

# Titanic's second disaster

## Oceanographer hopes to solve mystery of ship's rapid decay

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It should come as no surprise that a sunken ship on the bottom of the North Atlantic for nearly a century is falling apart. So why would anyone want to spend \$2 million to chronicle its decay?

Because it's the Titanic, of course.

"It's the ultimate shipwreck," says Flemington's David Bright, a diver who photographed the ill-fated ocean liner last summer. For the next two weeks, Bright and legions of Titanic buffs will be following the expedition of Robert Ballard, the oceanographer who located the sunken ship in 1985.

Ballard and other scientists think the "unsinkable" vessel — which led to the deaths of more than 1,500 people after sinking from a glancing blow from an iceberg in April 1912, on its maiden voyage from England to New York — is deteriorating faster than it should.

Ballard's government-backed team will try to learn if human activities are to blame, in hopes of preserving the Titanic and other museums of the deep.

"We know Titanic has been naturally deteriorating over time, but I'm convinced that the deterioration is being accelerated by manmade impacts as well," Ballard said in a statement before heading for the site, about 450 miles southeast of Newfoundland.

Theories for the hastening decay range from natural causes to disturbances by scientists, salvors and tourists. Pieces of a Russian submersible were retrieved from Titanic in 1996, and visitors have spied memorial plaques, plastic flowers and Tuborg beer bottles. During 2001, a New York couple was married on the ship's bow, in a mini-sub.

Split in two, at a depth of two and a half miles, the 46,000-ton Titanic is subject to currents, acidic soil and water pressure of three tons per square inch. Worms devoured teak decking long ago. Microbes consume as much as 600 pounds of iron daily, by some estimates.

Others suspect overfishing of the Grand Banks, where Titanic sank, as a culprit. Fewer fish mean more plankton, which flutter like snow onto the Titanic — and whip the microbes into a feeding frenzy, says Alfred McLaren, president emeritus of the Explorers Club and a retired Navy submarine captain.

McLaren observed the Titanic from a Russian submersible during 1999. He returned last year to find the bow completely caked with rusticles, braid-like "globbs" of microbes and fungi. The deck appeared too weak to support the small sub.

"I was really astonished, if not shocked, to see how accelerated this deterioration had



JOHN O'BOYLE/THE STAR-LEDGER

Bright, president of the Nautical Research Group, with underwater photos of Titanic.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NAUTICAL RESEARCH GROUP

Bright of Flemington believes this large crack on the starboard side of Titanic occurred within the past five years.

become," McLaren says. By comparison, he says, the sunken Nazi battleship Bismarck is faring far better in deeper water off Ireland.

The Titanic will collapse into the mud within 10 or 15 years, McLaren predicts. He hopes Ballard's studies will guide builders of oil tankers and nuclear subs, to avert undersea disasters from future wrecks.

Using three robotic subs, Ballard plans to compile a photographic "mosaic" of the Titanic. These will be compared with earlier images, to identify fresh cracks and struc-

tural collapses. Test metals, submerged at the site during recent years, also will be examined for corrosion.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is supplying the research ship, the Ronald H. Brown, captained by Craig McLean, a Rutgers University graduate. Other partners include the Mystic Aquarium and Institute for Exploration, Mystic, Conn., and the National Geographic Society. The first live telecast from Titanic is scheduled for Monday at 9 p.m. EDT on the National Geographic Channel; a book and documentary are expected later this year.

"Part of our mission here is marine archaeology, to study and better understand shipwrecks and other cultural resources that are part of our history," says NOAA spokesman Fred Gorell. "The Titanic really is a laboratory, 12,500 feet deep. This will give us information that is valuable to understanding iron-hulled shipwrecks in other parts of the world."

While the United States, France and Canada ponder joining Great Britain in declaring the Titanic an international memorial, an Atlanta-based salvage company called RMS Titanic has collected some 6,000 artifacts — from purses and portholes to a 17-ton section of the hull. Deck chairs, life jackets and other Titanic flotsam from private collections will be auctioned next week at New York's South Street Seaport Museum, by Guernsey's auction house.

In a 1996 interview, Ballard blasted salvage operations as a "carnival," and blamed them for destroying the crow's nest of the ship. Such broadsides rankle Charles Haas, a Randolph High School teacher who twice has made the 90-minute descent in a French submersible to view the doomed ocean liner.

Exhibits of artifacts have brought Titanic's history to life for 12 million people around the world, says Haas, a former historian for RMS Titanic. He recalls his dives as "mind-boggling, life-changing adventures," and defended ongoing explorations as unraveling mysteries of the Titanic, which ignored iceberg warnings en route to its fate. Some experts have blamed brittle rivets for popping as the frigid sea poured in.

Flemington's Bright just hopes Ballard gets to the bottom of why Titanic is crumbling. The former Pfizer director has dived the Andrea Doria, the Monitor and the Empress of Ireland, but none of those famed wrecks compares with the Titanic, which Bright paid \$36,000 to explore for a few "sur-realistic" hours last July in a Russian Mir submersible.

"Each ship has a story," says Bright, who consults on documentaries. "I went back to 1912 on the Titanic. This is really neat stuff."

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