Titanic - Recovering Bodies and Burials at Sea



A Canadian ship called the C.S. *Mackay-Bennett* left Halifax to help with the search for *Titanic* victims on the 17th of April, 1912 (a Wednesday that year). Hampered by fog, the ship made slow progress as she steamed toward the *Titanic's* final location.

Reaching the area where the great ship sank, it was clear to the *Mackay-Bennett's* crew that hundreds of bodies, floating on the surface of the North Atlantic, needed attention and a proper at-sea burial. They began their work on Sunday, the 21st of April.

On their first day at the wreck scene, the Mackay-Bennett's crew retrieved about fifty bodies. Rev. Canon Hind, who had a specific job to do, was aboard ship. Two weeks later, he wrote how the bodies were handled:

> *...all were carefully examined, and their effects placed in separate bags – all bodies and bags being numbered.*

Hind gives us his opinion of a burial at sea:

> *Anyone attending a burial at sea will most surely lose the common impression of the awfulness of a grave in the mighty deep. The wild Atlantic may rage and toss, the shipwreck mariners cry for mercy, but far below in the calm untroubled depth, they rest in peace.*

Some of the victims were buried at sea on Sunday. On Monday, the crew continued to look for more bodies.

The *Mackay-Bennett* stayed at the wreck scene for several more days, as her crew searched-for bodies. This rare image shows Rev. Hind, aboard the *Mackay-Bennett*, as he conducts a service for the dead.

The *Minia*, a cable ship, was dispatched to help with the difficult job of locating victims and providing them with proper burials. On Friday, the 26th of April, the *Minia's* crew took over and the *Mackay-Bennett* returned to Halifax.

Hind tells us that not all of the bodies were buried at sea:

> *Early on Friday some more bodies were picked up. The captain then felt we had covered the ground fairly well, and decided to start on our homeward way at noon. After receiving some supplies from the Minia, we bid goodbye and proceeded on our way.*
>
> *The Mackay-Bennett succeeded in finding in all 306 bodies, of which 166 were buried at sea, and one could not help feeling as we steamed homeward, that of those bodies we had on board, it would be well if the greater number of them were resting in the deep.*

Rev. Hind reports that the remains of all the victims were handled with respect:

> *It is to be noted how earnestly and reverently all the work was done, and how nobly the crew acquitted themselves during a work of several days, which meant a hard and trying strain on mind and body.*
>
> *What seems a very regrettable fact is, that in chartering the Mackay-Bennett for this work, the White Star Company did not send an official agent to accompany the steamer in her search for the bodies.*

This image—which experts believe was taken during the afternoon of April 24, 1912—depicts Rev. Hind as he was handling a mass funeral for numerous *Titanic* victims. The original photo was found in an archive belonging to RD "Westy" Legate, the 4th officer of the *Mackay-Bennett*, about a hundred years after the wreck.

Among other things that we see in the photo is a canvas bag bearing number 177 (see foreground, near Rev. Hind). That number was used for a *Titanic* victim—William Peter Mayo—and the canvas bag likely contains Mayo's personal possessions which the ship's crew would have returned to his family.

One question worth asking is how the scene which we see in Legate's picture—where bodies are piled on each

other—squares with the written record which Rev. Hind authored on April 30, 1912. (See *The Chronicle Herald's* "Titanic Newspaper Archives" for the full Hind article).

Click on the image for a full-page view.

Credits:

Photo, perhaps taken by RD "Westy" Legate—the 4th officer of the Mackay-Bennett—of a committal service led by Rev. Canon Hind aboard the Mackay-Bennett. Crew members were about to commence a burial-at-sea for some of the Titanic victims whose remains were recovered from the North Atlantic. Historians believe this photo was likely taken on the afternoon of April 24, 1912.

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