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Dr. Lulu E. Sweigard and friend

DR. LULU E. SWEIGARD, B.A. '18, and a former member of the Department of Physical Education for Women at TEACHERS COLLEGE, stood near enough the torpedo explosion on the S. S. ATHENIA, the day England declared war, to be knocked from her feet. Hours later she was rescued from a life boat and then transferred to the legend-bound CITY OF FLINT. Because of her knowledge of the human body—and her courageous unselfishness under stress—"Miss Lulu" gave invaluable, continuous aid to "the sad, the fearful, the sick, and the injured." The letters printed on pages six and seven reveal what, modestly, "Miss Lulu" minimized in her letter. But even because of her very restraint, THE ALUMNUS takes pride in presenting this moving drama of human beings caught in war at sea.



The Athenia Disaster -- My Story

An eye-witness account by DR. LULU E. SWEIGARD, B.A. '18

DEAR ALUMNI of Iowa State Teachers College: When I was asked to write for my fellow alumni some of my experiences on the S. S. *Athenia*, it seemed that I could not do it. Retrospect is more heart-rending than action in the midst of and following the disaster. For this reason I shall not attempt a consecutive story of events, nor shall I mention any of the worst tragedy—though it might seem otherwise to you.

There can be no doubt that it was a submarine that torpedoed the S. S. *Athenia*. The submarine was seen by various people, and it remained in our vicinity for some time. After we were in life boats for about an hour, the submarine must have passed under the life boat I was in. We were utterly quiet during those few tense moments. We saw

nothing different but realized by the slight humming sound, more felt than heard, and the different feeling of pressure on the boat, that it must be the submarine passing under us.

One effective torpedo was fired (about 7:30 o'clock in the evening), but it failed to hit the most vital spot to buckle and sink the ship quickly. Of course this was a thing we did not know; nor did we know at any moment what next might happen to us. The submarine came to the surface and fired a shot at the radio apparatus, but this too failed in its objective. So our SOS continued to be transmitted. The following is not fact, but the feeling of many growing out of the sum-total experience: if the ship had been hit in a vital spot to make it sink quickly, and if the radio apparatus

had been put out of commission, our life boats would have been sunk and the fate of the S. S. *Athenia* and its passengers would have remained a mystery.

"We Were Thrown Off Our Feet". . .

☆ JUST BEFORE WE WERE TORPEDOED I had been walking with a New York man, Mr. Johnston, on the promenade deck of both port and starboard sides; we had stopped to enjoy the sight of the sea, but had seen nothing unusual. Then we had gone inside on the port side to look for Janet Olson. As I check back now on the chart of the S. S. *Athenia* I know that we must have been almost directly over the place the torpedo struck on the port side. Some of the pressure and smoke from the explosion came up through a bar close by, sending dishes and other objects in all directions. We were thrown off our feet and, in utter darkness, sought to regain a standing position in the midst of tumbling with the furniture. I found out later that Mr. Johnston was hurt at this time; I was not.

Having been on the S. S. *Athenia* only a little over twenty-four hours meant that few people were oriented—they would have difficulty to know where they were in relation to their life boat stations. This was true with me, but it seemed highly important that I should somehow, somehow follow the directions that had been given to us the afternoon before in our life boat drill. I had no thought of trying to find my cabin to get a life belt. Later I saw Mr. Johnston on some stairs in the midst of struggling and crying people. He went back to his cabin close by for a life belt for me and helped me put it on. Then I insisted I must find my own station and he should find his. It was during the search for my station on B deck that I saw the results of the explosion on A deck. It had blown through an aft hold, bringing with it bodies and debris, and leaving dead and injured scattered about. Here I was torn with indecision for a few moments as I passed and repassed through this area—should I attempt to help, or should I follow orders? The latter seemed most important for the good of all.

At my station I stood in a group of approximately 150 people, waiting and watching for Janet.

WRITTEN OF A GRADUATE

☆ THIS SIGNIFICANT LETTER was written in praise of Miss Sweigard to her superior, by Dr. R. L. Jenkins, M.D., New York Training School for Boys. Returning from a scientific congress in Edinburgh, Dr. Jenkins was aboard the *City of Flint* when that ship turned to pick up the *Athenia* survivors, among them Miss Sweigard.

The Letter

"... I feel a strong desire to express my appreciation of the service and aid of Miss Lulu Sweigard in organizing the impromptu medical services aboard the CITY OF FLINT and to compliment you on having such an unusual person on your staff. My statement is really misleading in referring to her in organizing the service. "Lulu," or "Miss Lulu" as she came respectfully to be called, was the organization.

"... You must understand what it meant under the circumstances to have some one appear from nowhere in particular and step into the responsibilities of an utterly chaotic and confused situation as though it was something she 'had been doing nothing else but' all her life. Aside from her skill in assisting along medical and nursing lines, her ability to pick out that which needed to be done next, and to manage all kinds of people in the accomplishment of it, contributed in a major way both to the comfort and the morale of a bedraggled and bewildered group.

"... If you have any question of the personal qualities . . . of the distinguished personage who graces your department, consult the passengers, crew and officers of the CITY OF FLINT.

"—Cordially yours with congratulations,
"R. L. Jenkins, M.D."

Here incidents occurred which later had their amusing side. Two women (occupants of our cabin) were frantically passing a bottle back and forth as if it were the one thing that would bolster

their courage. Evidently I had misjudged these two women. When the station was practically cleared I saw Janet getting safely (via rope) into the life boat below. This, and the quick estimate that there was more than room for the rest of us, put me into action. I chose the most unlikely place to get into the boat — a collapsed water hose, too large for the hand to encircle, which was being used to hold one end of the life boat below. From the remarks (now amusing) of the man at the top end of this water hose, I judged that he thought no woman would take that means of getting into the boat. But the strong grip I have in my hands and my training in rope climbing did not fail me. By timing the rise and fall of the boat, I landed without a bump, then helped pull three other women out of the water after they had tried to negotiate the same hose. Their arms were weak, they did not seem to know how to use their legs, and they were so frantic that they could not follow the directions we tried to shout to them.

FROM THE REAR ADMIRAL

☆ THE FOLLOWING LETTER was written by E. S. Land, Rear Admiral, retired, to Miss Sweigard.

"Dear Miss Sweigard,

"The United States Maritime Commission desires to express its appreciation of the great assistance rendered by you, a survivor yourself, to the Captain of the Maritime Commission Ship CITY OF FLINT in caring for, nursing, cheering, and directing the survivors of the S. S. ATHENIA during the period you and the other survivors were on board the CITY OF FLINT.

"Your untiring and efficient service added materially to the successful transportation and landing of the survivors of the S. S. ATHENIA in Halifax with no untoward incidents.

"Sincerely yours,

"E. S. Land, Chairman.

"You did a splendid job. — E. S. L."

WHILE IN THE LIFE BOATS almost everybody was very seasick. The first time was comforting, but after that it seemed to be more and more of a struggle to bring up one's heels. The reactions of people differed greatly. There were those who worked hard bailing water; some who rowed at least until boats were well away from the S. S. *Athenia* (the chef was the only sea-going man in our boat); some who complained and even quarreled over discomfort; others who remained extremely quiet, helping those near by in any way possible. We were a bunch of huddled forms in a small boat being tossed about on the swells of the sea during the night. It rained lightly on us twice; the moon peaked out at us a few times; every star near the horizon was first interpreted as a boat coming to our rescue. Theories about our destiny were advanced and changed continually. The confidence in the quick rescue work of the English was marked. Some people were practically without clothing, others wore light summer dresses with no coat, a few of us had light coats. The chill crept deeper and deeper into our bones. We were hoping for the best, probably as never before. How it would have buoyed our spirits to know that a little American freighter, 200 miles closer to America than we were, had turned and was making all speed in our direction!

A British destroyer and a Norwegian boat first started to pick up the survivors, probably soon after midnight. Then came the yacht, the *Southern Cross*. It made its way directly to our boat. We thought then that we were the last of the stragglers, since we no longer saw the flares of other boats within a two-mile radius of the S. S. *Athenia*. We were rescued between 2:30 and 3:00 a.m. — the rescue work of others continued for two or more hours after that.

In War, Death is Inevitable . . .

☆ DURING OUR TIME ON THE WATER some overloaded life boats had been upset and their occupants picked out of the sea by other life boats; some people were transferred from overcrowded boats into less crowded ones, once they were safely away from the S. S. *Athenia*. Two boats at least were upset at the *Southern Cross* when they were dashed

by the high waves under its stern. When one of these was upset, a Polish father already on the *Southern Cross*, watching and hoping to find his two children, dived overboard and helped in the rescue of many children, only to find that his were among those who were lost. One man, a musician from Montreal, was rescued after he had been battered between the life boat and the propeller of the *Southern Cross*, but his life-long friend was among the missing. These things I learned later on the *City of Flint*, for at the time they were happening I was still unable to stand on my feet.

Women and Children First

NEVER HAVING GONE THROUGH such an experience before, I have no way to judge the amount of confusion and terror that occurred on the *S. S. Athenia* after the explosion. The deaths and injuries caused by the explosion must be accepted as inevitable under the circumstances. Besides those injuries received at the time of the explosion, other injuries that might have been avoided occurred when people overcrowded the life boats and were later upset, when they frantically jumped into a life boat or into the water, when they were unable to hold the weight of their bodies as they attempted to go down ropes into life boats, and when boats were upset and crushed at the *Southern Cross*. The order, "women and children first," was followed. But sometimes the occupants of a boat proved to be such a majority of women and children that the safety of all was in great danger; too often a much needed father was separated from his wife and children. Since no one is in a position to judge fairly who should go first, perhaps it is best for such a rule to continue with dependence on the sane judgment of the people concerned, even though such judgment may seldom be shown.

The order of the thoughts that flashed through my mind as I stood at the outskirts of the large group waiting to get into life boats is very vivid in my memory. I was first thankful that my research was complete and written, then I wondered who without the experience of that research could ever interpret and apply its highly technical conclusions. Right on the heels of this followed,

"so what!" Next I thought that my family needed me. Evidently I was trying to justify my continued existence. Then came a feeling of relative insignificance such as I have never experienced before. As an individual I was of no importance.

NEWS ABOUT "MISS LULU"

☆ DR. LULU EDITH SWEIGARD was awarded the Bachelor's degree in physical education from TEACHERS COLLEGE in 1918. Her work so impressed college authorities that she became a member of the Department of Physical Education for Women in 1917 and continued in that capacity until 1926. In the following year she earned her Master's degree from Teachers College, Columbia University, and taught there until she went to New York University in 1931. Having performed original and practical research in posture and body mechanics and the means of promoting poise, relaxation, and efficiency in the use of the body, she was awarded the Doctor's degree in February, 1939, from New York University, at which institution she is now a member of the Department of Physical Education and Health, School of Education. The topic of her doctor's thesis was "Bilateral Asymmetry in the Alignment of the Skeletal Framework of the Human Body." Antero-posterior radiographs of the trunk and proximal femora of 497 subjects were used in this study. Dr. Sweigard's residence is 25 East Ninth Street, New York City.

☆ I SHALL NOT TRY TO TELL about anything that took place after 226 of us were transferred by life boats from the *Southern Cross* to the American freighter, the *City of Flint*, a boat which was not built to carry passengers. (See letters written by E. S. Land, chairman of the United States Maritime Commission, and Dr. R. L. Jenkins. The letters are printed on these pages.—Ed.) We spent nine days coming into Halifax where all but a few disembarked. These days were filled with the fastest and most concentrated experience in dealing with a cross-section of hu-

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