

A QUIET SEA

RMS TITANIC



THIRD OFFICER PITMAN

## TITANIC'S THIRD OFFICER



Herbert John Pitman

Credit: Wikipedia

Herbert J. Pitman was born in Castle Cary, Somerset, England in 1877. His father, a farmer, died when he was 3. At about age 17, Pitman attended the Merchant Venturers' Technical College, a charitable school for those seeking a career in the Merchant Marine. He went to sea in 1895 as an apprentice with James Nourse, Ltd., serving aboard the full-rigged ships Mersey, Forth and Bann.



Three masted ships, Mersey L and Bann R

Credit: Titanic Officers

Rated as an able-bodied seaman in 1899, Pitman eventually became Third Officer on another Norse ship. After passing his Second Mate's examination in 1900, he joined the company's full-rigged ship Clyde as Second Officer.



Ship Clyde  
Credit: Titanic Officers

Upon passing his First Officer examinations, Pitman switched to steamships, working with the Blue Anchor Line aboard the single screw passenger/cargo steamer SS Warrigal.



SS Warrigal  
Credit: Titanic Officers

Eager for more responsibility but frustrated with the lack of promotion, Pitman joined the Shire Line in 1903, serving on vessels that traveled to Australia and Japan. Two years later, he rejoined the Nourse Line, serving as Third, Second and First Officer on the new steamship Indus, transporting Indian indentured laborers to Trinidad. Pitman passed his Master's Certificate in 1906, earning a position with the White Star Line. He first served on SS Gothic, then SS Delphic as Second Mate, the highest rank he would ever achieve. He went on to serve on other White Star steamers, including the RMS Majestic (as Fourth Officer) and the highly successful RMS Oceanic. He wrote, "I got my severest mail boat training during the seven hard, though happy years I spent in the Queen of the Seas, as the *Oceanic* was then called. A wonderful ship, built in a class of her own, and by herself... She was an experiment, and a wonderfully successful one;

built by Harland and Wolff, regardless of cost, elaborate to a degree, money lavished where it was necessary, but never gaudily as is so common nowadays."



RMS Oceanic at launching

Credit: Facebook

## TITANIC'S MAIDEN VOYAGE

While on holiday in early 1912, Pitman received word to report to Titanic in Belfast on March 27, to prepare her for her dockside tests and sea trials. On the day of departure, April 10, Pitman was on the after docking bridge passing along instructions from the bridge to First Officer Murdoch, who was supervising the letting go of dock lines and tending to the tugs guiding the stern away from the wharf. As Titanic's propellers churned up the silty bottom and the ship began making way, she had to advance about a half mile along the quay before making a left-hand turn for the channel. As she drew past several smaller liners, the suction from her passing hull and propellers caused their dock lines to part with loud reports. One, the New York, was drawn toward Titanic's stern. A tug quickly got a line on the New York's stern and barely kept her clear of Titanic. Titanic stopped and reversed her engines to cut the suction, while New York was shepherded to another berth so Titanic's departure could resume. Pitman thought the event a minor incident.

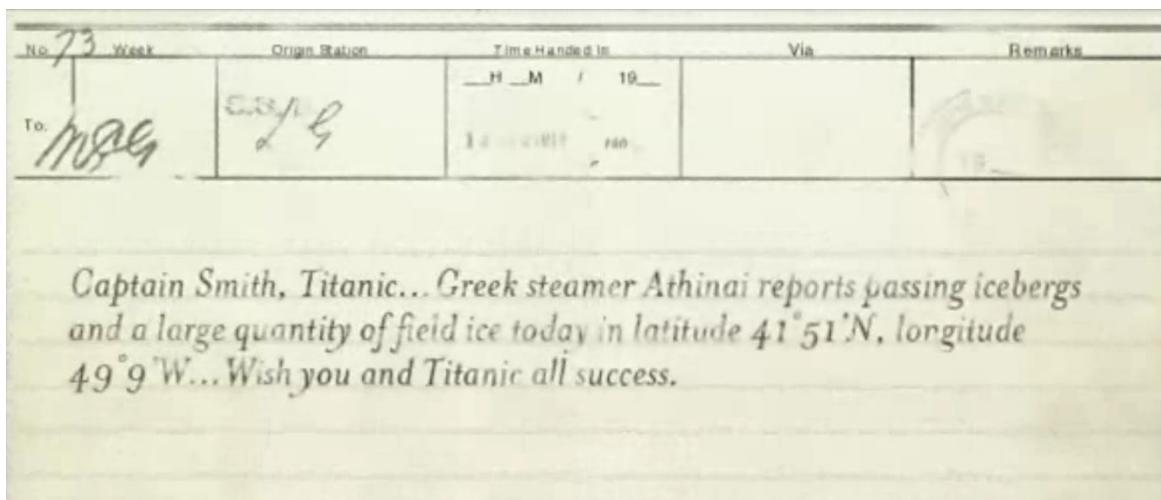


SS New York swinging toward Titanic

Credit: Encyclopedia Titanica

As Third Officer aboard Titanic, Pitman's duties included helping supervise the deck crew and the quartermasters and relieving senior watch officers. Like other officers, he also was responsible for determining Titanic's position during his watch. He did so in part using celestial observations. The compass course would be corrected for the natural variation between the magnetic and geographical north poles, information provided on the local chart. The effect on the compass from the ship's own magnetic field had been determined and noted during sea trials; this information was posted in the wheelhouse. Once these corrections were applied, the precise course was given to the quartermaster steering the ship.

On April 14, no one officer received all of the messages regarding ice. Pitman saw a message in the morning, about 12 hours before the collision, indicating ice ahead and slightly to the north of Titanic's track. However, it was not posted in the chart house until late that afternoon. (Pitman later testified that he had marked an "X" on the ship's chart noting the location.) That night, he and Second Officer Lightoller used the celestial observations of four evening stars to determine the ship's position. After calculating Titanic's position and distance run, Pitman determined that the icebergs were not particularly close to the ship's course. The two wireless operators, employed by the Marconi Company, were primarily tasked with transmitting passenger messages and had discretion as to when to forward ice warnings to the bridge. These misplaced priorities severely hampered information vital to the safe navigation of the ship.



SS Athenian ice message relayed by SS Baltic the afternoon of 14 April  
Credit: Titanic: History's Most Famous Ship

Lying in his bunk before assuming the watch at midnight, Pitman felt a slight rumble go through the ship, similar, he thought, to the vibration of letting go an anchor. He began to dress when Fourth Officer Boxhall came into his cabin and told him they had hit an iceberg and that Titanic was making water. As Pitman reported to the bridge, Titanic was gliding to a stop. Assisting First Officer Murdoch, he began uncovering the boats to prepare them for lowering. Admiring the efficient new Welin davits, he swung and lowered the boats to the level of the boat deck for loading. Rushed and distracted by the White Star Line's Managing Director Bruce Ismay, who was shouting directions, Pitman went to the bridge to get orders from Captain Smith to lower away.

Pitman stood in boat No. 5 and urged the women to board, allowing a few men in the boat when there were no more women in the area. Climbing back on deck, Pitman was ordered by Murdoch to take charge of boat No. 5 and to stand by one of the after-gangway doors. Pitman assumed

that he would load passengers from there. As the boat was lowered, Murdoch wished him good luck. Once afloat and seeing no doors open, Pitman pulled away from Titanic. Thinking the ship would remain afloat, he watched Titanic sink lower, eventually realizing she was doomed. He had five crew members with him and later spoke admirably of the women in the boat. In the pitch dark, Pitman heard the hull tearing itself apart and saw the stern upend and disappear. Pitman looked at his watch and announced it was 2:20am.

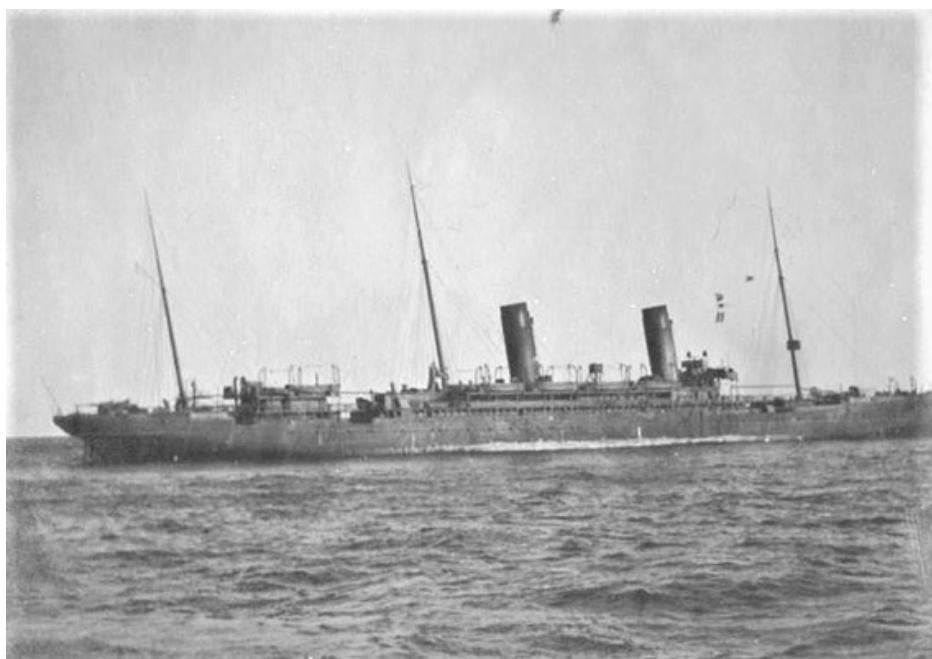
Wanting to respond to the cries of those in the cold night, Pitman gave the order to return to where Titanic sank. However, he was dissuaded by the boat's other passengers, who feared they would be swamped and drowned; better to save we few, they said. Lashing his boat to another, he redistributed some passengers. A little more than an hour after Titanic sank, Pitman's boat was picked up by Carpathia. Landed in New York, Pitman supplied testimony to the American Inquiry in the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. He, with other surviving officers and Bruce Ismay, left for England aboard Adriatic about 2 weeks later.



Pitman (L) and Second Officer Lightoller preparing to enter the British Inquiry  
Credit: Wiki Commons

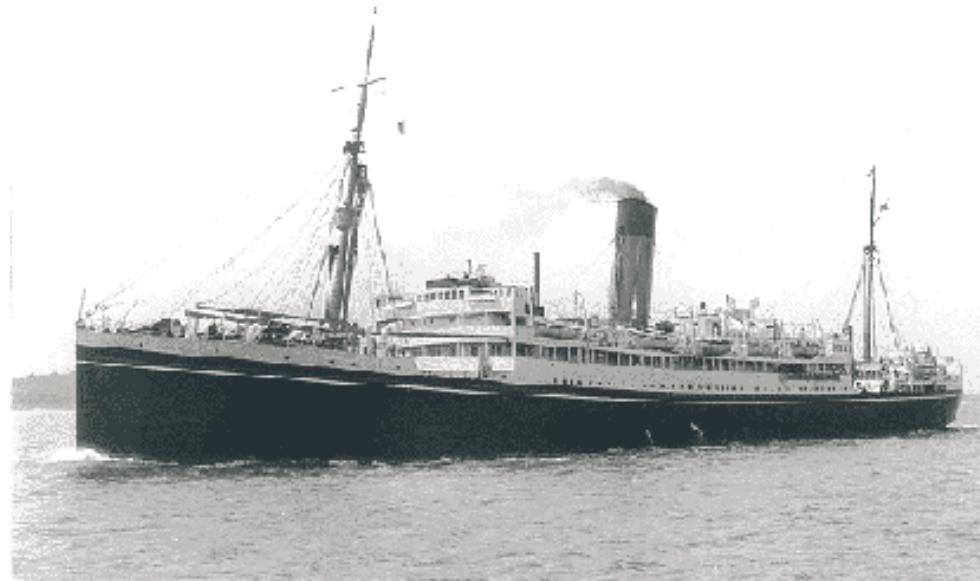
Immense guilt for not returning to those thrashing in the sea weighed heavily on Pitman the rest of his life. Reporting to the British Inquiry, he answered nearly 400 questions, breaking down on the stand when recalling the cries of those in the sea.

Pitman continued working with White Star, serving again on Oceanic and Titanic's sister, Olympic. About this time, he failed color blind tests and subsequently transferred from his deck duties to that of purser. During the First World War, Pitman served first on the armed merchant cruiser Teutonic, patrolling the waters north of Russia, then on a destroyer, leaving the Navy as Lieutenant Commander when the war ended. Married in 1922, his wife passed away 11 years later.



HMS Teutonic  
Credit: Naval History, British warships

Returning briefly to Olympic, he continued with several other steamship lines, serving as purser for more than 20 years on Shaw Sevill's SS Mataroa. Aboard Mataroa during World War II, Pitman participated in numerous operations, including transporting troops and meat cargos and carrying US troops to Northern Ireland to prepare for the D-Day invasion. After the war, Mataroa transported immigrants to Palestine.



SS Mataroa  
Credit: Mubi

After a 50-year career at sea, Pitman retired in 1947. He was awarded the Member of the British Empire Order for his long sea service during both world wars. He died in 1961 and is interred near his home in Somerset.

Sources: British and American Wreck Inquiries; A Night to Remember by Walter Lord; Crew of the Titanic by Gunter Babler; Titanic Officers; Titanic and other ships by Charles Lightoller; Titanic Gazette