

## **SHIPWRECK SAGA**

### **Sinking of the Hautapu**

Lynton Diggle is co-author of the 8<sup>th</sup> edition of the New Zealand Shipwreck's book, recently released. He is working on the supplement.

One of the great mysteries of our maritime history, is who blew up the *Hautapu*, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 1966. Lynton is anxious to contact anyone who was crew on HMNZS *Inverell*, at that time, particularly the armourers, the 'cracker stackers'. Anyone who can help, phone Lynton on 09-8179001. Write to 3 Ngaio Rd. Titirangi, or email: diggle@words-worth.co.nz

After her rudder was badly damaged by striking an unidentified object off the northern Kaikoura Coast on the night of November 2, 1963, the *Hautapu*, a 41m. steam trawler, ex minesweeper, was beached in Ward Bay, between Chancet Rocks and Long Point, seven and a half miles south of Cape Campbell. With heavy seas pounding her, she listed heavily to starboard and quickly filled with water. The eight-man crew got ashore through heavy surf.

The *Hautapu* lay on the beach for several months, at the mercy of the sea and vandals, both causing extensive damage. Salvage efforts were slow, but during April 1964 several attempts were made. These culminated in her being towed off the beach by the Perano's whaling tender *Tuatea* on April 29, 1964. The *Hautapu* was towed into Wellington next day where, on slipping and inspection, was found to be a constructive total loss and was laid up. For two years she lay there, until May 1966 when her owners gave her to the Royal New Zealand Air Force for use as a target. May 31 was set for the exercise in which she was to be sunk 20 miles south of Cape Palliser by Air Force Vampires, Canberras and a Sunderland. However, the ship that was to tow the *Hautapu* to sea, H.M.N.Z.S. *Inverell*, was diverted to search for the collier *Kaitawa* sunk off Cape Reinga, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> May, and so the exercise was postponed and the *Hautapu* remained at the Air Force base at Shelly Bay. In the early hours of Thursday June 2, 1966, a scuttling charge placed in the *Hautapu*'s engine room by Navy, 'cracker stackers,' exploded and she sank stern first at her berth, bow still afloat. The charge was designed to be remotely fired in case the Air Force missed their target. The Air Force would have still looked good. No one has ever been charged with the sinking.

### **THE CONSPIRACY THEORY.**

We all like conspiracy theories and stories of cover-ups. Much more fun than reality. However more often than not it's nothing more than a cock up.

Many extravagant rumours circulated as to who sank the *Hautapu*. One story is, a navy telegrapher and character, Jake Huka<sup>1</sup>, billeted at Shelly Bay, was continually being harassed by Air Force staff that the Navy didn't know how to sink a ship and they had to do it for them. He is rumoured to have placed a one pound charge in the engine room and 'let it go.' The most colourful, is that 'top brass' from the Defence Force were partying at Shelly Bay, including the then Minister of Defence, Dean Eyre. In the wee small hours, someone suggested, "Let's blow the bastard up!" Now, 42 years later, further research has uncovered evidence that tends to support not only that theory, but also a cover up. Blowing up a ship and sinking it beside a wharf in the capital city, is a rather serious thing to do. Were it to happen today, the anti-terrorist squad would be deployed quicker than you could say Ruatoria. But, was it accidental, or deliberate, and if so, who dunnit? A check with SIS archives, (they're surprisingly pleasant and helpful,) determined they were not involved in any investigation.

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<sup>1</sup> See my reply on page 6 regarding Jake Huka.

There must have been a police enquiry. However, police archives cannot find any files relating to the *Hautapu*. No police file exists in our National Archives either and a Defence Department archivist cannot find any files relating to the *Hautapu*. They have simply disappeared!

I spent hours in Alexander Turnbull Library searching microfilm files of the *Dominion* and the *Auckland Star*, but found not a word on the sinking! The *N Z Herald* had a very small piece, but not until the 4<sup>th</sup> June. The *Inverell* and the *Kaitawa* featured prominently, but no *Hautapu*. Was there a word from the Minister of Defence? The Prime Minister? Why would major newspapers ignore what was the day's biggest story? However if the *Evening Post* got the call, they certainly took no notice and gave extensive coverage, with photographs. Freedom of the press, and all that. Where are the missing Police files, the Defence Department enquiry, the *Dominion* and the *Star's* coverage? Is this a cover up? (I must give Niki Hager a call)

A suggestion someone was trying to blow off a port hole that set off the preset explosives is discounted by George Dawson, ex manager of the N.Z. Fisheries Co. (now living in Cairns) "We removed all the non ferrous before we asked the Air Force to use it for target practice. Besides you wouldn't need explosives to remove a port hole as only four bolts held them on." Mmmm, good point. Then, of course, there would also have been a guard on the gate. Maybe there was a big Air Force party that night?

Regardless of how the *Hautapu* was sunk, if a vessel packed with explosives by the Navy, blows up and sinks at a city wharf, it's damn embarrassing. Dean Eyre would not have been amused. One would normally expect a government to go into damage control. I believe they did exactly that, before they even knew who or what caused the explosion.

## **NO PARTY TRICK.**

In spite of all the above, I still don't believe the sinking of the *Hautapu* had anything to do with a party at the Air Force base.

June 1st 1966 was not a Friday or Saturday. No, June 1st was a Wednesday, not a usual party night and Air Force personnel are not that stupid, even when drunk. It's not conceivable they would risk careers in a post midnight prank. Sink a ship, for fun? I don't think so. However it is certainly possible the Government was worried the rumours might have had some truth. Further, George Dawson is wrong when he says they removed all the non-ferrous before the handover to the Air Force. The Navy dive team, who eventually cut up the *Hautapu*, removed much non-ferrous, which was passed to the Wellington Harbour Board to offset some of their expenses. He is also wrong about the number of bolts holding a porthole on. They had eight, not four bolts. A few double happies would have made the job of removable much easier. However Navy divers aren't saints either. One has a porthole from the wreck, on the wall of his bar. There are probably others. Even the Air Force whipped off the ship's wheel and hung it in their mess.

## **ROYDON THOMAS.**

Undoubtedly the person of interest, who could have helped with my enquires, was a colourful character and well-known identity around the Wellington waterfront, Roydon (Roy) Henry Thomas. A fisherman with a master's ticket, Roy lived in a boat shed at Evan's Bay, where he and his mates used to hold 'choir practise' on Friday nights. He also had access to a boat building shed, right on Shelly Bay wharf and was aware that brass portholes and other valuable non-ferrous materials were about to be sent to the bottom of Cook Strait. A waste!

Together with a few mates, in the early hours of that Thursday morning, it is suggested he placed his own explosives to remove a porthole. Unfortunately this set off the scuttling charge laid to ensure the Air Force looked good when practising their bombing skills. The charge blew a hole in the bottom. Fortunately, Roy and his mates were on the wharf when she blew. (He always had colourful nicknames for his mates. Ray the Cray, Harry Heaving Line and Gannet Guts.) Terrified by what had happened, Roy took off to the home of his brother Norman Thomas, in Island Bay. Norman's wife, Shirley decided, in the light of a recent publicity for information, (2007), to reveal that it was her brother in law, wot dunnit. The surveyor spacecraft had just landed on the Moon, but Roydon knew he might be landed in a lot of trouble. He came home 'in a state' after the explosion. He told his brother what he had done and asked to hang out until things quietened down. The *Evening Post* reported the Police finding fuses left on the wharf.

Roy was, at 14, the youngest sailor to ever sail the Sydney to Hobart in 1947. His father, Norman, a member of the Royal Port Nicholson Yacht Club was also a bit of a character who used to own the well known 35 metre yacht, the *Huia*. After it was wrecked in New Caledonia he purchased the 72ft. *Coongoola* and sailed for Australia. Planning to settle there, he loaded the 22m vessel with spare parts and fittings but sort of forgot to declare them. (Australian customs, like elsewhere, are a rather unforgiving lot.) He was charged with smuggling.

Roydon thought it a huge joke and at a yacht club party sang with his banjo, "My old man's a smuggler".

Unfortunately, Roydon drowned in 1971 when crushed between Wellington's Queen's wharf and his fishing boat. He was found two days later with a large grouper hook in his thigh. A sad loss for one of the waterfront's much loved characters. At his funeral, someone even expressed concern for the safety of all the brass plaques in the cemetery.

But, did Roydon actually use explosives at 1.30 am to get a porthole? The Shelly Bay slip-master at the time was Bill Brambleby; he knew Roydon well but is adamant Roydon knew nothing about explosives. Further, an explosion at one o'clock in the morning is going to wake up everyone at the Air Force base rather quickly. Why then did Roydon scurry off to his brother's home 'till things quietened down?' Maybe something malfunctioned with the set explosives. The scuttling charge that would have scared the pants off anyone on the wharf at that hour of the morning. Yet discussions with a Navel explosives expert, suggests any explosives would not have been primed while the vessel was inside harbour limits.

Someone out there knows exactly what happened. Can you please give me a call before you die!

## **WHO OWNED THE HAUTAPU?**

It's was now party time for the bureaucrats. Lawyers, the Air force, the Harbour Board, the Defence Department, the NZ Fisheries company, Crown Law Office, Miramar Ratepayers Association, the MP for Miramar and the media. The question, who and when, will the *Hautapu* be moved from the seabed besides the wharf and relieve the area of an eyesore. More particularly, who owns it? Who pays? There she lay, sinking deeper into the mud, nobody wanting to be responsible for her costly removal. (Shelly Bay wharf would later gain further fame as a location for some of Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings sets.)

The Harbour Board were quick to write to NZ Fisheries, requiring them, pursuant to section 208 of the Harbour's Act 1950, to remove the said vessel on or before June 24th 1966.

NZ Fisheries were equally quick to write to the Air Force, pointing out that, in the Company's view, the *Hautapu* had been handed over to the Ministry of Defence before the explosion.

At this point the Crown Law Office got in the act. The Ministry of Defence sought their advice as to whether they had any liability with respect to the *Hautapu*. Their response, with a copy to the Secretary of the Wellington Harbour Board, was that their notice under section 208 could not be binding on the Crown. They also repudiated suggestions that ownership of the *Hautapu* lay with the Crown. Stalemate.

By October, 1966, another meeting was held in the Navy office. The question was raised as to whether it was warranted to consider removing the vessel due to the potential cost of the exercise. The Harbour Board insisted it must be removed as it had long term plans for the development of the wharf. Arbitration was suggested and promptly rejected by the Fisheries Company's lawyers, as they considered there was no question to be resolved. They gave the vessel to the Ministry of Defence. It was their problem.

Months had now passed without a resolution. Everyone was jumping into a shoebox and pulling the lid down. The Air Force were now saying the Fisheries Company had simply asked them to dispose of the vessel on their behalf and this in no way vested ownership in the Air Force. Some bright lawyer even asked whether the *Inverell* had actually connected a towrope to the vessel, as if in some way, this inferred ownership.

## **THE POLITICS.**

Several years had now passed and the *Hautapu* still lay in the mud. **AN EYESORE**, screamed headlines, on letters to the editor. "When is Mr Young, our member of Parliament for Miramar going to do something about the wreck?" Questions were asked in parliament! Lots of them. Nothing is more sure to create action, than embarrassing questions in Parliament.

It was now May 1968. The Minister of Marine suggested that perhaps the Ministry of Defence could arrange the salvage and disposal of the wreck. It was noted that Sir John William's, United Salvage, was shortly to commence cutting up the *Wahine* and had expressed an interest in tendering for the salvage. By July 1969, three years after the sinking, United Salvage had tendered \$54,700 to remove the wreck, but were committed to a further 18 months removing the *Wahine*. Other local firms wanted to tender. Another bright suggestion was to approach the Army Demolition Squad. Their job was to get rid of things. The reply was classic. "The purpose of an Army Demolition Squad is to render an object useless to the enemy. Should we undertake to remove the *Hautapu*, then the pieces would be too small to collect and there would be considerable damage."

Five years after the sinking. August 1971 and yet another meeting in the Minister of Defence's office. Another gathering of the Harbour Board, Crown Law Office, MP for Miramar and the Secretary of Defence. The Harbour Board again alleged that ownership rested with the Crown and it was scandalous that nothing had been done about removal. Again, the Minister denied ownership, but suggested that as legal determination of ownership could take a considerable time (as if it hadn't already!) then it was in the interests of all parties to come together and use the best facilities available to dispose of the wreck.

Nothing happened and another year went by. July 1972. Another gathering of officials. At last, the Secretary of Defence undertook to assist in removing the wreck, at the same time, again denying any admission of ownership.

The wrangle between the N Z Fisheries Company, the Defence Department, Crown Law office and the Harbour Board was finally over. It took six years.

The *Hautapu* was cut up in 1972-73 by Navy divers. The Harbour Board's floating crane *Hikitia* lifted the sections ashore for scrapping and the *Hautapu* was melted down for razor blades at Pacific Scrap in Auckland.

**Footnote:**

In spite of extensive research and enquires, neither Ray the Cray, Harry Heaving Line, nor Gannet Guts, have 'come out of the woodwork.' The 'cracker stacker' from the Inverell has not surfaced. The editor of the *Dominion* in 1966, was Bill Reeves, now retired in Wellington. He refutes any suggestion there was any Government pressure to kill the *Hautapu* story. However, he was surprised to hear there was no coverage in his paper and had no explanation. (Niki where are you?)

(In my reply to the above story I wrote):

*Dear Lynton,*

Many thanks for your recent update on the continuing saga of the *Hautapu*'s history and the attached photographs showing some of the artefacts recovered from the vessel. In all honesty I don't recall ever seeing (nor indeed hearing about) any items being recovered from the ship either prior to or after its destruction. Apart from what you've sent.

You brought a smile to my face when I read the name "Jake Huka". Jake was a Maori fellow, a likeable rogue and naval communicator who lived at Shelly Bay with a group of about six other matelots. Sadly Jake has passed away now, up Rotorua way I believe. Rather prematurely, but then again I guess his death was indicative of the hectic life style he led. The last time I saw Jake was in Rotorua, which would have been the best part of more than thirty years ago (c. 1977) when I pulled into a gas station for petrol, and who should serve me was my old mate Jake. He hadn't changed, smiling, joking and as large as life itself. Gee he had some stories to tell of his early days in the Navy.

One I'd love to share with you which today I find is as funny as a play, but obviously deadly serious occurred during one of his tour of duties at the time of the Indonesian Confrontation back in 1965.

Back in those days members of the New Zealand navy manned British naval ships patrolling the Malacca Straits between Indonesia and mainland Malaya in an attempt to stop Chinese Junks and Indonesian gun-runners from infiltrating into Malaya.

Jake's daytime job was a "bunter", i.e. a signalman who used flags. Now, as most of the Chinese clandestine operations were carried out after dark, one of Jake's secondary duties was to man one of the ship's searchlights. Once a radar contact was made, the naval vessel would sneak up on the unsuspecting Junk and when within hailing range turn on its searchlights and flood the sea area for the ship's gunners. One of the more common problems encountered with this type of operation was quite often the Junk was armed and its machine-gunner would open up on the searchlight. Even to a layman, manning the light had its hidden dangers, which only naturally resulted in a high casualty rate. So old Jake wishing to live a little longer than the others before him, worked out a method where through the use of pulleys and wire he could "remotely" control the light while remaining concealed from behind the relative safety of what armour plating the vessel had to offer.

This Heath Robinson contraption worked well until one night a Chinese gunner opened up on his light. Well Jake got such a fright he accidentally pulled on the wires and flipped the light through 180

degrees, which lit up the ship's open bridge like a Christmas tree. Naturally, this luminance provided the Asian gunner with a new target of opportunity who started to pepper the bridge and all those standing in it until Jake regained the presence of mind to turn the light off. Needless to say the "old man", Jake's skipper went ballistic!

While it's easy to single out one man who provided Shelly Bay with an immense source of entertainment. Jake was certainly a most "colourful" character whose antics will long be remembered after his passing. A couple of other incidents I had the misfortune of being involved with him included a brawl he started in the "Purple Onion", one of Wellington's strip clubs, a mate's car he wrote off and having to explain to my cobber as to how it happened, the night he got thrown off a balcony by one of the Airwomen and "rescuing" him from the long arm of the law when he was "ejected" from the Warren Taylor police station. They broke the mould when he was born, for he certainly made life at the "Bay" most interesting.

Although my principal interest is wartime research, one could quite conceivably write a book on the "social-history" of Shelly Bay and the fellows one has met along life's "highway".

Thanks to you and your Hautapu incident, you're certainly rekindled many fond memories from a by-gone-era.

With kind regards and best wishes.

***Paul London***

(Flight Sergeant - retired)