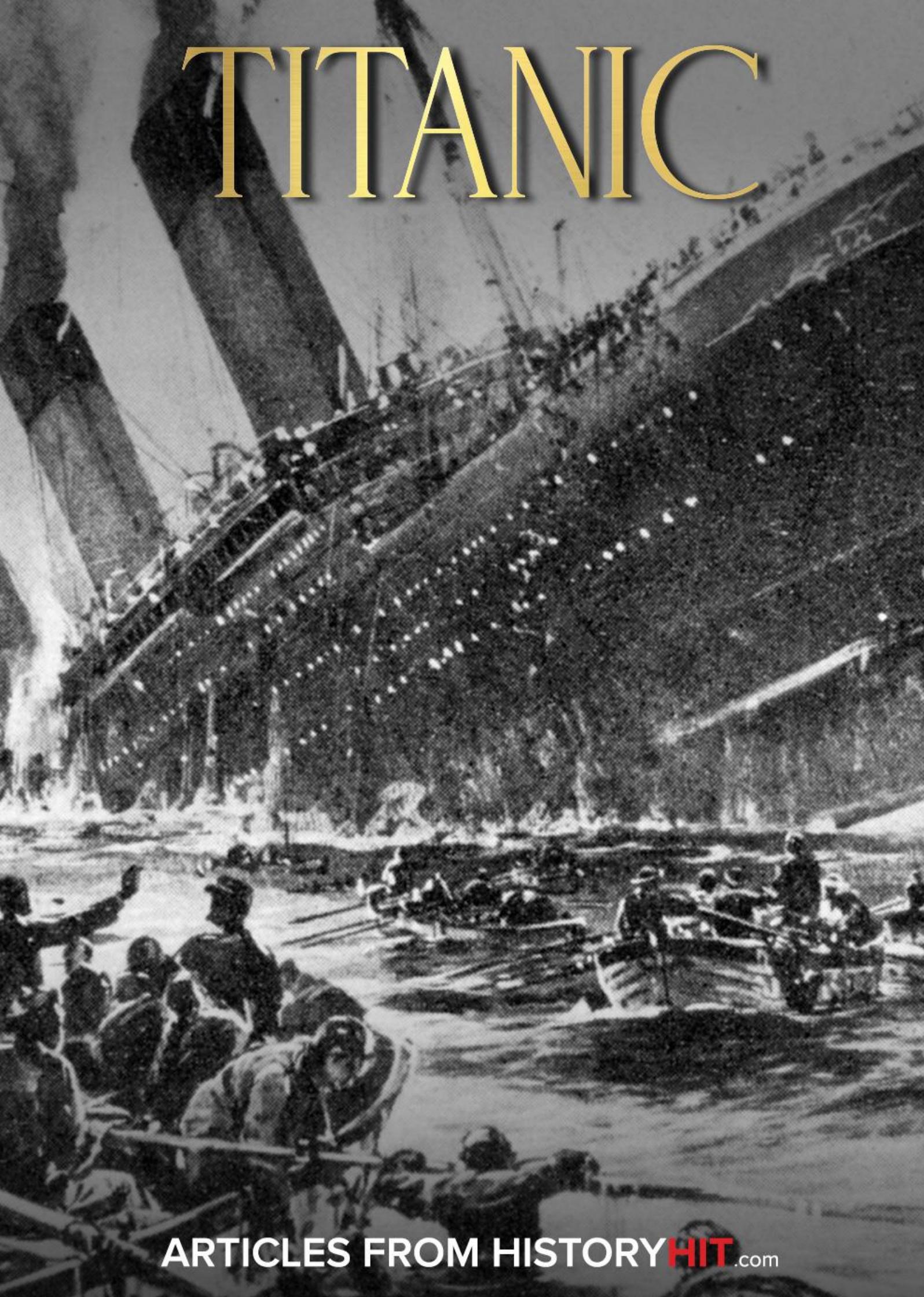


TITANIC



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At noon on 10 April 1912, crowds gathered at Southampton to watch the maiden voyage of the World's largest ship. *RMS Titanic*.

A sleek, modern luxurious liner that was offering a safe and fast crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. Titanic was said to be invincible.

She cruised down Southampton waters on her maiden voyage to North America, watched by large crowds. But she would never reach New York.

Barely 5 days after leaving Southampton she was gone, swallowed up by the Atlantic after striking an iceberg. The maritime disaster that struck Titanic has made her the most famous ship in history, with many myths emerging about what happened that fateful night on 14/15 April.

This eBook aims to sort the fact from the fiction about this maritime disaster.

Included also are two articles about the actual worst maritime disaster in history: the sinking of 'Hitler's Titanic', the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, 75 years ago.

Detailed articles explain key topics, edited from various History Hit resources.

Included in this eBook are articles written for History Hit by leading historians including Titanic expert Tim Maltin and World War Two author Roger Moorhouse.

Features written by History Hit staff past and present are also included.

You can access all these articles on historyhit.com.

Titanic was compiled by Tristan Hughes.

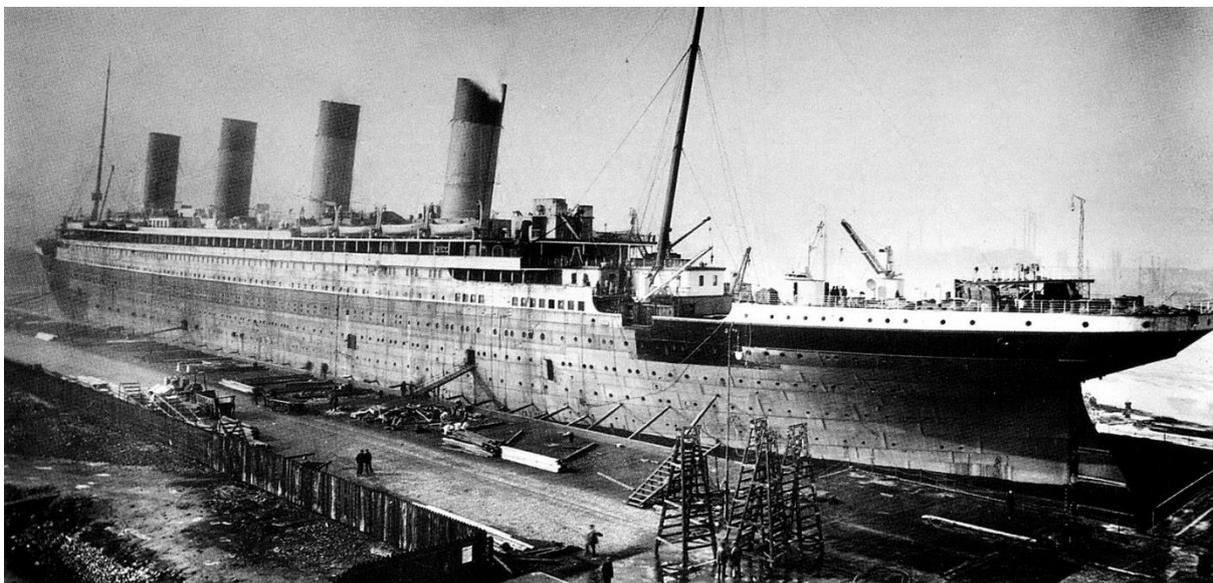


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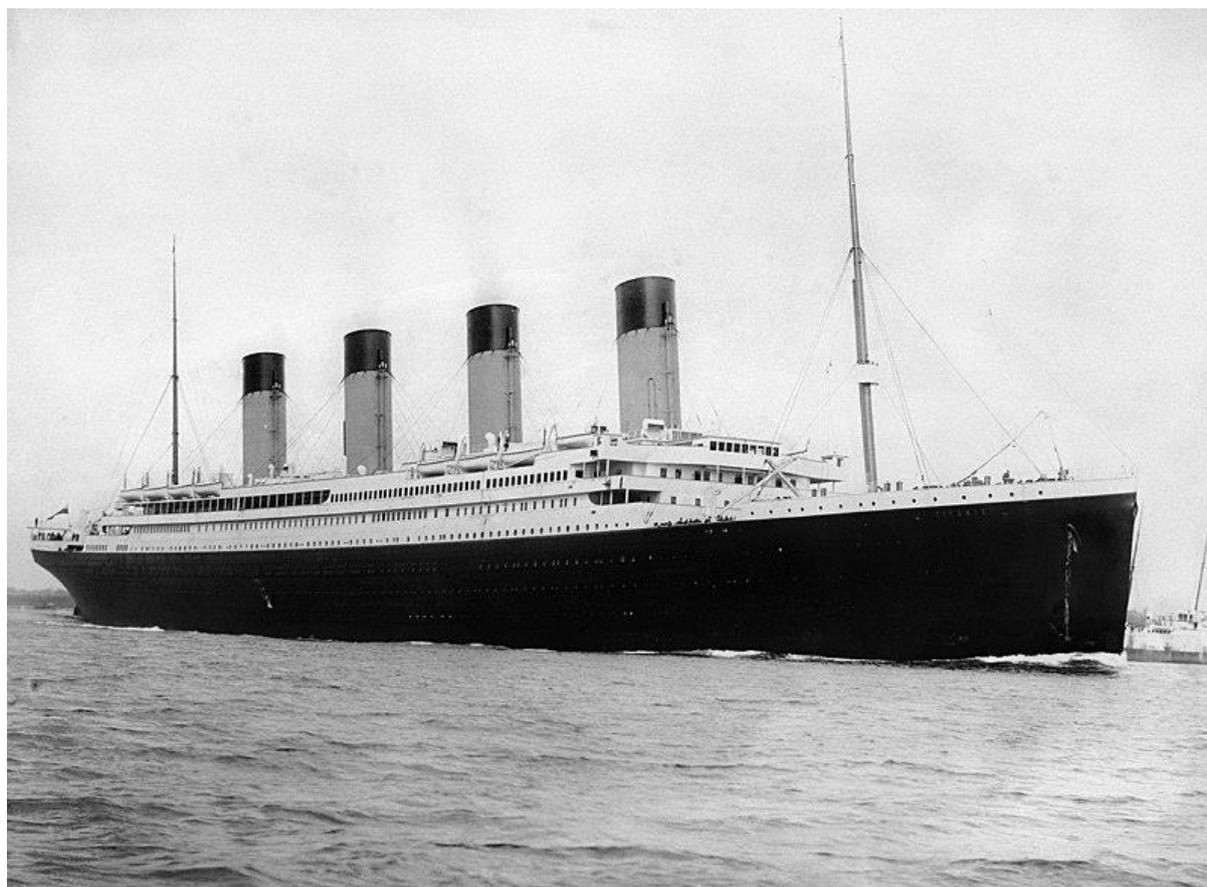
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The Titanic



RMS Titanic leaves Southampton. 10 April 1912.

When Did the Titanic Sink? A Timeline of the Ship's Disastrous Maiden Voyage

By Tristan Hughes

On 10 April 1912 *RMS Titanic* – the World's largest ship - cruised down Southampton waters at the start of her maiden voyage to North America, watched by large crowds. But barely 5 days later she was gone, swallowed up by the Atlantic after striking an iceberg.

Below is a timeline of the ship's ill-fated maiden voyage.

10 April 1912

12:00 *RMS Titanic* left Southampton, watched by crowds who had come to watch the start of the maiden voyage of the World's largest ship.

18:30 The *Titanic* arrived at Cherbourg, France, where it picked up more passengers.

20:10 *Titanic* departed Cherbourg for Queenstown, Ireland.

On her launch, the Titanic became the largest movable man-made object. She was 269 metres long and 28 metres wide. From keel to bridge she was 32 metres high, 53 metres to the top of the stacks.

11 April

11:30 The *Titanic* anchored in Queenstown before it commenced its voyage across the Atlantic to North America.

13:30 After the last tender left *RMS Titanic*, the ship departed Queenstown and began its ill-fated voyage across the Atlantic.



RMS Titanic leaves Queenstown. 11 April 1912.

14 April

19:00 – 19:30 Second Officer Charles Lightoller testified a drop of 4 degrees Celsius as *RMS Titanic* crossed from the warmer waters of the Gulf Stream to the much colder waters of the Labrador Current.

Titanic's captain, Edward Smith, dined with the passengers. Contrary to the myths, he did not get drunk.

A lifeboat drill scheduled for the 14 April was called off, possibly because Captain Edward Smith wished to deliver a final Sunday service before retirement. The ship sank that night.

23:39 The lookouts in the Crow's Nest of *RMS Titanic* spotted an iceberg ahead of them. Immediately they rang the warning bell three times. This meant iceberg dead ahead.

The engines were ordered to stop, as the crew desperately attempted to evade a collision.

23:40 The Titanic struck the iceberg on its starboard side. The iceberg's damage to Titanic appeared relatively light at first. The iceberg had only scraped the ship.

What was significant, however, was the length of the damage. The 'side-swipe' collision had occurred along 200 feet of Titanic's length. 5 water-tight compartments were damaged and started taking in water.

The crew immediately had the watertight doors of the damaged compartments sealed.

23:59 Just before midnight *RMS Titanic* came to a halt. Excess steam was vented to prevent the boilers in the damaged compartments from exploding when coming into contact with the sea.

Around the same time the order was given to prepare the lifeboats and wake the passengers.

15 April

00:22 As the Titanic started taking on a starboard list Thomas Andrews, the ship's designer who was onboard, confirmed that the damage was too extensive and that Titanic would sink. Titanic was capable of staying afloat with 4 watertight compartments being breached, but it couldn't sustain 5.

Andrews estimated that they would have 1-2 hours before Titanic submerged beneath the waves. Within minutes Titanic's radio operators sent out the first distress call.

The nearby *SS Californian* did not pick up the distress call as their sole radio operator had just gone to bed.

00:45 By quarter to one the lifeboats on board *RMS Titanic* were readied for loading. So far only two boats had been launched. Though each had the capacity for up to 70 people, less than 40 passengers were on board each.

The first distress rocket was launched.

SS Californian spotted the distress rocket and their crew tried to signal the Titanic with morse lamps. Titanic would respond, but neither ship could read the morse because the still, freezing air was scrambling the lamp signals.

00:49 *RMS Carpathia* picked up the distress call of Titanic by accident. The ship headed for Titanic's location, but it was 58 miles away. It would take 4 hours for Carpathia to reach Titanic.

01:00 Mrs Strauss refused to leave her husband, as women and children were loaded onto the lifeboats first. She gave her place on the lifeboat to her maid.

As this was unfolding the Titanic orchestra continued playing, trying to keep the passengers calm as the crew lowered them into the lifeboats.

01:15 The water had risen up to Titanic's nameplate.

c.01:30 Lifeboats continued to be launched, each now with more people onboard. Lifeboat 16, for instance, was launched with 53 people.

Meanwhile more ships had responded to Titanic's distress call. *RMS Baltic* and *SS Frankfurt* were on their way. But *SS Californian* had not moved.

01:45 More lifeboats were launched and there was almost a collision as Lifeboat 13 struggled to escape from under Lifeboat 15 as the latter was being lowered.

01:47 Despite being close, *SS Frankfurt* was unable to locate Titanic due to miscalculated coordinates.

01:55 Captain Smith ordered the telegraph operators to abandon their posts and to save themselves. The operators, Harold Bride and Jack Phillips, decided to stay longer and continued sending out transmissions.

02:00 Captain Smith made a futile attempt to call back half-filled lifeboats to allow more passengers on. The attempts failed. The orchestra continued playing.

02:08 The last wireless transmission was sent, but with power fading and the ship within minutes of sinking, the message was unintelligible.

02:10 The last collapsible boats were lowered into the water with passengers onboard. Moments later 4 explosions were heard deep within Titanic.

C.1,500 people were still onboard the ship. Almost all of them were on the stern.

*Around 2,200 people were on board when the Titanic sank in 1912,
but her maximum capacity was around 3,500.*

c.02:15 The stern of *RMS Titanic* broke away from the rest of the ship. Because it was so well sub-divided, it crashed back down into the water. For a moment the people still on the stern thought this meant the stern would stay afloat.

But.

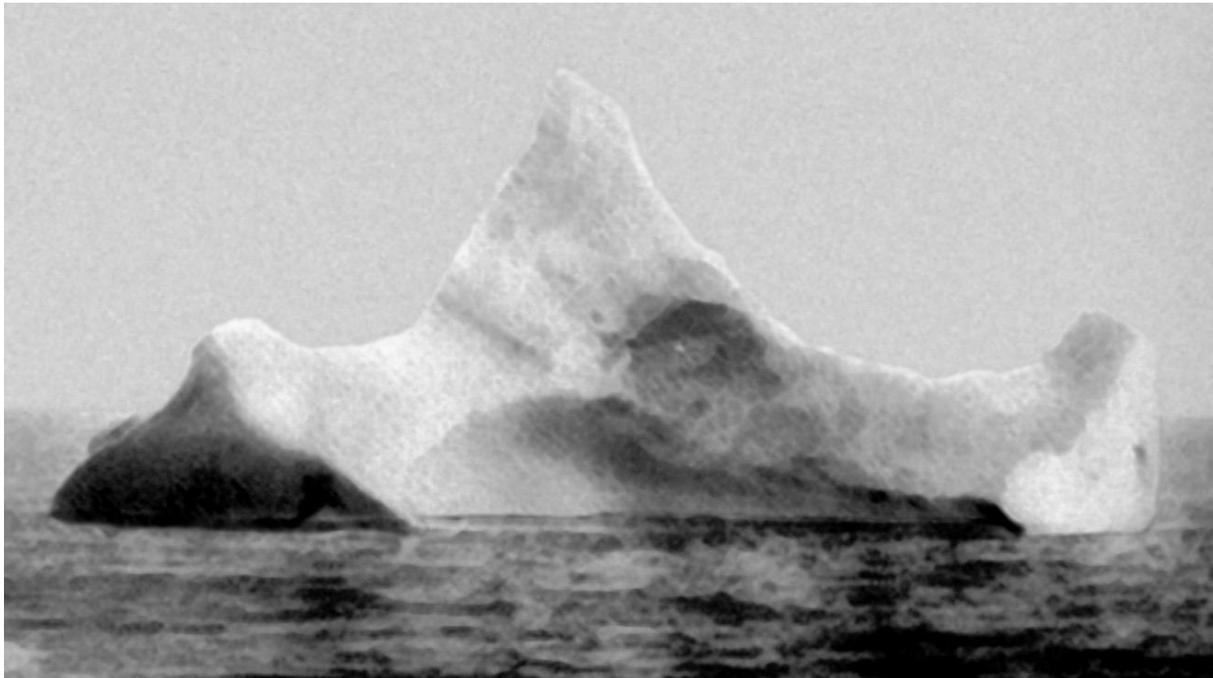
Titanic's submerged, water-saturated bow started to tug the floating stern underwater.

Rather than rise up into the air, the stern slowly – and very quietly - started to sink. One passenger who survived later recalled how he swam off the stern as it started to submerge. He didn't even get his head wet.

02:20 *RMS Titanic's* stern had by now disappeared beneath the water.

The water's freezing temperatures ensured that many survivors in the water died of hypothermia before rescue arrived.

c.04:00 *RMS Carpathia* arrived to rescue the survivors.



The iceberg thought to have been hit by Titanic, photographed on the morning of 15 April 1912. Note the dark spot just along the berg's waterline, which was described by onlookers as a smear of red paint.

The Hidden Cause of the Titanic Disaster: Thermal Inversion and the Titanic

By Tim Maltin

When the Titanic sank on the moonless night of 14/15th April 1912 she was surrounded by icebergs and on the edge of a large ice field. As Captain Rostron of the rescue ship Carpathia explained:

"...about two or three miles from the position of the "Titanic's" wreckage we saw a huge ice-field extending as far as we could see, N.W. to S.E....I sent a Junior Officer to the top of the wheelhouse, and told him to count the icebergs 150 to 200 feet high; I sampled out one or two and told him to count the icebergs of about that size. He counted 25 large ones, 150 to 200 feet high, and stopped counting the smaller ones; there were dozens and dozens all over the place"

And this was confirmed by Titanic's Quartermaster Hitchens:

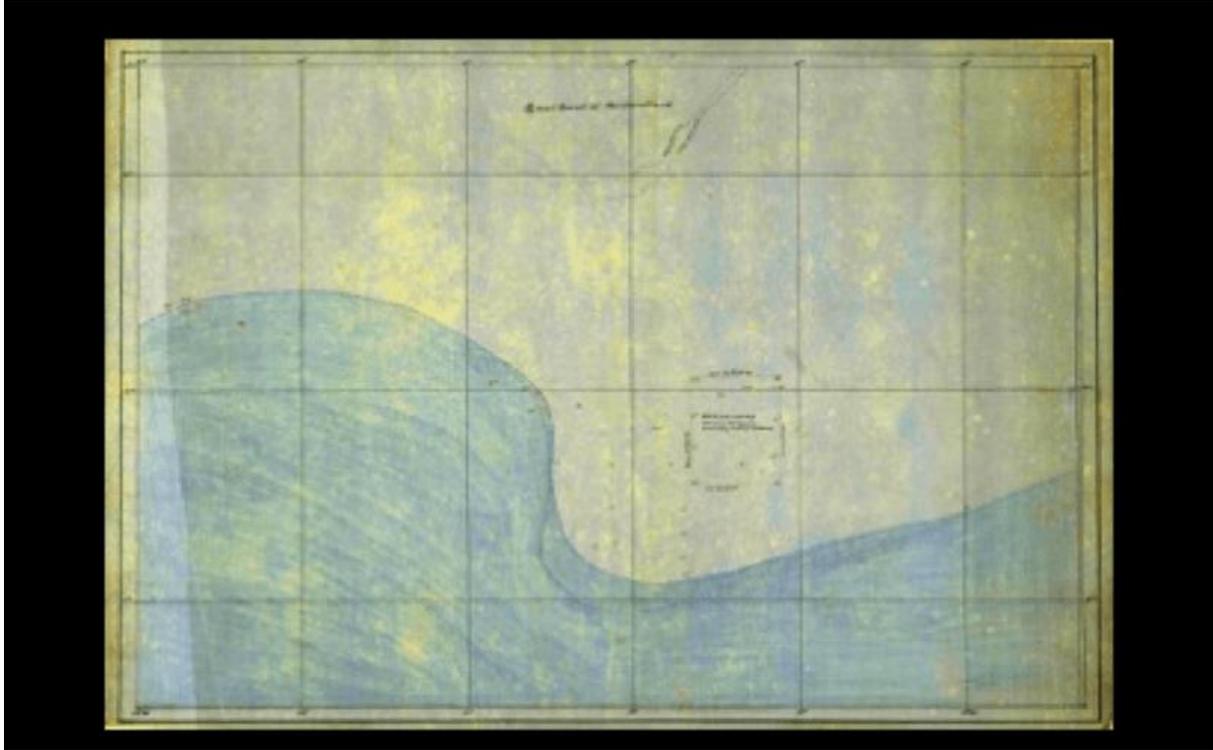
"In the morning, when it turned daybreak, we could see icebergs everywhere; also a field of ice about 20 to 30 miles long, which it took the Carpathia 2 miles to get clear from when it picked the boats up. The icebergs was up on every point of the compass, almost."

These giant bergs and field ice were flowing southwards in the meltwater of the swollen Labrador Current, bringing freezing air up to a height of the tallest of these bergs into an area of sea normally occupied by the 12 degrees Celsius Gulf Stream, like a cold river in flood, bursting its banks and flowing over much warmer land.

The sharpness of the boundary between the warm waters of the Gulf Stream and the freezing waters of the Labrador Current, and its proximity to Titanic's wreck site, was recorded after the disaster by the SS Minia, who whilst drifting and collecting bodies near Titanic's wreck site noted in her log:

"Northern edge of Gulf Stream well defined. Water changed from 36 to 56 [degrees Fahrenheit] in half mile".

The rescue ship Mackay Bennett, also recovering bodies in 1912, drew the following map of water temperatures at Titanic's wreck site, which also records this sharp boundary between the warm waters of the Gulf Stream and the cold waters of the Labrador current, and its proximity to Titanic's wreck site (the red crosses mark where the bodies of victims were found floating, and recovered):



The sudden temperature change as Titanic crossed from the warm waters of the Gulf Stream into the much colder waters of the Labrador Current was recorded by her Second Officer, Charles Lightoller, who testified that there was a drop in temperature of four degrees Celsius in the half hour between 7pm and 7.30pm on the night of the fatal collision, and a drop in temperature of ten degrees Celsius in the two hours between 7pm and 9pm that night, when the air approached freezing.

The cold icebergs and icy meltwater in the Labrador Current had chilled the formerly warm air, which had previously been heated to approximately 10 degrees Celsius by the warm waters of the Gulf Stream; so the air column at Titanic's crash site was freezing from sea level, up to a height of about 60 meters – almost the height of the tallest icebergs, and then about 10 degrees Celsius above that height.

Thermal inversion

This arrangement of warm air over freezing air at Titanic's crash site is known as a thermal inversion. This was observed from the lifeboats as Titanic sank, when the warm smoke from the sinking ship was seen to rise up through the cold air near the sea surface quickly, in a column; but when it hit the capping inversion, the smoke was cooler than the much warmer air above and so immediately stopped rising, flattening out at the top of the column.

This was observed by Titanic First Class passenger Philipp Edmund Mock from Lifeboat Number 11:

"We were probably a mile away when the Titanic's lights went out. I last saw the ship with her stern high in the air going down.

After the noise I saw a huge column of black smoke slightly lighter than the sky rising high into the sky and then flattening out at the top like a mushroom."

Strong thermal inversions like this one are highly significant for navigation as they cause light to bend strongly downwards, around the curvature of the earth, allowing you to see much further than normal and making distant objects appear nearer than they really are.

This phenomenon, known as super-refraction, frequently occurs over cold water, especially near the boundary with warmer water or land. The light rays bending more strongly downwards than the curvature of the earth have the effect of raising the level of the apparent sea horizon, producing a superior mirage of the distant sea.

In the daylight a superior mirage over sea ice looks like this (page below):



But at night the miraging on the horizon appears like a narrow bank of haze, due to light scattering in the very long air path over the unusual distance you can see for, and the trapping of light in a duct beneath the inversion. Titanic's lookouts noticed this apparent haze around the horizon, despite the remarkable clarity of the night, and they testified that the fatal iceberg appeared to come out of this haze at the last moment:

Reginald Lee, Titanic Lookout:

2401. What sort of a night was it?

– A clear, starry night overhead, but at the time of the accident there was a haze right ahead.

2402. At the time of the accident a haze right ahead?

– A haze right ahead – in fact it was extending more or less round the horizon. There was no moon.

2403. And no wind?

– And no wind whatever, barring what the ship made herself.

2404. Quite a calm sea?

– Quite a calm sea.

2405. Was it cold?

– Very, freezing.

2408. Did you notice this haze which you said extended on the horizon when you first came on the look-out, or did it come later?

– It was not so distinct then – not to be noticed. You did not really notice it then – not on going on watch, but we had all our work cut out to pierce through it just after we started. My mate happened to pass the remark to me. He said, “Well; if we can see through that we will be lucky.” That was when we began to notice there was a haze on the water. There was nothing in sight.

2409. You had been told, of course, to keep a careful look-out for ice, and you were trying to pierce the haze as much as you could?

– Yes, to see as much as we could.

2441. Can you give us any idea of the breadth [of the iceberg]? What did it look like? It was something which was above the forecastle?

– It was a dark mass that came through that haze and there was no white appearing until it was just close alongside the ship, and that was just a fringe at the top.

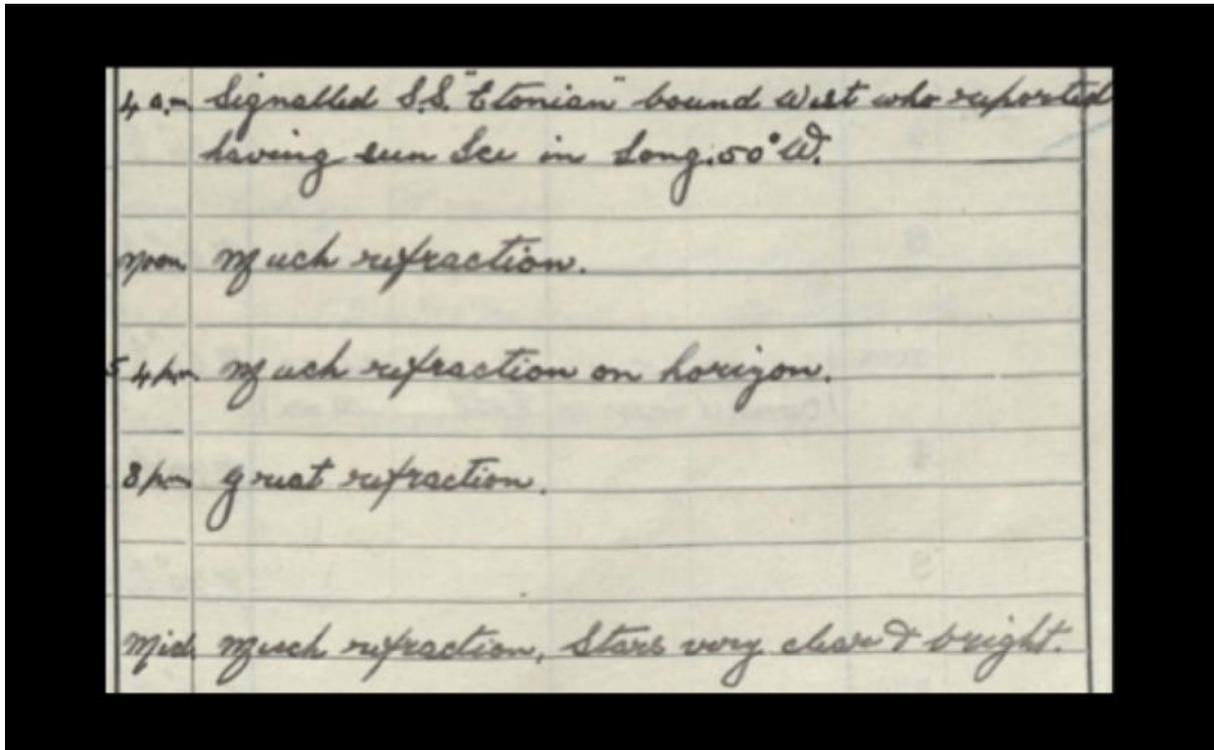
2442. It was a dark mass that appeared, you say?

– Through this haze, and as she moved away from it, there was just a white fringe along the top.

2447. Quite right; that is where she hit, but can you tell us how far the iceberg was from you, this mass that you saw?

– It might have been half a mile or more; it might have been less; I could not give you the distance in that peculiar light.

Several ships in the area where Titanic sank recorded seeing mirages at the horizon or noted the refraction on the horizon, including the Wilson Line steamer Marengo, bound from New York to Hull under the command of Captain G. W. Owen. On the night of the collision and sinking of the Titanic on the 14/15th April 1912 she was in the same longitude as the Titanic and only one degree south, and her log records both the clear, starlit night and the great refraction on the horizon:



Second Class passenger Lawrence Beesley also noticed the very bright stars that night, and the very abnormal weather conditions:

"First of all, the climatic conditions were extraordinary. The night was one of the most beautiful I have ever seen: the sky without a single cloud to mar the perfect brilliance of the stars, clustered so thickly together that in places there seemed almost more dazzling points of light set in the black sky than background of sky itself; and each star seemed, in the keen atmosphere, free from any haze, to have increased its brilliance tenfold and to twinkle and glitter with a staccato flash that made the sky seem nothing but a setting made for them in which to display their wonder. They seemed so near, and their light so much more intense than ever before, that fancy suggested they saw this beautiful ship in dire distress below and all their energies had awakened to flash messages across the black dome of the sky to each other,

telling and warning of the calamity happening in the world beneath...the stars seemed really to be alive and to talk.

The complete absence of haze produced a phenomenon I had never seen before: Where the sky met the sea the line was as clear and definite as the edge of a knife, so that the water and the air never merged gradually into each other and blended to a softened rounded horizon, but each element was so exclusively separate that where a star came low down in the sky near the clear-cut edge of the water-line, it still lost none of its brilliance. As the earth revolved and the water edge came up and covered partially the star, as it were, it simply cut the star in two, the upper half continuing to sparkle as long as it was not entirely hidden, and throwing a long beam of light along the sea to us.

In the evidence before the United States Senate Committee the captain of one of the ships near us that night [Captain Lord of the Californian] said the stars were so extraordinarily bright near the horizon that he was deceived into thinking that they were ships' lights: he did not remember seeing such a night before. Those who were afloat will all agree with that statement: we were often deceived into thinking they were lights of a ship.

And next the cold air! Here again was something quite new to us: there was not a breath of wind to blow keenly round us as we stood in the boat, and because of its continued persistence to make us feel cold; it was just a keen, bitter, icy, motionless cold that came from nowhere and yet was there all the time; the stillness of it – if one can imagine “cold” being motionless and still – was what seemed new and strange.”

Beesley is describing the strange, motionless cold air beneath the thermal inversion, but stars can never really be seen setting on the horizon, as they always become extinct as they approach the real horizon, due to the depth of air one is having to see them through at such a low altitude.

What Beesley was actually seeing was the reflections of the stars on the distant sea surface, reflecting in the miraging duct at the horizon.

Here is a photograph kindly supplied to me by the brilliant mirage photographer Pekka Parviainen. It shows the glitter of sunlight on the distant sea being miraged at the horizon, in much the same way as the reflected starlight on the distant sea surface was being miraged at the horizon the night the Titanic sank, creating the impression that the stars themselves were actually setting on the horizon, sending long beams of light along the sea towards the observers in Titanic's lifeboats:



Titanic's second officer Charles Lightoller also noticed this phenomenon, and he discussed it with First Officer Murdoch as he handed over Titanic's watch prior to the collision:

CHL457. What was said between you [Lightoller and Murdoch]?

– We remarked on the weather, about its being calm, clear. We remarked the distance we could see. We seemed to be able to see a long distance. Everything was very clear. We could see the stars setting down to the horizon.

The false horizon

Like Beesley in the lifeboat, what Murdoch and Lightoller were observing from Titanic's bridge that night was not stars actually setting on the real horizon, but abnormal refraction reflecting starlight on the distant sea below a false horizon,

which raised the apparent sea horizon higher up, behind the icebergs they were looking for, making them even harder to spot than they would normally have been on that starlit night.

It was the combination of this refraction reducing the contrast of icebergs below the false horizon, together with the moonless night that raised the contrast threshold for their detection, plus the unusually high eye heights of the observers on the giant Titanic's bridge and crows nest that increased the dip of the horizon, thus putting the icebergs even farther below the false horizon, that made the icebergs at Titanic's crash site impossible to detect until it was too late to avoid a collision.

Tragedy

Not only did the raised horizon at Titanic's crash site make the icebergs more difficult to spot, but it also caused Captain Lord on the nearby Californian to conclude that the Titanic was a 400ft ship about five miles away, instead of a more than 800ft ship about 10 miles away.

You can see how a raised horizon behind Titanic would have this effect in the below image, where the ship within the horizon appears nearer, and therefore seems smaller than the ship on the horizon; but if you measure the two hulls in the image below you will see that in fact they are both the same size:



The tragic result of this natural deception was that it caused Captain Lord on the Californian to come to the incorrect conclusion that the ship they were watching did not have any wireless:

7093. *What reason have you for thinking that this steamer, a steamer which you say was, at all events, as big as your own, had not got wireless?*

– At 11 o'clock when I saw her the operator told me he had not got anything only the "Titanic." I remarked then, "That is not the 'Titanic," judging from its size and the number of lights about it.

7083. *This steamer had been in sight, the one that fired the rocket, when we sent the last message to the "Titanic," and I was certain that the steamer was not the "Titanic", and the operator said he had not any other steamers, so I drew my conclusion that she had not got any wireless.*

He therefore decided to signal what he thought to be the nearby, small ship, about four miles away, with his powerful electric morse lamp. But his signals were not replied to, as the scintillation caused by the turbulence in the air path along the approximately 10 miles distance between the two ships (which effect Beesley has noticed was causing the stars to appear to be flashing messages across the sky to one another) in fact scrambled the meaning out of the real Morse lamp communications between these two vessels. Captain Lord described this incident as follows:

"She came and lay at half-past 11, alongside of us until, I suppose, a quarter past, within 4 miles of us. We could see everything on her quite distinctly, see her lights. We signalled her, at half-past 11, with the Morse lamp. She did not take the slightest notice of it. That was between half-past 11 and 20 minutes to 12. We signalled her again at 10 minutes past 12, half-past 12, a quarter to 1 o'clock. We have a very powerful Morse lamp. I suppose you can see that about 10 miles, and she was about 4 miles off, and she did not take the slightest notice of it."

We know that in reality these two vessels were about 10 miles apart because in the morning, when the breeze which sprang up with the dawn had dispersed the thermal inversion, restoring normal refraction, it was clear from the rescue ship Carpathia

that the Californian was about 10 miles away, as the Carpathia's Second Officer, James Bisset, recorded on page 291 of his memoirs, "Tramps and Ladies":

"While we had been picking up survivors, in the slowly increasing daylight after 4.30am, we had sighted the smoke of a steamer on the fringe of the pack ice, ten miles away from us to the northwards. She was making no signals, and we paid little attention to her, for we were preoccupied with more urgent matters; but at 6am we had noticed that she was under way and slowly coming towards us". "When I took over the watch on the bridge of the Carpathia at 8am, the stranger was little more than a mile from us, and flying her signals of identification. She was the Leyland Line cargo-steamer Californian, which had been stopped overnight, blocked by ice."

And Bisset's observation of the Californian being 10 miles north of Titanic's wreck site until 6am on 15th April 1912 is corroborated by the following evidence of Captain Moore of the Mount Temple, who raced to Titanic's distress position but found himself on the west side of the ice barrier, while Titanic sank to its east:

JHM276. *"...when I got the position in the morning I got a prime vertical sight; that is a sight taken when the sun is bearing due east. That position gave me 500 9 1/2' west. [10 miles west of Titanic's wreck site at 49.46W]*

JHM289. On which side of the ice pack was the Californian?

– The Californian was to the north, sir. She was to the north of the Carpathia...

JHM290. And you were also cut off from the Carpathia by this ice pack?

– Yes, sir; by this ice pack. He [Californian] was then north of the Carpathia, and he must have been, I suppose, about the same distance to the north of the Carpathia as I was to the westward of her."

Due to the abnormal refraction at Titanic's crash site causing light to bend very strongly downwards, around the curvature of the earth, Captain Lord had first spotted Titanic approaching at about 10.30pm, when she was more than 50km away from the stopped Californian. He noticed that the light he could see right on the horizon [actually Titanic's miraging masthead light at more than 50km distance] "was a most peculiar light":

STL227. – *“When I came off the bridge, at half-past 10, I pointed out to the officer [Third Officer Groves] that I thought I saw a light coming along, and it was a most peculiar light, and we had been making mistakes all along with the stars, thinking they were signals. We could not distinguish where the sky ended and where the water commenced. You understand, it was a flat calm. He said he thought it was a star, and I did not say anything more. I went down below.”*

Groves later studied this strange light himself, just before Titanic’s collision, when she was still about 12 miles away and he realised that the peculiar-looking masthead light now in fact appeared to be two lights:

8143. What lights did you see?

– *At first I just saw what I took to be one light, one white light, but, of course, when I saw her first I did not pay particular attention to her, because I thought it might have been a star rising.*

8144. When do you think you began to pay particular attention to her?

– *About 11.15.*

8145. About five minutes after you first saw her?

– *About five minutes after I first saw her.*

8146. Did you then see more lights than one?

– *About 11.25 I made out two lights – two white lights.*

8147. Two masthead lights?

– *Two white masthead lights.*

This could have been Titanic’s one masthead light, appearing as two in the miraging conditions. An example of this is seen in the following photograph where the single lights on the top of two aerial masts are each multiplied in the miraging conditions. One light above the other could also have been interpreted as the fore masthead and main masthead lights of an approaching ship:



Two aerial masts, with just one light on the top of each, multiply in the miraging conditions in this photograph taken by Pekka Parviainen.

These strange conditions caused Titanic's distress rockets to appear to Californian's Second Officer Herbert Stone to be much lower than they really were:

7921. ...these rockets did not appear to go very high; they were very low lying; they were only about half the height of the steamer's masthead light and I thought rockets would go higher than that.

In fact Titanic's distress rockets were exploding at a height of approximately 600 feet above Titanic, in the warm, normally refracting air above the abnormally refracting duct near the sea, but they were not noticed from Californian until they were seen in the very cold, magnifying air within the optical duct near the sea, when they appeared much brighter.

The effect involved here is very similar to the atmospheric focusing and defocusing that caused the twinkling of the stars which Beesley recorded, and which effectively scrambled Titanic and Californian's Morse lamp signals to each other. There, the cause was random fluctuations in refraction due to slight turbulence in the air; but here the changes in magnification by the atmosphere produced an increase in the

brightness of Titanic's rockets in the cold air near the sea surface, as the glowing rockets sank slowly down into the sea.

This effect was also observed by Earnest Gill, a Greaser on the Californian, as he was having a smoke on deck:

ERG016. What kind of rockets were they? What did they look like?

– *They looked to me to be pale blue, or white.*

ERG017. Which, pale blue or white?

– *It would be apt to be a very clear blue; I would catch it when it was dying [i.e. low down]. I did not catch the exact tint, but I reckon it was white.*

ERG018. Did it look as if the rocket had been sent up and the explosion had taken place in the air and the stars spangled out?

– *Yes, sir; the stars spangled out. I could not say about the stars. I say, I caught the tail end of the rocket.[i.e. when the rocket was low down]*

ERG028. You think it may have been the Titanic?

– *Yes; sir. I am of the general opinion that the crew is, that she was the Titanic.*

At the British Inquiry into the Titanic disaster Gill explained the same phenomenon again, of the rockets only being noticeable as they sank low down near the sea, like falling stars, and his testimony also includes a reference to the false horizon “what appeared to be the water's edge – a great distance away”, which was causing so much confusion that night:

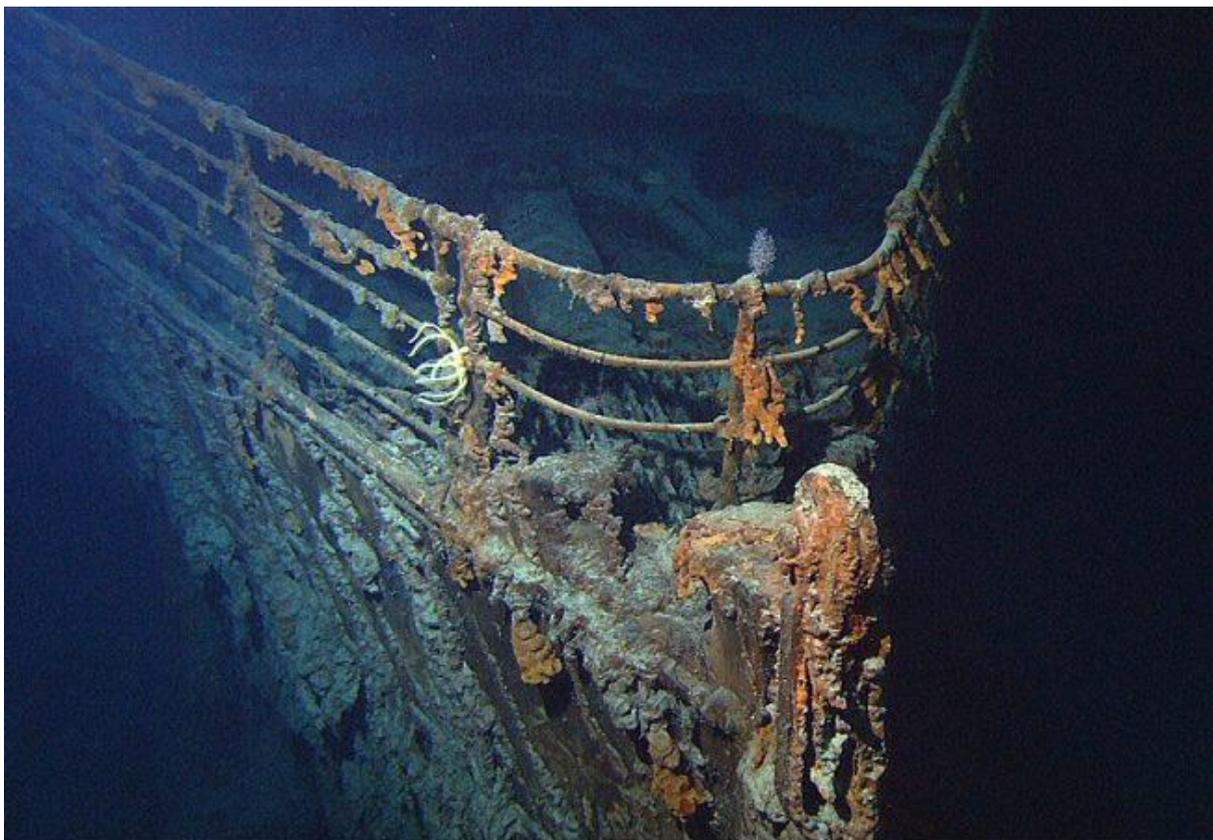
18157. – *I had pretty nearly finished my smoke and was looking around, and I saw what I took to be a falling star. It descended and then disappeared. That is how a star does fall. I did not pay any attention to that. A few minutes after, probably five minutes, I threw my cigarette away and looked over, and I could see from the water's edge – what appeared to be the water's edge – a great distance away, well, it was unmistakably a rocket; you could make no mistake about it. Whether it was a distress signal or a signal rocket I could not say, but it was a rocket.*

When Captain Lord was eventually informed that this strange vessel within sight was firing rockets, he decided not to risk his ship and crew in going to investigate what he thought was a small, nearby stranger who would not even reply to his Morse lamp signals, until daylight, when it was safe to do so.

There is no doubt that Captain Lord *should* have gone to the aid of that vessel, despite the very dangerous conditions that night. But had it not been for the abnormal refraction, which caused him not to recognise that it was the biggest ship in the world sinking on her maiden voyage, he *would* have gone to her aid.

This article was first published on [Tim Maltin's blog](#).

The Titanic wreck lies 3,700 metres below the surface of the Atlantic. It was not discovered until 1985, at which time it was confirmed that the boat had split in two.



Hitler's Titanic



Wilhelm Gustloff as a hospital ship, before being converted into an armed military transport. Image Credit: Bundesarchiv / CC.

The Worst Maritime Disaster in History: The Sinking of the Gustloff

History Hit Podcast with Roger Moorhouse

The sinking of Nazi ship the Wilhelm Gustloff in 1945 was the worst maritime disaster in history – but it is also an incident that most of us have never heard of, not least because it doesn't really fit the conventional western narrative of World War Two.

The Gustloff started out life in 1937 as the first ever purpose-built cruise ship of the Nazi leisure time organisation *Kraft durch Freude* (Strength through Joy). But when World War Two broke out, it was acquired by the military and

redesignated – first as a hospital ship and then as a barracks ship in Gdynia, a port city on the Baltic coast of Poland.

Operation Hannibal

Fast forward to January 1945 and the Soviets were making major inroads into occupied Poland, with Warsaw liberated by the middle of the month. In response, the Germans set up Operation Hannibal, an enormous evacuation operation of Nazi Europe's eastern provinces, predominantly via the Baltic Sea.

The aim of this remarkable operation was to evacuate wounded military personnel and troops who could be shipped to another theatre of the war, as well as some of the many hundreds of thousands of refugees who were being pushed westwards by the advance of the Red Army.

As one of the largest – if not the largest – seaborne evacuations in history, the Nazis used almost any ship they could get their hands on for the operation, including the Gustloff.

On the morning of 30 January the former cruise ship set out on its fateful crossing – the first and last it would undertake for Hannibal – coincidentally also the twelfth anniversary of Hitler coming to power.

Standing room only

That night, it was cruising westwards, about 20 miles off the north Polish coast – the Pomeranian coast – when it was torpedoed by a Soviet submarine. The Gustloff was hit three times across her flanks and sank in just 40 minutes.

This was not in itself an uncommon fate for ships during World War Two, including other ships used in Hannibal. What makes the Gustloff story unique, however, is that when she went down she was carrying an estimated 11,000 people.

With the ship only initially built to hold 2,000 people, including 1,500 passengers and some 500 crew members, this meant the Gustloff was absolutely packed to the gunnels; standing room only.

Some of those on board were military personnel, including wounded military, but the vast majority were civilians – mostly women and children at that.

The Baltic Sea is extremely cold at that time of year and we can only imagine the horror of the scenes that unfolded. The ship listed very heavily to the port side before sinking in less than an hour, with many never even able to get outside.

By the time that various vessels arrived, most of those on board had died; when the rescue boats reached shore they were carrying just 1,252 survivors. But we are only left with an estimate of the numbers of dead because those who were letting refugees on the Gustloff at Gdynia essentially stopped counting at around 8,000.

Going from the estimated number of 11,000 people on board the Gustloff, as well as the number of survivors, we are left with a death toll of about 9,500, making the sinking the largest maritime disaster in history.

Horrors at sea

The survivors gave harrowing accounts. One remarkable story is that of a woman who handed her infant child to a crew member who then promptly disappeared. She didn't know if he had gone over the side or elsewhere but became very distressed.

The woman then subsequently found herself in a lifeboat – in itself a very exceptional experience as most people on board didn't get that far – and then on a rescue ship. At which point, a character appeared out of the gloom and handed back the missing child to her.

Most accounts did not end so happily, however. A particularly awful aspect of the ship and the sinking was that the promenade deck was sealed in with glass panels. Many of the passengers who were below deck fought their way up through the stairwells – which consequently turned into death traps – to the promenade deck, thinking that they could exit the ship from there.

But they then found themselves in what survivors described as a “glass coffin”.

With the ship being standing room only, it was almost impossible for those who arrived on the promenade deck to then force their way back out and, as more and more passengers fought their way onto the deck, many ended up being crushed.

Was the Gustloff a legitimate military target or was the sinking a war crime?

Despite all this, however, the Soviets' attack on the Gustloff cannot technically be viewed as a war crime.

Not only was the ship carrying military personnel but it was also armed. In their wisdom, the Nazi authorities in Gdynia had placed anti-aircraft guns on the Gustloff's upper decks, hoping that these would deter attack.

Adding to this was the fact that the ship was periodically travelling with her lights off.

So lights out, travelling through a war zone, carrying military personnel and armed; all of which tends to the argument that the ship was a legitimate military target, and to the idea that the Soviet submarine crew who carried out the torpedo attack did so in good faith.

The Soviet Union has never apologised for the sinking of the Gustloff or expressed any remorse, viewing its torpedo attack as a normal act of warfare in 1945. Of course, this doesn't stop the attack being – like so many acts of warfare – unquestionably cruel, particularly because the vast majority of those killed were women and children.

The story of Alexander Marinesko

In fact, far from being viewed as something to feel ashamed or guilty about, the sinking of the Gustloff was considered the greatest achievement of the Soviet submarine captain's career – though he didn't receive recognition for it straight away.

A very flawed character, Alexander Marinesko was on his last chance as a submarine commander in 1945. But the arguably successful attack on the Gustloff wasn't enough to save him. Previous misdemeanours caught up with him and he

was subsequently stripped of his captaincy and put down the ranks, ending up in a succession of work camps in Siberia.

Marinesko was eventually awarded the Soviets' highest decoration, the Hero of the Soviet Union, but only posthumously by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990 – 45 years after the sinking of the *Gustloff*.



A porthole window from Wilhelm Gustloff, salvaged in 1988. Image Credit: Darkone /

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Does the Sinking of the Gustloff Get Swept Up in the Carnage at the End of World War Two?

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The sinking of the Titanic may be the most famous maritime disaster in history – at least in the western world – but it is a long way off from being the deadliest. While more than 1,500 people were killed after the Titanic hit an iceberg in April 1912, an estimated 9,500 people perished in the sinking of Nazi military transport ship the Gustloff – and even that may be a conservative toll.

Despite being the worst shipwreck of all time, the Soviets' sinking of the Gustloff on 30 January 1945 is often forgotten about. Taking place in unquestionably the darkest period of German history, it is often swept up with all of the other terrible things that were taking place across central Europe at that time.

The death toll and circumstances of the Gustloff sinking are certainly horrific – the majority of those who died never even left the boat, while those who did faced the freezing temperatures of the Baltic Sea in January.

But, coinciding with the Holocaust and the Nazis' prisoner death marches, among many other horrors, it can be argued that the Gustloff has been correctly subsumed into the general tragedy of World War Two, and particularly its end.

A deliberate sweeping?

The relative nature of tragedy may not be the only reason we don't remember the sinking of the Gustloff today. It is also possible that it has been deliberately forgotten or swept under the carpet.

As a German tragedy, the Soviet attack on the Gustloff falls into the category of "German victimhood", something that couldn't really be mentioned in polite society until relatively recently.

With Germany responsible for starting the war and for carrying out the Holocaust, for many decades after World War Two it was considered distasteful to talk about German victimhood in the context of the conflict.

As a result, stories like the Gustloff sinking just didn't get talked about after the war and were subsequently largely forgotten about.

A tectonic shift

Interestingly, the person responsible for most of the research on the sinking was a survivor named Heinz Schön. Schön was on the ship as an 18-year-old and, after surviving, spent most of his life collecting eyewitness accounts of the tragedy and other information about it.

But although he published a number of books about the Gustloff before his death in 2013, those books were very much on the fringes of academia and publishing. He was someone who was slightly beyond the pale and beyond polite society.

In fact, it wasn't until about 20 years ago that German historiography began to talk about the Gustloff. A shift came when the sinking was front and centre of Günter Grass's 2002 novel *Crabwalk*.

And that was one of those moments when there was a sort of almost tectonic shift in German historiography and in Germany's treatment of its own history.

With this shift, it suddenly became possible for German society to start talking about its own victims – albeit within certain parameters and certain circumstances. And Schön, at the very end of his career and at the end of his life, had a kind of swan song. He was suddenly considered interesting and began to be invited to conferences; to some extent, he came back in from the cold.