

Passport to Perdition

by Senan Molony

Gare Maritime

Sunday 18 March 2007

AN EXPIRED passport could have prevented the untimely expiry of a life on the *Lusitania*.

But instead its holder, Thomas J. Silva, moved heaven and earth to get replacement documents in order to sail on the fatal voyage that left New York on May 1, 1915. In doing so, he obtained his own death warrant.

The demise of plain Tom Silva, a salt-of-the-earth son of the south, is uncommonly well documented. There is his last letter home – on *Lusitania* stationery - the desperate telegrams after the sinking, a communication of regret from Cunard, clips of news coverage, tributes of sympathy, and a gripping letter from a survivor about his last minutes alive.

IT WAS a consummation devoutly to be wished. The 1909 marriage of Thomas James Silva and Ethel Dekle had long been hoped for by both families. Not that the respective scions kept their kinfolk waiting, for they wed when each was just twenty years old.

He was from Atlanta, she from Thomasville - both Georgians; and both belonged to what remained of a faded antebellum aristocracy, one that held on to good breeding and good manners. The new partners were exemplars of both.

The couple's first child, bouncing son Frank Robertson (Bobby) Silva, arrived when they were both 22. Two years later came a daughter, Bettina. It was 1913.



A blissful family life seemed to hold the promise of perfect happiness forever. The Great European War, when it came a year later, was but a puff of smoke on the far horizon.

Yet in time the strife came to trouble Thomas Silva, an Anglophile who was also a Teutonophile. "He went often to England and Germany, buying and selling cotton," said daughter Bettina Silva Callaway in November 2006. With friends in both countries, it is easy to imagine his loyalties torn.

In the ten years of his business career Silva had spent "two or three seasons" in Bremen, Germany's second largest port, the *Savannah Morning News* later noted. Bremen's twin city, Bremerhaven, was now a major base of her proud new fleet of *Unterseebooten*.

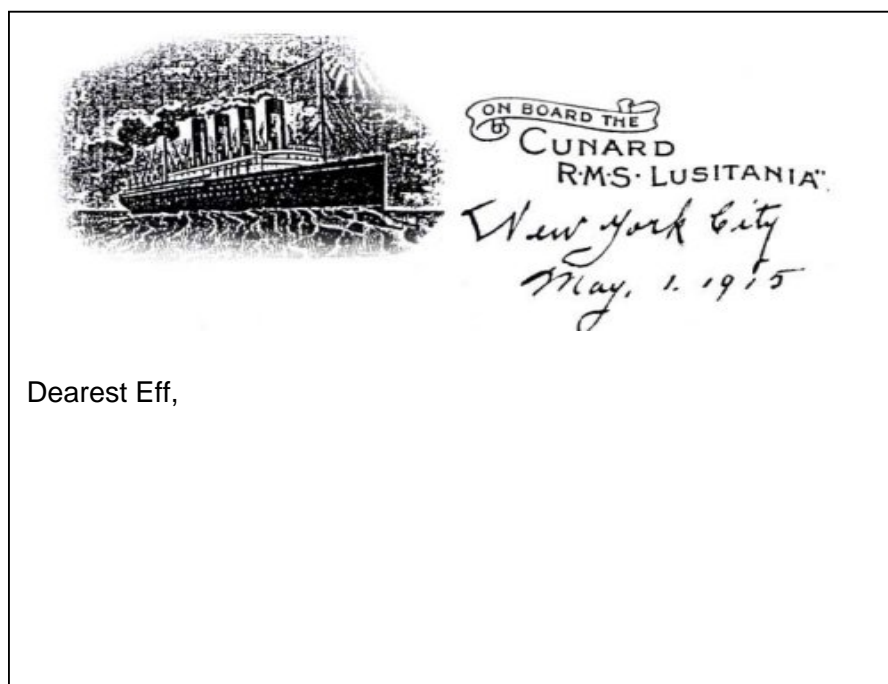
Still, no-one dreamt of submarines that early in the war. To Americans, it was a conflict drawn in barb-wire lines across the European landmass. When discussion turned to the sea, it was about the prospects of the British battleships drawing out those of Imperial Germany to the high seas where they might be destroyed and the war speedily ended.

The dawning of 1915 changed such thinking. The U-boats had begun sinking British shipping by the hundred tons, and neutral vessels were not immune from fog-of-war attack. In February, the German Government warned that the waters around the British Isles would now be considered a war zone, and

This announcement of a 'paper blockade' attracted much scorn from the British press. But it was a source of concern to Transatlantic travellers, all the more as companies like Cunard aggressively asserted the safety of the passage.

When 26-year-old Thomas Silva boarded the RMS in May 1915, he was something of a hostage to "business as usual" in more ways than one. A cotton-broker, working on the Cotton Exchange in Savannah, he was ultimately bound for Bremen to negotiate new contracts.

The first time he had been to Bremen, to clients called Robertson, he travelled alone. On another occasion, in peacetime, he had brought his wife and new baby (Bobby). Old man Robertson was so impressed with little Bobby's composed manner that he allowed him to sit at the table for meals, a privilege not extended to his own grandson.



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The day after the sinking, a telegram to Silva's workplace from Cunard confirmed:

May 8, 1915

Mr Silva was booked saloon passage. Name not yet reported from abroad.

Cunard S. S. Co.

It was followed almost immediately by a wire from the New York friend with whom Silva had dined before leaving on the
Lusitania

Parrish & Co., Temple, Texas.

Steinhauser

Tom Silva had begun his career in the cotton business with the Espy Cotton Company of Savannah in 1905. He was then associated with W. W. Espy in Thomasville after leaving Savannah, and had "severed his connection with that firm to accept a position with E. T. Robertson & Son in Bremen.

"Recently he was connected with Parrish & Company of Temple, Texas. He had just closed a most successful season when he sailed for Europe on May 1 on business for the firm, expecting to return early in July," it was reported.

"When news reached his relatives that he was not among the saved, they used every means in their power to ascertain his fate and learn whether the body was recovered."

The *Temple Daily Telegram* reported on Sunday morning, May 9, 1915:



THOMAS J. SILVA
His Body Has Not Been Recovered.

"No definite word comes to the stricken wife and the business and personal friends of T. J. Silva of Temple, who is among the "unrecovered" of the *Lusitania* horror.

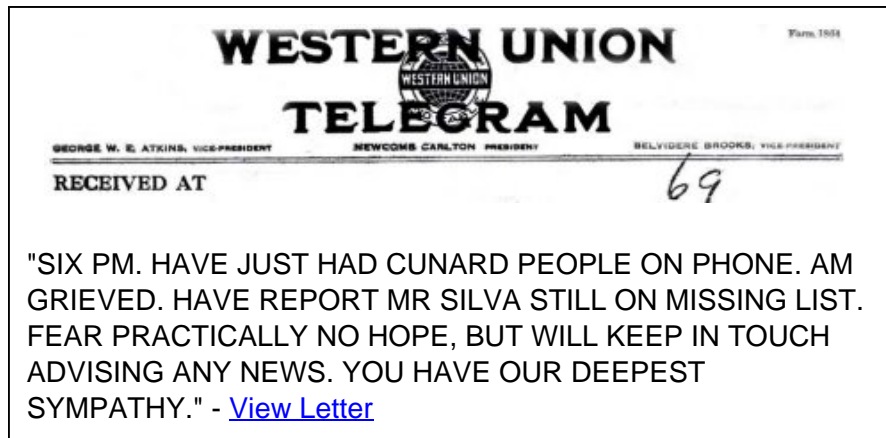
"There are of course chances that other survivors were picked up at sea by boats headed for distant ports, or there may have been survivors landed at points along the coast and not reported. The faint hope will be cherished until complete information is obtained."

Mrs Ethel Silva was reported to be "hoping against hope" that a message would come. "She is tenderly cared for by friends and neighbours."

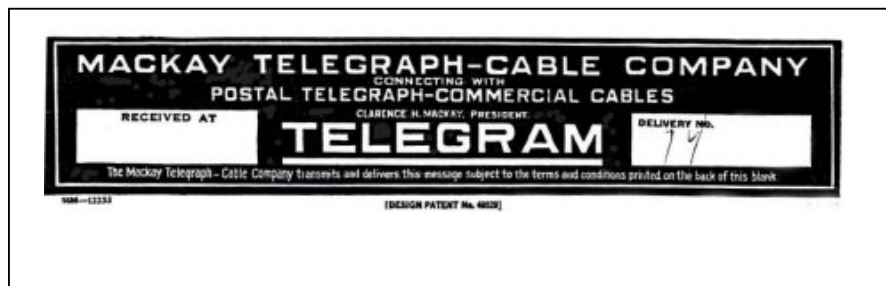
The newspaper's headline that day read: "**SHIP'S DEATH LIST IS 1,198. Temple Man Is Believed Among Lost.**" Claimed by both Texas and Georgia newspapers, Silva was one of 120 Americans to perish.

The next day, Monday May 10, a Western Union telegram arrived at the office of Parrish & Co, where many workers were learning for the first time of the involvement of one of their colleagues in the cataclysm.

From New York dealer W. H. Hubbard, it read:



A more personal telegram to Mrs Silva arrived from Tampa, Florida, on May 11 –



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The fruitless hunt for news was taken to the very top, as the Texas newspaper reported in midweek (Thursday May 13), six days after the sinking:

NO HOPE OF FINDING BODY OF T. J. SILVA

Cannot Find Trace of Savannah
Lusitania Victim.

SURVIVOR TELLS STORY

HOPE THAT SILVA WAS SAVED ABANDONED

Young Man Was Passenger on
Lusitania.

INTEREST AROUSED IN FATE OF SILVA

Information is sought concerning Temple man on ill-fated *Lusitania*

An appeal to Governor James E. Ferguson to do all in his power as chief executive of the state of Texas to interest Secretary of State William J. Bryan in demanding all information possible as to the fate of Thomas J. Silva, an employee of the cotton firm of Parrish & Co, who was on board the ill-fated passenger steamer *Lusitania* when it went down last Friday, has been made by Mayor J. B. Watters of Temple.

"Temple, Texas, May 12, 1915.
Hon. James E. Ferguson, Governor, Austin, Texas.

The political efforts show the desperation of the family, including Tom's sisters Margaret and Mary, his brother Frank, and his mother, a widow, who had remarried to become Mrs W. H. Teasdale.



The telegram also hints at the huge workload that had just fallen on Queenstown, the site of three major morgues improvised in response to the tragedy, and nerve centre for the recovery efforts all along the south coast of Ireland.

By now, unbeknownst to his kinfolk, a physical description of passenger Thomas Silva had been received in the Town of the Dead, as it was quickly dubbed -

Thomas Silva: Tattooed Elk's head on left arm and Greek band on right arm. Five feet eight inches high, age twenty-six.

This was a very useful guide. The Elk motif derived from Silva's membership of the Thomasville lodge of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, the local chapter since defunct.

The Greek band apparently signified his involvement in athletics, having been a member of YMCA teams in Savannah, where he "took an active part in the gymnasium" and was "well liked by all those who knew him."

But no such body had been recovered. Or ever would be.

Strange to say, among the unidentified to this day is body 146, an American whose remains contained an unfinished letter of ship's stationery, beginning: 'Dear Ted – We hit New York at 7.30 in the morning, and after seeing to our luggage we made our way to Bronx Park to see some friends of mine…'

With better communication and more publicity, this body, consigned to Mass Grave B in Queentown's Old Church cemetery, might easily have been identified.

As the days went by, hope faded for Thomas Silva. The family hopes were finally all but dashed by a letter from Cunard:

PLEASE ADDRESS ALL COMMUNICATIONS TO THE
COMPANY AND NOT TO INDIVIDUAL EMPLOYEES
PASSENGER DEPARTMENT
FIRST CABIN



M-S

The Cunard Steamship Co. (Limited.)
"Battery Park Building"
21 to 24 State Street, (continuation of Broadway)
New York, May 29, 1915

Mrs. Thomas J. Silva,
Thomasville, Ga..

Dear Madam,

In reply to yours of the 26th- inst. we beg to say that we greatly regret being unable to give you any information in reference to Mr Silva and can only state that up to the present time there has been no indication that any of the recovered remains were his.

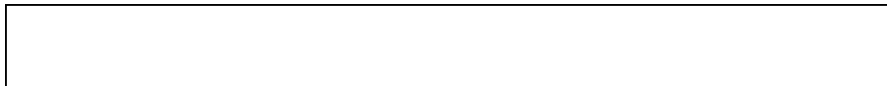
Of course you will appreciate that there was a very large number of persons on board the steamer and only a limited number of those survived, and likewise not a great many of the bodies have been recovered.

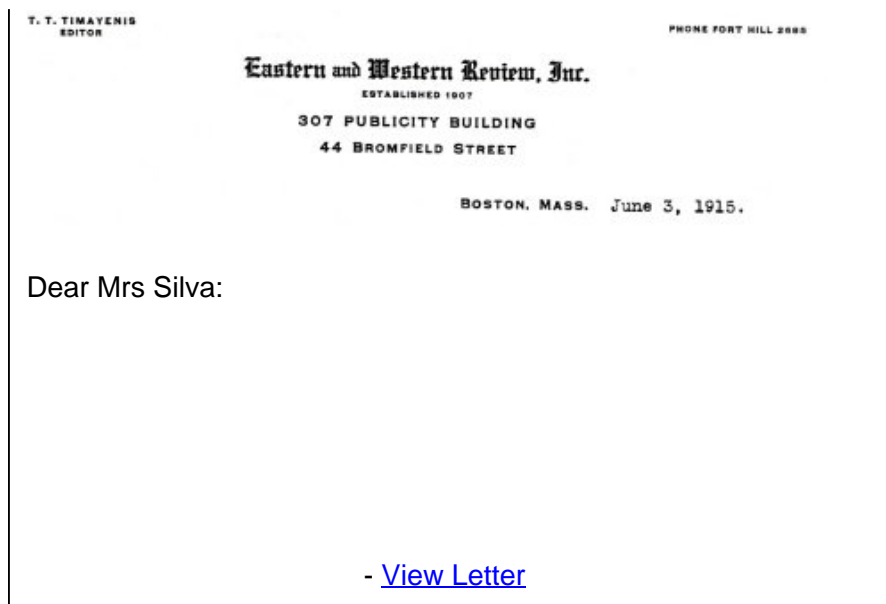
Permit us to extend to you our very sincere sympathy at your loss.

Yours truly,

The Cunard Steamship Co., Ltd - [View Letter](#)

Among the tributes to Tom Silva to arrive was this one, from T. T. Timayenis, Editor of the *Eastern and Western Review*, who had been asked to use his good offices in securing further information for the family:





But it was not quite 'impossible to add anything further.' The family eventually tracked down a survivor who recalled Tom Silva clearly from the voyage. His name was Charles Thomas Jeffery, a saloon passenger and President of the Jeffery Motor Car Company of Kenosha, Wisconsin.



Ethel Silva, Charles Jeffery

The Silvas had been trying to find Mr Jeffery ever since an interviewer in Queenstown had questioned him in the immediate wake of the sinking. Quotations from that interview found their way into the *New York World* of May 10, 1915

Quickly clipped out and sent to the family by more than one person anxious to assist, the excerpt quoting Mr Jeffery ran:

"I was the only person saved from our table of five in the saloon. There was a splendid young fellow in our party named Silva, in the cotton business, coming over to Liverpool, who might surely have been expected to battle his way through, but I am afraid he was lost."

This paragraph led to a continuous effort to locate Mr Jeffery after hope for Tom Silva's safety had been abandoned. But it quickly turned into a dead end – because the *New York World* had mistakenly described him as president of the Bridgeport Motor Car Company of Bridgeport, Connecticut, instead of the Jeffery Motor Car Co. of Kenosha, Wis.



Eventually Jeffery was traced, and his reply to a letter is here recited in full:

CHARLES T. JEFFERY

Mrs Thomas J. Silva

My dear Mrs Silva:

Lusitania.

Charles T. Jeffery

In another letter, this time to Silva's mother, Mrs W. H. Teasdale, Jeffery offered some further details in another telling of what he knew:

Further testimony to Silva's nobility of character was contained in a letter received by his mother from his employer, Will Espy of Parrish & Company, in whose interest he had undertaken the voyage.

Tom Silva's son Bobby grew up to become a civil engineer. He graduated *magna cum laude* from Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Kentucky.

"Mama talked a great deal about it (the *Lusitania* disaster) when we were kids," Bettina says.

She is glad her father's story is being recorded as the 100th anniversary approaches, as if the preservation of memory were itself a passport to the past.



Senan Molony is the author of *Lusitania: An Irish Tragedy*.

Courtesy of Senan Molony

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