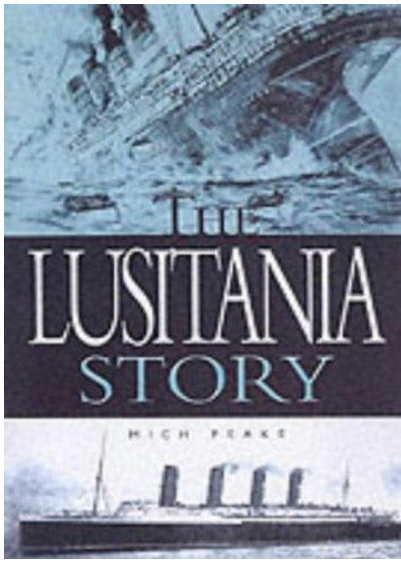




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The Lusitania Story

van Peeke, Mitch

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At 12.10 hours that day, Sunday, 8 September, Lusitania passed the Daunt's Rock Lightship. By 15.00 hours she had again overtaken the Lucania, which had left Queenstown thirty-five minutes ahead of her. By noon on Monday, she had covered 561 miles, by noon on Tuesday another 575 miles, by noon on Wednesday, 570 miles; to noon on Thursday 593 miles and finally 493 miles to her arrival at Sandy Hook at 09.05 hours on Friday. Fog had hampered her progress on three of the five days of her Atlantic passage, plus the fact that her engines were not fully run-in. All the same, her time of passage across the North Atlantic had been five days and fifty-four minutes; exactly thirty minutes outside the German held record, and her average speed over the five days had been 23.01 knots. Therefore, the record still belonged, for now at least, to the Germans. But the Germans knew that they would not long retain the Blue Riband. Lusitania's best day's run of 593 miles, was eleven miles better than Kaiser Wilhelm II's best run and only eight miles behind Deutschland's. Both of the German ships had only recorded their best runs with good weather and fully settled engines.

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Lusitania reached Sandy Hook at 01.17 hours on 11 October 1907. Her time of passage across the North Atlantic was four days, nineteen hours and fifty-two minutes, at an average speed of 23.99 knots. The Blue Riband was now most definitely hers and what was more, the people of New York City already knew it. Arriving early, she had been forced to anchor off Sandy Hook until there was sufficient water over the bar to admit her. This gave plenty of time for the news of her record-breaking voyage to reach the city. At 07.12 hours, she was able to proceed up the Ambrose channel and she then anchored again off the quarantine station at Staten Island. One hour later, she steamed triumphantly up the Hudson, the stentorian blast of her whistles returning the general din of the continuous salutes from the tugs, fireboats, pleasure boats and the veritable fleet of small craft that had turned out to welcome her back to her 'second home', New York. The

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First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, now deliberately used the German U-boat commanders' hitherto largely chivalrous behaviour against them, by his sanctioning of the Q-ship, a seemingly ordinary cargo vessel that was in fact secretly armed and manned by a naval crew and a party of Marines. When stopped by a U-boat, these ships pretended to comply with the cruiser rules. Occasionally, the crew of a Q-ship would even go so far as to feign panic and pretend to abandon their vessel but, as soon as the U-boat's boarding party were on their way over, the concealed 4.1-inch guns were brought into action, the White Ensign was displayed and the now highly vulnerable submarine was sent swiftly to the bottom in a hail of shell and rifle fire.

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The Admiralty ordered that any captured U-boat crew were to be treated as 'accused persons' but in reality, prisoners were seldom taken by Q-ships; the Marines saw to that. Not surprisingly, the Germans ordered their submarine commanders to abandon the use of the cruiser rules. The Germans announced that henceforth, all ships encountered by U-boats in the declared war zone were liable to be sunk without warning. This was in fact exactly the situation that Churchill had striven to achieve. Churchill hoped that he could now successfully goad the U-boat commanders into attacking any ship in British waters. As First Sea Lord John Fisher had once remarked in a paper on this very subject, 'One flag looks much like another when viewed against the light through a periscope'. Of course, it was Churchill's fervent hope that the U-boats would attack a neutral ship, and ultimately for his purposes, an American one. The following extract from a secret letter he wrote at the time to Walter Runciman, the President of the Board of Trade, outlines his intentions perfectly.

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Having diverted two other Cunarders, the Transylvania and the Ausonia, into Queenstown harbour, the Admiralty duly informed the Lusitania of the U-boat peril. Captain Dow promptly ran up the Stars and Stripes and bolted for Liverpool with all dispatch. The incident did not pass unnoticed as Colonel Edward House, one of President Wilson's closest advisors, was a passenger aboard the Lusitania on that voyage and so there were diplomatic repercussions. However, political oil was poured onto the troubled American waters and no more was said, but it was a measure of the strain Captain Dow was obviously feeling. By the end of the first week in March 1915, the strain finally proved to be too much. Captain Dow had yet to see a German U-boat but his continuing fear of being torpedoed, given that he knew something of the nature of the cargoes his ship was carrying, caused him to worry greatly about the safety of his passengers.

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The daily boat drills as practiced aboard the Lusitania on her final voyage, farcical though they may seem to us at this remove, were merely for the visual reassurance of the passengers. They served no purpose as an exercise of training for the crew, but Captain Turner obviously could not have told his passengers this fact. Meanwhile, events and circumstances in London, Queenstown and on the Atlantic Ocean that Wednesday, were beginning to assume a shape and form that would ultimately have a bearing on the lives of all those aboard the Lusitania quite beyond their belief. At Admiralty House in Whitehall, London, a briefing was taking place in the map room that Wednesday morning as the First Lord, Winston Churchill, was leaving for France after lunch. The briefing was being held so that the First Sea Lord, John Fisher, and Admiral Oliver, who would deputize for Churchill in his absence, would be up to date with what was known as 'the plot'. The plot referred to the great map of the world's oceans on which was plotted the latest positions of German U-boats, (obtained by wireless intercepts, sighting reports, reports of sinkings etc.) of units of the Royal Navy and any other important ships, such as those under Admiralty charter or others carrying important war supplies. The positions of each of the vessels on the plot was marked with a brightly coloured pin, colour coded to represent the type of vessel. On the head of each pin, to the scale of the map, was a disc, which represented the field of vision of a lookout on board that vessel. The plot was updated continually as each piece of fresh information came in, and was verified. It was upon the plot that all operational decisions of the Admiralty were made. The plot that Wednesday morning showed two U-boats on or near the Western approaches. U-30 was shown north of Ireland and heading roughly north-eastwards round Scotland for home and U-20 north-west of Fastnet, heading south. Also shown near Fastnet, slightly to the south-west, was the cruiser HMS Juno, which was detailed to act as an escort for the approaching Lusitania, at the end of her patrol. The largest disc of all represented the Lusitania, shown well west of Fastnet but approaching at 20 knots. It did not therefore take a genius to work out that one passenger liner, one warship and one enemy submarine were all converging on the same spot: Fastnet.

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The Admiralty in London had ordered him to protect the Lusitania in the best way that he was able. But how could he protect her without her escort and without telling her where the danger was? It was absurd. 'SUBMARINES ACTIVE OFF THE SOUTH COAST OF IRELAND' was certainly general and negative in nature. It was the only thing he could think of. But he knew it was not enough.

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He allowed himself a slight smile. This latest signal meant that the immediate danger was passed. He had been right; the fog had undoubtedly saved them as the submarine off Fastnet had now evidently given up. Cape Clear was many miles astern of Lusitania. The entrance to St George's Channel, and therefore the next notified U-boat threat, would have been four to five hours away if Lusitania had maintained her original course. As far as Captain Turner knew, there were now no U-boats in his immediate vicinity. Yet the most curious thing in all this was that there was no submarine off Cape Clear, there never had been. The 'Fastnet' submarine was obviously a figment of someone's imagination. But the 'Conningbeg' submarine was real enough. Only now of course, it was no longer near Conningbeg. At 13.20 hours GMT, U-20 was still running on the surface, heading back toward Fastnet. Schwieger was still up on the conning tower with the lookouts, the air was a lot fresher up there. Suddenly, the starboard lookout saw smoke off the U-20's starboard bow. Schwieger focussed his binoculars on it. He could see the shape of a big ship with one, two, three, four funnels. Only the biggest ships had four. He estimated the distance between them to be twelve to fourteen miles. It would be a long shot but if the ship was heading for Queenstown, it might just be possible. As the diving klaxon screeched out its warning, U-20 altered course to intercept, and quickly began to submerge. At 13.40 hours GMT, Captain Turner saw a landmark as familiar to him as his own front door; a long promontory with a lighthouse on top of it, which was painted with black and white horizontal bands. The Old Head of Kinsale. For centuries, the Old Head of Kinsale had been an important landmark for the world's mariners. It was, in a way, like the Lusitania herself, impossible to mistake. Now he knew for certain where he was

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With the Lusitania now at the bottom of the Atlantic and U-20 on her way home, those whose task it had been to protect the ship began the fight for their political lives. One thousand two hundred and one souls may have perished along with the Lusitania, but those in power were not going to relinquish their privileged positions easily. Indeed, from that point on, they would do their utmost to ensure that the full blame for this disastrous event was attached solely to the ship's master, Captain Turner.

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Oliver's problem was twofold. Firstly, the Lusitania had been successfully attacked by a German submarine, which the Admiralty knew to be operating in that area; after all measures to protect the ship had been withdrawn. Secondly, the Lusitania had gone down in a mere eighteen minutes with appalling loss of life due to the explosive nature of the cargo which the Admiralty's Trade Division had loaded aboard her. If either or both of those facts were to become public knowledge, the buck would stop at the Admiralty. All sorts of awkward questions would be asked and heads would undoubtedly roll from the highest positions. The higher they fell from, the harder they would land. So, a scapegoat seemed to be urgently needed and who better to fill that position than the Lusitania's Captain? Reading the collective correspondence in its original, unedited state would have made it abundantly clear to anyone that Captain Turner had in fact acted well within his controlled remit; that is to say, he had followed his Admiralty instructions to the letter. This is why Oliver and Webb were now busily 'tailoring' the Admiralty signals register, the Admiralty advices and even the questions that the London inquiry would ultimately be asking.

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Another thorn in the Admiralty's side was the unfortunate fact that the bodies of five of the Lusitania's victims had been landed at Kinsale, in southern Ireland. The Kinsale coroner was John Horgan, a known Sinn Fein sympathizer, which did not sit well with those in London, particularly as Horgan would not release the bodies until he had discharged his official duty as coroner. This meant that he would have to hold an inquest. Horgan was now in a perfect position to cause maximum embarrassment to the Admiralty in London as well as HM Government and was unlikely to waste the golden opportunity with which he had been presented. Or so the Admiralty thought. Horgan originally set the inquest date for Monday, 10 May. His next task was to subpoena as many of the survivors as he could, including Captain Turner.

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With a new Board of the Admiralty headed by A.J. Balfour, Inglefield's complaint fell on deaf ears. The Admiralty had not only changed its body, it had changed its mind. On 17 July 1915 the court was assembled to hear the final verdict. The court found that 'torpedoes fired by a submarine of German nationality' had caused the sinking of the Lusitania. The court opined, '... that this act was done not merely with the intention of sinking the ship, but also with the intention of destroying the lives of the people on board'. In the annexe to his report, Lord Mersey stated that whilst Captain Turner may have disregarded some of the Admiralty's advices, he had most definitely followed his Admiralty instructions. The advices, said Lord Mersey, were 'not intended to deprive him of the right to exercise his skilled judgement'. Lord Mersey went on to say that 'he exercised his judgement for the best. It was the judgement of a skilled and experienced man, and although others may have acted differently ... he ought not, in my opinion, to be blamed.'

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Now we turn to the fourth element, the Lusitania's cargo. This is perhaps the most controversial aspect of the whole episode. For some time since war had been declared, the Lusitania had been used as a high-speed munitions carrier by the Admiralty's trade department. On her final voyage, she was carrying considerably more contraband than usual, including eighteen cases of fuses for various calibre artillery shells, which were listed on her manifest, and a large consignment of gun-cotton, an explosive used in the manufacture of propellant charges for big-gun shells, which wasn't listed on the manifest. These two items caused a minor sensation when their presence aboard the Lusitania was first revealed in the American press shortly after the sinking. The fuses carried in eighteen cases as cargo aboard the Lusitania were far from complete fuses and formed part of a mixed consignment of percussion fuse mechanisms for the British Army's 4.5-inch and 6-inch calibre high explosive shells, and the 13-pounder shrapnel shell. Despite being incomplete, they did contain a small quantity of explosive, which is why all eighteen cases were stored in the ship's magazine, aft. The gun-cotton was quite a large consignment and was stored in part of the new space created by the Admiralty, forward on E deck. It is worth recording that this large consignment was not packed in the proper containers usually employed to transport this explosive, due to a sudden shortage of them. In the immediate area of the torpedo's impact there was, according to the ship's manifest, only a generally harmless cargo listed as being, '1,248 cases of shrapnel', (supposedly just the lead musket balls with which to fill shrapnel shells) surrounded by three large consignments, one of butter, one of cheese and the other being lard. The last three items were kept unrefrigerated for the entire voyage. However, thanks to Colin Simpson's detective work in his excellent 1972 book *Lusitania*, it transpires that two of the three items stowed next to the shrapnel, namely the large consignments of unrefrigerated butter and cheese, were in fact consigned to the Liverpool box number of the Royal Navy's weapons testing establishment at Shoeburyness, Essex. This immediately begs the question, what on earth would such an establishment want with approximately 90 tons of unrefrigerated dairy products? The exact nature of these two consignments has never been firmly established but curiously, as Colin Simpson discovered, both were insured at the special government rate and furthermore, the insurance money was never claimed. The cases of shrapnel, situated at the heart of the torpedo's impact point, are easier to trace though, thanks once again to Colin Simpson's initial detective work. The 1,248 cases of shrapnel listed on the manifest of the Lusitania came from the Bethlehem Steel Corporation and Simpson found that their shipping note was a little more specific than the ship's cargo manifest.

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The shipping note, dated 28 April 1915, shows 'consignment number 23' as being '1,248 cases of three-inch calibre shrapnel shells, filled; four shells to each case'. These shells were consigned to the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich and as our own subsequent research, aided by the Royal Artillery Historical Trust has revealed, they were for use by the Royal Artillery in the 13-pounder field gun. So why was such a large consignment of live artillery shells being carried aboard the Lusitania, a passenger liner?

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Such then, is the story of RMS Lusitania. A story of pride, triumph, of great achievements and technological advancements, but ultimately of great tragedy. Today, with the exception of a few select books, all that is left in her wake is a brief, and usually inaccurate mention, in a handful of history books and encyclopaedias. Even the very real tragedy of the 1,201 lives lost in the disaster is largely forgotten. The physicality of her sinking has seemingly eclipsed almost every aspect of her story, except perhaps for the almost endless controversies that seem destined to be forever recycled. Was she armed? Did she carry munitions? Did Winston Churchill engineer the disaster to bring the Americans into the war? Was Captain Turner to blame? We believe that those questions have now been fully answered. Once the historical barrier of the disaster is passed however, it becomes immediately apparent just what a truly pioneering ship the Lusitania was. The first ever quadruple-screw turbine-driven passenger liner. It was she that set the standard all subsequent liners would follow. Great liners like the Queen Mary, Queen Elizabeth, France and United States, all owed their heritage to the Lusitania.
