

THE WRECK OF THE MARIA

by F.C.Rhodes

The aim of the New Guinea Prospecting Association, membership 70, was to establish a settlement in Papua and prospect for gold, which was reported to be plentiful. The company hoped to trade with the natives and later, South Sea Islanders; while some members were known to be interested in settling there and establishing a regular trade with Australia, and perhaps, China. The company got itself afloat with the purchase of the American-built 167-ton *Maria*, lately of the Newcastle-Sydney coal trade, in which members sailed from Port Jackson early in the evening of January 25, 1872, for the Fly River. There were 66 company members in the 'tween decks, four paid seamen in the fo'c's'le, the captain, first and second mates and the company's doctor and storekeeper in the cabin. The brig had 75 on board, and the 39 survivors were back in Sydney on board the *Governor Blackall* about 9 p.m. on March 28.

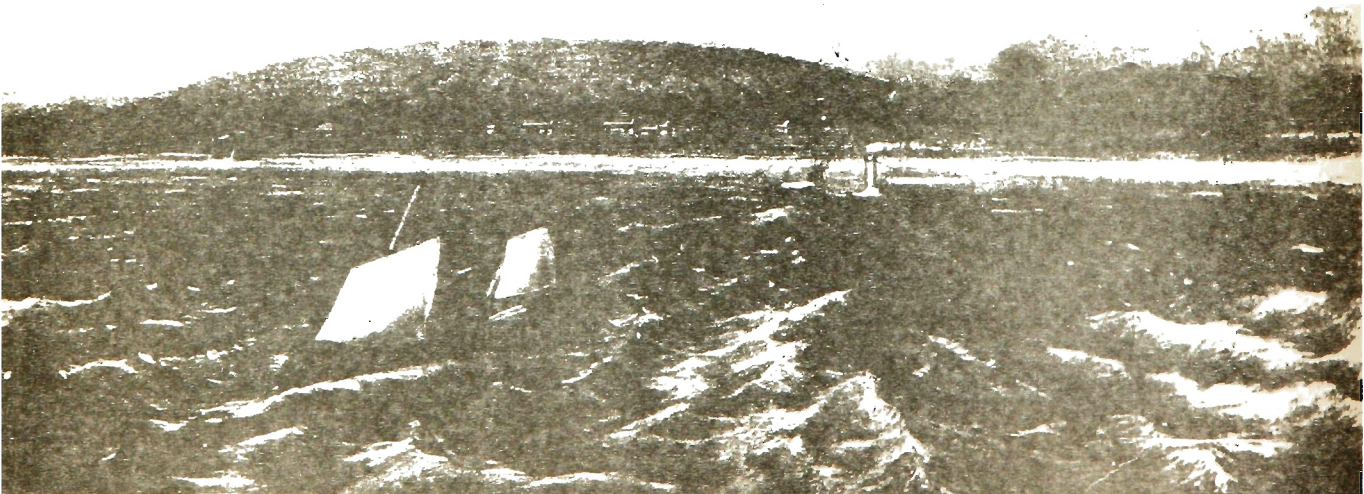
The trip did not begin well. The Customs people in Sydney delayed granting a clearance because of the number of passengers on board such a small ship, and then the captain suddenly defected. The company promoted the chief officer Mr. Stratman, to master. By February 1, the *Maria* was becalmed off the Solitary Group, about 30 miles north of Coffs Harbour, with a strong current pushing her south. Then a sou'easter carried her so far north at such a speed that Stratman was able to announce that New Guinea was only 300 miles ahead. The wind switched to a strong nor'wester and the *Maria* began to declare herself. Her rotten main t'gallant yard came down, her shrouds began to part, decay showed in her other rigging, and she lost a section of her unsound weather bulwark. Her deck seams opened and admitted a mixture of the coal dust of her former trade, sea water and deluging rain, her sails split, and her rudder carried away.

On Sunday, February 18, a deputation of passengers asked Stratman to run for the nearest port; other company members agreed and the decision was taken to try for Moreton Bay. The weather deteriorated further that evening, and with the *Maria* showing that most of her good qualities were in her hull (which was holding together), the captain decided to try to make Cleveland Bay, on which Townsville stands. The weather improved and the voyage towards the Fly River resumed. But the *Maria* ended all the indecision at 3.15a.m. on February 26 when she grounded on Bramble Reef, about 25 miles north-east of Great Palm Island. Stratman and five men left in the whaleboat, Stratman having said he would try to get help ashore. People at the wreck built two rafts which became known as the large raft (it carried 13 men), and the small raft (on which there were 12). The rafts left the *Maria* in company for the coast, but those on the large raft lost sight of the other on the first night out and never saw the men again.

The story of the *Maria* is based on two pamphlets at the John Oxley Library; one by W.T. Forster The Wreck of the Maria (Sydney, 1872), the other by Thomas Tate who had published his account of the wreck in the *Norman Chronicle*, Normanton, in 1903. This article was later published as a pamphlet. Tate, who had begun studies in medicine was appointed the *Maria's* Acting Surgeon, but at the time he published his article on the wreck he was Head Teacher at the Normanton State School.



Passengers aboard the brig "Maria", wrecked on Bramble Reef. 1872. Thomas Tate, the last survivor of the wreck died in 1934. Copied from the original held by the Rockhampton Municipal Library.



View of Cardwell in 1872.

Forster was on the large raft. He wrote that squalls overturned the rafts several times, and that five men on his raft were drowned. The large raft went ashore early on February 29 about four miles north of the mouth of the Gladys River. The small raft was found about two miles south of the river mouth. Forster's party decided to try to walk south to Cardwell, and had the good fortune to fall in with natives who advised them of the fruit and berries to eat. They also shared cooked fish and shrimps, and passed the castaways to friendly neighbours. About noon on March 12, H.M.S. *Basilisk* (Captain Moresby) took them off the beach near the Frankland Islands. On board the *Basilisk* the survivors learned of the murder of the *Maria's* captain and two of the crew by natives just north of Tam o'Shanter Point. On March 13, a boat from the *Basilisk*, under Lieutenant Smith, found the small raft, beside which were two skeletons. The body of a man from the small raft was found at the entrance to Mourilyan Harbour on March 14. He had been murdered.

Tate wrote of a brief stay on one raft which sank under the weight of 19 men before it left the wreck. He got into a boat in which there were 15 men, and of which he was given charge by the chief officer who had a boat with 13 men. Tate wrote that when the boats left the *Maria*, nine men were still clutching to the masts and rigging. Both boats reached Hinchinbrook Island, and the 28 survivors were in Cardwell next day. The steamer *Tinonee* was chartered to go to the wrecked *Maria* in the hope that the men left there had survived. They had not. Four men from the captain's whaleboat were murdered near Tam o'Shanter Point; two escaped into the sea. The captain's boat was picked up by the crew of the island schooner *Peri*, (midshipman Sapper), which the *Basilisk* captured from Kanakas in Torres Strait. The Kanakas had murdered the white crew and made off. A party from the *Basilisk* found the large raft in the vicinity of Cooper Point, 60 miles north of Bramble Reef. In a gunyah was a half watch-case with "Siddell Barden wrecked *Maria*" scratched on it. (Forster's account refers to Bardon). Farther south, the search party found a pair of trousers on which "G. Angell" (Angell from the small raft) was inscribed. 1. The New Guinea Expedition of 1872 had ended in disaster.

Endnote 1. Tate, Thos. Wreck of the "Maria", (1903).[p.4].

Bibliography

FORSTER, W.T. Wreck of the "Maria" or Adventures of the New Guinea Prospecting Association. Sydney, J. Reading & Co., 1872.

TATE, Thos. Wreck of the "Maria": A New Guinea Expedition. Normanton, *Norman Chronicle*, 1903.