HOW THE WRECK OF THE BARQUE STEFANO WAS NOT DISCOVERED?

Part 1

THE SEARCH EXPEDITION FOR THE STEFANO SHIPWRECK SITE BY PEMBERTON WALCOTT IN JUNE 1876

Josko Petkovic

The two survivors of the 1875 Stefano shipwreck, Miho Baccich and Ivan Jurich, were picked up at Bundegi Beach on 18 April 1876 by Charles Tuckey in his cutter Jessie. The news did not reach the nearest North-West port settlements of Cossack (Port Walcott) until 11 May 1876 when nearby Roebourne Government Resident J. R. Sholl received a letter from George Vinall, the Master of the brig Alexandra. Vinall’s letter initiated the search for the Stefano. His passing observations of the excited Aborigines he sighted at the distance, is most illuminating. These were the same Aborigines that helped the two Stefano survivors:

Brig Alexandria
Port Walcott
11 May 1876

I the undersigned Master of the Brig “Alexandra” of Shoreham report that on 27th April 1876 I spoke to the cutter Jessie of Fremantle about 40 miles NW of North end of Cape Inscription (Dirk Hartog’s Island) there was too much wind and sea to hold much communication. As we approached each other she held up a board on which was chalked “Barque ‘Stefani’ wrecked NW Cape. I have the only two survivors on board”.

I worked up the coast with a view of discovering the wreck & affording relief if any more survivors existed. On the evening of 1st May off the NW Cape I imagined I saw a wreck on the reef but it was too late & dangerous a locality to attempt anything that night. I therefore worked to windward all night with the purpose & intention of running the coast down again in the morning next day. I again ran down I again saw what I took for a wreck. But shortly afterwards it had so altered its appearance that I concluded it was a rock distorted by refraction. Shortly after I noticed natives on the beach. I sent a boat crew under the mate ashore, armed with instructions to act with caution & not to land unless a white man was seen. On his nearing the shore I saw a red flag hoisted or displayed behind sandhills and on the boat-leaving the shore it was quickly hauled down. The mater reported to me that on his nearing the shore he observed some 20 natives with green boughs in their hands & making friendly signs for them to land. There he pulled gently down along the coast the natives keeping pace with them & shouting – “Walla-Walla” the mate observed a great-number of natives armed keeping pace with them inside the sandhills but saw no white men. He then pulled off shore immediately. The natives saw he was going they rushed down from the hills & thickets to the number of 2 or 300 armed & shouting in a most threatening & ferocious manner. That night they had fires for half a mile in length. I believe the flag hoisted to have been a treacherous native decoy.
I am quite unable to come to any conclusion as to the probability of white men having survived the wreck or being on the Cape among the natives.

(Sd) Geo Vinall [1]

Not long after Sholl received this letter he sent Pemberton Walcott to search for the wreck of the *Stefano* and to find out if there were any other survivors. The schooner *Victoria* was chartered for this purpose.

Walcott was also asked to search for two missing men, Rogers and McGee, who were thought to have gone missing somewhere near the Mermaid Straits on the *Speculator*. On 17 May, Walcott departed northwards for the Mermaid Straits and after several days of unsuccessfully searching for Rogers and McGee he turned westward and sailed for the North West Cape to search for the *Stefano*.

On the North West Cape Walcott engaged two Aboriginal guides to help him locate the spot where the *Stefano* was wrecked. On 7 June he reached Point Cloates and anchored the *Victoria* in the safe waters now known as Jane Bay. On the beach Walcott discovered the wreckage of the *Stefano* and 3-4 other vessels. He also found the first shelter constructed by the *Stefano* survivors and as evidence of his discovery he retrieved the makeshift wooden door which had the names of the *Stefano* crew inscribed on it. After he completed his inspection Walcott drew a sketch of the area where he found the wreckage.

As Walcott was inspecting the wreckage at Point Cloates he was not to know that the two survivors had already landed at Fremantle on 5 May and that the Preliminary Court of Inquiry was to be held a few days later on 8 May 1876 in the Fremantle Custom House. The Collector of Customs, L. Worsley Clifton, who presided over the Court, sent a note to the Colonial Governor, at the end of the Court proceedings, suggesting that the Aborigines be rewarded in some way for the help they provided to the two *Stefano* mariners. On 22 May the two survivors were sent northwards again, on the *Rosette* under command of John Vincent, bearing gifts for their Aboriginal benefactors. Their first port of call was Cossack (Port Walcott).

Walcott returned to Cosack from Point Cloates on 20 June only to find that the two survivors were already in port. The conversation they had on the details of the *Stefano* shipwrecked are invoked by both Walcott’s report and the *Stefano* shipwreck manuscript. This makes Walcott’s report all the more valuable as a document of the *Stefano* shipwreck.

These remarks are intended to frame and contextualise Walcott’s report. But it is the detail of his inspection of the wreckage that is of most interest and the reason it is included in full below.
Cossack

20th June 1876

Dear Sir,

We arrived here this morning about 11 a.m. – having experienced a constant succession of head winds and calms both ways.

On our way down we spoke [to] the "Morning Star" McAlister – at "Yaardi" & from him procured an intelligent native who could speak the N.W. Cape language – after a close inspection of the eastern side of the N.W. Cape (when we were driven by stress of weather) & finding no natives we shaped seaward, and on rounding N.W. Cape, saw smoke & natives on shore – stood in & brought up – landed & held communication with natives who informed us that the rest of the white men had gone south along the beach – I persuaded two natives to accompany us from thence – one of them being one of the natives who had brought the 2 survivors up – after a tempestuous passage of 5 days we reached Point Cloates and felt our way in – passing over 5 fathom Bank between heavy reefs into 9 fathom water, pretty well sheltered – landing accompanied by natives we found wrecks of "Stefano" and 3 or 4 other vessels – wrecked since. I have reason to believe from statements made me by "Survivors in Rosette" – one of these vessels must have been registered not less than 1500 tons, probably more – I found the Camp of Stefano men, and brought away with me a painted Cabin door – covered with writing in Italian and English – & sundry small articles – when here the natives told us that the other men had died further South "Some days journey". – I took sundry bearings of the spot which I think with further survey will prove a useful harbour or refuge – with fine entrance 2 miles wide and 5 fthms water on Bank.

There is an Island off Point Cloates, which point extends further out than shown on chart – I shall be happy to furnish you with tracing of Port Sholl & Sholl Island before I leave – We had some rather fresh weather on the trip – having split our main and other sails – & finally, carried the main gaff away & mainsail split to ribbons.

Pray consider this a private communication – I shall do myself the honor to furnish you with reports of the Cruise & if you care for it copy of my Journal – I gave the niggers on N.W. Cape on my return all the flour and tobacco I could spare, & sundry other small items – as a reward for having preserved the life of the 2 men. I believe if the rest had trusted themselves to them they would have been saved.

In haste
Yours sincerely
Pemberton Walcott [2]
R.J. Sholl Esq. Govt. Resident Roebourne

Cossack 21st June 1876.

I have the honor to inform you, that in accordance with the decision arrived at between us on 15th May last, and acting on your consent, proceeded to Cossack, and Completed Charter of Schooner “Victoria” on term offered, and engaged three (3) men to make up my party. Charter to commence, on 17. May 1876. In consequence of death of Capt. Eagle I consented to take charge of Said Vessel as Master during the trip towards Point Cloates in "Stefano" search expedition. I now beg to report that we arrived at this port on the 20th June instant and hasten to give you a very concise report of my proceedings and results of the trip — I may here state that I had made up my mind to try and speak some of the Pearling Vessels on the Coast, and if possible procure, an intelligent native from them, who could speak the N Western Cape language.

We got under weigh on Wednesday 17th May Party consisting of myself, PC Coppin and 6 hands provided with sufficient arms and about 3 weeks supply of provisions, after being detained for 36 hours on the bar of the Creek in consequence of there being insufficient water for us (neap tide). We ran in a few hours to Foam passage where in accordance with your instructions I arranged to have a thorough search for the missing men Rogers and McGee – supposed to be late in the "Speculator", and in conjunction with Cutter "Aurora" spent 3 days in examining the islands in Mermaid Straits, I regret to say without discovering any trace of missing boat or men – from this we made sail towards Yaardi Gulf (Mangrove Islands), experiencing a constant succession of head winds and calms, which together with the fact of having to bring up every night protracted the passage to that place very considerably – sighting "Yaardi Creek" and a vessels topsails behind the mangroves Friday a.m. the 26th May 1876, with whaleboat I proceeded up Creek and procured an intelligent native who possessed the required qualifications and made sail same evening on our voyage – calling in at Berdon on the 27th and procuring 8 casks of good water, on this day p.m. the weather assuming a very threatening appearance and wind increasing fast from Swd and Wwd with rapidly falling glass, I reefed vessel down to close canvass and wind still increasing I ran back and brought up in Berdon Bay in 31/2 fathoms, mud. Proceeding on our course on the 28th, we encountered a succession of heavy weather from the Swd by westward, during which period the vessel made very heavy weather of it under reefed canvass, shipping a great deal of water & splitting and carrying away sails daily – until Friday morning June 2nd when with fine fresh breeze we were rounding the N.W. Cape (having previously visited Bay of Rest) we descried a native fire, landed among about 100 natives, vessel being anchored about (1) one mile from shore. – Natives appearing friendly I endeavoured to consiliate them by the distribution of some tobacco and biscuits – and finally heard from them that Charles Tuckey, has rescued two survivors of wrecked vessel "Stefano" but that the rest had "gone South" some dying – Having come so far, I decided on this information to proceed to the scene of wreck on the Chance of some of the party being alive, I understood them to say that the two survivors had been brought up to that spot by the natives, and I was so fortunate, through my interpreter, to persuade 2 of the natives to accompany the vessel as guides etc., one of them being one of those who carried and supported the two survivors – we proceeded on our voyage same day and experienced heavy weather from the Swd and Wwd for
several days with a very strong current setting us to the N and W, vessel making heavy weather of it and shipping considerable quantities of water until the 7th June when with fine weather at noon I discovered a passage about 6 miles South of Point Cloates, about 2 miles wide. I anchored vessel outside reefs in about 10 fathoms and proceeded to explore in whaleboat, finding all clear muddy 5 fathoms two miles further in directly between the reefs I ran back and brought the vessel in and again let go anchor, proceeded again in whaleboat – sounding and found water deepen gradually to 9 fathoms within 3 miles of shore, took such bearings on boat at sea to bring the vessel in at 5 p.m. – brought up and made all snug for night. After tea being full moon I proceeded on shore in whaleboat accompanied by P.C. Coppin and armed boats crew – with Tony – native guide – steering E by N N for a conspicuous hill – we landed amid a mass of wrecks – walked about a mile along the beach, and came to the Conclusion that several vessels had been lately wrecked – then proceeded on board at 11 p.m. On the 8th June at 6 a.m. left ship and accompanied by same party and Mr. Crouch & 2 natives made a minute examination of the different wrecks and parts of wrecks, and from difference of wood and size of spars I came to the conclusion that not less than 4 and probably 5 Vessels of considerable tonnage had been wrecked within 7 or 8 months – the wreck of "Stefano" was pointed out by natives & the camp of survivors, when sundry articles belonging to them were found such as boards with written particulars – torn charts, stool etc. etc. This wreck, since verified beyond a doubt as the remains of "Stefano" appears to us the oldest wreck on the beach – as far as amount of damage sustained, and more buried in sand seaweed etc., but at same time, the paint work appeared brighter and fresher, probably having been newly painted, in her immediate neighbourhood on each side within 1/4 mile of her were two other vessels or sides of vessels partially buried in sand and seaweed, and piled up with spars and timbers, one of these was Indian built hard wood – I should judge from 300 to 500 tons burthen, the other was Oronge Pine [sic] – and apparently American built – about same size – Half a mile further up the beach S. Westerly was the deck of a soft wood ship with main hatch, combings etc. complete but so choked with spars, mast yards & other wreckage, as well as to a great extent buried in sand and seaweed, that I found it difficult to identify it as part of one of the other wrecks – a little further south westerly on the beach, just awash was the side of a very large vessel – apparently lately wrecked hard wood – (very like teak) copper fastened & coppered, the copper sheathing, being but only slightly torn in a few places and quite bright without any barnacles, or other indications of having been any considerable time afloat. I counted (13) thirteen planks 9 inches wide between her copper and coaming boards, the wreck appeared to consist of nearly the whole length of a vessel broadside, but a number of the lower planks had been torn from her timbers, there were 13 rows of sheathing left on her, and by comparison I am of the opinion she must have had about the same number below. \( \frac{4}{9} \) of the side (being end on) was under water at an angle of about 7° or 8° degrees – the extreme end not being visible – I should judge her to be a vessel about 1000 tons. I noticed the other side of apparently some vessel afloat about 1/4 mile from the beach. I noticed (3) three built masts of very large size – not less than three feet diameter, a bowsprit I measured was 41 ft long & 2 ft 9" diam and a main or fore yard, a small portion of which had been broken off measured 71 feet – hundreds of other spars were strewed along the beach but it was remarkable that all wreckage had come ashore within a distance of two miles – and literally nothing was seen beyond. The native "Tony" who had camped with the survivors of the "Stefano" immediately after her wreck – seemed very much surprised to see so many other wrecks & declared they were not there at the time he was last there and this has since been verified by statement of the 2 survivors of “Stefano”, in the "Gazette" who informed me that no wrecks were visible when they left, the native also informed me that about 2 winters ago “a very large steamer” had been wrecked down at his country (Cape Cuvier) and all hands lost including a woman – he also has informed me here that the rest of "Stefano's" survivors had died a long way South.
Having now done all, I considered myself justified in doing with such information, I repaired on board at noon & after taking round of bearings to fix anchorage, Point Cloates, Island & reefs etc. etc. we got under weigh, and made sail beating out through passage and shaping course for NW Cape with fair wind, at 4 a.m. hove too for fear of overrunning distance, at daylight the wind veered to NE and easterly, blowing heavily with heavy sea – beat up and at 1 a.m. Sunday 10th June we brought up 1 mile from NW Cape in 6 fathoms blowing very fresh, paid out 30 fathoms chain and set watch as usual – Having landed natives here and made them suitable presents for their services and rewarded them for their humanity to shipwrecked sailors – and making them thoroughly understand that they would be well rewarded by Govt for similar acts we sailed away, leaving them all in high glee (about 40).

- from this place we experienced heavy Easterly gales with alternate calms – on June 13th landed native belonging to "Aurora" at Yaardi Creek – and experiencing similar weather, we carried away sundry spars and sails we finally reached Port Walcott on the morning of the 20th June having been out 35 days on a trip when with average weather 14 days would have sufficed.

In conclusion I have to state that I believe a very safe Port exists to the Southward of Point Cloates, inside of the reefs – with perfectly safe and roomy working passage into it with not less than 5 fathoms. I have named this Port Sholl – a rough sketch accompanies this hasty report – Point Cloates extends, as low sandy hills about 2 miles further seawards than shown on Chart, a small sand island lies of it, the whole encompassed with heavy reefs.

I have only now to record my satisfaction with the general conduct of my crew, especially it affords me pleasure to say that I found P.C. Coppin an exceedingly useful and willing aid, and one eminently suited for an expedition of this nature.

I have the honour to be Sir
Your obt. Servant
Pemberton Walcott
Master Sch. Victoria & leader Of "Stefano" Search Expedition

Submitted to Collector of Customs so that he might report to Board of Trade, if he thinks necessary.
A. Sholl 30/9/76 [3]
Sketch of Point Cloates wreck site by Pemberton Walcott on 8 June 1876 [4]
Contemporary Google map of Point Cloates locality

Notes and References


