

Ship of Babel

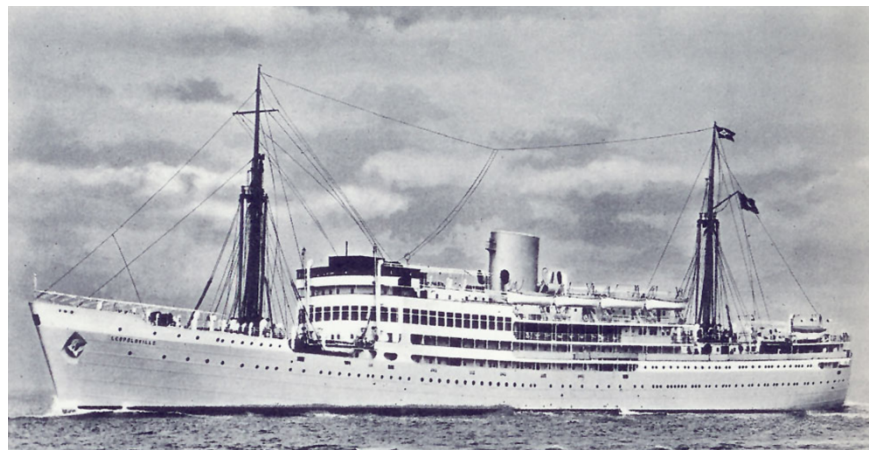
In the Biblical story of Babel, the Lord confuses the language of the people, preventing them from building their city with its tower intended to reach the heavens. Confused languages also contributed to the second-largest loss of lives from the sinking of a troop ship in the European Theater during World War II.

William Ingram Lawrence of Sumter arrived on the Clemson College campus in 1942. The war was already underway but, according to Clemson historian Jerry Reel, student life was still “usual” until the end of that academic year in July 1943. By then, many faculty and students were serving in the military. It is unclear when Lawrence, an engineering major, left Clemson for his military service, but he was assigned to the 262nd Infantry Regiment of the 66th Infantry Division which arrived in Dorchester, England on November 26, 1944.

On that same date, the German submarine *U-486*, commanded by Oberleutnant zur See Gerhard Meyer, sailed from Egersund, Norway on its first war patrol. *U-486* sailed west around the British Isles before turning back to the east and transiting the Western Approaches into the English Channel.

In England, the 66th Infantry trained and prepared for its eventual deployment over the beaches of Normandy and into continental Europe. The timetable of Allied planners was thrown out the window when the Germans launched the Battle of the Bulge in mid-December. Suddenly, every available unit was rushed to British ports. Lawrence’s 262nd Infantry Regiment was hurried aboard the Belgian transport *Leopoldville*. Rather than loading in an organized manner with equipment and soldiers packed to ensure unit integrity, men and materiel were loaded as they arrived at the ship.

Leopoldville had been chartered by the British Admiralty in 1939. Converted for troop carrying, the ship had completed twenty-four Channel crossings by December 1944, transporting more than 120,000 troops in support of the landings in Normandy which had begun on D-Day. The ship’s Belgian crew, including ninety-three Africans from the Belgian Congo, received its orders in Flemish. None spoke English—a problem since the ship’s



Christmas Eve cargo included 2,235 American and an undetermined number of British soldiers. To add to the peril, the ship sailed with an insufficient number of life jackets and few troops understood the need to participate in the poorly supervised lifeboat drill.

Leopoldville sailed from Southampton at 0900 on December 24 as part of a six ship convoy made up of three British and one French warships plus one other troop ship.

At 1754 hours, with the ship just five miles from the French coast, a torpedo launched from *U-486* struck *Leopoldville* on its starboard side aft, exploding in hold number four and killing approximately three hundred men. Few of the American soldiers understood the abandon ship orders given in Flemish. Others, failing to realize that the ship had suffered a mortal wound, stayed on board assuming the ship would be towed to the nearby port of Cherbourg.

One of the escorting destroyers, HMS *Brilliant*, maneuvered alongside to attempt to rescue *Leopoldville*'s passengers. A crewman from *Brilliant* later reported that sea swells of eight to twelve feet made transferring from the cargo ship to the smaller destroyer perilous. Some men jumped, breaking limbs as they landed on *Brilliant*'s torpedo tubes and other fixed equipment. Others miss-timed their leaps falling in between the two ships where they were crushed. *Brilliant* was able to take five hundred men off the stricken transport, but that left twelve hundred still on board.

Brilliant then attempted to contact American forces at Cherbourg, but the Americans used different frequencies and could not decipher the British code. Next *Brilliant* contacted the British naval base at Portsmouth. Portsmouth telephoned Cherbourg, but these round-about communications were hindered by minimal staffing due to holiday celebrations. As a result, Allied forces in Cherbourg failed to quickly mobilize rescue efforts. By the time rescuers arrived, many of those who had gone into the frigid Channel waters were already dead from hypothermia.

Five hundred fifteen American soldiers, an unknown number of British troops, three Congolese crewmen, and two Belgians, including the ship's captain, are believed to have gone down with the ship. Another two hundred forty-eight died from injuries, drowning or hypothermia. William Ingram Lawrence was among those killed.

U-486 returned to Norway on January 15. During her second war patrol on April 12, she was sunk by torpedoes from the British submarine HMS *Tapir*, just three and a half weeks before the end of the European war.

William Ingram Lawrence is memorialized at Normandy American Cemetery, Colleville-sur-Mer, France and Evergreen Cemetery, Sumter SC.

