

The Cruise to Nowhere

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It was billed as “The Cruise to Nowhere”. What we didn’t know was that it wasn’t coming back.

I had been in Singapore about eight weeks, teaching summer school at The Canadian International School. It was the last week of school and we needed a holiday.

We thought it would be a good send-off for Lynn, a Canadian from London, who had been there for July and August. It was her last weekend and she’d noticed the ad for the cruise in the paper. It was the maiden voyage for the Starlight Cruises’ Royal Pacific. Prior to that, it had been a gambling casino running between Jakarta and Singapore. Yes, more than one person that we invited to join us brought up the Titanic (also on a first run), while politely declining.

Lori, another Canadian who’d arrived the week before, and Kristina, an Australian we’d been sharing a flat with, were also interested.

We boarded the Royal Pacific at 6 p.m. Friday. It was Aug. 21st, 1992. We were supposed to leave port at 7 p.m. but the ship didn’t cast its lines until after 9 p.m. Dinner was a bit of a disaster and we were beginning to wonder what the weekend would be like. (They had open seating in the dining room and we waited over two hours for our meal.)

During dinner on the first night, there was a rather haphazard attempt to demonstrate the use of our lifejackets. That was the extent of our safety training, except for a test signal that was to warn us in case of an emergency. I remember listening to the sound of the beeps on the way to the restaurant that night, but they weren’t repeated hours later when a warning may have made a difference to the dead and missing...

By Saturday, things in the dining room seemed more organized (two seatings now) and we were thoroughly enjoying ourselves. We attended the Captain’s Cocktail Party that evening. After meeting the Captain, it was quite obvious that he’d been imbibing freely. “Who’s driving the ship,” I wondered and hoped he, at least, was sober. Afterwards, we had a drink in the casino where I watched a passenger go through a thick wad of U.S. \$100 dollar bills in minutes! He was still betting and losing when I left.

Having had a series of late nights and early mornings during the previous week in which I’d been preparing exams (which are now at the bottom of the Straits of Malacca), I retired early. So did Lynn, in the cabin next to mine.

It was 1 a.m. and I fell asleep immediately. I didn’t hear Kris knocking on the door, over an hour later, and eventually she gave up and went to the desk for a key.

She’d been back in the cabin about ten minutes when we were hit. Those ten minutes (and of course, Kris) saved my life as she would have never been able to get a key after that.

Apparently there was a loud crash, but I didn’t hear it. I could now add ship crash to the litany of disasters I’ve slept through – car crash, typhoons, hurricanes and an earthquake! Kris threw a lifejacket at me and told me we had to leave the cabin. Lynn telephoned from next door and said the same thing. The scuttlebutt was that we’d been hit by a “fishing boat”.

Only partially awake, I wasn’t thinking very clearly, but I do remember wondering what all the excitement was about. Fishing boats were small; our ship was large.

The rest happened very quickly. I'm thankful that Kris and Lori were hungry that night, had gone down to the restaurant to eat at 1 a.m. and had met three young students from Singapore. When Kris and Lori returned to their cabins, the three young men went up on deck and witnessed the collision. Our ship was well lit up and they were amazed to see a large trawler heading straight for us. They kept waiting for it to change course, but it didn't.

The guys came down and started banging on doors. Lori and Kris got up and woke Lynn and I. If Kris and Lori had been in as deep a sleep as Lynn and I, I doubt that we would have been up and out as quickly as we were. We weren't aware then, but time was of the essence.

The students were shouting for us to get on deck. I threw on some clothes and remember asking Kris what we should take. I then concluded aloud that if the ship was sinking, there was no point in taking anything. Kris assured me that the ship was not sinking and I'd never really believed it was. I thought it was a drill, we'd go up on deck, then return to our cabins and snug bunks.

We went into the hall and were ushered to the deck. On the way, we stopped to help two older Chinese women in the cabin next to us, as they were having trouble with their lifejackets. We were on Deck No. 7 on the starboard side. We were, luckily, very close to the lifeboats.

All this was like a dream. I wasn't even completely awake yet. I felt like I was sleepwalking.

As we got up on deck, the ship began listing. We were told to get to the other side and we did. We were all helped into lifeboats, but I still couldn't believe what was happening. I couldn't see my friends anywhere.

The lifeboat was lowered into the water, smashing all the way down into the side of the Royal Pacific. I remember someone grabbing my arm and yelling, "look out!" As I turned my head I saw a huge, jagged protrusion on the side of the ship. My head would have bashed into it, without the warning.

We were in the second lifeboat down, on the port side and the panic for the lifeboats hadn't yet begun. Our departure from the ship was smooth and fast, unlike that of some of the other passengers.

A third lifeboat came down, but a fourth couldn't be lowered on the port side, due to the angle of the ship. I don't know how many lifeboats were launched from the starboard side - perhaps four. There were also rubber life rafts, but there was a problem opening them.

A lot of people had to jump.

Our lifeboat, which held approximately fifty people, had a motor that worked, but several didn't. We also had flares.

Once we were afloat, I could see the gash in the side of the ship. It was on the port side, just about midship. It was dark and it looked like there were deep scrapes in the side.

Although it looked pretty serious, I still didn't expect the ship to sink. I didn't realize that the scrapes were, in fact, gaping holes. I later read in the newspaper accounts, that they were large enough for two city buses to pass through.

On our lifeboat, there were a number of Australians who worked in the ship's casino and they were very helpful. Eventually I spotted Lynn and later, Lori and Kris. They thought I was on a different boat too and we were all relieved to have found each other.

I looked at our ship again. The lights were still on and the stern had begun to go down. As it disappeared under the water, the bow rose and the lights went out. It was dark but we could still make out the silhouette. Then the entire ship went down. It was terribly eerie watching it in the dark.

We'd been in the lifeboat about fifteen minutes and my stomach was in knots. A flood of nausea hit. I wondered how many people hadn't woken. There'd been no announcement in English or Chinese, although some people reported there'd been one in Greek. Some said there was a horrid sizzling sound as the smoke stack disappeared and they had heard screams for help. I was right beside the motor and didn't hear a thing.

We headed for a nearby ship until we realized it was the trawler that had hit us – not a small fishing boat, but a very large ship with the bow bashed in. As soon as we realized that the trawler might also be going down, we changed course. At one point, we were traveling in circles.

I really felt sick. The ship had gone down so fast it was like watching a movie with time-lapsed photography. I was living those photos of the Titanic (years before the movie). After about a half hour on the lifeboat, we approached a South African cargo ship – The Mariza. A long rope ladder was lowered and we climbed up the ropes and onboard. Although we were only the second lifeboat to be rescued, the Royal Pacific captain and several crew members were already there! The captain had scored the first lifeboat! None of this business of going down with the ship for him! After a third lifeboat arrived, we collected up lifejackets and flashlights and some of the Australian casino workers got back into the lifeboat and went to search for survivors.

We sat on the open deck and everyone looked dazed and shocked. It was about 4 a.m. People started curling up, using their lifejackets as chairs or pillows. For the whole of the next day, everyone walked around the ship holding on to their lifejackets. They were like lifelines. At one point, a bunch of us were lying on the floor of the lounge. This was a freighter, so it was not luxurious by any means. But there was a VCR and some videos. Someone called out, "Whatever you do, don't put on the "Poseidon Adventure". There was a man lying beside me. He was a travel agent (this being the inaugural cruise, there were several on board) and I recognized him from the Captain's Cocktail Party, only hours before but what now seemed like a lifetime ago! He was smoking. He took a drag, then offered it to me. I'd quit smoking nearly a year before. "No thanks, I quit."

"I don't even smoke but it tastes great", he replied.

"Give it to me", I countered and let the smoke fill my lungs. I had a few more cigarettes over the course of the next sixteen hours but then decided that yes, it would be a very legitimate excuse, but no, I'd quit three times in the past and didn't want to begin again. That was seventeen years ago and was the last time I smoked.

The Filipino crew was wonderful. They gave up their cabins to the older passengers and gave us all the cold drinking water they had. They also made us rice, bread and stew. We drank coffee from bowls. I'm sure they didn't expect to pick up an extra hundred and seventy-eight passengers for a couple of days, in the middle of nowhere, but they coped remarkably.

I found a spot on the deck and tried to sleep. One of the crew gave me his key and told me to help myself to his cabin, although I found that I still couldn't sleep.

Eighteen hours after boarding The Mariza, we arrived back in Singapore. As we pulled into The World Trade Center, T.V. crews on boats anchored around us. After what

seemed like a very long time, we were led down a gangplank and into The World Trade Center.

Representatives from The Canadian High Commission whisked us through and into a waiting car where we were taken to their office and allowed to make phone calls home.

“Dad, did you hear about that ship that went down?”

“Yes, I can’t believe that kind of thing happens in this day and age.”

“I was on it”.

“I’m putting your mother on, but don’t mention the ship.”

Just what he thought I was going to talk about baffled me but when I mentioned that conversation to him years later, he couldn’t believe that he’d said that. I suppose he, too, was in shock.

Eleven people died that night but it’s a miracle that out of 515 passengers, there were so few deaths. It was 3:00 a.m. and twenty minutes from the time we were hit, the entire ship was under water!

It was actually a hit and run, a Taiwanese trawler hired by the Indonesian Mafia was the story we were told. There had apparently been cash flow problems with the earlier gambling casino. As for compensation, we never received a cent, though we hired a lawyer and pursued the case off and on for at least a year. Ultimately, we know we’re very fortunate to be alive but we did lose a lot of cash and valuables and some recompense would have been appreciated.

There are certain expressions that will never be the same again. Two ships that pass in the night. Sink or swim. I have that sinking feeling.

Although it was being touted as the blockbuster hit of the year, I was apprehensive to go to the cinema to see “Titanic.” My eldest brother offered to accompany me, just in case I had flashbacks or the Nam Hebejeebes, as he termed it. And there were times I did.

Recently I came across a copy to The Royal Pacific sales brochure we had received from our travel agent. Reading it from the safety of dry land and the distance of many years, it took on a new meaning.

“The Royal Magic starts the moment you come on board.”

“An amazing crew to pander to your every whim.”

“Enjoy the cruise into serenity.” (Luckily we didn’t)

But my favourite excerpt, and definitely the most prophetic, has to be, “And even before you’re wide awake, a whole range of activities await you”! Yes, a whole range of activities that we could’ve done without!