

**ACTIVITY:** Sea Disaster

**CASE:** [GSAF 1852.02.26](#)

**DATE:** Thursday February 26, 1852

**LOCATION:** The incident took place in the Indian Ocean at Danger Point off Gansbaai, Western Cape Province, South Africa.

**NARRATIVE:** When Her Majesty's troopship, the iron paddle-steamer *Birkenhead* commanded by Captain Robert Salmond, R.N., sailed to South Africa from Cork in southern Ireland in January 1852, she carried troop reinforcements for Lieutenant General Sir Harry Smith, who led Queen Victoria's troops in the Kaffir War.

The *Birkenhead* docked in Simon's Town, False Bay, South Africa, on February 23, 1852. Some passengers disembarked and seven came aboard. The ship took on provisions, fresh water and 350 tons of coal. Bales of hay for the horses were stored on the upper deck.

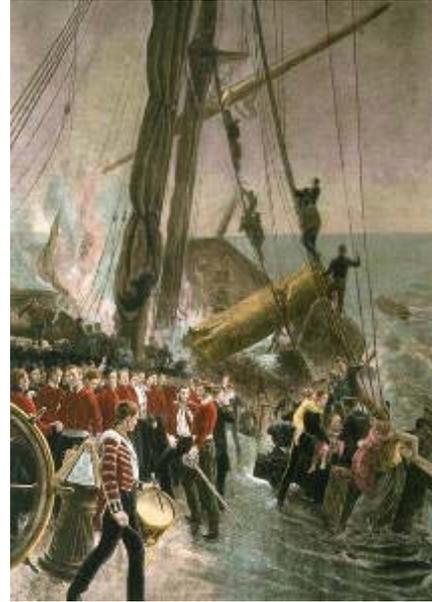
When the *Birkenhead* steamed out of Simon's Town in the late afternoon of February 25th she carried 638 people. In addition to her crew of 130, her passengers included a file of Royal Marines, 480 soldiers from the Queen's Regiment, 6th Royal Regiment, the 12th Lancers, the 60th Rifles, the 74th Highlanders and seven women and 13 children, the families of soldiers. The sea was calm; the sky clear and cloudless – a perfect summer day. Captain Salmond's orders were to deliver the reinforcements with all haste. He set a course for Port Elizabeth.

In the early hours of February 26th all was quiet on the steamer. The only sounds were the throb of the engine and the rhythmic splashing of the paddle wheels as the ship ploughed through the calm sea. She moved steadily on course unaware that a chain of uncharted rocks, named Danger Point, lay dead ahead. If her course had taken her six metres to either side she would have sailed through the night.

At 01h50 a crash shattered the stillness; the *Birkenhead* had impaled herself on Danger Point. Her hull was sliced open and, as the sea rushed through the forward compartments of the lower troopdeck, more than a hundred soldiers were drowned in their hammocks.

Captain Salmond, Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander Seton of the 74th Highlanders and Captain Wright were on the top deck within moments of the impact. Barefoot men rushed and stumbled to the open deck where they were met by their officers who told them to fall in and await orders.

To prevent his ship from slipping off the rock into deeper water, and hoping to give the men trapped below time to reach the upper deck, Captain Salmond ordered the engines stopped and the small bower anchor dropped. Again the steamer struck the rock, this time beneath the engine room; it quickly flooded, driving the stokers and engineers on deck.



Painting by Thomas M. Hemy

The captain ordered 30 soldiers to get on top of each paddlebox to help the seamen launch the paddlebox boats. Sixty men in three shifts manned the chain pumps on the lower afterdeck. Ten minutes after the steamer struck, the flooded bow broke off with a sharp crack and the foremast raked the hull. Funnel stays parted; the stack fell across the starboard paddlebox, crushing the boat and the men working to free it.

A cutter manned by a few seamen was lowered. Sobbing women and children struggled to remain with their husbands and fathers, but all were forced into the boat. Another cutter with seamen and troops was lowered, and then a gig. In the end three boats were launched, altogether carrying 60 or 70 people. Except for those drowned when the ship struck and those killed by the falling stack, most of the soldiers and crew were still on board the doomed ship.

There were other boats on board, and soldiers struggled to free them. The port boat jammed and capsized. The longboat had to be hoisted with a complex system of tackles; another gig and a dinghy took too much time to launch – and the men of the *Birkenhead* had no time left.

The sharks were gathering round the stricken ship. John O'Neil of the 91st Regiment remembered Major Wright advised his men: "You men who cannot swim, stick to some wreckage, whatever you can lay hands on. As for you who can swim, I can give you no advice. As you see there are sharks about, and I cannot advise you how to avoid them".

Just before she sank the steamer split abaft the engine-room, throwing men into the water. Captain Salmond despaired: "All those who can swim, jump overboard and make for the boats." Officers and men alike instantly realized that such an order would mean disaster for those in the overcrowded boats. "Stand fast!" the officers begged. Three men jumped overboard, but hundreds of men refused; they stood in silent ranks as though on parade.

The *Birkenhead* sank, only the rigging of her mainmast protruded above the sea. Thick oil and fragments of wreckage hung over her grave. The sea was alive with men – some swimming strongly, others struggling to stay afloat or clinging to pieces of wreckage – all among feeding sharks. Benjamin Turner, a second-class boy on board the *Birkenhead* and servant to Mr Archbold, the gunner, said, "I swam about for some time, resting on pieces of the wreckage, until I came across a part of the ship's bridge, which I lay on top of, and thank God it enabled me to keep clear of the sharks. I saw many poor fellows during the day, who were hanging their arms over a spar and their legs in the water, taken down by sharks. A shark would come up, seize them by the leg and drag them down."

Cornet R.M. Bond of the 12th Royal Lancers described the sea "covered with struggling forms while the cries, piercing shrieks and shoutings for the boat were awful. Two men who were swimming close to me I saw disappear with a shriek, most probably bitten by sharks."

"Nearly all of those who took to the water without their clothes on were taken by sharks," said Lieutenant Frank Giradot of the 4th Light Infantry. In a letter to his father dated March 1, 1852, written in Simon's Town, he said, "Hundreds of (sharks) were all around us and I saw men taken by them quite close to me, but as I was dressed (having on a flannel shirt and trousers) they preferred the others".

The boats took on as many men as they dared. Ensign Russell was on board one of the cutters when he saw a man struggling in the water. Russell, insisting that he was a strong swimmer, gave up his place in the cutter to the exhausted man. Within five minutes Russell was seized by a shark and pulled beneath the waves.

Private James Boydon of the Queen's Regiment had been in service only five months. He managed to clamber on top of a bale of compressed hay and was carried ashore by the current, "when on the hay I saw the sea literally swarming with sharks, which dashed among their prey till the air resounded with the cries of their victims".

The cutters were found by the British schooner *Lioness*, which loaded the survivors. The *Lioness* returned to the wreck of the steamer and took on another 40 or 50 men still clinging to the rigging. The gig reached land and word of the disaster soon reached Cape Town. The *Lioness* had saved 116 people, and 68 men got ashore on floating wreckage. A total of 193 people – including all the women and children – survived; 445 men perished. Among the dead were Captain Salmond and Lieutenant-Colonel Seton.

The *Birkenhead* was lost but the men who chose to sacrifice their lives rather than jeopardize the lives of the women and children and their comrades have never been forgotten; their courage has endured in the maritime ethic as an unwritten code of behavior. The Afrikaans word for a British soldier was "Tamaai", and a shark is "haai". So many young British soldiers were killed by white sharks on that summer night nearly 140 years ago that the shark earned a new name in the Eastern Cape; it is still known as the Tamaai haai.

