

# Titanic captain wasn't only one responsible for tragedy



IN THE early hours of April 15, 1912, the Titanic, a luxury passenger liner making its maiden voyage from Southampton, England, to New York City, struck an iceberg in the North Atlantic.

Titanic, billed as “unsinkable,” plummeted two miles to the bottom of the ocean floor in just two and a half hours. Of the 2,240 people aboard, 1,517 perished either by drowning or by freezing in the frigid ocean waters.

A U.S. inquiry board found Capt. Edward J. Smith responsible for the tragedy, citing his “indifference to danger” and “overconfidence and neglect” in steering the ship into an ice field while traveling too fast for the conditions. For 100 years, Smith’s reputation has been sullied. While he bore the ultimate responsibility for the tragedy, there were others in positions of authority who also were culpable but escaped the scrutiny of history.

Capt. Smith was by experience and ability the most respected commander of the White Star Line, the British shipping company that operated Titanic. Smith, a native of Henley, England, joined the company in 1880 and captained 18 ships, having sailed an estimated 2 million miles before taking command of the Titanic. It was to be his last voyage before retiring at age 62.

At 9 p.m. April 14, Smith, concerned that the vessel was entering an ice zone, excused himself from a dinner party. He headed for the bridge at the front of the boat deck and spent the next few hours charting a safe course. Contrary to popular belief, Smith was not trying to break records, for the Titanic could never match the speed of a

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## COMMENTARY

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Cunard liner. Maintaining speed in the vicinity of ice was accepted practice by captains of all liners who did so to adhere to scheduled mail deliveries.

The sea was calm, the sky cloudless and full of stars, allowing plenty of time to identify and avoid any obstacles in the ship’s path. But as a routine precaution, the captain, before retiring to his quarters, ordered the lookout to watch for icebergs.

About 11:40 p.m., the lookout, Frederick Fleet, saw “a small iceberg” directly ahead. But as the ship drew closer he realized that the berg was considerably bigger. Only then did he sound the warning bell. The delay proved to be fatal.

First Officer William Murdoch ordered a sharp change of direction and reversed engines in order to avert a collision. For more than 20 seconds, however, the bow continued to steam straight ahead. The iceberg, towering 100 feet above the surface, was only 500 yards away. Murdoch should have left the engines full ahead – not reverse – to make a sharp turn.

Titanic sideswiped the iceberg on the starboard (right) side, punching a series of gashes and holes along 250 feet of the hull. Smith, awakened by the collision, rushed to the bridge and was briefed by Murdoch. During a quick inspection, Smith and Thomas Andrews, the ship’s architect, discovered that five of the ship’s forward compartments were severely damaged. Massive flooding already had begun. Andrews believed the damage fatal, estimating that

Titanic had two hours, at most, before it sank.

Smith immediately ordered the lifeboats uncovered and the passengers awakened. He then instructed radio operators to send distress signals and, later, when a light was spotted on the horizon, had rockets launched from the bridge. But there were no ships in wireless contact, or close enough to render immediate assistance.

Smith was severely criticized for the 60 minutes he took to assess the situation and to order the lifeboats loaded and lowered. But he had good reason. He knew Titanic had only 20 lifeboats with a total capacity of 1,100, insufficient to evacuate all 2,240 passengers.

The shortage was due to British Board of Trade’s outdated maritime safety regulations as well as the White Star Line’s misconception that Titanic’s “unsinkable” design would enable her to stay afloat long enough for passengers to be transferred safely to a rescue vessel. Nor was the crew adequately trained in evacuation procedures – a responsibility shared by the Board of Trade, White Star and Smith – with the result that the evacuation was poorly managed and many of the lifeboats left half-empty.

During Titanic’s final moments the captain continued to call out orders and assist in the evacuation. At one point, he drew his pistol and ordered a group of sailors to get out of a lifeboat where they had squirmed themselves away.

When Titanic finally sank at 2:18 a.m., Smith went down with the ship. If his body was recovered, it was never identified.

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