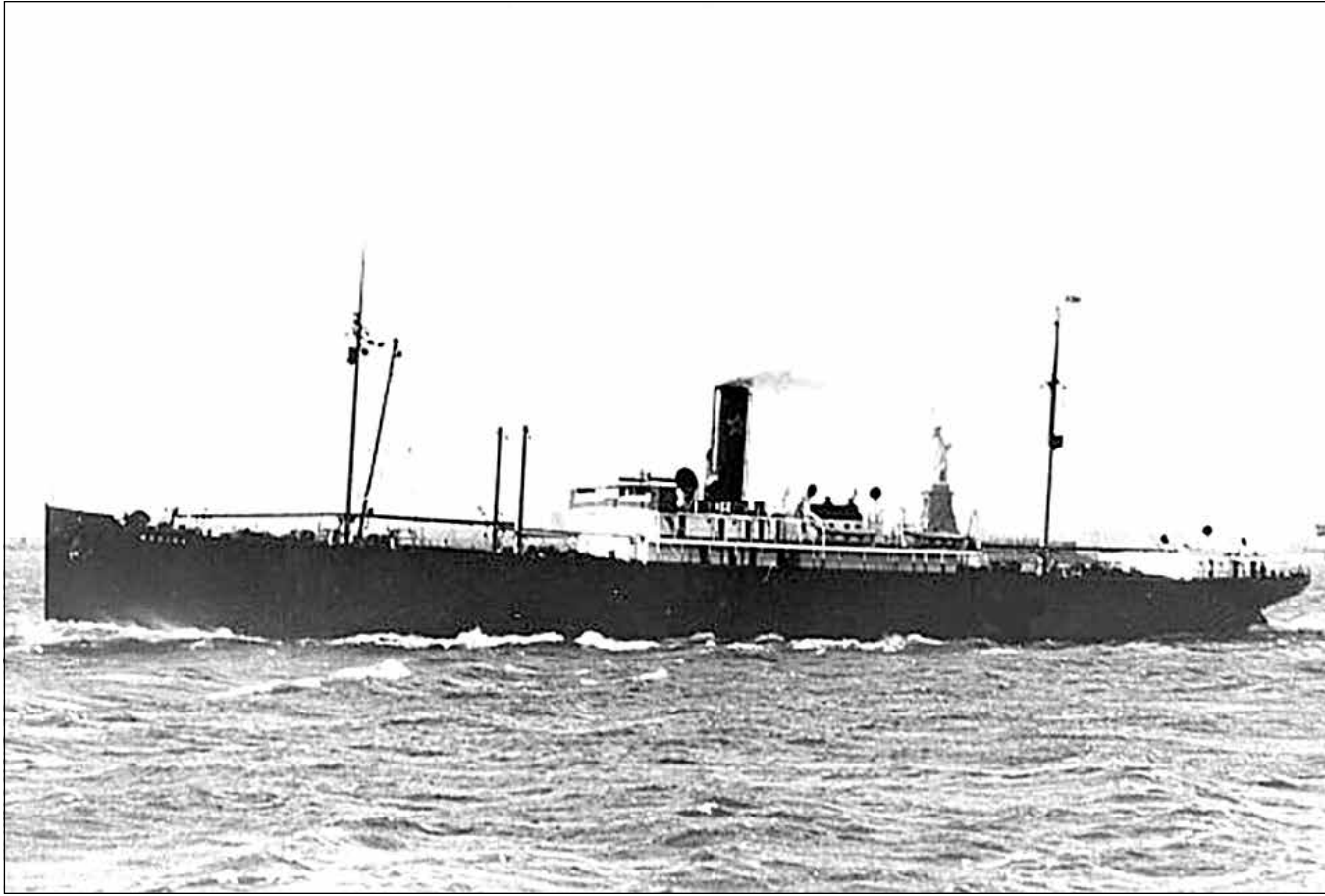


WWI Profile: David Elton Lewis 1891-1965



Lewis served as an assistant engineer on the SS Medina, a Navy supply ship during WWI.



Lt. David Elton Lewis in uniform.

By NORMA ECKARD

David Elton Lewis
Brunswick County, N.C.
U.S. Navy, Lieutenant
(junior grade)
Served: May 1, 1917 -
unknown

David Elton Lewis was born in Brunswick County, N.C., in 1891. A partial family tree is located in FamilySearch.

Two of David's brothers also served in WWI. Grover Ransom Lewis enlisted in the Navy in N.Y. in March 1918 [Source: Ancestry.com]. John Quincy Lewis served in the U.S. Army. Grover was not originally included in the Brunswick County WWI Veteran List as his N.Y. WWI Service Record shows he was born in Wilmington, N.C. However, we now know he lived in Brunswick County, which will allow us to add his name to the Brunswick County WWI Veteran List.

The 1900 Census shows his family living in Shallotte. David is 9 years old, one of eight children.

When David was about 12 years old, his father and uncle were lost at sea.

On the night of Dec. 9, 1903, his father, Captain James Harker Lewis, and his uncle, Captain William Edward Lewis, along with all three crew members were lost at sea at the mouth of the Cape Fear River. Captains James and William Lewis were captains and foremen of fishing crews but were passengers on the small schooner "Clarence

H.," which was delivering goods from Shallotte to Wilmington. The story was printed in newspapers across the nation.

According to the Dec. 11, 1903, edition of The Morning Post (Raleigh, N.C.), the boat was discovered lying bottom-up on Oak Island beach that morning. That afternoon, his uncle's body washed ashore. The Dec. 13 edition of *The Morning Star* reported that there was no evidence that Captain William Lewis had water in his lungs, indicating that his cause of death was likely the blow to his forehead, possibly from the mast. His body was sent to Shallotte for interment. His gravesite is unknown.

His father's body washed ashore near the same location on Jan. 9, 1904, and was identified by the papers in his clothing, according to the Jan. 15, 1904, edition of the *Wilmington Messenger*. He was laid to rest in the Old Smithville Cemetery in what is now Southport. By March, all five bodies had been recovered.

David's grandson, Dave Lewis of Brunswick County Historical Society, shares this story about his grandfather:

"My great-grandmother moved to Wilmington with all her children after my great-grandfather was lost in a shipwreck off Southport in 1903. She put my granddad to work in a cotton mill, which he stayed for about one week. That was not for him, so he went down to the waterfront looking for work. After shoveling coal on a freighter from N.Y. to China, he taught himself to read and write and obtained his engineer license allowing him to sail as chief engineer on any size ship. That was why he was in N.Y. before enlisting in the Navy.

Family lore tells me that my great-grandmother was told by family members, "they would be back before the peach trees bloom," but they never returned to Brunswick County except for visits."

The 1910 Census shows him living with his mother and some siblings, working on a tugboat. As mentioned above, he is able to read and write now. His name appears in several years of city directories for Wilmington.

On May 1, 1917, David Elton Lewis enlisted in the US Navy Reserve as a lieutenant (junior grade) [Source: Ancestry].

David's WWI Draft Registration was completed on Feb. 27, 1918, later than the required registration of June 5, 1917. Written on his registration by the Registrar and signed by David was the statement, "Was on the high seas on June 5."

David's passport application or Application for Seaman's Certificate of American Citizenship of March 15, 1918, states that he has been a seaman for 4 years,

with his recent position as an assistant engineer on the Medina.

Family documents confirm that he served on Medina for about five years. In the September 1914 issue of "International Marine Engineering," the Medina was referred to as "one of the most modern and largest freight steamships operating on the Atlantic coast." When World War I broke out, she became a supply ship for the U.S. Army, but was placed under the operational control of the U.S. Navy. In August 1918, the SS Medina was the Commodore's Flagship in a convoy of about 20 ships en route to Europe. During that arduous voyage, two ships in the convoy were torpedoed, but the Medina escaped without harm. Following cessation of hostilities, Medina was returned to her original owners [Source: SS Medina].

Note: The Medina served as the Commodore's Flagship. Traditionally, "commodore" is the title for any officer assigned to command more than one ship at a time. A commodore's ship is typically designated by the flying of a broad pennant, as opposed to an admiral's flag. [Source: Wikipedia]

It is not known whether Lt. (jg) Lewis was serving at the time, but it is very likely. The following is a more detailed account of the convoy being torpedoed:

The U.S.S. West Bridge, commanded by Lieutenant Commander Mortimer Hawkins, U.S. Naval Reserve Force, left New York on Aug. 1, 1918, in convoy with about 20 other vessels. The S.S. Medina acted as the Commodore Ship.

At about 1740 on Aug. 15, the captain of the West Bridge was notified by the chief engineer that the main engine turbine rotor was stripped and that the ship could not proceed or make any repairs. The Medina was notified of the engine trouble and the inability of the West Bridge to maintain position or hold speed.

At about 1800, the U.S.S. Montana, which was in the convoy and about four miles ahead of the West Bridge, was torpedoed. At 2358, one torpedo struck the West Bridge on her starboard side amidships abreast of the engine room. A second torpedo struck immediately afterwards at about 20 feet forward of the first. The vessel listed to starboard immediately and the captain ordered, "abandon ship." She settled quickly so that there was about two feet of water on her well decks, but as she sank, she came back to an even keel while the survivors stood by the stricken vessel in lifeboats.

The West Bridge began settling and all hope of saving her was abandoned. The lives of four West Bridge crewmen were lost. [Source: Torpedoing of USS West Bridge].

David returned to Wilmington, presumably as he continued to serve; the 1919 City Directory lists him as U.S. Navy. In 1920 (Census), he continued working aboard the SS Medina.

His grandson, Dave Lewis, referenced above, added the following touching information: "I have the old painting of the ship [Medina] that hung in my grandparents' dining room while they were living at Carolina Beach. The picture hung there as long as I can remember."

In 1922, David married Gertie Lancaster in Southport. The 1930 Census shows him living in Wilmington, working as a marine engineer. By the 1940 Census, he was in Texas. He and his wife raised two sons.

David Elton Lewis was living in Wilmington when he passed away on Jan. 5, 1965. He was laid to rest in Greenlawn Memorial Park Cemetery in Wilmington. No military honors are displayed.

If you would like to help us honor David Elton Lewis or another Brunswick County WWI veteran, email the Friends of Ft. Caswell Rifle Range at ftcaswellrifrange@gmail.com or go to caswellrifrange.com.

A future fundraiser, Oktoberfest, is scheduled for Saturday, Oct. 12, at the Caswell Beach town public service facility building (fire station) to raise funds for publishing the book of Brunswick County men and women that served in WWI; to continue historic preservation of the rifle range

memorial; and to honor Brunswick County WWI veterans. There will be a dinner and dance with music by The Back Porch Rockers. More information will follow soon.

Another Roll Call event is planned for Veterans Day, Monday, Nov. 11, at 11 a.m. beside the 1918 Fort Caswell Rifle Range Memorial in Caswell Beach.

U.S.CHARTERED VESSEL SUNK; 16 MEN LOST

Lake Edon Victim of U-Boat in European Waters.

OTHER VESSELS SUNK

West Bridge and Cubore, U. S. Ships; Diomed, British.

The Navy Department received a cablegram late yesterday afternoon stating that the steamship Lake Edon, an army-chartered cargo transport, was sunk by an enemy submarine in European waters August 21. There were forty-nine in the crew, sixteen are reported missing. The names of those missing were not given in the dispatch.

Reports received by the department show that three firemen were lost in the sinking of the U. S. S. West Bridge by a submarine in foreign waters on August 16. They were: Jens Peter Cronne Noelsen, fireman, third class, of Djylland, Denmark; William L. Porter, fireman, second class, of Portland, Oregon; Robert Johnson McConkey, fireman, second class, of Mt. Vernon, Washington.

The West Bridge was a cargo ship of 4,800 tons deadweight, in government service, and was westbound when torpedoed.

The U. S. S. Cubore, 7,500 gross tons, was torpedoed and sunk on August 15 in European waters, on westbound voyage. Reports state that there was no loss of life in the sinking of the Cubore.

Newspaper clipping of torpedoing of USS West Bridge (Source: Chronicing America).