

SOS : Titanic NOT the first user

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OVER the years many myths and fallacies have grown up around the *Titanic*. Not least the myth that the *Titanic* was the first vessel to use the International Distress Call 'SOS'.

This is not so - the facts are these:-

The first RADIO DISTRESS SIGNAL was transmitted from the *East Goodwin Lightship* on 17 March 1899 when the merchant vessel *Elbe* ran aground on the Goodwin Sands. The message was received by the radio operator on duty at the South Foreland Lighthouse, who was able to summon the aid of the Ramsgate lifeboat.

The Goodwin Sands again featured in another 'first' when on 30 April 1899, the *East Goodwin Sands Lightship* sent a distress message on her own account when she was rammed by the *SS R. F. Matthews*.

This was prior to the introduction of the 'SOS' and the recognised call sign for ships in distress then was 'CQD'. This signal had been devised by the Marconi Company, it was intended to mean 'All Stations - Urgent', but was popularly misinterpreted as 'Come Quick - Danger' or 'Come Quickly Down'.

The 'SOS' signal was established as an International Distress Signal by an agreement made between the British Marconi Society and the German Telefunken organisation at the Berlin Radio Conference, 3 October 1906. The signal was formally introduced on 1 July 1908.

The first time the 'SOS' signal was used in an emergency was on 10 June 1909, when the Cunard liner *SS Slavonia* was wrecked off the Azores. Two steamers received her signals and went to the rescue.

This was nearly three years before the *Titanic* made her famous signal!

Fact from: The Shell Book of Firsts. By Patrick Robertson. Elbury Press & Michael Joseph Ltd. London.

This article first appeared in the British Titanic Society's *Atlantic Daily Bulletin* in Fall 1988, it seems that this myth is going to go on forever!

Courtesy of Brian Ticehurst

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