



The ASC History Newsletter

100th Anniversary of World War I:

Lusitania

This
MONTH in
military
history ...

- 1610: First Anglo-Powhatan War
- 1676: King Philip's War ended
- 1812: USS Constitution "Old Ironsides" captured and destroyed the British brig *Adeona*
- 1846: US Forces captured Santa Fe, NM
- 1861: Battle of Wilson's Creek
- 1900: During the Boxer Rebellion, an international force entered Peking
- 1920: 19th Amendment to the Constitution ratified
- 1942: Invasion of Guadalcanal
- 1943: German troops began to evacuate Sicily
- 1945: Atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki
- 1949: Department of Defense established
- 1965: 7th Marines landed at Chu Lai
- 1965: Watts Riots
- 1967: Operation Cochise
- 1972: Last US combat unit left South Vietnam



At the outbreak of WWI, the British Royal Navy established a blockade against Germany and its allies on the European continent. In place until 1919, the blockade significantly curtailed shipments of raw material and food. In 1915, to find an answer to the strain put on the German population and military, the Kaiser's high command implemented Unrestricted Submarine Warfare.

Prior to the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the German Navy adhered to internationally recognized Prize Rules. The rules specified that U-boats had to surface before attacking merchant ships, carrying out formal searches of cargo, and allow time for passengers and crew to escape before the ship was sunk. In theory, these rules were established to regulate warfare on the high seas. Britain countered by using a vessel called a Q-ship to lure German submarines. The Q-ship looked like a normal merchant ship but, had hidden armaments which were used to attack and sink German U-boats.

In response to the British subterfuge, on February 4, 1915, Germany implemented unrestricted submarine warfare. In doing so, the *Kaiserliche Marine* warned the world that the waters around Great Britain were a war zone and any ship within British waters would be sunk.

In September of 1907 the *Lusitania* made its maiden voyage from Liverpool to New York. The *Lusitania* was specially built so it could be easily converted into a warship. It was registered with the British Admiralty as an armed auxiliary cruiser. Despite this, the British continued to use the *Lusitania* as a passenger liner. The fact that it was also carrying war materiel for the British and Allied armies would not be discovered until documents were declassified long after the war.

On May 1, 1915, the *Lusitania* departed New York for a voyage to Liverpool. The *Lusitania* was in-

structed prior to entering British waters to take certain precautions. The preventative measures called for the ship to take a different route to Liverpool and use evasive measures such as zigzagging to confuse U-boats from plotting their route. These safeguards were ignored.

On the afternoon of May 7, the *Lusitania* was hit by a torpedo from *Kapitänleutnant* (Lieutenant Commander) Walter Schwieger's U-20 in the Celtic Sea. Schwieger explained what happened after the *Lusitania* was hit by the first torpedo: "Clear bow shot at 700 [meters] . . . Shot struck starboard side close behind the bridge. An extraordinarily heavy detonation followed, with a very large cloud of smoke (far above the front funnel). A second explosion must have followed that of the torpedo (boiler or coal or powder?). . . . The ship stopped immediately and quickly listed sharply to starboard, sinking deeper by the head at the same time. It appeared as if it would capsize in a short time. Great confusion arose on the ship; some of the boats were swung clear and lowered into the water." The 2,000 passengers and crew had only eighteen minutes to abandon ship. The failure to have enough life boats for everyone on board proved to be costly for the passengers and crew.

The decision not to use evasive maneuvers allowed the Germans to claim the lives of 1,200 passengers and crew on board the *Lusitania*. Of the 1,200 passengers and crew that were lost, 128 were Americans. The people of the British Empire and the United States immediately voiced their outrage over the sinking of the *Lusitania*.

The initial reaction focused on the fact that it was a passenger liner and not a warship. However, as the ship was sinking a second explosion was reported by the 800 survivors. During the outcry, the Germans claimed that the ship was carrying

munitions to supply the British Army, a claim which explains the large explosions and would later be substantiated.

The American government protested the actions of Germany. The U.S. demanded an apology and the suspension of unrestricted submarine warfare. However, the German government continued to tell the United States and Britain that there were munitions on board and that it was within their right to sink the *Lusitania* in the right of self-defense. It has long been suspected that there were German spies on the New York docks reporting what was loaded onto ships. Despite this inside information, the Germans agreed with the terms listed by the U. S. to ensure continued American neutrality.

The diary of *Kapitänleutnant* Walter Schwieger explained the chaotic scene as the *Lusitania* was sinking and whether there was a second torpedo fired. "Many people must have lost their heads; several boats loaded with people rushed downward, struck the water bow or stern first and filled at once. . . . The ship blew off steam; at the bow the name "Lusitania" in golden letters was visible. The funnels were painted black; stern flag not in place. Since it seemed as if the steamer could only remain above water for a short time, nor could I have fired a second torpedo into this swarm of people who were trying to save themselves."

What caused the second explosion on the *Lusitania* is a question many historians and scholars still ask today? The German government claimed that the explosion was from the munitions stored on board. While the British government claimed it was a boiler not munitions and would continue to deny that it carried any munitions at all. In 2008 the *Lusitania* was found with four million rounds of Remington .303 in its hull. The question still remains to this day what caused the second explosion?