

That sinking feeling...

There have been over 300 maritime disasters off our shores. *GO Magazine* pays its respects and re-visits the memory of the most famous in recent years – The Sygna

STORY Carol Duncan PHOTOS Simone de Peak

Shipwrecks and rescues have been part of Newcastle since Europeans first came here and this is the sort of situation that exemplifies the 'can-do' attitude of people here. Everyone gets in to try to help."

So says Deb Mastello, the curator of the Newcastle Maritime Centre, which is located on the water's edge at Honeysuckle where the first load of coal to leave the port of Newcastle was sent to Sydney for international export over 200 years ago (1799). Newcastle is now the world's largest coal export port and a great powerhouse of the Australian economy.

The city's dependence upon the sea for trade has come at a high price. The waters in and around the port littered with shipwrecks. Ironically, these water-born tragedies are also a boon for tourism as numerous visitors head to the region to see the wrecks. Some sit forlornly above the waterline, while others are a magnet for divers and fishermen.

Perhaps the most famous of those is the

Sygna, a 53,000-ton Norwegian bulk carrier that ran aground in a ferocious storm on 26 May 1974. Much of the eastern seaboard was ravaged by the storm, officially declared a cyclone, and the stern section of the Sygna remains a potent reminder of that day.

The storm of 1974 was in many ways similar to the 2007 storm that left the Pasha

and truly hard aground when I got there and the photo we took that morning showed the ship starting to buckle in the centre.

"The seas were huge and the photographer with me, Ken Robson, had a gammy leg. He was posing me in front of the ship for his photos and we were the only people on the beach at the time. Ken said,

"Wave height buoys were reading 14.8m or nearly 50 feet, the biggest sea recorded off Newcastle to that point"

Bulker stranded high and dry on Nobby's Beach, just on the other side of Newcastle Harbour. Fortunately, all that remains today of the Pasha Bulker is its rudder, which has been turned into a public artwork.

When the Sygna met its fate 33 years earlier, local journalist Vic Levi was one of the first on the scene. "The wreck was well

'just get out a little bit further towards the ship.' I was in my overcoat, it was a miserable day. I had my trousers rolled up and this bloody wave came around the stern of the boat and engulfed us both. We both went down with it but Ken kept his hand with his camera in it above the water and took the photograph that went around the world."



1974 - Locals contend with 160km/h winds to keep the flying fox line taught *INSET* The luckless Mr Yamada and his salvage crew Brad and Laurie March and Peter Alcock

Laurie March is a member of the Merewether Surf Life Saving Club which provided assistance to the crew of the Sygna during the rescue and to the salvage team for the following month.

"Our jet rescue boat was kept at the Newcastle Harbour Pilot Station and when we went to collect it to assist with the rescue of the crew, they said, 'You're crazy. Have a look at this.' Their wave height buoys were reading 14.8m or nearly 50 feet, the biggest sea recorded off Newcastle to that point. We had great confidence in our 16-foot boat and said, 'We'll be right' and took off to help.

"The next day we put Captain Lund, the engineer and first mate back on board the Sygna so they could claim the ship. They'd been taken off by the airforce helicopter, but leaving the ship deserted meant that it was legally vulnerable flotsam and jetsam."

Laurie and the SLSC team were then hired by Mr Kintoku Yamada, the millionaire Japanese salvage expert who had paid \$150,000 for the rights to the now-ruined vessel.

"Mr Yamada paid the club to provide a safety backup. We had an amazing first aid kit and 26 life jackets. I said to him, 'Pretty big first aid kit, Mr Yamada', to which he replied, 'Pretty big accident if we have one!'"

Their major concern by now was the tow lines breaking. "Mr Yamada stayed at our home a few times, he was a real character. The first thing he did was put the Australian flag up and tied a bottle of sake to the mast for good luck."

Laurie describes Captain Lund of the Sygna as a real gentleman. "We would see him sometimes at the Great Northern Hotel for meals. He remained in Newcastle for a month or so after the accident but remained a life-long >>

Shipwreck roll of honour

THE SHIPWRECK WALK at Stockton – access from King Street – is an easy 2km walk along the Stockton breakwall, which was built over the top of numerous wrecks, including the Adolphe. Plaques along the wall tell the stories of 17 of the ships that have come to grief here.

The Adolphe was a French, four-masted barque that was being towed into the port by the tugs Hero and Victoria. In the rough seas, the Victoria's thick rope snapped. The Hero alone couldn't hold the Adolphe and the huge waves swept it onto the remains of another wreck, the Colonist. The rescue of the crew of the Adolphe remains as one of the great success stories of Newcastle's maritime history as all 47 lives were saved despite atrocious conditions.

The wreck of the Adolphe lies above not only the Colonist, but also the Lindus, Wendouree and the Cawarra – Newcastle's greatest maritime tragedy. In 1866, the Cawarra, a paddle steamer, was heading for Brisbane when it became caught up in rough seas along the east coast. As it headed into port to seek shelter it was hit by waves and sunk. Only one of its 61 passengers and crew survived. That same weather event was responsible for the sinking of 14 other ships between Sydney and Port Stephens.

The Australian Shipwrecks database shows the waters around Newcastle hold the secrets of over 300 maritime disasters, including the Yarra Yarra, which saw 17 lives lost, and the Susan Gilmore, which gives it's name to the beach it was wrecked upon – now also Newcastle's unofficial nudist beach!

Stockton Beach is a glorious 32km stretch of sand from Stockton in the south to Anna Bay in the north. Many local business offer escorted tours of Stockton Beach, the sand dunes and the Sygna wreck. It is also accessible by 4WD vehicle via Lavis Lane in Williamtown or two entrances in Anna Bay.

Strict conditions apply to taking vehicles onto the beach with a beach access permit also required. For more information about driving on the beach visit www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/parks/wclBeachDriving.pdf

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2011 - Veterans of that fateful day revisit the beach; LEFT TO RIGHT Lifesavers Stewie Hughes and Laurie March and journalist Vic Levi are joined by Deb Mastello, curator of the Newcastle Maritime Centre

"It's no longer safe for diving. The stern is corroding rapidly and getting much smaller. Steel is no match for salt water and wind"

friend. Before he left Newcastle, he presented the Sygna's brass manufacturer's plaque to my daughter, Suzanne."

Almost four decades on, thousands of visitors come to see the wreck of the Sygna every year, but it is disappearing fast. "We think it only has 10 or 15 years left," says Deb Mastello. "It's startling when you consider the wreck of the Adolphe, which is visible from the Shipwrecks Walk in Stockton. It was wrecked in 1904 yet there's far more of the Adolphe left. It shows the difference in steel used in the two ships."

Journalist Vic Levi notes, "It's no longer safe for diving. The stern is corroding rapidly and getting much smaller. Steel is no match for salt water and wind."

However, the fishing enthusiast adds that

the wreck delivers other benefits. "It's a great fishing spot because as the waves move around the wreck, it creates holes and attracts fish for beach fisherman - Tailor and bream mostly, also some whiting and flathead. The little fish like to get into the white water around the wreck to hide and the big fish get in to eat them!"

This leads to another reason why locals don't advise diving the wreck. The Stockton Bight area is a well-known nursery for the Great White Shark, which feeds on the abundant salmon. One local diver operator says, "No sane person would attempt diving the Sygna. The last person to dive it was probably Mr Yamada!"

Local surfer Dave Anderson agrees. "The local surfers don't really care what's out in the water, but if you see mullet, you get out quick smart!"



HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF...

EARLY ON THE morning of 8 June 2007, The Pasha Bulker failed to heed a storm warning and ran aground on Nobbys Beach.

Containing hundreds of tonnes of fuel it could have been a major ecological disaster, yet, its location on a popular beach and close proximity to the Newcastle CBD actually made it a tourist attraction and caused a minor economic boom.

The ship was successfully towed off the reef on the third attempt with no lasting damage but serves as a stark reminder of the very real power of the seas off of our coastline.



1984



2004

The ravages of time

THE SYGNA IS slowly but surely losing its battle against the ravages of the sea. After 37 years there's not a whole lot left. Experts estimate that another decade will see the wreck disappear and the chance to visit one of our best known historical sites will be gone.

If you want to pay her a visit there's no better way than to be driven out to the site in luxury by Port Stephens 4WD Tours. They offer tours that suit all tastes - from exhilarating sandboarding trips to more leisurely tours of Aboriginal sites and the surreal Tin City.



For more details of tours across the dunes visit www.portstephens4wd.com.au or phone (02) 4984 4760.