The sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915 shocked and horrified the world. This is the incredible true story of a 12-year-old girl who was there.

**BY KRISTIN LEWIS**

How does the author help you understand what it was like on the *Lusitania*?
The morning of May 1, 1915, dawned warm and drizzly in New York City. Twelve-year-old Elsie Hook, along with her 11-year-old brother, Frank, and her father, George, were about to board one of the most spectacular ships in the world.

Elsie was filled with excitement as she hurried up the gangway. The pier around her vibrated with activity. Crew members were barking orders. Motorcars and buggies were depositing passengers and their mountains of luggage. A band was playing. And throngs of reporters and curious onlookers were scrambling to catch a glimpse of the RMS Lusitania—a ship so magnificent she was called a “floating palace.”

Elsie must have gazed in wonder at the Lusitania's four towering steel funnels, which gleamed in the rays of sunshine that briefly pierced the gray clouds. She must have marveled at the ship’s shiny black hull, which stretched the length of more than two football fields. She must have felt glamorous to be traveling to England on a ship as grand as a fancy New York hotel.

But as the Lusitania steamed out of New York Harbor, what Elsie could not have known was that her...
get involved in Europe’s problems. So for the most part, life went on as usual.

Still, Elsie had no doubt heard stories about what was happening across the Atlantic, where new weapons were unleashing death and destruction on a scale the world had never seen. There were stories of soldiers huddled in miserable, mud-filled trenches, of once-beautiful countryside scarred by fire and barbed wire, of thousands killed by poison gases and rapid-fire machine guns.

But as the Lusitania sailed through the open sea, her engine humming pleasantly and the cold waters of the Atlantic splashing across her bow, the horrors of war must have seemed distant. Soon, however, everyone on board would experience that horror firsthand.

A few days before the Lusitania left New York, the German embassy in Washington, D.C., had issued a warning to Americans that any ships voyage was doomed. Thousands of miles away, a much smaller boat had also headed out to sea. It was a German war submarine, or U-boat. In just six days, that U-boat would tear the Lusitania apart, and 1,198 people would be dead.

A Rapidly Changing World

Elsie and her family were about to start a new life. Elsie’s mother had passed away, and her father had decided to move the family back to his native England.

Elsie’s life wasn’t the only thing changing, though. The whole world was being transformed. It was suddenly filled with shiny new automobiles, bright electric lights, and newfangled machines like the telegraph, which sent messages around the globe in seconds.

Advances in science and technology had made life safer, more exciting, and more connected.

Perhaps nothing symbolized the power of human ingenuity more than ocean liners like the Lusitania, with her steam-powered engine and record speeds. The Lusitania could cross the ocean in mere days. Just 50 years earlier, such a journey could have taken weeks. In those early years of the new century, it seemed like humans could do anything.

The Horrors of War

That said, by the time the Lusitania set sail in 1915, that optimism was starting to slip away. Tensions in Europe had exploded into war. Now Great Britain, Russia, and France were fighting Germany, the Ottoman Empire, and Austria-Hungary. In the United States, most people didn’t want to get involved in Europe’s problems. So for the most part, life went on as usual.

A Rapidly Changing World

The Lusitania was one of the largest, fastest, and most luxurious passenger ships of its day. Both rich and poor traveled aboard, but their experiences were very different. First-class passengers enjoyed stately cabins and dined in lavish halls, where they feasted on roast duck, broiled sea bass, apple tarts, and chocolate cakes. Those in third class traveled more modestly, in simple but comfortable cabins.

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sailing near England would be attacked.

And England is exactly where the Lusitania was headed.

**The Unsinkable Ship**

The first two days at sea were cold and dreary. Elsie and Frank explored the Lusitania’s long corridors and open decks. They mingled with other passengers in the dining room, where they sat at enormous tables piled high with fried fish, pies, and puddings. Elsie was excited that even as a third-class passenger, she was allowed to explore the first-class part of the ship, which contained luxuries beyond her wildest dreams. In first class, wealthy passengers stayed in spacious cabins and dined in opulent cafés, where they feasted on caviar and oysters.

Yet the many wonders of the ship could not protect the Lusitania as she drew closer to her destination. It was well known that German U-boats prowled the waters near Ireland and Britain, lurking unseen beneath the waves. They had been torpedoing British supply ships there for months.

If any passengers were nervous, however, crew members were quick to calm their jitters. The Lusitania could not be sunk, they said. She was too fast. Nothing could catch her. Even Captain William Turner—who had received notices about U-boat sightings from the British navy throughout the voyage—seemed unconcerned.

The idea of the Lusitania being in any danger was “the best joke I’ve heard in many days,” he had told reporters back in New York. It was easy to trust him. He was a highly experienced captain, having crossed the Atlantic dozens of times.

On the Hunt

The captain of the German U-boat U-20 was a bright and well-respected man named Walther Schwieger. Like the Lusitania, his U-boat was a technological marvel. Silent and stealthy, it could creep up on any ship and sink it with a single torpedo. (By the end of World War I, U-boats would sink nearly 5,000 ships.) But unlike the glorious Lusitania, the U-20 was hot and claustrophobic and reeked of sweat, fumes, and human waste.

On the afternoon of May 7, Schwieger and his crew were on the hunt. They had sunk two British ships the day before and now they were after a new prize. Schwieger peered through his binoculars; in the distance, he could just make out the four funnels of the Lusitania.

He ordered his submarine to dive beneath the waves and set a course to intercept.

A Nightmare

Schwieger’s torpedo slithered through the water like a speeding snake. When it struck the Lusitania, the torpedo exploded, launching a fountain of water and debris high into the air. A second explosion quickly followed,
sending a mighty shudder through the ship. (The cause of the second explosion is debated—one theory is that a boiler exploded.) Glass shattered. Fire broke out below deck. Passengers shrieked.

There was little doubt about what had happened: The Lusitania had been attacked.

Immediately, Captain Turner ordered the ship to stop, but the controls were no longer working and the ship plowed forward, taking on more and more water. Meanwhile, from their position on the deck, Elsie, Frank, and their father fought panic as the ship started to list, or tilt, sharply. All around them, men, women, and children were slipping, some becoming tangled in the ropes. Crew and passengers tried desperately to hoist the 10-ton lifeboats into the water. But as the ship listed, the boats swung wildly, crushing some and trapping others.

Elsie’s father quickly decided that they’d be better off in the water. And so they clutched the railing, the three of them together, waiting for the right moment to jump into the cold sea. If they leapt too soon, they could be hurt or killed in the fall. If they waited too long, they could be sucked down with the ship.

They said a prayer.

Elsie turned to two frantic women beside her and said simply, “God will save you.”

And then, when the first waves began to swirl around their feet, they leaped.

Elsie and her father surfaced.

But Frank?

He was just . . . gone.

Agonizing Search

It took only 18 minutes for the Lusitania to sink. For those who made it off the ship, the ordeal was just beginning.

INSTRUMENTS OF DEATH

New technology brought destruction on a massive scale. Machine guns fired off bullets at terrifying rates. Airplanes dropped bombs from high above, while submarines torpedoned boats from deep below. By the time World War I ended, 9 million people had died—nearly the population of New York City today.
Hundreds of survivors bobbed in the chilly 50-degree water. They were less than 12 miles from the coast of Ireland—maddeningly close enough to see the shoreline—but too far to swim. Many would die of hypothermia.

In the end, only 6 of the Lusitania’s 44 lifeboats were successfully launched. Eventually, Elsie and her father were pulled into one of them. They shouted and shouted Frank’s name, their voices drowned out by the cries of hundreds of others.

No reply ever came.

At last, after three miserable hours, the first rescue boats arrived. Still there was no sign of Frank.

For weeks, bodies washed ashore. Each corpse was covered with a blanket and taken to a morgue. Elsie and her father searched for Frank among the dead. And then, on the third day of searching, they heard about a boy at a nearby hospital.

Could it be their Frank?

They raced to find out—and sure enough, there he was, lying in a hospital bed.

“Gee Dad, it took you long enough to get here!” Frank said.

His leg had been broken when a lifeboat fell on him, but he would make a full recovery.

The Legacy

News of the Lusitania’s demise shook the world. Britain was outraged. Of the 1,959 passengers and crew, only 761 survived. Yet Germany defended the attack. The Lusitania had been carrying many tons of munitions for Allied armies.

Many historians would later say that the disaster was a turning point. The sinking helped change public opinion in the United States about the war: 128 Americans had gone down with the ship, and anger against Germany grew. In 1917, the United States declared war on Germany. Over the next year, America would send 2 million soldiers to Europe to help the Allies. Germany finally surrendered in 1918.

After the war, the Hooks moved to Australia. Both Elsie and her brother, Frank, lived well into their 90s. Captain Turner also survived the Lusitania. He went on to captain another ocean liner. It too was torpedoed and sunk; he survived again and lived to the age of 76. Captain Schwieger was killed in 1917 when his U-boat hit an underwater mine. At the time of his death, he had sunk 49 ships.

As for the Lusitania?

Her remains lie at the bottom of the sea. Over the years, divers have tried to explore the wreck, but it’s dangerous work. And so she rests in uneasy peace, in the dark and the cold, the mangled hulk of a magnificent ship that belongs to another world and another time.