

THE TITANIC

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This is the first chance I've had to formally address the group since I joined Athenaeum. I'd like to say I'm honored to be a member of such an organization... I'd like to say that, but looking around the room right now I'm having a little trouble with the idea.

Nevertheless, it's time to present my very first paper. Perhaps foolishly, I have chosen the Titanic for my topic. I say perhaps foolishly because you probably know what happened to the Titanic on its maiden voyage: It struck an iceberg in the North Atlantic and was resting on the ocean floor less than three hours later.

The story of the Titanic is a heartbreaking one. Such a magnificent ship - such a sudden and painful demise. And I'm going to answer the most important question first: Why did it happen? The primary factor was overconfidence. The ship was the biggest, most luxurious, closest-to-heaven piece of manmade hardware ever manufactured up to 1912. Nobody thought it could sink. Man had reached the point of conquest over the seas - or so they thought. The previous 50 years had taught them that civilization was capable of anything.

The overconfidence was not overt. Never did the company - the White Star Line - or the captain, or the crew, or the passengers come right out and say "the ship is virtually unsinkable" like a technical journal of the day had done in an issue devoted entirely to the Titanic, but there was always that underlying assumption.

No need to worry about complete lifeboat drills. No need to worry about having enough boats to seat all the passengers. No need to worry about the six ice warnings received by the Titanic on the day of the disaster: April 14, 1912. Full speed ahead.

the bridge or, failing that, could be set off automatically by the presence of rising water. It was precisely these watertight compartments which prompted Shipbuilder magazine to call the Titanic "practically unsinkable." In the unlikely event of a breach in the double hull from a collision of some sort, the affected compartment could be sealed off and the ship would go on its merry way. Also, the thing was just so darn big. What could hurt it?

Passenger accommodations provided unprecedented spaciousness and luxury, especially in first class. There were four passenger elevators; a 50 phone switchboard; a powerful five kilowatt Marconi station; a gym with all the latest electrical exercise devices; ultramodern kitchens; elegant dining rooms; gourmet restaurants; smoking rooms, lounges, and libraries of various period designs; a glass enclosed promenade deck; luxurious carpeting and furniture; the first swimming pool ever put on a ship; a regulation squash racket court; a turkish bath; refrigerated holds for mineral water and fresh-cut flowers; barber shops; even a well-equipped darkroom for amateur photographers.

Two extraordinary first-class suites, the best of the best, went for \$4,350 one way. That would be \$52,200 today - for a single trip.

All of this was designed to attract a certain type of passenger - rich in other words - and it did. The first-class passenger list resembled a gala theater premiere. There were 337 first-class passengers, 46 percent of capacity. Most of them were captains of industry. Collectively they represented well over 500 million dollars, equivalent to six billion dollars today. The industrial revolution had made a few people very, very rich. They were the aristocracy of the day and, in a time before TV or movies, also the leading celebrities of the day. Whatever they did made headlines.

- There was Dick Bishop of Michigan, heir to the Round Oak Stove Company. He and his wife had been honeymooning all over Europe, awaiting the completion of their \$200,000 home.

- There was John Jacob Astor, the richest man on earth, and his wife who was some 30 years his junior. He was eventually found floating in the Atlantic, crushed to a pulp - identified by his large diamond ring, set in platinum and the \$4,000 in his pocket.
- There was Benjamin Guggenheim, president of the International Pump Company. According to legend he went back to his cabin while the lifeboats were leaving and reappeared on deck with his servant in full evening attire. He reportedly said to a steward, "I won't die here like a beast. Tell my wife, Johnson, if it should happen that my secretary and I both go down and you are saved, tell her I played the game out straight to the end. No women shall be left aboard this ship because Ben Guggenheim was a coward."
- Isidor Strauss, the founder of Macy's, was on board with his wife. When an officer ordered Mrs. Strauss into a lifeboat she reportedly said "I will not leave by husband. We have been together all these years and I'll not leave him now." When it was suggested that, because of his age, no one would object to Mr. Strauss entering a boat he said "No. I do not wish any distinction in my favor which is not granted to others." They sat down in chairs on the deck to watch the activity. After their maid was safely aboard a lifeboat they went below to await their fate.
- There was also Archie Butt, personal friend and aide to President Taft, the artist Frank Millet, Denver socialite Molly Brown, writers, athletes and a host of other rich and famous personalities.

There were 271 passengers in second class or 40 percent of capacity.

Steerage or third class consisted of 712 passengers, nearly all immigrants - English, Irish, French, Polish, Scandinavian, Italian, and a surprising number from the Middle and Far East. There were 1320 passengers, a crew of 397, and 518 employees - that's 2235 people in all. Over 1500 died April 15, 1912.

On Sunday night, April 14, the Atlantic was as flat and calm as the top

of a table. Experienced sailors later said they hadn't seen such tranquil conditions on the Atlantic in their lifetimes. There was no moon, but the sky was absolutely clear and the air bitterly cold. In the crow's nest of the Titanic lookouts Frederick Fleet and Reginald Lee had been casually warned to keep an eye out for icebergs.

Suddenly, at about 11:40, Fleet saw something even darker than the night. He banged the crow's nest bell three times and phoned the bridge. "Iceberg right ahead," he said. Sixth officer Moody repeated the message on the bridge. First officer Murdoch reacted instantly, rushing to the telegraph to order the engines stopped and reversed. At the same moment he called out "hard-a-starboard" to the quartermaster, which at that time meant a hard left turn. He also pushed the button to close the watertight doors.

About 37 seconds after the iceberg was sighted, it came in contact with the Titanic, grazing down the right side and inflicting a 300 foot injury about 12 feet above the keel. The ship avoided a head-on collision. It probably started turning less than 10 seconds before impact. The irony is that a head-on collision would have been better. The impact would have been infinitely greater, possibly 200 people or more would have been killed, but the damage would have been confined to a small area and the watertight compartments would have allowed it to stay afloat. A 300 foot series of gashes, tears, and buckles was too much even for the Titanic.

Another irony is that closing the watertight doors was probably the wrong thing to do. As the front compartments filled with water, pulling the front part of the ship further and further into the ocean, water began to pour through portholes, large holes for the anchor chains, etc.; openings which dwarfed the ones caused by the iceberg. If the doors inside the ship had been left open, allowing the ship to sink evenly, the whole process would have been drawn out and help would have arrived in time.

Most people on board the ship felt nothing as the iceberg passed by and into the frigid night. Others felt only a slight shudder or vibration. One person described it as if a finger had been drawn along the length of the ship. Some got outside on deck quickly enough to see the berg towering perhaps some 50 feet above them.

Captain E.J. Smith, who looked and behaved exactly the way you would expect a veteran British ship's captain to look and act, was on the bridge immediately after the incident.

The commander ordered fourth officer Boxhall to go down and inspect the damage. Fifteen minutes later he was back. Postal clerk John Smith had told him that water was coming in the lower mail sorting room and mail sacks were being moved to the deck above.

The builder of the Titanic, Thomas Andrews, was on board making notes and checking out his beloved ship on its maiden voyage. He was summoned to the bridge. The Captain and Andrews took their own short tour. They saw the water in the mailroom and in a lot of other places. After doing a bit of scribbling, he gave Captain Smith the bad news: The ship was doomed. The Captain asked how long. "An hour and a half. Possibly two. Not much longer."

Thomas Andrews was one of the heroic and tragic figures on board the Titanic that night. He had put his heart and soul into that ship. Twenty minutes after a collision he hadn't even felt, he knew his ship was doomed. By all accounts he worked tirelessly urging people to take the situation seriously and helping people into lifeboats. The last anyone saw of him he was sitting at a table in a smoking room, staring into space.

Upon learning the awful truth, Captain Smith gave the order at 12:05 to ready the lifeboats. It was a slow and confusing process. There was a lot more to it than simply letting passengers jump into the boats and lowering

them to the water. Neither passengers nor crew were assigned specific places to go in an emergency. Boats had to be uncovered, hooked on davits and swung out from the ship. Many passengers were either uninformed or unconvinced of the danger. There had been little fanfare surrounding the collision and the ship seemed to be perfectly fine. Could jumping into a lifeboat in the middle of the ocean really be the best course of action?

Crew members had trouble finding people to fill the lifeboats. Sixteen of them were large wooden boats, some capable of carrying about 65 people. The first left the ship at 12:45 with only 28 people in it. It's probable that the crew thought it important to go ahead and get the boats away; that they could come back and pick up others shortly before or after the ship had sunk.

At 12:15 the Captain entered the wireless shack and told the two operators to send the call of assistance. He handed them a piece of paper which had the ship's location worked out on it. First operator John Phillips began tapping out the usual international call of distress - "CQD," followed by MGY, the call letters for the Titanic.

A few miles away was another ship, the Californian. The Californian had stopped dead in the water because of icebergs and floe ice in its way. About 11 o'clock it had called the Titanic to tell it about the ice. Phillips, on the Titanic, was too busy to listen however. The ship had just come into range of the station at Cape Race and he had a backlog of personal messages to send from passengers. The Californian had been so close that the signal had almost blown his headset off. He snapped back "Shut up, shut up! I am busy; I am working Cape Race!"

There was only one wireless operator on the Californian. After being on duty 16½ hours he shut off his set and went to bed at 11:30, ten minutes before

the Titanic's collision. At about 12:15 the third officer of the Californian came into the radio shack while the operator was asleep. He had curiosity about the device and liked to listen occasionally. This was precisely the time the Titanic was beginning its distress signals. He didn't hear anything because the magnetic signal detector needed winding.

For nearly two hours the wireless of the Titanic sent out a stream of pleas: Require assistance immediately... Come at once. We have struck a berg... Sinking head down. Come soon as possible... We are putting the women off in boats... Engine room full up to boilers...

After a while they decided to use the new distress signal which had just been announced. Titanic became the first vessel in history to send an SOS. Several ships heard the signal. None were very close. The Titanic's sister ship, the Olympic, responded immediately, but it simply was too far away.

While Phillips was working the wireless, Harold Bride, the second wireless operator, slipped a lifejacket over him. Later on a crewman came into the room and tried to take it off of him. This enraged Bride so much he attacked the man with a length of steel and rendered him unconscious, possibly even killing him. Finally, at 2:05, Captain Smith entered the shack. "You can do nothing more, look out for yourselves." At first Phillips didn't budge. "You have done your full duty!" Smith shouted. "I release you. Abandon your cabin." After a couple of minutes, they did. Phillips didn't survive. Bride helped operate the radio aboard the rescue ship and was met in New York by Marconi himself.

Radio operators weren't even members of the crew. Technically they were employees of the Marconi Company. At the time radio telegraphy was a novelty on ships. Not all ships had it. Most that did didn't keep an operator on duty 24 hours. It's clear the passengers on the Titanic considered it something

of a toy - sending frivolous messages just for the sake of sending them. A department store in New York had a radio as a gimmick to attract shoppers. A very young operator spent three days at the controls, taking down names of survivors as they were broadcast from the rescue ship. His name was David Sarnoff. He became famous because of the incident and went on to become the founder of RCA and one of the pivotal figures in radio and TV history.

After the disaster Marconi and his invention were given credit for making the rescue of survivors possible. In the old days they would simply have waited, probably in vain, for another ship just to happen by. In most cases, lifeboats on ships only prolonged the inevitable.

First officer Will Murdoch was in charge of filling boats on one side of the Titanic; second officer Charles Lightoller on the other. If you were a man, your chance of survival depended on what side of the ship you went to. One man took "Women and children first" to mean women and children only, while the other took it to mean women and children first, but men when no women or children were available.

Amazingly, with hundreds of passengers on board, there were times when the crew was frustrated in their attempts to find people to put into the boats. And I have yet to understand in my own mind how this could be, though I have read many accounts of the incident from various points of view. There were many factors: passengers may have thought they had plenty of time, especially at first when the ship showed no ill effects; some may have simply been waiting for someone to come and get them; no one really knows.

Boat number one was loaded with rich and rotund first class passenger Sir Cosmo Duff Gordon, his wife, her secretary, two American men, a lookout and <sup>six</sup>stokers before being lowered away. That's 12 persons in a boat designed for 40. Later, this would come back to haunt Sir Cosmo who was accused of somehow arranging this. After the ship sank he also allegedly hinted that he

would pay the crewmen if they didn't go back to pick up survivors in the water. He claimed he only made a passing comment in response to a stoker saying he had lost his valuables.

The boarding of lifeboats, for the most part, was urgent but there was no panic. Occasionally women were forcibly put aboard. Occasionally, a couple of men, usually described as Italians or foreigners, would be discovered hiding in covered lifeboats. A few jumped onto boats as they were being lowered. Late in the disaster, warning shots were fired to keep a crowd at bay while one of the last boats was lowered.

A Mister Hoffman, whose real name was Navratil, brought his two small children to a boat, kissed them goodbye, and stepped back forever into the shadows. The children weren't identified for some time. He had abducted them in Nice from his estranged wife and had planned to raise them in America under an assumed name.

After the 16 wooden lifeboats were gone, the crew set about releasing the four Englehardt boats with collapsible canvas sides. They were lashed in ridiculous positions far above the boat deck. Only two of them were launched. As the bow sank deeper and water washed upon the decks suddenly, taking people with it, the other two boats simply floated off. In this manner some of the crew (including Lightoller) were saved as they swam to the boats and used them as rafts.

One man who got into a launched lifeboat and survived... and lived to regret it... was Bruce Ismay. The Titanic was really owned by an American Company headed by J.P. Morgan. Ostensibly though, the ship was British and operated by Britain's White Star Line. Easily disliked Bruce Ismay was the president. He was a short fussy gentleman who like to impress people with his importance. The night of the disaster he helped load people into boats,

sometimes annoying the crew in the process. After there were no more women or children in sight, he climbed into one of the final lifeboats.

There was a great outcry later that the president of the company had survived while many others had died. Some said he should have been the very last to take a seat in a lifeboat. Besides, his company was to blame for not having enough lifeboats. Ismay became a scapegoat, retired a year later and lived out his life as an outcast.

Captain Smith, who was beloved by crew and passengers alike, at least had the good sense to go down with the ship. Because of that, he was mostly lionized even though he deserves a good deal of blame for allowing the incident to happen in the first place. The ice warnings were numerous and consistent, showing a huge presence directly in the path of the ship, yet the Titanic never even slowed down. Perhaps the captain just didn't put it all together. Maybe he thought the ice would be seen in plenty of time on such an unbelievably clear night. No one knows.

Some said Smith stayed on the bridge until the very end. Others, that he dove off just before the bridge went under. His last reported words were "Be British boys. Be British." One rumor was that he shot himself, but this is probably a confusion with First Officer Murdoch. According to a couple of witnesses Murdoch shot one or two people for trying to get into the last lifeboat. He then addressed those on deck, saying "Gentlemen, each man for himself, Good-bye." With that he gave a military salute and fired a bullet into his head.

A major question was whether or not there had been any class discrimination in filling the lifeboats. The answer, in my opinion, is no, at least not on purpose. Probably there was just a lack of organization. American regulations required immigrants to be separated from others for health reasons. Doors and

gates barred many third class passengers from going up to where the boats were. Some forced their way. Some waited in vain for instructions. Others were led up to the boats by stewards. Still, there is reason to argue that not enough was done. Ninety-four percent of first and second class women and children were saved. but only 42 percent in third class.

There is a song sung by schoolchildren still today in some places, which describes the event:

Oh, they built a ship Titanic  
to sail the ocean blue  
And they thought they had a ship  
that the water wouldn't go through

One verse goes like this:

Irish people came aboard  
with very little dough  
so they put them down below  
where they'd be the first to go

An enduring legend has been that of the Titanic's band. They immediately started playing as the disaster began to unfold to calm the passengers. Some say they played until the very last moment. Witnesses agreed that the music was mostly snappy and upbeat. Many reputable survivors swore the band played "Nearer My God To Thee" as the final minutes of the ship passed. In a later interview Harold Bride said the band played "Autumn" in the final seconds. There is an Episcopal hymn called Autumn - two lines of which are "Hold me up in mighty waters; Keep my eyes on things above." Most historians now believe, however, that Bride probably meant "Songe d'Automne," a popular dance hall tune in 1912. No band members survived. Their widows were later billed for the loss of the uniforms.

Another legend is that one man sneaked onto a lifeboat by dressing in women's clothing. At least six first class gentlemen were accused of this, without justification. It actually was a young Irish lad named Daniel Buckley.

He said Mrs. Astor had put a shawl over him to keep him from being tossed out after he and some others from third class had crashed a lifeboat.

Another legend concerns stoker Frank "Lucks" Towers. He supposedly survived the sinking of the Titanic without injury, but his troubles were just beginning. Two years later he miraculously survived the sinking of the Empress of Ireland on the St. Lawrence River, virtually alone. His next job was aboard the Lusitania where he was heard to shout "Now what!" when the torpedo struck. He swam to a lifeboat, vowing with every stroke to take up farming.

About 705 people survived the Titanic, thanks to the Carpathia. It was 58 miles away and came as fast as it possibly could, putting its own safety into jeopardy. Just after daylight on the morning of the 15th it began picking up survivors. They arrived in New York on Wednesday night, accompanied by a horrific thunderstorm. Throngs of people were on hand, including numerous representatives of the sensationalistic press. The Senate investigation got under way Thursday morning.

There could have been more survivors. Remember the Californian, whose radio operator went to bed 10 minutes before the collision? There is evidence it was only 10 miles away or less. Some on the Titanic had reported seeing a ship on the horizon. The Californian was at a complete stop and also reported seeing a ship. It even tried to get in touch with it by Morse lamp. Eight white rockets were fired from it. When informed the Captain, Stanley Lord, always asked what color. Colored rockets were sometimes used as private signals. The captain remained interested but not overly concerned. It's not clear if he considered the white rockets distress signals, as he surely should have. In any event he never woke the radio man or went in the direction of the other ship. The Californian didn't find out what happened until the next morning. Reportedly some members of the crew were outraged. They were the ones

who later broke the story.

In any event, entire books have been written about the incident. Captain Lord has his defenders, but the evidence is damning. Either he was incredibly slow and didn't put all the facts together or he knew something was up and didn't respond, out of a fear of the icy conditions or a simple desire not to get involved.

In the summer of 1985 an ocean explorer named Robert Ballard headed a team which found the Titanic. He took pictures then returned a year later and went down 2½ miles to take a look himself. With the exact location of the ship finally revealed, it became clear that the Californian had been obscenely close to the Titanic, perhaps as little as five miles - her captain had claimed 18.

Something else was also cleared up by Ballard. Many survivors had claimed that the Titanic had broken in two before sinking, but this was dismissed. It turns out that's exactly what happened.

With all the lifeboats gone and the ship sinking further and further, bow first, 1500 people instinctively moved farther and farther toward the stern. As the angle became more severe, giant boilers, grand staircases, crystal chandeliers, and a brand new Renault motor car all went audibly crashing toward the front. Giant propellers in the rear were lifted out of the water. Too steep to stand, many jumped off the boat into the icy water. Under tremendous pressure, the front two-thirds of the boat tore away from the stern. The back part righted itself for a short time and then followed. The iceberg was hit at 11:40. The final trace of the ship was gone by 2:20.

In the lifeboats there was a fear that the sinking would cause a suction and pull everyone under. Therefore they had pulled far away from the ship. There was an incredible scene played out as 1500 people cried out, gasped for air, and either drowned or died from the 29 degree water. Most lifeboats stayed

away for fear of being swamped by the scores of people in the water.

After the Titanic, things were different. Society was different. Outdated regulations were different. A group was formed to patrol the North Atlantic and report on ice. That group became the Coast Guard, which each year still drops a wreath on the location of the disaster.

Perhaps the strangest part of the whole affair concerns a writer <sup>named</sup> Morgan Robertson. He was an American who wrote a book in 1898 called Futility. He claimed to be inspired by an "astral writing partner." Fourteen years before the Titanic disaster, his book described an incident in which an immense liner crossed the Atlantic in April and collided with an iceberg. Both the real and fictional ships were British, both had very similar dimensions, both had the same top speed, both were struck on the same starboard side. He called his ship the Titan.

He later wrote a book about a world war that began when Japanese planes bombed American harbors in Manila and Hawaii on a December morning. Called Beyond the Spectrum, the book described a global air war (fought with planes which did not exist at the time), Japanese internment camps in America, and what he called sun bombs which were capable of burning everything for miles around.

Finally, perhaps the builders of the Titanic should have listened to the writers at the Belfast Morning News. In an editorial around the time of the unveiling in the summer of 1911, they wrote:

"It is difficult to understand why the owners and builders named this ship Titanic. The Titans were a mythological race who came to believe they'd conquered nature, who

thought they'd achieved power and learning greater than Zeus himself, to their ultimate ruin. He smote the strong and daring Titans with thunderbolts; and their final abiding place was in some limbo beneath the lowest depths of the Tartarus, a sunless abyss below Hades."

In retrospect, maybe that's exactly what happened.

SOURCES:

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