

# Hurricane claimed 305 lives

**A**S A red, tropical sun set over Cape York Peninsula on Saturday, March 4, 1899, the sounds of boisterous revelry floated across the calm waters of Charlotte Bay from the boats of the Thursday Island pearling fleet.

Work had ceased for the weekend and the pearlers, mostly Asians, were celebrating in their own way.

As they chanted their folk songs and twanged on banjos, few paid any attention to the ominous black wall of lightning-streaked cloud that was approaching from the north-east. Until it was too late.

By dawn the next day, the bodies of more than 300 pearlers were tossing in the raging seas or were being washed ashore.

In a night of cyclonic fury — the worst ever experienced off the North Queensland coast — the pearling fleet was almost wiped out. More than 50 luggers and five large pearling ships were either sunk or ripped to pieces on jagged coral reefs.

The final death toll — 293 colored people and 12 whites — made it Australia's most tragic pearling disaster. For days afterwards, mercy ships sailed among treacherous reefs to rescue men and women survivors clinging to rocks or washed up on Barrier Reef atolls.

Survivors told of nightmare experiences as they swam for hours in shark-infested waters after the wind and mountainous seas snapped masts, broke in bulwarks and cabins and finally sank their tiny crafts.

At the height of the hurricane, a tidal wave devastated the Cape York Peninsula coast and swept several kilometres inland, drowning stock and depositing thousands of sharks, porpoises and other fish over a wide area of the countryside.

The colorful, ill-fated pearling fleet had set out from Thursday Island early in February for the beche-de-mer and pearling grounds some 200km south, on the inside of the Great Barrier Reef above Cooktown.

Most of the "big mother ship" schooners, each of about 90 tonnes, were commanded by white captains, while the crews of their diving boats and luggers were mainly Aborigines and Asians. There were Japanese, Filipinos, Malays, Bengalis, West Indians, Murray and Thursday Islanders and mainland Aborigines, as well as a variety of half-castes.

Aboard some of the luggers were the wives and children of pearlers, who preferred life on the boats to a bored existence at home. Even Captain William Field Porter, the young, two-metre tall, raw-boned New Zealand skipper of the schooner, *Crest of the Waves*, had taken along his wife and

## Survivors told of terrible ordeals

# HISTORICAL Feature

18-month-old daughter rather than leave them at home.

The fleet arrived in Princess Charlotte Bay and adjoining Bathurst Bay at the end of February and began working at once. It was an isolated area, with no shore habitations except those of hostile blacks, whose fathers, some 50 years earlier, had killed the explorer, Edmund Kennedy.

Meanwhile, in Brisbane, the Queensland meteorologist, Clement Wragge, issued a report, warning that a hurricane was approaching the coast from the direction of the Louisiades.

"Much indeed do we regret that we have no means of advising the lightships (of the Barrier Reef) and the pearling fleets of the approaching storm between Cooktown and the Torres Strait," the report said.

**W**ragge called the hurricane Mahina, the name of a legendary Tahitian coral nymph, but feared that it would "not prove so soft and gentle as the Tahitian maiden".

Anxiety increased when, next day, a new monsoon was reported to be extending from the base of the Gulf of Carpentaria towards Princess Charlotte Bay, which now apparently lay directly in the path of two great tropical disturbances.

On the same day — March 3 — the Thursday Island postmaster, A.P. Beach, who was also a meteorological expert, wondered why the weather had become so hot and op-

pressive. He went to the post office door and saw an ink-black wall of cloud on the eastern horizon.

Unaware of the approaching danger, the pearling fleet, dotted along the North Queensland coast, made no preparations to cope with a hurricane — a rare occurrence in these waters so far south — and spent their weekend leisure lolling around the decks or holding noisy gatherings with friends on neighboring luggers.

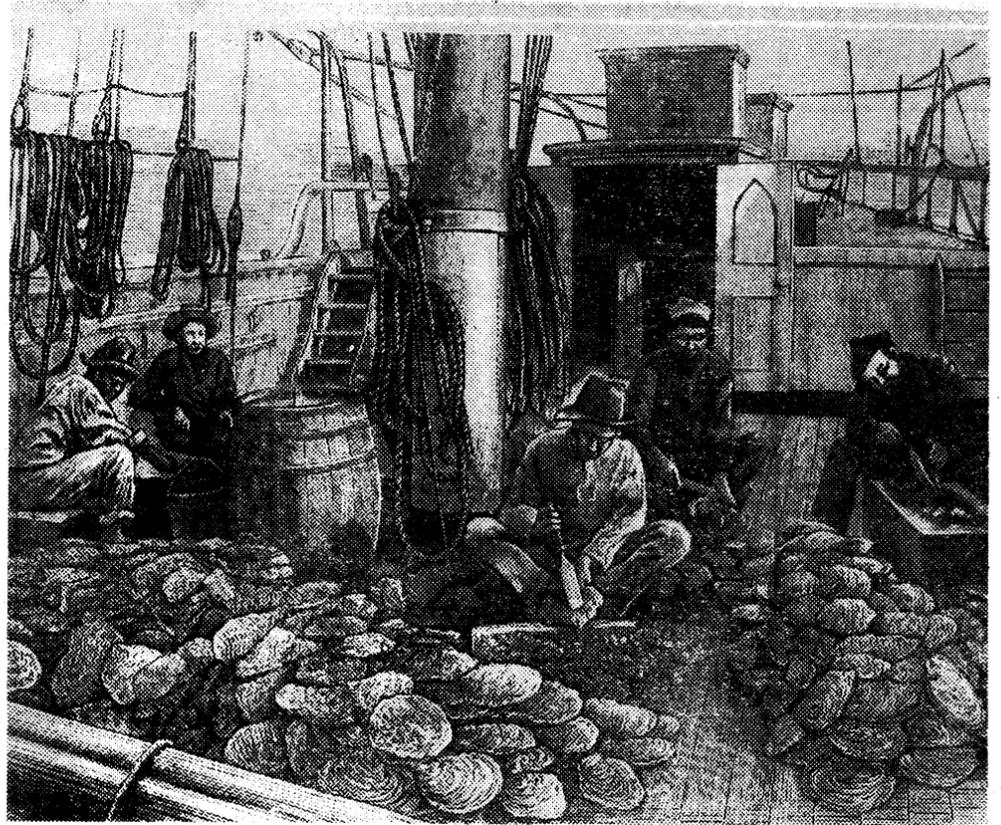
At about 7 o'clock on the Saturday night, they were thankful when a south-easterly breeze sprang up to relieve a day of searing heat. But it was soon evident that this was no ordinary south-easterly, for the wind slowly increased in velocity until it became a gale.

Captain Porter, who was anchored in the lee of Cape Melville, checked his barometer at sundown — it read 29.60.

Before darkness fell, he could see more than 40 luggers anchored near the shore and three other schooners — the *Sagitta* (84 tonnes), *Silvery Wave* (98 tonnes) and the tender, *Admiral* (25 tonnes). Disaster was soon to befall them all, as well as many others in the vicinity.

As the night wore on, thick clouds blotted out the sky and the crews of the luggers could only see one another when lightning lit up the scene. At 9.30, Porter went below to check his barometer again. It was still falling.

An hour later, the hurricane hit with such enormous force



Pearlers pictured opening oyster shells. Most of the luggers and diving boats were crewed by Asians.



Captain William Porter (left) who saved his wife and infant daughter by cutting away the main mast of his capsized schooner, *Crest of the Waves*.

that it lifted men bodily from the decks and pitched them metres out into the water. The smaller luggers were stood on their beam ends and capsized.

The hurricane whipped the sea into a raging torrent and huge waves engulfed the dozens of men floundering in the water. In a vain effort to save their lives, some lashed themselves to masts with rope, only to see the masts snap like matchsticks and either crush them to death on the decks or take them overboard to drown.

Lugger after lugger went down as the hurricane increased in fury. Many swimmers, struggling to keep afloat, were knocked unconscious and drowned by pieces of wreckage, which were picked up by the wind and hurled about the surface like scraps of paper.

As mountainous seas smashed against the schooners, they began to drag their anchors and to drift seawards. In a bid to keep other luggers and schooners informed of his changing position, Captain Porter began firing off his shotgun.

Captain Jefferson, of the *Silvery Waves*, replied, signalling that he was completely out of control of his rapidly drifting ship. From the signals that came from Captain Murray, of the *Sagitta*, it seemed certain that he lay directly in the path of *Silvery Waves* — and that the danger of collision was now added to the perils of wind and waves.

The signals were the last heard from either schooner.

At about midnight, the wind

veered sharply to the south-west and, to the men battling to keep their wallowing ships afloat, it seemed to blow with even greater ferocity.

By now, all the luggers had been sunk. Hundreds of men, women and children were in the broiling sea, either drowned or struggling to keep afloat.

At 4.30 on Sunday morning, there was a strange lull in the storm. As if by magic, the wind dropped and the schooner captains surveyed their battered boats. For the first time in six hours, Captain Porter went below decks to see his terrified wife and their daughter. He was shocked to see that, in spite of the calm, the barometer had dropped to 27 — a reading usually recorded at the height of the most devastating typhoons

**H**e soon learned that the worst of hurricane Mahina was yet to come. The lull lasted only 15 minutes. Then, with a shattering roar, Mahina struck again, a hot, searing blast from the opposite direction — the north-west.

The first impact threw *Crest of the Waves* on her beam ends and she lay on her side, almost submerged in the raging sea and with her masts under water. Another huge wave smashed through the cabin windows and water poured in.

Ignoring the danger, Porter seized an axe and hacked away at the masts. It was his only chance to save their lives.

After the schooner righted herself, it was found that she

had sprung a leak and all efforts to plug it with blankets and clothing proved futile. Not beaten yet, Porter and his crew formed a human bucket-chain and began bailing frantically. It was an exhausting, losing battle, which was to continue, nevertheless, without food or rest, for the next 12 hours — until a passing steamer, the *Duke of Norfolk*, came to the rescue.

Dawn brought no respite for the pearling fleet. At about 7.30, a huge wave struck the already stricken *Silvery Waves* amidships and delivered the final blow of destruction. She sank almost immediately — the lone survivor being a Japanese crewman named Sugimoto, who had been ill in his bunk.

By some strange fate, he had been thrown clear of the sinking schooner and managed to scramble onto floating wreckage. Captain Jefferson and two other whites — Edward Atthow and John Henry Nichols — died, along with 20 of their colored crew.

*Sagitta* had foundered during the night, in circumstances never known for all the 20 men on board perished. They included Captain Murray and three other white men, Alfred and Arthur Outridge and R. Cameron, a Scot.

The only survivor from the schooner, *Estelle*, was a Malay, who clung to wreckage for six hours. Rescuers found him lying unconscious on the beach. The Channel Island lightship also foundered and all on board were lost, including her four officers, Captain Fuhrman, a Swede, Douglas Lee, Henry Harr and Dan Crowley.

Mrs Porter and her baby were taken aboard the *Duke of Norfolk* at 7pm on Sunday but Captain Porter and his crew, refusing to quit their ship, finally ran her aground.

The hurricane blew itself out during that Sunday but it was days before the scattered survivors reached safety. Most pathetic of a host of pathetic stories was that of two young native wives and their two children.

Thrown into the water when their small boat was swamped, they made for land, with the children clinging to their flowing hair. In the morning, they staggered ashore on Flinder's Island, weeping and heartbroken — and carrying the bodies of their children, who had died of exposure.

Only 80 bodies of the 305 who drowned were recovered and some of those had been horribly mauled by sharks — and looting natives had to be chased away from bodies washed ashore in Princess Charlotte Bay.