

Port tragedy saw 10 men drown

Michael Fowler – Historic Hawke's Bay

Port Ahuriri was not able to service many larger ships within its harbour, so lighters (smaller barge-type vessels) would unload or take cargo out to the roadstead – that is ships anchored some distance from the harbour's entrance. Watersiders were taken out to the ships and would load or unload the cargo from or to the lighters.

On the evening of December 28, 1932, at 11pm, the launch Doris, owned by Fenwick and Co and with 31 men on board, 28 of them watersiders, left the roadstead.

Fifteen of the men had been working in the cargo freezer hold of the Port Brisbane and therefore wearing two pairs of trousers, two shirts and thick coats. The other 13 more lightly dressed men were loading wool on the Port Hunter.

As the Doris made its way into the harbour it was struck by the lighter Tu Atu, owned by the Richardson Shipping Co and heading to Wairoa. From some eyewitness accounts from the Doris, a glancing blow from the Tu Atu tipped the unbalanced launch over when men "sprang to the port side" trying to avoid a collision on the starboard side after a cry of "Look out, here's the Tu Atu".

Being heavily dressed, 10 men would drown, and there would have been more fatalities, but behind the Doris was the tugboat Coralie which began to pull men to safety, as was a lifeboat launched from the Tu Atu.

One watersider, James Joseph, swam about 135 metres to the eastern pier to raise the alarm, and the launch Naomi was sent to look for survivors within 10 minutes of his alert to the tragedy.

Word then spread, and the men's wives and children tearfully waited anxiously on the wharf with some survivors, the pleas of the missing men's wives sent the launch out again. The Naomi recovered a body of a man, and despite him being dead for some time, the crew attempted resuscitation. When his body was brought back to the port, a doctor also attempted to revive the man on the wharf, but to no avail. Overall 15 men were picked up by vessels and six swam to safety. After this incident, watersiders refused to travel in a launch and would only use lighters to the roadstead.

From a town still reeling from the approximate 160 deaths after the 1931 Hawke's Bay Earthquake, this tragedy hit the town hard. All the men were married, and had 25 children between them.

A combined funeral was held for nine of the men on Saturday January 30, 1932 (it appears one of the bodies was never found¹).

Thousands lined the streets of the Napier CBD, which was still under some reconstruction, to view the long line of hearses in the funeral procession.

An inquiry was held in March 1933 where it was found that the helmsman of the Doris had cut across the path of the Tu Atu, resulting in the collision. The judgement also stated that the harbour board had made a "mistake" in granting a certificate to the helmsman.

As a result the helmsman of the Doris had his certificate cancelled, and was fined £10 10s (2016: \$1200) towards the inquiry costs. No other charges were laid, including against the Doris' owner John Fenwick, who was in the launch at the time of the collision.

John Fenwick, however was subject to a lawsuit of £14,500 (\$1.6 million) brought by the widows of the 10 drowned men. The claims were settled quickly in the Supreme Court in May 1933 and £10,500 (\$1.15 million) was paid out to the widows and trust accounts for the children. John, it emerged, had also paid £185 (\$20,500) for the funerals of the men – which he was not obliged to do.

The men were buried in a mass grave at Park Island Cemetery, John Fenwick was commended for his co-operation over the period of inquiry and court action, and he was "gratified to think there was no fear of destitution arising out of the disaster" for the women and children. In addition to the lawsuit funds (which I assume was covered by insurance), there was a public fund started by the Napier mayor, John Vigor Brown.

The case highlighted a law going back to 1846, meaning if John Fenwick had perished in the accident, then the right to sue for damages would have been lost, as action could not be taken against his estate.

The 1903-build Tu Atu, which hit the Doris, and was acquired by Richardsons in 1913, remained in service until 1942 when it was bought by the government to be used a part of the war effort during World War II and sent to Auckland.

I am not aware of any memorial to the perished men, or current plans for one. If not, I believe that a memorial plaque recording the names and the disaster should be put up in the area of the entrance to the Ahuriri Port and paid for by the Port of Napier or its shareholder, the Hawke's Bay Regional Council. I believe this should have been done a long time ago, but this generation has an opportunity to do so. How about this Port of Napier?

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¹ Since the publication of this article, it has come to light that the body of Norman Low was found the next day.