

THE TITANIC STORY

By John S. Halbert

Beginning In the latter part of the nineteenth century and continuing for several decades thereafter, millions of Europeans emigrated to the United States to seek a better life. Since in those days, the only way to make the trip was by ship, several large steamship companies regularly sailed huge ocean liners between the seaports of Western Europe and North America. The primary destination was New York City, where most immigrants entered the United States.

One of the biggest and most successful steamship companies, *'The White Star Line'*, was owned by a wealthy American, J.P. Morgan, who operated a fleet of very popular ships through his *'International Mercantile Marine'*, an amalgamation of several shipping companies. Thus, "White Star Line" ships, although flying the British flag, were, in fact, American-owned.

Competition for passengers, especially the lowest and cheapest class, "Third Class," also known as "steerage," was fierce among the shipping companies, as they made most of their profits carrying huge numbers of people tightly-packed, in the least desirable sections of the ships.

* * *

In 1907, The White Star Line designed what would become the most luxurious ships yet seen on the North Atlantic; enormous ocean liners to be called *'Olympic'* and *'Titanic'*. (A third ship, to be named *'Gigantic'*, was projected for later.)

At the vast *'Harland and Wolff Shipyard'* at Belfast, Ireland---the biggest and arguably the most respected shipbuilder in the world---construction of the "Olympic" began in the fall of 1908. Its sister ship, "Titanic", followed several months later. (The two liners were the largest ships ever to be built side-by-side.) Over 14,000 skilled workmen were employed in their building. The giant new vessels, when completed in three years, would not only be identical, but also the biggest ships in the world.

* * *

The splendid new Titanic, when ready for sea-trials in April, 1912, was 882 1/2 feet long and 92 1/2-feet wide. The shipyard had added some improvements to the Titanic over the first ship of the pair, increasing its weight by about a thousand tons, which made the Titanic the single biggest ship in the world. The monstrous new liner towered eleven stories above the water, was topped by four huge smokestacks (called "funnels"), and was registered at 46,328 tons. (Her actual weight was 66,000 tons.) A walking trip around all her decks entailed seven miles. The Titanic was built to an unheard-of standard of luxury for the day. She was capable of carrying 2,400 passengers in three classes: "First Class", "Second Class", and "Third Class" ("Steerage"), plus a crew that numbered about 860.

The Titanic featured, along with her sister, the Olympic, the first swimming pool ever

installed in a ship. Other facilities for the First Class passengers included three elevators, a fully-equipped gymnasium, a Turkish Bath, even a racquetball court! There were public rooms including lounges, smoking rooms and a "Reading and Writing Room" for the ladies. Second Class accommodations were only slightly less elaborate; and included an elevator. Even Third Class on the two vessels were far and away above anything provided for steerage passengers in other ships. The Titanic was the ultimate in ocean liners. Nothing was spared in making the new ship the last word in ocean-going luxury. It was said that more care and effort was put into the Titanic than with any other ship, before or since.

The new liner was powered by 29 boilers, each as large as a two-story house, that supplied steam to a pair of colossal "reciprocating" engines and a revolutionary turbine---a propulsion plant that totalled 46,000 horsepower, delivered through three shafts to a trio of huge propellers at the stern. Everything about the Titanic was on a stupendous scale. Each reciprocating engine, for example, weighed over 1,000 tons, was three stories tall and 75 feet long. Each of the two reciprocating crankshafts weighed 110 tons. Any one of the Titanic's four smokestacks was large enough to hold two locomotives side-by-side at the same time---with plenty of room to spare.

Since the new ship was considered to be "unsinkable", she carried only enough lifeboats for a fraction of her rated capacity of passengers and crew, a fact that would have serious and tragic repercussions later.

* * *

The Titanic was ready for her first trip in April, 1912. In those days, a new ship's first voyage, called the "Maiden Voyage" (especially for the world's largest ship) was a high social event of the first order. Titanic began her maiden voyage at noon on Wednesday, April 10, 1912. Aboard were some of the richest and most famous people of the day. She sailed from Southampton, England for New York, with over 2,200 passengers and crew on board. After brief stops at Cherbourg, France, and Queenstown, Ireland, the Titanic pointed her bow southwestward. As the days went by, it became clear that the Titanic was not only the biggest, but also the most glamorous ship in the world. Even the immigrants in steerage enjoyed the highest standard of accommodation most of them had ever known. Hundreds of stewards and stewardesses ministered to each and every whim of the pampered passengers.

* * *

By Sunday, April 14, passengers and crew alike were starting to look forward to their arrival in New York, scheduled for Wednesday morning. But on the bridge, Captain Edward J. Smith and his officers began receiving disquieting radio messages from other ships concerning a mass of floating ice that was reportedly lying ahead of the Titanic. The captain, however, confident he could spot any ice in time to evade it, continued on his course. Throughout the day on that Sunday, the great ship pressed on westward at a speed of 22-knots, about 26 miles per hour. In the late afternoon, the temperature of the air and the water started to drop---important clues that they were approaching ice. Nevertheless, the Titanic pushed onward at nearly full speed. Indeed, that afternoon more boilers were lit off that fed more steam to the engines that turned the propellers faster and faster as the day became evening, then a brilliant, star-studded night. The ocean was calm, and there was no moon.

* * *

It was getting on toward 11:40 P.M., when lookouts sighted something directly ahead of the Titanic. The officer in charge ordered the steering wheel turned hard over, but it was too late---the liner slammed into a huge block of ice, called an "iceberg." The granite-hard ice, weighing millions of tons, punched a series of holes in the hull along the right---called the "starboard" side of the Titanic---below the waterline. Torrents of water began to gush through the breaches into the forepart of the ship. No one had ever considered the possibility of an injury such as the tears that had opened up several of the forward watertight compartments.

At first, there was no real alarm, either among the crew or the passengers. After all, hadn't the Titanic been described as "unsinkable?" Someone had even said "God himself could not sink this ship!" With all the watertight doors closed, and depending on the watertight "bulkheads" that divided the ship into compartments to hold back the flooding, at first there appeared to be no cause for concern. But in a few minutes, strange things began to be seen and heard in the forward part of the ship. A crewman, investigating a curious hissing sound, discovered that, far below, water was rushing in so fast that air was being forced out under tremendous pressure.* Soon, water was rising in several boiler rooms, forcing the engineers and firemen to abandon their posts. It was now determined that the Titanic was taking on water forward in nearly one-third of her length. Captain Smith ordered the lifeboats uncovered and swung out, to be filled with women and children.

The problem now facing the officers was the lack of enough lifeboats. With safety appliances for less than 1,200 people, and with over 2,200 on board, this meant that there was a serious shortage. At first, since many believed the Titanic could not sink, a number of her lifeboats went away only partially-filled. Only as it became obvious that the ship was actually sinking, did the boats fill to capacity. By that time, it was too late, and in a little more than 2 1/2 hours, the Titanic stood on end and disappeared beneath the surface. Over 1,500 men, women and children went down with the ship or froze to death in the freezing water. It was the worst commercial shipping disaster up to that time.

Included among the lost passengers were some of the most famous people of the day, including John Jacob Astor, one of the world's wealthiest men, Harry Molson of the big Canadian brewery, and Isidor Strauss, founder of '*Macy's Department Store*'. Out of the more than 2,200 people on board, only 705 survived in what few lifeboats the Titanic carried. They were picked up from the freezing ocean the next morning by the rescue ship '*Carpathia*', which had been summoned by radio the distress signals of the Titanic's heroic chief radio operator, who went down with the ship, along with the captain and most of the rest of the crew.

* * *

Investigations, both in the United States and in England, found that the reason the Titanic ran into the iceberg was largely due to a lack of attention by the captain and some of the other officers to the impending danger and who had not fully appreciated the several warning messages telling them of the big ice field lying directly in the Titanic's path. The investigation by the U.S. Senate was held because the ship was American-owned and because many of the passengers who had lost their lives in the disaster were American citizens.

It was revealed that another ship, a small freighter called the '*Californian*' (which, ironically, was owned by the same Americans who owned the Titanic), was stopped by ice only a few miles

away, but her radio operator was asleep and its officers had failed to recognize the significance of eight distress rockets the Titanic fired that they allegedly saw but misunderstood. Thereafter, International Law required that ships take ice warnings seriously and to man the radio at all times. Other measures were set up for An *'International Ice Patrol* to keep track of floating ice. Shipping lanes were moved farther south as a precaution, and---most importantly---all ships were now required to carry lifeboats for everyone on board.+

* * *

Today, the Titanic lies in about 12,600 feet of water, 450 miles southeast of Cape Race, Newfoundland. The wreck was discovered in 1985 by a joint team of Americans and Frenchmen after a long and arduous search. The ship was found to have broken in half, with the main forward section about 1,900 feet from the stern, or rearmost part. An immense debris field fills the space between the two main sections. The forepart is in relatively better condition, although mostly covered by rust and with nearly all the wood having been eaten away over the decades by marine animals. The four huge smokestacks are gone, doubtless torn away during the wrenching 2 1/2 mile descent to the ocean floor. The foremast lies across the remains of the bridge, most of which was ripped away during the long fall to the bottom. The only recognizable feature on the bridge, apart from the jumbled remains of the starboard wing-bridge, is the brass steering wheel pedestal that stands shiny and alone among the disorderly piles of rubble that litter the bridge area. A bare outline of the wooden wheelhouse still remains visible on the deck.

In 1986, a group of American scientists visited the wreck in a submarine-like machine and sent a robot on a picture-taking mission deep inside the hull and discovered light fixtures in near-perfect condition still hanging from the ceiling. But much of the rest of the ship was found to be badly deteriorated and showed signs in some areas of imminent collapse. (*Recent dives to the wreck have noted that portions of the upper Boat Deck and the Promenade Decks have begun to sag downward onto lower decks.*) Near where the ship had broken in half, the decks were collapsed downward on top of one another like a stack of steel pancakes. Rivers of rust run down the side of the ship onto the seabed. The bow is deeply imbedded in a mound of muddy sediment, hiding from view the damage caused by the iceberg.

The stern section, by contrast, is badly shattered, evidence that it struck the bottom with considerably more force than that experienced by the bow section. The sides of the ship are splayed outward, and the aft decks are peeled up and over the stern. The three propellers are barely visible in the mud. The explorers discovered that the stern is surrounded by ripped-up chunks of decks and blown-out sides and sections of the bottom of the ship, along with twisted cranes, parts of the engines, ventilators, lifeboat davits, smaller pieces of wreckage and other assorted debris that fell out of the ship during the sinking.

* * *

Based on the evidence collected on the ocean bottom by the earlier explorations and by more recent expeditions to the shipwreck, the scientists have been able to reconstruct what likely happened as the Titanic sank. They believe that, as the bow of the ship tilted lower and lower, the stern rose out of the water, placing an unbearable strain on the hull structure. At some point, the hull gave way and tore into two parts. Survivors' accounts consistently told of "loud sounds

of wrenchings and tearings." Others recalled noises such as "a roar and a sensation of buckling, great crashing noises," in the moments just before she vanished. Other eyewitnesses said they saw the Titanic stand against the night, then fall back momentarily to a nearly level position, before becoming vertical again and disappearing. All these accounts would be consistent with the sights and sounds of a big ship breaking in two. Based on the evidence, it would appear that the hull broke open through the front of the engine room, with the tear continuing upward through the aft main staircase. Heavy pieces of machinery fell through the gap, and indeed, five boilers and the forward steam-cylinders of both reciprocating engines, plus other heavy objects from the Number-One Boiler Room and the Engine Room were found outside the hull in the mud.

* * *

Proposals have been put forth from time to time from various groups and individuals to raise the "Titanic," but the condition of the ship is, by now, too fragile to survive such an undertaking. Therefore, it is likely that the remains of the Titanic, in 1912 the most fabulous ship in the world, the biggest, costliest, best, finest---man's greatest engineering achievement---will forever remain on the ocean floor as evidence of what happens when men and women put their entire trust into something mechanical that fails them. *(To this day, the Titanic remains the biggest ship in regular service to ever sink on the high seas in peacetime.)*

Over time, it is expected that the deterioration of the ship, which is accelerating, will, in a few hundred years, render the remains to where it will be only a smudgy stain on the ocean floor.

*Walter Lord, 'A Night to Remember', Henry Holt & Co., 1955

+Some other sources derived from the U.S. Senate Hearings and the British Board of Trade Hearings.