

Victorian Heritage Database Report

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S.S. ORUNGAL



S507 Orungal BarwonHeads
HistoricView

Location

Formby Reef, Barwon Heads

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S507

Date lost

20 Nov 1940

Official number

146699

Construction material

Steel

Hull

bottom painted 9/1929

Propulsion

Steam - Screw

Engine specification

Two turbines geared to one shaft, 4 boilers fitted to burn oil, rated 13 knots. Lloyds Machinery Certificate LMC & TSE- 6/1927, boilers surveyed 2/1929

Length/Breadth/Depth

390.10 Feet / 55.20 Feet / 28.10 Feet

Builder

Alexander Stephen & Sons

Year of construction

1923

Built port

Linthouse, Glasgow

Built country

Scotland

Registration Port

Melbourne

Date lost

20 Nov 1940

Departure

Sydney

Destination

Melbourne

Cargo

1,200 tons of general cargo

Owner

Khedival Mail Steamship & Graving Dock Company of Egypt under charter to Australasian United Steam Navigation Co Ltd.

Master

Capt. Samuel Gilling

Weather conditions

south-westerly gale; heavy rain, thick weather, abnormal current setting to the north-west

Cause of loss

Stranded on reef, fire later broke out during salvage operations

Passenger comments

Mr and Mrs P.A. Gibb, Kingsford NSW (on honeymoon); Miss Helen Moors, Geelong; Mr and Mrs A.V. Chantry and Colin Chantry, age 5, Pascoevale; Miss W. Sherston; Sister J. Hanna, Miss G. Hanna; Mrs M. Wilson; Mr James Stewart; Mr C.A. Landfield; Misses T. Po

Number of crew

30

Crew comments

Joyce Westhoven, pianist; Miss Catherine Murphy, violinist; Mr Doug Miller, Head Waiter; Chief Engineer, Mr Boswell.

Statement of significance

<p>The SS Orungal it has social and historical significance for its role as an interstate passenger and mail steamer in the inter-war period, and as a chartered vessel represents the economic impact of the Depression on Australian shipping lines, especially the AUSNCo. It also represents the risks and threats faced by domestic shipping in World War II.</p>

VHR history

The wrecking of the SS Orungal was closely related to the wrecks of the MV City of Rayville, SS Cambridge and HMAS Goorangai, as the laying of minefields in Bass Strait led to war measures including brown-outs and mine sweeping in the channels, affecting navigation in the area.

 The Orungal was originally built in Glasgow in 1923 for the Khedival Mail Steamship & Graving Dock Company of Egypt and named the S.S. Fezara. Due to the effects on steamship companies of the Great Depression including the steep costs of building new ships and increases in running costs and port charges, no new passenger ships had been ordered in Australia since before World War One.
 To meet demand for passenger berths, the Fezara (5826 tons) along with its sister ship the Famaka (5856 tons, renamed Ormiston), were chartered by the Australasian United Steam Navigation Company Ltd (A.U.S.N.Co.) in 1927. Both the A.U.S.N.Co and the Khedival Mail Steamship Co. were part of the P&O Group (Plowman: 44). The Orungal operated in this role as an interstate passenger and mail steamer between 1927 and 1940 (Pemberton: 13, 146), being used mainly on the Melbourne to Queensland and Western Australian runs, with 240 single class berths (Parsons:146).

 Following the outbreak of World War Two six of the nine large passenger liners servicing mainland Australian passenger and mail trades were requisitioned by the Government to ferry equipment, troops and supplies. Some of them were converted to armed merchant cruisers and used for patrol work and escort duties in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The Orungal had originally been requisitioned by the government along with the Zealandia on 25 June 1940, to transport troops to Darwin, but was returned to commercial service because "of her unsuitability" (The Log, May 1994: 58), perhaps too slow for the demands of the work.

 As an interesting footnote, two of the A.U.S.N.Co.'s earlier passenger liners and sister ships Kyarra and Kanowna had been similarly requisitioned by the Government in World War One. The Kanowna served with distinction as a troopship and a hospital ship, only to become another of Victoria's marine casualties when it hit a rock off Wilsons Promontory in February 1929. The Kyarra also served as a troopship, and was torpedoed two miles off the Isle of Wight in May 1918 with the loss of six lives. The Kanowna was especially declared an historic shipwreck in September 1998 (Commonwealth Gazette No. S. 446 4/9/1998).

 In a broader sense the A.U.S.N.Co., as a passenger, mail and cargo carrier "had played a very substantial part in the servicing of the development and expansion of Australia. Likewise it had made its contribution in two world wars in the vital tools its ships were to Australia's war efforts. It contributed much to the training of officers for the Australian Merchant Marine, being for most of its

existence the only company which engaged apprentices." (Fitchett, 1976: 45)

Despite being rejected for patrol and convoy duties the Orungal still had a vital role as one of only three passenger liners left to service the mainland Australian trades (Pemberton: 114, 230). Following its requisitioning by the Government shortly after war broke out, it had been fitted out with defensive armament. On its final voyage arriving at Port Phillip Heads from Sydney, Captain Gilling was attempting to enter the Heads ahead of a worsening south-westerly storm and, with a minefield known to have been laid in the area, had been warned by the Navy not to deviate from the swept channel. The captain and crew held fears that in the stormy seas a mine may have been carried away. In the worsening weather a blur of lights at Barwon Heads was mistaken for Port Lonsdale, and the Orungal steamed ashore onto Formby Reef, just east of the entrance of the Barwon River - instead of passing safely through the middle of the Rip. At the Marine Board Inquiry Capt. Gilling - who had been master of the Orungal since 1926 - stated that after becoming uneasy about his position and changing course to starboard one point:

" At 10.21 pm I ordered the engineroom to stand by, and gave instructions for the patent log to be hauled in and for the sounding-gear to be got ready. Approximately two minutes later, in a flash of lightning, I saw land off the port beam. I immediately recognised it as Barwon Heads, and ordered the helm to be put hard to starboard, but the vessel struck before she had time to answer the helm" (Argus 29/11/1940).

Barwon Heads and Ocean Grove residents were startled to hear the shrill blast of the ship's whistle, followed by the bright flares and explosions of signal rockets. The Queenscliff lifeboat crew, who had responded to the tragic collision between the Goorangai and another passenger liner the Duntroon in Port Phillip Bay less than 24 hours earlier, were later praised for their efforts in safely taking off all the passengers and crew.

Most of the passengers were asleep at the time of the wreck, and were woken up by the commotion, the ship shaking "from stem to stern" and stewards ordering them to lifeboat stations in driving rain. It was a dramatic time with the ships siren wailing and distress rockets being fired. It was reported that "When it was found the ship was safe, the passengers all went to the music room. There they sang and danced for several hours. The ship's orchestra played merrily, and amateur performers among the passengers clowned, danced and sang to keep the laughter going. In the early hours of the morning passengers went to their cabins, most of them to sleep soundly while the keel grated on the rocks" (Argus 3 November 1940). At dawn the Queenscliff lifeboat arrived at the scene having been launched at 2.30am, and cautiously approached the ship which was being "battered by mountainous seas". By 5am oil from a burst oil line was helping to calm seas around the Orungal sufficiently enough for the lifeboat to approach, and all the passengers and crew were taken off in a number of trips by the lifeboat. A Court of Inquiry later found that the wreck was caused by an abnormal set of current to the north-west, and cleared the officers and crew of neglect of duty.

The sight of a huge liner almost on the beach saw an unprecedented amount of traffic as people drove an estimated 10,000 cars, using some 60,000 gallons of fuel in a time of strict petrol rationing, to see the spectacle (Fitchett, 1976: 44).

Salvage operations began in an attempt to refloat the vessel, scheduled for the high tide on 15 December 1940. However during these operations, at 2.30 am on 13 December 1940, a major fire broke out, believed to have been caused by spontaneous combustion in the boiler room. The ship was soon ablaze, with smoke pouring from its hatches and ventilators, and at mid morning the magazine exploded fiercely. Of the 60 men working aboard the vessel two were severely burned and had to be taken to Geelong Hospital. The gathered spectators witnessed the eerie sight of the ship's hull glowing red when night fell.

The well known building demolition contractor Whelan the Wrecker bought the salvage rights, and methodically proceeded to dismantle the ship and its fittings. The drama was not yet over for the wreckers when - without warning - the burnt out hulk was 'attacked' by RAAF for strafing practice. Salvage rights were transferred to another private owner in 1963.

By 1945 the combined effects of the exposed location, fire and salvage had seen what was left of the wreck disappear beneath the waves (Loney: 1979: 67-68).

The site today is marked by two of the four Scotch type boilers sitting upright and exposed at low tide, just north-east of the small boats channel at the entrance to Barwon Heads. Large sections of steel hull plating and framing, and impressively large pieces of ships structure and machinery including masts, booms, deck winches, propellor shaft, flywheel, and a thrust block lie scattered about and make the site an interesting shallow dive. It is interesting to compare the site of the Orungal with the intact remains of similar large passenger ships scuttled in deep water in the Ships' Graveyard, such as the Milora and Malaita.

The site is subject to waves and surge, and is best dived on flat calm days.