

Defending Fleet and Lee

by Richard Krebs

Titanic Research

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The iceberg that doomed the *Titanic* and 1,523 people to die left a gash of about 300 feet in the ship's side from beneath the stem of her bow to the boiler room number 6.

The 1997 film that took her name as it's title gored into the truth of her story from stem to stern. Tearing and ripping at the historical fabric in popular consciousness until the myth the story centered on an epic romance was firmly planted in the minds of millions worldwide.

And more myths piled on top of it.

Two of several historical characters shoe horned into the script were Frederick Fleet and Reginald Lee. The lookouts on duty who sighted the fateful iceberg.



Frederick Fleet and Reginald Lee

The film depicted them as two irresponsible youths who let their attention wander. With Fleet only belatedly sight the iceberg and then going through the familiar routine of warning the bridge. Giving birth to a myth that the 's lookouts were irresponsible kids. As guilty, perhaps, as the helmsman on the SS *Stockholm* the night she collided with the SS due to a moment's lapse of attention while at the wheel¹. It is the intent of this paper to debunk this myth.

The Lookouts: A Brief Profile.

The 1997 film is correct in showing Fleet as a young man. Being he was twenty-five at the time. Yet Reginald Lee was a much older man. Being forty-one years of age. Both men already had amassed considerable experience in their profession. Fleet having served previously for four years on the White Star Liner *Oceanic*. With a total of twelve years sea experience. Lee had been at sea for about fifteen or sixteen years. Starting in 1887. Serving on royal mail vessels, in the Royal Navy, as well as the likes of the SS *Minnehaha* of the Atlantic Transport Line. Serving as lookout numerous times.

Both men were rated "special look outs".
There were another four "special look outs" aboard ship:

Archie Jewell. A twenty-three year-old sailor with experience aboard the White Star Liner *Oceanic*. With the rest of his sea experience from ordinary seaman's duties aboard sailing ships.

George Symons. Who had eight and a half years experience at sea. Four years and four months of which was also aboard the *Oceanic*. With three of them spent as look out. Like Fleet, he too was 24 years old at the time.

George Hogg. A twenty-nine year-old sailor with 13 years sea experience under his belt. Including duties as ship's lookout. Made his home in Southampton with his wife and two children like most of the *Titanic's* married crewmen did.

And Alfred Evans. 24 years old. Transferred to *Titanic* from the White Star Liner *Oceanic*. Alas, the record about him is scarce beyond the fact that he left the in lifeboat number 15.

Nevertheless, he too had sea experience, and experience aboard passenger liners.

Titanic's crew who had raised families called home when back in England.

Each man's wages were five pounds a month with five shillings extra due to their position as "special lookouts".

All six men possessed certificates from the British Board of Trade that they were qualified as lookouts.

The Use Of Lookouts In 1912

Radar was decades in the future at this point in maritime history, and ship's officers on watch naturally could not juggle all their other duties as well as keeping watch for ships, fog, or other obstacles on their track.

Thus, either able seamen or men specially rated as lookouts were assigned the duty of keeping watch.

On smaller passenger liners and tramp steamers such as the *Carpathia* and *Californian* one man per watch was assigned duty in the "crow's nest" on the ship's foremast. Two men were assigned the duty on larger liners like the *Titanic* and her sister ship *Olympic*.

In the event of poor weather, such as fog, one or more members of the ship's crew could be assigned to the "eyes" of the vessel. That is, the forward point of the ship's forecastle².

Also, when searching for survivors, other men would be assigned to keep watch on this portion of the vessel. Captain Stanley Lord even put a sailor equipped with binoculars into a coal basket and had the man hauled up the foremast above the *Californian's* crow's nest while setting off to the *Titanic's* CQD position the morning of April 15th.

The Means To See, And Warn

Men with poor eyesight never lasted long on the list of crewmen able to perform lookout.

A box or bag was kept in a ship's crow's nest for binoculars.

David Blair, briefly second officer of the *Titanic* during her delivery trip from Belfast to Southampton prior to the maiden voyage, lent his own pair of glasses that were stamped according to lookout Hogg "Second Officer S.S. *Titanic*." Telling Hogg to have them locked up in his cabin when the ship arrived in Southampton. With these glasses somehow lost in the shuffle when Blair was transferred off ship as the senior officers were switched around when Henry Wilde came over from the *Olympic* at Captain Smith's request to assume the duties of Chief Officer from William Murdoch. Who then took the first officer slot and Charles Lightoller replacing Blair as second.

After the *Titanic* set sail for New York, lookout Symons asked Lightoller for binoculars. With Lightoller going to confer with another officer and returning saying "Symons there are none." A fact Symons then reported to Fleet, Lee, Hogg, Evans, and Jewell.

Whether or not they were of much use that night was much bandied about at both the American and British inquiries.

The most notable observation that resulted from the hashing and rehashing of the issue time and again was Frederick Fleet's expressed belief at the American Inquiry that, had he had access to a pair, he would have been able to sight the iceberg in enough time for the *Titanic* to have avoided it³.

Frederick Fleet and Reginald Lee had the 10 to Midnight watch the night of April 14th. Having enjoyed four hours off after coming off duty at 6 P.M. due to the method of having two men stand two-hour watches with four hours off.

There they relieved lookouts Symons and Jewell. With Symons relaying to them instructions received via telephone at 9:30 from Second Officer Lightoller on the bridge ordering to be on the lookout for "small ice and growlers."

Just how attentive were they while on watch, especially when the iceberg came into view?

Frederick Fleet had this to say at the American Inquiry:

Senator SMITH.

Who sighted the black mass first; you or Lee?

Mr. FLEET.

I did. I say I did, but I think he was just as soon as me.

Senator SMITH.

Were you both looking ahead?

Mr. FLEET.

We were looking all over the place, all around.

Senator SMITH.

All over the sea?

Mr. FLEET.

Yes, sir.

Senator SMITH.

Had you been especially directed to look carefully?

Mr. FLEET.

Yes, sir.

2408. Did you notice this haze which you said extended on the horizon when you first came on the look-out, or did it come later?

- It was not so distinct then - not to be noticed. You did not really notice it then - not on going on watch, but we had all our work cut out to pierce through it just after we started. My mate happened to pass the remark to me. He said, "Well; if we can see through that we will be lucky." That was when we began to notice there was a haze on the water. There was nothing in sight.

2409. You had been told, of course, to keep a careful look-out for ice, and you were trying to pierce the haze as much as you could?

- Yes, to see as much as we could.

Frederick Fleet had this to say on the haze at the British inquiry:

17250. After the first part of the watch what was the change if any?

- A sort of slight haze.

17251. A slight haze?

- Yes.

17252. Was the haze on the waterline?

- Yes.

17253. It prevented you from seeing the horizon clearly?

- It was nothing to talk about.

17254. It was nothing much, apparently?

- No.

17255. Was this haze ahead of you?

- Yes.

17256. Was it only ahead, did you notice?

17257. When you saw this haze did it continue right up to the time of your striking the berg?

- Yes.

While Lee and Fleet disagreed as to the severity of the haze, with Fleet even denying at the British inquiry that he said what Lee claimed he did when the haze first came in sight, their recollection of it does indicate they were certainly paying close attention⁴.

What of when the iceberg hove into view?

Frederick Fleet (American inquiry):

Senator SMITH.

How large an object was this when you first saw it?

Mr. FLEET.

It was not very large when I first saw it.

Senator SMITH.

How large was it?

Mr. FLEET.

I have no idea of distances or spaces.

Senator SMITH.

Was it the size of an ordinary house? Was it as large as this room appears to be?

Mr. FLEET.

No; no. It did not appear very large at all.

Senator SMITH.

Was it as large as the table at which I am sitting?

Mr. FLEET.

It would be as large as those two tables put together, when I saw it at first.

Senator SMITH.

When you first saw it, it appeared about as large as these two tables put together?

Mr. FLEET.

Yes, sir.

Senator SMITH.

Did it appear to get larger after you first saw it?

Mr. FLEET.

Yes; it kept getting larger as we were getting nearer it.

There also is this nugget of information from his British inquiry testimony:

17389. If it is not troubling you too much, Mr. Fleet, would you tell his Lordship this; when you first saw the iceberg, the first sight of it you caught at the distance you were from it, did it appear as a very small object?

- Yes.

This, too, indicates that Fleet, who was shown as the first to become distracted before the accident in the 1997 film, was the polar opposite of such carelessness. Being he was able to detect the iceberg with his eyes alone when it appeared to be the size of two ordinary tables put together. Not a distinct iceberg like he does in the movie.

Just how far ahead was the fatal berg at first sight?

Fleet could not say, but Lee hazarded this guess at the British inquiry:

2446. You have told us your vessel veered to port and then you got the iceberg on your starboard side?

- Yes, that is where she hit.

2447. Quite right; that is where she hit, but can you tell us how far the iceberg was from you, this mass that you saw?

- It might have been half a mile or more; it might have been less; I could not give you the distance in that peculiar light.

2448. You are speaking of when it was you first saw it?

- Yes.

Coupling Lee's guesstimate as to the distance when it was first scene to the fact that the iceberg looked about the size of two ordinary tables put together to Fleet, both men must have had their eyes on the berg as it became distinct.

The only known time Fleet took his eyes off the ocean was when he went to the starboard side of the crow's nest to the telephone located there after striking three bells to denote "Object directly ahead" to call in his sighting to the bridge before resuming his watch.

Fleet (British Inquiry):

17280. You struck three bells immediately, I suppose?

- Yes, as soon as I saw it.

17281. What did you do next?

- I went to the telephone.

17282. Was that on the starboard side of the crow's-nest?

- Yes.

17283. You went to the telephone, and -?

- Rang them up on the bridge.

17284. Did you get an answer?

- Yes.

17285. Did you say anything to them at once, or did they answer you before you told them?

- I asked them were they there, and they said yes.

17286. Yes?

- Then they said, "What do you see?" I said, "Iceberg right ahead.' They said, "Thank you."

17287. Then you dropped the telephone, did you?

- Yes.

17288. What did you do next?

- I kept the look-out again.

What of Lee during this time?

Lee (British inquiry):

2421. (*The Commissioner.*) Seven bells struck, and ten minutes after, about 10 minutes, Fleet struck three bells?

- Yes.

2422. And telephoned? - And telephoned to the bridge, "Iceberg right ahead."

2423. And you got an answer, "Thank you"?

- "Thank you" was the answer from the bridge.

2424. (*The Attorney-General.*) I want you to tell the story from this point. You were watching the iceberg?

- Yes.

2425. Did you notice what the ship did?

- As soon as the reply came back "Thank you," the helm must have been put either hard-a-starboard or very close to it, because she veered to port, and it seemed almost as if she might clear it, but I suppose there was ice under water.

2426. (*The Commissioner.*) She veered to port. Her helm must have been put hard-a-starboard?

- Yes.

2427. (*The Attorney-General.*) He then said it looked as if she was going to clear it. (*To the Witness.*) It looked as if she was going to clear it, and then did you feel a blow?

- As she struck on the starboard bow there was a certain amount of ice that came on board the ship. That was the forewell deck. It seemed as if she struck just before the foremast.

2428. (*The Commissioner.*) Did you say anything about the ship striking part of the iceberg under the

water?

- The formation of the berg is, there is more under water than there is above.

2429. I daresay. What I want to know is, did you say anything just now about the ship striking the iceberg under the water?

- I did not hear it.

2430. (*The Attorney-General.*) He did, my Lord; he said it "Felt as if," and I was trying to get to it. He said it just after he said "I thought she was going to clear it." I think we will get it from him in this way. (*To the Witness.*) You saw the iceberg as the vessel veered to port, did you?

- I saw it before that.

2431. Yes, you had seen it before, but that had been reported?

- Yes.

2432. Then you said you saw her head veer to port?

- Yes.

2433. Where did you get the iceberg - on what side of you?

- On the starboard hand as she was veering to port.

2434. You had the iceberg on your starboard side?

- Yes.

2435. You were on the starboard side of the crow's-nest, you told us?

- Just at that time I happened to be right in front of the nest, because as the nest is semi-circular the telephone is in the corner of the nest on the starboard side. My mate was telephoning from there, and I was standing in the front of the nest watching the boat.

2436. Do you mean you were standing just about amidships?

- Just about amidships in front of the nest.

2437. You were watching the berg. You had got the berg on the starboard side as the vessel's head veered to port?

- Yes.

2438. And you watched it?

- I watched it.

Conclusion

Only the head of British inquiry, Lord Mersey, cast some doubt upon the attention span of the lookouts. Saying to Sir Rufus Isaacs at one point during a sidebar in relation to Reginald Lee's tale about a thick haze: "My impression is this, that the man [Lee] was trying to make an excuse for not seeing the iceberg, and he thought he could make it out by creating a thick haze."⁵

Contradicting Mersey's doubts, though, is a theory posed by *Titanic* historian George Behe in his booklet *Titanic: Safety, Speed, and Sacrifice*. Chiefly that, based upon the evidence of *Titanic* survivor John Podesta who claimed years later hearing calls of "Ice ahead sir!" three times before the collision, the fact that three separate passengers recalled seeing an iceberg nearby before the ship met her fate, and surviving steward Thomas Whiteley's claims in press accounts that the ship's lookouts wondering why their warnings of three icebergs sighted before the crash were ignored, indicates the possibility Fleet and Lee saw three separate icebergs nearby *before* they spotted the fatal one.

But moving beyond the doubts cast by Mersey on Reginald Lee and the theory about three icebergs, the existing evidence from both inquires contradicts the 1997 movie's assertion Fleet and Lee were careless in the discharge of their duties. Perhaps there were some "yellow journalism" press accounts which said so (though this writer knows of none that exist), but the solid evidence harvested by Senator Smith's inquiry and Lord Mersey's showed nothing of the sort.

Hollywood's mangling of the truth as to their actions and story speaks volumes as to how dramatic license is all too often used as a license to kill truth rather than enhance it. Dramatic license that can, when used in a film based on a historical event, can birth new myths about that event.

Special Feature: A Proper Dramatization

My reply is yes. For in addition to being a scholar I am also a storyteller.

Here, in historical "micro fiction" format, is a proper depiction of Fleet and Lee within the context of the *Titanic's* fateful collision:

By Richard Krebs

Fleet finished wrapping a scarf around his neck. Turned to open the door.

Wrapping his own scarf around his neck, Lee followed Fleet.

The warmth permeating E-deck made both men feel somewhat uncomfortable, bundled up as they were, trotting up the steps leading to C-deck. Where they entered the doorway leading to the internal ladder up the foremast to the crow's nest. Fleet going up first, Lee following.

As he stood up, he tugged his scarf up across his face. Lee following suit as he emerged.

Jewell and Symons awaited them.

"Bridge says to keep a careful watch for small ice and growlers until daylight." Symons said loudly above the cold breeze whistling by their ears.

"All right," Fleet replied. Lee echoing him.

"Bridge also ordered closed all hatches to keep the light out of our eyes so we can see best," Symons added.

Fleet and Lee nodded in acknowledgment.

"Good night," Symons then said, then ducked into the hatch. Jewell right behind him.

From the bridge forward the deck was in total darkness. No passengers tarried on the decks below the bridge or on the forward well deck it was so bitter. Fleet and Lee alone the ones braving the elements here. Two shadowy figures cloaked in the dark of a moonless, starry night.

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Aft the foremast, beneath the towering first funnel that spat a constant stream of man-made black cloud into the starlit skies above, leading fireman Fred Barrett sweated in his thin cotton trousers and shirt as he supervised the stokers on duty.

"Thanks Joe," the stoker leaning on his shovel said to the trimmer as he delivered the fresh load of fuel. Then the stoker chuckled, added "You look like you're in that Turkish Bath they keep saying is on this ship."

"True fact, mate." The trimmer replied with a grin, letting the barrow rest on the deck to soothe his aching back. "This ship's got a swimming pool, too."

"Fancy that," the stoker replied. "By the way, Joe, any idea what it's like up top?"

"I don't know," the trimmer replied, picking up his barrow again. "There was a chill out when I was up before going on watch. Suspect it's colder now."

Barrett felt himself shiver at the thought.

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In the wheelhouse of the darkened bridge, quartermaster Robert Hichens stood at the wheel. Except for correcting the ship's course when he saw the compass veering a degree to port or starboard from time to time, the Titanic was giving him no trouble.

The compass beckoned to him. A green orb glowing in the darkness.

He gave it his full attention. Not a thought entering his mind so keenly were his senses tuned to his duty. Hichens knew all too well that if his attention wandered and there was an accident of any kind, he would be lucky to get a job on a fishing smack.

Next to him stood Sixth Officer James Moody. Waiting by the phone awaiting any messages from the crow's nest.

11 P.M. came and went. The hour hands on the wheelhouse clock set to ship's time crawling relentlessly towards midnight.

11:30 came, and with it, seven bells.

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Fleet rubbed his hands together once more, battling the numbness in his fingers.

Then his eyes narrowed.

Dead ahead, across both bows, small clumps of haze hugged the surface of the water. As if the water was slowly steaming in a hot cauldron.

Fleet nudged Lee, who leaned closer to hear what he had to say.

"There's a slight mist ahead," said Fleet.

"I see it Fred," Lee replied.

Both men felt their senses become keen, taut, alert as the Titanic's bow began slicing through the chilly vapors hugging the waterline.

Fleet began scanning the horizon yet again, working his eyes from port to starboard.

As his eyes began to align on dead ahead, Fleet's head stopped moving. Narrowed his eyes.

A small object was directly ahead.

The object became more larger, more distinct.

Fleet felt a spark of electricity shoot up his spine into his brain as the realization hit him full force. Making him yank his scarf away from his mouth.

"There is ice ahead!" Fleet shouted to Lee as he raised his right hand behind him up to where the bell rope dangled above them.

With all his might, he struck it once, then again, then again.

Clang!

Clang!

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Moody blinked at the sound of the bells. Snatched up the wheelhouse telephone. at the same time Fleet reached his.

"Yes," Moody calmly replied. "What did you see?"

Moody's spine stiffened.

"Thank you," he quickly replied. Slammed the telephone back in it's bracket.

"Iceberg right ahead!" He shouted out onto the bridge.

"Hard a-starboard!" Echoed Hichens, spinning the wheel deftly in his hands.

After the helm was hard over, the first thought he had for hours flashed across his mind.

"Helm's hard over, Mr. Murdoch!" Moody relayed.

"Thank you Mr. Moody," Murdoch called back.

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Barrett hurried over to confer with Hesketh, wondering what was needed.

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He could just make out the iceberg. A cold, dark mass the Titanic's bow was struggling to clear.

One point. Two points, Murdoch silently noted to himself. Eyes locked on the bow and the black mass closing in on it.

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Fleet gazed down at the tableau of the Titanic's bow sluggishly trying to turn away from the dark mass of ice that was barely as tall as the forecastle.

Suddenly, the twain met. Steel sheering ice from the berg. Sprinkling it all along the forecastle head. An icy trail that began to near the forward well deck as the hull gouged at the immovable black mass besetting it.

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The stokehold came alive as the eight firemen on watch began cutting off the flow of air to the boilers. Hesketh stood next to Barrett staring up at the stokehold clock, his brow knitted in momentary puzzlement at the sudden change.

Suddenly, the crash of damper doors slamming shut one by one was drowned out by a loud Bang! That assaulted the eardrums of every man in boiler room six.

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the watertight doors.

In the wheelhouse, Hichens and Moody felt the deck tremble under their feet.

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"Get out! Get out!" Hesketh bellowed at Barrett and the others as the icy cold sea sprayed in from the starboard side of boiler room six as if from a fire house. "Every man out!"

Discarding their shovels and barrows as they abandoned their frowning hungry charges, the firemen and trimmers scampered through the watertight door as it began to make it's moaning descent. Barret quickly nipping after Hesketh as he followed them. Escaping the spraying jets that were so cold, they stung like nettles.

The End

That wasn't so hard, was it, to keep to the historical record while being dramatic?

This bit of micro-fiction is based solely upon the inquiry testimonies of Frederick Fleet, Reginald Lee, Robert Hichens, and Frederick Barret. With the only speculative part being the bit featuring First Officer Murdoch. But I tried to time his movement to close the watertight door to how Barret recalled the door shutting as water spurted into boiler room number 6.

Much of the dialogue, what Fleet and Lee are wearing, as well as the men's thoughts and feelings, are

the result of this writer's careful use of dramatic license. Done in a way as authentic as possible to the setting without injecting hackneyed dialogue or cliches into it at the same time.

It is hoped by this writer that this bit of historical "micro-fiction" that dramatizes the stories of Frederick Fleet and Reginald Lee may prove instructive as to the point that their stories from that night to remember need no adulterating to make them more gripping. A point that also stands for the saga of the Royal Mail Steamer *Titanic* as a whole.

Notes

1. This fascinating facet of the collision can be found in Alvin Moscow's marvelous book *Andrea Doria* Stockholm. (Putnam, 1959. New Putnam edition released 1981. Paperback edition released by the Lyons Press 2004.)

2. Incredibly, the 1997 film depicted a crewman stationed in the "eyes" of the at the time of the collision with the iceberg. On the theory, one supposes, the officers on watch knew Fleet and Lee were green, carefree kids and needed an experienced hand on the prow to back them up on watch.

On a more serious note, Frederick Fleet was asked if anyone was twice asked if anyone was present there during his time on the stand in America:

Senator SMITH.

Mr. Fleet, can you tell who was on the forward part of the *Titanic* Sunday night when you took your position in the crow's nest?

Mr. FLEET.

There was nobody.

Senator SMITH.

Nobody?

Mr. FLEET.

No, sir.

And later:

Senator SMITH.

Who was on the bow of that boat, if anyone, Sunday evening, forward of the bridge?

Mr. FLEET.

There was nobody forward of it.

Senator SMITH.

Nobody forward of the bridge?

Mr. FLEET.

No, sir; we were the only ones that were forward - up in the nest.

Senator SMITH.

And there was no one else?

Mr. FLEET.
No, sir.

While it is a fact, as noted in this article, that the "eyes" of a ship can function as a supplementary lookout

place in fog or when searching for survivors of a shipwreck, the weather was crystal clear the night the *Titanic* was lost. Which meant no man had to be up in the "eyes". And Fleet twice stated for a fact while before Senator Smith that no one was posted there.

Clearly, this part of the film's staging of the iceberg collision was a last-minute "disaster movie" addition while filming, for there is no mention of it in the final draft of the screenplay.

3. This section is derived from the inquiry testimonies of lookouts Frederick Fleet, Reginald Lee, George Symons, Archie Jewell, and George Hogg of the *Titanic*. (Alfred Evans was never called to testify.) Captain Arthur *Rostron* of the RMS *Carpathia*, captain Stanley Lord of the SS *Californian*, and captain James Moore of the RMS *Mount Temple*.

4. To wit, Fleet had this to say about this divergence of recollections:

17271. (*The Attorney-General*.) I think it is necessary to direct your Lordship's attention to question 2408 at page 73 of Lee's evidence. I have asked him his story in detail, but I think it is necessary to put it to him now. I will read it. (*To the witness*.) Just listen to this, Fleet. This is a question put to your mate and I will read you his answer. "Did you notice this haze which you said extended on the horizon when you first came on the look-out or did it come later?"

- (A.) It was not so distinct then - not to be noticed. You did not really notice it then - not on going on watch, but we had all our work cut out to pierce through it just after we started. My mate" - that is you - "happened to pass the remark to me. He said 'Well if we can see through that we will be lucky.' That was when we began to notice there was a haze on the water. There was nothing in sight"?

- Well, I never said that.

17272. You never said it?

- No.

Then later, when asked in relation to evidence by lookout Symons on this point:

17394. [Scanlan-Mersey sidebar fragment deleted] (*To the witness*.) You know George Symons; you know Symons was also a look-out man?

- Yes.

He was asked: "While you were on the look-out up to 10 o'clock, what sort of a night was it? - (A.) Pretty clear, Sir; a fine night, rather hazy; if anything, a little hazy on the horizon, but nothing to speak of."

The Commissioner:

Then the next question.

17395. (*Mr. Scanlan*.) "Would you describe it as a very clear night? - (A.) Yes. (Q.) With stars? - (A.) Yes." Do you agree with this description of the night - "fine night, rather hazy; if anything a little hazy on the horizon."

The Witness:

Not when I went on the look-out; it was not hazy.

17396. But when the haze did come was it like that?

- A slight haze.

17397. And did it extend right round the horizon?

- No.

17398. It did not extend all round?

- No.

17399. Was it right in front of you?

- Right in front.

17400. (*The Commissioner*.) I understand you to say two points on each bow?

- Two points on each bow; that is in front.

5 This sidebar occurred during Fleet's testimony.

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