

# Why did the Titanic sink?

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Image 1. A watercolor illustration of the sinking of the Titanic by German artist Willy Stower in 1912. Image from Shutterstock

On May 31, 1911, around 100,000 people gathered at a dock in Belfast, Ireland. They had come to watch the launch of the world's largest and fanciest ocean liner, the Titanic. The mighty ship was 882 feet long and 175 feet high. It weighed more than 46,000 tons. A car weighs about 3 or 4 tons. The Titanic weighed as much as 150,000 cars.

The Titanic was considered to be an "unsinkable" ship. Yet on the night of April 14, 1912, disaster struck. Just four days after leaving Southampton, England, on the way to New York City, the Titanic struck an iceberg near Canada. The boat sank. More than 1,500 passengers and crew lost their lives.

Today, experts are still trying to figure out why the ship went down. Here are some possible explanations.

## Going Too Fast

From the beginning, some blamed the Titanic's skipper, Captain E.J. Smith. They said the huge ship was sailing too quickly through iceberg-heavy waters. Some believed Smith was trying to beat the crossing time of Titanic's sister ship, the Olympic.

## Iceberg Warning Ignored

Less than an hour before the Titanic hit the iceberg, another nearby ship, the Californian, radioed to say it had been stopped by ice. However, the warning wasn't marked as a message that needed to be seen by the captain. For that reason, the Titanic's radio operator, Jack Phillips, didn't consider the warning that important. As a result, he didn't pass it along.

## Turning Into Danger



In 2010, Louise Patten offered a new explanation for the crash. Patten is the granddaughter of the highest-ranking Titanic officer to survive, Charles Lightoller. Patten heard the story from her grandmother after her grandfather's death.

According to Patten's story, the crash was caused by one of the ship's crew members. That crew member panicked after hearing the order to turn "hard-a-starboard" in order to avoid the approaching iceberg. Instead of making a sharp right turn, he turned left, directly toward the ice.

## **Building Material Questioned**

In 1985, the sunken wreck of the Titanic was finally located. Investigators discovered that the ship had not gone down in one piece, as previously believed. Instead, it had broken apart on the ocean's surface.

Scientists Tim Foecke and Jennifer Hooper McCarty studied the wreck. They discovered a problem with the ship's rivets. A rivet is a bolt used to hold steel plates together. The Titanic's rivets contained too much "slag," a waste product created when metal is refined.

Slag is not strong. It would only have been used because it was so cheap. Its presence may have weakened the part of the ship that hit the iceberg, causing it to break apart.

## **Weather Conditions**

Two other studies suggest that nature played a key role in the ship's sinking. The first argued that tides were unusually strong that year. That caused increased amounts of floating ice in the North Atlantic.

The second study was done by British historian Tim Maltin. It claimed the sky was very hazy on the night of the disaster. That might have prevented the Titanic's lookouts from seeing the iceberg clearly.

## **No Binoculars On Board**

Second Officer David Blair held the key to the room where the Titanic's binoculars were kept. Blair left the ship before it sailed from Southampton. As he left, he forgot to hand over the key to the officer who replaced him. After the sinking, a lookout on the Titanic said binoculars might have helped them spot and dodge the iceberg in time.

## **Not Enough Lifeboats**

No matter what caused the Titanic to sink, fewer people might have died if the ship had brought along enough lifeboats. The Titanic left Southampton with only 20 lifeboats. The 20 lifeboats could only have held 1,178 people.

In addition, those 20 lifeboats were not full when they left the sinking ship. There were still about 400 empty seats. More than 1,500 people were left behind to drown in the freezing ocean waters.