

99 years ago



The WordchipperSM

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I'm looking down at the water and thinking. No, I'm not thinking about the great Fargo floods of 2011, 2010, 2009 and 1997. I'm imagining what it would be like to jump from here into the very dark, foreboding sea swirling and foaming about 60 feet below me. It's night and I'm standing on an open deck of the Norwegian Cruise Lines' 91,000 ton *Norwegian Star*, plying Alaskan waters.

What I'm looking at with fascination reminds me of a night and an event I've read about, even studied, in countless books and TV documentaries. It will be 99 years this April 14th since the *R. M. S.* (Royal Mail Ship) *Titanic* steamed into an iceberg and into history. The air temperature on that Sunday evening was 28 degrees. The ocean was only slightly warmer at 11:40 P.M. (ship's time) as the 46,000 ton liner foundered in the middle of an ice field at 41° 46' north latitude and 50° 14' longitude.

The Alaskan sea I was studying on that mid-summer evening seven years ago was probably similar in temperature. However, in contemplating an emergency, it was good to know that the enclosed, well-equipped lifeboats on a modern cruise ship are a far cry from the open, wooden crafts the *Titanic* didn't have enough of for all on board. As a result of rules enacted following the deaths of 1,517 souls (of the 2,227 on board), one of the first things guests are required to do on today's passenger ships is participate in a full-scale lifeboat drill as soon as the vessel leaves port. This is why every guest and crew member must be given a life jacket and assigned a particular seat in a specific lifeboat. The boat exercise is required so that everyone knows where to find his or her place on a boat. I've been through several of these drills and, to me, it's always reassuring, even if a little frightening. I tend to think about what happened on the *Titanic* on that cold April night.

There have been countless books and several movies about the ship, some historically accurate while others have created or perpetuated myths and half-truths. For example, most dramas portray the ship's band playing "Nearer My God to Thee," as all who remained aboard were about to meet their maker. However, some survivors who were on the ship until the very end state they did not hear that hymn at all. Others seemed to recall the band playing "Autumn," a popular waltz during that period.

Regarding music, what has been documented by several sources is a hymn sung during the liner's non-denominational church service conducted by Captain Edward John Smith on the Sunday morning of the disaster. Capt. Smith went down with the ship and it was tragically ironic that, on that very day, he led the congregation assembled in the singing of a hymn which begins with these words:

*Eternal Father, strong to save, whose arm hath bound the restless wave;
Who bid'st the mighty ocean deep; Its own appointed limits keep; Oh, hear us when
we cry to Thee for those in peril on the sea.*

This classic sea-faring number is traditionally associated with the British and American navies. The original words were penned by a Church of England clergyman, Rev. William Whiting (1825-1878); music was added to the words by another English preacher, Rev. John B. Dykes (1823-1876), who also is credited with other enduring hymns, including: "Holy, Holy, Holy" and "Nearer My God to Thee."

I have read numerous books about the ship and its end, as well as the discovery of the wreck by Dr. Robert Ballard of Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute. Ballard examined the *Titanic* 73 years after the ship hit bottom, 12,460 feet below the surface of the North Atlantic. However, I recently discovered a book with a new twist on the disaster: *The Last Log of the Titanic* by Capt. David G. Brown, an experienced mariner and an excellent researcher and writer.

Last Log is an easy-to-read technical treatise, and will be appreciated by those who are interested in the minute-by-minute details of what happened on the bridge prior to and after the encounter with the iceberg. The book is not without controversy: Capt. Brown contends that the *Titanic* did not scrape the *side* of the iceberg causing an opening that sank the ship; rather, it was a "grounding," with her starboard bow section *sliding* across a submerged ledge of the berg that opened the wound. He presents very plausible evidence to support his contention.

Unfortunately, it's a bit challenging find a printed copy of this book, although e-reader versions of the text are available for \$9.99 for the Amazon *Kindle* and the Barnes & Noble *Nook*. If you're interested in a print copy, be sure to include a visit to a good used bookstore, like BDS Books in downtown Fargo.