

The Sinking of *Llandoverly Castle*

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The growth of digital archives offers contemporary scholars a new and exciting source of original materials. Newspaper archives such as the ones presented free of charge by Historical Canadian Newspapers Online or the US Library of Congress program *Chronicling America* offer over 10 million pages of old newspapers which are rich with historical gems heretofore unobtainable without extensive and time-consuming research.¹ This new source of historical information presents a sort of digital ‘selfie’ offering scholars an opportunity to see events as they unfolded and were presented in real time to the public. I’d like to take this opportunity to discuss an incident that occurred late in the First World War about which information has become available through these online sources. This incident had repercussions for Canadian attitudes about the war, participation in the war and for the prosecution of war crimes in subsequent years.

Like the Battle of Vimy Ridge, the sinking of the hospital ship *Llandoverly Castle* served to propel the Canadian people towards national self-awareness, national unity and ultimate sovereignty. As the country learned to assert itself militarily on the world stage, one can trace the deathbed struggle of the old imperial order and the emergence of modern democracies such as Canada. The *Llandoverly Castle* atrocity must also be viewed as one of

the many seeds sowed during WWI from which evolved international war crimes law – germinating, at the end of the next war, into the ad hoc tribunals at Nuremberg and in the Far East. An international war crimes court finally became a reality in 2002 when the International Criminal Court was created with specific jurisdiction to prosecute individuals for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

What are the details of the incident? *Llandoverly Castle* was a Canadian hospital ship which was torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat on 27 June 1918. The world first learned of the sinking on 1 July 1918 when the British Admiralty revealed the incident which had occurred four days earlier. The hospital ship, on its way to England from Halifax, had a crew of 168 men, 80 officers and men of the Canadian Medical Corps and 14 nurses – 258 people in all. According to naval conventions, the ship “was displaying a brightly illuminated [electric] Red Cross sign and could not have been mistaken for anything other than a hospital ship.”²

Llandoverly Castle was sunk at 9:30 in the evening about 116 miles southwest of Ireland. The ship’s telegraph was destroyed and unable to transmit an SOS. The ship sank within 10 minutes but several lifeboats were launched. Of



Llandoverly Castle pre-World War I.

Credit: Cliff McMullen



Captured World War I German submarine U-86 on display to the public in Bristol Harbour 1918.

those on board only 24 persons survived, the remaining 234 either drowned or were shot. Evidence disclosed at the trial supported the supposition that at least five lifeboats were launched – each of which could carry up to 52 persons. The captain’s lifeboat had collected 24 persons, and would be the only one rescued. It was determined that it was possible that one or two of the lifeboats “may have been drawn into the vortex by the sinking ship ... but the evidence has shown that at least three ... survived the sinking ship.”³

Despite orders to leave hospital ships alone, the U-boat’s Captain, Helmut Patzig, “was of the opinion, founded on various information (including some from official sources, the accuracy of which cannot be verified)” – that hospital ships were being surreptitiously used to transport troops and munitions.⁴ He asserted that he “had sunk the ship because she was carrying American aviation officers and others in the fighting service of the allies.”⁵

Some time after the sinking U-86 surfaced and approached the lifeboats to ascertain if the ship had airmen and/or munitions on board. Captain Patzig ordered Major Lyon, one of seven Canadian medical officers, and Captain R.A. Sylvester of the sinking vessel aboard his submarine. Lyon testified that he was forced to stand on the conning tower

“despite his injured foot ... [and he was] roughly hauled on board and thrust along the deck ... a bone in his foot [was] broken by the handling.” Captain Patzig accused him of being part of a fighting unit and not a medical officer. Major Lyon denied the allegation, and Captain Sylvester denied any illegal uses of the hospital ship.⁶

They were released back to their lifeboat and the U-boat moved about for a while but returned. Then the second and fourth officers of *Llandovery Castle* (Chapman and Barton) were taken on board the U-boat. Captain Patzig asserted that the violent explosion when the ship sank proved that there must have been munitions on board, but Chapman and Barton convinced him that the “noise was caused by the explosion of the boilers.”⁷ They too were released back to the lifeboat.

The U-boat then seemed to play a kind of game of chicken – twice approaching the captain’s lifeboat in a menacing manner seemingly intent on ramming it. Each time, though, it steered sideways at the last moment. One of the lifeboats seen by Lyon was one containing the nurses, but the captain’s lifeboat lost sight of it and rescuers/searchers found no survivors of that boat. The captain’s lifeboat finally mounted its sail and was able to put distance between itself and the sub. According to reports, “[a]fter

a brief period [its] occupants ... noticed firing from the U-boat ... about 12 to 14 shots fell all told.”⁸

The captain’s boat drifted for about 36 hours before it was found by a British destroyer. Five allied ships searched the area looking for other survivors but found only one empty lifeboat which evidence showed had been occupied. At the time of the sinking and the four days following the weather had been good.

When Canadians heard about the sinking of the hospital ship *Llandoverly Castle*, they were incensed. It was seen to be one of the greatest atrocities of the Great War, and there was demand for a trial to punish the perpetrators. At war’s end Patzig the commander of U-86 was declared a war criminal. The British government sought to have him turned over to Britain for trial but the German government refused, asserting he would be judged before a war crimes court in Leipzig. Prior to the trial Patzig fled and at the time of the trial his whereabouts was unknown. As a result, German prosecutors charged his two subordinate officers, Lieutenants Ludwig Dithmar and Johann Boldt, with first degree murder.

In July of 1921 Canadian Major Thomas Lyon of Vancouver traveled 7,000 miles by rail and ship to testify before the War Crimes Court at Leipzig, Germany. The sub’s First (Boatswain) Mate Meissner and Captain Sylvester of *Llandoverly Castle* both died before the trial and thus were unable to provide their account. Lyon’s “melodramatic” arrival minutes before the close of the trial against the two U-boat officers was sensationalized by the world’s press. His verbal attack upon the U-boat’s Captain was called “excoriating.”⁹ When Lyon testified at the trial he called Patzig a shameful coward because he had not appeared to face the charges in court. “Why is he leaving the blame for the sinking of the hospital ship *Llandoverly Castle*

upon his subordinates?” Lyon asked, and “[w]hy does he not come out of his hiding place and say ‘I sunk the *Llandoverly Castle* because I was told she carried American aviators to France.’”¹⁰ Dithmar and Boldt were each sentenced to four years in prison.¹¹ The original charge was reduced to manslaughter because the court determined that they “acted on the impulse of the moment and the deed was not premeditated.” The prosecutor had asked for hard labour to be part of the sentence, but that was not included by the court. *The Ocala [Florida] Evening Star’s* headline, “German Justice Only a Joke,” is indicative of the disbelieving reaction in Canada and the United States to the lenient sentences.¹²

A month later Patzig surfaced in South America and manned up. He declared his intent to return to Leipzig and surrender himself for trial. He asserted that he “was alone responsible” for the sinking.¹³ Despite this, Patzig never showed up for a trial, and it didn’t seem like anyone was searching very hard for him. As well, Lieutenant Boldt escaped prison in November, four months after his incarceration.¹⁴ Dithmar followed his lead two months later escaping in January of 1922.¹⁵

Trial testimony from German crew members indicated that only four men were topside when the shelling and ramming occurred – Patzig, Boldt, Dithmar and Meissner. Testimony at the trial indicated that “[w]hile firing, the U-boat moved about ... did not submerge ... but continued on the surface.”¹⁶ The prosecution asserted that the firing was directed at the lifeboats after they had been rammed forcing survivors into the sea, and the court concurred. The court’s decision was based, in large part, on the testimony of both the German submarine crew and Canadian survivors.

According to newspaper reports of the trial, in the days following the incident, German crew members were extremely depressed. According to testimony, Captain Patzig was confronted by his chief engineer and Patzig told him “he could never do it a second time.” The court was not certain what exactly he meant by this, but concluded that he meant both torpedoing the ship and subsequently ramming and shooting at the lifeboats. Despite Patzig’s apparent remorse, he nonetheless ordered the crew to say nothing. He called the crew together the following day asking them to remain silent about the preceding day’s occurrence. He told them “he [alone] would be responsible to God and his own conscience.”¹⁷ Patzig asked for and obtained a promise to maintain silence from Dithmar and Boldt – both testified that “they had promised Patzig to be silent” which, in their minds, justified their refusal to testify about some elements of the sinking.¹⁸ Patzig’s



HMHS *Llandoverly Castle* sinking after being torpedoed, 27 June 1918.

conduct also figured highly in the decision. Apparently he made no entry in the logbook and entered an incorrect statement of the route taken by the ship on the chart so it would look like the submarine was a long way from where the torpedoing occurred.

After it found out about the sinking of *Llandoverly Castle*, the Canadian government immediately issued a new war bond poster. "Victory Bonds Will Help Stop This," it read. The poster depicted a survivor holding a drowned nurse while cursing U-86. Printed on a life preserver in the foreground is *Llandoverly Castle*.

The indictment against Captain Patzig was quashed in 1931 when the German Reichstag enacted amnesty legislation in the build-up to the Second World War. He re-appeared and re-entered the German *Kriegsmarine* as Brümmer-Patzig in 1933 and served as a naval officer until 1945. In his First World War U-boat career he is credited with sinking 24 ships and damaging one. During the Second World War he was awarded the Iron Cross and War Merit Cross. He died in 1984 at the age of 94, having never been tried for the atrocity of sinking the Canadian hospital ship. Dithmar also served in the *Kriegsmarine* during WWII. He never served the remainder of his sentence. He died in 1970. Johann Boldt, who retired from the navy in 1918, died in 1931 having never served out the remainder of his sentence.

So, why discuss this incident in 2015? First, the mass of interesting material that can now be found through new online sources has provided context and texture for the incident that had been missing before. This material is easily accessible to any researcher and helps to illustrate public opinion of many of the events of the war. Second, this incident, and the aftermath, is an early illustration of the difficulty of prosecuting international war crimes, particularly in the absence of political will. 🍷

Notes

1. See Historical Canadian Newspapers Online at <http://libguides.bgsu.edu/CanadianNewspapers>; and US Library of Congress, *Chronicling America* at www.chroniclingamerica.com.
2. Merchant Navy Association, The Red Duster website, Union-Castle Mail Steamship Co., *Llandoverly Castle*, <http://www.red-duster.co.uk/>.
3. "German War Trials: Judgment in Case of Lieutenants Dithmar and Boldt," *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (October 1922), p. 711.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 710.
5. "Huns Torpedo Hospital Ship," *Corpus Christi Caller*, 2 July 1918, p. 2.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. "German War Trials: Judgment in Case of Lieutenants Dithmar and Boldt," p. 713.
9. "Travels 7,000 Miles to Denounce Submarine Captain Who Shelled Boats after Sinking Hospital Ship," *The Washington Herald*, 16 July 1921, p. 2.
10. *Ibid.*
11. "War Criminals Receive Four Year Sentence," *Arizona Republic*, 17 July 1921, p. 1.



A wartime poster using the U-86 sinking of *Llandoverly Castle* to sell Victory Bonds.

12. "German Justice Only a Joke," *The Ocala Evening Star*, 16 July 1921, p. 1; see also, "Ruthless U-Boat Commanders Escape their Just Punishment," *New York Tribune*, 12 February 1922, p. 3.
13. "U-Boat Captain Seeks Trial," *New York Tribune*, 7 August 1921, p. 2.
14. "U-Boat Commander Flees from Jail," *The [New York] Evening World*, 19 November 1921, p. 2.
15. "German Officer Who Sank Hospital Ship is Again at Liberty," *Bibee Daily Review*, 31 January 1922, p. 4.
16. "German War Trials: Judgment in Case of Lieutenants Dithmar and Boldt."
17. *Ibid.*, p. 717.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 716.

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