

= SS Irish Oak (1919) =

The SS Irish Oak was an Irish @-@ operated steamship which was sunk in the North Atlantic during World War II by a German submarine .

As the West Neris she had been built in the US and operated by the United States Shipping Board . In 1941 , she was chartered by Irish Shipping Limited , to transport wheat and fertilizer from North America to Ireland . Sailing as a clearly marked neutral vessel , not in convoy , she was nonetheless torpedoed and sunk by U @-@ 607 on 15 May 1943 midway between North America and Ireland . The crew were rescued .

At the time there were conflicting reports that she had not and allegations that she had warned a nearby convoy of the presence of a U @-@ boat . The British nationality of her captain became an issue in the Irish general election of June 1943 , there were diplomatic exchanges between the United States and Ireland , and questions raised in the British House of Commons . The U @-@ boat 's captain received a mild reprimand .

= = Construction = =

Southwestern Shipbuilding of San Pedro , California , was organized in 1918 to build cargo ships for the United States Shipping Board . As Yard No. 11 , the ship was built to Design 1019 , launched on 24 August 1918 and completed in December 1919 . Her displacement was 5 @,@ 589 tons , length 410 feet 5 inches (125 @.@ 10 m) , with a beam of 54 feet 3 inches (16 @.@ 54 m) , and a depth of 27 feet 2 inches (8 @.@ 28 m) .

Propelled by a triple expansion steam engine built by the Llewellyn Iron Works of Los Angeles , with cylinders of 24 @.@ 5 inches (62 cm) , 42 @.@ 5 inches (108 cm) and 72 inches (180 cm) bore and 48 inches (120 cm) stroke , the ship could make 10 @.@ 5 knots (19 @.@ 4 km / h) .

= = West Neris = =

West Neris had been built for the United States Maritime Commission (USMC) and operated by the United States Shipping Board (USSB) , her port of registry being New Orleans .

In 1928 , she was sold to the Mississippi Steamship Company . She was sold back to the USSB in 1933 . With the abolition of the USSB , she was transferred to the United States Shipping Board Bureau in 1935 , and laid up in New Orleans . During this period the ship was neglected and the condition of her engine deteriorated . In 1937 she was transferred to the United States Maritime Commission . On 26 September 1941 she was chartered to Irish Shipping Ltd , through United States Lines at £ 3 @,@ 245 per month .

= = Irish Oak = =

= = = Background = = =

At the outbreak of World War II Ireland had very few ships , and the United States instructed its ships not to enter the " war zone " . Acting for the Irish Government , Minister Frank Aiken negotiated the charter of two oil @-@ burning steamships from the United States Maritime Commission 's reserve fleet . These were the West Neris and the West Hematite . Two Irish crews travelled to New Orleans to take over the ships , which they did on 9 September 1941 .

The West Neris was renamed Irish Oak and West Hematite was renamed Irish Pine . Both were chartered by government owned Irish Shipping Limited (ISL) and managed by the Limerick Steamship Company , with their port of registry changed to Dublin . The Irish Oak was captained by Matthew Moran of Wexford ; the Irish Pine by Frank Dick of Islandmagee , with Samuel McNamara of Belfast as Chief Engineer .

== Initial sailing , convoys and delays ==

Destined to carry wheat and phosphate fertilizer , both ships sailed initially from New Orleans for St John 's in October 1941 , to take on cargoes of wheat bound for Ireland . Since insurers such as Lloyd 's of London charged higher premiums for ships not in convoy , the Irish Oak and the Irish Pine were painted war @-@ time camouflage in preparation for sailing in @-@ convoy . Irish Pine joined Convoy SC 56 and arrived in Dublin on 11 December 1941 . In contrast , Irish Oak experienced a number of serious mishaps and setbacks : Chief Engineer R. Marsh , of Dublin , suffered a heart attack and was hospitalised in New Orleans ; another engineer , O ? Keefe of Dún Laoghaire , was severely burned in a boiler room blow @-@ back and hospitalised in St John ; and a locally recruited Greek replacement engineer caused difficulties , was reported to the Canadian authorities by the captain , and jailed .

Initially Irish Oak sailed with Convoy SC 52 , which departed from Sydney , Nova Scotia on 29 October 1941 . On 3 November the convoy was attacked by U @-@ 202 and U @-@ 203 and lost four ships ; it turned back for Sydney and arrived on 5 November . But neglect had left the Irish Oak in poor condition . Ships from SC 52 were merged with Convoy SC 53 and Irish Oak sailed with it , but had to return to Sydney . Her next attempt was with Convoy SC 55 , which departed Sydney on 16 November 1941 and arrived at Liverpool on 5 December , but again engine problems struck and she was towed to Saint John , New Brunswick . Irish Oak remained in St. John for four months while efforts were made to repair her engine . Eventually she had to be towed to Boston for repairs . The voyage from New Orleans to Dublin - including repairs - took nine months : Irish Oak berthed in Dublin on 6 July 1942 .

== Out of convoy sailings ==

The crew of the Irish Oak became acutely uneasy after her engine failed and she was left behind by SC 55 , dead in the water , to wait for a tugboat ; this , coupled with the experiences of other Irish ships , especially in OG 71 , the " Nightmare Convoy " in August 1941 , resolved Irish crews and owners to sail as neutrals , out @-@ of @-@ convoy . Thereafter Irish ships were clearly marked and fully lit , usually sailing out @-@ of @-@ convoy on a direct course , and they always answered SOS calls for assistance . Irish ships rescued 534 men ; yet lost 20 % of their seamen .

Irish Shipping Limited built up its fleet to 15 ships . Two ships were lost , Irish Oak , and Irish Pine , on which 33 lives were lost . The ISL ships alone saved some 166 lives .

== The Stornest ==

At 04 : 44 on 14 October 1942 , in very bad weather , Irish Oak received a distress call from British ship Stornest , a straggler from convoy ONS 136 , torpedoed by U @-@ 706 . Irish Oak answered the call and altered course . Six minutes later Stornest radioed Irish Oak that they were abandoning ship in life @-@ rafts , having lost their lifeboats in the heavy seas . Irish Oak continued to relay Stormest 's SOS and spent ten hours searching for survivors in a westerly gale . The rescue tug Adherent , the anti @-@ submarine trawler Drangey and two corvettes from convoy ONS 137 joined the search , to no avail . Stornest 's crew of 29 and ten gunners were lost at sea .

A week later Captain Matthew Moran was fatally injured while boarding at the Dublin quayside , when the gangway collapsed beneath him . He was replaced by Captain Eric Jones (see Crew) .

== Encounter with U @-@ 650 ==

On 14 May 1943 , Irish Oak was en route from Tampa , Florida , to Dublin with a cargo of 8 @,@ 000 tons of phosphate fertiliser . Smoke from an allied convoy was visible ahead in the distance ; in general Irish ships were sailing out @-@ of @-@ convoy at this time .

At 2.23pm German U @-@ boat U @-@ 650 came alongside . There was no contact or exchange between the vessels . They continued alongside each other all afternoon . At nightfall Irish Oak

turned on her lights , in accordance with her neutral status . Apparently satisfied , U @-@ 650 departed during the night . Irish Oak continued sailing astern of Convoy SC 129 .

As it happened , on the same day U @-@ 642 reported that an aircraft carrier (the escort carrier HMS Biter with the 5th Escort Group) was joining the convoy ; in fear of the aircraft , the stalking U @-@ boats were ordered to " break off operations against convoy " .

= = = Torpedoed = = =

As dawn broke next morning , 15 May 1943 , a torpedo hit Irish Oak at 8 : 19am (12 : 19 German Summer Time) . Two torpedoes were launched , one missed , the other struck her port side and exploded .

At the time it was uncertain which submarine had launched the torpedoes . Its periscope remained visible as lifeboats were lowered . The submarine waited until the lifeboats were well clear before firing a coup de grâce at 9 : 31 am . Irish Plane , Irish Rose and Irish Ash responded to the SOS . The survivors were located by Irish Plane at 4 : 20 pm .

Irish Oak lies in position 47 ° 51 ' N 25 ° 53 ' W , almost midway between Newfoundland and Ireland .

= = = Landfall = = =

The survivors landed at Cobh on 19 May . They were welcomed by Samuel Roycroft , a director of both the Limerick Steamship Company and of Irish Shipping Limited . They lunched at the Imperial Hotel , Cork . On arrival in Dublin on 21 May , they were welcomed by Peadar Doyle , the Lord Mayor , and hosted to lunch at Leinster House , home of the Dáil Éireann (Ireland 's parliament) , on 24 May .

It was common practice for crews ' wages to be stopped when a ship was sunk . Famed Labour leader James Larkin raised the issue of the survivors ' treatment in the Dáil Éireann . Citing the crew member who was told by the Labour exchange to ' go and get his record card ' , which was lost when Irish Oak sank , he suggested that the Dáil Éireann ask the German Consul @-@ General to send a submarine to retrieve it .

= = Aftermath = =

= = = British = = =

At the time it was not known which submarine had sunk Irish Oak . The survivors knew only that it was not U @-@ 650 . In the House of Commons Sir William Davidson called for a formal protest , because Irish Oak had not warned the convoy , and Douglas Lloyd Savory called for an end of coal exports to Ireland .

No official action was taken : Ireland was exporting food to Britain at the time . Also , Paul Emrys @-@ Evans revealed that the convoy knew about the U @-@ boat ; the British stance was that , as it already knew of the presence of both Irish Oak and U @-@ 607 , there was no need for Irish Oak to have warned the convoy .

= = = Irish = = =

During World War I the South Arklow Lightvessel Guillemot , operated by the Commissioners of Irish Lights , had given warning of a U @-@ boat . In consequence on 28 March 1917 UC @-@ 65 surfaced , ordered the crew into their lifeboat , and sank the Guillemot . Against this background the sinking of Irish Oak became a hotly debated issue .

The Irish Government 's stance was that Irish Oak had not warned the Allied convoy of a U @-@ boat presence , as stated by Éamon de Valera in the Dáil , and by Irish Shipping Limited . De Valera

went on to say that it was " ... no business of Irish ships to give any information to anyone " .

A rumour to the contrary was picked up by the Irish Labour Party . James Everett asked : " Was information given to the British convoy that a submarine was sighted the night before ? " Discussion in the Dáil during the run @-@ up to the General Election , focused on the possibility that a warning had been transmitted and demands were made to know the nationality of the captain (a British subject) :

Bill Norton : " Would the Taoiseach state the nationality of the master of the ship ? "

Éamon de Valera : " I do not know it . "

James Hickey : " I think the Taoiseach should take a deep interest in finding out the nationality of the captains of our ships . "

William Davin : " Is the Taoiseach aware that a recommendation was submitted that Irish nationals should get preference for these ships ? "

Norton , Hickey and Davin were Labour Party members .

Luke Duffy , secretary of the Labour Party , said that the " ... government was guilty of duplicity and near belligerency behind a facade of neutrality . They had placed foreign nationals on the bridge of Irish ships ... " . The party issued an advertisement condemning the " criminal conduct of the Fianna Fáil Government in sending brave men to their doom on the Irish Oak " .

Responding to allegations that Irish Oak had acted in such a way as to endanger her neutral status , Irish Shipping Limited stated :

" ... whether ... any information had been conveyed to a British convoy that a submarine had been sighted . The company states in the most explicit manner that there is no foundation whatever for the suggestion contained in the question . No such message was sent .

Seán MacEntee (Fianna Fáil Party) placed a counter advertisement in the Irish Times titled " Licence to Sink , " saying that the Labour Party sought to justify the sinking of the Irish Oak ; " But for these ships many of our people might have been hungry , would have been idle " ... " If our people were hungry and idle they would be more ready to listen to their pernicious doctrines " .

After the election William Davin complained of " the unfounded allegations and the slanderous and libellous statements made against members of this { sic Labour } Party " ... " had the audacity to charge members of this Party , during the recent election campaign , with having condoned the sinking of the Irish Oak . Could anything be more scandalous , or more untrue ? "

Although Labour increased its representation and de Valera 's Fianna Fáil party lost seats in the General Election , Éamon de Valera remained in power with the support of the Farmers ' Party .

= = = American = = =

It was not known at the time which submarine had sunk Irish Oak , only that it was not U @-@ 650 . Irish Shipping Limited was negotiating a lease of the SS Wolverine from the United States . The U.S. State Department intervened , asking why Ireland had not protested to Germany for the sinking .

The Irish replied that they protested other sinkings when the attacker was known . They protested the attacks on the colliers Glencullen and Glencree . They referred to the attack on the MV Kerlogue by two unidentified aircraft , initially denied by the British but admitted when shell fragments of British manufacture were found .

No further American ships were leased or sold to Ireland .

= = = German = = =

Not until after the war was it learned U @-@ 607 had sunk Irish Oak . This action , and U @-@ 607 's report , were not well received . Her Captain , Oberleutnant zur See Wolf Jeschonnek , claimed Irish Oak was a Q @-@ ship with false Irish markings , sailing without lights .

" The Second Lieutenant excused the sinking by saying that " IRISH OAK " was obviously a " Q " ship . He alleged that she was sailing at night without lights , zigzagging , and travelling at fourteen knots , although she appeared capable of barely half that speed . "

Flag Officer U @-@ boats said it ought not to have happened , but could be attributed to an

understandable mistake by an eager captain . " The precise observance of Irish neutrality and of all Flag Officer U @-@ boats ' strict orders in this connection is the duty of all U @-@ boat captains and is in the most immediate and pressing interests of the German Reich " .

U @-@ 607 was sunk , while in convoy with two other U @-@ boats , in the Bay of Biscay on 13 July 1943 by a Sunderland flying boat of 228 Squadron Royal Air Force , assisted by a Halifax of 58 Squadron . Oberleutnant Jeschonnek and six of his crew were taken prisoner ; the rest perished .

Nine days after the sinking of Irish Oak , on 24 May 1943 , Admiral Dönitz ordered a U @-@ boat withdrawal from the Atlantic . Of their operational fleet , 41 U @-@ boats ? or 25 % ? had been lost in Black May , against a total of 50 Allied merchant ships destroyed . The Battle of the Atlantic was over .

= = Crew = =

The crew of the Irish Oak when she was sunk on 15 May 1943 , all of whom were rescued :

Eric Jones had been captain of the SS Luimneach when it was sunk by gunfire from U @-@ 46 on 4 September 1940 . He then captained the SS Edenvale , which was bombed on 17 October 1941 .

Thomas Donohue (Second Mate) went on to captain MV Kerlogue , replacing Desmond Fortune who was unable to walk following the RAF attack on it .

James Burke (Radio Officer) had served on SS Oropesa which was torpedoed and sunk by U @-@ 96 , with 106 lives lost .

= = Official Numbers , Code Letters and Call Signs = =

Official Numbers , a forerunner to IMO Numbers , were :

West Neris - United States Official Number 219439 .

Irish Oak - United Kingdom Official Number 189859 .

Code Letters :

West Neris - LVFP until 1933 .

Call signs , the replacement of code letters from 1934 : KOTK from 1934 .

Irish Oak - EINY .

= = Other ships named Irish Oak = =

In 1949 , Irish Shipping Limited acquired a new Irish Oak (Official Number 174596) . Built for ISL by J. Readhead and Sons Ltd . , South Shields ; Bill Norton complained that it was to be British built . It would be immortalised in Frank McCourt ? s book ? ? Tis ? . In 1967 she was sold to Proverde Shipping of Greece and renamed Vegas . In 1979 , en route from Piraeus to Vietnam , she ran aground near Jeddah , was re @-@ floated but sold for breaking up .

In 1973 , Irish Shipping Limited acquired another Irish Oak , a bulk carrier motor ship with a diesel engine . Irish Oak , 16 @,@ 704 GRT , 25 @,@ 649 DWT , was in service with Irish Shipping until 1982 .