

SS Matakana - New Zealand reefer goes down near Plana Cay (Part 2)

• Continued from part one

A PASSENGER on the Panama related how “the ship was hard around on a coral reef just off the small island with a heavy sea breaking over both the forward and aft decks ... coming abreast of the second island, the captain saw men walking along the shore ... waving their shirts. We signaled with three blasts on the horn which was certainly answered by a smoke signal from the shore,” and on the sheltered side were local sailboats and the lifeboats. SS Endicott then left.

“The captain took this ship as near the shore as he dared ... a small sailboat definitely a native craft, with a number of men on board pulled alongside of that sailboat, and several men got into it and started rowing towards us. Two of the men were in uniform. They came alongside, weary and bedraggled looking indeed. The boat was operated by other locals. Captain Erikson inquired who they were. They replied they were the captain and mate; it was their ship aground, and that the crew arrived ashore was safe on the island, and they wished to be taken aboard our ship. They also reported that one of their men had a broken leg, and asked about a doctor on board. Captain Erikson reported there was, and said that he would send splints in a basket for the men.”

While feeding and taking care of the officers of the Matakana, Panama drifted away from Plana, with seven Bahamian sailors still alongside. The ship’s

By Eric Wiberg



crew were “a sorry sight: These men were in all sorts of attire....” Passengers on the Panama pitched in \$70 for the comfort of the survivors and cots were laid out for them. Some of the men had sunstroke, pneumonia or mal-effects from submersion; Geoffrey Mulford and William Balchin had broken or fractured bones

and Harry Allsop had bronchitis from exposure.

The Bahamian mariners “who stayed alongside they were quite surprised to find that everyone spoke English. We learned some about the islands which are British possessions and a part of the Bahamas. Our passengers tossed fruit, cigarettes and other articles to



“Arrival of rescued crew of British ship rescued by SS Panama. The crew of the SS Matakana which was carrying frozen beef from Australia to England by way of the Panama Canal, which went aground on the island of Mayiguana [sic]. Some of the seamen had never seen America before. This morning they came up the bay,” in New York. Acme, 4 May, 1940.



“Here are some of the 78 crew members of the British freighter Matakana which was wrecked off the Flat Cays in the Bahamas May 1, as they climbed from lifeboats to the rescue ship, Panama, which arrived with them in New York three days later.”

Photo: Panama crew member/Lancaster Daily Intelligence Journal, 6 May, 1940.



CAPTAIN Erik J. Erikson of the SS Panama which rescued 78 men from SS Matakana.

Bulkheads.” A Miami paper records how “Monarch of Nassau operated by Carl Sawyer ... visited the wreck under secret orders of the Bahamas government. The journalist noted shells in racks, a depth charge marked T.N.T. This mailboat was under command of Captain Cromwell Curry and Chief Fred Moe.”

On 20 June, 1940 a Tampa paper related that “the wrecking tug Warbler returned today after abandoning as a total loss the ... Matakana,” whose senior officers were taken to Kingston, Jamaica. Some of the 200 tons of steel and other salvaged goods were loaded aboard barges and towed to Philadelphia. Her Engineer J. G. Chappell volunteered and was chief engineering officer aboard HMS Jervis Bay, which was sunk. He was killed at age 44, leaving his bride Gladys Facer and two children behind. On 3 October, 1940 the Sydney Daily Commercial News reported that in a ceremony Lord Essenden of Furness Withy thanked Captain Erikson for “help and assistance freely given in accordance with the highest traditions of the brotherhood of the sea.” In 1950 Matakana was cited in an obituary, pointing out how E. A. Bausman of East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania “helped to rescue the British freighter Matakana.”

Lloyd’s List & Shipping Gazette and the Salvage Association’s surveyor reported extensively on the wreck for weeks, summing up that the whole ship was basically “embedded in sand and coral.” A week after the accident, British Admiralty’s 26-ship Convoy BHX 41 (Bermuda-Halifax) left Bermuda without Matakana. At least four ships which also left New Zealand in April arrived in the UK on May 23. Today, wreck divers confirm that her remains are still visible in The Bahamas. For one day in the country’s history New Zealand lamb outnumbered hutia on East Plana, and on West Plana Brits outnumbered Acklins Islanders.

them in thanks ... the biggest struggle was over the bows of women that some girl tossed out to them wanting to do their bit and giving something to these men who had helped in rescue of the crew.”

The captain and First Officer went back to the island, and to facilitate their trip, Captain Erikson towed the Bahamian vessels still alongside closer to East Plana, where they could reunite with what was left of their ship. Fourteen officers and 64 seamen were taken aboard the Panama. Erikson gave the remaining men a week’s supply of food, and medical supplies. “The last we saw of them was the small boat in the path of the setting sun with two officers waving their handkerchief goodbye to their crew,” at 6.29pm, or 17 hours after impact. The chief engineer had stayed on shore to look after any possible salvage. Authorities at Nassau said a ship would come over in a day or two to pick them up. The Panama sailed for New York, arriving six days later.

The Bahamian government in Nassau meanwhile assigned their commissioner in Long Island to coordinate; he visited the site and determined that the ship could not be refloated. Captain Davis was stunned and “hoping by a miracle to save something from the wreckage”. He and three senior officers stayed “to

await the arrival of British authorities from Nassau”. Determined salvage efforts were undertaken by ships and planes from Key West, Cuba and beyond. The Merritt, Chapman, & Scott salvage tug Warbler, US Navy Destroyer USS Laub, and several smaller ships, including numerous sailboat and rowboats sourced locally were not successful, salvaging only 200 bales of dry wool, and tallow. Alas, the salvor reported that Matakana was “in a precarious position and badly damaged, with shaft tunnel, engine room and lower holds flooded”.

The Long Island Commissioner and wreck master advised insurers that the “vessel settled, tearing plates and enlarging a hole on port side of engine room aft, which is badly crushed with numerous openings, rotting [meat] cargo washing out, bilge forward of engine room crushed, no openings showing above bottom.” The gas and odours were so bad that even salvage divers in hard hats could only last about 10-15 minutes in the holds. The wreck appears in newspapers across North and South America, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK. A stark photograph of the bridge notes that “The Matakana’s telegraph tells the story of its last moments: “Full Astern,” and “Close Watertight

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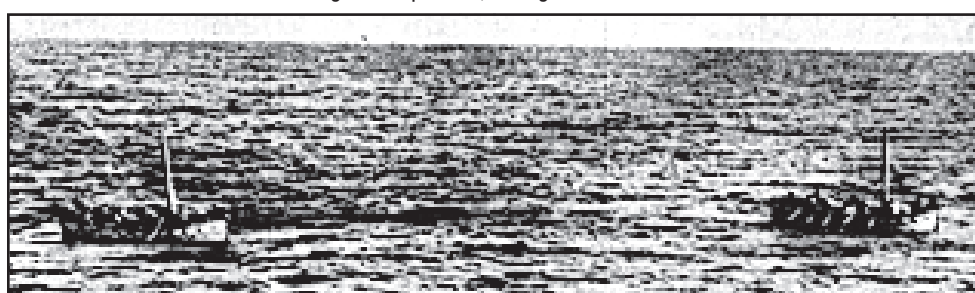
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“ONE of the salvage workers in a diving suit gasps for breath. The men can work only for 10 to 15 minutes at a time for the decomposing meat in the cargo knocks them out.” It appears that there are mariners from Bahamas assisting in the photos, though unverified.



“LIFEBOATS head for rescue ship after freighter wrecks,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, 6 May, 1940.