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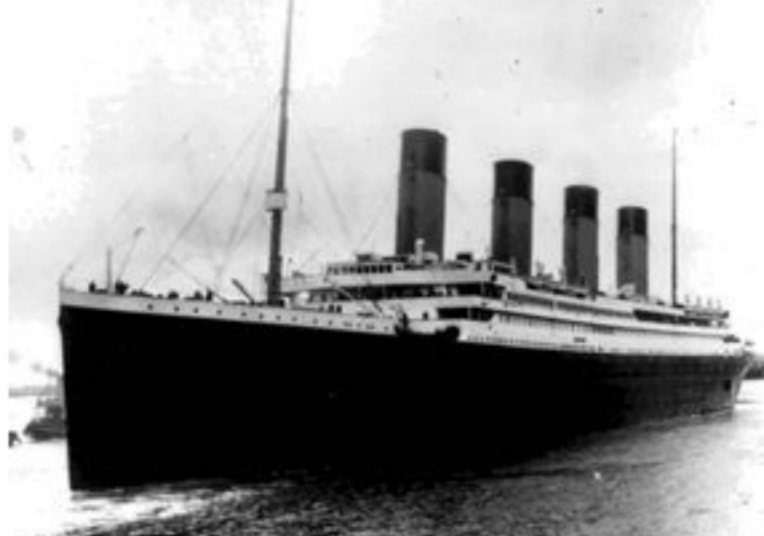
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THE ERRORS THAT SANK THE TITANIC



The Titanic sets off on its maiden voyage from Southampton

Sunday February 19, 2012 By Sunday Express reporter Have your say(0)

AS THE 100th anniversary of the sinking of the titanic on its maiden voyage on April 15, 1912 approaches a fascinating new book details the blame that went on in the aftermath of the tragedy. Historian Allen Gibson has meticulously pieced together thousands of illuminating facts in The Unsinkable Titanic, which clearly show that blunders by the captain Edward Smith and White Star Line boss Bruce Ismay led to the destruction of the "indestructible".

The work is timely because of last month's Costa Concordia tragedy off Giglio Island in Italy, following which the actions of captain Francesco Schettino and the conduct of the cruise liner's owners are now being scrutinised, just as Smith and Ismay's actions were a century ago.

Relatives of dead passengers and crew lambasted Ismay for deserting his ship after it collided with an iceberg. They also accused Smith of recklessness. Yet, as Allen's book reveals, despite the forensic examination of the sinking at inquiries in America and Britain, Smith's reputation remained intact despite the fact that his negligence was a key factor.

Why? Because he chose to go down with his ship with typical Edwardian stoicism in the face of adversity.

An analysis of the timeline of the events of April 14, 1912 shows that the white bearded Smith knew full well that the world's biggest liner was heading straight for a 78-mile iceberg zone on her voyage from Southampton to New York.

"I feel the greatest reluctance in finding negligence against a man who cannot be heard unless there is a fixed practice which binds me"

Yet even as the dangers magnified with the fading light, he chose to dine with wealthy passengers and go to his bed early, leaving first officer William Murdoch with the responsibility of dodging the ice.

The British inquiry, headed by Lord Mersey, found no way to criticise Smith's decision not to change course or to reduce the top speed of 22.5 knots as that was the accepted maritime custom at the time, even in iceberg strewn seas.

The fact that two lookouts in the Titanic's crew's nest did not have binoculars was not considered a reprimandable factor either.

Lord Mersey wrote in his report: "I feel the greatest reluctance in

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finding negligence against a man who cannot be heard unless there is a fixed practice which binds me."

However Mersey did recommend that in future if ice was reported to the captain he should reduce speed and change course to avoid the area.

Perhaps most astonishing is the revelation that Smith waited 20 minutes after hitting the iceberg before ordering his wireless operators to put out an alert to nearby shipping.

The survival of White Star Line boss Ismay meant he was castigated by the public and grieving families for cowardice but he too found a surprising ally in Lord Mersey, something which ranked with the public.

"Crucially he found sympathetic ears at Mersey's court," writes Gibson. "Had Ismay remained on Titanic, Mersey asserted, he would only have achieved adding himself to the death toll.

"Captain Smith, who died at his post, was instantly championed in death, honoured in songs for keeping imperturbable in the face of adversity and stoically going down with his ship. Yet it was the captain, not Ismay, whose actions were instrumental in provoking disaster." Although Ismay was savaged in the court of public opinion for insisting that the 32 lifeboats planned for the Titanic by chief designer Alexander Carlisle be reduced to just 16 (plus four collapsibles) on the grounds it would allow more space on the boat deck, he still escaped censure. During the inquiry it emerged that the two wireless operators on board, Jack Phillips and Harold Bride, neglected to deliver to the bridge four of the seven ice warnings received on the day of the disaster.

IN HOLLYWOOD'S version of events first officer William Murdoch put a revolver to his head after slamming the engines into reverse and trying to steer around the looming ice.

At the time, however, it was said he wasted valuable minutes by reversing the engines and should have instead used the ship's momentum to try to avoid the obstacle.

Surprisingly Gibson's analysis concludes that blaming Murdoch was wrong, asserting: "The idea to 'port around' the iceberg (make an s-shaped manoeuvre) had saved Titanic from far greater damage.

"Had Murdoch kept the bow veering port it would have smashed the iceberg along the entire hull, killing hundreds of passengers accommodated along her starboard flank and potentially forcing the ship to capsize. Instead Murdoch's manoeuvre pivoted Titanic sufficiently to bump her away from the iceberg as they met. It is why most passengers barely noticed the collision, recalling Titanic quivering gently upon a dulled impact which, after all, had seen thousands of tons of ice and metal collide.

"Although fatal the resulting damage was confined to the bow, keeping Titanic afloat long enough for her crew to launch all of the main lifeboats she carried."

Murdoch's much-contested second mistake was ordering the bulkhead doors to be shut to seal the 16 watertight compartments. Gibson argues that although it was an instinctive reaction it proved disastrous. Ice damage extended through the first five compartments, making the bow extremely heavy. He writes: "Its assimilated weight began pulling the bow lower, tilting the deck to flow water over one bulkhead wall into the next, filling each compartment as the angle became further accentuated."

If Murdoch had left the doors open water would have flooded the compartments more evenly, giving valuable extra minutes for the evacuation and rescue operation.

On entering the bridge at this crucial point captain Smith agreed with Murdoch's decision but then made matters worse by forcing the Titanic to limp on for 20 minutes at eight knots.

The resumption of the forward motion inadvertently drove more water into the hull, sealing the liner's fate.

The 11-deck high Titanic was designed to carry 2,603 passengers and 944 crew, some 3,547 in total. On its maiden voyage there were 2,228 people on board and only 705 of them survived, making the sinking of the unsinkable the darkest moment in our maritime history.

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