The giant iceberg was only part of the story

New studies of Titanic point to high tides and unusual type of mirage

BY WILLIAM J BROAD

What doomed the Titanic is well known, at least in outline: On a snowy night in the North Atlantic, the liner hit an iceberg and disaster ensued, with 1,500 lives lost.

The theories on the sinking vary widely, placing the blame on everything from icebergs to flawed design. Now, a century after the liner went down in the early hours of April 15, 1912, two new studies argue that rare storms of nature played major roles in the catastrophe.

The first says Earth’s nearness to the Moon and the Sun — a preternaturally matched in more than 1,600 years — resulted in record tides that helped explain why the Titanic encountered so much ice, including the giant iceberg.

And a second, put forward by a Titanic historian from Britain, contends that the icy waves created ideal conditions for an unusual type of mirage that hid icebergs from lookouts and confused a nearby ship as to the liner’s identity, delaying rescue efforts for hours.

The author, Ian Malin, said his explanation helps remove the stain of blunder from what he regards as a tragedy.

“There were so heroic, his villains,” Mr. Malin said in an interview, “and instead, there were so of Titanic, and so of scientific interest to try to do their best in the situation as they saw it.”

The title of his book, “Titanic, A Very Deceiving Night,” was published last week as an e-book,的局面 to help ferries could have wrought havoc with human observations.

Millions of the Titanic, as well as scien
tists, are debating the new theories. Some question where the 1912 event can outweigh the significance of minor events like the mirage described

The team discovered that Earth had been unusually close to the Sun and Moon, enhancing the gravitational pull on the seas and producing record tides. The rare orbits took place between December 31, 1911 and February 15, 1912 — about two months before the disaster. The researchers say that the high tides refocused images of icebergs traditionally seen by the crew. This refocusing made icebergs easier to spot, which in turn helped prevent the disaster.

Mr. Malin says that the speed of the Titanic would have slowed down if its crew and officers had understood how the cold night was sending light to confusing ways. As for the failed rescue, Mr. Malin cites testimony that he says reveals the role of natural trickery. The Californian — a modest steamer with a small crew — knew the luxury liner was nearby but were off sightings of its lights and distant rockets.

This sense of closeness — as well as the hostile notices inherent to the play of mirages — helped create a distress series of false impressions, Mr. Malin argues.

For instance, he says the mirages probably would have alerted the Californian’s view of the Titanic’s overall shape, and illustrated his point with photographs of modern ships seen in mirage distortions. One photo reveals a ship’s hull to be greatly warped as its mast and superstructure are collapsed to near invisibility.

Mr. Malin says optical trickery also clouded the Californian’s view of the Titanic’s dimwits. The ship’s edge of horizons blurring, had failed to help the Californian understand what they were only about half the height of the steamer’s actual height.

But those perceptions, Mr. Malin says, could have been caused by a mirage. The Titanic’s right ships might have indeed shared high but simply appeared lost compared with the looming vessel.