

The Southland Disaster.

It was about 9.45 on the morning of September 2, 1915, and the Southland had just encountered the German submarine UB14, under the command of Oberleutnant Heino von Heimbürg. As part of the 6th Brigade convoy, she had left Alexandria 3 days before, carrying troops for the Gallipoli campaign, and was only about 65km south of the isle of Lemnos when hit.

Her contingent included the 21st Bn, B Coy of the 23rd, the 6th FAB, members of the 2nd DSC, as well as 6th Bde & 2nd Div Headquarters staff, a NZ Artillery unit and various other sundry details.

The convoy had been following a zigzag course all the way, the 'torpedo guard' on each ship keeping their eyes peeled for submarines. The Nile, carrying the 24th Bn and well ahead, had spotted the sub and managed to outrun it, the Scotian with the 22nd Bn on board also managed to dodge it, but the first the Southland knew of her predicament was the approaching torpedo.

About an hour and a half after being hit, with the ship close to empty and the sea strewn with boats, debris and men, the captain realized there was a chance she might continue to float. He called for volunteer stokers, and someone asked the chief engineer "Is it good enough?" "I don't give it much chance," was the reply, "but I've a wife and kids and it's good enough for me." Nineteen men, headed by Captain Nelson Wellington of the 21st Bn decided to chance it. The men worked hard for an hour and twenty minutes before they managed to get the ship operational, all the time contending with the uncertainty of their fate, brought to bear even more when the ship changed her list.

A modest account of a very heroic deed is given by Lance-Corporal R. W. Ahearn, of A. Company, 21st Battalion, who was one of the men who volunteered to go down into the stokehold and get steam up in the Southland, which was then thought to be sinking. In an interesting letter Lance-Corporal Ahearn states that sometime after the explosion, and when the last boats were leaving, the captain of the Southland called for 15 men to remain behind to man the stokehold, and that he and another Mortlake recruit, Private Williamson, 13 men, and five officers answered the call. Some of the volunteers felt a 'bit off' as they went down the long succession of ladders and passed the gratings, but it was only for a few seconds, and then they set to. "The fires," Lance-Corporal Ahearn states, "were down," and there was no water in the glasses; but we followed the engineer's orders, and nine of us took on 32 fires. Steam had been down-only showing 70lb. - hardly enough to keep one pump going. It was awfully hot down there, but our only hope was to keep moving. We kept the pumps going, and got steam up to 200lb., which enabled the engineer to get the ship under way. We had the engines going when a relief party of stokers from a British Navy ship came aboard. I was never so glad to see a sailor in all my life. We got out on deck after doing two hours below, and our appearance was enough to have brought tears of laughter to your eyes. A ***** glee-party was not in it with us. We had a great laugh, and the relief of getting on deck again made us laugh the more. You see, we did not exactly know how much the ship was damaged, and all the time we were expecting another "tin-fish" to blow in. We took the chance, and with God's help, got out of it safe and sound. After that we were treated splendidly - allowed anything we fancied. I had a small bottle of 'the best.' We dined in the saloon, and the lads polished off eight chickens and heaps of good stuff - a real picnic."

Sources:

<https://www.greatwarforum.org/blogs/entry/1634-the-southland-the-first-australian-troopship-to-be-torpedoed/>

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article119555939>