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Remembering RMS Titanic a Century Later

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Rediscovering *Titanic* a Century Later

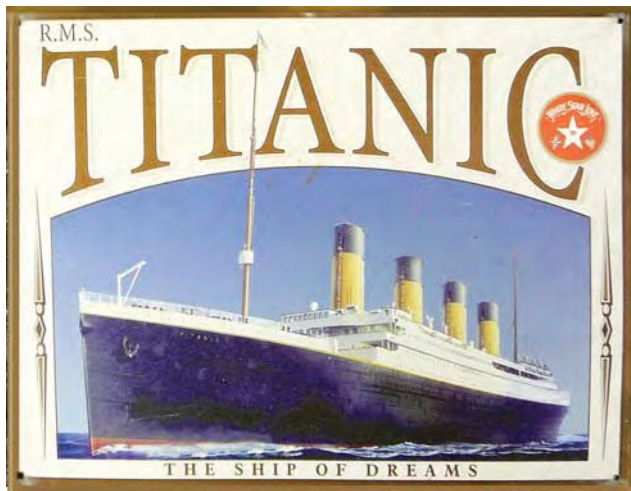
by Peg Van Patten

“There may have been stars, but the blackness of the night was so intense one could not see anything like a horizon” recalled the late Marshall Drew, who survived the tragic sinking of *RMS Titanic* as a young boy a century ago. “As row by row of the porthole lights of the *Titanic* sank into the sea this was about all one could see,” he said. In his memoir, he recalled being precariously lowered in a lifeboat during the night with his aunt, some 70 feet to the dark sea below. He was surprised to see that the steerage section of the White Star line’s ill-fated, brightly lit luxury liner was completely blacked out. Later he could hear screams in the distance, but he couldn’t utter a sound.



Choi/Tom/Mystic Aquarium

Imagine an iceberg like this looming out of the darkness, from the ill-fated *Titanic*’s lookout tower, or through the eyes of a small sleepy boy being lowered into a lifeboat.



P. Van Patten

An advertisement on tin for the historic doomed ship, touted for its enormous size and elegant accommodations.

Drew, a New York City art teacher born in Greenport, Long Island, later taught oil painting when he lived in Westerly, Rhode Island. He was only eight then and was on a trip intending to visit his father’s family. He never forgot the darkness and ironic calmness of the Atlantic Ocean on the night of April 14-15, 1912 when the legendary White Star “Ship of Dreams” hit an iceberg, tearing a long gash in its side that sealed its watery fate.

When I met Drew as an art student, I noticed that he liked to paint landscapes. I completely understand why. Adopted by an aunt and uncle after losing his mother, the little boy then lost his uncle Jim when the “unsinkable” ship went down, killing 1,513 people. Drew said then that no matter what career accomplishments he achieved, he would

always be remembered primarily as a *Titanic* passenger. It was true; even today the historic disaster with its unprecedented loss of life looms large in the human imagination.

Famed ocean explorer Robert Ballard and colleagues must have been deeply affected by the same oddly silent yet profound darkness of the ocean depths when they first spotted *Titanic*’s eerie sunken remains, barely visible on the deep ocean floor 73 years later. Ballard, president of the Sea Research Foundation’s Institute for Exploration, led the expedition that first located and mapped the sunken *Titanic* remains in 1985. So, when Ballard worked with Tim J. Delany, a former Disney Imagineering designer, to develop a new exhibit to commemorate *Titanic* at the Mystic Aquarium, they wanted blackness to be the first sensation that visitors experience. The new exhibit, called *Titanic—12,450 Feet Below*, opened on April 12 this year, and is dedicated to those lives lost on *Titanic*’s fateful maiden voyage.

The exhibit allows visitors to imagine what it’s like to suddenly see an iceberg appear in the dark. They can go down into a recreation of the ship’s engine room. They can see a replica of a typical passenger’s stateroom. They can even see a replica of the telegraph room where two Marconi wireless operators spent the evening sending greetings from wealthy passengers to their envious friends and later desperately tapped out distress messages on the same frequency. They can also

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A visitor looks at the replica of *Titanic's* radio room, imagining the telegraph operators at work.

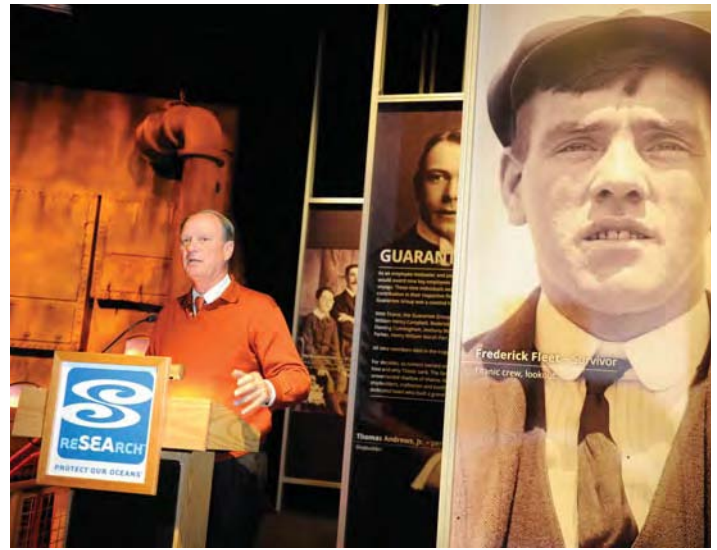
imagine what it's like to be an ocean explorer when they climb down into a simulation of *Alvin*, the submersible vehicle owned by Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, which explorers manned during the *Titanic* discovery expedition.

"It is designed to capture the moment of discovery that only access to the actual discoverer's insight and vision can deliver" said Delany. "Working hand-in-glove with Bob Ballard and Sea Research has enabled us to create something that both adults and children will find thrilling, immersive, interactive, experiential and memorable. *Titanic - 12,450 Feet Below* takes you there." Delany said. Putting the drama of the event together with the high technology used by ocean explorers is the key to understanding the excitement of the discovery, he said.

"12,450 feet below is a real place, and also a place in your imagination," the exhibit signage reminds visitors.



Shoes in the sand are a powerful reminder that ocean archaeology sites are often not history alone but also underwater museums and memorial sites for real peoples' remains.



Ocean explorer Bob Ballard, next to wall of faces gives remarks at the opening of the *Titanic* exhibit. at the Mystic Aquarium and Institute for Exploration.

All photos: Choi Ton /Mystic Aquarium

"We can tell the story in effective and powerful ways without desecrating the site" Ballard said. Pairs of shoes in the ocean sand that the Ballard crew saw amidst the *Titanic's* debris, for example, were profoundly symbolic of the real passengers and crew who once wore them. Now a replica of shoes in the sand is included in the exhibit.

"Where are Jack and Rose?" a teen visitor asked friends, tongue-in-cheek. She knew that the two romantic movie characters in the blockbuster Cameron flick were fictional depictions of people of the period, but the exhibit's bigger than life portraits of some of those truly lost that night put real human faces on the tragedy. Remembering them is a triumph of the human spirit, as were the lives of survivors like Drew. Disasters tend to elicit examples of both bravery and cowardice, and a range in-between from the people unexpectedly caught in them. The fate of real people and families lost is difficult to contemplate, yet makes you think what you might have said or done in their shoes. Most passengers were not told what was happening initially to avoid panic (it didn't), a practice which has changed in crisis communication now.

The new exhibit, by design, does not include any artifacts retrieved from *Titanic's* wreckage. Ballard and the Sea Research Foundation prefer to think of the wreck as an underwater museum that is also sacred ground, a graveyard. "We wanted to bring back the memory of *Titanic* and also make the point that the deep sea is the largest museum on earth," Ballard said in a press conference at the exhibit opening. Ballard sees conserving and protecting such sites in the ocean, as more of it is explored, as a high priority.

The *Titanic-12,450 Feet Below* exhibit, sponsored by the United Technologies Corporation, is part of a larger renovation of The Ocean Exploration Center underway at the Mystic Aquarium.