

# CLASSified in Death : Recovering the Titanic's dead

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## ***ET Research***

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AFTER the *Titanic* sank in the early hours of the 15th April, 1912 the sea around the site was littered with the flotsam and jetsam of the liner. Among the broken decking, furniture and fittings were hundreds of bodies floating around. Each of these had a cork lifejacket on which would keep them afloat for weeks.

After the *RMS Carpathia* left the scene with her survivors she asked the *RMS Californian*, which had belatedly arrived to search for more survivors and bodies. Another of the unanswered mysteries is the fact that the *Californian* claimed not to have seen any at all. The *Californian* must have made a very cursory search of the area and not allowed for the fact that the wind, drift, and current would have already scattered the wreckage and bodies over a very wide area.

The officials of the White Star Line were not convinced that everything had disappeared and they set to and chartered several ships to go and search the area and recover any bodies that they could.

The *SS Mackay-Bennett* was the first to be made ready, she was a cable laying ship under the command of Captain F. H. Lardner. She hurriedly loaded over 100 coffins and as much embalming fluid as could be found at short notice and also loaded 12 tons of grate iron (the purpose of which will be seen later).

The *Mackay-Bennett* recovered some 306 bodies, 116 were buried at sea and 190 taken to Halifax, Nova Scotia.

To help in the recovery the cable ship *SS Mina* was also sent, she had 150 coffins, 20 tons of ice and 10 tons of grate iron, she was under the command of Captain W. E. S. Decarteret. She picked up 15 bodies, of these two were buried at sea and the rest returned to Halifax.

Also sent was the Marine and Fisheries vessel the *SS Montmagny* under the command of Captain Peter Johnson and they recovered just four bodies, one of which was buried at sea and the other three returned to Halifax.

The last ship was the Bowring brothers of St. Johns, the *SS Algerine*, she along with the *Montmagny* searched for as long as there was any possible chance of finding any bodies, they searched to the edge of the Gulf Stream. She picked up just the one body, that of James McGrady a Saloon Steward whose body was transhipped to the *SS Florizel* and the body was finally transported to Halifax where it arrived on the 11th June and was interred on the 12th June nearly two months after the disaster.

The *Mackay-Bennett* was the first vessel to return to Halifax and there were some harrowing scenes on her arrival.

The following is an extract from the Nova Scotian Evening Mail dated 31st April 1912:

*"The first bodies taken ashore were those of the crew. These bodies had not been*

*embalmed or even sewn up in canvas (they had been kept in the ice filled hold) and presented a gruesome sight that it would be impossible to picture. The bodies were carried on stretchers by members of the Mackay-Bennett crew and at times as many as 30-40 bodies were in a heap on the deck where they had been taken from the ice-filled hold. (It is reported that to get the bodies on to the stretchers and later into the coffins many of the frozen limbs had to be broken).*

The bodies of the Second Class passengers and steerage were sewn up in canvas bags, and these were brought ashore next.

The bodies of the First Class passengers were all in coffins on the poop deck and were the last to be brought ashore.”

To sum up the above:

- Crew members - put in the ice filled hold
- Steerage (Third Class) passengers - sewn in canvas bags.
- Second Class passengers - sewn in canvas bags
- First Class passengers - placed in coffins.

Truly they were Classified in Death

## **Mayflower Curling Rink, Halifax, Nova Scotia**

The Mayflower Curling Rink had been made ready as a temporary mortuary. Preparations had been through and every conceivable thing had been thought of and prepared for.

On arrival all the bodies were taken to the screened off embalming section and the bodies embalmed, there was a female embalmer for the women and children.

Once embalmed the bodies were placed on specially made platforms so that any identifications could take place. Many had already been identified from the contents of their pockets, clothing etc.

One undertaker Mr. Newell from Yarmouth, Nova Scotia while performing his work unexpectedly encountered the body of his uncle, A. W. Newell (First Class passenger) and he collapsed from shock.

The Nova Scotian authorities had also provided a First Aid station to console and comfort any of the relatives who became too distressed. This station was under the capable supervision of nurse Miss Nellie Remby, and it proved to be a Godsend to some of the relatives who found the whole experience too much for them.

There was also provided a writing room and offices for the Coroners staff and shipping officials - all in all it was a model of efficiency and good management.

## **Buried at Sea**

‘Buried At Sea’ this bald statement covers a lot.

When the *Mackay-Bennett* arrived at the scene of the disaster there were bodies all over the place, but it was a slow painful job picking them up.

Imagine the scene, the crew of the *Mackay-Bennett* were using the ships heavy, awkward, lifeboats that needed at least four strong men at the oars, it was very cold so they were all

frozen stiff (remember there were no 'Thermal Clothing' or adequate waterproofed clothing then) and then they had to pull aboard the frozen corpses from the *Titanic*. It is bad enough to pull a live person over the side of a lifeboat and it must have been very hard work indeed pulling the half frozen dead weights. The weather at the time was described as 'quite rough' to add to their troubles.

I have never been able to prove it but it seems that the orders were 'Recover the Passengers first and Crew, second!'

That explains the grate iron, (iron bars weighing 28 lbs each two feet long, four inches wide, hole at tapered end at top. Just the thing (after removing the cork lifejacket) for tying one or two to each leg pushing the body over the side of the lifeboat and committing the body to the deep.

One hundred and nineteen bodies of the crew, identified and unidentified were committed to the deep in this way.

Anybody who was well dressed or of good appearance was kept on board. This is where the anomalies creep in, once the last lifeboats had gone, the crew and the rest of the passengers were left to fend for themselves on board.

Being men of initiative the crew (or some of them) went scavenging in the cabins of the First and Second Class passengers - that was after they had (most possibly) helped themselves to a bottle of spirits or beer - and attired themselves in suits, Astrakhan overcoats, even fur coats, remember it was bitterly cold and their own clothing was flooded in their cabins deep in the bowels of the ship. They obviously thought that having warm clothing on would mean that they might live a bit longer.

That is why some of the bodies of the crew arrived back at Halifax, in coffins, treated as First Class dressed in their Saville Row suits, that they had borrowed!

Relatives of Mr. John Jacob Astor (an American multimillionaire) had offered a \$10,000 dollar reward for the recovery of his body. A body was pulled, supposedly terribly mutilated, (possibly from the crushing it received when the aft funnel came loose and crashed onto the people in the water) but from the contents of the pockets and bodily statistics it was obviously that of John Jacob Astor. So the body was returned to Halifax, and the reward claimed and shared by the crew of the Mackay-Bennett.

After body number 200 there seems to have been a change of policy or perhaps they had run out of grate iron, for there were no more 'Buried at Sea' after number 200 (who was poor Extra Baker, J. J. Davies of Eastfield Road, St. Denys, Southampton) every body recovered after number 200 was returned to Halifax for burial.

Incidentally no bodies that were recovered from any of the above ships were returned to Southampton - The White Star Line was charging the relatives 'cargo rates' to bring them home and the offer was not taken up by anyone in this area.

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Courtesy of Brian J. Ticehurst

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