

1917: THE YEAR OF THE *NORWEGIAN*

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Following years of simmering political tension and rivalry, Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914, leading to the outbreak of World War I. Britain immediately imposed a blockade on Germany that stopped all imports of food and goods. Germany retaliated by sending in her submarine fleet, known as U-boats (*Unterseeboot*) to target British naval ships. This signalled a significant turning point in modern naval warfare. There were several different classes of U-boats. The UC class, which carried some torpedoes, was primarily used for laying mines but had so many fatal accidents that they became known as the ‘sisters of sorrow’. The U class was armed with lethal torpedoes, as well as deck guns.

The waters from the Fastnet Rock along the Cork coast were known as ‘The Western Approaches’ where shipping crossing the Atlantic made landfall before proceeding to their final destination in the British ports of Liverpool and Bristol. During World War I, this stretch of water became a huge maritime graveyard as a result of the German Imperial Admiralty identifying it as an area where merchant shipping could be attacked successfully by U-boats and would eventually become known as ‘Torpedo Alley’.¹ German U-boats

typically lay in wait in close proximity to lighthouses, as British merchant ships sailed close to these to get a fix on their location.

Galley Head Lighthouse was the first station to report to the world the news of the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania* on 7 May 1915. The principal keeper at the Galley Head, Thomas Duffy, received £1 from the British Admiralty for doing so.² Over the following days a number of bodies were recovered west of the Galley Head but the vast majority were never found.³ This was the first contact the people of West Cork had with the harsh realities of naval war. On 19 August of the same year, the White Star Liner SS *Arabic* was sunk by U 24 southeast of the Galley without warning and with the loss of forty-four lives, including three Americans.⁴ The Germans would later claim that they believed her to be a troopship. An entry from the lighthouse keeper's log for 24 September 1915 details how the body of a lady was washed ashore at Galley Head the previous evening. It was determined that she was a casualty from the *Arabic* as she was still wearing her lifebelt, was dressed in a heavy travelling coat and silk gown, and wore a gold ring.⁵ A second lady was discovered on Castlerefke Strand brought ashore by the same tide, 2 miles further west, having £16 worth of American money on her person.⁶ The loss of three American lives so soon after the *Lusitania* disaster inflamed public opinion in the United States and forced the Germans to temporarily scale back their submarine activities. The Germans were fearful of further antagonising the US and facilitating their entry into the war on the British side.

The ongoing blockade of Germany led to extreme shortages of food. The winter of 1916/17 became known as 'Turnip Winter' as the turnip was one of the few sources of food for the starving population. This food shortage led to great social unrest in Germany. On 1 February 1917, Germany once again announced a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare on all shipping entering UK waters in a final desperate attempt to achieve victory.⁷ It was into this theatre of war that the SS *Norwegian* sailed on 13 March 1917 on a voyage from New York to Liverpool. The *Norwegian* was the property of F. Leyland & Co. of Liverpool and was a lightly armed steamship with a single 4.7 inch stern gun.⁸ She had a gross tonnage of 6,237 tonnes and had only recently been commissioned in 1913.⁹ While 4 miles southwest of the Seven Heads she was rocked by a huge explosion killing five of her boiler room crew.¹⁰ Initially there was confusion as to whether she was torpedoed or mined; however, German

war records indicate that she struck a mine laid by the German UC 43.¹¹ By this time, UC 43 had already met her fate being sunk by a British submarine north of the Shetland Islands just three days previous, with the loss of all twenty-six of her crew.¹²

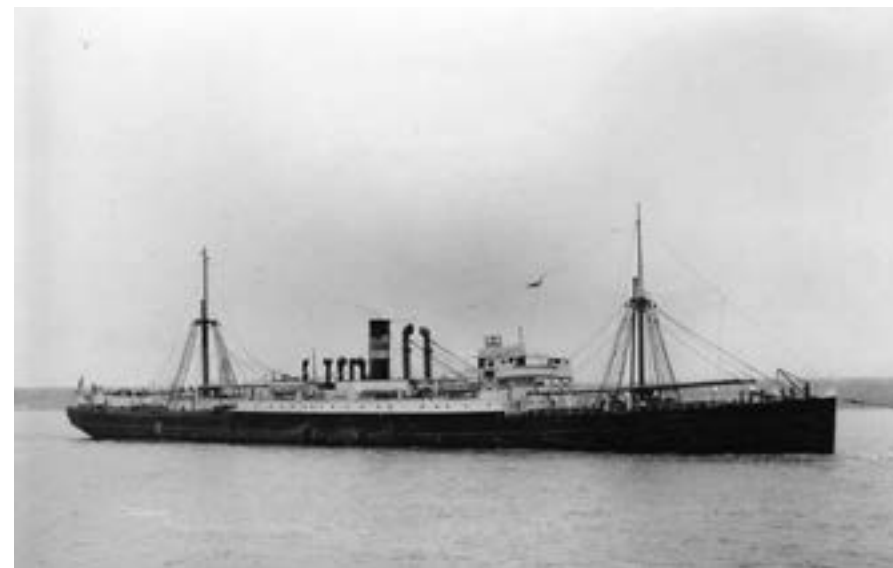


Fig. 1: SS *Norwegian* (Photo: courtesy of James Barrett).

The *Norwegian* was taken under tow by the sloop HMS *Bluebell* in a frantic effort to beach the vessel at Red Strand with a view to saving the cargo. The Red Strand was selected because it was sheltered by the Galley Head from the prevailing southwesterly gales and the nearby road would provide access for the salvage operation.¹³ As Red Strand came into sight, the *Norwegian* went aground on the Black Rock (*Carrig Dubh*) and remained there until 17 March 1918.¹⁴ Officially the *Norwegian*'s cargo consisted of mail, grain and general goods.¹⁵ But it transpired that she was carrying a large consignment of nickel and copper ingots (to feed Britain's insatiable armaments industry), rifles, ammunition, artillery shells, automobiles, aeroplane parts, a considerable amount of balata (a rubber-like substance), Guinness barrels, fur coats and

ladies shoes.¹⁶ It was said locally that she carried ‘everything from a needle to an anchor’. Among the novel items removed from the *Norwegian* was carrot seed which was successfully grown by local farmers. Until then, only yellow carrots were grown as horse feed and this was the first time orange carrots had been grown locally.¹⁷

Before an official salvage operation could be put in place, many items were removed from the *Norwegian* by the people of the locality who mounted an unofficial salvage operation of their own. A number of rifles were removed at the outset and hidden. In his book *Towards Ireland Free*, Liam Deasy describes the IRA’s desperate quest for arms. He mentions how some IRA Volunteers from Clogagh, the Walsh brothers, approached an Ardfield farmer who had six rifles hidden under a cock of hay. The Volunteers offered to buy the rifles but the farmer put an exorbitant price on them, which the IRA refused to pay. That night the IRA returned, searched the property and seized the rifles. Deasy also mentions how two other Volunteers, Frank Hurley of the Mount Pleasant Company and Dan Cauty of the Newcestown Company, purchased two rifles taken from the *Norwegian*. They paid £5 each from their own resources, a considerable sum at the time.¹⁸ Local tradition has it that Jimmy Ban O’Donovan of Dunowen gave the IRA rifles which had also come from the *Norwegian*, and that he later received an IRA pension for his efforts. In documents recently released by the Bureau of Military History covering the period 1913 to 1921, a statement given by James Moloney, officer in command of the Barryroe IRA Company, dated 8 December 1955, records that the first rifle to come into their possession was given to them by an Ardfield man, who took it from the *Norwegian*.¹⁹

With the *Norwegian* fast aground, Mr Stanley Woods Snr of Clonakilty bought the salvage rights to the ship and any profits made were to be divided 75% to Woods and 25% to the British Board of Trade.²⁰ The Coast Guard, based at Dirk Cove, west of Dunowen and the local Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), stationed at Milltown (Rathbarry), were charged with protecting the ship. Dan Lordan of Clonakilty was in charge of the pumps put in place to remove seawater from the vessel.²¹ Modifications were made to her damaged machinery and her deck winches were put back in action to remove the cargo. While this official salvage operation was ongoing, the wreck was being boarded at night. The RIC conducted searches on the properties of several local boat

owners who were considered the most likely parties to raid the *Norwegian*. For the most part the locals had their spoils well hidden but there are several written accounts of persons charged with possession of stolen goods taken from the *Norwegian*.



Fig. 2: Photo of salvaging operation of SS *Norwegian* with John Harrington (L.) and John O’Donovan (R.), both of Dundeady, c. 1917
(Photo: courtesy of Mrs Nellie O’Donovan).

At Rosscarbery Petty Sessions on 23 May 1917, a Dundeady resident was charged with being in possession of a sewing machine taken from the vessel, but was subsequently acquitted.²² The large quantity of sewing machines and typewriters that were taken from the wreck and available for sale led to the emergence of the expression, ‘a Clonakilty machine’.²³ Several weeks later on 27 June again at Rosscarbery Petty Sessions, a Gahanive (Ganniv) resident was charged with possession of several bags of pollard (cattle feed) and ropes, and a quantity of vaseline. He claimed to have found them on the shore and did not have time to report it to the Coast Guard and was also acquitted.²⁴ Two further defendants (brothers) were charged with taking a 17 foot-long piece of

pine, valued at £12, on 12 June at 1am and found guilty, each receiving a fine of £4.²⁵ A prominent local boat builder was fined £3 5s for being in possession of property taken from the *Norwegian* while two other local men were fined £4 5s each for the same offence, with a fourth man receiving the benefit of the Probation (First Offenders) Act.²⁶

In December of that year, the *Skibbereen Eagle* reported on a court case in Clonakilty where three local men were charged with having in their possession a quantity of balata or rubber from the *Norwegian*. One of the men, a farmer from Dunowen, was convicted and fined £69 2s 6d, which was a very substantial amount. He was determined to be a principal player in this operation, having made an acquaintance with a dentist from Great George's Street (now Washington Street), Cork, who visited Clonakilty once a week to practise dentistry there and to whom the Dunowen man sold a small quantity of balata. Balata was used in dentistry to fill the cavity after root canal treatment. The dentist later purchased from this man a larger quantity of balata valued at £70 for 10 guineas and paid a Clonakilty carrier to take the balata to Cork. A Clonakilty woman who was present during the various business exchanges between the two men gave evidence against both in court. The Cork Police Court found the dentist guilty and he received the minimum fine of £105.²⁷ Two other men from Ardfield were also convicted in Clonakilty and ordered to pay £69 2s 6d and £29 14s 6d respectively.²⁸ During the course of the trial, Mr J. Travers Wolfe, for the prosecution, declared:

“Stolen” goods is the proper name for “wreck” goods, and there will be no question about the goods being from the wrecked vessel, the S.S. *Norwegian*. There is not a balata factory out at the Galleyhead. The goods were conveyed by road to the City, leaving Clonakilty after midnight. This is done secretly, when they could have been taken to their destination by rail for a small charge.²⁹

It has recently emerged that a man from Dunowen, who was a Justice of the Peace and a member of the jury that adjudicated on the trial, intervened on behalf of the local men and got their fines mitigated to £1 10s each, which were quietly paid. It appears that a deal had been struck to sell the balata to another party but the dentist offered a better price. The underbidders were so

aggrieved that they reported the proceedings to the police thus making them aware of the transaction.³⁰

Despite the apparent intense police activity, a lot of goods found their way on to the black market in Clonakilty, as the constabulary turned a blind eye to much of the looting. Indeed, it is said locally that one police sergeant was on 10% commission for all goods sold from the wreck. Even in 1918, local men were still being prosecuted for activities associated with the ship, including one man who had in his possession lard and paraffin wax from the *Norwegian* for which he was fined £18 12s 6d at the Rosscarbery Petty Sessions.³¹ Much of the cargo of the *Norwegian* was salvaged by Stanley Woods in the summer and autumn of 1917. However, the winter gales began to move the *Norwegian* from her resting place. On St Patrick's Day 1918, Sam O'Brien of Dunowen was walking up Dunowen Hill when he heard what he described as a ‘massive crack’ behind him. As he looked back, he saw that the *Norwegian* had broken its back, spilt in two and slipped off the Black Rock and into the sea.³² That was the end of that particular salvage operation. Further salvage operations were carried out in the 1930s and again in the 1980s.³³ These recovered more of the *Norwegian's* ingots, along with rusted rifles and artillery shells.³⁴

The *Norwegian* remains a part of Ardfield/Rathbarry folklore for people of a certain generation. Children born in 1917 were referred to as ‘Norwegian babies’. While the locals did not greatly profit from the wreck of the *Norwegian*, its presence created a huge sense of excitement, with the Red Strand a hive of activity for the twelve months she lay on the Black Rock and with many people in the district employed in the salvage operation. However, the most significant impact of the shipwreck, both locally and nationally, was the procurement of the rifles by the IRA before the arrival of the military. These were subsequently used by the West Cork flying columns in the fight for freedom. It is ironic that the HMS *Bluebell* that arrested the *Aud* off Banna Strand, Co. Kerry – thus preventing the huge consignment of German rifles from coming into the possession of the Irish Volunteers – should have been the one to tow the *Norwegian* into the Red Strand, thus providing a ready supply of arms for the local Volunteers. A hundred years on, this once proud ship rests in 60 feet of water, never to complete her voyage to Liverpool. She is a relic of a vicious war that was fought on our doorstep with a large loss of life. The *Norwegian* is now only visited by recreational divers in the search for

souvenirs or mementoes of a war that impacted on the West Cork coast and its inhabitants.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 Feen, T. 2015. 'SS *Pegu*: From Rangoon to Ringlea'. *Clonakilty Historical and Archaeological Journal* 1, pp. 189-99, at pp. 190-92.
- 2 Interview with Gerald Butler (attendant keeper at Galley Head Lighthouse), 2017.
- 3 Feen, T. 2012. *World War I and the West Cork Connection: Shipping Casualties on the Coast of West Cork*. Unpublished Master's Thesis, University College Cork.
- 4 King, G. L. 2017. *Shape a Course for Fastnet Attacks on Merchant Ships by U-boats during the Great War where the Survivors Landed in Kerry and West Cork*. Wexford, p. 113.
- 5 Interview with Gerald Butler, 2017.
- 6 Interview with Gerald Butler, 2017.
- 7 Interview with Paddy O'Sullivan (author of *The Sinking of the Lusitania*), 2017.
- 8 Larn, B. and Larn, R. 2002. *Shipwreck Index of Ireland*, vol. 6 (part of the *Shipwreck Index of the British Isles* series). Redhill, Surrey, section 4; 'SS *Norwegian* [+1917]', <https://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?10305> [accessed 23 Nov. 2017].
- 9 'Ships hit during WWI: *Norwegian*', https://uboat.net/wwi/ships_hit/4464.html [accessed 23 Nov. 2017]; 'SS *Norwegian* [+1917]', <https://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?10305> [accessed 23 Nov. 2017].
- 10 'Ships hit during WWI: *Norwegian*', https://uboat.net/wwi/ships_hit/4464.html [accessed 23 Nov. 2017].
- 11 'WWI U-boat successes ships hit by UC 43', <https://uboat.net/wwi/boats/successes/uc43.html> [accessed 23 Nov. 2017].
- 12 'WWI U-boats: UC 43', <https://uboat.net/wwi/boats/?boat=UC+43> [accessed 23 Nov. 2017].
- 13 Draper, D. 2000–01. 'Sinking and salvaging of the steamship *Norwegian*'. *Ardfield/Ratbarrary Journal* 3, pp. 40-41, at p. 40.
- 14 Interview with local historian Con Scully of Dunowen, 2012.
- 15 'SS *Norwegian* [+1917]', <https://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?10305> [accessed 23 Nov. 2017]
- 16 Interview with Paddy O'Sullivan, 2017.
- 17 Interview with Neilie O'Donovan of Donoure, 2012.
- 18 Deasy, L. 1983. *Towards Ireland Free*. Dublin, pp. 9-10.
- 19 WS no. 1,310: James Moloney, O/C Barryroe Company, Bandon Battalion, Cork III Brigade, Witness Statement, p. 2, Bureau of Military History (hereafter BMH), available to view at <http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1310.pdf#page=3> [accessed 23 Nov. 2017]. In a 1956 Witness Statement, James Hurley stated that six men of the Clonakilty Battalion made an attempted raid on the *Norwegian* in search of arms, while four others including Hurley were on guard duty onshore, but the mission was unsuccessful. The statement incorrectly states that the ship was torpedoed in April 1918. See WS no. 1,354: James Hurley, O/C Transport and Supply Clonakilty Battalion, Cork III Brigade, Witness Statement, p. 6, BMH, available to view at <http://www.bureauofmilitary-history.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1354.pdf#page=7> [accessed 23 Nov. 2017].
- 20 Interview with Paddy O'Sullivan, 2017.
- 21 Interview with James Barrett (diver) of Ring, 2017.
- 22 *Southern Star*, 2 June 1917.
- 23 *Cork Examiner*, 25 Jan. 1918, 6 Sep. 1918.
- 24 *Skibbereen Eagle*, 30 June 1917.
- 25 *Skibbereen Eagle*, 30 June 1917.
- 26 *Skibbereen Eagle*, 30 June 1917.
- 27 *Skibbereen Eagle*, 3 Nov. 1917, 1 Dec. 1917; *Southern Star*, 1 Dec. 1917.
- 28 *Southern Star*, 1 Dec. 1917. *Skibbereen Eagle*, 1 Dec. 1917, reported a slightly different figure with O'Driscoll fined £29 2s 6d.
- 29 *Skibbereen Eagle*, 1 Dec. 1917.
- 30 Interview with Jerry Daly of Dunowen, 2017.
- 31 *Skibbereen Eagle*, 2 Mar. 1918.
- 32 Interview with Con Scully of Dunowen, 2012. Con was a neighbour of Sam O'Brien who was a fisherman who took Con fishing as a child.
- 33 Interview with Paddy O'Sullivan, 2017.
- 34 Draper, 'Sinking and salvaging of the steamship *Norwegian*', p. 40.