

# The Shipwreck Watch

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## **‘I can’t face Hatch’: *Jessie Niccol***

The *Jessie Niccol* was the second of Joseph Hatch’s ships to be wrecked while involved in sealing operations at the Nuggets. She was under the command of Captain J.O. Holmes, who was making his first visit to the island. It was said that Captain Holmes chose to drown, rather than face the anger of his employer, Joseph Hatch, after the shipwreck.

### *Second Hatch Wreck on Macquarie Island*



*Jessie Niccol* photo De Maus, from J.S. Cumpston,  
*Macquarie Island*.

The schooner, *Jessie Niccol* sailed for Macquarie Island from Invercargill, New Zealand, on 8 December 1910. Her owner, sealing businessman Joseph Hatch, had contracted ten sealers to remain on the island for eighteen months. The headsman of this gang was Hatch’s son-in-law, Otto Bauer. There were six months supplies of food aboard the *Jessie Niccol*, and a new digester to be used for boiling down penguins and seals and extracting their oil.

The party also took with them a smart twenty-two foot launch to help raft the casks between ship and shore. The *Jessie Niccol* reached Macquarie Island on 18 December 1910 and anchored at the Nuggets. The men rafted oil barrels and provisions ashore. The last raft left the ship at 8.30 P.M.



Sealers landing a boiler at the Nuggets, c1911-1913. Photo H. Hamilton, Mitchell Library, State Library of N.S.W.

Rough seas arose during the night and Captain J.O. Holmes ordered a watch on the anchors. Early in the morning the *Jessie Niccol* slipped her moorings. Holmes tried sailing south, but by then there was not enough wind for sail and the vessel drifted rapidly towards the rocks. The Captain then gave orders to anchor in 10 fathoms of water.

Another party of Hatch's sealers had been watching from the shore, and ran southwards to try to assist the *Jessie Niccol*. There they found the second mate and three men in a lifeboat trying to fix the anchor.

*The shore party called out to the three men to come ashore but they refused.*

They wanted to see what the weather would do. One of the sealers tried to swim out to the next rock, but became tangled in the kelp. He was rescued by Otto Bauer.

Between 9 and 9.30 A.M. the *Jessie Niccol* crunched on a rock under her stern. This broke the rudder and forced the stern post four feet above the deck. Homes called all hands to the poop deck and told them **it was every man for himself as nothing could be done to save the ship.**

The men on shore shouted to the Captain to leave the ship, but Holmes made signs indicating that he would not leave. Holmes ordered his second mate, Alfred Corps, to take the crew and their clothes ashore in the lifeboat. Corps was reluctant to leave without all crew members, but the Captain insisted. After an hour of hard rowing, the lifeboat came close to shore but overturned in the breakers. The men on board were dragged to the beach by the shore party.

Captain Holmes, the chief mate, Paterson, and the cook, John Mercer, were still on board the *Jessie Niccol* when she 'broke her back'. Mercer tried to swim ashore at about 10.45 A.M. but struggled on back on board. At 11A.M. a heavy wave struck the vessel and she capsized to port. **Casks, water tanks and spars were floating close to the vessel.** The men on shore watched the Captain emerge from the cabin and make for the starboard side. They shouted to him to swim ashore but he replied:

*'I can't face Hatch. I can't go back'.*

Holmes caught the rail, but a water tank struck him and he disappeared into the sea. Mercer was standing on the port water tank and the chief mate was climbing the rigging when the vessel listed. Heavy seas washed away Mercer, but Paterson withstood the seas for a quarter of an hour by holding on to a winch. Then he too, disappeared from sight.

Three bodies eventually washed ashore and were buried beneath tussock grass, at the first point to the south of the Nuggets. The graves of Holmes, Mercer and Paterson were marked with a lifebelt and their carved names were carved on a board.



The grave of Captain Holmes from J.S. Cumpston, Macquarie Island.

On 28 December, the *Ida M Clarke* from Nova Scotia, called at Macquarie Island. Her master offered a passage to the shipwreck survivors but they decided they would remain on Macquarie Island, since they were not short of provisions. On 11 March 1911 Hatch chartered the *Huanui* for Macquarie Island and brought some of the *Jessie Niccol* sealers and crew back to New Zealand. Before leaving the island,

Hatch called for volunteers to remain another three months for the 'elephant season'. Five men decided to remain.

### *Sealing while Shipwrecked:*

These men were left with three months of provisions, one pound of black tobacco and twelve boxes of wax matches. To make their tobacco last, every time they smoked their pipes they scraped the remnants out and saved it in matchboxes to smoke over again.

The sealers lost two rifles and ammunition in the shipwreck, and had only an old Mauser rifle and about twenty-four bullets. They made up some clubs out of piping to use as clubs to kill the elephant seals. Their stove was falling to bits, and sealer Alex Sutherland cut a small stove out of a sheet of light iron he found in the boiler house. They burned a little coal and used driftwood from previous shipwrecks. Winter blizzards and fog set in and they were unable to do much work. Their provisions were low, and for the next four months they lived on sea elephant tongues and hearts, and penguin hearts and livers. They added wekas, or New Zealand native hens to their stew pots.

When they were short of yeast, they boiled a packet of hops and poured it in with their yeast supplies. They had no oven in which to bake the bread, so they cut a kerosene tin to make a dish for mixing the dough and cooked it in a frying pan.

'Sinkers' formed their main diet. These were minced elephant tongues and hearts rolled in dough. They varied this diet with penguins, wekas and penguin eggs.

*These sealers were still on Macquarie Island in the second week of November 1911, when three men rowed ashore from the Clyde. The joy of the sealers was dashed as they stood by and watched the Clyde being shipwrecked.*



### **R**eferences

Cumpston, J. S., 1968, *Macquarie Island*, Antarctic Division, Melbourne, pp 230-233.

### **F**urther **R**eadings

The *Clyde* was about to be shipwrecked. You can read this story in:

[Third Hatch Shipwreck - Clyde](#)