



# TSMS Lakonia Disaster 50th Anniversary

# The Disaster

The T.S.M.S. Lakonia was a 20,000 ton vessel, which had originally started life as the M.S. Johan Van Oldenbarnevelt of the Netherland Line, sailing between Amsterdam and the East Indies. She was later chartered by the Holland American Line and used as a troopship during the Second World War, reverting to her peace-time service as a passenger ship. On 19 December 1963, now belonging to the General Steam Navigation Company of Greece, she sailed from Southampton for an 11-day Christmas cruise, carrying a total of 646 passengers and 376 crew.

At around 11.00 pm on 22 December, a fire broke out in the ship's hairdressing saloon and quickly spread to other areas, making it difficult to fight the blaze. At the time, most of the passengers were in the ship's ballroom, but they and the rest of those in their cabins, were not immediately made aware of the fire, due to the public address system having been disabled by the blaze and also because the fire alarm was not loud enough. The pressure boilers began to explode, filling the saloons and hallways with thick black smoke, suffocating passengers who had fled from their cabins.

Order to abandon the ship was given by the Purser just before 1.00 am, with dazed passengers trying to make their



January 3, 1964 issue of **LIFE Magazine**. This is the only known colour photo of the Lakonia disaster. Source: © 1964 LIFE Magazine

way to the lifeboat stations, some in evening wear and others in pyjamas and nightgowns. Evacuation of the ship became extremely difficult as some of the lifeboats had been burnt, others had their davits completely rusted and other boats were swamped when being lowered. Only half the life boats were able to be launched, some of them only half full, and there were still many people adrift in the sea, with over 100 persons on board the Lakonia, which continued to burn fiercely and was rocked by violent explosions.

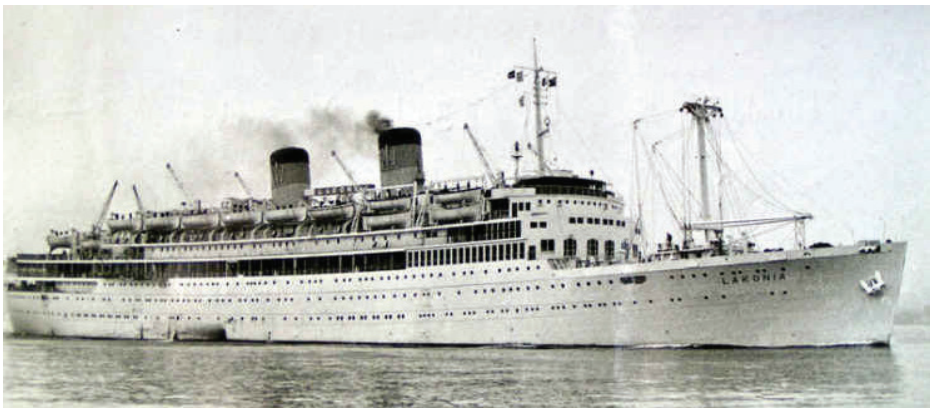
# The Rescue

The last distress call sent at midnight, and received by nearby ships and also at Cable & Wireless in Gibraltar, read: “ This is my last message. I cannot stay any more in the wireless room and we are now leaving the ship. Please rush immediate assistance”. The first to arrive on the scene, between 3.30 am and 4.00 am, were the Argentinian passenger ship, Salta, and the British tanker, Montcalm, with other vessels joining them some hours later. United States Ari Force c-54 planes were sent from their base in the Azores and two RAF Avro Shackletons flew in from Gibraltar, dropping survival equipment, pinpointing survivors in the sea and guiding the rescue with flares. Survivors were transported to Madeira and some others, including the ship’s captain, were taken to Casablanca.

Crewmen from the Aircraft Carrier HMS Centaur were able to board the Lakonia the following day, once the fires had died down and recovered a

total of 22 bodies from the ship, which by then was a charred and smoking hulk. Soon after the first reports of the disaster reached Gibraltar, the Norwegian salvage tug, Herkules, set out to cover the some 500 miles to where the Lakonia lay. It managed to attach a towline to the Lakonia and with the assistance of a Portuguese tugboat, Praia da Adraga, set off for the Rock with the Lakonia on tow. However, every day, the ship’s list began to become more severe and on 29 December, at 2.00 pm, just 250 miles from Gibraltar, she rolled over her starboard side and sank stern-first in only 3 minutes.

In all, a total of 128 persons died in the Lakonia disaster, 95 of whom were passengers and 33 crew members. With 53 persons killed by the fire and the others succumbing to exposure, drowning and from injuries sustained whilst jumping into the sea.



# Gibraltar

HMS Centaur arrived in Gibraltar on Christmas afternoon and unloaded the bodies recovered in the Lakonia, with three more bodies, recovered by another ship, brought over from Ceuta by an RAF launch, making a total of 58 victims landed. The bodies of the deceased were transported to the REME Chambers where an autopsy was carried out, with five of these victims not being able to be identified.

The mass funeral took place on Boxing Day in the evening, after memorial services had taken place in both Cathedrals and in the synagogues, with the participation of clergy of all denominations. This was the largest mass funeral held in Gibraltar since 1891, when 130 bodies were buried following the sinking of the liner Utopia; the previous largest funeral had been in 1937 when 24 German sailors from the battleship Deutschland were buried, following the bombardment of their ship during the Spanish Civil War.

An inquest was held at the Gibraltar Magistrates Court on 30 January 1964, with the Coroner, Mr J.E. Alcántara, recording an open verdict, with the cause of death in the majority of cases being exposure and drowning, in some instances preceded by knock-out blows, caused by the victims' lifebelts. The Greek Merchant Marine Ministry Launched a two year investigation, which attributed the fire on board the Lakonia to a short circuit in faulty electric wiring. The Board of Enquiry charged that the order to abandon ship was given too late, that the operation of evacuation on deck was not properly supervised by responsible officers and that, in most cases, the crew failed to rescue the sleeping passengers from their cabins below decks. It also resulted in eight of the Lakonia's officers being charged with negligence and the Captain, the First Officer and the Security Officer being charged with gross negligence.



# Andalucia.com Forum

## **TSMS Lakonia Disaster. 1963**

by **BENIDORM** on Thu Dec 04, 2008 9:45 pm

I have been trying for quite some time to find out if there is a memorial or plaque in Gibraltar to commemorate this disaster .I have tried through another forum to find any information, but although I had some very helpful replies, I'm still no nearer to finding any positive information.

As so many members of A.Com will be visiting Gibraltar at this time of year, I wondered if I could ask you to keep your eyes open , on the off chance that someone might spot some info. that they could pass on to me, I don't want to put anyone to any trouble, but would be most grateful.

Fast forward nearly 40 years. In December 2008, an andalucia.com forum member, Gordon Holmes (alias Benidorm), posted a message to ask if anyone knew whether there was a memorial or plaque in Gibraltar commemorating the disaster. He was a 17-year-old crewman on the Centaur back in 1963, and was among the group which recovered 78 bodies from the ship, and from the sea, and brought them back to Gibraltar on Christmas Day 1963. The response he received over the following four years was extraordinary.

Through this thread on the andalucia.com forum, someone closely

connected with the tragedy made contact with Gordon. Barbara is the daughter of the ship's doctor, who was a 54-year-old Irishman on his first cruise. Her father had drowned, and Barbara had managed to locate his grave in Gibraltar a few years previously.

As Barbara, who lives in Australia, said "Here I am conversing with a total stranger about something so personal for both of us." In spite of this, Gordon and Barbara kept their correspondence public, on the forum rather than via personal messages, because so many members had helped Gordon in his very personal quest for information.

## **Re: TSMS Lakonia Disaster. 1963**

by **Bronte** on Tue Mar 10, 2009 10:36 am

My father was the ship's doctor, James Riordan. It was his first voyage on a cruise ship. His body was never positively ID'd. I actually live in Australia, but about 8 years ago we'd returned to the UK and tacked on a week's holiday in southern Spain. I wanted to go to Gibraltar to find my father's grave, which I knew would be optimistic as I had no idea where to start, I arrived at about 5.30pm, just as they were closing. I explained to this charming man, that I was hoping to find my father's unmarked grave. He told me that there are 60,000 bodies in that cemetery. Realising my task was huge, I mentioned that he'd been the doctor on a ship which sank in December 1963. I cannot express the shock I felt when this man replied "That would be the Lakonia". He took into the office, and looked up my surname on the computer. He told me my father had the title of commander, which I didn't know. He then took me to 4 graves (same religion as my dad), and told me that my father's was one of them.

# Andalucia.com Forum



Another forum member, Margaret, revealed that her husband, Philip McGovern was one of the survivors. He was on the Lakonia with two friends, one of whom survived, but the other, Enda Maguire perished and whose grave is in Gibraltar. Philip had spent five hours in the water, having been one of the last to jump ship.

## Grave of Enda Maguire

One of the many gravestones from the Lakonia Disaster. The stone reads: "In loving memory of Enda M. Maguire. Died in Lakonia Disaster 23rd Dec. 1963. Aged 32 years.

Andalucia.com Forum members thank the Gibraltar Heritage Trust for commissioning the plaque which will provide a historic and personal marker for those interested in the TSMS Lakonia Tragedy in addition to serving local culture and tourism.

## Re: TSMS Lakonia Disaster. 1963

by **Margo** on Sun Jul 04, 2010 4:49 pm

I have just seen your post on the Lakonia tragedy. My husband, who is now 80, was on that ship with 2 friends, one of whom is buried in Gibraltar. We visited Gibraltar when we were on our honeymoon (1965) and located Enda Maguire's grave (Philip's friend)... his sister's had put a headstone on it. We actually were told the doctor's grave was (your father) over near a wall. While on this ship, your dad had looked at the passenger list to see if there were any Irish names and then looked Philip and his friends up. We have a lot of newspaper cuttings about the Lakonia and could photocopy these for you if you wished. My husband actually ended up in the water for 5 hours, it was tough going for him. The third friend got away safely. Philip was one of the last to get into the water.



# North Front Cemetery

## Graves in the North Front Cemetery:

### Church of England: Grave

Reginald Barrington	3136
Stuart Roberts	3135
Kenneth Bushnill	3138
Violet Barrington	3140
George Heaton	3142
Fredric Neary	3155
Enda Maguire	3152
G.M. Harcourt	3154
M.A. Coleman	3147

### Roman Catholic:

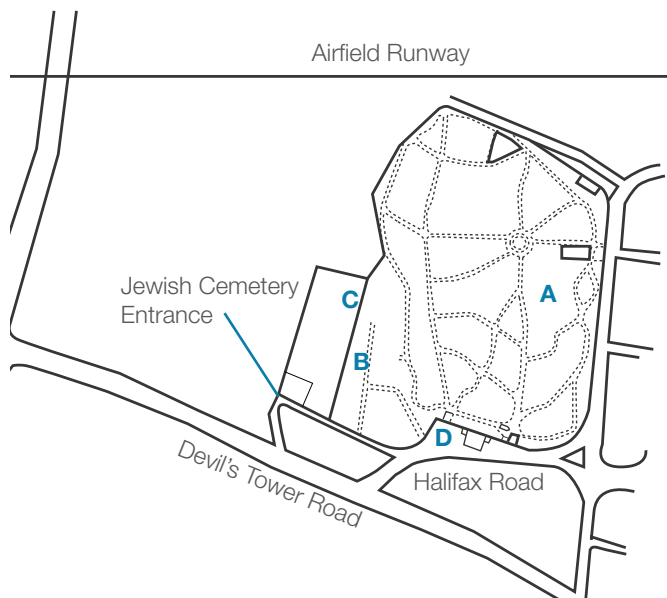
Violet Hills	3178
Nathalic Skinner	3179

### Jewish:

Myer Bernard	N/A
Harry Goodwin	N/A
Thomas Cumberland	N/A

## Buried in North Front Cemetery and Repatriated:

Alexandros Gialitakas	Florence Friend
Frederick Motti	Evelyn Mulholland
Emily Potter	Heather Fishenden
John Noble	K.J. Robinson
M.C. Aylward	H. Nothover
Ernest Haighton	Catherine Nothover
Nicholas Fishenden	Joyce Potter
Dr. Frederick Elshoff	Doannis Roussos
Capt. A.J. Campbell	Pamggiotis Autzoglou
Surg/Cdr JJ Riordan	Alma Pavletich
Isabel Coleman	Margaret Millburn
Erhard Trennert	E.G. McGlown
Johann Feichtenschlager	W.A. Turner
Majorie Spurgeon	G.G.B. Lloyd
Fredy Brodacre	Walter Wilkinson
Diane Williams	Sybil Zablocki
B.M. Hobro	A.G. Spurgeon
Matilda Bullous	E.K. Stopps
F.W.C. Kenny	James Perry
Lilian Hartman	Nicholas Chortes
Mildrea Haighton	Cedric Millburn
Clara Bertha Bate	



## Gibraltar North Front Cemetery

### KEY

#### Location of Lakonia Graves

- A - Church of England
- B - Roman Catholic
- C - Jewish

#### Location of Lakonia Commemorative Plaque

- D - Main Entrance

# 50th Anniversary Commemorative Plaque Ceremony 6th December 2013

## Order of Service

Keith Farrell, Chair of Gibraltar Heritage Trust

The Hon. Steven E. Linares, Gibraltar Minister for Sport, Culture, Heritage & Youth

Philip McGovern, a TSMS Lakonia Survivor

Gordon Holmes (AKA Benidorm), a rescuer and instigator of the forum thread

Chris Chaplow, founder of Andalucia.com

Blessing of the Plaque by Religious Leaders

Visit to Graves

Visit to Garrison Library (up to 17:00)

Afternoon tea at the Rock Hotel 16:00 (£12.50 each)



More information: [andalucia.com/history/tsms-lakonia.htm](http://andalucia.com/history/tsms-lakonia.htm)

Brochure produced by Chris Chaplow ([chris@andalucia.com](mailto:chris@andalucia.com))

Text by Manolo Galliano and Fiona Flores Watson

***This is a commemorative brochure commissioned by Andalucia.com in conjunction with the Gibraltar Heritage Trust for the 50th anniversary of the TMS Lakonia disaster.***