

# The Forgotten Tragedy. HMT Lancastria



## RMS Lancastria

- Built by William Beardmore for the Anchor Line subsidiary of Cunard.
- Launched on the Clyde in 1922, originally as the Tyrrenhia.
- Fitted to carry 2200 passengers
- Crew of 320
- 16243 tons; 579 feet long (178 metres)
- Estimates vary that on 17 June 1940 there were between 5500 and 9000 people on board



- Ocean going liner: mainly Transatlantic passage. From 1926 – 1932 Lancastria maintained a weekly service from London to New York
- After 1932 she became popular as a cruising ship to the Mediterranean and Norwegian Fjords
- Designed to carry 265 first class, 339 second class, 1258 third class and crew
- And Cargo
- On 27 February 1924 the Tyrrenhia was renamed the Lancastria.  
(Original name not popular: passengers found Tyrrenhia difficult to say)

Age old superstition since as early as 14<sup>th</sup> century.. That changing a ship's name is courting disaster.



## Internal images and menus

- Passenger accommodation included a garden lounge with dance floor, a smoking room and cocktail bar, dining room and gymnasium.
- An area of nearly 3000 square feet of deck space at the far end of the ship for sun and sea bathing and sports.
- Please see photos and menus being circulated

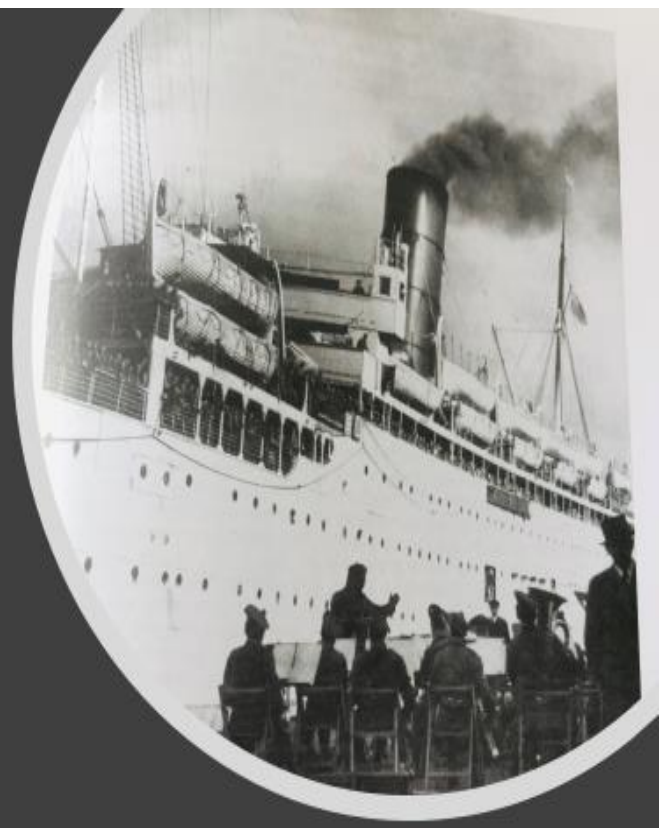




30. A superb view of the *Lancastria* in Cunard's colours. She was a classic ship of 1920s design.

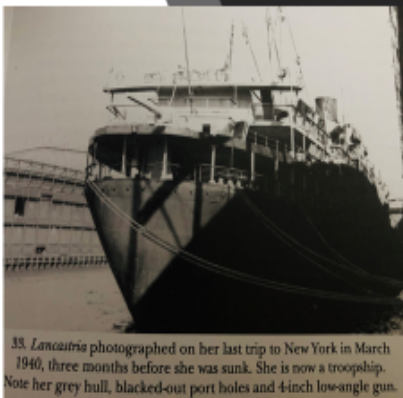
# HMT Lancastria

- About to leave Glasgow on 14 May 1940 as part of convoy Alabaster.
- Being played off by a Scottish Band
- Her decks were crammed with troops...
- This would be repeated approx. threefold in June 1940.



## Lancastria and the War

- September 1939. After outbreak of war. Berthed in New York. Painted Grey and portholes blacked out.
- October 1939. London. Requisitioned by the Ministry of War Transport for use as a troopship, converted and armed with defensive guns.
- February 1940. Captain Rudolph Sharp took over command of HMT Lancastria
- April 1940. In Liverpool and Glasgow.
- May 1940. Convoy Alabaster sailed from Glasgow bound for Reykjavik
- Then Norway
- Lancastria returned to the Clyde on 10 June then to Liverpool for repairs.
- These repairs did not happen as Lancastria was required for Operation Ariel.
- Within hours of berthing at Liverpool, Lancastria was urgently recalled to sea; loud-speaker announcements at the main railway station successfully recalled nearly all the crew members; she arrived in Plymouth on 15 June to await orders



33. Lancastria photographed on her last trip to New York in March 1940, three months before she was sunk. She is now a troopship. Note her grey hull, blacked-out port holes and 4-inch low-angle gun.

# Lancastria and the War

- After the German attack on Belgium and France in May and June 1940 a large number of British Forces were trapped in France threatened by the advancing German Army. The British Government developed a number of emergency plans to evacuate these forces.
- Most celebrated evacuation took place from Dunkirk in May 1940 (338,226 men over 9 days) but British Forces were taken from France from other ports in June 1940.
- St Nazaire was one of these ports. The Lancastria was expected to sail from there on 17 June 1940



## Lancastria and troops in France

- After the Dunkirk evacuation Winston Churchill had assured the nation that 'the British Expeditionary Force had been completely and successfully evacuated from France'.
- This was a spectacular piece of misinformation. Around 150,000 British troops were left behind.
- After two weeks they were given the order to head for the coast for evacuation home.

## Lancastria and the war

- She arrived in the mouth of the Loire estuary late on 16 June. Because the port has to be accessed along a tidal channel, *Lancastria* anchored in the Charpentier Roads, some 5 miles (8.0 km) south-west of St. Nazaire, at 04:00 on 17 June, along with some thirty other merchant vessels of all sizes.
- Troops and civilians had travelled to St. Nazaire. 'For a month the men had worn the same uniforms, had seldom slept regularly, never eaten decent meals and had done much marching... We had bedded down on the French beach the night before but there was little sleep. German planes straffed us again and again and most of the night we ducked under oil barrels'. (Staff Sergeant Major A Picken)

# Lancastria and troops in France

- Early in the morning, three Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve officers came aboard to ask how many troops the *Lancastria* could take. Her normal compliment in troopship configuration was 2,180 including 330 crew; however, Captain Sharp had brought 2,653 men back from Norway, so he replied that he could take 3,000 "at a pinch". He was told that he should take as many as he possibly could "without regard to the limits of International Law".

- Troops were ferried out to *Lancastria* and the other larger ships by destroyers, tugs, fishing boats and other small craft, a round trip of three or four hours.



- By the mid-afternoon of 17 June she had embarked an unknown number (estimates range up to 9,000) line-of-communication troops (including Pioneer and Royal Army Service Corps soldiers) and Royal Air Force personnel, together with about forty civilian refugees, including embassy staff and employees of Fairey Aviation of Belgium with their families (and some pets).
- People were crowded into whatever spaces were available including the large cargo holds. One Royal Engineers officer reported that he had been told by one of *Lancastria's* loading officers that over 7,200 people had come aboard. Captain Sharp estimated the number to be 5,500



Robert Smith  
from Glasgow

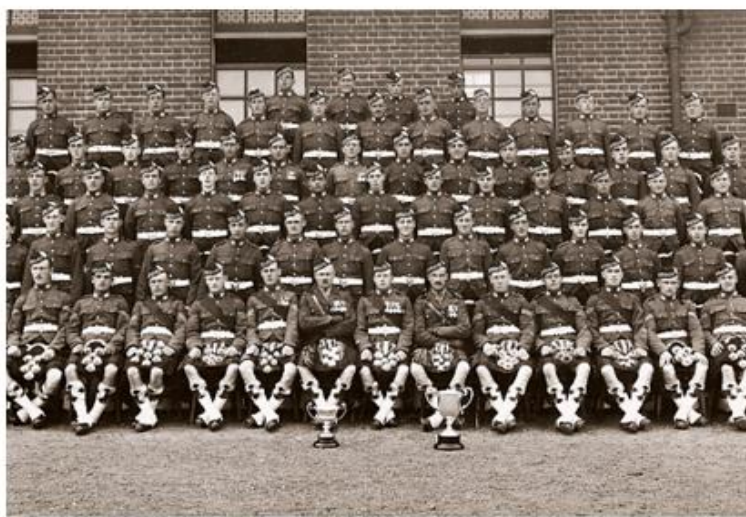
Aged 33 years

Argyll and Sutherland  
Highlanders

Attached to the Auxiliary  
Military Pioneer Corps

Married to Agnes, Father  
of four children under 5  
years; Alex, Maudie,  
Ronnie and Douglas

## Robert Smith.



- Enlisted at Paisley in 1925 aged 18 years
- Civilian employment was listed as labourer
- Serving in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion and A Company when awarded his 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Certificate of Education at Parkhurst in 1926
- Serving in HQ Company when appointed unpaid Lance Corporal
- 1927 the Battalion moved to Jamaica until September 1929 when the men moved to Northern China
- Embarked from China on the troopship HT Neurala February 1933 for the UK for his transfer to the Army Reserve ; a reserve of trained and disciplined military personnel for use in an emergency.
- Returned to civilian life. Married Agnes in 1934. Robert's job at the time is recorded as 'Tramway Car Conductor'
- 1939 Robert rejoined the Argylls and was attached to the AMPC

# Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps

In September 1939, a number of infantry and cavalry reservists were formed into Works Labour Companies. These, in October 1939 became the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps (AMPC), and a Labour Directorate was created to control labour matters. On 22 November 1940 the name was changed from the AMPC to the Pioneer Corps.

They performed a wide variety of tasks, ranging from handling all types of stores, laying prefabricated track on the beaches and stretcher-bearing. They also worked under Engineer supervision on the construction of the Mulberry Harbour and laid the Pipe Line Under the Ocean (PLUTO), constructed airfields, roads and erected bridges.



Labor omnia vincit is a Latin phrase meaning "Work conquers all".



## AMPC.

- A large number of Pioneers served in France with the British Expeditionary Force. During the Battle of France, an infantry brigade was improvised from several AMPC Companies. The brigade became part of Beauman Division and fought in defence of the Andelle and Bethune rivers on 8 June 1940 against the 5th and 7th Panzer Divisions.
- Many thousands of Germans and Austrians joined the Pioneer Corps to assist the Allied war efforts and liberation of their home countries. These were mainly Jews and political opponents of the Nazi Regime who had fled to Britain while it was still possible

**H.M.T. Lancastria**  
**Monday, June 17, 1940**

### LUNCHEON

Hors d'œuvre, varie

Consomme Massena Thick Ox Tail Soup

Fried Fillet of Cod, Colbert

(Cold) Crab Salad, Mayonnaise

Macaroni au Gratin

Saute of Ox Tail, Nohant

To Order from the Grill:

Minute Steak, Maitre d'Hotel

Boiled Knuckle of Veal and Bacon, Parsley Sauce

Green Lima Beans

Baked Jacket and Mashed Potatoes

Cold Buffet:

Brawn Luncheon Sausage Ox Tongue

Roast Beef Roast Lamb

Lettuce Tomatoes Beetroot

Rusk Pudding Apricot Flan

Ice Cream and Wafers

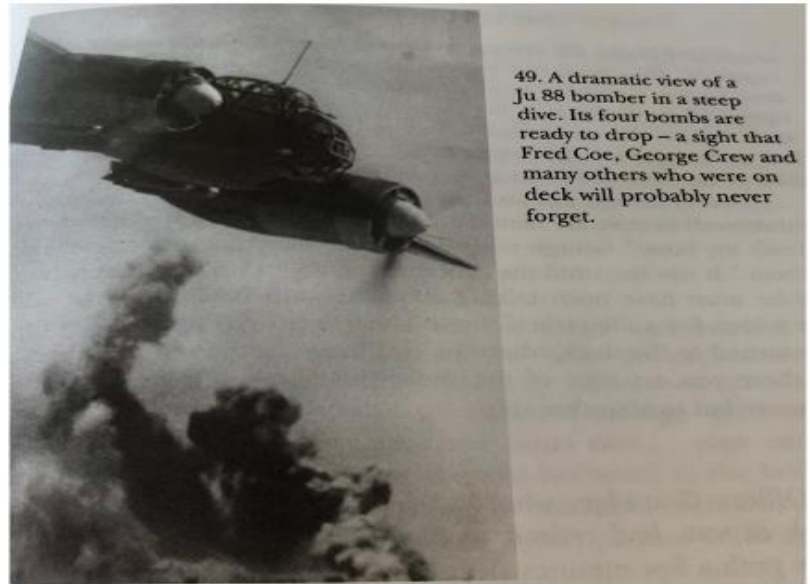
Cheese Biscuits Coffee



## Monday 17 June 1940

- Captain Sharp with his ship full to capacity awaited completion of embarkation of other ships and further orders. He assumed that his ship was to sail in convoy, escorted by warships of the Royal Navy

# The Bombing



## The Bombing

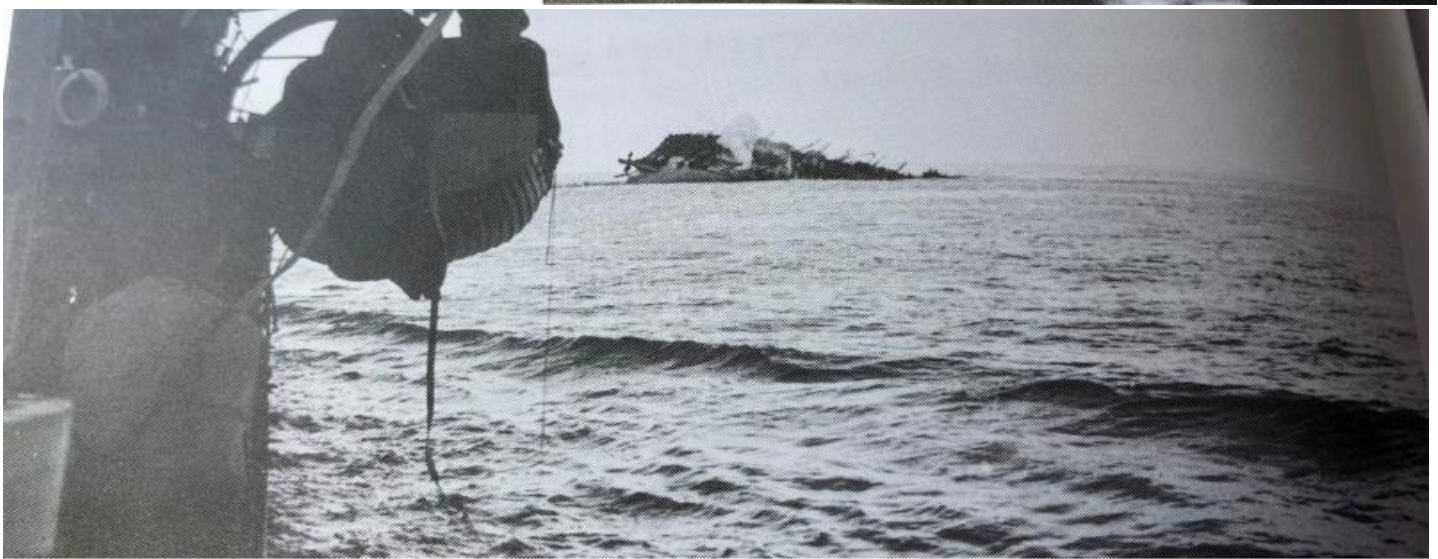
- The Ju-88 was the pride of the Luftwaffe; came into service in 1939
  - Elite crews chosen. Pilot, bomb – aimer/navigator, wireless operator and gunner
  - Pilot Peter Stahl flew from Belgium. He decided to complete his bombing mission although there was a French Fighter plane 'on his tail'. In his diary he recorded that his unit had scored a 'number of good hits'.
  - At shortly before 3.50pm on Monday 17 June 1940 The Lancastria was hit by four high explosive bombs
  - Three blew up in the holds, instantly killing many of those who had been sent downstairs including 800 RAF men crowded in one space
  - The fourth bomb either fell down the funnel or landed right beside it
- 
- One of the bombs hit a bulkhead and ripped open an oil tank unleashing 1400 tons of fuel
  - Within two minutes of being bombed the Lancastria was listing heavily to starboard. Attempts were made to correct this but then she listed too far to port, her deck dropped towards the water, her stern rising in the air.
  - Death and chaos everywhere
  - 'bodies and oil, bodies some with their life jackets on; decks were packed with soldiers laden with rifles and equipment just waiting for a miracle to happen',
  - Having a life jacket was a 'double edged privilege'. Men jumping into water wearing one were strangled or had their necks broken by the stiff cork collars.
  - Women in lifeboats took off their life jackets and threw them into the water for other people
  - The Lancastria sunk within twenty minutes

# The sinking



## Survivors' accounts

- Sea, and people, covered in oil
- German fighters dropping flares into water
- Machine gunning people in water
- Men clinging onto the propeller
- People singing 'Roll out the Barrel'
- People stripping off their clothes
- Hundreds of bodies, shot or blown to pieces
- Witnessed incredible bravery and heroism



## The Rescue

55. One of the *Highlander's* lifeboats is being prepared for rescue work,

- As soon as the Lancastria began to list a fleet of boats hurried out to rescue survivors.
- Every Captain faced with dilemma; safety of his own men and ship against the impulse to rush to rescue survivors
- French tugs, ferry boat, schooner, fishing boats, lifeboats.
- Survivors taken to larger ships
- Including the SS Oronsay and the Destroyer HMS Highlander
- Approx 2500 lives were saved, including women and children



Rescued



Tea

## The bodies

- However, while in Britain most people were unaware of the tragedy, those living around the coast where Lancastria had sunk could not get away from it. Bodies were washed ashore from Piriatic...right down to the Île de Ré, just off La Rochelle...probably about three hundreds kilometres of coastline. The first bodies came ashore on 28 June 1940, and they kept coming all summer. The bodies were then taken away and buried in either local cemeteries or makeshift cemeteries and largely without coffins because they didn't have the wood to make them.
- A couple of local observations – Michel Lugez: 'The bodies did not reach the shore immediately after the ship sank, but by July the bodies came ashore in large numbers. Here in Pornichet for example, there were two or three at each tide. At the Ponte du Bec there were others. At Sainte-Marguerite all along the coast there were corpses that were given back by the sea. At each tide, there were corpses being washed up on the beach.'

## The bodies

- The bodies on the beaches carried with them a wide collection of everyday objects, watches, scissors, mirrors, rings, combs, pipes, tobacco pouches, whistles, cigarette cases, pencils, penknives, bandages and purses; false teeth in a pocket....
- Paybooks, maps, identity disks, bibles, rosaries and letters; money, driving licences and cheque books



## The bodies

- At the end of summer, the bodies stopped, and Charles Merlet writes: 'We were walking along the coast on December 2nd. That's when we noticed that there were bones. More bones and lots of military clothing, and in these clothes that had really deteriorated and were damaged we collected the wallets of these poor men who'd drowned, to identify them, and then the many bones; we never collected them, it was not possible. There were too many, all over.'
- A fisherman found sixteen corpses tangled in his nets six months after the disaster. He took their identity disks and papers from their wallets and handed them in to a British Naval Ship that called in after the liberation of France.
- Many more bodies trapped in hull of ship

The bodies; Treatment depended on attitudes of German Commanders in the occupied villages and on political sympathies of local mayors

- Some refused to allow burial in cemeteries so corpses were put in trenches dug at the top of beaches
- At Clion-sur-Mer the Mayor had trees cut down to make coffins
- In the coastal village of La Bernerie 120 bodies were taken in coffins on carts from the sea front to the church for burial accompanied by a German guard of honour and a detachment of soldiers carrying a wreath. Local people and officials gathered. Bells tolled. A triple gun salute was fired.
- The senior German Officer said the soldiers they had just buried 'fought for their country with the same courage as we did for ours and our Fuhrer'.

## The Dead

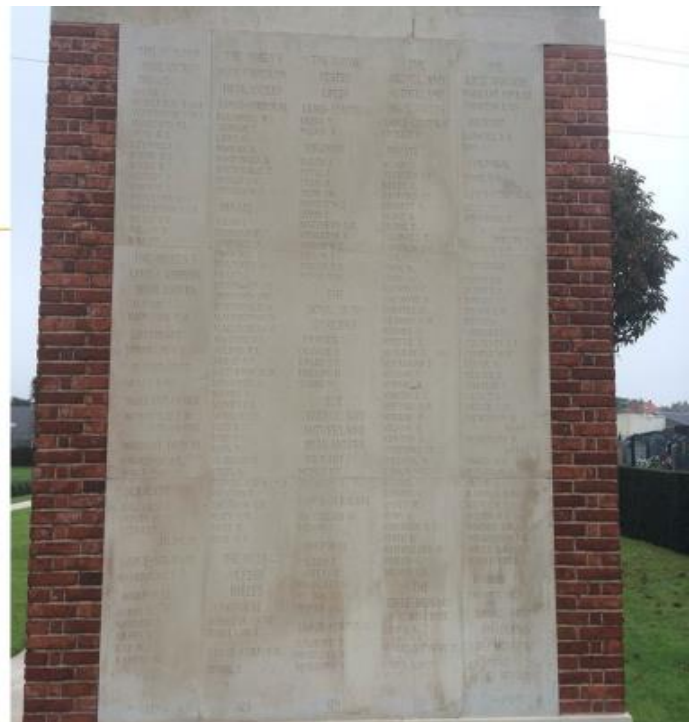
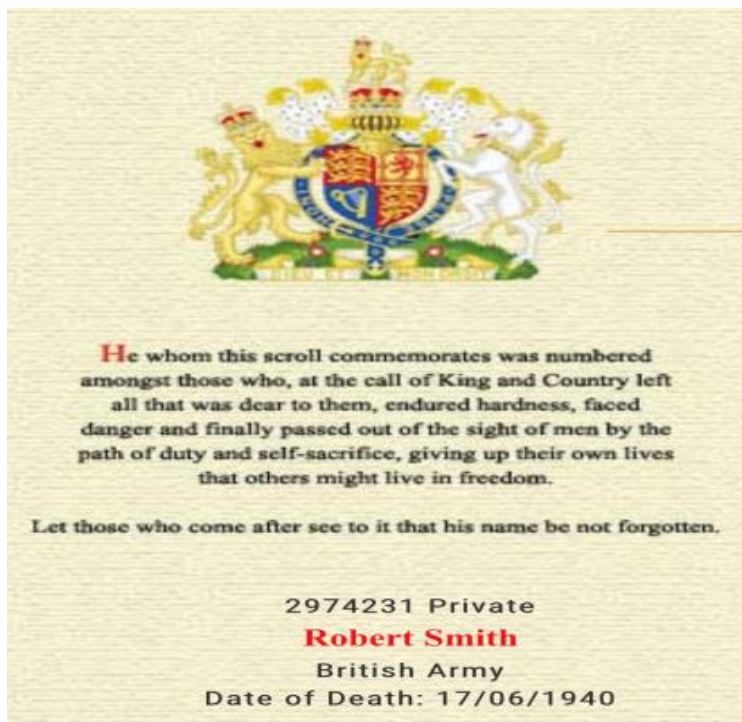
- The scale of the Lancastria disaster, the fact that an accurate manifest was not recorded as the ship was boarded and the fact that many people must have died trapped inside the hull means that is an impossible task to accurately compile a list of the casualties.
- The Register of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission record 1816 of those who died on the Lancastria.
- More than 400 bodies lie in Cemeteries in Western France.
- Over 750 names of those who were known to be on the Lancastria and whose bodies were never recovered are recorded on the memorial at Dunkirk North. This includes the name of Pte. Robert Smith of the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders and AMPC.
- Robert was recorded as being on board the Lancastria on 17 June 1940.
- 16 August 1940: Recorded as 'Missing'.
- 24 June 1941: Recorded as 'Killed in Action' on 17 June 1940.



Robert Smith  
My Grandfather

- 1907 – 17 June 1940
- Died aged 33 years
- HMT Lancastria
- St Nazaire. France
- Four generations of Robert's descendents living in Scotland and Australia

‘Here beside the graves of their comrades are commemorated the soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force who fell in the campaign of 1939 – 1940 and have no known grave’.



## So why do so few people know?

- Telegrams from military authorities to families of those on board the liner simply said Missing in Action without giving any details of where they had been lost.
- Survivors were instructed not to speak about it... many being sent back into action; often on ships....
- One of the most controversial aspects of the sinking of the Lancastria was the alleged cover up of the facts by Churchill's Government. The Lancastria was sunk on 17 June 1940. On this day, following the resignation of the French Prime Minister, Marshal Petain ordered the French to cease hostilities against the German invaders. France would surrender and capitulate to Hitler's German war machine.

- As soon as news reached the Cabinet Office about the Lancastria, Winston Churchill issued a 'D' notice on the news, an official request to news editors not to publish or broadcast items on specified subjects for reasons of national security. The system is still in use in the United Kingdom; suspending publication about the disaster until the 'D' notice was lifted.
- He later wrote that: 'When news of this came through to me in the quiet Cabinet room during the afternoon, I forbade its publication, saying that the newspapers have got quite enough disaster for today at least. I had intended to release news of the disaster a few days later, but events crowded in so black and so quickly, that I forgot to lift the ban, and it was some time before the knowledge of this horror became public.'

- The news actually came to light (very briefly) five and a half weeks later. The New York Sun broke the story on 25 July then The Times in London, The Daily Mirror and the Telegraph reported it for one day. All reporting around 2500 people saved and a similar number lost. After that flurry of attention the story disappeared.
- At the time of the sinking, Churchill's coalition Government had only been in existence since 10 May 1940 .....and in that time, they had dealt with the evacuation of Dunkirk, the fall of France, the evacuation of the second British Expeditionary Force, and the very real prospect of an invasion across the Channel.
- The Lancastria was just a bad news story in a sea of bad news stories.



So why is the loss of the Lancastria such a significant maritime disaster?

- Well, we all know of the great loss of life on board the Titanic. 1,517 were lost when she hit an iceberg. Again we all know of the tragic circumstances surrounding the Lusitania; 1,198 people died when she was torpedoed.
- The loss of life on the Lancastria was more than these two ships put together.
- More than the number of lives lost in the September 11 attacks in USA. 2606 in the World Trade Center and surrounding areas, 265 on the four planes and 125 at the Pentagon.
- The Lancastria: Estimates range from a conservative 2,500 to 6,000 deaths.
- Britain's worst maritime disaster remains cloaked in ignorance to this day.
- The single largest loss of British Forces in WW2.

# The Memory

- Once proud liner now lies 72 feet down on the sea bed. Ships travelling the estuary steer clear of her
- Strong currents make diving difficult so the Lancastria lies undisturbed
- The French Government placed an exclusion zone around the wreck site
- The Lancastria has been designated a maritime monument by the French and so cannot be moved or interfered with.
- In St. Nazaire a stone memorial on the seafront looks out at the site of the wreck, dedicated to the 'more than 4000 who died'.
- The British government has not made the site a war grave under the [Protection of Military Remains Act 1986](#) stating that it has no jurisdiction over French territorial waters.
- Official information about the tragedy is STILL classified as confidential until 2040.
- (100 years after tragedy)

## St. Nazaire. France



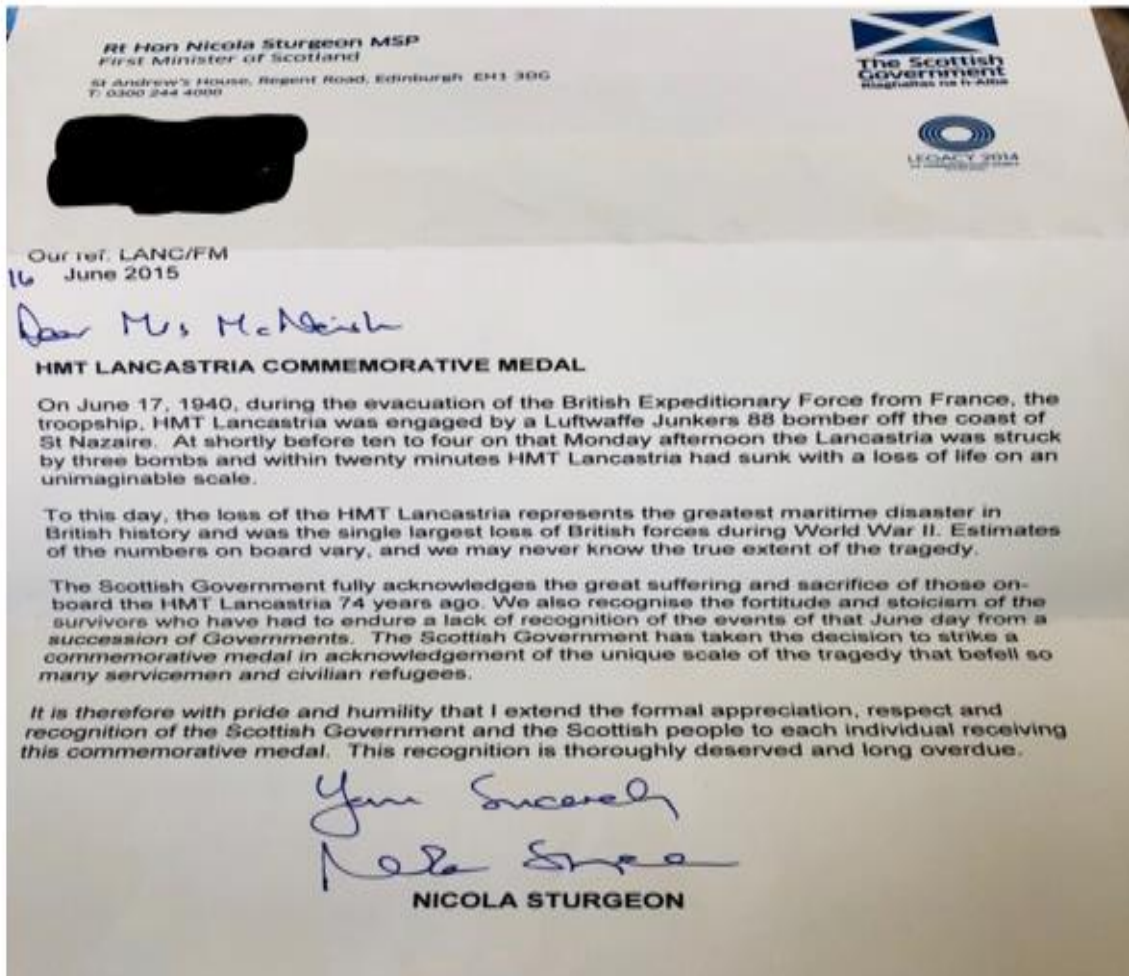
## Memorial

Golden Jubilee Hospital Clydebank.

Site of the Beardmore Shipyard



# 2015 Scotland's response



HMT Lancastria. 17 June 1940

