



The s.s. Wairarapa left Sydney on Wednesday 24 October 1894 bound for Auckland. She passed her sister ship the s.s. Manapouri at 6pm on Friday 26th some 690 miles from Auckland. Her usual course would have taken her around North Cape and then south east

down the coast to Auckland. These two ships operated regularly across the Tasman Sea, and after Auckland they would continue on down the coast to Bluff.

Wararapa, 1716 tons gross, was built in 1882 at Wm Denny & Bros on the River Clyde, near Glasgow, and was owned by the Union Steamship Company of Dunedin.

On the journey down the coast to Auckland the Wairarapa encountered heavy fog, and a heavy sea was running from the north-east but she was able to run at her usual cruising speed of twelve and a half knots. Passengers were enjoying the luxury of the modern ship and most had retired for the night, when at eight minutes past midnight, at full cruising speed, [23 kph] she ran straight into the rocks at the base of huge cliffs at Miners Head at the northern end of Great Barrier Island, and stopped dead.

The Captain, John McIntosh from Dunedin, immediately ordered the engines to full reverse, but this only had the effect of destabilizing the situation further. The night became one of absolute horror for the 250 passengers and crew. Only two lifeboats were launched successfully and these managed to save many partly clad people from the icy water. Many others were clinging to the heavily listing ship and being regularly washed off their perches and drowned in a watery grave.

The night was pitch black, no one had any idea where they were, and it was not until dawn that the survivors had any idea how the ship lay. In fact it hung on a sort of a ledge slightly above the water. Sixteen horses were among the deck cargo and they broke loose on the impact and all were drowned. Dead bodies floated on the tied mingled with wreckage and deck cargo and other flotsam.

A rope was finally rigged from ship to shore and by this means many passengers were saved. They then had to remain on the rock in the scantiest of clothing for some 30 hours before they were discovered by some Maori boating parties. In the meantime the third officer and some men had made their way overland to Port Fitzroy and reported the catastrophe.

It was not until Thursday, November 1, eight days after the wrecking, that the news broke over the colony of New Zealand. Great Barrier Island, 50 miles from Auckland had no telegraph line to Auckland. The Northern Company's steamer Argyle arrived at Port Fitzroy on Wednesday morning on its scheduled run, and took the survivors and proceeded to the wreck where it took on board the remainder of the survivors and proceeded to Auckland, arriving about 3am on Thursday morning.

Many were the tales of heroism and sacrifice which were told by the survivors. Luck played a terrible role as most people could not swim, and although lifejackets were available to all, they were rudimentary and ill-fitting. Those drowned from Dunedin numbered, the Captain, John McIntosh, along with 7 other crew, and 10 passengers.

The residents of Great Barrier, European and Maori, and the police and many survivors were left with the terrible task of retrieving the bodies. The beaches were littered with

wreckage and bodies, most bodies being stripped naked by the action of the sea, lying on the beaches with mouths full of sand.

The stewardesses, Annie McQuaid, Elizabeth Grindrod, and Mrs Charlotte McDonald, all of whom were drowned, came in for much praise from the survivors, and their Union Steamship Co colleagues erected a memorial in Dunedin's Northern Cemetery, the first one inside the gate, in recognition of their selfless dedication. Ironically Mrs McDonald's husband had earlier been drowned in Otago Harbour.

The captain was found guilty of causing the tragedy, in that he seemed to have ignored all aspects of good seamanship and navigation and lessons from his long experience at sea.

The numbers of passengers on board was never finally reconciled but the figures drawn from the evidence available shows that of the 271 souls who were on board 135 were lost, and 136 saved. It is New Zealand's third worst disaster at sea.

Taken from "Eight Minutes Past Midnight" by Steve Locker-Lampson and Ian Francis (1981)