

# Gallipoli ship mystery laid to rest

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Members of the Southern Ocean Exploration dive group explore the shipwreck of *TSS Kanowna*, which sank off Wilsons Promontory in 1929 after striking a rock.

Photo: *Supplied*

It is a Saturday in late April, on a boat in Bass Strait. Four middle-aged men are high-fiving each other like teenagers. They can scarcely believe their luck. "If we had beer on board," said one of them later, "we would have been cracking it."

Below them was *TSS Kanowna*, a passenger ship that sank in 1929 off Wilsons Promontory. Until Melbourne shipwreck explorer Peter Taylor came across an obscure archival clue recently, the ship's final resting place was a mystery.

Bass Strait was about to give up the answer. Taylor and his mates Greg Hodge, Mark Ryan and Mick Whitmore from Southern Ocean Exploration had found one of Victoria's biggest shipwrecks.

"Just think of the Spirit of Tasmania sinking with everything on it," explained Heritage Victoria maritime archaeologist Ross Anderson. The 126-metre-long *Kanowna* is 80 metres shorter than the Tasmanian ferry. "It is basically an untouched, intact, entire ship with all of its passenger belongings, cargo and fittings. It wasn't salvaged . . . so it is a time capsule from 1929."

And the timing of the discovery was perfect. The *Kanowna*, once a hospital ship for wounded soldiers from Gallipoli, was found on Anzac weekend, the landing's 90th anniversary.

The 7105-tonne ship's location was unknown because she had drifted for hours before finally sinking, stern-first, on the morning of February 18, 1929. The night before, the *Kanowna* had been steaming from Sydney to Melbourne when she hit Skull Rock, off Wilsons Prom, at 8.39pm. Her recent discovery has brought to the surface speculation that this was no accident.

The "eureka" moment for the shipwreck hunters came when Mr Taylor found a reference to the *Kanowna* in wartime records.

Taking this new piece of evidence, the Southern Ocean Exploration team "mowed the lawn" with their boat across four square kilometres of Bass Strait with a depth sounder and magnetometer. They did this for three days before their treasure loomed up on the instruments. The location, and details of the archival evidence, will remain secret because of the fierce battle between those such as Southern Ocean Exploration - who want to preserve shipwrecks - and others who want to loot them.

It was supposedly a foggy night when the *Kanowna* suffered "a glancing blow". In a later court of inquiry, blame came to rest on the ship's master, who was told he should have slowed down. Survivors remember an almighty crash and the ship shuddering from end to end, then lurching.

By 10pm the 141 passengers had abandoned ship, to be picked up by the nearby *SS Mackarra*. A young girl broke her leg, a man fell off the gangway, but everyone survived except for a dog, a cat and a racehorse. More than £200,000 of cargo, including three cars, settled with the ship on the bottom of Bass Strait.

Amid the lost cargo were the worldly possessions - including the heirlooms - of the Filmer family, on their way back from years living in Vanuatu. Iris Hull, nee Filmer, was one when she, her three-year-old sister, Shirley, and five other family members were forced to abandon ship.

Now living in Adelaide, Mrs Hull, 77, was too young to recall much, but the event has become family lore.

What passed from generation to generation was the theory that the sinking of the *Kanowna* was an insurance job.

The Filmers believe the *Kanowna* was a "leaky old tub" that was soon headed for the scrap heap. Records from the ship's owner, the Australasian United Steam Navigation Company, show that in January it turned down an offer to insure the ship for £14,750. Insurance of £55,000 was paid when the *Kanowna* sank.

The family remembered it being a clear, starry night with no fog and thought it suspicious that *SS Mackarra*, owned by the same shipping company, just happened to be nearby to pick up passengers.

But another survivor, Pauline Ahern, remembers things differently. Although she was only three, Mrs Ahern, 79, says the ship was delayed for hours in Sydney because of trouble loading the racehorse. Mrs Ahern, whose father was the ship's doctor, thought the *Kanowna* was taking a short cut to make up time when it hit a rock.

"I am really pleased the shipwreck has been found. Maybe deep down there's my little suitcase. I have sailed along there many times in my life and gone past that area and wondered where the ship was," she said.

It is unlikely that Mrs Ahern's suitcase has survived 76 years in Bass Strait. When Southern Ocean Exploration dived at the wreck site for the first time last month, the ship was remarkably intact but much of the timber had rotted away.

In early May the divers took the 83-metre journey into the deep. "We had beautiful conditions. We dropped down and she just appeared underneath us," Mr Ryan said. "We had 20-metre underwater visibility. We went up over the stern and into the rear hold. She was sitting upright on the bottom."

The ship had become a reef, with prolific fish life attracting seals.

The men saw brass beds, all stacked in a pile. Lots of porcelain toilets - they later realised they had swum over the second-class men's lavatories - and the deck crane was there, still with its arm up. The decking was remarkably unscathed.

The challenge now is to protect the ship from looters.