A different course for Titanic tale

The disaster that overtook the ill-starred Titanic 100 years ago is known the world over. But what might have happened if ‘Iceberg Charlie’ had taken charge of the ‘wonder ship’?

Steve Snelling examines a seafaring legend.

The image is as beguiling as it is strangely endearing. It is of the greatest ocean liner captain of his day all at sea at the helm of a humble river boat. Apocryphal or not, the light-hearted tale of Charles Bartlett, one-time senior master of the White Star Line, steering into troubled waters on the Norfolk Broads adds an amusing aside to one of the greatest of all maritime what ifs.

For just as his freshwater mishaps became part of family folklore and the source of much light-hearted banter, so there grew a legend that endures to this day of the man who might have saved the ‘unsinkable’ Titanic from her untimely fate 100 years ago.

The story of Charles Bartlett, or ‘Iceberg Charlie’ to give him his celebrated epithet, is, indeed, a tantalising one. It is of a man awash with sea-going achievement but whose greatest claim to fame, it could be argued, was his association with a command he never held but forever wished he had.

“By this time,” says Richard, “Charles had acquired a reputation as an excellent seaman and a safe captain. He was evidently a strict disciplinarian who wouldn’t take anyone on board if he thought they would be a problem but despite all of that he was well-respected and even liked by his crew who had total faith in his ability to get them safely from one place to another.”

“Charlie’s story, and that, according to the account handed down in the family, was why he didn’t get the command. I’ve not been able to prove or disprove the story, but that was what we were always told and the feeling not just in the family was that if he had been captain of the Titanic it might never have sunk because he was a notoriously cautious seaman who could supposedly sniff out icebergs.”

But that is not the end of the story. To this alluring speculation has been added another memory that raises further possibilities about the decision to appoint the respected and long-serving Edward John Smith as captain of the Titanic.

What’s more, it was said that he had an uncanny knack of being able to smell icebergs and, therefore, avoid them. It sounds extraordinary, but that’s how he came by his famous nickname, ‘Iceberg Charlie’.

“Called to the inquiry that was convened to confront the consequences of an appalling disaster that claimed the lives of more than 1,500 passengers and crew,” he added, “he had to face up to awkward questions about why the liner came to grief and why so many people died. In particular, he was asked about the question of why the liner came to grief and why so many people died. In particular, he was asked about the

cover story

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spell as commodore in charge
venerable battleship to the bottom
night in May, 1915, when torpedoes
aboard HMS Goliath, he died one
of their only son. A midshipman
Bartlett were mourning the loss
occurrences, Charles and Edie
casualties quickly became everyday
Charlie'. His career continued to
no blame was directed towards 'Iceberg
potentially lethal crags of floating ice.
means for detecting the whereabouts of
was made to his own, more unusual,
having binoculars and the ship having no
lifeboats, the number of seamen available
adequacy of the liner's assortment of

By then, 'Iceberg Charlie' had
the most magnificent of all the ships built for
liner was designed to be the largest and
third and last Olympic-class four-funnelled
process of being completed.
which he was subsequently decorated,
account of tragic sister's defects, the
not launched until February 1914
Britannic, as she was renamed, was
48,158-ton liner was requisitioned
changed. Instead of transporting
dormitories and operating theatres,
and was not ready for service until
December 1915.

A nurse on board recalled hearing
a "loud report". It sounded as though
something had clashed against the ship's
side. "We all stood up," she wrote, "some
rushed from the dining hall. There was a
loud clatter of falling plates and glasses,
the room then suddenly came to their
senses and told us to sit down and have
our breakfast as we had only run into a
barge. I sat down and resumed breakfast
when the order rang out 'Ladies go
to your cabins, put on your lifebelts and get
up to the boat deck'.

In fact, Britannic had almost certainly
struck a mine newly laid by the German
submarine U73 in the supposedly cleared
channel. Moments later, there was a
second explosion as the ship's coal bunkers
ignited. Six of her forward compartments began flooding fast.

Messing about in boats: Above, in retirement 'Iceberg Charlie' and his
Great Yarmouth-born wife Edie enjoyed exploring the waterways of the Norfolk Broads in a variety of boats they kept at Hornery Ferry.

Doomed youth: Left, Charles Bartlett's son, Charles Sidney Ellis Bartlett, who died as a 15-year-old midshipman when his ship was torpedoed in 1915.

Thanks to Alisdair Fairbairn for photos from the Bartlett family archive.

But even then, 'Iceberg Charlie', who had run aces into the British navy, was confident of saving his ship. With all the safety modifications in place she had been designed to stay afloat three hours in the event of such damage. His plan was to drive the great ship indoors to beach her.

'For all accounts', says Richard Ellis, "he would have made it, too, but by a mischance the nurses had thrown open all the portholes that morning in order to air the wards in readiness for receiving the wounded aboard. And as the listing ship drove on, the water poured in and flooded one too many compartments."

Whatever the cause, and for all her safety modifications, Britannic sank in just 55 minutes, barely a third of the time it took the Titanic to take her final death plunge.

Through all of that time, 'Iceberg Charlie' stuck to his post, barking out orders to all and sundry as the uncommanded ship beneath his feet. According to one account, he didn't so much abandon ship as calmly step from the bridge into the water that was lapping at his feet. "In classic tradition," says Richard, "he was the last to leave the ship."

Incredibly of the 1,125 people aboard only 36 lives were lost - a figure in stark contrast to the Titanic's death toll. "If a couple of seamen hadn't panicked and lowered the lifeboats without instructions, it seems likely none of the others would have died," says Richard. "For the deaths all occurred in those lifeboats which were smashed by the propellers."

The 'ghostly swirl' which menced men and boats was witnessed by an English nurse Violet Jessop who, amazingly, had survived not only the sinking of the Titanic but also the collision between the Olympic and a British warship. As Britannic sank, never to be seen again until the legendary French undersea explorer Jacques Cousteau found it almost 60 years later, Charles Bartlett whose conduct had been exemplary in the epic that swept to a nearby ship from where he coordinated the evacuation of all the passengers aboard.

In hindsight, the admirals commanding in the Aegean thought it was "tempting Providence to send the British out here". What 'Iceberg Charlie' thought is not recorded and probably not reconstructable. Either way, his lost command had the unenviable distinction of being the largest ship of any nation to be sunk during the war.

Thereafter, Charles Bartlett's career sailed serenely on to retirement in 1931. Having resumed his old job as marine superintendent, he served a spell as aide-de-camp to King George V, was honoured with an appointment as Commander of the British Empire, and promoted to the rank of commodore.

A brief interlude followed in Norfolk, where Charles and Edie enjoyed 'messing about in boats' and where he penned his, probably undeserved, reputation for having eluded the full speed through the Kea Channel, a waterway separating the Cyclades archipelago from mainland Greece that had only just been swept for mines.

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To this day, Alasdair retains affectionate memories of his by then landlocked grandfather. One in particular stands out. It is of a visit to his grandfather's house in Crosby during the second world war and being maimed with his siblings round the garden with forks and spades for 'pretending you were the British army ready to take on Hitler'.

'Iceberg Charlie' died in his 76th year in February 1945, leaving a swirl of seafaring memories trailing in his majestic wake and a Titanic tale of what might have been that continues to tantalise a century later.

See Monday's EDP for the story of Norfolk's Titanic ties.