

> IN 1846, IF THE CORVETTE *LA SEINE* DIDN'T WRECK AT THE EXTREME NORTHEAST OF THE MAIN ISLAND, NEW CALEDONIA MAY NEVER HAVE BECOME A FRENCH POSSESSION. A GUIDED VISIT OF THE SITE OF THE PROVIDENTIAL WRECKAGE WHICH HAS BECOME THE MOST BEAUTIFUL SUNKEN SHIP OF THE ARCHIPELAGO.

# La Seine A PROVIDENTIAL WRECKAGE

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## THE MISSION

*La Seine*, a war corvette of 800 barrels, with 26 guns, sets off on the 8th of September 1845 from Brest, destination the South Pacific. She sails under the commandment of Captain François Leconte. The voyage objectives are many. The political situation is tense between France and England about the protectorate signed in 1842 between the Queen Pomaré of Tahiti and King Louis Philippe of France. The pastor Pritchard, the English consul, is trying to incite the local population against the French establishments in Polynesia. Admiral Dupetit Thouars expels him to Australia, threatening the "cordial agreement". Guizot, Louis Philippe's Foreign Minister turns against the Admiral and indemnifies the pastor. In this context, the ship transports troops to Tahiti to re-establish law and order to assist the French population living in the South Pacific archipelagos. Louis Philippe also gave a secret mission to Monseigneur Douarre of the Catholic mission of Balade in New Caledonia. The ship should then proceed to Kamchatka before returning to France after a four year journey.

## THE WRECKAGE

After a stopover in New Zealand to relieve the corvette *Le Rhin* and assist the population of the small French colony in the Bay of Akaroa in the South Island, the

ship heads towards the extreme northeast of the main island of New Caledonia where the Marist monks of the Catholic mission of Balade have been converting the natives since December 21, 1843.

The Commander sails with a tail wind to the extreme end of the barrier reef. Believing he was at the entrance of the Balade Pass, in reality he enters Pouebo Pass. He positions the ship under the southerly winds close to the reef. The sun prevents the lookout from noticing the colour of the water in time indicating that it was shallow in the trajectory.

Despite an avoidance maneuver, *La Seine* hits the reef by the stern and is immobilized. Once the sails are furled tightly, a boat is lowered into the sea; probing around the ship gives hope that with an anchor set at a distance by row boat and by lightening the ship, that it could be pulled away. The water containers are emptied, the cannons are moved nearer to the bow... to no avail.

Night falls, making operations more difficult. In the morning of July 4, 1846, *La Seine* floats anew; she is still fastened to the reef by two anchors, but unfortunately the rudder detaches and disappears. The situation becomes critical with waves increasing in size; the three pumps function non-stop, but water levels

Main: Mercy anchor pointing the middle of the wreck. (Luc Faucompré FMC)

Inset: *La Seine* twin steering wheel axiometer showing stern position. (Pierre Larue FMC)

Above: Shell gun alignment, 25m deep on the bottom. (Luc Faucompré FMC)

Top: A huge brass captsan. (Luc Faucompré FMC); Picture of french navy *La Durance*, sister ship of *La Seine*. (Aquarelle from François Roux MNMP)



Left: A modern shell gun to the left and an older 8-pounder gun to the right. (Luc Faucompré FMC)  
Wreck general view. Divers working near munitions boxes. (Luc Faucompré FMC)

in the hold keep keep rising. A row boat deposits 50 men with ammunition on the shore. The evacuation starts at 3pm and soon the entire crew is on the shore of the canaque (native) tribes of Pouebo.

Only the top of the mast shows where the wreck, which claimed no victims, occurred. Our 232 castaway sailors on the other side of the Earth from their homeland need to get organized for their survival. The Commander Leconte discreetly informs Monseigneur Douarre of the secret letter dated August 26, 1845. It states that France has no intention of establishing a colony in New Caledonia and to help calm relations with England, he is asked to reconstitute the French flag that Julien Laferrrière, commander of the Bucephale, gave to him in 1843 when the Marist monks arrived in Balade.

But this providential wreckage changed history by providing knowledge about the archipelago and its inhabitants. Emperor Napoleon III decided to claim the archipelago and the Captain Février Despointes, aboard the *Phoque*, claimed possession of New Caledonia for France on September 24, 1853 – a date which is now a public holiday in New Caledonia.

**THE CASTAWAYS**

The repatriation of the crew was the main concern of the commander. On July 9 he negotiated with a sandalwood ship the evacuation to Sydney of 53 men among the sick and

strong headed. On August 16 the schooner *Clara* sailed from Balade with 23 sailors for the same destination. September 3, 1846, two months after the wreck, the English whaler *Arabian* commissioned by the French consul in Sydney repatriated the commander and the remaining 148 crew.

In Port Jackson harbour, the crew waited for orders to return to France. At least two sailors managed to desert, one by the name of Etienne Fabard. In 1849 he married Margaret Core in Sydney under the name of Stephen (Etienne in English) Fabare and was naturalized an English citizen in 1850. He was a father to nine children and died aged 84 years old in 1908 as John Fabar.

Another sailor from *La Seine* was recorded at his 1853 Sydney marriage as Jean Prospere Fabard. Jean wed Eliza Core, sister to Margaret and it is possible that he was related to Etienne. Jean was naturalized twice, in 1853 and 1875 and died under the name of John Prosper in 1899, having fathered eight children. Both ex-sailors became miners in the Australian goldrush era.

In 2006, Elizabeth Hook, who lives in New South Wales and is related to the sisters who married the French sailors,



Above: French navy pistols before and after electrochemist treatment by the Maritime museum team. (Pierre Larue FMC); Sauce and custard pots for La Seine officers. (Pierre Larue FMC); Sword hilts before and after electrochemist treatment by Maritime museum team. (Pierre Larue FMC); French navy uniform button. (Pierre Larue FMC).  
Right: Jean-Paul Mugnier drawing of La Seine wreck. (Pierre Larue FMC).

contacted the MHMNC to obtain information about *La Seine* and to report this extraordinary anecdote.

It took 142 days for the *Berkshire* to finally arrive in Cherbourg, France on March 29, 1847 with the survivors. After the war council, Captain Leconte obtained a new commandment. No fault was retained against him, either concerning the wreckage or the events that followed.

**THE DISCOVERY**

It is 1968. Lieutenant Jean-Noël Pouliquen commands the deminer *La Dunkerquoise*. Following a request from the Noumea Museum, he receives orders to search for the wreck. On May 28 the ship anchors in Pouebo Pass. The captain, after having surveyed where the wreck took place according to archives, organizes the search.

Aimé Bourgoïn, a civilian, dives with Terorotua, a Polynesian sailor. Followed by a raft, they swim along the Pass. In less than two minutes they spot a rusted chain descending the wall of the barrier reef. At a depth of 25 metres, the untouched remains of the war corvette appear in clear water. The anchor lies in the middle of a pile of metallic objects. Two parallel lines of 22 thirty modern shell guns and four eight-pound canons materialize at the sides of the ship. The divers identify the water containers and the gigantic bronze capstan. In the following days they discover two small bronze guns (pierriers) amongst the four that were on the ship's inventory, several espingole guns, swords, pistols, different sizes of canon balls, grenades, portholes, crockery, wine bottles, carved furniture pieces and a bell without inscriptions.

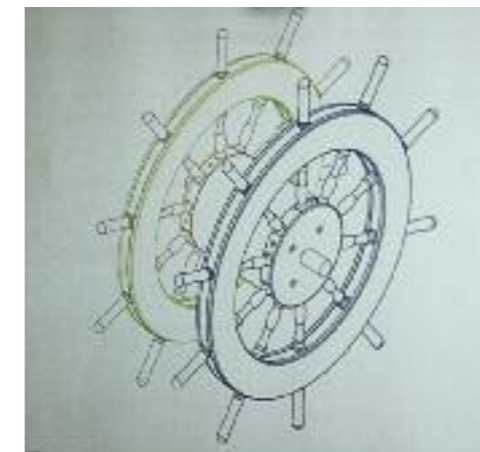
The first archeological sites  
In April 1997, the members of the Fortunes de Mer Calédoniennes

association (FMC) obtain authorization from Maritime Affairs to organize underwater research on this fabulous wreck. They received assistance from French navy hydrographic vessel BH *Laplace* which was on a mission in the region. They survey the site to prepare a large scale archeological search. The divers draw a detailed map of the site by placing a reference for each remarkable element in relation to the Anchor of Mercy placed at the centre of the 43.30 metre long vessel.

*La Seine* has endured 150 years of immersion, tidal currents and cyclones. Certain large metallic elements are identifiable like anchors, canons and the huge bronze capstan. At the base of the reef, a pile of rudder gudgeons (femelots) indicate precisely the position of the sternpost (étambot) where the rudder was attached.

The second campaign, which lasted 10 days, allowed divers to search deeper with the help of a hydraulic suction pump.

Right: La Seine twin steering wheel, lying on bottom sand starboard side. (Pierre Larue FMC); Christian Grondin, Jean-Pierre Folliard & Luc Faucompré removing the steering wheel, during low tide. (Josette Neumayer); Inside the maritime museum laboratory, La



Seine double wheel pieces are assembled after an electrolytic treatment. (Pierre Larue FMC); La Seine twin steering wheel is drawn by computer assistance. (Pierre Larue FMC); Inside technical high school work shop, teacher Marc Jeandel, runs with his pupils La Seine twin steering wheel restoration, using pieces of kohu (local wood). (Luc Faucompré FMC); Ten kohu elements are assembled on each steering wheel. (Luc Faucompré FMC); Positioning the axis through the drum on the original mounts. (Pierre Larue FMC).





Above: Students and teachers are very happy to have successfully met this challenge. (Pierre Larue FMC)

About a hundred small objects were recovered: wine bottles, jugs, flasks, cutlery, locks, uniform buttons, sheet wheels, canon balls, portholes and rudder gudgeons.

In March 1999, a final land-based campaign recovered an exceptional bronze piece: the ship's twin steering wheel. Perfectly preserved, this rare relic was immediately treated by electrolysis once out of water, then conditioned by the laboratory staff of the New Caledonian Maritime History Museum.

The twin steering wheel restoration.

A passionate diver, Marc Jeandel, who teaches joinery at the professional high school Petro Attiti in Noumea, offers to restore *La Seine's* twin steering wheel for exhibition at the museum. To emphasize the importance of the archeological piece, he sets up a cultural and artistic project, associating two classes. Members of the FMC association came to tell to the students and teachers the history of the ship, the circumstances of its discovery and the importance of this restoration for New Caledonia.

Few documents show a twin steering wheel such as this one. Marc Jeandel will find inspiration in the drawing of the famous book of naval archeology by Jean Boudriot. To reconstitute the helm's system and analyze the functioning of the rudder, he makes up a drawing assisted by computer. A working drawing is used for the calculation of volumes and the forms of the pieces to help in the machining of the different elements.

Starting in November 2008, this multidisciplinary pedagogic project ended in 2009. Twenty intermediary pieces assembled to the reel constitutes the most recognizable part of the twin steering wheel. They are all embedded into bronze flasks and glued with epoxy resine. The two wheels are crowned with round pieces of wood, screwed on either side. The two original bronze flasks have been adjusted at each end of the drum, in the shape of an empty wood cylinder and made up of 40 trapezoidal pieces, glued with epoxy. This cylinder is designed to receive the reefing line, which transmits the twin steering wheel movement to the tiller located under the first deck which then acts directly on the rudder.

The twin steering wheel and drum lie on bronze fixations and turn on a 60mm diameter axel, also in bronze. All the elements are fixed with original rivets on a duckboard, also similar to the original. Approximately 0.5m<sup>3</sup> of kohu, a New Caledonian hardwood was used. The total weight is approximately 250kg. A hundred hours of work excluding design were necessary for the completion. The icing on the cake – the 15 future craftsmen, motivated by the original work, all obtained their baccalaureat that year!

