

REMEMBERING THE STORM



The Sygna ... 30 years on

Almost everyone whose memory reaches back 30 years knows where they were the night of the "Sygna storm", when mother nature turned her full force on the region smashing people, homes, powerlines, trees and ships at sea, including the largest ship ever wrecked on the Australian shoreline, the Norwegian bulk carrier *Sygna*, whose rusting skeleton on Stockton Beach provides a reminder of nature's power and the amazing tale of a shipwreck and the rescue and salvage attempt that followed.

SYGNA'S

THE full toll of the sea off the coast of Newcastle will never be known, but around 600 lives and approaching 600 ships are believed to have been lost, many just disappearing at sea.

In the last 200 years wrecks between Seal Rocks and Broken Bay have ranged in size from butcher boats to the MV *Syigna*, and Japanese torpedoes in World War II also took a heavy toll of shipping headed for or leaving Newcastle.

Following are some of the most tragic of the region's shipwrecks.

1808, August 15: The *Dundee*, en route from Sydney to Fiji, wrecked on Stockton beach with two lives lost.

1826, August: The schooner *Newcastle* disappears after leaving the city with its wreckage found a month later. Nine lives lost.

1827, September: The *Charlotte* wrecked on Stockton Beach with four lives lost.

1828, June 5: The cutter *Dove* sinks at Port Stephens with seven lives lost.

1831, May 11: The sloop *Jessie* sinks off Lake Macquarie with all on board lost.

1833, March: Another *Charlotte* lost off Newcastle with two deaths.

1836, January 16: The cutter *Pandora* lost off North Head, Port Stephens, with five lives lost.

1838, January: The sloop *Elizabeth Gibbes* lost between Newcastle and Sydney with no survivors.

1842, November 11: The *Rover* sinks at Broken Bay with two lives lost.

1843, September: The *Sally* sinks at Seal Rocks, the bodies of its passengers and crew found by the *Mary Ann*, wrecked itself in the same area a few weeks later.

1852: The schooner *Baruah* lost off Terrigal with two drowned.

1856, November: The *Maria Theresa* founders after leaving Newcastle with a cargo of coal, and no trace of the crew is ever found.

1864, March 19: The schooner *Zone* wrecked off Stockton Beach, its lifeboat overturns while bringing its crew to harbour and four men drown.

1864, June 2: The *Waratah* lost between Newcastle and Sydney with seven lives lost.

1864, August 30: The barque *Tybee* goes ashore in a gale at



ALL HANDS: A rocket line is hauled taunt by spectators and volunteers as the *Syigna* rescue begins.

Tomorrow marks the 30th anniversary of "the *Syigna* storm", a wild night in the Hunter remembered for the biggest ship wrecked on the Australian shore. **GREG RAY** looks back at that monumental storm and the amazing story that followed.

ASK most older Newcastle people where they were on the night the *Syigna* went aground and they'll probably be able to tell you.

Since European settlement in Newcastle there have been two really big hurricanes that have left lasting impressions on those who experienced them. Both these giant storms were known for decades to follow by the names of the ships they destroyed.

The first was the *Cawarra* Gale, which lashed the NSW coast for days in July, 1866. Up and down the coastline massive gales smashed the coast with incredible fury. A hundred men, women and children died in two days of storms and 14 ships were totally wrecked. One of the ships lost was the *SS Cawarra*, which sank with the loss of 60 lives while trying to enter Newcastle Harbour during the savage storm.

The next, on May 26, 1974, tossed a big Norwegian bulk carrier onto Stockton Beach, leaving much of the rusting hulk to rot there for decades, and went down in popular history as "the *Syigna* storm".

The killer storm was a once-in-a-lifetime reminder of nature's awesome power.

During its 150-minute peak the gale, with gusts of up to 170 km/h, buffeted the whole region and caused incredible damage.

At Terrigal, a 19-year-old man drowned when huge waves smashed across a camping ground and hurled the car in which he was sitting into the ocean.

A newly finished house in Francis St, Swansea, literally disappeared at the height of the storm. Pieces of the building and its foundations were later found more than a kilometre away.

Another house, at Brightwaters, was lifted and removed from around its startled occupant who was left unharmed to contemplate his property's brick foundations.

Other homes either disintegrated or were so badly damaged they had to be demolished in the following days.

One Swansea home was destroyed by a fire that broke out during the storm, probably as a result of an electrical fault.

A timber church at Morisset was shifted more than 6m from its foundations and at Catherine Hill Bay half of a 200m jetty was destroyed. The Stockton ferry wharf was partly demolished and pieces washed up in Newcastle Harbour.

Police estimated that 200 cars were wrecked or damaged. One was washed off Nobbys breakwater and crushed against a rock wall. Several motorists were injured in collisions as they tried to drive during the hurricane.

People cowered in their homes as countless television aerials crashed down on rooftops and windows smashed. Hundreds of blacked-out houses lost their roofs and live wires whipped and sparked in the screaming sky.

Trees splintered and fell. Caravans flew like kites, with one blowing more than 60m from its site.

For those on the water the fear was greatest.

Lives were lost at sea as yachts were crippled and sunk by the buffeting waves and howling wind.

In the lakes and bays yachts and cruisers snapped their moorings and were broken up on rocks or dumped in the yards of waterfront homes. One was found next day halfway up a tree.

At Wamberal and Avoca waves crashed their way into beachfront houses, cascading through rooms and forcing residents to flee.

When daylight finally dawned residents were greeted by the sight of streets littered with tree limbs, pieces of houses, broken wires, stray shop awnings and broken glass.

The cleanup, hampered by continuing rain and bad weather, took weeks.

That's the piece of weather that those who saw it will never forget.

But for all that, the hurricane is always known as "the *Syigna* storm".

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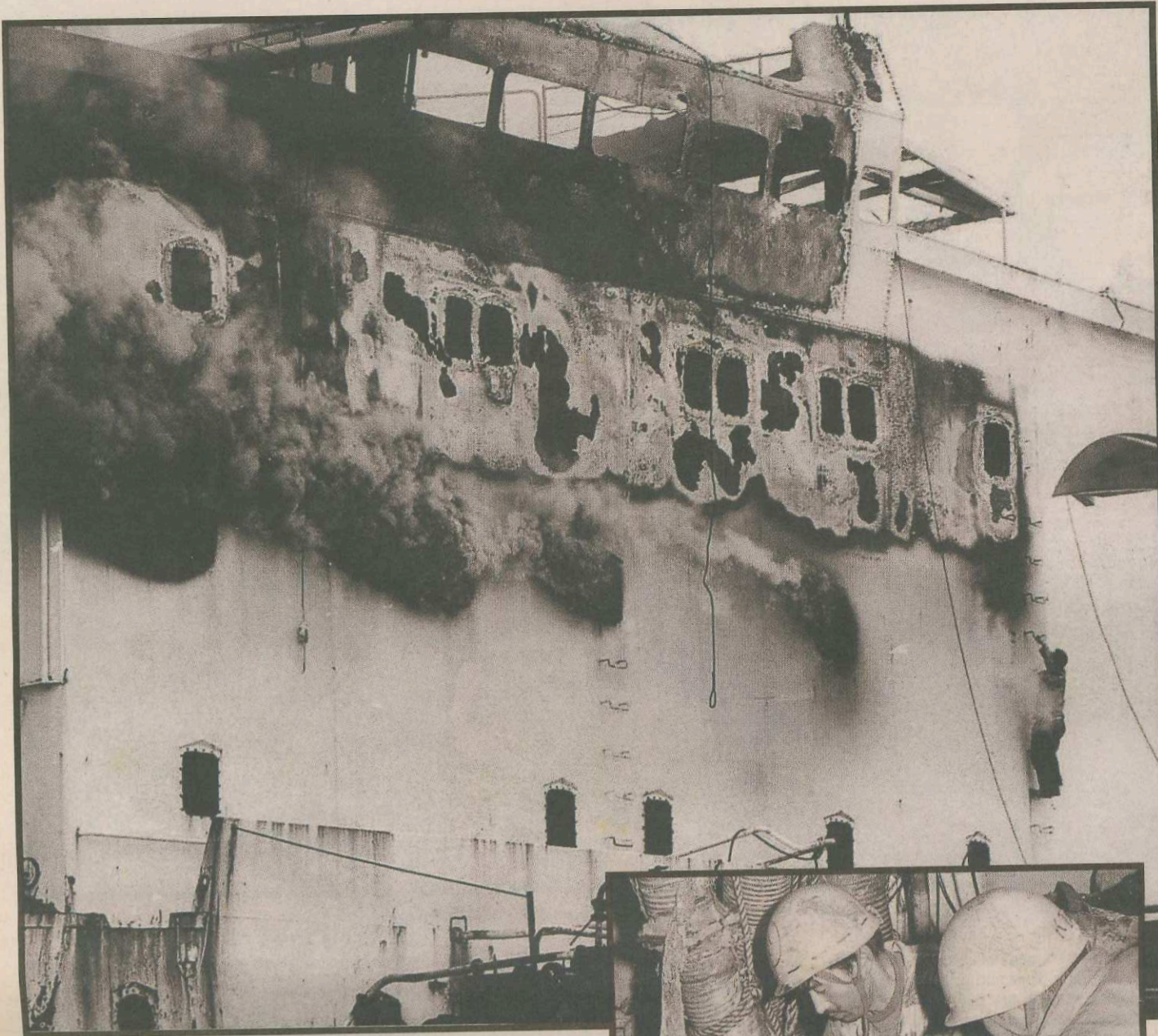
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THE SYGNA: 30 YEARS ON



SHIP AFLAME: Smoke pours from the remains of the *Sygna* on Stockton Beach in 1975.

and drank Aussie beer. The first thing he did on the *Sygna* when he arrived in August 1974 was to place a bottle of sake (Japanese rice wine) on a mast on the ship as a sort of good luck charm. It didn't work.

Yamada knew time was his enemy and he and his 23-man Japanese team of divers and engineers worked flat-out, around the clock, on the *Sygna* job. They never walked if they could run and they never slept unless they had to.

They were acutely aware that the longer the ship stayed stuck on the beach, the greater the damage to its steel plates and the smaller the chance of Yamada's gamble paying off.

He knew immediately that Australian workers would never put in the same effort that he and his team were prepared to and he made a decision to pay whatever he had to pay to guarantee industrial peace and some measure of moderate efficiency.

The result was a massive workforce of Aussies – most of whom Yamada considered unnecessary but all of whom were paid very high wages.

He only wanted five Australians to work on board the ship with his own team and by all accounts the two groups built up a tremendous rapport.

It was the army of fetchers and carriers on the beach that caused the friction. He was forced to employ as many as 60 men, a large number of them painters and dockers. Yamada thought many of them were obstructionist bludgers who'd bung on a demarcation dispute at the drop of a hat. And he didn't hesitate to tell them so, usually with a polite smile on his face. Once, when a group of dockers was sitting on piece of equipment that was needed on the ship he yelled from the deck: "Off your backsides and move – please."

Finally he is reputed to have agreed to pay some of them just to sit on the beach and keep out of the way of those who were actually working.

Naturally those involved in the work recall things differently, and there was a tremendous amount of ill-feeling aroused whenever the Aussie workers were criticized, which was often.

Union delegates have since argued that the pay rates were not unreasonable for the work and have pointed out that the beach work involved 12-hour shifts – increasing to 24 hours when serious pumping began. They never divulged just how much their members were paid, however, simply explaining that it was "a considerable amount".

It was the manning scale, not the pay, that was bleeding Yamada dry, but



HARD HATS: A diver descends into an underwater section of the *Sygna* in 1974.

pay became an issue when he wanted tugs to take off the refloated sections of the wreck.

It's hard to know, now that 30 years have passed, just what really happened when Yamada needed tugs at the *Sygna*.

On all the evidence now available it seems likely that Yamada offered to pay a hefty bonus to the tug men to keep them sweet. The tug men wouldn't have had a problem with that, but there is more than a hint of evidence to suggest that some towage companies were worried that this extra money might be seen as a precedent that could affect future work.

The unions offered to sign declarations that the *Sygna* payments would be a one-off, but the signs point to a management "go-slow" on the issue. Yamada was bled again.

As a stop-gap solution he hired the sea-going supply ship *Lady Vera* for three times its normal charter rate and paid bonus wages to a crew that amounted to twice its normal complement.

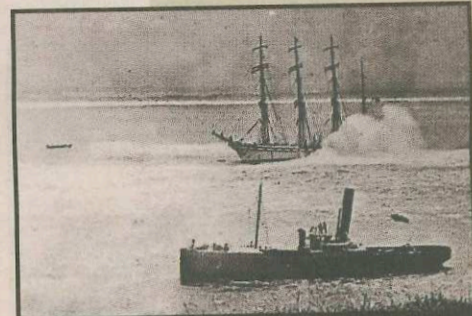
The *Sygna* refloated on September 6 and promptly but not unexpectedly broke in half.

The bow section was towed to Port Stephens on September 10, leaving the stern – still holed and leaking badly – to be refloated another day.

When the expensive *Lady Vera* finished its job and moved off to a wait- >>

1898, May 6: The steamship *Maitland* is wrecked on Cape Three points with 21 lives lost.

1898, December: *Little Nell* sinks off Redhead, two crewmen drowning after being trapped below decks.



ADOLPHE: The *Adolphe* aground on the Oyster Bank in 1904, with the tug *Victoria* in the foreground and the lifeboat *Victoria* at left.

1904, September 30: The barque *Adolphe* runs aground on the Oyster Bank, providing Newcastle with one of its most famous wrecks. Its remains can still be seen today along Shipwreck Walk. It was a wreck that probably should not have happened as the tug *Hero* offered the *Adolphe*, at the end of a long trek from Antwerp, a tow into harbour before a storm struck, but the offer was declined because the *Adolphe* was under charter to J and A Brown and the *Hero* belonged to another company. After striking the Oyster Bank the lifeboat *Victoria* went to the rescue of the crew, saving 33 men. The construction of the Stockton breakwater – now Shipwreck Walk – reached an incorporated the wreck in 1912.

1905, August 31: *Jones Brothers* founders while under tow off the Oyster Bank and is swept onto the remains of the *Adolphe*, with seven crewmen lost.

1907, August 14: *Ingeborg* collides with *SS Arawatta* off Port Stephens and seven crewmen die.

1908, December 25: *Advance* collides with barque *Inverna* 27km south-west of Nobbys, with one survivor out of a crew of eight.

1910, April 20: *Satara* is holed and sinks off Seal Rocks while taking a cargo of coal to the Far East, with two lives lost.

1911, July: En route from Callao, South America, to Newcastle, the *Inca* founders off Port Stephens, with none of its crew found.

1911, October 12: The *Macleay* sinks near Broughton Island, with 15 crewmen lost.

1917, September 19: *Nerong* founders off Norah Head and three of 14 on board die.



THE JOURNALIST

Vic Levi, who was working on the *Newcastle Sun*

"The SES came out to our house, we had to evacuate the kids - it was terrible.

"We went to the wreck on Monday. *The Herald* had been there on the Sunday and they were out with their photo of the people on the beach heaving on the rescue line. But on the Monday the crew was all gone but the ship was really starting to break up.

"Ken suggested we wade into the shallow water between the ship and the shore for a photo. A big wave swept around the bow and knocked me over. All my clothes were saturated and filled with sand. I looked around to see what had happened to Ken and all I could see was this arm sticking up out of the water with a camera in it. He'd been flattened by the wave, but he kept his camera dry."



THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Ken Robson, who was working for *The Herald* and *Sun*.

"The police decided to fire a rocket line onto the ship, with the idea being to stretch a rope from ship to shore for a boat to haul along. (Ken's photograph of would-be rescuers on the rope made the front page of *The Herald* and was reproduced all over the world).

"A helicopter was called in and that was the most fantastic piece of helicopter flying, in shocking conditions, that I have ever seen.

"By the time I was back on the scene next day with Vic Levi, the weather had eased a bit and the beach was deserted. Vic talked me into wading into the water. It was shallow. Vic reckoned we could just about walk to the ship. Trouble was this big wave came barrelling around the front and knocked us flying. I was under water and all I could think of was keeping my camera dry."



THE BUSINESSMAN

Les Graham, Terrigal Dive School head

"I was woken at 2.30am with the news that my business was washing into the sea.

"By the time we got to The Haven [at Terrigal] there were boulders across what is now the oval and it was like a moonscape.

"People don't believe it when you tell them, but there were boulders that we knew had come from more than 15 metres deep.

"The storm caused severe damage to the dive school building.

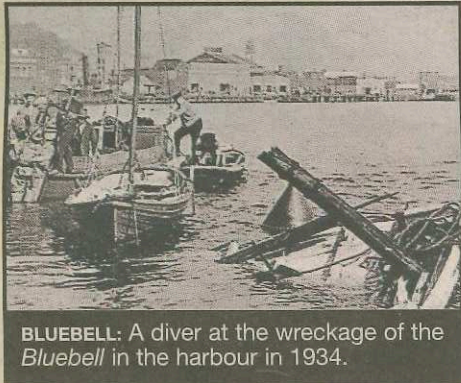
"There were three young men staying in a caravan and when the waves started to wash the van into the water, they tried to escape in a car.

"One of them was swept across to the main beach, one was hanging onto mooring lines and the third was trapped in the car."

THE SYGNA: 30 YEARS ON

1927, February 9: *Galava* founders off Terrigal. Seven die but the captain and two crewmen swim eight kilometres to shore.

1928, June 14: *White Bay* swamped while trying to enter Newcastle Harbour and five lost.



BLUEBELL: A diver at the wreckage of the *Bluebell* in the harbour in 1934.

1934, August 9: The Stockton ferry *Bluebell* sinks after a collision and three passengers drown.

1940, December 5: *Nimbin* strikes a mine off Norah Head and seven crewmen die.



IRON CHIEFTAIN: The freighter before it was torpedoed in 1941 with 12 crewmen lost.

1941, June 3: The freighter *Iron Chieftain*, en route from Newcastle to Whyalla, is torpedoed by a Japanese submarine and 12 crewmen are lost.

1942, June 4: The *Iron Crown* is torpedoed off Cape Howe and 38 lives are lost.

1943, February 8: The freighter *Iron Knight* is torpedoed by a Japanese submarine off Twofold Bay and 36 crewmen are killed.

1943, April 11: The *Recina*, en route from Whyalla to Newcastle with iron ore, is torpedoed and 32 crewmen die.

1955, March: Eight Army amphibious craft swamped in Newcastle Bight and three soldiers drown.

1974, May 26: The *Syigna*, the largest ship to be wrecked on the Australian coast, washes onto Stockton Beach.

1990, January 8: The launch *N'Gluka* capsizes in Port Stephens and five children drown.

■ This list compiled from the work of the late Norm Barney in 1994.



SEA POWER: The *Syigna* ashore on May 30, 1974, with the salvage drama still ahead.

ing contract, Yamada started seeking another tug. Tugs were available, but it seems towage companies were frightened of letting the crews be paid the sort of money that was earned by those aboard the *Lady Vera*.

Yamada's men, believing a deal would be done, kept working to refloat the stern section of the *Syigna*. But when they got it afloat there was still no tug and, after winching it painstakingly into deeper water, they were forced to let it settle again onto the sand.

Suddenly, a tug was available, but weather caused problems. On September 26 big winds whipped up and pushed the half-ship back inshore, almost to the same point it had rested before Yamada's men got it afloat.

After much more acrimonious and unproductive arguing between Yamada, the tug owners and the unions representing the tug crews, the sea-going tug *Warawee* was finally sent from Sydney in October.

And while the companies always claimed they paid the men no more than award rates it is commonly accepted that Yamada's hand was in his pocket again. Which was no more or less than he'd expected all along.

But now it was too late.

By November the stern section was structurally damaged from all the refloating and re-grounding. The salvage job, already incredibly expensive, had become completely unviable to complete.

To November 18 the salvage effort had cost \$1.6million, with \$600,000 of that paid to firms and workers in Newcastle.

The Norwegian insurer of the ship, Skuld, which had guaranteed a large chunk of the salvage cost, summed up the situation with brutal frankness:

"Mr Yamada is bleeding to death. He is the loser.

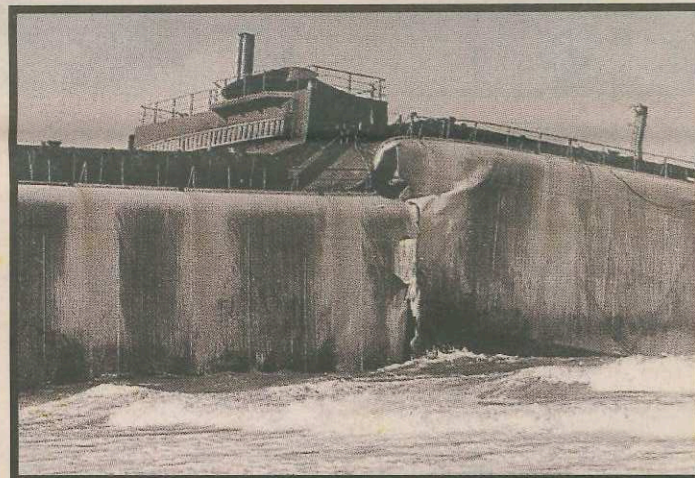
"The people in Newcastle are the only winners because of the money spent there in the operation. Yet their contribution was very limited.

"Yamada has smiled and paid. We feel very, very sorry for him. He was very optimistic when he bought the wreck. The Japanese crew were very capable and did good work. It is sad to have seen them work so hard for so little result. The workers from the Australian side worked very little and achieved an enormous amount of money."

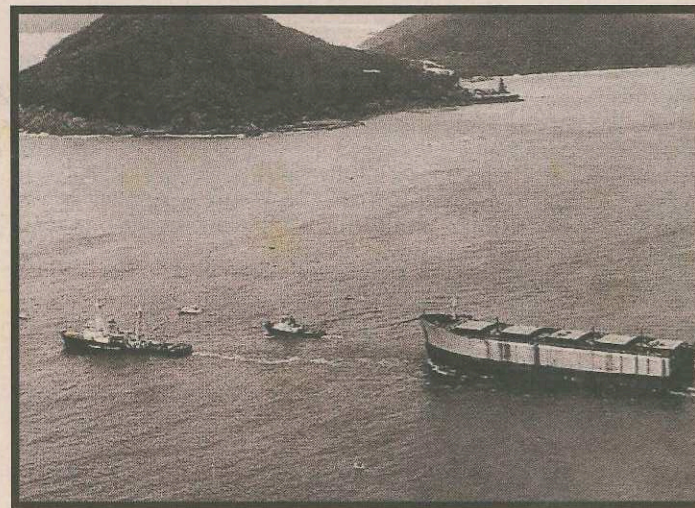
Before he went back to Japan, Yamada took the bottle of sake from the *Syigna's* mast. He tried to persuade the Norwegians and the Australian Government to finance one more try but nobody wanted to get involved.

The 116m bow section of the ship – containing 4000 tonnes of steel – remained anchored at Port Stephens for more than 18 months before it was towed to a shipbreaker's yard in Taiwan.

The stern section still sits on Stockton Beach, a favourite spot for photographers, fishermen, surfers and four-wheel drivers. Its rusting hulk is starkly and strangely beautiful: a reminder of the tremendous power of the angry elements and of a once-in-a-lifetime storm that left its mark on a generation.



BREAKING UP: The sea shows its power as it snaps the back of the *Syigna*.



FAREWELL: The bow of the *Syigna* leaves Port Stephens for Taiwan.

THE NEWCASTLE HERALD THE HERALD

Helping you commemorate the 1974 storm and beaching of the stricken carrier, the Sygna

THE SYGNA: 30 YEARS ON

1869, May 9: Schooner *Eagleton* founders off Anna Bay with six believed lost.

1870, June: *Harlech Castle*, en route from Melbourne to Newcastle with crew of 23, disappears.

1871, November 16: *Tim Whiffler* sinks off Bird Island with three of the four on board lost.

1876, July 22: The barque *Anne* founders off Port Stephens and the crew of 10 perish.

1876, December 12: *Urania* sinks off Newcastle with six lives lost.

1877, April 12: The ketch *Rose* sinks near Terrigal with two lives lost.

1877, July 15: The steamship *Yarra Yarra* lost on the Oyster Bank with 18 killed.

1879, March 10: *Bonnie Dundee* sinks off Redhead after colliding with SS *Barrabool* and four passengers and a cabin boy drown.

1880, September 28: *Susanne Goddefroy*, en route for Yokohama, sinks off Stockton Beach and seven crewmen drown.

1886, August 15: *Condong* sinks off Port Stephens with two lives lost.

1891, July: The *Ellen* is abandoned after leaving Newcastle for Noumea and seven crewmen die, two from exposure and five from being washed overboard. The lone survivor reaches Seal Rocks.

1892, September: The schooner *Minnie Young* disappears after leaving Newcastle along with the eight people on board.

1893, October 19: *Bound to Win* capsizes and sinks at Port Stephens with three lives lost.

1895, August 8: *Catterthun* strikes rocks at Seal Rocks with 55 lives lost.

1896, May 24: *Karoola* wrecked at Morna Point with two lives lost.

1898, January 1: *Minora* founders off Cape three Points en route from Newcastle to Sydney and seven crewmen drown.

1898, May 6: *Merksworth* founders off Newcastle with only three of the crew of 12 surviving.



SMILING SALVAGER: Kintohu Yamada and some of his salvage crew.

The harbour authorities planned to wait for daylight to assess the *Sygna's* plight. They had plenty on their plate already and there had been no call for a rescue of the crew.

After 4am the *Sygna* fired a red distress flare which was seen at Nobbys and helped locate the stricken ship. Captain Lunde again requested tugs at 5am, but was told the bar was too dangerous for tugs to leave port.

As soon as daylight appeared, Newcastle Water Police took a four-wheel-drive along Stockton Beach to where the ship was stranded. They reported it was hard aground, but the crew appeared to be in no danger.

This assessment changed at 7.30am when the police reported that the ship now appeared to have broken its back and might be starting to disintegrate. Oil was pouring from the ship and a crack had appeared in its side.

With news of the fractured hull, the Sydney-based sea-going tug – more than five hours away – was taken off standby.

Williamtown RAAF was put on alert. The base agreed to supply a helicopter to evacuate the crew if requested.

But first an attempt was made to remove the crew by lifeboat. Police fired a rocket line aboard the ship and the famous photograph was taken

HIGH HOPES: Salvage work goes ahead four months after the *Sygna* grounding.

of spectators and volunteers, rugged up on the rainy beach, hauling the line taut.

The lifeboat attempt failed, however. The boat's motor failed, the current was too strong and the danger was deemed too great.

By midday a helicopter was taking off from Williamtown and by 3pm the crew had been safely removed.

Captain Lunde, seemingly more worried about his ship now it was hard aground and doomed than he had been when it was lying alone on a single anchor between a gale and a hostile coastline, refused at first to leave. He had to be reassured that his departure would not cost the *Sygna's* owners their salvage rights.

LONG after the storm had gone and most of the painstaking cleanup was over, the question of what to do with the giant steel hulk lying broken and leaking oil on Stockton Beach remained.

The man who won the right to salvage the ship (nobody else wanted the job) was an incredible character named Kintoku Yamada, of Japan.

Mr Yamada reckoned he had a debt of honour to pay to an Aussie ex-serviceman named "Harry".

A teenage survivor of the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima, Yamada had lost his father at the end of the war and he had been seriously weakened by recurrent bouts of tuberculosis. All his life he remembered the kindness of Corporal Harry, a member of the Allied occupation force, who gave him \$100 and urged him to get an education.

Taking Harry's advice, Yamada studied economics, set up a salvage business and made himself a reasonable fortune. He came to Australia a number of times to try to find Harry, but when he finally discovered the man's identity he learned that Harry had died five years before and was buried in country Victoria.

At any rate, if Yamada owed any sort of debt to Australians, he paid it back with interest on the *Sygna* job.

Yamada's plan was to float the *Sygna* off the beach in two sections and tow them back to a Japanese shipyard to be rejoined and turned back into a useable ship. It was a good plan and if it had worked he'd have made money.

But fate was against him from the start. Standing just 1.5m tall, the feisty, jocular Yamada spoke fluent English

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MAITLAND: The steamship aground at Cape Three Points in 1898.

THE SAILOR

Neil Morrison, master of the tank ship *Howard Smith*.

"I wanted to do engine repairs and I was due to enter Botany Bay the following day. "Knowing the storm was coming I put the ship 25 nautical miles east of Botany Bay so we could immobilise the main engine. "That was about two o'clock in the afternoon. By two o'clock the next morning after the *Sygna* had gone ashore and I found myself seven miles off Lakes Entrance, near Terrigal. "I drifted all that way in 12 hours at something like a speed of five knots in a fully laden tank ship of 60,000 tonnes. "We started the main engine again and it took us the almost the same time to get back to Botany Bay as it did to drift from there before the storm."

THE RESIDENT

Frank Rigby, long-time Stockton resident.

"We were at home and the lady up the street said 'come up quick'. "The wind wasn't blowing, it was screaming. "I went up to get her and there were tiles and sheets of tin and God knows what flying through the air. "At the back of our house our neighbours had a shed that had just been put there. It lifted up, went over our back fence, down the side of our house and lobbed in our drive. "As soon as the wind stopped the dockyard rang up and said 'come to work'. "The ship that we were building broke its moorings. It actually blew across to Stockton sideways and ran aground on the sand."

THE SES VOLUNTEER

Glen Sturt, SES volunteer.

"There was no warning that it was going to be a storm of that calibre. "It was just put as a low depression, nothing special until it started. "Then when it started it just kept on getting bigger and bigger. "By seven o'clock it was off the Richter scale. It was blowing like a pack of 40 sods. I hadn't seen wind like it before and I haven't seen it since. "We had a humungous amount of calls. We were out all night and most of the next day. "Trees were down, roofs were down there were bits of roofs hurtling around. "From memory there were over 200 calls."

STORM

While most people gritted their teeth by torchlight in the battered suburbs, praying their walls and roof would hold together, there was a heart-stopping drama unfolding in the busy port of Newcastle.

And just offshore a giant steel ship was fighting a grim and losing battle with the sea.

THE *Sygna* was just one of many ships waiting off Newcastle when the storm struck.

There had been a surge in demand for coal and the port couldn't keep up with the loading schedule.

The seven-year-old, 53,000-tonne Norwegian freighter had arrived off Newcastle from Japan five days earlier and was waiting to load a cargo of 50,000 tonnes of Hunter Valley coal, destined for European customers.

In the middle of the afternoon of May 25, the *Sygna's* skipper, 57-year-old Ingolf Lunde, missed hearing the NSW Weather Bureau's gale warning for waters south of Kempsey.

Later, when he watched the TV weather report and saw the warning of 40-knot winds, he wasn't unduly perturbed. Winds of that speed were not unusual, he thought, and his ship could ride them out without too much trouble.

Anyway, strong wind warnings had been broadcast over the previous few days and to Captain Lunde it may have all been starting to sound routine.

Until about 8pm the biggest wind gust had been 35 knots, but after 8.15 things got markedly worse. The wind swung around to the south-south-east and started gusting up to 50 knots.

The *Sygna* dragged its anchor at about 9.30, but Captain Lunde had the cable recovered, set a watch for the night and went below to sleep.

By 11pm the weather-watchers at Newcastle's Nobbys Signal Station were getting very apprehensive and they warned the ships at anchor off the city that the storm was likely to get worse.

Most of the ships took the hint, and by about midnight only three ships remained. The little Chinese-owned ship *Cherry* couldn't raise its anchors

"A quarter of an hour later all hell broke loose, and so did six ships..."

because the cables were tangled, and the Norwegian bulk carrier *Rudolf Olsen* was determined to stay put because it didn't want to lose its position as next in line for coal loading.

At midnight the winds died down a little: the calm before the storm. A quarter of an hour later all hell broke loose, and so did six ships moored in Newcastle Harbour.

The harbour pilots and tug crews who had been expecting a quiet night suddenly found themselves in the middle of chaos and confusion.

Winds of up to 70 knots were screaming across the water, snapping giant cables and sending huge ships careering around the harbour. No sooner was one secured than another was loose.

One ship, the *Brisbane Trader*, was among a group that had broken loose in the Steelworks Channel and it was lying right across the path of the drifting, engineless tanker *Express*, in the port for a refit.

The *Express* had already been re-secured once that night and had broken free again. Now it had to be pushed onto a mudbank to keep it out of danger.

Another ship, the *Man Lloyd*, was tied up at Lee Wharf when all 18 of its cables parted (each was brand new polypropylene, 18cm in circumference), and it went drifting into the crowded confusion of the harbour.

Some time around 2am the surging waters of the port snapped the communication cables that kept Nobbys Signal Station in touch with Sydney. The port was left with nothing more than a low-powered domestic radio link.

Shortly afterwards, the skipper of one of the harbour boats reported receiving a weak SOS signal. It was the *Sygna*, reporting itself aground and requesting two tugs to assist it. It was an impossibly optimistic request, given the hectic work to be done inside the port (where the surge was so powerful even the tugs struggled to make headway). The chances of a tug getting safely over the bar in those conditions were so remote as to be negligible. All Nobbys could do was to ask the sea-going tug *Warrawee*, based at Sydney, to standby in case it was needed.

The other two ships remaining close to shore were fighting for their lives.

The *Cherry*, with its anchor cables still tangled, turned head to the wind and ran its engines flat out to keep its anchors from dragging. Its frightened crew didn't get the cables untangled until conditions improved after 8am, when the ship fled, belatedly, to the safety of the open sea.

The *Rudolf Olsen*, which had been reluctant to risk losing its turn at the coal loader, almost finished up ashore. The ship was luckily able to raise just enough engine power to turn its bow into the storm and hold on through the ordeal.

Not so lucky was the bigger *Sygna*.

Although a Norwegian inquiry exonerated the ship's officers from

blame, there seems little doubt they might have saved their ship if they'd turned and run to sea between 11pm and midnight with most of the others.

But at 11pm Captain Lunde was asleep. Even with the 10pm gale warning he heard or the dragging of the anchor in the storm's early stages, he didn't bother dropping the ship's second anchor. He went to bed and told his officer of the watch to wake him if the anchor dragged again.

So, as the other ships around it left the area, the *Sygna* sat tight, swinging at its single anchor while the wind and sea rose around it.

By 1am the anchor let go and the ship was adrift. Captain Lunde, wide awake now, gave orders to weigh the anchor, but the weather conditions were so bad even this simple job became a major problem. By now the winds were gusting at 130km/h.

The captain ordered full speed ahead and full port rudder, finally deciding to head for the open sea.

Too late.

Full of ballast water and drawing about 9m, the *Sygna* was pushed sideways by the storm, bobbing up and down on the angry swell like a cork in a tub. The ship bounced on the bottom of Stockton Bight at least twice before it was pushed ashore and many believe it was one of these knocks that put the main engines out of action.

Unable to turn the ship's flailing head to the wind, Captain Lunde gave orders for a full starboard turn.

A few minutes later, at 2.15am, *Sygna* was aground on Stockton Beach.

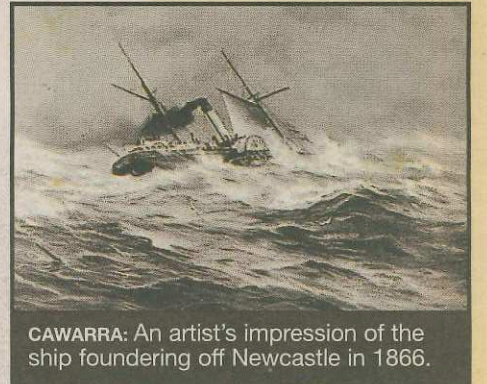
THE crew of 28 men and two women – mostly from the Bergen district in Norway – were not in immediate danger.

Captain Lunde had already made some contact with the Newcastle pilot cutter and he also sent a telegraph message to his shipping agents in Newcastle. He wanted help to tow his ship, which he was not yet ready to abandon.

Port Stephens with the master and six crew members lost.

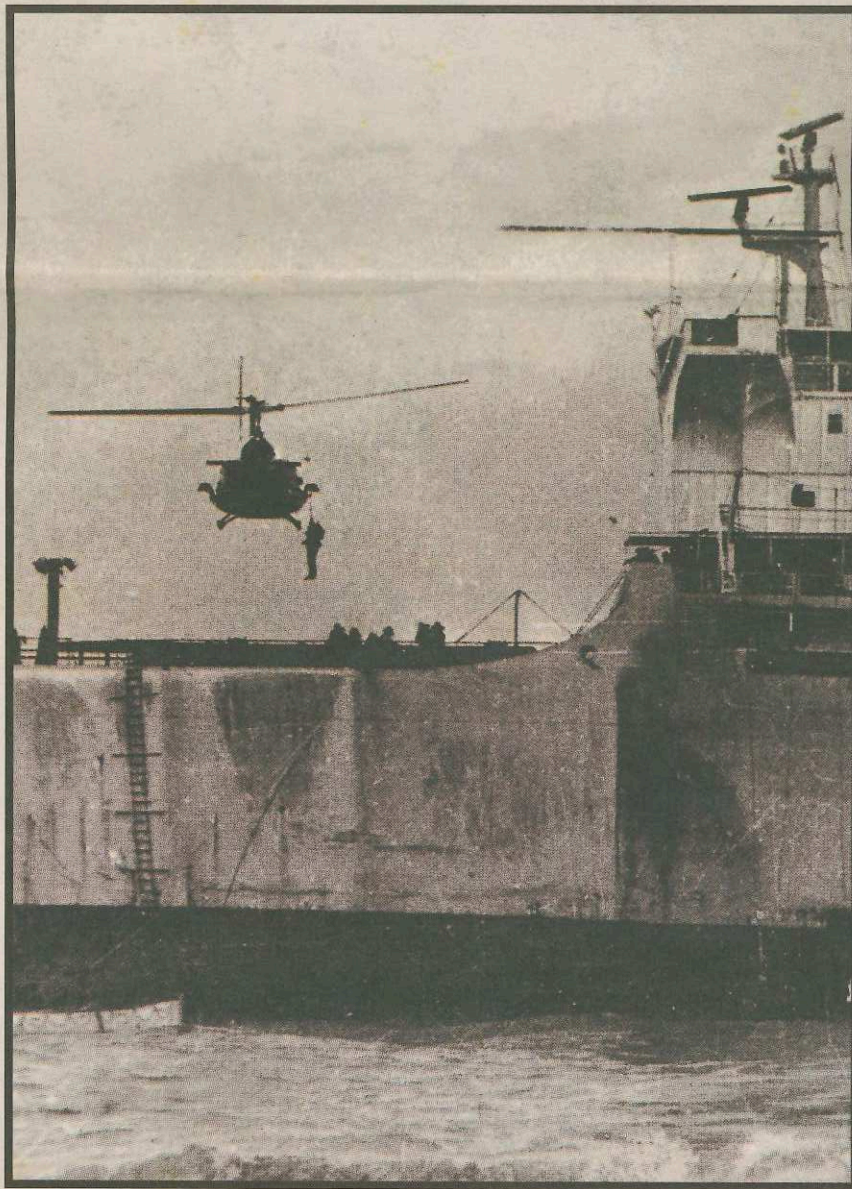
1864, October 1: Steamship *New Moon* founders at Anna Bay with its crew of 10 lost.

1865, January 12: *Boomerang* lost north of Newcastle with seven killed.



CAWARRA: An artist's impression of the ship foundering off Newcastle in 1866.

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UP AND AWAY: The RAAF helicopter rescue operation begins

1866, July 12: Newcastle's worst shipping disaster when the steamship *Cawarra* hits the Oyster Bank, with 60 lives lost. Only one person on board survives, Frederick Hedges, clinging to wreckage until rescued by a fisherman and two men from Nobbys Signal Station. Most of the 60 who died were within metres of Stockton Beach and safety, and hundreds of spectators on the shore could only watch in horror as people on the stricken vessel clung to a mast before it gave way and, according to a report of the time, "over it went with its burden of human beings, into the seething cauldron around". The *Cawarra* storm claimed 17 more lives from six ships wrecked between Sydney and Port Stephens. The remains of the *Cawarra* are now below Shipwreck Walk, with the remains of the *Adolphe* above them.

1866, July 12: *Mary and Rose* wrecked at Port Stephens with five drowned.

1866, July 13: *Seagull* sinks off Nobbys with five believed lost.

1866, July 13: *Arthur* lost in heavy seas off Lake Macquarie with crew of five.

1868, February 16: The brig *Esperanza* lost off Bird Island and 10 of the 11 people on board, including the master, wife and child, drown.

1869, May 9: *Nancy* founders off Newcastle with six believed lost.

1869, May 9: Schooner *Oriti* lost off Stockton Beach with no trace of crew.

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