**The Sinking of the *Lusitania*, 1915**

**I**t had been a very successful run. The German submarine *U-20* had entered the Irish Sea on May 5 and now, the morning of May 7, the submarine claimed its third victim. The *U-20* had only three torpedoes left in its arsenal and was low on fuel. As a result, Captain Walter Schwieger, the ship's commander, decided to steer for the open waters of the Atlantic and home. He was unaware that his greatest prize was steaming straight for him and that his actions that day would ultimately bring America into the war.

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| http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/images/lusitania1.jpg |
| Destiny's pathway: after sinking 3 ships, the *U-20*'s course brought the *Lusitania* into its sights. |

The *Lusitania* had left New York City on May 1 bound for Liverpool. On the afternoon of May 7 she was steaming off the coast of Ireland within easy sailing distance of her destination. Known as the "Greyhound of the Seas," the *Lusitania* was the fastest liner afloat and relied on her speed to defend against submarine attack. However, she was not running at full speed because of fog. Nor was the ship taking an evasive zigzag course. It was a sitting duck and was headed straight into the sights of the *U-20*.

The two ships converged at about 2 pm. After stalking his prey for an hour, Captain Schwieger unleashed one torpedo that hit its target amidships. The initial explosion was followed quickly by a second, more powerful, detonation. Within 20 minutes the great liner had slipped under the water, taking 1,198 victims with her. Among the dead were 138 Americans. Many in the United States were outraged. A declaration of war was narrowly averted when Germany vowed to cease her policy of unrestricted submarine warfare that allowed attacks on merchant ships without warning. However, American public opinion had turned against Germany and when she resurrected her unrestricted submarine warfare policy in February of 1917, [America decided to go to war](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/wilsonwar.htm).

**"Great confusion arose on the ship. . ."**

*Captain Schwieger kept a diary of the voyage. We join his story as he first catches sight of the Lusitania in the early afternoon of May 7, 1915:*

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| "2 pm | Straight ahead the 4 funnels and 3 masts of a steamer with a course at right angles to ours. . . Ship is made out to be a large passenger liner. |
| 3:05 pm | Went to 11m and ran at high speed on a course converging with that of the steamer, in hopes that it would change course to starboard along the Irish Coast.  The steamer turned to starboard, headed for Queenstown and thus made it possible to approach for a shot. Ran at high speed till 3 pm in order to secure an advantageous position. |
| 3:10 pm | Clear bow shot at 700 m. . . angle of intersection 90 [degrees] estimated speed 22 nautical miles.   |  | | --- | | http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/images/lusitania2.jpg | | A contemporary illustration of the attack shows the *Lusitania* hit by 2 torpedoes. This was  the explanation at the time for the 2 explosions and the rapid sinking of the ship. |   Shot struck starboard side close behind the bridge. An extraordinary 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 superstructure above the point of impact and the bridge were torn apart; fire broke out; light smoke veiled the high bridge. The ship stopped immediately and quickly listed sharply to starboard, sinking deeper by the head at the same time.  Great confusion arose on the ship; some of the boats were swung clear and lowered into the water. 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.  On the port side, because of the sloping position, fewer boats were swung clear than on the starboard side.  The ship blew off steam; at the bow the name “Lusitania” in golden letters was visible. It was running 20 nautical miles. |
| 3:25 pm | Since it seemed as if the steamer could only remain above water for a short time, went to 24m. and ran toward the Sea. Nor could I have fired a second torpedo into this swarm of people who were trying to save themselves. |
| 4:15 pm | Went to 11m and took a look around. In the distance straight ahead a number of life-boats were moving; nothing more was to be seen of the *Lusitania*. The wreck must lie 14 nautical miles from the Old Head of Kinsale light-house, at an angle of 358 degrees to the right of it, in 90m of water (27 nautical miles from Queenstown) 51 degrees 22’ 6” N and 8 degrees 31’ W. The land and the lighthouse could be seen very plainly. |
| 4:20 pm | When taking a look around, a large steamer was in sight ahead on the port side, with course laid for Fastnet Rock. Tried to get ahead at high speed, so as to get a stern shot. . . |
| 5:08 pm | Conditions for shot very favorable: no possibility of missing if torpedo kept its course. Torpedo did not strike. Since the telescope was cut off for some time after this shot the cause of failure could not be determined. . . The steamer or freighter was of the Cunard Line. |
| 6:15 pm | . . . It is remarkable that there is so much traffic on this particular day, although two large steamers were sunk the day before south of George’s Channel. It is also inexplicable that the *Lusitania* was not sent through the North Channel." |

**References:**   
   Walter Schwieger’s diary is part of the collection of the National Archives: Record Group 45: Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library, 1691 – 1945.  
Other references: Hickey, Des & Smith, Gus, Seven Days to Disaster (1982); Simpson, Colin, The Lusitania (1972).