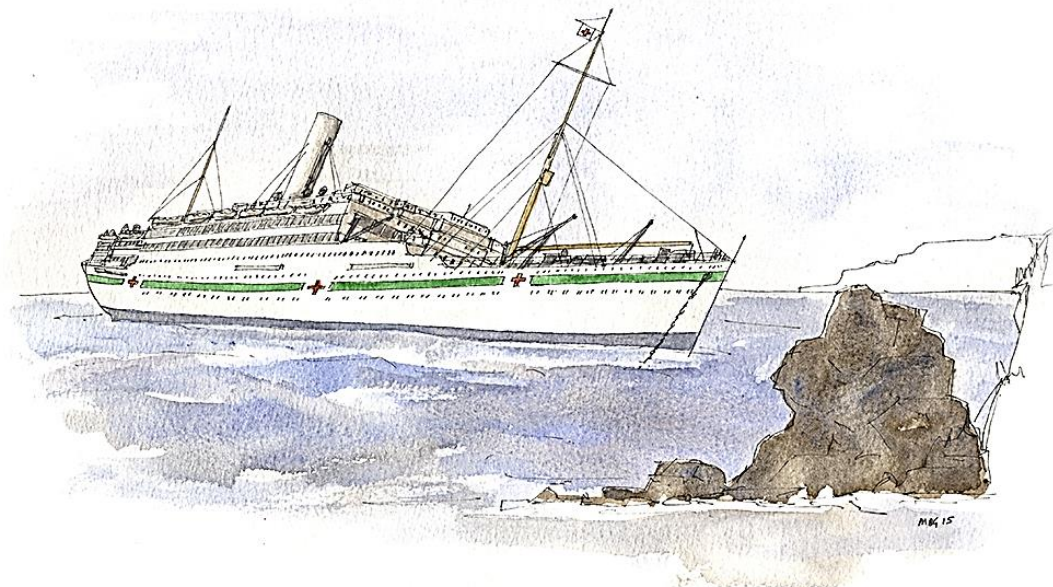


FORGOTTEN WRECKS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

HMHS *Asturias*



*HMHS Asturias beached on Great Eelstone Rock at Salcombe.
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- Launched 26th September, 1907.
- 12,000 tons, 365 foot long with a cruising speed of 16 knots.
- Converted to a hospital ship August 1914.
- Torpedoed and beached by UC-66, 20th March 1917.

His Majesty's Hospital Ship (HMHS) *Asturias* was one of thirteen allied hospital ships sunk between 1915 and 1918 as a result of enemy action. Nine were torpedoed by German U-boats and four struck enemy mines. The latter included HMHS *Britannic*, sister ship of the White Star Line's famous *Titanic* and *Olympic*. The Canadian hospital ship, HMHS *Llandoverly Castle*, probably paid the greatest human cost when a torpedo struck the vessel off southern Ireland in June 1918. In this incident alone, over two hundred and thirty people lost their lives, including many nursing sisters.[1]

HMHS *Asturias* was requisitioned from the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company in August 1914 and became one of the largest cross-channel hospital ships.[2] The vessel had formerly been employed on service between Buenos Aires and Southampton and had become a fashionable passenger liner, one of the great "modern floating palaces." [3] Once called into



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war service, *Asturias* was painted in hospital colours, distinguished by two wide green painted stripes interrupted by two red crosses and a huge red cross amidships. *Asturias* was refitted to carry swinging cot beds for 1,200 patients and was generally based in Southampton.[4]

Among *Asturias*'s most famous passengers was the then unknown 2nd Lt. J.R.R. Tolkien, of the 11th Lancashire Fusiliers, 74th brigade. Tolkien had recently taken part in the Battle of the Somme, surviving unscathed only to be struck down by a severe case of Trench Fever after his regiment had been ordered to Beauval. He was conveyed to Le Touquet by hospital train and then sailed home on the *Asturias*, while the rest of his regiment was sent onward to Ypres. He safely disembarked in Southampton on Thursday, November 9th, 1916. [5]

While Tolkien was on board *Asturias*, he may have borne witness to “improper” behaviour by Royal Army Medical Core (RMAC) staff. At the time Tolkien made his voyage, these personnel were under investigation for carrying out illicit trade in drink and “picture” postcards—the exact nature of which remains undisclosed—for which they were accused of charging “exorbitant” prices.[6]

On the 1st February 1915, *Asturias* became the victim of the first recorded act of aggression towards a hospital ship. *Asturias* was steaming fifteen miles north-north-west from the Havre lightship, under a clear sky, when crewmembers realized they were under attack. A.N. Thomson, Second Officer, became aware of the danger when he spotted a “smooth in the water about two points abaft the starboard beam 500 yards away. About 150 feet from the smooth I distinctly observed the track of a torpedo which passed us close under our stern.” Thomson was far from the only witness. Charles Law, Ship's Master, was alerted to the torpedo's presence by a cadet who spotted it passing astern. Instructions were sent to the engine room to give the ship all steam possible, and evasive manoeuvres were taken in the form of a zigzag course.[7]

Just over two years after this near miss, *Asturias* and her crew were not so lucky. At the start of February 1917, the German government accused British hospital ships of violating the Hague Convention by carrying troops and munitions. From this perspective, hospital ships became legitimate targets as part of Germany's widening policy of unrestricted maritime warfare. All vessels on course in a vast swathe of ocean between Flanborough Head to Terschelling on the one hand, and Ushant to Land's End on the other were now liable to be attacked and sunk by U-boats. In response, the British Foreign Office promised to avenge any attack against a hospital ship with immediate reprisals. [8]

On the night of 20th to 21st of March 1917, *Asturias* was returning from discharging patients at Avonmouth to her base in Southampton. German submarine UC-66 — commanded by



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Oberleutnant zur See Herbert Pustkuchen — attacked without warning. As before, *Asturias* was clearly marked as a hospital ship. She steamed “with all navigating lights on, and with all the distinguishing Red Cross signs brilliantly illuminated.” [9] One (or possibly two) torpedoes, struck the ship starboard, destroying one of her propellers and the rudder, as well as flooding the engine room. [10]

The ordeal of the crew and the male and female RAMC staff on board is vividly captured in the account of Cardiff doctor, William Townsend Dobson. Dobson had served as a medical officer on *Asturias* for eight months and was awakened by the explosion. He dressed and got on deck as quickly as he could. “There was an entire absence of panic,” said Dobson. “Everyone went to their stations and awaited orders. Presently several RAMC orderlies and members of the crew arrived with bandaged heads, suffering from the effects of the explosion. It was then I noticed that the lights were getting weaker and about ten past midnight they went out.” [11]

At this stage, the ship was crawling toward the coast at a rate of eight to ten knots and sinking slowly.[12] An attempt to launch the lifeboats reaped tragic results. As Dobson’s boat was lowered, with about twenty-six people on aboard, it tipped and threw three men into the water, crushing them between the boat and the sinking vessel. Then, as the lifeboat was about to push off, it capsized, throwing all passengers into the freezing waters, where it was “too dark to see.” [13]

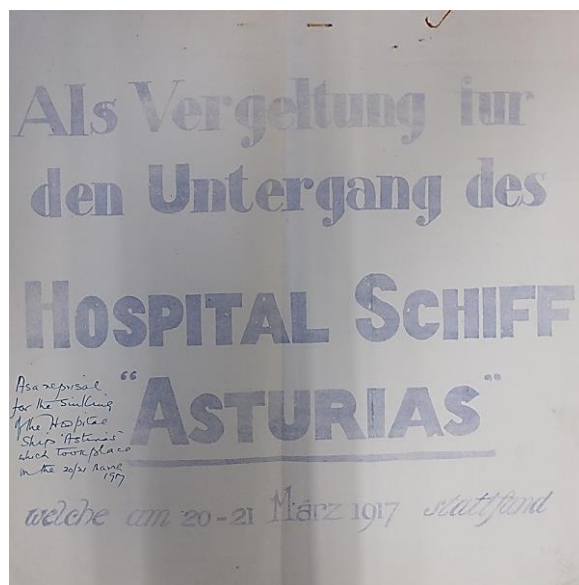
Dobson, a self-avowed strong swimmer, was fortunate. Realizing he was in danger of being sucked into one of *Asturias*’s propellers, he managed to struggle clear of the wreck. Seeing the lights of a small ship, he shouted to others to follow his example and swam toward it. He still remained in the water for over an hour, with the lights seeming “as far away as ever.” Then, in a strange twist of fate, he was rescued by a man he knew. The hand that stretched out and helped him into the boat belonged to Albert Beck, one of Dobson’s patients before the war, who was now serving in the Navy.” [14]

For survivors struggling in the water near the wreck, the conditions were atrocious. Not only was it a cold night, but, so press accounts claimed, the explosion had taken place in “an area of the ship where disinfectants were kept, and that region was rendered dangerous by the fumes of the chemicals.” [15] Once rescued, survivors were cared for by local people, who donated blankets and warm clothing and treated the more minor injuries. Not only humans were saved from the foundering hospital ship and welcomed by the people of Devon. According to *The Western Times*, one member of the crew had salvaged two cages of canaries. Another crewmember kept a grey Persian kitten under his coat, which was claimed to have “slept securely there during those terrible hours.” [16]

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Asturias had beached off Salcombe, Devon, beneath the cliff on Great Eelstone Rock, upon a combination of sand and rock. [17] In the following days, the secretary of the Admiralty announced that eleven military personnel had been lost along with twenty members of the crew. An additional eleven of those on board were still unaccounted for, including one female staff nurse and a stewardess.[18]

The target for British vengeance was Freiburg. Because of its location in South West Germany within access of French airfields, this German city became the victim of twenty-five allied air-raids during the war, of which the revenge attack of Saturday 14th April 1917 was the worst. A large squadron composed of British and French aeroplanes launched the raid in daylight when the city centre was crowded. Twelve people were killed, and the university's Anatomical Clinic was destroyed. Leaflets were dropped amid the bombs, explaining this was a reprisal for the attack on *Asturias*. [19]



A leaflet dropped during the reprisal raid.
The National Archives, ref. AIR1/115/15/39/66

A leaflet dropped during the reprisal raid. The National Archives, ref. AIR1/115/15/39/66 Salvage experts reached HMHS *Asturias* within days of her sinking and assessed the condition of the hulk, which remained beached on sand and rock. Although the engine room was badly damaged, and water inside ebbed and flowed with the tide, an attempt at salvage was recommended, dependent on the weather. [20] *Asturias* was successfully floated and ultimately towed to Portsmouth, where the Admiralty used her as an ammunitions hulk. [21]

However, the ship's glory days were not over. The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company purchased the remains of their once-glamorous vessel in 1919. After an extensive refit,



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Asturias was re-launched as *Arcadian* in 1923. *Arcadian* sailed on for a further ten years, taking passengers on luxurious Mediterranean and Scandinavian cruises, and was considered the “largest steamer in the world solely devoted to pleasure travelling.” Her “handsomely tiled” swimming baths were rated as amongst the finest ever installed aboard ship.[22]

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Sources

- [1] "The Sinking of the Llandovery Castle," courtesy of Lori Douglas, originally published in 1920. Retrieved from The Great War Documents Archive. 2012. <http://www.gwpda.org/naval/lcastl11.htm>. The *Llandovery Castle* sinking was presented by the British at the Leipzig trials following the war, after it was evidenced that the U-Boat crew who sunk the hospital ship resurfaced and gunned down the survivors in their lifeboats.
- [2] TS 13/46 Queen's Proctor: Prize and Prize Bounty Cases, Decrees and Affidavits: Writ No. 329 *Asturias* (1914).
- [3] *Portsmouth Evening News*, 3rd February 1915.
- [4] Chapter 4, "1917: Unrestricted Maritime Warfare," in Stephen McGreal, *The War on the Hospital Ships*.
- [5] WO 339/34423, No. 100054/2. See also John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth*, (Harper Collins: 2011), p205.
- [6] MT 23/597, Improper Acts of the RAMC staff aboard *Asturias*, 30th November, 1916.
- [7] MT23/364, Admiralty Transport Department Statement of Master and crew regarding the enemy torpedo fired at HMHS *Asturias*.
- [8] *The Times*, 1st February 1917.
- [9] Secretary of the Admiralty's press statement, quoted in most newspapers including *Western Times*, 28th March 1917.
- [10] *Western Gazette*, 30th March 1917.
- [11] Dobson's testimony was reproduced in most national and local newspapers, including *Western Mail*, 30th March 1917.
- [12] *Western Gazette*, 30th March 1917; ADM 116-1586, Report of Naval Salvage Advisor, 24th March 1917.
- [13] *Western Mail*, 30th March 1917.
- [14] *Western Mail*, 30th March 1917.
- [15] *Western Daily Press*, 28th March 1917.
- [16] *Western Times*, 29th March 1917.
- [17] *Western Gazette*, 30th March 1917; ADM 116-1586, Report of Naval Salvage Advisor, 24th March 1917.
- [18] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 28th March 1917.
- [19] Christian Geinitz, "The first air war against noncombatants: strategic bombing of German cities in World War I," in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster ed., *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918*, (Cambridge University Press: 2006), p.212. Freiburg's story told in Roger Chickering. *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914-1918*. (Cambridge University Press: 2007.)
- [20] ADM 116-1586, Report of Naval Salvage Advisor, 24th March 1917.
- [21] Chapter 4, "1917: Unrestricted Maritime Warfare," in Stephen McGreal, *The War on the Hospital Ships*.
- [22] *Dundee Courier*, 15th June 1923.