



SHIPS THAT RETIRE TO THE PACIFIC AND DIE

BY KEITH INGRAM

The recent spate of ferry losses in the Pacific has highlighted the vulnerability of the people in many of our Pacific nations who rely on local ferries to provide a trusted, safe service. No matter where in the Pacific you might be, when you live on an island the sea becomes not only your provider, it is also your highway to other islands.

In my travels around the Pacific I have seen most of its sea transport in one form or another. From the trusted dugout canoe to longboat to ferries and ships, many of which can only be regarded as the derelicts and junk of the Pacific. How some of these rust buckets keep going bears testament to the willingness of our island people to improvise, 'repair', if repair is the right word and somehow keep many of these boats and ships at sea.

Yes they are unsafe and yes many in authority turn a blind eye and yes they are likely to fail or breakdown at any time and yes we are constantly seeing them being overloaded and yes they are not making money, the end result being that we are losing many of these vessels on a regular basis. But, the alternative is no service, no transport for goods or services, no passenger transport and no essential services or trade and income with the resulting outcome being one of isolation.

This year we have seen the sinking of the *Dumai Express 10* in Indonesia with 29 lives lost. The *Teratai Prima* was only 10 years old when it went down in January with the loss of 200 lives. The *Princess of the Stars* had 800 passengers on board when she went down in the Philippines and other examples include 40 people drowned off tiny Kiribati when an overcrowded and ill-equipped boat sank in July. The list in the Asia Pacific region alone, over the last year, is far too long. Whether it is Indonesia, the Philippines, the Solomon Islands or further east into Polynesia, the circumstances all have a common denominator. While overloading can be a frequent contributor to the losses, poor maintenance is more often the culprit, ultimately leading to human error resulting in a sad loss of life.

The Australian government echoed these concerns when it recently issued a public warning to its travelling citizens against sea travel in the Philippines. "Sea travel is one of the most common and cheaper means of transportation within the Philippines, an archipelago consisting of more than 7100 islands," it said. No different to the rest of the Pacific, from South East Asia to Polynesia, where the country's cash-strapped Coastguard or emergency services lack the capability and equipment to monitor sea travel and the ability to quickly respond to sea emergencies. "Ferries are often overloaded, lack necessary lifesaving equipment

and are not adequately maintained. Storms can develop quickly," Australian officials said.

It also noted that standards maintained by search and rescue services, transport services and tour operators, including adventure activities such as scuba diving, may not be comparable to those in Australia or New Zealand. It's not often that I would be seen to be agreeing with the Australians, but on this occasion, they may not be far off the mark.

However, the problem is more than this. Clearly we, as leading Pacific maritime nations, have some responsibilities to our Pacific neighbours. So let's take a look at a situation closer to home. Yes we provide air surveillance and search and rescue coordinating services. But that's the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff routine. The recent sinking of the *Princess Ashika* and the tragic loss of 74 lives, has highlighted serious shortfalls in our support and has had far reaching impacts on our own Tongan communities, especially in Auckland and Wellington, with many questions still waiting to be answered. Granted, we were quick to respond in a very professional manner. But our reaction came after the event when lives had already been lost. Sadly in this situation, apart from stopping the vessel sailing, it was not going to be long before we lost that ship at sea.

Clearly, it would not have passed even the most rudimentary of surveys. It was unsafe when it left Fiji and only by the grace of God did it arrive in Tonga. Even local folk were saying the ship was unsafe and still they boarded, praying for a safe journey, because they had no other option.

As a general rule, the passenger and cargo ferries that service the huge expanse of Pacific Ocean are ageing, poorly-maintained ill-suited to deep waters and built for an entirely different purpose. The *Princess Ashika* was built to service ports in the relatively sheltered waters of the inland Sea of Japan. Yes, unlike the exposed ocean passages she was expected to undertake from Tongatapu to the Ha'apai group, then on to Vava'u, some 180nm with long stretches of open-ocean.

It's a sad indictment, but Pacific Islanders have no choice but to rely on old and often unseaworthy ships. The small countries of the Pacific have among the worst record for boating safety and regulation compliance in the world. That's unsurprising, given that the Pacific islands, constrained by small budgets, often buy their vessels fourth-hand after they have been traded down the ranks from first to Third World buyers.

The 37-year-old ferry, *Princess Ashika* was purchased fifth-hand from Fiji in July. It went down just before mid-night on August 5,



These images speak for themselves

Underwater images courtesy of HMNZS Manawanui NZ Defence Force

2009. It took with it 75 men, women and children, who got no warning of impending disaster, and left in its wake a litany of questions about the scale of the tragedy. Yet it was not a quick death. Water poured through the cargo hold of the ferry for two hours before it rocked violently and sank.

Survivors talk of the captain asleep, they say when they looked down from the observation deck they saw sea water coming through the bow ramp on both sides, and from underneath, hitting the cargo deck. The force of the water dislodged timber runners and lashings holding vehicles in place. Another survivor, Mr Lemoto, is reported as saying he “felt strange” and went and stood on the steps, looking down into the cargo deck and saw that a four-wheel-drive Pajero was completely engulfed in water and it, and an ambulance, were moving towards the bow ramp.” The ferry tilted seriously 20 minutes before sinking.

Mr Lemoto said there was no loudspeaker warning to passengers, no safety or emergency information given, and no directions given to where the life rafts were kept. He did, however, hear the captain calling for mayday help immediately before the ferry rolled and sank. Sadly, the warning never reached those trapped inside.

This ship was destined for the knackers yard with her owners resigned to the fact that she had reached the end of her practical working life, even by Pacific standards. But no! A voice from Tonga whispered, “we need” and a deal was done for some \$600,000. It doesn’t matter in whose dollars, it was far too much money for a ship on her last legs and should have been scrapped.

The South Pacific region has a reputation for ships ending their working lives and dying in some tropical backwater or mysteriously sinking into the deep blue sea. Just look around any of the Pacific island ports and the evidence is clear for all to see. Its not rocket science. These old ships are only good to be cannibalised of all salvageable parts and the bones sold as scrap or more often than not, left to rot, corrode and waste slowly away. In the case of the *Princess Ashika* we understand that after the Fijian authorities had condemned her to the scrap yard, she had been on the market for over a year for scrap value of \$200,000. Even this amount would have been wishful thinking and a long way from the \$600,000 she was sold ‘as is where is’ for.

So how was this able to happen? Just how did this ageing, decrepit ferry end up in Tonga?

New Zealand born chief executive of the Shipping Corporation of Polynesia, John Jonesse, bought the vessel in Fiji on behalf of the Tongan government. He has admitted to the commission that he had no shipping experience when he travelled to Fiji to inspect the ship. So whatever possessed the man to think he had the skills and expertise to inspect, negotiate and buy the ferry when anyone, just looking around her, would realise that this ship was all but dead. Did he seek advice or even ask the opinion of local shipping engineers or, better still, a surveyor? He has told the commission he never went to see the Fijian Marine Safety people when he inspected the ship and thought that responsibility lay with the Tongan Marine and Ports Authority. Hold on, he was, after all, representing the Shipping Corporation of Polynesia and tasked

This whole affair smells, with the commission becoming increasingly frustrated that the truth seems to be evading them

with the responsibility of spending valuable Tongan money to buy a ferry suitable to service islands dotted hundreds of miles over the Pacific and he did not bother to take a Tongan marine and ports inspector along. What was he thinking? Did he think he could turn up with an old rust bucket and all would be tickety boo? Yeah right!

Sorry, to be fair, it would now appear from Mr Jonesse’s admittance to the Commission hearing, that he used the name of an Australian engineer as doing an independent audit of the ship without his authorisation. Whaaaaat!!

Has this man been in the sun too long or was something more sinister afoot? There is no question that someone in Fiji has ▶

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Images courtesy of Matangi Tonga

Even when topside the *Princess Ashika* was in a sorry state and should not have been put to sea



significantly benefitted from this deal and in doing so, knowingly sold a pup.

Who knows! Hopefully the Royal Commission of enquiry will get to the bottom of it and bring all perpetrators to account. This whole affair smells, with the commission becoming increasingly frustrated that the truth seems to be evading them and much of what is being said bears little resemblance to the facts before them. This only begs the question, was there a level of corruption involved or were some folk just plain dumb? My guess is, all will be revealed in the fullness of time.

While I do not intend to pre-empt the work of the Royal Commission of enquiry, there are already many facts that we should learn from. Tonga is in desperate need of a safe replacement. One that is best suited for the role and not some derelict hand-me-down that is past its use by date. They do not need another ship that is a disaster waiting to happen.

Which brings me to the next question. Just what are the answers for the future? Currently, by best estimates, there is a fleet of some 1800 Pacific island passenger and cargo vessels, most of which many mariners say are operated at very average to sub standards. Tongan journalist, Pesi Fonua, is reported as saying, "it's a problem that must be fixed, because Islanders are desperately reliant on these services, and will use them regardless of the dangers. It sounds crazy, I know, but people can't afford to fly and they can't afford to wait a week for the next boat to show up. Many Islanders would take a boat even if they knew it was sinking, with the thought they can bail it out on the way". He advises that even with cleaning up the services, the fear is that fare prices will rise too high for locals, who will be forced to find cheaper, and ultimately less safe,

alternatives. Unfortunately this poses a major problem because the Pacific is full of such cheap, unsafe alternatives waiting to die.

Do the Australian and New Zealand governments have any responsibility? All too often we see millions of our aid dollars being thrown into the Pacific and lost with scant regard for accountability. And will throwing a pile of money at new ferries built to western standards fill the gap, probably not. The problems are much greater and a more pragmatic and realistic approach is required if solutions are to be found.



Servicing the vessels is the main obstacle, so they must be kept simple. Seaworthy, reliable engineering and support systems are a must. Pumping systems must be easy to use and service with manual backups and compartments must have ease of access. A frightened man with a two gallon bucket can shift a hell of a lot of water in an emergency. The task of getting inflatable life rafts serviced is a mission for most and just does not happen.

Floatable, solid rafts or Carley floats is the only way to go. Likewise, life rings and life jackets must be simple. Above all, the ships and services must be practical and easy to use with all gear securely stowed while maintaining ease of access. Now that's an oxymoron if ever I uttered one, but you will be getting my drift by now. Nothing shiny or gadgetry as these will quickly evaporate in these tropical climes and wont be available when needed.

Above all, we need these ships to be designed and built for the Pacific conditions. Flash, comfy chairs are not the issue. Air conditioning is something else to go wrong. Shade and good ventilation as well as benches where one can stretch out on are desirable. And, if they can float off in an emergency as well, they would be just the ticket. Speed is not critical as island folk have plenty of time on their hands, getting safely to the destination with possessions and family intact is far more important.

Am I dreaming? Probably. Clearly there are no quick fixes or easy answers for these island nations who cannot afford to buy reliable, well found, ferries of a standard we are used to. And, if someone could, the passengers in all likelihood, could not afford to use them without some serious subsidies.

So the conundrum remains, do we just throw another new ship at the problem and sit back and feel good as we create another disaster waiting to happen. Three years ago the Chinese government gave Vanuatu a brand new ferry with all the bells and whistles. Today you would think she is 30 years old. Do we follow the same mistakes or do we, at government level, channel our limited, valuable aid into far more practical services for these island people. What is most important, tinned food and corned bully beef or safe public transport among the islands? If we were to put this to the vote, I would hazard a reasonable guess what option these island communities would go for.

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