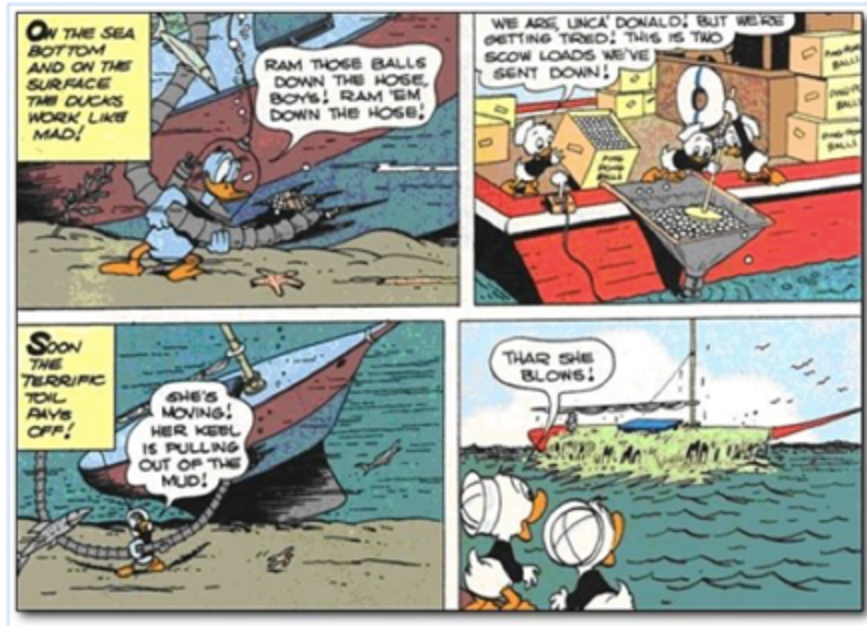




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"The *Titanic* now showing intense deterioration 12,000 feet underwater. Divers say the entire deckhouse is collapsing and destroying state rooms."

"Yeah that - headline should be the most unsurprising story of the day. The *Titanic* which sunk a hundred years ago in salt water's deteriorating."

"I mean if we wanted to save it we coulda lifted it. We talked about that, right?"

"I don't know that that was ever feasible."

"Right - no - you put balloons underneath it -"

"Right..."

"And then lift it up!"

Can we raise the *Titanic*? Should we raise the *Titanic*? Should resources be spent and lives be risked to recover more of *Titanic*'s artifacts, study more of her mysteries while the wreck still rests in one piece? Or should we let the great ship and each of her 1500 victims finally rest in peace?

My name is Amanda Hootman and today we're taking a look at the ethics and logistics of salvage "after *Titanic*."

Okay, first question's first: is it even possible to raise the *Titanic*? As soon as the week succeeding her sinking, people have been suggesting ways to accomplish the mighty feat. John

Jacob Astor IV's son, Vincent Astor, suggested raising her using dynamite. Similarly, Clive Cussler's 1976 novel *Raise The Titanic!* (and the 1980 film adaptation of the same name) uses tanks of compressed air to blow *Titanic* to the surface. Over time people have suggested using ping pong balls, nylon balloons, nylon bags filled with Vaseline, pumping the *Titanic* full of molten wax, or liquid nitrogen that she might float to the surface. The ping pong ball idea seems to stem from a 1949 Donald Duck comic, where Donald, Huey, Dewey, and Lewey pump a much smaller, shallower shipwreck with ping pong balls to raise it. This isn't quite as silly as it sounds, it's actually possible to raise some wrecks with ping pong balls. The Mythbusters achieved it with a small boat in shallow waters (and with much difficulty).

"The Mythbusters' bid to salvage a sunken boat using ping pong balls lies in the balance."

"Suddenly, hundreds of them bob up from below. That could be hours of work floating to the surface."

"Aw no..."

"*Mythtanic II* has ruptured."

"That hole blew out it seems from pressure of the ping pong balls."

"The Mythbusters are back in business. Before long, *Mythtanic II* seems to be straining at the leash..."

"*Mythtanic II* stirs, then slowly rises from her watery grave."

But, obviously a ship as large as *Titanic* would take a preposterous number of ping pong balls, and given the extent of her damage, one has to wonder how the ping pong balls were meant to stay *inside* the ship. But the point is moot anyway because at *Titanic*'s depth, the ping pong balls would be crushed into tiny little wads of plastic and would no longer be buoyant.

The fact of the matter is, raising the entire wreck of *Titanic* just simply isn't possible. It would require technology that we still aren't capable of and a wreck far less deteriorated than she is today. Essentially, it would require time travel. To salvage the *Titanic*, you would first have to invent a time machine. Delicate wrecks have been raised in the past, but from much shallower depths than *Titanic*. The 16th century English warship *The Mary Rose* was painstakingly excavated by a team of divers between 1979 and 1982 with a large section of her hull being salvaged by crane under peak conditions. The 17th century Swedish warship *Vasa* was also raised through use of divers. Similar to *Titanic*, ping pong balls and ice cubes had been suggested as means of raising the ship, but the Swedish salvagers opted instead to dig a series of tunnels in the mud underneath the warship through which steel cable slings could be threaded to lift the ship. The salvage of both *The Mary Rose* and *Vasa* were incredibly expensive and, at times, dangerous feats. The risks to the divers were considerable – at any point they could have found themselves trapped or entangled in part of the aging wrecks. Or in

the case of *Vasa*, which has sometimes been called “Sweden’s *Apollo* Mission”, they could have been trapped underneath the ship while tunneling underneath. Both wrecks were much, much older than *Titanic* and probably as or more delicate but, notably, they were located in much shallower waters. *Vasa* was under only 32 meters of water and *The Mary Rose* laid only 12 meters down. *Titanic*, by contrast, is about 3800 meters under the Atlantic, more than 1000 times deeper than *Vasa*. So, we’re talking a project roughly 1000 times more difficult than Sweden’s *Apollo* Mission.

So, no. Given its location and the deterioration of the wreck, there is simply no way to salvage the entire *Titanic*.

Even the salvage of The Big Piece, a 15 ton segment of *Titanic*’s hull retrieved by RMS Titanic Inc. in 1998 was an enormous feat. A previous attempt to raise it failed in 1996 when the nylon cables used to raise it snapped, sending the hull section plummeting back to the bottom of the Atlantic.

To say nothing of the ethical and legal quandaries that would face RMS Titanic Inc. or anyone who attempted a full salvage of the wreck. *The Mary Rose* and *Vasa* had far fewer casualties than *Titanic* and sank centuries before they were exhumed. Many people consider *Titanic* a gravesite for the 1500 lives lost on April 15, 1912 and disturbing her wreck would be tantamount to destroying a burial ground. Even the continued salvage of items from her debris field by RMS Titanic Inc., the exclusive salvage rights holder to the wreck, has come under intense scrutiny.

Who owns the wreck of *Titanic*? Typically, the owners of the ship own the ship. But White Star Line was bought out by Cunard in the 1930s and *Titanic*, still undiscovered and totaled at the bottom of the Atlantic, was not part of the sale. So, legal ownership of her was effectively relinquished by the merger in 1934.

Marine geologist Dr. Robert Ballard, oceanographer Jean-Louis Michel and a team of American and French scientists discovered the wreck of *Titanic* on September 1, 1985. Salvage rights usually come at a first-come-first-served basis, but Ballard declined to take anything from the wreck, recognizing it as the gravesite of over 1500 people.

That essentially meant it was open season for salvagers.

Nearly two years later, in June of 1987, a commercial salvage operation known as Titanic Ventures Limited Partnership (TLVP) salvaged the first 1800 objects to be recovered from the ship. This was done despite objections from scientists like Ballard and survivors like Eva Hart who described it in no uncertain terms as “grave looting”.

TLVP partnered with a French oceanographic institute for this initial salvage operation and entered into an agreement with the French government in 1993 that handed TLVP salvage rights to the wreck and in exchange this “French Collection” of artifacts would be brought back to France for curation and conservation and could not be sold off piecemeal.

Meanwhile, in the United States, a competing commercial salvage company, Marex Inc., sought exclusive salvage rights to the wreck by appealing to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia. This caused TLVP, now restyled as RMS Titanic Inc. (RMST), to respond, asserting its rights as an exclusive salvager because they had dibs. And, after a series of court cases, RMST was awarded exclusive salvage rights under an agreement with the US government that bound RMST to keep its 5500 piece “American Collection”, amassed over thirty expeditions, in one piece.

So, who are RMST? RMST is a private venture, a subsidiary of Premiere Exhibitions, which mostly runs touring exhibits like the Bodies exhibit, which displays flayed corpses preserved through a process known as plastination and has faced considerable criticism and scrutiny over the fact that the bodies sourced were “unclaimed” and not from willing donors – a fact that Premiere Exhibitions has been very up front about.

RMST, the *Titanic* subsidiary of Premier Exhibitions responsible for the touring *Titanic* exhibition and two permanent exhibits in Las Vegas and Orlando, has its own checkered past. In 2000, RMST ousted its COO, G. Michael Harris when he was found to be embezzling funds from the company. Notably, before landing at RMST, Harris used to make his money managing comedians and *organizing dwarf-throwing competitions* at Florida bars. He was later found to have illegally offered up *Titanic* artifacts from the RMST collection as collateral for a \$25,000 loan to finance a touring Duck Dynasty exhibit when he was sued for not repaying the loan.

In 2004, seven of RMST’s investors were fined \$400,000 by the Securities and Exchange Commission for making “materially false and misleading statements”, one of whom, founder and shareholder Joe Marsh, told the *New York Times* “We all know there are billions of dollars down there under the water. It’s like sitting on a gold mine, and if we can pull up \$1 billion worth of stuff, we are going to figure out how to get \$1 billion out of it.” The president of RMST in 2000, Arnie Geller, attempted sawing through the hull of *Titanic* in order to access an alleged \$300 million in jewels located in her safe. This plan luckily fell through due to technical problems and on April 15, 2012, the wreck came under the protection of UNESCO due to a 2001 piece of legislation that protects marine archeological artifacts that have been under water for more than 100 years. So, no more sawing into the UNESCO world heritage site.

In 2016, Premier Exhibitions filed for bankruptcy and, after a failed attempt to sue the French government for the right to sell the French Collection, announced that it would auction off the American Collection in order to repay its creditors. It placed the starting bid at \$19.2 million. In response, an enormous international campaign was launched to raise the money to get the entire collection to the *Titanic* museum in Belfast and the UK’s National Maritime Museum – to essentially bring *Titanic* home. The National Geographic Society donated \$500,000 towards the mission to repatriate the collection - feels like they could have given a little more, at least a cool mill - and James Cameron and Robert Ballard publicly championed the effort. Sadly, they fell just short of their goal and 40% of Premier Exhibitions’ private stock and the entire American Collection were auctioned off to a group of private hedge fund managers.

And RMS Titanic Inc.'s shareholders continue to try to squeeze more money out of the wreck. In 2023, the reorganized RMST partnered with Artifact Labs and Venture Smart Financial Holdings to turn each of the 5,500 artifacts into NFTs. But that's not all. Until 2020, RMST had been bound by a court ruling that they not cut into or detach any part of the wreck. But they got US District Judge Rebecca Beach Smith to overturn that so that they could cut into the hull and go get the Marconi system that's in *Titanic's* wireless room. RMST's reasoning, that Judge Beach Smith agreed with, was that the Marconi system was of historic and cultural significance and should be removed and preserved before the rapid deterioration of the wreck made accessing it impossible.

Federal authorities stepped in, noting that RMST's plans violated a treaty signed with the United Kingdom which recognized *Titanic's* two hull sections as gravesites and RMST became embroiled in a years' long legal battle with the US government. Eventually RMST walked back its planned expedition to only include taking images of the wreck and salvaging items from her debris field. But even expeditions to simply survey the wreck have been detrimental to her. In 2020, RMST also got into legal trouble with NOAA - the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration - for crashing a submersible into the wreck and failing to report the accident, which highlights the issues with even sending craft down to survey and film the wreck.

The hundreds of manned and unmanned dives to *Titanic* have hastened her deterioration. She is the most studied shipwreck of all time, and I'm certainly glad for the information we've gleaned from her. But are the thousands of scans, photos, filmed footage, and artifacts we've already taken from her not enough? The only real value I can see in continuing to monitor the wreck site would be in the interest of observing her rate of decay, the progress of *Halomonas titanicae's* ability to break down iron, and the impact of the shipwreck on deep sea fauna. When it comes to the artifacts down there and the ship itself, I think we have learned all that we ever will, and continued expeditions to the site necessarily come at the cost of the integrity of the wreck and its status as a gravesite.

Following the death of RMST's director of underwater research, Paul-Henri Nargeolet, aboard Oceangate's *Titan* submersible, RMST revised its plans to plunder the wreck once again. They announced that they would only be surveying the wreck. The US government withdrew its legal challenge and the dive went ahead in September of 2024. All subsequent plans on RMST's part to visit the wreck have been scrapped and to that I say "good riddance." May we let *Titanic* rest in peace, and may the hucksters, profiteers, and grave robbers at RMS Titanic Inc. go bankrupt a second time, and may their plunder finally be repatriated.

So, we can't physically raise *Titanic*, and there are significant ethical concerns when it comes to salvaging more of her, but what about resurrecting her through recreation? Why don't we do what so many television shows and movies have suggested and just build a *Titanic II*?

Well, an eccentric Australian billionaire is planning on doing just that. Well, he announced the plans around the 100th anniversary of the sinking and the project has been pretty stagnant since that, but I'm sure it's coming any day now.

Clive Palmer is a billionaire mining and real estate magnate who, among other things, attempted and failed to create a dinosaur theme park called Palmsaurus, attempted and failed to manage an Australian football team, and successfully founded the far right United Australia Party. Hilariously, in March of 2012, Palmer claimed that Barack Obama and the CIA were conspiring to kill the international coal industry. The CIA. Conspiring to kill coal.

Coinciding with his entry into politics, Palmer launched Blue Star Line Cruises, which is really more a website than a travel company because so far their only ship is the as yet unbuilt *Titanic II*. *Titanic II* has remained firmly in the design phase for the last fourteen years, with nothing but 3D renderings on the official Blue Star Line website to really show for it, but Clive Palmer is still insistent that the ship is coming. In 2018, he announced that the Finnish-based ship design and marine engineering company Deltamarin was signed on to build the ship. And in a 2024 *Rolling Stone* interview with Miles Klee, Palmer claimed that *Titanic II* would be an anti-woke safe space and a COVID vaccine-free environment that will offer an authentic delousing experience for third class passengers, weather permitting.

What the hell, sure. I hope you build your anti-woke *Titanic II*, Clive Palmer. At least it will keep you busy and not calling Chinese people slurs or whatever the hell it is you usually do.

Another attempt at resurrecting *Titanic* that's made significantly more progress is the video game *Titanic: Honor & Glory*. Named for the Honor & Glory clock centerpiece of *Titanic*'s Grand Staircase, the game project was also announced in 2012, and its creators, Vintage Digital Revival, have spent the last decade and a half painstakingly recreating *Titanic* in digital form. They've released complete deck plans, and dozens of animations, including a real time animation of the sinking. When the project is complete, the game will include a fully rendered, explorable recreation of *Titanic*. The screenshots that *Titanic: Honor & Glory* has released are truly beautiful, and I think a fully explorable recreation of her is the perfect way to educate and honor her memory, as well as those whose lives were lost on April 15, 1912. You can check out everything that's been released to the public so far at titanichq.com and can support their mission at Patreon.com/titanichq.

Titanic has rested two miles below the surface of the Atlantic for 114 years, and yet she continues to captivate us, to draw us in. For more than a century, people have dreamed of raising the *Titanic*. We yearn to see her face-to-face, perchance to understand her enduring appeal. But why does this enigmatic ship have such a hold on us? Why do we return to the story of *Titanic* again and again? I'll attempt to unpack that question and stick the landing on this series... next time, on "After *Titanic*."

"After *Titanic*" is a podcast by Bash Back Productions. Written, recorded, and edited by Amanda Hootman. Music by Neilly Farrell. Artwork by Paul Scott Canavan. Full cast list, transcripts and

sources are available on aftertitanic.com. "After *Titanic*" is supported by our generous Indiegogo backers and patrons. Help support the podcast by heading to Patreon.com/AfterTitanic where you'll get exclusive access to our Discord server, and join an entire community of Titanophiles to hang out with between episodes. I've been your host, Amanda Hootman. Thanks for listening.

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