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Titanic: The first dive of the new century

by David Concannon

photography by David Concannon



Mir submersible at launch

It is shortly after 8:00 a.m. on July 29, 2000, and I have a secret. I am about to make the first dive of the new century to the R.M.S. Titanic, and I am suffering from a wicked champagne hangover.

This is the fulfillment of a lifelong dream, a dream shared by millions, and I feel awful. I'm sure this has never happened to anyone else. Even worse, I am trying to hide my condition from the world's media. Thankfully, one respected journalist from a major international newspaper, which is read daily in airports and hotels all over the world, is in worse shape than I am, but this provides little solace because the observant reporter from Der Spiegel is beginning to worry me. She is here to do a hatchet job on the expedition, and she is eyeing me like a hawk who has spotted a tasty squirrel.

"Are you feeling Okay?" she asks her prey, eyes focused like lasers. "A little too much celebrating last night, ya?" She is fishing for a story, but I am not biting. "No, I'm just dehydrated. . . and a little nervous," I offer, looking away. She pauses for a moment and then reluctantly accepts my explanation without further inquiry. No stranger to expedition politics, she realizes that alienating the expedition consiere on the first dive day is a bad idea.

The prospect of making a deep submersible dive to the Titanic is dangerously seductive. The Der Spiegel lady has never met me, but she correctly figures that my name appears on the dive schedule below "Mir 1, Day 1, Dive 1" for a reason. Although she is searching for a lead, she is shrewd enough to realize that embarrassing me in front of the cast and crew could cost her a dive. She

moves off to find weaker or more interesting prey.



*The grand stairway
aboard Titanic, 1912*

Where Explorers Go, Lawyers Follow

Actually, my explanation is not too far from the truth. To reach this point, I have survived two years of contentious litigation, several trips to New York, Florida and Washington, D.C., and an eight-day ride across 1,200 miles of open ocean on a diving support vessel designed to operate in the calm waters of the Gulf of Mexico instead of the stormy North Atlantic.

Every day of this trip has brought rising winds and seas. On the day before we arrived at the Titanic site, the seas reached nearly 30 feet, and the wind was blowing at a sustained 45 knots. Water funnels were chasing our wake. If the trip had been on a Carnival cruise liner, we would have merely been sick. But it was downright frightening on this barge. On a calm day, the ship's stern rose only four feet off the water. On this trip, however, it had been submerged under a 20-foot high wall of green water every few seconds for several days.

We had been tossed like a cork in the heavy seas, our progress slowed to only four knots. We were left exhausted by the constant booming of the unsecured anchors getting slammed into their hawser pipes by waves crashing over the bow. At first, an occasional rogue wave would slam into the anchors, causing a crash that sounded like cannon fire on an artillery range. With nothing better to do, we persuaded our eccentric English historian that each boom was the sound of an endangered sea turtle, the "armadillos of the North Atlantic," being run over for sport by the ship's captain. By the last 100 miles, he thought the world's entire population of sea turtles had been slaughtered.

Curiously, the storm abated when we finally arrived at the Titanic wreck site, early on the cold morning of July 28, 2000. The scene was eerily familiar to what the rescue ship Carpathia had encountered upon its arrival at this very spot at first light on April 15, 1912. The seas were calm, cold and devoid of any sign of the tragedy that had occurred on this spot hours earlier. It was rather unsettling.

So yes, I had too much champagne the night before – exactly two glasses to celebrate our safe arrival at the Titanic wreck site – but it was the only thing I had persuaded myself to eat or drink for 24 hours. Now, I am about to spend the next 12 hours crammed into a seven-foot wide titanium sphere with no heat and no bathroom, traveling through freezing darkness to the wreck of the Titanic, and my head is splitting.

The Titanic wreck is located in one of the most inhospitable places on Earth, nearly 400 miles from the nearest point of land at a depth of 12,460 feet where the water pressure exceeds 6,000 pounds per square inch. Fewer people have been to this place than have been to outer space. Of course I am nervous.

Shortly after 9:00 a.m., I step into the Russian deep-diving submersible Mir 1, one of only five submersibles capable of reaching the crushing depth of Titanic, wave goodbye to the cameras, and settle in for the long ride to the bottom. My diving companions are former National Geographic cinematographer Ralph White and Dr. Anatoly Sagalevitch, the designer of the Mirs. Between them, White and Sagalevitch have made nearly 60 dives to the Titanic. Each has spent more time on the ship than did Captain Edward Smith, the man who guided the Titanic to its ill-fated destiny. (As White likes to say, it took 14,000 Irishmen four years to build the Titanic, and only one dumb Englishman one week to sink it.)

Our mission today is to assess the condition of the Titanic, which



is rapidly disintegrating, and to explore a previously unknown area of the wreck site. Our plan is to traverse the entire wreck site from north to south, covering a distance on the bottom of more than a mile. We will also explore the area to the west of the bow and stern sections, an area which has received little attention on the 12 previous expeditions that have visited the wreck site.

Shortly after 9:00 p.m., I step out of the Russian deep-diving submersible Mir 1

As we descend in a slow spiral from the surface to 3,000 feet, the temperature inside the sub drops from nearly 95 degrees to a more comfortable 65 degrees. The inside temperature will continuously drop throughout the dive, until it conforms to the outside temperature of approximately 34 degrees. Later on, we will don thick pile jackets over our black Nomex fire suits to keep warm.

As the tedium of the two-hour descent begins to set in, I reflect further on the course of events that has put a lawyer in the sub for the first dive of the century. The Titanic is like an annuity for lawyers – it just keeps paying off. Litigation over the Titanic and its remains has raged in at least five different jurisdictions since the ship's discovery in 1985. In 1987, the U.S. Congress passed legislation called the R.M.S. Titanic Memorial Act of 1987. The Act, which has been the subject of great debate, expresses "the sense of Congress" (an oxymoron if there ever was one) that the wreck should be treated as a memorial and left alone. In addition, the Titanic is now the subject of a draft international agreement between the U.S., U.K., Canada and France that imposes severe restrictions on activities at the wreck site. Ignoring both geography and the international law of the sea, the draft agreement states that the Titanic is located on the Canadian Continental Shelf. This is the practical equivalent of ceding authority over Tallahassee, Florida to Cuba. Thus, the company lawyer has been sent down to get a first hand look at the wreck to formulate a response.

The interior of the Mir is compact and efficient. It is as comfortable as one can expect of a tiny sphere crammed with three people and all their equipment. There are four walls formed by panels full of gauges, lights and switches. Underneath the port and starboard instrument panels are reclining benches with thin black padding. The co-pilot sits on the port side, the observer on the starboard side. With less than five feet of linear space on the benches, I am forced to lie on my side in the fetal position to see out the six-inch wide starboard porthole. It is impossible to raise my legs, since video housings and carbon dioxide scrubbers hang just above my knees and feet.

The titanium hull curves around by my right shoulder, where I have placed a towel to act as a barrier between me and the cold and condensation. The towel also doubles nicely as a pillow during the long descent. Above my head is the red panic button, curiously known as the "Giddings switch," encased in a steel cage. I have been instructed to push it only in the event of an actual emergency, after both the pilot and co-pilot have become incapacitated. It will send a signal to release ballast from the sub's bottom, thus allowing the sub to achieve positive buoyancy and, theoretically, float safely to the surface. Otherwise, as the JAFO ("Just A F***ing Observer") on this dive, I am not supposed to touch anything.

The pilot has the most room to move. He sits on a chair in the center during the ascent and descent, and kneels at the control panel when the sub is on the bottom. I grow increasingly envious as I realize that the pilot can stand fully upright if he wants to. I will not be able to do this until I climb out of the sub on the surface at 9:00 p.m., 12 hours after the beginning of my journey.

Diving in the submersible is a far cry from the wreck diving I have done for the past 15 years. For one thing, it's incredibly expensive. Each hour in the sub costs nearly \$1,500. The six-week charter for the ship and submersibles costs over \$1 million.

On the other hand, diving in the Mir would be familiar to any experienced diver. Even though we have sophisticated sonar and navigational systems at our disposal, we will use standard underwater search and recovery techniques during our survey of the wreck site. Artifacts will be identified for recovery using the naked eye, since subtle differences in light reflection and shading are not discernable on the video monitors. Navigation will be achieved by monitoring speed and distance, and the simple compass mounted below the pilot's viewport will be used more than any other piece of equipment during the dive.



Over two miles deep, the Mir settles on Titanic

We reach the ocean floor at 12,460 feet shortly before noon. I am surprised to see that the bottom is not the featureless expanse of mud I had expected. Instead, it is covered with large boulders that have been dropped for centuries by melting icebergs.

We are one-half mile north of the bow section of the Titanic. As we quietly traverse this distance, spider crabs and rattail fish pass beneath us. Staring out my tiny viewport, I feel insulated from the outside world, as if I am flying slowly above the surface of another planet.

My feeling of isolation is magnified by the occasional radio communication with the surface. The Keldysh sounds so faint, it may as well be on another planet. Our faint communications (in Russian, no less) provide a tangible reminder that the closest point of human contact and safety is two-and-one-half miles above our tiny sphere. If anything goes wrong, we have little chance of survival. Each time I hear the faint sound of the mother ship Keldysh, I tick off a mental checklist of everything that can go fatally wrong: fire, suffocation, implosion, drowning, freezing to death. White's earlier assertion that we are likely to freeze to death before suffocating provides little comfort. I decide that a sudden implosion is preferable to the other means of catastrophe.



The bow of Titanic, still intact after nearly 90 years undersea

Wreck Rapidly Deteriorating

Finally, at 12:30 p.m., we arrive at the Titanic. My first glimpse of the fabled ship is a section of her mast lying on the bottom, north of the bow. Beyond that, the bottom rises sharply into a hill caused by the force of ship's bow colliding with the bottom 88 years ago.

We wait for a few moments for Mir 1's identical twin, Mir 2, to join us before ascending. As the Titanic's hull rises steeply out of the darkness, Sagalevitch quietly says just one word: "Terrible." White says nothing. He is obviously still captivated by the sight of the ship he has already seen 24 times before.

I am astonished by the appalling condition of the wreck. The Titanic looks like it is made of wet sand. Rusticles, which are caused by a bacteria eating the iron ore from the steel hull, drape the wreck. Sections of the hull have collapsed. The wood decking is gone. Walls look like they are made of papier-mâché. The ship looks nothing like I imagined. Instead, it appears to be rotting away, like a candle melting from the top down. It is easy to believe that the Titanic will be nothing more than a stain on the ocean floor in a few years.

We are on the port side of the bow, near the forecastle. As we ascend approximately 50 feet, I stare through ghostly portholes into the ship's dark interior. When we rise above the port side railing, I can see the ship's 15-ton spare anchor still secured in the well deck on the forecastle. I am amazed that an object so heavy could have remained in its place during the ship's descent to the bottom.

After surveying the forecastle, we glide aft toward the shelter deck. As we pass over the forward well deck, I stare down into the blackness of the No. 2 cargo hatch. I can see the giraffe-like electric cargo cranes, which remain crossed like forearms, below the first class cabins on C-Deck.

This area of the bow section, which is canted forward, shows significant signs of deterioration. Rusticles drape the walls on the front of A, B and C-Decks. Mounds of rusticles have fallen on to the shelter deck and the front of B-Deck. The upper third of the mast, which used to run straight, is now collapsed in the shape of a "Z" onto the boat deck and A-Deck.

We follow the ship's collapsed mast as it ascends toward the bridge. Sagalevitch points to where the crow's nest used to be. I can almost hear the voice of lookout Frederick Fleet late on the night of April 14, 1912 shouting, "Iceberg right ahead!"

White recovered the crow's nest bell, which Fleet rang three times to signal the bridge that an obstacle lay directly ahead, on the 1987 expedition. A few days after this dive, White will also recover the telephone that Sixth Officer James Moody answered on the bridge when Fleet called to relay the same distress signal.

Near the top of the mast, we come to the bridge - or what is left of it. The walls and ceiling of the wheelhouse, and nearly all of the bridge's equipment, are now gone. The only fixture that remains is the ship's telemotor, or the bronze pedestal to which the ship's wheel was attached. This fixture betrays the former existence of the bridge, along with the short rail of the teak molding which traces the lines where the wheelhouse walls once stood.

As we glide aft on the starboard side of the boat deck past the officers' quarters, we notice that the ceiling and wall of Captain Smith's stateroom have almost completely collapsed. This is significant because the wall was here just 10 months ago. In 1999, the wall was peeled away and hanging precariously. Now, a large section of the wall has disappeared, and I can stare directly down into Captain Smith's bath tub.

Sagalevitch sets the sub down next to an expansion joint that has opened to expose the interior of the officers' quarters. We take a brief moment to discuss the plan for the rest of our dive. I find myself staring out my porthole during the entire discussion, fascinated by the interior of the ship as it is illuminated by the sub's powerful halogen lights. I can see fixtures still affixed to the wall inside the hull. I am startled, and a little unsettled, by the sight of my own reflection in a piece of glass on the far side of the cabin. I did not expect to see my reflection inside this time capsule from 1912.

Suddenly, our discussion is interrupted by a terse call from the surface. Sagalevitch listens patiently, with a look of deep concern on his face. He says "Da" into the microphone and then turns to us before announcing "It's time to go." After less than 20 minutes on the bow, we have been informed that the barge has managed to tangle the cable of a remotely operated vehicle the size of a Volkswagen in its stern thrusters. The ROV and three miles of cable are about to come raining down on us from the surface. We quickly decide that it is time to leave the area, and Sagalevitch makes a cursory pass over the grand staircase as we head off to the west.

Unexplored Areas

The Titanic's 882-foot hull ripped in half as it sank, spilling the contents of the ship over a wide area. The water-filled bow retained its shape as it fell upright through the water column, like a leaf falling from a tree. The bow now rests upright, buried 50 feet into the sea bottom, almost one-half mile north and slightly to the east of the stern. The air-filled stern remained on the surface for a while before sinking, spilling its contents like an upturned department store. It initially imploded during its descent and then exploded when it hit the bottom. Because of the great distance between the two hull sections, most submersible dives focus their valuable bottom time on one section of the wreck or the other.



Hell's kitchen debris field off stern showing Chimera fish, Bass ale bottles and wash basin from 2nd class stateroom

There is also a more practical reason to explore just one area of the wreck: the bow section is more visually striking than the stern. The bow is still recognizable as a luxury liner from a different era, whereas the stern is a barely recognizable heap of twisted steel and debris. Therefore, most of the photographic expeditions to the Titanic have

concentrated their dives on the bow, while the salvage expeditions have concentrated their dives on the debris fields to the north, south and east of the stern section, where artifacts can be easily retrieved. Consequently, the area to the west of the Titanic's bow is virtually unexplored.

Today, we will be rewarded for traveling off the beaten path. We find a pristine pair of binoculars, still in their case, almost immediately after leaving the bow. This is significant because binoculars have never been recovered from the Titanic. Moreover, we know that binoculars were issued to the crew, but they were never given to the lookouts in the crow's nest. Could this pair be one of those that remained unused in their case, possibly on the ship's bridge? We recover the binoculars and turn south.

As we travel south, we make several other unique discoveries: first-class china, wash bowls, an intact window from the first-class deck. We dutifully record the position of each significant artifact, recover some, and leave the rest for future dives.

It is easy to see that we are exploring new territory. Each of the submersibles that has visited the Titanic - Alvin, Nautila and the Mirs - leave distinctive tracks on the bottom. There are no tracks in this area of the wreck site. Our observations confirm that, after 12 expeditions, there is still much left to explore. After this dive, we will divide the wreck site into 400 square-meter grids, and then systematically search each grid in ten-meter-wide swaths until the entire wreck site has been surveyed.

Tense Moments

We finally arrive at the stern section around 4:00 p.m., seven hours into our dive. Sagalevitch is normally easygoing, but his demeanor changes dramatically as we approach this eerie web of entanglements. Torn pieces of hull plating, wires, plumbing, boilers and fixtures are everywhere. In other words, this is a death trap for a small submersible.

As we drift over a torn section of hull plating, I can see the exposed ribs of the ship. Suddenly, the sub becomes snagged by an overhang. A stream of rusticles rains down in front of my viewport. Sagalevitch quickly reverses thrust, but nothing happens. "Anatoly, are we stuck?" I ask. "Da," he says.

As any good JAFO would do, I sit quietly as Sagalevitch continues to work the controls. I don't want to distract him at this important time, just as it would be impolite to question a pilot as a plane was crashing. After what seems like an eternity, we are free. We unanimously agree to leave this dangerous area of the wreck. To break the tension, I joke that we can't leave without going under the hull to see the ship's enormous bronze propeller. Sagalevitch ignores me as he flies south into the debris field.

This is an area known as "Hell's Kitchen." The Titanic broke apart in the vicinity of the galleys for the first and second-class dining areas. Consequently, this area is covered by thousands of pieces of coal, dishes, cups, copper pots, crystal decanters and cooking utensils. Nearly all of them are broken. We recover what we can, guided by a list of artifacts required for our employer's international artifact exhibitions.

Suddenly, I spot a large leather bag, the only piece of personal luggage I have seen during the entire dive. We know from previous recovery expeditions that leather bags protect their contents from deterioration. Bags recovered on previous expeditions have contained clothing, currency, newspapers, post cards, coins and jewelry. None of these items can survive independently in this hostile environment.

We immediately recover the bag, which opens slightly as Sagalevitch lifts it with the sub's mechanical arm, revealing a layer of books. Miraculously, I can still read the print on the pages through my porthole. I realize that I am looking at a page in a book that has been underwater for more than 88 years, after it was lost in one of the worst tragedies of the last century.

Subsequent research will reveal that the bag belonged to a second-class passenger named Edgar Samuel Andrew, a 17-year-old student from Argentina. Andrew boarded the Titanic in Southampton, England, not far from where he was attending school. Two days before he departed, Andrew wrote a letter to his friend Josey Cowan lamenting that his transfer from another steamship to the Titanic required him to depart from England a week early, which meant he would miss his friend's arrival in England:

"You figure, Josey, I am boarding the greatest steamship in the world, but I don't really feel proud of it at all, right now I wish the Titanic were lying at the bottom of the ocean."

Seven days later, this young man got his wish. Both his bag and the Titanic were lying at the bottom of the ocean, and Andrew perished in the sinking. His body was never recovered. Now, at the beginning of a new century, we are returning his belongings to the surface.

At 6:00 p.m., Sagalevitch announces that it is time to begin our ascent. The submersible begins to rise slowly as we pump water from our ballast tanks. As the bottom begins to recede into total darkness, I am reminded of the scene of the moon falling away from Apollo 11 as it began its ascent from the lunar surface exactly 31 years ago.

For the next three hours, I contemplate my journey to the Titanic. I have seen things few others will ever see, a time capsule from a different era slowly dissolving into the sea.



Starboard bronze propeller



The last photograph of Titanic as she departs Ireland, April 11, 1912

When we break the surface at 9:00 p.m., I can think of only one thing: When can I go back?



Twisted remains of a deck bench lies on the bottom



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Concannon served as counsel to RMS Titanic, Inc., for its 2000 expedition. He made three submersible dives to the Titanic, including the first dive of the century on July 29, 2000.

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