



Ship of Fools

Suppose they should sink the Lusitania with American passengers onboard...

King George V, several hours before the Lusitania was torpedoed and sunk

AS THEY WERE PREPARING TO embark in New York on May 1, 1915, several passengers booked on the *RMS Lusitania's* transatlantic crossing were said to receive mysterious telegrams from an unknown source. An ominous message sent to millionaire sportsman Alfred Vanderbilt read simply: *The Lusitania is doomed. Do not sail on her.* It was signed *Morte* (Death).

Coincidentally, Vanderbilt had cancelled a booking on the maiden voyage of the *Titanic* three years earlier after his mother had a premonition about the ship sinking—but he shrugged off this latest warning, remarking that it was just “somebody trying to have a little fun at my expense.”

As with the ill-fated *Titanic*, few people considered it possible that the *Lusitania* wouldn't arrive safely at her destination in England a week after her departure.

Europe was embroiled in war, with 300,000 tons of Allied shipping sunk weekly, but the *Lusitania* was a passenger superliner, thought capable of outrunning—and believed to be off-limits—to the German U-boats which prowled the English coast. The ship sailed regularly between New York and Liverpool, and as an added precaution on its previous crossing in March, two destroyers were sent out to escort her as she sailed at full steam into Liverpool Bay.

Few passengers knew that the ship's owner, the British-American Cunard Line, had turned control of the *Lusitania* over to the English Navy, and it was now registered as an armed auxiliary cruiser. (It was fitted out for two large, hidden guns, although there is no evidence they were ever installed.)

What's more, while docked in New York the ship had been secretly loaded with six million rounds of ammunition, to be sold to England and France to aid in the war effort. Although the cargo—mostly small arms ammunition—was documented and may not have been illegal, its presence arguably made the ship a legitimate military target.

In fact, two months prior—after several close calls with German submarines—the *Lusitania's* former captain resigned, no longer willing to be responsible for “mixing passengers with munitions or contraband.”

After President Wilson refused the German embassy's urgent request to warn Americans about the dangers of traveling on the *Lusitania*, the embassy placed ads in fifty newspapers warning passengers that the liner could be sunk, but due to intervention by the U.S. State Department, only one newspaper (in Iowa) printed the warning.

As the *Lusitania* entered Germany's declared exclusion zone on the morning of May 7, it was unescorted, despite four destroyers sitting idly nearby in Wales. During the short time since the ship had left New York, 23 merchant ships had been sunk in the area—three alone by the German sub U-20—yet, inexplicably, no word of these attacks were relayed to the *Lusitania's* captain by the British Admiralty, only a series of customary warnings that enemy submarines were operating in the area.

By the time the U-20 spotted the *Lusitania* breaking through the fog off the coast of Kinsdale, Ireland, the sub had only three remaining torpedoes, two of which were to be kept in reserve for its transit back to port.

Winston Churchill had issued orders that British ships should no longer obey U-boat orders to stop and be searched but instead to engage the enemy, and as a result, the vulnerable U-boats were forced to remain submerged and attack without warning.

Churchill's stated reason for this aggressive change in policy was to force U-boats to “*run the risk of mistaking neutral for British ships ... drowning neutral crews and thus embroiling Germany with other Great Powers.*”

Likely aware that the *Lusitania* was carrying munitions and assumed to be armed, the U-20's captain was not inclined to take chances. (And justifiably so: Three months later, a British ship flying an American flag would attack a U-boat as it held its fire to allow a British freighter to abandon ship, sinking the sub and machine-gunning any crewmen who had managed to escape.)

Having cut its speed in order to arrive in Liverpool on the tide and passing only 750 yards away, the *Lusitania* was a sitting duck, and the U-20's lone torpedo struck its bow just below the bridge. Unexpectedly, however, a moment later a second huge explosion took place within the hull, and the ship foundered and sank in only 18 minutes.

Of 1962 people on board, 1198 were lost, including 159 Americans. (764 passengers were rescued from the icy waters—including one very lucky survivor who floated ashore in an armchair.) A subsequent investigation found the ship's captain at fault for the disaster, despite his refusal to abandon his post even as the ship sank beneath him.

The exact origin of the second, internal explosion remains a mystery, but investigation of the wreck by salvage divers decades later ruled out rupture of the boilers or other potentially benign causes, and many researchers believe the ship was carrying a hidden cargo of undocumented explosives.

Although two more years would pass before the U.S. would enter the war, the sinking of the *Lusitania* turned the tide of non-interventionist sentiment in America.

Radio exchanges between the *Lusitania* and the Admiralty on the day of the ship's sinking remain classified to this day. ■