THE LOSS OF THE "GRELKA"

On 26th January 55, Professor Sir Mark Mitchell's 16.8 m MY GRELKA caught fire about 6 nm from land and in about 20 fathoms of water between The Pages and Cape St Albans on KI. Although the vessel was lost, the 7 crew escaped in a 3.5 m (11½') dinghy, and despite a terrifying encounter with a 5.5 m (18') shark, they reached the safety of Cape St Albans. The amateur skipper on that fateful cruise, Mr Jack Wood, later wrote an account of the tragedy which was published in the May 1957 edition of "Seacraft" and was later supplied to Gifford Chapman for inclusion in his book "Shipwrecks of Kangaroo Island". The following description of the events surrounding the incident has been compiled from Mr Wood's article and other material supplied by him.

GRELKA was built in 1910 and was powered by a petrol/kero motor which had been overhauled just prior to the tragedy. Although ketch rigged, the sails only provided assistance to the motor and improved stability in beam seas. She was in first class condition having been refitted by Searles just before her last trip to the island. The engine room with it's steel bulkheads was originally designed to be both fire and water proof. Unfortunately an old paid hand who looked after the yacht in her early days and kept her in immaculate condition was reputed to get a little tired of pumping her out from 3 positions and remedied this by knocking holes in these bulkheads and then only having to use one pump. Ventilation to the engine room comprised 2 ventilators on either side of the wheelhouse. Air was admitted to the front of the engine depending on the velocity of the wind and the speed of the vessel. The engine had both magneto and battery ignition with 2 sets of spark plugs.

GRELKA left American River on 25th January 55 bound eastwards for Antechamber Bay, a haunt for many famous

big game anglers at that time including Jack Davey. Before leaving, Jack's guardian angel prompted him to leave GRELKA's small dinghy (usually carried in her davits) behind, and to take a larger 3.5 m dinghy that also fitted the davits. The other lifesaving gear aboard consisted of 2 lifebuoys and 2 lifejackets.

With 4 crew on board, GRELKA sailed to Antechamber Bay and early that afternoon met the owner who had established a shore camp. The owner and 3 of his guests came aboard and the vessel cruised around the bay until sufficient fish had been caught for the pot. The owner and his guests then went ashore to camp for the night after arranging for them to be picked up again next morning for a trip out to The Pages to try their hands at shark fishing. Towards evening, the RAN survey vessel HMAS BARCOO entered the bay and also anchored for the night.

Early the next morning the 3 guests were picked up after the owner decided to try his hand at freshwater fishing in the nearby river. After an uneventful run out to the islands, they anchored in pleasant conditions. There was a slight breeze with a large swell running. The weather was quite warm with the temperature reaching about 37°C. At about 1030 hrs they "upped" anchor to cruise back to the bay. It was a contented crew that lounged on GRELKA's deck listening to the reassuring throb of the motor, the sun shining brightly, the helmsman singing lustily at the wheel with everybody at peace with the world. Suddenly a terrific explosion was heard from the direction of the engine room and the skipper ran forward to look down the hatch. Inside he found a raging inferno.

All hands then raced to procure fire extinguishers. They carried 3 foam type of which 1 was in the engine room and out of reach, and 1 pyrene type. All available extinguishers were played on the fire but to

no avail. By this time the fire had spread forward through the bilge and flames were shooting from the forecastle hatch. They could see that the main fuel tanks which were nearly full at the time had not caught fire yet and could blow up at any moment. The dinghy was therefore lowered and all on board except the skipper and Mr Max Wall (the mate) clambered into the dinghy which was hung astern. Jack and Max then endeavoured to pour buckets of water onto the fire but it seemed to only encourage the flames. With all the extinguishers empty, buckets of water having no apparent effect and the main fuel tanks in danger of exploding, all hope of saving the yacht was lost. The HMAS BARCOO had left Antechamber Bay early in the morning and was only smoke on the horizon and even if she saw GRELKA's smoke they did not consider that she could reach them in time to be of assistance.

By this time the dinghy had been pulled away from the stricken vessel and those remaining on board had to jump and swim for the dinghy. Although uncertain that the dinghy would hold the 7 men, they were pulled on board and set out for the nearest land at Cape St Albans. At this stage they could not gamble on the BARCOO coming to their rescue. At 1115 hrs just after the outboard motor had been started, there was another very loud explosion on the burning yacht accompanied by huge columns of black smoke. It probably was the main tanks and the men had left the boat just in time.

As they neared land, the BARCOO was seen approaching the still burning GRELKA. After circling the stricken vessel the master observed the falls hanging loose from the davits and he then assumed that the occupants had escaped from what was now a doomed ship. He then commenced a block search for the survivors. They were about ½ mile from shore when they saw the BARCOO closing quickly. The dinghy was about 300 m from land when the BARCOO signalled them to turn around and to

head for the ship. They turned the dinghy around and headed for the ship but not for long. They were now in more trouble because a 5.5 m shark had begun to tag along. By this time the outboard motor had ceased to operate and the occupants had taken to the oars. As the coast was closer than the BARCOO, they elected to head for land with the shark following along behind. It began to nudge the transom of the dinghy and then swum on either side bumping the oars. It then moved under the dinghy and began bumping the underside presumably to upset it. In desperation Jack dropped the outboard motor over the side to distract the monster and luckily it followed the motor down. The oars were applied with great vigour for the last 100 m and the dinghy headed into a crevice in the rocks to allow the survivors to scramble ashore.

The HMAS BARCOO lowered a boat which was run alongside the rocks to allow GRELKA's crew to be picked up and taken back to the BARCOO. They were very grateful for the handsome treatment given to them by the officers and crew of the ship. The BARCOO then took them to Penneshaw where they were landed in the ship's launch. The BARCOO then returned to the floating wreck. Whilst never officially reported, it is believed that the BARCOO sunk her with a few shells to eliminate a possible navigational hazard caused by the hulk which by this time had no decks, and one side of her topsides blown off.

The cause of the fire on GRELKA will never be known. It is suspected that a fuel line may have ruptured causing a leak. Due to the hot weather and the poor ventilation, the vapour would have quickly spread then would have been ignited by a spark from the brushes of the 12 volt generator. Incidentally Jack was told by former war time crew members that they had had a couple of fires on her during her war service.

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An amusing incident occurred on their arrival at Penneshaw. The British Lt (on exchange to the RAN) landed them at a shore camp that the BARCOO had established to make weather observations and take tidal readings. They found the camp deserted with the company of sailors no where to be seen. The camp was in a mess with dirty dishes and empty tins everywhere. The lieutenant's face turned red and he scooped up their observation logs to see if they had been doing their work. His face went even redder when he found that they had been doing their work far too well. The party had filled their logs with entries for the next 4 days right up until the time that the BARCOO was due to return. At this stage one small but worried rating came running into the camp from the beach where the others were apparently entertaining the local belles. They were rounded up, told a few home truths by the officer and then sent back to the ship for punishment after a relief party had been organised by radio.

However the loss of the GRELKA was a sad end for a vessel that had served in both the RN and RAN in 2 World Wars and there is no doubt that the dangers of fuel leakage is not lost on any of us who go to sea in motor vessels.

DAVE HURFORD

PERSONAL FLOTATION DEVICES

A Personal Flotation Device (PFD) is designed to provide additional buoyancy to help you remain afloat in an emergency. It cannot guarantee your survival under all circumstances but it will substantially improve your chances of surviving. A PFD should be worn if there is any risk of being accidentally immersed in water, eg children in boats.

There are 3 main types of PFD's:-

PFD TYPE 1 : Features a substantial collar or head support and designed to turn the wearer to a safe floating position in calm waters where early rescue may be expected. (Previously known as a life jacket.)

PFD TYPE 2 : Designed to assist flotation during short term immersion in calm waters. (Previously known as a buoyancy vest.)

PFD TYPE 3 : Designed for use when you are at risk of short term immersion in calm waters. They are available in a wider range of colours than PFD Type 2's. (Previously known as a buoyancy garment.)

Choosing the correct PFD is essential to improve your chances of survival in an emergency. You should consider:-

1. the location where you will be using the PFD and the weather conditions you can expect,
2. your size, weight, physical condition and state of health,
3. your intended aquatic activity, eg canoeing, water skiing, fishing etc,
4. your personal comfort including ease of putting on or taking off, required freedom of movement, and how long it will be worn, and
5. any rules or regulations administered by State or Local Government authorities or by the club or any controlling body.