

# SS *PEGU*: FROM RANGOON TO RINGLEA

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## Introduction

The Steam Ship *Pegu* was built in 1913 by Denny Bros of Dumbarton, Scotland.<sup>1</sup> Unusually, she was owned by two companies: British and Burmese Steam Navigation Co. Ltd. & Burmah Steam Ship Co. Ltd., and she was managed on

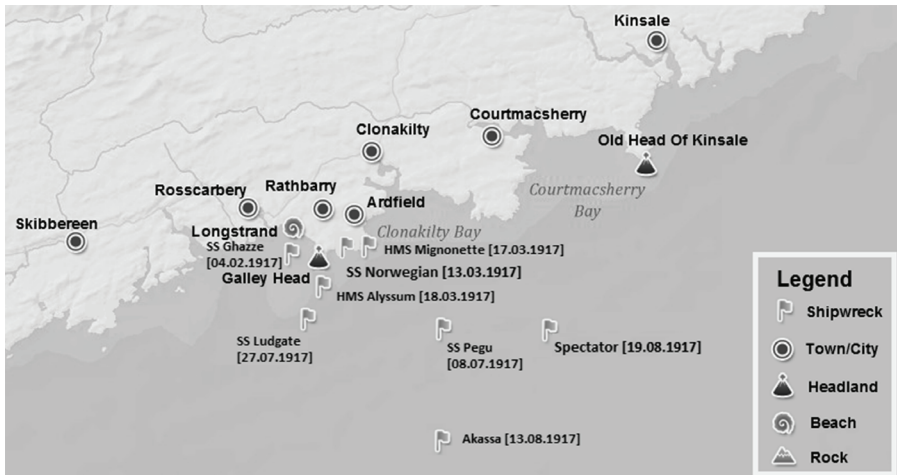


Fig. 1: Map of West Cork coastline showing locations of various wrecks (Map: author).

a day-to-day basis by Paddy Henderson & Co., Glasgow (Fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> Her tonnage was 6348 GRT<sup>3</sup> and she was 445.87ft in length.<sup>4</sup> She was equipped with one 4.7 inch, stern-mounted gun.<sup>5</sup> She made frequent voyages between England and Burma (now Myanmar). On her outward voyages to Burma, her cargo usually comprised steel, machinery and other goods from Glasgow, as well as cotton from Liverpool.

## South-western Approaches

On 4 August 1914, Britain declared war on Germany and its allies. The British immediately enforced a blockade of German seaways by the Royal Navy,<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 2: Henderson Steam Ship company flag (Photo: *Wreck Site*, <http://www.wrecksite.eu/imgBrowser.aspx?25032>).

which at the time was the most powerful navy in the world. The aim of the blockade was to starve the German people into submission, and it is estimated that 750,000 German civilians died of starvation during the course of World War I.<sup>7</sup> Germany retaliated with the implementation of their own blockade by

targeting all ships entering the waters around the British Isles.

The German naval surface fleet was reluctant to engage in battle with the Royal Navy due to the superiority of their British counterparts. However, the Germans were quick to recognise the value of their submarines (known as U-boats/*Unterseeboot*) and their potential to inflict extensive losses on Britain's merchant shipping fleet. At the start of World War I, Germany had a total of twenty-eight U-boats, of which three were constantly on patrol off the south coast of Ireland in the region known as the South-western Approaches.<sup>8</sup> The U-boats main area of operations extended from west of Fastnet Rock, off Schull, along the Cork/Waterford coastline and up into the Irish Sea. This area of coastline quickly acquired the name of Torpedo Alley among the Germans and allies alike due to the severe losses inflicted by the German U-boats during this time of warfare.<sup>9</sup> The U-boats usually laid in wait for their targets near lighthouses which helps to explain the losses of so many ships close to the Galley Head, Old Head of Kinsale, etc.

Until the sinking of the *Lusitania* on 7 May 1915 off the Old Head of Kinsale, the people of West Cork seemed far removed from the devastations of World War I. The loss of such an iconic vessel, together with the deaths of nearly 1200 people, brought home the reality and cruelty of war. The public outcry after the sinking of the *Lusitania* led to the curtailing of U-boat activity in the area for some time.

At the outbreak of World War I, the German submariners would usually approach a target and give those on board adequate time to evacuate the ship and take to their lifeboats; the ship would usually be sunk by gunfire or explosives which would give the Germans the opportunity to save their torpedoes. However, all this changed on 1 February 1917 when the Germans launched a campaign known as Unrestricted Submarine Warfare, where ships would be attacked without warning.<sup>10</sup> On St Patrick's Day 1917, the British minesweeper HMS *Mignonette* struck a mine off Sands Cove, Ardfield, and sank, with fourteen lives lost (Fig. 1).<sup>11</sup> The sound of the explosion was heard clearly by people at mass in Ardfield.<sup>12</sup> Survivors were rescued by a sister ship of the *Mignonette*: the HMS *Alyssum*. It sank in the same locality on the following day without any loss of life (Fig. 1).<sup>13</sup> Both ships were based at Queenstown (now Cobh) under the command of Admiral Lewis Bayly.<sup>14</sup> On

13 March 1917, the SS *Norwegian* which was on a voyage from New York to Liverpool struck a mine south-east of the Galley Head killing five of its crew (Figs 1 and 3).<sup>15</sup> The *Norwegian* was taken under tow in an attempt to beach her at Red Strand but she went aground at the Black Rock near Dunowen Point, Ardfield.<sup>16</sup> It was against this background that the SS *Pegu* entered Irish waters in the summer of 1917 (Fig. 1).



Fig. 3: The SS *Norwegian*. Photo courtesy of James Barrett.

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## The Final Voyage

In the spring of 1917, as the *Pegu* set sail from Rangoon in Burma, those on board would have been much relieved to be finally escaping the monsoon rains, oppressive heat and humidity. Their perilous voyage would take them several thousand miles across the Indian Ocean, up the Suez Canal, into the Mediterranean and through the Straits of Gibraltar, before skirting the south-west coast of Ireland and finally reaching their destination: the Port of Liverpool.

The ship's manifest showed that on this particular voyage, she carried 2200 tonnes of beans, 2000 tonnes of rice and general cargo.<sup>17</sup> However, what the ship's manifest did not disclose was the fact that she was also carrying a considerable amount of tin concentrate, known as cassiterite which was bound

for the ever-increasing British arms industry,<sup>18</sup> and a large consignment of Burmese teak, which would be used to reinforce the heavy gun emplacements in France and Belgium (the so-called Western Front).<sup>19</sup>

Those on board the *Pegu* sighted the Irish coast on Sunday morning, 8 July 1917.<sup>20</sup> By now, the US had finally entered the war on the British side and had sent thirty-six warships to Queenstown in an attempt to defeat the U-boat menace.<sup>21</sup> The Germans were sinking British merchant vessels faster than the ships could be replaced. The British badly needed the cargoes of food and supplies for the war effort.

The *Pegu* was proceeding along Clonakilty Bay at a speed of 10.5 knots when she was rocked by a violent explosion at 2:54pm, 7 miles south-east of Ringlea Point, Ardfield. The 4<sup>th</sup> Engineer, Robert Maxwell, aged twenty-two was the only fatality.<sup>22</sup> The four passengers (one of whom was a female) and ninety-six crew took to the lifeboats and were rescued by minesweepers and taken to Queenstown.<sup>23</sup> At the time it was assumed that the *Pegu* had struck a German mine. German war records later showed that she had in fact been torpedoed by the German U-boat *U57* under the command of Carl-Siegfried Ritter von Georg (Fig. 4).<sup>24</sup> The U-boat's log showed that she passed westwards beyond the lighthouse at the Old Head of Kinsale at 10:48am and that she spotted several small targets in Clonakilty Bay but chose to wait for a bigger target to come along in an effort to conserve her meagre supply of torpedoes.<sup>25</sup> Eventually, they spotted a larger steamer travelling on its own, unprotected. They dived, launched a torpedo and scored a direct hit on the ship; the ship struck was of course the *Pegu*. The U-boat's log further stated that the ship sunk in six minutes.<sup>26</sup> The *U57* then spotted several warships to the west at which time she submerged and escaped.

Von Georg was an interesting character who survived WWI and was tried for war crimes at the end of the war. He was acquitted and served again in World War II.<sup>27</sup> During the course of WWI he sank a total of 200,187 tonnes of merchant shipping (which included seventy-five ships during his time on the *U57*) and the minesweeper HMS *Genista*.<sup>28</sup> Another of the *U57*'s victims was an Irish ship, the *Aylevarroo*, which was torpedoed and sunk off Cork Harbour with the loss of twenty lives.<sup>29</sup> The *U57* was one of Germany's newer U-boats having been commissioned on 6 July 1916 and, in contrast to many other U-boats, it survived the war and was surrendered to the French on 24 November 1918.<sup>30</sup>



Fig. 4: Photograph of Carl-Siegfried Ritter von Georg, Commander of *U 57* which sank the *SS Pegu* (Photo: <http://uboat.net/wwi/men/commanders/85.html>).

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## The Wreck

In August 1985 a Union Hall fisherman, Graham Williams, was on board his prawn potter, *The Island Fisher*, in Clonakilty Bay looking on his echo sounder for muddy ground in which to set his prawn pots when an object which looked like a ship appeared on the screen. Graham reported the co-ordinates to the British Admiralty who confirmed that he had located the wreck of the *Pegu*.<sup>31</sup> Some months later, a specialised diving vessel called *Drive Performer* spent some months anchored over the wreck of the *Pegu*. Amongst the divers were two New Zealanders: Willie Auld and Ross Bullock. Initially the priority was to recover as much tin as possible but after a considerable effort no tin could

be located. It was said locally that a large amount of wolframite – a form of tungsten steel used in armour piercing shells – was located and successfully recovered.<sup>32</sup> Those involved in the salvage effort became aware of the presence of large amounts of teak, some of which was badly damaged and appeared to have been eaten away by molluscs known as sea snails. Other lengths of teak were largely undamaged and were in fact in incredibly good condition considering that they had been immersed in sea water for some seventy years. Some token landings of teak were brought to Kinsale to appease the Irish Custom Service but it was said, at the time, that large amounts of teak had been sent directly back to the UK. The *Drive Performer* was later painted red and re-named the *Archimides*, and was used on diving expeditions on the *Lusitania*.<sup>33</sup>

In 1997 Galley Head native, Gerald Butler, was fishing in Clonakilty Bay on his Union Hall-based trawler, the *Gabrielle*. While pulling in his trawl he discovered a baulk of teak entangled in the nets.<sup>34</sup> He successfully landed the teak in Union Hall and subsequently gave it to the late Nick Gotto; Gotto employed a local carpenter, John Shepherd, who transformed the teak into a beautiful kitchen unit in Myross, Union Hall. This is the only known use of the teak from the *Pegu* in Ireland.

In the UK, however, the *Pegu* teak has been used in a variety of high-end products. In Bethnal Green in London the teak was transformed into a beautiful memorial bench dedicated to 174 persons who died in a stampede in an underground train station during a World War II air raid (Fig. 5).

It has been confirmed that teak from the *Pegu* has been stockpiled with a view to being used in future restorations of Lord Nelson's flagship, HMS *Victory*, from the battle of Trafalgar in 1805.<sup>35</sup> The teak has also been used in restoring railway carriages in the Bo'ness and Kinneil railway line in Scotland. John Claridge Boats have used the teak in the construction of small racing dinghies.<sup>36</sup>

The *Cutty Sark* was a famous British sailing ship, known as a tea clipper, which had been built in 1869 but had fallen into serious disrepair. A £25,000,000 restoration of the *Cutty Sark* commenced in November 2006 but in May 2007 disaster struck when it was seriously damaged by fire.<sup>37</sup> Much of the ship was destroyed. Most of the ship's timber was Burmese teak which was a scarce commodity and those involved in the restoration insisted that any teak to be used should be teak from a similar date. After some time, those



Fig. 5: Part of Bethnal Green Memorial, London. Photo courtesy of Harry Paticas.

involved in the project became aware that teak had been recovered from the *Pegu* in Clonakilty Bay in the late 1980s.<sup>38</sup> A Shetland Islander named Magnie Mann who worked in the salvaging trade was approached to lead the project to recover teak from the *Pegu*. In 2011, he sailed his boat, the *Constructor*, to West Cork basing himself in Kinsale. In the space of two months, some 80 tonnes of Burmese teak was recovered by crane and winch.<sup>39</sup> All of the teak was landed in Kinsale and transported by lorry to the UK (Fig. 6). The work to lift the timber was done with a remotely operated salvage grab attached to a crane and was viewed on two screens. The lengths of timber were 20–30ft long and roughly 18 inches squared; some of them weighed up to 3 tonnes.<sup>40</sup> Mann later said that ‘the timber was in “brand new” condition ... as it had been buried in silt ... We could see the whole engine room, and derricks that had broken off, and cups and boots. It was amazing to see these things’.<sup>41</sup> The teak was later washed and air-dried; then slowly kiln-dried. At the time, it was worth about \$3000 per cubic metre dry weight.<sup>42</sup>





Fig. 6: Teak salvaged from the *Pegu* in 2011 in Kinsale. Photo courtesy of Phil Devitt.

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## Conclusion

A number of subtle similarities exist between the wreck of the *Pegu* and that of the more famous *Lusitania* which lies a few miles to the east in about the same depth of water (c. 300ft). Both ships were torpedoed by German U-boats and were en route to Liverpool when they were sunk. The nature and content of both vessels and their cargoes still attract attention from naval historians and maritime explorers. Both wrecks are believed to be in an advanced state of decay and with the passage of time, will eventually disintegrate. The *Pegu* is an unremarkable wreck but is one of many thousands of victims of an invisible and unpredictable enemy: the U-boat. Merchant sailors from a variety of countries, including Ireland, lost their lives on these vessels. World War I which was known as the Great War was supposed to have been the war to end all wars, sadly this was not the case.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 'SS Pegu [+1917]', *Wreck Site*, <http://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?71187> [accessed 23/09/15]; 'List of Casualties', *Wreck Site*, <http://www.wrecksite.eu/casualty-list.aspx?PBz/CC3ShCEnPp0vGGPTpg==#71187> [accessed 23/09/15]. A total of five ships built by Denny Bros were named 'Pegu'; while photographs of ships carrying this name exist, it is not possible to verify if any of them are the *Pegu* built in 1913.
- 2 'Pegu 1913', *The Clyde Built Ships*, [http://www.clydeships.co.uk/view.php?year\\_built=&builder=&ref=15466&vessel=PEGU](http://www.clydeships.co.uk/view.php?year_built=&builder=&ref=15466&vessel=PEGU) [accessed 26/11/15]. Thanks to David Asprey, Caledonian Maritime Research Trust, for clarifying the names of the companies.
- 3 Gross Register Tonnage.
- 4 'SS Pegu [+1917]'.
- 5 Larn, B. and Larn, R. 2002. *Shipwrecks Index of Ireland*. Surrey.
- 6 O'Sullivan, P. 1998. *The Lusitania: Unravelling the Mysteries*. Cork, p. 51.
- 7 O'Sullivan, *The Lusitania*, p. 52.
- 8 O'Sullivan, *The Lusitania*, p. 53.
- 9 O'Sullivan, *The Lusitania*, p. 53.
- 10 Nolan, L. and Nolan, J. E. 2009. *Secret Victory: Ireland and the War at Sea 1914-1918*. Cork, p. 186.
- 11 Pocock, W. 2009. 'Daily Event for March 17', *Maritime Quest*, [http://www.maritimequest.com/daily\\_event\\_archive/2009/03\\_march/17\\_city\\_of\\_memphis\\_hms\\_mignonette.htm](http://www.maritimequest.com/daily_event_archive/2009/03_march/17_city_of_memphis_hms_mignonette.htm) [accessed 20/09/2015]; see also 'HMS Mignonette [+1917]', *Wreck Site*, <http://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?14882> [accessed 29/09/15].
- 12 Paddy O'Sullivan pers. comm.
- 13 'HMS Alyssum ?[+1917]', *Wreck Site*, <http://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?71189> [accessed 29/09/15].
- 14 HMS Alyssum ?[+1917]'.
- 15 Deasy, L. 1973. *Towards Ireland Free: The West Cork Brigade in the War of Independence 1917-1921*. Dublin, pp. 8-9.
- 16 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.
- 17 'List of Casualties', *Wreck Site*, <http://www.wrecksite.eu/casualty-list.aspx?PBz/CC3ShCEnPp0vGGPTpg==#71187> [accessed 23/09/15].
- 18 Paddy O'Sullivan pers. comm.
- 19 'SS Pegu [+1917]'.
- 20 'SS Pegu [+1917]'.
- 21 Nolan and Nolan, *Secret Victory*, p. 228. American assistance, combined with the implementation of the convoy system, led to the eventual defeat of the U-boats.
- 22 Larn and Larn, *Shipwrecks Index*, vol. 6, section 4; 'SS Pegu [+1917]'.
- 23 Larn and Larn, *Shipwrecks Index*, vol. 6, section 4.

- 24 Feen, *World War I and the West Cork Connection*, 'WWI U-boats: U57', <http://uboat.net/wwi/boats/index.html?boat=57> [accessed 20/09/15]; 'WWI U-boat commanders: Carl-Siegfried Ritter von Georg', <http://uboat.net/wwi/men/commanders/85.html> [accessed 20/09/15].
- 25 Feen, *World War I and the West Cork Connection*.
- 26 Feen, *World War I and the West Cork Connection*.
- 27 'WWI U-boat commanders: Carl-Siegfried Ritter von Georg'.
- 28 'WWI U-boat commanders: Carl-Siegfried Ritter von Georg'.
- 29 'SS Aylevarroo (+1917)', *Wreck Site*, <http://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?10518> [accessed 01/10/15].
- 30 'WWI U-boats: U57'.
- 31 Graham Williams pers. comm.
- 32 Colin Barnes pers. comm.
- 33 Paddy O'Sullivan pers. comm.
- 34 Gerald Butler pers. comm.
- 35 Alice Wareham pers. comm.
- 36 <http://www.news.johnclaridgeboats.co.uk/> [accessed 01/10/15].
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- 38 'SS *Pegu* [+1917]'.
- 39 Griffiths, *Shetland Times*, 28 Oct. 2011.
- 40 Griffiths, *Shetland Times*, 28 Oct. 2011.
- 41 Griffiths, *Shetland Times*, 28 Oct. 2011.
- 42 Griffiths, *Shetland Times*, 28 Oct. 2011.

