1918

# OVERNIGHT

## WHEN THE WAR CAME TO ISLAY

WW100 SCOTLAND

WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM ALL THIS?


Tuscania *flag and graves*

# OVERNIGHT

## WHEN THE WAR CAME TO ISLAY

Thur. Oct. 3. Repaired cart & wheels for Cullen Bridgend
Fri. Making hay capes for Mulindry
Sat. Dressed wood for Ladder.
Mon. Oct. 7. At Kilchoman recovering the bodies of American Soldiers drowned off S.S. Otranto on Sunday Oct. 6
Tues. At Kilchoman
Wed. "
Thur. Making Coffins for Officers
Fri. At Funeral of "
Sat. Started making Coffins for the Soldiers at Bruichladdich Distillery
Mon. 14. "
Tues. "
Wed. "
Thur. "
Fri. Making Stacks for H.B.
Sat. "

*Extract from James MacTaggart's diary showing the impact of the* Otranto *disaster*

Mon 21. Lifting potatoes at B.R.
Tues. " "
Wed. " "
Thur. " " & B.R. & Lags top an
Fri. "
Sat. " "
Mon. 28. put 2 clogs & Bearers on
Cart for Ferguson Cladville
& Bushed & painted cart wheels
Tues. " " "
Wed. Making Ladder.
Thur. Fast Day.
Nov. 1918.
Fri. 1. Bushed cart trams & putting
in hay at B.R.
Sat. Threshing at B.R. in afternoon
Mon. At wet Morning. Dressed cart
trams in afternoon. Yd day
Tues. At Machrie Strand
Wed Dressed wood for Cart &
put 1 tread in coach wheel for Forbes


# QUEEN OF THE HEBRIDES

Islay is known as the Queen of the Hebrides - perhaps due to its former political prominence in the 12th Century when the Lords of the Isles resided there, or maybe simply for its beauty and its softer, greener appearance than its northern counterparts Mull and Skye. Certainly on a sunny summer's day, sheltered from the wind by a whitewashed croft wall with the sparkling sea beyond, one could be convinced it was an Aegean island or a patch of heaven.

The southernmost of the Inner Hebrides islands, Islay is the fifth largest Scottish island with a landmass of 239 square miles and a coastline of 130 miles. It is about 25 miles long and 15 miles wide at its longest and broadest points. It lies some 40 miles from the mainland of Scotland's west coast and 25 miles north of Northern Ireland.

From times immemorial storms raging against Islay's Atlantic coast have been diabolic and merciless in the extreme. There are many graves of drowned and beached seafarers dotted about the western aspects of the island. In 1847, 100 bodies were washed ashore after the wreck of the emigrant ship *Exmouth Castle*.

Farming is Islay's traditional means of livelihood and its extensive peat bogs fuel its whisky distilleries. Peat from the land and the briny winds from the sea help give Islay whisky its distinctive 'phenolic' smoky flavour. Islay is one of five whisky distilling localities and regions in Scotland whose identity is protected by law, and folklore has it that it was to Islay that Irish monks first brought the knowledge of distilling.


*Peat-cutting*

*Bowmore Distillery*

*Laphroaig Distillery*

The Bowmore distillery, which is synonymous with the island's main village, dates back to 1779, making it the second oldest legal distillery in Scotland. Bowmore is Scotland's first planned village and was constructed, as part of a re-settlement scheme, on a grid system. In geometric contrast its little church is completely round – so that there is nowhere for the Devil to hide, so it is said.

*Bowmore Round Church*

However, in 1918, the devil was not interested in the Round Church in Bowmore. He was too busy wreaking havoc beneath the waves beyond the shore and devilment is exacerbated in ungodly wars.

# CALM BEFORE THE STORM

## THE ISLAND IN 1918

In 1918 certain consequences and effects of war were felt on Islay and yet the trenches of Flanders, France and beyond seemed far away. The island itself was fairly remote from mainland Scotland, with one ferry a day taking over three hours. There were very few cars and few trucks; horses did most of the transporting and heavy farm tasks. There were 1,349 horses on Islay at the time along with 81,249 head of sheep and about 11,000 head of cattle. Settlements were spread out across the island and many wouldn't know much of what was happening outside of their immediate community, except where those who had been conscripted sent letters home.

There were no telephones. The island's top civic authority, Police Sergeant MacNeill, stationed in Bowmore, got about by bicycle and was probably one of the main conduits of news. There was no electricity on the island: heat and cooking were provided by peat fires, and light came from paraffin lamps.

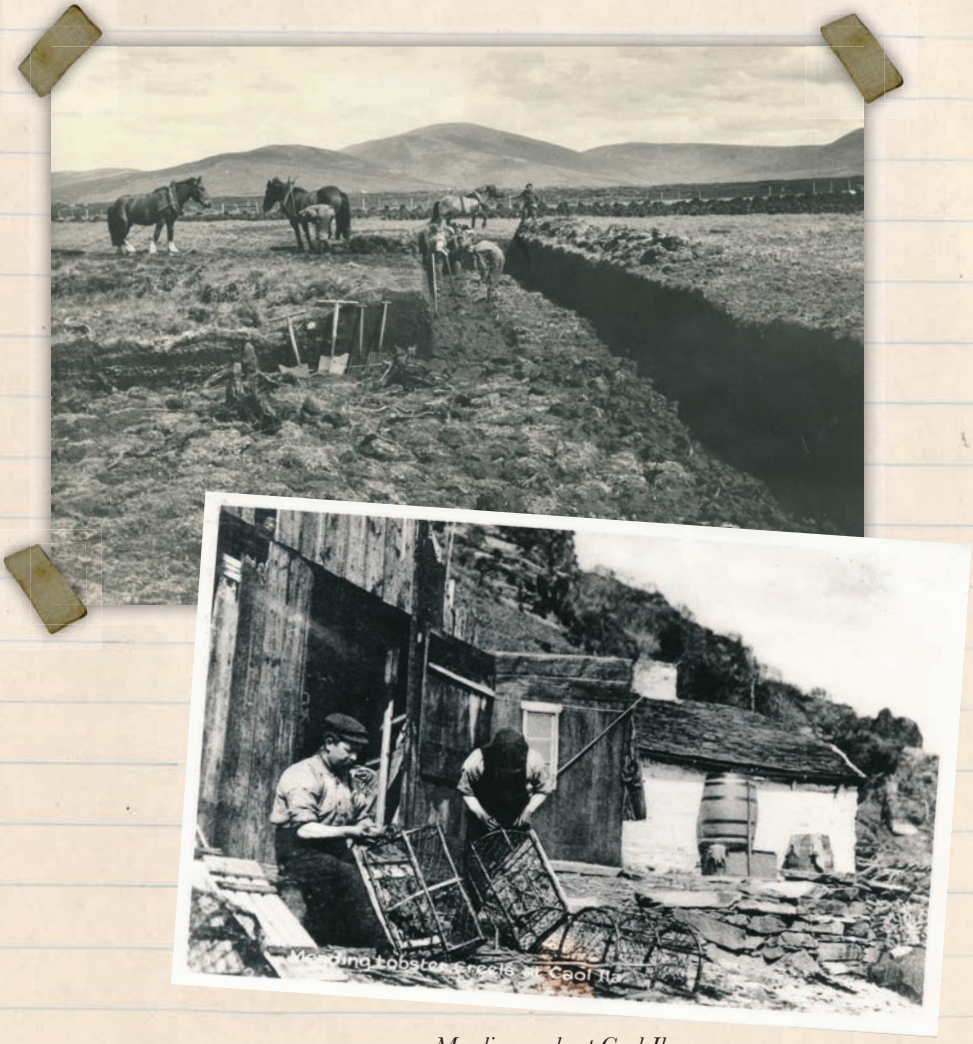
Life was hard and in the half-century before the war many had left the island to seek opportunities in Glasgow, the 'workshop of the Empire', or further afield. The 1911 census put the population at 6,287. Seventy years previously it had been at 15,500. The kelp boom of those days was long over and the effects of land clearance and seeking a better life had left the island community as one in decline. The island had once boasted as many as 30 distilleries but by the time of the First World War there were only 10 still in operation.

However, the farms were of a reasonable size and employed a good number of farm labourers. Most were tenanted from the large estates that owned the land, although on the Rhinns small farmers tended to own their farms. There were fewer crofts on Islay than other Hebridean islands. Most of the inhabitants lived on meagre wages as farm labourers or shepherds, or with trades such as blacksmithing, carpentry or wheelwrighting. However community spirit was strong. People helped each other out for peat-cutting or at harvest and every village had its own bard or poet. Eighty per cent of the population were Gaelic speakers. Most but not all of these would have had English too.


*Port Charlotte lighthouse*


*One of the first trucks on the island*

The island's other main occupation was fishing. Most of its trade was with the Baltic States and this vanished overnight when war was declared in 1914. A fleet of herring boats had operated out of the island and there was a curing station on the shores of Loch Gruinart. Lights on shore and night-time fishing were prohibited once hostilities started, so fishing basically became a part-time subsistence occupation.



*Mending creels at Caol Ila*


*Port Charlotte Distillery*

The distilling industry was also dark by 1918 – Lloyd George's Central Liquor Control Board having prohibited any distilling not licensed by the Ministry of Munitions in May 1916. Lloyd George believed drink to be as great if not a greater enemy than the Kaiser. Bruichladdich and Port Charlotte distilleries however were to play their part in the two impending tragedies.

The biggest impact of the war, which affected every family, was the absence of its young men. Over 1,000 had enlisted, leaving the population at around 5,000 people. The great majority of islanders served in the Army – particularly the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. A good number were also in the Royal Naval Reserve.

Others worked on minesweeping trawlers, where two trawlers would drag a metal line between them - cutting the cables that fixed the mines to the seabed. When the mines surfaced, the crewmen would shoot them with rifles until they exploded. Sometimes the metal line would draw a mine against the stern of the trawler and blow it up. Mine-laying U-boats would also sink minesweepers. In short this was a dangerous job.

Without young men, the running of the farms and many other jobs fell to the women and the elderly. Women also helped the war effort collecting sphagnum moss for dressing wounds; knitting socks, gloves and other warm clothes; sending preserves and other foodstuffs to the men at the front; and raising funds by hosting and taking part in concerts and other gatherings. Some went to serve as nurses and one Islay-born woman, Helen McDougall, served as a doctor in the Scottish Women's Hospitals in Serbia and France.

## FAIR SHEENA

(an extract)

### BY ISLAY BARD DUNCAN JOHNSON

*Blàth nan cailean, Sine Bhàn,*
*Reul nan nighean, dileas, òg,*
*Cuspair diomhair i dom dhàn,*
*Gràdh mo chridh', an ribhinn òg*

Flower of the girls, fair Sheena,
Star of the girls, young and faithful,
She is the secret subject of my song.
The love of my heart, the beautiful young girl.


*An Islay dairymaid*

*Everyday island life*

JOHN BUIE

*John Buie (known to his family as 'Uncle John') was the first man from Caol Ila to be killed during the war: April 9th 1917 at the Battle of Arras.*

JOHN McNAB

*Before the war John McNab was a clerk at Lagavulin Distillery. He served with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. He was admitted to hospital in France in August 1917 with gas poisoning. He never really recovered and died on Islay on May 12th 1919.*

There was also, of course, the loss of life far away on a foreign battlefield. One of the hardest things for the grieving families was that they never saw the bodies of their lost loved ones. There are Islay men in known graves all over the theatres of war including the Somme, Arras and Tyne Cot – as well as in Thessalonica and Africa.

There are also many men with no known graves, including those lost at sea, and very few bodies were laid to rest on Islay soil – those soldiers who were died in 1919 as a result of injuries sustained in the war. By early 1918 Islay had lost 125 of its sons. By the end of the war that figure had risen to over 200. Many more bodies than these however were about to be washed up broken and mangled on Islay's shores.

# THE TRAGIC WHYTE FAMILY OF PORT ELLEN

On New Year's Day 1916, Daniel Whyte, aged 18 years, went out to the Carraig Fhada lighthouse at Kilnaughton Bay with provisions for his father, Donald Whyte, the light keeper, who had been storm-bound for several days. Mrs Whyte was anxiously watching to see if Daniel would manage to get on to the rocky promontory of the lighthouse. He did. However, when returning he somehow lost his foothold and was swept off the rocks and into the heavy sea. His mother, the younger children standing with her, was helpless to do anything but watch. Donald Whyte leapt into the surf in an attempt to save his son. He managed to get a hold of him and together they appeared to make it to the shore. They even seemed to get a footing but only for an instant, before another wave washed them away.

"Donald Whyte was 53 years of age, and was appointed light-keeper in May last. He was a man much esteemed by all who knew him. The district people are in mournful sympathy with the bereaved wife and children, of whom there are five of school age. Of a family of 14, 12 survive. Three of the older boys, Duncan, Dugald and Walter, are serving with the colours, and all were wounded in action."

"The interment of the remains of Donald Whyte, lost on New Year's Day, took place at Kilnaughton Cemetery on 4th January…"

THE OBAN TIMES 8/1/1916

Daniel's body was recovered from the sea a fortnight later and interred with his father in the family grave. The eldest brother, Duncan Whyte, having been wounded whilst fighting at the Front with the 8th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, was at home on leave at the time of the funeral. The final chapter of this tragic story happened in August 1916. *The Oban Times* of 4th October 1916 reported as follows:

## HEROIC ISLAY FAMILY

"The War is taking toll of the lives of the brave youth from this locality. The pictures are those of two brothers, Private Dugald Whyte, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, killed in action on the 16th December, 1915, and Lance-Corporal Walter Whyte, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, who also fell in France in the same cause on August 18th last. At death the respective young men were 21 and 20 years."

# AT SEA

The only major sea battle of the war, the Battle of Jutland, was fought over 31st May and 1st June 1916, during which Islay man, ERA Francis Livingston, lost his life. There was no out-and-out victor but as a consequence the German High Seas Fleet never left port again. Instead, both sides put all their maritime efforts into preventing supplies reaching the enemy's homeland. The Germans deployed their deadly U-boats to destroy British cargo ships and the Royal Navy, with the help of requisitioned merchant vessels and crews, patrolled the seas and intercepted supply ships bound for Germany and used merchant ships as blockades.

On 31st January 1917 Germany announced a third campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare. From the very next day all ships suspected of carrying goods bound for Britain were to be sunk on sight, without warning and without mercy, irrespective of the impossibility of avoiding in all cases danger to passengers and crew.

*HMS Lion served as Vice Admiral Beatty's flagship at the battles of Dogger Bank and Jutland*


*Islay and the North Channel*

In April 1917 the United States, in response to a number of provocations by the Germans, finally entered the war. Troopships left from New York, bound for Liverpool, on their way to the battlefields of Europe. Many of them had been built on the River Clyde as passenger ships and had since been converted into basic dormitories for soldiers.

To reach Liverpool many passed through the 25-mile-wide North Channel from the Atlantic, between the northernmost tip of Ireland and the west coast of Islay – a dangerous strip of water in stormy peacetime conditions, a lethal strip in wartime, being heavily mined and patrolled by the merciless U-boats.

*An extract from Rosemary Hamilton's article:*

# HIDDEN HARBOUR

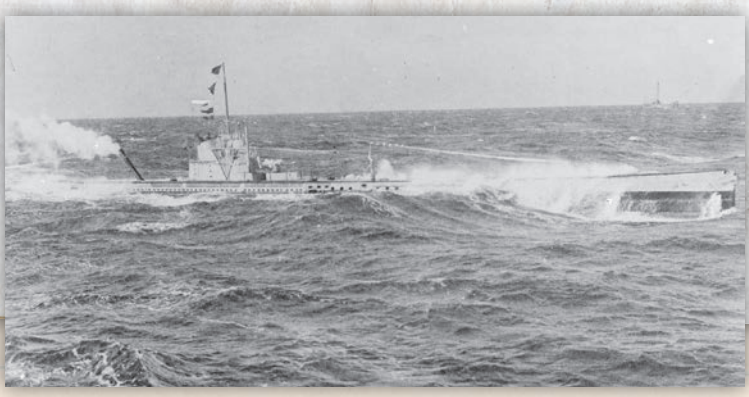
## U-BOAT CAPTAIN'S SURPRISE VISIT

In 1921 a German arrived at the White Hart Hotel in Port Ellen. He created quite a sensation by announcing that he wished to see, from the landward side, the bay into which he had brought his submarine during the 1914-18 war.

This was the first anyone on the island of Islay knew about this vessel's visit. The German captain was able to show on a map the exact place – Glas Uig – a tiny bay with hills on both sides between Ardmore and Aros and the only safe deep water anchorage on the east side of the island: an anchorage unused and uncharted for many years and basically forgotten.

On the next day he went to the spot accompanied by some local people and showed them where he had anchored at an old disused quay. He pointed out the promontories on either side of the tiny bay on each of which he posted a look-out on his visits.

From these high places, well covered with scrub and rocks in which to hide, the watchers could scan the countryside. The captain realised there was little chance of anyone approaching through the valley between the promontories – a marsh quite impassable in bad weather.



*WWI German U-boat*

*Glas Uig*


*White Hart Hotel across the sands at Port Ellen*

Equally, the bay was well hidden from the mainland – the narrow entrance to Glas Uig partly obscures the anchorage and, more importantly, faces towards Loch Swein and Loch Coalisport – both deserted apart from one farm on the Loch Swein side.

How he found the entrance to the harbour is a mystery. Maps and charts warn seamen to keep away; the bays all along the coast are shallow; tiny islands abound and treacherous reefs run far out to sea.

But with the limited equipment of the day, he found the narrow deep-water channel safely and used it often.

He surfaced unthreatened and replenished the ship's larder with excellent Blackface mutton. Shepherds had noticed larger than usual losses between 1916 and 1918!

His U-boat was the last ship to use this anchorage regularly despite the fact that its existence had been known for 1,000 years.

*SS Tuscania*

# A VERY DISTRESSFUL DAY FOR EVERYBODY

## THE SINKING OF *SS TUSCANIA*: FEBRUARY 5TH 1918

On 24th January 1918, the *SS Tuscania*, a troopship carrying American servicemen towards the Western Front, left New York Harbour. On board were 2,336 American servicemen and a crew of 239 officers and men and two women, most of whom were from Glasgow. The captain was the experienced Perth-born Peter McLean. By the morning of 27th January the *Tuscania* was part of convoy HX20 bound for Liverpool. Twelve ships manoeuvred into five columns with *HMS Cochrane*, a heavily armed British cruiser, in the vanguard.

After a 12 day voyage the convoy was approaching the entrance to the North Channel when they were spotted by a U-boat and shadowed until just after dark. At this point the commander of UB-77, Captain Wilhelm Meyer, fired two torpedoes at the *Tuscania*. The first one missed. The second one hit its target amidships.

Clarence Krueger of the US 107th Supply Train later recalled: *"One of the boys had just looked at his watch and it was fifteen minutes to six. The words were no more than uttered when a terrible explosion occurred. The force of the shock threw us all in a heap."* Twenty sailors were killed almost immediately by the blast and the inrush of water into the engine room. The ship was plunged into darkness and began to list. One of the two stewardesses aboard later reported in an interview: *"I was on the saloon deck and immediately proceeded to my berth to get my lifebelt. In the darkness this was not an easy matter, as the alleys were crowded with soldiers, but there was less excitement than might have been expected under the circumstances."*

The American troops had all done abandon-ship exercises and began assembling at their designated places. Three escort destroyers, *Grasshopper*, *Mosquito* and *Pigeon* arrived and rescued survivors from the successfully launched lifeboats which were visible in the dark.

*HMS Grasshopper*

The troops and crew still on board the *Tuscania* then tried to launch the remaining lifeboats. But as Arthur Siplon recalled:

> *"All was not well. The ship's crew had evidently little training in the handling of lifeboats. In addition the ship almost immediately listed badly to the starboard, thus making it difficult to release lifeboats on the opposite side. Some men attempting to take the boats down were spilled into the chilling water like dice from a box. This was caused by lines getting fouled, and then some excited person would cut loose one end with disastrous results. One lifeboat was chopped loose on both ends, and dropped down onto a loaded one already in the water."*

As the lifeboats which had not been intercepted by the destroyers approached the coast of Islay in the dark, the men on board would have heard the alarming sound of waves crashing against the rocks of The Oa peninsula, the island's most southerly point and most jagged and dangerous coastline. One Islay crewman, Duncan McDonald, persuaded the men on his lifeboat to wait until it became light. They then made their way safely into Port Ellen Harbour. Others were less fortunate and many lives were lost attempting to land in the dark.

Arthur Siplon's lifeboat was hurled against an immense rock:

> *"The lifeboat was turned upside down throwing everyone into the boiling, angry sea… With a great effort I scrambled up on the bottom of the boat…men screaming and praying all about me… It was then a matter of being buffeted about against bruising rocks, washed in with waves and out with the undertow."*

Eventually, with a fellow soldier, a 'boy' he half-hauled onto a rock,

> *"I found a small cave well above the waterline… we managed slowly and painfully to reach the cave together. Here we tried to protect ourselves against the bitter cold. We snuggled up into each other's arms like a couple of cub bears, to keep from freezing to death."*

Another boat landed safely near Upper Killeyan and survivors made their way to the home of the Morrison family. There they alerted the family to what had happened. Robert Morrison immediately set off to see what he could do, while his brother set off to get more help. Robert saved the lives of three American soldiers, wading out in the surf to help two who were clinging to a rock. He then rescued a soldier trapped part way up a cliff, carrying him to safety across his shoulders as he would a stranded sheep.

Meanwhile his sisters, Betsy and Annie, had begun baking girdle scones to feed the exhausted and hungry men. They baked throughout the night. The Morrisons not only used up their supply of food, they also gave away all their spare clothing and refused to accept any payment for their services – as did Duncan Campbell of Stremnish, who also rescued an American soldier from a cliff and accommodated fourteen survivors at his small farm.

*Ninety survivors sheltered in Robert Morrison's tiny cottage, and were cared for by his family. Morrison saved three Americans at great risk to himself. The picture shows Morrison, his sister, his aunt, his mother, his grandmother and farmhand John Woodrow who helped with the rescues.*

Calls for help were answered as more and more men – the elderly and the young – from across The Oa and Port Ellen began searching for survivors. They came across many injured, dead and dying. As islanders recall today *"it was terrible for lads too young to go to war."*

US survivor, Everett Harpham wrote the following to a friend in America, *"Nine of us were finally washed ashore alive, some injured badly and all nearly drowned. We laid together by a large rock, in the wind, and had to listen to the moans and groans of our dying comrades till daylight. About twenty corpses washed ashore beside us when daylight came and we were rescued by a Highlander."*

An Islay schoolgirl, Isabelle Macgilvary, wrote some years later, *"That was a very distressful day for everybody… My father with his small cart conveyed some of these (bodies) to the Drill Hall in the back road. He found a small black man up at the top of the Ard and was able to carry him unaided to the cart he was so slight. That affected my father very deeply, he had to come home for a while."*

*Two of the* Tuscania's *lifeboats on the shore at Kinnabus. Robert Morrison with John Woodrow, one of his 'hands'. Morrison points to the spot where the lifeboats came ashore. He received the Order of the British Empire for his work in the disaster.*

132 men made it safely to Islay, although many were very badly injured. The dead from the Oa were stored in the Drill Hall in Port Ellen. A further 50 bodies came ashore in Loch Indaal. Most of these were taken to Port Charlotte Distillery, with some temporarily laid out in Portnahaven Church.

The men who survived were taken into the homes of the islanders. Schoolteacher, Jetty Shanks, took seven into her home on Frederick Crescent. The White Hart Hotel in Port Ellen filled all its rooms with survivors. In addition many families gave up their beds and best clothing. At this time many Islay women, with husbands or sons away fighting in the war, were managing both their households and their income when the war came knocking at their doors.

As carpenter James MacTaggart's diary entry so tellingly reveals, a routine life, if not a normal life, changed overnight.

Sat: Dressed wood for cart. Half day. At home afternoon (killed pig).

Mon. Feb. 4: Dressed wood for cart & jobbing at Foreland sheds

Tues:

Wed: Salvaging lifeboat at Black Rock.

Thurs: Making coffins for bodies of American soldiers washed ashore at Port Charlotte, Drowned of SS Tuscania which was torpedoed by a German Submarine off north coast of Ireland. (had to work overnight)

Fri: Making crosses for soldiers' graves.

Sat: At soldiers' funeral.

Mon. Feb 11: Finishing graves.


*The shores of Kilnaughton*

*Islay House, residence of Hugh Morrison, the Laird of Islay. Mr. Morrison placed his entire estate and all his employees at the service of the American Red Cross.*

Four cemeteries – at Kilnaughton near Port Ellen, two on The Oa and one at Port Charlotte – were created for the dead. However, before burial, diligent attempts were made by Police Sergeant Malcolm MacNeill to identify the bodies. Most of the soldiers would have worn identity discs. Yet many of these were missing, so Sergeant MacNeill took fingerprints. Mutilation, disfigurement, severance of limbs and heads and natural putrefaction made this a horrific task. By all accounts Sergeant MacNeill carried it out with utmost respect and remarkable sangfroid.

In addition, before the funerals could take place, Union Jack and Stars and Stripes flags were required. It was very much part of the Gàidhealtachd (Gaelic community) to bury the dead with honour. The Union Jack was no problem but there was no US flag on the island – and so, on the eve of the first funerals, a group of Islay women sat up through the night in Islay House sewing a flag to the correct design and dimensions.

In a letter to an American official, the Laird of Islay, Hugh Morrison wrote an account of the making of the flag in his house (see page 31). The flag meant a tremendous amount to the American survivors who attended the funerals. Soon after, it was gifted to President Woodrow Wilson and is now held by the Smithsonian Museum in Washington DC.

# A TRULY PLUCKY FELLOW

Stories amalgamated from various news clippings including the *Glasgow Herald* and *The Evening Times,* 8th February 1918.

Glaswegian John McCance was the Engine Room Storekeeper on *SS Tuscania* on the night it was torpedoed. Aged 40, he was married with five children. He was on his twenty third wartime voyage. He had been a seafarer most of his life with his first voyage being made in 1897. McCance said that before leaving the sinking *Tuscania* he ran to his locker and got out £6 and 16 shillings and six sticks of tobacco. He then jumped onto a lifeboat alongside an American soldier. *The Evening Times* described him as 'a truly plucky fellow'. McCance survived to tell his tale and remained a seafarer until 1941 when, at the age of 63, he made his last voyage on the armed merchant cruiser *HMS Montclare*.

US survivor Arthur Siplon attended the funeral to mourn the loss of one of his close friends and wrote: *"Into the graves the bodies of these American boys were carefully lowered. Among them my close pal Wilbur Clark, 18 years old, the 1917 honor student of his class in Jackson, Michigan. When the last mournful note of 'Taps' floated away the ceremony came to an end. The folds of the homemade flag whipped smartly in the chilling winter's wind. Proudly it flew on a foreign shore, an unusual flag – made by the kindly hands of Scottish mothers to honor the sons of mothers they never knew."*

Dear Mr. Havenel,

I delayed answering your letter of June 11th until I returned to Islay and was able to consult our old Housekeeper, Miss Mary Armour, with regard to the American Flag which was made in this house at the time of the disaster to the transport Tuscania in 1918. At four o'clock on the evening before the funeral of the victims of the Tuscania disaster, I asked Miss Mary Armour if it was possible to make an American Flag to carry at the funeral. Mrs Forbes, the wife of the then factor of Islay estate, had an Encyclopaedia where John MacDougall, the estate joiner, got all information as to the size of the Flag and the correct number of stars and stripes. John made a plan from which Miss Mary Armour and her helpers, Jessie MacLellan, Mary Cunningham and Catherine MacGregor, were able to cut the cloth to the right dimensions. There was no time to send for suitable material and the stars and stripes were made of white cotton calico; the blue part of figured calico turned outside in; and the red stripes of Turkey twill, all procured at the local merchant's in Bridgend. Jessie MacLellan and her Mother cut the stars and sewed them on the blue. The Flag was completed about 2 a.m. next morning. At the funeral, an American survivor carried the Flag. I should like to add that I remember how anxious everybody in Islay was to show every possible honour to the soldiers of the United States who had come over to fight for the cause of the Allies in the Great War.

Yours sincerely,
Hugh Morrison

Tuscania *funeral cortege through Port Charlotte*

*Six gun salute at Kilnaughton funeral*

The women of Islay did not only sew the flag, they also prepared the bodies for the four funerals, the first of which took place on Friday 8th February. Isabelle Macgilvary watched the funeral cortege leave Port Ellen for Kilnaughton:

*"It was very emotional to see the bodies, stiff as statues in their splendid uniforms carried out of the Drill Hall and laid reverently on the lorries. Coffins were unobtainable for such a number, almost 100."*

Port Charlotte held a funeral on the Saturday and over 400 people from Islay attended despite very heavy rain. Survivors and American officials and American Red Cross representatives also attended and American soldiers acted as pall-bearers. Pipers played and there were gun salutes. Afterwards, whisky, oatcakes and cheese were passed around then everyone went their separate ways, as was the custom of the island.

Until the bodies were taken to lie in American soil, Islay cemeteries held 182 bodies. It is estimated that 210 lives were lost.

The sinking of the *Tuscania* was seen by Germany as a great victory. Across the Atlantic it was the final spur for thousands of Americans, who had hitherto been reluctant, to sign up. The war in Europe was now indisputably their war too. Three days after the sinking, more men enlisted than on any other day since America had declared war on Germany. The leader column in the *New York American* started with the words:

*"The war is no longer three thousand miles away; it has come to the doors of every American home. The torpedo that sank the Tuscania will prove a fatal missile for Germany."*

Back in Britain, the Prince of Wales visited Glasgow and the Clydeside shipyards to boost morale, speaking to many of the 154 mariners who had survived the *Tuscania* ordeal, including the stewardesses, Mary Carson and Flora Collins.

On Islay, letters of thanks poured in for the part the islanders had played in nurturing the living and honouring the dead. Neil Campbell, Port Charlotte's postman received a letter of thanks from the Secretary for Scotland and Mrs Alexander Currie of Port Ellen received a letter from the Governor of California thanking her for her ministrations:

*"I am told that you personally treated the boys with the same sympathy and tenderness that their own mother would have used."*

At the same time Police Sergeant MacNeill in Bowmore and Constable Alexander MacLean in Port Ellen received letters from distressed yet respectful parents looking for, in the words of Mrs S Talley, the mother of Milton Talley, 'the least scrap of information' about their lost boys. Milton's grave 'she thought' was No 38. Constable MacLean replied:

"I beg to inform you that the property found on the body of Milton C. Talley, victim of the Tuscania disaster and buried No 35 Kilnaughton is as follows:

One gold ring.

One cigarette case.

One watch.

So far as I remember only 37 of those bodies buried in Kilnaughton were coffined."

This was but one of many such letters and the extent to which MacNeill and MacLean went in identifying the bodies and returning the boys' effects was remarkable and hugely appreciated, as was all the care the islanders had shown. Mrs Christine Campbell of Port Charlotte was known to put pansies on the graves and in her letter, in response to that of a grieving sister, she wrote: *"Give your mother my deepest sympathy and I hope she will feel pleased at her boy being laid carefully away."*

Whilst there was nothing but praise for the Ileachs, the people of Islay, there was considerable criticism from on high on both sides of the Atlantic of how the *Tuscania*'s crew had handled the evacuation of the ship. One distressing fact which emerged was that due to Britain's Merchant Marine being much depleted after three and a half years of war, there were more than a dozen 14-year-olds amongst the crew and many more not much older.

The American Red Cross decided to step up their involvement and 'look after their own'. At the same time recommendations were put in place as to how to make transatlantic convoys safer.

Convoy after convoy, the Americans kept coming. By the end of the war the US had sent more than a million men to the Western Front. The majority of the troopships got through and the soldiers had to quickly grasp the realities of static trench warfare. That Islay should witness the sinking of another troopship off its shores only eight months after the *Tuscania* seemed unbelievable and served to bring an unshakeable gloom to the island for some time.

*HMS Otranto*

# THE WORST CONVOY DISASTER OF THE WAR

## THE SINKING OF *HMS OTRANTO* 6TH OCTOBER 1918

On 25th September 1918 *HMS Otranto* left New York Harbour as the flagship of Convoy HX50, which comprised 13 ships carrying 20,000 troops. The *Otranto*, once a Belfast built luxury liner but now 'brought to her bare bones' with all her interior panelling and décor stripped out, sailed under the seasoned captaincy of Ernest Davidson. It had 701 US soldiers on board, a fair number of whom were beginning to come down with, or indeed die from, the so-called Spanish Flu which was gathering momentum and would, in time, take more in its wake than the shells and the gas and the bayonets. For 11 days there was not one without a burial at sea.

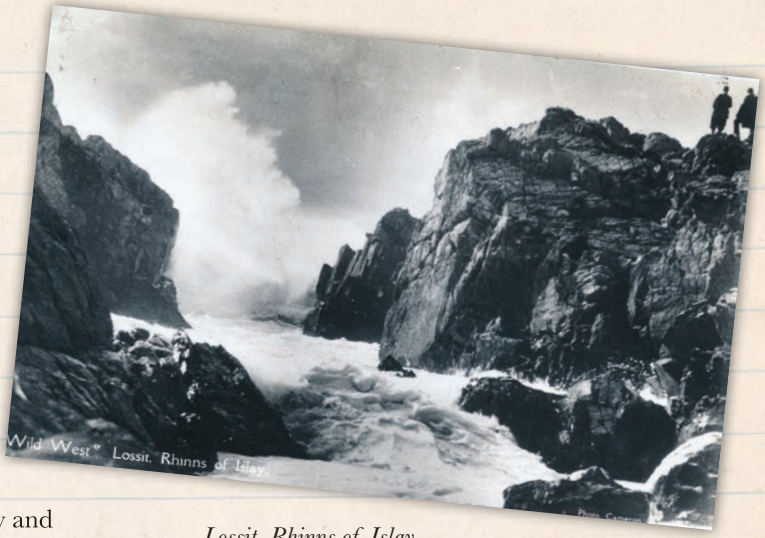
*The crew of HMS Otranto*

Convoy HX-50, sailing in six columns, hit bad weather and by Sunday 6th October was being battered by a Force 11 south-westerly off the north coast of Ireland. En route the *Otranto* had picked up the crew of a shipwrecked Breton schooner and had 36 additional men on board. Overcrowded, with many sick on board and now, as Private David Roberts wrote, *'with waves like mountains'* conditions were dire. It is possible that Captain Davidson himself was suffering from Spanish flu and any detriment to his judgement was compounded by zero visibility: they were effectively sailing blind. As the convoy was scattered by the storm the converted P&O liner *Kashmir*, which was heading up column 4, and the *Otranto* turned in opposite directions. The *Otranto* thought the land sighted was Ireland, and turned north to get round it. The *Kashmir* realised the land was Scotland, and turned south towards the North Channel. This put them on a collision course. Conditions prevented communication between the ships and the result of their independent manoeuvres was the *Kashmir* slicing through the mid-ships of the *Otranto*.

On board the *Otranto*, Archibald Campbell described the *Kashmir* going into the ship's side *"like a knife into cheese"*. Paul Frederickson, on board the *Kashmir*, recalled *"a grinding, tearing noise, more felt by us than heard"*.

A judge of the Admiralty Division of the High Court of Justice later placed the blame for the collision equally on both ships. For those on board the rammed *Otranto*, the desire to survive was the predominant thought. Hours of terror and pandemonium ensued. Many were to lose their lives, more so than from the *Tuscania* tragedy. On top of all the other horrors, many couldn't swim. Edgar Sheppard from South Georgia recalled: *"I felt so sorry for the troops who were much older than I as they were running up and down the deck crying and wringing their hands"*.

Despite its damaged bow the *Kashmir* was still seaworthy and, acting strictly in accordance with Admiralty regulations, the captain turned his ship and headed for Glasgow leaving the *Otranto* wallowing hopelessly and heading relentlessly for the rocky coast of Islay.




*Lossit, Rhinns of Islay*

The *Otranto* was breaking up and severely destabilised as the upper decks became crammed with desperate men. Then came a glimmer of hope. *"To our great joy a British destroyer greeted our eyes, for here lay our only hopes."* The destroyer in question was the *HMS Mounsey*, whose skipper, Lieutenant Francis Craven, had made the daring decision to risk the forty-foot waves and try and manoeuvre his very much smaller ship alongside the *Otranto*, so that the soldiers could jump from ship to ship. Captain Davidson tried to order him away; it was far too dangerous, but Craven was not for turning.

What followed was both gruesome and heroic. Craven was a remarkable seaman and managed to bring his ship alongside the *Otranto*, riding the waves time and again. Some 600 men made the leap successfully, although many only just, slipping and sliding on the wave drenched decks. Many others miscalculated their jumps and either plunged into the raging sea or were crushed between the scraping ships. When Craven eventually pulled away and headed for Belfast about 500 men remained on board the stricken *Otranto*.

By 11am the ship was being driven inexorably towards the treacherous western coastline of Islay, the Rhinns. Machir Bay is the largest of three golden beaches that punctuates the rock of this coastline and those remaining aboard the *Otranto*, sighting it, must have prayed the drifting wreck would come aground there but it was not to be. A huge wave raised the *Otranto* up and smashed it down on a submerged reef, the Botha na Cailleach or 'The Old Woman's Reef' breaking up what was left of the ship. The sick, who had been carried to the upper decks, did not have a chance. Those on deck jumped or were thrown into the sea. Captain Davidson is reported to have shouted: *"Boys, we've got to swim for it after all."* He didn't make it alive to the shore, along with over 400 others.

*HMS Mounsey*

Again the islanders, the farmers, the young lads and the old, but this time from the Rhinns – Machrie, Kilchoman and Port Charlotte – did what they could to rescue soldiers and crewmen, risking their own lives to pull men out of the raging surf or hauling them off stranded rocks. Of the 500 or so troops, crewmen and Breton fishermen left aboard the *Otranto* only 21 made it ashore alive, two of whom died soon after.

In an official report Sergeant MacNeill was at pains to praise the efforts of both Islay men and women. Without the tender care of the likes of Mrs McPhee and her daughter Margaret, Isabella McIntyre and Elizabeth Grant those who were rescued would probably never have recovered.

What had for MacNeill been a massive undertaking with the *Tuscania* was now multiplied: the Rhinns was like a morgue, with the bodies of the dead, or partial bodies, lain out in Kilchoman Church. His notebook runs to 81 pages, a catalogue of discoveries including such heart-rending entries as: *"Unidentified nude body. Head and legs from knees downwards gone. Description of identity impossible."*

Within a number of days, British and American soldiers arrived along with the American Red Cross to help with the searches for more bodies and the ordeal of burial. In the distillery cooperage where once the sound of hammering was in the assemblage of whisky barrels now it was the dreadful clamour of coffin-making.

On Friday 11th October, five days after the *Otranto* sank, a mass funeral was held in the newly created cemetery close to Kilchoman churchyard. David Grant, the minister of Kilchoman, led the service; pipers played a lament; the British and American flags were lowered and the honour guard fired a six-volley salute.

*Sgt MacNeill (far left); Mr Loughton, Islay House Factor (second from left) and colleagues*

Then a shocked hush fell upon the island and the letters came, as before, praising the islanders and seeking whatever scraps of information there might be about the remains of the dead. The sinking of the *Otranto* was the worst convoy disaster of the war. America, as well as Islay, was in shock. What made the tragedy seem even more pitiful was the fact that the end of the war was just one month away.

*The second* Otranto *funeral at Kilchoman*

*The arrival of the funeral procession at the Otranto cemetery at Kilchoman on October 17th. About sixteen long trench graves contained the bodies of the American soldiers. The burial services were read on a little lawn in front of the trench graves.*

# A FRIEND FROM ACROSS THE WATER

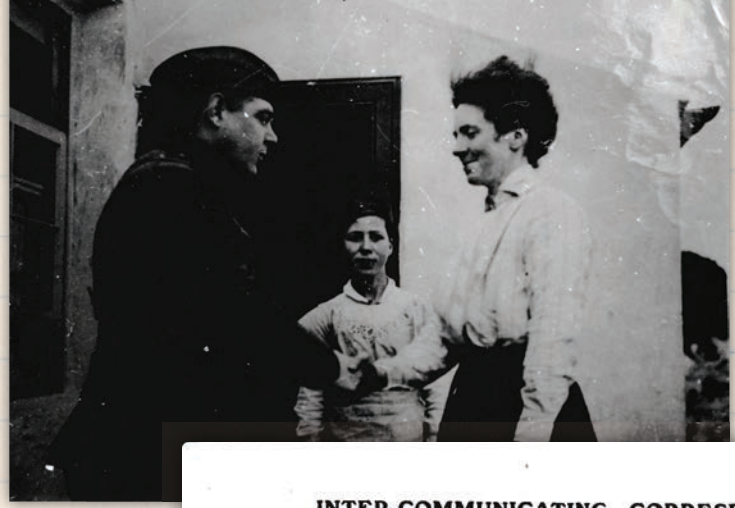
An extract from *The Drowned and The Saved*
by Les Wilson with some additional information

Of all the Americans to descend on Islay following the tragedy, it was Lieutenant James Jeffers, of the American Red Cross, who was to develop the most profound relationship with the islanders. Jeffers recalls:

*"When I reached Islay the good folk there had given all their food and clothing to the survivors. The American Red Cross has done something to show its gratitude to the splendid people, but I can tell you that the last has not been heard of this, for all Americans will be thrilled when the full story is told of the noble self-sacrificing efforts of the humble people in the tiny island far away from the mainland."*

Jeffers began by helping out local people who sacrificed their time and, energy and possessions with gifts of food and clothing, and he presented money to the Reverend Grant 'to put the church in usable shape'. Its floor was covered in bloodstains. James Jeffers had a clear affinity for the people of Islay. He was born an Irishman and became a naturalised US citizen. To the Ileachs he was almost a neighbour or at least a distant cousin. Although an officer, a 'Yank' and a New York businessman, James Jeffers would have absolutely understood the hard rural and Celtic lifestyle of the majority of Islay people, and would have appreciated the value of the sacrifices they made to help the American survivors and to bury the dead.

Jeffers received many letters and telegrams from soldiers' relatives in the US asking for any information he might have to hand. The polite, yet palpably distressed, correspondence opposite is quite typical of the pleas he received.



*Lieutenant James Jeffers outside the Bridgend Hotel meeting Maggie McPhee and Mary McIntyre.*

**INTER-COMMUNICATING CORRESPONDENCE.**

AMERICAN RED CROSS — 52, Grosvenor Gardens, S.W.1

*To*_____ *Date*_____

*Subject*_____

COPY

6 West View,
Helmshore,
Dec 23rd 1918.

To Lieut James Jeffers,

Dear Sir,

Your Red Cross Bulletin, and photos of the Otranto disaster to hand, for which, please accept our best thanks and the enlcosed P.O.

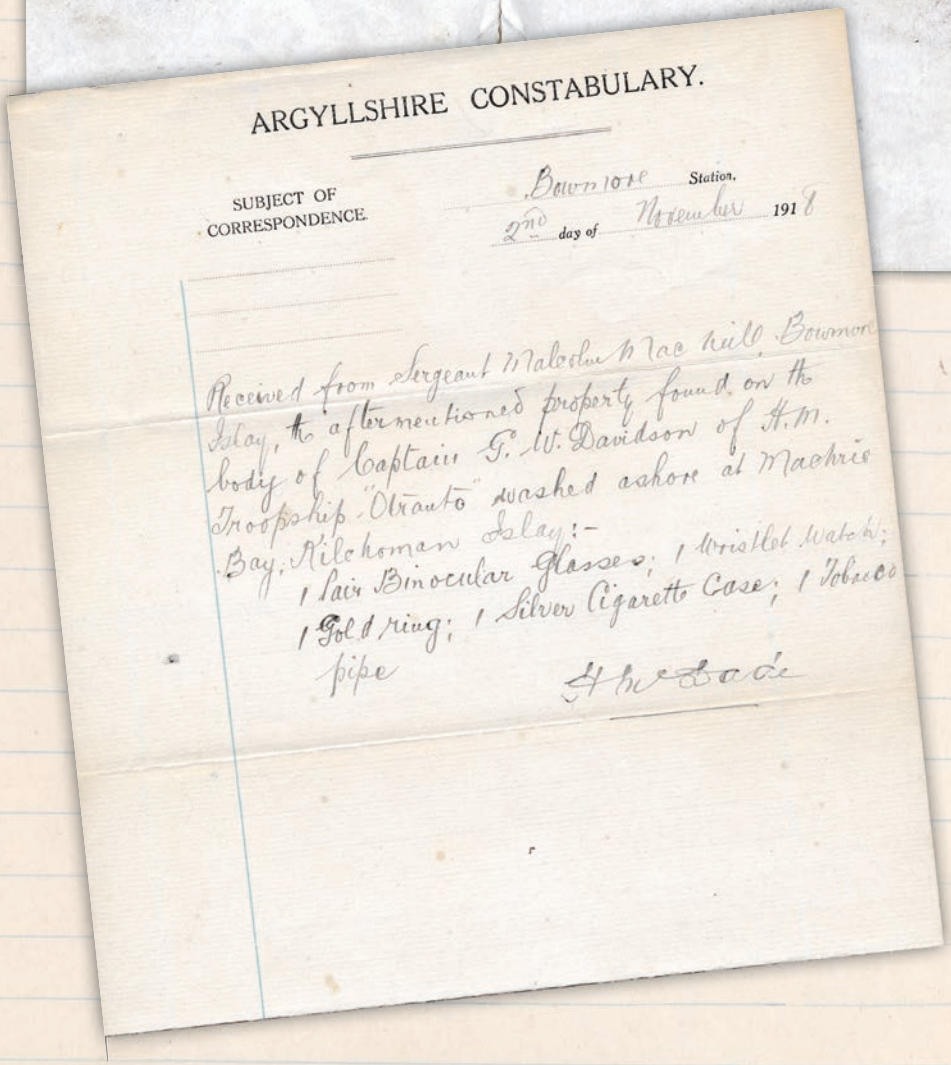
We should be obliged if you could tell us how many of the crew left aboard were washed ashore. The Rev. Donald Grant informs us that our son had not his identification disc on when found, but what was found on him would be forwarded to us through the Admiralty, as we have not heard anything from them, we should be pleased if you could give us any information or the address where to write to. Do you think it possible for us to get our sons remains removed from Islay and interned in our own Parish Church. Our son was Thomas H. Jaworth, A.B.M. Z 2662. R.N.V.R. Thanking you for your past services.

We remain,
Yours truly,

(Signed) Mr. & Mrs Haworth.

The following correspondence gives just a glimpse of the heroic efforts made by Sergeant Malcolm MacNeill in helping to identify bodies, record burials, return belongings and generally assist the British and American authorities.

Captain Lehoerff was the master of the Breton schooner that the *Otranto* rescued earlier in its voyage. He also lost his life. The property found on the body of Captain Davidson poignantly sums up the key strands in this man's life: his office, his marriage and his relaxation.



ARGYLLSHIRE CONSTABULARY.

SUBJECT OF CORRESPONDENCE

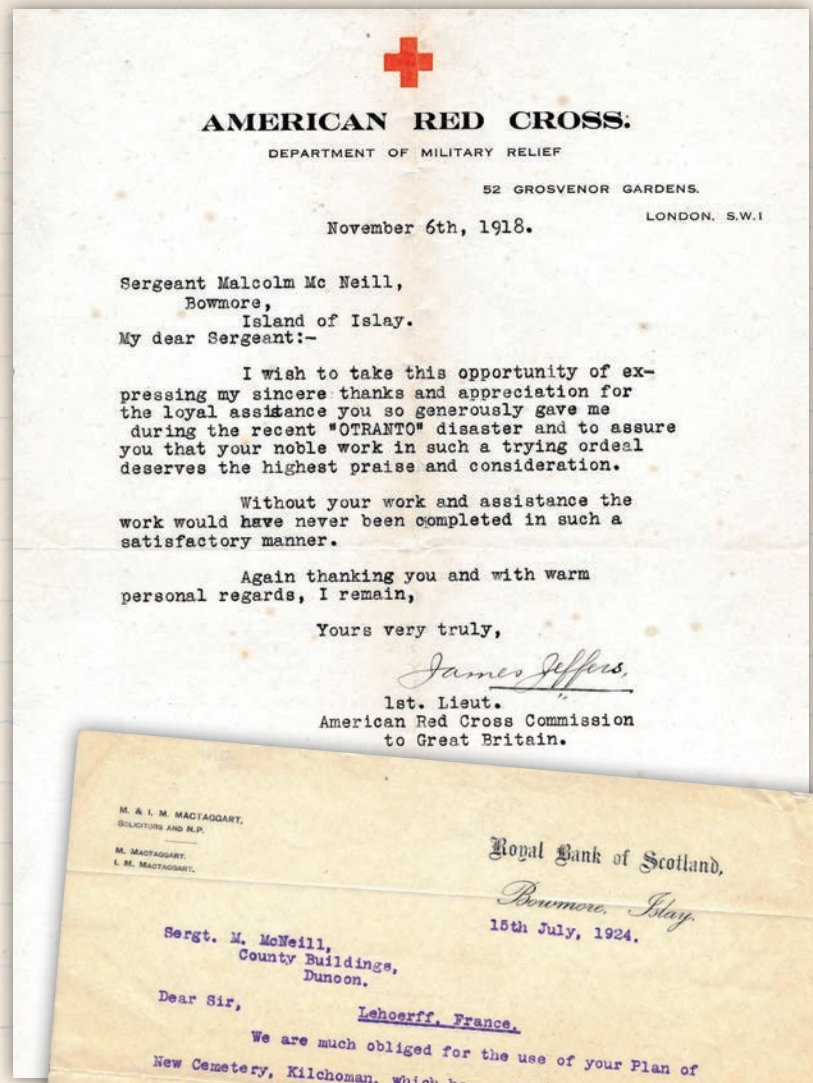
Bowmore Station.

2nd day of November 1918

Received from Sergeant Malcolm Mac Neill Bowmore Islay, the aftermentioned property found on the body of Captain G. W. Davidson of H.M. Troopship "Otranto" washed ashore at Machrie Bay, Kilchoman Islay:-

1 pair Binocular Glasses; 1 Wristlet Watch; 1 Gold ring; 1 Silver Cigarette Case; 1 Tobacco pipe

G. W. Davidson



**AMERICAN RED CROSS.**

DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY RELIEF

52 GROSVENOR GARDENS.
LONDON. S.W.1

November 6th, 1918.

Sergeant Malcolm Mc Neill,
Bowmore,
Island of Islay.

My dear Sergeant:-

I wish to take this opportunity of expressing my sincere thanks and appreciation for the loyal assistance you so generously gave me during the recent "OTRANTO" disaster and to assure you that your noble work in such a trying ordeal deserves the highest praise and consideration.

Without your work and assistance the work would have never been completed in such a satisfactory manner.

Again thanking you and with warm personal regards, I remain,

Yours very truly,

James Jeffers.

1st. Lieut.
American Red Cross Commission
to Great Britain.

M. & I. M. MACTAGGART,
SOLICITORS AND N.P.

M. MACTAGGART.
I. M. MACTAGGART.

Royal Bank of Scotland,
Bowmore, Islay.
15th July, 1924.

Sergt. M. McNeill,
County Buildings,
Dunoon.

Dear Sir,

Lehoerff, France.

We are much obliged for the use of your Plan of New Cemetery, Kilchoman, which has enabled us to trace the coffin of Capt. Lehoerff. His remains were removed to France last week, and the plan is herewith returned.

If you have any expenses please send a note of same by return.

Yours faithfully,

M. & I. M. Mactaggart

# LT. FRANCIS CRAVEN DSO & DSM (US)

Francis Worthington Craven was born in Manchester 1888 and was 29 years old when he mounted his rescue of *HMS Otranto*. He was awarded the DSO for his bravery and the citation is shown opposite.

He was also awarded the Distinguished Service Medal by the President of the USA.

After the war he went on to serve as a District Inspector, Auxiliary Division Royal Irish Constabulary. He was killed in action on 2nd February 1921 during the Clonfin Ambush mounted by the Longford IRA.

*"In recognition of his services when HMS OTRANTO was wrecked on the 6th October 1918. HMS OTRANTO was damaged in collision with the SS KASHMIR whilst carrying a large number of American troops. Lieutenant Craven displayed magnificent courage and seamanship in placing HMS MOUNSEY alongside HMS OTRANTO in spite of the fact that the conditions of wind, weather and sea were exceptionally severe. After going alongside and embarking a certain number of men it was reported that the MOUNSEY had sustained considerable damage, and that there was a large quantity of water in the engine room. Lieutenant Craven, therefore, left the OTRANTO but on finding the damage was not so serious as had been reported, he again went alongside, though he had previously experienced great difficulty in getting away. His action resulted in the saving of over 600 lives which would otherwise have certainly been lost. His performance was a remarkable one, and in personal courage, coolness and seamanship ranks in the very highest order."*

# LOSS MADE VISIBLE

Designs were already underway for a simple shaft of granite to be erected on the Mull of Oa as a memorial to the *Tuscania*'s dead. It was decided that the memorial should commemorate the American dead of both tragedies.

Lest it be forgot, Charles McNiven, the Bard of Kilchoman who lived at Rockside and saw body after body washed up, was moved to put aside his usual light verse and write the lament, *Cumha an Otranto* (see page 50/51), giving the soldiers the respect they deserved even though they hadn't set foot in France. It was translated into English and sent to US families. It retains deep significance in the island's collective memory and is enshrined in its heart. For with none of their own brought home to bury and mourn, the burying of these unknown sons helped the islanders to make sense of what was happening and in some way come to terms with their own loss.

*The Oa Monument on the peninsula*


*The Oa Monument*

# ÒRAN MAR CHUIMHNEACHAN AIR CALL NA H-OTRANTO

Air mios deireannach an fhoghair–
An seathamh latha ma's maith mo chuimhne,
Nuair a thainig an "Otranto"
'S iomadh gaisgeach a bha innte,
Dhol a sheasamh saors' an t-saoghail,
Chan e mhàin air raoin na Frainge,
Air gach uile chearn 'ga sgaoileadh,
Bratach shaors' o dhaors' a naimhdean.

Bu bheag a shaoil' nuair rinn iad fàgail,
Seadh, gu'm b'ann air tràigh an Ile
A thachradh Righ Fuar a' bhàis orr',
Chum am fàgail ann 'nan sineadh;
Is ged nach d' fhuair iad cùis air Nàmhaid,
Fhuair iad bàs a cheart cho dileas:
Fhuair gach aon dhiubh bàs mar ghaisgeach,
Fad o dhachaidhean a shinnsear.

Thiodhlaic sinne iad leis gach urram,
A b'uurrainn sinn a chur air saighdear;
Chaidh am pasgadh mar bu mhiann leo,
Anns a' Bhrataich Stiallaich Reultaich;
Is am beagan a bha beo dhiubh,
Nochdadh coibhneas mòr is bàidh dhoibh;
Fhuair iad dion is blàthas is fasgadh,
'S tric a thaisbeanaich na Gàidheil.

'S iomadh màthair 's maith glé aosds,
Chaill a h-aon mhac mùirneach gràdhach,
'S iomadh nighneag bhòidheach bhanail
A Chaill a leannan air an tràigh ud;
Is O! cha till, cha till a h-aon dhiubh,
Dh'ionnis' na dùthcha 'rinn iad fhàgail;
Tha iad tosdach fuar, 'nan cadal,
Fad o dhachaidhean an àirdean.

A chaoidh bidh blàthas gus 'n latha mu dheireadh
Aig America ri Ile,
Oir tha còrr is ceithir cheud dhiubh,
Air an tiodhlacadh ann gu dilinn.
Fo thulaichean gorma Chille-Chomain
Tha na h-òganaich 'nan sineadh,
'S los gu'n dùisgear o na mairbh iad,
Ghiulan arm do dh'Iosa Criosda.

IN MEMORY OF "OTRANTO" DISASTER OFF ISLAY 6th October 1918.

'Twas the latest month of Autumn -
The sixth day as I recall -
When we hailed the ship "Otranto"
With full freight, and heroes all:
They left home to fight for justice,
Liberty had heard the call;
And the Stripes were now unfurling,
On the war torn fields of Gaul.

Little thought they when they parted,
From their friends beyond the main,
That upon the shores of Islay,
Soon that Death would make his claim;
Though they fought not in the battle,
Nor did to the strife descend,
Far from dear ones, home and kindred,
Still they met a hero's end.

On the peaceful sward full daisied,
Where the winds of ocean blow,
Shrouded in their own loved banner,
Tenderly we laid them low;
And the few that Death had spared us,
To the utmost love can know
They were tended well and bravely,
As our Gaels were wont to show.

Many are the loving mothers,
That now mourn the sons they bore;
Many are the winsome maidens,
Lost their loved ones on yon shore.
Never more with hearty greetings,
Will they meet them on the Strand,
For, alas, they now lie sleeping,
'Neath the flowers in distant land.

Till the last dread trump be sounded,
Never will Columba's Land,
Cease to think with pride, but sadly,
Of green Islay's distant land.
There full more then four hundred
Brave ones sleep beneath its sod,
Till they waken on yon morning,
In the skies to meet their God.

Charles MacNiven,
Islay.

With grateful thanks to the following:

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With special thanks to everyone who has kindly shared personal stories and reflections which feature within this book, and the staff of the Museum of Islay Life.



Designed by Wolffe

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# TO THE GIRLS WHO MADE THE AMERICAN FLAG.

GRAVES OF AMERICAN SOLDIERS IN ISLAY—THE TWO FLAGS.

WW100

# ALBA

DÈ DH'IONNSAICH SINN?