

Ever diminishing but still conspicuous from seawards, if you know where to look, are the rusty remains of the stern section of the ore carrier Sygna, where she continues to remind us of the destructiveness of an east coast low. This almost meaningless meteorological term refers to a low-pressure system that can form anywhere along the New South Wales coast and develop into a serious storm. In summer it may be a remnant Queensland cyclone: in winter it can result from a pool of cold air in the atmosphere – the latter being the probable cause of the 'Sygna Storm' – as it became known.

On Saturday 25 May 1974, ten ore ships lay to anchor off Newcastle Harbour waiting their turn to enter port to load coal. One of these ships was the 53,000 tonne Norwegian bulk carrier Sygna. Her position was two and a half miles east of the harbour entrance and a little over three miles to seaward of Stockton Beach, in Stockton Bight. She had been waiting at this ocean anchorage for four days when, at 4.30pm, a strong wind warning was issued by the Met Bureau. It was updated to a full gale warning soon after.

By 9pm the wind was SSE at 50 knots, making Stockton Beach a seething lee shore encouraging most of the fleet to up-anchor and stand out to sea. By midnight, seven ships had made this wise move leaving just three in Stockton Bight: one was the Chinese-owned Cherry, which had a foul hawse, her two anchor cables being hopelessly twisted, obliging her to remain on station; another was the Norwegian bulk carrier Rudolf Olsen, whose master chose not to lose his place in the queue and remain on anchor, and the third was Sygna, whose master possibly had a similar motive.

While it must be conceded that a vessel of her size could survive a storm at open roadstead, there seemed to be a critical lack of urgency about the gravity of her situation. Captain Lunde, the ship's master, hit the sack at 10pm after leaving orders that he was to be woken if the weather deteriorated. Surprisingly, he was not called until 1am by which time his ship was already dragging anchor towards the beach. Captain Lunde immediately gave orders to get under way, but 45 minutes passed before the anchor came home during which time the ship dragged beam to wind, port side up, as her unladen, slab-sided hull offered tremendous windage. With the anchor finally weighed, full port rudder at full ahead

was ordered, but Sygna refused to respond, her windage holding her portside to wind and sailing her obliquely downwind.

By now the wind was gusting to over 90 knots, encouraging Captain Lunde to gamble heavily on having the space to leeward to try the desperate tactic of turning downwind to gather speed then – hopefully – gain speed and steerageway to coax her bow towards the open sea before hitting the beach.

To this end he ordered full starboard rudder while the engineer squeezed every revolution he could from the engine in their quest for a miracle – but no doubt anticipating the worst. And, as we are only too aware, the worst happened, the doomed ship failing to complete the manoeuvre, ramming herself ashore.



Sygna hits the beach in 1974

Cherry, meanwhile, rode the storm to her foul hawse, reducing her anchors' burden by steaming into the wind. She survived. Rudolf Olsen, the other Norwegian bulk carrier, almost joined Sygna on the beach, but managed to raise enough power to make a safe offing.

The Newcastle tug fleet was busy coping with breakaway vessels in port and could not respond to Sygna's calls for assistance even were it possible to locate her through the radar 'soap' and then effectively get a line aboard in such abysmal conditions. The best that could be done was to place the Sydney tug Warrawee on alert in the hope of hauling her off when the storm abated.

Sygna hit the beach four miles northeast of Newcastle Harbour at 2.15am on 26 May 1974.



She lay obliquely to the surf line with her bow high and dry at low tide and her heavy stern section overhanging a deep gutter. The strain of this unequal support proved too much for her hull, which snapped slightly abaft midships at about 8am, by which time the wind had dropped to 10 knots. Happily, no lives were lost and the officers and crew were successfully lifted off by RAAF helicopter after initial attempts to fire a line to them from the beach failed.

From here on, tensions progressively ratcheted up as self-interest interfered with the business of getting the job done to save an eminently salvageable ship.

It started when a Norwegian salvage expert immediately flew out to assess the situation. He reported that the ship had broken in two and the underwriters decided to class her as a total loss and pay the owners in full. They then placed the wreck on the open market. After a period of disinterest, the Japanese company Taiseikaihatu Co Ltd bought Sygna for \$150,000.

The company president, Mr Yamada, was a bright and breezy hands-on man who had worked alongside his men on many a salvage job. His obvious experience and infectious optimism initially inspired the Australian workers, who were soon hailing him as the hero of the Sygna – the man who would achieve the impossible.

Unfortunately, however, Mr Yamada's flamboyant manner conveyed the impression that money was no object, allowing avarice to eventually undermine the entire enterprise.

It started with a union insisting on double time for normal hours and double-double time for shift work.

Surprisingly, Mr Yamada accepted the demands without a whimper, anxious, as he was, to just get on with the job, which was forging ahead, with relations between the Japanese and Australian teams remaining excellent. There was, however, a marked difference in the hours worked, the Japanese powering on whilst the Australians took whatever breaks were within their awards.

Early in September 1974 – over three months after the grounding, the bow section was successfully hauled off the beach and winched out into deep water from where the oil drilling tender Lady Vera towed it to Port Stephens and left it on anchor in Salamander Bay.



The bow of the Sygna as seen at Salamander Bay

At this point, the tender was paid off and attention was concentrated on the stubborn stern section, which was by far the most valuable prize, containing, as it did, all the expensive machinery, accommodation and controls. If the two halves could be freed, towed to a shipyard and reunited, their salvage would prove lucrative: on the other hand, one without the other may not cover costs.

Being flooded with oil, water and sand, the stern section had to be pumped out and sealed for refloating, its weight and excessive draft proving extremely difficult to free from the beach. Nevertheless, determined effort by the workforce and well-placed offshore anchors from

which steel cables led to huge winches eventually won the day and the stern floated free during October to the elation of all involved. But their elation was short lived because, unbelievably, no tugs arrived to haul it clear and take it to Port Stephens!

The freeing of the stern section was viewed by many observers as being premature because Mr Yamada already suspected that the tugs might not arrive, mired, as they were, in industrial dispute.

He acted optimistically unable, perhaps, to believe that a standoff between tug owners and the unions could prevail under such critical circumstances. But it could and it did, the tug owners reluctant to commit their vessels while unions demanded pay scales equal to those paid on the beach.

The unions claimed that a tow of this nature ranked as a continuation of a salvage operation: the tug owners countered that once the stern section is winched off into deep water, it becomes a normal tow with no special circumstances.

This was not one of Australia's proudest moments in industrial relations.

Both arguments had merit, of course, but the timing was appalling, leaving the Japanese crew no option but to scuttle their hard-won stern back on the beach and wait. Born in 1971, I am not much older than the wreck of the Sygna, however I have been told that this unbelievable scenario was played out at least once more before Mr Yamada again beached his prize and abandoned the project in despair.

The intractability of an industrial dispute wore him down and left Australia with its biggest wreck.



The Sygna 1984, 10 years on

The bow, anchored in Port Stephens, was towed to Taiwan in January 1976, but the stern stayed on Stockton Beach to remind us that a well-developed east coast low can create havoc along the New South Wales coast. And it is sobering to think that nowadays a similar incident could prove far more spectacular when it is realised that as many as 60 ore ships may be seen anchored at sea off Newcastle at any one time, most of whose tonnages make Sygna look like a coaster by comparison. Of course, history was repeated in 2007 with the grounding of the Pasha Bulker on Newcastle's most famous beach, Nobby's. Salvage crews were successful to refloat the bulker, and tow it seaward then onto repairs.



The Sygna in 2009, slowly fading into the sea