

# VSAGers Making a Difference

*Over the years VSAGers have been involved in many significant events.*

## The Raising of the Loch Ard Anchor

by Paul Tipping

If ever the VSAG was to make a contribution to the maritime heritage of the State of Victoria, the club's participation in the Loch Ard Centenary Commemoration in 1978 ensured that it did. The theme of the commemoration was to be known as "Settlers Under Sail" to mark the era of sailing ship emigration to Victoria. The *Loch Ard* tragedy, in which fifty two persons perished on 1 June, 1878 was the last occasion on which migrants were lost when a sailing ship failed to

successfully negotiate the western entrance to Bass Strait.

When Peter Stone, Secretary of Scuba Divers Federation of Victoria, asked our Club Committee in January, 1978 if VSAG would be willing to provide manpower and boats to assist SDFV in locating and recovering one of the *Loch Ard* anchors from the wreck off Mutton Bird Island, we leapt at the offer. The Victorian Government, through Premier and Arts Minister Rupert ('Dick') Hamer, had appointed the construction magnate Sir John Holland to chair the Loch Ard Centenary Committee. In the absence of available personnel from the Flagstaff Maritime Village of Warrnambool at the time, Sir John approached Peter



*Loch Ard, 1620 Tons. Built at Glasgow 1873.  
Twice dismasted on first voyage, and totally lost 1878 at Port Campbell, Victoria. Only 2 saved.*

Stone and through him the SDFV (as the head amateur ‘peak body’ in the diving community) to seek and recover a significant relic from the *Loch Ard* with the idea of having it available for public display at Port Campbell in time for the centenary of the loss of the vessel.

VSAG in 1978 was (as it still is) one of the most active clubs in this State. Little wonder that no fewer than 15 of the 22 personnel involved in the recovery mission belonged to our great club. And standing testament to the enduring fascination of our members with diving is that some thirty-eight years later, several of the VSAG participants remain active in the sport.

So, on the 10<sup>th</sup> March 1978, the VSAG contingent, led by club President John Goulding, assembled at Port Campbell. Joining our very own ‘fabulous fifteen’ next day were four very experienced wreck divers from Torquay Sub-Aqua Club. The 19 divers were under the command of Peter Stone who had brought in experienced salvage diver Len Brennan to fulfill the role of lift-master should we succeed in locating the relic.

As Saturday dawned, the palpable enthusiasm of the divers was soon tempered by the reality of adverse weather conditions. Three and four metre swells were smashing against Mutton Bird Island where the wreck is located. This situation did not bode well for our prospects. With matters looking even less promising at midday, most of the team left the bleakness of the caravan park for lunch at the town’s hotel — where refuge from the elements was at least assured.

Such is the unpredictability of the coastal conditions in this part of the world, one of the group, having left



*The only photo of the suspended anchor at the work site over the Loch Ard wreck. Photo: Paul Tipping.*

the sanctuary of the bar for the hotel verandah for a calming cigarette and to check out the sea, soon returned inside with the news, “It’s as flat out there as a nightman’s hat!”

Well, maybe or maybe not, but a long, low and even swell was a bit better than the cauldron that had greeted the day. Even the local abalone diver, seated at his semi-permanent bar stool (and reputed to dive not more than once or twice a month) was acknowledging that these interlopers from the City might have a point to make about launching the boats! He’d earlier said

we were “crazy” and had convinced even us for a time that he might have had a point.

This was the ‘window’ we had waited for — and a dozen or more souls were heard to affirm their innocence of any infraction of the diver’s 12-hour ‘no alcohol’ rule! It was already 3 o’clock in the afternoon and without the advantage of daylight saving. Quickly, four aluminium and fibre glass boats and one ‘rubber ducky’ inflatable craft were launched by means of the ample manpower available, with the heavier boats supported and pushed across soft sand by careful deployment of rollers. There was no such luxury of easy water access by a ramp and the boat launch winch on the wharf was out of bounds if you didn’t have the required operator’s ‘ticket’.

By 5 o’clock, several pairs of divers had searched the ocean floor beneath Mutton Bird Island which is some ten kilometres distant from Port Campbell Harbour. Luckless in the attempt to locate a cluster of three or four kedging anchors which we knew to be on the wreck, a lone buoy marking part of the wreck site was the best that could be achieved in order to set the scene for the resumption of work next day — as always, ‘weather permitting!’

All boats were relaunched on the Sunday, 12<sup>th</sup> March. Still, 2–3 metre swells, while relatively calm for this coastline, were not conducive to good visibility which, with an overcast sky, languished at some 2 metres. There was little chance that the day’s main action at a depth of 25 metres could be recorded on film even if we could dive.

Within a very short time after arriving over the wreck site, Torquay divers, Wayne Osborne and Graham Stephens, had located the clump of anchors. They managed to buoy one of the specimens. Peter Stone, assisted by two VSAG divers, descended with Len Brennan’s carefully prepared lifting bag. Using steel cabling and shackles, they carefully secured the bag to the anchor. Brennan commenced to inflate the bag with sufficient exhaust air from a regulator for the bag to clear the seabed. By rotation, Stone and Brennan, followed by a succession of VSAG divers, plied the bag with air expelled from a number of cylinders that were ferried, from the compression station operated by a VSAG ‘shore crew’ in the car park on top of Loch Ard Gorge, down steep steps to the beach. The tanks were then taken by dive boats through the gorge entrance to the work site.



*Flotation bag holding anchor shortly after surfacing at Mutton Bird Island. Photo Paul Tipping.*



*Anchor's first appearance in 100 years — Twilight at Port Campbell jetty in March 1978. Photo Paul Tipping.*

During the operation, VSAG divers detected movement in the lifting tackle. With many divers reaching their 'no decompression' limits (exacerbated by their exertions) in an age before dive computers, the necessary adjustment was made by two of the Torquay divers. Finally, as acknowledged by Peter Stone in a contemporary report to the Centenary Committee prepared after the recovery action, "...two groups of VSAG divers, using four 72 cubic foot tanks, filled the bag to maximum capacity under their own supervision."

"Damn it", the thing would not budge! And the lift capacity of the now fully inflated bag was close to two tonnes. Yet the anchor was believed to be less than one half that weight. In fact, the two flukes and the anchor ring were so heavily encrusted that the anchor at three points was effectively 'concreted' to other anchors in the cluster and to the seabed itself.

One of the Torquay crew, quick to see a possible solution in the rapidly encroaching late afternoon light, put his marine radio to good use. As luck would

have it, a call transmitted from the water on the CB wavelength requesting that "a crowbar be brought urgently to Loch Ard Gorge" was intercepted by a passing motorist. After some initial misgivings, the motorist (who had suspected a hoax or 'crank' call) nevertheless reported the call to Port Campbell police whose duty officer at the time was Senior Constable Terry Hayden, a local diver who was armed with knowledge of the lift operation. SC Hayden acted immediately by bringing a crowbar to the gorge where it was picked up by our tender boat and handed to VSAG's Max Synon. One other diver joined Max in a return mission to the seabed. Extraordinarily, with minimal number of blows with the crowbar, the anchor was dislodged!

Max recalls that he had not dived that day until he descended with a diver he believed was a cameraman from one of the television networks: "He pointed to where I had to put the crowbar... I gave it a nudge and a bit of leverage, while keeping well back from the anchor. It didn't take much to free it!"



*Some SDFV team members with 'their' anchor. VSAG members David Moore and Paul Tipping with Peter Stone and members of Torquay Scuba Club. Photo courtesy Peter Stone.*

After almost one hundred years on the seabed, the relic and the flotation bag rocketed to the surface in a matter of a few seconds, travelling at such speed that the entire eight foot bag flew out of the water in a sea of foam formed by the escaping air bubbles before settling in the light swell under the weight of the prized anchor.

Acting quickly, a buoy line from the Torquay boat was attached to the drifting bag and anchor. The trailing line slackened and became fouled on the boat's propeller. Peter Stone entered the water from Brennan's inflatable and retrieved the remnants of the buoy line which they had cut in order to allow the Torquay boat to retreat from the turbulence at the foot of the island. He swam to Barry Truscott's boat to which he passed the line allowing the inflatable bag to be towed.

The 'comedy of errors' (aka 'near disasters') continued when a crayfish buoyline managed to foul the anchor bag. Adding to the mayhem, other divers were on the surface armed with cameras making determined but

futile efforts to photograph the submerged anchor — all to no avail due to the murk. Finally, local crayfisherman Bill Morris, on hand with his boat *Joyleen*, tethered the bag once Stone and two Torquay co-divers had disentangled the line from the craypot line.

By now, the afternoon was well advanced. The activities of the divers had also managed to attract a crowd of some several hundred onlookers to the cliff top. The late afternoon air was ruptured by some loud cheers from the throng once the *Joyleen* towed the bag to sea. Apparently, many of them were drawn to the scene by the police siren when the vital crowbar was rushed to the gorge.

By the time the flotilla of craft reached Port Campbell, a crowd that we estimated at around five hundred had assembled on the wharf and environs. Although co-ordinator Stone had expected the anchor would remain in the water next to the wharf, the anchor was winched from the sea "for a quick look before returning her to the seabed." Another cheer went up.



*Lesley Tipping and Don Charlwood with recovered anchor. Photo: Paul Tipping.*

Everyone was pleased to see that the anchor was in perfect condition.

The anchor itself was not to be the only memento of an exciting weekend's activity. On the Monday, the VSAG camp received a friendly visit from the police who had helped out on Sunday. Their playful enquiry about the fate of their crowbar was met with the response "...it's still in Max Synon's boat". Max offered to pay the thirteen dollars the police wanted for it — and at time of writing it's still on display in his Melbourne suburban garage.

A fortnight later, on Easter Saturday, 25<sup>th</sup> March 1978, the anchor was retrieved from the harbour at Port Campbell and displayed before another large crowd. A number of dignitaries were on hand for the ceremony, including Sir John Holland and members of his Centenary Committee. One committeeman, Don Charlwood, the historian and an authority on the *Loch Ard*, and a former wartime navigator and peacetime air traffic controller, regaled many with his stories of the *Loch Ard* disaster and other maritime mishaps



*Paul Tipping with anchor at Port Campbell Tourist Information Centre.*



*The last moments of the Loch Ard — an artist's impression.*

along this Shipwreck Coast. In a direct link with the rescue of the two survivors of the wreck, the nonagenarian son of William Till, the fourteen year old farm-hand who located survivor Tom Pearce near the gorge that bears the name of that tragic ship, was sharing recollections of his father's tales of his incredible find a hundred years earlier.

What became of the raised anchor? Promptly after the Easter ceremony, the relic was placed in the custody of the expert conservators at Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village in Warrnambool. After the necessary 'cleaning' (believed to have included the process known as electro-osmosis), over a period totalling eighteen months, fittingly, the anchor was returned to Port Campbell. It has for some years been displayed on a wall at the town Information Centre at the rear of the Port Campbell caravan park.

Shortly before Christmas 1978, several members of the VSAG, resplendent in business attire, attended the State Government offices in Spring Street, Melbourne as guests of the Arts Ministry. At the reception, they shared experiences with the Premier and other dignitaries and accepted the generous praise lavished upon them and their other SDFV colleagues for the

significant part they had played in the centenary commemoration of a bygone era... the era of sailing ship immigration to Victoria as epitomised by the worst maritime disaster in our State.

And so it is that the VSAG can take justifiable pride in the significant part it played in an event that lives on through the *Loch Ard* anchor: the very anchor which greets hundreds of pilgrims and tourists from all over the world to the growing Port Campbell township in every week of every year.

