

A Distant Field



A Novel of World War I

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You fell;
and on a distant field,
shell shatter'd,
Soaked with blood

—*For Francis Ledwidge* (Killed in action, July 31, 1917),
Norreys Jephson O'Conor

For John MacDonald—Grampa

Who served with the Scots Guards, the Cameron Highlanders, and the King's Own Scottish Borderers in Egypt, North Africa, Canada, the Rhine Crossing, Germany, Palestine and Cyprus. He enlisted as a piper in 1931 and fought throughout WWII, retiring as a highly decorated lieutenant colonel.

He seldom spoke of his wartime experiences.

CHAPTER ONE

RMS *Lusitania*

2:10pm, 7th May 1915
11 miles off the Old Head of Kinsale,
the south coast of Ireland

“Torpedo! Starboard side!” The lookout grasped the cold metal handrail tightly, his knuckles white, staring helplessly as a 20-foot torpedo, travelling at 60 feet per second, disappeared from his view to ram 400 pounds of high-explosive TNT-Hexanite into the majestic ocean passenger liner.

The detonation rocked through the ship, instantly killing those below decks where the torpedo hit. Passengers and crew braced themselves against whatever they could hold on to or fell to the deck. A column of water powered into the air and cascaded over the ship, damaging lifeboats and leaving the surfaces slick with water and punctuated with debris. Then a second, much larger explosion ripped through the doomed vessel.

The blast reverberated through the metal hull, buckling metalwork and shattering glass. Smoke billowed from the forward funnels, and soot rained down onto the decks below. Stokers in the forward boiler room screamed inhumanely as pressurized steam erupted from fractured boilers, blinding and scalding them. Within seconds, steam burned their bare sweat-drenched torsos, plunging them into a sensory hell before they found a merciful death from shock and drowning.

No one near the first or second explosions lived. They were either incinerated or trapped in the forward boiler rooms, far below the waterline, as the cold dark waters of the Atlantic rushed in through the ruptured hull to drown those who lay blinded, bleeding, and damaged on the industrial metal deck. On the bridge, Captain Turner ordered a hard turn towards the Irish coast in a desperate attempt to reach safety, but just after the ship altered course, the steam lines ruptured, and the liner's four Parsons turbine engines failed to respond. RMS *Lusitania*, once the world's fastest ship—the greyhound of the seas—suddenly had no power.

Stuart McReynolds struggled to comprehend what was happening. He lay sprawled on the port-side upper promenade deck, near the stern, his ears ringing from the shock of the explosion. As he struggled to his feet and looked around him, the stunned silence was split with screams. Panic swept through the crowd as injuries registered pain and alarm. Deck officers began to bellow urgent orders to crewmen. An icy realization gripped McReynolds—his family were below decks. His mother and father, twin sisters, and younger brother had gone back to their cabins after lunch to prepare for arrival in Liverpool later that day. Stuart had been about to join them after his walk along the promenade deck.

He began to run, dodging around people until he reached the stairwell leading three levels down to second-class accommodations. Groups of passengers were forming, packing into the narrow corridors and stairwells in the ship's interior. Even as he forced his way down the stairwell, McReynolds realized that ship was already listing dramatically and he was fighting against a flow of passengers trying to escape up on to the open decks—and he was losing. He began to shout, barging into people, pushing people aside, politeness gone in his desperation to get to his family.

As he reached the first level down, Stuart's way was blocked by those surging towards him. He forced his way into the crowd, only to be roughly pushed back by a large, wild-looking bearded man, shouting at him and leading a large family group of women and children. Stuart tried again and felt the hard jab of a fist striking him as the bearded man lashed out without warning. Stuart stumbled back, carried by the crowd, and just as he thought he would lose his balance and be swept backwards by the desperate flow of passengers, he heard his brother yelling his name, "Stuart!"

The bearded man turned to the sound of the shout and his head snapped backward as Stuart's brother connected a punch to his chin. The man glared at the new threat, instinctively wanting to fight, but hands were grasping his sleeves and pleading in a foreign language as he was pushed forward by his family. It was not the time to fight; it was the time to live. The big man pointed a threatening finger at his attacker before pushing forward again with the large group of women and children behind him towards the exits. Stuart's knees buckled, but then his brother was next to him, pulling him into a recess and letting the panicking horde sweep past.

"Jesus Christ. You're a mess," his brother Ross shouted, concern on his face.

Stuart's face was burning where he'd been hit. His cut lip bled inside his cheek and down his chin, but there was no time to dwell on it. "What's happened?"

"They're saying we've been torpedoed."

"Torpedoed?" Stuart struggled to comprehend what he was hearing as Ross reached out to feel his bloodied face.

"I'm all right." He realized his brother was alone. "Where are they?" he asked in alarm as he searched the crowd for the rest of his family.

"Dad sent me on ahead. They couldn't keep a hold of the girls in this crowd, so they're going for the elevators. We need to help them get out when they reach this deck," Ross

shouted back over the noise of the panicked passengers sweeping past them.

Only eight years old, the twins had arrived ten years after Ross, an unexpected blessing as his mother would say. Their parents would have been terrified of losing them in the crowd of frantic passengers. The elevators were beyond the throng. He looked at his brother. Ross McReynolds was younger, 18 but built big. Where Stuart was strong and lean, Ross was muscular and heavysset, a wide chest leading to a thick neck and large muscle-bound arms. Both boys had grown up spending a great deal of their time outdoors and playing sports, unwittingly strengthening their bodies as they grew into early manhood. Although both were six feet tall, Ross had first equaled, then grown in strength past his older 20-year-old brother.

The deck below their feet lurched. The ship was no longer moving forward, but it was listing more and more to the starboard side. Stuart looked at Ross who looked back in alarm. Through the screams and shouts, they heard deck officers relaying orders to abandon ship.

“We need to move now!” shouted Stuart.

“Stay behind me,” Ross replied before turning into the crowd and wading against the on-flowing crowd of passengers. Even in their panic, the crowd parted as Ross, face set in fierce determination, cleared a temporary channel which lapped around and closed behind them. From deep within the ship, they heard a series of ominous rumbles as the ship shuddered and they pressed on towards the elevators. Eventually, they reached the elevator shafts, one on either side of the main staircase. The first elevator reached their deck. As it rose up, the brothers saw frightened passengers coming up from second class. When it reached the level of the deck and stopped moving, the gate clicked as the double locks holding the gate in place released. Stuart yanked open the doors and the passengers hauled back the heavy concertina interior metal gate and spilled out. Stuart looked but

couldn't see any of their family as the occupants poured out and ran down the passageway towards the exits.

Then Ross ran past him yelling, "Over this way! The other one's coming up!"

They reached the next elevator moving slowly upward towards them. Stuart and Ross shouted, "Dad!" They heard shouting as the elevator came towards them. "Dad! Are you there, Dad?" Stuart heard a hint of desperation creeping into his brother's voice as Ross bellowed, "Dad!"

His father's deep voice came back to them, "We're here, boys! We're coming up!" They heard their mother and young sisters calling their names, hope in their voices. The brothers, despite the panic around them, smiled with shared relief. They'd made it; the family was together. They just needed get out and reach a lifeboat.

Suddenly, the great ship lurched, tilting up at the stern while the bow dipped towards the starboard side. As both boys staggered, the lights flickered once, twice, and then died. The area at the top of the stairs, which straddled the width of the ship, plunged into semi-darkness, lit only by light coming in from portholes on either side of the ship. The elevator, which had just broken the plane of the deck by 12 inches, creaked and stopped without electricity to power it. A shout of alarm came from inside. Stuart pulled on the door, but it remained closed until Ross grasped the brass handle with him and together they forced the exterior doors open and outwards. The boys both crouched down, just able to see into the elevator and to reach through the metal concertina gate to touch their father's hand. Then they heard the water.

"Get the gate open, boys, and you can pull us through the gap!" shouted their father. Both sons stood. Gripping the metal concertina gate, they began pulling it open, but the gate held firm. Working together, they counted to three and pulled sideways with all their combined might, but the gate remained closed. They heard the twin girls scream and then

their father's voice, "Boys, there's water coming up fast. Get that gate open and we'll pass up the girls!"

Ross braced himself against one side of the elevator door and heaved with all his might, the muscles in his arms and the veins in his neck both bulging as he applied all his strength. Stuart grabbed a hold of the metal and strained with his brother. By now, their hands were bleeding, cutting into the metal, but the doors refused to open. The RMS *Lusitania* was built on docks that lined the river Clyde in Scotland and was built to last. The ship was only eight years old. From its hull to its masthead, from its bow to its stern, construction engineers, welders, metalworkers, ordinary workmen, and craftsmen had done their job with pride and had done it well, including the Glasgow firm that had taken great care in installing the elevator gates so that they would only open when the lift floor was fully level with the deck.

The gates were concertinaed to make them strong. They bent and shook with the combined might of the boys, giving the brothers the belief they could force them open if they just tried harder, but the gates held fast as the water flooded in unabated. Each parent had one of the twins in their arms. The girls hung on to their necks, small arms and feet wrapped tightly around their parents, each wailing in alarm and fear into the murky darkness, seeking some sort of comfort from their parents that all would be well.

Hearing the girl's crying, Ross swore at the gates, heaving his body and bracing his feet against the elevator opening to gain leverage, ignoring his battered hands as he sought some way to open the doors. Stuart looked frantically around him. There were no fire axes on the wall, there were no other passengers—they'd all fled.

Water began pouring out of the elevator and the stairwell beside them, covering the deck. The parents looked at each other in the gloom, their eyes meeting, filled with desperation before a silent, calm resignation formed between them.

The brothers then heard their mother's voice for the first time. "Boys."

She wasn't shouting as they all had been. Her voice was clear and calm, "Boys, there isn't any time, now listen to me."

Ross heard his mother but replied by heaving more frantically on the doors, yelling over and over again, "No, no, no!"

His father cut him off. His voice had changed, sounding strangely distant. "Stop, boys. It's time for you to go, find help if you can, but go. There's still time. We'll be fine."

As he spoke, both boys dropped to the wet deck, pushing their hands through the elevator gate and feeling for their parent's hands. Their mother's voice was trembling but clear. She was holding one of the crying twins, whispering softly, trying to reassure her wee ones that whatever was going to happen, they'd be together—that Mummy and Daddy loved them and to close their eyes and hold on as tightly as they could.

The water was up to their necks, the twins inching their way up their parent's bodies to keep their heads out of the water, trembling and sobbing as they clung on. Tears of frustration welled up in the boy's eyes as they pleaded with their parents not to give up. Then their mother's voice reached them once more and stilled them.

"Listen to me, boys. No more of that shouting. Stay together; find a way off this ship. Go, please, and don't turn back." Her voice wavered as she spluttered water. The boys continued to reach through the gate, holding their parents' hands and feeling the twin's wet clothes as the small girls gripped their parent's bodies ever more tightly in desperation.

They heard their father's voice, straining and half-muffled. "We're in God's hands now, boys. Save yourselves. Live. We..."

He began to say more, but whatever it was, it was cut off as the water rose above his mouth. They heard their mother struggling for breath as the water reached within inches of the elevator's ceiling, still trying to soothe the girls who had stopped crying as they gasped for breath. Their father, choking as water covered his face, refused to panic or struggle and turned away to embrace his wife and children in the last seconds of his life.

Stuart strained against the gate, reaching out towards his family in the flooded compartment. He felt a small hand latch tightly around his own, fingers digging in, one of the twins, he didn't know which, and then a larger one, his father's, and then unmistakably his mother's kiss on the back of his hand, and then no more. The grips loosened and then broke, floating away into the gloom.

Abandoned or embraced by God, their family was gone.

The guttural scream from Ross was beyond pain; it came from beyond human endurance for pain. He held his hands to his face, kneeling in the rising water, moaning in anguish. Then he grabbed the gate again and started to shake it, cursing and swearing at the unyielding metal. Diluted, watery blood ran down his wrists and dripped off his arms.

Stuart reached out through his numbness and put one hand on his brother's shoulder. "They're gone, Ross. They're gone."

They stared at each other, tears rolling down their faces, soaked to the skin, and felt the great ship begin to tilt downwards. For a moment, neither of them moved. Stuart looked at his brother and saw no will to live. He felt it, too. Without question, they both could have stayed and let the water take them. But then his mother's voice came back to him, "...find a way off this ship."

Despite his desperation, he felt something else emerge deep inside him, an anger so overwhelming it lent warmth to his pain-filled soul and sent a pulse of energy through his battered and soaked body.

“We’ve got to live,” Stuart said, staring into his brother’s tear-filled eyes. “We’ve got to try for them, and we’ve got to try together. I need you with me. I can’t do this alone.”

Ross looked back into his brother’s eyes and nodded slowly, wiping away tears before looking back at the elevator shaft, now submerged in oily dark water that bubbled up from below, and added in a voice void of grief, “And God show mercy to those who did this.”

The brothers stood almost waist deep in water, staring at the elevator shaft until they heard an explosion below. The remaining boilers were rupturing violently as cold seawater came in contact with white-hot furnaces. With one last backwards look, they began to wade against the water, seeking an exit. The water pulled against their legs as they struggled through the darkened passageway. Just as they were reaching the exit, the ship’s bow sank underwater, tilting the stern upward so the brothers were now struggling uphill to escape. The water rushed down the passageway and Ross grabbed Stuart’s shirt to stop him from falling backwards. As they reached the door, the brothers looked out onto a scene of sheer devastation and panic.

The ship was now sinking at the bow and rising in the stern, its four massive propellers emerging from the water as it listed hard to starboard. The lifeboats couldn’t be lowered on the rotating hull of the ship without simply smashing against the hull or swinging inboard to crush passengers and crew.

The passengers staggered about in front of them trying to keep their balance, trying to hold on to the railings, and desperately looking for a way off the rapidly sinking ship. Families were trying to stay together, desperately looking for a way off the ship. Children were crying, and crewmen were rushing past, yelling commands at each other and trying to launch any lifeboat or raft they could. Some

passengers had life vests on and some didn't. Some people were praying, and some, overwhelmed by the scene they found themselves in, just stared about them, unable to think, unable to function.

A warning yell from above was followed by a lifeboat crashing down past the brothers from the deck above as it attempted to launch down the hull of the ship. The one-inch rivets dug into the wooden hull, up-turning the lifeboat and spilling its occupants, cart-wheeling them down the hull like bloody ragdolls to disappear into the sea below, leaving smears of blood where women and children had once been. Out on the water, they could see small groups of people, some clinging to debris, circular lifebuoys, or each other. Others floated, face down, and arms spread wide as if to embrace the ocean, hair gently fanning out in the sea. Looking down from above, women's white skirts and petticoats billowed out in the water, and for a moment Stuart thought they looked like white magnolia flowers or lilies in a pond. There were no lifeboats among them.

Stuart looked down the length of the ship. As far as he could see, passengers and crew were frantically moving about, trying to cut away lifeboats in a vain attempt to float them off the ship. As he stood staring, the stern began to rise even more. If they stayed, the brothers would be trapped and go down with the ship.

He turned to Ross, "We have to jump, now!"

"How?"

"We need to get closer to the water. If we stay on this side, we won't get hit by the funnels or masts as the ship rolls over, but we'll need to run down the outside hull," Stuart replied, a vague surreal plan forming in his mind. Ross nodded.

"Let's go!" Stuart shouted over the sound of screaming and the ship tearing itself apart. Metal fittings succumbed to gravity and pressure, and began to tear through the doomed liner.

They moved downward towards the bow and towards the water. The brothers stayed close, but as they moved down the passageway, a door to their right flung open. A large woman rushed out, grabbing Ross by the arm and yelling for help hysterically, pointing towards the open door. Ross stepped back, trying to break the woman's grip on his arm, but she hung on even tighter, wet clothes clinging to her body, pleading for his help.

Above them Stuart heard a loud, sharp metal crack, one of the steel cables supporting the orange-red funnel above tore loose and came whip-lashing towards them. He shouted a warning but there was no time for Ross to react before the cable cut through the air and sliced into the woman, missing Ross's arm by an inch.

The weight and speed of the cable cut the woman in two like a cheese wire. Ross stepped back stunned as blood spayed over him and the remains of her eviscerated body fell to the deck in a bloody unrecognizable mess. Stuart looked into the open door, but could see nothing but darkness. No one answered when he shouted, Whoever the woman had wanted Ross to help rescue would remain unsaved.

He grabbed Ross, shaking him out of his trance, "Keep moving!" he yelled. Metal groaned and he could hear more of the deadly cables whipping through the air. The ship lurched forward and another explosion rocked the ship as the final boilers blew apart below decks.

Stuart looked at his brother, "We're out of time!"

He began to climb over the railing onto the upturning hull, shouting for Ross to follow. He grabbed the railing and hauled himself over. Looking down, he could see the slope of the hull, curving its way to the churning sea below. Stuart looked into his brother's eyes, "Together on three?"

Ross nodded, "Together on three."

They both counted down and then let go the railing, running awkwardly down the side of the ship as it rolled up towards them. Stuart could see rivets sticking up proud and

then barnacles and willed himself not to trip over. To do so would be a death sentence. Then they both reached the sea and dived the last ten feet as far out as they could into oil slick-covered cold water. Both boys were strong swimmers and they came up together, quickly kicking off their shoes to help them swim. The ship continued to roll and looking up, they could see it begin its last plunge into the sea.

“Swim! Swim before it drags us under!” yelled Stuart, and both of them swam away from the ship as hard as they could, lungs burning from exertion. The oily water stung their eyes and tasted foul, but they matched each other stroke for stroke, desperate to get away from the sinking ship and its undertow. Desperate to live.

Behind them, the great ship, once the largest in the world, went into its final dive. The stern rose up angling to the right and then, gathering momentum, slid towards the ocean floor. The brothers could hear the screaming of hundreds of people, either still trapped within the doomed ship or being swept overboard into the sea. The brothers kept swimming, only slowing through sheer exhaustion. The *Lusitania* gathered speed and then, throwing out one gigantic circular wave, disappeared below the waves, crushing those in the water who lay in the path of its four funnels and superstructure, sending out one last tortuous, deafening, metallic wail of pain.

CHAPTER TWO

The O'Connells

Old Head of Kinsale Lighthouse,
the south coast of Ireland

Seamus O'Connell loved nothing better than spending a day fishing. He liked it even better when he was out with his three childhood friends, Connor, Aiden, and Liam—all O'Connells.

They were distantly related as extended cousins once or twice removed, none of them really knew for sure. They liked that they shared the same name, and perhaps because of that, they had remained close. Their schoolboy gang of friends had weathered the storms and squabbles of puberty, and now they were young men. Ready to join their fathers at work and in the pub, ready to court the girls they'd gone to school with, ready to try out for the local hurling team, ready to become adults—but there was always time for fishing. Some things just had to take priority.

They had decided to enjoy the day fishing while making some money for their family and themselves by bringing home food for the table, which kept everyone happy. They had rowed out to An Seancheann, the Old Head of Kinsale, to a favorite fishing spot off the black-and-white-striped tower of the Old Head Lighthouse which punctuated the headland. The day was perfectly calm, and the morning mist had burned off by noon to reveal a blue sea bathed in sunshine. *One of the first days of summer*, thought Seamus, as

he sat with his friends and let the warmth of the sun shine down on his pale face.

They'd gone out to the sands at low tide the evening before and dug for lugworm, and a tin of the large thick black marine worms lay in the bottom of their red skiff, which drifted over the rocky seabed. They'd baited their hand-lines and had landed about three dozen fish between them, mainly pollock, coalfish, and six of the big-mouthed green-brown Atlantic cod. Conner had just caught a cuckoo wrasse—small, tropically colorful and pretty, but absolutely no use for the pot. He'd thrown it back amid some good-natured ribbing from his pals.

While Seamus was wiry, pale, and red-haired, Connor was tall, dark, and handsome and very popular with the girls, not that any of the others would ever acknowledge it. He had wide, strong shoulders, and Seamus liked having him in the skiff because he could row effortlessly for miles. Perhaps the endearing trait that had kept any jealousy from the others at bay was that Connor seemed completely unaware of his good looks and their effect on the girls. His thick dark hair was usually unkempt, and he had a shy, almost clumsy manner, as if he hadn't quite figured out where his long limbs had grown to.

By two o'clock in the afternoon, the boys would head back to the shore, keep the best fish for the plate, and then go door to door through their small coastal village, selling their freshly caught fish. There was always a market for freshly caught fish on a Friday in Ireland.

That afternoon, the boys were into a run of mackerel, hauling them in two or three at a time, laughing and calling to each other. The blue-grey fish were built for speed and two or three on a line could put up some fight before they fell flapping into the bottom of the skiff to form a writhing pile, gulping air and bleeding through gills and mouths where the hooks had been yanked out. The late shoal of oily fish was a bonus, filleted and rolled in oatmeal and then

fried they were a prized dish for both supper and breakfast. Seamus looked up at the lighthouse, 240 feet above sea level, and knew it was probably time to time to head in, but a few more minutes wouldn't hurt. He wound in his hand-line and stared out to sea. He had another reason for lingering—his brother.

The first battalion, Royal Munster Fusiliers, their local regiment, had been sent to Gallipoli. The allies were trying to open up another front through what Winston Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, had called “the soft underbelly” of Europe. No official word had come back, but bad news travels fast, even during war, and folk over in Cork were whispering about casualty lists a mile long. *Surely it was all gossip*, willed Seamus.

The campaign against the Turks didn't seem to be going well, but it was early days yet. The Royal Navy, together with the French Navy, had been forced back by sea mines and shore batteries as it had tried to pass through the Dardanelles Strait towards Constantinople. So the British Army, along with the French and troops from Australia and New Zealand, had been sent in to clear the way. Along with them went Irishmen—including the Royal Munster Fusiliers—and along with them Patrick, his older brother, and Frank, Connor's older brother.

Seamus was worried, and fishing was an escape from those worries. His brother had always been there for him. They were close despite the six years between them. It had been his brother who made sure Seamus had the pocket money he needed, that he had the right clothes for school, that his shoes were decent, if not new, and had defended him from their dad when the old man flew into a volatile rage for no good reason after coming home late from the pub. Patrick and Frank had joined up together, despite, or maybe because of, both their fathers' objections to “good Irish boys fighting for the British Army.”

But the British Army provided a pay packet every week, three square meals a day, a bed, a uniform, a roof over their heads, and the promise of adventure, so the older brothers had taken the Queen's shilling and had signed up alongside tens of thousands of other "good Irish boys" for five years. After that, Patrick would come home with savings and soldier's stories, or that had been the plan until war had been declared ten months ago and the first battalion, Royal Munster Fusiliers, had been given orders to deploy overseas. Seamus could still remember walking his brother to the station for the train that would take Patrick and Frank to the regiment's depot in Tralee. Conner had been there, too, seeing off his brother. There had been a Salvation Army band playing *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*; folk were cheering and waving flags as steam bellowed from the train's boiler in preparation for the journey through Cork and Kerry. But Seamus had had to fight to keep the tears in as the moment came to say goodbye.

His big brother had known it. "I can read you like a book," he'd say to him often with a smile. Perhaps it was because they were so alike and so close. When the time came, his brother grasped his hand and squeezed the back of his neck with the other hand and lent in.

"Be brave, Seamus. Take care of Ma, finish school, and I'll be back before you know it." He'd winked, and as Seamus had let go his hand he'd found a small brown paper bag of aniseed-ball candies in it, his brother's favorite, along with one worn silver crown coin.

"Don't tell Dad about the money. That's for you and a rainy day, and don't tell Ma about the sweets or you'll have to share them." His brother had smiled, reached out with a hand to playfully ruffle Seamus' red hair, and then had turned quickly and was gone into the train. Seamus had often wondered if he'd been fighting back the tears as well. The last memory he and Connor had of their big brothers was of them waving and yelling together from the open window of

the train as it blew its whistle and steamed out of the station. Seamus had waved as long as he could see his brother, and then he was gone in a cloud of steam and smoke.

Seamus had been daydreaming, and as he'd been doing so, he'd been staring out to sea at a huge ocean liner coming in from America and likely heading for England. He could just see its four orange-red funnels and graceful lines breaking the distant horizon and wondered what it must be like to cruise in luxury without a care in the world. Just as he was about to turn away, something caught his eye. It looked like a great geyser of water had washed over the ship, but that made no sense. The ship must be massive to be seen from so far away. As he tried to see more clearly, he heard the first ominous bang rolling in from the direction of the liner.

"There's something wrong," he said, pointing out to sea.

The others had heard the sound and were looking in the direction that Seamus was pointing, trying to figure out what had made it. And then the big ship seemed to leap in the water, black smoke bellowing from the front two funnels and seconds later a louder, deeper boom came towards them from across the sea.

"Sweet Jesus. What's happening?" asked Connor.

"I'm not sure," replied Seamus. "I thought I saw a great column of water break over it, but that can't be right. Let's get those lines up and get ready to go in."

They wound in the lines while looking out to sea. It was clear something had happened, but the boys had no idea what. Then the ship turned towards the coast.

"Is it trying to come in?" said Liam to no one in particular.

They all stared at the ship. It had turned towards them, smoke billowing from the front two stacks.

Aiden had the best eyesight. His piercing blue-grey eyes could see v-shaped flocks of geese in the air coming in for

their winter migration from Greenland before anyone else; he could also hear them calling before the others. His mother said he had his grandmother's sixth sense about things, and that it was a God-given gift.

"Aiden, what can you see?" asked Seamus.

Aiden stood up on the skiff and stared out to sea, the boys keeping quiet as if their silence might improve his eyesight.

"Keep her steady," he said, as he stepped carefully up onto one of the four rowing benches that bisected the skiff, spreading his feet wider to help him balance and stabilize himself. He was tall and fair and not one to be hurried. He had a quiet, almost gentle manner. One of the brightest boys in school, he had helped scribble down answers to homework for all his friends at some stage in their adolescence.

But he was no bookworm. All the boys had seen him play hurling or stare down bigger bullies in school. Below the calm placid exterior, Aiden could be single-mindedly determined and disconcertingly fierce when he needed to be. He took his time in most things that he did, be it answering a question, eating his supper, or asking out his childhood sweetheart Mary McCafferty—which he still hadn't quite managed—or in this instance, trying to figure out what was happening in front of them far out at sea.

The boys waited. They were used to Aiden's ways, and knew it was worthwhile waiting and listening to him. He was rarely wrong. Aiden stared, isolating his senses and focusing his gaze towards the ship out at sea. The external noises of the water lapping against the skiff and the fulmars wheeling overhead receded as he stared into the distance. And then he spoke. "She's sinking."

The others just looked up at him in disbelief.

"Are you sure, Aiden?" asked Seamus quietly.

"Yes," he replied. "She's sinking. She's going down at the bow. Looks like she's leaning to one side as well."

A few seconds passed as the boys processed the information, accepting it as fact. "What's happened to it?" asked Liam.

"I'm not sure," Aiden replied, still looking out to sea, "but we all heard the bangs and Seamus saw water rising up over her deck." He looked at the others for confirmation; they all nodded in reply. "So I'm thinking it's another submarine attack. I think she's been torpedoed."

The boys looked at each other. There had been increasing submarine attacks since the Germans had declared unrestricted submarine warfare around the British Isles three months earlier, and in the last two days alone, three ships had been sunk off their coast.

Seamus looked at his friends. Connor looked back at him and then up at Aiden. "How far away is it?" he asked quietly.

Aiden shielded his blue-grey eyes from the sun above them and pursed his lips. "It's hard to tell. She was definitely coming towards us, but I think she's either slowed right down or she's already dead in the water. I think the leaning is worse already. Whatever's happened, she's settling fast. It must have been torpedoed." He paused, "I think she's nine, maybe ten miles away, and she must be gigantic for us to see her from here."

Connor looked back at Seamus. "What should we do?"

Seamus looked around him. There were no other boats out. He had thought they would head in to spread the news, but looking out at the ship in the distance and weighing up Aiden's thoughts, a new course of action was forming in his head.

He looked at his friends. "All right, here's what I'm thinking. I'm thinking we can head in, let our folks and Police Constable O'Hare know what we've seen, and they can raise the alarm. Courtmacsherry's lifeboat at Barry Point can be launched, and the fishing boats and lifeboat from Queenstown can be launched. We'll have done our job." He hesitated. "But I'm also thinking that ship, whoever she is,

will have sent out radio messages and is probably still doing so.”

He looked at Aiden, who nodded in affirmation. “In that case, we’re here, we’re already offshore, and even if others get there before us, we can still help. If that ocean liner really is sinking, they’ll be hundreds of folk in the water soon.”

Aiden sat down. “I agree with Seamus. We’re already out here, and we can probably even beat the lifeboats. They’ll have more rowers, but won’t be able to use their sails in this weather. There’s no wind at all, and we’ll have a head start; we’re closer.”

Liam rubbed his face with his hand, blew his cheeks up, and expelled the air. “It’s going to be one hell of a row.”

Seamus smiled, “You’re not wrong there, but if we’re right, they’ll be fishing boats heading out behind us and we can get a tow back to the village from a Kinsale boat down the coast if we’re lucky.”

They all looked over at Conner, who looked out towards the stricken ship and then down at bottom of the skiff and sighed. “I think the days of us running to our parents or PC O’Hare are over.” It was a simple statement, but the boys knew he was right. He looked up and, perhaps taken aback by what he had just voiced, said, “Well, what are we waiting for?”

“All right then; let’s get ready to row,” said Seamus, and the friends began to sort out the skiff.

“If I’m home late, I won’t be able to come out to play tomorrow,” Liam joked and despite the ordeal ahead of them, the boys laughed and grinned back at him, shaking their heads.

That was Liam. He always had the knack of making them laugh. It wasn’t that he told jokes, he just had the gift of finding the humor in most situations. Liam always had a deeply dimpled grin on his face, with shining brown eyes and a mop of spiky brown hair to match Connor’s mop of black. He wasn’t tall, but he was quick and tough and could hold his

own in the fights that were always erupting outside of school.

He liked whistling, although that often got him into trouble with Father Foley, who didn't approve of it and would clip him about the ear for reasons they didn't understand. It didn't stop him whistling for long as he had a stubborn streak as wide as his smile. That same stubbornness could be seen emerging now as Liam pulled out his oar and began fixing it into the oars locks. For all his humor, Liam was right about one thing—it was going to be one a hell of a row.

The skiff was clinker-built, constructed from overlapping six-inch wooden planks of ash bracketed into a strong larch wood keel. It was 22-feet long and six-feet wide at the middle, and tapered to a point at both the bow and stern. The worn faded paint was red with an off-white interior and matching stripe below the gunwales, the colors of Cork's hurling team. It was beautifully suited to the coastal waters, strong and seaworthy and able to ride even the choppy waves. It was common property, owned by the village for the purpose in the summer months of rowing against the other coastal villages, who all had similar skiffs.

While perhaps not as pivotal as hurling, each village took pride in its skiff and its rowers were selected for each race with great deliberation. For the past two years, the rowing had been dominated by the O'Connell boys who'd formed a team so strong and fluid that they won every race they entered.

The small boat had four rowing benches, one for each of the boys, and each boy had one 14-foot oar, two each side, set alternatively. Seamus always rowed from the bow, looking over his shoulder to see where they were going and to call out any adjustments. Connor and Aiden took up the middle two benches, the powerhouse of the crew, and Liam, the lightest of them all, sat facing the stern. It was his job to set the pace that all the others would follow, pushing them

hard but knowing when to conserve energy for the final sprint.

The boys were ready, flexing their shoulders and arms as they sat on their benches, double-checking oars were securely pinned onto the kabes, clearing their throats, spitting over the side and establishing their own individual double-grip on the Sitka spruce oars.

Seamus took one last look in the direction of the sinking liner. "All right then; ready to row?"

Conner replied, "Ready to row." He was followed in turn by Aiden and then Liam. Seamus looked once more in the direction of the smoking funnels then up to the lighthouse to get a back-bearing, so he would know the rough direction they needed to go without swiveling his neck all the time. As he looked up, he could just make out the lighthouse keepers looking seaward from top of the lighthouse, obviously looking out with binoculars to the big ship in distress. He raised his arm in a wave and one waved back, at least someone would know where they'd gone.

It was time to go. To Seamus' command of "Oars in the water," all four oars dropped into the calm sea, burying their blades underwater.

"Connor, Liam, bring us around, two strokes each." The boys, their oars on the same side of the skiff, pulled gently two times and the bow of the skiff pointed out towards the sinking ship.

"Liam, on your call," said Seamus, handing over control to Liam.

Liam cleared his mouth one last time and braced. "Right boys, four short ones and then long and steady and we'll build it up as we head out. Ready to row..." Four sets of arms stretched out, heads held high, backs straight, stomach muscles tensed, and four oar blades sat deep in the water poised to be pulled back. "Row!"

The oars were pulled back in short strokes four times, jerking the skiff into action and building up the momentum.

Then together they lengthened their pull, leaning forward and then pulling back in a continual series of long powerful strokes, keeping the blades in the water as long as they could to power the skiff forward and then quickly recovering in unison to begin again. Within ten seconds they were moving fast, the streamlined skiff cutting through the millpond flat surface of the water. Used to racing for a mile or two, Seamus had to reign them in. "Long and steady, Liam!" Liam responded by fractionally lowering the tempo, giving the boys a miniscule rest during the recovery between pulls.

Then, coming from the headland, they heard the loud blast of the foghorn up by the lighthouse, followed by another. They looked up and could just make out all the lighthouse men now waving to them, the fog horn blasting two more times. "That's quite a send-off!" Seamus yelled, surprise tinged with a hint of pride in his voice. All the boys impulsively raised an open-palmed hand back towards the lighthouse before quickly resuming their two-handed rowing. The fog horn sounded three more times as the skiff headed away from the point and out to sea.

It wouldn't take long now for their entire village to know about the stricken ocean liner, and that the O'Connell boys were rowing out to it.

To find out more, please visit my website at www.rjmacdonald.scot or [Facebook.com/rjmacdonald.scot](https://www.facebook.com/rjmacdonald.scot)



About the Author

RJ MacDonald grew up in a small coastal fishing village in Scotland. He crossed the Atlantic and attended Cate School before studying at UC Berkeley, where his dissertation professor was Stephen Ambrose (*Band of Brothers*). After graduating with double BA in military history and social science, he enlisted in the U.S. Marines as a reservist. Boot camp in San Diego went



well for five days until the drill instructors read his personnel file and discovered not only a “Berkeley hippy freak infiltrating their Marine Corps,” but also one with an accent. “You speak funny, Private. Are you Russian?” Meritoriously promoted to sergeant, he served in a helicopter support squadron at NAS Miramar and as an expert marksman and marksmanship instructor. Returning to Scotland to complete two masters degrees, he was commissioned into the Royal Air Force Reserves. “You speak funny, sir. Are you Canadian?” Parachute qualified with jump-wings from Holland, the Czech Republic, and U.S. Special Operations Command Europe, he deployed as an operational intelligence officer with a Puma helicopter detachment during the war in Iraq, and then again to Cyprus during the conflict in Libya.

Now a director with a small research company, he also serves on a Royal National Lifeboat Institute volunteer crew tasked with a 24/7 all-weather maritime search and rescue role. He lives with his wife, three children, and a very cute but equally stupid cocker spaniel in the East Neuk of Fife where he grew up. *A Distant Field* is his debut novel and the first in The Seaforths series. His second novel, *The Chosen Heroes*, is underway.