

FINAL VOYAGE

The world's worst maritime disasters

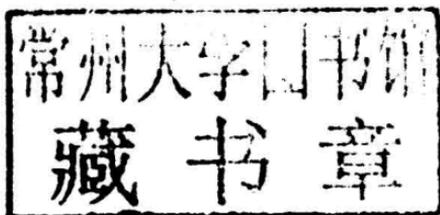


JONATHAN EYERS

FINAL VOYAGE

The world's worst
maritime disasters

Jonathan Eyers



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For Camilla Evers

1. *Titanic*
2. *Scilly disaster*
3. *Tek Sing*
4. *Sultana*
5. *Mont Blanc*
6. *Spanish Armada*
7. *Principe Umberto*
8. *Bismarck*

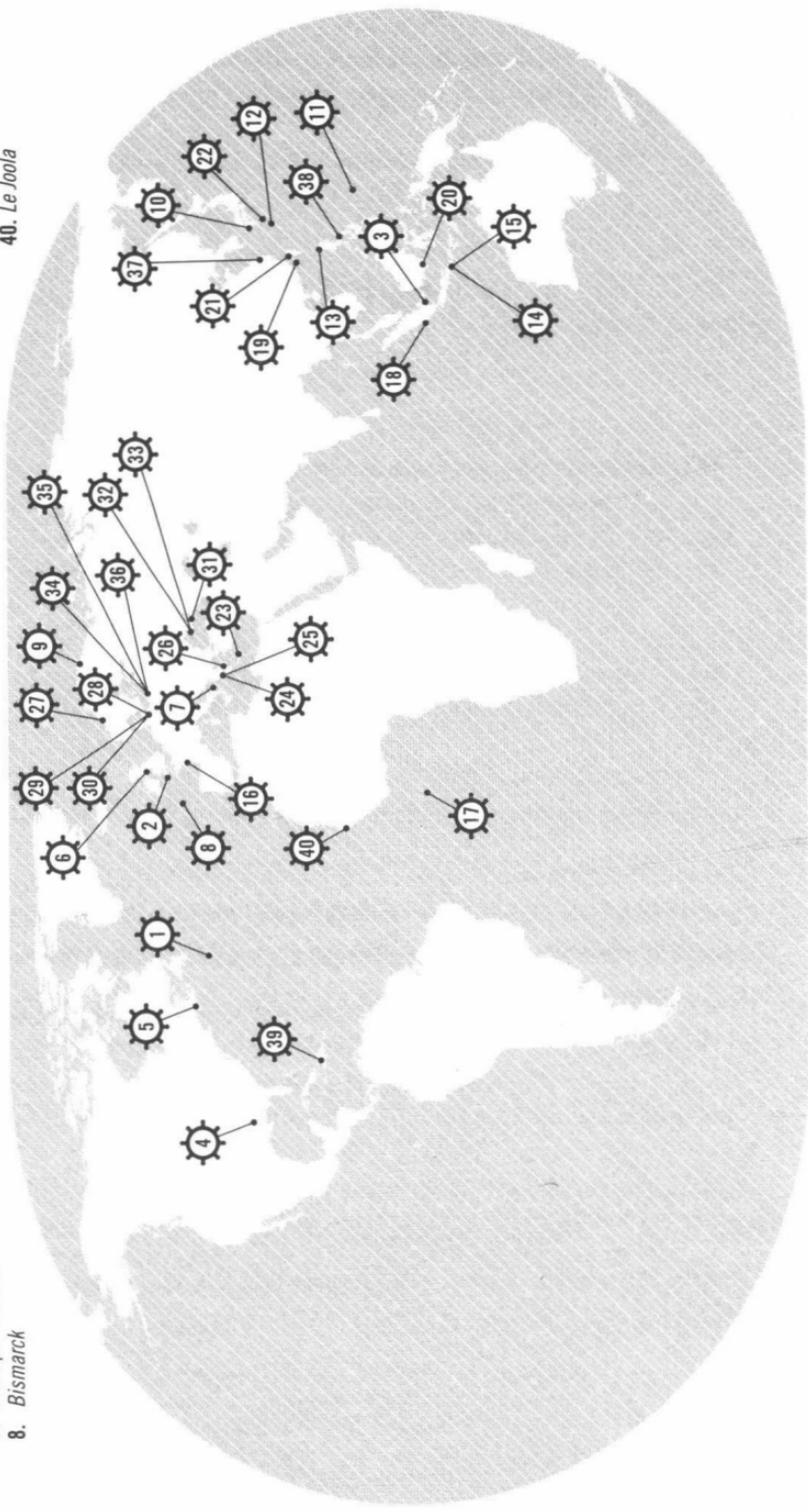
9. *Scharnhorst*
10. *Yamato*
11. *Taiho*
12. *Toyama Maru*
13. *Teia Maru*
14. *Ryusei Maru*

15. *Tango Maru*
16. *Lancastria*
17. *Laconia*
18. *Junyo Maru*
19. *Arisan Maru*
20. *Koshu Maru*

21. *Awa Maru*
22. *Isushima Maru*
23. *Gaetano Donizetti*
24. *Simfra*
25. *Petrella*
26. *Oria*

27. *Rigel*
28. *Cap Arcona*
29. *Thielbek*
30. *Deutschland*
31. *Armenia*
32. *Teja*

33. *Totila*
34. *Steuben*
35. *Goya*
36. *Wilhelm Gustloff*
37. *Kiangya*
38. *Doña Paz*
39. *Neptune*
40. *Le Joola*



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INTRODUCTION

In terms of loss of life alone, the sinking of the *Titanic* doesn't even figure as one of the fifty worst maritime disasters of the last three hundred years. Even putting aside an objective and somewhat cold comparison of death tolls, some of the circumstances in which the other vessels sank – and some of the experiences of those who died on, or survived, them – were horrific almost to the point of being unimaginable. They make disaster movies look sanitised, and that includes even the more accurate versions of the *Titanic* story.

The *Titanic* wasn't hopelessly overcrowded with more than 10,000 people, unlike the *Wilhelm Gustloff*. The *Titanic* didn't lose all power and wasn't plunged into darkness when she began to sink, making escape almost impossible for those below decks, unlike *Le Joola*. The *Titanic* wasn't consumed by a swiftly spreading inferno,

unlike the *Sultana* and the *Doña Paz*. Those fleeing the *Titanic* weren't shot at, unlike those fleeing the *Thielbek* and the *Cap Arcona*. The *Titanic* didn't capsize before she went down, unlike the *Lancastria* and the *Neptune*. And the *Titanic* took almost three hours to sink, unlike most of the ships in this book.

It is a popular misconception that the *Titanic* disaster had a great impact on maritime safety. The first Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) convention in 1914 was a direct response to the disaster, and there have been several others since, in 1929, 1948, 1960 and 1974. Since 1929 the emphasis has been on fire prevention, because fire has been responsible for half of all peacetime casualties at sea. In 1974 a completely new convention was drawn up, which made it a requirement for all passenger ships to be subdivided into watertight compartments to ensure they can stay afloat even with the level of hull damage the *Titanic* suffered. However, as of a few years ago there were still cruise ships in active service that only adhered to the 1948 convention. And most of the disasters in this book have occurred since the first convention.

The *Titanic* disaster continues to hold sway over the public imagination, being the archetypal maritime disaster, possibly because it became a symbol of a dying age, the point at which mankind's belief in its invincibility thanks to technology faltered, before finally being extinguished on the battlefields of Europe a couple of years later. Many of the films made about the *Titanic* use the decks of the ship to represent a microcosm of a society riven by class. Poor European emigrants seeking a better life in America face the same peril as Sir Cosmo Duff Gordon, John Jacob

Astor and Benjamin Guggenheim, some of the richest, most notable men in the Western world at the time.

It is hard to imagine *Le Joola*, the most recent disaster featured in this book, making so few headlines in the West had there been any British aristocrats or rich American industrialists on board. Yet around 2,000 died when *Le Joola* capsized off the coast of Senegal in 2002 and, only a decade later, the disaster is unknown even to those who consider the loss of the *Titanic* – and 1,500 of its passengers – a great tragedy. The *Titanic* has been remembered, commemorated and celebrated for over a century now. This book is about the people who sailed on other ships that met with disaster. Some lived, many died, but all have been almost completely forgotten.

1

IN THE HANDS OF GOD

Catastrophe at sea
during the Age of
Sail

Life expectancy for the average sailor in the 18th and 19th centuries was unmercifully short. Whilst someone who worked on land could reasonably expect to make it to at least their late thirties or early forties, a sailor could consider himself lucky if he made it out of his twenties.

It should perhaps not be surprising, then, that at times half of all British sailors serving on Royal Navy ships during the Age of Sail were conscripted by press gangs. Sailors were physically overworked in harsh conditions, spending much of the time wet and cold. They were malnourished, eating poorly preserved food; a diet that

contained little in the way of fresh fruit or vegetables but plenty in the way of weak alcohol, the only alternative to which was dirty water. They lived in crowded conditions and sanitation was poor. Half of all deaths that occurred at sea were due to disease. During the Napoleonic Wars, for example, 100,000 British sailors perished. Only 1,500 died in battle, whilst 60,000 died from disease, the biggest killer being typhus spread by infected lice.

*A graveyard of shipwrecks
litters the seabeds of the
world's oceans.*

Disease and sea battles aside, whether on warships or merchant vessels, life at sea during the Age of Sail carried with it at least a one in ten chance of death. Approximately ten per cent of long voyages met with total disaster. A graveyard of shipwrecks litters the seabeds of the world's oceans, the unknown final resting places of the vessels and crews who never reached their intended destinations, having disappeared without trace – or survivors – en route.

Hundreds of thousands died over the centuries, but death at sea was too commonplace, too routine, to warrant memorialising the loss of yet another 200 crewmen. Two particular disasters stand out, however, because both of them led to the deaths of more people than the sinking of the *Titanic*. One of them – the Scilly Disaster of 1707 – changed the world. The other – the sinking of the *Tek Sing* in 1822 – has been forgotten by all but ghoulish collectors, and the treasure hunters who serve them.

From siege to storm

On 29th September 1707, Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovell sent word from his flagship HMS *Association* to the other