WIRELESS AND THE TITANIC

Adapted from original by Allan Brett VK2EBA

It is a fascinating subject - the failure of the latest and greatest technological transport masterpiece of the then new century. In retrospect, one of the bitter historical lessons of over confidence. But what of the part played by wireless?

It was most probable that the CALIFORNIAN, which was the nearest vessel, could have responded long before the Carpathia, the eventual rescue vessel, [had the Marconi operator not shut down his operations half an hour before Jack Phillips (the TITANIC's first operator) commenced sending distress signals.] You may have noticed that the TITANIC's wireless operator was referred to as a 'Marconi' operator. Guglielmo really had the game sewn up relative to maritime communications in 1912. The operators all worked for him and he hired them out to the shipping companies.

Wireless and the operators played a pivotal role in the TITANIC disaster. Operators were by today's standard overworked and underpaid. According to testimony, Jack Phillips aboard the TITANIC, forwarded an ice warning from the AMERICA to Cape Race regarding ice about 19 miles southward of the TITANIC's course. This message was never sent to the bridge probably due to the work load which he had to carry. At 9.05 pm about two and a half hours before the collision with the iceberg, the CALIFORNIAN sent 'We are stopped and surrounded by ice.' The reply from the TITANIC was 'Shut up. I am busy. I am working Cape Race' Cyril Evans, the operator on the CALIFORNIAN, stated to the British inquiry that he was not insulted by this rebuff as the larger or faster ships took preference in sending their traffic. Evans had a long day in any case, he had been on duty since 7 am that morning and therefore he retired to his bunk at 11.30 p.m. The operators on the TITANIC were required to work six hours on and six hours off. Passengers lined up to send a message home via this newfangled service.

When Captain E. J. Smith appeared and said, 'You had better get assistance'. Jack Phillips came back into the room and took over and commenced the distress messages at about 12.05 am Monday 15 April 1912.

According to Bride, the TITANIC's wireless was functioning until ten minutes before the ship's final death throes at about 2.20 am Monday April 15. As we have seen, Jack Phillips as the principal operator, came back on duty and commenced sending CQD followed by MGY [1]. CQD was the Marconi conventional distress signal and MGY was the TITANIC's call sign. While SOS was also used, there was much discussion at the American Senate Inquiry as to whether CQD actually stood for an abbreviation and if it was in accordance with the international convention. Marconi himself replied that it was not in accord with international convention but that it was a conventional company signal. He went on to say that the international distress signal decided at the Berlin Convention was SOS.

Remember this was 1912 and the range of transmission was restricted and much of the traffic relied on third party transmission. Imagine [the Carpathia opertors] Cottam's surprise when he called the TITANIC with, 'I say OM do you know there is a batch of messages coming through for you from Cape Cod and received, 'Come at once it's CQD, OM. Position 41'46N, 50'14W'. Cottam replied, 'Shall I tell my Captain ? Do you require assistance?' The cryptic reply

was, 'Yes come quick.' Despite Cottam racing to the bridge with the CQD message and the consequent awakening of Captain Rostron, the master of the Carpathia and his heroic efforts to push his ship beyond its capabilities, it was about 4 hours before they arrived at the scene, too late to save the 1,527 who perished, but in time to rescue those who had survived the night in lifeboats.

Phillips and Bride remained at their posts after being released from their duties by Captain Smith until they could no longer transmit due to the failure of the generators. When they came onto the deck, all the lifeboats had long been launched and some of the officers were attempting to get off the last collapsible boat which was attached to the roof of the officers' quarters. The attempt was only partially successful, the boat being washed off as the TITANIC broke apart and sank.

The lifeboat ended up inverted with Bride being trapped under it in an air pocket. He was eventually able to extract himself after a considerable time and make his way onto the top of the overturned boat. Phillips also managed to make his way to the same boat but died of exposure during the night Bride survived with frostbitten feet and injured ankles and was picked up by the Carpathia.

As a result of the part played by wireless in the events surrounding the loss of the TITANIC, 24 hour radio watch was introduced. The strange set of coincidences which resulted in one radio operator shutting down at a critical time and another contacting the stricken liner by pure chance would not be permitted to happen again. On the debit side, the TITANIC operators actions in ignoring and not passing on several ice warnings contributed to numerous oversights which when taken as individual events, could not be regarded as serious, but when combined reached overwhelming proportions. For the operators, it was clearly a case of overload of often frivolous messages from the wealthy passengers. On the credit side, both operators stayed on even after they were released from duty by the Captain, only ceasing transmission when their spark failed due to the failing generators. The sending of the first SOS distress call was made at 12.45 am on 15 April 1912.