

# MERCHANT NAVY NEWS

Newsletter of the Merchant Navy Association and the  
Merchant Navy RSL Sub-Branch NSW

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TO FOSTER THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE SEA

## *MV Noongah*



*50 years ago*

*On 25 August 1969, the Australian Coastal ship MV Noongah foundered off Smokey Cape, New South Wales with a cargo of steel bound for Townsville in Queensland. Of the 26 crew members, 21 of them were lost.*

# IN MEMORY OF

<i>Master: Leo Botsman</i>	<i>Bosun: John Fleming</i>	<i>Crew Attendant: Nick Maragos</i>
<i>First Mate: Archibald Mitchell</i>	<i>Able Seaman: Keith LeFevre</i>	<i>Greaser: Kenneth McIntyre</i>
<i>Second Mate: James McCormack</i>	<i>Able Seaman: George Jenkins</i>	<i>Greaser: Charles Donnelly</i>
<i>Third Mate: Alfred Hopkins</i>	<i>Able Seaman: Patrick Kilgariff</i>	<i>Chief Steward: Eric Hynes</i>
<i>Chief Engineer: Paul Hutton</i>	<i>Able Seaman: Stanley Davis</i>	<i>Chief Cook: Thomas Ford</i>
<i>Fourth Engineer: Gerald Abbott</i>	<i>Able Seaman: Ralph Chappell</i>	<i>Second Cook: Hector MacDonald</i>

## THE TRAGIC LOSS OF THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL LINE MOTOR SHIP NOONGAH

Captain Iain Steverson FNI

Two small general cargo ships were ordered in 1952 from the Scottish shipyard of James Lamont & Co. Ltd., of Port Glasgow on the River Clyde by the Australian Shipping Board (ASB), predecessor of the Australian National Line. They were named **Nilpena** and **Noongah**, identical sisters, single deck, single screw motor ships with a raised quarter deck, engine aft design typical of British coasters of the time. Their length was 243 feet overall, beam 37 feet, loaded draft 15 feet, with tonnages gross 1,464, deadweight capacity 1,673 tons. The ships had two holds, with No1 in a well, aft of the raised forecastle and No.2 on the raised quarter deck forward of the navigation/accommodation. The two holds were fitted with MacGregor steel hatch covers which may possibly of had a bearing in the eventual tragic loss of **Noongah**. Each hold had two sets of union purchase 5 ton derricks each attached to a fore mast, the raised winch platform/ stump mast between the two holds and a goal post arrangement in front of the navigation bridge. Accommodation for the complement which initially comprised 30 persons was situated aft with two wooden lifeboats on either side fitted with Welin' wind out' davits.

**Noongah's** main engine was built by British Polar Engines Ltd., of Glasgow, a 6 cylinder, 2 stroke single acting Polar oil engine which generated horsepower of 1,000 bhp, giving a speed of 9.5 knots. Navigation equipment was minimal, with just a magnetic compass, an echo sounder, and associated radio and direction- finding equipment. Radar was not fitted when I sailed in her in 1963. Port of Registry was Melbourne and classification was with Lloyds. She was a neat little ship with a nicely raked stem, cruiser stern and topped with a small funnel.

The ship was certainly no ocean greyhound and from personal experience in a force nine 'east coast low' gale the **Noongah** became quite difficult to handle, just maintaining steerage way in what was a similar area off the NSW east coast to where she was subsequently lost seven years later.

**Noongah** was an Aboriginal word for the Kurrajong tree, launching taking place in December 1954 and finally delivered to her new owners in April 1955. The intended

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trade for the sisters was to carry timber and general dry cargo between mainland ports and Tasmania. They fitted nicely trading as handy little units for what was now the ANL Traffic Department carrying various cargoes amongst which early in her career was bagged wheat from South Australian ports to Tasmania. This was before the introduction in 1958 of the first of the two similar Australian built 'half-sisters', **North Esk** capable of handling wheat in bulk. By the early 1960's **Noongah** was trading regularly directly between Brisbane and Hobart direct carrying general cargo such as Golden circle tinned fruit, building material etc south and Cadbury chocolates and apples north! This little ship was ideally suited to handle this type of light volume cargo plus the odd top up with potatoes from Devonport. An unlikely voyage at Christmas 1961 saw **Noongah** make an emergency trip from main southern ports to Darwin when another ANL ship **Wangara**, grounded at the entrance to Port Phillip. In the middle 1960's **Noongah** was regularly engaged in the BHP steel trade from Port Kembla/Newcastle to North Queensland ports.

In 1965 **Noongah** was stripped of her cargo handling gear in order to enter the Bass Strait Searoad Service carrying containerised cargo, timber packs and additional paper reels from Burnie in order to supplement the faster ships engaged in the Searoad Service.

With additional modern tonnage in 1967 becoming available **Noongah** was refitted with her derricks and returned to the East Coast steel trade to North Queensland ports. On a north bound voyage having loaded at Newcastle with 1,472 tons of mixed steel products she sailed fully loaded at noon on the 23 August 1969 with a freeboard of just 4 feet 10 inches. The previous month she had undertaken repairs in Sydney to No.1 hold tank top while 1200 rivets were also replaced. The voyage north was routine until in the area of Port Macquarie the following afternoon the weather deteriorated to the extent that the ship was subjected to a full-blown force 10 gale. The wind was blowing from 45 degrees on the starboard bow, with wave heights peaking at 10 metres, with associated waves the length of which were estimated to be 130m between crests. By 2000 hours the ship had been reduced to barely 3 knots and rolling heavily. A starboard list had been noted ~~increasing~~ during the 8-12 watch and then in the middle watch enormous amount of water were observed across the fore deck well in the way of the lower placed No.1 hatch secured with steel hatch covers. At 0345 **Noongah** finally lost steerage way and at 0352 the first radio message was dispatched indicating a starboard list of 15 degrees. Finally, at 0437 a SOS radio message was sent advising the ship which was near Smoky Cape was being abandoned. She finally sank three minutes later sinking by the head. The two Welin wind out davits were unable to be operated for the wooden lifeboats to be launched so the only available lifesaving equipment were the two RFD life rafts, a 10 person and a six person plus personal life jackets. Of the crew of 26 only five survived the maelstrom that night. The search that

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followed was the largest undertaken in Australia's peace time maritime history and involved eight RAN ships and seven Merchant ships together with RAN and RAAF aircraft. Greaser Kenneth McIntyre was posthumously awarded the Royal Humane Society of NSW 's Bronze Medal 'for bravery in attempting to save the lives of crew members of the **Noongah**'.

In June 1971 her sister **Nilpena** was sold overseas and in 1986 finally meeting a similar fate in heavy seas in the Bay of Bengal. Having developed a list in heavy weather and once again lifeboats were unable to be launched which resulted in just a sole survivor who spent five days drifting in a life raft before being rescued. The British pairs other Australian built 'half- sister', ANL's former **South Esk** was lost in February 1980 on passage from Hong Kong to Manila initially reporting a 20 degree list in heavy weather, crew preparing to abandon ship, no further messages and was lost with all hands.

I sailed on another similar small quarter deck ex Union Company of New Zealand collier which later sank with the loss of all hands in a typhoon in the South China Sea. Her sister ship sank off the North Cape of New Zealand and divers discovered her steel hatch lids had been displaced from the sunken hull.

Did the enormous amount of water battering the steel hatch lids in the forward well deck cause these steel hatch lids to be dislodged resulting in a sudden ingress of water into the holds thus causing an unmanageable list?

Resulting from my experience in these underpowered small motor ships I changed to a different shipping company which had large powerful steam turbine ships!

Captain Iain Steverson FNI

Former BHP Marine Superintendent

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## World Maritime Day 2019

**World Maritime Day is the day workers can reflect on the contribution maritime workers make to world trade and pay respect to those who sacrificed their lives for this country and their industry.**

**The wreath laying ceremony will have special significance this year as we remember those lost in the *NOONGAH*  
Join us on Tuesday the 24th of September.**

**Please assemble at the city side of the Pyrmont Walk Bridge at 12 noon.**