

THE SINKING OF THE 'ATHENIA'

On September 3rd 1939, the Second World War was only just ten hours old, and the 13,581 ton passenger liner *Athenia* of the Donaldson Line was steaming across the Atlantic Ocean bound for Montreal from Glasgow in Scotland. It was 2000 hrs, and on smooth seas and one of the more pleasant days as far as the weather was concerned, many of the adults were busy making themselves ready for the evening dinner, while others who had children were busy putting them to bed for the night. There were others who were relaxing in the ship's lounge listening to the ship's orchestra, and as with many ocean voyages, many found walking around the deck on such a beautiful evening one of the more relaxing pastimes on such a voyage.

On this voyage, the "Athenia" was carrying 1,103 passengers, 300 of them being American, and the total complement was made up with 305 members of the crew.

At 2040hrs, the German U-boat U30 captained by Kapitänleutnant Fritz-Julius Lemp spotted the lights of the *Athenia* against the evening sky. The U30 increased speed, and when just about level with her prey, turned and lined up the length of the Donaldson liner in her sights and fired a single torpedo. Completely unaware of the deadly 'fish' that was coming towards her, no-one saw the tell tale silver wash of the torpedo coming towards them that was to send the great ship to the bottom.

It was just 2100hrs when suddenly the peace of the evening was shattered by explosion and fire as the warhead of the torpedo ripped open the port side of the ship and penetrated into the ship's engine room. Panic and havoc raced throughout the ship as parents tried in vain to reach their berths where children had been tucked away for the night. Many waded through water trying to find a way up onto the decks. Within twenty minutes the bulkheads gave way and volumes of water poured into the forward engine room and further explosions could be heard, also most of the accommodation below decks was now filled with water.

The British crew behaved in an orderly and very disciplined manner and it was because of their actions that many were able to be saved. The ship began to list heavily to port as water continued to pour into the hull of the ship. Even though many of the lifeboats on the port side became almost impossible to launch, the crew managed to quickly cut the anchoring ropes and securing chains to get the lifeboats into the water. Passengers were organized into groups and they were requested which part of the ship they should go to, where other members of the crew were waiting to organize them into lifeboats.

It was this action by the crew that managed to save nearly a thousand lives, the official records stating that 112 lives were lost, and of these, 28 of them were American. The sickening part about it all was that Lemp ordered the U30 to about turn and disappear into the darkness of the night without rendering any assistance to the survivors, leaving them on the dark and desolate ocean alone.

Under the terms of sea warfare, Kapitänleutnant Fritz-Julius Lemp was at liberty to warn and evacuate the ship before going ahead and sinking it, and his order to attack without such warning was an atrocity of the highest order. His action was to cause great embarrassment to Germany, who, in trying to cover themselves of the situation stated that Lemp described the actions of the *Athenia*, to be zig-zagging and without lights and that it was using a manoeuvre that was used by ships trying to avoid detection and that he assumed the *Athenia* to be an armed merchant cruiser.

Both America and Britain accused Germany of a cover-up stating that it would not have been possible for the *Athenia* to be sailing under total darkness for the safety of her passengers. Also, it would have to be understood that the *Athenia* had left Glasgow two days earlier and was at sea when Britain announced that war had been declared and that the captain of the *Athenia* would have thought that as a passenger ship, and travelling away from Britain would have been safe from any enemy action. To avoid any confrontation from America, Hitler even accused the British Royal Navy of deliberately sinking the *Athenia* to get a sympathetic reaction from the United States.

In an inquiry into the sinking later, it was revealed that the attack on the *Athenia* was an unfortunate incident and that to attack without warning was a genuine mistake on the part of Kapitänleutnant Fritz-Julius Lemp, who, acted with over-enthusiasm in attacking an unidentified ship when he and his crew were highly trained in aggressive naval warfare and no blame was put on Lemp in the findings.

Three days later, another U- boat was in a position to attack a British merchant vessel, but realizing the embarrassment caused by the sinking of the Athenia, the method used was completely different. This was the attack by U33 on Olivegrove.

http://www.battleofbritain.net/section-5/naval_1.html

KinShips®



Athenia (I)
Donaldson Line, 1905-1917
Print 1708a



Athenia (I)
Donaldson Line, 1905-1917
Print 1708b

<http://www.kinshipsprints.com/catalog/ships/a/athenia.htm>

THIS BRASS NAME- PLATE was presented to the Society by Mrs Elsie Murray, widow of the late Mr David Murray who served with the Lovat Scouts throughout World War II. The history of the name-plate is recorded here in Mr Murray's own words:

‘During the summer of 1940, while serving with the Lovat Scouts in the Faroe Islands, it was part of our duties to patrol the coastline of the numerous islands which make up the Faroe group. On the occasion of one of these patrols, of which I was a member, we spotted a wrecked boat washed up on a ledge at the foot of some cliffs flanking the south side of Oyndar Fiord which lies to the north-east of the island of Eysturoy one of the most northerly islands of the group. On investigating we found the wreck to be one of the *Athenia's* lifeboats. The S.S. *Athenia* of the Donaldson Line (Glasgow) was torpedoed by a German U-boat on the 3rd of Sept. 1939, 250 miles NW of Rathlin Island with the loss of 112 lives.