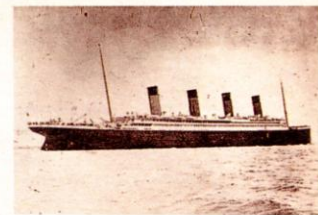




**F**OR three-quarters of a century the world has been fascinated by the tragic story of the *Titanic* – the great liner sunk by an iceberg on its maiden voyage in 1912 with the loss of more than 1,500 lives. Then suddenly, 75 years on, came the first sighting of the liner... but the excitement was soured by a bitter controversy over salvage, which culminated in July with a French expedition bringing up more than 300 items from the shattered ship. Last week in the *Sunday Express Magazine* Dr Robert Ballard, the man who found the legendary wreck, told the story of his discovery; this week we publish his exclusive pictures and thrilling account of the first glimpse of the great prow on the ocean bed...



**75 YEARS ON ... THE FIRST SIGHTING OF THE**

# **TITANIC**

**Dr Ballard describes what it was like to come within a periscope's length of the great ship for the first time**



As we glided soundlessly across the bottom of the ocean in our mini-sub, out of the darkness loomed the razor's edge of the bow.

The great ship towered above us and suddenly it seemed to be coming right at us, about to run mini-sub *Alvin* over. My first impulse was to get out of the way - but *Titanic* wasn't going anywhere. Gently, my colleague Ralph brought the sub closer until we could see the bow more clearly. It was buried more than 60 feet in bottom mud. Both anchors still hung in place, the port one about six feet above the bottom, the starboard one resting just at mud level. I felt myself smiling. The would-be salvagers were out of luck; the *Titanic* was far too deeply buried for anyone to pull her out of the ooze.

As we moved closer, it seemed as though the metal hull was slowly melting away. Rivers of rust covered the side of the ship, pouring out over the bottom sediment where it formed great ponds as much as 30-40 feet across, covered by a reddish-yellow crust. The blood of the great ship lay in pools on the ocean floor.

We manoeuvred over *Titanic's* mighty forward deck. I was struck by the sheer size of everything - giant bollards, the huge links of anchor chains and even bigger, shiny bronze-topped capstans. There on the spot it really was titanic.

By now our sub was being buffeted by the full force of the underwater current. As we turned into the current, I didn't like what I saw out of the viewport.

The graceful lines of the ship had disappeared into a maelstrom of twisted and torn steel plating - jumbled wreckage protruding in our direction, too close for comfort, ready to poke out *Alvin's* eye. This marked the spot where the ship had broken in two, the decks had collapsed in on one another like a giant accordion. The bow had a certain dignity. The stern was utter devastation.

On our next trip we took *Jason Junior*, *Alvin's* floating eyeball, to explore the forward Grand Staircase. It was a beautiful underwater day for diving, with only a gentle current. We moved quickly through a field of light debris full of white third-class china coffee cups bearing the insignia of the White Star Line. Within moments, the *Titanic's* massive hull emerged from the darkness.

*Jason Junior* and his revolving video eye which relayed pictures back into our sub disappeared down the staircase.

A room appeared off the port-side foyer on A Deck, defined by the dim shapes of pillars. My colleague Martin swung *Jason Junior* around for a closer look and suddenly he saw something off

in the distance. "Look at that," he said softly. "Look at that chandelier."

Now I could see something, too. "No, it can't be a chandelier," I said. "It couldn't possibly have survived." It was difficult to believe my eyes. The ship had fallen two-and-a-half-miles, impacting the bottom at 25-30mph with the force of a train running into a mountainside, and here was an almost perfectly preserved light fixture! Soon we could see more of them. "My God, it is a chandelier," I crowed.

And there was the actual socket where a bulb had been fitted!

Later we sent *Jason Junior* for a stroll aft along the boat deck. He looked in the windows of several first-class cabins and then the gymnasium where a turn-of-the-century exercise

space heaters, bath tubs, suitcases and porcelain sinks. Then, without any warning, I found myself looking into the eyes of a small, white smiling face. For a split second I thought a corpse had actually materialised - and it scared the hell out of me.

Then I realised I was seeing a ceramic doll's head, its hair and clothes gone. My initial shock changed to sadness as the poignancy of the image sank in. Who had owned this toy? Had the girl (or boy) been one of the lucky survivors? Or had she clutched it tightly as she sank in the icy waters?

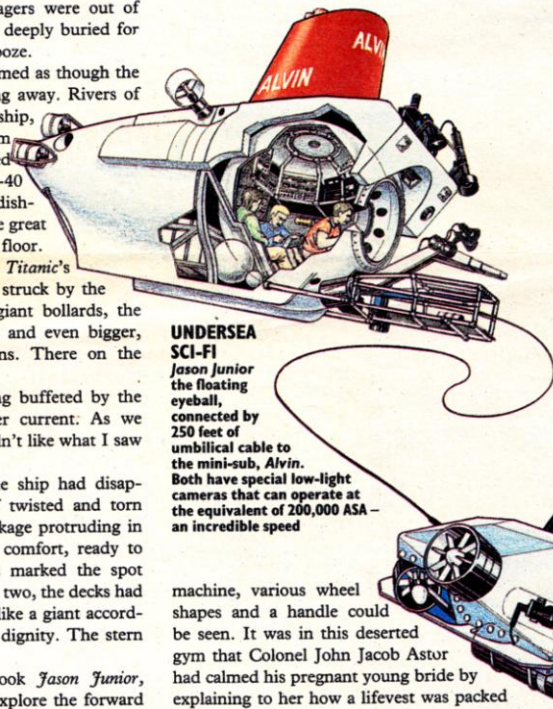
Then we spotted a safe, with a shiny brass handle. Why not try to open it with *Alvin's* sample-gathering metal fingers? To my surprise the handle turned easily and then stopped. The door wouldn't budge, its flanges apparently rusted. We could lift the safe up - it might contain something valuable - the bejewelled Rubayat of Omar Khayam, for instance. But on closer examination we saw this was a safe from the second-class and unlikely to contain much of value. So my vow not to take salvage from the wreck was not put to the test.

Altogether I would visit the *Titanic* nine times and I would get to know her damaged yet dignified condition intimately. As we landed on her decks and penetrated her ravaged interior, I wouldn't help but relive at different times the famous scenes from the tragedy of 1912 - in the actual spots where they took place. After each dive, I would come back humbled by the magnitude of what lay below.

The *Titanic* is truly gone for good, home-ported at last. She'll never be raised and for that I'm sad, but content. After 33 hours of manned exploration of her dismembered hulk - and many more hours of still photography - her fate is now known.

Although she is still awesome in her dimensions, she is no longer the graceful lady that sank four days into her maiden voyage in April 1912. Her beauty has faded; she is broken in two and age has withered her. Her massive steel plates melting into rivers of rust. Her once-proud bulkheads are squashed and buckled. Her ornate wooden elegance has been eaten away and almost obliterated by armies of wood-boring molluscs. Her innards are scattered unceremoniously across the muddy ocean floor.

The bottom of the ocean is a quiet place, a peaceful place, fitting for a memorial to all the things that sank when the *Titanic* went down. The wreck we found and photographed can stand as a monument to a mistake of arrogance, to a lost age, and to a kind of innocence we can't recover - and to the people, both guilty perpetrators and innocent victims, who figured in the drama. ●



**UNDERSEA SCI-FI**  
*Jason Junior* the floating eyeball, connected by 250 feet of umbilical cable to the mini-sub, *Alvin*. Both have special low-light cameras that can operate at the equivalent of 200,000 ASA - an incredible speed

machine, various wheel shapes and a handle could be seen. It was in this deserted gym that Colonel John Jacob Astor had calmed his pregnant young bride by explaining to her how a lifevest was packed with cork as he cut one open with a small pocket knife. He saw his wife off safely by lifeboat and then returned to die.

We left *Jason Junior* behind when we explored the debris field, the area away from the main wreck where *Titanic's* contents had spewed out on the ocean floor like the remains of a bombed out museum. In stark contrast to the grandeur of the broken bow, this was a grisly mixture of beauty and destruction.

I snapped away on my Nikon as a *Titanic* buff's wildest dream-come-true passed by - chinaware, silver serving trays, pots and pans, wine bottles, boots, chamber pots, headboards,

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ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN GRAV