

They came from a land down under: Australians on board RMS *Leinster*, 10 October 1918*

Jeff Kildea

Introduction

Unlike Ireland, for which remembrance of the First World War has until recently been somewhat problematical, Australia has had little difficulty in commemorating a war widely regarded as the crucible of the Australian nation, when the six former British colonies that had federated in 1901, first came together in battle as Australians. No longer were we Victorians, Queenslanders, New South Welshman etc., but Australians. That is the national myth and it still holds sway today in popular discourse despite cogent arguments to the contrary.

Much of that mythology has focused on the Gallipoli campaign in Turkey from April to December 1915, the first major campaign in which Australians fought together as a nation. But in recent years Australians have begun to rediscover the Western Front, where more than five times as many Australians died than at Gallipoli: at battles such as the Somme, Messines, Passchendaele, places no doubt familiar to you where Irishmen also fought sometimes side by side with the Australians.

But while most Australians have heard of those big battles in which thousands of our compatriots died, the same cannot be said for the many smaller actions that claimed the lives of a few, such as the event we commemorate today – the sinking of RMS *Leinster*. In that tragedy when more than 500 perished that day 100 years ago, there were but nine Australians among the dead. Yet, although the number of Australians who died that day is small compared to the 8700 killed in eight months at Gallipoli or the 8000 killed in eight weeks at Passchendaele, to their families they were equally as precious. And, in a sense, for an Australian, recalling such an event may lead to a better understanding of the tragedy of that war than by concentrating on the big battles where the numbers of casualties were so large and incomprehensible that they numb us to the reality of the individual lives cut short and of the families left with long mourning and deep grief.

In that regard, I must commend Philip Lecane for the way in which he has devoted years of research to identify each of the individuals who died that day, and for his passing on to families around the world information on their particular family member. Many of those families are represented here today and I am sure they are extremely grateful for what Philip has done. Our paths crossed in 2002 when I was researching my book *Anzacs and Ireland*, which looks at relations between Australian soldiers and Ireland during the First World War. In the chapter on Australian war graves in Ireland I deal with the sinking of RMS *Leinster* and I am grateful to Philip for having shared his research with me. But more importantly we have become firm friends.

Australian sources on the sinking of RMS *Leinster*

Another person to whom I owe a debt of gratitude in my research of the Australian connection with the sinking of the *Leinster* is someone I have never met and who is probably unknown to anyone in this room apart from Philip and myself. He was Sydney Ernest Yeomans, a Warrant Officer whom the Australian military authorities sent to Ireland to investigate the affair. Alarmed by the news that there was no passenger list, staff at the

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London headquarters of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) feared that Australians absent without leave in Ireland, might take advantage of the fact that the authorities were unsure as to the identity of the missing.

The AIF, like the Irish regiments, was an all-volunteer force; but it was the only army on the Western Front without the death penalty for desertion. As a result, the AIF had the highest rate of desertion of any of the Allied forces. Throughout the war, the Australian government, for domestic political reasons, resisted persistent pressure from Field Marshal Haig for Australia to apply the death penalty to its soldiers. Instead, an Australian deserter, if caught, would generally spend a short time in prison before being returned to his unit. And Ireland was a popular destination for Australian deserters. The military police were few in number and Sinn Féin was only too willing to assist deserters to blend in by providing jobs and civilian clothes.

Consequently, in order to allay AIF headquarters' concerns, Warrant Officer Yeomans conducted a very thorough investigation, interviewing many survivors in order to verify accounts of the presence on board the *Leinster* of Australians reported as missing. Information was also collected by the Australian Red Cross (ARC), which from 1916 had run an office in London led by two Australian women, Vera Deakin and Mary Chomley. The office acted as a point of contact between families and the military, collecting information from official sources as well as taking statements from soldiers about their comrades who had been killed or wounded or who had gone missing or were prisoners of war, and passing that information on to the families grateful for any news that expanded on the unembellished prose of the official telegram. The eye-witness statements in the files compiled by Yeomans and the ARC contain graphic and often poignant accounts of the tragedy of the *Leinster* as it unfolded.

Warrant Officer Yeoman's investigation was made more difficult by the fact that standard embarkation procedure had not been followed that morning. In the normal course, soldiers travelling by ship were required to complete an embarkation card and to hand it in as they boarded, thus enabling a list of military passengers to be prepared. This was not an ideal system because, as Yeomans noted in his report, there was no process by which each soldier's identity could be verified. But this less-than-ideal system was made worse by the fact that just before the *Leinster* sailed, the third mail train from Dublin arrived late and there was a last-minute surge of soldiers trying to get on board, many of them anxious to return to England before their leave ran out. As a result, according to Yeomans, no fewer than eighteen soldiers were able to board without embarkation cards, among them at least five Australians. Furthermore, the embarkation officer, Captain Harold Locke of the Royal Irish Regiment, who sailed with the ship, appears not to have transcribed the names of those who had completed embarkation cards. He drowned in the sinking and no passenger list was found on his person. Despite these difficulties, the information gleaned by Warrant Officer Yeomans and the ARC allows us to reconstruct in some detail what happened that day 100 years ago, at least as seen through the eyes of the Australian survivors.

The sinking of RMS *Leinster* through Australian eyes

According to Sergeant Francis Thomas Coleman of the 3rd Australian Divisional Headquarters, a civil servant from Sydney, he and his best mate Private Boxer Allen Ware of the 3rd Division Motor Transport Company, a 22-year old wool classer from Adelaide, took leave together in Britain. The two men caught the channel ferry from Boulogne on the

morning of 4 October 1918 and spent the first three days of their leave in London before crossing to Dublin, where, making the most of the generous pay Australian soldiers received – six shillings a day compared to the one shilling for British troops – they stayed three nights at the salubrious Shelbourne Hotel. The two friends had intended going on to Cork, but on the morning of 10 October, in what proved to be a fateful decision, they decided to catch the mail boat to Holyhead in order to spend the rest of their leave with friends in London.

Coleman told Yeomans that about fifty minutes out of port, he and Ware were standing on the port side of the *Leinster* when, gazing out over the grey, choppy sea, Coleman observed an object in the water heading towards the ship. It soon dawned on him that it was a torpedo. Unable to do anything about it, he followed its course through the water and watched it strike the port side bow, bringing the vessel to a halt and causing it to settle slowly by the head. In fact, the German submarine UB-123 had fired two torpedoes in quick succession, the first one missing the *Leinster*; it was the second that Coleman saw. In order to avoid the second torpedo, the mail boat's skipper Captain Birch had ordered the ship to be swung hard to starboard, but to no avail. The torpedo ripped into the hull on the ship's port side and passed through, blowing a hole in the starboard side as well. The *Leinster* continued its 180-degree turn until it was facing back towards Kingstown.

The *Leinster's* crew quickly and methodically began to lower the lifeboats and to throw rafts into the water. At this stage there was no panic and for ten minutes the passengers quietly watched the crew go through their drill, waiting anxiously but patiently for the order to board the lifeboats. As a precaution, Coleman and Ware put on their lifebelts, but Coleman was not unduly troubled, believing the ship would hold until the rescue boats arrived. Suddenly, however, the eerie silence was broken by the sound of another explosion as a third torpedo hit amidships, practically severing the vessel and smashing two of the lifeboats. Then another explosion rent the air – this time it was the boiler exploding. Pandemonium immediately broke out and terrified passengers began jumping into the sea. Coleman and Ware leapt for their lives and began swimming away from the sinking ship to avoid being sucked under as the *Leinster* began to plunge. Within 15 minutes, it had gone under.

As Coleman bobbed about in the heavy swell, he heard Ware call his name. 'I turned towards him,' he later wrote to Corporal Russell, a friend of Ware, 'he seemed to be going well, and not unduly distressed'. Coleman called out to him to make for a raft, which he himself eventually did. With the help of a New Zealander, Coleman scrambled aboard. 'On looking back I could not see Boxer and I thought at the time he might have went to one of the Boats'. Coleman and the New Zealander had great difficulty holding on to the raft as the sea was running very high, and frequently Coleman fell off, fortunately being able to scramble back each time. Many of those who drowned that day were washed off the life rafts in the heavy swell. After two hours in the water, Coleman was eventually rescued by a British destroyer, HMS *Lively*. On returning to Dublin, he visited the local military hospitals in a vain attempt to trace his friend. At the mortuary he looked among the unidentified dead but none resembled Ware. 'I cannot think what has become of him,' he wrote to Corporal Russell. 'I cannot think in what way he was not picked up'.

During his ordeal, Coleman saw another Australian, Private Joseph Gratton of the 4th Machine Gun Battalion, a 28-year-old plumber from Toowoomba, Queensland, clinging desperately to a lifeboat, which was too crowded to take him aboard. Gratton was also returning from leave, after having visited a cousin who was living in Dublin. To Coleman's

observation, Gratton seemed to be in an exhausted condition as he clung to the lifeboat, and he later learned from a Scottish officer that Gratton had subsequently drowned. The Scottish officer, Captain Hugh Love Parker of the 3rd Battalion Cameron Highlanders and Adjutant of the *Leinster*, told the Australian Red Cross of Gratton's final moments:

I spoke words of encouragement to him but it was obvious his strength was failing fast. Every time I spoke to him he smiled but never answered. The seas kept breaking over us & this combined with the cold and exposure, undoubtedly caused his death. Ultimately he let go his hold & sank smiling to the last. In all my experience (which includes several fronts) I have never seen a braver death.

Private Michael Ernest Smith was also on the *Leinster* that morning, returning from leave with his mate Private John Arthur Meigan. Smith, originally from Cobar in New South Wales, was working as a labourer in Sydney when he enlisted in February 1916 aged 22. In September 1918 Smith and Meigan went on leave to London, Dublin and Belfast. At the end of their fortnight's furlough they were standing together on the deck of the *Leinster* watching Ireland recede into the mist. At that time their mates from the 19th Battalion were taking a well-earned rest after the battalion had fought its last battle of the war around Montbrehain the week before. Cruelly, however, the war, now over for their comrades in France, was about to come to them.

When the torpedoes struck, Meigan and Smith shook hands, for the last time as it turned out, and jumped into the sea. After about 15 minutes of bobbing helplessly in the swell, Meigan managed to swim to a life raft where 14 others were clinging. But Smith was not with him. Meigan told Warrant Officer Yeomans that on reaching the raft he called out, 'Are there any Australians here?' to which one man replied, 'Yes. I am an Australian. I belong to the Australian Flying Corps'. Meigan and the man clasped hands for a while, but the raft overturned when struck by a large wave and Meigan saw the man no more. The identity of this soldier remains a mystery as the list of Australian dead, missing and survived does not include anyone from the Australian Flying Corps. Meigan claimed also to have seen another Australian on the ship, a soldier by the name of Brissett, with whom he had stayed at Robertson's Temperance Hotel in Belfast a few days before. But it is more likely he saw Brissett at the wharf, as he was fortunate enough to miss the boat.

Meigan was in the water for two hours before being picked up by HMS *Mallard*. He landed at Kingstown with two other Australian survivors, Corporal John Brendan Murray and Driver Frederick Leonard Hopkins. Meigan was downcast, telling them he believed his comrade Smith had drowned. Unfortunately, he was right, for the next time Meigan saw Private Smith was at the mortuary in Dublin where Warrant Officer Yeomans had asked him to come to identify the body.

When Yeomans had first arrived in Dublin on the day following the sinking, he had gone straight to King George V Military Hospital, where the bodies of military personnel recovered from the tragedy had been taken. Among the corpses lying in the mortuary he discovered three bodies already identified as Australians, while the identity of another three corpses remained to be determined – one of them turned out to be Private Smith. The three identified Australians were Private Gratton and two infantrymen, Privates Barnes and Carter.

Joseph Thomas Barnes, BA, of the 48th Battalion was a 37-year-old school teacher from Payneham in South Australia when he enlisted in July 1917. On 3 May 1918, a month after

arriving at the front, he was on his way back to England after having been wounded at Monument Wood near Villers-Bretonneux where his battalion had been engaged in a fierce struggle. Having recovered from his wounds, Barnes was returning from convalescent leave in Ireland when he boarded the *Leinster*. A friend, Lance Corporal Michael Denis Roach of the 12th Field Ambulance, had seen him on the ship, but it is not known what happened to him after the torpedoes struck; that is, until Warrant Officer Yeomans found his body in the Dublin mortuary.

Roach himself was lucky to survive. After the third torpedo hit the ship, he jumped overboard like many others and swam on his back for about ten minutes before finding a raft. He did not last long there, being pulled under by another soldier, so he swam to a lifeboat, which he found was full of water. Clinging to the boat was another Australian, Private John Henry Moore. When the lifeboat eventually capsized, its erstwhile occupants struggled to hold onto the upturned boat in the heavy swell, and Roach watched helplessly as a man and a young woman, washed off the boat for the fourth time and too exhausted to climb back on, drowned in front of him as they struggled to keep each other afloat. 'I do not know the young lady's name,' he later told Warrant Officer Yeomans, 'but she was very plucky'. Roach and Moore managed to hang on until picked up by HMS *Helga*, the vessel that two and a half years earlier had shelled rebel strongholds in Dublin during the Easter Rising.

The body of the third Australian identified in the mortuary belonged to Private Edwin Johnson Carter, a 34-year old farmer from the Warrnambool area of Victoria, who had enlisted in the 29th Battalion, a unit of the 5th Australian Division. Wounded in action on 9 August 1918 at the start of the great advance that spelt the end of Germany's hopes of defeating the Allies, he, too, was returning from convalescent leave when he boarded the *Leinster*. Lance Corporal Roach reported seeing an Australian of the 5th Division on board the ship, but, as with Private Barnes, Carter's movements after the submarine attacked are unknown.

One Australian whose body was never recovered was 27-year old Lieutenant Francis Patrick Laracy. His presence on the *Leinster* was noted by a number of witnesses, perhaps because he stood out – he was a tall man and his left arm was in a sling. Born at Toowoomba, Queensland, Laracy was studying to be a chemist at Sydney University when he enlisted in the 1st Field Ambulance in August 1914. Wounded three times, once at Gallipoli and twice in France, he was recommended for the Military Cross for conspicuous gallantry and leadership, which he had shown on 12 July 1918 during his battalion's attack on the enemy around Merris in northern France, where he was wounded. For Laracy the war was over: his wound, the result of a German bullet which struck him in the left forearm, where he had previously been wounded in October 1916, had earned him a trip home. He had already received his orders to return to Australia but had decided to visit relatives in Kilkenny before taking the ship home. Yet another fateful decision.

Another Australian soldier who disappeared without a trace that day was Lance Corporal Frederick William Knuckey of the 38th Battalion, a 38-year-old bank manager from Bendigo, Victoria. He had enlisted in February 1916 and was gassed in November 1917 during the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele). This kept him out of the line for three months. He had hardly returned to his unit in Belgium when the battalion was rushed south to help stem the German offensive of March 1918. In May, he went to England on leave, but this was interrupted when he was admitted to hospital with myalgia (muscle pain). Its underlying

cause must have been serious as he was in hospital almost two months before being discharged to the No. 1 Australian Command Depot at Sutton Veny in Wiltshire. It was while waiting to be posted back to his unit that he went on leave to Ireland. Although his body was not recovered, his name was among the early lists of those missing from the *Leinster* and presumed drowned. In March 1918 a Court of Enquiry held at AIF Headquarters, London confirmed that finding.

That makes a total of seven Australian dead – four whose bodies were recovered and are buried at Grangegorman Military Cemetery and three whose bodies were not recovered. But another two Australians were killed in the *Leinster's* encounter with UB-123. They were serving with the New Zealand forces. One was Nurse Winifred Starling, whose body was not recovered. Born at Petersham in Sydney in 1878, she studied nursing at Sydney's Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and at the Chelsea Children's Hospital in London. In August 1915, she volunteered her services to the war effort, being appointed to Sutton Veny (Warminster) Hospital and No. 2 New Zealand General Hospital, Walton-on-Thames, where she was serving when she took leave in Ireland. Nurse Starling had just been given a new posting on a hospital ship heading to New Zealand, and, like Lieutenant Laracy, had made the fateful decision to visit friends in Ireland before returning to the antipodes.

The other Australian Kiwi was 31-year old Lance Corporal Peter Freitas of the New Zealand Army Service Corps. A native of Guildford in Sydney, he and another New Zealander killed that day, Lieutenant Henry Doyle, lie next to each other at Grangegorman near the graves of their four Australian comrades.

A poignant tragedy

The sinking of the *Leinster* was a tragedy that ended the lives of hundreds of men and women from many nations, many of whom are represented here today. It was a tragedy made more poignant by the fact that it occurred just a month before the armistice which brought an end to that terrible war, and at a time when the Germans were pursuing peace talks with the Allies. It led an angry President Wilson to condemn the Germans for their 'acts of inhumanity, spoliation and desolation'. For the Australian casualties the poignancy was further magnified by the fact that for the AIF on the Western Front the war was effectively over. After the gruelling campaign from 8 August on, when the Australians along with their British, Irish and Canadian counterparts pushed the Germans back to and beyond the Hindenburg line, the battered and torn Australian divisions had been withdrawn from the fighting to rest, never to return to the firing line.

They had come from a land down under, ten thousand miles away, to help defend the empire to which they belonged, and they were soon to make the long voyage home. But for the nine of their compatriots who boarded the *Leinster* that fateful day 100 years ago, their voyage was much shorter and which would take them to a new home, one that is eternal.