

100 Years Later, Tragedy Of Titanic Still Resonates

BY TIM O'NEIL
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So much was shaken by the sinking of the Titanic — the gilded post-Victorian era, public adulation of the rich and famous, breezy faith in mechanical progress.

None of that changed at once, of course. World War I, commencing 28 months later, inflicted far worse upon Western society. But viewed from 100 years, the marvelous steamship is a symbol of transformation, of loss and progress. The Titanic resonates for its powerful tale of courage, cowardice, glitz, unforgiving nature and the peril of overconfidence.

Humanity seems fated to learn and relearn that last lesson, always too late. Rome, the Eternal City, was pillaged in 410. Only 26 years ago, America considered its space shuttle Challenger safe enough for Christa McAuliffe, a social studies teacher from New Hampshire. Challenger's destruction was wrenching, as was Titanic's.

"It's the 9/11 of its time," said Richard McWalters of the National Geographic Museum in Washington.

The museum, at the headquarters of the National Geographic Society, has opened a special exhibit called "Titanic: 100 Year Obsession." McWalters, museum operations director, said it chose the title "because there is a never-ending fascination for the Titanic as tragedy."

A century ago, it was the grand product of a steamship race. German and British companies jostled for pride and passengers with bigger, faster, gaudier ships. In 1907, the British

Cunard line introduced the Lusitania, a 758-foot-long luxury ship with four smokestacks — symbols of power and size. It reached New York in less than five days.

In 1909, the White Star Line, British-based but controlled by American banker J.P. Morgan, answered Cunard in a Belfast shipyard, where it laid keels for the Titanic and the Olympic.

The Titanic was 882 feet long and had four funnels, even though it needed only three. It could accommodate 2,500 passengers in three classes carefully segregated by price, luxury and social caste. First class included a Turkish bath, a squash court and plush dining and smoking rooms.

White Star never declared the ship unsinkable, but the line said nothing when Shipbuilder, the leading trade magazine, dubbed Titanic "practically unsinkable." Five years before, Titanic Capt. Edward J. Smith had expressed the industry view when he said of another White Star liner: "I cannot conceive of any vital disaster happening to this vessel."

The Titanic carried 16 full-size wooden lifeboats and four canvas folding boats. They could hold only 1,178 people — perfectly legal, according to the British Board of Trade, which considered that complement sufficient to ferry passengers during any most unlikely event.

On April 11, 1912, Titanic headed for New York from its last stop in Queenstown (renamed Cobh), on the south coast of Ireland, with 2,223 passengers and crew. Its first class list was long with names from America's society pages. The sister ship Olympic had been sailing for 10

months, but Titanic's inaugural run was still a big deal. Capt. Smith, who had a following among wealthy travelers, delighted Titanic's celebrity passengers with his presence.

Four nights at sea, Smith's ship steamed westward at 24 mph (22.5 knots), despite at least six warnings by Marconi radiotelegraph of an unusually large drift of icebergs south of Newfoundland. The radio, known as the wireless, used dots and dashes. It was in its early years.

Jack Phillips, telegraph operator on the Titanic, was harried that evening by a stack of messages. Passengers badgered him to tap notes to envious friends as the ship came closer to land.

At 11 p.m., perhaps only 20 miles away from Titanic, radioman Cyril Evans of the humbler steamship Californian sent another warning of ice. Evans' signal, beamed at such a short distance, popped loudly in Phillips' headphones. The irritation was too much.

"Shut up," Phillips clicked back.

Chastised and weary, Evans turned off his Marconi at 11:30 p.m. on Sunday, April 14. A century ago, ship crews actually did things like that.

The Titanic was expected in New York City in two more days.

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