

IT IS just 68 years ago this month that the gallant Norwegian barque, Mandalay, was wrecked off the Nornalup coast between Chatham Island and Long Point.

Fortunately no lives were lost but the ship was a total wreck. Here is her story.

The sun shone through the cloud flecked, blue May sky — its pleasant autumn warmth reaching out to the Norwegian barque, Mandalay, as she sailed through the southern ocean off the south-west corner of Western Australia.

Her bow dipped gently into the swell and a brisk breeze billowed her white sails as she headed for Albany, having left Delagoa Bay in Africa on April 9, 1911 in ballast to take on cargo in the southern port of WA.

Good weather had favoured the ship and Captain Emile Tonnessen and his crew were looking forward to reaching their destination.

Captain Tonnessen had been a seafaring man for 46 years and a captain for 25 years. He was liked by all who served him and had never had a mishap at sea in his career.

This was to be his last voyage and as he strode the deck his mind wandered back over the years and though he knew that it was time he brought his shipboard life to an end he also knew that he would miss the sea and all it represented.

Gale drove Norwegian ship ashore

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by MOLLIE SMITH

Suddenly the captain stopped in his stride and looked at the sky. He took out his pocket watch and glanced at it, 11.15 am.

He felt, rather than saw, the subtle change in the weather and was — for some reason — filled with a strange sense of foreboding.

The sky was clouding over, the breeze had freshened and a freak wind change stirred that same breeze into a gale blowing from the southwest.

Constant struggle

The crew sprang into action. The winds increased in strength and continued all day until the men were exhausted from the constant struggle against the fury of the gale which whipped up huge relentless seas.

The force of the wind caused the vessel to be driven shorewards and by day break next morning their position was serious.

The ship was driven perilously close to Chatham Island, a rocky peak rising a sheer 40 metres

out of the water. By some miracle the crew managed to keep the vessel clear of this, only avoiding rocks on the island by a few fathoms.

However, a greater danger then presented itself in the shape of Long Point — an indomitable hazard — for with the force of the wind blowing on shore it would be impossible for them to round the point.

The captain ordered the crew to beach the vessel.

This was eventually accomplished, but this move also brought a further problem — that of getting a man ashore through the angry surf which lay between the boat and the shore.

The man chosen to make the attempt plunged bravely into the dark, unfriendly water, a strong line fastened around his body. He had made only a little headway when the line became entangled around his leg.

A young Englishman went to his rescue. Both men finally reached the shore exhausted.

Then followed the task

of taking provisions ashore.

The wind-lashed seas turned the exercise into a nightmare, but urged on by their captain who joined them in their job, the men battled bravely and finally they managed to make themselves comfortable for the night.

However, the hurricane force winds and torrential rain made sleep almost impossible.

Over the next few days the weather improved slightly though the force of the wind had not abated altogether.

Sighted settlers

Several attempts were made to find help but they ended in failure when the men were forced to return to their rough camp, exhausted after tramping hour after hour through the dense scrub.

Finally the second mate was sighted by Frank Thompson and his sister Phyllis, whose parents were pioneer settlers on the Deep River.

The pair were returning from Nornalup across the inlet to their home when they heard shouting.

They stilled their oars, listened and saw a sailor.

They made their way quickly to shore and though the man spoke little English he was able to make them understand what had happened before he collapsed into their boat.

Frank and his sister took the sailor home and after a good night's rest and good food he recovered enough to lead

a rescue party to the wreck which was actually midway between Clifty Head and Long Point.

The captain and crew were delighted to see the relief party.

Distress signals

They had erected a rough flagstaff high on a cliff and flown distress signals.

A number of steamers had passed but such was the position of the Mandalay and so rough were the seas that there was little hope of getting a boat in or out.

The relief party boarded the boat and they found untold damage on the stricken vessel.

The captain was now faced with the decision as to how he should get the men to Albany. One lifeboat was completely wrecked but two were intact. Should they wait for calmer weather and attempt the journey by sea or go overland to Denmark and from there to Albany?

He decided on the overland route as the crew were anxious to take some of their personal belongings with them.

The journey was through a narrow pass in the coastal hills to the rolling plains lying between the coast and the Deep River — a distance of about 15km.

The weary men at last arrived at the Thompson homestead, where Mrs Thompson showed them great hospitality.

Next day, the captain and his men were taken to the home of the Nornalup pioneers, Pierre Bellanger and his family.

From Nornalup they journeyed to Bow Bridge and spent the night with pioneer Bert Saw.

A Mr Ross at the survey camp arranged with Charlie Benson of Bow Bridge and Harry Parker to take the party to Denmark and from there they were taken to Albany where arrangements were made by the Norwegian Consul to send the crew to Fremantle.

From here they would be sent home or found employment on other vessels. And so ended the voyage of the gallant sailing ship, Mandalay, and the seafaring life of her captain, Emile Tonnessen (centre, below).

