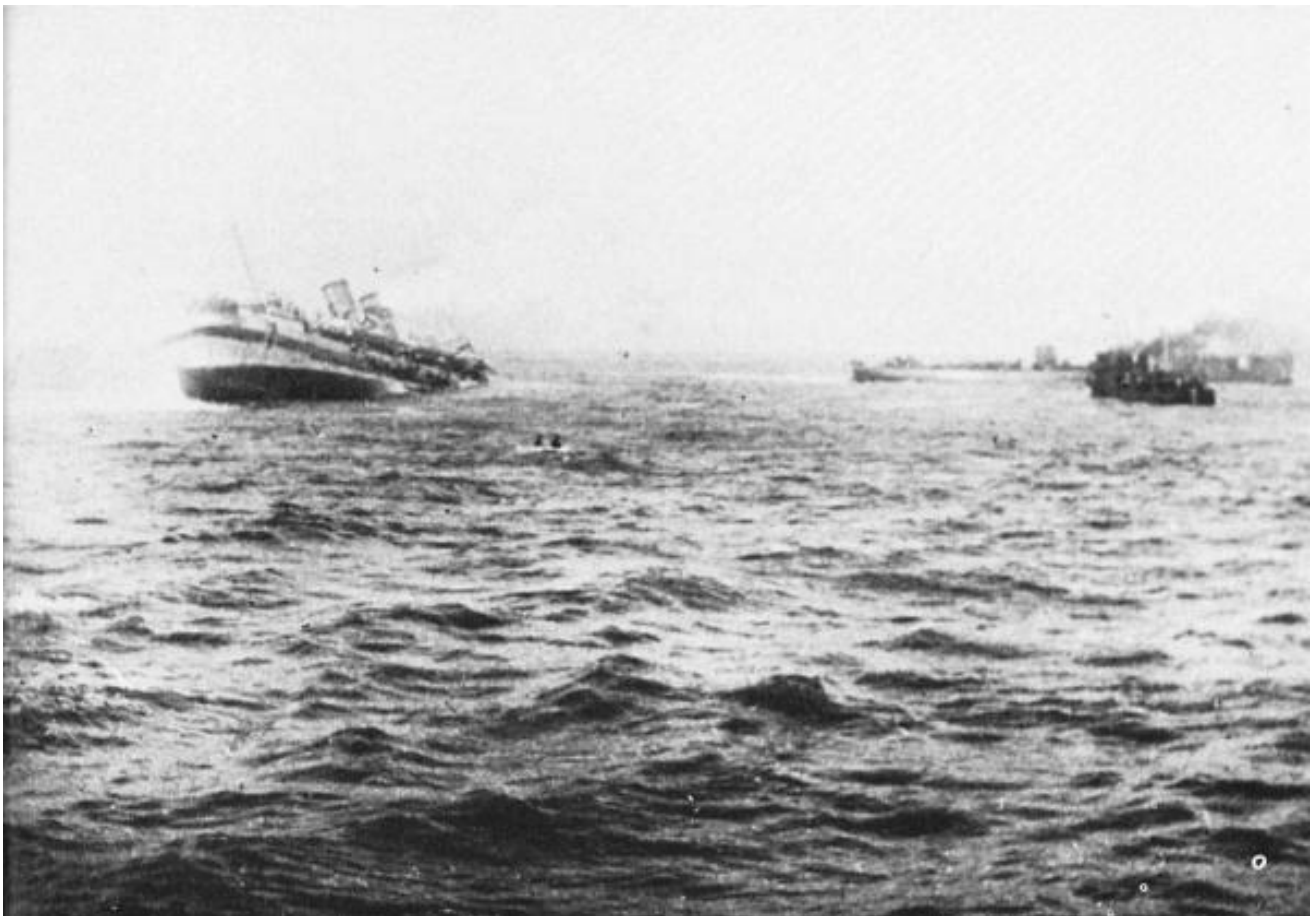


Percy Walmsley and the “Anglia” disaster

Percy Walmsley, of 25 Main Street, Farnhill, was 20 years old when he volunteered to serve with the Duke of Wellington’s (West Riding) Regiment. on 12th October 1914. Assigned to 1/6 battalion, he arrived in France on 29th June 1915 – his 21st birthday.

In November 1915 he suffered frostbite and, on the morning of the 17th, he was brought back to hospital in England on board the hospital ship ‘Anglia’. The ‘Anglia’ was a steam ship built for the London and North Western Railway and had run between Holyhead and Southern Ireland. At the outbreak of the war the ship was requisitioned and refitted for use as a hospital ship and it had, a few days before Percy came on board, been used to evacuate King George V from France – following a riding accident.

The ‘Anglia’, carrying three hundred and eighty-five patients, its own crew and doctors, nurses and stretcher bearers was about three miles off Dover when it struck a mine. This mine had been laid by the German U-boat, UC-5, on the previous night. The ship was holed on the port side, forward of the bridge, and immediately began to sink – bow first. It began taking on water quickly and the first two wards went under the water almost immediately. Other wards were soon awash, but brave nurses, crew, and some of the more able-bodied patients helped others to safety – although around one hundred and sixty souls perished. The ‘Anglia’ sank within fifteen minutes of hitting the mine.



HMHS Anglia sinking – with the collier SS Lusitania in close attendance
Image from <http://hospitalship.tripod.com/id2.html> – Public Domain

Forty men had been able to jump to safety – Percy Walmsley amongst them. Without a life belt, Percy clung to the only boat safely lowered from the stricken ship. Eventually he was hauled into the boat and they pulled away from the 'Anglia'.

Quite a number of vessels – HM Torpedo Boat No 4, HMS Hazard, HMS Ure, War Department Vessel Langton, SS Channel Queen, and the collier Lusitania – came to the rescue. The Lusitania was bound for France with a cargo of ammunition. The boat Percy Walmsley was in pulled alongside her but just as Percy was climbing the ladder to safety, the Lusitania also hit a mine and he was blown into the water.

Stunned and not remembering much, he found himself on another boat which, using oars, set off towards the shore. A tug boat arrived and towed them into Dover harbour. The Lusitania had lowered two boats but as she began to sink these boats returned and took off those left on board, and there was no loss of life.

Percy Walmsley was taken to the London County War Hospital in Epsom and, whilst recovering, wrote of his experiences in letters home that were later published in the local press (see following pages).

FARNHILL MAN IN A MINED HOSPITAL SHIP.

Thrilling Experiences.

Private Percy E. Walmsley, of the 6th Duke of Wellington's Regiment, youngest son of Mr. and Mrs. James Walmsley, of Main Street, Farnhill, relates a wonderful experience. In writing to his wife, from the London County War Hospital, Epsom, he says:—"No doubt you will be pleased to hear that I am in dear old England. I knew I was coming on Monday, the 15th, but I thought I would not write until I got here. How pleased I was when we were told that we were going on Wednesday morning. (Private Walmsley was suffering from frost bite in the feet). Well, we set sail at eleven o'clock in the morning aboard the hospital ship 'Anglia,' and expected to be in Dover by one o'clock dinner time, but something happened which I shall never forget as long as I live. We had just had dinner and I was sat on the deck smoking my usual cigarette, when, 'bang.' I realised at once that we had either struck a mine or else we had been torpedoed. Luckily we were only three miles off Dover, or I don't think I should have been here. Well, I'll try to explain what happened. All those who could walk made off to the stern, some putting on lifebelts and jumping overboard; others made for the boats, which the crew were trying to launch. The poor fellows on stretchers were helpless, and being down below they hadn't much chance. I must not forget to tell you that the R.A.M.C. men worked like slaves and got as many out as possible. The boat was struck at twenty minutes to one and went down at five minutes past, only 25 minutes, so we hadn't much time. I made for one of the boats, but was told it was full, and full it was, for as soon as it was lowered into the water it sank. Poor chaps, 30 or more all in the water. By now the ship was sinking fast, one half being under water. The rear half was crowded with soldiers, a scene I don't want to see or be in again. I saw a boat in the water

soldiers, a scene I don't want to see or be in again. I saw a boat in the water and jumped overboard, and as luck would have it, I managed to cling to the side. Others followed, but unfortunately for me, I found myself being used as a landing stage. I was jumped upon four times, twice by fellows with boots on, one of them cutting my head open. I could feel the blood trickling down my face. How long I remained like that I can't say: only a few minutes, I suppose, but to me it seemed hours. However, I found myself being pulled into the boat, and I thanked the Lord for that. We put off for the nearest rescue boat, a collier, the 'Lusitania,' on its way to France with ammunition. Those on board lowered the rope ladders. Four men had got aboard. I was the fifth, and was just saying to myself 'Now I'm safe,' as I was at the top, when 'bang' again. A torpedo had struck the ship not four yards from where I was standing. What a sight! Men and all sorts of stuff were blown up into the air. How I came off I don't know, as the shock must have stunned me. Afterwards I found myself on another boat and learnt that I had been blown again into the water and picked up again. This was not all. I found myself sitting near the rope which hung from the ship which had just been struck, and was being pulled out of the boat legs first. I shouted and with some difficulty was released. The officer gave the order 'Row to the shore,' so off we went wondering what would happen next. It wasn't long before a tug boat arrived and towed us into Dover harbour. Here we exchanged our clothes and were soon in bed in a hospital train. When it started I thought to myself, 'What will be next? I've been under rifle and shell fire, shipwrecked twice in one day. We have only to have bombs dropped on this train and then we should have had what some people would call a rather rough passage.' 'But we're not downhearted yet.' Here I am in Epsom Hospital, with a bandaged head and leg, not forgetting a bruised leg and shoulder, but I'm not going to grumble, only I'd just like to have four rounds with the man who laid the mine or fired the torpedo at the 'Anglia' on November 17 in the English Channel."

Private Walmsley speaks highly of the treatment in the hospital. Everything is done for them that can be done. He is looking forward to coming home shortly, and in a letter to Mr. Peter Baldwin, of Farnhill, describing his experiences, he closed with a challenge to Mr. Baldwin to a game of billiards at the Farnhill and Kildwick Institute.

FARNHILL SOLDIER'S EXPERIENCE ON THE "ANGLIA." A THRILLING TIME.



Mr. Peter G. Baldwin, Farnhill, has received a letter dated November 19th from Pte. Percy E. Walmsley, Seaward B. Division, London County War Hospital, Epsom:—

Dear Mr. Baldwin,

Just a few lines to let you know that I am in dear "Blighty." No doubt my father would tell you that I was in hospital in France suffering from frost bite. Well, I was booked for England on Monday, but did not get sail until Wednesday. We left Boulogne at 11 in the morning and expected to be in Dover by 1 o'clock. I was on the hospital ship "Anglia."

All went well until we got about three miles off Dover, then something happened which I shall never forget. We had just had dinner; it was exactly twenty minutes to one. I was sat on deck smoking a cigarette, when bang! I at once realised that we had either struck a mine or else we had been torpedoed, as the ship gave a heavy list. I made for the stern, same as all the rest; some put on life belts and jumped overboard, but for some reason or other I stayed on deck.

The crew at once made to the boats, but as fate would have it, two of the four boats could not be lowered, as the ship was listed too much on the left. By now I thought I had better be making ready for a move. I could see she was not going to last very long. Someone shouted, "Get up there into that boat," so I went up the ladder, but the man in charge shouted "Full up," and full up it was, for as soon as it was lowered into the water it capsized, letting between thirty and fifty poor fellows into the water.

I knew there was nothing left only to jump overboard, so, of course, I said my prayers, then stood on the rail, and jumped overboard. I had no life belt on, but luckily I managed to cling to the only boat, which had been safely lowered from the ship. As fate would have it again, I found myself being used as a landing stage for those who were jumping from the ship into the boat. Altogether I was jumped on five

times, twice with fellows who had their boots on. I could feel the blood trickling down my face as I clung for dear life on the boat. Eventually I was pulled into the boat. How long I was in the water I can't say—only a few minutes, I suppose, but to me it seemed hours. The oars were got going and we pulled away from the sinking ship.

A good number of vessels had come to the rescue and it was to one of these that we made. She was a collier, the "Lusitania," bound for France with a cargo of ammunition. She was stationary at the time, being about three hundred yards away. Her boats had been lowered and were picking up survivors. We pulled alongside of her, and the crew put down a ladder and we started to board her. I was the fifth to go up the ladder, and was just saying to myself, "Thank God, I am safe," when bang!—men on board were blown into the air. She had been torpedoed.

How I got down that ladder was a mystery to me. I must have been stunned, for I learnt afterwards that I had been blown into the water. After we had all got aboard the officer gave the order, "Row for the shore," and the oars were soon moving again. Here I was unfortunate again, for I found myself being pulled out of the boat. I had sat down in the loop of a rope which was fixed to the sinking collier. It had been used to hold us against her when we were getting aboard. I gave a shout and the boat was sent back a little, and was safely unhooked.

Away we made for the shore, wondering what would happen next, when I saw a tug making towards us. She came alongside of us and took ten aboard; then fixing a rope into our boat, started to tug us into Dover harbour, and thank God we landed without further mishap. I looked round when we were being towed in, and what a sight! There was just the mast of the hospital ship showing, still flying the Red Cross Flag. She was struck at twenty minutes to one and went down at five minutes past—only twenty-five minutes.

After we got ashore, we soon got our wet clothes off, and some dry underclothing on, and got into bed in a hospital train. When we started off from Dover, I thought to myself, "I have been under rifle fire and shell fire, I've been shipwrecked twice in one day. I thought, 'Now (Mr. Fritz), a few bombs from an aeroplane on this train, then we shall have had what some folks might call a 'rather rough passage.'"

We arrived at Epsom about 8 p.m., and here I am in bed with a bandaged head and leg, and a lot of bruises. It was an experience I never shall forget. I have thanked God many a time since.

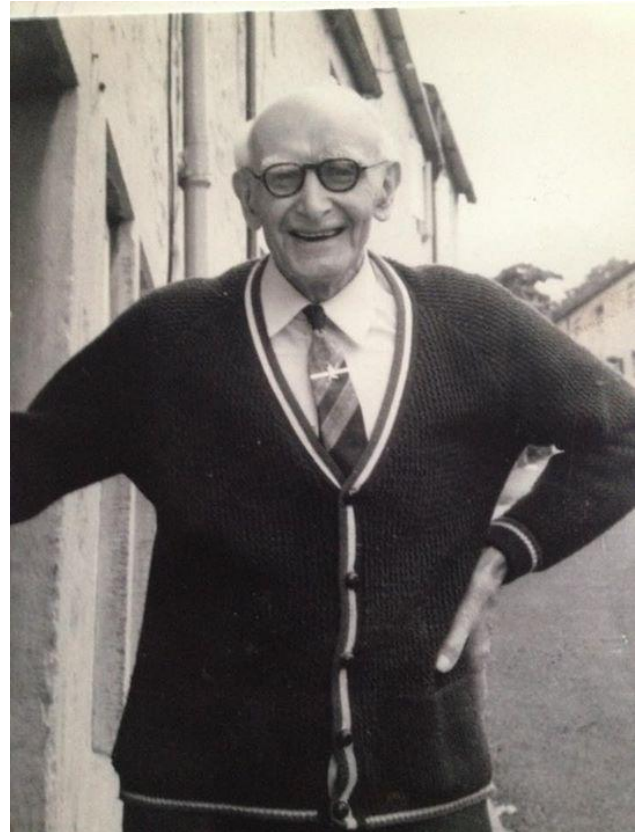
Kindest regards from your soldier friend

PERCY.

Percy returned to France in 1916 and served during the rest of the war with both the Duke of Wellington's Regiment and the Yorkshire Regiment (The Green Howards).

In March 1918 he was wounded by a shell burst and was still recovering in hospital when the Armistice was declared on 11th November. He was eventually discharged from the army on 4th February 1919, when he was deemed unfit for further military service due to his wounds. He returned to Farnhill and lived the rest of his life in the local area.

Percy Walmsley died on 22nd February 1986, at the age of 91. He was the last of the Farnhill WW1 Volunteers.



Percy Walmsley, as a WW1 Private and outside his home in Starkey Lane, Farnhill, in 1977

Photographs by kind permission of Sam Tyler

The precise location of the wreck of the Anglia was identified In October 2014 and, in March 2017, it was declared an official war grave.

