

Exploring the Titanic: Buzz Aldrin goes from astronaut to argonaut.

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By Gary Robbins

SANTA ANA, Calif. _ Like a ghost rising from the grave, the silhouette of the RMS Titanic slowly came into view through the porthole of the minisubmarine Nautille, captivating **Buzz Aldrin**. The former Apollo 11 astronaut pressed his face against the window, straining to see as the sub whirred through the deep. Nautille crept forward until it hovered just above the Titanic's bow, 12,500 feet beneath the surface of the North Atlantic. **Aldrin** grabbed a camera and began snapping away, capturing the spot where passengers had stood 84 years ago, just before the ship struck an iceberg and sank.

``The bow sort of looked like gingerbread covered with frosting. Something _ algae, maybe _ seemed to ooze all over the hull," **Aldrin** said this week, after returning home to Laguna Beach, Calif.

``It was an eerie and surreal sight, although not as unusual as what I saw while walking on the moon (in 1969)."

Aldrin, 66, photographed the Titanic two weeks ago, while serving as a guest observer on a controversial U.S. and French expedition aimed at recovering part of the ship's hull from the sea floor 420 miles southeast of Newfoundland.

RMS Titanic Inc. of New York, which has salvage rights to the liner, chartered French divers to use the Nautille to connect a 15-ton section of the Titanic's hull to underwater flotation balloons or lift bags with cables. The hull would slowly rise to the surface, where it would be recovered and later placed on public display.

At least, that was the plan.

The balloons did lift the hull to within 215 feet of the ocean's surface. But then the assemblage became unstable and the 33-foot-by-23-foot section fell back to the sea floor.

RMS Titanic Inc. also failed in its attempt to use powerful underwater floodlights to illuminate the entire bow of the Titanic for the first time. The lights would have made it easier to televise salvage efforts for the 1,700 tourists the company had transported to the wreck site aboard two large cruise ships.

Some passengers had paid up to \$6,000 to catch glimpses of the hull section on closed-circuit TV. Even with the failures, most seemed pleased with the experience.

That was not true of some on land, who accused the company of desecrating what amounts to a watery tomb where more than 1,500 people died in April 1912. Historian Edward Kamuda of Springfield, Mass., told The Boston Globe the salvage effort ``was like robbing a grave."

Aldrin, the second man to walk on the moon, doesn't share that viewpoint.

``These are well-intentioned people who are trying to preserve a piece of history," **Aldrin** said of the salvage executives. ``Their divers have been down to the Titanic dozens of times, so they know how to move around and be careful. And the company is associated with fan clubs and organizations who care about the ship's preservation."

That attitude and **Aldrin's** well-known love of exploration led the company to invite the former astronaut to join two Frenchmen on the three-person submersible Nautilus. **Aldrin**, who has dived after many wrecks during more than 40 years of scuba diving, embraced the opportunity.

On Aug. 28, he dropped down the hatch of Nautilus, a super-strong titanium cocoon that is just as cramped as the aluminum-and-Mylar lander **Aldrin** and Neil Armstrong rode to the lunar surface 27 years ago.

The Nautilus's pilot and its observer must lie on their stomachs. The co-pilot can sit upright. But the cabin is not tall enough for anyone to stand. And there is no restroom. Passengers are asked not to eat or

drink 12 hours before they enter the sub so they don't have to relieve themselves.

The untethered, self-propelled sub dipped below the ocean's surface in early morning and began the two-hour trip to the bottom, descending about 138 feet per minute. Two years ago, while reflecting on his descent from Apollo 11 to the moon's surface, **Aldrin** said, "If I had it to do over, I'd spend more time looking out the window, taking in the view." In Nautilie, he had plenty of time for sight-seeing, but little to see. At first, anyway.

"The ocean quickly grows dark as you go down," **Aldrin** said. "We could have turned on lights, but all we would have seen in the water column were particles floating by."

The three argonauts passed the time shooting the breeze, munching M&M's and watching moisture bead up like sweat on the interior of the hull.

When the Nautilie finally reached the bottom, the underwater visibility was about 150 feet. That wasn't nearly enough to allow the argonauts to take in the full breadth of an 882-foot-long liner, whose bow and stern lie more than 2,000 feet apart on the murky sea floor.

"At one point, I could see the Titanic's bow and railing, but I couldn't look down and see bottom," **Aldrin** said. "I could only see portions of the ship at any one time. So I couldn't get a good sense of the Titanic's enormity.

"As we moved along, one of the crewmen pointed out what he said was the radio room. I had to take his word for it. There was so much mud and algae, you couldn't distinguish much of what you were seeing.

"The bottom was pretty murky, too. Every 10 feet or so you could make out a spindly starfish. And maybe some odd-looking shrimp. But that's about it."

Originally, plans called for **Aldrin** to turn on the floodlights that would illuminate the Titanic's hull. But some of the lights developed

glitches. And the Nautilus was more urgently needed to fix the array of balloons that would lift the section of the hull to the surface.

Earlier, the salvagers had towed six huge balloons almost all the way to the sea floor — nearly 2½ miles deep. The balloons were filled with lighter-than-water diesel fuel. They were attached by cable to what once was a portion of a steel wall near the Titanic's first-class cabins.

The salvagers planned to simultaneously release the balloon's anchors, causing the assembly to carry the hull section to the surface. But two of the anchor chains didn't release properly.

That necessitated another visit by the Nautilus. As **Aldrin** looked on, the French crewmen piloted the sub through the dark, 35-degree water, trying to free the other balloons with the sub's mechanical arm.

“It was a slow, painstaking process involving very precise maneuvers,” **Aldrin** says. “It reminded me of the sensation you get maneuvering a spacecraft around another object while in orbit.”

The Nautilus's crewmen accidentally snapped the cable linking one of the balloons to the hull. But they successfully freed the other balloon and the section eventually began its slow rise. The balloons eventually broke the surface with the hull dangling from its cables.

Unfortunately, one of the cables broke, weakening the assemblage. And the seas turned rough, causing the hull to separate and fall to the bottom.

All was not lost. At least, not from **Aldrin's** standpoint. He spent part of the 10-hour dive skimming over the remains of a ship that was said to be unsinkable at the time of her launch. Fewer than 100 people have enjoyed that privilege.

“The visibility wasn't that good, but it's not something I'll forget,” **Aldrin** said. “It's one of the most exciting things I've done since walking on the moon.”