

# The Titanicman

## From tale to reality.

A tale about a man, who in reality came to end his life on the hospital of St. Gertrud, Västervik, Sweden.

The tale says that my grand grandmothers sisters son, my grandmothers cousin, was officer on the Titanic. He is said to have jumped into a lifeboat meant for the passengers. At the time he should have received a slap on his face, which should have caused grief to him through his lifetime. To make up for the grief he is told to have been participating in a war on Finlands side. This should in consequence have made him insane and he should have ended his days on a hospital in the neighborhood of Västervik, Sweden.

The one who knows about history finds that the tale in itself contains obvious errors. In this article we will follow the story from tale to reality.

The name of the Titanicman is John Charles Asplund. He was born in the star-sign of Aquarius in 1889 in Oskarshamn, Sweden. His parents as well as his grand-parents were divorced during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which at that time was very unusual. From five years of age he grows up with his mother and his two brothers.

His father, as well as one of his brothers, Oskar, were both seaman, which even John Charles himself became. As ordinary seaman on a brig named Frida, in 1912, he received permission to migrate to America. His oldest brother, Karl Alfred, had at that time already moved across the Atlantic to the big country in the west.

From the migration certificate we learn that his knowledge of Christianity was *defend-able* and that we was *for marriage available*.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of April 1912, at the age of 23 years old, he was in Southampton and entered the Titanic. He traveled along with his friend, Einar Gervasius Karlsson, also from Oskarshamn, and had payed 7 pounds and 15 shillings for his 3<sup>rd</sup> class ticket.

Already at this point of the story we can tell that the *officer in the tale*, in reality was a *seaman* with a 3<sup>rd</sup> class ticket.

The safest ship in the world, at that time, ran into an iceberg on the 14<sup>th</sup> April around half past eleven in the evening, just four days after departure from Southampton. The disaster was a fact. 1495 people deceased – though not John Charles Asplund.

M/S Carpathia arrived around two hours after the sinking, to the scene of the accident, and were able to salvage the survivors from the lifeboats. John Charles Asplund was one of those in lifeboat number 13. A survivor.

On the stationary of M/S Carpathia, he writes his first letter to his mother Augusta. (*free direct translation made by Jerker Pettersson*)

*Dear Mother*

*Feel good and have good health are my greatest wishes for you. I must let you know that we arrived yesterday evening at 12 o'clock, and we were allowed to debark immediately, as you must know the Titanic has sunk to the bottom of the ocean along with an awful lot of people.*

*I shall tell you about our journey, We went from Copenhagen on the 4<sup>th</sup>, and we went by train and ferries to Esbjerg. Then we went from Esbjerg on the 6<sup>th</sup> to Parkeston, and we went by train to Southampton were we stayed a couple of days at the Emigrant Hotel. Then arrived the Titanic and we went with it until Sunday evening when it collided with an iceberg at around half past eleven, then it was filled with increasing amount of water until we were forced to leave it at one o'clock in the night, and at around two o'clock it sank.*

*As lucky we were there was a lifeboat, so we had it as good as possible. There were many lying in the water during 6 hours. Then came the other boat at half past four and rescued us aboard.*

*It looked like a pig-house on that boat we went by. You must believe that the Titanic was a real nice boat and good food they had as well, it was like a hotel. I must ask you to send the address of Agnes and Bertil to aunt Anna, so I can receive it later, because I have lost it. I have nothing else to write about, so I will finish with lots of greetings from John.*

*Greet all relatives and dad from me. Greet also Oskar. I will write when I have been at aunt Anna. Luckily I had the package in the carpet-bag otherwise it would have been in the Atlantic also. Don't be worry about me, because we get money for the luggage that's been lost.*

The Titanicman, John Charles Asplund, had truly obvious traveled with the Titanic and survived. But what about the slap on the face, from the tale?

Six days after the disaster, M/S Carpathia reached New York, where John Charles got 25 dollars from the Salvation Army and a train ticket to Minneapolis. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of May, just over 40 days after the sinking, John Charles writes again a letter to his mother, where he in a more detailed way describes the dramatic moments at sea. (free direct translation made by Jerker Pettersson)

*Minneapolis 24<sup>th</sup> of May*

*Feel good and have good health are my wishes. I will now in short tell you about my rescue.*

*We were laying sleeping as the collision occurred. Einar woke up and woke me up and told me that it must have touched a shallow. I then laughed and told him about touching a shallow in the middle of the Atlantic. We lay down and turn to sleep again. When we have been laying about 15 minutes there came a passenger knocking on the door to our cabin and told us that they had collided with an iceberg.*

*We left the beds and got us dressed. It went on in a slow way. We did never believe that the boat would sink because they had been boasting about the waterproof sections. When we got ready we walked and entered the after deck. When we had been standing there a couple of minutes it was told that the stem was crashed by ice and that the ballast was full of ice. Then I told Einar that we should go and see for ourselves. We went and could confirm they had been telling us, as we looked down into the space watching the water flowing we went back to the poop again. There is a long hallway down inside the boat to walk on, so we couldn't walk out on deck along the midship to reach the poop.*

*We, being third class passengers, when we*

*arrived at the poop, we saw that they opened the doors to first class and that the third class passengers went up there. We followed the crowd and when we reached the next floor, they prepared to launch the emergency-boats into the sea, and told us that women should enter first. The first boat was slipped and we stood at the second one and agreed upon entering that one.*

*I managed to enter the boat but when Einar should enter he got a slap on his face by an officer. When I came to see that I jumped back from the emergency-boat onto the Titanic again. Afterwards we were walking and believing we could enter one after another of the lifeboats. But it couldn't be done until the last but one of the emergency-boats, I told Einar that when it has slipped a bit we will jump into it. He agreed. When they had slipped the boat about three meters we jumped down into it. If we hadn't done that, we probably wouldn't have been rescued.*

*When they had slipped us down into the water, they untangled the boat from the wires and row away around 50 meters from the Titanic. Then we saw the Titanic with the stem at first. You must believe it was a sad view to watch and listen to so many people fighting for their life and their cry for distress.*

*The cries lasted for about an hour, then they had blacked out and then it was silent. We were sitting in the emergency-boat around six hours, may be a bit longer, until we were taken aboard Carpathia (it was around 7 o'clock). You must believe it was not so nice to be there, in the emergency-boat. We had no idea of for how long time we should have to stay there. Some told us that we may starve to death and some told us different. Lucky for us the ocean was quite calm, otherwise not so many would have been saved. The ocean was as calm as the water in our barrel back home by the woodshed.*

*When we entered Carpathia we were cherished as good as possible. At first we got a mouthful of coffee. We needed it, because we were shivering of cold. I wouldn't had been freezing such a lot if it wasn't for that I had been giving away my coat to a stoker in the same emergency-boat as us. He didn't had more clothing than a "langery stall", or whatever they call it. I thought he needed it better than me. When we reached New York we were*

welcomed by a warm-hearted reception of charity people. We arrived at the Salvation Army, Einar, myself and three other Swedes. (You must have read in the papers).

*Has aunt Ida received Annas address yet? Write to me and let me know and give me the address so I will send the package to her, cause I want her to have it, as I have kept it from being buried n the Atlantic ocean.*

*Give my greetings to everyone I know*

Besides the fact that John Charles is a survivor we here find that he holds a big heart, filled with empathy. Loyal with his friend Einar and extraordinary kind to the freezing stoker.

The slap on the face from the tale originates from the slap Einar got when jumping into the lifeboat. The origin of the tale is made clear.

There is only pieces of facts about John Charles life in his new country. He was on his way to visit his brother Karl Alfred in Minnesota as well as his aunt Anna in New York. John Charles registered in America, as well as his brother Karl Alfred, for service in the First World War, in 1917. At the time John Charles was living in Brooklyn, New York. What really happened to him during the first world war is still unknown.

John Charles himself and his travel companion on the Titanic, Einar Karlsson, and many other passengers from the Titanic became often very quiet about their experiences. Several felt guilt from having been saved as their fellow passengers disappeared in the deep ocean. Those who later came to serve in the first world war are expected to have experienced even more awfulness and thereby having all the components for developing a mental illness.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of August 1919 is John Charles anew arriving in America, almost 9 months after cease fire on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1918. That leads us to believe that he sometimes between 1917 and 1918 entered the war. He traveled now one more time over the sea where he had been experiencing affrightment seven years earlier. This trip takes part on S/S La Lorraine, which is used during the first world war for transportation of soldiers. On the arrival in America in 1919 he was at an examination

found to be 1,62 meters of height, with blue eyes. He is told to have continued to his living place in New York.

It's with the picture of man, with in early years divorced parents, a seaman, a Titanic survivor and a survivor from the first world war, still in shape, we leave him in 1919, to over four years later come to meet him again.

In the beginning of 1923, John Charles sneaks aboard a steamer in Portland, America, with destination Antwerpen, Belgium. On the arrival he is seriously confused and violent. The Swedish consulate in Antwerpen provides him with a transportation to Sweden, where he is taken care of at the poor- and sustainment institution named Gibraltar in Gothenburg on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February 1923.

The brother of the Titanicman, Oskar, brings him back home to Oskarshamn in April 1923. However John Charles becomes violent and knocks his brother, leading to initial lookup at the police and afterwards registration at Västerviks Hospital in June 1923. The hospital was at the time 11 years old, being established the same year as the Titanic sank, 1912.

Below is reproduced the complete initial story from John Charles medical records in 1923. (*free translation by Jerker Pettersson*)

*“The father being keen on drinking and degeneration. The patient has been raised in his home, finalized public school and confirmed Christian with the degree of defend-able. Since teenage been sailing as a seaman. The last ten years stayed in America. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of February he was registered at Gibraltar in Gothenburg being sent back home from Antwerpen on behalf of the consulate.: he had in Portland sneaked aboard on a steamer. He was taken in as stated by the police and with prescription from a doctor, because he behaved confused and were partly violent.*

*Status present on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March 1923: Somatically nothing to comment. The patient is taken care of on the surveillance department for worriers: walks mostly around, seems to be afraid to put on his socks, even afraid for all sorts of physical contact, very perplexed: will some times come forward to the doctor but says nothing, are heard to murmur about evil people that has nothing to do with him. His facial*

*appearance is stiff. He is obviously destined to mental confusion, gives an unreliable impression but has not yet made any violence. In April 1923 the patient was taken from Gibraltar by his brother. Already during the first days of his staying at home he was violent towards his brother so the patient had to be taken into custody: from where he thereafter has been transferred to sustainment institution.*

*Present status on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June 1923.*

*The patient is 163 centimeter long and weighs 55 kilograms. Thin body with rather thin flesh. Head-shape and facial structure does not differ from ordinary. Head measures 15-18-56 centimeters.*

*Somatic examination can not be performed due to unwillingness from the patient. He is treated in bed in the worriers ward. Runs continuously out of bed and tries to get out through doors and windows. Never responds to anyone. Gets upset and angry when he receives order to behave etc. Facial expression without any mimicry. He shows off any examination and physical contact. If one insists he gets threatening and appears to have hard to control himself. He takes care of himself in all ways.*

From our original tale we can note that John Charles really got ill and was placed on a hospital in the neighborhood of Västervik. What made him ill may we for the moment just speculate about. From what we now we can understand that a human being can feel really mentally bad.

Nowhere in the complete records from the hospital is there anything told about Titanic or war. May be the doctors and the nurses never got to know anything about his early life. And even if they should have come to know there was no knowledge of the treatments we today take for granted. Ward staff from the 1940 decade has talked about their knowledge of John Charles having been rescued from the Titanic, which may have been told to them through relatives, and not written in the records.

Our man, the Titanicman, John Charles Asplund, who has survived both the Titanic and the war had now in his 34<sup>th</sup> year of living new challenges to manage in the hospital environment. What was to come?

John Charles did not feel at home at all at the hospital. Already one week after he arrived in ward number 4, the 17<sup>th</sup> of June 1923 he escapes for the first time, which is described in the records as follows:

*“Today he smashed a window in the ward and managed to, with lightning speed, crawl through the window and run away. Was being found in the forest near the town about 3 hours later. Worried and impulsive. Always up to speed. Bathing during long time tentatively.”*

The Titanicman doesn't give up. *“He picks apart the walls in continuous effort to allow for a way to escape”*. It is impossible to keep him in the arrival-ward, why he is moved to Länspaviljongen, which is impossible to escape from, a few days later. At Länspaviljongen he is told to be *“More well-behaved. May now be up from bed along with the other patients.”*

After just about 6 months at Länspaviljongen he escapes again. An achievement he shares with only 2 or 3 other patients during the 75 years as Länspaviljongen was in operation. In the records we read:

*“As the patient today was out in the garden he took the opportunity to grab a broom, and by using it he with an unbelievable speed gained access to a window-grid in the garden. Then out on the roof and along the waterspout down to the ground. He was caught around 300 meters from Länspaviljongen. Bed rest.”*

The same methods as we can imagine saved him when jumping into lifeboat number 13 from the Titanic and which have helped him to survive the first world war, he now uses to reach freedom outside the hospital-walls. A survivor.

Hereafter he is moved between Länspaviljongen and ward number 32A and B due to lack of living-space and the fact that he is told to *“embarrass other patients”*.

In February 1929, over five years after the second escape attempt, he escapes for the third time. This time from ward number 32A. The records gives the details:

*“By breaking a window without any noise the patient tonight managed to leave the ward. He*

*had ripped the bed-sheets and tied together them and marked down to the ground. He had made himself a costume from blankets, stitched together with the bed-sheets. He went to the engine room and asked for a ship from Sundsvall, he was recognized on the clothing. Back to ward number 32A."*

Almost six years after arrival at Västerviks Hospital has the Titanicman, John Charles Asplund, creativity and energy to engineer an escape by all classical means with sheets stitched together. With knowledge of the cold weather in February he has obviously arranged with warm clothing as well. His life at sea takes him to search rescue in what he knows about – the sea and the boats. This escape attempt fails and life returns to ward number 32A.

**A**t the same time as the stock market crashes and the depression arrives in 1929, the Titanicman, John Charles Asplund, initiates his last 14 years in life. He alternates by being in bed, walking around, by being calm and screaming and knocking his fellow patients. No one seems to know why. No one seems to have knowledge about his experiences from icebergs and world-war.

In July 1932 he receives a visit from his brother Oscar, with a note in the records - *"Were sitting silent but responded now or then when spoken to"*. What did he say?

In November 1935 the records tell *"Today agitated and threat full, jumped up in the window, crashed two window-boxes. Got scars."* His constant yearning to leave made crashed windows and scars an everyday incident.

His medication during the 1930's contains trional, cloral and paraldehyd – the *"drink"* he often asks for.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 1939 his mother, Augusta, dies at an age of 75 years old. John Charles younger brother, Oskar, visits him the day after, June 6<sup>th</sup>, with the following notes in the records - *"Visit from a brother, no order, did not respond when spoken to."*

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of September 1939, the day after the outbreak of the second world war, there is a note in the records:

*"Visit from a relative. Did not recognize him"*.

The 1940's takes off with John Charles brother, Oscar, being killed on the British ship Valparaiso, where he is commander. The ship is part of a convoy from Halifax to Liverpool, when the German sub-marine U38 appears on the 29<sup>th</sup> of December 1940. All of the convoy is being torpedoed and Valparaiso with its entire crew of 32 people, including Oscar, sinks to the bottom of the sea.

From now on, John Charles, is the only one left from his family. The oldest brother, Karl Alfred, is missing after the first world war. The father died from tuberculosis in 1922, the mother Augusta in 1939 and Oscar in 1940.

During the remaining part of the 1940's John Charles continues to revolt, although in worse physical condition, with stomach pains.. He *"tears apart sheets and blankets, "takes off his clothes and puts them into the toilet, "tears apart a buldan-blanket"*. A buldan-blanket was made from heavy fabrics meant to never be able to tear apart.

In 1943 John Charles, the Titanicman, suffers from nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and fever. It gets worse and two days before his death he is ordered 4 to 5 carbon tablets daily.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of August at ten minutes past two in the afternoon his life ends. He suffers from *"enteritis acuta"* - volvulus.

The Titanicman has survived Titanic, the first world war, 20 years of hospital life and all of his family.

The survivor is dead.

Our tale has developed to a reality. A human beings life full of content and drama.

Still we don't know what really happened to the Titanicman, John Charles Asplund, in America. We do neither know where the part of the tale about Finland comes from. There are several traces to be investigated.

We know that the story about his life has a continuation.

Follow further development on [www.titanicmannen.se](http://www.titanicmannen.se)

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