

Relic hunters plan to retrieve Titanic radio that relayed the ship's final pleas for help

By
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The messages burst from the RMS Titanic to other ships navigating the icy waters of the Atlantic in the early morning hours of April 15, 1912.

“Come at once. We have struck a berg. It’s a CQD, old man,” the famed ocean liner’s wireless operator, Jack Phillips, tapped in one of the first calls for help moments after the collision.

Soon, he added calls of SOS, a newly adopted distress signal that would ultimately come to replace CQD. Junior wireless operator Harold Bride had suggested using the new code, later telling the New York Times that he joked to Phillips that it “may be your last chance to send it.”

“We are putting passengers off in small boats,” said one, according to a BBC account of the calls. “Women and children in boats. Cannot last much longer. Losing power.” Then came the last words, just minutes before the “unsinkable” ship foundered: “Come quick. Engine room nearly full.”

After resting at the bottom of the ocean for more than a century, the rust-covered device that relayed those messages — which summoned the liner RMS Carpathia to rescue survivors — could be recovered. RMS Titanic Inc., the Atlanta-based company with the sole rights to salvage artifacts from the shipwreck, is seeking a court’s permission for the “surgical removal and retrieval” of the Marconi set.

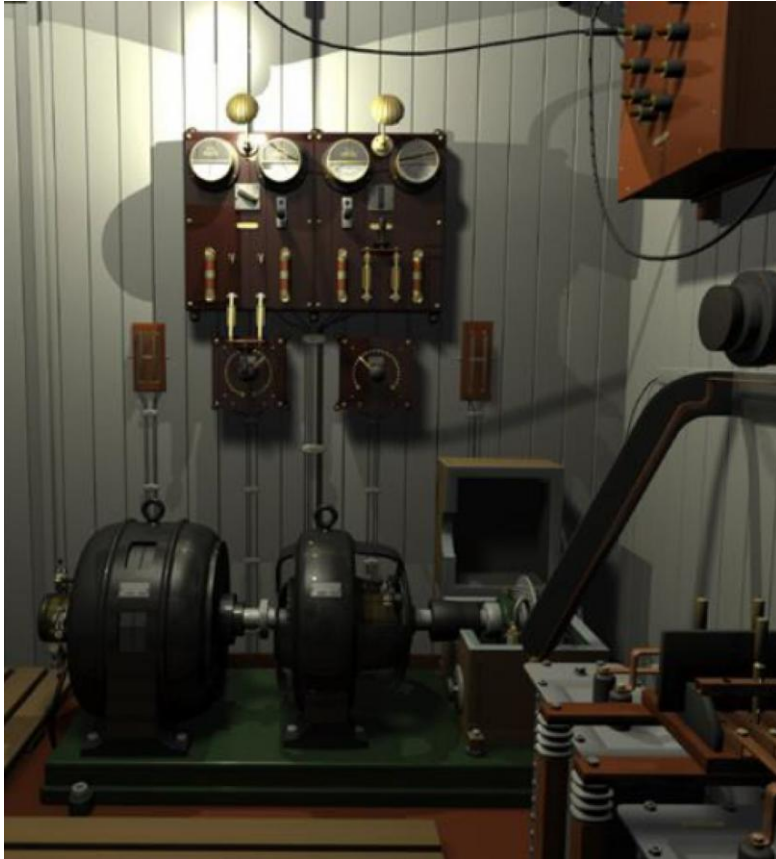
The request, laid out in documents filed this week in U.S. District Court in Eastern Virginia, represents the first time salvagers would collect something from inside the doomed ship, noted the Telegraph, which was first to report on the planned expedition. Sure to be

controversial, the request came as British officials announced a “historic treaty” with the United States to better protect what remains of the Titanic. The countries will now have the authority to approve or deny licenses allowing people to enter the wreck and remove items found outside it. The state-of-the-art wireless telegraph transmitter, installed by a leading technology company called Marconi, was the Titanic’s sole connection to the rest of the world. And in the hours after the ship hit the iceberg, as frigid water flooded the lower decks and panicked passengers scrambled to the scarce lifeboats on board, the messages grew more frantic.

“Lying two and a half miles below the ocean surface, the RMS Titanic is the subject of the most documented maritime tragedy in history,” British Transport and Maritime Minister Nusrat Ghani said in a statement. “This momentous agreement with the United States to preserve the wreck means it will be treated with the sensitivity and respect owed to the final resting place of more than 1,500 lives.”

RMS Titanic Inc. argues that the wireless transmitter must be recovered soon, and ideally within the year, as expeditions to the site more than two miles below the ocean’s surface have noted deterioration over the years. The “Silent Cabin,” the soundproof room where it is housed, withstood years of damage and protected the transmitting switchboards and regulators, the company wrote in court documents.

But the deckhouse above the Marconi transmitter has been falling apart since 2005, and holes have been forming over the Silent Cabin. The overhead will probably collapse within the next few years, Titanic expert Parks Stephenson wrote in court documents, “potentially burying forever the remains of the world’s most famous radio.”



A rendering of the Marconi transmitter as it would have appeared in 1912. (U.S. District Court)

The idea of removing items from inside the vessel has come under fire in the past, according to the Telegraph, with the disaster’s last survivor among the critics. Previous expeditions have collected artifacts only from the debris scattered alongside it.

“I think the ship should be left in peace,” Millvena Dean said in a 2000 interview. She was 9 weeks old at the time of the disaster and died in 2009. “Any bits and pieces that have come out from the ship on the seabed — that is all right. But to go on the ship — no, that is all wrong.”

RMS Titanic Inc. President Bretton Hunchak, however, has said the radio recovery mission would be limited in scope and undertaken in an effort to protect the important artifact before it’s too late.

“It’s not some kind of Trojan horse so that we can start grabbing suitcases full of diamonds from the wreck,” he said, according to the

Telegraph. “This is a careful, surgical operation to rescue a historically significant item so it can teach future generations about the story of Titanic.”

The Marconi transmitter, which would be extracted by sending a manned submarine to the wreck and then using an underwater robot to perforate the deck plating and reach inside the Titanic, was key to the rescue of the 705 survivors of the disaster.

It has already brought to life some of the last, previously unknowable moments aboard the sinking ship, Stephenson wrote. In 2001, an expedition revealed the system was in the reset position — showing that Phillips, who did not survive the sinking, had attempted to boost the signal “one final time before the power completely failed.” If carried to the surface, it could perhaps be restored to working order, RMS Titanic Inc. said, meaning “Titanic’s radio — Titanic’s voice — could once again be heard.”