

Langenbacher: Honoring the Titanic

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Last week marked the 99th anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic. The tragedy, one of the greatest marine disasters, also sparked the formation of the U.S. Coast Guard International Ice Patrol.

The luxury liner's collision with an iceberg resulted in more than 1,500 deaths. The Titanic was on her maiden voyage from Southampton, England to New York, and was the largest passenger liner of its time.

The magnitude of the disaster brought about public demand for international cooperation in dealing with icebergs as a marine hazard. The sinking of the Titanic was the prime stimulus for the establishment of the International Ice Patrol.

This year, as in years past the Coast Guard's International Ice Patrol dedicated three wreaths which were dropped near where the RMS Titanic sunk 99 years ago. The Titanic's maiden voyage ended tragically in the late evening of April 14, 1912, when the ship struck an iceberg. It took less than four hours for it to sink, and more than 1,500 of the 2,200-plus passengers died in the North Atlantic.

Every year the Coast Guard remembers and honors those lost with Titanic with a wreath drop near her resting place. Lt. Cmdr. Gabrielle McGrath, deputy commander of the International Ice Patrol, said during the brief ceremony outside the unit's Groton, Conn. offices.

Chaplain Kyle Fauntleroy dedicated the wreaths, which were dropped as close to April 14 as possible from a Coast Guard plane during an iceberg reconnaissance flight. Five Ice Patrol members left New London for the deployment.

In response to the Titanic disaster, the world's major maritime powers convened the first meeting of the International Conference on the Safety of Life at Sea in London in 1913. The conference helped lay the groundwork for the International Ice Patrol.

With the exception of World Wars I and II, the Ice Patrol has routinely patrolled the shipping lanes to protect lives, ships and commerce traveling between Europe and North America.

For the past 20 years, C-130 Hercules aircraft based out of Elizabeth City have been the chief air support for these missions. Patrols generally last five to seven hours and cover an average expanse of 30,000 square miles. These patrols are used to monitor icebergs threatening the primary shipping routes between Europe and North America. The crews relay data back to the IIP Operations Center at the Coast Guard Research and Development Center in Groton, Conn.

Collected data is fed into a computer model along with ocean currents and wind reports. The model then predicts the drift of icebergs, which are updated every 12 hours and relayed to maritime traffic. "Ice Bulletins" and radio facsimile charts of the area are broadcasted via World Wide Web and radio stations throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe to advise vessels transiting the area of known iceberg hazards.

Plans are already underway for commemorating the centennial anniversary of the Titanic's sinking next year.

Kristi Langenbacher is a Coast Guard spouse and writes about military family life