

Saved by an Emu

by Jeanette Lee

We often come across extraordinary experiences that happened to our pensioners in their former lives as soldiers so it should not have surprised me that when researching the WO 97 for Pensioner James Fallon I came across the statement "He states he was wrecked in the Royal Charlotte transport in Torres Straits 20 June 1824 [sic 1825] and was 42 days on a rock on his passage from NSW to India."

James was attested in the 95th Foot on 31st December 1823 aged 20, he transferred to the 20th Regiment on 13 January 1824 and was promptly despatched to New South Wales prior to being sent to India with a detachment of seventy-one non-commissioned officers and privates of the 20th, 41st and 46th Regiments, together with eight women and twelve children, on the Convict ship Royal Charlotte on its return voyage from delivering a cargo of convicts to Sydney.

The Royal Princess sailed from Port Jackson on 12th June 1825 only to come to grief six days later on the Frederick Reef located about 450 kilometres off the Queensland coast. Stuck hard and fast on the rocky outcrop the situation looked desperate until an emu, the property of the captain, decided to attempt to walk to the reef and established that it was

possible to walk from the ship to the reef successfully.

The soldiers and crew set about building a platform on a sandy part of the reef and transferring casks of water, food and fuel to the platform as well as most of the soldiers and their families. A tent was erected on the platform for the women including the family of the Commanding Officer Lieut. Clinton.

Throughout the operation the surf was crashing over the reef and Corporal John Hughes of the 20th regiment was drowned. The newborn child of the wife of Sergeant McDonnell also died. Another death occurred after returning to Sydney that of seaman William Banks who died of injuries sustained during the ordeal.

After experiencing extreme conditions the long boat was launched and set sail to Moreton Bay to summons help where it arrived twenty days later after sundry mishaps and misadventures. The brig Amity was promptly sent to relieve the survivors and after many anxious moments and feats of bravery it was able to come sufficiently near to embark the survivors only hours before the surf completely covered the outcrop which had bought them succour. Ten days later the Amity sailed into Port Jackson, where it was reported the soldiers were in a pitiful state having lost most of their possessions including their uniforms, accoutrements and weapons, no mention of the state of the women and children.

By the 6th October the men and their families were once again to resume

their journey to India, this time on the Norfolk bound for Madras, via Calcutta.

In 2012 the Australian National Maritime Museum expedition located the remains of the 1825 wreck of the Royal Charlotte in the Coral Sea. The ANMM website has many underwater photographs of the expedition and artifacts recovered from the wreck.

No further mention was made of the emu and we can only speculate as to its fate!

References:

The Australian (Sydney, NSW: 1824-1848)
Thursday 18 August 1825, page 3
Thursday 6 October 1825 page 4

A detailed account can be found on EBooks
"The Museum of Foreign Literature, Science
& Art. Vol 9, pages 431-435.