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Lusitania Rising



Victim of a German U-boat, tomb of 1,198 innocents, and enduring object of controversy, the *Lusitania* has been resting at the bottom of the Celtic Sea for 93 years. Her secrets are finally surfacing—and history may never be the same.

By Hampton Sides and Anne Goodwin Sides. Photographed by Julian Dufort.

"Even now, I think of what it must have been like," boatman Colin Barnes says as he stands at the wheel of his 36-foot catamaran. "A thousand people in the water, flotsam strewn about. Cries for help, children drowning. And off in *that* direction, a tiny periscope disappearing beneath the waves."

The wreck lies directly below us, 300 feet down, slumbering in cold, dark water clouded with plankton. Barnes, the irascible, chain-smoking skipper of the *Holly Jo*, hovers over the site, which he has visited at least 50 times in his long career as a fisherman and professional whale watcher in County Cork. He consults his GPS and feathers the diesel engine to steer us to the exact spot where tech divers plan to drop a line and descend into the murk.

"That's the *Lucy* there—we're just now passing over her bows," Barnes says, pointing out a huge ghostly form on his sonar scanner: the 787-foot RMS *Lusitania*, pride of the Cunard line, the "Greyhound of the Sea," and one of the worst maritime disasters in history. "You can see how she's standing proud of the seabed—but what a mess! See all that gunk there? It's just a bloody tangle of fishing nets."

Barnes rolls another cigarette and darts a weather eye off his port side. Along the gauzy smudge of Irish coastline some eleven miles to the northeast, we can make out a faint spike—the lighthouse at the Old Head of Kinsale. Otherwise, it's whitecapped seas in all directions, and the *Holly Jo* heaves so crazily that some of us onboard begin to do the same.

Barnes glances at the wreck's engineering blueprints and grins. "Here's the spot," he says. He kills the engine and plunks a cinder block into the water. The attached chain unspools as the makeshift anchor plummets to the bottom. Karl Bredendieck lowers his small submersible robot, or ROV (remotely operated vehicle), off the side of the boat. Sitting at the toggle controls inside the wheelhouse of the *Holly Jo*, he speeds the ROV through the depths, aiming for the wreck.

Now divers Eoin McGarry and Stewart Andrews gear up in their black dry suits and rebreathing equipment. Two of the best technical divers in Ireland, they consider this wreck the Everest of their sport—a coveted but dangerous destination that demands supreme concentration of mind and body. Last night at a pub near Kinsale, they and the other five divers assembled here had done a decidedly un-Irish thing: Nervous, excited, and concerned about dehydration at depth, they had filled their pints with milk.

There's a ruckus of hissing hoses, clanking tanks, and suctioning buoyancy bladders as McGarry and Andrews waddle up to the gunwales in full dive regalia and splash into the frigid Celtic Sea. As they descend along the shot-line, the computers onboard their dive systems constantly recalibrate the gas mixtures while recycling all the oxygen—so that, eerily, there are no bubbles. A far cry from the rudimentary systems of the Jacques Cousteau era, these "rebreathers"—perfected only in the last decade—allow people to go to previously impossible depths. The two divers soon disappear from sight.

About five minutes later, we cluster around the TV monitor in the wheelhouse and watch McGarry and Andrews

floating among the *Lusitania*'s barnacle-encrusted bulwarks. At first, the picture is muddy. The divers' fins keep stirring up gray plumes of fine debris. Cod and pollack dart from the shadows, and rotten nets thread like cobwebs over jagged plates of metal.

Then Andrews drifts into view. He stares into the ROV's camera, his masked face beaming in the acrid light. He looks down and scoops something up in his gloved hand, a small cache of metal. Andrews holds the specimens in the full glare, and it's unmistakable to us all.

In his hand lie pieces of history: several rounds of .303 ammunition, probably made by Remington in America and intended for the British Army. They are bullets that were expressly manufactured to kill Germans in World War I—bullets that British officials in Whitehall and American officials in Washington have long denied were onboard the *Lusitania*. Yet all around Andrews are cases and cases of .303s—thousands and possibly millions of rounds. The brass jackets are still shiny, and they gleam like talismans in the robot's light. Although the wreck has been dived hundreds of times over the decades, none of that ammo had ever surfaced. Because the ship settled on her starboard side—the side that was torpedoed by a German U-boat on May 7, 1915—the *Lusitania* has effectively been lying on her secrets for 93 years. Now, for the first time, hard evidence of the truth of the German claim rests in a human hand.

Up in the wheelhouse, we all send up a cheer. The .303 rounds are exactly what the divers were hoping to find, exactly the reason we're out here on this windswept day, pitching in the swells eleven miles off the green coast of Ireland.

This breakthrough late-September dive is part of an effort to solve the last lingering riddles of the *Lusitania*. Nowadays, it's almost impossible for us to imagine the psychic fallout caused by the disaster. The tragedy seemed to puncture the last shroud of innocence in the Modern Age, revealing whole new categories of human horror. And it's often forgotten what a magnificent piece of naval architecture the ship was. The *Lusitania* once held the record for the fastest transatlantic crossing. In 1907, the four-funneled steamer traversed the North Atlantic in an extraordinary four days, nineteen hours, and 52 minutes. She was launched nearly six years before her White Star Line competitor, the *Titanic*, and remained the sleek paragon of elegant travel for three years after the *Titanic*'s demise.

But on May 7, 1915, while she was en route from New York to Liverpool, fate finally caught up with the *Lusitania* when a German U-boat came upon the ship in Irish waters. Its skipper, *Kapitänleutnant* Walther Schwieger, found to his surprise and delight that she was without an escort. (For reasons profoundly murky to history, the British Navy recalled the cruiser that had been assigned to guide the *Lusitania* into Liverpool.) Schwieger promptly put a torpedo in her hull.

But that was not what ultimately sank the *Lusitania*: A second, far more powerful explosion—whose origin has never been determined—rocked the ship fifteen seconds later, causing her to list precariously and take on lakes of water. Within eighteen minutes, her bow plunged to the bottom. Because the ship was more than twice as long as the water was deep, her stern remained pitched in the air for a terrible moment before it, too, sagged beneath the waves eleven miles off the Old Head of Kinsale, where picnickers watched the horrible event.

Nearly 1,200 people, including 128 Americans, went down with her. Many passengers were trapped in the newly installed elevators, which had stopped working when the power shut down. Among the more prominent victims were millionaire playboy Alfred Vanderbilt, Broadway producer Charles Frohman, and Irish art collector Sir Hugh Lane, who was believed to be carrying lead tubes filled with works by Rubens, Rembrandt, Monet, and other preeminent painters, all purchased in New York and insured for \$4 million. The Royal Navy cruiser that had been mysteriously recalled earlier was dispatched from Queenstown (now Cobh) to undertake a rescue, but just as it hove into view of the survivors, it was recalled *a second time*—leaving the drowning hundreds desperately waving in disbelief.

The sinking of the *Lusitania*—widely considered one of the first acts of large-scale terrorism in modern history—served as the crucial rallying cry for America's entry, two years later, into World War I. The tragedy set off a paroxysm of recruitment propaganda—including, perhaps most famously, a poster that depicted a beautiful young mother freefalling through the ocean depths while clutching her infant, the last bubbles trailing from their lips. The poster bore a single word: ENLIST.

In a hastily arranged inquiry that proved little more than a sham tribunal, Royal Navy officials tried with limited success to scapegoat the *Lusitania*'s captain, William Turner, for failing to elude anticipated German subs with a zigzagging course. In the end, most people in Great Britain and the United States simply attributed the sinking to the unspeakable bloodthirstiness of the "Pirate Huns."

But Germany always contended, and experts have long argued, that the *Lusitania*, contrary to war rules as well as Cunard's public statements, was stuffed with munitions secretly intended for Britain and her allies, and that these caused the second, catastrophic explosion. Indeed, the *Lusitania*'s manifest lists many tons of war materials—including some four million rounds of ammunition—an inconvenient fact that the British always tried to keep from public knowledge.

As divers McGarry and Andrews begin their hour-long decompression, Colin Barnes brings up the man behind this expedition, the American venture capitalist who conceived and paid for it—and who cares more about the *Lusitania*

than any person alive. He's the gray eminence, the octogenarian sport-diving entrepreneur who, among other things, owns the *Lusitania* and has over the past several decades spent a small fortune doggedly defending his title as "salvor-in-possession." Eight thousand miles away, in his adobe house in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the old man is waiting for news.

"We're still in cell-phone range, you know," Barnes says. "Don't you think we ought to call Mr. Bemis?"

A few weeks earlier, we spent five days with F. Gregg Bemis Jr. in and around the intensely quaint port of Kinsale, his usual base of operations when he is working on the *Lusitania* project. The weather was horrible, making any diving impossible. But Bemis had brought his engineering drawings of the ship, and for hours we sat in pubs talking about his long fascination with the Lonely Lady, as he calls her. It's a complicated story, one that required many conversations, and many pints of Guinness, to absorb. "I'm a person who's dedicated to resolution," Bemis said. "For me, the *Lusitania* is a problem that needs to be solved."

Bemis is an avuncular-looking man with downy white hair and sartorial tendencies that lean heavily toward New England preppy. A Republican in a famously touchy-feely town, he writes a biweekly column for the *Santa Fe New Mexican* and plays the affable grump on a weekly political talk-radio show. Animated by a need "to push water uphill," as he puts it, he has run unsuccessfully for New Mexico political offices five times—twice against Bill Richardson.

He's a Stanford graduate in economics with an MBA from Harvard who had a hand in starting over 40 companies. A Marine who saw combat in Korea and the son of a celebrated competitive sailor from Boston, Bemis is outlandishly fit for a man of 80 and sport-dives all over the world—Fiji, the Galapagos, Bonaire, the Bahamas. "I guess I'm just blessed with good genes," he says.

He has been coming to Ireland since the late sixties, when he first joined in a salvage partnership with several Massachusetts colleagues who'd bought the title to the wreck at auction from Cunard's underwriting company for a mere £1,000. (Observing a curious but not uncommon superstition of the high seas, the Cunard company completely wrote off the *Lusitania* in 1915 and today treats her as though she never existed; inquiries to the company regarding the ship tend to be met with a tone of deep puzzlement.) Bemis eventually bought out his partners and became the wreck's sole owner in 1982.

At first, his interest in the *Lusitania* was frankly mercenary—he hoped to set up a commercial salvage operation to harvest brass, copper, and other metals. But because dive science was in its infancy, Bemis found it both impractical and dangerous to send teams down to explore the wreck. It wasn't until 1982 that he was able to mount a successful salvage operation, hauling up three propellers, watches, cutlery, and other artifacts from the ship—some of which

ended up in museums and some of which were sold at auction. By the mid-nineties, with the advent of rebreather technology—which allowed for deeper, safer, and longer dives without the risks of nitrogen narcosis—Bemis was able to tap into Ireland's burgeoning subculture of "technical divers." Over the past decade, this fraternity of hardy souls has undertaken several hundred dives of the wreck. (On one of them, a few years ago, a diver spotted the .303 bullets moments before he had to ascend; at the time, it was illegal to remove them from the wreck.)

But Bemis has had an extremely trying relationship with the country's government ministries. In the 1980s, Ireland adopted new U.N. maritime laws that extended territorial waters to twelve miles off national coastlines, thus placing the *Lusitania* just inside Irish domain and suddenly subjecting her to a raft of new restrictions. Irish authorities then began to throw every imaginable obstacle in Bemis's way. Over the past decade, Bemis has fought four protracted legal cases—in the U.S. admiralty courts, in the British and Irish maritime courts, and, most ambitious of all, in the Irish Supreme Court—and has defeated all challengers. "I suppose you could say that taking on the State of Ireland is one definition of insanity," he says. "But I don't see it that way. It's just part of the process of getting to the answers."

Even so, the *Lusitania* is Ireland's one and only "underwater heritage site," and as a result, the Department of the Environment's Underwater Archaeology Unit bedevils him with arcane requirements and an unbelievable amount of paperwork. His salvor-in-possession status entitles Bemis only to the ship itself and all objects formerly belonging to the Cunard company; any personal effects and cargo must go through an elaborate quitclaim process administered by the Irish Receiver of Wrecks.

Bemis has been respectful of this process—and remains aware that the *Lusitania* is, in fact, a massive underwater crypt. Even so, people have inevitably called him a grave robber. Many critics of his efforts think the ship should be left alone as a permanent memorial to its victims. Around Kinsale, Bemis draws stares and raised eyebrows; people generally seem to assume that when he's in town something juicy and sinister must be afoot.

After all, few stories loom as large in the Irish imagination as the *Lusitania*. In towns along the Cork coast, one finds shrines and markers commemorating the sinking and the valiant rescue efforts mounted by local boat owners that saved the lives of some 700 passengers and crew. In the melancholy port city of Cobh, 193 *Lusitania* victims, most of them unidentified, lie buried in mass graves in a beautiful cemetery on the edge of town.

Say what you will about Bemis but, whatever you do, don't call him obsessed. He cringes at the word. The subculture of deep-wreck diving and salvage, he notes, is populated by a large, colorful cast of obsessives—rogues, gold diggers, drama queens, tortured souls. "The nutcases," he calls them, with a slightly contemptuous chuckle.

Certainly the *Lusitania*, with her many historical intrigues and forensic cul-de-sacs, has served as an unusually powerful magnet for the obsessive type. Dire things have tended to befall those who've become too deeply involved with this endlessly fascinating but seriously haunted wreck—over the years, people have gone broke, gotten bent, turned to drink, run afoul of the law, landed in mental institutions, even committed suicide. But Bemis treats the *Lusitania* more like a long-term business, one that may or may not make him any money but has the potential for larger and more abstract payoffs. For him, it's a kind of epic chess game that's now been in progress for four decades—half his life. Each year, he makes a few more moves.

The object of all this maneuvering is to get at the mystery that lies at the heart of the *Lusitania*'s precipitous sinking: What caused that infamous second explosion? "It's almost impossible for a single torpedo to sink a ship 787 feet long in eighteen minutes," Bemis says, noting that the *Titanic*, suffering from a much more serious initial rupture of her hull, took well over two hours to go down. Over the years, various theories have been put forward to account for the second blast: an explosion in the boiler room, a second torpedo hit from *another* U-boat, a massive ignition of suspended coal dust in the fuel bunkers.

Titanic explorer Robert Ballard, who, with Bemis's blessing, led a 1993 National Geographic Society-funded expedition to study the *Lusitania*, is the chief proponent of the coal-dust theory. But don't get Bemis started on that subject unless you want an earful. "Ballard is a prima donna, and his theory is *nuts!*" he says. "In all of maritime history, there has never been a reported incidence of a coal-dust explosion sinking a ship."

Bemis believes the *Lusitania* went down for much more disturbing and nefarious reasons. "With this latest finding," he says, referring to the September dive, "we now know that the manifest was right. Those four million rounds of .303s were not just some private hunter's stash. Now that we've found it, the British can't deny anymore that there was ammunition onboard. That raises the question: What else was onboard that shouldn't have been there? There were literally tons and tons of stuff stored in the unrefrigerated cargo holds that were dubiously marked CHEESE, BUTTER, and OYSTERS. I've always felt there were some significant high explosives in the holds—shells, powder, gun cotton—that were set off by the torpedo and the inflow of water. *That's* what sank the ship."

Which leads to his next chess move: Bemis is now raising the capital that will enable him, at last, to undertake a full-scale forensic examination next summer in order to get to the bottom of what happened on May 7, 1915. He'll hire teams of commercial divers to work around the clock in heated suits, living inside a pressurized chamber aboard a large ship and traveling back and forth to the wreck site on a small transport vehicle. Working in shifts, they will cut into the port side of the hull, vacuum out the silt, investigate the torpedo hole, lift relevant artifacts, and take scrapings of the twisted and deformed metal to determine the nature of the explosion that took the ship down. While they're at it, they might also poke around for those Monet and Rubens masterpieces, though Bemis is not too optimistic about the prospects. "Yeah," he says wryly. "Mr. Lane's paintings are down there somewhere. But by this

point, I think they're all watercolors."

Next summer's dive will be an enormously ambitious and expensive operation—costing upward of \$4 million, including the price of filming a documentary—but Bemis believes it's the only way to unravel the ship's great enigma. The implications of his research could be vast and far-reaching. Proving that the *Lusitania* was indeed carrying high explosives onboard would potentially rewrite the history of World War I—and would go far in absolving Schwieger's decision to torpedo a luxury liner filled with innocents. Ultimately, the research may cast shadows on the reputations of various American and British officials—particularly Sir Winston Churchill, who, as First Lord of the Admiralty during World War I, is widely thought to have known much more than he ever let on about the *Lusitania*'s final voyage. "It is most important to attract neutral shipping to our shores, in the hope especially of embroiling the U.S. with Germany," Churchill wrote in a confidential letter shortly before the *Lusitania*'s sinking. "For our part we want the traffic—the more the better, and if some of it gets into trouble, better still."

Bemis insists he has no national axe to grind. "Look, I'm not pro-German or anti-British," he says. "And I happen to think Churchill was a great man. It's just a question of pure truth. It's a question of having history properly written. I don't believe in official cover-ups. If governments can say anything they want about their misdeeds, I think you're setting up the world for more and more trouble."

With the *Lusitania*, Bemis has not always been content to leave the firsthand exploring to others. He traveled to his wreck in a Delta submarine in 1993, and four years ago he actually dove her. This was a significant feat for a man of his years—he was 76 at the time—and he believes it may have qualified as an age-depth record. When he landed on one of the ship's air condensers, Bemis did something uncharacteristically sentimental: He took out his regulator and planted a big kiss right on the *Lusitania*'s decks. Despite its sorry condition, he thought she was beautiful. "The *Lusitania*," he wrote in his foreword to one history of the ship, "remains a magnificent creation."

Yet Bemis seems to have recognized that time is running out—not only for him but for the wreck itself. Ninety-three years of pressure, tides, corrosion, microbial digestion, and those infernal fishnets have conspired to make her fragile. As if the *Lusitania* hadn't suffered enough, the Royal Navy depth-charged the ship in the fifties, leaving her decks and hull pocked beyond recognition. "She's like Swiss cheese, and the seabed around her is littered with unexploded hedgehog mines," says Des Quigley, a Dublin-based technical diver who repeatedly dove the wreck, with Bemis's consent, back in the nineties. "At first we thought they were Champagne bottles—they were just rolling around on the bottom."

British Navy officials later claimed they had only been "practicing" on the ship, though more conspiracy-minded

observers have suggested that in fact the Brits were deliberately trying to destroy evidence in order to stymie future exploration. "There's no doubt at all about it that the Royal Navy and the British government have taken very considerable steps over the years to try to prevent whatever can be found out about the Lusitania," says Professor William Kingston of Dublin's Trinity College, an expert on British intelligence in World War I.

Another problem Bemis has had to contend with is divers exploring the wreck without his permission—and lifting trophies for themselves. He calls them pirates, and although he knows that valuable relics have been taken from the Lusitania—the ship's plundered telegraph, he claims, now sits rusting in the London garden of a certain British diver—he says pursuing these "scoundrels" while the ship slowly collapses into oblivion is a waste of precious time. "Bemis is an old man now, and he's looking at a much bigger picture," Des Quigley says. "You have to admire him because he's outlasted most of the lunatics involved. We're now in the third act of a Shakespearean play, and he wants to get it sorted out once and for all."

Having definitively proved his ownership, Bemis has noticed a distinct improvement in his relations with Irish government officials in recent years. "I say fair play to him," says Fionnbarr Moore, senior marine archaeologist with the National Monuments Service in Dublin. "What's interesting with Gregg Bemis's work is that, unlike most wreck owners, he doesn't seem to be just going after the goodies. His interest is focused on what happened, and that's what everybody wants to know. It's as relevant today as it was back then. And if he can come up with answers that completely undermine the received history of the Lusitania, it would really have reverberations. People are always questioning what their governments are up to, especially in a time of war. We say, Go for it! It's a legitimate question, and we'd be as curious as anyone to find out."

The divers are up now, bobbing on the surface with huge smiles visible beneath their masks. We pull Eoin McGarry and Stewart Andrews into the Holly Jo. McGarry digs into the folds of his dry suit and from a zippered pocket produces a small Tupperware container. He removes the lid, and there they are—ten long brass bullets, meeting the air for the first time in 93 years. Their casings are splotched with verdigris and marred by a few small cauliflowers of corrosion. "There are thousands of cases of ammo down in that hole!" McGarry says, catching his breath. "You could just scoop the stuff up!" He turns the small trove over to Connie Kelleher, a government marine archaeologist required by Irish law to be onboard. Kelleher begins to measure and photograph the bullets in preparation for their handoff, on shore, to the Receiver of Wrecks.

Colin Barnes pulls up the shot-line and turns his boat around, aiming for Kinsale in the slanting afternoon light. As we bounce along through the swells, he points out a pair of fin whales spouting in the distance. "They're magnificent animals," Barnes says. "After blue whales, they're the largest creatures on earth."

As we head for shore, McGarry, like the rest of us, is of two minds: He wants to celebrate the success of the dive—

his mission accomplished for Bemis—but he can't get the Lusitania's beautiful sadness out of his mind. "It's humbling being down there," he says. "It's the closest thing I can think of to traveling back in time." He looks across the darkening water, the indentation from his mask still leaving a faint impression around his eyes. "It will always be a scary place, a daunting place—there's a lot of lost souls down there. She's corroding and dying and slowly slipping away."

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