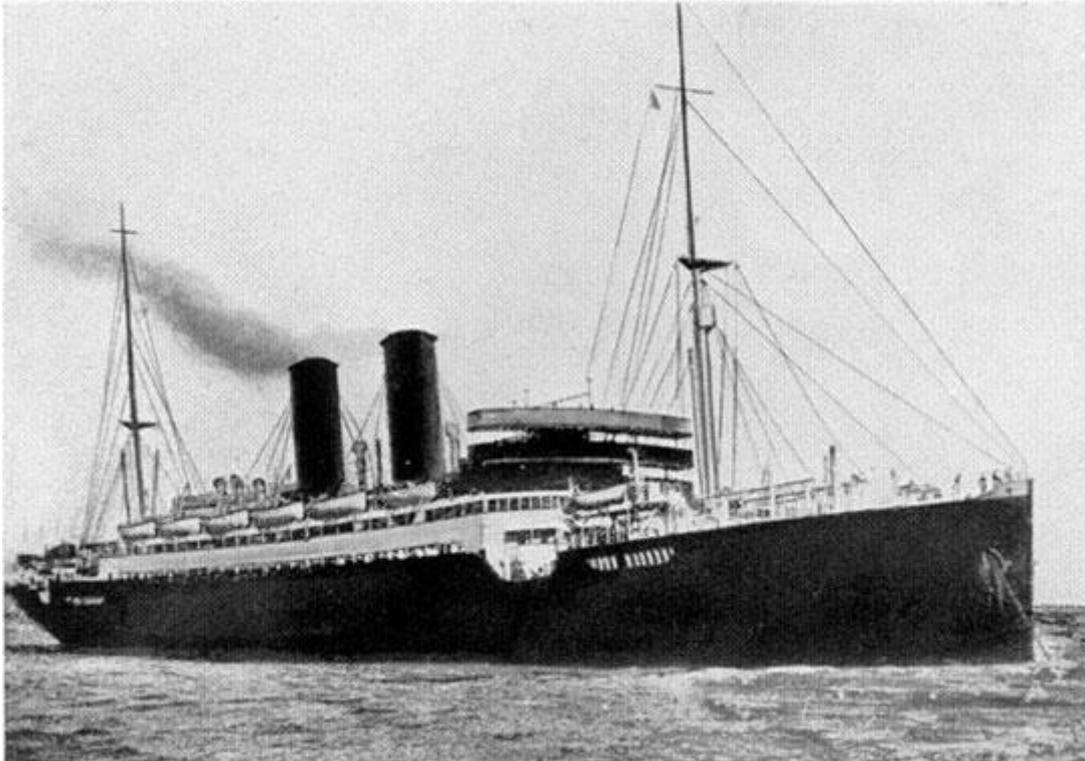


Leasowe Castle



Campaigns in the Middle Eastern theatre of war took place between October 1914 and October 1918. The main objectives, initially, were the defence of the Suez canal and the Persian Gulf, both of which were of strategic importance. The Allies later moved to aggressive campaigns against the Ottoman Empire from both base areas. The Nottinghamshire Yeomanry, also known as the South Notts Hussars, were involved, spending periods in Egypt interspersed with tours in Gallipoli and Salonika. They were converted to a machine gun corps in April 1918 in response to the German gains in the Spring Offensive (there was little role for cavalry on the western front) and plans were put in place to transfer them to France. They embarked on HMS *Leasowe Castle* at the end of May 1918.

On 26 May 1918 SS *Leasowe Castle* cast off at 5.00pm and proceeded from Alexandria bound for Marseilles in company with five other troopships convoyed by Japanese destroyers, and other vessels such as trawlers and even a captive kite balloon for observation. Several sea-planes accompanied the convoy for some distance. The balloon was towed aloft until dark when it was hauled down.

The convoy steamed in line ahead until it came to the end of the swept channel and then came in to "T" formation, with the *Leasowe Castle* 3rd in the leading line. She was carrying 2,900 troops plus crew. Every precaution was taken to prevent light showing after dark, and as many men as possible were ordered to sleep on deck at their emergency stations.

The night of 28 May 1918 was had bright moonlight, with a calm sea, and from the decks every ship in the convoy and its protective ring of trawlers and destroyers could be seen. An obvious target for any submarines in the area.

All had gone well, but at 12.25am, about 100 miles from Alexandria, the *Leasowe Castle* was hit by a torpedo on the starboard side a little forward of amidships. (under the after funnel) The engines were stopped practically at once: she remained on an even keel, settling slightly by the stern. Meanwhile the remainder of the convoy had disappeared, leaving the Japanese destroyer *Katsura* (also lettered R) to render assistance.

Troops fell in at their emergency stations immediately. Those berthed on the lower decks had been sleeping on deck near their emergency stations that night. The order was given by the master of the ship to lower the boats and this was done and rafts flung overboard by the crew assisted by parties from troops on board. Around forty boats and rafts were thrown overboard and troops began leaving the ship.

As soon as the first batch of boats was on the water they were ordered to be filled while the remainder were being lowered: troops going over the side down ropes and ladders. Boats were ordered by the master to pull over to the sloop and destroyer, discharge troops and pull back to the ship. This order was carried out by some boats but not by all; some boats left empty and drifting!

HMS *Lily* returned to assist, coming alongside the forecastle and making fast with ropes, narrowly escaping going down with the *Leasowe*. By 1.30 am about 2,000 men had been evacuated. After all the boats had left the ship, there were still roughly 800-1000 men left on board. These were mostly troops stationed in the forecastle and on the starboard side; in the latter case in the latter case owing to there being slightly more men that side and to some of the boats hanging outboard being smashed by columns of water from the explosion. The remainder of those on board were taken off partly by the boats which came back after discharging; partly by the sloop *Lily* which had made fast with ropes up to within a few seconds of the final plunge. Many men jumped in to the sea during the last few moments and were picked up from rafts, amongst those being the Battalion commander Major Sir St J Gore Bt.

The majority of the men on board were saved. 102 men lost their lives including eight officers and 44 other ranks from the South Notts Hussars. Most men who lost their lives when the ship went down had been waiting on the forecastle. The survivors were returned to Egypt. The unit re-embarked in mid-June and eventually arrived in France, via Italy, in mid-August. The Nottinghamshire Yeomanry were then renamed the 100th Battalion MGC.

The sloop *Lily* having about 1,100 survivors on board started back to Alexandria immediately. The Destroyer R with about 400 on board remained in the vicinity of the ships boats which numbered about 34 and carried the remainder of the survivors.

At about 1200 HM Torpedo Boat *Chelmer*), HM Monitor *Ladybird* and HM Auxiliary *Lychnis* arrived and took over the survivors from the *Katsura* and the ships boats. The officers and men of the Royal Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy did everything in their power to assist the survivors many of whom were almost without clothes. The rescuing vessels arrived at Alexandria at times between 1400 and 1830.

There all arrangements had been made for their reception: men of the Battalion were sent straight to Sidi Bishr transit camp and officers to various hotels for the night.

Captain Sutton described his experience:

We had got about nine hours out. nearly all of us were asleep in bed. I was subconsciously aware of a sudden jar, but what I do remember was sitting on my berth and asking what happened, and was told if I didn't get out pretty quickly I should pretty soon know what it was. I pulled on a pair of shoes and tying on my lifebelt scuttled along the corridor, and slipped up at the foot of the stairs. I went straight to our emergency station and found the other men arriving. They were awfully good on the ship, and there was no panic. The yeoman is a downright good fellow and I take off my hat to him. The ship soon stopped. There was a very slight list. The boats were got off and the rafts too and when all the men were off the ship and I said to about half a dozen still there, "Well we'll go now". The water was then awash in the after well deck. So clad in pyjamas, canvas shoes and a wrist watch, I climbed down about six feet of ladder, held my breath, looked at the black water, and dropped quietly in. I had a swim of about 30 to 50 yards. I had a life belt on, a splendid thing. When we got the life raft (a collapsible canvas sided boat), we rowed and rowed round in circles till a motor launch came and took us in tow, and then we arrived in an auxiliary ship of war. While we were getting on board the auxiliary had two torpedoes launched at her but both were misses, thank God.

A few minutes after, the ship went down with a rush. we made of back towards Alexandria with over 1,100 survivors on board. The night was wonderfully warm and I never felt cold, even in wet pyjamas. However some kind naval officer fitted me out in a naval tunic and a pair of trousers, and of course I was the butt of many jests. All were fitted up with blankets or something to keep the warm and some food. About ten hours afterwards we arrived back in Alex. On the quay we were give clothes, army issue, and the red cross gave us tea and biscuits.

The above account was written two days after. The following account from Fred Marshall was some 70 years after:

We were on transports going to France, actually to Marseilles. Six transports and about 2 cruisers 7 destroyers and a couple of sloops named The Lily and The Ladybird. When we got 150 miles from Alexandria which would have put us somewhere opposite Cyprus, we were torpedoed, it was just midnight. I think we had left Alexandria about teatime, 4 o'clock. The officer in charge of us on board, Lawson, came round to ask for volunteers to lower the rafts and all that sort of thing after the crew had got the lifeboats down. Then once finished he stepped up to me and my mate "Come on boys the decks are awash, every man for himself. So we scrambled over the side and the ship stood up. The deck was above water. We had life jackets on which was just as well since I couldn't swim very well. Well once in the water I kicked myself off the side of the ship and got my legs tangled round a piece of rope. So I pulled myself back, kicked myself clear and out I went into the blue. Sixteen minutes past one when my watch stopped, course they wouldn't go in those days, they weren't waterproof. I swam about out there, and we were anxious that we couldn't get as far as we would want because of the suction of the ship (when it went down.)

The crew consisted of a load of Lascars, took the life boats to the rescue ships, the lily and ladybird and all those others. When they got their they and got onto the ships themselves they let the lifeboats go. And it was one of these which I swam out to. Well as we were being trained as Hotchkiss machine gunners and our horses taken away, we'd lost our breeches and putties and all that sort of thing. We just wore shorts. The sergeants and the sergeant majors they kept their breeches as did the officers. So through the movement of this boat up came somebody in the dark beside of me, my Sergeant Major Legg. We went to clamber up in to the boat together, and he said to me, "Let go of me you bloody fool, I can't get up there with you hanging on to my breeches". So when we eventually rolled in to the boat, I was free minus one sock and one shoe. He had his breeches full of 2 or 3 gallons of water which had held him down from getting in the boat. That made me laugh, did that. Having got into the boat there was only one oar left. About 5 or 6 other fellows gathered together and got into the boat, and we tried to get away with only one oar. The Leasowe Castle with 3000 of us on board, big ship she was. As she was going down we tried to get the boat 50 yards from her so she wouldn't suck us down. Anyway eventually round came this motor-boat with 2 sailors in and chucked us a line and towed us round to where we got on the Ladybird. I think there was two more ships in attendance while the rest of the convoy had gone on, otherwise they'd be in danger too. I think it was the lady bird I got on, and luck for us they stayed. There was so many of us on this little sloop that the Captain of the ship asked us to get more equally spread all over the ship to keep her balanced.