

# A DAY OF GRIEF AND HEROISM

## Memories of Aragon Disaster

### TRANSPORT AND ESCORT GO DOWN TOGETHER

To many people—and certainly to hundreds of men scattered all over the world, as well as to 250 women who served as nurses during the war—the coming of the end of the year brings memories of a tragic day fourteen years ago now, when the transport Aragon and her escort, H.M.S. Attack, went down from a German torpedo on Sunday morning, December 30, 1917.

The incident at the time, unparalleled in the annals of war, caused a tremendous sensation both at home and throughout the East.

Aragon was perhaps the best-known ship on war duty in the Mediterranean. She was headquarters ship at Mudros during the Gallipoli campaign, and Lord Kitchener had visited the General Staff there on several occasions.

After the evacuation of the peninsula she was employed on transport duty, and carried many thousands of troops to and from the Eastern theatres of war.

A fine ship of over 9000 tons, she was specially designed by the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company to secure their prestige on the South American route in face of German competition.

#### 2000 Troops Embarked

Early in December, 1917, the Aragon embarked over 2000 troops of all ranks and also 250 nursing sisters at Marseilles. She lay in harbour for 11 days before setting out, and when she did so a fierce gale, which lasted three days, was raging. She was accompanied by the transport Nile, and the joint escort consisted of three destroyers—two Japanese and one British.

Christmas Day was spent in a Maltese harbour, the Admiralty having issued an order that, as far as possible, all ships were to be in safety on that day.

#### Too Late for the Harbour

The three ships started off in the evening of the 29th, when the Nile and the Japanese destroyers proceeded further East.

The Aragon and her escort, H.M.S. Attack, were too late to enter the harbour that evening, and cruised around until the channel should be swept for them next morning.

After breakfast all was gaiety and excitement aboard. The shore and palm trees could be seen, and the approaching minesweepers heralded a safe and early landing. At this point the element of mystery creeps into this Sunday morning epic.

#### A Host of Rumours

The writer, however, does not give credence to the amazing stories of treachery and spies which were rife for many months afterwards. The facts as he witnessed them do not lend themselves to any fantastic tale of mystery.

Answering the signals of a minesweeper

nificent type of British sailor, gave the order like a trumpet-call, from the bridge, "Launch the boats: women first!" Not a man stirred save the navigating crews.

The lifeboats were in the water in a trice, and every woman of that 250 was safely transferred to a minesweeper.

During the launching, as if led by an invisible choir, the whole company sang "Keep the Home Fires Burning."

The Attack came rushing alongside to the rescue, and hundreds of men clambered on board to apparent safety.

The Aragon was now heeling over, and Captain Bateman gave his final order, "Every man for himself."

He dived overboard and was not seen again—a great hero, where heroism had become almost commonplace.

At 11.20 the Aragon took her final plunge, and the sea was strewn with a mass of struggling men.

The women were wonderful beyond words. As injured and dying were transferred from the lifeboats to the minesweepers, the Sisters rendered first-aid, and tore their garments to improvise bandages.

#### A Second Disaster

A navyman on the bridge of the Attack was signalling orders to the minesweeper, when a second torpedo hit the destroyer amidships, and she went down in the twinkling of an eye.

The Navyman persisted in signalling with his flags after he found himself in the water!

The sailors worked feverishly picking up survivors, of whom there were nearly 2000.

At 5.30 there was not a living man in the water, and the last trawler headed for harbour, where the crews of the ships lying there manned the riggings and gave a rousing cheer, to which the troops could only faintly respond.

#### The Missing

The great company of 250 women—nurses of the British Navy, Army, and Merchantile, Marines who met death on that memorable Sunday morning 14 years ago included representatives of almost every unit in the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. There were Yeomen from Dorset and Forfar, Oxford, and Glasgow; Englishmen, Irishmen, Scotsmen, Welshmen, New Zealanders and Australians, engineers, signallers, infantry, artillery, R.A.M.C.

The story of the Aragon will undoubtedly remain for all time an outstanding example of British heroism and discipline unsurpassed in the annals of our history.

S. A. P. R.

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Answering the signals of a minesweeper, Aragon entered the "channel," only to be ordered out by furious signalling from the Attack.

"You have no right to take orders from a trawler. Follow me!" was the message from the Commander of the escorting destroyer.

The Aragon turned round into the unswept sea immediately, while Attack circled round her at full speed.

### Amazing Calm

A few minutes later, at exactly 11 a.m., there was a terrific impact. No need to sound the alarm. Aragon had been torpedoed behind the engine-room, and a hatch blew up on the after welldeck, which was crowded.

Discipline was superb, and though the ship was even then known to be doomed the parade to appointed boat stations was quiet and orderly.

A nursing sister who had been visiting the engine-room rushed up to find the companion-way to the upper deck blocked with soldiers.

Some one said, "Make room for a sister," and she was hoisted bodily to the promenade deck. She could only smile her "Thanks."

### Nurses' Great Work

N.C.O.s in charge of platoons took the roll-call quickly. Captain Bateman, a r