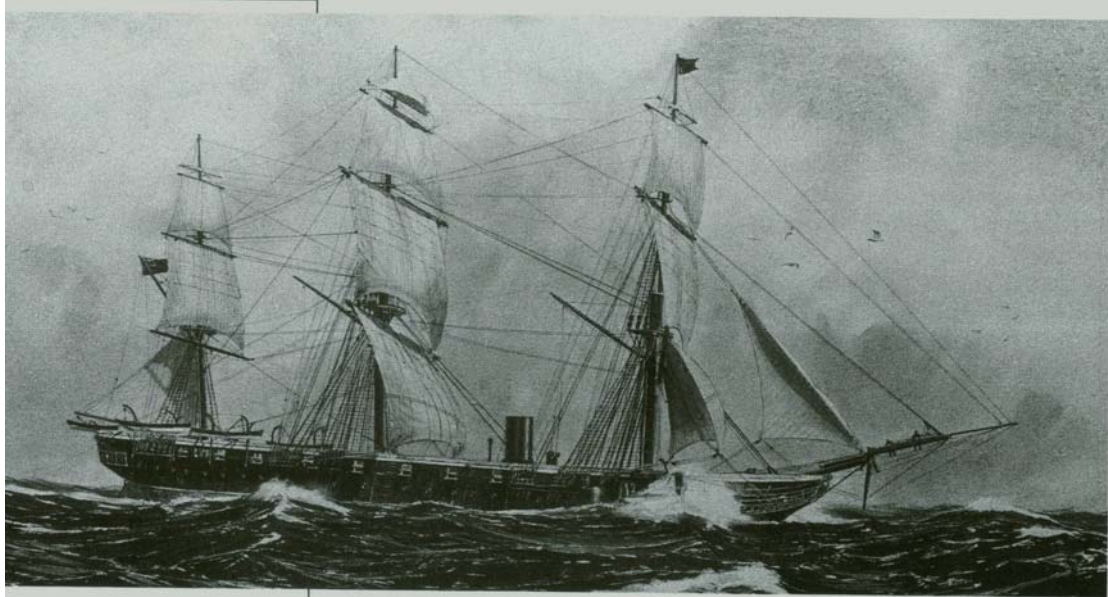


The Melancholy and Lamentable Loss of HMS *Orpheus* 1835



Good morning Ladies and gentlemen,

On Saturday we remember the worst maritime and naval disaster in New Zealand's history, the loss of HMS *Orpheus*, the Flagship of the Australian Station on 7 February 1863 at the Manukau Bar. Official Despatches from Governor Grey to the Colonial Office in 1863 describe the tragedy as melancholy and lamentable. 150 years on one still wonders how a ship of the world's most powerful navy was lost on that day.

Firstly, what kind of ship was she? *Orpheus* was a Jason-class wooden screw corvette, one of six of this class built for the Royal Navy. She was laid down at the Chatham Dockyard in May 1858, launched on 23 June 1860 and completed and commissioned into the Royal Navy in October 1861. She displaced 2,400 tonnes, was 68.5m in length, 12.39m wide and had a draft of 5.79m.

She had four coal-fired boilers that powered her steam engine at a maximum speed of 11 knots. Her telescope funnel could be lowered and the screw could be raised as well. This allowed her to

use sails and save on coal. As was common for the time, she carried a full set of rigging and three masts which would come into use when she was wrecked.

She was armed with twenty 8-inch [203mm] smooth bore muzzle loading guns which weighed nine tonnes each and fired an 80kg shell. They were arranged in a row of ten port and starboard and were fixed in position. There were also two 110-pdr Armstrong breechloaders that could be pivoted. To man this ship required 240 officers and ratings.¹ Although on this voyage the complement was 259. The *Orpheus* was designed for the Australian Station and after a brief deployment to North America she arrived in Sydney on 20 March 1862.²

In early 1863, the colony of New Zealand was asking for naval support. The Colonial Office did meet some requests, especially where there seemed little harm in doing so, if only to assuage the bothersome Governor. One such occasion involved the sending of the Commodore of the Australian Station to New Zealand. Thus *Orpheus* was despatched to New Zealand. She left Sydney on 31 January 1863³ under the command of the Commodore of the Australia Station, William Burnett. He was ordered to consult with the Governor Grey on the situation in the Waikato.

Although she was supposed to arrive at Auckland the decision was made by Burnett during the voyage to join the warships HMS *Niger*

¹ Chesneau, Roger, Kolesnik, Eugene M. (eds.), *Conway's All The World's Fighting Ships 1860-1905*, New York: Mayflower Books, 1979, p. 48. Some accounts state there were two 110-pdrs.

² John McLean, *A Mission of Honour: The Royal Navy in the Pacific 1769-1997*, Derby: Winter Productions, 2010, p. 156.

³ *ibid.*, pp. 156-157.

& *Harrier* in the Manukau Harbour and possibly look at the Waikato River.⁴ After a pleasant cruise across the Tasman, the west coast of New Zealand was sighted just before 7am on Saturday morning 7 February and the *Orpheus* approached the Manukau Harbour.⁵

The signal station ordered the ship to go north and enter the channel. However, the vessel did not respond and in fact passed the entrance to the surprise of the Signal Station. That was because the Commodore Burnett had not visited the Manukau before and the navigator was relying on a chart from 1853 that had the passage marked one kilometre southward of its current location.⁶ Frederick Butler, the only an aboard ship that knew the harbour was in the brig for desertion from HMS *Harrier* in Sydney. He had crossed the bar twice as Quartermaster on *Harrier*.⁷

The real tragedy is that the information that the passage had moved northwards was known to the Royal Navy in 1861. HMS *Miranda* who had been in New Zealand and visited the Manukau communicated the updated information to the previous Commodore Australia Station.⁸ The 1853 chart's directions for crossing the bar it was noted "will lead over shallow and dangerous waters".

Signals came from the Pilot Station advised the ship to "take the bar." This was followed by a signal to keep more to port. Evidence

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 156.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 157.

⁶ Despatch No. 1 from Governor Grey to Duke of Newcastle dated 9 February 1863 AJHR D No. 1 *Despatches Relative to the Loss of Her Majesty's Ship "Orpheus"*, Auckland 1863, p.1.

⁷ John McLean, *A Mission of Honour: The Royal Navy in the Pacific 1769-1997*, Derby: Winter Productions, 2010, pp. 157-158.

⁸ Despatch No. 2 from Governor Grey to Duke of Newcastle dated 9 February 1863 AJHR D No. 1 *Despatches Relative to the Loss of Her Majesty's Ship "Orpheus"*, Auckland 1863, p. 2. See also Enclosure 1 which is a note from the Commanding Officer HM Colonial Gunboat *Caroline* dated 4 May 1861.

from one of *Orpheus* signalmen indicated that this had been communicated to the Sailing Master. By this time Commodore Burnett, Commander Burton and Sailing Master Strong sensed that something was wrong with their charts. At this time a signal was sent advising the warship that it was dangerous and the ship should stand off.⁹

Butler, who had been calling out to be released as he realised all too quickly that the ship was on the wrong course. After speaking to the Sailing Master, Butler was taken to Burnett and Burton. It was here that Butler stated that the ship was “going wrong”.¹⁰ This disturbing news soon reached all the men aboard. Seeing that the chart being used was incorrect the frantic Butler pointed out the correct entrance. Commodore Burnett immediately ordered the helm to be put a-starboard and the engines reversed. But it was too late. A few moments later she struck the bar at eight knots¹¹ slewing around to broadside on the sea as Edward Wing watched helplessly from the signal station.¹²

All was chaos aboard ship at the moment she struck the bar. Guns and other gear slid around the main deck. The jolt had knocked men off their feet and waves began to pour into the lower decks. Moments earlier men were looking forward to docking in the harbour and now their lives were in peril.¹³ Some ratings and

⁹ Court-martial evidence of Signalman William Oliert given on HMS *Victory* 27 April 1863 AJHR D No 1A Further Papers Relative to the Loss of Her Majesty's Ship HMS "Orpheus", Enclosure to No. 15 dated 2 June 1863, pp. 15-16.

¹⁰ John McLean, *A Mission of Honour: The Royal Navy in the Pacific 1769-1997*, Derby: Winter Productions, 2010, p. 158.

¹¹ Despatch No. 3 from Governor Grey to Duke of Newcastle dated 12 February 1863 AJHR D No. 1 *Despatches Relative to the Loss of Her Majesty's Ship "Orpheus"*, Auckland 1863, p. 3. Grey states that the speed was misidentified as 12 knots.

¹² John McLean, *A Mission of Honour: The Royal Navy in the Pacific 1769-1997*, Derby: Winter Productions, 2010, p. 158.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 159.

midshipmen on the main deck were badly injured or killed by the guns coming loose.

But naval discipline took over. Directed by Commodore Burnett and his officers the ship's company began to lighten the ship. Initially, the crashing waves prevented the ship's boats being launched. Burnett ordered those who wished to save themselves to get the launch overboard and attempt to make the shore. It managed to get away but was struck by a wave and hit the warship and sank drowning forty men before the aghast men still aboard ship.¹⁴

Stuck fast, she was pounded by the sea. Men were being washed overboard and drowned. One can only imagine the horror those still on board felt as rescue now seemed very distant. Despite seeming hopelessness in the situation, courage, commitment and comradeship was shown by the men of *Orpheus* in these desperate times. Men helped each other into the rigging; some midshipmen risked their own lives to bring injured men into the tops.¹⁵ This is part of the legend of the tragedy and one that remains a vivid image 150 years on.

By this time the men were in the rigging hanging on. They were heard singing and cheering in an effort to keep spirits up. Commodore Burnett ordered two of the ship's boats to attempt to reach the shore. One was the ship's pinnacle with the Paymaster Lieutenant Amphett carrying the ship's papers and the other was

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.* See also Despatch No. 1 from Governor Grey to Duke of Newcastle dated 9 February 1863 AJHR D No. 1 *Despatches Relative to the Loss of Her Majesty's Ship "Orpheus"*, Auckland 1863, p. 1.

commanded by Lt Hill. After hard and exhausting rowing, both were successful in reaching safety. On meeting Lt Amphett, Captain Wing exchanged his boat for Amphett's on the Orwell Bank while Amphett continued on to Onehunga in Wing's boat. Lt Hill's boat took on Wing's four Maori crew.

Now both boats went to the aid of survivors from the *Orpheus*. *Wonga Wonga* stood off about 200m from the smashed ship and the ship's boats ferried survivors to the steamer where the men were given blankets and food. Only those strong swimmers and who had survived the initial striking of the bar were able to be saved. Many drowned trying to reach safety. Most of the ship's company remained in the rigging. Commodore Burnett was on the mainmast with his officers. At about 8.30pm when this fell the men perched upon it were heard to give "three heartrending farewell cheers" answered by the men in the other masts which soon followed the main mast into the sea.¹⁶ Commodore Burnett was seen to drown after being hit by a spar.¹⁷

Of the 259 officers and ratings aboard, approximately 80 survived.¹⁸ Of those who lost their lives approximately 60 bodies were recovered. Amazingly, Butler survived. Commodore Burnett, Chief Boatswain John Pascoe, Assistant Master W.J. Taylor, and an unidentified Cook are buried in the Symonds Street Cemetery. When the Graft Gully Road was built they were cremated and their names placed on the memorial wall. The Chaplain Charles

¹⁶ Despatch No. 3 from Governor Grey to Duke of Newcastle dated 12 February 1863 AJHR D No. 1 *Despatches Relative to the Loss of Her Majesty's Ship "Orpheus"* Auckland 1863, p. 3.

¹⁷ Despatch No. 1 from Governor Grey to Duke of Newcastle dated 9 February 1863 AJHR D No. 1 *Despatches Relative to the Loss of Her Majesty's Ship "Orpheus"* Auckland 1863, p. 1.

¹⁸ Figures for those who died and survived are not accurate. It is thought that some men who were rescued deserted the RN or came ashore and were never reported as survivors at the time. However the 189 figure is generally used.

Haslewood is buried at St Peter's Church cemetery in Onehunga. Three unidentified Midshipmen are buried at the common grave located on Cornwallis Wharf Road.

189 lives lost in all..... Or was it? It seems that some sailors could swim or cling to debris and they appear to have made their way to shore. It is known that the Kilgour family of Cornwallis rescued several sailors and sheltered them from the authorities. These rescued sailors set about working in the kauri mills with new identities. The Kilgours, with their wide coastal views, would set goats free with bells on, whenever authorities came enquiring. Approximately 50 bodies received a proper funeral – the remaining 139 were never found.

An inquiry held in April 1863 found that the loss was due to the shifting nature of the Manukau Bar. No blame was given to Commodore Burnett or the ship's company. However, that may have been a different outcome had he survived. Commendations were awarded for the men who attempted to rescue their fellow men in the boats. This included Humane Medals and ten pounds each to the Maori crew, one of whom rescued the son of the Governor of Victoria.

The official enquiry found that the loss of HMS *Orpheus* was occasioned by the shifting nature of the Manukau bar, and which rendered navigation particularly difficult, but the event

had shown how British seamen could face death with that gallant, chivalrous, fortitude for which

they are proverbial, and which would be held up as an example for others in later days.¹⁹

Signalman Wing was also exonerated, the inquiry stated:

That the correct signals had been semaphored from the shore Station and that the Signalman had discharged his duties faithfully and faultlessly.

This disaster was not the fault of one man but rather a combination of factors that in a chain of events led to the loss of the warship on that fine day in February. One could easily point the finger at any number of individuals, but if we think about a modern day analysis of disasters, it is usually decisions made before the event, or charts not provided, or signals not being sent that merge together in a catastrophic fashion. The men of the *Orpheus's* would have had no idea that their actions would led to such an ill-fated trip even before the warship left Sydney.

Let me end with a contemporary poem:

**The saved stood on the steamer's deck
Straining their eyes to see
Their comrades clinging to the wreck
Upon that surging sea**

**And as they gazed into the dark
Upon their startled ears
There came from that fast sinking bark
A sound of gallant cheers**

**Again, and yet again, it grew,
Then silence round them fell –
Silence of death – and each man knew
It was a last farewell.²⁰**

¹⁹ Hugh Edwards, *Australian and New Zealand Shipwrecks & Sea Tragedies*, Milson's Point: Phillip Mathews Publishers, 1978, pp.90-92.

²⁰ Sir F.C. Wraxwall, *The Wreck of the Orpheus*, John McLean, *A Mission of Honour: The Royal Navy in the Pacific 1769-1997*, Derby: Winter Productions, 2010, p. 156.