



The Wahine Disaster

The *Wahine* was a Union Steam Ship Company ferry of 8,948 gross tons, which entered service between Wellington and Lyttelton in August 1966 and foundered in Wellington Harbour 20 months later with the loss of 51 lives.

On the morning of 10 April 1968, after an overnight voyage from Lyttelton, *Wahine* encountered the worst of a violent southerly storm, with winds that began gusting to over 100 mph just as she entered Wellington Harbour shortly after 0600 hours. The radar went out and shortly afterwards the ship unexpectedly sheered off course to port and failed to respond to her controls.

The captain decided to turn the ship around in an attempt to put back out to the open sea, but in conditions of nil visibility and huge seas the ship was moved back and forth in the raging storm for about half an hour, until the stern struck the southernmost rocks of Barrett Reef. This caused the loss of the starboard propeller and shaft and shortly afterwards the port engine also failed. The *Wahine* slowly drifted without power, dragging her anchors, until she finally reached a position close to Steeple Rock light at about 1100 hours.

Several vessels attempted to reach the *Wahine*, including the Union Steam Ship Company tug *Tapuhi* and the harbour board pilot launch *Tiakina*, but the storm drove them back. When conditions improved slightly *Tapuhi* did manage to get a line to the stricken ship but it parted under the strain. At about 1215 hours, when the Deputy Harbour Master managed to board the *Wahine* from the pilot launch, she was listing to starboard and within half an hour the list had increased to about 25 degrees with the ship becoming progressively unstable.

At about 1320 hours, under the influence of a premature ebb [outward] tide, *Wahine* swung port side on to the weather and the opportunity was taken to give the order to abandon ship from the leeward [sheltered] side. A request went out for vessels to assist in picking up survivors, the wind having now lessened in intensity, and the rescue operation began.

Although the port side lifeboats could not be launched because of the ship's list, all the starboard lifeboats were launched, along with a number of inflatable life rafts. The first of the lifeboats capsized in the heavy seas, as did some of the life rafts, and their occupants were thrown into the water near *Wahine*. Many were carried by the tide to the rocky eastern shore, where there were fewer rescuers to pull people from the surf. Most of those who died perished on that side of the harbour, but 223 people (including 20 from rescue craft) came ashore to safety there. Another 500 or so survivors were landed by rescue craft at Seatoun or at the Inter Island Ferry Wharf in town.

Sometime after 1400 hours, when everyone on board had left the ship, *Wahine* heeled over and came to rest on her side on the seabed in approximately 11.6 metres [38 feet] of water. The ship was a total loss and planning began immediately for the salvage and removal of the wreck, which lay close to the main shipping channel. A southerly storm the following year broke the hull into three pieces and it was not until over five years later, in September 1973 that the salvage work was completed.

Many items from the *Wahine* are featured in the Museum of Wellington City & Sea, including a specially made short film compiled from original documentary footage, a timeline of events and other items removed from the wreck. There is also a graphic model of the *Wahine* foundering, made for the museum by Dal Flannery of Hawera. A memorial made from ventilation pipes, an anchor and chain from the ship has been erected on the foreshore at Seatoun to mark the last resting place of the *Wahine*. Just south of the museum, at Frank Kitts Park, one of the masts from the ship can be seen.

Further reading: *The Wahine Disaster, A Tragedy Remembered*, Emmanuel Makarios (available at the Museum of Wellington City & Sea Shop).

