

FEATURE - BY GEOFF WALKER



THE SINKING OF THE S.S. QUETTA



The fate of the S.S. Quetta was first brought to my attention by a Barrier Reef Pilot that had been engaged to pilot my vessel through the Torres Straits. Spending many hours on the bridge during the tricky passage with little to do other than monitor the navigation, talk to the Pilot, and drink a bottomless pot of coffee, I became engrossed in the tale of the sinking of the S.S. Quetta, on an uncharted rock in the Adolphus Channel, on what is now known as “Quetta Rock”, situated in the eastern approaches to the Torres Straits.

The RMS Quetta was a British-India Steam Navigation Company liner that travelled between England, India, Australia, and the Far East. The Quetta was a state of the art, single screw steamer, schooner rigged, and steel hulled. With a gross tonnage of 3,302 and powered by a 490 nhp compound steam engine driving a four bladed propeller, the ship also had three masts which carried sails for extra speed, resulting in here being a fast ship for her day, with a service speed of about 14 knots. She provided superior accommodation for 72 First Class, and 32 Second Class passengers.

The Queensland Government had negotiated to have a regular service between the United Kingdom and Brisbane, to facilitate the passage of people and mail. RMS Quetta was specifically designed and built for the Australia run, with refrigeration and the capacity to carry frozen meat in special lockers. The ship was launched in March 1881, from the W. Denny & Brothers Ltd. shipyard, at Dumbarton and made her maiden voyage to Brisbane in 1883. The designation RMS indicated the ship's role within the Queensland Royal Mail Service.

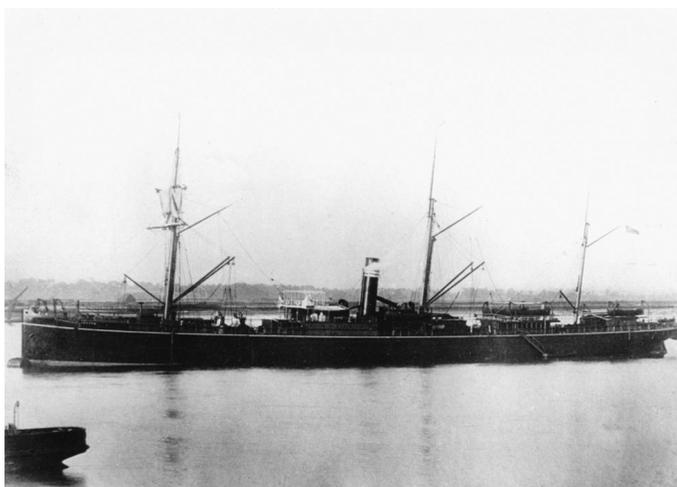
The Quetta was built following the Queensland Government's lobbying for a regular service between Europe and Brisbane to assist with increasing passenger, freight, and mail demand, a result of the expanding State of Queensland. The subsequent loss of life, cargo, and the ship itself, caused public outrage with demands for beacons and accurate charts for these treacherous waters, to minimize the risks of further shipwrecks and to ensure greater safety at sea.

On 27th February 1890, the Quetta departed from Cooktown for Thursday Island, at the top end of Australia in the Torres Straits. Onboard were 291 people, 33 in Saloon (First) Class, 65 Steerage (Second) class and 71 (Deck) class. The crew made up the rest of the numbers.

The next evening the Quetta was approaching Adolphus Channel. The Captain left the Pilot and Third Officer on the bridge, while he went to dinner. At 7.45pm he returned to the bridge and was satisfied, that everything was safe. At 9.10 pm the Pilot ordered a change of direction to north-west to compensate for the strong currents. The Captain was on the bridge at this time and within a few minutes, the Quetta hit the hitherto uncharted rock, without any warning. Typical of most nights in the Torres Straits, it was clear, calm, and moonlit, when the Quetta had entered Adolphus Channel on her 12th round voyage. Onboard were many eminent Queensland families, mail, and valuable cargo.

Captain Sanders immediately ordered the engine stopped, and for the lifeboats to be made ready for embarkation of those onboard. The ship quickly started settling by the head, but unknown to those on the bridge, the stokehold crew were already dead, drowned by the sudden ingress of seawater. The Captain went forward and saw that the water was already level with the forecastle. He called out to the passengers on deck to move aft. The forward hatch cover was blown off, as the water came in from below and forced the air up. The people standing on it were blown overboard.

The catastrophic damage to the ship was caused by hitting the uncharted rock. The keel of the ship at the bow was bent back and a



The Quetta off Gravesend in 1884.

gaping hole was ripped across the hull at the collision bulkhead. The ship was doomed as the hole was so large the massive ingress of water was always going to flood in faster than any pump could remove it.

The now heavier, and deeper, bow, caused the sinking ship to pivot around the bow as the fast-flowing currents yawed the stern, from side to side. The ship had now drifted north and was listing heavily to port. This meant that only half the lifeboats were able to be launched. Two lifeboats were launched and within three minutes of hitting the rock, the Quetta sank bow first. The Captain scrambled up the mizzen rigging and kicked off his shoes before the ship plunged to her watery grave. The Pilot handed out life jackets before he too was forced into the water.

Captain Sanders made it into one of the lifeboats which held a total of 80 survivors. His boat only had two oars, so passengers used their hands and anything else they could find, to assist with the rowing. The other boat passed his, headed for Little Adolphus Island. The first boat dropped its passengers on the island and returned to the wreck site to look for more survivors. They only found a few. At 1.30 am on 1st March 1890, Captain Sanders' lifeboat made it to Little Adolphus Island, four miles north of the wreck site.

The next morning, at around 5.30 am, the Captain, Pilot and eight crew members took one lifeboat and set off for Somerset, a small settlement on the Pacific Ocean side of Cape York. Today all that is left here are the ruins of some buildings and some graves. After first landing at Albany Island, they arrived at Somerset at 10.30 am.

Here, Frank Jardine, who the Jardine River is named after, gathered a crew of his staff and they set off to the wreck site to look for more survivors. At the same time a man set off on horseback with a telegram written by Captain Sanders. This was taken 16 miles across Cape York to Paterson Telegraph Station. Just before 2.00pm, the telegram was handed to the Administrator of Thursday Island, John Douglas, the former Premier of Queensland.

Within one hour the Queensland Government steamer, Albatross was underway under the command of Captain David Reid. The New Guinea Government steamer Merrie England, was also at Thursday Island and she too set sail for the Adolphus Islands, with water and provisions. The pilot cutter Eileen, also headed to the scene of the tragedy.

Jardine's staff in the lifeboat had already found and rescued several people found clinging to wreckage, flotsam and life belts. They also found the body of Dr J. Harry Poland, the ship's surgeon, and

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A drawing of the SS Quetta in the Torres Strait at 9.15pm and 9.18 pm on 28th February 1890. The first drawing shows the Quetta before foundering and the second shows the shipwreck.

The scroll in the picture says:

"Thy way is in the sea, and thy paths in the great waters and thy footsteps are not known"

(State Library of Queensland)

another male. Two people were seen on Achoineh Island.

Meanwhile, Captain Sanders had hailed down the passing ship SS Victoria. They immediately turned about and headed back north and when they came across the Albatross, Sanders transferred to her. The Victoria then continued her voyage south. The Albatross collected the 98 survivors from Little Adolphus Island. This included, a 2 years old girl, whose family appeared to have died in the sinking. She had been supported in the water for several hours by Mutassa Clark, a Cingalese engine room crewman. She was the only child out of the 25 onboard to survive.

All the survivors were then transferred to the Merrie England which took them back to Thursday Island. The baby's real identity was never established, and she was later adopted by Torres Strait pilot, Captain Edmond Lechmere Brown and his wife Marjorie. She was named Cecil (Cissy) Lechmere Brown but was known far and wide as Quetta Brown. She passed away in 1949.

In the final reckoning, 134 out of the 292 people on board died when the Quetta sank, the greatest loss of life in Australia's maritime records, at that time.

As Captain Reid turned the Albatross around Cambridge Point towards Achoineh Island, he spotted what he first thought was a coconut in the water. This turned out to be another survivor, Emily Lacy a 16 year old Saloon passenger. She was delirious and badly sunburnt after spending 36 hours in the water. Initially she tried to fight off her rescuers, but eventually she was taken onboard. Her 13 years old sister died in the sinking.

Among the steerage passengers lost one particularly sad case was that of Mrs Jacobsen and family. Her husband was drowned in the Brisbane river during the recent floods, and a subscription was raised for her and passages taken by the Quetta for England, where she had friends. She and her four children all went down.

One of the saloon passengers, numbered among the missing, was on his way to take over a fortune of between £50,000 and £60,000 which he had just inherited. He had been working for 20s a week for some months past, and paid a premium of £20 above saloon fare to secure a berth by the ill fated ship at the last moment.

Another passenger, supposed to be lost, insured his life in Brisbane for £500 before leaving. He was on his way to some gold-fields in Batavia.

A few days after the tragedy, the Albatross set off again, this time with Captain Sanders, Captain Keatinge, Third Officer Babb, the local priest, Reverend Maclaren and Police Sub-inspector Savage onboard. They headed to the location where Captain Keatinge claimed the Quetta had sank. Immediately, they located the wreck, it was obvious by the way the tidal flow was pushed up by the wreck forming a whirlpool on the surface. This still happens today. Soundings using lead weights attached to rope lines, the old way of checking your depth, established the wreck was at between 6 and 13 fathoms, or in today's jargon, 11 to 24 meters.

The wreck was marked with a buoy and the boat then headed to Achoineh Island where they buried Dr Poland and the other male. They then went to Somerset. No other bodies were found. At Somerset, Frank Jardine advised that his men had saved 36 people and recovered the bodies of another 45 who they had buried at sea.

The next morning the Albatross headed south searching for more bodies and presumably looking for survivors on islands. Without finding anything, they headed north following the Quetta's track eventually arriving back to the wreck site.

In November 1890, a diver named Anderson, who had previously been diving on the wreck, once again dived on the wreck, but this time he was attempting to salvage cargo, specifically 60 tons of silver and tin ingots being carried in the rear hold. This had been loaded at Port Douglas. He was assisted by other divers. They placed dynamite charges on the starboard hull above the rear hold. These were detonated by battery from his ship located above the wreck.

The hull was successfully blown open, but the divers, using hard protective head gear, encountered clouds of wool and tallow that had been swept up from the hold. They eventually salvaged all the ingots, valued at over £7,000. They also recovered other items including personal papers, clothing, and jewelry. In the process, they also recovered the ship's bell which is now at the Quetta Memorial Church, on Thursday Island.

The rocky outcrop which the ship struck, became known as the Quetta Rock. In 1981 the wreck of the Quetta gained protection under the Historic Shipwrecks Act 1977. To this day it remains one of Australia's worst maritime disasters.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, the Master and Pilot, who had been following Admiralty Chart sailing directions, were exonerated of any negligence. Marine surveys of the Torres Strait began just months later and all recovered mail was subsequently collected from the sea and delivered. By 1915 the Commonwealth had assumed responsibility for building and maintaining all lighthouses and navigational aids in the Torres Straits and Great Barrier Reef.