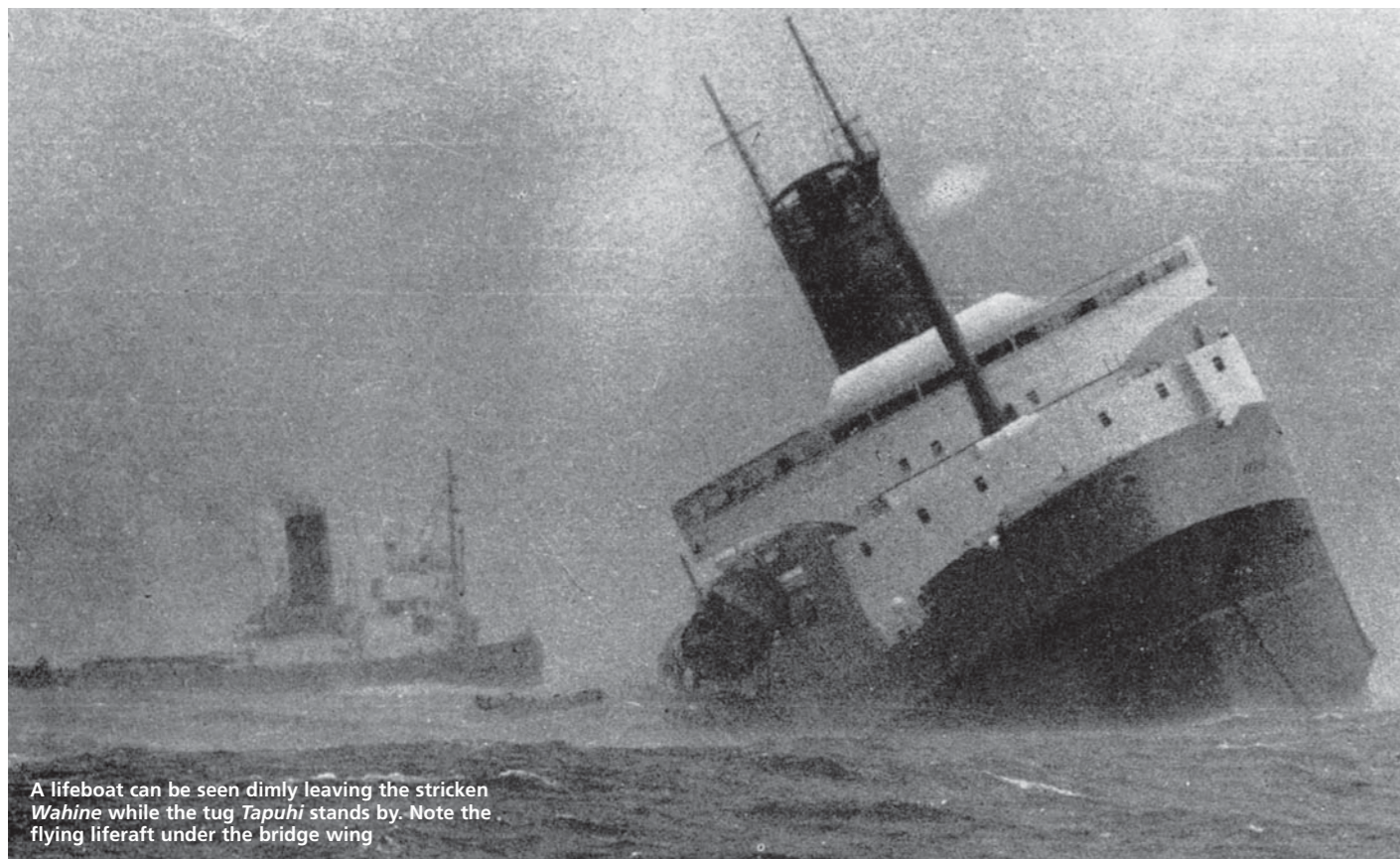


THE WAHINE DISASTER – AN ACT OF GOD

BY KEITH INGRAM



A lifeboat can be seen dimly leaving the stricken *Wahine* while the tug *Tapuhi* stands by. Note the flying liferaft under the bridge wing

A cold, misty dawn broke over the eastern bays of Wellington as a convoy of army trucks made their way home around the coastline with laden coffins, a grim reminder of the *Wahine* disaster that unfolded on Wellington's harbour the day before.

After 40 years, it would be remiss of us not to remember Wednesday, April 10, 1968, the lead-up to Easter weekend, when the inter-island ferry *Wahine*, carrying 614 passengers and 130 crew, foundered in the morning in raging seas in the entrance to Wellington Harbour off Seatoun Beach with a loss of 44 passengers, six crewmembers and one stowaway – a total of 51 lives.

The *Wahine* had sailed from Lyttelton on her overnight scheduled run to Wellington. The two-year-old ship, owned by the Union Steam Ship Company, the pride of the inter-island ferry fleet, was a very modern roll on-roll off ferry with the latest navigational aids and safety systems on board.

Meanwhile, the weather forecast on the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation's all-night programme reported that tropical cyclone Giselle was centred near the eastern coast of the northern part of Coromandel Peninsula at 0300. The weathermen were right when they predicted gales in the north and strong southerly conditions in Cook Strait in a few hours, but their estimate of the cyclone's centre moving off Hawkes Bay by mid-

day was to prove sadly inaccurate by one factor largely unknown to them. The storm had speeded up, intensified and was now heading in a southerly direction down the coast.

I well remember the time, as I was a young, single able seaman, having recently returned from the Commonwealth emergency forces in Malaya, in 1967. The only shore postings available for returning single seamen were as riggers on the naval radio station HMNZS *Irirangi*, situated in the central North Island plateau of Hihitahi, near Waiouru.

Although high inland ranges protected the station, the storm, now some 500km wide, gave the North Island of New Zealand a fair pasting. The radio station lost some critical aerials, and a few radio masts ended up in a tangled heap of steel and wires.

But as the storm hit Cook Strait, New Zealand's largest modern maritime disaster was to unfold, and any call for help from the ship, marine department or local authorities was too little, too late. Aboard the *Wahine*, Captain Hector Robertson and the on-duty mate were not concerned about the storm.

On the basis of the 2030 weather forecast they heard, he expected the centre of the storm to be in the Bay of Plenty at 0600, when the *Wahine* would be entering Wellington Harbour. The storm's southerly radius of 250km would be in the vicinity of Hastings, well to the north, in which case there was no earthly reason why he should not proceed on the normal voyage as scheduled. At this

time it was not normal to maintain a 24 hour radio watch while the ferries were at sea, and weather updates were often missed.

On approaching the entrance to Wellington Harbour, Captain Robertson contacted the pilot station on Beacon Hill via VHF, and heard there was a southerly of 50 knots, gusting to 60 knots at Pipitea Wharf. A tug had been called out for another ship to be moved in the harbour and would be available if the *Wahine* required her for berthing. This was not unusual for Wellington, which has a reputation of presenting ferry masters with some challenging times as they try to maintain the timetable and navigate their ships in and out of Wellington's harbour.

As the captain committed the ship to enter the harbour, the weather quickly closed in, the wind intensity built and all visibility was lost within minutes. The rapid arrival of the peak of the storm, along with a heavy southerly surge and swell, would test the crew's skill and the ship's seakeeping ability.

Then the first of a series of events that would ultimately lead to the demise of the ship happened – the radar failed. The ship lurched and rolled heavily, with his ship in a nightmarish situation: the building rogue sea had thrown her further round towards Barrett Reef and the winds, with hurricane-force gusts, shrieked through the rigging and battered the ship. The captain was without radar, in a narrow channel between rocks with nil visibility. This was frightening enough, but he also had to contend with huge seas and estimated 90 knot-plus winds, which made control of his vessel almost impossible.

Not only could the crew not see the bow of the ship in the storm-lashed seas, they also could not see by radar and were now effectively blind, frightening stuff at the best of times and now was not a good time. Any ship, no matter what type of sophisticated manoeuvring equipment she has, is easier to steer going ahead than astern.

Captain Robertson, who was unaware of his exact position, made the only possible decision, to abort entering the harbour. He decided to continue with both engines full ahead to push her round to port, to open sea and safety. In his efforts to turn the ship around in the narrow entrance way with a huge following sea and the wind lashing him on the beam as he faced a westerly direction, he could not be sure of his position nor the wind's intensity, as he was enclosed in a modern ship's bridge. He was fighting to bring the head of the ship into the sea, so violent was the motion, for much of the time the propellers were thrashing out of the water, when the steering appeared to fail.

With the *Wahine* thus crippled and her bowthrusters unable to cope, and not being sure that he was facing out to sea and safety, she was driven stern-first onto the southwestern extremity of Barrett Reef, with the rocks

ripping out the starboard propeller and shaft and punching a hole into the engineroom. With no power, Captain Robertson ordered both anchors to be dropped manually. This took some 45 minutes as the ship ground against the reef as she drifted further into the harbour, making more holes and taking on water.

Unfortunately, tragedy and sadness followed, and there were heroic actions by many, as the story of the *Wahine* disaster is well documented. But what have we learnt from this disaster? Fifty-one lives lost is an expensive lesson.

Clearly the country, and Wellington in particular, was not geared up to respond to this type of shipping disaster. Yes, a brave fleet of small, recreational craft did set sail to assist once it was realised that the survivors were being dragged across the harbour to the rugged shores of the Pencarrow coast.

Communications were abysmal, civil defence workers were not called in to help those stricken by the storm, including the survivors of the tragedy. The city and Hutt Valley had problems of its own as houses were losing roofs, along with smashed windows, downed powerlines, flooding and blocked roads. It was mayhem ashore without even considering a disaster at sea.

In reality, civil defence could not have handled the situation even if they had been notified. In fact, it was believed the only reason the city council did not declare an emergency was because it could not provide the men to assist. Wellington's civil defence was nowhere near the standard of many other New Zealand local bodies. It was, as some said, a job for the old boys with limited funding and no leadership worthy of note. The Ministry of Civil Defence could not step in because the city council did not ask it to do so. Sorry, we are in the seat of government and not even common sense or logic could get one bureaucrat to look out his office window and make a decision when the city needed leadership?

Even the Police and local civil defence headquarters could not handle all the distress calls, as they were overwhelmed by calls to save houses and property and could not give an effective response. The New Zealand Army and Navy had told the council they were prepared to help but were not called in. The storm showed once again how precarious New Zealand's civil defence organisation was at the time.

The city council certainly did call in local radio amateurs to provide communications, but this was of little comfort to those suffering from the storm. Communications with whom, for no-one had been asked to assist and too few people were listening. The Police turned out in force, with every available officer responding to the emergency from a sense of duty because they new something was seriously wrong. At least the Police had a structure and discipline, and even senior officers in collars and ties ▶

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