

Was the Crew's Decision Making the Main Cause of the *Titanic* Sinking?

Dennis Gill

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Professor Claudine Ferrell

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Abstract

The 1912 sinking of the RMS *Titanic* has been engraved in popular culture in the century since the disaster, and the popularity of James Cameron's 1997 film helped increase the public's interest. Ever since the sinking, many authors and historians have published books and articles exploring and analyzing the broad, detailed subject of the *Titanic*. From Walter Lord's masterpiece *A Night to Remember* to Andrew Wilson's *Shadow of the Titanic: The Extraordinary Stories of Those Who Survived*, the chain of events leading up to the disaster and its immediate aftermath are explored in great detail but one question needs to be asked: did the crew onboard the *Titanic* contribute to the tragedy regardless of how the ship was constructed or how hard it struck the iceberg. From questionable decisions by the crew to the lack of lifeboats for all the passengers onboard, there is more to the tragedy of the *Titanic* than the "unsinkable" simply striking an iceberg.

On the evening of April 14, 1912, the RMS *Titanic* struck an iceberg in the North Atlantic Ocean during its maiden voyage and sunk to the ocean floor over the course of three hours. At the end of the tragedy, 1,500 passengers and crew were killed in the tragedy and the survivors were picked by the RMS *Carpathia*. As the *Carpathia* returned to New York with the survivors, news of the *Titanic* disaster made international headlines and public outcry soon led to official inquiries on both sides of the Atlantic to investigate whether human error caused the tragedy. Although the *Titanic* disaster had resulted in massive change in maritime safety, authors and historians still have questions on how much human error was to blame for the tragedy, in particular if safety protocol was neglected before and during the sinking. **In this research paper, it will examine if the crew's ignorance of important safety regulation was the main cause of the *Titanic* disaster regardless of how the *Titanic* was constructed or how hard it struck the iceberg.**

While the main cause of the *Titanic* disaster was the ship striking the iceberg, the events that led up to the tragedy are debated amongst authors and historians ranging from the materials used in the construction of the ship to the questionable decision-making of the crew. Beginning with Walter Lord's 1955 book *A Night to Remember* and the 1912 U.S. Senate Inquiry transcripts, historians and authors begin their research with these two resources and search for additional materials related to the *Titanic* disaster such as survivor interviews or artifacts from the wreck. Depending on the significant events that occurred during the publication (e.g. marine historian Robert Ballard's 1986 rediscovery of the wreck or the 1997 James Cameron film), monographs published by authors and historians examine different topics such Robert J. Strange's 2012 book *Who Sank the Titanic* exploring how the British Board of Trade's cost-cutting moves during the construction or Andrew Wilson's 2012 book *Shadow of the Titanic*

exploring what happened to the survivors after the disaster. While most monographs that focus on the disaster examine the decision-making done by Captain Edward Smith and Bruce Ismay, Daniel Allen Butler's *Unsinkable* and Walter Lord's *The Night Lives On* explores the other members of the crew who made critical decision throughout the night such as First Order William Murdoch's decision to steer hard astarboard toward the iceberg or how Second Officer Charles Lightoller improperly loading the lifeboats with enough passengers. While human error onboard the *Titanic* is the main focus of the research paper, the lack of lifeboats onboard the *Titanic* and the missing binoculars from the lookout's nest are the only equipment examined that had an effect on the tragedy

After news about the sinking of the *Titanic* made international headlines, Senator William Alden Smith saw the disaster as an opportunity to investigate the safeties of maritime travel and to prevent White Star Line chairman Bruce Ismay (who oversaw the company that build the *Titanic*) from fleeing back to Liverpool.¹ With the help of seven senators, Senator Smith formed the 1912 U.S. Senate *Titanic* inquiry and had the role of chairman in which he asked the majority of the questions to the witnesses during the eighteen-day investigation.² After listening to the testimonies of more than 80 eyewitnesses (ranging from wireless operator Harold Bride to inventor Guglielmo Marconi), the U.S. Senate inquiry concluded several things: the British Board of Trade was to blame for the lack of lifeboats and for cutting costs during the ship's construction, Captain Edward Smith showed ignorance against danger despite his year of experience, the lack of emergency drills before and during the voyage, and recommended the

¹ Daniel Allen Butler, *Unsinkable: The Full Story of RMS Titanic* (Cambridge, MA: Stackpole Books, 1998), 180-86.

² "Titanic Disaster: The Official Transcript of the United States Senate Hearings," Accessed September 18, 2019. <https://www.titanicinquiry.org/>

crew of the SS *Californian* be prosecuted for failing to provide help.³ While the U.S. Senate was satisfied with the results of their inquiry, the British Board of Trade had their own investigation where they suggested that the only reason the *Titanic* disaster occurred was due to its collision with the iceberg and there was no blame with the crew (specifically Captain Smith in particular) or the British Board of Trade.⁴ Regardless of the findings on the both sides of the Atlantic, maritime laws were changed a few months after the *Titanic* disaster and it required all ships to have enough lifeboats for everyone on board in addition to all radio equipment being operated at 24 hours a day and the formation of the Ice Patrol to monitor for icebergs.⁵

Before analyzing the chain of events that occurred during the *Titanic*'s maiden voyage the amount of drills and safety training the crew of the *Titanic* before and during the maiden voyage requires close examination. As was required by the rules and regulations installed by the British Board of Trade, Captain Smith and his department heads (the chief officer, the chief engineer, the chief steward, and the purser) examined every deck of the *Titanic* top to bottom for any irregularities such as missing equipment.⁶ Once the captain's inspection was completed, the boat drill was to be completed by the crew and there were many differences between the two inspections. Unlike the captain's inspection of the ship, it is the ship officer's responsibility to choose a team of crew members and order them to lower a lifeboat into the water. Depending on how demanding a ship officer could be, one team could be ordered to examine the rigging and masts while another team could do nothing at all during a drill. When the *Titanic* is out on the

³ Wyn Craig Wade, *The Titanic: Disaster of a Century* (New York: Allworth, 2012), 102-115.

⁴ John P. Eaton and Charles A. Haas, *Titanic: Triumph and Tragedy* (New York: Norton, 1986), 156.

⁵ Walter Lord, *A Night to Remember* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1955), 56.

⁶ Butler, *Unsinkable*, 73-74.

open seas, the fire drill comes before the boat drills and the former consists of a siren signaling the crew members to man the fire hoses.⁷ Despite the drills being required to be performed during the maiden voyage, Able Seamen Walter Brice revealed in his testimony that the last boat drill occurred on the day the *Titanic* left Southampton.⁸ To make matters worse, Able Seamen Frederick Clench testified that there were no onboard drills during the *Titanic*'s maiden voyage and the only time a crew would perform a drill (fire or boat) would have been on Saturday.⁹ Despite the lack of safety drills, the crew helped kept the passengers calm during the disaster and Fifth Officer Harold Lowe described the discipline and order of the crew as "calm and orderly."¹⁰

While the Marconi radio onboard the *Titanic* was one of the best at receiving messages from other ships, there is evidence that the wireless operators received iceberg warnings and the administration onboard the ship ignored the warnings. Starting at 9 am on the day the *Titanic* sunk, the ship received a wireless message from the Cunard Liner *Caronia* that warned of "bergs, growlers, and field ice in 42°N, from 49° to 51°W" and other warnings were sent by the Dutch liner *Noordam* and the SS *Californian*.¹¹ Although there were a total six iceberg warnings, they were not placed together, and different messages went to a different person (e.g., a message from the White Star Liner *Baltic* was displayed between Captain Smith and Bruce Ismay while a

⁷ Walter Lord, *The Night Lives On* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986), 73.

⁸ "Titanic Disaster: The Official Transcript of the United States Senate Hearings," 655.

⁹ "Titanic Disaster: The Official Transcript of the United States Senate Hearings," 634.

¹⁰ "Titanic Disaster: The Official Transcript of the United States Senate Hearings," 399.

¹¹ Butler, *Unsinkable*, 77-80.

warning from the *Californian* was only seen by Harold Bride).¹² According to author Daniel Allen Butler, the communication between the bridge and the radio room was “fuzzy at best” and any incoming messages that involve latitude and longitude would confuse the wireless operators due to them not being navigators. In addition to the operators’ lack of navigational skills, there was no “clear-cut” procedure for handling messages once they made to the bridge because every captain has his own system onboard his respective ships. As a result, important information was ignored or missed altogether and there were conflicting reports amongst the crew about where the ice sheet was.

Due to the missing iceberg warnings, Captain Smith made an error in ignorance by maintaining the *Titanic*’s speed at 22 knots and failing to decrease once the ship was in dangerous waters. Although Captain Smith had an “outstanding reputation” as a professional seaman and an expert ship handler amongst his peers, there were questions whether Smith had enough knowledge about the ship’s maneuverability and speed despite knowing the *Titanic* was never tested at full speed. Going back to 1911 when the crew tested the *Titanic* in the Belfast waters, the ship was never tested at full speed because the main focus of the test was to see how fast the ship could stop at full reverse in the open waters.¹³ Although Captain Smith had no idea where the ice sheet was located and was overseeing the tests prior to the *Titanic*’s departure, he did not see the necessity to reduce speed and none of the officers questioned his orders. In addition to Captain Smith’s ignorance, Bruce Ismay’s influence on board the ship may have contributed to the *Titanic*’s speed remaining at a high speed. Although the U.S. Senate Inquiry

¹² Lord, *The Night Lives On*, 48-55.

¹³ During the test run, the *Titanic* remained at a constant speed of 18 knots and it took almost 4 minutes at full reverse to stop over 3,000 feet (*The Night Lives On*).

discovered that Ismay never ordered Captain Smith to increase the *Titanic*'s speed, it was no secret that he wanted the *Titanic*'s speed to top the speed of the sister *Olympia* and wanted all the publicity about the *Titanic*.¹⁴

On a moonless night that survivor Colonel Archibald Gracie described the sea as “glass, so smooth that the stars were clearly reflected,” lookouts Frederick Fleet and Reginald Lee had no binoculars in the crow’s nest and the *Titanic* was creeping closer to striking the iceberg.¹⁵ On the day the *Titanic* set sail from Southampton, lookout George Symons reported to Second Officer Lightoller that there were no binoculars in the crow’s nest and the latter was unable to find the binoculars.¹⁶ Unbeknownst to anyone onboard the *Titanic*, the binoculars were actually still under lock because second officer David Blair was left behind in Southampton due to Lightoller replacing him. Before he left the ship, Blair mysteriously ordered that the binoculars be locked in his quarters, and in the confusion either he forgot to tell someone onboard where the binoculars were or the person Blair gave the order simply forgot. During his testimony during the U.S. Senate Inquiry, Fleet notes that the binoculars were used during both the day and night and they allowed the user to scour the horizon.¹⁷ In addition to his description of the usefulness of the binoculars. Fleet revealed that his eyesight was checked by a British Board of Trade official instead of anyone onboard the ship and the only question the officers onboard the *Titanic* asked Fleet during the voyage was if he took an eye test. Regardless of where the binoculars were onboard the *Titanic* or how well the lookouts’ eyes were tested, authors and historians such as

¹⁴ Andrew Wilson, *Shadow of the Titanic: The Extraordinary Stories of Those Who Survived* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 202.

¹⁵ Colonel Archibald Gracie and John B. Thayer, *Titanic: A Survivor's Story & the Sinking of the S.S. Titanic* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2005), accessed October 29, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central, 197.

¹⁶ Butler, *Unsinkable*, 77-80.

¹⁷ “Titanic Disaster: The Official Transcript of the United States Senate Hearings,” 323.

Daniel Allen Butler believe binoculars were “useful in identifying objects, but not in initially sighting them.” While Fleet and Lee wished that they had binoculars in the crow’s nest, there was no light of any kind when they spotted the iceberg and it was too late for the officers on the bridge to change the *Titanic*’s course.

Once the iceberg had been spotted, the crew onboard the bridge only had seconds to avoid the collision and there is debate whether First Officer William Murdoch made the right decision when he ordered the command “hard astarboard”. Due to Captain Smith being off-duty , Officer Murdoch was on the bridge with Fourth Officer Joseph Boxhall and he gave the order “hard-a-starboard” in an effort to “port around” the iceberg.¹⁸ Although Officer Boxhall confirmed during the U.S. Senate Hearings that Murdoch ordered the ship to turn “hard-a-starboard”, Second Officer Lightoller revealed in a BBC interview years after the disaster that Murdoch saw the iceberg around the same time as the lookout men (which is highly debatable) and issued the additional commands of “full speed astern”.¹⁹ To make matters worse, Murdoch’s command of “hard astarboard” caused the structure of the *Titanic*’s two four-cylinder reciprocating engines to reduce the effectiveness of the rudder and it resulted in the ship slowly turning toward the iceberg.²⁰ In the aftermath of the disaster, Murdoch’s command to turn the *Titanic* was widely criticized for “more likely to cause collisions than to prevent them” and it was suggested by Wyn Craig Wade that he was merely acting out of instinct (“a natural desire”). In his book *Titanic: Disaster of the Century*, Wyn Craig Wade lists the steps that Murdoch should have taken instead: reverse the port screw full astern, keep the starboard screw full ahead,

¹⁸ Wade, *The Titanic: Disaster of a Century*), 170-72.

¹⁹ According to Wyn Craig Wade, “hard-a-starboard” means the ship’s bow would swing to the port side and “full speed astern” would be the equivalent of “jamming the brakes”.

²⁰ Robert J. Strange, *Who Sank the Titanic? The Final Verdict* (Barnsley, England: Pen & Sword Maritime, 2012), 186.

and put the helm astarboard. Once the *Titanic* had struck the iceberg, Murdoch had to deliver the unfortunate news to Captain Smith himself and start preparations to abandon ship.

When it was clear to the crew that the *Titanic* was damaged and taking in water, the order to abandon ship was given by Captain Smith and the final part of the tragedy involves the lifeboats. Regarding the lifeboats onboard the *Titanic*, there are two aspects that relate to the tragedy: there was not enough lifeboats onboard for all the passengers and the ones that were used during the disaster were not properly loaded by the deck officers. Although there were 20 lifeboats onboard the *Titanic* during the maiden voyage, the ship was originally designed to carry 32 and the main reason the number was lowered because giving “boats for all” would be expensive and require over 60 lifeboats cluttering the deck.²¹ In an attempt to explain their reasoning, the British Board of Trade (who oversaw all the ships in England) had a “complicated” formula to determine lifeboat requirements of ships registered in Great Britain: all ships over 10,000 tons were required to have lifeboats with space to carry 550 people (each person allotted up ten cubic feet of space) and the minimum number of lifeboats is 16. The major flaw with the British Board of Trade’s formula was that the *Titanic* was four times the size of a regular-sized ship in 1894 which was when the rule was last updated. To make matters worse, all the lifeboats onboard were only capable of carrying 1,178 of the 2,201 passengers and crew and it would have left 1,023 individuals with no chance of escaping a watery grave (an estimated 1,500 people perished in the sinking).²²

Knowing that the lifeboats did not have enough room for everyone onboard, the crew made mistakes during the sinking such as not filling the lifeboats to full capacity. In order to load

²¹ Butler, *Unsinkable*, 77-80

²² Lord, *The Night Lives On*, 48-55.

passengers into the lifeboats, the crew was faced with two decisions based on Edwardian code of conduct: load passengers by class (starting with first class regardless of gender and age) or the “women and children first”.²³ After consulting with his officers, Captain Smith gave the order to begin loading women and children into the lifeboats along with assigning First Officer Murdoch in charge of the starboard side and Second Officer Lightoller supervising the port side.

Unfortunately for the families being separated, deck officers misinterpreted (Second Officer Lightoller in particular) the “women and children first” rule as *only* women and children while First Officer Murdoch loaded men when there were no women on the deck. Due to misinterpretations of the “women and children only” rule by the officers, a life of a male passenger on the *Titanic* literally depends on the deck side they were on and the odds were even worse for third-class passengers who were struggling to reach the top deck. To make matters worse for everybody still onboard the *Titanic*, Officer Lightoller and Officer Murdoch did not fill the lifeboats up to full capacity and they were lowered into the ocean. For example, Officer Murdoch only placed 28 people in Lifeboat 7 (less than half its capacity) and allowed couples and parties of people to board.²⁴ In his memoir *A Survivor's Story*, survivor Jack Thayer commented how the people onboard one half-filled lifeboat were ignoring the pleads of the officers to come back and wondered “any human being fail to heed those cries?”²⁵ Between the officers failing to fill the lifeboats to full capacity or the lifeboats failing to return to the boat, the mistakes the crew of the *Titanic* made contributed to the massive loss of life during the disaster.

While the tragedy of the *Titanic* is remembered for how the ship struck an iceberg and the

²³ Strange, *Who Sank the Titanic*, 167.

²⁴ Butler, *Unsinkable*, 77-80.

²⁵ Gracie and Thayer, *Titanic: A Survivor's Story & the Sinking of the S.S. Titanic*, 349.

lives loss in the process, the crew's ignorance of safety protocol to the disaster was the main cause of the disaster regardless of the ship's construction or how hard the *Titanic* struck the iceberg. Although the *Titanic* encountered problems during its construction and external factors such as weather played a factor, the lack of emergency drills, ignorance of iceberg warnings, and the disappearance of the binoculars by different members of the crew led the "unsinkable" ship towards its inevitable fate. Once the *Titanic* struck the iceberg, the decision-making of the deck officers to enforce the "women and children first" led to the lifeboats being improperly loaded and left hundreds of people to their fates. Although there were significant changes in maritime safety in the aftermath of the *Titanic*, the questionable decision-making of the crew resulted in one of the deadliest man-made disasters in history and changed the course of history forever.

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