

THE TWO COMPANIONS, "SAPPHIRE" AND "MARINA"

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In 1858 the two Liverpool-owned ships, *Sapphire* and *Marina*, the former 749 tons and the latter 529 tons, lay motionless together at Liverpool. Their captains — Bowden and Jamieson — were friends and their crews well known to each other. Their future courses were curiously parallel. In 1859 both ships were again motionless together in Sydney Harbour. From Sydney they went in different directions, the *Sapphire* to Port Curtis with a final destination of Madras whilst the *Marina* sailed to New Zealand and then to Calcutta. Later in 1859 both ships again lay motionless within actual sight of each other. Each was then wrecked and abandoned on the same reef in Torres Strait — but even after that, their destinies and the destinies of their crews continued to be inter-twined, culminating with a Flying Dutchman-like eeriness.

This Australian voyage of the *Sapphire* was a matter of interest in many respects as she created a number of firsts. On leaving Liverpool the *Sapphire* brought to Australia the first instalment of immigrants from Donegal whose passage had been paid for by friends subscribed by "the colonists, and whose arrival, after the terrible tales had been told of the famine under which they had suffered, was regarded with strong feeling of sympathy by their warm-hearted countrymen".

At Sydney the two ships parted company, the *Marina* to New Zealand to load timber and the *Sapphire* to the new northern harbour of Port Curtis. The *Sapphire* had been chartered by Captain Maurice Charles O'Connell, a grandson of Admiral Bligh who some years previously had a remarkable voyage which took him through Torres Strait. Coincidentally much of the story of the *Sapphire* and the *Marina* is set in Torres Strait. O'Connell chartered the *Sapphire* to convey horses to Madras.

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This shipment of livestock was a first for the new port. Port Curtis had not been previously tested as a port of direct shipment abroad for livestock, and the O'Connell charter was celebrated with much rejoicing by many who looked upon Port Curtis as destined to eclipse Moreton Bay as a commercial centre of the Northern Colony, not then proclaimed as Queensland.

CHAIN OF COINCIDENCES

The *Sapphire* with her cargo of horses departed from Port Curtis in early September 1859 for India via the Outer Barrier Route and Torres Strait. Meanwhile the *Marina*, laden with New Zealand timber bound for Calcutta, set course for Torres Strait. On 5 October the *Marina*, with insufficient wind to haul off, was carried on to reef near Raine Island and there her astonished crew saw the *Sapphire* abandoned and wrecked on the same reef. The *Marina* crew examined the *Sapphire* and found the lifeboat, the long boat and the pinnacle missing. The stench of the dead horses made their examination brief. The *Marina* was also abandoned by her crew who set course for Port Curtis in lifeboats from the *Marina*. On the evening of 5 October, the day they were shipwrecked, they landed at Sir Charles Hardy Island. Here occurred another curious coincidence, for they discovered written records left by the survivors of the *Sapphire*. These records established that the *Sapphire* was wrecked on 23 September and that the survivors after landing at Sir Charles Hardy Island had left for Port Curtis on 6 October in two open boats. There is a discrepancy in dates, which recurs, but at all events there could have been only a few hours between the departure of the *Sapphire* crew and the arrival of the boats from the *Marina*.

Some touching letters were among the records left on Sir Charles Hardy Island. One said: "Dear Arthur, I hope we shall meet again: got no end of trouble to go through. Dreadful business this, and only one biscuit a day, and a little meat. Good bye". A second said: "I send a lock of my hair, as this may be the last you hear of me". Whilst a third said: "Farewell, dear mother. If I never see you again you can say your son died like a true Briton. Tell — — — (contemporary newspaper reports omitted her name) I loved her to the last. Love to all sisters and grandmother, aunts and everyone. Pray for me".

The *Marina* crew safely reached Port Curtis at the end of the month and reported the loss of the *Sapphire* and the records they discovered. Her Majesty's ship *Cordelia* had just conveyed Sir George Bowen, the first Governor of the newly proclaimed Col-

ony of Queensland, from Sydney to Moreton Bay. As soon as news of the wreck of the *Sapphire* came to hand, the *Cordelia* was despatched to search for survivors but returned unsuccessful. The wrecked *Sapphire* was fading from public memory when suddenly on 19 February 1860 the *Marina* appeared off Port Curtis. The *Marina* was manned by eleven survivors of the *Sapphire* who had brought her 700 miles to Port Curtis on a voyage which lasted three months and in a ship with her bottom out, waterlogged, and so scantily provisioned they finally had to put themselves on half a biscuit a day.

And what a tale the survivors had to tell!

On the morning of 23 September the *Sapphire* made all sail and stood for the Raine Island passage. The weather was fine, and stormy trade winds blew. At noon the latitude by observation was 11° 52' south and the longitude by chronometer 144° 23' east. At 6 p.m. the topsails were double reefed, the mainsail furled, and the ship hauled close to the wind on the port tack. At 7.30 p.m. the weather continued fair and the breeze dropped to moderate when breakers were seen close to the starboard beam. Desperate efforts were made to back the ship but she went broadside onto the reef 10 miles from Raine Island Beacon. The ship was lurching and straining violently and there was no possibility of getting her off. At 8.30 p.m. the mainmast and fore and mizen masts were cut away to prevent the ship from going to pieces. At 1.00 a.m. the foremast went by the board and in so doing, stove in the long boat. Some 27 hours later the carpenter with willing helpers completed repairs to the long boat and made it seaworthy. Three boats were launched, the lifeboat with Captain Bowden and six others, the pinnace with 11 men. The third, the long boat, was launched and then tied to the wreck when without warning she parted her moorings and went adrift with the second mate and three seamen, leaving seven others on the wreck without any boat. Next morning both the pinnace and long boat made valiant efforts to return to the wreck and rescue the seven and finally the pinnace made it. During all this time the lifeboat was out of sight.

The pinnace, under the command of the carpenter and with a crew of nine, set out after the long boat, leaving some men on board the wreck. Next morning the pinnace returned, not under the command of the carpenter but under the command of Captain Bowden and four men. Captain Bowden reported that the long boat had been wrecked on a reef about six miles to the

leeward of the *Sapphire* but all on board had been rescued by the lifeboat. The valiant repairs and restoration by the carpenter had extended the life of the long boat by only a few hours. Shortly afterwards the lifeboat and the pinnace joined company and their crews redistributed between the two boats. Provisions were loaded onto the pinnace, during which time the lifeboat came to anchor about a quarter of a mile from the wreck. Provisioning of both boats was finished by 4 p.m. on 26 September. The lifeboat had on board Captain Bowden and 18 men, whilst on the pinnace was the mate and nine men. The full complement of 29 men was intact, and not a life had been lost.

TRAGEDY LIES AHEAD

On the morning of 28 September, Sir Charles Hardy Island was reached. Here the two boats remained until 6 October, during which period nothing remarkable happened. On that day both boats left with the intention of beating against the prevailing S.E. trade winds to Port Curtis. No progress was made in three days, so course was changed to Cape York where they arrived on 12 October, and there they stayed for eight days. On 20 October, they reached Booby Island where they found stores provided for shipwrecked seamen. Friday Island was reached on 2 November.

By this time the crew of the *Marina* had made their report to the authorities at Port Curtis of the loss of the *Sapphire* and the disappearance of her crew. Attempts at rescue were under way. At this point also the *Sapphire* crew were intact, but this was to change drastically in the next hour or so.

The lifeboat left the pinnace at Friday Island and proceeded to nearby Hammond Island with the captain and 17 other men on board. Their purpose was to obtain turtle. At first the natives appeared very friendly and sold them a turtle and then a second. After receiving payment for the second turtle the natives refused to give it up, but subsequently agreed to do so. This turtle was lying in a canoe which the natives left, and they got into another canoe. Able bodied seaman Richard Law and two others left the lifeboat for the purpose of securing the turtle. About this time two other canoes were on the scene filled with about 25 natives.

The crew of the *Sapphire* were without firearms and were defenceless. One canoe went across the bows of the lifeboat and the other within 15 yards of her broadside. As Captain Bowden stood and hauled in the line to which the turtle was attached the natives attacked and the captain was instantly speared. Law

jumped out of his canoe into the water followed by William Charleton, who unfortunately could not swim. Law drifted past the lifeboat — fortunately on the side opposite to the attacking canoes, and as long as he was able to see the canoes he saw the natives continue to throw spears at the lifeboat. Richard Law was to be the only survivor from the lifeboat out of its complement of 18.

Meanwhile, back at Friday Island, tragedy was also striking those on board the pinnace. A canoe with five natives came alongside. Again they appeared friendly and willing to trade turtle. Three men from the pinnace went in the canoe to the shore for turtle. After some time a man from the pinnace was sent on shore to tell the others to come off. A few minutes later a second canoe appeared and exchanged fish for tobacco. Then the natives grew daring — they wanted to take objects from the pinnace and they made signals to other natives on shore. The suspicions of those on board the pinnace were fully aroused, and at 9.30 a.m. another man was sent ashore to tell the others to come off. The pinnace weighed anchor and kept as close as possible to the shore, with repeated calls to those on shore to swim aboard, and this three men did with safety, leaving two still ashore.

The pinnace was more fortunate than the lifeboat, as it possessed a small but effective armoury of one musket and a pair of pistols. Again repeated calls were made to the two to swim to the boat, and as they were getting into the water the natives, without any provocation, attacked, throwing showers of spears. One of the two reached the pinnace but the other received three spears through his body. The musket was fired, killing one of the natives and wounding another, giving those on the pinnace valuable respite.

The pinnace then proceeded to Hammond Island to join the lifeboat. At 1.30 p.m. the lifeboat was observed apparently lying at anchor — but in a suspicious manner. Then broken spears and other things were seen, which indicated that the lifeboat had been attacked. The pinnace wisely stood off and tacked. A voice was heard calling, and a man was sent to the mast head. The boat was tacked from time to time, and for 20 minutes the frustrating voice was continued to be heard until finally Richard Law was seen floating and soon rescued.

Then occurred another extraordinary event. The lifeboat was seen with native sails hoisted and filled with natives, who commenced paddling towards the pinnace. No council of war

was necessary to determine their intent. The lifeboat came within a quarter of a mile of the pinnace before the pinnace was able to shake it off and lose her.

From Hammond Island the pinnace with its survivors, managed to make their way back to the old *Sapphire*. Here they found a strange scene. The horses were lying dead between decks, but a poor goat was still alive even though it had been without water for eight weeks.

FINAL RACE WITH HUNGER

Having reprovisioned their pinnace, they then examined the *Marina* which they found water-logged and abandoned and with the bottom out — but in their desperation their only salvation lay in repossessing the battered *Marina*, which their earlier shipwrecked comrades had previously assessed as unsalvageable. On 26 November they managed to get the damaged hulk under way. Their ambitious destiny was Port Curtis some 700 miles to the south. Their provisions were short and they finally placed themselves on half a biscuit a day. As the *Empire* newspaper reported:

“Yet their hearts did not faint, and the lady’s lover who well deserved his reward, makes merry over the mishaps of the old hulk, which appears to have a point of running upon every reef in her way”. “She goes on when she likes and comes off when she likes”, says the author of the third quoted letter. He also went on to describe a freak of the same kind as: “This is the third time she has been on shore and come off herself, although the bottom is knocked out, and her hold full of water; and at this moment the old craft is going homeward bound like ‘a brick’ and knocking off four to five knots an hour”.

His final entry in his journal after the *Marina*, with the 11 starved survivors from the *Sapphire*, reached Port Curtis was: “We humbly thank God for all his mercies to us all, hoping that it will be a useful lesson to us”.

But this extraordinary story does not end here.

Sir George Bowen, in a despatch to the Duke of Newcastle dated 4 April, reported on the events surrounding the *Sapphire* which “throws fresh luster on the skill, perseverance, and heroism of English Sailors” and urged the establishment of a station at Cape York complete with stockades. The *Moreton Bay Courier* of Tuesday 27 March 1860 urged “a vindication of the prowess of the whites and that a boat be sent and the aborigines punished”, and added: “It is the business of the Executive of Queensland, aided by all the Australian Colonies, so to act that Torres Straits

may not remain the dangerous seaway it now is — when escape from death by drowning is only the prelude to a more miserable and horrible death at the hands of the blood-thirsty and cannibal savages”.

The 11 crew of the *Sapphire* shared salvage money assessed at £600. The *Marina* was purchased by Robert Towns, and after repairs she left for Sydney under the escort of the schooner *Tom Tough*.

Perhaps ships do have souls, and perhaps the *Marina* grieved at being denied the right to spend her days with her close companion *Sapphire*, for the *Marina* did not make it to Sydney, and off Cape Moreton whilst still in Queensland waters her seams opened and she sank.