

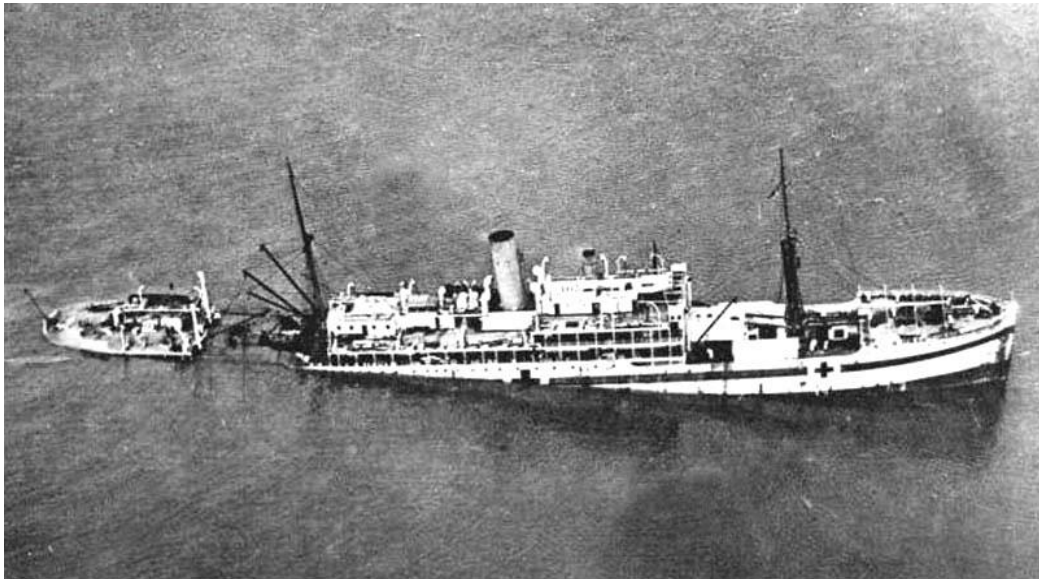
HMHS *LLANDOVERY CASTLE*

War Crimes Strike Close to Home

At 9:30 p.m., in the lingering dusk of Thursday, June 27, 1918, as the Canadian Army hospital ship HMHS¹ *Llandoverly Castle*² steamed 116 miles (187 km) southwest of Fastnet, Ireland, with red cross insignia luminous on her brightly lit white hull, a torpedo slammed into the vessel's starboard side.

The explosion ripped through the engine deck, killed the engineers and stokers, destroyed her generator, thus extinguishing her lights and disabling her wireless equipment, and cut the signal cables connecting bridge to engine room. Even as she continued to churn forward, the ship immediately began to list and sink. Among those scrambling to lifeboat stations across the sloping decks were Donald George MacPhail, Walter McKenzie Cowie and Jessie Mabel McDiarmid, sons and daughter, respectively, of the Lanark County Townships of Drummond, North Burgess and Beckwith.

When attacked, the *Llandoverly Castle* was eight days out of Halifax where she had delivered 622 wounded Canadian soldiers, victims of the bloodletting on the Western Front. Having repeatedly performed boat drills, there was no panic as the 258 crew and medical staff aboard obeyed orders promptly and assembled with life vests at their assigned stations within minutes. With no patients on board, the ship's total lifeboat capacity of 980 was far in excess of requirement³, but launching the boats, from tangled hoist lines and listing decks, into fast moving water as the ship continued to steam forward, proved extremely difficult. Two boats were wrecked, including one smashed by the ship's propellers when it was dragged into the vortex as the stern went under. Fourteen nursing sisters had been in that boat – and worse was to come.



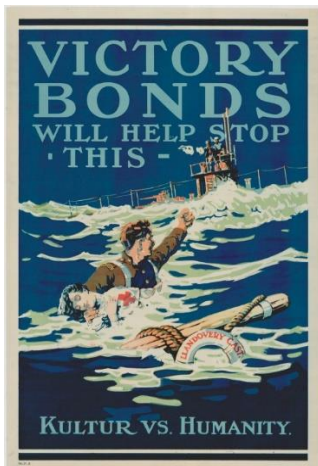
¹ His Majesty's Hospital Ship.

² Named after a Welsh castle.

³ There were 19 lifeboats on board, each capable of taking 52 people, and although some were destroyed by the explosion.

⁴ Royal Canadian Medical Service Association, *Sinking of Llandoverly Castle: Commemorative Photo Album*. This is apparently an 'imagined' image as no aerial photo of the sinking was, or could have, been taken as the event occurred after darkness had fallen.

Except for crew killed in the initial explosion, almost everyone escaped the stricken vessel in the 10 short minutes she remained afloat. Captain Edward Arthur Sylvester (1863-1920) was the last to leave, just as his ship disappeared, its boilers exploding as she went under. Then, as the captain's launch and four lifeboats that had managed to launch successfully began to rescue survivors adrift in their life vests or clinging to wreckage, Oberleutnant⁵ Helmut Patzig (1890-1984) of the German Kriegsmarine brought his submarine, *U-86*, to the surface.



Propaganda Poster
(Imperial War Museum)

Patzig, ordered that the wreckage, lifeboats, and survivors be searched and took Captain Sylvester and CMAC doctor Major Thomas Lyon (1882-1948) aboard *U-86* for interrogation in the conning tower. He accused Sylvester of transporting munitions and Lyon of being an American airman. Both denied the charges and Lyon was roughly knocked about, suffering a broken ankle before he and Sylvester were returned to the launch. A short time later *U-86* again came alongside Sylvester's boat and questioned him a second time.

When *U-86* returned to the scene for a third time, Patzig gave the order to make clear for diving, sending his crew below deck with the exception of two junior officers, Lieutenants⁶ Ludwig Dithmar (1892-1970) and John Boldt (1895-1931), and a Petty Officer named Meissner. The U-boat did not, however, dive.

For the next two hours, in an effort to erase all evidence of what had transpired by eliminating witnesses, the submarine crisscrossed the wreckage-strewn scene, ramming and firing 14 rounds from its 105mm deck gun into the lifeboats, and raking survivors in the water with machine gun fire. It was later revealed that Patzig later swore his crew to secrecy and forged the course of *U-86* in its logbook so that nothing would connect his command with the sinking of the *Llandoverly Castle*.

Despite his best efforts, however, one lifeboat carrying 24 survivors escaped the attack to tell the tale. Thirty-six hours later, on the morning of June 29th, it was picked up by the British destroyer HMS *Lysander*.

"That one boat survived is not the fault of the enemy," CAMC Sergeant Arthur Knight (1886-1966), the only survivor of lifeboat No.5 in which the nurses had died, later recalled. *"At least three efforts were made to run it down, in addition to shell fire directed towards it."*

The *U-86* attack killed 234 people, including 150 merchant mariners and 84 CAMC personnel (five Medical Officers, 14 Nursing Sisters, five NCOs, 59 Medical Orderlies and one Chaplain). Only the 24 occupants of the single lifeboat survived.



Captain E. A. Sylvester
(Library of Congress)

A few days later, when the armed merchant cruiser HMS *Morea* sailed through the wreckage, 18-year-old Midshipman Kenneth Cummins (1900-2006)⁷, recalled,

⁵ First Lieutenant.

⁶ Lieutenants.

⁷ When Kenneth Alfred Hugo Cummins died in 2006 at age 106, he was one of the last surviving British veterans of WW1.

Suddenly, we began going through corpses.... we were sailing through floating bodies. We were not allowed to stop — we just had to go straight through. It was quite horrific, and my reaction was to vomit over the edge. It was something we could never have imagined... particularly the nurses: seeing these bodies of women and nurses, floating in the ocean, having been there some time. Huge aprons and skirts in billows, which looked almost like sails because they dried in the hot sun.

The Victims

(Hon.) Captain Reverend Donald George MacPhail

Donald George MacPhail was born April 23, 1864, on his family's Drummond Township farm, one of three children⁸ born to Donald MacPhail Sr. (1822-1905) and Christina D. Thompson (1825-1916).

His grandparents, John MacPhail (1778-1868) and Christiana Campbell (1779-1864), natives of Perthshire, Scotland, emigrated via the brig *Prompt* in 1817 and were located on Drummond Township C-8/L-16(W) at the Perth Military Settlement in April 1818. They made the journey with four daughters and a son⁹, and their second son, Donald, was born in Drummond. In due course Donald purchased his own farm at Drummond C-3/L-14, on the Tennyson Road, and it was there that Donald George MacPhail was born and raised.

MacPhail received his primary education at the local Township School, attended the Perth Collegiate Institute and graduated from Queen's University, Kingston, in 1889 with a degree in Arts and Theology. He was ordained to the ministry of the Presbyterian Church of Canada and began his career in 1892 at St. Andrew's Church, Picton, Ontario.

In 1894, at Kingston, Reverend MacPhail married Louise Annie Britton (1870-1936). His father-in-law was Byron Moffat Britton (1833-1920), lawyer, QC, and MP for the riding of Kingston 1896-1904, and later judge of the Court of Queen's Bench. His mother-in-law, Mary Eliza Holton (1842-1905), was the daughter of Luther Hamilton Holton (1817-1880), businessman and MP for the riding of Châteauguay 1867-1880. Donald and Louise MacPhail became the parents of two daughters, Mary Christine (1895-1973) and Katherine Louise (1897-1986).

MacPhail left Picton in 1902 and took up a charge at the frontier coal mining town of Frank in southern Alberta. A few months after his arrival there, on April 29, 1903, 110 million tonnes of limestone rock slid down Turtle Mountain and, in less than two minutes, buried the eastern end of the town, the Crowsnest railway line, and the mine. Nearly 100 people were killed and most of the bodies were never recovered.¹⁰

⁸ His siblings were Isabella (1850-1879), John David (1851-1877), Margaret (1853-1887), William (1857-1858), Christina (1856-1943), Peter Epton (1859-1946), Mary Elizabeth (1861-1864), Janet Inglis (1865-1952).

⁹ Margaret (1803-1843), Janet (1807-1874), Peter (1811-1891), Christiana (1813-1891), Catherine (1815-1840).

¹⁰ The town quickly recovered, however. By 1908 the lost buildings were replaced at a safer location, the mine was back in operation, a zinc smelter was established, and the three-storey Rocky Mountains Sanatorium opened at a nearby hot springs.

MacPhail returned to Ontario in 1907 to become minister at Knox Presbyterian Church, Cayuga, a post held until April 1916 when, at age 52, he enlisted, at Halifax, Nova Scotia, in the Chaplains Service of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. (CEF). During his time at Cayuga, he had been Chaplain to the 37th Haldimand Rifles militia regiment, a unit in which two companies were comprised entirely of Six Nations Iroquois from the Grand River community south of Brantford. At Halifax he was assigned to the 72nd (Seaforth Highlanders) Battalion, Canadian Infantry.

After six months at Bramshott Army Camp in England MacPhail joined the 6th Infantry Brigade, 2nd Canadian Division at the front in France, and was later posted to 12th Infantry Brigade, 4th Infantry Division. In July 1917 he was admitted to the #10 Canadian Field Ambulance clinic suffering from severe bronchitis. Although he was discharged after only a few days, health issues seem to have resulted in his transfer to England in mid-September 1917.



Captain Rev. Donald G. MacPhail
(Queen's University Archive)

Back in England MacPhail served troops of the Canadian Training Division and patients at the CAMC Hospitals at Shorncliffe Camp for the next nine months. On June 5, 1918, he was assigned to duty aboard HMHS *Llandoverly Castle*. Three weeks later he was drowned when the ship was sunk by German submarine *U-86*.

On October 12, 1918, more than three months after the sinking, MacPhail's body was found washed ashore on Ile d'Ouessant, 40 kilometers off the coast of Brittany, France. He was buried on the island, in the south-east corner of Lampaul Communal Cemetery.¹¹

During WW1, of 447 Canadian chaplains serving overseas, 11 died on active service, but only five were killed in action - Georges Étienne Rosario Crochetière, William Henry Davis, Joseph Elliott, Webster Henry Fanning Harris, and Donald George MacPhail.

Private Walter MacKenzie Cowie

Walter MacKenzie Cowie was born December 5, 1896, on a Scotch Line farm in North Burgess Township, the youngest child of William Adams Cowie (1840-1918) and Kathleen Blanche 'Kate' MacKenzie (1870-1941). He had two full sisters and a brother, as well as seven half-siblings, born to his father's first wife, Margaret Kemp (1837-1886).¹²

¹¹ There are five WW1 casualties buried in Lampaul Churchyard but only two have been identified.

¹² Full siblings: Robert John (1863-1944), Jessie Forgie (1864-1889), James (1867-1938), William Kemp (1870-1921), Francis Allan (1873-1955), Henrietta Jane (1875-1934), Isaac Constantine (1877-1946). Half siblings: Garvilla Blanche (1890-1975), Nelson Adams (1893-1972), Lilly Ferguson (1894-1896).

His grandfather, Robert Cowie (1805-1887), was born at Edinburgh (Corstorphine), Scotland, and in 1826 followed a relative, Frank Allen¹³, to the Perth Military Settlement. Cowie, a stonemason, found work building locks on the Rideau Canal and later built houses at Smiths Falls and Lock's Brewery at Perth. In the early 1830s he moved to Split Rock, New York¹⁴, where he lived for about seven years and where he married Jane Henrietta Adams (1813-1871)¹⁵. Returning to Perth, they purchased a farm on the Scotch Line and raised a family of 14 children¹⁶.

When Robert Cowie retired in 1872, he sold the family farm to his son, William Adams Cowie, and, in turn, his son, Walter, was born and raised on that North Burgess property. Walter Cowie attended the local township elementary school and worked on the family farm until, at age 20, on July 11, 1916, he enlisted with the CEF at the Perth recruitment office.



Pvt. Walter MacKenzie Cowie
(Perth Courier)

Assigned to the 9th (Queen's University) Field Ambulance Company of the CAMC, Private Cowie arrived in England via the S.S. *Grampian* in the first week of November 1916 and was sent for further training at Dibgate, a part of the massive Shorncliffe Camp in Kent. However, he soon fell ill, and spent most of the following year in hospital as a patient rather than a staff member.

During February and March 1917, he was confined to the Canadian Hospital at Moore Barracks with a mild case of mumps. He returned to service in April and was shipped to France on May 31, 1917, but soon fell ill again at Le Havre Army Depot. Diagnosed with diphtheria, his service record lists him as "*dangerously ill*" between June 4th and 16th at 46th Stationary Hospital, Étaples, France. Removed from the 'dangerous' list, but still seriously ill, he was evacuated to England and spent four months at the Military Hospital, Richmond, Surrey, and the Canadian Convalescent Hospital, Hillingdon. Returned to duty in October, he spent the following six months serving as an orderly at the Canadian Army's Westhanger Hospital facility in Kent.

On March 21, 1918, Private Cowie was reassigned to the Canadian hospital ship HMHS *Llandoverly Castle* and during April and May made three trips conveying Canadian wounded from Liverpool to Halifax. He drowned on June 27, 1918, at age 22¹⁷, when the *Llandoverly Castle* was torpedoed and sunk.

Walker Cowie's first cousin, CAMC Nursing Sister Jean 'Jennie' Templeman (1885-1918), also died in the sinking of HMHS *Llandoverly Castle*. She was born at Ottawa in 1885, the daughter of John Templeman (1856-1928), a native of Fife, Scotland, and Elizabeth Caroline Cowie (1856-1896). Her mother had been born on the same North Burgess Township farm as Walter Cowie - she and Walter's father William Adams Cowie were siblings.

¹³ Emigrated via the *Atlas* in 1815 and located at Bathurst C-1/L-20(W) in 1816.

¹⁴ West of Syracuse.

¹⁵ A letter to the editor published in the *Perth Courier* of October 22, 1964, discussing the genealogy of the Thompson and Cowie families, stated that Jane Henrietta Adams-Cowie was related to John Adams, second President of the United States.

¹⁶ The first child was born in Canada, the next three were born in the USA, and the remaining 10 were born in Canada.

¹⁷ Or possibly at age 19. Some sources, including his *Perth Courier* obituary, suggest he may have been born December 5, 1899, not December 5, 1896 as his CEF attestation papers record, and was thus only 16 years of age at enlistment.

Templeman enlisted with the CAMC at Montreal on June 3, 1915, and sailed from Halifax with the first contingent of the CEF, arriving at Moore Barracks, Shorncliffe, in the first week of January 1916. She crossed the channel to France on February 19th and joined the medical staff at No.1 Canadian General Hospital, Étapes, south of Boulogne. During the month of July, she was temporarily attached to No.21 Casualty Clearing Station and then returned to work at No.1 General Hospital until January 24,1917 when she was granted 14 days leave, during which she made a hurried visit to her father back in Ottawa.

She reported for duty again on January 25th and continued to work at Étapes until she was ordered to England at the end of May 1917. Reassigned to the 1,000-bed Ontario Military Hospital¹⁸ at Orpington, south of London, Templeman worked there until June 4, 1917, when she was assigned to the Canadian hospital ship *Llandoverly Castle*. Three weeks later, 33-year-old Jean Templeman died with 13 other CAMC nurses when the lifeboat in which she had sought refuge was sucked into the vortex of the sinking ship and smashed to kindling by the still rotating propellers.

The bodies of Private Walter MacKenzie Cowie and Nursing Sister Jean Templeman were never recovered.

Nursing Sister Jessie 'Mabel' McDiarmid

Born in 1880 at Ashton, Beckwith Township, Jessie 'Mabel' McDiarmid was the daughter of Peter H. McDiarmid (1818-1892) and Jane Bridget Brady (1821-1910)¹⁹. She received her primary and secondary education at Ashton and Carleton Place and was a graduate of the Royal Jubilee Nursing School, Victoria, British Columbia.

McDiarmid worked as a nurse in the United States for a number of years and was living at San Francisco when WW1 broke out in 1914. She returned to Canada and, on July 30, 1915, at Esquimalt, British Columbia²⁰, enlisted as a Nursing Sister with the CAMC, attached to No.5 General Hospital, a medical team organized that summer at Victoria. No.5 Hospital reached the England on September 7th.

After a temporary assignment to the Red Cross Hospital at Taplow, Buckinghamshire, in December 1915, McDiarmid and No.5 Hospital travelled via Cairo, Egypt, to Salonika, Greece. There, in extremes of heat and cold, they established a 1,240-bed field hospital treating casualties from the ill-fated allied defence of Serbia. In September 1917 the hospital was transferred back to England and re-established at Liverpool.



**NS Jessie 'Mable' McDiarmid
(Imperial War Museum)**

¹⁸ A facility funded by the Province of Ontario, later re-named 16th Canadian General Hospital.

¹⁹ Her siblings were, Mary (b.c1854), Sarah (1855-1930), Anne (1857-1936), Margaret (1859-1951), John (1862-1945), Jennet (b.c1863), Peter (b.c1866), Bertha (1880-1902), Margaret (1859-1951). Bertha and Jessie were twins.

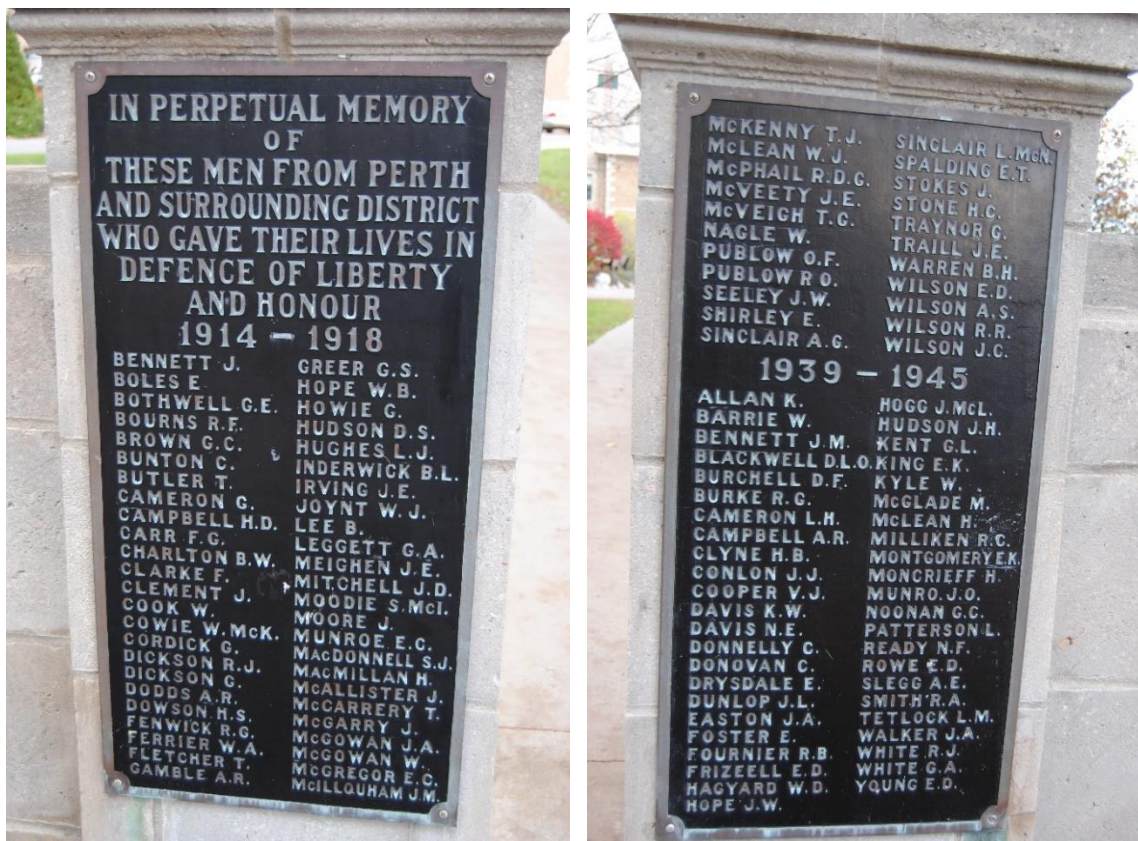
²⁰ Although she was not attested (sworn in) until September 16, 1915, after she reached London, England.

On October 25, 1917, Nursing Sister McDiarmid was mentioned in dispatches by Lieutenant General²¹ George Francis Milne (1866-1948), Commander-in-Chief of the British Army at Salonika, for “*gallant and distinguished service in the field*”, in recognition of her work under the brutally difficult conditions at Salonika.

In December 1917 McDiarmid was transferred to No.4 Canadian General Hospital at Liverpool and six months later, on June 5, 1918, she was assigned to the nursing contingent aboard HMHS *Llandoverly Castle*. Twenty-two days later, at age 38, she was drowned when her ship was torpedoed and sunk by German submarine *U-86*. Her body was never recovered.

Remembering

Hon. Captain Chaplain Reverend Donald George MacPhail’s grave on Ile d’Ouessant is marked by a Commonwealth War Graves Commission gravestone. His name is also inscribed in the Book of Remembrance in the Memorial Chamber of Canada’s Parliament Buildings, Ottawa. He is further memorialized on the gates of Perth’s Great War Memorial Hospital, on the marble plaque at Perth & District Collegiate Institute, by a brass tablet at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, Picton, and by a stained glass window, placed by his widow, at Knox Church, Cayuga.



Perth Great War Memorial Hospital Memorial Plaques
(Photo – Ron W. Shaw)

²¹ Later Field Marshal Sir G. F. Milne.



Halifax Memorial to Sailors Lost at Sea
(Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society)

The names of Private Walter MacKenzie Cowie and Nursing Sister Jessie Mabel McDiarmid are both inscribed on the Halifax Memorial to Sailors Lost at Sea²² honoring Canadian war dead “*missing, presumed lost*”. They are also remembered in the pages of the Book of Remembrance in the Memorial Chamber in the Canadian Parliament Buildings, Ottawa.

Nursing Sister McDiarmid is also named on memorial plaques at Stradacona Hospital, Halifax, and at Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Hospital in London, England, as well as on the Beckwith Township War Memorial and a family stone at Dewar Cemetery, Beckwith Township.

Private Cowie is also among those remembered on the memorial gates of Perth’s Great War Memorial Hospital.

All of the *Llandoverly Castle* victims were remembered by an opera based on the sinking, composed by Stephanie Martin, a York University associate professor, with libretto by playwright Paul Ciufo, as performed at Toronto on the 100th anniversary of the sinking in June 2018.

Leipzig Trials

Efforts to secure justice for MacPhail, Cowie, McDiarmid, and the other 234 victims of the *U-86* turned into a shambles.

Although firing on a hospital ship contravened both international law (Hague Convention) and standing orders of the Imperial German Navy, and the bloody attempt at a coverup amounted to mass murder, *U-86* commander Helmut Patzig was awarded the Hohenzollern Knights Cross with Swords two weeks after he sank *Llandoverly Castle*, adding the honor to an Iron Cross 1st Class he already held. He was then promoted to Kapitänleutnant in February 1920. When the British pressured German courts into conducting a war crimes trial at Leipzig in 1921, however, they failed to lay hands on Patzig. He was convicted in absentia of homicide but escaped the court’s jurisdiction by fleeing to the free city of Danzig (his hometown).



Oberleutnant Helmut Patzig
(U-Boat.net)

²² Located at Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, Nova Scotia, the memorial was built in 1924 and inscribed with the names of 415 WW1 casualties lost at sea. After WW2 the names of 2,852 Canadian sailors and soldiers lost at sea in that war were added.

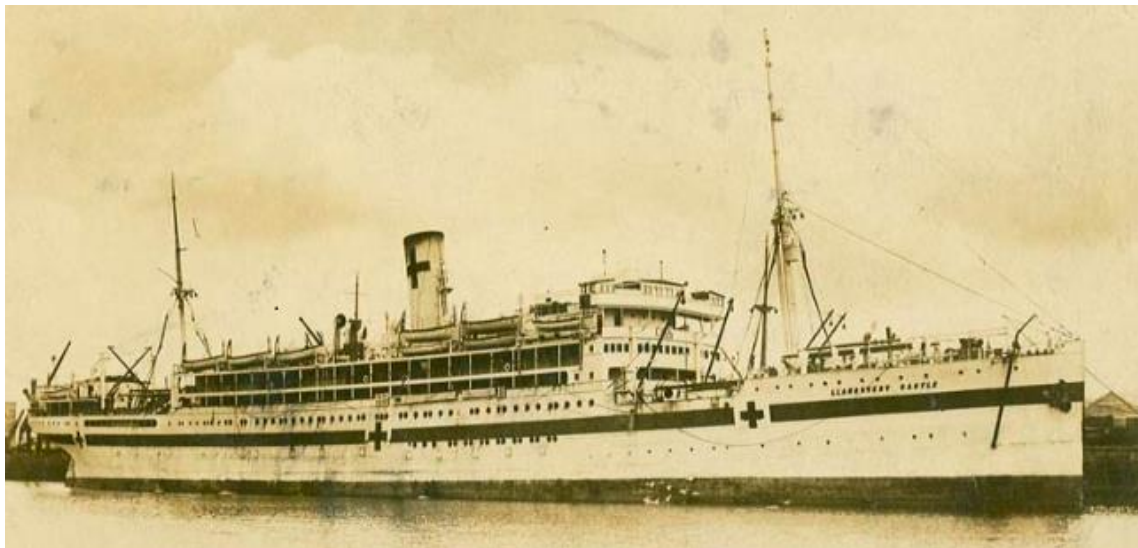
Patzig was never sentenced and went on to serve with Nazi Germany's Kriegsmarine (Navy) during WW2 as commander of the 26th U-Boat Flotilla, a training group, where he was awarded the Merit Cross and another Iron Cross. He died at age 93.

Lieutenants Ludwig Dithmar and John Boldt were tried, convicted, and sentenced to four years of hard labour, but escaped while on their way to prison and were never recaptured. Petty Officer Meissner had died before the Leipzig trial was convened.

The Ships

HMHS *Llandoverly Castle*

The *Llandoverly Castle* was built in 1914 at Glasgow by Barclay, Curle & Co. as a Royal Mail ship for the Union-Castle Line. At 10,639 gross registered tons she was 500 feet long with a beam of 63 feet and powered by twin screws. She was well appointed and boasted many then-modern features such as the first elevators aboard a passenger ship. As RMS *Llandoverly Castle*, she began her service sailing between London and East African ports, and later to West Africa. In July 1916 she was requisitioned for war service and became one of five vessels chartered by the Canadian Army to serve as hospital ships. When converted *Llandoverly Castle* was equipped with 622 casualty beds and accommodation for a medical staff of 102.



HMHS *Llandoverly Castle*
(Nova Scotia Archives)

On her final voyage HMHS *Llandoverly Castle* sailed from Liverpool, England, on June 7, 1918, carrying a full complement of wounded Canadian soldiers, the majority of them amputees. She began her return voyage on June 19th, but as she prepared to sail, a German spy operating at Halifax mistakenly concluded that the Canadian doctors aboard were American airmen. That report dovetailed with an unfounded but widely held belief at German Naval Intelligence (Nachrichten-Abteilung) that the Allies were using outward journeys of their hospital ships to smuggle troops and munitions over to Europe. The 'intelligence' report from Halifax was promptly signalled to Helmut Patzig, commander of *U-86*, who immediately took post off the coast of Ireland and lay in wait.

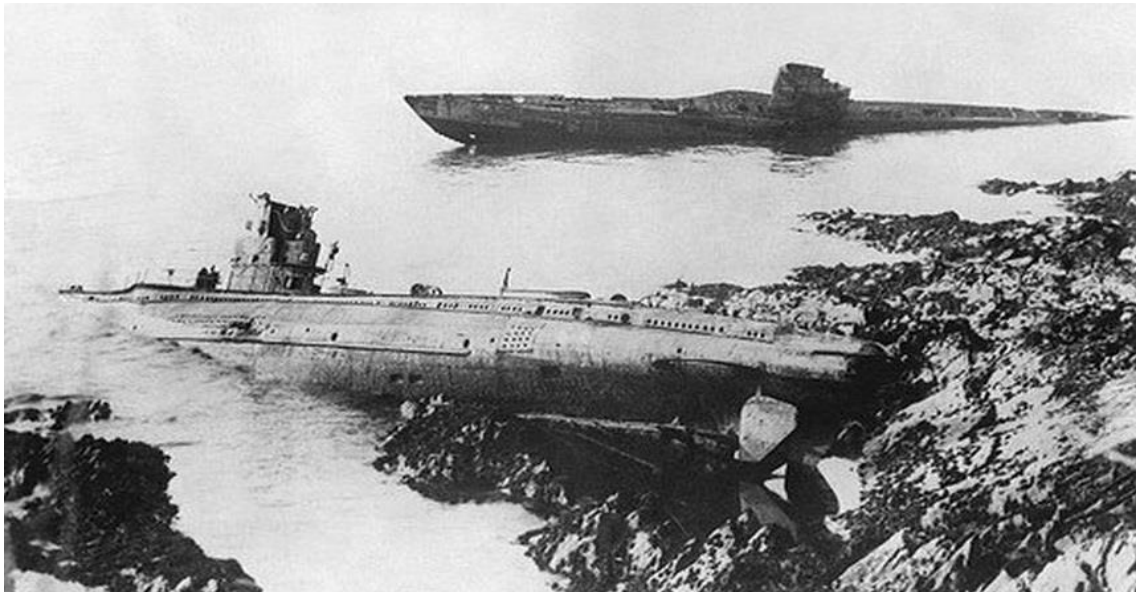
When the *Llandoverly Castle* steamed into his sights, had Patzig exercised his right under the Hague Convention to stop, board and search the ship, the spy's report would have proven unfounded. He chose, however, to sink the vessel without warning and then kill most of her contingent in an attempt to cover up his crime.

HMHS *Llandoverly Castle* lies on the bottom of the North Atlantic, off the southwest coast of Ireland, at 51°17'60.00"N - 9°53'59.99"W.

Submarine U-86

Commissioned on October 31, 1917, *U-86* was a Type UB III submarine or U-Boat (Unterseeboot) of the German Imperial Navy (Kaiserliche Marine). Between January and June 1918, under command of Oberleutnant Helmut Patzig, she had sunk 16 allied merchant ships before her attack on the *Llandoverly Castle*.

U-86 was surrendered to the Allies in November 1918, passed into British hands, and was towed to Falmouth along with five other U-boats for use in explosive test trials by the Royal Navy in Falmouth Bay. Following these tests *U-86* was run aground on Castle Beach in January 1924 and sold for scrap.



U-86 (foreground) aground on Castle Beach, Falmouth Bay, UK, 1924
(U.S. Defense Visual Information Center)

During WW1, 19 allied hospital ships were sunk by German submarines or submarine-laid mines: Australian 1, British 12, Canadian 1, Dutch 1, Greek 1, Italian 1, and Russian 2.

Germany lost one hospital ship to hostile action when British warships sunk the HS *Taboa* in Dar es Salaam harbor after she refused to be boarded for inspection. Austria-Hungary lost two hospital ships to mines and one to a French submarine.

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