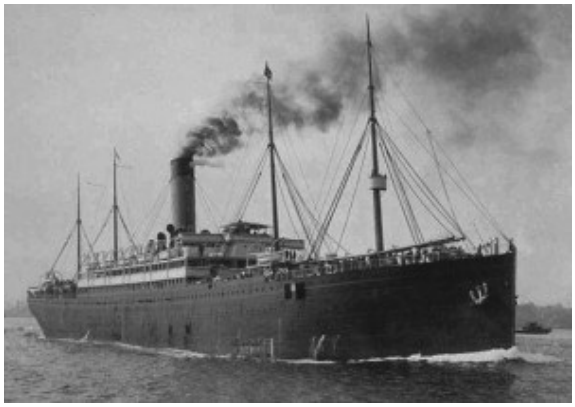
Living in the Past

Historical perspective

The first radio rescue at sea

On 23 January 1909, two ships, *Republic* of the White Star Line (owner of *Titanic*), carrying American tourists to Europe, and Lloyd Italiano liner *Florida*, carrying Italian earthquake refugees to New York, were en route for a course to destiny. The two had encountered dense fog off the island of Nantucket, Massachusetts, and had taken the normal maritime precautions of signaling approaching vessels by loud whistle. At 5:47 am, another whistle was heard, and *Republic*'s engines were ordered to full reverse. Out of nowhere, *Florida* appeared, and T-boned *Republic* in her port side.

The engine and boiler rooms of *Republic* began to flood, and the ship listed. It was outfitted with the new Marconi wireless telegraph system, and became the first ship in history to issue a *CQD* distress call (which preceded the later *SOS*). The 26-year-old telegraph operator Jack Binns bravely tapped out the distress call from his sinking ship, to all who could hear it.

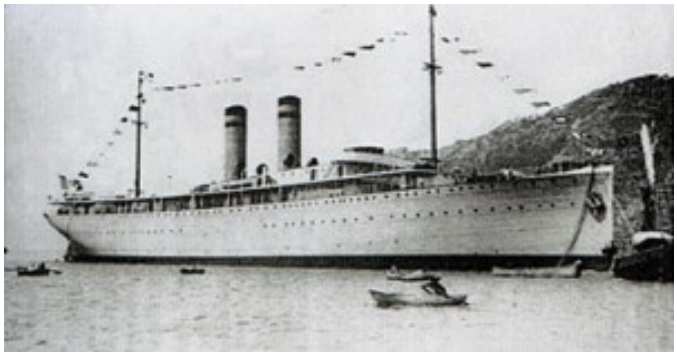


Republic

Republic's signal was detected and relayed by Nantucket Island station. Another White Star Liner *Baltic* responded to the *CQD*, and answered the call, but could not locate the damaged vessels until nearly nightfall, due to the persistent fog. The *USRC Gresham* also responded. By the following day, *Republic* sank in 270 feet of water about 50 miles to the south of Nantucket Island, in spite of all attempts to reinforce it and take it under tow.

In the end, only six people lost their lives, out of 742 on *Republic* and over 900 on *Florida*, proving the success of the new wireless telegraph technology. The wireless room was damaged in the collision, and had Jack been in the room at the time, he might also have lost his life. Jack had to retrieve working batteries from three decks below, to power the now disabled radios, and re-assemble the wiring sufficiently to make the calls for help. BTW, Jack was later asked to serve on *Titanic*, but turned down the offer.

Jack Binns, in Marconi cap



Florida