

# Wollongbar II (1922-1943)

## Shipwreck information Sheet

The *Wollongbar II* was a single screw steamship owned by the North Coast Steam Navigation Company Ltd. At 2239 tons and 87 metres in length, the vessel had been built at Lithgow's Ltd shipyard at Port Glasgow, Scotland in 1922. *Wollongbar II* was built to replace an earlier steamer of the same name wrecked at Belongil Beach, Byron Bay in 1921.



*Lithgows of the Port of Glasgow website collection.*

## Wreck event

On the 29th April 1943 the merchant ship *Wollongbar II* was torpedoed and sunk by the Japanese submarine *I-180* off Crescent Head New South Wales on a voyage from Byron Bay to Newcastle. Out of a crew of 37 only five survived. Onboard was a cargo of 18,000 cases of butter, sugar and bacon.

Just the day before, the vessel was searching for survivors of the freighter *Limerick* torpedoed and sunk off Ballina on 26 April. This loss was attributed to *I-177*. Submarines were about!

Captain Toshio Kusaka boldly surfaced *I-180* only 450 metres from *Wollongbar* at 10.15am on 29 April 1943. Captain Charles Benson (59) and the Chief Officer Will Mason saw the conning tower submerging into a bubbling sea and a torpedo, already fired, bouncing erratically at them at speed. There was no time even to sound the emergency alarm. Captain Benson bawled 'look out for yourselves, boys', then went down the port ladder. The lookout man also left the bridge as Able Seaman Roy Brown remained at the wheel. Mason later recounted how the "torpedo struck us just forward of the bridge with a terrific thud" near Number 2 hold. Within moments another torpedo slammed into the port side which "suddenly exploded with a thunderous crash".

Survivors told how the ship broke in two, with the bow and stern rising sharply into the air. *Wollongbar II* sank within two minutes, taking Mason deep under water until he "shot up like a jack-in-the-box". He first clung to a box of butter, then a life ring, transferring to a damaged lifeboat from the ship. Engine room greaser Frank Emson was draped across its bows, having been badly scalded by a steam pipe with skin hanging off his arms and hands.



*Lifering from wreck of Wollongbar II at Mid-North Coast Maritime Museum (Image: B. Duncan, Heritage NSW)*

Two sailors, Roy Brown (who had been at the ship's wheel) and Pat Tehan rowed to them. Both men were uninjured, and they placed Emson on the raft and towed it behind the boat. The four men inspected a few other empty rafts and then saw another with fireman Blinkhorn waving a piece of white wood. Mason described how, *"When we picked him up his clothes were still dry. He told us that he was thrown by the explosion out of a bunker and landed on (the) raft ... quite happy and unhurt"*.

A Catalina flying boat was miraculously passing above them and saw the terrific tower of water from the explosions; even seeing the submarine at periscope depth before it descended into deep water. Being unarmed, it could only provide moral support, flying around the 'circle of devastation' and seeing the five men scrambling onto the rafts and boats. Captain Benson had rigged the ship's boats and rafts so that if the vessel sank, they would float free. The aircraft left the scene and dropped a message onto the town wharf at Crescent Head advising of the disaster.

The five survivors stayed for about an hour amongst the wreckage and thousands of cases of butter looking for others, dead or alive, but found no one. The men began to row towards the coast and when about two miles off at about 4pm, were collected by the Radley family's local fishing trawler, *XLCR* (Excelsior), sent to their aid.



*The XLCR at Port Macquarie (Image B Duncan)*

One survivor remarked that *"I knew the XLCR would come to rescue us"*, as they also

operated as the town's rescue boat (Radley 2019). The vessel still operates today out of Port Macquarie and is used as a training vessel for the Newman Senior Technical College.

The Captain and crew of the vessel (father Capt. Thomas Radley and brothers' Claude, Mervyn and Russell, along with Arthur Beattie and Raymond Smith) were all awarded Bravery Certificates by the Royal Shipwreck Relief and Humane Society of NSW for their efforts in rescuing the survivors despite the grave peril they placed themselves in by doing so.



**Bravery certificate presented to the Master of the XLCR Thomas Radley**

### The crew

Apart from the 5 survivors, the remaining crew of 32 (including Captain Benson) were killed in the attack and their bodies never found. Several would have gone down inside the ship with the wreck respected as a War Grave today. The youngest victim was seventeen-year-old deck boy Ken Dury, who died with his father, Third Engineer James Dury, aged 48. The oldest victim was Steward, Amos Waites, aged 64 years. The families of the crew were largely from Sydney, with United Kingdom-born Gwilym Wilcox being the only non-Australian member.

Death notices placed after the war signal the impact of the losses, made harder by the secrecy of the times.

*CARLSON.- In ever loving memory of my beloved husband, Olof (Merchant Navy), who lost his life when his ship, S.S. Wollongbar, was torpedoed on April 29, 1943. Inserted by his loving wife. Amy Carlson. 6 Ewell Street, Balmain. Sydney Morning Herald, 29 April 1946.*

Hundreds of boxes of butter were washed ashore the night after the wreck, a boon in the depressed wartime rationing era where it was in short supply and was seen as “a gift from God”. Locals recount that there were “lots of cakes” in the area after the event, and children finding it on the beach would have butter fights, much to the dismay of their mothers when they returned home (Radley 2019). In 1954, boxes of butter from the wreck washed ashore at Point Plomer, near Port Macquarie, covered in barnacles.

### Submarine I-180

Japanese submarine *I-180* was a *Kaidai* type (KD7 sub-class) cruiser submarine of the Imperial Japanese Navy. Ordered in 1939, she was laid down at the Yokosuka Naval Arsenal on 17 April 1941 as *I-80*. Launched on 7 February 1942 and renumbered *I-180* she was ready for service in 15 January 1943. She completed one war patrol along Australia’s East Coast in March 1943 with sister submarines *I-177* and *I-178* after leaving Truk (Chuuk) Lagoon in the Pacific.



Sister submarine *I-176*



*I-180* had a successful patrol off the Mid-North Coast sinking the *Wollongbar II* on 29

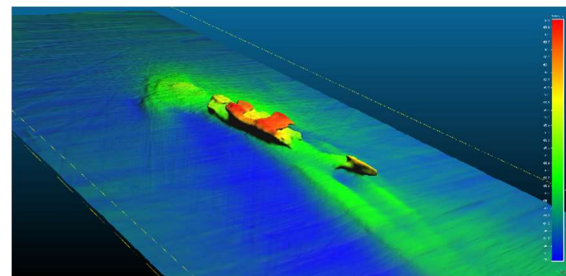
April 1943, the Norwegian merchant ship *Fingal* on 5 May 1943 off Coffs Harbour, and damaging the steamer’s *Ormiston* and *Caradale* on 12 May 1943 also in that area. Three days before sinking *Wollongbar*, on 26 April 1943, an unnamed vessel had a lucky break off Byron Bay with three torpedoes fired by *I-180* missing their target.



*Wollongbar II* builder’s half model donated from NCSNCo. MAAS collection, Create NSW.

### Wreck Discovery and Survey

In 2019, the wreck’s accurate location was reported by Port Macquarie mariners although had been generally known of years prior. Heritage NSW, Department of Premier and Cabinet, undertook the first-ever archaeological inspection of the site in late 2019. This included cutting-edge multibeam and side scan surveys, and the deployment of a Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) to inspect and photograph the deep site. The survey confirmed the wreck as *Wollongbar II*. Survey operations were assisted by AUS ROV and Fish Port Macquarie.



Multibeam survey of the *Wollongbar II* (Image: AUS ROV)

### Wreck site description

The wreck shows signs of extensive torpedo damage forward of the bridge and at the stern just aft of the steam engine (behind the aft



funnel). The stern section appears to be lying in pieces at a 90-degree angle to the rest of the vessel. The upper decks appear to have been blown upwards as a result of the blast and collapsed back into the hull of the vessel. The wreck is in very poor condition, with only sections of the midships and bow remaining partially intact. It is home to a previously unknown colony of critically endangered Grey Nurse Sharks.



**Bow and Grey Nurse Shark (Image: AUS ROV)**



**View of aft torpedoed area at stern (Image: AUS ROV)**



**Torpedoed area just forward of the bridge (Image: AUS ROV)**



**Winch, anchor and fallen derrick crane (Image: AUS ROV)**

## Protection

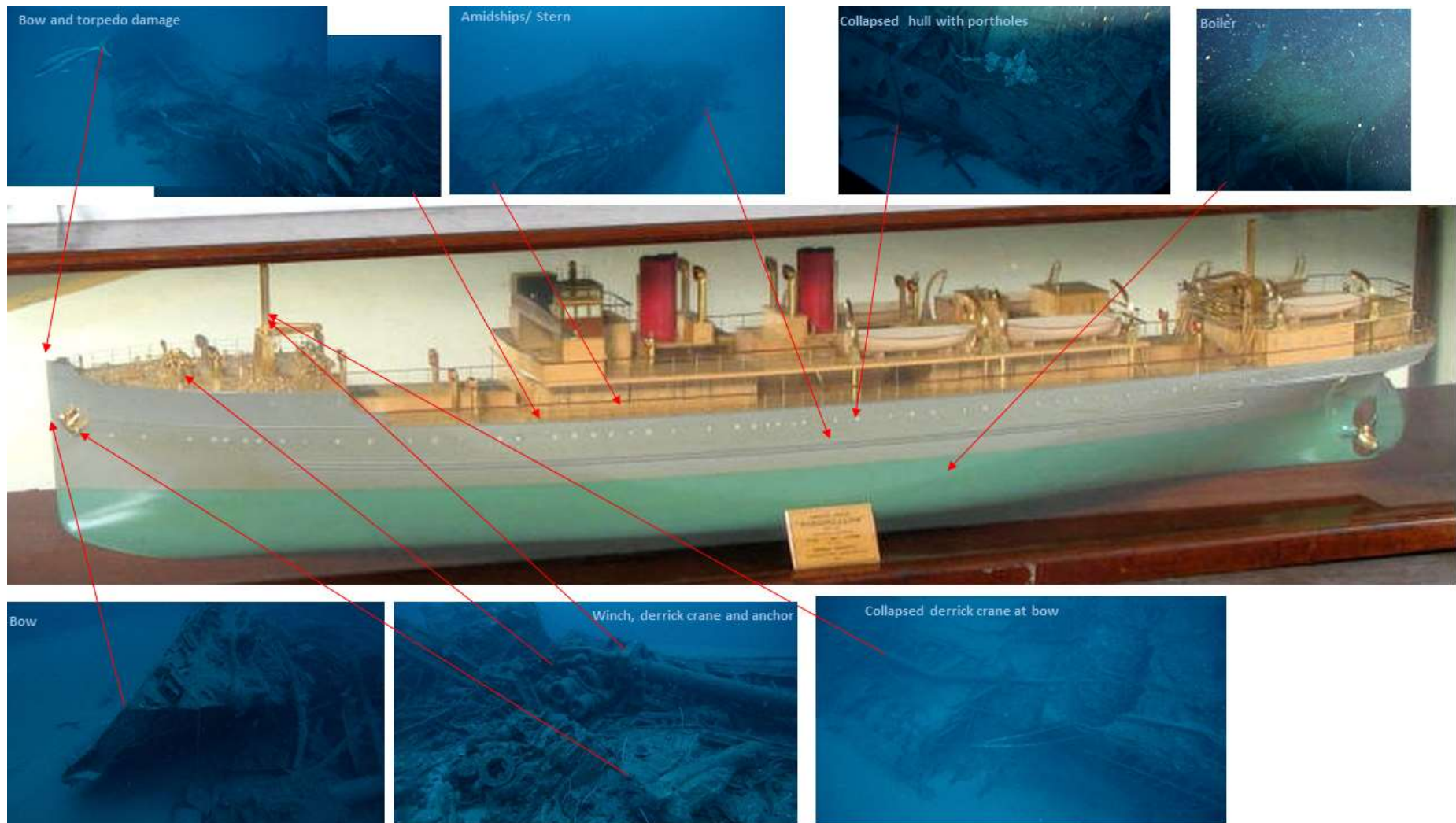
The wreck and any associated human remains are protected by the Commonwealth *Underwater Cultural Heritage Act 2018*, with the wreck site managed by Heritage NSW, Sydney. The remains of any human remains are also protected under the *NSW Coroners Act 2009*. The site is a significant place of loss and should be treated with respect for those killed in the incident

## Copyright

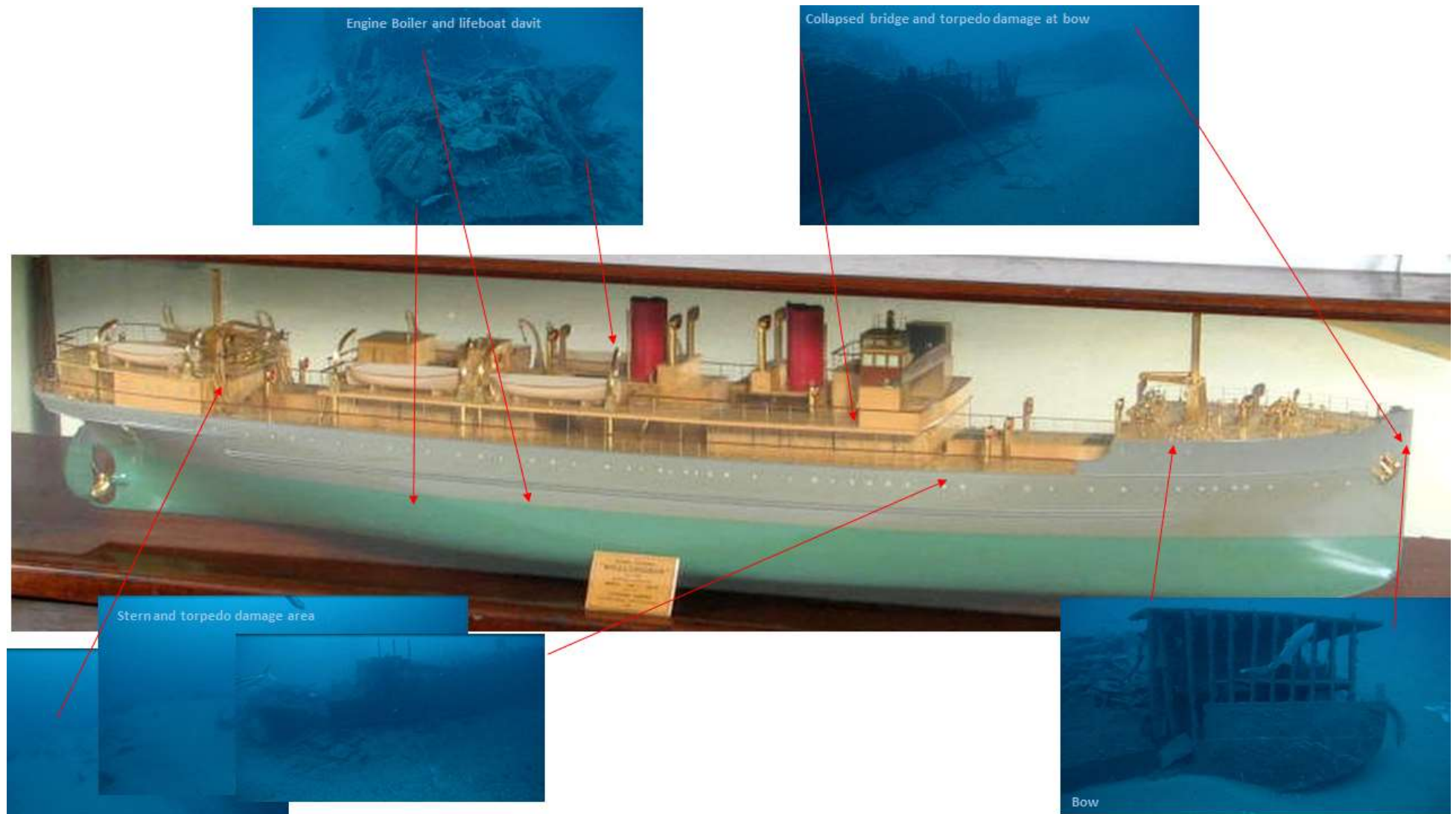
Authors: Tim Smith OAM and Dr Brad Duncan, Heritage NSW, Sydney. This publication can be referenced with proper acknowledgement. Heritage NSW. Locked Bag 5020, Parramatta NSW 2124.

## Sources

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Schematic of ROV fieldwork results against ships model of the *Wollongbar II*



Schematic of ROV fieldwork results against ships model of the *Wollongbar I*

