

The Sinking of the R.M.S. Leinster Recalled

21 POST OFFICE OFFICIALS PERISH

[The recent death of Mr. J. J. Higgins, Overseer, Dublin Postal District, recalled the sinking of the R.M.S. Leinster a month before the conclusion of the first World War. The following article was written by Mr. Higgins and is reproduced from an early edition of the POSTAL WORKER. Mr. Higgins was the sole survivor of the Post Office staff which manned the ill-fated ship and we are sure his narrative will be read with interest not only by those who recall the loss of their worthy colleagues, but also by those now in the Service to whom mention of the sad event conveys only an imperfect picture of the harrowing scene enacted off Dun Laoghaire. Mr. Higgins was a staunch and veteran member of the Union prior to his promotion to the Overseer class.—Ed., POSTAL WORKER.]

On the morning of the 10th October, 1918, the R.M.S., *Leinster*, left Dun Laoghaire on her last journey. The weather was somewhat blustery and a heavy sea was running. In the Post Office on the vessel work was going on as usual, and as it was the fourth year of alarms the staff had become somewhat hardened to the danger of submarines, especially in a rough sea. When the *Leinster*, however, was about twelve miles out a fearful explosion shook the whole ship and played fearful havoc in the Post Office. I happened to be working in the Registered Letter section and the force of the explosion knocked me down and partly stunned me. When I recovered everything was dark, as all the lights had been broken. I found that the corner of the office where I was escaped the full burst of the torpedo. I should perhaps explain that the Post Office was situated two decks down, the floor being about three feet below sea level. The office was a self-contained compartment with only one exit by means of a stairs leading to a compartment above (known as the shed). Underneath the office there were two other rooms, one used as a ship's stores and the other being used as a resting room for the Post Office clerks during the wait at Holyhead.

The Torpedo Explodes

The torpedo exploded in the middle of the Post Office, destroying the floor and the stairs (the only means of escape), which fell down into the storeroom underneath and all the men working in the fore part of the office were either killed instantly by the explosion or engulfed by the falling structure and drowned by the tons of water pouring in through the hole in the side of the ship. The after portion of the office being further away from the scene of the explosion, was not so terribly damaged, and I think that the men working in this

part of the office ran forward towards the stairs and were also thrown into the ship's storeroom and drowned. When I pulled myself together I found that I was alone in the dark, and judging by the noise of rushing water I thought that the ship was going straight to the bottom and that it was up to me to get out of the office before she went too far down. By this time the water in the office was up to my chin and I started to swim through it, and to this day I vividly recall swimming through a sea of white letters which were floating on top of the water. When I reached the place where the stairs should be I was horrified to find that they had been blown away, leaving only a large hole through which a pale glimmer of daylight was shining. At this stage I began to think of the next world, but after a time observed a couple of strands of electric wire hanging loose from the roof of the office and grasping these I held on until the rising water brought me under the opening. After several vain attempts to grasp something solid I succeeded in getting hold of the edge of the opening and drew myself into the upper portion of the office (known as the shed). After that it was easy to get out on the main deck. My first impression was one of relief that the ship was still above water and not half way to the bottom as I had thought while in the darkness of the office. The ship was very much down by the head and looking aft I saw that all the passengers had gone to that portion of the ship. Up to this time the Postal officials and some of the crew who happened to be in the fore part of the ship at the time were the only sufferers. Looking at the mass of people I knew that I would not have much chance among them, so I concluded that I would remain in the fore part of the ship until she went down, and, judging from her position, I concluded that she would not sink before help arrived. The life belts for the use of the Postal officials were hanging in that portion of the office previously referred to as the shed, so I went down again and got one and returned on deck. As I reached the deck I observed one of the forward life boats being lowered and concluded that this was an opportunity not to be overlooked, so I got over the rails and lowered myself into the boat by means of a rope, arriving there just as she was being shoved away from the ship. We were only a few yards away when the second torpedo

struck the *Leinster* and she was practically broken in two pieces, the whole centre portion being blown sky-high. The life boat, being so near the sinking ship, it was in great danger of being drawn into the vortex and it was only the good seamanship of the crew that saved the boat. After being adrift for some hours we were rescued by a British destroyer. The British sailors did everything possible for the people they had taken aboard and after some hours searching for further survivors we were landed at Dun Laoghaire, where a sailor of one of the ships who knew me exclaimed: "You are the only Post Office man I saw coming ashore yet." That was a bad shock as up to this time I thought that some others might have got clear and been taken on some of the other ships. I was taken to the Red Cross station at Dun Laoghaire where I received every attention, being fitted with some dry underclothing and afterwards sent to Dublin in a military lorry.

I am not likely to forget the happenings of that day, but the one particular occurrence which is burned in my memory is when the *Leinster* plunged to her last resting place to see hundreds of people who could not get off in time being brought down with the ship.

THOSE WHO PERISHED

R. Patterson, Assistant Supt.
 P. P. Murphy, S.C. & T.
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 J. Blake, "
 J. Warbrook, "
 J. H. Bradley, "
 J. Dolan, "
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