

10 TRUE TALES

TITANIC YOUNG SURVIVORS

By Allan Zullo

SCHOLASTIC INC.

To my grandson Jack Manausa, whose spirited nature, charming personality, and cheerful attitude are unsinkable.

—A.Z.

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The Sinking of the *Titanic*

No maritime disaster in modern history has captivated the public's imagination more than the sinking of the RMS *Titanic*. Over the years, countless books and articles have examined every conceivable angle of the calamity. Movies have re-created gripping scenes from that fateful night. Museums have been built dedicated solely to the ship and the people she was transporting. Websites, message boards, forums, and discussion groups have analyzed and debated all aspects of the passengers, crew, and ship.

There have been worse peacetime tragedies at sea before and after the *Titanic*'s doomed journey. (The Chinese junk *Tek Sing* struck a reef and sank in 1822, killing at least 1,600 persons; the Philippine ferry *Doña Paz* went down in 1987, claiming more than 4,300 lives.) But in terms of sheer worldwide interest, nothing compares with the *Titanic*—history's most famous (and arguably most infamous) ship.

On April 10, 1912, the majestic steamship set off on her maiden voyage from Southampton, England, bound for New York City with 2,208 passengers and crewmembers on board. She stopped in Cherbourg, France, and Queenstown, Ireland, before heading out into the Atlantic. Four days into the crossing, at 11:40 P.M., the ship struck an iceberg. Less than three hours later—at 2:20 A.M., April 15—she sank, taking the lives of an estimated 1,502 passengers and crewmembers. Reportedly, only 712 people were saved—including 86 children.

On so many levels, the disaster stunned people around the globe.

The sinking was simply unimaginable. During the construction of the *Titanic* and her sister ship the *Olympic*, her British owner, the White Star Line, published a 1910 publicity brochure boasting “as far as it is possible to do so, these two wonderful vessels are designed to be unsinkable.” A major industry publication called her “practically unsinkable.” But by the time the *Titanic* was ready to sail, the general public had ignored the word “practically” and believed she truly was “unsinkable.”

The *Titanic* was the technological marvel of her time—the largest moving man-made object in the world. She was 882 feet 9 inches long (the length of almost three football fields) and 92 feet wide (slightly

more than the major league distance from home plate to first base). From the waterline to the top deck, she rose 60.5 feet. She had ten decks—the Boat Deck (the top one), then Decks A through G and two more at the bottom for the equipment and cargo. The four-funnelled steamship was equipped with 29 boilers fired by 159 coal-burning furnaces to create the steam that powered her three massive propellers. Built to carry more than 3,500 passengers and crew, she could reach a speed of 23 knots (26 miles an hour) and make the Atlantic crossing in a week—an amazing feat back then. She had a double hull and 16 watertight compartments that were designed to keep her afloat in case some of them were breeched.

While most people lit their homes with gas lanterns, *Titanic* had electric lights in all the cabins and electric heaters in all the first-class staterooms. Her wireless radio was capable of transmitting messages up to 1,200 miles away, depending on the weather. She had a 50-telephone switchboard, a state-of-the-art hospital, and four elevators for the use of first- and second-class passengers.

When it came to luxury, the *Titanic* couldn't be matched. Her public rooms were adorned with ornate wood-carved paneling, elaborate glass domes, works of art, and the finest furnishings. She featured a heated swimming pool, a fully-equipped gymnasium,

a regulation squash court, a Turkish bath (a fancy sauna), a darkroom for amateur photographers, gourmet restaurants, barbershops, libraries, and lounges. The accommodations were as good, if not better, than most hotels of that era.

She was an awesome wonder at a time when Americans were toiling incredibly hard just to make ends meet. In 1912, the annual salary for the average worker was \$850. Many children worked in cotton mills, factories, and coal mines for pennies a day. Horse and buggies shared rutted and muddy roads with automobiles, like the Model T Ford, which was becoming affordable for the working class. To travel long distances, people took a train or boat. Airplanes were flown mostly at air shows and for the military. Five months before the *Titanic*'s maiden voyage, the first plane flew from coast to coast—in 84 days. Few people had telephones, so they communicated by writing letters or going down to the local telegraph office. For entertainment, they went to the picture show to watch silent movies or to the theater to see live variety shows called vaudeville. Back then, the *Titanic* represented the latest achievement in engineering, technology, science, and even the arts. She symbolized progress in mankind's constant quest to create the biggest and best of everything. And that, in turn, gave hope to the common man, because with every new innovation and

advancement like the *Titanic*, he believed his life would get better, too. If a ship could be built that not even Mother Nature could sink, surely there would be even more remarkable triumphs that would benefit everyone.

Adding to the allure of the *Titanic* were the more than 1,300 people who booked passages on her maiden voyage. More than half were British, American, and Irish. The rest came from two dozen other countries. The passenger list covered all segments of society: In first class, wealthy industrialists, businessmen, and upper-crust families returning home from European vacations; in second class, young professionals and tradesmen seeking their fortune in America; and in third class, poor immigrants hoping for a better life in the New World. The ship was transporting more than just people. She was carrying their dreams and ambitions.

Out on the open sea, the ship handled beautifully, slicing through the water at near her top speed. On Sunday, April 14, the wireless operator began receiving reports from other ships of icebergs west of the westbound *Titanic*. Later that night, a lookout from the crow's nest spotted an iceberg directly ahead. He immediately alerted the bridge, but the ship couldn't turn fast enough.

Her starboard side brushed up against the iceberg.