**RMS Lusitania: The Fateful Voyage**

On April 30th 1915, the Lusitania was at New York, being loaded with meat, medical supplies, copper, cheese, oil and machinery, but she was also secretly being loaded with munitions for Britain for the war.  That same day, Kapitänleutnant Walter Schwieger was ordered to take his [U-boat-20 German submarine](http://www.firstworldwar.com/atoz/u20.htm) to the northern tip of Great Britain, then back down south on the Atlantic side and then east to the Irish Channel to destroy ships going to and from Liverpool, England. Then he was to go around Ireland and head back to Germany.  Schwieger was known to frequently attack ships without warning them, and fired at any neutral ships he suspected may be British.  In an earlier voyage, he narrowly missed hitting a hospital ship with a torpedo.  His reputation made it more likely for him to destroy a British passenger liner, such as the Lusitania.

*Beside the CUNARD advertisement was a notice*:

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|  | NOTICE! Travellers intending to embark on the Atlantic voyage are reminded that a state of war exists between Germany and her allies and Great Britain and her allies; that the zone of war includes the waters adjacent to the British Isles; that, in accordance with formal notice given by the Imperial German Government, vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters and that travellers sailing in the war zone on ships of Great Britain or her allies do so at their own risk. IMPERIAL GERMAN EMBASSY WASHINGTON, D.C., APRIL 22, 1915. |

This notice was thought by most of the passengers as an idle threat.

Before the voyage, it was decided that only 19 of the 25 boilers would be utilized for the voyage because of the enormous consumption of coal, so boiler room 4 was shut down.  This limited the Lusitania's speed to 21 knots, still much faster than a U-boat submarine's top speed of 13 knots.  On May 1st, 1915, the Lusitania embarked on its 202nd crossing of the Atlantic with 1257 passengers, plus a crew of 702.  It was under the command of Captain William Turner.

The first days of the voyage were uneventful, but not for the U-20.  On May 5th, Captain Schwieger rounded the south-west tip of Ireland.  He tried to destroy but missed several ships, including several neutral ones.  That day, he spotted a small schooner, the *Earl of Lathom*.  He surfaced to warn the crew, then destroyed the boat with gunfire.

The next day as he continued further east in the Irish Channel, he fired two torpedoes at the *Candidate*, a 5858-ton steamer from Liverpool.  About two hours later, he destroyed another ship, the *Centurion*.  The British never warned the Lusitania of these sinkings which were taking place near where the Lusitania was about to travel through.

The U-20's fuel was running low so Schwieger decided not to travel past Liverpool, and instead turn back.  The U-20 and the Lusitania were going to cross paths.

On May 7th, the Lusitania entered the Irish Channel.  Captain Turner slowed the ship down to 15 knots because of the fog.  This was contrary to orders to travel at full speed in the submarine war zone around Great Britain.  However, as a precaution, Captain Turner posted extra lookouts and swung the lifeboats out.

That same day, the U-20 was travelling west in the Irish Channel.  At about noon, Schwieger and his crew sighted an old war cruiser, the *Juno*.  It escaped because it was zigzagging, which made it hard for a submarine to fire at it, due to its constantly changing path.  Captain Turner of the Lusitania did not do this because he felt that it wasted time and fuel.  Then, at 1:20pm British time, Schwieger sighted something of note.

*"Starboard ahead four funnels and two masts of a steamer with course at right angles to us..."*

He submerged and approached the large passenger liner at 9 knots and waited.  To his luck, at 1:40pm, when the ship was roughly 700 meters away, it turned 30° toward him, making it easier to attack.  He fired a single torpedo...

**A Deadly Encounter**

At about 1:30pm, just after the passengers had eaten their lunch, Captain Turner went down to his cabin, probably to go the bathroom.

At about 1:39pm, lookout Leslie Morton, of only 18 years of age, saw a burst of bubbles about 500 meters away.  Then a trail of bubbles began to approach from the starboard (right) side of the ship at about 22 knots.  Morton grabbed his megaphone and shouted to the bridge: "Torpedoes coming on the starboard side." The officers there did not hear him.  About 30 seconds later, Thomas Quinn, a lookout high above in the crows’ nest, saw the torpedo's wake and sounded the alarm.  Captain Turner ran to the navigating bridge, and as he reached it the torpedo detonated.

There was a large explosion similar to a crack of thunder at the side of the ship just ahead of the 2nd funnel.  Then there was a second, larger, muffled explosion that seemed to come from the bottom of the ship.  The ship tilted to the right side at an angle of 25°.  The power suddenly failed, but Captain Turner still attempted to steer the Lusitania toward land in an attempt to beach her.  The rudder and engines did not respond (obviously).  Also, the watertight doors in the ship could not be closed unless there was power.  The wireless room had to run on battery power to tap out its S.O.Ss.

As a result of the list (tilt) of the ship, the lifeboats on the port (left) side could not be launched.  The starboard-side boats were swung out so far as a result of the list that many passengers had to jump from the deck to the lifeboats, risking falling into the water many stories below.  Many crew members panicked and a few lifeboats were launched that contained only crew members.

Other lifeboats capsized, and one or two were damaged when the torpedo hit the ship.  Although the Lusitania had adequate lifeboats for all on board, most lifeboats simply could not be launched.  The Lusitania sank below the waves shortly before 2:00pm.  It sank in 90 meters of water, and since the Lusitania was 239 meters long, the bow (front of the ship) hit the bottom of the ocean while the stern was still up in the air.

Captain Turner jumped into the water as the bridge was about to go under.  He swam for about 3 hours, until he finally found a nearby lifeboat, which was being swarmed with people trying to survive.  A Canadian told some people to leave the boat to prevent it from collapsing.  Turner decided to stay on the lifeboat.

The U-20 saw all this.  Schwieger made the following note in his war diary:

*"An unusually heavy explosion takes place with a very strong explosion cloud (cloud reaches far beyond front funnel).  The explosion of the torpedo must have been followed by a second one (boiler or coal or powder?).  The superstructure right above the point of impact and the bridge are torn asunder, fire breaks out, and smoke envelops the high bridge.  The ship stops immediately and heels over to starboard very quickly, immersing simultaneously at the bow.  It appears as if the ship were going to capsize very shortly, Great confusion ensues on board; the boats are made clear and some of them are lowered to the water with either stem or stern first and founder immediately.  On the port side fewer boats are made clear than on the starboard side on account of the ship's list.  The ship blows off [steam]; on the bow the name "Lusitania" becomes visible in golden letters.  The funnels were painted black, no flag was set astern.  Ship was running twenty knots.  Since it seems as if the steamer will keep above water only a short time, we dived to a depth of twenty-four meters and ran out to sea.  It would have been impossible for me, anyhow, to fire a second torpedo into this crowd of people struggling to save their lives."*

Many claimed that Schwieger added the last sentence after the voyage after the world became shocked by the sinking.

The distress signals sent from the Lusitania reached Queenstown, a city in Ireland about 17 kilometres away.  Vice Admiral Sir Charles Coke gathered up whatever ships were available (they were all relatively small) and told their captains to sail to where the Lusitania was.  They arrived 2 hours after the sinking.  When they got there, they picked up any people still alive in the water and only 6 lifeboats, which were all from the starboard side.

http://www.firstworldwar.com/features/lusitania.htm