

Fifteen times into the sea dives Leinster hero

By Sean Dunne TD in association with Raymond Foxall

Ship on the port quarter! The 70 castaways huddled in the cramped lifeboat jerked their heads upwards at the hoarse cry from a sailor crouched in the prow. They peered over the pounding Irish Sea in the direction of the trembling, pointing finger. There on the horizon moved a tiny feather of smoke. For these shivering, weary souls a whole perilous lifetime had dragged out in the 90 minutes since the Irish mailboat R.M.S. Leinster had been torpedoed and sunk under their feet 12 miles out from Kingstown.

UNSpoken

Yet they had never given up hope. Even now with spirits rising, there were unspoken questions, the answers to which might well dash them again into cruel and numb despair. Was the approaching ship a passenger cruiser which under wartime orders must not stop? Whatever she was, would she arrive in time?

The gunwale of the overloaded boat, in which cramped bodies lay across the knees of those who crammed the seats, sank each minute lower into the sea. Every pounding wave swilled more water in the wallowing drifting shell. Captain William Birch, master of the torpedoed steamer, wounded in eye and leg, lying half in and half out of the boat, could no longer speak.

They looked now for orders to the soaked and bedraggled figure of an elderly naval commander who had been one of the 700 passengers in the Leinster on the dreadful day – October 10 1918. For the 100th time the commander removed his glasses and wiped away the spray with a silk handkerchief. “Use your oars to keep her into the sea” he said. “It is impossible to row... They must find us”.

Chef Bill Roberts wrenched off the white apron he still wore and tied it to an oar. Steward Tom Deegan held it aloft as a distress flag. Suddenly the wind snatched away the flapping signal. “There goes my ruddy apron.” roared Roberts, and his words did more to cheer than anything in the last wave-lashed hour.

Chief Steward Llew Lewis was the first to identify the approaching ship. Excitement almost closed his throat as he shouted: “God be praised—a Warship” It was, in fact, the torpedo boat “*Lively*” answering the feeble call for help that wireless officer George Jeffreys, now lost with the ship, had

tapped out before the aerial crashed down. Thirty miles she had raced at 20 knots - a speed so excessive in these heaving seas that her bridge hung smashed and splintered. Over the whine of the wind the skipper's voice was carried by megaphone "Keep your hearts up. We'll have you dry in a minute. Hang on to every rope we throw."

CAPTAIN DIES

Yet the whirling ropes, those sinews of safety, brought a new peril as they slapped into the sea. The hands that reached for them unsteadied the foundering boat and it partially sank.

Captain Birch, the taciturn Irishman who for four years had braved the U-boat-infested crossing and now almost at the war's end had lost his ship, was washed overboard. Gravely wounded, utterly helpless, he died with safety an arm's reach away.

Honeymoon couple Lieutenant and Mrs. Carlyle were also pitched into the sea. The bride's lifebelt slipped down and supported her feet above water. Down went her head. But her fur coat retained some air and floated her upright again. She made a desperate grasp and hung on to the tapes at the back of a lifebelt worn by Thomas Hood, a commercial traveller from King's Norton.

A sailor from the rescue ship leaped into the foundering boat and, using a rope as a lasso, secured her by the shoulders and hauled her to safety. Her husband was rescued, too.

People were plucked from this new danger in a variety of unorthodox ways. The naval commander in charge of the lifeboat saw that the destroyer's deck was not unduly high. "Jump for It!" he shouted each time she rolled towards them. Those who obeyed him were saved. One William Sweeney, the young assistant purser, was grabbed by the seat of his pants by a sailor above and thrown like a bag of feathers to safety. Sixteen-

year-old Tom Connolly, the assistant steward, found himself struggling in the water near the destroyer's stem.

The next moment a huge sailor, hanging from the destroyer's rail, grabbed him with one hand and hurled him over his shoulder smack on the deck. "Is my father safe?" he cried. In the destroyer Philip Connolly, from the engine room of the *Leinster*, was asking the same question about his son. When the sad reckoning was made it was found that half of those spilled from the boat had drowned within a few yards of rescue. Now the destroyer "*Mallard*" came steaming at full-speed, soon to be followed by patrol boats and mine-sweepers from Kingstown.

On one raft a motor launch found Stoker William Maher still clinging to Mrs. Louisa Toppin and her 13-year-old daughter Dorothy. Only they and army sergeant Duffin remained out of ten. The rest, exhausted, had released their grip. The wash of the launch upset the raft and loosened the grip Maher had kept for three hours. Hands grabbed Mrs. Toppin and the sergeant, but Dorothy went down.

SUPERSTITION

Maher struggled for her in the water. He could not find her, but he refused to be hauled aboard until she had bobbed up beside the boat and been saved. Fifteen times as the boat searched on, Stoker Maher dived over the side in rescue attempts. Later he was to receive the Albert Medal for Bravery.

In the safety of the launch they found new credence for an old superstition. Two survivors —Mrs. Toppin and the sergeant — had been born with loose skin called a caul over their heads. This, legend has it, guards against drowning at sea.

Judge Francis Osborne and three others were rescued as their numbed hands almost released their grip on the keel of an upturned boat. It took three hours to find Father James Hoey, of

Aughrim, who had been returning to Barrow-in-Furness. He was hanging on to a raft. Non-swimmer Miss Coffey, the stewardess who with infinite calm had marshalled the women on the sinking Leinster, lived to be picked up from another raft. But not before she had been washed off it three times and hauled back on again. But the rescue craft, nosing among the drifting flotsam found many empty rafts from which scores had been swept away.

Back in Ireland, six people in widely separated parts of Dublin and Kingstown had seen over the sea a cross in the sky, apparently made up of miniature and unrecognisable human faces. The time was shortly after 10 a.m.—minutes after the Leinster's death plunge. No-one could have known of the disaster. Says Mrs. Dorothy Ward, the former Miss Toppin, the youngest survivor: “They said it was a huge, smoky cross against the grey sky.” The night before the disaster her uncle dreamt he had seen her and her mother struggling in water. An hour before the Leinster sank her grandmother, with whom she had been on holiday from London, received in Dalkey a telegram from him: “Are Louie and Dot safe ?” By midday a rumour had begun to circulate in Dublin that the Leinster had been torpedoed. Gradually the awful truth of the disaster seeped through. . .

Crowds rushing to Kingstown were so thick that they stopped the port's traffic. Roads leading to the quay were thronged. Nearly 200 ambulances and cars and 460 Red Cross workers were rushed to Victoria Wharf.

At 1.30 p.m., news buzzed among the crowd that a destroyer was approaching harbour, and in came the “*Lively*” to land 100 survivors.

Peering at each face was 17 year-old assistant steward Daniel Smyth, who had docked three hours before from the “*Ulster*”. His father Adam, aged 45, was one of the Post Office team in

the Leinster. Without knowing that his father had died, young Daniel had to rejoin the ship to return to Holyhead. A man married the previous day was reunited with his bride, whom he had not seen since the Leinster sank.

QUEUES

All day the ships came in. Some with the living, others with the dead. At the quayside, pathetic figures tried to identify the dead from their footwear, which jutted from a huge tarpaulin. At hospitals they queued anxiously to see if their relatives were alive. Slowly the death roll was built up to 501. Fifteen women and children lived out of 100 on board. Altogether 270 people were saved. Some went to hospital, some to their homes. Miss Waters, of Ballintemple went to an hotel to send a letter to her family. This is what she wrote:

“My friend and I were quite calm as we went on deck. We kissed each other goodbye... In the lifeboat I began to cry, but then I stopped to console my poor friend. I just prayed as I never did before, and in the end I buried my head in my friend's lap never even hoping to be saved. To see the crowds of unfortunate people struggling in that awful sea was terrible....”

Passengers on a steamer which docked the next morning brought stories of having sailed through a ghastly jetsam of wreckage and floating bodies. Many were drifting upside down, drowned because their lifebelts, not properly secured, had slipped down to their feet. Said a priest: “We have just come through the Dead Sea”

The newspapers raised an indignant voice. The Globe expressed a belief that “For 50 years to come seamen of civilised nations will refuse to heed the call of any German ship in distress”, and

the London Evening suggested a new battle cry for the Irish battalions in France: “*Remember the Leinster!*”. One Irish paper called for 501 Irish recruits for the army—the exact number of the dead—to avenge the disaster.

EMPTY BOAT

The morning of the inquest, October 16, dawned with a touch of mystery. A patrol boat towed in an empty lifeboat from the Leinster. It had been found drifting entirely undamaged. Its oars still lashed in place and with sodden lifejackets and an empty water casket in it.

Irish M.P.s in the House of Commons who called for an inquiry into the sinking were told that reports would be studied by the Admiralty. That the Irish Sea had been made as immune from enemy submarines as any waters around the British Isles. Why, they asked, was the Leinster not escorted?

It was a question of speed. The fast mailboats were better on their own on a patrolled route. The slower speed of escorting destroyers would mean that the mailboats could not sail full out. The Leinster had disastrously shattered this theory, but in the end the questions were buried with the victims at Deanagrang Cemetery, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, beneath a single headstone and a replica in bronze of the ship that suffered the only blow that Germany struck at Ireland.