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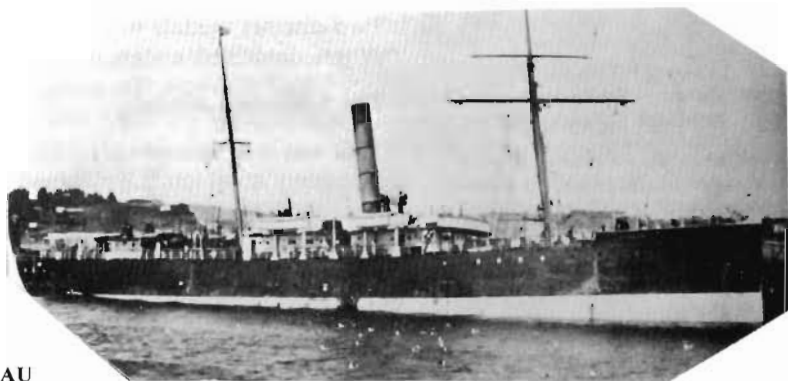
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# THE OVALAU MEDALS

BY W. J. MIRA



S.S. OVALAU

**The Sydney Morning Herald, Tuesday, 3 November, 1903:  
“LOSS OF THE *OVALAU* RETURN OF THE *CAPTAIN COOK* WITH SOME  
PASSENGERS AND SEAMEN  
DETAILS OF THE DISASTER  
AWFUL EXPERIENCE OF CAPTAIN AND CREW  
SHIP AFIRE IN MID OCEAN”**

These column headlines in the second edition of the Sydney daily cleared up a mystery that had perturbed Sydney-siders for several weeks; *SS Ovalau*, island steamer of Burns Philp & Co had been found, her crew and passengers safe and well.

The *SS Ovalau*, named after one of the Fiji Islands, was built by William Denney & Bros. of Dunbarton, for the Union Steamship of New Zealand.

The *Ovalau* served the U.S.S. Co. for over a decade, then sold to Burns Philp on 1 July 1903. Her first trip for the new owners, undertaken in July and August 1903 under Captain Finch, was to Lord Howe Island, Norfolk Island, Noumea, Vila and the Solomons and proved

uneventful. After this trip C. W. Todd took over as Master.

On 25 August 1902 the vessel left Sydney on her island run, calling at Newcastle and taking on a cargo of copra at Noumea and passengers in the Solomons and Norfolk Island. There were on board 45 passengers and a crew of 28<sup>1</sup>. It had been a peaceful voyage<sup>2</sup> until the night of Sunday, 18 October when, at 7 p.m., the cry of “Fire” rang throughout the ship. Smoke was pouring out of the forehold hatch where the oily copra was stored. Hoses were run out, the crew and passengers working feverishly to quell the blaze — but to no avail<sup>3</sup>. The lifeboats, watered and provisioned, were swung out.

## Notes

1. There is some doubt on the exact number aboard — the Sydney Morning Herald, 3 November reported 65, whilst on 4 October — 63. The crew list as per Sydney Morning Herald appears correct but only 27 passengers signed the letter to Capt. Todd on Lord Howe Island. There is no mention of any children on board — it appears that some of the wives did not sign the letter, or only those who gave sovereigns appended their names.
2. The Norfolk Is. Correspondent of the Sydney Morning Herald reported on 16 October that “the *Ovalau* of Messrs. Burns Philp & Co’s line arrived from the Solomons in the Cascades at 8 o’clock this morning. The voyage was uneventful, fine weather prevailing and the excursionists appeared to be well pleased with their trip”.
3. Spontaneous combustion was a common and accepted hazard of copra cargoes.

The *Ovalau* at this time was 100 miles from Lord Howe Island — the nearest landfall and safety.

All through the night she sailed — the fire gradually spreading.

At 6 a.m. on Sunday, 19 October, Lord Howe Island came into view; when close to shore Captain Todd dropped anchor, there not being a suitable spot to beach the ship, and immediately began sending the passengers ashore. “The interior of the ship was by this time a roaring furnace — the flames had spread from the forepart of the ship right aft.”

By 10 a.m. all the passengers and crew were ashore — the last to leave had been Captain Todd — by which time the *Ovalau* was burning from stem to stern.

The survivors were cared for by the island’s inhabitants<sup>4</sup> until the pilot steamer *Captain Cook*, one of the search vessels, under the Command of Captain Hildebrand, reached them two weeks later.<sup>5</sup> Some returned on this vessel, reaching Sydney on 3rd November; the remainder arrived on 4th November per the *Ysabel*.

The behaviour of Captain Todd and his crew had been in the finest traditions of the sea and shortly after landing the passengers presented Captain Todd with “a letter of appreciation and a bag of sovereigns”.

A Marine Court of Enquiry in November 1903<sup>6</sup> made the following findings:—

“... the Master deserves all credit for doing everything he could under the most trying conditions; and he was ably assisted by his officers and crew. Particularly is John Larkins, the boatswain, deserving of commendation for his action in going down the ventilator at considerable risk to try to locate the fire . . .”

Captain Todd and his crew were not only lauded by the passengers but also by the State of N.S.W.

Two distinct medals were issued for the events described above.

### The Captain’s Medal

This was well described during the ceremony at which it was presented — late in 1904.

### PRESENTATION TO CAPTAIN TODD

“A pleasant little ceremony took place at the Chief Secretary’s office recently, when Captain Todd, of the *Ovalau*, which came to grief off Lord Howe Island, was presented with a gold medal by the State Premier, Sir John See. When making the presentation to Captain Todd, Sir John See said: ‘On behalf of the Government and the people of New South Wales, I have great pleasure in handing you this trophy, in recognition of your gallantry and intrepidity on the occasion of the loss of the Steamer *Ovalau*. . . On behalf of the Government and the people of this State I have much pleasure in presenting to you this souvenir, which bears the following inscription:—’

“Presented by Sir John See, K.C.M.G., Premier and Chief Secretary of New South Wales, on behalf of the Government, to Captain C. W. Todd, as a mark of appreciation of his gallant and meritorious exertion in rescuing the passengers and crew of the *S.S. Ovalau*, at Lord Howe Island, on 19th October, 1903.”

Captain Todd said that the loss of the fine steamer *Ovalau* troubled him more than anything else, but the Premier’s kind expressions had taken away a great amount of the sting.

4. The sojourn of the survivors on Lord Howe Island was apparently quite pleasant. They fished, played cricket and were entertained by their island hosts.
5. One of the vessels to touch Lord Howe Island after the sinking was the *Pacifique* on her way to Noumea. On her arrival there, a cable was sent to Sydney arriving at 9.45 p.m. on Sunday, 2 November 1903, but as the Cable Office was closed on Sundays the message was not delivered until 10.20 a.m. on Monday, some hours after the *Captain Cook* had appeared at the heads.
6. Copy extract from “Decisions of Courts of Marine Inquiry 1903”. Held by the Maritime Services Board of N.S.W. Sydney, and taken over from the Superintendent of Navigation by the Board in 1935.

Sir John See stated that he proposed to present each member of the crew with a small memento in recognition of their services.

“The Captain’s medal, which as shown in the ‘Mail’ is about the size of a half-crown piece, was made by William Easy and Co. of this city.”<sup>7</sup>

### THE CREW MEDAL



The *Ovalau* Medal presented to ‘C. MOLIN’ (Mitchell Library).

The memento for each of the crew took the form of a silver medal struck by Amor, Sydney:—

*Obverse* — Coat of arms of New South Wales.

*Reverse* —

*Legend*

PRESENTED BY  
THE GOVERNMENT  
OF NEW SOUTH WALES  
TO  
(Recipient’s Name — Engraved)  
ONE OF THE CREW OF THE  
“OVALAU”,  
TO MARK THEIR APPRECIATION  
OF THE COOL INTREPIDITY,  
LOYAL OBEDIENCE AND GOOD  
JUDGEMENT, DISPLAYED BY THEM  
IN TRYING TO SAVE THEIR SHIP  
AND OF THEIR VALUABLE  
SERVICES IN TRANSPORTING THE  
PASSENGERS OF THE DOOMED  
VESSEL TO LORD HOWE ISLAND  
19 OCTOBER 1903 (Engraved)

The reverse of the medal shows: A wreath of palm leaves, broken at the bottom by “OVALAU” in a frame. In the centre of the field is the monogram of Captain Todd — C.W.T. Diameter = 1 ¼”: Ornate scroll suspender.

All the above legend is in upper case lettering — the second and third lines being larger than the remainder.

Diameter = 1 9/16 ins.  
Metal = Silver.

### THE CREW OF THE “OVALAU”

C. W. Todd — Master; T. Wilson — Chief Eng.; T. Ingham — Second Eng.; W. Thomas — Chief Officer; W. Cheshire — Second Officer; G. Robertson — Super Cargo; L. Lawton — Asst. S. Cargo; A. Morrow — Chief Steward; H. Reid — Second Steward; G. Wells — Steward; J. Larkin — Boatswain; R. Glen<sup>8</sup> — Chief Cook; F. Keida — Second Cook; W. Brett — Third Cook; S. Quacken, J. Sherrit — Trimmers and Greasers; A. Ireland — Carpenter; J. O’Donnell — Fireman; A. Fisher — Greaser; J. Keefe — Donkeyman. Seamen: J. Pinto; T. Hammond; A. Abramson; C. Molin, C. Seymour; J. Figurro; S. Jerries; F. Metham.

7. William Easy & Co. were Jewellers and Silversmiths situated at 10-12 Hunter St, Sydney.

8. The medal to R. Glen was bought in an antique shop in Sydney by a Sydney collector in the mid 1970’s. It was sold to Spink & Son (Australia) who disposed of it privately.