

**Stephen Wynn. *The Lancastria Tragedy. Sinking and Cover-up: June 1940*. Barnsley, S. Yorks: Pen & Sword, [www.pen-and-sword-co.uk](http://www.pen-and-sword-co.uk), 2021. 192 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. UK £14.99, paper; ISBN 978-1-52670-663-8.**

Throughout history, numerous passenger liners have been sunk in circumstances that were noteworthy and tragic, both in peacetime and armed conflict. The loss of the RMS *Titanic* in 1912 still resonates today and will probably continue to exercise its hold on our imagination for decades to come. Other tragedies, like the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* at the end of the Second World War are less well-known, but have still garnered their share of writers who highlighted the circumstances behind their losses. The author of this volume has decided to bring the loss of a lesser-known victim of the Second World War to our attention. Serving the Allied cause as a troopship, the HMT *Lancastria* was sunk during the hectic Allied 1940 evacuation along France's Atlantic coast in the face of Germany's successful attack on that nation. Author, Stephen Wynn, is a retired police officer who has previously published a work on his reaction to the service of his sons in the more recent Afghanistan conflict.

Wynn tells the *Lancastria's* story in eleven chapters of disparate length, and has added a thoughtful introduction and conclusion. There is a helpful index and a very brief list of internet sources. The text is ably buttressed by eight pages of photographs which span the gamut of the ship, the survivors and victims of its loss, and a few more miscellaneous images. At least two of them, however, seem to be very similar to each other. Unfortunately, a line drawing of the *Lancastria* is not included. Strangely, the bulk of Chapter 10 comprises a very long list of evacuated military personnel and others who are known to have been lost when the ship went down. This ruins the flow of the text and one must ask why this information was not provided in the form of an Appendix. Overall, the text is poignant, and the tales of the survivors are well told. In many cases, the author has included very lengthy first-hand accounts of their experiences. He notes that we will probably never know the full extent of the loss of human life from her sinking, as even the sailors who were charged with making the head count of persons boarding her were overwhelmed by the numbers of would-be passengers seeking to escape Hitler's forces. Another positive point is that he reminds us that the Allied evacuation efforts of that fateful summer of 1940 were not limited to the port of Dunkirk. The actual story of the attack that led to her loss is riveting. Wynn discusses how the *Lancastria* came to be impressed as a troop ship and her brief service in the Royal Navy. He also notes that, in a rare tribute, the government of Scotland minted and distributed a medal commemorating her loss to her known survivors and their families.

Strangely, the then-newly installed government of Sir Winston Churchill decided to issue a “D” notice which restricted press coverage of its loss, leading to wartime and post-war speculation of a political-military “cover-up”. Despite this measure, however, the *Lancastria*’s loss could not be hidden from the public for long, especially once the news of her sinking was reported in American newspapers. Unfortunately, it here that Wynn’s narrative falls short. While this work promises to be an exposé, all that Wynn offers is a repetition of the hackneyed reasons that could have prompted Churchill’s government’s attempt to suppress the news of the ship’s loss. In spite of his research, he has failed to identify any “mystery” cargo, “shadowy” characters or otherwise notable passengers that were aboard her or any “secret mission” with which she may have been tasked. In effect, all he has accomplished is to re-raise the question of why Churchill tried to restrict the news of her loss. If there were a political or military cover-up, we will have to await the scheduled 2040 release of the documents regarding this ship and its loss. Nevertheless, Wynn does offer some details regarding the frantic nature of the Allied evacuation of France in 1940. Hopefully, he will be able to return to this story in 2040 and offer us a more definitive work on the loss of the *Lancastria*. While this is still a striking and poignant story and worth reading, it falls short of meeting the expectations its title raises.

Peter Mispelkamp  
Pointe Claire, Quebec