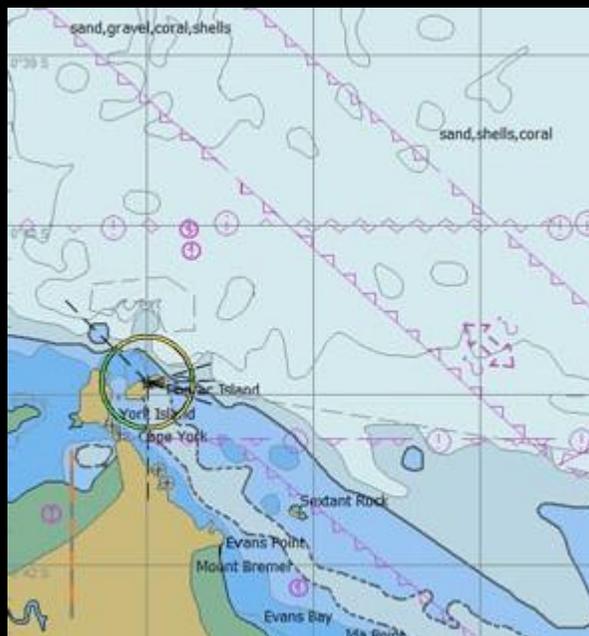


# A Chronicle of the Sinking of the S.S Quetta.

By Geoff Walker



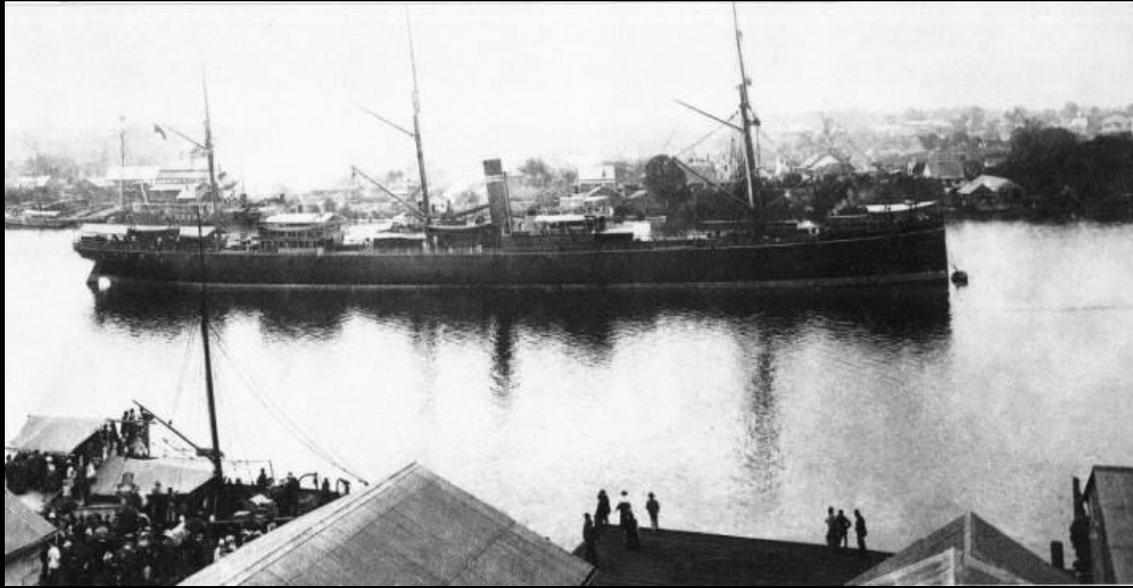
The wreck site of the **S.S. Quetta**

The fate of the **S.S. Quetta** was first brought to my attention by a Barrier Reef Pilot that had been engaged to pilot my vessel through the Torres Straits. Spending many hours on the bridge during the tricky passage, with little to do other than monitor the navigation, talk to the Pilot, and drink a bottomless pot of coffee, I became engrossed in the tale of the sinking of the **S.S. Quetta**, on an uncharted rock in the **Adolphus Channel**, on what is now known as "**Quetta Rock**", situated in the eastern approaches to the Torres Straits.

The "**RMS Quetta**" was a British-India Steam Navigation Company liner that travelled between England, India, Australia, and the Far East. The "**Quetta**" was a state of the art, single screw steamer, schooner rigged, and steel hulled. With a gross tonnage of 3,302 tons and powered by a 490 nhp compound steam engine driving a four bladed propeller, the ship also had three masts which carried sails for extra speed, resulting in here being a fast ship for her day, with a service speed of about 14 knots. She provided superior accommodation for 72 First Class, and 32 Second Class passengers.

The Queensland Government had negotiated to have a regular service between the United Kingdom and Brisbane, to facilitate the passage of people and mail. **RMS Quetta** was specifically designed and built for the Australia run, with refrigeration and the capacity to carry frozen meat, in special lockers. The ship was launched in March 1881, from the W. Denny & Brothers Limited shipyard, at Dumbarton, near Glasgow and made her maiden voyage to Brisbane, in 1883. The designation **RMS** indicated the ship's role within the Queensland Royal Mail Service.

**“Quetta”** was built following the Queensland Government’s lobbying for a regular service between Europe and Brisbane to assist with increasing passenger, freight, and mail demand, a result of the expanding State of Queensland. The subsequent loss of life, cargo, and the ship itself, caused public outrage, with demands for beacons and accurate charts for these treacherous waters, to minimize the risks of shipwrecks and to ensure greater safety at sea.



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The **S.S. Quetta** photographed at Brisbane, about 1884.

On 27 February 1890, the **“Quetta”** departed from Cooktown for Thursday Island, at the top end of Australia, in the Torres Straits. On board were 291 people, 33 in Saloon (First) Class, 65 Steerage (Second) class and 71 (Deck) class. The crew made up the rest of the numbers.

The next evening the **Quetta** was approaching Adolphus Channel. The Captain left the Pilot and Third Officer on the bridge, while he went to dinner. At 7:45 pm he returned to the bridge and was satisfied, that everything was safe. At 9:10 pm the Pilot ordered a change of direction to north-west to compensate for the strong currents. The Captain was on the bridge at this time and within a few minutes, the **“Quetta”** hit the uncharted rock, without any warning. Typical of most nights in the Torres Straits, it was clear, calm, and moonlit, when the **“RMS Quetta”** had entered **Adolphus Channel** on her 12th round voyage. On board were many eminent Queensland families, mail, and valuable cargo.

Captain Sanders immediately ordered the engine stopped, and for the lifeboats to be made ready for embarkation of those on board. The ship quickly started settling by the head, but unknown to those on the bridge, the stokehold crew were already dead, drowned by the sudden influx of water. The Captain went forward and saw that the water was already level with the forecastle. He called out to the passengers on deck to move aft. The forward hatch cover was blown off, as the water came in from below and forced the air up. The people standing on it were blown overboard.

The catastrophic damage to the ship was caused by hitting a hitherto uncharted rock (now called Quetta Rock). The keel of the ship at the bow was bent back and a gaping hole was ripped across the hull at the collision bulkhead. The ship was doomed as the hole was so large the ingress of water was always going to flood in faster than any pump could remove it.



Left, the Navigation Track of the “**Quetta**” on that fateful night.

The rocky outcrop which the ship struck, became known as the “**Quetta Rock**”. In 1981 “**Quetta**” gained protection under the Historic Shipwrecks Act 1977. It remains one of Australia’s worst maritime disasters.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, the Master and Pilot, who had been following Admiralty Chart sailing directions, were absolved of any negligence; marine surveys of the Torres Strait began just months later; all recovered mail was subsequently collected from the sea and delivered; and by 1915, the Commonwealth had assumed responsibility for building and maintaining all lighthouses and navigational aids in the Torres Straits and Great Barrier Reef.

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The now heavier, and deeper, bow, caused the sinking ship to pivot around the bow as the fast-flowing currents yawed the stern, from side to side. The ship had now drifted north of **Quetta Rock** and was listing heavily to port. This meant that only half the lifeboats were accessible. Two lifeboats were launched and within three minutes of hitting the rock, the “**Quetta**” sank bow first. The Captain scrambled up the mizzen rigging and kicked off his shoes before the ship plunged to her watery grave. The Pilot handed out life jackets before he too was forced into the water.

Captain Sanders made it into one of the lifeboats which held a total of 80 survivors. His boat only had two oars, so passengers used their hands and anything else they could find, to assist with the rowing. The other boat passed his, headed for Little Adolphus Island. The first boat dropped its passengers on the island and returned to the wreck site to look for more survivors. They only found a few. At 1:30 am on 1 March 1890, Captain Sanders’ lifeboat made it to Little Adolphus Island, four miles north of the wreck site.

The next morning, at around 5:30 am, the Captain, Pilot and eight crew members took one lifeboat and set off for Somerset, a small settlement on the Pacific Ocean side of Cape York (today all that is left here are the ruins of some buildings and some graves). After first landing at Albany Island, they arrived at Somerset at 10:30 am.

Here, Frank Jardine (who the Jardine River is named after) gathered a crew of his staff and they set off to the wreck site to look for more survivors. At the same time a man set off on horseback with a telegram written by Captain Sanders. This was taken 16 miles across Cape York to Paterson Telegraph Station. Just before 2:00 pm, the telegram was handed to the Administrator of Thursday Island, John Douglas, the former Premier of Queensland.

Within one hour the Queensland Government steamer, **Albatross**, was underway under the command of Captain David Reid. The New Guinea Government steamer, **Merrie England**, was also at Thursday Island and she too set sail for the Adolphus Islands, with water and provisions. The pilot cutter, **Eileen**, also headed to the scene of the tragedy.

Jardine's staff in the lifeboat had already found and rescued several people found clinging to wreckage, flotsam, and life belts. They also found the body of Dr J. Harry Poland, the ship's surgeon, and another male. Two people were seen on **Achoineh Island** (Perhaps native name - unknown location).

Meanwhile, Captain Sanders had hailed down the passing ship **SS Victoria**. They immediately turned about and headed back north and when they came across the **Albatross**, Sanders transferred to her. The **Victoria** then continued her voyage south. The **Albatross** collected the 98 survivors from Little Adolphus Island. This included, a small 2years old girl, whose family appeared to have died in the sinking. She had been supported in the water for several hours by Mutassa Clark, a Cingalese engine room crewman. She was the only child out of the 25 on board to survive.

All the survivors were then transferred to the **Merrie England** which took them back to Thursday Island. The baby's real identity was never established, and she was later adopted by Torres Strait pilot, Captain Edmond Lechmere Brown, and his wife Marjorie. She was named Cecil (Cissy) Lechmere Brown but was known far and wide as **Quetta Brown**. She passed away in 1949.

In the final reckoning, 134 out of the 292 people on board died when the "**RMS Quetta**" sank, the greatest loss of life in Australia's maritime records, at that time.

As Captain Reid turned the **Albatross** around Cambridge Point towards Achoineh Island, he spotted what he first thought was a coconut in the water. This turned out to be another survivor, Emily Lacy a 16years old Saloon passenger. She was delirious and badly sunburnt after spending 36 hours in the water. She at first tried to fight off her rescuers, but eventually she was taken on board. Her 13 years old sister died in the sinking.

A few days after the tragedy, the **Albatross** set off again, this time with Captain Sanders, Captain Keatinge, Third Officer Babb, the local priest, Reverend Maclaren, and Police Sub-inspector Savage, on board. They headed to the location where Captain Keatinge claimed the "**Quetta**" had sank. Immediately, they located the wreck, it was obvious by the way the tidal flow was pushed up by the wreck forming a whirlpool on the surface (this still happens today). Soundings using lead weights attached to rope lines (the old way of checking your depth), established the wreck was at between 6 and 13 fathoms, or in today's jargon, 11 to 24 meters.

The wreck was marked with a buoy and the boat then headed to **Achoineh Island** where they buried Dr Poland and the other male. They then went to Somerset. No other bodies were found. At Somerset, Frank Jardine advised that his men had **saved 36 people and recovered the bodies of another 45** who they had buried at sea. The next morning the **Albatross** headed south searching for more bodies (and presumably looking for survivors on islands). Without finding anything, they headed north following the **Quetta's** track eventually arriving back to the wreck site.

In November 1890, a diver named Anderson, who had previously been diving on the wreck, once again dived on the wreck, but this time he was attempting to salvage cargo, specifically 60 tons of silver and tin ingots being carried in the rear hold. This had been loaded at Port Douglas. He was assisted by other

divers. They placed dynamite charges on the starboard hull above the rear hold. These were detonated by battery from his ship located above the wreck.

The hull was successfully blown open, but the divers (using hard protective head gear) encountered clouds of wool and tallow that had been swept up from the hold. They eventually salvaged all the ingots, valued at over £7,000. They also recovered other items including personal papers, clothing, and jewelry. In the process, they also recovered the ship's bell.



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One of the few remaining artifacts from the “**RMS Quetta**”, the ship’s bell.

At the Quetta Memorial Church, on Thursday Island. In memory of Australia’s Maritime Heritage.

End

References: Australia Marine Museums Council, Marine Board of Queensland – Casualty Report on foundering of RMS Quetta, RMS Quetta Google/wiki, Queensland State Archives, Qalbum.archives.qld.gov.au

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