Setting the Record Straight

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ET Comment

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In Senan Molony's article of 6 November 2006, entitled: "Hugh Woolner's US Evidence is Highly Unreliable," the author attempts to discredit the evidence presented by Woolner at the US Inquiry based on a newspaper report in the Calgary Herald of April 21, 1912. Molony's premise is that the newspaper article came from a first hand interview with Woolner when the Carpathia docked in New York, and that this interview was the earliest existing account of Woolner's experiences during the sinking. Molony then goes on to present his own interpretation of what was described in this newspaper story in order to bolster his claim that Woolner's later testimony is "far too good to be true."

In this article we will show that Senan Molony's premise is completely wrong. First we will show that the story as published by the Calgary Herald did not come from Woolner himself, and that earlier accounts exist which fully support Woolner's US testimony. We will also show that Molony's claim that Woolner's friend, Hakan Bjornstrom Steffansson, does not support Woolner's account is absolutely false. We will also address Woolner's and Steffansson's involvement in clearing men out of collapsible lifeboat C and helping women to get into it, and their escape into collapsible lifeboat D from A deck. In summary, we will show that Hugh Woolner's testimony is both reliable and supportable, and that Senan Molony's attempt to discredit Woolner is baseless.

First Accounts and the Calgary Herald

The most obvious of Senan Molony's erroneous claims is that the Calgary newspaper account is an interview with Woolner himself. But reading the account in its entirety it is very clear that the account of Woolner's experiences is actually related by "Edward C. Desegrund," a friend of Woolner's who met him at the pier in New York as Woolner left the Carpathia. So any quotations that appear in the article are not Woolner's words themselves, but Desegrund's, and these in turn have been filtered through the newspaper reporter. In short, the Calgary Herald interview is, at best, a second hand account of what happened. We have no way of knowing how accurately Desegrund recalled what Woolner told him - or whether or not the reporter might have altered or omitted certain details of Woolner's story.

Contrary to Molony's claim that the Calgary Herald interview is the earliest Woolner account
extant, a number of earlier Woolner accounts exist, such as (1) the private letter (in his own words!) that Woolner wrote while onboard the *Carpathia* which matches the details of his later Senate testimony;[1] (2) a very brief press interview with Woolner that appeared in the Cleveland Plain Dealer on April 20, 1912; and (3) a more detailed newspaper account that also matches Woolner’s testimony, from April 19, 1912.

The current authors find it puzzling that a later press account which merely paraphrases Woolner’s statements and which contains no actual quotes from Woolner himself would be put forward as being the "true" version of his survival by any researcher, given the considerable body of evidence to the contrary.

**Hakan Bjornstrom Steffansson**

Senan Molony insists that Steffansson does not support Woolner’s claim that the two of them went down to ‘A’ deck. The present authors find this allegation puzzling, considering that Steffansson gave numerous press accounts and private accounts supporting exactly this version of events.

In press accounts following the sinking, Steffansson said:

> We then went down a deck lower…We saw the water pouring into the hull and where we finally stood water rose to our knees. Woolner and I decided to get out as quickly as we could and as we turned to rush upward we saw gliding down the portside of the drowning ship a collapsible lifeboat…’Let’s not take any chances,’ I shouted…and as it came nearly opposite us, swinging in and out slowly, we jumped and fortunately landed in it. The boat teetered a bit and then swiftly shot down to the water. [2]

And:

> Woolner and myself went two decks down and saw water rushing in there. A lifeboat was lowered…and as it passed where I was I jumped in. [3]

Shortly after the disaster, Steffansson gave a much more detailed version of his escape with Woolner that appeared in a private letter to his brother Sigge, which was written at the Hotel Gotham, where Steffansson was staying. Steffansson states that after working ‘like a dog’ to load scores of persons into the lifeboats, that he induced his friend to go down to the deck below. After they did so, the ship began going down rapidly, and they rushed forward to avoid being boxed in by the windows. Arriving at the open deck forward, water reached the deck, and began rushing around their legs. Collapsible D was being lowered past at this time, and they jumped for it. Steffansson repeated these claims in a 1960s interview near the end of his life as well. These accounts illustrate that contrary to the claim that Steffansson never supported Woolner’s version of events, he in fact corroborates many key points of it.

**The Commotion at Collapsible C**
Molony tries to argue that Hugh Woolner's account, given before the US Inquiry, "seems demonstrably impossible" to have taken place in the time available. What does he base his conclusion on? Molony would have us believe that because the Calgary newspaper article jumps from the commotion taking place at "a boat being loaded forward" to the "last boat to be sent away," that these boats had to be one and same. Why? Molony points out that the article makes no mention of Woolner and Stefansson going from the port side to the starboard side and then down to ‘A’ deck. No mention of helping women into a starboard boat and pulling men out of a starboard boat. No mention as to which forward boat it was or at what time shots were fired in order to get men out of the boat being loaded.

So, based on what was not mentioned in a second-hand newspaper interview, are we supposed to draw conclusions as to what did or did not place? Simply because a newspaper story jumps from one event to another (with a story about Mr. and Mrs. Straus thrown in between) are we to conclude that both events took place at the same boat?

To get at the true story one has to look beyond a single source, especially if that single source is merely a second-hand newspaper interview like the *Calgary Herald* interview. First, it is necessary to examine what Woolner himself described regarding this incident, in first-hand accounts. In the private letter written aboard the *Carpathia*, Woolner stated that the following happened after Steffansson and he helped load Collapsible D:

“We then turned our attention to a boat ready on the starboard side, where there was shouting going on. We saw the first officer twice fire a pistol in the air ordering a crowd of the crew out of the boat. We ran in and helped bundle the men onto the deck and then we got a lot, about ten, Italian and other foreign women into that boat.”

And in his later Senate Inquiry testimony, Woolner said:

“We went across there [from Collapsible D] because we heard a certain kind of shouting going on, and just as we got around the corner I saw these two flashes of the pistol, and Steffanson and I went up to help to clear that boat of the men who were climbing in, because there was a bunch of women - I think Italians and foreigners - who were standing on the outside of the crowd, unable to make their way toward the side of the boat.”

Both of these accounts come directly from Woolner himself. Note that Woolner never claims that Steffansson and him were the only two helping to pull the men out of the boat, or to help load the women into it.

Further confirmation of Woolner’s version of events on the starboard side once again comes in the form of Bjornstrom Steffansson himself. Steffansson, in an interview later in his life, described how hard Woolner and he worked to load passengers into the lifeboats, “until every lifeboat had gone.” In a private letter to his brother, he describes that Woolner and he “helped scores of persons loading the boats,” and that he “worked like a dog,” particularly at the last lifeboats. In a press account given on April 20, 1912, Steffansson described the “fluster and scramble” for the boats, and in a private account written on that same day, Steffansson described going over to the starboard side after having helped at the port collapsible:
“Many jumped from the deck. An officer of the ship fired a pistol into the air to warn those who were trying to crowd into the boats.”

There are numerous accounts that corroborate the scene of events around Collapsible C as described by Woolner and Steffansson. These include:

First Class passenger John B. Thayer, Jr., in his book, stated that a large crowd of men had pressed to get into the last two forward starboard boats, that Purser McElroy fired two warning shots into the air, and that the men were quickly thrown out. [4] Third Class passenger Emily Badman was rescued in Collapsible C, after having been led there by Edward Dorkings and another unnamed passenger. They had to push through crowds to get to the lifeboat. [5] Third Class passenger Margaret Devaney said in a private letter that she became caught in a crowd around Collapsible C, and had to be pushed into it. Third Class passenger Emily Goldsmith described a similar chaotic scene as she boarded the collapsible with her son Frank. In press accounts, Mrs. Goldsmith described the crewmen having linked arms to prevent a crowd of men from rushing the lifeboat, and an officer firing three warning shots in the air. Third Class passenger Frank Goldsmith Jr., in his book, described an officer firing warning shots into the air four feet away from him. [6] Third Class passenger May Howard stated that one of the Titanic’s officers grabbed Mrs. Goldsmith and herself, and pushed them towards the lifeboat, and that the crew told the men to stand back and let the women through first. [7] Third Class passenger Shawneene George Joseph stated that as she was being pushed toward her lifeboat, officers fired shots in the air to frighten men who were trying to crowd into it. [8] Third Class passenger Amy Stanley, in a private letter to her parents, stated that as her lifeboat was being lowered, a man jumped into it, and that a crewmember fired a pistol to prevent a rush. [9] Fireman Walter Hurst, in his 1955 reminiscences of the disaster, stated that while helping to free Collapsible A from the roof of the Officer’s Quarters, there was commotion at Collapsible C. He said that he saw the “chief officer” fire shots. Fireman Harry Senior claimed to have seen First Officer Murdoch fire warning shots over the heads of two or three men who had been rushing the lifeboat. [10]

Despite some contradictory evidence given by J. Bruce Ismay and a few crew members, the overwhelming evidence concerning the events that took place around Collapsible C supports the events that Woolner and Steffansson described. [11]

**Escape From A deck**

Molony asks his readers why Woolner and Steffansson would go down to ‘A’ deck when the ship is sinking, citing the Calgary newspaper article as making no mention of them doing so. However, as Titanic researcher Ben Holme suggests, in all likelihood it may have been a deliberate attempt to try and get into collapsible D, the last boat to be lowered, without any officer around them to block their way. Jumping from ‘A’ deck would be much safer for the two men should they happen to miss getting into the boat, as ‘A’ deck was much closer to the rising waterline at that time. The boat deck was exactly 9 feet 6 inches above ‘A’ deck, the deck that Woolner and Steffansson said they were on, when they jumped for it. This was simply the best place to be, whether they deliberately planned to jump for the boat, or to make a jump from the sinking ship in the hope of being picked up. This possibility is further supported by a statement
Steffansson made in an interview later in his life, saying that he convinced Woolner to come down to 'A' deck by saying they should go to see where the level of water was, and to see "if we can't save our lives by jumping."

Molony cites the Calgary newspaper article's paraphrase of Woolner's experiences to suggest that the "true" way Woolner and Steffansson left the ship was by jumping down into the lowering Collapsible from the boat deck, as opposed to 'A' deck. Not only is this claim completely at odds with the evidence already discussed, but Woolner and Steffanson's version is corroborated by another witness. In his book, "Titanic and Other Ships," Titanic's 2nd Officer Charles Lightoller wrote: [12]

As this boat was being lowered, two men jumped into her from the deck below. This, as far as I know, was the only instance of men getting away in boats on the port side. I don't blame them, the boat wasn't full, for the simple reason we couldn't find sufficient women, and there was no time to wait – the water was then actually lapping round their feet on ‘A’ deck, so they jumped for it and got away. Good luck to them.

Molony also suggests that Woolner and Steffansson did not have the time to leave collapsible D as it was about to be lowered, go over to the starboard side to help with the final loading of collapsible C, and then go down to ‘A’ deck and cross over to the port side in time to jump into collapsible D as it was being lowered to the sea. But when Woolner and Steffansson first went over to the starboard side, collapsible D was not ready to be lowered.

In relating the events of what happened that night at the US Inquiry, [13] Hugh Woolner's exact words were:

Then they eventually lowered all the wooden lifeboats on the port side, and then they got out a collapsible and hitched her onto the most forward davits and they filled that up, mostly with steerage women and children, and one seaman, and a steward, and I think one other man - but I am not quite certain about that - and when that boat seemed to be quite full, and was ready to be swung over the side, and was to be lowered away, I said to Steffanson: "There is nothing more for us to do here."
But before Senator Smith had a chance to follow with his next question, Woolner remembered that he made that particular statement to Steffansson when they were on the starboard side of the boat deck, not at the port side. While collapsible D was still in the process of being loaded on the port side, Woolner and Steffansson became distracted by what was happening over on the starboard side by collapsible C.

Again, using Woolner’s exact words:

*Oh, no; something else happened while that boat [collapsible D] was being loaded. There was a sort of scramble on the starboard side, and I looked around and I saw two flashes of a pistol in the air...*

And then Woolner goes on to explain the commotion that took place at collapsible C, and how he and Steffansson helped the officer to pull men out put several women in.

Woolner then goes on to say:

*Then that boat [collapsible C] was finally filled up and swung out, and then I said to Steffanson: “There is nothing more for us to do. Let us go down onto A deck again.”*

At the time that collapsible C was being lowered, collapsible D was still in the final stages of being loaded [14]. It is at this point in time that he and Steffansson most likely decided that their best hope would be to go down to ‘A’ deck if they would have any chance of making a successful escape. And collapsible D, the last boat to be lowered from the deck of the *Titanic*, was not just dropped into the water. Despite the short distance, it took a couple of minutes to lower boat D safely. Quartermaster Arthur Bright, who was put in charge of boat D, had said: “When the boat was lowered the foremost fall was lowered down and the other one seemed to hang and I called out to hang on to the foremost fall and to see what was the matter and let go the after one.” There was just enough time for Woolner and Steffansson to climb onto the open gunwale (just ahead of the enclosed part of the ‘A’ deck promenade) and jump for the bow of collapsible D as it was being lowered into the water, just as they both described it in several accounts. The scenario as laid forth by Senan Molony is nowhere to be found in Woolner's testimony, nor anywhere else.

**Conclusions**

What we see in all of this is that the account given by Hugh Woolner before the US Inquiry is completely consistent with the condition of the ship at the time collapsible D was being lowered to the water [15]. Steffansson and his description of how he and Hugh Woolner jumped for it from ‘A’ deck as water was just coming onto the deck not only supports the testimony of Woolner but is also supported by the account written by Charles Lightoller who was there to witness their escape from death. The allegation made by Senan Molony in his article that Hugh Woolner’s US evidence is unreliable, an allegation based on a second-hand interview in a newspaper, is entirely without foundation.
Acknowledgement

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A major extract from that letter is available.

New York Herald, April 19, 1912.

Toronto Daily Star, April 19, 1912

"The Sinking of the SS Titanic," 1940. Thayer described a similar scene in a letter to his late friend Milton Long's father on April 23, 1912, in which he described an "awful crowd around the last boat of the forward part of the starboard side, pushing and shoving wildly" to get into it.

Jersey Journal, July 17, 1946.

“Echoes in the Night. Memories of a Titanic Survivor,” 1991. Frank always believed he was rescued in Collapsible D, but was mistaken. Both his mother and he mentioned 4 Asian stowaways in the boat, the same number mentioned by Rowe, Ismay, and others. There were 6 Asian survivors - one rescued from the water in Lifeboat #14, and one in Lifeboat #10. This leaves only four, proving the Goldsmiths were in Collapsible C. Emily Goldsmith also described their lifeboat catching on rivets as it was being lowered. Due to the port list, this only occurred at Collapsible C. Collapsible D hung away from the side of this ship as it was lowered.

The Orleans American and Weekly News, May 2, 1912

Sharon Harold, April 14, 1937. Which lifeboat Shawneene was rescued in is not a certainty. She stated that her lifeboat was the "second to last" lowered, which C was. Emily Goldsmith said there were "Syrian women" in her lifeboat. Shawneene left the ship with other middle eastern women. In addition, Shawneene told of a woman and her young daughter in her lifeboat, and that the mother was hysterical because she had been separated from her 5 year old son “Tommy.” This description may be of Catherine Joseph Peter, also from Lebanon, who boarded a collapsible with her 2 year old daughter, and had been separated from her 4 year 11 month old son Michael, nicknamed “Ty,” and was grief-stricken until reunited with him on the Carpathia.

Which lifeboat Stanley was rescued in has been controversial. According to information from her family, after going on deck and being separated from Virginia Emanuel and Elizabeth Dowdell, two male acquaintances she knew helped her over the railing and into a starboard collapsible.

The Daily Sketch, April 29, 1912

A highly detailed article on the circumstances surrounding the launch of Collapsible C is
available.


United States Senate Inquiry, Day 10, Page 886.

For corroborating evidence on the timing of the launches of Collapsible C and D, see “Titanic: The Lifeboat Launching Sequence Re-Examined,” by Wormstedt, Fitch and Behe, 2006: .

For a complete description of the condition of the Titanic at the time that Woolner and Steffansson made their escape, see “Titanic's Sinking – Angles of Trim and Heel,” by Samuel Halpern, The Titanic Commutator, Vol. 30, No. 174, Second Quarter 2006.

Courtesy of Tad Fitch