

The Shipwreck Watch

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‘A True Viking Funeral!’ - *Nella Dan* 1987

The *Nella Dan* anchored in Buckles Bay on 3 December 1987, close to the Macquarie Island station. There were 45 people on board. Gale-force winds were blowing and the ‘*Nella*’ drifted onto rocks. Her owners decided the damage was too great for her to be salvaged and shortly before Christmas, she was towed out to sea and scuttled. Before she sank she caught fire and went down in a blaze of fire, in what Captain Arne Sorensen described as ‘a true Viking Funeral’.

A modern day shipwreck survivor

Gerry Nash is a marine scientist who works at the Australian Antarctic Division at Kingston, Tasmania. At the time of the *Nella Dan* shipwreck, she was Cargo Supervisor for the voyage. She and the *Nella Dan*'s Chief Officer were responsible for co-ordinating the loading and unloading of cargo. She was also part of a team of marine science researchers who were taking seawater samples and netting for krill specimens.



Gerry Nash using an electron microscope at the Australian Antarctic Division, Kingston.
Photo Glyn Roberts.

Gerry Nash described the '*Nella*' as:

'really a bit like a sweet old dinosaur in a modern shipping world. The things you noticed were the brass and wood, the smells - diesel mixed with the delicious aromas of Danish cooking. The cabins were quite small, dark and wonderfully old fashioned. She was nothing like the Aurora Australis or the Icebird. The marine science labs were mostly containers on the heli deck. Nella was small and had a really cosy feel about her.'



Nella Dan in Antarctica. Photo Rowan Butler

She gave this account of the shipwreck of the *Nella Dan* to Annie Rushton:

'The *Nella Dan* arrived at 'Macca' two days earlier than expected and the crew had been unloading cargo whilst the weather was reasonable and the seas moderate. Much earlier that morning the weather had not been too bad, so they had off loaded about half the expeditioners and cargo. We were also unloading fuel for the station by pumping it ashore through a fuel line from the station to the ship. By mid morning the weather was blowing up and the seas were getting too rough for the LARC or derrick operations to continue safely.

The fuel line was still connected to the shore and the captain had decided that it was still OK to continue to pump the fuel. The weather continued to deteriorate with increasingly rough seas and winds with driving rain. During the refueling, the LARCs came out from the island every so often to the fuel line and checked it. It seemed to be OK and the refueling was going well. Also, it was the practice to leave the ship's engines running during a refueling process, just in case you have to move suddenly. But this time the crew wanted to carry out some quick maintenance work on the ship's engines so they were not idling normally.

The ship was gradually being blown towards the shore during the afternoon - you could tell because the fuel line was getting 'bendier' as the ship moved closer to the shore. You could see the fuel line snaking its way through the waves. Those ashore did not wind in the slack of the fuel line as this had to be done manually and required a lot of people to help with it. Just before dinner at about 5.00pm I was in my cabin and noticed that we were passing some big rocks outside the porthole. I knew these rocks were quite close to the shore but I assumed that the captain also realized this so everything must be OK.

Dinner was at 5.30pm and as usual I sat at Captain Arne Sorensen's table. He was quiet and not eating much. The Chief Officer was off duty and was getting some much needed sleep. Other officers were on watch at this time. During dinner the phone rang for the captain and he spoke briefly and calmly. He had spoken in Danish so I didn't understand what had been discussed. He then left the table. I also left and went on back to my cabin. Soon after that some expeditioners came into my cabin to tell me that we were very close to the shore and to come outside and have a look. I went outside on deck and felt the engines running normally again. I assumed that was what the phone call to the captain at dinner had been about.

I was just leaning over the rails looking at the yellow shoal water and about to say: 'I think everything will be OK', when there was a huge crunch as Nella's hull ploughed into the rocky sea floor. We had gone aground in the shoal water which was shallow and filled with many large rocks. Nella's engines had not managed to get us out of these waters in time. The ship's evacuation bells went off and the horn sounded. Expeditioners and the crew quickly mustered at their designated emergency stations. The Deputy Voyage Leader and I decided to get the expeditioners into their life jackets rather than full immersion suits as we were very close to the shore. As Nella went aground a rock holed one of her fuel oil tanks in the hull. The fuel oil was being forced skywards by the sea and then raining down on all of us on deck. This fuel oil combined with the heavy rain made everything terribly slippery.

The LARCs rushed from the shore to the ship and lined up side by side alongside Nella. The expeditioners quickly climbed down the side of the ship on a Jacob's ladder into the waiting LARCs. They stepped across the first LARC into the second one which then ferried them safely ashore. Some people were very frightened as the decks were so slippery and the ship was crushing around a lot. The Deputy Voyage Leader had to lower some people down the side of the ship on ropes. One of the LARCies, we found out later, had got his cornea scratched during the incident, but he continued to work on the Jacob's ladder, helping people to disembark, even though the oil was getting into the scratch on his eye. He was treated later on the island by the doctors and his eye made a complete recovery.

After we had checked that all the expeditioners had gone ashore, the Chief Officer asked me to go below decks to double check that all the expeditioners were in fact off the ship. This was really scary - it was so dark and noisy as the waves and wind crashed against the ship. The ship itself was still rocking back and forth against the rocks around it. If anything had happened to me down there, it would have been sometime before I was missed. Scary!

We managed to evacuate everyone off the ship in 15 minutes, except for the captain and four of the crew who remained with the ship'.



A LARC coming ashore at Macquarie Island. Photo courtesy of Antarctic Division.

The Nella was just bobbing on the waves like a little red cork, she was caught between two rocks, and was crashing in the waves from one rock to the other. Above the noise of the wind you could hear the screeching sound of metal pounding against rock. It was daunting to think that something so huge like a ship could be tossed around like it was weightless! . The DVL, Ric Burbury said to me as we watched poor Nella being tossed about in sea: "O and man thinks he has some command over the elements! Just look at Nella!"

'The Macca crew were great - they organised hot showers, food and hot drinks, as well as clean dry clothing, bedding and a lot of TLC - I really don't know how they did it all so quickly! We also had an army psychologist on board, as a round trip expeditioner, who was probably a great help to everyone under the tragic circumstances. The sad irony is that the weather completely changed the next day, and for the following six days was just unreal - the winds and the seas on both sides of the island isthmus were calm like a millpond and completely still and it was sunny and warm! Possibly the longest and calmest conditions ever experienced on Macquarie Island!

Later the next day, the captain allowed the expeditioners and crew one short visit only to collect what they could of their personal belongings. The seas were completely flat and the LARCs quickly took us to Nella only a few hundred feet away off shore. It was eerie on board and very dark, silent and partially flooded in the lower parts of the ship. I worked on board for some time to help remove as much of the scientific cargo and equipment as we could. Understandably, the crew were distraught but the captain didn't want them to return to the ship again. Their cabins were in the bowels of the ship and were underwater to some degree and dangerous to visit.



Nella Dan aground in Buckles Bay. Photo Geof Copson

The captain and the four crew members stayed on the ship the entire time. When we went back the next day they looked totally exhausted - the captain had had a front tooth knocked out, they were still all covered in fuel oil and none of them had had any sleep. The ship could not generate any power at this stage and so no hot food or drinks were available to the crew. But the Macquarie Islanders realised this and came to the rescue with a continuous supply of hot food and drinks for them onboard.

It's amazing the things you do in times of crisis that you don't recall later. There had been two French marine scientists onboard, and apparently when they had first mustered on the deck, I had spoken to them in fluent French telling them what had happened and what they were to do. The next day they spoke to me in French and I had difficulty in understanding them. Confused, they said: 'O, but you spoke to us in perfect French last night during the emergency. We thought you could speak French!' (I had lived in France for quite sometime some years previously and could speak some French, but I was certainly not fluent anymore, or so I thought!)



Hannelore Lauritzen was naturally extremely upset about the grounding and her evacuation from her beloved 'Nella'. ('Nella' was the last of the 'Dan' ships in the Lauritzen company and Nella's captain was a highly respected member of her staff and close friend). This was a very very sad and emotional time for Hannelore.'



Hannelore Lauritzen. Photo courtesy the Mercury.

On 13 December, the Lady Lorraine, an oil rig tug and supply vessel, arrived at Buckles Bay to assist the salvage operation. The Lady Lorraine crew boarded the Nella Dan and met six crew members from the shipwreck. Divers inspected the hull at first light. The divers decided at first that the damage to the hull was not as bad as anticipated and the salvage team began to remove oil from the ship. At this stage, the owners were hopeful that the vessel could be repaired, towed back to Hobart and used as part of an Antarctic museum.

After the Lady Lorraine was brought as close as possible to the Nella Dan oil was pumped across into the tanks of the Lady Lorraine. When the transfer of oil was complete, the salvage team tried to seal up and fill the holes in compartments with compressed air and pumped water out of other flooded spaces. On 20 December 1987, the high tide was used to swing the ship's bow to seaward and the next day the Lady Lorraine towed her off the rocks. The divers inspected the hull again, but this time found serious damage to the bottom of the hull. The ship owners then announced that they were left with no option, for practical and safety reasons, but to scuttle the Nella Dan in deep water.

A work party from the station went on board to help the crew remove as much as possible from the ship. Most of the remaining cargo was unloaded from the holds, except the concrete which was left to provide stability for the tow out to deep water. Two expensive lifeboats were towed ashore to Macquarie Island during the last stage of the operation. The Lady Lorraine began towing the Nella Dan out into deep water, where she was expected to sink very quickly. However, the overnight weather conditions were calm and the Nella Dan was still afloat, although settling into the water. At this point the Salvage Master and Captain Sorensen decided to go aboard again to assess whether it was safe to remove any more valuables.

As the LARCs approached from shore to assist with this operation, the Nella Dan caught fire. This fire burned strongly throughout the day and it was not until the fire was almost out that members of the salvage crew were safe to go aboard and release the compressed air then providing most of the buoyancy in the forward compartments. The Nella Dan sank in deep water off Macquarie Island at 1742 pm at a position of 54 degrees 37.5minS, 159 degrees 13.3 min E on the 24 December 1987.

Her grounding resulted in a large quantity of oil being leaked into Buckles Bay over a 22 day period.

If it had washed ashore the oil could have devastated populations of Macquarie Island plants and wildlife, but instead the oil washed out to sea. ‘

References

Interview with Gerry Nash, conducted by Annie Rushton, July 1999.

Voyage Report, Voyage 4, 1987-88, Nella Dan, Australian Antarctic Division, Department of the Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and Territories.

Further Reading

You can read about a small invertebrate named after the Nella Dan in:

[Nella Dan Still Found in Buckles Bay](#)

Captain Arne Sorensen is now Captain of the Greenpeace ship, Arctic Sunrise. The work of Greenpeace features in the story:

[Albatrosses, Pirates and Patagonian Toothfish](#)