

### Wartime letters recovered from the SS Gairsoppa



- 1 The fragments of a 1941 love letter to a woman named Iris, found nearly three miles under the ocean in a shipwreck, have been painstakingly pieced together by experts, 80 years after it was posted. “Look after yourself my darling, not only for your own sake ..... for mine also,” wrote the unknown serviceman stationed in the Waziristan region, now part of Pakistan.
- 2 The letter is one of 717 that were never delivered by the cargo ship, the SS Gairsoppa, which was destined for the US. The ship was torpedoed off the coast of Ireland by a German U-boat on 16 February 1941. The ship lay nearly three miles deep until 2011, when Odyssey Marine Exploration, a US firm that won the contract from the British government in 2010 for salvage, discovered it. The company recovered more than 100 tonnes of silver from the wreck, along with the letters. The missives had been sealed within the hold under tons of mailbags and sediments, protected from light, currents, heat and oxygen, and stayed mostly intact.
- 3 “It’s an environment without oxygen so the corrosion is slowed down completely. And because there were so many mailbags together, a massive percentage of the whole post office mail would have been destroyed, but a central part of all this big bundle of mailbags has survived,” said conservator Eleni Katsiani. While a handful of the more complete letters from the ship were displayed in an exhibition at the Postal Museum in London, the museum’s archive team have been working on some of the more damaged specimens over recent months, piecing together fragments to reveal glimpses of wartime lives.

- 4 The letters were immediately freeze-dried after the discovery, to stop the decay process. They were also washed in freshwater to get the salt out, said Katsiani, “an intense and 24-1 process for each letter but one that secured their current condition and therefore worth all the hours of work.” The Postal Museum’s senior paper conservator, Jackie Coppen, came across the letter to Iris, which she described as “a tender testament to love and longing, written on incredibly thin and fragile paper. Like many of the letters, it has suffered, but despite 24-2 areas, enough remains to appreciate the sentiments,” Coppen said. “It talks of hope and the future, it professes dreams of embracing tightly and being together again. It evokes a romantic past, when the handwritten word sent through the post was often the only means of 24-3 long-distance relationships.”
  
- 5 Under half of the letters have now been worked on by the conservators, giving, as the museum puts it, “insight into the lives of ordinary people, living in extraordinary circumstances during the Second World War.” “There were missionaries, business people, soldiers and generals writing, ordinary travellers who had gone to India,” said Katsiani. “The letters are talking about life, love, faith, business – and the weather, of course.” “It feels somewhat touching and appropriate to be uniting these letters on the 80th anniversary of the ship’s sinking,” said Coppen. “It is inevitable that while piecing the letters together I have come to form an intimate relationship with them – they are mesmerising and capture a remarkable snippet of life during a most significant period.”

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