



Sixty tons of explosive cargo!



The Tuncurry's propeller, our first sight of the wreck lost 93 years ago

# THE SS TUNCURRY

: JOHN RILEY

**> THE FISHERMAN WAS RIGHT. OUR ECHO SOUNDER IMAGE SHOWS WHAT LOOKS LIKE A WRECK IN THE POSITION HE GAVE. THE IMAGE IS SMALL BUT DISTINCT. IT'S TOO DEEP FOR A CASUAL DIVE TO CHECK IT OUT SO WE RUN A MAGNETOMETER OVER THE SITE; IT DETECTS FERROUS METAL BUT NOT A LOT OF IT. THERE ARE A NUMBER OF WOODEN STEAMERS LOST IN THE AREA – THE ECHO SOUNDER READING AND THE MAGNETOMETER'S RESPONSE INDICATE WE'RE OVER ONE OF THESE.**

**T**here's four of us on board, Paul Wright, John Black, Andreas Thimm and John Riley. We usually dive in pairs - two down, two up. We buoy the site and Paul and Riley dive first. The shot line is on sand 10 metres south of a medium sized propeller. We swim to the propeller and see the shaft leading to a scotch boiler. The wreck is covered in fish; they obscure detail but the visibility is good. We swim to the boiler past the steam engine which has a trawl net wrapped around it and on past the boiler.

A toilet and steam pipes lie alongside the port side of the boiler. A life boat davit leads us further north to a windlass and upturned galley stove resting on what looks like a cargo of cement bags; they lay stacked as if still in the vessel's hold. The wooden hull has long since gone, eaten by worms and dragged away by

trawler nets. Past the cargo is sand with a cluster of wreckage marking the bow a hawse pipe with its stockless anchor and a mound of anchor chain. We retrace our path and surface to tell the others the good news.

You know when you're the first to dive a wreck – there are no signs of disturbance and the fish look at you not believing what they see. The wreck is a single screw wooden steamship with a cargo of cement in bags. The bow is pointing north and the vessel's length is about 30 metres. The boiler is a high pressure scotch type and the broken engine seems to be compound.

A list of the wrecks in the area indicates that the wreck is that of the *SS Tuncurry*, a single screw steamer with a compound engine and a scotch boiler. Lost in 1916, it was bound for Brisbane from Sydney

with a cargo of explosives and cement. The other wooden steamers lost in the area are twin screw or had cargoes of coal. The cargo of explosives comes as a shock! The newspaper of the day says "1200 cases of explosives and 90 cases of cement" and that's what we estimate to be on the seabed.

The cases are gone and the bags are now solidified into a large mound. It's a change to have a wreck with a cargo visible and not the usual cargo of coal in the wrecks found off the Sydney coast.

Ship fittings are scattered around the wreck. The propeller and its shaft have been displaced by a trawl net and rest on a copper sheathed rudder. The boiler is holed by otter boards. Fish life is prolific – nannygai obscure the vision and there are large and fat wobbegong sharks on the site. The largest of the wobbegongs has a damaged right eye and put on a big display when we first met. It slapped out with its tail and bit on a spare regulator and then did laps of the boiler. On later dives it seems to have settled down and accepted our intrusion – it now rests in its lair in the boiler.

When the fisherman told Paul of a possible wreck, he wanted to check it out even if it was a wild goose chase. It turned out to be a great little wreck site.

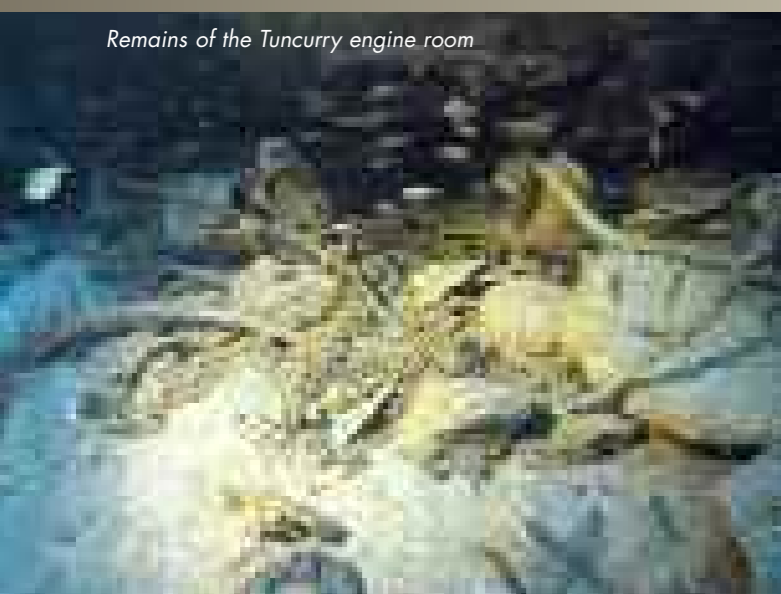
The summer and autumn weather have been excellent for diving on the *Tuncurry*, with good visibility and little or no current. Our dives have been spent exploring, taking video, photographing, sketching the site and enjoying this small but interesting new ship wreck.



The SS Tuncurry. Courtesy of the Mitchell Library



From the stern, the engine has been displaced by a trawlers net



Remains of the Tuncurry engine room



Diver over cargo



Forward boiler



Remains of the propeller & shaft

## FOUNDERING OF A STEAMER OFF BROKEN BAY.

**DAILY TELEGRAPH 23 OCTOBER 1916.**

Captain Hutchins and ten men, comprising the crew of the steamer *Tuncurry* (late *Tokelau*) had an exciting adventure off the coast yesterday morning. They arrived in Watsons Bay yesterday morning in the ships lifeboat with news of the loss of the vessel. The *Tuncurry* sprang a leak and foundered when three miles off Broken Bay.

The *Tuncurry*, loaded with a cargo of cement and explosives at Sydney, and cleared Sydney heads at midnight on Saturday the 22 October 1916 bound for Brisbane. Making north, the steamer was soon pitching into a northerly breeze and head sea. All went well until 3 o'clock in the morning, when the engineer on watch reported that the vessel was leaking badly. All hands were called and the pumps started, the steamer meanwhile being headed in towards Broken Bay.

Efforts were made by the captain to trace the leak, but to no avail, and in the course of time soundings showed that the water was rapidly gaining on the pumps. The position was serious with several miles of ocean to cover before reaching shallow water, but all hands still worked hard to save the vessel. Their efforts at last proved fruitless.

The steamer lost way; and gradually began to settle down. The captain, officers and men just had time to launch the lifeboat and jump clear when the *Tuncurry* took a heavy plunge and disappeared below the surface. Favoured by a slant of wind the boat safely negotiated the passage to Sydney Heads, and on arrival the captain boarded the pilot steamer and made a report of the disaster. Subsequently the crew landed and hurried off to their homes.

The SS *Tuncurry* is one of two ships named after a small coastal town on the New South Wales north coast. Both ships were built by John Wright, shipbuilder at Tuncurry. The first *Tuncurry*, our shipwreck, was built in 1903. It was a wooden single screw steamer thirty four metres long. Gross tonnage was 162 and 92 tons net.



SS *Tuncurry* was sold to the High Commission for the Western Pacific Protectorate on behalf of the British Government in 1909 and renamed *Tokelau*. John Wright built another ship in 1909, it was a twin screw steamer and it was also named *Tuncurry*. TSS *Tuncurry* was a slightly larger vessel than its younger namesake.

The SS *Tokelau* after service in the Pacific was sold to Hassell and Company of Sydney, renovated and renamed *Tuncurry*.

Both *Tuncurry*'s departed Sydney on that same fateful night on voyages north. The SS *Tuncurry* foundered off Broken Bay and the TSS *Tuncurry* arrived safely at its destination and continued to have a long service life, eventually being scuttled off Sydney.