

The Kaiser-i-Hind

If you were stood on Plymouth Hoe in 1916 you would have seen a remarkable looking P&O Passenger ship in elaborate Dazzle Camouflage about to set sail on what would be a record breaking voyage. The ship's name was The Kaiser-i-Hind which led something of a charmed life on the High Seas and sailors and passengers alike appreciate nothing more than a 'lucky ship' to travel on. Her start was perhaps not auspicious when she was launched on the very day that the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated on June 28th 1914. Or perhaps this very collision with such a date of destiny would serve her well and helped forge her fortune. Although sounding oddly Germanic, the name actually was Urdu for the Empress of India and indeed she spent much of her career plying the routes between Britain, India and Australia linking three of the most important destinations in the British Empire. Maybe they also hoped that German U-boat commanders might be reluctant to target a ship sharing the same name as their Head of State?

The record-breaking voyage set in 1916 was from Plymouth to Bombay in the remarkable time of just 17 days, 20 hours and 52 minutes. This was the fastest time recorded by any ship up to that point and perhaps the added danger of German U-boat activity helped motivate the stokers to keep the engines operating at optimum level for the entire journey. The unlikely looking dazzle camouflage was also supposed to frustrate U-boat commanders peering through their periscopes. The design was never meant to conceal the ship but to confuse U-boat commanders and make it difficult for them to calculate the direction of travel and the speed of the ship, making the calculations for firing torpedoes far more problematic in predicting where their intended target may be by the time the torpedo travelled the necessary distance to find its target. In the case of the Kaiser-i-Hind it may well have worked as she was targeted on no less than 6 occasions and on 5 of those 6 targetings the Kaiser-i-Hind was missed - and sometimes by more than one torpedo. Her unexpected speed for such a large ship may also have been a complicating factor and she also had the ability to outrun any danger when she was made aware of it. She was indeed hit on one occasion - BUT, the torpedo failed to explode and the ship continued to sail its charmed life much to the relief of everyone on board which actually included 3000 troops at the time. The final miss was as late as 22nd September 1918 just seven weeks before the end of the war. Many Australian and New Zealand troops knew the ship well as she carried tens of thousands of ANZACs to and from the European war zone. Another fortunate passenger had been the Viceroy of India, Lord Chelmsford, who was travelling with his family in the Mediterranean back to Britain when a number of torpedoes all failed to find their precious target and the ship sped away one more time!

The Kaiser-i-Hind was the ship that Lawrence of Arabia returned from his actions in the Middle East upon in October 1918 and just a few years later in 1921 Winston Churchill would be heading back out to the Middle East aboard the Kaiser-i-Hind as Colonial Secretary to try to deal with the consequences of Britain's First World War promises and commitments such as those made by Lawrence of Arabia no less. In 1926 the Prince of Wales and his brother the Duke of Gloucester (the future King Edward VIII and his younger brother) travelled on what was then known as RMS Kaiser-i-Hind before starting a Royal Tour around Africa starting from Alexandria where they alighted the ship. RMS meant a Royal Mail Steamer. This was one way that the British government could subsidise regular sailings around the Empire by ensuring that these ships carried mail at regular intervals. It helped the shipping companies defray the costs of regular sailings throughout the year and not just at popular times.

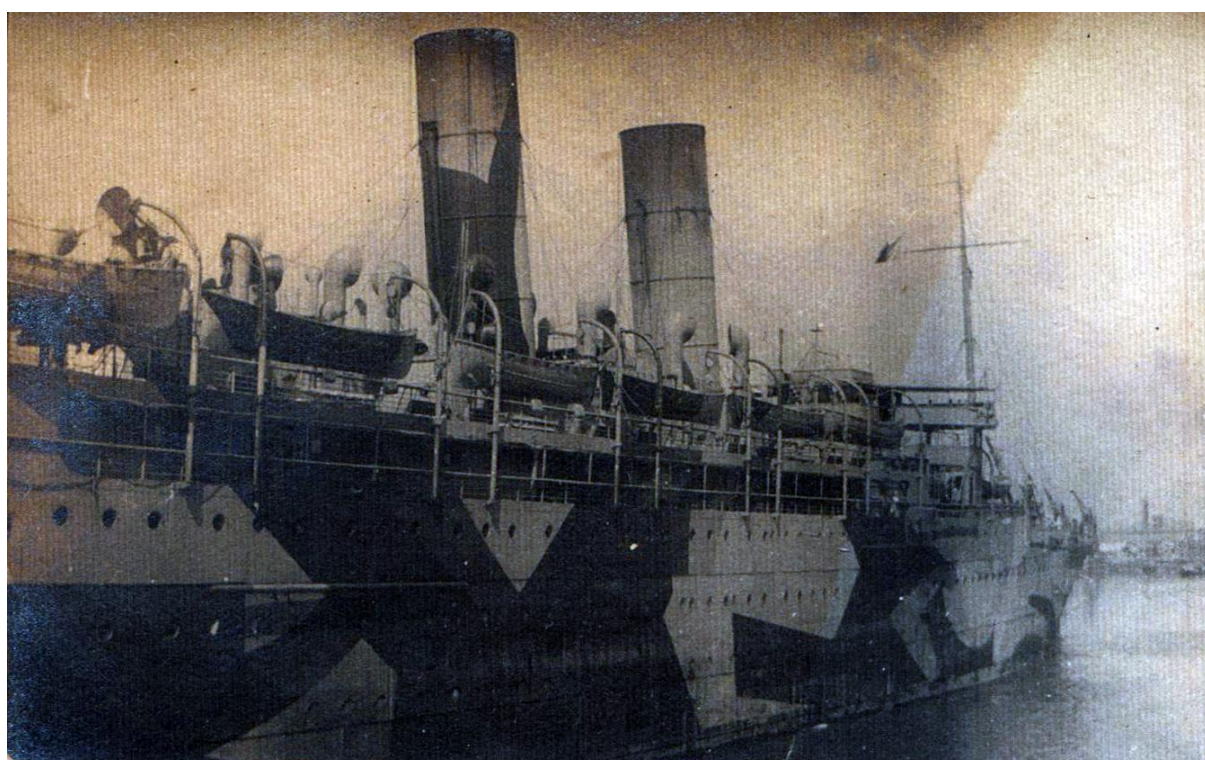
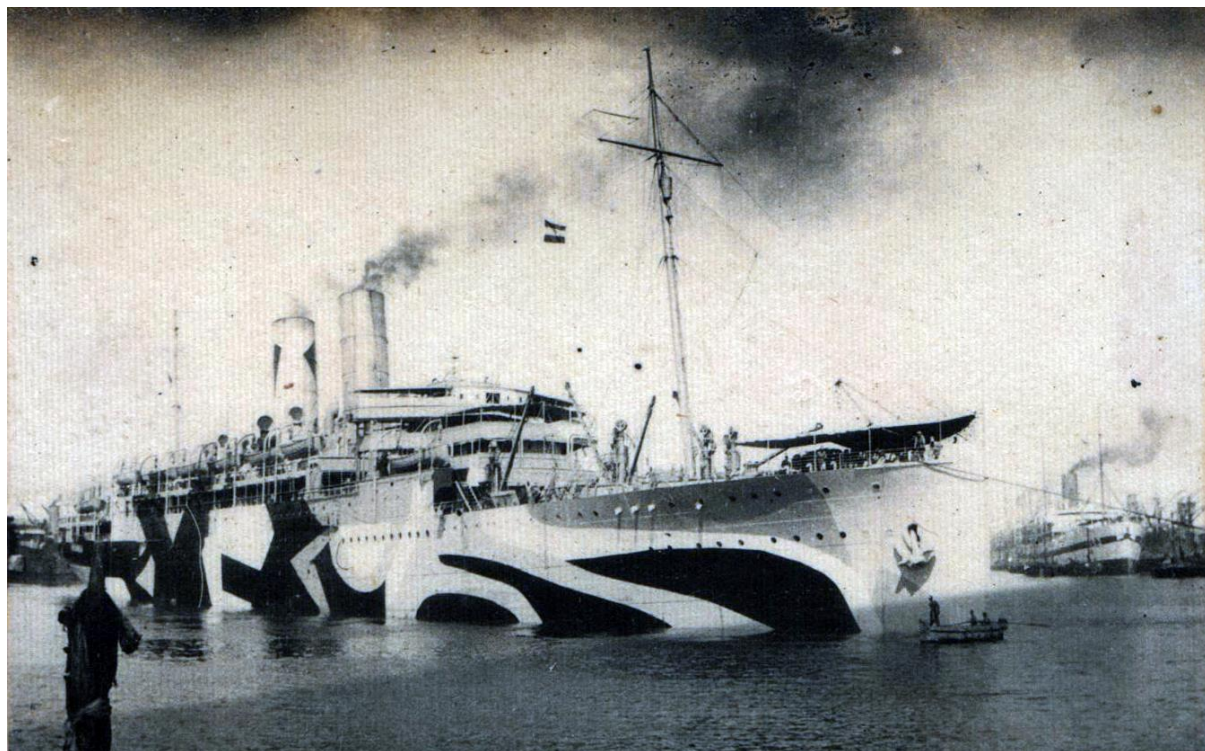
The Kaiser-i-Hind would be met in Plymouth Sound by the Great Western Railway tenders the TSS Sir Walter Raleigh and TSS Sir Francis Drake who would bring the troops or passengers ashore at Millbay where they could get on a GWR train at the station there and continue their journey on land. For most passengers it was far quicker taking the train to Paddington from Plymouth than sailing the final leg of the journey to Tilbury.

Plymouth was the Kaiser-i-Hind's penultimate port of call on April 21st 1938 when the ageing ship returned to Britain on her final voyage. She was 24 years of age and was showing her age. More worryingly for the shipping industry was the fact that high end passengers were increasingly turning

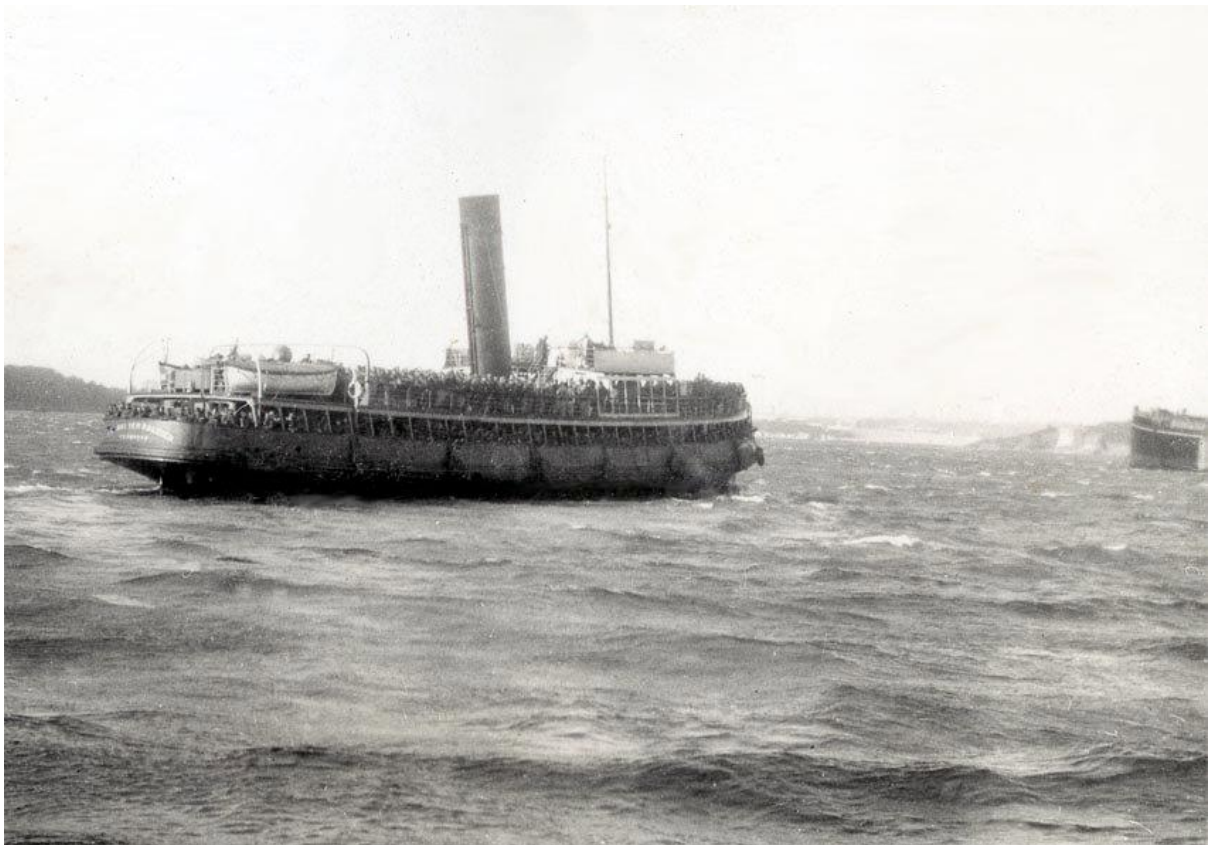
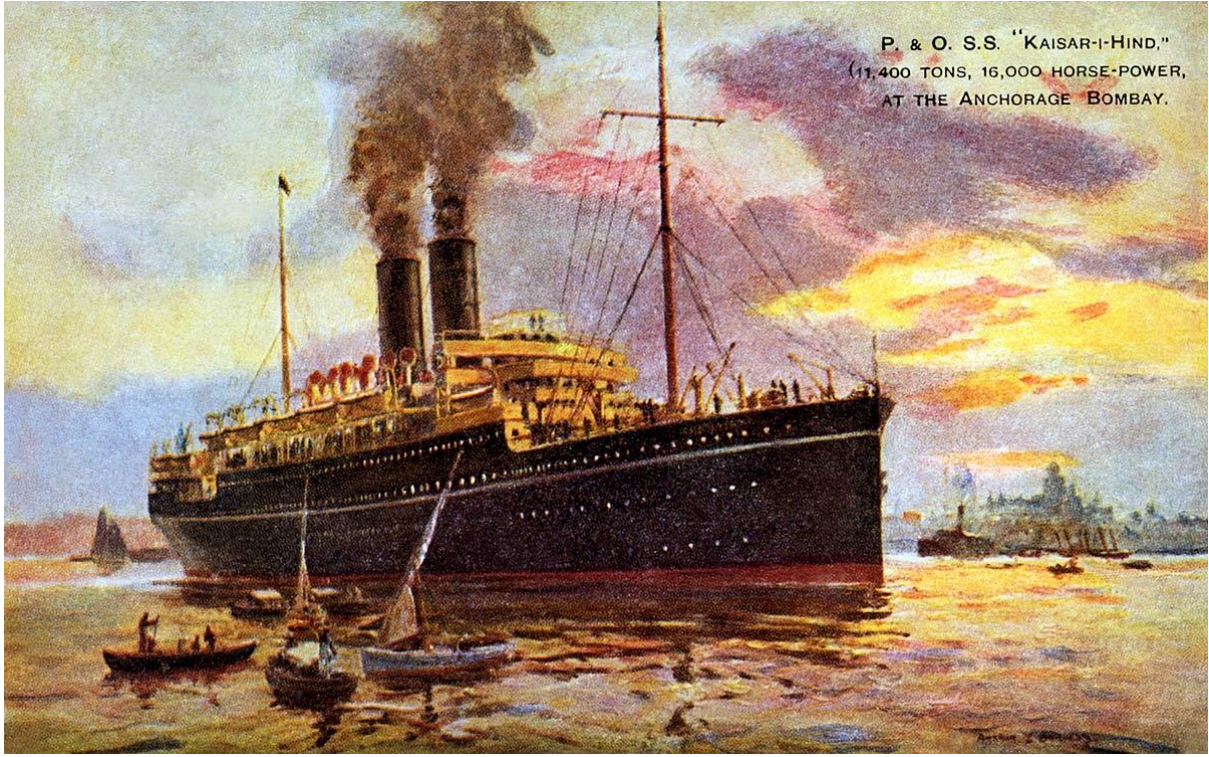
to Flying Boats such as those operated by Imperial Airways who coincidentally started their first regular service to Australia via India in that same year of 1938. Be that as it may, when the Kaiser-i-Hind arrived in Plymouth she flew an enormously long 72 foot paying off pennant. This had been a tradition long known in the Royal Navy from the days when old cleaning rags were flown from the mast to indicate that they were no longer required after the ship's final voyage. Interestingly, the Kaiser-i-Hind's paying off pennant at Plymouth is thought to be the first time that the P&O ships joined in with this tradition. Perhaps Plymouth's naval heritage had rubbed off on the sentimental Captain as he entered the Royal Naval port for the last time. The Kaiser-i-Hind had led a charmed life and Plymouth had been a friendly port to her for her entire working life.

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P. & O. S.S. "KAISAR-I-HIND,"
(11,400 TONS, 16,000 HORSE-POWER,
AT THE ANCHORAGE BOMBAY.











Lawrence of Arabia