

Victims of Lizzie Bell tragedy honoured



Shipwreck

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A dozen sailors who drowned when their ship sank off the South Taranaki coast 118 years ago have been honoured by the Merchant Navy.

The iron barque Lizzie Bell was sailing from Wellington to New South Wales to pick up coal on July 24, 1901, but went off course and slammed into rocks at Oeo in South Taranaki. Two men were lost overboard on impact and another 10 died after the lifeboat they were in capsized.

Six survivors eventually made it to shore and were helped by people from the community.

The bodies of the men who died were buried at the nearby Pihama Cemetery, which was renamed the Lizzie Bell Memorial Cemetery in 1974.

A ceremony to commemorate the 118th anniversary of the sinking was held at the cemetery on Wednesday.

Organised by the Taranaki Sub Branch of the New Zealand Merchant Navy, the service was attended by about 80 people, including representatives from the Royal New Zealand Air Force, Army and Navy, as well as people from the local community and around Taranaki, and South Taranaki District Council.

"It's a nice way to get the community involved, to get together and remember these brave men who lost their lives. On Anzac Day we remember the Anzacs, and we should also be remembering quite a few other people who dedicated their lives to service," secretary Denise Woods said.

At Wednesday's ceremony the men were remembered with prayer and song in te reo and English.

Wreaths were laid on the graves, the drowned men's names read, the *Last Post* rang out and a



Merv Martin, chairman Hamuora Kinera and Denise Wood, all from the NZ Merchant Navy Association, lead a memorial service beside the graves of the 12 men who drowned when the Lizzie Bell sank off the South Taranaki coast in 1901.

PHOTOS: CATHERINE GROENESTEIN



Pihama Cemetery Board president Mark Stevenson and South Taranaki District mayor Ross Dunlop with the long-lost bell of the Lizzie Bell, which was rediscovered by Dunlop this week in a cupboard at a Hāwera School, just in time for the commemoration service on Wednesday.



Allan, Christina and Sarah Good with a letter their ancestor Thomas Good received from the ship's captain, thanking him for helping the survivors when the Lizzie Bell sank near his farm.

"It's a nice way to get the community involved."

Denise Woods

Red Ensign, the merchant navy flag, hoisted up the flagpole.

Also on display was the ship's bell and an old horse-drawn dray owned by the Pettigrew family, which was used to ferry the sailors' bodies to the cemetery.

The story of how Oeo farmer Thomas Good helped the six survivors, who spent a freezing night after they made it to shore, was passed down the generations of the Good family who still farm there, his great-great-granddaughter Sarah Good said.

The boiler of the Lizzie Bell can still be seen from the farm on a very low tide, she said.

Another reminder of the tragedy is a framed letter that ship's master, John Rees, penned a month after the tragedy, thanking the Goods for their help and telling them how the men they helped rescue were faring.

"I will never forget the kindness shown by your family to me in my distress," he wrote.

One of the sailors was so close to death when they found him, the Good family took him into their own home and nursed him by their fire, Christina Good, who had the framed letter at the ceremony, said.

"They saved his life."