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Saturday, May 3, 2008

The Incredible Postal Workers Aboard RMS Titanic

It's Fun Friday -- time for some fun for the weekend. Enjoy today's post and I'll see you back here on Monday with more philatelic news and notes.

"Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds" is often cited as the motto for the U.S. Postal Service. It is not; while this saying is engraved above the Farley Post Office in New York City, it is not the official motto of the U.S. Postal Service nor any postal service for that matter. Yet it does represent the spirit of mail carriers throughout the world. And nowhere does this spirit seem more real than by the actions of the postal workers aboard the *R.M.S. Titanic* on the night of her demise.



The
Royal
Mail
Ship

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(R.M.S.) *Titanic*, was conceived and built as mankind's efforts to tame the seas. She was called unsinkable by many and she represented the apex of what was thought to be man's domination over nature. She sailed in April, 1912, full of hope and promise and triumph as the greatest ship ever built.

As a Royal Mail Ship, *Titanic* had been commissioned to transport and handle mail from the United Kingdom's Royal Mail postal service. This type of service, called Sea Post, offered postal authorities an opportunity to process the mail during the transit time of the ship's passage, and it offered the ship's owners a reliable and predictable source of income. On board *Titanic* was a state of the art Sea Post Office where mail would be sorted and canceled in route to the ship's destination. Incredibly, over 3000 mailbags were ultimately loaded onto *Titanic* for her fateful journey.

On April 10th, *Titanic* left Southampton, England and set sail for its ultimate destination, New York City. Below decks, five Sea Post workers started their task of sorting the mail.

The five men represented some of the best postal workers of two nations. Americans John March, Oscar Woody, and William Gwinn worked alongside British clerks John Smith and James Williamson on the voyage.

The Accident and The Postal Workers

Late in the evening of April 14, 1912, the ship struck an iceberg and suffered irreparable damage. While the magnitude of the disaster was unknown at the time, the ship was doomed as compartment after compartment began flooding.

The postal workers rushed to the mail room to begin rescuing the mail. It has been estimated that the workers retrieved up to 200 sacks of registered mail and had carried them to the upper decks on the slim chance that it might get rescued. Even as water began to fill the post office, the men admirably answered the postal workers call of duty to save the mail from destruction. Their admirable efforts might have cost the

"I urged them to leave their work. They shook their heads and continued."

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men their lives; as they tried to get the mail above deck, their chances of getting aboard one of the precious few lifeboats, while slim at best, vanished completely as the chivalrous call for women and children first seized the day.

The men were claimed by the frigid Atlantic waters in the early morning hours of April 15, 1912. Coincidentally, it was postal worker Oscar Woody's 44th birthday.

The Aftermath

None of the mail was ever recovered. The icy Atlantic had doomed these five gallant men and claimed all of the mail. But two life-jacketed bodies were later recovered floating in the detritus of the shipwreck. Birthday celebrant Oscar Woody and fellow American John March were recovered. Woody, whose body had badly decomposed was quickly buried at sea after his effects were removed. The body of his fellow co-worker, John March, had fared better; it was able to be interred in a cemetery in New Jersey in the United States. The bodies of the other three men were never located.

Inside Oscar Woody's coat pockets were found *facing slips*. These pieces of paper were used by the postal workers to label sacks of mail that had been sorted. When attached to a mail sack they would indicate the delivery destination and the sorting clerk's name for tracking purposes. Apparently, Woody had stashed a handful of the facing slips in his pockets while he had been working.

"I saw them no more."

Also found on Woody's body was a chain with some of the ship's mailroom keys on it and the letter assigning Woody to service on the Titanic. These

items are the only postal items recovered from the disaster.

So far, no mail has been recovered from salvaging operations. The debate remains unsettled as to whether any of the mail could even be intact after being underwater for such a long time. Ocean currents, tremendous pressures, biological elements, and even the rusting hulk of metal that was once a proud ship would all serve to harm any mail. It seems doubtful that nearly 100 years after the disaster that any mail would have survived.

Honoring the Postal Workers

As word began to spread about the last hours aboard the doomed ship, stories of heroes began to emerge. The incredible story of the postal worker's last actions did not go unnoticed.

Numerous memorials were offered by two grieving countries. Southampton, initial point on *Titanic's* maiden voyage was also home to most of the ship's crew. The town suffered an incredible loss of 549 lives.

A memorial to the five postal workers aboard *Titanic* was installed in the High Street Post Office. It was forged from a spare propeller donated by shipbuilder Harland and Wolff. The plaque reads:

This tablet is erected by the Postal and Telegraph Service to the honor and memory of John R. Jago Smith, James B. Williamson, British Sea Post officers, and their American colleagues William H. L. Gwinn, John S. March, [and] Oscar S. Woody who died on duty in the foundering of S. S. Titanic
April 15, 1912
"Steadfast in Peril"

In April, 2008, the High Street Post Office was closed. A controversy arose since it was possible that the plaque that adorned the walls would be sold at auction like numerous other *Titanic* memorabilia. However, Southampton city council members have directed that the memorial be placed in Southampton's Civic Center, thus thwarting any plans to profit from the disaster.

At the time of the disaster, U.S. Postmaster General Frank Hitchcock noted the "bravery exhibited by these men in their efforts to safeguard under such trying conditions the valuable mail intrusted [sic] to them should be a source of pride to the entire Postal Service."

Indeed.