

Roaming Around: Memoirs of a Marconi operator

by Alec Bagot

Extract

The next year went past for me in many experiences of life and places. I was a fully fledged Marconi operator, had visited my Australia of loving memories, Norway, with its North Cape, where I had taken photographs in the sunshine at midnight and many Mediterranean and other cruises, some in the pleasure ship *Vectus*. Unknown to either of us, while I was on board *Vectus*, in the harbor at Venice, my future wife was with her parents at the Hotel Qanielli, not half a mile away. Neither of us knew any more about it than we had on that long ago Christmas Day when we were born in South Australia.

Having reached the advanced age of eighteen, I had also reached the exalted height of becoming the junior Marconi operator on the biggest ship in the world – *Olympic*. Then came one of the world's greatest tragedies in which I was to play a part.

Fifty years is a long spell in anyone's life, but more especially when it happens to be your own. Yet the passage of half a century has not dimmed the memory of that tragic night in April 1912, when *Titanic* sank on her maiden voyage from Southampton to New York. I have but to close my eyes to feel again Ernie Moore shaking my shoulder, saying, "Get up quickly. The *Titanic*'s sinking."

"What's the time?"

"Eleven forty. I can't wait. Get up."

I turned back, disgruntled. It was a mean thing to wake you twenty minutes before you need go on watch. Five was enough. Nor was there anything funny in the greeting, although, usually, it was the "*Maurie*" or the "*Lucy*," our Cunard rivals *Mauretania* and *Lusitania*, which were supposed to be in distress. That, or "The old man wants you on the Bridge," – too corny to carry weight with any seasoned "Sparks." So, when the 1st Wireless Officer of *RMS Olympic*, E. J. Moore, awakened me with such lack of originality, I wasn't impressed and said so as boldly as any junior may to his senior. But Ernie was serious. "It's true, I'm telling you. It's true. Don't fool around. Get up."

With that, he dived back to the operating room and began calling MGC to *Titanic*. With the old spark system you could read every letter as the high voltage crashed noisily across the rotary gap. Moore did not look up when, three minutes later, uniform over pajamas, I joined him. Over his shoulder he handed me a message addressed "Commander, *Olympic*. Urgent. The Bridge." "It's SOS," he said.

I sped along the port passage way leading from the wireless room, past the deck officers' cabins, through the chart house to the bridge. Here were assembled with Captain Herbert Haddock, the 1st Officer R. Hume, 2nd Officer A. H. Fry and two junior officers. Such a gathering should have removed any lingering doubts, but did not prevent me from saying as I handed the signal to the Officer of the Watch, "It's true, then, about the *Titanic*?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"She's really sinking?"

"Sinking? No, of course not. How could she? But they say she's struck an iceberg and may need our help. Wait while I give this to the Commander."

Captain Haddock tore open the envelope. Even in direst urgency, Ernie Moore could never so far forget himself as to leave a radiogram unsealed. "I'll answer it myself. Please come with me."

I followed him into the chart room. On a message pad he wrote, "Commander *Titanic* – Am lighting up all possible boilers as fast as I can – Haddock." Handing me the message, the Captain said, "Please send that

urgent. What is your name?" "Bagot, sir."

"You are the 2nd Marconi Officer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Please ask your senior, Mr..."

"Moore, sir."

"Yes. Mr. Moore, to stand by all the time and let me know immediately he gets any further news."

"Yes, sir."

As I saluted and turned, the Captain spoke again. "And Bagot..."

"Sir?"

"There is no need, of course, to say no mention of this business may be made outside."

"No, sir."

What does he take me for, I thought. Every Marconi man was sworn to secrecy. This ruling did not apply to Americans – the United States not having ratified the Borne convention, a fact of which ex-radio man, Jack Binns, and the American press were quick to take full advantage.

Back in the wireless cabin, where, at midnight, I took over watch, Moore told me what had gone before. As usual, at 10.30 p.m., he had been receiving long wave news from Cape Race. This, our second night out from New York, brought us within easy range of the station whose powerful signals could span the Atlantic. There had been little of interest to record – Sunday's news, generally, was a rehash of what had appeared on Saturday. Switching back to the commercial 600 metre wavelength, Ernie had heard *Titanic* signaling some ship about striking an iceberg. "I wasn't sure whether it was the *Titanic* or some other ship," he said. "X's (atmospherics) were bad, and a lot of other stations jamming. But I answered him and asked whether he needed help." Ten minutes later, Moore's doubts were dispelled. Across 505 miles of space, Jack Phillips, 1st radio Officer of *Titanic*, signaled *Olympic*. "We have struck an iceberg. Our position 41.46 N 50.14 W. Tell Captain."

Barely waiting to reply "RD.O.K" (Your message received. Understood.), Ernie had reported to the bridge. Back in the wireless room, he again put on his head phones. The ether was jammed with stations talking to each other. Moore started up the motors. "CQ - QRT" he signaled. "All stations stop transmitting. This is *Olympic* calling *Titanic*. Stop talking. Stop talking."

Rule of radio gave control to the most powerful station and priority to greatest urgency. *Olympic* and *Titanic*, in addition to 'being the largest ships in the world,' were equipped with 5 kilowatt Marconi wireless sets – the newest and, with one exception, most powerful radio installations in any mercantile vessels afloat. When *Titanic* again signaled *Olympic*, it was to say, "Tell Captain get your boats ready and what is your position"

A natural precaution and enquiry with nothing to indicate extreme danger. Everyone knew that *Titanic*, like *Olympic*, was unsinkable. Had this not been proven a year earlier, when the British cruiser, *H.M.S. Hawke*, colliding in the Solent with the *Olympic*, had driven a 40 foot hole into *Olympic*'s side and the injured vessel had barely listed four inches? But if *Titanic* had sustained heavy damage, passengers, doubtless, would want to 'be transferred to her sister ship, possibly taken in her to New York.' Hence the message, "Get your boats ready," for neither *Titanic* nor *Olympic* carried life boat accommodation for more than forty per cent of the complements. They are only for show "or to help someone else," we had been told that week, in New York, when *Olympic*'s new commander, Captain Herbert Haddock, had insisted on holding boat stations drill. This was something his predecessor, Commodore-Captain E.J. Smith, now commanding *Titanic*, had never done.

"No good you two standing here," third Officer John Evans had said. "Your duty's to stick to your ruddy sparks and go down like heroes with the sinking ship – while I take charge of a boat full of pretty girls." The advent of the Captain, with his staff, had drawn us to attention. Nevertheless, looking down the port boat deck, on which were assembled half of our 900 crew alongside 8 boats, each with a capacity of 50 persons, one realized how lucky we were to be in an unsinkable ship. With only sixteen life boats for

something like 2,300 persons, someone would miss out. It was, therefore, with a feeling amounting to disbelief, in answer to Haddock's signal "Commander *Titanic* 4.24 a.m. G.M.T. (Greenwich Mean Time) 40.52 N 61.18 W are you steering southerly to meet us?" Five minutes later, *Titanic* replied, "Tell Captain we are putting the passengers off in small boats."

Such was the incredible message I had carried to the bridge. To it Captain Haddock had replied, "Am lighting up all possible boilers as fast as can." "What weather have you had?" Moore had asked. "Clear and calm," Jack Phillips replied, so we still felt there was no need to worry unduly.

Then began the long watch through the early hours of Monday 15th April, whilst, at intervals, I kept calling *Titanic*, not knowing she had foundered. It was an uncanny, unforgettable night. As each boiler came into full power, *Olympic* rapidly increased from her economic quiet cruising speed of 18-1/2 knots until she surged through the water with tremendous force at something over 25 knots an hour. Never had she raced with such impulse, trembling with energy. The sea was calm, yet the mighty vessel gathered rhythm, with a noticeable up and down movement, as though leaping a series of invisible hurdles. Outside our cabin along the boat check, sailors were removing tarpaulins, swinging davits, testing falls. Every now and then an officer, or A.B., would come to the wireless room seeking news. Always the same reply. "We've lost touch."

We were not then to know that as the waters had risen in *Titanic*'s engine room cutting off power, Phillips had been forced onto his emergency set – a ten inch induction coil, with maximum night range of some 150 miles. Nevertheless, such a possibility had crept into our mind; therefore we kept signaling other ships, besides land stations, trying to make contact, indirectly with *Titanic*.

At daylight, shortly after 4.15 a.m., Sable Island signaled us with traffic. A message addressed, "Captain Haddock *Olympic* – Endeavor communicate *Titanic* and ascertain time and position. Reply as soon as possible to Ismay (Code name for White Star Line) New York," signal "F.W.Redway" told us that the New York Office was aware some thing had happened but, like ourselves, lacked details. "Have you any particulars of *Titanic*?" our Captain asked Cape Race, via Sable Island. Three hours later, whilst 205 miles from Sable Island, we received a relayed service message from Cape Race, saying, "Your signal's good here, watch and tune for us." We listened hard, switching now and then onto "news" wave length without success, on the chance he might be transmitting on long distance. Not until 10.55 a.m. New York time, when 350 miles distant, did we establish direct contact. The land station's signals were weak – almost inaudible. We exchanged via *S.S. Scandinavian* eight urgent messages, all more or less repeating those already relayed – "Have you any further news?" "Nothing new." Indeed, New York seemed as well informed as ourselves, having received from Cape Race, Cape Sable and Sable Island transmissions of signals exchanged between various ships and shore stations.

Our radio log shows that many vessels were within wireless range. At 12.20 a.m. *Hellig Olav* said he had no news of *Titanic*. Nor had French ship *La Bretagne*. Neither had Cunard liner *S.S. Athenia* when we spoke to her at 8.15 a.m. Nor the *Nesaba* two hours later, although her master, Captain Clark, signaled, "Captain *Olympic* in Lat 42 to Lat 41.25 N long 49 W to long 50.35 W we saw heavy pack ice and a large number of icebergs also some field ice. Weather has been fine and clear." Other vessels confirmed the ice packs. Captain Wood of *S.S. Asian* signaled, "13th April iceberg reported in lat 41.50 long 50.20."

This, will be noted, was mighty close to *Titanic*'s collision position, given as "lat. 41.46 long 50.20." We had first made contact with *Asian* at 5.40 a.m. NYT, when her only operator signaled, "We have a German oil tank in tow for Halifax only making 5 knots. I think the *Baltic* some way ahead of us – say about 200 miles would have passed *Titanic* but our (Leyland) *Antillian* if he was on watch, should have got *Titanic*. He was about 60 miles astern. Say who is M.G.Y.? I last heard him at 11.58 p.m. calling SOS. Had heard him previous to that very faint working to Cape Race."

Here was a tantalizing state of affairs. The *Asian*'s operator had heard M.G.Y. sending SOS, but had not even known it was the *Titanic*'s call-signal. Such was the position in 1912, when the Marconi code book comprised a few pages of names and a lot of blank spaces opposite call signals to be filled in, later, with

ship's names. Apparently, *Asian*'s operator, before sailing, had not received the usual monthly bulletin of new equipment. Weak reed though he was, I told him to keep watch whilst his news was reported to our commander.

At 7.35 a.m., Sable Island broke in with another message, this time from Phillip Franklin, the General Manager, White Star, New York, saying, "Keep us posted fully regarding *Titanic*. Captain Haddock replied, "Since midnight when her position was 41.46 N 50.14 we have been unable to communicate. We are now 310 miles from her nine a.m. under full power. Will inform you at once if hear anything."

Our commander then signaled, "Captain *Asian* – Can you give me any information *Titanic* and if any ships standing by her?" To the Captain, Wood replied, "*Asian* heard *Titanic* signaling Cape Race on and off from eight to ten local time Sunday. Messages too faint to read. Finished calling SOS midnight. Position given as lat. 41.46 long 50.14. No further information. *Asian* then 500 miles west of *Titanic* and towing oil Tank to Halifax."

Nearly one hour later, at 9.25 a.m. NYT, when we established communication with *S.S. Parisian*, we got our next positive news. Their operator signaled, "I sent traffic to the *Titanic* at 8.30 last night and heard him send traffic to Cape Race just before I went to bed. I turned in at 11.15 ship's time. The *Californian* was about fifty miles astern of us. I heard the following this morning at six o'clock. According to information received the *Carpathia* has picked up about twenty boats with passengers. The *Baltic* is returning to give assistance. As regards *Titanic* have heard nothing. Don't know if she has sunk." This information was conveyed immediately to Captain Haddock, who forthwith relayed it to Ismay, New York.

Captain Hains of the *Parisian* also gave us valuable information about the fateful ice-pack. In reply to a message from *Olympic*'s commander asking whether we could steer to 41.22 N 50.14 W from westward, thence north to *Titanic*'s position, which we were due to reach at midnight, Captain Hains advised, "As the ice was yesterday, you would be safe from field ice to the position mentioned." It would then be necessary to approach *Titanic*'s position from the westward, steering about WNW. If the *Titanic*'s position, as given by *Olympic* to New York was 41.47: 50.20, *Titanic* would be in heavy field ice and numerous bergs. "I hope and trust matters are not as bad as they appear," said Hains. Thus can mistakes occur. At no time had we either received or given *Titanic*'s position as noted by Captain Hains; close though it was to the 41.46N 50.14W already recorded. Could he have confused *Titanic* with nearby *Californian* or some signal reporting the ice pack? Or, possibly, *Parisian*'s operator might have erred in reception. It would be easy to mistake a few dots for dashes in the heavy atmospheric conditions then prevailing.

Why, one asked, should such an experienced mariner as Captain Smith, of whom it was said he could find his way across the Atlantic blindfold, risk his ship by taking her on "the northern summer circle" amongst ice packs? What fate drove him there? This question, at first only whispered, was later shouted by angry and insistent voices when it became known that other ships' warnings of ice in the *Titanic*'s pathway had been ignored.

Exceptionally heavy winter seas had caused early break-up of the ice fields, resulting in an unprecedented number of bergs and large floes of pack-ice finding their way farther south earlier than usual. Whether Captain Smith would have avoided danger by taking a more southerly course, had his dominating chief, Bruce Ismay, not been aboard, is purely speculative. More certain was the challenge to White Star's prestige, owning the largest ships in the world, by Cunard's faster vessels, *Lusitania* and *Mauretania*. Competition between the two companies was intense. Cunard was determined their rival should not hold all the glory. Hot on the heels of the great *Titanic* pounded the blue-ribbon *Mauretania*, seeking to break her own trans-Atlantic record. Should she succeed, the score would be evened. Although no match for *Mauritania*'s speed, by taking some calculated risks, under pressure *Titanic* might yet put up a formidable performance. Was this the motivating force that led to the disaster?

On Monday afternoon, tension rose to a dramatic crisis. From 1.25 p.m. until 1.40 p.m., I struggled to read weak signal from Cape Race. Nearby German liner *Berlin* jammed me badly. I told him angrily, "QRT, stop transmitting" – or he would find himself in trouble. *S.S. Scandinavian* came to my aid, offering to

relay. Fifteen minutes later, a number of similarly worded messages had been received from New York: "Wireless operator *Olympic*: We will pay you liberally for story of rescue of *Titanic*'s passengers. Any length possible for you to send earliest possible moment. Mention prominent persons – World." Another, more specific, offered thirty pounds a column, whilst others, open handed, said, "Name your own price." It was tempting, but time wasting. Even had we been inclined, we could not have broken our pledge to secrecy. We told Cape Race, "It's no use sending messages from newspapers asking us for news of *Titanic* as we have none to give. If you've no more urgent traffic, better stand by as it's most important we should contact some ship with definite news of *Titanic*." "But we must clear this traffic, as all the messages are paid for," was the shore station's plaintive and logical reply.

Obdurate, we began calling *Carpathia*. At last, at 2 p.m., *Carpathia*'s Marconi operator answered. I hurled at him a series of prepared questions.

"Steady on. I don't do everything at once. Patience please," my opposite number, Harold Cottam, replied. I felt justly rebuked – the more so as, on his crackling, antiquated, induction coil, he told his tragic story. "I received distress signals from the *Titanic* at 11.20 and we proceeded to the spot mentioned. On arrival at daybreak, we saw field ice twenty-five miles long, apparently solid and a quantity of wreckage and a number of boats full of people. We raised about 670 souls." (It turned out to be 705, but survivors were still being listed.) Then came the incredible. "The *Titanic* has sunk. She went down in about two hours. Captain and all engineers lost. Our Captain sent orders there was no need for *Baltic* to come any further, so with that she returned on her course to Liverpool. Are you going to resume your course on that information? We have two or three officers aboard and the second Marconi operator. Mr. Ismay is aboard."

The message was, of course, rushed to Captain Haddock immediately. This was the vital news for which not only ourselves, but the whole world had been waiting. Thanking Cottam, "Any urgent messages for shore we will send through Cape Race for you," I said. "But please stand by for service (ship to ship) messages."

"OK, old man, but I'm tired and hungry. Have had nothing to eat since 5.30 p.m. yesterday," Harold replied. Cottam's tenacity and selfless devotion to duty throughout the whole period encompassing the tragedy, in my opinion, has never been sufficiently recognized. At 2.35 p.m., New York Time, Captain Haddock acknowledged *Carpathia*'s distressing news. "7.12 p.m. G.M.T. our position 41.17 N 53.53 W steering east true. Shall I meet you and where," he asked. The *Virginian* chipped in, "Please tell *Carpathia* we have been standing by for him since 9 a.m. when we were within 35 miles of him. Have message for him." "Give him a chance – he's busy," we answered.

Then came from *Carpathia*'s Captain a batch of historic messages:

"Captain *Olympic* – 7.30 GMT lat. 41.15 N long. 51.45 W, am steering south 87 West true. Returning to New York with *Titanic*'s passengers – Rostron."

"Captain *Olympic* – Bruce Ismay is under an opiate – Rostron."

"Captain *Olympic* – Do you think it is advisable *Titanic*'s passengers see *Olympic*? Personally I say not – Rostron."

"Captain *Olympic* – Mr. Ismay's orders *Olympic* not to be seen by *Carpathia* no transfer to take place – Rostron."

Thus, out of sight, across the sea, the powerful Ismay signaled his command. The man whose voice, it was said, ordered Captain Edward J. Smith to press *Titanic* along the northern course, when prudence would have directed one more southerly, was still in control. Still reluctant to believe the worst, our Commander now signaled Captain Rostron, *Carpathia*, asking whether there was "the slightest hope in searching *Titanic*'s position." "Leyland line *S.S. Californian* remaining and searching round. All boats accounted for. About 675 souls saved. Crew and passengers latter nearly all women and children. *Titanic* foundered about

2.20 a.m. 5.47 G.M.T. in 41.15 N 50.14 West. Not certain of having got through. Please forward to White Star also to Cunard Liverpool and New York that I am returning to New York. Consider this most advisable for many considerations." It will be noted that *Carpathia's* reckoning of *Titanic's* last position at 41.15 North, differed greatly from the 41.46 North that we had received from *Titanic* itself.

Shock is an extraordinary thing, numbing the senses. Only then did the full measure of the disaster become apparent. From the first incredulous "It can't happen," through a period of growing doubt, until this bald statement rammed home with brutal directness the awful truth. As I returned from the bridge, one part of my brain kept saying, "It can't be – it can't be," whilst another voice, even more compelling, repeated "It's true. It's true. It's true."

True? I returned to the cabin. Ernie Moore was at the operating bench. We were taking turn and turn about, both on watch or waiting on the Commander. Thoughtfully, Captain Haddock ordered an able seaman to "be in attendance during those fateful hours." He took up station just inside the door. It was here, beside a small desk, that Captain E.J. Smith had stood one evening a few weeks earlier. He had entered casually, unannounced. We were nearing Southampton on the old man's last voyage in command of *Olympic*. The Captain looked like a slightly less rotund edition of the late King Edward VII – a resemblance we sometimes thought he tried to foster. In uniform, with sea cap, he was unmistakably the sailor.

"Pray sit down, gentlemen. Sit down," he said, as we sprang to our feet. "As you may have heard, I am taking command of the *Titanic*. I've come to say good-bye."

We were dumbfounded. Although Moore and I had now been in *Olympic* since she was recommissioned after collision with the *Hawke* during some nine or ten months, the Captain had seldom been inside our cabin. That he should have come now for such a purpose was an unexpected honour, Ernie said. Something appropriate. Captain Smith half rested against the desk table. "Been happy?"

Moore answered for both of us. "Yes, sir. Very."

The old man played with a toothpick – a peculiar little habit, like holding a pencil or an unlighted cigarette between the lips. Almost as though speaking to himself, he said, "Yes, she's been a happy ship. I'll be sorry to leave her."

The fear object of his visit came out. "I'm very satisfied with the way you men have dealt with your work. If you wish, Mr. Moore, I'll be pleased to recommend you both transfer with me to *Titanic*." When the Captain had left, Moore, seldom demonstrative had playfully shaken my hand. "How's that for an offer?" It may seem strange we did not jump to accept. First inclination was to do so, but Moore in his quiet way pointed out little, if anything, was to be gained. *Olympic* and *Titanic* were sister ships, of which *Titanic* would be the junior when Commodore Smith retired. We had both spent months getting our wireless equipment into good working order. Why start all over with a new set? More important, no higher pay would attach. Finally, almost all that voyage, since leaving New York, Moore had suffered from a severe cold resulting in my doing double duty. Since we maintained between us a continuous 24 hour watch, by the journey's end we were both exhausted.

"Let's toss up," I suggested. "Heads we go, tails we stay." We spun a coin. It came down tails. We remained on *Olympic*, whilst sixty percent of her officers transferred to *Titanic*.

This was one of those vivid memories that flashed through my mind. Jack Phillips, [*Titanic's*] senior Marconi officer, had drowned. His junior, Harold Bride, was saved. Would that have meant, had positions "been reversed," my good friend Ernie Moore would have been lost, whilst I escaped? Who can say? The afternoon wore on. We relayed *Carpathia's* news to Cape Race by way of direct message from our commander. To Phillip A. Franklin, Captain Haddock sent a personal marconigram. "Inexpressible sorrow. Am proceeding straight on voyage. *Carpathia* informs me no hope in searching. Will send names of survivors. Yamsi (Ismay) on *Carpathia*." It was this signal, intercepted by Jack Binns, that caused Bruce Ismay to be held in New York at a Court of Enquiry, hastily summoned.

“Poor Mr. Franklin,” I thought. Before we had left New York, he had visited us, with his pretty daughter; friendly, interested in our show-piece wireless, asking questions, speaking with obvious pride of our great ship and the new one, due next week.

We asked *Carpathia* to rush his lists of survivors. Before he could start, the *Californian* came in. This was the vessel, ice bound, some ten miles from *Titanic*, whose captain had failed to interpret the drama taking place within visual signaling distance. We were not to know until later that *Titanic*'s distress rockets were mistaken for company identification signals – relic of sailing days whereby ships that passed in the night made themselves known to each other. Nor, when *Titanic*'s lights gradually disappeared, that it had been assumed the giant vessel was steaming southward. Charges subsequently hurled against *Californian*'s master, Captain Stanley Lord, that he was drunk; had refused to hazard his ship; had turned a deaf ear to his officers; in after light can be treated as unfounded. But for an accumulation of human errors, as tragic in their build up as those that drove the *Titanic* onto the iceberg, few, probably would have lost their lives. “Why didn't *Californian*'s wireless operator, Cyril Evans, receive Jack Phillip's SOS? What devilish hand made him take off his head phones only a few minutes before *Titanic*'s distress call crashed the ether? Here, again, the personal equation comes into the picture. Neither *Californian*, *Asian*, *Parisian*, *Mesala* nor *Carpathia* – in fact, none but the largest liners carried more than one operator. Costs had to be kept down. One recalls an old nursery jingle:

“For want of a nail, the shoe was lost.

For want of shoe, the horse was lost.

For want of the horse, the rider was lost.

For want of the rider, the battle was lost”

Might we not say, “For want of a second operator at twenty shillings a week, fifteen hundred souls were lost?” For such was the margin between life and wholesale death.

“We were the second boat on the scene of disaster,” *Californian*'s operator, Evans, signaled us at 4.52 p.m. – in what I still regard as the most pathetic message of the whole series. “All we could see were some boxes and coats and a few empty boats and what looked like oil on the water. When we were near the *Carpathia* he would not answer me though I kept calling him as I wanted the position. He kept on talking to the *Baltic*. The latter says he is going to report me for jamming. We were the nearer boat to the *Carpathia*. A boat called the *Birma* was still looking.” Some boxes and coats, and a few empty boats and what looked like oil on the water – what a sepulcher for the mighty vessel. Captain Arthur Rostron now sent a private signal to Captain Haddock: “Captain, chief, first and sixth officers and all engineers gone. Also the Doctor and all pursers and one Marconi operator and chief steward gone. We have second fourth and fifth officers and one Marconi operator on board.”

Shipmates and friends. So many gone. “All the pursers.” That included the assistant purser, R.L. Barker, my friend. A recollection of his farewell to us at Southampton came to mind. “Well, so long, you miserable sparks. When you call for help we'll come to your rescue.” Something unusual seemed to happen to *Olympic* every voyage – a lost propeller blade – grounding in the River Hudson – damage to the New York wharf – some of the roughest winter passages on record, when waves smashing over the forecastle had washed a seven-ton hatch cover clear overboard and spent itself along the boat decks, normally 80 feet above waterline. With all this, following the *Hawke* episode, *Olympic*'s crew sometimes called her an unlucky ship. “Never mind about us, look after yourselves. Don't forget what I told you about drowning,” I answered in similar vein. We had played poker together. With learner's luck I had filled a royal flush to the ace and ten of clubs. Too excited to wait for a call, I had claimed royalties.

Paying his dollar, Barker said, “If ever you do that again I'll throw you overboard.”

“I won't drown. I've a lucky hand.”

“Lucky! I'll say!”

“No. My palm, I mean, let's see yours.”

I turned his right hand palm upwards. “Yes, there it is. You’ll die suddenly when you’re twenty-six.”
“Rot! How’d you make that out?”

“Looks at your life line – heart line – line of fate – all broken off early.” Barker snatched away his hand, half laughing, half angry. “You’re too late. I’m twenty-six now.”

“There’s still time!” I answered with the callousness of youth. So Barker had gone.

Came another signal from *Carpathia*: “We will send names immediately we can. You can understand we are working under considerable difficulty. Everything possible being done for comfort of survivors. Please maintain standby – Rostron.”

Cottam then began sending the names of survivors. From his uneven transmission he was obviously tired out. Half way through a name the morse code dots and dashes became one continuous crackle, lasting nearly a minute. Regaining activity, “Please excuse sending but am half asleep,” he said, having fallen over his key. By the end of nearly two hours, we had received 322 first and second class passengers’ names. “The third class passengers’ names and lists of crew will follow later,” said Cottam.

For the next twelve hours, we were continuously on the air, either sending or receiving messages. Much time was taken up with repetitions and radiograms crossing each other from New York, asking for information already on its way from ships trying to break in with service message, everyone of which claimed to be most urgent. We relayed *Carpathia*’s messages to Cape Race. One, partly in private code, from Captain Rostron to Cunard, New York, said, “Returning to New York with about 700 survivors, including Mr. Ismay. Consider New York best. Large number of ice bergs and twenty miles of field ice with bergs amongst *Carpathia* had been proceeding towards Liverpool when she got *Titanic*’s distress call.”

We had now lost contact with Cape Race, but at 10.30 p.m., Sable Island, farther east, called, offering traffic. Instead, we started sending him our list of survivors. Two hours later, Cape Race broke in. “Your signals strong here. Have received names you’ve been sending to Sable and sent them on to New York.” We continued sending the list of names to Cape Race, completing at 2.30 a.m. Tuesday morning – twenty-four hours after *Titanic* had sunk. This explains that long delay when the world anxiously awaited news of survivors. These messages, intercepted by Jack Binns, ex-Marconi operator, resulted in a New York evening journal securing a ‘scoop.’ Binns’ contemporary and friend of Ernie Moore, was the man whose distress ‘CQD’ from White Star liner *Republic*, sinking after collision with *S.S. Florida*, had been the means of saving many lives.

Overnight, Jack Binns had become a hero, sharing with inventor Marconi the praise of a grateful world. His nomination by the Marconi Company to be in charge of *Titanic*’s wireless embarrassed the ship-owners. They wanted no reminders of sea hazards to accompany their greatest vessel on her maiden voyage. Withdrawn from the prestige ship, a frustrated, angry Binns resigned [and] went to New York, primarily to get damages for a film made about him without his consent, secondarily to get a job.

“What are you doing here?” Moore asked, when Binns had called aboard *Olympic*. “If I don’t land something soon, I’ll let the press know I’m here. I think they’ll give me publicity,” Jack answered. Within three days the call came. An astute editor hired a tug, *Mary F. Scully*, bought a complete wireless outfit, threw it on board and told Binns to get busy as the small ship put out to sea. Jack rigged the radio, received our messages and sent them to his editor – a legitimate proceeding, since no laws regarding privacy of wireless existed in the States.

All this Jack Binns told us later. During the crisis, when we were receiving from *Carpathia* and relaying to shore, we did not know our erstwhile colleague was leveling his score with the White Star by listening in to our transmission. Then came a series of messages from Franklin, New York. “Wireless name of every officer, passenger, crew on *Carpathia*. It is most important keep in communication with *Carpathia* to accomplish this. Instruct *Californian* stand by scene of wreck until she hears from us or is relieved or her coal supply runs short.” Much more to the same tenor, showing how confused the situation was.

Reference to coal took into account the great miners’ strike in England, resulting in many ships sailing

short bunkered. *Olympic*'s own supplies had been denuded so that *Titanic*'s maiden voyage should not be impaired. Hence, we had been cruising at economic speed, 18-1/2 knots, instead of average 22-1/2 [or] 23-1/2, which, had we been able to make it, would have brought us 100 miles closer to the scene of *Titanic*'s disaster. Closer, but not near enough. Nor, had *Olympic* left New York on her ordinary schedule, instead as happened, two hours later than usual, would we have been able to help. Nothing, it seemed, was destined to save *Titanic*. Not even the *Californian* – barely ten miles distant. Everything conspired towards her doom.

“Are you absolutely satisfied that *Carpathia* has all survivors as we heard a rumor *Virginian*, *Parisian* also had survivors. Where is *Baltic*?” Franklin asked. Tuesday, 3.10 a.m. New York Time – “Now daylight. Cape Race signals die off,” my radio log records. Twenty-five minutes later the *Virginian* signaled. “We were requested by *Carpathia* to resume our course at the same time as the *Baltic*. We got within 25 miles of the *Titanic*. I heard her distress calls and we went to her right away. We had 200 miles to go.”

“Did you pick up any survivors?” I asked. “No. Wait till I report to the bridge.” Ten minutes later came the signal destroying all lingering hopes.

“*Virginian* ... Captain *Olympic* – You hear rumors that we have survivors of *Titanic* on board. This is not so. I have none. At ten a.m. yesterday when thirty miles from position of disaster received a Marconi from *Carpathia* as follows: ‘Turn back now everything OK. We have eight hundred aboard. Return to your northern track.’ I consequently proceeded on my course to Liverpool. Similar instructions were sent at same time to the *Baltic* from *Carpathia*. I passed a large quantity of field ice and bergs Gambell (Commander)”

We may have slept, Ernie Moore and I, during the next three days to Southampton, but if we did, I have no recollection of it. Eight hours on watch; eight hours off; four hours on; four off was our ordinary day. During our long watch ‘below,’ we normally attended to the motors, wrote up our abstract of messages, did odd jobs and got our ‘long’ sleep. On this memorable voyage, we seemed never to stop sending or receiving “Marconigrams.” In addition, we received orders from London to prepare a complete copy of our wireless log. I made an extract for Moore and myself. Next voyage, in New York, a journalist offered \$2,000 for it. “Heck, son, ain’t yer gotta price?” he asked, when I explained, patiently, “we weren’t allowed to sell.”

Arrived at Southampton, summoned to his cabin, Captain Haddock thanked us. For what, we wondered? Later, in London, Godfrey C. Isaacs, on “behalf of Marconi’s, presented Ernie Moore with a gold watch, engraved. I must have looked slightly envious; disappointed. Nothing for me? Not even a silver watch? The Chairman was again speaking, “a ‘double rise,’” making my pay at sea thenceforth twenty-five shillings instead of one pound a week. We both felt well rewarded for the parts we had played in the greatest peace-time sea disaster of the century.

When the enquiry was over, in which I showed Lord Mersey (who conducted it) all the *Olympic* Marconi apparatus and contacted the French Station at Cape Ushant for him to hear, I asked to be transferred to the Naval Wireless in Australia, and so spent two happy years at the Marconi Stations in Melbourne and Adelaide. I enjoyed life as well as work, and made many friends, but my great disappointment was that, having become part of the Navy, I was not allowed to transfer to the Army, as the 1914-18 war had started during that time, and the very few Marconi land stations were much needed. Having wanted to get away to the fighting front in 1914, I had to wait for my transfer until 1915, and I was then sent with the First ANZAC Wireless Squadron to Mesopotamia. As life worked out, that lapse of time was my greatest piece of good fortune. I was taken by a cousin to visit some friends and having been introduced to my hostess, turned to come face to face with her daughter – my Christmas day baby of years ago; and each of us found the love and influence that was to last for all our lives. We rushed a cable to my future father-in-law who was with his Field Ambulance in France, and managed to be married twenty-four hours before my troop ship sailed for the Persian Gulf. The old *Karmala* sailed from Adelaide, South Australia, and I watched from the deck as my wife faded into the distance, with the heart-breaking thought, “Will we ever meet again?”

Reprinted with the permission of John H. Bagot;

© The Bagot Family and the State Library of South Australia.

Courtesy of [Shelley Dziedzic](#)

© Encyclopedia Titanica (www.encyclopedia-titanica.org) 1996-2010 and third parties (ref: #4523, accessed 5th February 2010 10:12:03 PM)

URL : <http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/roaming-around-memoirs-marconi-operator.html>