

Victorian Heritage Database Report

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S.S. SELJE

Location

Bass Strait, south-west of Cape Otway

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S619

Date lost

30 Mar 1929

Official number

83796

Construction material

Steel

Hull

One main deck and one shelter deck, cellular construction double bottom 360 feet 1156 tons, Midships deep tank 15 feet 606 tons, fore-peak tank 105 tons, aft peak tank 231 tons. Flat keel, part cement, one bulkhead to shelter-deck

Propulsion

Steam - Screw

Engine specification

Triple-expansion 3 cylinder 27", 44.5" & 75" - 54", 180lb 577 NHP. Single-ended boilers, 9 corrugated furnaces, grate surface 189 square feet, heating surface 8530 square feet, forced draught, flash point above 150 deg. F. Boilers surveyed Feb. 1928.

Engine builder

W. Doxford & Sons Ltd

Length/Breadth/Depth

420.10 Feet / 54.00 Feet / 34.40 Feet

Builder

W. Doxford & Sons Ltd.

Year of construction

1921

Built port

Sunderland

Built country

United Kingdom

Registration Port

Bergen

Date lost

30 Mar 1929

Departure

Melbourne

Destination

Las Palmas, Canary Islands and Norwegian ports

Cargo

Fully laden with 114,000 bags of wheat valued at 80,000 pounds

Owner

A/S Rederiet Odfjell

Master

Captain Carl Endressen

Weather conditions

clear weather; light southerly wind; moderate swell

Cause of loss

Sank after collision with SS Kaituna (Union Steamship Company)

Passenger comments

Mrs Endressen (Captain's wife)

Number of crew

32

Crew comments

Samuel Keys, seaman; Carl Anda, Chief Engineer; Erling Thorsen (Third Officer and on watch at time of collision); Carl Fecht, Second Engineer; Johan Erikson, seaman; Svend Svensen, seaman.

Statement of significance

The Selje has potential archaeological significance as an international trader likely to be in an intact and unsalvaged condition. The Selje was carrying a cargo of wheat which may aid in the understanding of international trade and commerce in Depression-era Australia. Ship plans, as well as a number of archival documents regarding the Selje's collision with the SS Kaituna exist. In addition to its archaeological potential, the site presents a tremendous opportunity for interpretation to divers and non-divers who cannot access the wreck.

VHR history

In similar circumstances to the night time collision between the SS Champion and SS Lady Bird in 1857 in clear conditions, there was confusion and conflicting evidence surrounding the collision that left the cargo ships SS Kaituna badly damaged and the SS Selje a sunken wreck. However the news was overshadowed in the press by anxiety following the search for the Southern Cross with Sir Charles Kingsford Smith and his fellow aviators missing in the Kimberley Ranges for a week, and concern for the overdue Danish training ship Kobenhavn, believed lost with all hands in the Southern Ocean between Cape Town and Melbourne.

On Saturday 30 March 1929, the Norwegian owned 6598 ton Selje (previously UK owned and originally named the Hallgrim) had departed Melbourne and had just cleared Cape Otway on a course to Cape Leeuwin, Western Australia. It was fully laden with a cargo of wheat bound for Las Palmas, Canary Islands and travelling at nine knots. Weather conditions were clear with a light south wind, a moderate south-westerly swell and light rain. The Cape Otway light could be clearly seen flashing (GA 1/4/1929). Most of the crew were in their bunks, when at 9.25pm the Selje's Third Officer Erling Thorsen on watch saw the lights of the inward bound Union Steamship Company's SS Kaituna (2042 tons). He could only see two white masthead lights, so altered the Selje's course to starboard, then saw a red light, indicating the Kaituna was correctly to the port side of the Selje. At this point the Kaituna's lights disappeared. Some minutes later Thorsen became uneasy and rang the telegraph for the captain, and ordered the engines stopped. Captain Carl Endressen ran up to the bridge in his pajamas. At this point the Kaituna's lights were again visible, but in evidence given at the Marine Board Enquiry the lights visible this time were two masthead lights and a green light, indicating the vessels were now on the wrong (starboard) side of each other, and very close.

Captain Endressen gave one blast of the whistle indicating he was turning to the starboard, ordering the engines full speed ahead and the helm turned hard to port, while the Kaituna's Captain A. Sizer also gave one blast of the whistle. However, despite the Kaituna reversing its engines it was too late as between 10.05 and 10.10pm with a noise "like a clap of thunder" the bow of the Kaituna crashed into the port side of the Selje, between 40-50 feet from the stern between No. 5 and No. 6 holds (GA 1/4/1929, 9/4/1929). The Selje opened up as if it had been torpedoed (Age 1/4/1929) and it was immediately obvious that it was going to sink. The motorboat and lifeboat were got out but in the pitching swell they crashed against the sides of the hull, causing a plank to spring in one of them, and the motorboat could not be started. All the crew and the Captain's wife jumped into the two boats and cast off from the vessel. Captain Endressen thought he was the last to leave the Selje, however the wireless operator had heroically remained at his post sending out distress S.O.S. messages. He then dived overboard from the bridge at the last minute, and was picked up by one of the Kaituna's lifeboats. At this stage all of the Selje's crew had made it off the stricken ship, and the Selje had disappeared in a cloud of steam and smoke, but it was also uncertain whether or not the Kaituna would sink. All the Selje's crew were transferred onto the Kaituna, while on board the Kaituna inspections revealed that the forward bulkhead had held and tarpaulins were lashed over the bow.

The Selje had sunk within 22 minutes of the collision, leaving a vast slick of oil from its full bunkers to mark where it had gone down. A P&O ship Cormorin later stated it had been forced to detour 6 miles around the slick and floating spars and wreckage, and due to the oil that the sea for miles around Cape Otway had been "as calm as a pool"

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 Meanwhile the SS Ferndale from Aberdeen to Melbourne had received the Selje's distress signals and rushed to the scene, to be informed that all the crew were safe and proceeding to Melbourne in the Kaituna. The Kaituna was met by the tug Eagle at Port Phillip Heads but proceeded to Williamstown under its own steam.

 The subsequent Marine Enquiry took into account irreconcilable evidence from the crews of the Kaituna and Selje. The Kaituna crew alleged that the Selje was steering an erratic course, while the Selje crew alleged that the Kaituna's lights had been extinguished for four or five minutes at a critical time before the collision - that this was possible was indicated by the fact they had mysteriously gone out for 30 seconds after the collision (Age 10/4/1929). At this same time the watch had changed on the Kaituna, and there was no look-out (Age 12/4/1929). A Commonwealth Navigation officer later testified that ten days after the collision the Kaituna's port light would not work when tested, but this was not taken into account by the Board given the length of time after the event (Age 10/4/1929). Captain Endressen also alleged that the crew of the Kaituna were holding Good Friday celebrations as evidenced by gramophone sounds coming from the cabin, and that Captain Sizer had only given one blast of the whistle when in fact he should have given three blasts, to indicate he was going astern (Age 12/4 1929). After considering all of the evidence the Board found the Kaituna was totally to blame for the collision, that the Captain Sizer had disregarded Articles 18 and 28 of the Collision Regulations 1910 and his navigation had been faulty. Costs were not awarded, but the Board commended the actions of both captains following the collision in ensuring there was no loss of life, and Captain Sizer for bringing the Kaituna safely back to port unassisted (Age 12/4/1929, GA 12/4/1929).

 The Kaituna was drydocked at Duke & Orrs dock, where it was found to be more badly damaged below the waterline than at first thought. The bow had been smashed open with "a hole nearly large enough for a motor car to be driven through" and the steel plates "twisted and crumpled like paper" (Argus 3/4/1929). A 4-5 feet wide split extended along the starboard side from the bow to within 4 feet of the collision bulkhead, and repairs were estimated to cost 2000-3000 pounds.

 By a strange coincidence Captain Endressen's brother, master of the M.V. Trianon was also in port and he and Mrs Endressen stayed on board with him. The rest of the crew, mainly Norwegians, were accommodated and given clothes by the Norwegian consulate, their sum total wealth being 2 pounds as they lost all of their possessions in the wreck (Age 2/4/1929). They were soon after returned to Norway at their company's expense.

 The site of the Selje has been reported to lie west of Cape Otway, in 70-80m depth.