



**The *Castro*, Lord Heneage and the Prologue to the Easter Rising**



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Two East Riding built ships played significant roles, albeit for opposing sides, in the feverish and yet furtive military and intelligence manoeuvrings that preceded the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin. The background to their high seas confrontation off the southwest coast of Ireland is outlined below.



**Sackville Street (O'Connell Street) after the Easter Rising 1916**  
(Source: Teacher Net - [www.teachnet.ie](http://www.teachnet.ie))

### **The Easter Rising**

The April 1916 insurrection involved about 1600 republican nationalist rebels who seized key points in the Irish capital, including the General Post Office. The rebels were determined to use force to make their country independent of Britain and the Proclamation they issued declared the establishment of an Irish Republic. Although the rebellion was quickly crushed by British troops it was a seminal moment in Irish history, having a profound effect on the future direction of Irish and indeed UK politics. The Easter Rising took place at the height of the Great War and many in senior British military circles viewed the rebels as traitors who had to be summarily punished in a harsh manner. Military courts subsequently sentenced many rebels to death whilst thousands of other Irish people were interned.

Although there had been little immediate mass support for the Rising, the subsequent heavy punishments engendered a widespread sympathy amongst many Irish for the rebels and the long term effect of the Easter Rising was to inspire a new generation of Irish Republicans whilst fuelling popular support in Southern Ireland for the notion of full independence from Britain. The unrest in Ireland which followed the Great War led to Home Rule, the partitioning of the country, civil war and eventually the creation of the Republic of Ireland.

### The Background

Irish nationalists had always looked for support from England's enemies and after the outbreak of the Great War they began planning an uprising. Sir Roger Casement, an Irish-born former British diplomat, established the Irish rebels' links with Germany. He travelled to Germany and even attempted, though without much success, to raise an Irish Brigade amongst Irish soldiers captured on the western front to fight against the British on their native soil. However, once the German government received confirmation that the Irish Rising would take place in 1916 they agreed to send 25,000 rifles and one million rounds of ammunition – but no troops – to Ireland to support the rebellion.

The Germans hoped that an uprising in Ireland would divert British troops from the Western Front but Casement felt that their support was insufficient for the Rebellion to succeed. He persuaded the German authorities to transport him to Ireland so that he could supervise the landing and storage of the weapons. He also hoped to prevent the insurrection going ahead on the planned date because he thought it would fail.

It was eventually decided to use a submarine to land Casement on a remote stretch of the southern Irish coast whilst the arms were to be smuggled through the British Naval blockade on board a vessel disguised as a neutral Norwegian merchant ship. The vessel chosen was the *Libau* and originally hailed from Hull.

The *Libau* was formerly known as the *Castro* and had been built by Earles Shipbuilding and Engineering Company of Hull in 1911 for Thomas Wilson, Sons and Company. The *Castro* was 250 feet in length and of 1228 gross registered tonnage. She seems to have led a fairly uneventful life but was unfortunate enough to be en-route through the Kiel Canal when war broke out on the 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914. The vessel was seized by the Germans, renamed the *Libau* but after being selected to carry the arms, a new name was painted on her sides. She was disguised as the *Aud*, a well-known neutral Norwegian merchant ship. The choice was apparently apt as the disguised '*Aud*' was somewhat similar to the Norwegian original.



***The Aud/Libau/Castro***

(source: <http://www.iol.ie/~mkeniry/aaAud.htm>)

### The Voyage of the '*Aud*'

Lieutenant Karl Spindler, formerly commander of a half flotilla of patrol boats, was appointed to command the '*Aud*' and the disguised ship left German Baltic waters on the 10<sup>th</sup> April 1916, with her shipment of arms hidden amongst other cargo. The fake papers she carried suggested that the ship was on a normal trading voyage from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean. Most of the weapons and arms she had on board were Russian and had been captured by the Germans at the Battle of Tannenburg in 1914. The vessel entered the North Sea and passed through the British blockades, including the Tenth Cruiser Squadron which patrolled between Shetland and Iceland, without challenge. The deception seemed to be working although with hindsight it appears that the British had reliable intelligence about an arms shipment and it has been conjectured that the vessel was deliberately left to move on towards its ultimate destination. Whatever the reason, the '*Aud*' continued to make good progress, weathering violent storms off Rockall to arrive in Tralee Bay on the West Coast of Ireland on the 20<sup>th</sup> May 1916.

On arrival Spindler found the coast was clear, in fact it was too clear. No reception committee was waiting to unload the arms. What Spindler didn't know was that there had been a change of plan by the rebel leadership. They had asked for his arrival to be delayed until the 23<sup>rd</sup>. This message was relayed to Germany but by this time Spindler was already at sea and his ship did not carry a radio. British Intelligence, having broken German codes and intercepted messages about Sir Roger Casement's activities, were by this time fully aware that the ship was due and intensified patrols around the Irish coast.

Whilst all this was going on Casement and two companions were put ashore from the U-19 by rubber dingy on the 21<sup>st</sup> in the same general area. However, cold, soaked and exhausted, Casement hid in an ancient fort and was discovered there by a police search party. They found a German railway ticket in his pocket and he was arrested and locked up just a few hours after landing.

### Pursuit by the *Lord Heneage*

On the same day as Casement was captured, British naval forces made contact with the '*Aud*'. The first vessel to encounter the '*Aud*' was the armed trawler *Setter II* on the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup> April but the disguised vessel was not closely checked. Shortly after 1pm, however, Spindler spotted a second patrol vessel, the *Lord Heneage*, closing in on his ship. Like the *Aud*, the *Lord Heneage* was a Hull ship, built by Cook, Welton and Gemmell at Beverley in 1909, one of many trawlers which had been requisitioned and armed by the Admiralty after the outbreak of the Great War. As soon as it was clear that the *Lord Heneage* was coming straight for the '*Aud*' then Spindler weighed anchor and a chase ensued. The *Aud* made top speed and at thirteen knots managed to stay well clear of her pursuer but the *Lord Heneage* under Commander, William Bee, stayed in contact and successfully shadowed the gun runner all afternoon, radioing her position to Admiralty. Still Spindler continued to run, making full steam as he headed south-westwards, hoping to disappear into the

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vast wastes of the Atlantic but the *Lord Heneage* stuck to the pursuit and by now other Royal Navy ships were closing in. Towards 6pm the German commander spotted smoke from the sloops HMS *Bluebell* and *Zinnic* and before long a flotilla of vessels swept down his ship.

The game seemed up – but Spindler had one last throw of the dice. He was ordered to follow HMS *Bluebell* to Cork but no Royal Navy boarding party was put on the '*Aud*', probably because of the state of the sea. As they reached the harbour approaches the German commander stopped his ship, ran up two German ensigns and detonated pre-set explosives which blew the bottom out of the '*Aud*'. The stricken ship sank immediately, taking its lethal cargo to the bottom. Meanwhile, the German crew had taken to lifeboats and were picked up by HMS *Bluebell*.



**HMS Bluebell**

(source: <http://www.iol.ie/~mkeniry/aaAud.htm>)

If Spindler had intended to block Cork Harbour by this action then he had not succeeded. More importantly, perhaps, the crucial arms consignment lay on the seabed and out of immediate reach. When the Easter Rising was formulated the original plan was to seize and hold key points in Dublin long enough for the arms brought by the '*Aud*' to be distributed to volunteers across Ireland but after the vessel was seized there was no hope of arming uprisings elsewhere and of stopping the full weight of the British military being turned on the Dublin rebels. Yet, despite the odds being stacked against them the rebels went ahead with the uprising.

### **Afterwards**

Without the arms and the wider insurrection, the rebels were doomed to an early military defeat. And yet the very hopelessness of their action may have proved to the long term benefit of the cause they espoused. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the rebellion, their actions and the subsequent events certainly inflamed the political situation and fuelled outright nationalist feelings in Ireland. The 1916 Easter Rebellion proved a watershed in Irish history.

Sir Roger Casement like many of the leaders of the Easter Rebellion was subsequently executed, though in his case he was hanged in London's Pentonville Gaol the following summer. But what of the ships? The U-19 which landed Sir Roger Casement on the coast of Ireland survived the war, having carried out twelve patrols and sunk sixteen ships before being surrendered to the British in November 1918.

The vessel was subsequently cut up in Blyth, Northumberland but her gun is now on display in a park in Bangor, County Down. The little trawler, *Lord Heneage* was returned to fishing in 1919 but worked out of Grimsby before being sold to Portuguese owners in 1924. She sank after a collision in the River Tagus in 1930. Shortly after the '*Aud*' was scuttled, the wreck was depth charged and wire swept a number of times in order to scatter the weapons and deny cover to submarines. The wreck is still sometimes visited by divers. Examples of foodstuffs and rifles recovered from the site can be viewed in museums in Cork and at the Imperial War Museum in London. Small remnants of a key moment in Irish Maritime History

Robb Robinson, March 2009

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