UNITED STATES ARMY OFFICERS DESCRIBES TUSCANIA SINKING

One of the most interesting and vivid accounts of the sinking of the Tuscania that we have read is the following from a letter written by Sergeant Archie G. Meredith of the Mellen Company and published recently in the Ashland Press:

“Tuesday morning, February 5th, the dark grey clouds parted before the sunlight and for the first time its warm rays seem to cheer all onboard. Away in the distance we could see the mountains of Ireland and the Uplands of the Isles West of Scotland. The sight was welcome, for even though we have been surrounded with destroyers, there was that which seem to make certain our safe passage as we came closer to the shore. Games and Boxing matches had been the order of the afternoon, but due to the fact that fight fans were numerous, I had gone below to visit with my friends Chief Howith and Alex Cunningham (Merchant Marines).

I spent most of the afternoon in the Chief’s cabin and had gotten much information of the manner in which the seas are charted as the afternoon’s subject drew to a close. It was about 4:30 when the Chief usually made his inspection and he invited me to go below to see the turbines and the machinery of the ship.

We had spent almost an hour together, I was very much taken with the many new types of motors and different parts of the ship, of which I was learning, and as we came from the boiling room into the turbine room I noted that it would soon be time for evening mess. There were one or two things to see, and as we stood talking, something impressed me several times that I should be up and off to supper with my fellows.

I had just mounted the stairs after telling the Chief that I would see him later, when suddenly there was a terrific explosion, followed by the sound of a million dishes breaking to bits, falling down a long stairway. The ship gave a lurch with the impact and the lights were out. I groped about in the dark and barely recovered my balance when the emergency lamps came on and looking over my shoulder I saw where the dynamos had been and a great rent in the hull of the ship. I heard the Chief call to his men and tell me to go up, after exclaiming “they got us.” In my bewilderment I seemed glued to the stairway, for already the water was rushing across the engine room floor, and splashing on steam pipes and the sizzling sputtering noises seem to mark time with the tiny tongued waves that raced across the room in quest of everything – even life itself. I felt weak; there was a sense of being smothered; something seems to impress me with the fact that there was not a thing to do; not a single way to hit back; nothing to try as a possible chance for safety. I felt no fear but rather a sense of inability to help myself. I had my lifebelt in my hand and was about to adjust it as a matter of training when the thing that brought me to my senses happened.
Chief Howith came out from behind the stairs and shouted to me to take my time, saying “We will float for hour’s Laddies” and “Tie a hard knot in your lifebelt and go up and tell the others to be cool.” His words had a magical effect on me; I hardly realized their meaning but I understood the tone of his voice and up the winding stairs I went until I reached the main hall below the exit to the deck. As I stepped through the doors, they closed with a clank and the crew worked feverishly to tighten the locks so as to make everything in the bulkhead waterproof.

In the hall I found myself in a cursing, praying, fighting, pleading mob, where order was unknown and the mightiest made his way most easily. In the flare of pocket flashlights I saw hundreds of pale faces distorted with fear and men with glaring eyes savagely pushing their way to the fore, heeding only the first law of nature – self preservation. I remembered the Chief’s orders. This sight unnerved me; I wondered if it was possible that we were going to float; the frantic effort of these men made me guess otherwise but I called as loud as I could, repeating the orders I had received and never again in my life, do I hope to see anything have such a magical effect. I had heard of men about to drown, grasping at a straw – they do without a doubt. Here was the straw of hope, not my word, but the word of one who knew. Order came out of nothing; the word was passed on and on to the deck of the ship, and men walked and assisted each other. Bunkie’s called to each other, and guided each other in the dark to the proper doorways. Cheers replaced the curses and pleadings of the moments before and hearts were filled with hope as I came on deck in my turn.

I had crossed the deck, climbed over the hatchway and mounted the upper deck where I had only a short distance to go to my life boat station when the decks were lighted by auxiliary motors just put into motion. There were several loud explosions, which frighten many of us – the reports of bursting rockets sent up from the bridge, and as they exploded the sea was illuminated for a great area about the boat. It was in these flashes of light that I saw the scenes that will never leave my memory.

Out there in the sea, crying for help, I saw forms of many men, who had jumped or fallen from boats launched improperly. The decks of the ship was swarmed with men, and as I looked about for two of the home boys who should be with or near me (the Captain and Clovis McGeehan, my Bunkie). I saw accidents that were partly responsible for the greater loss of life. One boat filled with troops was half way to the water when one end of the rope broke and the boat hung like a pea pod, spilling men into the icy water. Sights like this and the cries for help from those in the water seem to create no fear. I thought of the Captain who had been sick, and I pushed through the crowd until I reached his cabin, which was vacant. Returning I want on top of the ship to McGeehan’s post for I knew he was on guard if aboard the ship. I was told that he had gotten away safely in the first boat launched and that the Captain had gone back to his post.
Time passes mighty fast in moments like these and may have been a half an hour before I found Captain Edward Gillouly, but in that time I saw many horrible things, scenes I shall never forget; I saw the ruined lifeboats, blown to pieces by the explosion and watched the nurses, two women onboard, go down a rope into a boat to safety. I saw an officer rush into the deck and take his turn going over clad only in the light clothing which is customary to bathroom use. A Lieutenant and myself threw a rope to one of our boys and had him half way up the side of the ship when he was overcome with exhaustion and called to us in a weary voice, later I saw his cramped formed face downward in the water.

One of the British destroyers, commendable for her bravery, came alongside the well lighted ship and took off hundreds on lines which were shot to her from the decks. One poor lad, late in turn was sliding down the rope when the boat, not daring to remain any longer, pulled away with its great load, and finding himself in a precarious condition, he swung out and leaped only to miss the destroyer by a foot or so and to land into the icy water. In contrast to these scenes, the antics of a Negro whom I saw in action were comical. This lad dived from the upper deck into the sea, climbed onto a broken raft and not struck with his success, dove again and swam in a rapid way to the nearest lifeboat, into which he got, unaided and grabbing an oar proceeded to get the boat away from the sinking ship.

In the meantime our opportunity had not come. Captain Edward Gillouly and I met at short intervals; I cut several long ropes and ordered men to coil them in readiness for instant use as one or two destroyers had loaded up and it would soon be our turn. The Captain was calm and cool, his attitude nerved me, for the quiet manner in which he rolled his cigarette and talked of our chances, made me confident, and our talk onboard must have been a source of comfort to us both for we actually laughed when I tied his belt on over a heavy coat he had scored from someone on deck. His actions nerved our waiting company, and here, let me add, the fact, that we knew our boats could not be launched and that it was either a rescue or a straight doom as our lot.

The auxiliary lamps had gone out, the rockets had ceased to be sent up and all that remained was in darkness, save for the occasional light of a burning cigarette or the quick flash of a pocket light.

After moments of anxiety, for in the dark of night on a rough sea, huddled on a sinking liner, your mind shocked with scenes of death and destruction; anxiety is rampant and you fairly suffer in silence; after all of this, in the dark, herding herself by faint flashes of light, we could see the outline the shape of a destroyer coming in on our port side of the ship; the side sloping to the water. I called to the Captain who ordered his men to line up and taking our ropes we had lines made fast to the destroyer before she was stopped. Our boy's went over the sides, across on the lines and landing on the deck of the tiny boat; assisted the next man and made way for those following.
Captain Edward Gillouly saw that all were over and then he followed, via the rope route as I could see in the light furnished by the destroyer. I had sent my men over and was about to follow them when I saw Chief Howith coming from the bridge, he hailed me and took me forward where from the deck of the Tuscania, we had only to wait for the waves to even the deck with that of the destroyer and step aboard. The Chief followed me, and the last man I saw leave the ship was Captain McLean of the ship. Two sailors coming over found a man on deck badly injured from a fall or possibly leaping to the lower deck, and we took him into the mess room under the bridge of the destroyer.

I shall never forget the feeling after I had come to realize that I was safe. I was standing before the stack of the boat, just behind the bridge and the heat of the stack penetrated my damp coat and warmed me as the little ship turned and shoved off toward the shore. The waves rocked and rolled our boat, the HMS Pigeon, and yet safety seemed absolute. The fact that two white streaks passing our bow just a moment before, telling tales of torpedo’s fired at us, I had no fear. I realized that at last I was safe, that I could send the glad news to my mother, and friends back home.

I think I must have prayed a bit too, for after all, out there on the tossing sea, miles off the twinkling lights of the lighthouses, prayer could relieve as I was relived. As we steamed away toward Ireland my mind was filled with thoughts, reviewing the whole adventure. I thought of everything from the time I left home and wondered when after all I have read and heard about the sea tragedies, I knew so little. I recalled the sinking of the Lusitania, the drowning of women and babes and compared what writers had said to our own plight but a few minutes before; what a feeble effort was made to convey the real horror of the scene; how little it meant to the average reader; how unexaggerated was the pictures of the worst that Germans do.

I want to be fair in telling this tale. The Germans did us honor in trying to get us before we landed. He fears America and Americans. He is proud of his sympathetic friends back home and those from the “Fatherland” who revel in the thoughts of a future day when Prussianism shall rule the world. What a poor lot the pro-German has to be proud of. Here is a government, willing to commit crime after crime against civilization; to bring about the destruction of life and property in the most inconceivable of inhuman ways and gloating over success – momentary success – declares before the world that it is God given. The half has never been told of German atrocities on nations at war with them. They have stooped to anything to gain their end and gaining they have only to lose for already in the front line the cry of “Remember the Tuscania” is the slogan of our boys and that of the men with whom they are fighting side by side. Every shot, every shell carries that message in its wake and the time is not far off when the Germans shall remember that his crimes are the cause of his downfall and that the world will collect in exacting recompense for his sin.
In the cold gray light of the morning, we were landed at Buncrana, Ireland in the county of Donegal, British troops, mostly young men, willingly gave up their blankets and their bunks to make us comfortable. We were served with hot soups and good quantities of tea and war bread. Our names were taken and we were piloted to sleeping quarters for a few hours rest.

I think I was most fortunate for one lad took me to a thatched roofed cottage just beyond the lines and I enjoyed the hospitality of a real Irish home. The family seemed to know and understand how to make a stranger contented. The mother of the household saw to it that I was warmed and prepared the softest bed in the house for me, but sleep – real sleep, was not to come so soon after the ordeal through which I had passed. My nerves relaxed and I was unable to think of a thing except that which concerned the others whom I did not know were safe. Finally I was able to rest for an hour or more before being called for a “bit of food” after which I bade goodbye to my hostess and rejoined the members of our company that had been saved by the destroyer.

Our trip to the camp at Randalstown, a Scottish camp, was one of the things I shall always look back upon with pleasure. We shipped to Londonderry where we stayed for a day or two, and as we marched through the streets we received an ovation from the people, the likes of which I know we will never experience again. There was a warmth about it that just made the tears come to your eyes. Little children ran into the ranks and marched beside us, placing chubby little fingers in our hands. Men and boys cheered and women sobbed quietly as we passed through the streets and Old Glory hung from many a window to welcome the survivor of the first American transport to be sunk.

Ireland is a beautiful land. Its beauty is something that cannot be described or taken in a single glance. There are colors no artist can make, which blending into one, green, give it the name of the Emerald Isle. As we rode away down the western coast route to our camp, I saw more wonderful scenery than I ever will see again, unless I go back. The aged hills, footing the Mourne mountains, rise abruptly from the coast line and here and there, bursting from the stony bank, we saw tiny streams, which rushed down the sides only to hide behind the green tops of pine trees, lost to view a moment but reappearing in a rough tumbling rivulet from below some hedge. Sheep and Goats grazed on the highlands, and quaint shays decorated the highways as we sped along our way. Every city and village and hamlet seemed to be advised of our coming. People thronged to see us and to welcome us and asked about the loss of life, ever willing to sympathize and regret our sad experience. Pretty girls, I fear I should have to linger at the blarney stone if I were to describe Irish beauty, and then to, I want to come home and remain among those I know.

The fact is, every one of us, Jew or Gentile, claimed to be of Irish decent after a week’s sojourn on the Isle of beauty and wonderful picturesque ways. I was Irish to the core until our arrival at Ronaldstown where we were greeted by a band of Kilties. Welcome as a wonderful thing; but when you see hundreds of men – young men – made old with two or three years of
service – a few months of battle – when you see men with six, eight, and nine gold bars, denoting the number of times they were wounded, lame, crippled, convalescent, men that know that which is in store for the American soldier before he is through; where you are welcomed by such as these, there is something that makes brothers of men.

Our disaster was mere inconvenience to what the careworn faces told of the front. Our welcome was more than I could convey in words. The men were glad to see us come, and still they were sorry. They provided a truly highland welcome for us and our stay with them was filled with hours of pleasure chat with these "Laddies from Hell" as the Germans called them, whereby we got first handed much which time and opportunity does not permit to be told.

Hearty welcome united the survivors of the Tuscania in a common bond with the people of Ireland, Scotland, and England. We all talked the one language. We understand better than ever what the war has been and what it means to win. There is one thing left to do and that is to get word back home as fast as possible telling of the great sacrifice made by these people, telling of the suffering alone, for a cause that is ours since the war started. Misinformed know nothings in every community have jabbered on with foolish tongues, blaming this and that, charging this against the other thing, but there is one thing that is so true, it's painful – German ambition to rule the world has been about its task for years.

Prussianism means to rule by an iron hand every race and nation on the earth to make subservant to its domineering control every other people and to force its culture upon every country on every continent.

The quicker Americans wake up to the fact that the enemy is organized to the height of perfection just so much quicker will the strife end.

Our President has asked for control of all reins so that he may have full power to handle the affairs of our country until the war is over. He should have it by all means and without a moments delay. A democracy is a wonderful thing in times of peace but a “one man’s game” beats it all to pieces when war is in order.”