

Ron “Smash” Howells on the Patanela

Patanela was built to work. Her early crayfishing years in Tasmania’s notoriously ill-tempered waters – including the treacherous west coast – were hard slogging tests of endurance for both vessel and the men who sailed her.

It was a gritty baptism for any boat new to the sea, but Patanela and skipper John Key, a veteran mariner from Victoria, proved to be a solid combination. The £20,000 vessel was stable in heavy seas and considered unsinkable, due to the four watertight compartments which could be independently closed off in an emergency.

John Key was well respected as a skipper and considered an expert navigator. He knew the southern waters well and was reputed to have survived a shipwreck off the coast of Victoria. Although popular with his crew and other fishermen, Key was considered somewhat of an ‘outsider’ within the industry. Tasmanian crayfishing was a hard drinking, brawling way of life with injury and sometimes death part of every working day. Key, however, fitted a different mould – an educated, articulate man who was as much at ease in a dinner suit as he was in his fishing gear.



Crewman Ron 'Crash' Howells with a section of Patanela's damaged bow after hitting an uncharted rock in north-west Tasmanian waters. Constitution Dock, Hobart, 1958.

Key’s handling of boats and men in emergencies was tested on board Patanela on more than one occasion. In early 1958, deckhand Ron “Smash” Howells fell overboard in icy seas off Maatsuyker Island, a light-house occupied speck of land to the extreme south of Tasmania. The water in this remote region is deep, treacherous, and inhabited by tiger sharks. On this day, however, it was remarkably calm. Howells had slipped on the deck and gone overboard after asking Keys what he wanted for breakfast. It was more than half an hour before he was missed. Realising finally what had happened, Key backtracked over his course until he spotted sea birds circling a speck in the water. That speck was Howells, treading water and grinning widely, according to legend. Howells had reputedly explained that he knew Keys would come back and find him if he stayed in the once place, instead of attempting the long swim to Maatsuyker Island. The Howells incident was kept under wraps by the influential Phil Waterworth and never reported to the press. Waterworth feared adverse publicity and a possible inquiry into the incident.

At 7.10 p.m. on 1 July 1958, Patanela slammed into an uncharted submerged rock off Bluff Hill Point in north-west Tasmania. The impact sliced open the 6 millimetre steel plate of the hull. Water rushed into the living quarters, but was held in check by a watertight door. The schooner was heavy with a full load of live crayfish in her tanks and was heading towards the coast to lay up over-night before sailing to Melbourne the following day.

Deckhand Ken Pybus was in the galley preparing the evening meal when the boat struck. The 19-year-old fisherman heard a 'tremendous bang' a split second before his head cracked against a shelf. Pybus estimates the vessel was traveling about 9 knots when she hit the rock. His first thoughts were concerns that the Patanela might be lost.

'I'm a poor swimmer and my life could well have been in danger, but all I could think of was what a great tragedy it would be if we lost the Patanela,' he said.

John Key was cool under pressure. Reversing off the rock, the steel schooner dipped heavily at the bow, lifting the stern almost clear of the water. Ron Howells went below to inspect the damage, submerging himself in the gloomy water. Howells reported the hull had been sliced open 'as if by a giant tin opener'. Later measurements showed the impact had opened a 1.4 metre long hole, 45 centimetres across. Key deliberated on his options. At first he planned to take the vessel into deeper water in case she sank and became a danger to shipping. But Patanela's watertight compartments held and, after contacting Hobart Radio to report the accident, Key set a course for the port of Stanley, 80 nautical miles around the north-west tip of Tasmania. The trip took twenty-two hours, a long journey with the stricken vessel's bowsprit almost under water and the half-exposed rudder making steering difficult.

Reproduced from the book "Patanela is Missing" by Paul Whittaker and Robert Reid.