

# SHIPWRECKS IN CAPE HORN ISLA DE LOS ESTADOS, MAGALLANES, MITRE PENINSULA, MALVINAS, AND SOUTH GEORGIA

*Lic. Carlos Pedro Vairo*



*Nuevo Horizonte de Ushuaia*



ZAGIER & URRUTY  
PUBLICATIONS

## Appendix 10

### The 'Desdémona' in Mitre Peninsula



Of all wreckages recounted in the present work, the only captain we could meet and who gave us his official version of his wreckage was the *Desdémona's*. This is a brief summary of a long interview.

The wreckage took place on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1985 at 1 a.m.

Place: Cape San Pablo. Crew: 20 hands in all.

Length: 78 m. Beam: 8.50 m.

Captain: Germán Gustavo Prillwitz. Allen 914, Banfield. Telephone number: 4242-0247.

Place of the interview: Tucumán 326, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, Capital Federal. Centro de Egresados de la Escuela de Náutica.

*Desdémona's* shipowner: Cormorán Empresa Marítima. Andrea Gunaris and Crisanta Copulus.

Built in Hamburg in 1952 following the restrictions imposed by the Allies as regards speed, length, and engine power.

*Desdémona's* sister ships: *Ofelia*, sunk opposite the coast of Venezuela; and *Cleopatra*, which was being broken up in Dársena, Port of Buenos Aires, when the interview took place. There is a relevant detail: the *Desdémona*, the same as her sister ships, was reinforced for ice. This is why she sailed for many years without wanting repairs.

Account by her captain, Don Germán G. Prillwitz:

In 1985, he set sail from Comodoro Rivadavia and, because of mechanical failures, the skirt and the block of a piston broke down; apparently, this happened due to lack of lubrication but, according to the Captain, it was sabotage.

On arriving in Ushuaia, he tries to fix the engine, but at the request of the shipowner he sails on to Río Grande. As the Captain insists on repairing the damage, the shipowner tells him to go on toward Río Grande as he considers the Captain masters the ship and there is nothing to worry about.

The captain covered the distance in five days when this trip usually takes no longer than thirty-six hours. He sailed along the coast trying to find shelter from storms and anchoring on several occasions. He eventually reached the port of Río Grande, but as there was NW wind (storm), he did not enter for fear that the ship run aground.

At that point, he decided to sail south along the coast looking for a sheltered place to anchor. Thus, he arrived at Cape San Pablo and, with a forecast of SW storm, he looked for a sheltered place to outride the storm. He approached the cape and, 1,000 m to the south,

she touched ground twice. At that moment, the captain decided to sail out wearing round. Apparently, there is a rock ledge which extends up to 2,500 m from the cape some 1,000 m and this does not appear in the charts.

When the stern crushes against the ledge, the tunnel is punched and a three-inch hole is produced and this is the only place where there is a double bottom. Therefore, the stern starts to flood and the pumps are not enough; the locks are shut, but the tunnel is flooded.

At that moment, the captain decides to sail out and anchor, but he realizes that the double bottom is breaking and the hold with a cargo of cement starts to flood. The ship starts to sink at the stern and he determines to approach the beach to strand her. The place chosen is the mouth of a river. He prefers it because at the mouth of rivers the bed is firmer; in this case, of stones and sand. He is planning to leave the ship properly trimmed thus avoiding burying her.

He makes head at full speed but, being more buried, the bow strands. The breaking sea makes her advance and, thus, she is driven to a perfect place to disembark all the people and try to save the cargo which is unloaded straight to trucks.

The shipowner criticized the Captain arguing that he should have stayed anchored instead of stranding. Mr. Prillwitz, the Captain, was of the opinion that, if he remained anchored, the ship would sink with all the cargo and, according to his version, this was what the shipowner apparently wanted to happen. This issued ended up at the Supreme Court and Captain Prillwitz was charged with negligence and blamed for the wreckage of the ship, said to have occurred because of his decision...

According to his account, after taking the cargo out, he intended to cover the leakages. Later, with a syzygial tide, and having previously lightened all the cargo ruined at the bottom, he could have left sailing.

The captain also suspects that the people in charge of the engine might have made hold 2 get flooded as he himself used to control the amount of water and, all of a sudden, he found it flooded.

The truth about this is that the *Desdémona* had an insurance policy of U\$S 300,000, but

the insurance company covered 100,000 since her bottom had not being repaired. Her scraps were sold to junk dealers who could not break her in because the roads and bridges of the area cannot resist the weight of trucks loaded with this material. They could only take three small trucks.

The abandoned lifeboat was left in charge of Felix, who was an alcoholic cook.

The junk dealers assigned somebody to take care of the ship. But as the pay was not enough, the maintenance of the engines was progressively abandoned and therefore they ruined —motors as well as cranes and engines.

We are really astonished because Captain's Prillwitz account, and of course this was also said in the trial, states that in fact problems had started before all this. The ship had stranded in Río Grande and had stayed there for twenty-five days until they could take it out. The method used, as the ship had been sucked by mud, consisted in washing the bottom where she was trimmed with jets of water under pressure. According to the Captain, everything started when the hawsers were cut because neither the shipowner nor the Dirección de Puertos (Ports Administration) had provided him with suitable hawsers (he refers to quality and thickness). Therefore, she stood off and the strength of the tide dragged the stern away from the pier and took her toward a muddy bottom.

During this stranding, the bottom was dented and the cost of its repairing was calculated in U\$S 100,000, amount paid by the insurance. But the bottom was never fixed. To take her out of her stranded position, a specialized company would have charged U\$S 250,000, a sum which they were not willing to pay since it was the same value that the insurance would pay.

The *Desdémona's* bell is now kept at the Centro de Egresados de la Escuela de Náutica together with a poem that reads:

"You have died at the age of Jesus Christ  
Our Lord  
You have chosen your fate as a ship  
From the bottom of his heart  
The one who in your memory this one tolls  
Condemned will be  
For all the present  
A round to pay."

# SHIPWRECKS IN CAPE HORN

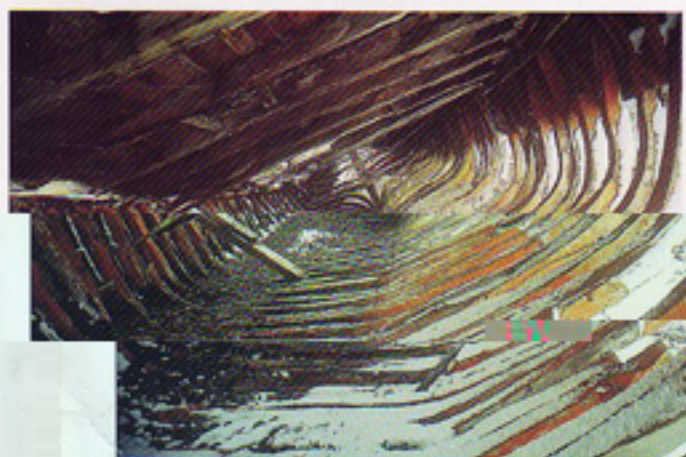
ISLA DE LOS ESTADOS, MAGALLANES, MITRE PENINSULA,  
MALVINAS AND SOUTH GEORGIAS



The most complete compilation of shipwrecks in the Fuegian Archipelago. This is a book for the common reader as well as for the researcher. It can be used as a base for more detailed studies of each boat. Unpublished data and photographs.

Carlos Pedro Vairo is Director of the Maritime Museum of Ushuaia and has written several books about the history of the South Atlantic: «Ushuaia Maritime Museum», «Ushuaia Prison», «Isla de los Estados y el Faro del Fin del Mundo», «Ushuaia», etc.

This book can be used in conjunction with our «Historical Chart of Cape Horn, Mitre Peninsula and Isla de los Estados».



ARCHAEOLOGY  
HISTORY  
NAVIGATION  
TIERRA DEL FUEGO

ISBN 1-879568-77-2



ZAGIER &  
PUBLIC