

This Day in History... September 1, 1985

The *Titanic* is Found

More than 70 years after the *Titanic* sank, a joint American-French expedition located its wreck on the North Atlantic floor on September 1, 1985. The discovery ended decades of failed searches and revealed that the ship still rested nearly 12,500 feet below the surface.

The *Titanic* struck an iceberg shortly before midnight on April 14, 1912, during its maiden voyage from Southampton, England, to New York City. It sank in the early hours of April 15. Of the roughly 2,200 passengers and crew members aboard, more than 1,500 died. The disaster exposed serious weaknesses in maritime safety, including too few lifeboats and inadequate radio monitoring. In response, international rules later required ships to carry enough lifeboat space for everyone aboard and to maintain continuous radio watches.

Finding the wreck proved difficult. The ship had gone down in the North Atlantic about 370 miles southeast of Newfoundland. Its wireless distress calls gave a position, but it was not exact. Ocean currents, navigational errors, and the limits of 1912 technology had affected the coordinates. Searchers also faced an enormous area of deep, dark seafloor.

Several expeditions attempted to find the ship during the 1970s and early 1980s. Texas oilman Jack Grimm sponsored three searches between 1980 and 1983. His teams photographed several promising objects, but none was confirmed as the *Titanic*. Other researchers used sonar to scan the bottom, but a shipwreck lying more than two miles below the ocean's surface was a difficult target.

Oceanographer Robert Ballard of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution believed new deep-sea technology could make the search possible. Ballard was also a US Navy commander. The Navy agreed to support his work, but the *Titanic* search was not its main purpose. Ballard first had to examine the wrecks of two lost nuclear submarines, the USS *Thresher* and USS *Scorpion*, which had sunk during the Cold War.

That work gave Ballard an important idea. The submarines had broken apart and left long trails of debris across the seabed. Instead of searching only for a single hull, he could search for the larger debris field that the *Titanic* had likely left behind. The strategy greatly increased the area that might reveal evidence of the ship.

In July 1985, the French research vessel *Le Suroît* surveyed the search area with side-scan sonar. The French team found no confirmed wreck. Ballard then joined the research vessel *Knorr*, which arrived in the area in late August. Its crew towed an unmanned deep-sea camera system called *Argo* above the ocean floor. *Argo* sent live video images to scientists aboard the ship while it moved back and forth across the seabed.

Just after midnight on September 1, the monitors began showing small objects scattered across the mud. Then the team saw a large boiler. Its shape matched boilers installed on the *Titanic*. The debris trail soon led them to the ship itself.

The wreck lay in two major pieces about 2,000 feet apart. For decades, many survivors had claimed they saw or heard the ship split in half, but as they were largely women or had been children at the time of the sinking, their accounts were treated as a mass hysteria. The ship's second officer and the most senior surviving member of the crew, Charles Lightoller, testified, "It is utterly untrue. The ship did not and could not have broken in two." The discovery vindicated those survivors.

The bow remained recognizable, with its railings, anchor equipment, and rows of portholes. The stern had been badly damaged as it sank and struck the seafloor. Ballard's team did not attempt to raise artifacts. He believed the site should be treated as a grave, since so many people had died in the disaster.

Ballard returned in 1986 with the crewed submersible *Alvin* and a small remotely operated vehicle called *Jason Jr.* Their cameras recorded the wreck in greater detail. Later expeditions recovered thousands of artifacts from the debris field, including dishes, luggage, jewelry, bottles, and personal belongings. In 1998, RMS *Titanic* Inc. raised a large section of the hull, often called the "Big Piece," for public display.

The wreck continues to deteriorate. Saltwater, pressure, deep-sea organisms, and metal-eating bacteria have weakened its steel for more than a century. A 2024 expedition documented the loss of a section of the bow's famous railing. The *Titanic* remains an important archaeological site, but its condition also raises continuing questions about preservation, artifact recovery, and respect for a maritime disaster site.



Celebrate the Century stamp honoring the Popular 1997 Titanic Film



For more than 20 years, the Navy-funded part of the mission remained classified; Ballard publicly revealed in 2008 that the Titanic search had also served as cover for inspecting the two lost nuclear submarines.

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