

HAUTAPU SINKING MAY BE SOLVED

BY LYNTON DIGGLE

It was one of the most frustrating maritime mysteries of 1966. Who blew up and sank the fishing trawler *Hautapu* at a wharf in Wellington?

The 41m fishing trawler sank at her mooring at the Royal New Zealand Air Force base in Shelly Bay on June 2, 1966, when explosives were laid in the engineroom and a hole was blasted in the steel hull early in the morning.

The wreckage lay on the bottom for several years while police hunted the bomber, and authorities argued over who would pay for its removal. No-one was arrested and Royal New Zealand Navy divers finally cut up the wreckage.

Now Shirley Thomas says her brother-in-law, the late Roydon Thomas, was one of the people who sank the *Hautapu* in Shelly Bay in 1966. For 40 years she has stayed silent on the part her roguish relative played in one of Wellington's biggest naval mysteries.

Shirley was at home with husband Norman when his brother, Roydon, arrived early on June 2, 1966, in an agitated state. Hours earlier, the trawler, a former minesweeper, had sunk after an explosion tore a hole in her hull as she sat alongside Shelly Bay wharf. Explosives had been packed on the ship to help the RNZAF sink it in Cook Strait, but police and naval officials were unsure why they detonated early, or who was to blame.

Now, after reading a Dominion Post story in June on the sinking, Shirley Thomas has revealed a family secret. She understands the explosion was the result of a plan hatched by Roydon with some friends to remove brass fittings from the ship before it was sunk. The group had gathered at Roydon's boatshed in Evans Bay, where he was living after separating from his wife.

Roydon was well known in Wellington maritime circles and was working as first mate on a fishing boat at the time. "They were around there drinking one night and they decided it was a crying shame that all the brass was going to waste," Mrs Thomas said.

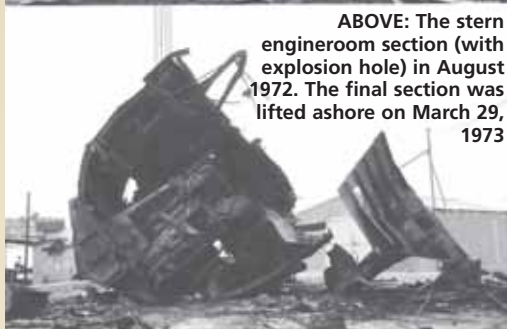
They used small charges to blow portholes off their mounts, and apparently unaware that explosives had already been packed on the ship, they set off the main explosives, ripping a hole in the *Hautapu's* hull and sinking the vessel.

"Roy said they were standing on the wharf nearly crying that she was going down."

After lying low at his brother's house, Roydon eventually returned to Evans Bay. "I think he was scared somebody would find out and make them pay." He drowned five years later, aged 39, after falling into the sea from a wharf on the Wellington



ABOVE: The stern engineroom section (with explosion hole) in August 1972. The final section was lifted ashore on March 29, 1973



The *Hikitia* lifting two of the sections out of the water at Shelly Bay



PHOTOS COURTESY BOB MCDUGALL

waterfront. Mrs Thomas said Roydon was a rogue who loved life at sea, and would have meant no harm with his plan to salvage brass off the *Hautapu*.

Roydon had recounted the events to Norman who then told her and, with both men now dead, she decided to tell the family. "I sort of pursue a policy of keeping my mouth closed on these things."

A maritime historian, Bob McDougall, said it was possible Roydon Thomas and others had sunk the ship, as it was still an unexplained crime. "It's one of those mysteries that has been left to lie."

The *Hautapu*, a Castle class minesweeper, was built in Port Chalmers for the Navy during the Second World War, and had been moored at Shelly Bay for two years after her crew had run her aground at Long Point, on the eastern entrance to Cook Strait, late in 1963.

The 272 tonne trawler was pounded by the sea for several months and badly damaged before the Peranos' whaling tender *Tuatea* salvaged her and towed her to Wellington.

She was found to be damaged beyond repair and laid up until 1966, when she was given to the air force, and was to have been towed to a point 20 miles

off Cape Palliser, the southernmost point of the North Island, for bombing practice.

The minesweeper *HMNZS Inverell* had been organised to tow her out, but was diverted to Cape Reinga to search for a missing coal ship, the *Kaitawa*.

For several years the *Hautapu* sank deeper into the mud while the Navy, the Air Force, the registered owners and the Wellington Harbour Board argued over who should pay for her removal.

Lynton Diggle, and his co-authors, his wife Edith, and Keith Gordon, who are preparing the eighth edition of *The New Zealand Shipwreck Book*, due to be released in November, said the wrangle was finally settled, and the *Hautapu* was cut up by Navy divers and removed in 1973.

One popular rumour in 1966 was that senior government and Navy officials having a heavy drinking session at the Shelly Bay base decided to blow it up for their own entertainment. However, Lynton Diggle said that that theory was highly unlikely. "It was a wonderful story, but I don't believe a bit of it."

Forty years on, the controversy of the *Hautapu* may have been solved before the next edition of the *Shipwreck Book* is published.

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