Chapter VI

ROCKETS BEARING SOUTH-SOUTHEAST BY STANDARD

Since the discovery of the *Titanic* wreck in 1985, there is little doubt that the rockets seen from the bridge of the SS *Californian* during the Middle Watch back in April 1912 came from *Titanic*. These signals, actually distress socket signals, reached heights of about 600 feet before they exploded into white stars.[1] Even if *Californian* had been as far away as the position later given by Captain Lord, these signals went high enough and were bright enough to be seen from the *Californian*. Not only were *Titanic*'s signals seen that night, but those of *Carpathia* as well when she was still a good 10 miles beyond where *Titanic* had been. What is still in doubt, however, is whether *Californian* and *Titanic* were in sight of each other that night. When considering the totality of evidence and analysis, as we shall show, the answer is a resounding "yes!"

In March 1992, almost 80 years after these events happened, the Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) of the Department of Transport in Britain issued a report regarding the role *Californian* played at the time *Titanic* was lost.[2] The purpose of the report was to address four items:

1. What were the positions of *Titanic* and *Californian* when *Titanic* struck the iceberg on April 14, and when she foundered on April 15, and to deduce the distance that they were apart from each other?
2. Was *Titanic* seen by *Californian* during this period, and if so, by whom?
3. Were *Titanic*'s distress signals seen by *Californian*, and if so were proper actions taken?
4. To assess the action taken by *Californian*'s Captain Stanley Lord from when he stopped his ship on April 14 until the time he resumed his voyage on April 15.

The appointed inspector was Master Mariner Thomas Barnett, who reported his findings to Captain P. B. Marriott, Chief Inspector of Marine Accidents. Marriott did not fully agree with Barnett's findings and subsequently asked Deputy Chief Inspector Captain James de Coverly to examine the issues further and issue a report.

Both Barnett and de Coverly agreed as to the approximate location of *Titanic* when she struck the iceberg, and that both *Titanic* and *Californian* had been under the influence of a strong south setting current of more than one knot in the local vicinity. However Barnett believed that *Californian* had been under the influence of a south setting current since about noon and was between 5 to 7 miles from *Titanic*, while de Coverly believed the south setting current affected *Californian* much later on, and the two ships were between 17 and 20 miles apart. Barnett believed that *Titanic* was seen from *Californian*, while de Coverly believed that if she was seen, it was caused by abnormal refraction. They both agreed that the two ships remained in the same relative position with respect to each other, drifting southward with the current, from the time *Titanic* collided with the iceberg until the time she foundered. They also both agreed that *Titanic*'s distress signals were indeed seen from *Californian*, and that proper actions were *not* taken.

In the areas where de Coverly disagreed with Barnett, de Coverly cited five opinionated reasons:

1. The strong southerly current set was unusual to begin with and more unusual if it extended so far east

2. The Pole star sighting at 7:30pm by Chief Officer Stewart showed *Californian* at the same latitude as at noon.
3. The latitude for 6:30pm in the ice message to *Antillian* showed *Californian* heading close to due west.
4. The effect of current on *Carpathia* appeared to set her to the north of her track to the SOS position, not to the south.
5. There was no reported ice east of longitude 49°W, suggesting that the axis of the southerly drift probably did not extend east of there.

As far as a mystery ship coming between *Titanic* and *Californian*, the two inspectors also had differing views as summarized in the table below:

Table 6-A

Thomas Barnett	**James de Coverly**
Titanic was seen by *Californian* and was kept under observation from about 11pm April 14th until she sank.	A ship was seen by *Californian* and kept under observation from about 11pm April 14th until she disappeared.
There is an extent of coincidence between what was seen from *Californian* and what is known of *Titanic*'s movements.	Either a third ship came in between the two vessels, or *Titanic* was seen but at a far greater range due to super refraction.

Captain de Coverly's objections as to why *Californian* was unlikely to have seen *Titanic* were also listed in his report. They were:

1. At 11pm April 14, *Titanic* would have been 20 miles away which is a very long way off to be seen.
2. *Titanic* was turned to port at the time of collision, and her red sidelight would not be seen.
3. No ship was seen by *Titanic* until well past midnight.
4. *Californian*'s second officer Herbert Stone claimed to have noticed a change of bearings before the other ship disappeared.

It is unfortunate that more time was not spent by the MAIB in researching all the evidence that was available, or that they were not given more time to do a more thorough analysis. When we look closely at de Coverly's objections to Barnett's findings, we find that he came to his conclusions based on a number of assumptions that he made, something that can be very dangerous when one is asked to perform a critical analysis.

Let us first look at each of the five points that de Coverly cited for not agreeing with Barnett.

de Coverly's Point 1: It is unusual for a south setting current to extend so far east. – This statement needs to be quantified. Sir Ernest Shackleton testified before the Wreck Commission that "these currents sometimes come far out of their usual route."[3] We also know that pack ice and icebergs had drifted much further to the south than what was usually expected for that time of the year. So was it possible for *Californian* to be under the influence of the cold Labrador Current some distance well to the east of the wreck site area? To answer this question let us look at specific measured air and sea temperatures recorded