

# MY LUSITANIA DREAM

**D**ESPITE WARNINGS from the German embassy published in the US press that the *Lusitania* should not embark on her transatlantic crossing, the liner was brought under steam on 1 May, 1915.

On board were 1257 passengers and 702 crew under Captain WJ Turner. The passengers weren't that bothered about the crossing, because it was assumed that the Germans wouldn't dare to torpedo a ship carrying so many American civilians.

The 30,400-ton, 240m ocean liner had been built by John Brown on Clydebank in 1907. The first-class passengers certainly appreciated the luxurious trappings of the beautiful Cunard ship.

One of them, Sir Hugh Lane, was director of the National Gallery of Ireland and was said to have brought lead tubes containing US \$60 million-worth of paintings by the likes of Monet and Rubens aboard.

As the *Lusitania* approached the Irish coast after a trouble-free passage, a German submarine was reported to be lurking nearby. Captain Turner doubled the look-out – a week before, three ships had been torpedoed in the area and he didn't want to take any risks.

**A**T 2.15 ON the afternoon of 7 May the *Lusitania* was about 10 miles south of the Old Head of Kinsale when a torpedo exploded between the first funnel and the bow.

This was immediately followed by a second powerful explosion that badly damaged the engine-room.

The ship listed heavily, making it difficult to lower the lifeboats. At 2.26pm she sank, drowning 761 people including 94 children. Of the victims 124 were American, but Germany told the furious US government that because the ship had been carrying ammunition during wartime the attack was legitimate.

Capt-Lt Schwieger, commanding *U20*, mentioned only a single torpedo in his report. There was much discussion in the press about the second explosion, but the Germans attributed this to the cargo of ammunition aboard the ship.

The torpedo strike would be a major factor in the USA later joining the war effort to defeat Germany.

I had been looking for an opportunity to dive the 90m-deep wreck of the *Lusitania* for quite a few years but couldn't find a team to go with me until, in 2017, I heard about an expedition being organised by Irish deep-wreck diver Peter McCamley.

He wanted to bring a team together to carry out a project that would last for several years, hoping to produce, among other things, high-quality 3D images of the wreck.

I contacted Peter, who agreed that I should come over to Ireland to help on

the boat. Unfortunately I would be unable to dive, because I had not been among those listed in the permit application.

It was impossible to dive on the wreck without the approval of the Irish government and the long-time US owner Gregg Bemis. He died only recently, bequeathing his ownership to the Old Head of Kinsale Museum, as reported in **DIVER**.

Even if I couldn't dive I wanted to be involved in this special project, and at the end of July left in good spirits to catch a ferry from the French town of Cherbourg

**Pictured:** Stuart Williamson's depiction of the sinking of the *Lusitania* from 2011.

Second-class deck



After the *Titanic*, the wreck of the *Lusitania* could be the most keenly imagined of shipwrecks for divers around the world. "It was a great challenge for me to be able to see it with my own eyes," says **VIC VERLINDEN** – but there would be obstacles to overcome

to Rosslare in Ireland. I had a 400-mile drive to Cherbourg and still had some 40 to go when I decided to pull off the motorway for a coffee stop. I hit a narrow road and suddenly heard a loud bang.

When I stopped and looked under the car I could see oil running out of the carburettor. An iron pole in the road had rendered my car unusable. I had insurance but would never make the ferry on time. My planned trip was over.

**T**HAT WINTER Peter McCamley put together a new team – and this time I would be on the diving list.

I prepared for the trip carefully – physically, mentally and equipment-wise, everything needed to be perfect.

This time my crossing went ahead trouble-free and I was able to bring my equipment aboard the expedition vessel, which was complete with diver-lift.

The weather was very good, sunny with a soft breeze, on 24 September, 2018, the day of my first dive. First into the water were Dave Gration and Kari Hyttinen who, as in the previous year, were after 3D film footage of the bow. I was in the second team with Steve Saunders.

We were at 70m and still descending when we ran into the first team, who pointed out that the anchor was not fastened into the wreck, so we would have to return. It was a severe setback, and there was no possibility of diving again soon because bad weather was setting in.

It was five days before the weather improved enough for us to be able to try again. The line was shifted, and once again I was descending to the wreck. I had waited years to realise this dream and now I would finally see the *Lusitania* for myself.

Visibility at the bottom was no more than 5m

but it was clear that there were a lot of fishing-nets on the wreck. 🐟





I decided not to swim too far from the ascent-line.

The treble hook was not far from the bridge, but I found it difficult to orient myself. I could see one of the iron davits for the lifeboats at the edge of the wreck

**Top:** Portholes on the *Lusitania*.

**Above:** Some of the fortunate survivors.

**Above:** Stuart Williamson's depiction of the wreck.

and a row of round portholes still intact in the side. I decided to follow these, because there were fewer nets there.

Doing this, I suddenly came on one of the large entrance doors that would have welcomed the passengers on board.

I saw only large round bronze windows in this area – hardly surprising, because a big liner like the *Lusitania* would have had hundreds of these.

I decided to turn and swim back in the direction of the treble hook. As I proceeded I could see that the wreck had

suffered heavily over the century since the sinking from the effects of currents and salty water.

It was high time to start my ascent – 20 minutes of bottom time had passed quickly, and a long decompression time awaited.

The next day we dived the wreck again, but our reconnaissance was limited, because I didn't want to take any risks.

**I**N THE SUMMER of 2019 I returned to Ireland. I had prepared myself well and Karl Van Der Auwera, my dive-buddy of many years, was with me this time.

However, at the start of the trip the weather was poor and diving wasn't possible. It took five days before it had improved enough for us to risk it.

Karl and I were both using APD Inspiration rebreathers, with a 10/50 bottom gas, 18/38 travel gas and 11/53 bail-out.

The treble hook was on the bridge again, and as we arrived on the wreck I could see that the visibility was much better than it had been the year before. At around 8m it was exceptionally good for the *Lusitania*.

Karl used a reel so that we would be able to find the line again easily and explore the wreck with peace of mind.

Near the treble hook were several rectangular bronze windows, marking the cabins of first-class passengers.



**Above, clockwise from top left:** The dive team; anchor-winch; one of the ornate bronze windows; lifeboat davits; bollards with rope still in place; remnant of the mosaic floor; another of the bronze windows.



We also saw one of the water tanks that had stood on the deck and, not far away, two showers and a piece of mosaic floor from the bathrooms.

As we swam towards the bow we saw pieces of wreckage littered with portholes of all shapes.

On the bow itself we could make out the anchor-chain and the anchor-winch. We also saw two bollards with rope still coiled around them. Pieces of timber floor from the foredeck remained intact.

Over the next few days we carried out

more dives and the various teams captured thousands of images. Four days of consecutive 90m dives were enough for me, however – I had to take a rest, but it had been a priceless experience to participate in this wonderful adventure.

Next year we will try to return to explore even more parts of the *Lusitania*.

We also hope to bring artefacts from the wreck up in an archaeologically responsible way – to be exhibited in the new *Lusitania* museum that is being built in Kinsale. 

