

Woods Hole Oceanographic Research Vessel KNORR Locates Titanic September 1985

Story related by: Ernie Smith – K1HO

(Editor's note – I find it very interesting the great finds one makes while searching thru someone's old "stuff". Out of some "stuff" Dick, WB2JPQ and Marsh, W3FL comes a contact with K1HO. What a rare find; read on and see what I mean!!! Thank you Ernie for sharing the story and pictures.)

It was moonless and chilly on that fateful night in April of 1912 in the North Atlantic when the R.M.S. Titanic struck an iceberg and sank with great loss of life. Strangely enough conditions were very much the same on that September night in 1985 when we finally located the final resting place of the R.M.S. Titanic and a final resting place for a great number of her passengers as well. The state of the sea was very calm when the Titanic struck the iceberg in 1912 and was very calm when we found her in 1985 – very bizarre indeed. I was Radio Electronics Officer on board Research Vessel Knorr at the time. We arrived on the Titanic search site around 2200 Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), on August 24, 1985. This is the time of year when you have to start keeping a sharp eye out for North Atlantic storms as well, so of course I checked the latest weather information and verified via the International Ice Patrol data on how far we were from any ice fields. It looked okay for us – we were in the clear. The temperature wasn't too bad (about 67 degrees Fahrenheit and there was a slight drizzle).

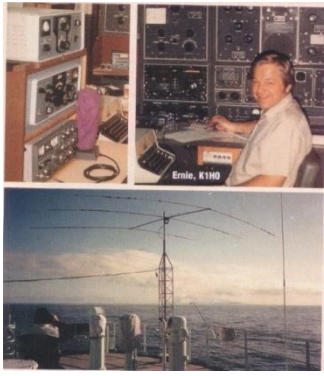


Ernie K1HO 1985

I was able to keep my regular Ham Sked with the W4GLL (Gil Geitner – now a SK) on 20 meters that evening. Usually I would hook up with Gil on the Maritime Mobile Net and move down to a clear frequency and run a few phone patches. This usually worked out quite well for us over a period of several years.

We struck gold early morning of September 1, 1985, after approximately seven days of "mowing-the-lawn" with our video camera sled. We came across one the Titanic's Boilers which had been emptied out of the Titanic during her sinking. There of course was a feeling of great excitement, and at the same time a realization that this was hallowed ground, the location of the great Titanic disaster where many people had suffered and died on the fateful night. I can only imagine what the people went through that night and how busy the Chief Marconi Operator of the Titanic, Jack Phillips, and his able assistant, Harold Bride, were in their attempts to contact help. How tremendously busy they must have been even before disaster struck.

On that tragic night, both Phillips and Bride had received reports of icebergs from other ships to their West and relayed the information to the bridge of the Titanic. Once disaster had struck, Phillips and Bride courageously stayed on duty in the wireless room sending out reports on the Titanic's condition and position to any one within hearing range. They continued on right up to the last minutes before her final plunge into the depths. The final signals likely heard from the Titanic were likely heard by Harold Cottam, Marconi operator on board the Carpathia, which eventually rescued the only survivors from the Titanic. Only slightly more than 700 people were saved out of the 2,224 people on board the Titanic.



The final resting place of the Titanic was located early morning of September 1, 1985, some 73 years after she was last seen on the surface. Most of us were off duty and asleep when this occurred. I was catching a few winks at the time myself in my stateroom next to the radio room. It was only a short time after the discovery that I was awoken by Captain Richard Bowen, who informed me of the discovery. From that moment onward, the "traffic" through the radio room was immense. I was handling a large number of commercial radio telephone calls, forty or so radio telegraph messages, eighty or so HAM radio phone patches – mostly via Gil, W4LLA, and a number of calls from coast stations with "traffic" for the KNORR (KCEJ). On a normal trip of this length I would only handle about 1/20 of this amount of "traffic" –

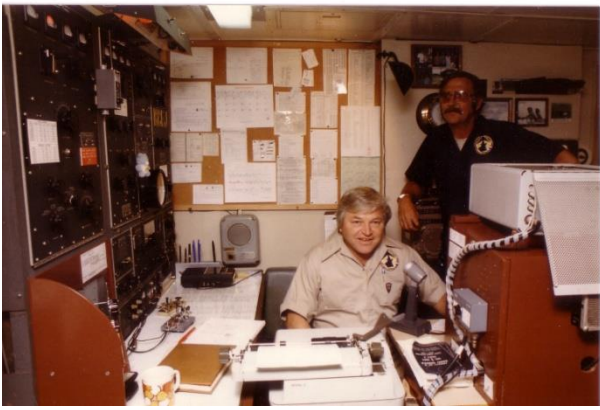
and this all took place in just 8 or 9 days. Needless to say I had a lot of overtime to submit to the home office!



RV Melville sister ship to RV Knorr show at port in Capetown So. Africa

I had to keep a running list of all the calls coming to the Knorr. I would take the party's name and phone number from the marine operator and add it to my fast growing list. Dr. Robert Ballard (Chief Scientist) was interviewed via radio with all the top networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) and when he had time we would return as many calls as possible. I was also running high sea phone traffic for the French scientists with calls to France. In my time away from working with these folks I would attempt to catch up on my radiotelegraphy traffic.

I would send my customary weather reports in to my favorite commercial coast station in Connecticut which was owned by Doug Losty, WA1TUT. His only other operator there was Bob Wright, WT3A. Both excellent CW operators and real gentlemen. So even though we were kind of silent on the exact location of the Titanic at that time, they could have had a good idea where we were do to the Latitude and Longitude information on our weather reports! It is ironic that commercial radiotelegraph has basically diminished to almost non existence, especially after it has played such an important role in saving lives on the high seas over the years. Modern technology has taken it's place, but there are still quite a few of 'die-hard' Ham operators out there that enjoy using that mode of communications. I might add that Ralph White (formerly K6MUL) was on board the KNORR during the Titanic expedition as a photographer working for National Geographic. He has had his own Titanic specials on National Geo TV in the past and has many interesting stories to tell in his own right.



Ernie K10H and Ralph Wright K6MUL on RV Knorr

I might add that Ralph White (former K6MUL) was a cameraman aboard the Research Vessel Knorr working for National Geographic during our phase of the Titanic search. As a qualified SCUBA diver he was able to take pictures of the submerged camera sleds that eventually made their way down to the Titanic. He has quite a history of his own, having made several dives on the Titanic site onboard deep diving submersibles. I don't think he would mind me mentioning that he has gathered, over a period of time, some four hundred plus hours on the site - more than Captain Smith spent on the Titanic! Our paths crossed a few times over the years in San Diego at the then called Naval Electronics Lab and Scripps Institute of Oceanography and finally at Woods Hole Oceanographic on Cape Cod. He is a gentleman and extremely interesting to talk to. The pictures showing him standing behind me at the radio console on the RV Knorr were taken by Emory Kristof who is a famous National Geographic photographer whose pictures you have undoubtedly seen over the years in the National Geographic magazine. We were listening, at the time, to all the radio stations looking to contact the Knorr right after our finding the Titanic. I did run quite a few phone patches on the Ham bands (20 meters) at the time, even a couple for Dr. Robert Ballard our Chief Scientist.

Interviews with Dr. Robert Ballard were conducted via commercial radio with David Hartman of "Good Morning America," Peter Jennings of "The Evening News," Tom Brokaw of NBC, Maria of "The CBS Morning News," Terry Drinkwater of and Walter Sullivan, science writer for the *The York times*. As a rule I would not communicate with the big anchors on the networks, but would get everything set up with the technicians at networks and once that was done I would have the microphone over to Dr. Ballard, or whoever, in the radio room for the interviews. I do remember David Hartman got quite a kick out of talking over the Seas radiotelephone station. He mentioned that reminded him of his old Air Force days. We also were able to hook the French scientists on board up with some French sources for interviews. Really quite an interesting time and as you can see, some of the aforementioned folks are no longer with us and some have retired. There were some rather lengthy radiotelegraph messages that I was able to send via commercial coast stations as well and was happy when that job was completed! Those fellows who took the radiotelegraph messages at the coast stations were usually also Ham Radio operators. I believe the longest radiotelegraph message I sent during that time was sent through station WOE in Florida. Most of our radiotelephone contacts were through station WOO in New York. They (WOO) even had the QEII standby, after us, for their turn. That kind of caught my attention.



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The pictures of the wreck are very interesting, but my favorite picture of the majestic Titanic is of her steaming on the High Sea painted by: James A. Flood. She was the biggest, most interesting ship of her day and still remains so in many of our hearts today.

I got my start in Ham radio back in Junior High School (1954) thanks to Don Stansifer, my radio shop teacher. Don (now a silent key) was formerly W6LRU and later N6RU. He was mentor to many young fellows like me (now much older) over the years and meant a lot to all of us that knew him. He was a radio operator on Navy oil tankers during World War II and saw plenty of action in the Pacific theatre.



Knorr returning to port after discovery of the Titanic

Sea travel today is as safe as our technology can make it, due directly to the saga of the Titanic. Those who perished on that night under such dreadful circumstances did not die in vain.

Best wishes to all, Ernie Smith – K1HO

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