

> THERE THEY ARE, SEPIA TINGED, LARGE AS LIFE, STUCK ON A WALL IN MEMORIAM. THE OFFICERS OF THE SS YONGALA, CAPTURED FOR POSTERITY, NOW BENIGNLY WATCH OVER THEIR BEAUTIFUL EDWARDIAN SHIP.

THE LAST DIVE OF YOUR LIFE

: HE SAWYER



The small gallery in the Maritime Museum of Townsville creaks underfoot. It's like a ship inside and out, so no surprise to discover this was once the office of the Pier Master before they moved the building to its present position overlooking Ross Creek. Here, lovingly curated, are some of the artefacts recovered from the wreck; deformed skylights and portholes, stained glassware and porcelain, the bell, a photograph of the racehorse Moonshine (*Yongala's* most celebrated victim) and an artist's impression of the ship on the brink of oblivion swamped by the sea. I can barely bring myself to look at Bill Knight, head cocked with a trace of a smile. He looks too kind for this end. Tomorrow I'm going to dive the ship that became his grave; I feel guilty, because I can't wait.

The Greyhound bus takes me south along the Bruce Highway towards the small town of Ayr, just over an hour away. I journey in the company of Max Gleeson's detailed account of the *SS Yongala*, purchased at the Maritime Museum gift shop. She was commissioned along with a sister ship, *Grantala*, by the Adelaide Steamship Company to meet the demand of the gold rush coastal routes in the late 1890s.

Built in Newcastle-on-Tyne, launched in 1903, she was a beautiful 363 foot long state-of-the-art vessel, fitted out in walnut and oak, with capacity for 110 first class and 130 second class passengers, plus cargo. She boasted staterooms, smoking room, music room, saloon, and a magnificent staircase in the dining room, all whisked along in fine style at an impressive 16 knots. Her name came from the Aboriginal word meaning 'broad watering place' in line with the company's policy to christen their ships in the indigenous language.

As the gold rush panned out in Western Australia, the company switched to ply the northern coast, and *Yongala* commenced the Melbourne to Cairns run in 1907, with Captain Knight in command. Born in

Bromley, England in 1852, sailor William Knight came to Australia and patiently learnt his trade. His first command, the steamer *Glanworth*, didn't fare too well, as she ran aground on only his second voyage. Nonetheless, having served a six month suspension, he was taken on as a mate by his new employers, the Adelaide Steamship Company, and subsequently given command of their steamer, *Wollowra*. Knight duly became an experienced, respected captain, and by 1901 his portrait was centre stage amongst his contemporaries in the line's promotional literature.

The bus pulls into the crossroads at Ayr, and within a minute I'm standing alone in single storey rural Australia. A radio plays to itself through an open window. I call *Yongala Dive*. They'll send someone to pick me up when the dive boat returns, in an hour, maybe two. No drama.

In a scene straight out of a Coen brothers movie, I wander across the deserted street to the supermarket. I'm the only customer. There I find treasure for dinner – a tin of Stagg Chilli. I'd give this place UNESCO World Heritage status, no question.

Back on my bus stop bench I turn the page to *Yongala's* final voyage. She departed Melbourne for Cairns on 14 March 1911, making her usual scheduled stops, and at Brisbane received a racehorse trainer with his new acquisition, Moonshine. Livestock as freight wasn't unusual in those days, and the horse joined the red Lincoln bull already aboard. *Yongala* departed Flat-top Island for the 200-odd mile leg north to Townsville, early afternoon on 23 March, and was sighted five hours later by a lighthouse keeper in worsening weather. The vessel and the 121 souls on board were never seen again.

Other ships receiving storm warnings sought shelter, but the *Yongala*, without radio, sailed straight into a cyclone. Overdue at Townsville, it was assumed Knight had taken refuge, but when other

Main: Remaining superstructure, port side.

Top to bottom: A turtle on the wreck; Trevally under the stern;

Marble rays off the starboard side; Mast of the *Yongala*.



“NOTHING PREPARES YOU FOR THE AMOUNT OF MARINE LIFE ON THE WRECK. DIVE OPERATORS WHO SINK SHIPS TO MAKE ARTIFICIAL REEFS CAN ONLY DREAM OF THIS”



ships arrived and there was still no word, an extensive land and sea search began. The lighthouse keeper at Cape Bowling Green found a bag of chaff on the beach, and a steamer arrived in Townsville having recovered detritus, including an inscribed door from *Yongala's* promenade deck to the music room. Then the badly decomposed remains of a horse, presumably Moonshine, were washed ashore.

With the ship now lost beyond doubt, a disaster fund was launched, show biz got involved, but over time, with no sign of the wreck, *Yongala* slipped into maritime mythology. There was the odd ghost story featuring a rusty doppelgänger, but it wasn't until 1947, when the Navy took a closer look at an obstruction discovered by minesweepers during the war, that they realised they'd found a wreck, and one with dimensions matching *Yongala*.

Obviously when the Navy's discovery off Cape Bowling Green was made public, everyone assumed *Yongala* had been found. The Queensland Underwater Research Group, with their new scuba

equipment, finally established the wreck's identity. In 1958 they recovered a safe, and though the contents had been reduced to sludge, the serial number was sent to the manufacturer in England, who duly confirmed that the safe came from *Yongala*. With the mystery finally solved, the scuba club dumped the artefact into the river. And then went to the pub for a cold one. Probably.

Christina of Yongala Dive picks me up for the 15 minute scenic drive to Alva Beach. There's not even a crossroads here, just a small residential community bolstered by the transients of the local trailer park. I've arrived in the Twilight Zone on the fringe of a beautiful white beach. The Yongala Divers Lodge accommodates a dozen divers in neat dorms, or a double room, with a lounge, kitchen, and a sunset thrown in. The dive shop is downstairs, so you can roll out of bed, grab some brekkie, and you're good to go.

Having sorted your kit, the polished dive briefing takes place under the shade in the garden over coffee and tea, then it's into the 4WD to off-road along the beach to the waiting 'Yongala Express', a 10m rigid inflatable for 12 divers, guides and crew. We're tracted off the beach into the surf, skipper Bryan navigates the shifting sand bars, then opens the throttle for the exhilarating 30 minute dash to the wreck.

And this is where diving from Alva Beach with Yongala Dive becomes a no brainer. The boats from Townsville only run when full, and with their trip to the wreck taking three hours over choppy water, when they do eventually arrive, the majority of their clients hang off the back to indulge in a bout of impromptu fish feeding.

We suit up. Thin hoods are offered to ward off the odd stinger in the water and I have the pleasure of rolling in first with buddy Jamie, a dive instructor from Sydney. We descend down the line as briefed, although there's little discernible current on this dive, through blue water with at least 15m visibility; the bow at 14m is clearly visible from the surface.

I'd seen plenty of underwater footage of the wreck, (the Townsville Maritime Museum staff will put on a 40 minute DVD for you to watch during your visit), and enviously sat through plenty of

firsthand accounts, but nothing prepares you for the amount of marine life on the wreck. Dive operators who sink ships to make artificial reefs can only dream of this. Every square inch is occupied with a greater variety of coral than you'll find on most reefs. This is like a sci-fi world for fish. For them, *Yongala* is Mega-City One.

We descend over the bow, across the deck, the carcass upright, listing to starboard, and past the forward cargo hold, which according to the briefing now contains some femur bones. Penetration of the wreck is now forbidden due to it's fragility, but you can peer in from outside with a torch. Continuing our 'loop' tour requires concentration to avoid ploughing into the prolific black coral trees that have supplanted the lifeboat davits.

The wreck moves. Everywhere. It heaves with life. Shoals bomb back and forth, trevally, jacks, yellow-tailed fusiliers and cardinal fish. The small fry flee from the path of the patrolling schoolmaster; the humphead Maori wrasse. A hawksbill turtle grazes on the wreck, ignoring our close proximity in favour of food.

We drop down onto the flat white sandy bottom, between masts lying like fallen maypoles, to examine a pair of marbled rays. Again we're ignored. The wreck's inhabitants are so unconcerned with our presence, *Yongala* might well be a lost outpost of the Galapagos. As I follow Jamie along the starboard side, he's shadowed by an olive sea snake. Another travels across the deck, poses momentarily for a photo, then sells me a dummy and sashays away between my legs. First time I've been nutmegged by a sea snake.

The stern rears above us, a ceiling bedecked with jewellery growth, beneath which the rank and file trevally screen a huge flowery cod. This is the maximum depth of the dive with my computer registering 28.3m, hand-on-the-sand. The rudder lies to the port side, but the 'Wow!' factor is lifting off the bottom and hanging back to view the sweep of the stern blurred by frenetic fish traffic.

As we ascend to cover the port side it's possible to peer into the bowels of the wreck at the cast iron bath and toilets, and the obligatory decorative anemone fish, before coming along the

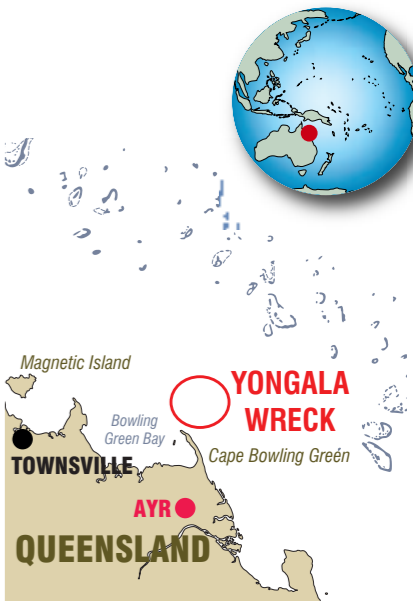
companionways to the coral grotto that was once the first class dining room.

As we near the end of the dive and return to the line at the bow, there's still plenty of time to observe an impromptu cleaning station for batfish. This is a stunning dive, and it's no surprise that diving legend Valerie Taylor said if she had just one more dive in her life, she would chose *Yongala*.



Opposite page top to bottom: Fish traffic on the stern; An olive sea snake; A turtle on the wreck; The bell of the *Yongala*.

This page top to bottom: The Townsville Maritime Museum; A model of the *Yongala* with a photo of the officers in the background; Glassware and artefacts from the wreck; A skylight from the wreck on display in the Maritime Museum.



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