

WRECK OF THE ORPHEUS.

(From a Correspondent.)

I hasten to send you the appalling intelligence of the total wreck of H.M.S. Orpheus on the west coast of New Zealand, with the loss of Commodore Burnett, C.B., twenty-three officers, and one hundred and sixty-six sailors, Royal Marines, and boys, only seventy lives being saved out of a complement mustering 260.

The Orpheus, a new steam-corvette of 21 guns, and 1706 tons, was commissioned at Portsmouth late in the year 1861, for the broad pennant of the Commodore in Australia, and was at Spithead waiting orders when the news of the Trent affair reached England. Commodore Burnett was at once dispatched to convey the Melbourne transport, with a valuable freight of rifles and ammunition, across the Atlantic, and remained on the North American coast, doing good service in directing the disembarking of the “little army” of Canada all through the winter months, when he received orders from the Admiralty to proceed to his command in Australia, arriving in Sydney in July, 1862.

During the detention of the Orpheus in dock, completing a necessary refit and replacing copper torn off in the ice, the Commodore proceeded in the Pioneer to ascertain the most favourable site for a new settlement near Cape York, and to select the most eligible harbour and outlets for the new country recently opened up on the north-eastern shores of Australia. Subsequently, the Commodore proceeded to make the rounds of his station in the Orpheus. Having just returned from a visit to the beautiful colony of Tasmania, he left Sydney for New Zealand on the 31st of January, and, after a very fine passage under canvas, made the land off the Manakau Harbour, on the 7th of February.

The harbour of Manukau, situated on the west coast of New Zealand, is but little known. It is a large sheet of water, 100 miles in circumference, formed of innumerable mudbanks, which are dry at low water, intersected by intricate channels, more or less deep. It derives what little importance it has from its position with respect to the capital, Auckland, the two harbours being separated by a narrow neck of land only six miles wide. It has recently come into note as a place for embarking troops, and as a station for men-of-war, when employed against the natives in the Taranaki operations.

A bar, with 30 ft. at top of high water, extends, at a distance of three miles, right across the entrance, inshore of which are large shifting sandbanks, upon which the sea is constantly breaking, with the uninterrupted force of the great Pacific Ocean. Charts of the deep-water channels, compiled from the elaborate surveys of Captain Drury, R.N., are published, to which additions and corrections have been made from time to time by the New Zealand Government. A pilot look-out, with a semaphore signal-station, is in existence near the entrance. Navigators are instructed to pay attention to the signals in their approach through the outworks of shoals and sandbanks, towards the Heads, where they are boarded by the pilot.

As before stated, the Orpheus made the land about eleven a.m., in beautiful, fine, clear weather, with a moderate breeze from the south-west. Soon after was observed the signal-station, with the signal flying, “Take the bar;” the ship being under all plain sail. Steam was got up for half-speed, and she proceeded across the bar, the tide just being just on the turn to ebb. Steering by the Admiralty sailing-directions, the pilotage being altered now and then

in obedience to the signals, all precautions were taken with the steerage, and to keep the ship under perfect command, keeping, as was thought, in mid channel, making at a good rate for the entrance. It appears that either she was not kept far enough to the northward, or that the middle bank had very recently extended itself unknown to the pilots, for very shortly after passing the bar, and when about two miles from the Heads, at about 1.30 p.m., the ship struck on what was subsequently discovered to be the extreme northern edge of the middle bank, and at about fifty feet from the deep water.

The order was given to back astern, but the engines never moved; the ship immediately broached to, with her head to the north, and the rollers made one complete sweep over the port broadside, tearing to pieces and sweeping everything before them, whilst the heavy bumping of the ship forced up the hatchway fastenings, and she consequently soon filled with water.

All hands were employed lightening the ship of her heavy broadside guns, and getting out the boats.

Just at this time (two o'clock) a small steamer was seen coming out of harbour; but, finding she did not intend to stay near him, the Commodore dispatched, first of all, a cutter, with the records and valuable papers, and in half an hour another boat, with Lieutenant Hill and Mr. Amphlett, to obtain the services of the life-boat at the Head, and to give the alarm to H.M.S. Harrier, known to be in the port.

Mention should here be made of the perfect coolness and judgment of Commodore Burnett, of the discipline and quiet order maintained throughout this trying occasion; and the absolute good feeling displayed by all, from the chief to the smallest boy, speaks well for the service.

With great difficulty, and in imminent danger of swamping in the rollers, both the boats succeeded in reaching the Heads at five o'clock, where they met the pilot, and observed the small steamer Wonga-Wonga, which had a few hours previously proceeded to sea, returning by the south channel into port. The life-boats having been reported unserviceable, the steamer closed the boats, took them in tow, and steamed out to the scene of the wreck, which they did not reach till six o'clock. They found the ship almost buried in the water, the seas breaking clear over all and halfway up the rigging. All the people in the tops had mounted in the rigging; the Commodore, with all his young officers, being in the mizentop.

It was at once seen that the only chance of saving lives was from the bowsprit and jibboom, which overhung the deep, still water. The boats were placed to pick up all that ventured to jump and swim for it. With the exception of the boat's crews, all that survive were saved in this manner. Nearly all that left the ship abaft the foremast were taken down by the eddies and undercurrents around the ship. Some of the more young, active sailors slid down the stays from head to mast until they reached the jibboom. It was stated by the men who were picked up that, shortly after the two boats had left the ship, the launch was got out and manned with forty hands, but in endeavouring to clear the ship had got swamped alongside, and that all were drowned.

At about seven o'clock the flood-tide set in strong, and the rollers became very high and dangerous; the bowsprit soon broke short off, the boats being occasionally towed to windward by the steamer, which kept burning blue-lights.

Towards nine o'clock the masts went one by one; the people in the tops were heard cheering and encouraging each other as they fell. The passengers in the Wonga-Wonga speak

of this as a most heart-rending scene, for the ship seemed at the time to break thoroughly up. Fragments of spars and large masses of wreck could be seen (it was a beautifully clear, bright moonlight night) passing in shore with the tide, clinging to which a number of poor fellows were picked up, most of them in the last state of exhaustion. The boats kept on the spot until all had disappeared. Nothing could be heard or seen during the remainder of the night. At daylight the wind had subsided; the sea was a perfect calm. The Wonga-Wonga steamed close to the reef, but nothing was visible but the stump of one mast and a few bare ribs. It was difficult to realize, even to a person on the spot, and after a night of painful anxiety, that such a dreadful calamity had happened—that of that noble ship, and of her complement of gallant fellows so lately full of hope and life, nothing now remained but the few half-naked sailors that stood around us.

Numerous instances occurred of personal courage and endurance of the very highest order. One case, that of a young seaman named Johnson, who, at the risk of his own life, on four different occasions saved the lives of drowning men, deserves special notice; whilst the pilot's boat's crew—four marines—were among the first and foremost.

We have also been favoured by another correspondent with the following description of the crossing of Manukau Bar, from which a very fair idea may be formed to the perils to which the ill-fated Orpheus succumbed:—

“About half an hour after embarking at Onehunga we got under way, and steamed to the Heads; and, although the signal was up that the bar might be crossed, the pilot thought it as well to wait until the morning. We therefore came to anchor inside the Heads, about half a mile or less from the north shore, which was skirted with steep hills covered to the top with huge trees; but no one looking at them could believe they are anything approaching the size they really are. The South Head is very unlike the North, being a bare slope of white sand so loose that a gale of wind blows it about like smoke.

“From the town of Onehunga to the Heads the distance is about twenty miles, and from the Heads to the bar four or five miles. While at anchor inside we could see the spray rising from the bar in clouds, foaming and smoking along it like steam from a railway engine. However, about seven o'clock in the morning we got under way and passed the Heads, leaving the pilot at the Flagstaff Rock. I understand it is not his custom to cross the bar with vessels; he merely gives directions to cross when he considers it safe to do so. Immediately outside there is a remarkably defined tide ripple; short lumps of water jumping about as if agitated by a gale of wind, while a little inshore it is as smooth as a pond. There is plenty of water for any vessel between the Heads and the bar; and but for this bar the Manukau would be one of the finest harbours in New Zealand.

“There are three available passages on this bar:—First, the south, close in shore, and fit only for small vessels, if well buoyed; the next is Ormsby's; then the main channel, through which we passed; but the captain said that Drury's landmarks would now put us through the surf, which shows that the bar is shifting. After some heavy pitching, which made us all feel rather anxious for the moment, we passed in safety, having shot through about half a cable's length of unbroken water—all that was to be seen that day on a bar eight to ten miles long.”

When it is considered that the above was written in the year 1858, the colonial authorities would seem to be scarcely free from blame in the disaster which has occurred. If it be true that so long ago as the above year the bar was known to be shifting, information should certainly have been furnished to the Admiralty, who might, in the absence of any

action taken on the part of the colony, have ordered the necessary surveys to be made, and amended their sailing instructions. In the latest “New Zealand Pilot,” issued by the Hydrographic Office of the Admiralty, it is stated that the dangers and difficulties attending the navigation of the Manukau Harbour have been much overrated, and that, under ordinary circumstances, the entrance presents so little difficulty, that with moderate weather or a leading wind, and the recent survey, any vessel may approach and enter with perfect confidence. The forthcoming inquiry into the causes of the loss of the *Orpheus* will be looked for with great interest, and it is to be hoped that the causes of this sad disaster will receive a searching and impartial investigation.