

Living in the Past

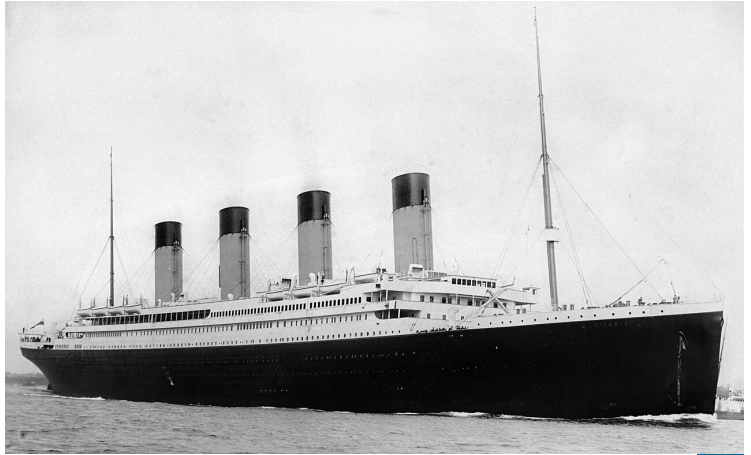
Historical perspective



The *Titanic* radio story

The sinking and subsequent rescue efforts of the British ship *RMS Titanic* had little direct relation to what we refer to as amateur radio. Yet what took place on the fateful morning of 15 April 1912 forever shaped the future of emergency communication, and radio protocol in general. There was not the first use of radio in a maritime rescue, being preceded by the *sinking of the Republic* three years prior.

The *Titanic*'s 5000-watt wireless telegraphy equipment was leased from the *Marconi Company*, which also supplied two Marconi employees, *Jack Phillips* and *Harold Bride* operating with the ship's call sign of MGY completely in Morse code. The transmitter used a rotary *spark-gap alternator* that was powered by batteries and *Leyden jars*. The installers had erected a *T-antenna*, which stretched much of the length of the ship between the two tall masts that feature prominently in the above photo.



The winter of 1911-1912 was rather mild, causing an unusually high number of icebergs to break off and flow away into the north Atlantic. Far from purposes of emergency communication, the primary tasks of the two Marconi operators were to provide customer communication between passengers and those on land, to be relayed to family and friends. In fact, Phillips was so busy handling passenger messages that at one point (10:55 pm) the *SS Californian* sent a warning message over the air that they had stopped because they were surrounded by icebergs, and Phillips scolded the *Californian* operator for interrupting him.

It's not the purpose of this short article to lay out every detail of the *Titanic* disaster timeline, which can be read on many online historical accounts. But for the sake of context, the *Titanic* struck an iceberg at 11:40 pm on Sunday night the 14th and sank by 2:20 am on the morning of the 15th, just 2½ hours later. Here is a summary of the radio-related events:

- On Sunday the 14th at 9:00 am, the first ice warning came from the *RMS Corona*.
- Throughout that day, several reports of icebergs came from the *SS La Touraine*, *RMS Baltic*, *SS Noordam*, *SS Californian*, and others, which were all relayed to the bridge.
- At 9:40 pm, the *Mesaba* broadcast a message that they had encountered an ice field, and Jack acknowledged the warning, but never relayed the message to the bridge.
- At 10:55 pm, Cyril Evans of the *Californian* attempted to warn *Titanic* about icebergs.
- At 11:40 pm, an iceberg was spotted by two *Titanic* crew members who manned the crow's nest and warned the bridge. The massive ship could not negotiate away from the chunk of ice in time, and hit the iceberg a few seconds later.
- At 12:15 am, Jack Phillips in the radio room made their first distress call for help, repeatedly calling *CQD DE MGY* ("calling any station, distress, from Titanic"), followed by *COME AT*

Living in the Past

Historical perspective, cont'd

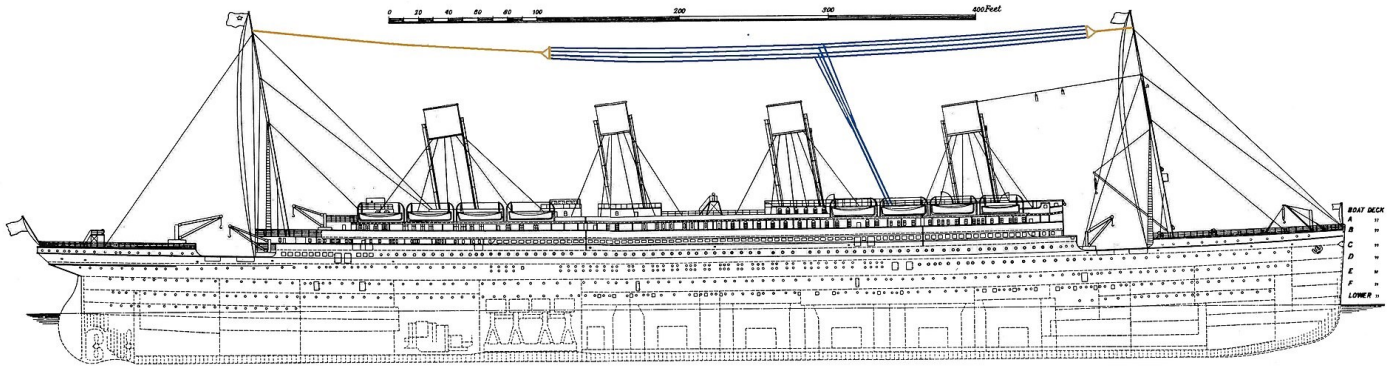
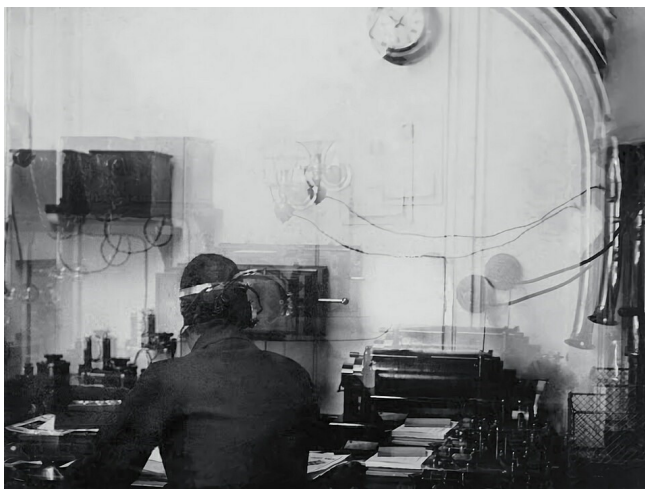


Diagram of the Titanic, showing the placement of its T-antenna between the two masts

ONCE. WE HAVE STRUCK A BERG. POSITION 41.44 N 50.24 W. (The coordinates announced by them were about 13 miles west of the actual wreck site we know of today.)

- By 12:45 am, the radio room had not received a reply, so Harold Bride decided to try the new international distress signal, repeatedly calling **SOS DE MGY COME AT ONCE...**
- At 2:10 am, Jack issued the final call for help. Afterwards, both radiomen began helping others locate life vests and getting them into life boats.
- At 2:18 am, all the lights on the *Titanic* went out.
- At 2:20 am, the *Titanic* went under.

The *Titanic* disaster prompted new maritime safety rules to be drawn up, not only for lifeboats and other lifesaving equipment and procedures, but for the importance of radio. In 1914 the International Convention for Safety of Life at Sea was formed in London and called for passenger and cargo ships on international voyages to maintain a **24-hour radio watch**.



Only known photograph of the actual radio room aboard the RMS Titanic, featuring Harold Bride at the desk on 11 April 1912

While this article is more about the role of radio emergency communication than about the two operators, it's not complete without honoring the two major names of the story. Harold Bride survived the *Titanic* sinking by clinging to a capsized collapsible life boat after being washed off the deck, but Jack Phillips did not, both men at their radio operating station until the last possible minute. Today both men have been recognized for their heroic and selfless efforts toward the saving of many lives.

You can read more about the *Titanic* rescue on [Smithsonian](#) and [Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute](#) and [Royal Museums Greenwich](#).