

## SAUNDERSFOOT & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

First meeting of the 2014-15 season

Terry John: The Sinking of the Falaba

Early in the First World War a superior British navy was able to blockade the German North Sea ports and force its navy to remain at anchor. The blockade also prevented much in the way of essential supplies, including fuel and food, from entering Germany. In retaliation Germany sought to respond in kind by using its larger and better equipped u-boat fleet to attack supply ships bound for the UK and Ireland. But this was a new type of warfare, the rules of engagement uncertain, naval protocols largely untested. It was also an area of combat open to propaganda by both sides.

It was against this backdrop that the Falaba, under a Captain Davies and 93 crew, left Liverpool at 6.00pm on the 27 of March 1915 bound for West Africa, her usual run. The Falaba was a mixed cargo and passenger ship of some 4,800 tonnes; on this voyage she was carrying 151 passengers, 93 crew and a cargo that included gunpowder and ordnance as well as general supplies. While many of the passengers were civilians, including colonial administrators, there were a number of military men and army medical corps personnel sailing to join the invasion of German Cameroon.

At around 11.30 am the following day, and about four miles off The Smalls, the Falaba sights on the surface and astern the German submarine, the U28, which is in pursuit. While there are reports the submarine is flying the red ensign Captain Davies determines to take no chances; he orders full steam ahead and manoeuvres to present the stern to the pursuer. The Falaba also sends out mayday signals in the hope that a British warship, possibly from the Milford Haven, could assist. The faster U28 is soon close by and initially fires a stop detonator, which is ignored, and then warns by megaphone that the ship is to be evacuated in five minutes after which it will be sunk.

The passengers had already been assembled on deck and the lifeboats, together with the two large surf boats used to ferry goods ashore where harbours are inaccessible to larger boats, held in readiness.

In the subsequent reports there is claim and counter claim about the timings and chain of events. What does happen is that the U28 fires a torpedo at the Falaba, there is a huge explosion and the ship sinks within five minutes. Many of the passengers and crew not killed on board are hurled in to the bitter cold of a December sea. In all 104 people died, many from hypothermia, and the survivors were treated at Milford Haven before making a sad journey home.

The sinking of the Falaba became something of a cause celebre so early in the war, with the British authorities emphasising the unarmed nature of the passenger liner, the impossibility of evacuating such a ship in five minutes and the flying of the dummy red ensign, whereas their counterparts in Germany denied that the ensign was flown and claimed that the U28 captain had allowed almost twenty-five minutes to abandon the ship although he had become concerned that the delaying tactics of Captain Davies could have allowed armed warships to endanger his own vessel.

Whatever the claims of the two sides about the particular sequence of events the sinking of the Falaba was an early sign in the war that gentlemanly rules of engagement at sea were to be a thing of the past.

The next meeting of the Society will be held at the Regency Hall, Saundersfoot on 15 October at 7.30 when Mr. Simon Hancock will speak on Haverfordwest Down the Ages.