

Deaths at Sea: From the Titan to the Mediterranean

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Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

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Mortality at sea is becoming a theme of late. The nature of how that mortality has been represented, however, has varied. The death of a billionaire on a quest to see the sunken ruins of the Titanic is treated with saturating interest; the deaths of those making their way across the Mediterranean to seek sanctuary receives a relative footnote of interest.

News has now emerged that the five occupants on the Titan submersible have perished, joining those other unfortunates already entombed in the watery ruins of the steamship that sank in April 1912 off the coast of Newfoundland. They include Stockton Rush, the CEO of OceanGate, the company funding the venture, British-Pakistani businessman Shahzada Dawood and his son, Suleman, British businessman Hamish Harding and renowned explorer Paul-Henri Nargeolet.

It was occasion enough to lead Hollywood film director James Cameron, himself a veteran of 33 dives to the vessel whose story he brought to the big screen in 1997, [to make a few queries](#). On hearing of the sub's disappearance, contacts in the deep submersible community were chased up. "Within about an hour I had the following facts. They were on descent. They were at 3,500 metres, heading for the bottom at 3,800 metres."

The loss of both communications and navigation could only lead to one conclusion: "an extreme catastrophic event or high, highly energetic catastrophic event." On June 22, an official in the US Navy [revealed](#) that "an acoustic anomaly consistent with an implosion" had been detected.

For almost a week, the coverage on the fate of the Titan remained unrelenting. Commentators with varying degrees of expertise were consulted over speculative minutiae and details. When would oxygen supplies run out? Were there banging sounds detected, suggesting signs of life? How would the Titan be retrieved?

None of this got away from the obvious point: the mission had been one of sheer folly and recklessness, a doomed reminder of humankind's overconfidence. The submersible lacked

standard certification protocols. Notables in the deep submersible community had also expressed their concerns to OceanGate, warning of the dangerously experimental nature of the vehicle. In March 2018, a [letter](#) from three dozen individuals, including oceanographers, deep-sea explorers and industry leaders, stated that “the current ‘experimental’ approach adopted by Oceangate could result in negative outcomes (from minor to catastrophic) that would have serious consequences for everyone in the industry.”

Within the company itself, the director of maritime operations, David Lochridge, [wrote a damning report](#) warning of “the potential dangers to passengers of the Titan as the submersible reached extreme depths.”

Indeed, the company was the subject of a 2018 lawsuit questioning the safety credentials of the craft. “It is, despite the exorbitant cost of what was supposed to be a short trip,” [writes](#) Alex Shephard for *The New Republic*, “almost comically shoddy, bolted together with parts intended for R.V.s and piloted with a video game controller.”

Those in the company, evidently aware of such risks, went so far as to make anyone making the journey sign multiple waivers. “To even get on the boat that takes you to the Titanic, you sign a massive waiver that you could die on the trip,” one former OceanGate passenger, Mike Reiss, [told](#) the BBC. “It lists one way, after another, that you could die on the trip. They mention death three times on page one. It’s never far from your mind.”

Perversely enough, the fate that befell the Titan had a resonance with the Titanic’s own fate. The point [was not missed](#) on Cameron, who was “struck by the similarity of the Titanic disaster itself, where the captain was repeatedly warned about ice ahead of his ship, and yet he steamed at full speed into an ice field on a moonless night and many people died as a result.”

While the focus on the Titan has become something of a mania, a different narrative, also featuring deaths at sea, has struggled to occupy the news. The Mediterranean has again become the watery grave for those making hazardous journeys to seek sanctuary. Deaths occur, not merely because of shoddy naval construction, but due to the continuing program of preventing desperate arrivals from entering Fortress Europe.

On June 14, up to 600 individuals may have perished off Pylos, Greece. Questions [are being asked](#) about the role played by the European border and coast guard agency, Frontex, the Hellenic coast guard, and the Italian and Maltese authorities. Certain testimonies from survivors, for instance, suggest that the Hellenic coast guard towed the boat away from Greek waters, a hazardous move that led to its capsizing. While the Greek State is being castigated, it is operating with an EU mandate increasingly hostile to irregular migrants. What a relief the Titan-Titanic affair must have been for policymakers.

Those who perished on the Titan should be grieved. But the incessant coverage of their fates has shown a latent snobbery towards the nature of death. Foolhardy explorers and doomed adventurers are to be admired, their names venerated; the anonymous refugee and asylum seeker is to be judged and reviled, their rights curbed, and coverage of their fates minimised.

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*Featured image: Shahzada Dawood, Suleman, Paul-Henri Nargeolet, Stockton Rush, Hamish Harding.
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