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 dropping off passengers and their mountains of luggage. A band was playing. And crowds of reporters and curious onlookers were scrambling to catch a glimpse of the RMS *Lusitania*—a ship so magnificent it was called a “floating palace.”

Elsie must have gazed in wonder at the *Lusitania’s* four towering steel funnels. She must have marveled at the ship’s shiny black hull, which stretched the length of more than two football fields. How 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 voyage was doomed. Thousands of miles away, a much smaller boat had also headed out to sea. It was a German war submarine, known as a U-boat. In just six days, that U-boat would tear the *Lusitania* apart, and 1,198 people would be dead.

**A 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 England, where he was from.

Elsie’s life wasn’t the only thing changing, though. The whole world was being transformed. It was now filled with shiny new automobiles, bright electric lights, and modern machines like the telegraph, which sent messages around the globe in seconds. New discoveries in science and technology had made life safer, more exciting, and more connected.

The *Lusitania* was a symbol of all of this progress. The *Lusitania* could cross the ocean in

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BY KRISTIN LEWIS

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mere days. Just 50 years earlier, such a journey might have taken weeks. Those first years of the 1900s were exciting. To many, it seemed like humans could do anything.

**The Horrors of War**

By the time the *Lusitania* set sail in 1915, though, there was also fear in the air. A terrible war had started in Europe. Great Britain, Russia, and France were fighting Germany and other countries. New weapons were causing death and destruction like the world had never seen before. Thousands of soldiers were being killed every month by poison gases and rapid-fire machine guns.

In the United States, most people didn’t want to get involved in Europe’s problems. To Elsie and other passengers setting sail on the *Lusitania*, those horrors must have seemed far away. Soon, however, everyone on board would experience such horror firsthand.

A few days before the *Lusitania* left New York, the German embassy in Washington, D.C., had sent a warning to Americans: Any ships 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 hallways and open decks. They chatted with other passengers in the dining room, where they sat at enormous tables piled high with fried fish, pies, and puddings. Elsie was staying in the ship’s cheapest section—third class. But she was allowed to explore the fanciest part of the ship. In first class, wealthy
passengers stayed in spacious cabins and dined in classy restaurants, 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 firing torpedoes at 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. It was too fast. Nothing could catch it. Captain William Turner had received notices about U-boat sightings from the British Navy throughout the voyage. But he seemed unworried. Before the voyage, a reporter asked him if the Lusitania was in danger. He said the question was “the best joke I’ve heard in many days.” 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. 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 cramped. Inside, it stunk 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 head right for it.

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—

POWER AND LUXURY

The Lusitania was one of the largest, fastest, and most luxurious passenger ships of its day. Both rich and poor people traveled on this ship, but their experiences were very different. First-class passengers enjoyed fancy cabins and feasted on roast duck, broiled sea bass, apple tarts, and chocolate cakes. Those in third class traveled in simple but comfortable cabins.

DANGEROUS WATERS

The German embassy warned that ships traveling in the waters near England were targets for German U-boats. Because the Lusitania was not a military ship, few passengers worried. They did not think Germany would target it.
one explanation 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. 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
Choose one exciting part of Elsie’s voyage and retell it from her point of view. Use the author’s descriptions to help you imagine Elsie’s experience and how she felt. Send your well-written narrative to “Lusitania Contest” by March 15, 2016. Ten winners will each receive a copy of Stubby the War Dog by Ann Bausum. See page 2 for details.