

THE LOST TREASURE OF THE MARIE

The details of the wreck of the Marie are almost completely unknown but events which followed the wreck are laden with mystery and remain some of the most contentious in Australia's maritime history.

On June 7th, 1840, the 136-ton brigantine Marie left Port Adelaide bound for Hobart Town. On board were 15 passengers, the captain and his wife, and nine crew. The cargo included more than 4,000 English gold sovereigns.

A month later, news of the wreck of the vessel and the deaths of all 26 on board reached Adelaide.

An exact location for the wreck has never been established but the fact that large amounts of wreckage washed ashore along the beach of Lacepede Bay, near Kingston, suggest that this is where the vessel went down, near the southern tip of the Coorong coast.

Because there were no survivors, first hand information is not available but it is believed that all the passengers and crew made it to shore and began to make their way toward Adelaide, a journey of some 180 kilometres. Here they were assisted by members of the aboriginal nation the Ngarrindgeri, who agreed to help them across land, providing food, water and shelter.

Two years previously the schooner Fanny had also been wrecked nearby and the passengers had been escorted up the coast to safety by the Ngarrindgeri tribesmen.

SOMETHING WENT TERRIBLY WRONG

In the case of the Marie however, something went terribly wrong. Day after day the passengers and crew of the Marie trudged along the beach, sometimes in blinding rain and sandstorms but eventually any fears they had of the natives must have diminished. At the head of Lake Albert – three days' journey from the whaling station – they came to the Coorong River. Here the leader of the natives indicated

that the party had to be divided in order to cross the Coorong in log canoes.

The first news of the shipwreck which reached Adelaide told of how the entire party had been killed by members of the Milmenrura people (a tribal grouping within the Ngarrindgeri nation), and a Mr Pullen was dispatched to investigate.

Once Pullen and his party made contact with the aboriginal people they were led to a place where the bodies, including those of women and children, lay.

On questioning various groups of aborigines, many of whom remained silent, Pullen decided he had found the guilty parties describing two as 'the most villainous (sic) looking characters I ever saw'. After abandoning his search for the wreck of the Marie, Pullen returned to Adelaide to file his report.

The explanation from the Ngarrindgeri regarding the deaths was that members of the travelling party had continually made sexual advances to young Ngarringeri women, a practice which carried dire consequences in Ngarrindgeri law. After regular warnings and attempts to split the party into separate groups at night, a violent altercation eventuated.

TALES OF A WHITE WOMAN

Not all the bodies of the passengers and crew of the Marie were found however. It was rumoured that one passenger, a woman, managed to escape. She eventually reached the mouth of the Murray, swam across and then disappeared forever. For years afterwards there were tales of a white woman with red hair living among the aborigines of the Lower Murray.

Anyway, after reading Pullen's report,

Governor Gawler of South Australia was determined to extract justice. He dispatched Pullen along with Major O'Halloran, 12 police, 11 sailors and three Encounter Bay aborigines to apprehend those responsible and instructed them thus:

"When to your conviction you have identified any number, not exceeding three, of the actual murderers...you will there explain to the blacks the nature of your conduct...and you will deliberately and formally cause sentence of death to be executed by shooting or hanging."

O'Halloran took 65 prisoners on August 22nd, 1840, and in a bush trial sentenced two men to death. After a gallows had been built the sentence was carried out immediately.

CONTRAVENED BRITISH JUSTICE

Once the story of the hangings became public, debate over the issue raged in Adelaide journals for some time and Governor Gawler was eventually recalled to England, in part due to the way in which he had handled the affair. The 'punitive expedition' contravened British justice by denying the accused a proper trial.

The wreck of the Marie was never found but given the fact that all 26 people on board had time to get off and make their way safely to shore, it's a reasonable bet that a fair number if not all of the 4,000-plus gold sovereigns also made it to terra firma with them. These would not have been carried by the passengers or crew but buried in a location that could be easily identified by a recovery expedition. Of course that would have required at least one member of the party making it back to civilisation. As none did, the whereabouts of the sovereigns remains a mystery to this day.

