

News



Contrary to popular belief, the crew of the Titanic saw the iceberg in plenty of time but the quartermaster steered the liner in the wrong direction, an error covered up by Second Officer Charles Lightoller (right)

The secret blunder that sank Titanic

By Richard Alleyne
Science Correspondent

IT WAS always thought the Titanic sank because it was sailing too fast and its crew failed to see the iceberg before it was too late.

But now it has been revealed that the danger was spotted in plenty of time, only for the liner to steam straight into it because of a basic steering blunder.

According to a new report, the ship had plenty of time to miss the iceberg, but the helmsman simply turned the wrong way. By the time the catastrophic error was

corrected, it was too late and the side of the ship was fatally holed by the iceberg.

The disclosure, which has come to light almost 100 years after the disaster, was kept secret until now by the family of the most senior officer to survive the disaster.

Second Officer Charles Lightoller covered up the error in two inquiries on both sides of the Atlantic because he was worried it would bankrupt the liner's owners and put colleagues out of a job.

Since his death in 1952 – by then a war hero after his role in the Dunkirk evacuation – the facts have

remained hidden for fear they would ruin his reputation.

But now his granddaughter, the writer Lady (Louise) Patten, has revealed the sequence of events in her new novel, *Good as Gold*.

Her grandfather died before she was born but she lived with her grandmother, who told her the story.

The error on the ship's maiden voyage between Southampton and New York in 1912 happened because at the time – in the midst of the conversion from sail to steam ships – there were two steering systems with different commands. Crucially, the two

TITANIC'S WRONG TURN

1 Helmsman misinterprets an order to turn left, and instead turns right

2 By the time the error was corrected, it was too late. The ship struck the iceberg before reaching New York



systems were the opposite of one another. So a command to turn "hard a-starboard" meant turn the wheel right under the older tiller system and left under the rudder system.

When First Officer William Murdoch spotted the iceberg two miles away, his "hard a-starboard" order was misinterpreted by the Quartermaster Robert Hitchens, who turned the ship right instead of left. Even though he was almost immediately told to correct the mistake, it was too late.

"The steersman panicked and the real reason why Titanic hit the iceberg is

because he turned the wheel the wrong way," said Lady Patten said, the captain was convinced by Bruce Ismay, the chairman of Titanic's owner, the White Star Line, to continue sailing rather than stop. This added enormously to the pressure of water flooding through the damaged hull, sinking Titanic many hours earlier than it otherwise would have done.

To compound that straightforward error, Lady Patten said, the captain was convinced by Bruce Ismay, the chairman of Titanic's owner, the White Star Line, to continue sailing rather than stop. This added enormously to the pressure of water flooding through the damaged hull, sinking Titanic many hours earlier than it otherwise would have done.

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Titanic's last secret

Thriller writer Louise Patten has broken a family vow to reveal her grandfather's key role in the tragedy. Peter Stanford reports

All families have their secrets, but usually about things that don't matter to anybody else. Not in the case of Louise Patten – or Lady Patten to give her full title, the wife of former Tory education secretary Lord (John) Patten, though her career as one of the first women board directors of a FTSE 100 company, and as a successful author of financial thrillers, means that she has plenty of achievements in her own right.

As a teenager in the 1960s, Patten was let in on a secret by her beloved grandmother, which, if revealed, she was warned, would result in two things. The first was awful – it would destroy the good name of her grandfather, Charles Lightoller, awarded the DSC with Bar in the First World War, and a hero again for his part in the evacuation of Dunkirk in 1940. But the second would change history, overturning the authorised version of one of the world's greatest disasters, the sinking of the Titanic with the loss of 1,517 lives in April 1912.

The tension between these two outcomes goes some way to explaining why, for 40 years, Patten kept quiet, not even, she reveals with a girlish chuckle from underneath the fringe of her striking black bob, telling her husband. What did he say when she finally did? "I think it was 'Good God.'" Now, though, 56-year-old Patten has decided to come clean in her latest novel, *Good as Gold*.

But can there really be anything new to say, almost 100 years on? "My grandfather was the Second Officer on the Titanic," Patten explains. "He was in his cabin when it struck the iceberg. Afterwards, he refused a direct order to go in a lifeboat, but by a fluke he was saved." Astonishingly, he jumped into the ocean as the boat sank, was being sucked down into the depths – but was then carried back to the surface by the force of an explosion beneath the waves and was rescued by a lifeboat.

As the senior surviving officer, he was asked at both official inquiries into the sinking [by the US Senate and the British Board of Trade] whether he had had any conversation after the collision with the Captain or the First Officer, William Murdoch, who had been in charge at the time. In other words, did he know exactly what had happened? And both times he said no. But he was lying.

"After the collision," Patten goes on, "my grandfather went down with the Captain and Murdoch to Murdoch's cabin to get the firearms in case there were riots when loading the lifeboats. That is when

they told him what had happened. Instead of steering Titanic safely round to the left of the iceberg, once it had been spotted dead ahead, the steersman, Robert Hitchens, had panicked and turned it the wrong way."

It sounds extraordinary that anyone – much less the man in charge of the wheel on the maiden voyage of what was then the world's most expensive liner – could have made such an error. But, Patten explains, requisitioning knives, napkins and even the breadbasket on the table of the London hotel where we meet for breakfast to give a demonstration. "Titanic was launched at a time when the world was moving from sailing ships to steam ships. My grandfather, like the other senior officers on Titanic, had started out on sailing ships. And on sailing ships, they steered by 'Tiller Orders', which means that if you want to go one way, you push the tiller the other way. Whereas with 'Rudder Orders', which is what steam ships used, it is like driving a car. You steer the way you want to go. It gets more confusing because, even though Titanic was a steam ship, at that time on the North Atlantic they were still using Tiller Orders. Therefore Murdoch gave the command in Tiller Orders but Hitchens, in a panic, reverted to the Rudder Orders he had been trained in. They only had four

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If Titanic had stood still, and not gone Slow Ahead, no one need have died

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minutes to change course and by the time Murdoch spotted Hitchens's mistake and then tried to rectify it, it was too late."

Patten's grandfather – who later set up a marine-repair business at Richmond-on-Thames and is commemorated by a blue plaque where the boatyard used to be – shared with his wife, Sylvia, a second and potentially even more damning secret. If the steersman had made a human error, Bruce Ismay, chairman of the White Star Line, owners of the Titanic, and another survivor, gave a lethal order.

"Titanic had hit the iceberg at her most vulnerable point," explains Patten, "but she could probably, my grandfather estimated, have gone on floating for a

long time. But Ismay went up on the bridge and didn't want his massive investment to sit in the middle of the Atlantic either sinking slowly, or being tugged in to port. Not great publicity! So he told the Captain to go Slow Ahead. Titanic was meant to be unsinkable."

Cue more demonstrations with napkins and cutlery. "Am I boring you?" she asks, as she arranges them. On the contrary, I am gripped by the feeling of getting inside history and Patten has clearly checked her grandfather's account against all the other evidence. "If Titanic had stood still," she demonstrates, "she would have survived at least until the rescue ship came and no one need have died, but when they drove her Slow Ahead, the pressure of the sea coming through her damaged hull forced the water over the bulkheads and flooded sequentially one watertight compartment after another – and that was why she sank so fast."

It is an extraordinary claim. After all the inquiries, films, books and, more recently, pinpointing of the wreck on the bottom of the Atlantic, a highly respected but apparently unconnected businesswoman in London, rather than some Titanic obsessive, holds the key to what happened on that fateful night.

Why, though, would Patten's grandfather have lied and carried on lying? "Because," she explains, "when he was on the rescue

ship, Bruce Ismay pointed out that if he told the truth, the White Star Line would be judged negligent and its limited liability insurance would be invalid. Ismay pretty much said that the whole company would go bust and everyone would lose their jobs. There was a code of honour among men like my grandfather in those days. So he lied to protect others' jobs."

But why didn't her grandmother speak up after her husband's death in 1952? "She was worried about showing this heroic figure to be a liar. And my mother, who also knew the secret and was even uncomfortable with Granny having told me, felt even more strongly about it. She hero-worshipped my grandfather."

So there this secret sat, locked in a

family circle from which Patten is now the only survivor. "I have an older sister, but she was away at boarding school most of the time. Because I was ill as a teenager, I spent a lot of more time at home with my grandmother."

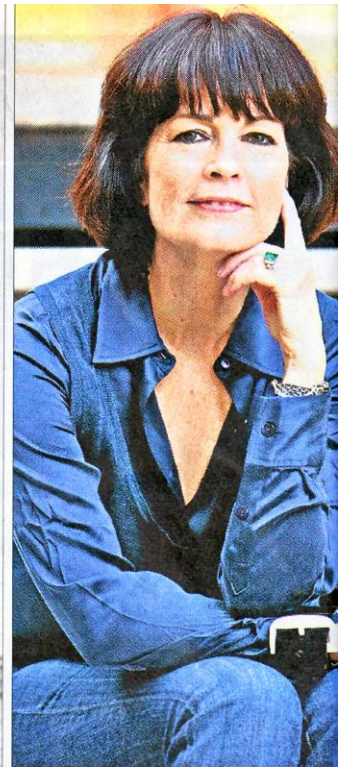
Why speak up now? "Well everyone else is dead, but" – she pauses, clearly still in two minds about – "I can still hear my mother's voice saying my grandfather must be remembered as a hero."

This is the sort of tale that most writers would have tackled years ago, and treated as a non-fiction, best of all a memoir. So why work it in to a novel? "Because I write thrillers," Patten replies crisply, and makes me think what an effective chairman of the board she must be. "I

started planning a thriller about a family with secrets, about a private banking dynasty involved with shipping, and then I suddenly thought I have this massive family secret and it is about shipping."

After all those years of silence, could it really have been that straightforward? "Well, not really. This sounds mad, I know, but once I started thinking about it, I felt as if I owed it to the world to share the secret. If I died tomorrow, then it would die with me."

'Good as Gold' by Louise Patten (Quercus Publishing £20) is available for £18 plus £1.25 post and packing from Telegraph Books, please call 0844 871 1515 or go to books.telegraph.co.uk



Some of the Titanic mementos belonging to Charles Lightoller, Louise Patten's grandfather (pictured, below right)

