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from the trenches

Lusitania's Secret Cargo

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by Erin Mullally

The nearly century-old debate about whether the passenger liner *Lusitania* was transporting British war munitions when torpedoed by a German U-boat is over. Physical evidence of just such a cargo has been recovered from the wreck, which rests 12 miles off the Irish coast in 300 feet of murky, turbulent water.



Lusitania was sunk off County Cork on May 7, 1915. The attack killed 1,198 people, including 128 Americans, and helped push the United States into World War I. Ever since the ship went down, there have been suspicions that *Lusitania* was carrying live munitions. Under the rules of war, that would have made the liner a legitimate target, as the Germans maintained at the time.

The British government has always been evasive about the presence of munitions on *Lusitania*. Two cargo manifests were submitted; the second, filed after the ship sailed, indicated there were light munitions on board. Some believe the ship was carrying much more, however, and that the British Navy attempted to destroy the wreck in the 1950s to conceal its military cargo.

Bullets from the ship now confirm it was carrying military cargo.
(Courtesy Eoin McGarry)

Now a team led by County Waterford-based diver Eoin McGarry, on behalf of *Lusitania's* American owner, Gregg Bemis, has recovered live ammunition from the wreck. Bemis was granted a five-year license in 2007 by the Irish government to conduct limited excavations at the site. He originally bought the vessel in 1968 for \$2,400 from the Liverpool & London War Risks Insurance Association.

This past September, Bemis's team used a remotely operated vehicle to penetrate the wreck. They were able to clearly identify a vast amount of ammunition in an area of *Lusitania* not believed to have carried cargo. The Remington .303 caliber bullets the team discovered on the ship had been used by the British military during World War I. Ten of the bullets were brought to the surface.

"Further research needs to be conducted, but if the discovered ammunition was found in an area where cargo was not known to be stored on board, it strongly supports the argument that the *Lusitania* was functioning as more than a passenger liner," says Fionnbar Moore, senior archaeologist with the Underwater Archaeology Unit of the Irish Department of Environment, which monitored the dive.

The bullets are in the hands of Irish authorities, who under maritime law are now responsible for establishing their owner. Further expeditions will search for additional evidence of munitions.

"The charge that the *Lusitania* was carrying war materiel is valid," says Bemis. "She was a legitimate target for the German submarine."

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