

The Wreck of MV Yandra

A query came to me as Squadron Historian from Mrs Marlene Millar.

I am trying to find an article for my brother, John Walters, who is currently living in Queensland... He was crewing on a yacht taking part in a Yacht Squadron race (I think to Pt. Lincoln) at the time the *Yandra* was wrecked on Neptune Island. Their yacht (I think owned by Mr Polson) withdrew from the race and its crew helped in the rescue...

I appealed for help from Colin Smith, who replied,

Yandra was lost on the night of Saturday, 24 January 1959. A good place to get details, is the Google search engine, using 'yandra wreck' as the query.

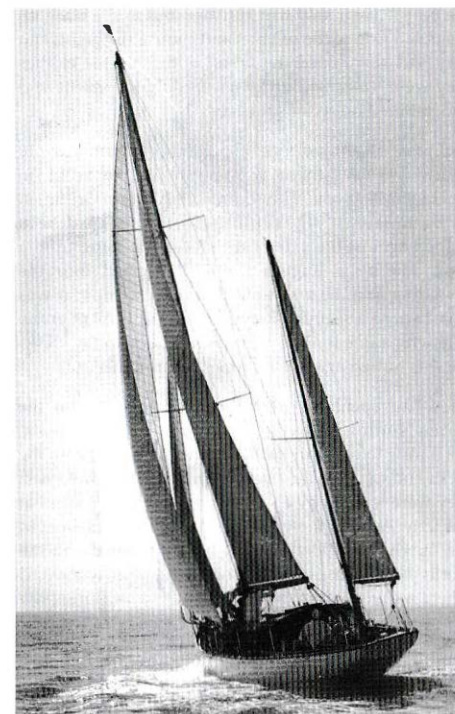
It was the race when we in *Tahuna* presumably rounded the North Neptunes instead of the South Neptunes. We never saw anything at all, but in the morning on the way home, we were very close to South West Rock off Wedge Island. Backtracking our DR suggested that we had rounded the North not the South Neptune Islands [and accordingly *Tahuna* was disqualified. — Ed.]

We were the leading boat leaving the Althorpes at dusk. We were sailing pretty well at maximum speed

on a reach, and the Neptune light just never appeared. It became apparent that we were sailing below dense fog, which was above mast height. Our only navigation from then on was by DR from our own previous position reports, as no lights were visible from Althorpe etc. Needless to say, we had a man permanently on the bow, looking. I remember Richard (Dicky Bart) Bartholomaeus volunteered to be lookout for much of the time. David Judell at one stage said he smelled oil, but we had no other indications.

When we first discovered that the Neptune light was not visible, Henry Wilckens, our skipper, who enjoyed a turn of phrase, went on the radio to the other yachts and said, 'We are hopelessly lost in an impenetrable fog.' Subsequently Colin Haselgrove, who was sailing *Cooroyba*, said that they hurriedly went on deck to get a bearing, but it was too late. When they did arrive at South Neptune, they didn't see the light until they were almost ashore. They looked upward, and in Mock Sarah's words, 'It looked like a hurricane lamp in a wet wheat bag.'

The yacht which was the most help to the wrecked crew, was *Iliana*, sailed by Jim Polson. Jim spoke to Adelaide radio for information about the light, and was told that the *Yandra* was aground, and to stand by. He



Tahuna close-hauled, 1954 (Jack Gamlin).

did so, and was able to ferry a number of the *Yandra* crew members ashore. From memory, *Iliana* was the only yacht to talk to Adelaide radio and was the only one to know of the disaster. It gives some idea of the denseness of the fog that the rest of us had no idea of the tragedy happening so close by.

Thinking back, there must have been a strong set pushing us all, *Yandra* included, to the North. *Tahuna's* DR was generally carried out regularly and with care, but it wasn't enough for us to find the Neptune light, or the Neptune Island for that matter, after a fetch from the Althorpes.

Altogether it was a memorable Neptune Race. I think your readers would enjoy the information on the internet as mentioned in my first sentence.

MV Yandra was a small steel ship of 918 tons, built in Copenhagen in 1928. Bill MacGinnes, who was bo'sn on the *Yandra* on that voyage, wrote —

She served the outposts of Eyre Peninsula on a ten-day schedule to include Wedge and Neptune Islands, Elliston, Venus Bay, Streaky Bay, Haslam, Thevenard, Ceduna, Denial Bay and Fowler's Bay (with a population of three!). She went up on South Neptune Island at about 2040 hrs on 24 January 1959. She struck with no reduction of speed from her usual 11-12 knots.

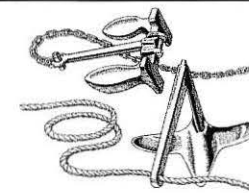
The bo'sn and second mate were in the lifeboat, when a wave hit the reef and engulfed the boat. The lifeboat was lost; the second mate was in the water hanging on to ladder; and the bo'sn was swinging from a lifeline. At this time the fog was so thick we still had no idea that we were alongside the island.

When the island became slightly visible, an improvised breeches buoy was rigged. Ron Giffard swam ashore with a heaving line tied round his waist. On reaching the shore, the after port boat fall was attached to the heaving line and Giffard tied the end round a large rock. The other end was made fast to the poop awning spar, which gave about a 30° drop from ship to shore. A snatch block was hung over the fall with a life buoy attached, and each person was then lowered ashore. All crew members were ashore by 2330 hours.

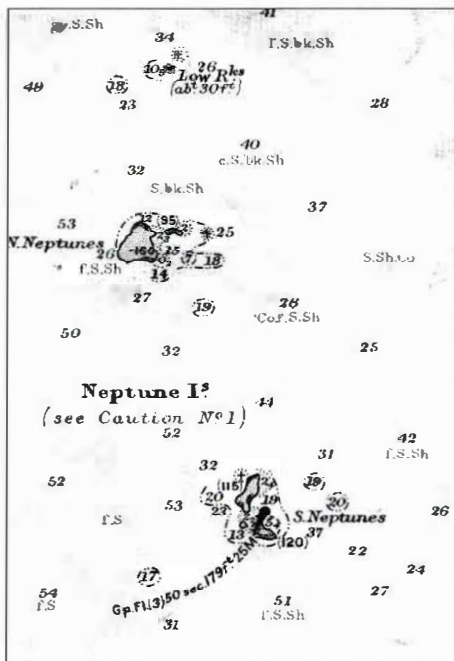


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Cautions: 1. Deep draught vessels should not approach within five miles of S Neptune Island due to irregularity of the bottom and lack of detailed survey... Currents: A branch of the east-going Southern Ocean Current sets north along the west coast of Kangaroo Island, with a consequent effect upon the tidal streams. Little is known of the currents elsewhere.

No lives were lost, but the ship could not be salvaged and men from fishing boats sheltering at South Neptune stole some of the crew's personal possessions—a mean thing to do.

Describing events from the perspective of the lighthouse keepers and their families, Mrs Margaret Hill wrote,

The three keepers all came into the kitchen, very worried. The radio was not working; there was a lot of static, possibly weather interference, but they were sure they had heard distress calls from a ship. With no visibility or clear communications, we waited. One man monitored the radio while we looked out into the gloom for flares...

... As dawn came, the fog began to lift. Hearing shouts from the jetty, I saw a group of men who I recognised as crewmen off the *Yandra*, walking up the track from

the beach. Their ship had run aground in thick fog on the ocean side of the other island during the night, and they had abandoned the vessel with only the clothes they were wearing. But they were in good spirits and had suffered no serious injuries.

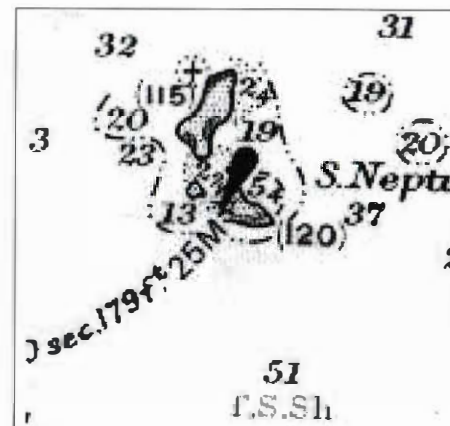
We were all thrown out of our bunks when she hit. When we saw there was no hope we went to emergency stations. The second mate, Norm Griffin, in trying to launch the only useable lifeboat, had been bashed against the side of the ship as he hung from a rope. Hit by a huge wave and washed into the pounding surf, he was very bruised. The lifeboat was smashed, so a seaman, Ron Giffard, had leapt over the side with a line to rig up a breeches buoy to the shore. He was hurled against the rocks, injuring his back.

They had spent the night huddled together on the barren North Island, cold, wet and in a state of shock, not daring to move in the fog for fear of slipping on the rocks and injuring themselves further. After daybreak, they were rescued by a yachtman who landed them at our jetty. As I led the group up to the cottages, I could see our rowing boat and the yacht returning to the North Island to pick up more men, and wondered where we would put them all.

The hierarchical protocol of the Commonwealth Lighthouse Service prevailed. The head keeper's wife swiftly separated the survivors into groups — the ship's captain and officers went into her care, the second keeper got the engineers, and I got the deckhands and cook.

According to the report in *The Advertiser*, there were 23 officers and men in the crew of MV *Yandra*. By the standards of today, that seems a large number for such a small vessel, but the power of the maritime unions was strong. She could carry 16 passengers, and allowance must be made that the crew undertook cargo operations.

In the days before GPS and electronic charts, we navigated by compass and echo sounder, relying on recognising landmarks by day and lights at night (which was much easier). Forty years ago Squadron racing fleets were usually larger than they are today, and there were many more offshore events — most alternate weekends throughout the sailing season, starting before Opening Day and sometimes concluding after the Inkster Memorial race. This is demonstrated by the trophies on our walls that are no longer competed for. The longest and most exacting was that to South Neptune Island, traditionally sailed over the long weekend for



The small jetty at South Neptune Island is obscured by the flash symbol for the light. There is little protection when the wind is S and none when it is SE through to NW. It would be a good spot to sit out a westerly change, but no doubt with a lot of surge. On the night we were there in *Fine Romance* and in company with *Morning Hustler*, *Falio* moved to shelter close to the northern (and larger) island, but it didn't seem to do her any good. The motion was vile, and we had a fright when a heavy nylon spring warp parted, allowing all the chain to run out.

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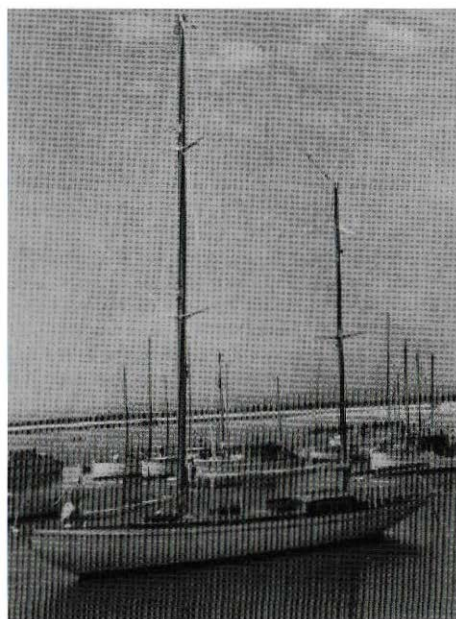
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way out of trouble. John Muirhead stowed that for *Enchantress* in her bow, and Graham Brown had big oars to propel *Liat* in a drifter before he bought an outboard engine.

I took *Kareelali* in a Neptune Island race in about 1969. In the early hours of the morning and with no moon we drifted round in light airs, to be set off course by the notorious currents. To my horror, on the western side of South Neptune Island a huge wave broke what seemed only a boat's length ahead, quite silently as we were to windward of it. We had no radio and if we had hit we would have been lucky to survive. Mercifully we were able to make to the west, and, very shaken, lost all chance of doing well by apprehensively taking too wide a sweep round the northern islet of the South Neptunes. In the following year we rounded in daylight, which was easier navigation and more interesting. I did not return to the North and South Neptunes until cruising with Ion and Margaret Ullett in *Fine Romance*, to find MV *Falie* putting enthusiasts into cages to look at sharks. That is another story, the moral of which is not to attempt to anchor there in S-SE weather.

Suzelle was a ketch built by Peter Clausen of Fletcher Road, Birkenhead in 1950 for a grazier named McGregor. This was during the Korean War, when wool prices were at their highest. She was the largest vessel in the pool at the time, and was famously 59 ft 10 in long. Had she been 60 ft or more, a pilot (or pilot exemption certificate) would have been required every time she went in and out of the Port River. Jim Polson bought her and changed her name to *Iliina*. Jim cruised in her to New Zealand, and sold her to Rupert Murdoch. After he left South Australia, he took *Iliina* to Sydney, where she competed under his name in the Sydney-Hobart Races of 1961 to 1965, and was winner of one of the races to Mooloolaba. We last heard of her a year or so ago undertaking charter work for recreational divers in South Africa. A Google search under that name was fruitless.

Next Jim Polson commissioned *Gip*, successor to the motor launch *Pegria*. Both were named for his sons Gregory, Ian and Peter. *Gip* participated in the Sydney-Hobart Race of 1963, from which *Iliina* retired. Don and Joan Taylor bought her, to cruise and race for many years. She went to



Suzelle, renamed *Iliina*.

Sydney, from whence David Barnfield brought her home as *Reprivee*. Finally Jim Polson built our first aluminium yacht, called *Yanpl*. This came from Aluminium Manufacturers Proprietary Limited, the company he set up to build more of the same, but few sold. After that he became interested in flying, and we saw no more of him at the Squadron. *Yanpl*'s name was changed to *Naranda*, and I don't know what happened to her after that.

It's sad that the Neptune Island Race (with the *Nerida* and *Wigan* trophies) has been dropped from our racing calendar. These days navigating round South Neptune Island in the dark should be easy, but in times gone by it was not so, and in fog the *Yandra* came to grief. Her bosun, Bill MacGuinness, recalls that at the moment of impact she was travelling at close to full speed, because they wanted to get home in time for the Australia Day holiday and the captain was confident of a position derived from dead reckoning after they got a fix on Liguanea Island. She did not have radar, and, somewhat surprisingly, not even rdf (radio direction finding) facilities. An odd feature of these fogs is



This prefabricated lighthouse arrived in South Australia in April 1867, and was placed on the lightship Fitzjames moored at the entrance to the Port River. The light was first exhibited on New Year's Day 1869. (The South Australian Yacht Club was founded on 5 November that year.) Subsequently the 40-ton central pillar was extended to the sea floor, but the structure was unstable. In 1899 it was declared unsafe, to be replaced by a light on Wonga Shoal. Following the Loch Sloy disaster of 1899, the lighthouse was relocated to South Neptune Island, where it was first exhibited on 1 November 1901. Vapourised kerosene was used until replaced by electricity in 1976. Finally the lighthouse was relocated to the historical precinct at Port Adelaide, where HM Queen Elizabeth II opened it on 13 March 1986.

that sometimes you can see stars quite clearly, when at deck level you can barely see the bow, let alone anything beyond that.

Postscript: John Walters wrote —

I was a 20 year-old crew member of *Iliina* during that race, which, incidentally I have always remembered as finishing at Neptune Island. *Iliina* was heading straight on to Port Lincoln and I had a plane ticket to Adelaide so that I could get back to work. There were about twelve of us crewing the boat... My recollections of that night are somewhat hazy. I have a clear memory of being on watch on a very dark Saturday night wearing only a pair of shorts and my heavy yellow oilskin jacket. Very cold and miserable conditions! I greeted the news that we were abandoning the race to go to *Yandra*'s aid with great relief.

I can remember early Sunday morning at Neptune — very grey, and, I think, still conditions as the crew was ferried from *Yandra* (which seemed to be right under the light) to shore. We took the captain aboard and returned to Adelaide.

This was my first (and last!) season sailing on *Iliina*.

At that time my father (Sydney Walters) had a 38-ft motorboat at the Squadron called *Panderel*. She was wooden and had been built in Scotland c 1932 for the South Australian Water Police. Her original name was *Lady Hore-Ruthven*, after the wife of the then SA Governor [subsequently Lord Gowrie VC and Governor-General.]... My father died in 1965 and *Panderel* was sold and moved to Sydney.

It's Peter Dermott recalls that *Panderel* was subsequently owned by Rex Von Sanden, who took her with him when he moved to Queensland.

Mark Tostevin wrote, 'My only memory of the race is that we saw lights ashore, but did not realise what had happened.' Jack Gamlin was a crew member of *Tahuna*, but he missed this race.

I thank those who helped compile this article.

SD