Hun Atrocity – U-Boat sinks Hospital Ship.

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The 12,000 ton RMS Asturias was built in 1907 for the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, and was used on the Buenos Aires service from Southampton until the Great War. In 1914 she was requisitioned by the Admiralty, converted into a hospital ship with the designation HMHS Asturias, and then handed over to the Army. For the next few years she did regular cross-channel runs carrying wounded men from France, as well as a period in the Mediterranean in support of the Dardanelles campaign. Although she had accommodation for 896 patients, on one occasion she brought 2400 sick and wounded back to England.

In March 1917 she had landed wounded at Avonmouth – presumably hospitals further south were getting rather full – and was returning round Cornwall to her base at Southampton, where most of the crew lived. Some 5 miles off Start Point in Devon, close on midnight on the 20th when the still night was rocked with an explosion. A German U-Boat had fired torpedoes at Asturias, a sitting duck as she sailed with her long green stripe and red crosses brightly illuminated as the Geneva Convention required. One torpedo smashed the rudder and passed on to explode in the engine-room. It is not clear whether a second torpedo struck, but the stern of the ship was blown off in any case. In total darkness the ship was abandoned, but many of the crew had been killed by the initial explosion while others drowned when two lifeboats smashed together while being launched.
Despite the extensive damage, “Asturias” was towed to shore and beached near Salcombe. It was later towed to Portsmouth, and for the rest of the war it was used as an ammunition hulk. After the war it was rebuilt as a cruise liner and renamed “Arcadian”.

Total casualties from the torpedoing were reported as:
Military: 11 dead, 3 missing including one nurse, 17 injured
Crew: 20 dead, 9 missing including one stewardess, 22 injured.

The Captain of U20 which sank the Asturias was Capitanleutnant Walther Schweiger, who two years before had been in command of the U-Boat which sank the Lusitania.

In 1916 the Germans had announced all out war on allied shipping including hospital ships, as they claimed that they were being used to carry troops and supplies to the war zones on their return trips. Whether this was true or not, it must have been very frustrating for the British to have to run these ships empty of any useful material when crossing to France to pick up more wounded.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission was until recently unaware that a number of the crew had in fact been buried in Southampton Old Cemetery until investigations by Chris Harley of the In From The Cold Project (IFCP). They had been recorded on the Tower Hill War Memorial, but no burial place was known. I was pleased to be able to help by locating the graves of these Asturias casualties, and it is very likely that for those with no gravestone – marked with * below - an official War Grave stone will be erected by the CWGC in due course. For the others where they are mentioned on a family gravestone, the CWGC may simply list the plot as an official war Grave.

+The Roll of Honour for these Southampton men is:

John Aitken Anderson, 6th Engineer, aged 26
Arthur Charles Andrews, waiter, aged 34
* William Henry Crook, Fireman, aged 42
Stanley Cross, Greaser, aged 25
* James William Earl, Trimmer, aged 26
* Edwin Alexander Glasspool, Assistant baker, aged 19
* Orlando William Green, Fireman, aged 29
  George Bevis Harvey, Engineer storekeeper, aged 58
* Arthur Edward Humby, Fireman, aged 32
  Herbert George Kimber, Assistant cook, aged 26
* Charles Manger.
  James George Alfred Munson, Waiter, aged 36
* Victor Charles Mafeking Orman, Boy, aged 18
  James John Tillyer, Able Seaman, aged 24
  Percy Newton Tubb, Fireman, aged 20

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