

AN ACCOUNT GIVEN BY LAWRENCE C. BELL, 158TH AERO SQUADRON OF THE TORPEDOING AND SINKING OF THE H.M.S. TUSCANIA

(Former address: Charleston, Illinois)
February 5, 1921

(Present Address: 112 W. Victoria St.,
South Bend, Indiana.)

On the afternoon of February 7, 1918, this country was stunned with the news that the TUSCANIA, a monster vessel loaned by England to the United States for the purpose of transporting United States military forces overseas, had been torpedoed, and sunk off the Irish coast about 5 o'clock on Tuesday evening, February 5th, 1918 with the probable loss of 200 American military men, marking the largest casualty list since the United States entered the war.

Courier bulletins told of the great disaster, and the next morning dispatches only added to the horror of the first American transport bound for France to fall a victim to the submarine warfare.

Lawrence Bell, son of Mr. and Mrs. George W. Bell of Charleston, Illinois; now in the service of McArthur Sales, was on the TUSCANIA, and had the most trying, exciting and horrifying experience of his life thus far.

Mr. Bell has kindly given the courier the following interview, which will prove most interesting:

“Three years ago this afternoon, February 5th, the American boys on the transport TUSCANIA sailing for France had perched themselves on whatever they could find, to witness the boxing bouts given by the officers. There were 2200 soldiers on board, most of that number being on deck. There had been three or four boxing matches and all enjoying it immensely when someone spied land on either side of us, Scotland being on our left and Ireland on our right. Such yelling you never heard for it certainly looked good to us, although we were many miles from either shore. We had sea for thirteen days.

The water was calm and the boat was going fine. There were five transports, six freighters, and a battle cruiser in the convoy besides eight British Destroyers that met us three days out.

As night drew, the boys began to return to their apartments. Those who ate supper first had finished about 5 o'clock, and the second sitting, including myself, was waiting at the top of the stairs for mess call, when suddenly we heard a loud explosion which rocked the ship. The lights went out, and the boys began to rush for the stairs when

someone yelled “take your time.” This was about 5:45 p.m. This being repeated several times quieted the boys – we then passed out in good order.

I had my life belt hanging on my shoulder. I did not move for a few moments, as to many men were rushing for the stairs. In a short time I managed to get in line. By the time I got to the top deck, boat No. 9, to which I was assigned, had met with a mishap, which left 50 of us boat-less. We had strict orders not to get in any other boat, for it might be overloaded, or we would cheat someone out of his place who had been assigned to that boat. A Sergeant of my squadron asked if I would help save the squadrons records. We brought them to the deck, but saw no chance of saving them, and not much of a chance for ourselves to escape. Several of the lifeboats had been smashed in lowering them, while another boat was let down on a boat loaded with men. Their fate we do not know. This Sergeant, seeing no chance of getting off except by getting in another boat, called to me and said “We have as good a right to get in a boat as anyone else,” so he said for me to come on as he climbed over the railing and slid down a rope. That was the last I saw of him, as I did not follow him, not even looking over the railing to see what he got in. Sergeant Skinner, I believe, was his name.

By this time the TUSCANIA was leaning to one side in a very uncomfortable position. While I was helping get a life boat down, a Destroyer pulled up to within fifty or seventy-five feet of the vessel and a rope was thrown to it. We slid so fast that the rope was kept warm. This was about two hours after the torpedo had hit us. There were three Destroyers that took boys off the ship. About twelve o’clock that night we landed in Ireland. The only thing I got wet, was when we unloaded from the Destroyer to a tugboat and a large wave dashed over the top and gave us a good ducking. We marched to a British camp, went to the big kitchen where we dried our clothing and ate a good hot meal.

More than 200 boys were drowned, and among them was the Sergeant that wanted me to go with him down the rope. A burial squad was sent to care for the dead boys, and they were sleeping in far off Scotland until a short time ago, when their bodies were sent home.

We remained in Ireland for five days, when we took a boat to Hollyhead, Wales (an American Destroyer was our protector on that trip), then by train to England, where we spent seven months before going to France for five months and then to dear old United States on the S.S. Mexican.

The Flag of my Squadron was the only one saved from the ship.”

Lawrence C. Bell
158th Aero Squadron