

# THE WAHINE DISASTER

By Tony Dominik

WEDNESDAY. April 10, 1968 is permanently etched into the minds of all New Zealanders as Wahine day. Residents in the capital city, Wellington, awoke to the clash of two gigantic storms.

One was hot from the tropics, the other chilled from the Antarctic. Between them they brought hurricane force winds gusting past 200 kilometres an hour sweeping through the city and leaving a trail of death, damage and destruction.

Roofs were ripped from houses, cars were abandoned, trees were uprooted and debris hurtled everywhere as the fierce winds wreaked havoc.

The storm, the damage and the report of the death of a little girl who was killed by flying roofing iron, seemed bad enough.

Few realised one of New Zealand's worst tragedies had begun on Wellington's doorstep hours before.

Heroes and tragic errors would be made that day. Fifty-one people would perish in the country's most seemingly senseless maritime disaster. By six that night a whole nation would be stunned with grief, unable to comprehend fully the enormity of the day's events.

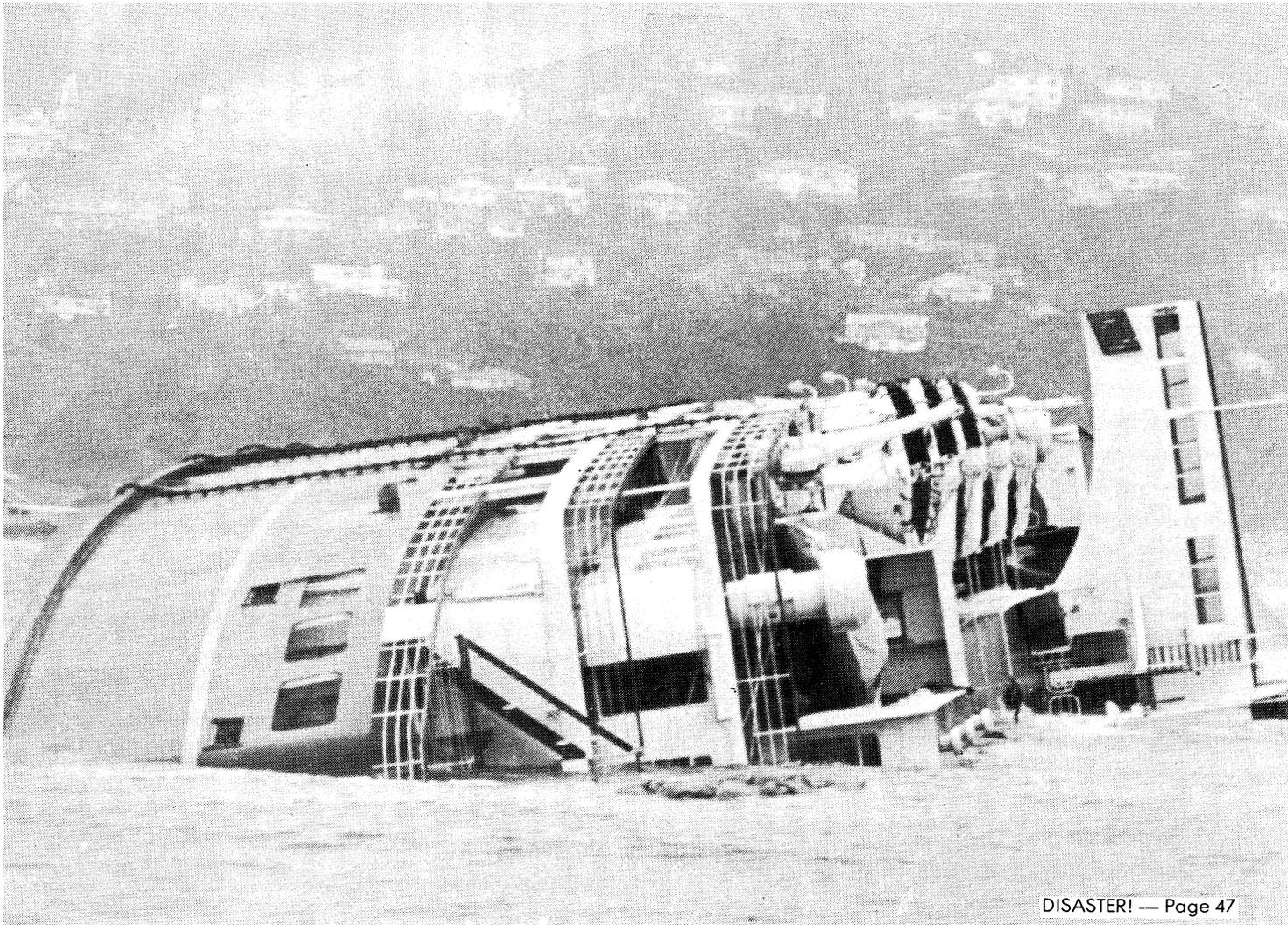
The disaster began at six am as the two-year-old 9000-tonne passenger ship Wahine approached the entrance to Well-

ington Harbor carrying more than 700 passengers and crew. Her name meant "Maori Maiden".

Since commissioned she had been travelling between Wellington and the South Island port of Lyttelton as a passenger-car and cargo ferry.

On her dimly-lit bridge was 57-year-old Captain Hector Gordon Robertson, a master of 18 years and a seaman since the age of 15. Weather reports that day had told Captain Robertson a storm was brewing and winds would be strong — but the storm was expected to be centred more than 300 kilometres from Wellington.

Captain Robertson expected a little





difficulty in guiding the Wahine through the narrow harbor entrance and wasn't concerned when the barometer suddenly dropped eight millibars. Peculiar conditions in the seas outside Wellington Harbor often caused ship barometers to go awry without any apparent explanation.

He assessed the wind speed at between 40 or 50 knots with some satisfaction. He had brought the Wahine into Wellington over 100 times before and the winds were often that strong.

Because of a heavy following swell Captain Robertson cut his engines to half speed — about 10 knots — for the approach into the harbor entrance.

As she nosed into the entrance visibility suddenly dropped.

The Wahine sheered violently to port heading straight towards treacherous Barrett's Reef — the graveyard of many a smaller vessel. Captain Robertson im-

mediately ordered hard right rudder but uncharacteristically the Wahine didn't respond. "Full ahead" Robertson shouted but the Wahine still wouldn't answer her helm.

He was about to shout orders for full astern when the ship gave a sudden lurch and the captain found himself being flung the length of the wheelhouse. He recovered to find the ship still pointing towards Barrett's Reef. She was beam-on to the sea and wind velocity had doubled in a matter of seconds to 100 knots.

For the next half-hour Robertson battled to turn the ship to port away from the reef and into the safety of the open sea but the squall stayed with the ship and inched her inexorably closer to disaster.

At 6.40 am she ran aground.

Captain Robertson gave orders to drop



anchors and close all watertight doors. Alarm bells were sounded to alert the passengers. Messages from the engineroom told him both propellers had stopped. Worse still, the engineroom was taking water badly.

Twenty minutes later the mountainous seas tore the Wahine from the reef and dumped her unceremoniously back into the sea, holed badly and leaking like a sieve from a series of gashes in her hull.

Passengers were unaware of the drama taking place on the bridge. Many hadn't realised the ship had run aground until loudspeakers and bells alerted them. "Passengers should don their lifejackets and stay in their cabins — this vessel is aground on Barrett's Reef."

This message signalled the start of what was later described as a tragedy in slow motion.

Passengers naturally greeted the message with concern. Parents snatched up their children and wrapped them in lifejackets and blankets. Another message minutes later asked passengers to assemble at the aft smoke room on B deck. Patiently they crowded into the smoke room and corridors and companionways around it.

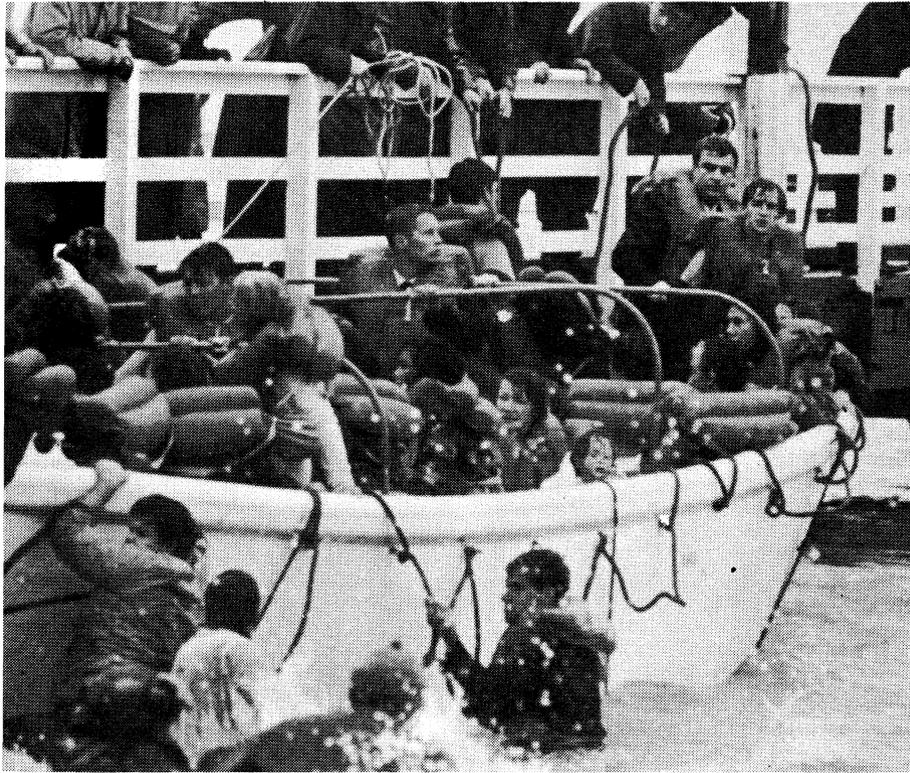
Babies cried, children fretted, fathers swore and mothers tried to soothe.

At 7.40 am another message said: "A tug is on its way to assist. Passengers are asked to refrain from smoking."

At 8.45: "All passengers to move to B deck and stay there."

The following sea slowly pushed the Wahine through the narrow gap into the harbor and Captain Robertson was optimistic the ship would berth safely.

He had informed the harbormaster, Captain Robert Suckling, of the ship's misfortune but added he felt there was no danger. Messages that there was no cause for concern were relayed to police, civil defence and the news media.



Small boat owners volunteering to stand by in case they could assist in a possible rescue were told by Captain Suckling not to go to the Wahine.

At 9 am the loudspeakers on board blared again: "We wish to advise passengers everything is under control. Passengers are requested to stay on B deck."

At 9.36: "We are inside the harbor and quite safe."

At 9.44: "We wish to advise passengers that the vessel is drifting in the harbor itself. We are not in the open sea. There is nothing to worry about at all."

Water was still pouring into the ship. She had begun to list noticeably and was settling deeper into the sea but the messages still insisted there was no cause for concern.

Steaming to her aid was the Union Steam Ship Company tug Tapuhi with

Captain Cyril Sword in charge. He found it impossible to see the Wahine as waves broke over Tapuhi's bridge. Plans to throw a wire over Wahine's stern and tow her into nearby sheltered Worser Bay were abandoned as the weather took a turn for the worse.

Instead Tapuhi had to head for Worser Bay empty handed where she met the pilot launch Tiakina which had arrived minutes earlier with deputy harbormaster Captain Doug Galloway on board.

At 8.23 am off-duty police had been placed on standby at points from which they could be quickly mobilised in the event of a disaster. Following a message from harbormaster Suckling that the Wahine had drifted past Steeple Rock — a dangerous obstacle in the harbor mouth — the police were sent back to barracks. Patrols that had been called in from outlying areas were ordered back to normal duties after news that the Wahine was safe.

At 10.29 am a message told passengers: "We are still drifting up the harbor and are perfectly safe." This message was repeated at 10.51.

Iain MacDonald, a passenger on the ship, found the atmosphere on B deck had become one of boredom.

Seasickness had become the biggest problem. The toilets on board had stopped working some time before and the stench was becoming hard to bear. The passengers were just hoping "someone would throw a rope around the damn thing and tow us ashore so we could stretch our legs" a survivor later related.

By noon most of the passengers had their lifejackets off and were using them as cushions against the bulkhead and deck. Nibbling cheese sandwiches and other refreshments they worried whether their cars had suffered in the pitching and rolling.

Some passengers still clung to life-jackets and looked nervous — a tiny minority of tension and distress in a sea of bored resignation. Some joked about the special entertainment that had been provided by the Union Steam Ship Company.

Meanwhile the weather had slightly eased. The pilot launch Tiakina had managed to move alongside the Wahine just long enough to let Captain Galloway grab a hastily lowered rope ladder and haul himself aboard — narrowly missing being dashed against the ship's side.

It was the day's first act of heroism but far from the last.

Tapuhi was also alongside and battling desperately to get a line to the Wahine as she wallowed helplessly in the crashing waves.

Back in the harbormaster's office controversies were brewing. Fishing and small boat skippers preparing to put to sea to pick up survivors were again told to stay put. Rescue services ashore and a waiting fleet of rescue vessels were lulled into security by assurances that the Wahine was in no danger.

From 8 am four harbor board divers were packed and ready to go out to help — but were ordered to stay away. Chief diver John Redman fumed as the Tiakina set off without him and three other rescue experts.

Redman and his men were later to go out regardless in a private vessel and play a valuable role in pulling survivors from the sea.

Nearly all elementary rescue precautions remained idle despite the rapidly deteriorating situation on the stricken ship. Tools needed to effect repairs were out of reach in the flooded engine room.

Just before noon Tapuhi finally succeeded in getting a line across the Wahine's stern.

At 11.56 the message to passengers was: "We request all passengers to stay on B deck and not move about the vessel. We have a tug with a line fast and will be towed into Wellington shortly."

The intention was to drag the ship with anchors down in case the heavy swell dragged both vessels on to the rocks — but the seas placed a strain on the wire that proved too much.

It snapped minutes after being made fast. Preparations were made to fire more wire-trailing rockets but the attempt had to be postponed again after two men were hurled against Tapuhi's engine casing and badly injured. Once more Tapuhi was forced to return to Worser Bay.

On board the Wahine, with Captain Galloway now on the bridge, the drama was increasing. Galloway pointed out to Captain Robertson that the water in the vehicle deck had risen dangerously and the lifeboats were also half full.

Robertson ordered the lifeboats bailed out and ordered for pumps to be sent out from the not-too-distant shore — all in vain.

Following reassuring messages relayed to police, Chief Inspector George Twentymen was at this time diverting patrols to the outlying Hutt Valley, which had been declared a local disaster area.

Chief Twentymen had been told the Wahine was reasonably safe and could ride out the storm. As late at 1.06 pm he was told the crisis had passed. Only 14 minutes later the bombshell burst.

On board Wahine the seas still looked mountainous. Visibility was almost nil and the ship rolled and pitched. At 1.20 pm what started as another roll to port never reversed to bring the Wahine back to a more-or-less even keel.

Captain Galloway saw immediately the situation was hopeless. He flashed a message to the Tapuhi — back again and trying for a third time to get lines attached: "Forget the lines and stand by to save lives."

Police picked up the message. Twentymen was staggered. Only 14 minutes before he had been assured everything was under control.

On board a bell rang and the loudspeakers told passengers to head for lifeboat stations on the starboard side. It was their first warning that they might be abandoning ship and many were by now no longer wearing their life jackets.

Confusion was the first reaction. Most passengers didn't know which side starboard was. Minutes later another message said: "The starboard side is the right side facing forward."

At last small craft were asked to render aid — but even the closest were an hour away in those enormous seas.

Passengers streamed outside on to crazily tilting decks and into the gale-driven rain and spray. As the ship leaned further they crashed among the furniture and slid along the decks in jumbled heaps.

The crew together with some of the male passengers formed a chain to pass women and children through to the boat deck.

With one hand they grasped railings and with the other they grabbed hands, shoulders, legs and even hair to steady tumbling bodies. One elderly woman lay on the ground, her artificial leg broken.

Some noticed with concern that many liferafts still lay unopened on deck as passengers — unsure of what they should do — began jumping from the ship's stern.

One lifeboat jam-packed with women, children and old folk splashed into the water only to sink minutes later.

Of 300 passengers still left in the aft smoking room 150 were rolling on the floor and crashing into furniture.

On deck, passenger Ian Bull heard a man yelling and screaming to his wife: "I still love you darling — just go."

Passengers were leaving the ship before liferafts were prepared, before the police and rescue services were prepared and an hour at least before the rescue flotilla would arrive.

Some passengers even then had to be persuaded to get into a lifeboat by third officer Graham Noblet. Soon after it hit the water it began to sink and minutes later its engine cut out. Before long it was completely swamped and its occupants were washed away by waves.

Before passenger Iain Macdonald dived from the ship he stood at the port rail clinging to a lifeboat davit. As the ship rose on those colossal waves and the spume cleared momentarily he could see houses and streets about a quarter of a mile away. Normally he would have swum that distance without much trouble — but not in those seas.

Before leaping overboard he thought to die in the open sea would make more sense. To drown so close to that scene of suburban serenity seemed almost laughable. But Macdonald was destined to be one of the lucky ones.

Once in the water he clambered on to an upturned raft with some others for another taste of irony. The rail ferry Aranui had arrived and was circling vainly around trying to rescue those that hadn't been swept too close to the shore and rocks.

Suddenly the raft began to skid down the side of a giant wave like a surfboard. At the same time heavy seas lifted Aranui's stern and her twin propellers spun in the path of the flimsy rubber float like two huge mincing machines. The raft shot under the Aranui's stern missing disaster by only a few feet.

Still on board the raft with Macdonald were two young parents who were lying on top of their five-month-old baby to stop her from slipping overboard.

Macdonald managed to pass the child to the occupants of another passing raft that was right side up, yelling out at the same time: "If we don't make it, her name is Judy Bull." He was later relieved

to see parents and child made it safely to shore.

On another lifeboat panicking passengers threatened to throw fourth engineer Phillip Bennett overboard. Bennett, in command of number two starboard lifeboat, insisted on staying in the area to pick up as many survivors as possible. He was earnestly threatened by those already on board who felt endangered because Bennett wouldn't take them ashore.

But the engineer stuck to his guns and saved another 20 lives before finally heading to shelter.

On another liferaft, waves washed a woman, her husband and their child overboard. The husband dragged himself and the child back on but his wife was trapped underneath. He clawed vainly at the unyielding rubber floor in a futile attempt to save her.

On board the Wahine two men had stayed behind until the last moment — Captain Robertson and Captain Galloway.

Galloway jumped overboard followed by Robertson who exercised his prerogative as ship's master to be the last to leave the ship.

Thirty-nine years before as a deck boy on the Union Line ship Manuka he had experienced something similar when that vessel broke up and foundered at the mouth of the Clutha River. This time there were two big differences for Robertson. It was his ship going down — and when the Manuka sank all 99 passengers and 104 crew safely reached the rocky shore.

Robertson and Galloway were picked up by rescue craft minutes before flooding waters in the vehicle deck finally caused the Wahine to topple.

She sank on to her beam in 30 metres of water still leaving her port side clearly above the waves.

Delays in alerting rescue services were still causing confusion. Many of the rescue crews had been rushed to the western side of the harbour before it was realised a lot of passengers were being swept by seas to the eastern side. Savage weather brought a slip down to block the road from Eastbourne to the rocks and beaches where survivors were being washed ashore.

Some lay on the beach for two hours before help came — they were the first to be washed up. Others actually made the beach and were washed back into the sea and drowned because they didn't have the strength to escape the reach of the waves.

Many, cold and helpless, could do nothing to save themselves from being battered against the rocks. The injuries they suffered left them powerless to fight back to shore and they drowned too.

Of the 51 who died, 50 drowned.

One died from a heart attack. Many of the drowned had heavy injuries — four had broken necks — but it was the sea that finally claimed them.

Doctors stood by helplessly and watched some die who could have been saved if life-giving oxygen had been available — but ambulances couldn't get past the landslide.

Many of the dead and living were washed up naked or nearly naked, their clothes torn off their bodies by the angry sea and jagged rocks.

Nearby residents on both sides of the harbor rushed down carrying hot drinks and blankets for survivors.

Many of them risked life and limb, standing shoulder to shoulder with police to drag survivors from the boiling surf. Police officers themselves had to be treated for exhaustion after wading into the water time and time again to help people ashore.

A constable helping survivors in a raft found an elderly woman lying face down and floating in its bottom. She had been trampled down by the raft's occupants.

Despite his efforts the policeman couldn't revive her.

Trucks and buses carted the fortunate ones to a clearing depot at Wellington Railway Station where they arrived wet and shivering — but safe. A stream of ambulances took the less fortunate to Wellington Hospital for treatment.

There was more confusion at the station. Passenger lists didn't tally with survivors' names. Newspapers speculated on casualty figures ranging from "one" to "many hundreds".

It wasn't until late the following day that authorities finally determined 51 had perished. Angry criticism followed numb shock.

The Marine Department laid charges of negligence against officers on the Wahine, the Harbor Board and the Union Steam Ship Company.

The charges were later to be dismissed by a court of inquiry which did, however,

note certain "serious errors of judgment".

The court found that the Union Steam Ship Company and the harbormaster should have realised the desirability of alerting the rescue craft and moving them as close as possible to the Wahine sometime during the morning and certainly no later than noon.

It said had the rescue craft been alerted earlier survivors carried to the rocky shore and killed may have been intercepted earlier.

More information from the ship on the gravity of the situation could have initiated this action, the court said. Criticism was directed at two quarters: The court found that on the Wahine "the Master Captain Robertson and Chief Officer R. S. Luly should have passed more information ashore. On shore the Union Steam Ship Company should have impressed the real danger of the situation upon the harbormaster."

But courage and heroism were also found in this tragic drama of the sea.

Radio Officer Lyver was commended for rendering service on board with calm, unhurried, efficiency. Later he found himself on a raft with an injured woman who could not be moved.

He refused to abandon the woman to board a rescue vessel at a time when prospects for their survival seemed low. Happily, both were saved.

A greaser on the Wahine, Bill Lahina, also elected to stay with Lyver and the injured woman rather than be taken to safety.

A steward named Ross elected to stay on a raft with an injured woman. He swam back from the safety of rescue vessel Tapuhi when he saw the woman

couldn't be brought aboard and gave her his life jacket. Ross drowned.

Fijian Eroni Vaceucau was found to have rendered great service by taking charge of a liferaft and bringing its occupants safely to shore, then returning to the surf to help other survivors.

An unidentified American or Canadian steward was mentioned by many for the great help he gave despite placing his own life in jeopardy.

Engineer Bennett was praised for the way he handled his lifeboat despite threats from some of the occupants.

Two officers of a motor vessel called the California Star volunteered themselves as crew members on the naval launch Manga. They dived over the side to support some children the launch couldn't pick up and floated with them to safety.

Captain Galloway was commended for boarding the Wahine at great personal risk.

Captains Sword and Ohlsen on the tug Tapuhi received commendations along with the crew for the risks they willingly took. So did the crew of pilot launch Tiakina.

Mention was made of the numerous unsung heroic acts by police and civilians who risked their lives to help survivors ashore on both sides of the harbor.

For more than two years the hulk of the Wahine lay at the entrance to Wellington Harbor, a third of her visible above water as a mute reminder of the tragedy.

She has gone now — cut into pieces by salvage teams and unceremoniously dumped into deeper waters where she won't be a hazard to shipping.

But the memory of what happened on April 10, 1968, will always remain.

