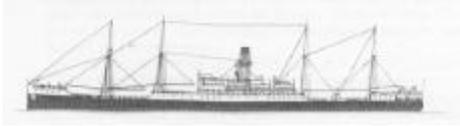


# CUMBERLAND SHIPWRECK 1917

## Information Sheet NSW Heritage Office

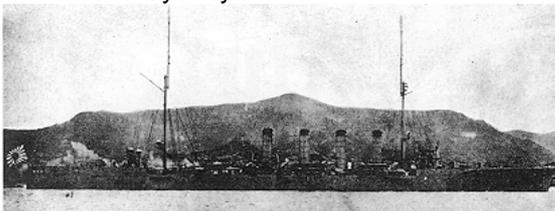


### Introduction

A huge explosion and geyser of water was the first indication that the huge international freighter *Cumberland* was in trouble. The steamer was passing a few miles off Gabo Island on 6 July 1917. No one on board could have known that a German merchant raider, the steamer *Wolf*, had laid a deadly minefield near Gabo Island, right in the track of vessels using the eastern Australia seaboard trade route. Today few realise that Captain Nerger and his vessel *Wolf* had brought the European war right to the doorstep of Sydney and southern ports.

At the time of the explosion, many believed that a saboteur had planted a bomb in the forward holds, perhaps when *Cumberland* loaded cargo at Townsville. It was not until the *Wolf*'s activities became understood that the link was suspected. The event created great concern internationally – the Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, raised the *Cumberland* incident in Parliament, while the American Government feared attacks on its merchant fleet.

*Cumberland* became the first wartime casualty in home waters. When the explosion rocked the *Cumberland*, the steamer was heading down the east coast for a voyage to the United Kingdom after picking up cargo in Townsville, Bowen and Sydney.



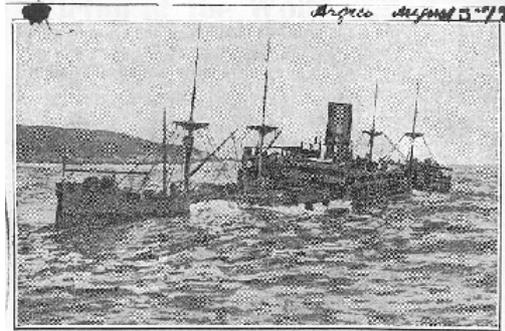
IJN's *Chikuma*. After: Janes, *Fighting Ships of World War One*. London. Studio Edition.

Under command of Captain McGibbon, the steamer sent out an SOS message which was relayed to the Japanese light Cruiser *Chikuma*, then on station protecting Australia's east coast from enemy vessel activity.

With water flooding into the forward section, *Cumberland* limped to Gabo Island and was run aground for urgent repairs.

### The vessel

*Cumberland* was a steel twin screw steamship of 8993 gross tons, 144.4 metres in length (474 feet). It was built in 1915 at Glasgow, Scotland, by Hamilton & Company and registered in London with Official No. 139102. The four masted steamer was owned by the Federal Steam Navigation Company Ltd., and powered by four steam turbines. Of the latest merchant ship design, *Cumberland* had a cruiser (naval type) stern and modern appliances for handling refrigerated and ordinary cargo. It was of the shelter deck type, with a bridge deck, deck houses aft and a promenade deck.



*Cumberland* almost beached at Gabo Island. Melbourne *Argus*, 3 August 1917.

### Cargo

Due to wartime restrictions, few details are available on the cargo carried by *Cumberland*. Newspapers noted bulk frozen meat, while other cargo included "enormous quantities of Red Cross comforts" (*The Lone Hand*, 1 June 1918).

When partly salvaged in 1951 the wreck was known to have also contained a rich cargo of copper and lead ingots. The salvage vessel, *Foremost 17*, successfully recovered approximately 1825 tons of ingots which they believed to be 95% of that cargo. *Foremost 17* was operated by British salvage firm, Risdon Beasley & Co. This was a significant salvage operation for the time and involved the unique deployment of a diving bell over the wreck.

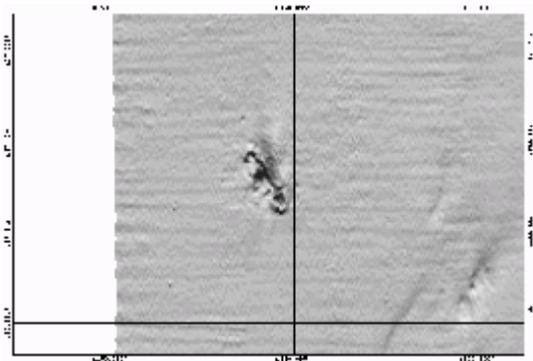
This followed an earlier 1938 failed attempt by salvage interests to relocate the wreck using *Viking Queen* (*Herald*, 5 December, 1951).

### Run aground for repairs

With water flooding into the forward section, *Cumberland* was run aground on Gabo Island for urgent repairs. A diver from the Japanese cruiser *Chikuma* first inspected the hole which

was estimated to be 30 feet (9 metres) in diameter. The Australian light cruiser HMAS *Encounter* arrived next on the scene, while vessels were dispatched from Sydney and Melbourne with dedicated salvage equipment, including pumps and mooring gear. An estimated eleven pumps were used in the operations, many presumably lost when the vessel was finally lost.

Naval and Harbour Trust divers were deployed patching the hole by removing jagged plating, attaching sturdy timber bracing and patches made from layers of canvas. Several vessels were involved in the work including the Illawarra & South Coast Steam Navigation Company's steamers *Merimbula* and *Bermagui*, the tugs *Champion* and *James Paterson* (*Argus*, 3 August 1917).



Tss *Cumberland* was imaged by CSIRO, Hobart for the first time in 2000 using a SIMRAD EM1002 swath mapping echo sounder. © CSIRO, Rudy Kloser.

### Sank steeply bow first

After five weeks of strenuous repair work by divers and a dedicated salvage team, the tugs *James Patterson* and *Champion* were in attendance when the steamer was towed back to Eden for further repairs. However, a storm caused the temporary patches to break and the tugs had to run for safety. *Merimbula* and *Bermagui* stood by to offer help, the former urgently evacuating *Cumberland's* crew when the steamer began to sink bow first – “described by onlookers as an awe-inspiring sight”.

The *Cumberland* sank about five miles south-east of Green Cape, NSW, on 11 August 1917 in an estimated depth of 50-60 fathoms (~91-110 metres).

### First diving inspection by *The Sydney Project* technical divers – 8-9 Nov 2003

The *Cumberland* site was independently inspected by a group of technical divers in 2003 – named *The Sydney Project*.



Photo © mark.spencer.com

Initial dives to the 96-metre deep (315-foot) wreck were undertaken using Tri-mix open circuit or “Inspiration” rebreather closed circuit systems. These were the first ‘free’ dives to the wreck.

The dive team identified the cargo of livestock meat from the numerous bones scattered about the staggering wreck site, located remnant metal ingots from the 1951-52 salvage operations, and confirmed the site as the *Cumberland* with the discovery of letters “U”, “M” and “E” on a section of plating at the bow.



Letters from the bow name plate. © The Sydney Project.

The site was found to stand up to 14 metres above the seabed and was cavernous in its scale. The bow section consisted of a confusing mass of plating and miscellaneous material, and appeared to have collapsed to one side. Many dives will be required to cover the entire extent of the wreck. Opportunities include the deployment of remote operated vehicles (ROV) fitted with video systems.

The wreck is protected as a Historic Shipwreck by the Commonwealth *Historic Shipwrecks Act* 1976. Severe penalties apply for disturbing the shipwreck structure or for removing items.

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