

## Epilogue

Could the *Californian* have saved anyone? Lord Mersey and Senator Smith certainly believed so. Leslie Reade and Edward de Groot avoided the question altogether. Walter Lord's arguments revolve around the fact that Captain Lord and his crew did not even attempt a rescue, but in private, he would write that, "The *Californian* could have done a great deal of good."

Let us explore this issue. The *Californian* could attain a maximum speed of 13 ½ knots, which could have been reached within a few minutes. Rockets were first reported to Captain Lord at 1.15am; if 2<sup>nd</sup> Officer Stone had shown more alacrity, he would have informed the Captain after the second rocket had been sighted and he was sure that he not just viewing shooting stars, perhaps at about 12.50am. What could have been achieved in the next hour, or hour and a half, before the *Titanic* sank? This requires an estimate of the distance; taking a lower limit of 5 miles and a higher one of 21 miles, at top speed, it would take between 22 minutes and 1 hour 33 minutes to reach the *Titanic*. No-one seriously suggests that Lord rush into an ice infested area with such wanton abandon for the safety of his own ship and crew. The argument that Lord should have adopted Rostron's practise by ringing "full speed ahead" down to his engine room is not very compelling. Rostron had received no ice warnings at all; all he knew was that the *Titanic* had hit an iceberg. Captain Lord would almost certainly have been more cautious; not only had he received Marconi reports, but he could see the ice. This would definitely have affected his navigation that night.

What speed would be acceptable in the vicinity of ice? We simply do not know. Sir Ernest Shackleton suggested four to six knots at the British Investigation. With these speeds, the *Californian* would not have arrived in time to pluck anyone from the *Titanic*'s decks. And, with lifeboats rowing towards the mystery steamer on the horizon, Lord would have to have been lucky not to have run over the small craft whilst en route.

Suppose that the *Californian*, by some caprice of good fortune, had arrived at the *Titanic* before she foundered. What then? How could the passengers and crew be transferred (transshipped) safely? How close would Lord have been prepared to take his own ship to the dying giant, without the risk of damaging either vessel?

The boat deck of the *Titanic* was ordinarily 60 feet above the water; at that time on the morning of April 15<sup>th</sup>, the forward-most end would be lower than this, with the stern end higher. The A deck promenade would be 10 feet lower than the boat deck. The bridge of the *Californian* was 39 feet above the water. How could people lower themselves this distance without injury, given that a separating gap would exist between the two ships? Possibly down the lines ('falls') of departed lifeboats, or by ferrying passengers down in boats to the deck of the *Californian*, raising the boats, and then repeating this process? The absolute earliest that Lord could have arrived at the *Titanic* would be sometime shortly after 1.35 a.m.; at this time, there would only be nine lifeboats left on the *Titanic*, 5 of them being on the port side. To transfer some 1,900 people still on board the ship. With time running out, one can imagine the horrific scum that would have ensued as people waited for their turn to escape. But with such a huge disparity in the heights of the decks, there could be no other way, short of ladders or gangplanks, which could have provided a point of transfer between these ships. The gangway doors on the *Titanic*, situated on D-deck, were about 20 feet above the waterline, and could have been used, if one fashions a method of transference, but with the *Titanic*'s bow dipping ever lower in the water, this would only have been a temporary solution.

There are incidents where passengers and crew have been transshipped<sup>314</sup>, the most salient

one being three years before the *Titanic* collision; in 1909, the Italian liner *Florida* punctured the hull of another White Star liner, the *Republic*, whilst in dense fog. The *Republic* eventually sank, but its rate of foundering was so slow that all but six people (who were killed in the initial collision) on both ships survived; there was therefore no overwhelming sense of urgency that had been evident during the later stages of the sinking of the *Titanic*. Some 400 passengers were transferred from the *Republic* to the *Florida*, a process that took between 2 ½ to 4 hours (depending on sources) using a single staircase which joined gangway doors on both ships. These passengers – and 900 additional ones from the *Florida* – were then taken again from the heavily overloaded Italian ship to the recently arrived rescue vessel *Baltic*. In rough weather, and using twenty lifeboats from all three vessels, these 1,300 people were transferred the one mile distance from the *Florida* to the *Baltic* in 84 boatloads, in 9 or ten hours. If we consider a hypothetical *Titanic* rescue by the *Californian*, we must remember that weather conditions on April 14<sup>th</sup> 1912 were perfect, and that Captain Lord may have manoeuvred his ship closer than one mile to the ailing giant. Factored in to a rescue scenario, the “9 or 10” hours quoted for the *Baltic*'s rescue may be reduced somewhat, but by no means could the *Californian* have taken everyone on board before the *Titanic* went to the bottom.

A reasonable scenario<sup>315</sup> posits that Lord would have arrived in time simply to rescue some of the people in the water. With a survival time measured in minutes before the onset of hypothermia, it is debatable how many people could have been saved. As with the lifeboats rowing towards his ship, Captain Lord would have to be fortunate not to run over and kill any of the unfortunates in the water, who would have undoubtedly made for this new arrival on the scene.

But there is another matter to consider. In his final report, Lord Mersey writes, “At 12.35 the message from the *Carpathia* was received announcing that she was making for the *Titanic*. This probably became known and may have tended to make the passengers still more unwilling to leave the ship; and the lights of a ship (the *Californian*) which were seen by many people may have encouraged the passengers to hope that assistance was at hand. These explanations are perhaps sufficient to account for so many of the lifeboats leaving without a full boat load.”

If we accept this logic and propagate it further, we can perhaps say that if the *Californian* was underway and was seen by the people on the *Titanic* to be heading towards them, then the sense of security which may have been generated may have actually *hindered* the loading of the lifeboats (“I'm not getting in one of those little row boats. I'm waiting for that ship to arrive!”). More people might have stayed on board the *Titanic*, and the loss of life higher than it eventually was.

Despite its many failings, the Marine Accident Investigation Branch report recognised the futility of the *Californian* effecting a rescue<sup>316</sup>. They stopped short of a full exoneration of Lord and his cohorts. It is a pity that Captain de Coverley did not have the courage of his convictions and agree in writing with the conclusions of Captain Barnett, namely that he felt that the two ships were in sight at all time. Both men, with decades of experience at sea, would then be unanimous, rather than issuing a diluted, useless report issued politically to quell the unending tide of complaints about Captain Lord's treatment.

What of the other aspects of the affair? That Stone saw low lying rockets, that the ship that he had been observing so patiently moved off whilst firing rockets?

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315 See Dave Gittins' website and e-book.

316 Bizarrely, in the 1930s, Lightoller gave his account of the sinking on a radio broadcast and he too said that the two ships could have come alongside and practically everyone rescued. At this time, Lightoller blamed Lord for the loss of life in his autobiography, but did not mention him by name in the radio dispatch.

Let us deal with the first of these questions. The first description of Stone's rockets comes in his written statement of April 18<sup>th</sup>: “At about 12:45, I observed a flash of light in the sky just above that steamer. I thought nothing of it as there were several shooting stars about, the night being fine and clear with light airs and calms. Shortly after I observed another distinctly over the steamer which I made out to be a white rocket though I observed no flash on the deck or any indication that it had come from that steamer, in fact, it appeared to come from a good distance beyond her.”

Gibson would later refute this, having seen a flash on the deck upon launch of a projectile, and even Stone would later concede that the rockets did indeed come from the other ship. Independent studies of the navigational and observational aspects of the case<sup>317</sup> place the distance between the *Titanic* and the *Californian* as being about 12-14 miles distant. With the *Titanic* pointing nearly at the *Californian*, and not displaying much illumination, and with nothing in the vicinity with which to compare sizes and distances, it would be very easy to confuse a medium sized tramp steamer before the horizon, with a much larger vessel beyond the horizon, and partially obscured. For a vessel 12-14 miles distant, and with rockets reaching a maximum height of 860 feet, the rockets would be seen to attain an angle of 0.6° relative to the horizontal. This value changes to 1.6° for a ship only 5 miles away. For Stone, this would have been confusing. He was sure that the ship was only about 5 miles distant, and yet the rockets did not seem to go as high as he would have been expecting. Why? Because he was mistaken about the distance. For rockets seen to reach an angle of 0.6° and fired from only a few miles away, it would *seem* that they would have reached a total height of nearly 400 feet, much less than the altitude he would have been familiar with. Note that Stone's first account of the rocket makes no mention of the half mast-light height he would later cite in London. This picture does help to explain how Stone may have thought that, given his inability to see the flash caused by the launch of the rocket, he would have thought that they seemed to come from a greater distance past the other steamer.

What is the origin of the 'half mast light' height clung to by Stone in London? Let us review his evidence:

7919. Did you ever say to any Officer that you and the Captain had talked about these rockets and had expressed an opinion that they might have come from some other ship? Have you ever said that to anybody till now? You have said it to me, you know?

Yes.

7920. Have you ever said it before to anybody else?

Yes. I think I have said it both to the Chief Officer and to the Third Officer in conversation.

7921. Tell me what you said to the Chief Officer?

I have remarked at different times that these rockets did not appear to go very high; they were very low lying; they were only about half the height of the steamer's masthead light and I thought rockets would go higher than that.

7922. Well, anything else?

But that I could not understand why if the rockets came from a steamer beyond this one, when the steamer altered her bearing the rockets should also alter their bearings.

7923. That pointed to this, that the rockets did come from this steamer?

It does, although I saw no actual evidence of their being fired from the deck of the steamer except in one case.

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317 See Appendix C and Sam Halpern's "Lights on the Horizon" series.