

CSI Titanic : Who Died How?

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One of the iconic images many of us carry from the sinking of *Titanic* is of the 705 people in lifeboats listening to the death cries of 1,500-plus people drowning in the North Atlantic after the ship sank.

The trouble is, that's not what happened.

This article will attempt to explore the methods of death during the foundering of *Titanic*, as well as how many people died from each. Obviously, any numbers will be at best an educated guess, as there are no primary sources for much of this information.

Body Count

“There are lies, damned lies, and statistics.” — Mark Twain¹

One of the first problems with this type of research is the incompleteness of the information. There is no real way of knowing, for example, how many paid passengers were aboard the ship when she left Queenstown. *Encyclopedia Titanica* lists 2,208 passengers and crew², but how accurate is this information?

In *Ghosts of the Titanic: New Discoveries from the Depths of the Ocean Floor*, Charles Pellegrino has crew member George Kemish musing on the fate of the stowaways in the forward cargo hold³. He cites no source for either the thoughts of this crewman nor the fact (not to mention the number) of stowaways.

Were there stowaways aboard *Titanic*? Possibly. Stowaways have always been a problem in shipping. By the end of the 19th Century, stringent anti-stowaway measures had been adopted by the major passenger lines, but these were by no means one hundred percent effective.

At the same time, there are no primary sources that cite the presence of stowaways aboard *Titanic* (This obviously does not count the allegations made against the Chinese survivors, who were paid passengers). So the best we can say is that it is possible that there were stowaways, but there's no way of knowing. Since none of the survivors came forward to admit that they were stowaways or that they knew of such, that any stowaways almost certainly died that fateful April night.

Numerical anomalies among the ticketed passengers and crew are shown in evidence everywhere. There are several explanations.

Traveling Incognito: The most famous example of this aboard *Titanic* were the Morgans. They appeared on the list of those not accounted for after the sinking. At the same time, Sir Cosmo and Lady Lucile Duff-Gordon appeared aboard the *Carpathia* as survivors, although their names did not appear on the official register of passengers⁴. They never disclosed their reasons for using assumed names on this trip, but it became known rather quickly that the Duff-Gordons and the Morgans were the same. Another example is George Brereton, a professional

gambler/con artist traveling under the name George Brayton. There are other known examples, so it seems rather obvious that there were other people traveling under assumed names.

Missed the Trip: This category includes those who were late to the pier, as well as those who simply didn't show up. J.P. Morgan was at first thought to have died in the sinking, but he had canceled his trip due to illness. *Encyclopedia Titanica* lists 23 crew members who were not aboard at the time of the sinking. Some of these had reported, but left the ship and not returned, while others "failed to join". There is also anecdotal evidence that a few passengers canceled their trips aboard Titanic due to "premonitions" or other "bad feelings".

Late Arrivals/Standbys: The ship cast off at rather less than full capacity. One is tempted to wonder if any passengers boarded at the last minute and remained unlisted on the official passenger rosters. The concept of the standby passenger was certainly current at the time of *Titanic's* voyage (although possibly under a different name); one must assume that they would have allowed standby passengers to board just before sailing. The vast majority of these, of course, would have been Third Class passengers due to high ticket prices.

Stolen/Missing Documents: Fireman Thomas Hart, supposed to board *Titanic* in that capacity, got drunk and his discharge book was stolen. His name, however, still appears on the crew roster as having died in the sinking. The real Hart appeared on 8 May 1912 at his mother's home⁵. There seems to be no evidence of a similar situation with any other crew member or passenger, but the high mortality rate leaves the question open.

Mistaken Identity: It is entirely possible that someone, survivor or victim, was mistakenly identified as someone else. For example, Amy Stanley, a Third Class survivor, was mistaken for a First Class passenger because she left Titanic wearing a fur coat. It wasn't long before she was discovered and sent to Carpathia's steerage survivors' area. Although this is not a true case of mistaken identity, it does demonstrate how such misidentifications may be possible.

Other Causes: There may have been other reasons for a passenger's or crew member's name not appearing on the official documents. James Cameron came up with one in his 1997 film to get Jack and Fabrizio aboard. Another possibility was that the passenger was not yet born when the ship left port. The only First Class woman who is known to have been pregnant is Madeleine Force Astor and she didn't go into labor during the trip. However, had any First or Second Class ladies given birth aboard ship, someone would have mentioned it. No one knows how many Third Class ladies were pregnant...or if any gave birth during the trip. Given the number of Third Class passengers and how few of them survived, it is not surprising to note that we can't possibly know much of what went on in Third Class before the foundering. There is no evidence for or against these or any other scenarios, however.

So there are many possible reasons why a passenger or crew member might not have been named in either the list of survivors or of the victims. There is no evidence of any of this for the overwhelming majority of the people aboard Titanic, but there are always known exceptions...and unknown exceptions. For example, the so-called "Cave List" contains the names of 248 people, of whom nine are either known not to have sailed on Titanic or are not known at all. Eleven known passengers on the list have no cabin allocation, including Thomas Andrews.

So we have to accept the figures on *Encyclopedia Titanica* as the best guess we have. All 2,208 people listed in ET's list are accounted for one way or another, with any and all discrepancies explained. However, it must be understood that no one has (or can have) anything more than an opinion on this subject. Unless more evidence such as the Cave List surfaces, we will be unable to give a more exact answer to the numbers question.

Causes (and Places) of Death

“There are all kinds of ways to get dead in a shipwreck.” — Michael H. Standart⁶

Of the 1,496 known victims of the sinking, only 330 bodies were recovered. Autopsies were not performed on any of the deceased.

Except in the few cases where another cause of death is known, 1912 authorities listed cause of death as “drowning”. Interestingly, Encyclopedia Titanica lists cause of death for these 1,496 people as “shipwreck”, acknowledging that cause of death is not actually known for the vast majority of these people⁷. We can, however, make some educated guesses.

Michael Standart’s quote above notwithstanding, most of the deaths associated with Titanic’s foundering can be considered as one of eight causes, as listed below. That some deaths may have other causes is a given; however, these eight are the most likely causes of death among Titanic’s passengers and crew:

1. Drowning: The most commonly ascribed cause of death related to Titanic’s sinking did not in fact kill very many people...and most of those died within the ship herself. For the purposes of this article, we will treat drowning by its simplest definition, death following the immersion of the mouth and nostrils in liquid and the inhalation of liquid. By that definition, very few of those in the water drowned. However, anyone who survived the plunge into the water without a life belt on most likely did drown. Those people who remained inside the ship stood a greater chance of drowning, although as we shall see, not all of them perished in this way.

The five postal clerks most likely drowned, as did Junior Assistant Second Engineer Jonathan Shepherd, who had broken his leg in Boiler Room 5 and was caught in the flooding. There is no way of telling how many of the engineering crew drowned in the boiler rooms; it is safe to say, however, that the vast majority of those who died before the ship sank drowned below decks.

One of the reasons it is known that few of those in the water died of drowning was the mass cry heard by survivors. Many of those who died in the water were able to call for help or otherwise make loud vocal noises. This is not possible with one’s lungs full of liquid.

2. Hypothermia: This was the cause of death of most of the people who landed alive in the ocean. When a human’s body temperature goes below 95° F (35° C), the phenomenon of hypothermia has set in. The temperature regulation process of the hypothalamus malfunctions and a flush of core blood rushes to the extremities, causing a false warmth sensation. Shortly after this, the internal organs begin to shut down and death occurs rapidly. In the 28-31° F water of the North Atlantic, this process likely took no more than 15 minutes for the healthier individuals. The elderly and the youngest, as well as the infirm, would have lasted much shorter periods of time. Getting out of the frigid water would have helped raise the body temperature for a short while, but prolonged exposure to the cold air would take its toll, albeit more slowly.

The survivors aboard Collapsible B managed to survive only because they needed to exercise to keep afloat. Reading Colonel Gracie’s description of the ordeal aboard that lifeboat shows clearly the need to keep busy to stay afloat; the men aboard Collapsible B probably never realized that they were raising their body temperature back to survivable levels by doing so⁸.

3. Natural Causes: It will never be known how many people aboard Titanic had fatal heart attacks or experienced fatal CVA (stroke). The likelihood of these becomes higher with advancing age; anyone with known or unsuspected heart problems would have also been at risk.

4. Injury: Specifically from falling and/or life belt misuse. As the ship’s tilt became more increased, more people would have fallen, either against other people and/or parts of the ship, or into the water. The further the fall, the greater the injury. As the stern of the ship became

closer to perpendicular, the likelihood increased of muscle strength failing and victims falling from up to 200 feet into the water. At this type of height, bones would break like matchsticks when hitting the surface of the ocean.

Additionally, those wearing life belts faced an additional danger. Because of the lack of proper drilling aboard Titanic, few if any of the passengers knew the proper way to drop into the water with a life belt on; one must cross one's arms across the breast with the hands on the opposing shoulders. Improper water entry while wearing a life belt would have had the effect of snapping the head back, potentially resulting in broken ribs, sternum, collarbones, or even neck. Probably many people died of broken necks as they hit the water.

We also know of at least one case where a broken leg led to the death of the injured person (Jonathan Shepherd). One has to speculate that his case was not unique, but again, the truth will probably never be known.

Finally, how many people still aboard Titanic fell into the broken area of the ship during and after the break-up? Fans of the 1997 film should remember Lovejoy at this point. Injuries sustained during such a fall would have included any of the above injuries, as well as a new horror: impalement on broken wood or metal. These would not have been easy deaths.

5 Crushing: Although this seems like it should fall under "Injury", it is truly a separate category. While the previous category focused on comparatively minor injuries. "Crushing" concerns most or all of the entire body being injured at once, a far more catastrophic event. The people who died from crushing mostly did so in the water, under one of the funnels or under the stern. Some also probably died within the ship at the time of the break-up, as various items inside the ship, some extremely heavy, crashed about and into them.

The falling funnels and stern would have explained why many of the bodies did not float to the surface, as well, since the impact would have pushed the bodies further under water. This would have also forced water into any open body cavities, as well as possibly tearing away life belts or forcing water into the cork of the life belts. Whatever the reason, most of those thrust under water by the falling funnels and stern were unable to return to the surface. Fortunately for them, most of them were already dead by this time.

6. Compression: This is probably the least likely cause of death plausibly associated with the actual foundering of Titanic. Death from compression is dependent on not only water depth, but also on speed of descent. The further one goes under water, the more pressure is built up around the body. The faster the descent, the less the chance that the body can build up a tolerance for the pressure. At some point, the pressure will be too much regardless.

Anyone still alive within the ship after it sank would have been killed by the pressure gained during the dive. The chances are that most people in the bow were dead of other causes prior to this point, but the possibility still remains that some had survived in air pockets until then. In the stern section, anyone still alive would have been killed at the point of implosion, which was also caused by pressure.

7. Suicide: There is one well-known rumored suicide associated with Titanic. An unidentified officer, usually thought to be First Officer William McMaster Murdoch, was said by many survivors to have killed himself. Although Murdoch is the officer most cited, all three of the other dead officers (Captain Smith, Chief Officer Wilde, and Sixth Officer Moody) have also been named as this suicide in different places.

How many other people might have committed suicide? A case could be made for anyone who turned down a place in a lifeboat, but that is not what is meant here. In this instance, "suicide" specifically refers to someone who actively kills themselves, as opposed to those who go passively to their deaths from altruistic or other motives.

Again, the answer is problematic. Edwardian culture, with the backing of the Victorian culture behind it, frowned upon suicide for most people, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world. There were circumstances under which it was not only allowable but required; still, for the most part it was considered cowardly. Those involved with a suicide would have done their best to cover it up. Thus, we have evidence of only one suicide, and that is entirely hearsay. Not one of those who claimed to have witnessed this suicide gave conclusive evidence of the identity of the suicide. That the suicide took place seems clear. Who it was remains open to conjecture.

8. Gunshot: That gunshots were fired is certain. Only one officer, Lowe, admitted to having shot a gun, but that was alongside the ship rather than at anyone. However, many survivors claimed that people on Titanic were shot to death. So again, this is unknown as to number of deaths.

Location of Bodies

“We all must die; but, hang it all, a man ought to be given a chance, if not for his life, then at least to die decently.” — Joseph Conrad⁹

As stated earlier, only 330 bodies were recovered by the McKay-Bennett and other ships, leaving 1,166 known bodies unaccounted for. We know that four to six bodies were buried at sea from the Carpathia. But where were the other 1,160-1,162 bodies? The answer is simple, since there are only three options:

1. Floating on Top of the Ocean: It is doubtful that only 330 people actually landed in the water. Surely the number was rather more than that. However, the action of wind and wave, not to mention minute differences in individual wind resistance and water drag, guaranteed the scattering of those bodies on the surface in all directions. The last body was found in June of 1912, almost two months after the sinking.

Many of those who went into the ocean were not wearing life belts. These would have sunk much earlier than those wearing life belts. A conservative estimate might be that between 700 and 1,000 people landed in the water, but that somewhere between one third and one half of these died upon impact or were already dead when they splashed down.

2. Floating Beneath the Ocean Surface: It would have taken longer for a body to sink to the bottom of the ocean than it did Titanic. The human body floats naturally, in part due to gases in the system. As these are replaced osmotically by water, the body begins a leisurely descent toward the depths. The ship took less than half an hour to settle to the ocean floor; the bodies that sank would have taken weeks. During this time, the bodies would have been dispersed over a wide area of the Atlantic.

3. Still Aboard Titanic: And here is the rub. How many people never made it off Titanic? We know that a lot of people were still inside the ship when she went down. According to testimony, many Third Class men were wandering along Scotland Road, while many Third Class women and families remained in the Third Class General Room or Dining Room. Some of those still within the ship died when the ship broke apart; the closer they were to the location of the break the more certain their death at that time. Those who survived the break-up did not have much longer to live.

In many ways, these people had the most horrific deaths. Some of them never received any explanation as to what was going on; they probably died wondering what all the fuss was about. Others knew, but thought they would be rescued by people in the higher classes. Those in the bow probably died sooner than those in the stern; the bow filled with water before sinking. Only small air pockets would remain, but they would be replaced by water quickly as pressure built up. In the stern, water filled space less quickly, but no less inexorably. But the point was reached where the stern section imploded, killing anyone still alive inside. In any case, being

inside the ship at the time of the sinking was a no-survival proposition.

The bodies of those caught inside the ship during the sinking landed on the bottom much earlier than those who merely sank on their own. In both cases, the remains have long since been consumed by scavengers and other erosive forces as part of the great recycling process of nature.

Forget fantasies about people floating off on icebergs or wreckage from the ship. There is no evidence that this happened; in any event, such people would have died long before they could have been rescued. We will never know the precise fate of any individual aboard Titanic other than the 330 deceased recovered and the 712 rescued.

Conclusion

While it would be nice to know the identities and exact fates of everyone who sailed on Titanic's maiden voyage, it is simply not possible. We don't even know for sure how many people were aboard.

All we really know is that at least 1,496 people died and 712 were rescued. Unless new evidence is uncovered, that is all we will ever know about those who didn't survive the ship's encounter with the iceberg.

Footnotes

1. This quote is also attributed to Benjamin Disraeli.
2. http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/titanic_survivors/ and http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/titanic_victims/
3. Pellegrino, Charles, Ghosts of the Titanic, HarperCollins Publishers, 2000, pp 10-11.
4. <http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/biography/100/>
5. <http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/biography/1512/>
6. <http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/discus/messages/5933/56750.html?1045504370> Used with permission.
7. http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/manifest.php?q=23&v1=l_cod&v2=1&t=Cause+of+Death+%3A+Shipwreck. There are actually 1,497 people listed here; one of those is a surviving crew member who died in a later shipwreck.
8. Gracie, Archibald, The Truth About the Titanic, New York: Mitchell Kennerly, 1913
9. Conrad, Joseph, "Certain Aspects of the Admirable Inquiry into the Loss of the Titanic", 1912

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