

bridge. The sailors strained their eyes across the empty sea for any sign of the enemy. Wassell was pouring himself a drink with a correspondent in the smoke room when he suddenly heard a commotion on deck. "Planes!" someone shouted. The doctor and the other men in the smoke room crawled under tables as three Japanese Zero fighters dived toward the *Janssens*. They had been escorting bombers from Bali to Tjilatjap when their leader had spotted the steamer.

The doctor struggled to reach his men on deck but was unable to force his way through the frantic crowd of passengers below. The enemy planes roared down at 300 miles an hour, machine guns chattering, and raked the steamer from bow to stern again and again. The Dutch gunners tried desperately to hit the three raiders, and the captain zigzagged the ship. The gun crews ran out of ammunition. Then, after several more passes against the steamer, the Japanese planes sheered off and flew away. It was almost a miracle; only 10 people aboard—most of them gunners—had been injured, and the steamer had suffered no serious damage. Rushing topside, Wassell was relieved to find his men unharmed.

The wounded gunners were carried into the ship's bar, where there was a first aid cabinet.

Wassell, who had not practiced any serious surgery for many years, rolled up his sleeves and went to work immediately. With only some morphine, iodine, bandages, and splints at hand, he and a Dutch pharmacist's mate did what they could for the gunners.

Meanwhile, everyone aboard feared that the Japanese would return, and many passengers pressed the captain to put them ashore where their chances of survival might be better. So, three hours after the attack the *Janssens* put in at a little island inlet, and a lifeboat carried some passengers and crewmen ashore. Several of the passengers were women and children. All were sure that the little steamer was doomed.

The *Janssens* stayed in the inlet for four hours, during which food and water was taken aboard and the damaged lifeboats repaired. Wassell and his men agreed to stay aboard and try their luck at reaching Australia. The captain waited for nightfall, and when the moon rose the steamer headed back out to sea. A bright, full moon etched the outline of the vessel on the smooth water. There was not a ripple of wind. The men aboard the *Janssens* were apprehensive, sure they would be spotted by the enemy.

The steamer pressed on. With more room aboard now, Wassell moved into a cabin with a

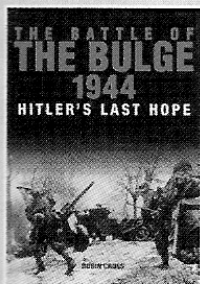
Dutch chaplain. The seven wounded bluejackets chose to stay on deck. Later that night, the captain announced that the *Janssens* had turned due south and, if all went well, would reach Australia in 10 days. Because of his depleted complement, the skipper ordered every able-bodied man to help with the chores and watches. Wassell and the Dutch padre set to work with mops and pails in the smoke room. Before turning in that night, both men knelt by their bunks and prayed for a safe journey and a speedy end to the war.

The little steamer chugged on southward through the moonlit night and day after day, with no sign of land. Her fearful occupants peered across the vast, empty ocean for a speck on the horizon or in the sky that could mean trouble, but there was nothing. Their luck held, and finally, after 10 grueling days, the Australian shore was sighted. Hearts soared and shouts went up, and the *Janssens* slipped into Fremantle harbor on the southwestern coast. The long odyssey of Wassell and his wounded sailors was ending.

Wassell took the men ashore and got them settled into a hospital. A few days later, he was summoned by an American admiral and informed that he had been awarded the Navy Cross for his "gallantry and splendid leader-

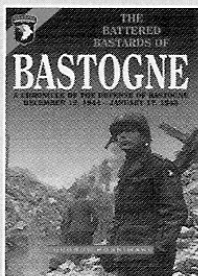
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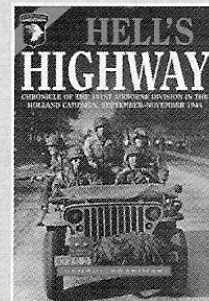
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