

# FILM TRIBUTE TO TITANIC DISASTER WIRELESS OPERATORS



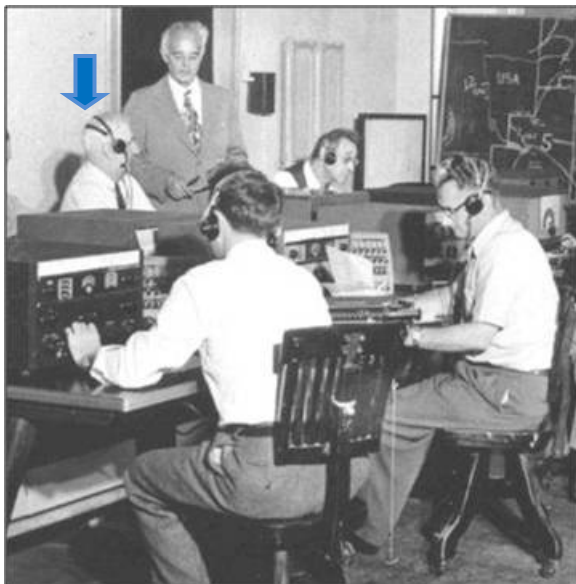
William C. (Bill) Ryder and Bill Upham remember Matt Tierney. Ed Fouhy shows film.

## FILM TRIBUTE TO A TITANIC DISASTER WIRELESS OPERATOR

*“The Titanic, Matt Tierney and Marconi’s Marvelous Invention”*

*By Ed Fouhy*

*To mark the centennial of the Titanic tragedy, CMMC commissioned new exhibits as well as a new film, “**The Titanic, Matt Tierney and Marconi’s Marvelous Invention.**” Written and produced by journalist Ed Fouhy with Chatham film maker Christopher Seufert as associate producer, the film tells the story of Marconi radio operator Matt Tierney’s key role in the rescue efforts following history’s most famous maritime disaster. We asked Ed to tell us the story behind the production.*



Last summer a man walked into the museum, looked at one of our photo murals, pointed to a picture of one of WCC’s radio operators and declared, “There’s my grandfather.”

The figure he was pointing at was Matt Tierney, an operator who worked at Chatham Radio from 1921 until his retirement three decades later.

The man who supplied the identification was Bill Upham and he had a tale to tell . . .

Bill was a small boy, maybe eight or nine, when he first began to spend his summers at the company-owned cottage on Old Comers Road, home to his grandparents Matt and Lillian Tierney. On many days, he said, he walked down the slope behind the operations building with his grandfather to visit the station, chat with the men on duty, though not until they had finished their day’s work, he added. He described

with startlingly clear detail what the interior looked like, what the sounds were, even what the big room smelled like. Hint: those were the days when everyone smoked.

Bill said that his grandfather was known widely in the marine radio business as the operator who heard the SOS signals from *Titanic* on that fateful April night in 1912, though he rarely spoke of it.

Bill's story seemed like family lore but it intrigued some of the museum's volunteer staff, especially Ed Moxon, Edee Crowell, Dick Kraycir and others; they set out to find evidence. Later they asked me to join in. My news detector went off as I thought about the possibility that Bill's family lore story might prove to be accurate and how it could draw attention to Marconi as the centennial of *Titanic*'s dramatic end loomed just a few months away. I signed on.

With Bill Upham in tow, the research team sailed to Nantucket where a Marconi-owned marine radio station in the village of Siasconset once stood. We had proof Tierney, then just 21 years old, had worked there in 1912. A staff historian at Nantucket's impressive Historical Association was eager to help; there was one catch she explained, 'Sconset had once had its own history collection but it had all been lost.

With the dauntless Edee Crowell and Ed Moxon in the lead, the search for evidence of Matt Tierney's night watch on April 14, 1912, and the days after continued. It wasn't enough that friends and contemporaries knew the story of his days spent with headphones clamped to his head, sending the names of survivors to anxious loved ones gathering at the White Star Line pier on New York Harbor. A few scholars wrote that only those names and the personal messages of survivors like film actress Dorothy Gibson were authorized. But other accounts said one news bulletin had been cleared for transmission and went to the New York headquarters of the Associated Press. Alas, the archivist at the A.P. said it had been lost.

We found that one of Matt Tierney's protégés on Nantucket was, by 1912, working in New York at a station Marconi, with his flair for marketing, had built atop the popular Wanamaker department store. That man had flair too, and some years later the young protégé became president of RCA, the company that bought out Marconi. His name? David Sarnoff.

Copies of Marconigrams sent and received during the epic voyage of the rescue ship *Carpathia* as she sailed toward New York with more than 700 survivors aboard came to light. Some bore the distinctive radio operator sine (cq) "MC," Matt Tierney's mark. It was the breakthrough we had been looking for. And Matt's grandson Bill Upham added a crucial fact: when Matt was about to retire, a call from RCA headquarters came to Chatham. It was Sarnoff with an order: Matt and Lillian were to be allowed to continue to live in the RCA-owned cottage as long as they wanted.

That clinched the story and gave the film Chris Seufert and I were making the Hollywood ending every storyteller dreams about. Chris had been my collaborator on an earlier CMMC film; we were both excited about telling Matt's story.

As the centennial weekend approached it seemed as though all of America was reliving the voyage of the *Titanic*. There was a National Geographic magazine cover and a special on television, Smithsonian magazine put the story on the cover too, so did *USA Today*. ABC broadcast a three hour dramatic special, PBS produced a documentary on the engine room crew, *The New York Times* was especially intrigued and published several stories.

At the Chatham Community Center, 200 of Matt and Lillian's townspeople turned out to see the film and hear a lecture by maritime historian Mark Wilkins.

Bill Upham and Tierney family members to the third generation came from Arizona to honor Matt and see the film memorializing their ancestor who had died in 1962. They gathered at his grave in Chatham's Union Cemetery, a little more than a mile from Chatham Radio, to share a prayer and lay a wreath. Boston television and the A.P. took note.