

THE SINKING OF H.M.HOSPITAL SHIP LLANDOVERY CASTLE

DELIBERATE SINKINGS 1917- 1918

ASTURIAS March 20, 1917 torpedoed off Start Point
GLOUCESTER CASTLE March 30, 1917 torpedoed in the English Channel
SALTA April 10, 1917 struck a mine off Le Havre
DOVER CASTLE May 26, 1917 torpedoed in Western Mediterranean
GOORKA October 17, 1917 damaged by a mine Eastern Mediterranean
REWA January 4, 1918, torpedoed in the Bristol Channel
GLENART CASTLE February 26, 1918, torpedoed in the Bristol Channel
GUILDFORD CASTLE March 19, 1918, foiled torpedo attack in Bristol Channel
LLANDOVERY CASTLE June 27, 1918 torpedoed in the Bristol Chanel

The Llandovery Castle (11,423 tons) was less fortunate than the Guildford Castle, for she was attacked and sunk while out in the Atlantic, over one hundred miles west of the Fastnet, with a terrible loss of life. Clearly marked as a hospital ship, she was sunk by a German U-Boat which later rammed all lifeboats.

It was in reference to the loss of the Llandovery Castle outside the zone in which the enemy had claimed the right to attack hospital ships that Mr. Bonar Law declared, in fitting language: "**A wild beast is at large. It is no use arguing or reasoning with him. There is only one thing to do, to destroy him, and it is the duty of all the Allied nations to set our teeth until that end has been achieved.**"

The Llandovery Castle had been in the service of the Canadian Government as a hospital ship since March 1918. She had made four voyages to Halifax, and with a tonnage of 11,200, afforded special facilities for the transport and care of wounded soldiers. On her last outward voyage to Halifax, the Llandovery Castle carried six hundred and forty-four military patients. She started on her return voyage on June 20, 1918, carrying her crew and hospital unit establishment of seven officers, fourteen nursing sisters, and seventy-six other ranks. Ideal summer weather prevailed. All went well and uneventfully until Thursday evening, June 27.



U-86

"At 9:30 p.m. the night was clear," stated Major Lyon. "All lights were burning, with the large Red Cross signal prominently displayed amidships. Most of the medical personnel had not yet retired. Without previous warning or sight of any submarine the ship was struck just abaft the engines at No. 4 hold. There was a terrific explosion, badly wrecking the afterpart of the ship. Immediately all lights went out. The signal to stop and reverse the engines was without response, all the engine-room crew evidently being killed or wounded. Consequently the ship forged forward, but was gradually forced down by the head. Quickly the captain found that No. 4 hold was completely blown in, and the ship could not remain afloat. The order was given to lower the lifeboats on either side.

The extreme slope of the decks by this time, and the continued forward movement of the ship, made the launching of the lifeboats a matter of great difficulty."



Patzig, Commander of U-86

According to the survivors, at least two boats were swamped in this operation. With reasonable certainty it can be stated that in the brief ten minutes before the ship submerged every one had been taken off save those killed by the explosion. The official story of Major T. Lyon, Sergt. A. Knight, Privates F. W. Cooper, G. R. Hickman, S.A. Taylor, and W. Pilot, all of the Canadian Army Medical Corps (C.A.M.C.), records the perfect discipline of all ranks and the loading and floating of the lifeboats in the face of every possible obstacle.

Through it all nothing stands out more brilliantly than the coolness and courage of the fourteen Canadian nursing sisters. The majority of these volunteered for service at the very outbreak of the hostilities in 1914, came to England and France with the First Canadian Division, had seen active service, chiefly in casualty clearing stations in France throughout the intervening period, and recently had been transferred to transport duty by way of change, and what would under ordinary conditions prove a rest.

These sisters had endured the hazards of the shelled areas in France, splendidly contributing to the efficiency of our Medical Service. Their final ordeal is simply related in the story of Sergt. A. Knight, the non-commissioned officer of the C.A.M.C., who took charge of life-boat No. 5.

"Our boat," said Sergt. Knight, "was quickly loaded and lowered to the surface of the water. Then the crew of eight men and myself faced the difficulty of getting free from the ropes holding us to the ship's side. I broke two axes trying to cut ourselves away, but was unsuccessful.

"With the forward motion and choppy sea, the boat all the time was pounding against the ship's side. To save the boat we tried to keep ourselves away by using the oars, and soon every one of the latter were broken.

"Finally the ropes became loose at the top and we commenced to drift away. We were carried towards the stern of the ship, when suddenly the poop-deck seemed to break away and sink. The suction drew us quickly into the vacuum, the boat tipped over sideways, and every occupant went under.

"I estimate we were together in the boat about eight minutes. In that whole time I did not hear a complaint or murmur from one of the sisters. Among the 14 nursing sisters who crowded into the Llandovery Castle's lifeboat on that awful June day in 1918, was a slender 39-year-old woman with a heart shaped face and deep brown eyes. Her name was Margaret Jane Fortescue. There was not a cry for help or any outward evidence of fear. In the entire time I overheard only one



S.S.Llandovery Castle in peacetime paint for the Union Castle Line

remark when the matron, Nursing Sister M.M. Fraser, turned to me as we drifted helplessly towards the stern of the ship and asked:-- "Sergeant, do you think there is any hope for us?" "I replied, 'No,' seeing myself our helplessness without oars and the sinking condition of the stern of the ship.

"A few seconds later we were drawn into the whirlpool of the submerged afterdeck, and the last I saw of the nursing sisters was as they were thrown over the side of the boat. All were wearing life-belts, and of the fourteen two were in their nightdress, the others in uniform.

"It was," concluded Sergt. Knight, "doubtful if any of them came to the surface again, although I myself sank and came up three times, finally clinging to a piece of wreckage and being eventually picked up by the captain's boat."

The captain and the second officer discovered a boat hanging in the falls, with its after-end in the water. They launched it successfully with other survivors and had moved on but thirty or forty feet when the Llandovery Castle disappeared. The boat at once proceeded to rescue work, cruising about in the mist of the floating wreckage and picking up survivors. At least two other lifeboats got clear of the sinking ship, and it is possible that others were successfully launched on the other side.

On all sides survivors were crying for help. Many were clinging to pieces of wreckage floating about the area of the disaster. Within twenty minutes the captain's boat had picked up eleven from the water, including three other ranks of the C.A.M.C. They were going to the rescue of two others when the submarine appeared, and ordered them to leave these drowning men and come alongside, threatening to fire with the submarine naval gun in case of refusal.

The captain's boat thereupon left the drowning men and pulled alongside the submarine. The latter's commander seemingly expressed no surprise when the captain stated it was the hospital ship Llandovery Castle that had been sunk. The accusation was then made that the ship was carrying eight American flying officers.

Another survivor, Pte. G. R. Hickman, left the sinking ship in No. 7 lifeboat, which was sighted by the submarine about one and a half hours after the Llandovery Castle disappeared. Pte. Hickman was taken on board the enemy vessel and asked if there had been any American flying officers on board. He replied "No," and gave particulars of its being a hospital ship with only the medical personnel on board. Later Pte. Hickman was put off the submarine into the captain's life-boat when the latter came alongside.

For upwards of two hours the German submarine repeatedly sought to blot out all trace of the crime by systematic attempts to ram, shell and sink the life-boats. It was so successfully performed that only one boat, containing twenty-four survivors, escaped.

