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The “Unsinkable” Titanic

AT 02:19 hours on 15 April 1912, at a place about 645km from Greenland in the Atlantic Ocean, the largest, most luxurious, and practically unsinkable cruise ship, Titanic snapped into two and sank into the ocean 4km below the surface, resulting in the loss of almost 1,500 lives, including some of the wealthiest people of Europe and many would-be migrants who were looking forward to starting a new life in America.

This tragedy happened in a mere 2 hours and 40 minutes after the ship collided with an iceberg on its starboard side on the fourth day of its 6-day maiden voyage from Southampton, England, to New York City in the United States of America. The ship was launched amidst much fanfare with the assurance by the naval architect who designed it that the Titanic was so strong it was practically unsinkable.

In fact, a group of modern day experts who have spent much time studying all aspects of the unfortunate event have come to the conclusion that had the captain not given the order to veer the ship to port immediately upon sighting the iceberg, but allowed the ship to ram into the iceberg head-on instead, the ship might have stayed afloat and many more lives would have been saved. Of course with the benefits of hindsight, even a fool may appear to be wise.

100 years later, laws governing international shipping have become much more stringent and cruise ships are now even more luxurious and safer than before. The Titanic, far from being forgotten, has been arousing the interest and curiosity of generations of scientists, explorers and fortune seekers, and such exploration is destined to continue in the future.

On 1 September 1985, a French-American team located the remains of the Titanic on the ocean floor. In 1987, salvage operators began to recover artifacts from the Titanic despite heavy criticism from the scientific community. In 1997, the movie Titanic broke the box office records. In 1998, some tourists visited the Titanic by submersibles at a hefty price. On 31 May 2009, the last Titanic survivor died at the age of 97. In 2010, the entire wreck site of the Titanic was surveyed and photographed in great detail. On 14 April 2012, UNESCO added the Titanic wreck site to its list of World Heritage Sites.

And in Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland, my wife and I visited the new Titanic House, an avant-garde museum constructed in time for the first centenary of the Titanic's demise. Its exhibits seek to retell the Titanic's brief but dramatic life history. I also visited the dry dock in which the Titanic was built. The Titanic's two sister ships, the Olympic and the Britannic, were also built in the same dock. Later in Liverpool, where the owner of the Titanic, the White Star Line was headquartered, I attended a special performance titled, “Treasured”, in the Anglican cathedral. The performance was an inter-play between stage drama and large screen projections, narrating the stories of those who survived the nightmare and those taken by the sea. ■

Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling in different parts of the world, capturing fascinating things and people he encounters with his camera, and sharing his experience with others through his photographs and writing.

