1-1-1920

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Recommended Citation

Hoyer, V. B. (1920) "Thrilling Tales of the Tuscania - From the Rolling Deep," Ames Forester: Vol. 6 , Article 5.
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/amesforester/vol6/iss1/5

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THRILLING TALES OF THE TUSCANIA

All good stories should have an introduction, and as the collaborators wrote distinct accounts of the sinking of the Tuscania, it is necessary to harmonize the stories somewhat. It was the original intention of the editor to combine the separate narratives of the authors into a single story, but each was distinct enough to merit printing entire. Suffice to say that each got off the boat alright, which seemed to be the principal object in view at the time. The editor met Shorty Hoyer a month or so later and he was very willingly chopping wood in France. Nevertheless, we are proud of the fact that we had five Ames foresters on the Tuscania and are more than glad that they are still with us.—Editor’s Note.

FROM THE ROLLING DEEP

By V. B. Hoyer (’20)

"Let’s sink her again." Such was the main occupation of the good ship Tuscania, sunk by a German submarine off the coast of Ireland on February 5, 1918. The men would, for some time after that day, gather in small crowds and indulge in the popular indoor sport of sinking the ship again. Many and wondrous were the tales told at these impromptu gatherings.

Along in December, 1917, the patriotic fever was running high, with the result that R. A. Fletcher, E. M. Davis, John Evans, George Hartman, Charles Ineck and myself, all being, or having been, students of Forestry at Ames, enlisted in the 20th Engineers (Forest) and eventually found ourselves at Jefferson Barracks, St. Louis, where we performed the act of raising the right hand aloft and saying "I do" at the designated time.

January 2, found Ineck, Evans, Davis, Fletcher and I on board the troop train speeding toward Washington, D. C., at which place the 20th was being mobilized. Ineck, Davis and Fletcher landed in Co. E of the 6th Battalion, but Evans and I were out seeing the camp at this time, so we found ourselves in Co. F of the same battalion. After a stay of seventeen days at Washington, we were again on our way, this time headed for the docks of Hoboken.

We ferried across the river and immediately boarded the liner Tuscania, which had been converted into a transport. The
first leg of our ocean journey was a 48-hour trip to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where we picked up the convoy consisting in all of thirteen ships. From here we sailed forth upon the rolling deep and then ensued day after day of monotonous travel and poor grub.

Along about noon of February 5, we sighted the shores of Scotland and later those of Ireland. With land in sight and several British torpedo boats which had met us a couple of days previous, everyone felt quite secure and were looking forward to the landing in Liverpool the following day.

Leaving Hoboken.

Just when day was about to yield to night, at five minutes of six o’clock, there was a terrific explosion on the starboard side, which shook the ship from bow to stern. There was no question in the minds of anyone concerning the origin of that explosion. Almost at once the men came pouring up from below and sought their various stations. For a bunch of men with as little training as our battalion had had, there was very little confusion. The American bump of curiosity was largely in evidence. Practically all but those who were to go in the first boat on our side were at the rail to see how a lifeboat was manned. The boat was lowered quickly enough and, with a load of perhaps fifty men, hit the water right side up, but was almost instantly overturned, precipitating the men into the ice cold waters of the Irish channel. The lowering equipment seemed good for only one boat, as the second was lowered about ten feet where it jammed and the efforts of the men at the winches only served
to tilt it enough to spill out the five or six who had gotten in on the highest deck. These men were treated to a plunge of about twenty or thirty feet into the frigid waters below. The cries of those who were now in the water were plainly audible to those who remained on deck, and one is not likely soon to forget the despairing anguish in those cries for "Help." Nothing could be done for them save pulling aboard such as could be reached with a rope. Boat No. 2 was finally launched by the simple expedient of severing the ropes and allowing it to drop. When it was thus unceremoniously precipitated into the briny deep, I figured that my chances for a long life had appreciably diminished, as it was the boat in which I had for some time planned on finishing the voyage in. After this unexpected departure of the boat to which we were assigned, we were detailed to the upper deck to assist in launching another. But as they weighed five tons, our efforts were of no avail and were finally called down and lined up on the port side. Our captain told us that a boat was coming to take us off, but it was a long time coming and time began to hang heavy on our hands. By this time the ship had such a decided list to the starboard that it would have taken a wampus to stand up on it with any comfort. Finally, however, we were ordered up on the next deck and over to the starboard side and then down a deck. There about a rod or so away stood the "Pigeon," a British torpedo boat, and the hundred or so of us that still remained on the doomed vessel quickly transferred ourselves to the smaller craft by crawling across the intervening space on ropes. One or two met with a ducking here by jumping onto ropes which were not fastened at one end, but the men were quickly hauled aboard by the British sailors. As soon as we were all stowed away, the destroyer started putting distance between herself and the sinking ship. After a four-hour run we entered the harbor of the small town of Buncrana and unloaded into small sloops which conveyed us to shore. How good "terra firma" did feel. We immediately struck out for a camp some three miles out of town, where we were given some hot soup which tasted mighty good. I ran onto Evans here and we were certainly overjoyed to know that each other had pulled through all right. Some Irish soldiers sacrificed their bunks and tucked us in and we put in a few hours of good, sound slumber. The following day we moved to Londonderry and then to a convalescent camp at Randallstown. Here we were joined by the other three, and right glad we were that our Ames contingent was still intact. The other three got away on a raft and put in half the night drifting until they were picked up and taken to land. We are all of the opinion that "A life on the rolling deep" is not to be desired.
"There's Scotland, lads, and you'll soon see Ireland on the other side." A ship's officer was speaking to an olive-drab group of Yanks as he pointed out a bluish line where sky and water met. Thirteen days before the Tuscania had left New York for Halifax, completing a convoy of thirteen ships. There had been sickness and sea sickness, overcrowding and underfeeding, little heat, less ventilation and endless military restrictions, so that now the officer's announcement was doubly welcome, as he had added that we were due to dock in Liverpool by midnight. The Scotch coast rose higher and more distinct, and in half an hour Ireland also was plainly visible. Here and there a distant lighthouse blinked in the early dusk of February. The groups split up and dissolved as the boys went below for mess.

Down in E.5 a sea lawyer from the Ozarks had the floor. "Why one of them sub boats ain't got no more chance than-" Boom! a muffled, jarring explosion brought the Tuscania to a standstill. The lights went out, one side slowly settled, and from some point in the darkness below, the sound of rushing water could be heard.

Then, as the novelists say, "pandemonium reigned." Grasping mackinaws, life belts and hats, we blundered through the blackness in the general direction of the stairs, colliding with bunks, posts and each other. Here rose a voice with a quaver in it, and there a string of "cuss words" inspired by a barked shin or a bumped head. "Here's the stairs," "Take your time," "Don't crowd," and several hundred scared Yanks groped their way up the narrow stairs, through a long hall and up a second flight in a way that was orderly as compared with the three daily stampedes for the mess hall.

Many of the troops had already reached deck and were lined up at their stations, calling out their lifeboat numbers to guide the missing ones. On reaching my boat, I found half a dozen cockney sailors preparing it to launch. They appeared to take more than usual interest in their work. By the time the canvas cover was removed and the oars got out, the boat's full quota was present.

The men previously assigned to lower the boats had never seen it done in the daytime. When they tried it in the dark, complications followed. One side of the Tuscania had settled till the deck lay at an angle of about 20 degrees. As a result, the boats on the high side could not swing clear when lowered.
Lifeboat 14 was finally swung out and jerkily started down. Suddenly one end, dropping several feet, nearly spilled the occupants before the other end caught up. Next a projection caught her side. As the men above continued to lower she tipped sideways farther and farther. Then came a sound of breaking wood. "Blast it," said a cockney, "there goes a bloody 'ole in'er. She reached the water and proved him to be wrong. By the time we had unhooked the lowering tackle several men joined us by sliding down ropes, filling the boat and we pushed off.

For the first time there was leisure to notice what was happening around us. From the bridge, red rockets rose and burst, one after another. The Tuscania seemed deserted by the rest of the convoy. But from behind her shot a low gray destroyer and then another. At full speed they passed and disappeared. Several heavy explosions followed: "Depth bombs," muttered a sailor, "Hope they got her." The light from the rockets showed several boat-loads safely rowing away. But some boats were hanging by one end, half way to the water, empty. Others had capsized in launching and many dark specks were rising and falling with the waves. Though boat 14 was too full to be easily handled, oars and waves combined, soon carried us out of sight of the liner and the other boats.

A nervous reaction set in as the height of the excitement passed. Two men started an irritable argument as to whether a mine or torpedo had done the damage. Another was growling over his favorite razor left behind. A chronic poker player had some sorrows to air, "First luck on the whole —— trip. Must have been $60 in the pot. I just won it and blooey! they got us. —— if I didn't get up and go right away from there and clean forget that cash." Above them all rose the almost hysterical voice of a stoker. "I'd been above and was just going back down the ladder. It hit square in the boiler room. Twenty of us in that watch and me the only one left. I know it. I was spattered with the pieces of them." Someone had just told a cheerful tale of a sub turning its machine gun on crowded lifeboats, when the stoker cried, "Look, there it is." Sure enough something was moving toward us on the crest of a wave. Nearer it came and, finally passing, we could make out a capsized boat with three or four men clinging to the bottom. Our calls were not answered.

The night became darker; the winking lighthouses seemed no nearer. The sea grew steadily rougher and a time came when we could barely keep her bow to the waves and constant bailing was necessary.

From some point ahead, the white beam of a searchlight
swept back and forth across the water, missed us and passed on. We could neither reach that ship nor make ourselves heard above the wind and waves.

It must have been an hour later when something a shade blacker than the night loomed up close by. A tiny spark of light showed it to be a ship. "Altogether now, yell." No equal number in any bleachers ever yelled louder. A faint reply came and the ship steamed around to windward, where her bulk partly sheltered us from the waves. Ropes were thrown. Two or three who were wise in the ways of boats caught them and took turns around cleats, taking up slack and letting it out as No. 14 rose and fell, bringing her close to the other. Her rail seemed hopelessly out of reach till a wave came. As the boat rose quickly, three men crouched, jumped, cleared the rail and landed squarely on deck. The wave, receding, dropped us 15 feet, only to be lifted up by the next. With every rise a few men made the jump. Now and then one fell short a trifle, but always he was caught and pulled aboard by the sailors. At last the empty boat was cut loose and drifted off in the darkness.

It was not an entirely cheerful group around the stove in the forecastle. A few were seasick; a few more, wet through, stripped and crawled into the bunks while their clothes steamed on the wires above the stove. One man anxiously inquired for
news of his brother, and the poker player still mourned his luck. I wondered about the four other Ames foresters and missed Fletcher, who was assigned to my boat.

In came a sailor with hot tea. A volley of questions met him. He replied that we were aboard the trawler “Gloria” of Larne, Ireland, having drifted twelve miles from the spot where the Tuscania was torpedoed four hours earlier. “She sank an hour ago,” he said. “It’s light your losses will be with a dozen trawlers out and her afloat so long.” A sergeant entered and, after taking names, remarked, “Well, boys, fifty-three of us; not so bad for a forty-man boat.”

The Gloria bumped against the dock in Larne at one a.m. A small but sympathetic crowd was gathered in the street where motor busses waited for us. For a mile or so we rumbled through the dark, silent streets, stopping at a large hotel. A cordial welcome was followed by a hot meal, after which the crowd gradually drifted upstairs to bed.

Music, of a sort, woke me at broad daylight. It was “Over There” as interpreted by a muscular pianist and a dozen or more powerful pairs of lungs. “More of the gang.” I thought, and hurried below. One of the first persons I met was Fletcher, wearing one of the few campaign hats remaining in the crowd. Mine, like most of the others, had been lost in the shuffle, so I bummed him for a shilling and bought a cap. He had no news of the other three Ames foresters.

Throughout the day our numbers increased to about 400 as other trawlers came in. The American invaders were met with such uniform kindness that we left Larne with regret on the third day; half the town waving goodbye from the station. For two hours, tiny green fields separated by low hedges and thatch-roofed stone villages, slid past our windows before we stopped at the village of Randalls-town.

There on the platform stood a squad of pipers in the Highland uniform. With pipes squealing and kilts swinging, they led the column down the street and into a large camp. Among the soldiers that lined the street were not a few Yanks. Suddenly I recognized one. “Hello, Shorty Hoyer! Fletcher’s here! You alone?” “No, John Evans is with me.” A little farther along I saw John and exchanged hellos. To celebrate the reunion we attended a free lunch at one of the canteens.

This, we learned, was a convalescent camp for the Scotch Highland regiments—the Gordons, Black Watch, Seaforths and others. Few of the men had seen less than two years’ service and all had at least one wound. As at Larne, our treatment was all that could be desired.

A week later the scene shifted to Winchester. On this first
morning in England, the Sixth battalion lined up, as usual, to get something or other that should have been issued long ago, also as usual. The headgear was varied—American, British and civilian; the coats, ditto; likewise, shoes and leggings. A "hardboiled" English scrub woman gave a look, sniffed contemptuously, and observed to her friend, "I bet the Germans run like hell when they see this bunch coming."

We learned that there were other Tuscania troops in camp, but quarantined. Not all, however, for a familiar head popped around a nearby building, searched the line for some friend and, finding him, grinned. There was a stage whisper, "Is Ineck in your gang?" "Sure." answers the head. And the Ames contingent was accounted for.

**HOW I GOT OFF**

By C. H. Ineck (ex-16)

I am sorry that the Editor-in-Chief has such a good memory as to remember that I was a passenger on the torpedoed transport Tuscania. Because of this good memory I am obliged to relate a part of my experience just to please him and to help him fill up space in his magazine. I am glad that Fletcher, Davis and Hoyer are also relating their experience. I know that they are more capable of describing events than I, and will do full justice to the events as they happened up until the time that our ship was hit by the torpedo. At this place I will have to begin my narrative, as I believe that my experience in getting away from the ship and seeing land again was somewhat different from theirs.

For the first time in my life I missed my supper and never thought of it again until the next day. I believe I had a good reason to forget it. I was in my stateroom and had just looked at my watch; it was 5:55 p.m., I went to mess at 6:00 o'clock sharp and, as I always made it a practice of being on time for this regular event, I decided to go down the galley. I sat on my bunk and had just reached out to get my mess kit when the torpedo struck. It was a sharp report, followed by a crashing, jingling sound; the lights went out immediately and the ship tilted to starboard side; the show was on, and my mess kit, and mess, entirely forgotten.

I managed to pick up my mackinaw and life belt in the dark and I didn't lose any time hunting for my hat or getting out into the hallway. On my way out to my lifeboat I had clear sailing, as the hallway was not very crowded. Some one right ahead of me went out singing "Where do we go from here,
boys?" If he really felt like singing, he certainly felt differently than I did, and if he was trying to make believe, he certainly made a good job of it. I got out to my life boat, No. 13-A, just as the storage battery lights came on and just in time to see life boat No. 13 go down end first into the water, spilling all its occupants into the cold sea. Boat No. 13, being right over our boat and lowered by the same rigging, gave some of our men, who were out in time, a little knowledge about how to free and swing and lower a boat, and we profited a great deal by their mistakes and accident. When our boat was clear and the ropes ready, we were more particular and careful about the knots and pulleys and twisted ropes, and instead of loading the boat with men before lowering, we allowed only ten men to get into the boat; I was one of the ten men. The rest who were assigned to the boat were to lower us to the water and then come down on the ropes. Ten of us got into the boat and the rest of the crew swung us out and began to lower us. We went down very nicely until within twenty feet of the water, when the pulley on my end of the boat broke and down we went end first. I don’t know what I grabbed, but it was something solid. I was determined to hold to the boat whenever, or however, it went, and I did, even though five or six men from the other end did try to jar me loose. Very luckily the boat righted itself and nothing more serious happened than that it half filled with water and threw a few of the fellows out into the water, who were fished out, however, before we left the ship’s side. The fun began when the rest of the 32 men of our boat began coming down the ropes and dropping into the boat, and some around it. Those who were successful enough to hit the boat were left to untangle themselves; those who dropped into the water were pulled into the life boat. It was only a matter of a few minutes until we were ready to pull away from the ship. It was lucky for us that the last man to get into our boat was an old sailor, the ship’s chief gunner, and an Englishman. He was immediately voted commander-in-chief of the boat full of landlubbers, and it was some job he had, but he did it well. Had it not been for him I’m afraid I might not be here to write this story.

Can you imagine 32 men in a life boat with five oars, men, many of whom had never seen the ocean before and who had never even rowed a small lake boat? Can you picture these men rowing this large life boat with twenty-foot oars on an ocean that tossed us around like a small cork on a rough lake? We had a hard time pulling away from the ship, although there were at least five or six men to an oar, some pushing, some pulling, some cursing and a few quiet. After ten or fifteen minutes arguing, working, pushing and pulling, we managed to get away.
from the ship, and here the Englishman took charge and began
to give out orders, when things worked better. When we were
far enough away from the ship and out of danger of the su-
tion, should the ship sink immediately, and when we began to
feel once more that we had a chance, some one mentioned a
smoke, and everyone wanted a smoke or a chew. One man
found a plug of salted chewing tobacco, and it went around to
the chewers. Another fellow found one dry cigarette. It like-
wise passed from man to man among the smokers, and you may
believe that it was a lip-burner before its life was done. Our
boat was half full of water and the plug was out of the bottom,
so with one army hat, one small tin can and one pail, those men
for whom there was no room at the oars, bailed water out of the
boat. This practice was kept up all night and we were able to
hold the water at an even depth inside the boat.

As we worked our way farther away from the sinking ship
we could look back and see the lights, they were still on; this
was between 7 and 7:30 p. m., and we could see the form of the
ship as she stood there with the starboard side of her main deck
nearly touching the water. Dim forms of men could still be
seen moving around on the decks. Occasionally a red skyrocket
would penetrate the sky and burst high above the troubled decks
from which it started. Finally the lights went out and we lost
all sight of the Tuscania. We wondered about the rest of our
comrades—how many were left behind—and it was several days
before we knew.

We were out on the rough ocean in a life boat, without
fresh water, a boat half full of salt water, wet from head to
foot, no help in sight, and nothing more than a few life boats
about us in the same circumstances. One or two upturned boats, a raft or two and other articles washed from the decks of the ship floated about. The question arose—what shall we do, where shall we go? We sighted a lighthouse on the Scotland side of the channel, and the gunner told us that it was a lighthouse on an island off the coast of Scotland, about 15 miles away. By heading for the light the high wind was in our favor and helped us along. Everyone in the boat was in favor of heading for the light, anywhere, any direction, as long as there was hopes of finding land. Thus we started our all-night journey toward the light and toward the Isle of Islay, just off the coast of Scotland.

It was rough going; great waves would break over us, drenching us with cold, icy water; at one moment the bow of the boat would be five or ten feet higher than the stern and the next moment just opposite: water was not only coming into the boat from the bottom, but over the sides as well. The hat, the can, and the bucket were doing double duty. Once, twice and three times, a destroyer already loaded with survivors sighted us, drew up to us, flashed their searchlight on us, looked us over, and sailed away. Each time our hearts were filled with joy only to drop again with disappointment when the boat would pass on, but they were only searching for parties who were less fortunate than we. After the third boat passed us by we decided that we were being left to help ourselves, and it was up to us to save our own lives, so we pulled hard toward the light. Under the directing orders of the gunner we were rapidly becoming good seamen. We had to be for we had a big job ahead of us which the gunner had already warned us, and that was, that we must keep away from the rocky coast until day light. He knew that if we tried to land, our boat would be smashed to pieces on the rocks and that probably not one out of ten would come out alive. We learned the reasons why a little later on.

At about 3:00 o’clock a.m. we came so near the shore that we could see the dim outline of the rocks just a short distance ahead of us. Everyone was tired and several men were down and out and layed down in the water in the bottom of the boat, others had great blisters on their hands from rowing. I was all in but managed to take my turn at the oars. Every one in the boat wanted to take a chance to land. That solid rock looked good to us even though we knew the danger. The gunner said, “No.” We insisted on landing so strongly that finally he said, “All right, if you want to die, land your boat. I’ll take a chance with you but it’s the slimmest chance you ever had.” So we pulled together again getting closer and closer to the shore. By this time we were trying to pull away from it but the wind
and tide were so strong that we only lost ground and came closer to the rocks and the great white breakers. At about 4:30 o’clock we were within 200 yards of the rocks, every man on his feet pulling and pushing somewhere on an oar, every ounce helping to hold our own against the wind and waves with only two men in the boat helpless. This last fight lasted for a good half hour. We were carried to the right by the tide and managed to keep our distance from the rocks. Still pulling with every ounce of our remaining strength we rounded a high rock cliff and within only a minute or two of the darkest period of the night we found ourselves in a quiet, windless, waveless and tideless spot. It was hard to believe. We could still see the rocks ahead but what were they, when there was no wind or waves to drive us into them? If we could just stay there until day light, only a matter of an hour or so, we could find a landing.

Carefully and slowly we worked our way among the rocks. Someone sighted a light a few hundred yards ahead. We all sighted it and watched it. The light was moving. We forgot about our oars and we might have lost them all had they not been fastened to the boat. The gunner let out some kind of a seaman’s call that sounded like a mixture of Scotch and English dialect. He received an answer and the light described a half circle through the air. “It’s a landing, boys, a small port.” No one in the world can imagine my feeling when he said that—not only mine—there were others also. It did not matter then if the boat did wreck on a rock, the light was close. I felt like getting out and trying my luck at wading it, if I couldn’t wade I could swim, if I couldn’t swim, I could sit on a rock until a boat came after me anyway. Anything only to get my feet on something solid. We were all so excited that the ending of our seaman life was worse than the beginning, our oars became twisted and we were all talking at once for the first time that night. As we drew nearer the man with the light we could see a dock, back of it a village. We made for the shore and began jumping out of the boat while the water was still neck deep. Several Scotchmen had appeared with lanterns by this time; our noise, yelling and talking had awakened the whole village population, and by the time we were all off the boat the women were also up, fires were burning in the great fire places of the hotels and houses that took us in. The village was Port Ellen on the Isle of Islay; it was 5:00 a. m. February 6th. Not until we were around the fire warming up did we realize what we had gone through, how narrow our escape and we wondered what had become of our friends and comrades. This was the saddest and yet the happiest hour of our lives.

Then came the wonderful breakfast, that first meal after
the supper which I had missed and forgot about so suddenly. We were clothed, fed and cared for by these good people who gave us everything they had. We were there four days, and because of their kindness and generosity and because of all the wonderful things they did for us, when we finally had to leave it was like leaving home. Don't let those other fellows make you believe that Ireland was a better landing spot, for I know; I like Scotland best.

From Port Ellen we were taken by water and by rail across Scotland to Glasgow, then to London, where, because of our uniformed appearance we were once taken for Bosche prisoners. From London we were taken to Winchester, England, where our battalion was assembled and re-equipped. Many great meetings took place at Winchester, reuniting of friends, comrades, and brothers who had been separated when the ship went down. Many yarns were swapped and it was a very surprising fact that at least fifty men were the "last" man off the boat.

"Liz" Hicks ('15) right.