

CHAPTER TEN:

The paper trail

In the foregoing accounts of the loss of the Manila flotilla you will have noticed a number of contradictory statements and differences of opinion as to some of the details about what actually happened and why. In this last chapter I want to have a look at what the official records have to say about the matter, in the hope that some of these discrepancies can be resolved.

The correspondence in the RTA Archives on what to do with the wrecks and who should do it comprises almost 600 pages in two files. One file is 460 pages and the other is 130 pages. If you are masochistic enough the want to have look at these files yourself, you can go to <http://naa12.naa.gov.au/scripts/ResearcherScreen.asp>, log in as a Guest, and then enter the Archives Series and Item control symbols exactly as given (i.e. with the comma between them) in the Reference number field of the form. These are SP1702/1, N1972/46 for the 420pp file, and B662, 74/1602 for the 130pp file.

Just imagine the fluttering in the dovecotes of the various maritime authorities once the news of the loss of the four vessels got out. Losing the Kooroongaba in an accidental sinking was one thing – after all, these things do happen - but losing the other three as well within a matter of days, and having them cluttering up one of NSW’s finest beaches to boot seemed like gross incompetence – or worse. When it became public knowledge that not only were the three remaining vessels all stranded, but their owner had just been declared bankrupt, the bureaucratic wheels went into overdrive to try to find reasons why their particular Department would not have to be the one that had to foot what looked like being an enormous bill for the removal of the wrecks. Here’s a copy of a letter that was written some months after Mr White’s financial circumstances were discovered:

DEPARTMENT OF SHIPPING & TRANSPORT
N.S.W. REGION


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MINUTE PAPER


SUBJECT : STUART ALAN WHITE

Regional Controller
New South Wales

- . Advice received from Mr. Williams of Official Receiver's section, Deputy Crown Solicitor's Office.
- . One word to sum up White's present financial status: "desperate".
- . His only substantial asset is a property in western Australia under mortgage to a bank.
 - When sold, there will be little left after bank is satisfied
 - unsecured creditors are expected to get nothing
- . Wife was a partner, but she too has nothing
- . White's son has purchased an old jeep for him and he is buying and selling a little scrap metal "in the back of South Australia somewhere".
 - he is paying debt owing to DCS at rate of \$4 a week
- . Williams believes that White is not dishonest but is "a modern Robin Hood - a real Walter Mitty".
- . Previous recommendation is confirmed
 - i.e. that money spent in an effort to recoup from White expenditure incurred would be money spent fruitlessly.



(B.W. DICKENS)
Executive Officer

20 September 1973



By the time the triple stranding was common knowledge, most people understood that it had all come about through bad weather, bad luck, the language barrier, and a certain amount of bungling – for that was the way it was reported in the media.

One of the most interesting documents that I came across in the RTA files was a Minute Paper for the Department of Shipping and Transport Head Office, prepared by the Senior Marine Surveyor from the Survey Section of the Department in Newcastle (Captain J.M. Quinlan). It is a comprehensive account of the whole saga of the ferries from the time they left Newcastle till they put into Trial Bay and tied up to the oil tanker bouys. It contains detail that I found nowhere else, and although it repeats some information already supplied, I've reproduced it here in full because of its informativeness, and the way it ties up a whole lot of loose ends, and also because the carbon-copied original conveys some of the flavour of the times. (If it's a bit hard to read, click on the "+" button at the top of your Adobe Reader window) .



DEPARTMENT OF SHIPPING & TRANSPORT
N.S.W. REGION

MC 68/30

MINUTE PAPER

SURVEY SECTION, NEWCASTLE, 24.1.72

SUBJECT TUG "POLARIS" - TOWAGE OF FOUR FERRIES TO MANILA

Regional Controller, N.S.W.

SYDNEY.

ATTENTION: Principal Surveyor



On Wednesday 17 NOV 71 I received a telephone call from Mr. J. Spate, White who informed me that he had bought the three Newcastle vehicular ferries which had been made re-dundant by the recent opening of the Stockton Bridge. He had also bought the ex Show Boat "Sydney Queen" which was in Sydney. A tug had been chartered in Manila and was bound for Sydney to bring the "Sydney Queen" to Newcastle. The tug would then tow the four ferries together to Manila. He asked me to meet him at the vehicular ferries so that I could explain the Department's requirements for the tow in detail. An inspection was arranged for that day.

Details of the vehicular ferries are:-

- "LUMAGURENA" 578 tons gross, built in Cheshire U.K. in 1925 to Lloyds class. Taken out of class in 1926. Length 187.0 ft. (O.A.), breadth 35.6ft., maximum draft 11.5ft.
- "KOONDOLLOO" 526 tons gross built Leith U.K. 1924 to Lloyds class. Taken out of class 1926. Length 191.6 ft. (O.A.), breadth 35.7ft., maximum draft 11.5ft.
- "KOGROONGABA" 313 tons gross, built 1921 Newcastle N.S.W. Length 145.6ft.(O.A.), breadth 38.5ft., maximum draft 8.5ft.
- "SYDNEY QUEEN" Precise details not known. Understood to have been built in U.K. about same time as "Koondooloo", to same design and size, as a vehicular ferry. Later converted to "Show Boat".

The three Newcastle ferries are coal burning steamships and were in continuous service until the opening of the Stockton Bridge last November. They were maintained to Maritime Services Board survey requirements as passenger vessels and were docked at least once a year, sometimes more often. The M.S.B. surveyor responsible for hull and machinery over the last few years states that the hull and machinery of all three were quite sound and all hull openings were in very good condition. The boilers were nearing the end of their useful life.

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It is understood that the "Sydney Queen" had been laid up in Sydney for the past nine years approximately and that she has not been docked in that time. This vessel was converted from coal to oil burning some time ago.

"Lurgarena", "Loandooloo" and "Sydney Queen" were delivered from the U.K. to Australia under their own power. All four ferries are of steel, riveted, single bottom, bar keel construction. The hulls are divided into fourteen watertight compartments as shown in the attached sketch. Watertight doors are fitted in the bulkheads between the engine-boiler-bunker spaces. There is a rudder and propeller at each end. The engine and boiler casings are contained within the deckhouse. Doors in the casings lead below to the engine and boiler rooms. There is a deck opening each end leading to the bunker and store spaces.

On 17th November 1971 the Newcastle ferries were inspected with Mr. White. I requested that:-

1. The windows in the lower tier deck house have steel plates welded over them.
2. The deck openings to the bunker & store compartments have steel plates welded over them.
3. Ventilator cowls on the main deck be removed and have steel plates welded over the vent coamings.
4. Deck house doors leading from the open deck to spaces below to be re-inforced.
(Note: Deck house fitted with scuppers draining to open deck).
5. Air and filling pipes to side fresh water tanks to be securely covered.
6. Spurling pipes* to be plugged with cement.
7. Rudders to be secured amidships.
8. Vehicle access ramps to be secured upright.
9. Watertight doors between engine-boiler-bunker spaces to be closed. Other watertight bulkhead and hull penetrations to be appropriately secured.
10. Towage and navigation light arrangements which were to be arranged by the tug to be to a surveyor's satisfaction.

Mr. White agreed to the above ten requests and made arrangements to put them into effect. In view of their current U.S.B. survey record I said that a survey aficat would be sufficient to satisfy myself that the hulls were seaworthy. This survey was carried out on subsequent visits and the hulls were found to be sound. The above 10 items were completed before sailing and the three Newcastle ferries were then

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* The spurling pipe (aka navel pipe) is where the anchor chain goes from the deck down into the chain locker, where it's stored.

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in a seaworthy condition for the voyage about to be undertaken. It was agreed that the tugs would be unmanned and that no cargo would be carried.

On 22nd December 1971 the tug "Polaris" arrived in Newcastle with the "Sydney Queen". "Polaris" is an ex U.S. Naval tug of World War II origin, gross tonnage 573 tons, 2000 B.H.P. and 19 tons bollard pull. It is specially designed and built for ocean towage and the master states that he has had nine years experience in command of this vessel. "Polaris" is one of a number of ocean going tugs owned by a Manila based company, is manned by Filipinos and is registered in Panama. Current SOLAS Convention Certificates were sighted on board.

The towing arrangements were discussed with the master at some length on several occasions. Because of the amount of growth on the hull of "Sydney Queen" the master was a little concerned that he might not be able to maintain sufficient speed towing the four ferries. Eventually he received instructions from his owners in Manila to proceed with the four. He agreed with me that if he could not make 4½ knots from Newcastle to Port Stephens he would return and drop off the "Sydney Queen". I advised Mr. White that as the vessel would have to be docked eventually it would be preferable to do it here and remove the heavy hull growth. He was not agreeable to this but in view of the arrangement with the master I did not press the matter. As it happened later, "Polaris" made 5½ knots from Newcastle to Port Stephens and it can be taken that the hull growth did not retard the tow unduly. It was also considered that the tug had more than adequate horsepower to manage the four ferries because of their relatively small displacement.

Another matter discussed with the master was whether the even trim of the ferries should be altered to trim by the stern by filling some of the aftertanks with water ballast. After due consideration the master said he would prefer the tanks empty for the extra freeboard and no objection was raised to this. All vessels sailed with even trim. The three larger ferries were drawing about 11 feet and the "Koorangaba" about 8 feet. All vessels were upright.

During a phone conversation with Captain G. Ross on another matter it was ascertained that "Polaris" had left Sydney with the "Sydney Queen" without a surveyor having checked that certain closing arrangements had been effected. He told me what closing arrangements Mr. White had been requested to make in Sydney. I checked here and found that this had been done, and that the arrangements were satisfactory. While strengthening of the deck in the way of "Sydney Queen's" towing attachments here, a hole was found in the fore peak above the waterline. This hole was about 30 square inches in area and was satisfactorily covered with a metal plate and cement box. This type of repair was considered sufficient in view of the relatively small size of the compartment and the fact that the hole was above the waterline.

The towing arrangements were as described in the attached sketch and were inspected and found satisfactory before departure. Satisfactory arrangements were made for the exhibition of the lights and shapes required by the Navigation (Collision) Regulations. Boarding ladders were not considered necessary as the vessels were small and could be easily boarded without a ladder from the tug's motor boat.

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On 1st January 1972 the tug left the berth assisted by a harbour tug. The tow had been shortened up on temporary ropes with the tow wires flaked ready for streaming when clear of the harbour. While negotiating the entrance channel between the breakwaters the "Kooroengaba" accidentally broke her temporary ropes and strained herself prematurely on the 700 ft. nylon tow rope. She veered out of the channel and, according to various eye witnesses came well within 100 feet of the northern breakwater. At the time it was dead low water, spring tides. The harbour master's detailed soundings cease within 100 feet from the breakwater. The pilot of the tug and the assistant harbour master who was watching from Neutys Signal Station are of the opinion that the "Kooroengaba" did not touch bottom. This opinion is apparently based on the manner in which the ferry moved and not on any detailed knowledge of the clear depth of water within 100 feet of the breakwater. The breakwater is constructed of very large concrete blocks which extend some distance out below low tide water level towards the channel. There is a distinct possibility that "Kooroengaba" could have scraped across one of these blocks without any change in her movement noticeable to the pilot or assistant harbour master who were some distance away.

On 3rd January 1972 "Kooroengaba" sank in about 56 fathoms of water off Crewdy Head. Details of this event are contained in the copies of Search and Rescue Log Sheets Nos. No 291, 292 & 293 previously forwarded to you.

The sinking and subsequent events attracted much press coverage on the 4th and 5th of January and there were confirmed press reports that the other ferries were taking water and that the tug itself was in difficulties. No further information on the matter had been received by this office from Sydney Radio or from Mr. White. It is understood that Mr. White is the owner of the ferries, the charterer of the tug and owner's agent for the tug. No other shipping agency to my knowledge has been involved in this matter.

On the 5th January it was learnt from the U.S.B. District Officer at South West Rocks that the vessels were off Trial Bay. The ferries were to be moored to the three tanker mooring buoys in bay and the tug would anchor. The precise reason for the vessel's entering Trial Bay was not clear. At your request I proceeded to South West Rocks and arrived there on the evening of 5th January. The tug and three ferries were still standing off the port, apparently shortening up the tow to negotiate the shallower water. I spoke to Mr. White who was in South West Rocks and he said the vessels would moor the following morning. He was apparently not sure himself of the full reason for the diversion to Trial Bay. I gathered the impression that although he appeared quite co-operative, he was reluctant to keep me fully informed.

"Polaris" dropped off "Langarena" in Trial Bay mid morning on 6th January and the fishing vessel "Yessabah" towed it to the mooring. By mid-day the seasonal sea breeze had started and conditions were too rough for the fishing vessel to attempt to take the other ferries to the buoys. During the afternoon I went with Mr. White in the "Yessabah" to have a look at the ferries. It was too rough to board the tug which was standing out to sea but we were able to approach the ferries quite closely. They were riding quite comfortably in apparently the same state of draught and trim as when they left Newcastle. All vessels were upright. There was some damage

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*Flake: the laying down of a rope coil in circular fashion where each loop is called a flake.

TUG "POLARIS" - TOWAGE OF FOUR FERRIES TO MANILA NO' 68/30 24.1.72

to the fendering of two ferries and it was observed that "Sydney Queen" had a hole in the forepeak. The hole appeared to be in the area of the cement box repair referred to earlier in this report. When the bow entered a wave some water would enter the forepeak and then drain out again on clearing the wave. It was also noted that the bow rudder on "Kocodooloo" was hard over to port. Returning, I was able to board "Lurgurena" at the buoy. She also was in the same draught and trim as leaving Newcastle. It was obvious that she had not been taking in water. Closing appliances fitted to openings in the hull in Newcastle were still intact and it was readily apparent that no seas had been shipped. There was some slight damage to the bow ramp. During this inspection it was noted that "Lurgurena" had been moored to the buoy with a single 5 inch circ. sisal rope which was already showing signs of chafe. Though not my responsibility, I advised the skipper of "Yessabah" that it would be prudent to moor with the chain towing bridle which was available on deck. He said the chain was too heavy to handle. I demonstrated that the chain could be hauled out to the buoy with a rope messenger without too much trouble. They compromised by putting out a second rope the same size as the first and also made an attempt to ease the chafing. I advised them that the mooring would probably last out the night provided the weather was good. There was at the time quite a surge at the buoys.

During the morning of 7th January the remaining ferries were moored and "Polaris" anchored in Trial Bay. I boarded the tug and spoke to the master about the sinking of "Kocrocmgaba". He could offer no reason for the sinking, saying that the vessel was observed to be down by the head at daylight on 3rd January. Shortly before she sank he observed a great cloud of black dust expelled out of the funnel. He then turned back and broke the tow between "Kocodooloo" and "Kocrocmgaba". While doing this the tow line from "Lurgurena" fouled the tug's propeller. He was able to cut this adrift and re-secure "Lurgurena" with a temporary tow rope. This rope was very light and towing speed had to be reduced to two knots to avoid breaking it.

As it was not practicable to continue the tow to Manila at two knots the master had to seek a convenient port to anchor and obtain a new tow line for "Lurgurena". He chose Trial Bay after declining to return south to Port Stephens and after having been refused permission by the M.S.B. to use Coff's Harbour. There was no other reason, he said, for entering Trial Bay. The weather after leaving Newcastle had been quite good and although there was still a little rope around his propeller, it was of no hindrance. A diver cleared it in a few minutes while I was aboard.

Because of transport difficulties I was able to make only a brief inspection of "Kocodooloo" and "Sydney Queen" from a launch. They were in the same state of draught and trim as leaving Newcastle and apart from the hole in the small fore peak of "Sydney Queen" did not appear to have taken in any water. It was obvious that seas had not been shipped aboard. However, like "Lurgurena" they were moored to the buoys with fibre rope and I again expressed the opinion that they should be moored using the chain towing bridle. Up until the time I left South West Rocks for Newcastle on the afternoon of 7th January, this advice had not been taken. All the ferries broke their moorings and beached themselves in Trial Bay

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TUG "POLARIS" - TOWAGE OF FOUR FERRIES TO MANILA

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several days later.

But for the sinking of "Koorongaba" the whole tow would probably have completed over half the voyage to Manila by now. My comments on the sinking of this vessel are:

1. "Koorongaba's" hull was without any doubt in a sound and seaworthy condition before leaving the berth in Newcastle on January 1st.
2. The vessel sank because of water entering the hull.
3. In view of the good weather, the closing precautions taken in Newcastle and judging by the appearances of the other ferries it is quite definite that the vessel did not take water in through any dock opening nor did it suffer hull damage through stress of weather.
4. Water entered the hull initially in the engine room and probably the accommodation/stores space for'd. of it. (There is insufficient information available to determine how much loss of buoyancy would be required to sink the vessel). From the master's description of the sudden cloud of black dust expelled from the funnel just before sinking it is evident that this was caused by a sudden collapse of the watertight bulkhead between the engine and boiler rooms. The sudden inrush of water would force out years of accumulation of coal dust. Rupture of the bulkhead probably near its base could also possibly have breached the bottom in that area.
5. The cause of the initial entry of water is not known for certain. The possibilities are:-
 - (a) Damage due to striking some submerged object at sea. This is most unlikely.
 - (b) Damage caused by collision with another vessel in the tow while the tug was stopped. It is understood that "Polaris" did stop several times and some of the ferries in Trail Bay were observed to have sustained fender damage. As "Kcondooloo" and "Koorongaba" were connected with floating nylon rope they are the least likely to have collided due to weight of towline drawing them together. Besides, because of their shape such collision damage could only affect side or peak tanks. The side tanks were not damaged as the vessel sank upright and breaching of the peak tanks would not be significant.
 - (c) There is a possibility that the vessel was sunk deliberately but there is no evidence at all to substantiate this. If the ferries were not insured as Mr. White has stated then such a possibility is hardly likely.

-/1

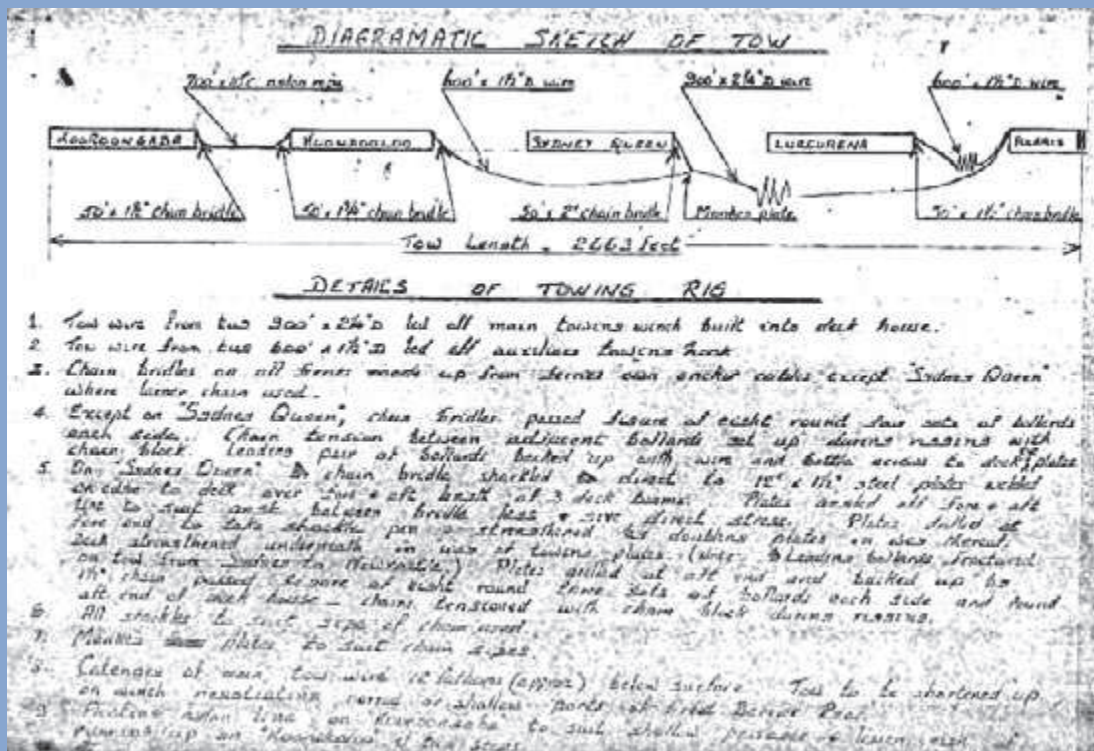
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TUG "EGLANIE" - TOWAGE OF FOUR FERRIES TO MANILA NO' 66/30 24.1.72

(a) Damage to the bottom caused by striking a submerged rock or concrete block close to the northern breakwater at Newcastle. Such damage could have quite easily occurred without it being apparent at the time. Had a line of rivets been sprung, possibly over two compartments, flooding could have progressed at a slow but ever increasing rate without the tug being aware of it for some time. This possibility is considered the most likely.

Damage to fendering and a bow ramp were most likely caused by the ferries colliding with each other while stopped. This is probably also the cause of the hole in the fore peak of the "Sydney Queen" and the "Mechanic's" bow rudder becoming un-secured.

J. O. ...
Senior Surveyor (Marine) Newcastle



These papers were almost illegible in the first place, but you should be able to make out most of what they contain by enlarging the page. However, the last diagram fades off into incomprehensibility despite my best efforts with Photoshop to elucidate it.

I found this to be a most interesting document. Not only does it fill in lots of detail about the tow and the sensible precautions that were taken as a matter of course before the authorities would permit the long voyage to begin, but, significantly, it offers a wholly new slant on how the ex-punts came to end up being washed onto the beach. According to the Marine Surveyor from Newcastle it wasn't the sorry litany of bumbling incompetence and language difficulties that it had generally been made out to be. It was more an accident that had its origins in one event that set off a chain of unanticipated other events, namely the probable underwater damage sustained by the Koroongaba on its way out of Newcastle. If this hadn't happened the Koroongaba wouldn't have sunk, the tow wouldn't have been interrupted and the Polaris wouldn't have got towlines entangled in its propellor. Moreover, the flotilla would not have had to put into Trial Bay to pick up heavier towlines, its speed would have remained around 5.5 knots, and the whole tow would probably have made it to Manila as originally expected. In all my researches this was the only document I found that suggested this way of looking at the strandings.

I was enthusing about this document to my mate Lorraine, who has had a fair bit to do with authorities of various kinds in her chequered career. Her comment was a sardonic one, suggesting that if Quinlan was the bloke who had ordered the safety measures to be taken in preparation for the long tow, (and he was), then it would be in his interest to find a way to look at things that exonerated him from any responsibility for the whole imbroglio. She could well have a point. Nonetheless, I still find it pretty persuasive.

The other document that I found interesting was one written by the Master of the Polaris, Benito Cirera (see next page). Given his important role in the whole sorry mess I'll include it in full, too – especially since it suggests, as does the Surveyor's Minute, that he was more competent than he was generally given credit for. I wonder if it would have been so easily assumed that he wasn't all that competent if he had not been a Philippino? I suspect that any local fisherman with a touch of xenophobia who was downing schooners at the South West Rocks pub would probably think that they could have handled it all better than Benito did, no matter how competent he might have been.

Captain Cirera's competence was further confirmed by the Department of Shipping's Regional Controller, L.W.B. Taylor in a letter to the Departmental Secretary in Canberra on February 7, 1973: *Whereas the towing of four vessels by one tug is unusual, I do not consider that the Surveyors or the Department could be held blameworthy for not having objected to the proposal. Ocean towage is a specialised field and it will be noted that the Master had had nine years experience in command of Polaris.*

The sinking of the Koroongaba is unexplained but may have resulted from damage to the hull when leaving Newcastle. The three remaining vessels could have been reconnected in a safe harbour if the Surveyor's advice to proceed to Port Stephens had been followed.

However, this letter can also be construed as another example of Departmental spin on the affair if you choose to see it that way, in much the same way as we saw with the report of the measures that were ordered to be taken to prepare the Sydney Queen when she left Sydney (see chapter 6). The local authorities must have been making things a bit hot for the skipper of the Polaris, Captain Cirera, because he called his document a "note of protest" in an attempt to rebut whatever charges that had been made against him that he felt he needed to make a formal protest about.

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m/t "POLARIS"

Port of: Trial Bay

Date: 7th Jan. 1972

M A R I N E N O T E O F P R O T E S T

C

I, BENITO B. CIERA, Master of the motor tug m/t "POLARIS" of Panama, hereby states that on the 3rd January 1972 while enroute from Newcastle, N. S. W., Australia to Manila, Philippines towing the Showboat s/s "SYDNEY QUEEN" and three car ferries the s/s "LUNGURANA", s/s "KOONDOLLOO" and s/s "KOOROONGABA" around the vicinity of Crowdy Head at 0540 hours, was informed by the Chief Officer then the officer on watch that the last tow, the s/s "KOOROONGABA" was down by the head.

O

After verifying and considering the situation and hoping to save subject tow, I directed my course for the shore. At this instant only a short portion of the forward deck was submerged and based on my estimated speed and distance I can reach the sandy shores of Harrington about 1030 hours.

P

At 0720 hours after I called standby the 3rd Officer advised me that the forward lifeboat was already afloat and it was found out that half of the entire deck was already underwater. I gave orders to make ready the lifeboat for launching.

Y

At 0810 hours in position Lat. $31^{\circ} 55.5' S$ Long. $152^{\circ} 54.5'$ the s/s "KOOROONGABA" sunk at a depth of 56 fathoms. I ordered to lower the lifeboat and sent crew to cut the chain bridle on the s/s "KOONDOLLOO" which was connected with the penant of s/s "KOOROONGABA".

At the sudden stop caused by the sinking of the last tow, the lead tow the s/s "LUNGURANA" which was heaving and independent penant, swift past the tug on the starboard hand and owing to breeze northeasterly drifted around the bow until she was well to the leeward and her penant fouled with the tug's propeller.

But most of the letters in the files are taken up with efforts by all concerned to get someone else to look after the mess. Very early on after the stranding we see letters from the MSB claiming that they cannot be held responsible, and similar claims soon surface from the Department of Shipping and Transport saying much the same thing. Macleay Shire Council feature on a regular basis with dogged requests to anyone and everyone they can think of to get rid of all the wrecks, no matter what. They would send letters demanding the removal of the wrecks on a monthly basis – a routine task after every Council meeting.

This process continued all through 1972 and 1973, and by 1974 the wrecks were so firmly embedded in the sand that the general consensus was that the Sydney Queen and the Lurgurena were unsalvageable, but that the Koondooloo was possible to remove since it was pretty well ashore and largely out of the surf. The Army was called in to see if they thought they could use explosives to get rid of the hulks, but someone realised that the use of explosives could jeopardise the oil pipeline on the seabed that tankers used to discharge oil into onshore tanks at South West Rocks, so that was ruled out. Then they got the Navy in to see if they wanted to take on removing the wrecks as a training exercise, but after an investigation of what would be needed the Navy declined this offer of hands-on experience for its men, saying that the risk of injury to the personnel doing the job was too high.

The Sydney Morning Herald of February 9, 1974 carried the following story: *Cyclone Pam has spelt the final death knell for the Sydney Queen, once the famed showboat of Sydney Harbour... The car ferries... have been almost buried in sand (since 1972), but the superstructure and the smokestack of the Sydney Queen remained to recall its former life. Now, after the cyclone, only the hull remains. The timber and steel that gave that skeleton flesh lie in the sandhills.*

During all this the local Council was still bombarding every authority it could think of with its demands to just get the damn things off the beach – they didn't care how, just so long as they were taken away somehow. They got Robin Askin to state that he would see that they were removed, but nothing came of this. Ian Robinson, the local Member, must have got sick of sending letters to the Minister for Transport on the request of Council, and the Minister, similarly, must have got sick of replying in a non-committal way. Come mid-1975, the Council had taken to writing direct to the Prime Minister, who at the time was Gough Whitlam. Gough would have had a lot on his mind at the time as the political situation in the country ground inexorably towards The Dismissal, but he still managed a reply in which he accepted that the Commonwealth had the power to legislate for the removal and that they would take over responsibility for removing the wrecks.

By early 1975 it had been pretty much agreed (but not by the local Council, of course) that the Sydney Queen and the Lurgurena would have to be left where they lay, and that tenders should be called for the removal of the Koondooloo.

It took an age to sort out the tendering process, but by the end of 1975 they had several quotes for the removal of the Koondooloo, and the one they favoured was of the order of \$98,000. (It was estimated that it would cost in the vicinity of a million dollars to remove the other two vessels). But the request to the Federal Government for funds to remove the Koondooloo weren't forthcoming, because, by the time they made the request, Gough had gone from office, and Peter Nixon had become the Minister for Transport. He worded the Government's backdown thus: *The situation now is that we have to get the economy on its feet and non-productive government expenditure naturally must stop. I am sure that you will appreciate that I could not ask my colleagues to agree that high priority should attach to expenditures on this*

*kind of wreck removal, especially when we previously took the view that the matter was really one for New South Wales. In other words, “you might have talked Gough into doing something about the wrecks, but we’re in power now and we couldn’t give a stuff”. The Council’s response to this was reminiscent of *The Mouse that Roared*, in that they sent the new government a telegram and a following letter, huffing that it was all unacceptable, and still unrealistically insisting that *all three* wrecks be removed. As before, nobody took any notice.*

Here’s an edited extract from the editorial in the Mid-Coast Observer of December 11, 1975. It sums up how things looked to the general public four years after the strandings:

The friendly foundering ferry, the Koondooloo is in the news again with the newly-formed Kempsey Shire Council taking over from the departed Macleay Shire Council, in doing something about getting its bulk shifted from the shifting sands of South West Rocks. (Description of how the Koondooloo became stranded with the other two vessels.)... According to Tourist Officer Val Melville the wrecks are still drawing tourists to the township in spite of the fact that as each day passes they bury themselves a little deeper in the sand.

The Government ruled out the idea of removing all three wrecks – as the talking figure was in the millions, so settled for the removal of the Koondooloo to the tune of about \$100,000. The last tender was rejected so another is to be called next year. By then, costs would have so escalated that the new tender price will no doubt be higher than the rejected one.

In the meantime the Shire Council is probably wishing them to hell, the Transport Minister who was is probably wishing he had never heard of South West Rocks and sitting Federal Member Ian Robinson is probably praying that the awkward subject will not be raised during his campaigning. Val Melville is no doubt making her own supplication that the good ship Koondooloo and her bedmates will remain in situ as long as the tourists keep rolling up.

So everyone agreed that they would call Tenders again the next year (1976). Somehow that didn’t happen, and all three hulks remained rotting away. Unfortunately the archival record stops at 1977 (because later correspondence comes under the thirty-year rule of availability), and I was not able to get access to look for a document which clearly states that a decision had been taken to leave the Koondooloo where it was, along with the other two. It would have been interesting, too, to be able to turn up the correspondence wherein the Council was forced to bow to the inevitable, but ferreting out such a documents will have to wait another year or so till the records involved are declared open to public scrutiny.

So, in a way, it all worked out OK in the end, though the authorities didn’t seem to foresee what would happen. Or perhaps they knew only too well what they were doing all along. Much the same sort of process was set in train when the Sygna was stranded on Stockton Beach some years ago, and you could see the beginnings of the process starting all over again when the Pasha Bulker looked for a few days as though it was about to become a fixture on Nobbys Beach late in 2007. By stalling and duckshoving responsibility back and forth for long enough, the authorities (inadvertently?) let nature do the job of getting rid of the wrecks for them. Given enough time the problem solved itself and nobody had to pay in the end and everyone was happy. Except, probably, Stuart White.

In a telephone conversation I had with Ron Parsons of the Australian Maritime

Historical Society in South Australia, I mentioned that it seemed to be all the bureaucratic buck-passing that resulted in the punts eventually being left on the beach to rot away. He pointed out that this is pretty much always the case with maritime matters like this. Instead of working to solve the problem of salvage, the primary aim of all the authorities involved is always to work at making sure that they are not the instrumentality that ends up having to pay for it all. (It's beginning to sound like an episode of *Yes, Minister for Shipping*, isn't it?). Ron's view was that it would be surprising really, when you think it through, for it to be any other way. The owner was bankrupt, the wrecks were virtually worthless, and they weren't in the way of any shipping lanes. Nobody could win whatever they did, because the cost of salvage was huge, and over time had become even huger, and there was no way anyone could get any of the money back. Even if they had been able to oxy them up on the beach and haul away the scrap, the scrap would have been so expensive that no scrap dealer would be interested in it. At ordinary scrap prices they would have recovered very little of the expense.

If you visit Trial Bay these days you'll see no sign of the wrecks, and there's nothing in the way of a public monument to commemorate their demise. When Lorraine and I were first there late in 2006 there was one samson post visible – one of the posts that were used to raise and lower the flaps – standing about a metre above the sand in the middle of the beach like a rusty sentinel. By the time we again visited a year later, even that had disappeared.

Vale the car punts of Newcastle. The hard-working old girls live on in the fond memories of those who knew them and loved them and travelled on them and worked on them, and, I hope, in books like this.



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