THE UNSINKABLE WRECK OF THE R.M.S.

TITANIC

from Ghost Liners: Exploring the World’s Greatest Lost Ships

by Robert D. Ballard and Rick Archbold
illustrations by Ken Marschall

Expository text tells the true story of an event. As you read, notice how the author tells why a ship sank and how he explored its wreckage.
Inside the cramped submarine, all I could hear was the steady pinging of the sonar and the regular breathing of the pilot and engineer. I crouched on my knees, my eyes glued to the tiny viewport. The pings speeded up—that meant the wreck was close—and I strained to see beyond the small cone of light that pierced the endless underwater night.

“Come right!” I was so excited I was almost shouting, even though the two others with me inside Alvin were so close I could touch them. “Bingo!”

Like a ghost from the ancient past, the bow of the Royal Mail Steamer Titanic, the greatest shipwreck of all time, materialized out my viewport. After years of questing, I had arrived at the ship’s last resting place.

Effortlessly we rose up the side of the famous bow, now weeping great tears of rust, past the huge anchor and up over the rail. We were the first in more than seventy years to “walk” on the Titanic’s deck! The giant windlasses used for raising and lowering the anchor still trailed their massive links of chain, as if ready to lower away. I felt as though I had walked into a dream.
In 1912, the *Titanic* had set sail on her maiden voyage, the largest, most luxurious ship the world had ever seen. On board were many of the rich and famous of the day.

Then, on the fifth night out—tragedy. An iceberg, seen too late. Too few lifeboats. Pandemonium, and over 1,500 dead out of the more than 2,200 people on board.
ow the sub sailed out over the well deck, following the angle of the fallen foremast up toward the liner’s bridge. We paused at the crow’s nest. On the fateful night, lookout Frederick Fleet had been on duty here. It was he who warned the bridge: “Iceberg right ahead.” Fleet was one of the lucky ones. He made it into a lifeboat and to safety.

The pilot set Alvin gently down on the bridge, not far from the telemotor control—all that remained of the steering mechanism of the ship. It was here that First Officer William Murdoch, desperate to avoid the mountain of ice that lay in the Titanic’s path, shouted to the helmsman, “Hard a-starboard!” Then Murdoch watched in excruciating agony as the huge ship slowly began to turn—but it was too late and the iceberg fatally grazed the liner’s side. I thought of Captain E. J. Smith rushing from his cabin to be told the terrible news. Thirty minutes later, after learning how quickly water was pouring into the ship, he knew that the “unsinkable” Titanic was doomed.

We lifted off from the bridge and headed toward the stern. Over a doorway we could make out the brass plate with the words: 1st Class Entrance. In my mind’s eye I could see the deck surging with passengers as the crew tried to keep order during the loading of the lifeboats. The broken arm of a lifeboat davit hung over the side. From this spot port-side lifeboat No. 2 was launched—barely half full. Among the twenty-five people in a boat designed to carry more than forty were Minnie Coutts and her two boys.
Willie and Neville. They were among the relatively few third-class passengers to survive the sinking.

As our tiny submarine continued toward the stern, we peered through the windows of first-class staterooms. The glass dome over the first-class grand staircase was long gone, providing a perfect opening for exploring the interior of the ship. But that would have to wait for a later visit, when we would bring along our robotic “swimming eyeball,” Jason Junior. As we continued back, I wondered what we would find. We already knew the ship lay in two pieces, with the stern nearly two thousand feet (six hundred meters) away. Suddenly the smooth steel subdecking contorted into a tangle of twisted metal where the stern had ripped free. Beyond it hundreds of objects that had spilled out when the ship broke in two were lying on the ocean floor.

Willie Coutts’s hat nearly cost him his life. When the Titanic hit the iceberg, his mother, Minnie, roused eleven-year-old Willie and his baby brother Neville (right), got them dressed, and put on their lifebelts. Through the swirl of panicking passengers, Minnie led her children out of third class toward what she hoped was safety. One officer handed his own lifebelt to Minnie, saying, “If the boat goes down you’ll remember me.” Another crewman led them to the boat deck. Minnie and Neville got in one of the last boats—but the officer in charge held Willie back. The rule was women and children first, and the hat Willie was wearing made him look too old. Willie’s mother insisted but the officer refused again. Finally, good sense prevailed and Willie, too, stepped to safety.
As we floated out over this debris field, I found it hard to believe that only a thin film of sediment covered plates and bottles that had lain on the bottom for seventy-four years. One of the ship’s boilers sat upright on the mud with a tin cup resting on it, as if set there by a human hand. Champagne bottles lay with their corks still intact. A porcelain doll’s head stared at us from its final resting place in the soft ooze. Had it belonged to little Loraine Allison, the only child from first class who didn’t survive that night? Most haunting of all were the shoes and boots. Many of them lay in pairs where bodies had once fallen. Within a few weeks of the sinking, the corpses had been consumed by underwater creatures and their bones had been dissolved by the cold salt water. Only those shoes remain—mute reminders of the human cost of the Titanic tragedy.

After only two hours on the bottom, it was time for Alvin to begin the long ascent back to the surface ship, two and a half miles (four kilometers) above. As we headed back to the surface, I was already impatient to return to the Titanic. We had only begun to plumb its secrets.