

The Shipwreck Watch

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‘Water, Water Everywhere, Nor Any Drop to Drink’¹ - *Betsey*

This is a tale of suffering that would stun the Ancient Mariner into silence. WARNING! This story is definitely not for the faint-hearted.

Blown off-shore in a gale

The *Betsey* belonged to the fleet of Sydney merchant, Joseph Underwood. She was under the command of Captain Philip Goodenough in February 1815. Goodenough sent a party of thirteen sealers ashore on Macquarie Island before the *Betsey* headed to Bristow’s Island.

*Scurvy had taken hold of the crew and two crewmen died before the *Betsey* returned to Macquarie Island in August that year to collect the Macquarie Island gang.*



¹ This is a quotation from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem, ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’

Before a rowboat could be launched, the *Betsey* was blown out to sea in a gale. Goodenough and his crew spent three frustrating weeks struggling against the gales. He gave up his attempt to land on Macquarie Island and set a course for Sydney, but still the *Betsey* made little headway against the relentless wind. Goodenough changed his course for New Zealand.

Two more sailors died of scurvy.

The water supply was dangerously low and the crew had to eat flour mixed with water instead of bread. There were rations of salted pork aboard, but these were useless without water to wash off the salt.

On the 18 September 1815, a heavy sea carried away the *Betsey's* rudder. The crew tried steering the vessel with a cable until they made another rudder. This, too was swept away.

Goodenough and eight European sailors had become so weakened by scurvy that they were unable to work. Water rations had to be reduced further to one pint a day, and food rations cut down to six pounds of flour a week. *The men were so weak they could only work in the daytime and from sunset to sunrise the Betsey drifted.*

Three more crew members died.



Weeks later, the *Betsey* lay becalmed within sight of Cook Strait, New Zealand. Another man died. Water rations had by then been reduced to only half a pint per day.

The remaining crewmen were overjoyed when they caught sight of land.

Tragically, their joy turned to bitter disappointment when a breeze carried the vessel back to sea.

Over the next fortnight, the *Betsey* drifted northwards. On 23 October the *Betsey* lay off New Zealand's Bay of Islands. The crew tried to run the vessel towards land when sudden squall arose. The brace holding the mainsail and the topsail sheet gave way. The topsail and the jib foretopsail were blown to shreds.

Again the Betsey drifted off shore. By then the discouraged crew had little strength left.

On 28 October 1815, the crew drank their last cask of water dry and the *Betsey* was twenty miles from land.

The surviving crewmen just marshaled enough strength to make a whaleboat and a jolly boat water-tight and launched them. The next morning, the third mate died. The stronger men, who were in the whale boat, tried towing their more feeble shipmates in the jolly boat. Goodenough was placed in the whaleboat, although he was in the last stage of illness and unable to row.

For an hour, the crew battled strong seas, but made no headway. The rowers realized that if they continued, they would completely exhaust themselves and all lives would be lost. They then made the painful decision to abandon the jolly boat, with its crew of sick men, so they could row to shore.



A whaleboat landing.
Photo from J.S. Cumpston, *Macquarie Island*

They hauled the jolly boat alongside the whaleboat and took a Lascar on board, who still had enough energy to bale out water. They also transferred a bag of flour to the whaleboat. Only one of the sick men in the jollyboat made any comment upon this dreadful situation: he offered his coat to the whaleboat crew, since the air was cold and he would no longer need it.

After twelve hours of rowing, the whaleboat reached the coast. Only eight men made it to shore alive: Captain Goodenough, Thomas Rodgers, Thomas Hunt and five Lascars, whose names have not been recorded. One of these Indians died soon after landing. On 1 November 1815, Goodenough also died.



Bay of Islands, New Zealand, sketch by
Augustus Earle 1827.

The trials of the survivors were far from over.

The survivors were captured by a group of Maoris, who took their flour supply and gave them a few potatoes in exchange. For some years, there had a series of violent incidents between sealers and the Maoris. The two European survivors, Rodgers and Hunt, believed that their captors were cannibal headhunters. They were terrified when some Maori leaders separated them from their Indian shipmates and took them away in a canoe.

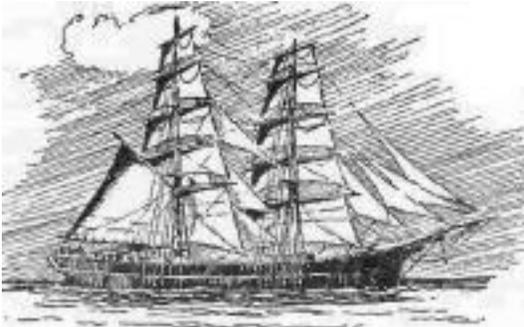


A Maori canoe, sketch by Augustus Earle. Sketch courtesy
Southland Museum, Invercargill.

After the canoes had traveled for about a mile along the coast, Rodgers and Hunt saw a large fire on the shore and became convinced that they were about to be eaten in a cannibal feast. Their captors landed the canoes and made them carry a basket of potatoes towards a group of people who had gathered on shore. This group included their four Indian shipmates. The Lascars told Hunt and Rodgers' that the Maoris intended to eat them both that night.

Luckily, the Maoris spared their lives.

They indicated to Rodgers and Hunt, however, that they would have to do whatever they were told. The next morning the Maoris marched Rodgers and Hunt along the coast. The captives were faint with fatigue and hunger, as their only food was sparse quantities of fern root and dried fish.



Sketch of a brig by H. Underhill. Permission to reproduce by Brown, Son & Ferguson Publishers, Glasgow.

On the 9 January 1816, Rodgers and Hunt saw a ship, but this did not approach the land. Two days later a brig coasted close to shore. The Maori chiefs agreed to let Rodgers and Hunt get on board if they could. **They obtained a canoe and tried to make it watertight,**

but by the time they had done this, the brig had sailed past without seeing them.

On 23 Feb 1816, the brig *Active* rescued Rodgers and Hunt. Her master had learned of their condition and had set out to rescue them. The four Lascars were left under the charge of the missionaries at the Bay of Islands while the *Active* took Rodgers and Hunt to Otaheiti, which is now known as Tahiti.

Joseph Underwood was concerned that he had no word of the *Betsey* and on 26 March 1816, sent the *Elizabeth and Mary* to Macquarie Island to search for her. The *Elizabeth and Mary* brought the *Betsey's* sealers back to Sydney. They had been stranded there for over a year. Though the Macquarie Island sealers didn't have to face the perils of being captured by Maoris, they nonetheless had to brave constant hunger and the relentlessly cold winds, fogs and snows and even earthquakes on a cold, windy, subantarctic island.

The Betsey's sealers were probably just as delighted as Rodgers and Hunt to arrive safely back in Sydney.



References

McNabb, R. 1907, *Murihiku and the Southern Islands*, William Smith Printer, Invercargill, pp 166-171.

Cumpston, J.S 1968, *Macquarie Island*, Australian Antarctic Division, Melbourne, pp 33-34.

Further **R**eadings

You can read about how the Elizabeth and Mary rescued some survivors of the *Campbell Macquarie* shipwreck in 1812 in:

First Known Wreck: *Campbell Macquarie*