

Restencilled April 1951

## NARRATIVE OF EVENTS

1. At 0530, zone plus one time, October 31, 1941, the U.S.S. REUBEN JAMES, a ship of Task Unit 4.1.3, was steaming at 8.8 knots in her night cruising position on the port quarter of convoy HX 156 which was composed of forty-two ships of United States, Panamanian, Norwegian, and British registry. At this time the U.S.S. REUBEN JAMES was in Material Condition of Readiness "BAKER" and in Battle Condition of Readiness "THREE."

2. At 0534 there was a heavy explosion(s) in the vicinity of the forward fire room of the U.S.S. REUBEN JAMES. Immediately following this or these explosions that part of the ship forward of number four stack sank. Those members of the crew berthed in the after compartment and those on watch in the after part of the ship, estimated at fifty to sixty men, made their way to the main deck and endeavored to establish communication with the bridge. Being unable to do so they cast loose three life rafts and attempted to lower the Gig. They then took to the water.

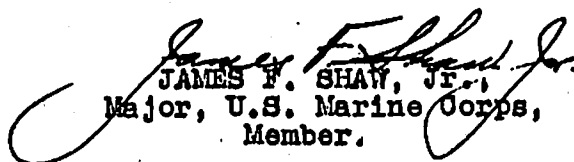
3. At 0541 the U.S.S. REUBEN JAMES sank. The position at this time was Latitude 51°-59'N, Longitude 27°-05'W. Immediately following the sinking there were two violent explosions which tossed the life rafts out of the water and caused many of the men to lose their grip upon the rafts and be thrown clear of the rafts. After the second explosion many of the men regained the life rafts.

4. At about 0600 the U.S.S. NIBLACK started picking up survivors. This action was protected by the U.S.S. HILARY P. JONES. Later the HILARY P. JONES picked up survivors and stayed in the vicinity of the disaster until 1200.

5. There were thirty-six men taken from the water by the U.S.S. NIBLACK. Of these one died from exposure. Eleven men were picked up by the U.S.S. HILARY P. JONES. One of these was dead at the time picked up. All but two of these men were either berthed or on watch in the after part of the U.S.S. REUBEN JAMES.



EDWARD C. RAGUET,  
Captain, U.S. Navy,  
Senior Member.



JAMES F. SHAW, JR.,  
Major, U.S. Marine Corps,  
Member.

USS Reuben James (DD-245) in World War II

List of Casualties; Sinking on 10/31/41<sup>1</sup>

KILLED IN ACTION<sup>2</sup>

Officers:

<u>Name</u>	<u>File No.</u>	<u>Rank</u>
EDWARDS, Heywood Lane	060361	*LCDR
GHEZLER, Benjamin	070036	*LT
JOHNSTON, Dewey George	073515	*LT
ELDEN, James M.	074377	LTjg
DAUB, John James, Jr.	077098	*LTjg
WADE, Howard V.	096648	ENS
SPOWERS, Craig	100371	*ENS

Enlisted:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Service No.</u>	<u>Rate</u>
BAUER, John F., Jr.	404-79-55	CRM
BEASLEY, Harold H.	266-16-07	SEA1
BENSON, James F.	262-35-07	MM2
BIEHL, Joseph P.	243-85-22	SEA1
BOYNTON, Paul R.	274-10-69	Y1
BRITT, Harold L.	212-53-49	Cox
BURRELL, Herbert R.	283-48-66	SEA2
BYRD, Hartwell, L.	262-62-79	SEA1
CARBAUGH, Leftwich E. Jr.	266-16-06	F1
CARUSO, Joseph J.	250-50-29	RM2
CLARK, James B.	283-27-17	FC2
COOK, Raymond	265-68-61	MATT1
COOPERIDER, Carl E.	283-27-22	GM3
COSGROVE, Lawrence R.	201-65-95	GM2
COUSINS, Alton A.	122-85-70	CMM
COX, Charles B.	355-42-75	CTM
DANIEL, Dennis H.	266-16-03	Y3
DEVEREAU, Laurence	131-06-98	CBM
DICKERSON, Leonidas C.	266-14-97	SK3
DOIRON, Gilbert J.	201-38-79	WT1
DRINKWALTER, Karl L.	234-32-00	SEA1
DUNSTON, Nebraska	266-06-84	MATT3
DYSON, Corbon	272-21-10	RM3

\* \* \* \* \*

Notes:

- 1 According to a machine-generated list at Archives II, College Park, MD, prepared by BuPers after the war in the 'Battle Books' (Record Group 24) listing casualties by battle/campaign by ship.
  - 2 OLMSTEAD, Donald E., Fireman 2nd Class, is shown as having died of wounds, on 11/2/41. All of the others were declared dead due to enemy action on 10/31/41 (Code: 6321).
- \* Graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy

Enlisted: (continued)

<u>Name</u>	<u>Service No.</u>	<u>Rate</u>
EVANS, Gene G.	268-35-16	B2
EVANS, Linn S.	265-93-57	FC3
EVERETT, Carlyle C.	234-31-71	F2
FARLEY, Edwin L.	266-16-20	SEA1
FITZGERALD, John J.	201-65-92	QM3
FLYNN, William A.	243-63-32	TM2
FRANKS, Hartley M.	255-97-45	SG2
FRENCH, Ralph G.	206-72-72	CCS
GASKINS, Lester C.	262-19-77	MM1
GREER, John C.	341-62-65	CEM
GREY, Ernest D., Jr.	328-88-77	SEA2
GRIFFIN, Arthur R.	223-13-54	SM2
HARRIS, Charles W.	272-58-68	SEA2
HAYES, Charles C.	283-52-58	SEA2
HENNIGER, William H.	223-19-44	GM1
HOGAN, Francis R.	212-52-29	GM3
HOUSE, Hugh	262-41-17	GM3
HUDLIN, Maurice W.	201-69-24	F1
JOHNSON, Joseph	262-50-58	MATT1
JONES, Glen W.	154-97-96	CQM
KALANTA, Anthony J.	212-32-70	BM2
KAPP, Donald	234-31-99	SEA1
KEEVER, Leonard A.	341-03-18	CMM
KLOEPPER, Ralph W.	410-00-68	SM3
LITTLE, Joseph G.	223-96-34	SEA1
MAGARIS, Paul L.	341-51-49	RM1
MCKEEVER, William J.	311-60-98	SEA2
MERRELL, Windell H.	295-58-08	F2
MERRITT, Auburn F.	272-52-58	SEA2
MILLS, Gerald E., Jr.	410-52-33	SEA2
MONDOUX, Albert J.	239-20-83	CWT
MUSSELWHITE, Edgar W.	268-29-96	MM1
NEELY, Kenneth C.	266-30-22	SEA2
NEPTUNE, Aldon W.	258-27-19	TM3
NEWTON, William H.	265-89-84	Y3
OLMSTEAD, Donald E.	234-31-66	F2
ORANGE, Harold J.	300-38-15	SEA2
ORTIZUELA, Pedro	420-56-53	CK1
OWEN, Benjamin T.	346-89-35	SEA1
PAINTER, William H.	262-49-84	SEA1
PARKIN, Joseph J.	212-18-97	CWT
PATERSON, William N.	234-18-96	Cox
PENNINGTON, Burl G.	287-28-82	QM2
POLIZZI, Joseph C.	311-61-03	SEA1
PORTER, Corwin D.	311-61-05	SEA1
POST, Fredrick R.	153-66-17	BM1
POWELL, Lee P.	261-75-97	PHM1
RAYHILL, Elmer R.	342-37-25	SEA1
REID, Lee L. N.	355-69-85	TM1



KILLED, Enlisted (continued)

<u>Name</u>	<u>Service No.</u>	<u>Rate</u>
RESS, John R., Jr.	224-06-01	SEA1
ROGERS, James W.	295-56-02	SEA1
RYAN, John J., Jr.	201-66-93	Cox
RYGWELSKI, Clarence	311-60-82	SEA1
SALTIS, Edward P.	299-65-21	B1
SCHLOTTHAUER, Eugene	375-53-45	CWT
SETTLE, Sunny J.	266-30-11	SEA1
SORENSEN, Walter	316-58-47	GM3
SOWERS, Wallace L.	266-31-46	SEA2
STANKUS, Anthony G.	212-55-18	SEA2
STELMACH, Jerome	234-31-48	SEA1
TAYLOR, Wilton L.	250-50-85	F1
TOWERS, George F.	271-56-70	CGM
TURNER, Lewis A.	359-77-50	SM3
VOILES, Loyd Z.	295-88-70	SEA1
VORE, Harold M.	279-63-37	F1
WEAVER, Jesse	295-56-70	SEA1
WELGH, Chester L.	266-30-13	F2
WHARTON, Kenneth R.	375-17-91	FC1
WOODY, George, Jr.	266-30-12	SEA1
WRAY, Edwin E.	346-77-63	SEA1

\* \* \* \* \*

WOUNDED (Enlisted)

BEGLEY, Claborn	310-79-18	MM2
BERGSTRESSER, William H.	380-47-41	CMM
CARR, Robert J.	403-03-92	F2
JACQUETTE, Charles	258-24-41	F1
MOLNAR, Joseph	266-05-66	F1
SIMS, Lloyd E.	274-10-90	WT1
THOMPSON, James C.	300-43-32	SEA2
TURNBULL, Thomas P.	223-53-96	EM2

\* \* \* \* \*

Summary of Casualties:

	<u>Killed</u>	<u>Wounded</u>	<u>Not Wounded</u>	<u>Complement on 10/31/41</u>
Officer	7	0	0	7
Enlisted	<u>93</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>37</u>	<u>138</u>
TOTAL	<u>100</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>37</u>	<u>145</u>

E. A. Wilde, Jr.  
August, 2007