



# AUSTRALIA'S GHOST SHIP

MISSING ITS CREW, THE STORY OF THIS SAILBOAT HAS POSED A MYSTERY THAT CONTINUES TO THE PRESENT  
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During April 2007, Australian newspapers and television programs were rife with reports on the appearance of a “ghost ship” off the coast of Townsville, Queensland, near the Great Barrier Reef. The vessel was completely intact but the crew was missing so there were immediate comparisons to the famed lost crew of the ghost ship *Mary Celeste*. For the readers of *Sea Classics*, this is an interesting mystery — and one that has similarities to incidents going back hundreds of years.

On 15 April of that year, three men — described in newspapers as “typical

Aussie blokes” — boarded their vessel named the *Kaz II* for what was to be a two-month fun-filled trip to Western Australia. Des Batten (age 56) had just purchased the vessel for \$100,000 and he and two friends — brothers Peter (69) and John Tunstead (63) — had loaded the ship with plenty of food, numerous cases of beer, a .44 caliber rifle with 100 rounds of ammunition, and other supplies.

The boat was spotted drifting on 18 April by an Australian helicopter and the pilot reported that the crew could be potentially in distress. On 20 April, a Royal Australian Air Force

helicopter went out to the ship and saw that the *Kaz II* appeared to be under power but no one was on deck and the helicopter made enough noise that anyone would have come from below deck to see what was going on. A decision was made to winch one of the rescue crew down to the catamaran. Corrie Benson was carefully winched to the deck of the moving boat. He would recount that he found the scene “eerie” and that he spotted a discarded coffee cup, newspapers, and knives strewn on the floor of the cabin. “My biggest fear was being attacked by somebody who

did not want me on the boat,” he later recounted. “I was 100 miles out to sea with no back-up. I didn’t know if someone was going to burst through a cupboard and go at me with a knife. I saw all the knives on the floor, but no blood, and thought ‘what the hell?’”

With this information, news sources speculated that the men may have staged their own disappearance to collect insurance money. Another newspaper stated that the *Kaz II* may have fallen victim of pirates and the men were simply thrown overboard. Paranormal events such as those to have purportedly happened in the Bermuda Triangle were even discussed. Benson said that once he was on the *Kaz II* he found, “the engine was idling and everything seemed to be in good working order. There was just no trace of the men.” On a table, a laptop computer was running. So was the GPS and the radio and the men’s clothing was found in neat piles on the rear deck. There was a full complement of life jackets and even a small boat still hoisted on the stern and the anchor was up. There was no life raft aboard but it is not known if the men had taken one. However, the main sail was completely shredded. “It was as if someone had taken a large knife to the sail,” said one of the rescue personnel.

An investigation was immediately started and further information came from the boat’s previous owner, Graeme Douglas. He said that he warned the trio not to leave the area because they did not seem to have enough experience. The new owner was the only one of the trio that had sailed a large vessel while Douglas said the two brothers had minimal boating experience (this would prove not completely accurate). Douglas said the men appeared to be nervous about the trip but anxious to get underway since their original start date had been postponed because of bad weather and the fact they had trouble understanding the GPS equipment aboard *Kaz II*. Douglas told the new owner, “If you’re not ready the don’t go.”

Des Batten, who was a semi-retired carpet layer, had a video camera and on the morning when they were due to



Another view of *Kaz II* taken by the circling helicopter. Gavin Howland, skipper of the commercial fishing vessel *Jillian*, testified that on 16 April, while fishing on a reef off Bowen, he and his crew saw a white yacht with a torn sail drifting sideways between the reefs through a narrow passage at 3.5 mph in a north-northeastern direction along with the current. He came to within 165 feet of the boat but was unable to spot anyone on board. This was two days before the Coast Guard spotted *Kaz II* adrift off the coast of Townsville and the day after the authorities believe the men went missing. Howland found it odd that a sailboat was in an area noted for its shallow water and rocks. He did not attempt to contact the boat or the authorities. Howland told the inquest that it did not occur to him that the crew of the yacht might be in distress and went on to state, “It did seem a bit strange to me but I just have this rule that no one goes near another vessel.”

set sail, he began filming aboard *Kaz II*. Jim Tunstead could be seen fishing while he and Batten can be heard mocking Peter Tunstead, who did not know how to swim, who was fishing at the back of the boat with the safety rail down. He was not wearing a lifejacket. On the video, the men can be heard talking about “threatening skies” ahead.

On 18 April, initial search and rescue operations began and a Royal Australian Navy aircraft was sent to search in the vicinity. At the same time, Bowen Volunteer Marine Rescue launched a coastal and island search. At night, a military aircraft with infrared capability was used to search the reef and cays. On the 19th, a full-scale SAR effort was launched involving volunteer units from several towns, two rescue helicopters, the Townsville Coast Guard, nine aircraft, two SAR helicopters, and two



James Tunstead, Des Batten, and Peter Tunstead. Some reports said the brothers had no sea experience but family members stated the Tunsteads had sailed together from the time they were 18-years-old and had even worked in the radio rooms of the Volunteer Sea Rescue. The family did say they were inexperienced on larger vessels.

commercial vessels.

Graeme Douglas, who had helped the men plan their trip, was surprised to see that they had deviated from their planned route (after viewing data from the recovered GPS) that had been programmed into the GPS. The weather had been windy and sea rough between the time that *Kaz II* departed and when it was found drifting. This led authorities to speculate the crew may have experienced some form of sudden problems during rough weather and gone overboard. However, this theory is doubtful since searchers found the

This is how the *Kaz II* was originally found by an Australian search helicopter. Jennifer Batten, wife of the owner, stated that prior to the final voyage, Batten had taken a coastal navigation/radio course. He had earned his recreational skipper’s ticket and a qualification in marine radio. Every summer, they traveled together to Rottneest Island on various motorboats, although *Kaz II* was their first sailboat. There was never a satisfactory explanation for the shredded sail.