

The secret blunder that sank Titanic

Command misunderstood, helmsman turned ship toward iceberg

BY RICHARD ALLEYNE, THE DAILY TELEGRAPH SEPTEMBER 22, 2010



This is a cropped photo of a hitherto unknown image of the Titanic as she left Southampton dock on April 10, 1912. The photo was taken by the superintendent of the docks. The original and the negative are the property of the Vancouver Maritime Museum.

Photograph by: File, PNG

It was always thought the Titanic sank because it was sailing too fast and its crew failed to see the iceberg before it was too late.

But now it has been revealed that the danger was spotted in plenty of time, only for the liner to steam straight into it because of a basic steering blunder.

According to a new report, the ship had plenty of time to miss the iceberg but the helmsman simply turned the wrong way. By the time the catastrophic error was corrected, it was too late and the side of the ship was fatally holed by the iceberg.

The disclosure, which comes out almost 100 years after the disaster, was kept secret until now by the family of the most senior officer to survive the disaster.

Second Officer Charles Lightoller covered up the error in two inquiries on both sides of the Atlantic

because he was worried it would bankrupt the liner's owners and put colleagues out of a job.

Since his death in 1952 - by then a war hero after his role in the Dunkirk evacuation - the facts have remained hidden for fear they would ruin his reputation.

But now his granddaughter, the writer Lady (Louise) Patten, has revealed the sequence of events in her new novel, *Good as Gold*.

The error on the ship's maiden voyage between Southampton and New York in 1912 happened because at the time - in the midst of the conversion from sail to steam ships - there were two steering systems and different commands attached to them.

Crucially, the two systems were the opposite of one another. So a command to turn "hard a-starboard" meant turn the wheel right under the older tiller system and left under the rudder system.

When First Officer William Murdoch spotted the iceberg two miles away, his "hard a-starboard" order was misinterpreted by the Quartermaster Robert Hitchens, who turned the ship right instead of left. Even though he was almost immediately told to correct the mistake, it was too late.

"The steersman panicked and the real reason why Titanic hit the iceberg, which has never come to light before, is because he turned the wheel the wrong way," said Lady Patten the wife of the former Tory education minister, Lord (John) Patten.

To compound that straightforward error, Lady Patten said, the captain was convinced by Bruce Ismay, the chairman of Titanic's owner, the White Star Line, to continue sailing rather than stop. This added enormously to the pressure of water flooding through the damaged hull, sinking Titanic many hours earlier than it otherwise would have done.

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