

The Knapman and Leach Story

as told by Ian Mudie in his book "The Wreck of the Admella".....

There had already been three failed attempts to get to shore and raise the alarm. Three of the four people involved in these attempts had drowned when "John Leach and his mate, a 23-year-old seaman told the Captain that they were willing to make a try for shore. Just as they were ready to climb down the rope there was a hold up. Magarey offered the £500 if he would take him with him. Other passengers began competing with him, offering jewellery and money to be allowed to go with the two sailors. McEwan persuaded them to withdraw these offers but Magarey persisted. When it was pointed out to him that the raft would only carry two people he changed his offer to £500 if they would let him take the place of either one of them. But they refused to be parted. They were used to being together and neither of them would trust anyone else as a companion.

Leach and Knapman then shook hands all round and, while the others wished them luck and God-speed, climbed down on the raft. Although Knapman, who was "rather below the middle size" was certainly not without courage, Leach, "a fine young fellow" who was dressed in one of the captain's regatta, seems to have been the leader. Once they were astride the raft he gave the signal to their shipmates, who were holding the rope from above to let go. Then, each clinging to the raft with one hand and using the other to wield an oar made from cabin fittings, they began to struggle with the breakers.

The people on the wreck watched them anxiously as their clumsy craft leapt this way and that in the surf on the reef. It seemed that their hands would be torn from the raft, but somehow they clung on. They had a hard perilous battle. It took them sometime, to pass through the more than a hundred yards of boiling foam that separated the wreck from the comparative safety of the open water lying between the reef and the shore-broken only by the swell of the waves.

For three tedious and dangerous hours of the winter's afternoon they inched their way towards shore. The "short mile" of the voyage was not without incident. At times the water was too rough for them to stay on the raft; they had to slide overboard and swim along side it, each clinging on with one hand. Once, too, a huge sea broke over them, overturned the raft, and left them hanging beneath it. When they managed to struggle to the surface and grasp the opposite sides of the raft, each of them grinned with relief to see that his mate was safe. Gradually they struggled towards the shore. And then, at last, they reached the shoreline breakers. As soon as the surf caught the raft they let go, dived under the water, and dug their fingers into the sand. They held on desperately against the backwash of the wave on which they had ridden into the surf for they were determined not to meet the same fate as Johnson had. When the next roller flung them further towards the beach they again dived and dug their hands into the sand.

Although the sand seemed to stream away from under their fingers like quicksilver, they somehow managed to cling on while the backwash strained at their arms and their bodies. Another wave. Again. Again. Until, at last, when it was almost dark, Captain McEwan, watching them through his glass, saw them crawl out on dry land.

They dropped down, and Leach helped Knapman to his feet. Then the two men stumbled off in the direction of the Cape Northumberland lighthouse, 20 miles away.

As well as being exhausted from their trip on the raft, they were suffering badly from thirst. Fortunately they found a swamp in the sand hills near their landing place, and they stayed there sometime, drinking and resting. Then they pushed on.

Although all the creeks were in flood and Blacks Creek, below rugged Cape Douglas was deep and dangerous with quicksands on both sides of it, they reached the cape in what seemed to them good time. But Knapman was barefooted, and crossing the cape nearly

broke his endurance. This cape, which is faced with craggy cliffs and has swamps on its landward side, was covered in those days with wild scrub. Despite the fact that as they crossed the hump of the cape the beam of the Cape Northumberland light began to flash in their faces, Knapman found it more and more difficult to keep on walking through the night. Exhausted, aching, and with torn and swollen feet, he lost heart. Three times he insisted on lying down, convinced he was about to die; and he rose to his feet again each time at the desperate urging of Leach. The young Crimean veteran, who had not been as badly bruised on the way to the shore as Knapman, was determined they should not give in.- not even for long enough to have a short sleep.

Slowly the miles stumbled behind them, until in the light of dawn they caught sight of the white buildings of the lighthouse standing in the sand hills ahead of them. At last, at half past six, just as the sun was rising, and what was described as in a state of bewilderment from their experience, they staggered to the light, and told the keeper, Germein, their story.”

Thus started the rescue of those remaining on the wreck of the *Admella* but the involvement of Knapman and Leach did not end there. They returned to the beach where they had struggled ashore and again volunteered to participate in the rescue.

By the time the *Ladybird* had brought the survivors to Melbourne Leach and Knapman had disappeared. They were probably already seeking berths on another ship.

After the Commission of Inquiry into this wreck of the *Admella* a medal was struck to be awarded for heroism to the rescuers, in June 1860. Knapman returned to receive his medal as one of the rescuers but Leach's medal was never claimed. What happened to these two heroes is unknown.

Acknowledgement of the family of the late Ian Mudie who has generously given the Admella Commemoration Advisory Committee permission to use his book “Wreck of the Admella” to help educate and engage students in the story of the Admella.