

***Perseverant* Survivors' Camp  
(Draft form only)**

by

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## INTRODUCTION

In May of 1988, a Western Australian Maritime Museum (WAMM) team, lead by Graeme Henderson, Curator of Maritime Archaeology, undertook a survey of whaling ship wreck sites on the Western Australian coast. The program included an investigation at Dirk Hartog Island: a study of the historic site covered in this preliminary report. Henderson's archival research suggested that the camp had been occupied by survivors of the French whaling vessel *Perseverant*, wrecked in 1841. Examination of the site and initial analysis of associated artefacts have supported this identification. Evaluation of the fragile *in situ* remains and their current deterioration has led to recommendations for further study. The author, a student of geology and archaeology, took part in the expedition as a volunteer, and as a representative of the Underwater Archaeological Society of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

Dirk Hartog Island is prominent, both geographically and historically. The western-most promontory of Australia was the site of European man's first recorded landfall on the continent's Indian Ocean shores. The island's 80 kilometre west coast endures the ravages of that ocean, and is fringed with high cliffs of gently folded sandstone. The east coast bounds the large and shallow Shark Bay and features lower cliffs, sandy bays and sand dunes. The long narrow island receives very little rainfall, and vegetation is largely limited to knee high scrub. When Dutch explorer Dirk Hartog visited the island in 1616 he stayed long enough to leave a pewter plate commemorating his achievement. He, along with later explorers found little value in the island save its prominence as a landmark.

However, the surrounding waters teemed with life. As early as 1792, whalers visited Shark Bay and by the 1830s American, British and French ships regularly harvested the great mammals along the coast, sometimes taking shelter from rough weather behind Dirk Hartog Island.

In 1976, local stockman Tom Pepper discovered the site while he mustered sheep in the dunes by the northeast shores of the island. He noted bottles and buttons in the scatter of iron fragments, and soon reported his find to the Western Australian Museum – David Hutchison, Curator of History visited the location. He described the position and orientation of the site, and collected representative artefacts. Significant among his finds were brass buttons, some embossed with an anchor and the inscription 'EQUIPAGE DE LIGNE'. Hutchison recommended that the site be examined further and that Pepper be awarded for his information.

In 1988, Henderson planned to visit and examine the site because his research indicated that such a camp had been occupied by the survivors of a French whaling vessel. Both the location and the type of remains fit a brief story of tragedy recounted by M. Estrade, Third Mate of the *Perseverant*, upon his rescue. The vessel, a 260-ton ship rigged whaler, of oak and copper construction ran aground near or on the shores of Dirk Hartog Island in March of 1841. Although a later sighting of the ship suggested he had suffered little damage, captain and crew evacuated the hulk and established a camp on the shore of the island. Sunbaked and windswept, this dry barren land presented less sanctuary

than obstacle to the unfortunate seamen. After ten weeks on the island, during which time five men died of scurvy, remaining officers and crew made a desperate bid for salvation. They set out for Java in four of the ship's small boats, only to be caught in a severe gale. The boats were separated and only one, containing M. Estrade and three crewmen was saved. The objectives of the WAMM study of the site were:

- to determine whether the reported site was indeed the *Perseverant* survivors' camp
- to assess the condition of the site and its potential for further study and
- to seek clues indicating the location of the ship itself.

#### **SITE DESCRIPTION**

The visual evidence of human occupancy at the site extend over a roughly rectangular area about 50 m in from a beach. The longitudinal axis of the site runs parallel to both the beach and the low fore-dune, which lies to the east. Some of the visible artefactual material is scattered in a hard surfaced basin while to the west, more material emerges from the softer sand dune banks. The prominent features are areas in which wrought iron fragments are concentrated.

Most of the iron appears to be the remains of barrel hoops in varying stages of disintegration. There are some intact examples of these hoops in the western portion of the site, measuring 60 cm in diameter. Throughout the area lies pottery and glass sherds, as well as small fasteners, clay pipe pieces, and a few specifically interesting artefacts to be discussed further. As noted on the site plan (fig. 2), these items are loosely clustered within the iron fragment concentrations, although several pieces were found further afield. Although Hutchison noted a dark stained area when he examined the site in 1976, we detected no stain. There are other indications that preservation of the remains is deteriorating, certainly from natural causes, and possibly through modern human activity.

#### **SITE DETERIORATION AND DISTURBANCE**

The movement of sand in the site area has at one or more times covered the artefactual remains, and is presently uncovering them. The evidence may be seen in the state of degradation of barrel hoops. A gradient occurs, along the east/west axis of the site. Complete barrel hoops occur along the higher elevated western extremity of the site. Further east, in the centre of the site, hoops are fragmented and scattered, although large curved sections are visible. Finally, in the easternmost, lowest area, hoop fragments are most scattered and disintegrated. Offered in a hypothetical model (fig. 3) is a possible explanation for this phenomena. The upper portion exhibits a stylised plan view; and east/west segment of the site. Below is a before and after profile. Perhaps complete barrels once stood along the same level, higher than their present elevation. The advancement of a blow-out, a wind excavated basin travelling westward, caused barrel hoops and other remains to drop as sand blew away from around them. Easternmost objects fell a greater distance, disintegrating more so than western

artefacts. If the model is correct, erosion is moving west, into the least disturbed areas of the site.

It is difficult to assess the effect of human activity on the site. Perhaps the movements of stock and people through the lower portions of the site account for some of the artefact scatter there.

#### **ARTEFACTS**

During the 1988 site survey, 66 specific artefacts and clusters of artefacts were plotted, photographed and assigned field numbers. Thirty-one (31) of the pieces were collected as representative samples and have been added to the original collection made by Hutchison.

The 100 plus specimens collected in 1976 bear registration numbers 1707 through 1714 and 1988 additions are numbers PS3368 through PS3390. The majority of the 1988 artefacts fall into four categories represented on the site plan diagram. For simplicity, some miscellaneous items have been omitted from the plan. Field locations 1 and 24 are noted, as they pinpoint objects of particular interest. Included under the ceramic category are: fragments of dishes with a buff yellow glaze, others with a red glaze, and several fragments of clay pipes.

The majority of glass fragments are green in colour and are pieces of bottles. The bottles appear to be early to middle 19<sup>th</sup> century in age, and of European origin (Jon Carpenter, WAMM, pers. comm.). A piece of flat colourless glass was also recovered.

Noted as fasteners on the plan are copper sheathing tacks, small nails, and in the north-western extremity of the site, a small cluster of iron spikes about 3 cm in length.

The category of organic items includes a wide range of items, some of which may not be related to the original site occupancy. Plotted on the diagram are the locations of oyster shell, red coral, animal bones and fragments of wood. As the wood fragments appeared in association with barrel hoops, it has been surmised that they could be remnants of staves or tops. Specimens from the 1976 and 1988 collections examined by Ian Godfrey (WAMM Conservation) have been identified as pitch pine (*Pinus palustris*), Mill P. *elliotti* Engelm, or *P. Taeda* L), species indigenous to southern North America and the Caribbean region.

A button, field location 1, registration 3368, similar to that collected by Hutchison was received by the 1988 team. An anchor and the inscription 'EQUIPAGE DE LIGNE' are embossed on the face (fig. ?) (photo by Jon Carpenter). A coin, field location 24, registration PS3375 was also collected. The coin is an 1823 French two franc piece, featuring Louis XVIII (fig. ?).

#### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Tentative identification of the historic archaeological site as the *Perseverant* survivors' camp is based on the following criteria. The occupancy of such a camp was reported by the survivors of the wrecked ship. The location is appropriate; it lies in the vicinity of the incident, and it would provide shelter from prevailing winds during March, April and May. Barrels, which may have contained provisions and water would have high salvage priority for shipwreck victims. The

abandonment of these valuable containers suggests an inability to transport them further. Brass buttons with French embellishment support the identification, although their specific origin has yet to be determined. Up to this point, however, there is the question that the camp was that of one of the early French scientific explorers on the coast; de Saint Alloüarn (1772) or de Freycinet (1803-1818). Therefore the presence of the 1823 French coin is significant in narrowing down possible explanation for the site. None of the points mentioned are conclusive in themselves, yet collectively they present a strong case.

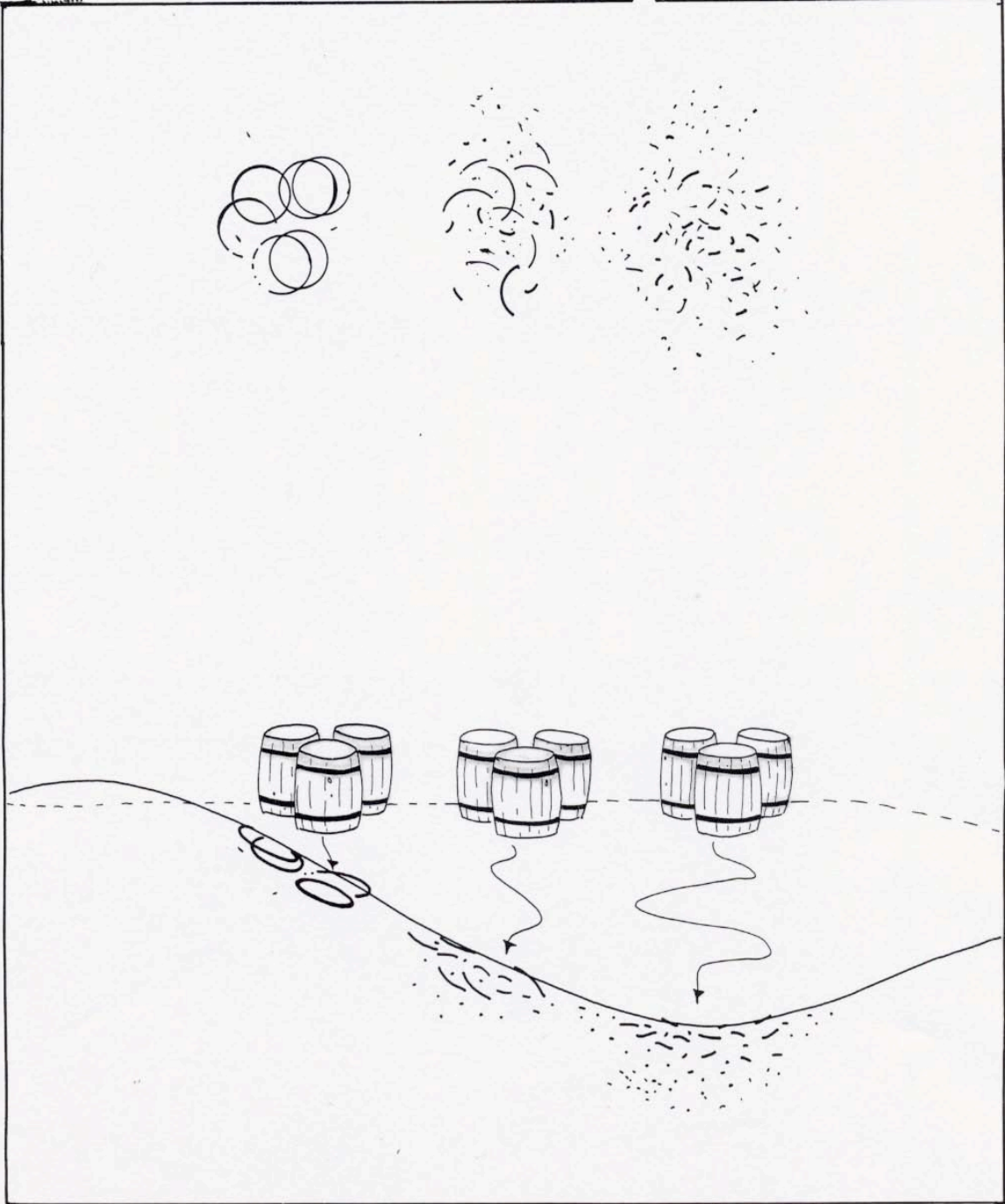
Assuming that this site is the survivors' camp, there are several unanswered questions regarding the circumstances of the wrecking, about those individuals dealing with the crisis. The crew was apparently hasty in leaving what the American whaler *Adeline* described as a ship run ashore with little damage. In ten weeks the Captain and crew recovered little from the ship but barrels. Was there nothing else of survival value to bring to the camp? Did they hope to refloat the vessel? While five died of scurvy, did the rest forage for food? Signal with fire? Quarrel amongst themselves, or with local inhabitants? Did M. Estrade leave an accurate report of events on Dirk Hartog Island in 1841? Where is the ship?

It may be that answers to such questions could appear with further study of the site. An urgency to commence such a study is suggested by the ongoing deterioration of the fragile remnants. Also, a more complete understanding of dynamic processes involved in this degradation may be revealed through excavation. A geomorphologist may have answers to the following questions. How quickly is the process occurring? How much undisturbed material remains *in situ*? Has the site been covered and uncovered several times? How has the area changed since the site was occupied? How does this information help explain conditions at other sites?

The *Perseverant* survivors' camp is potentially a valuable key to the understanding of a historical event, and of natural processes which cover, protect, uncover and destroy archaeological information.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank Graeme Henderson for the opportunity to examine and evaluate the site. The following members of the expedition to Dirk Hartog Island all provided valuable expertise and information: Pat Baker, Jon Carpenter, Dena Garratt, Ian Godfrey, Geoff Kimpton, Mike McCarthy and Captain Tom van Leeuwen. Special thanks to Susan Cox for typing the report. All WAMM staff I had the pleasure to work with proved extremely cooperative and friendly.

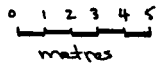


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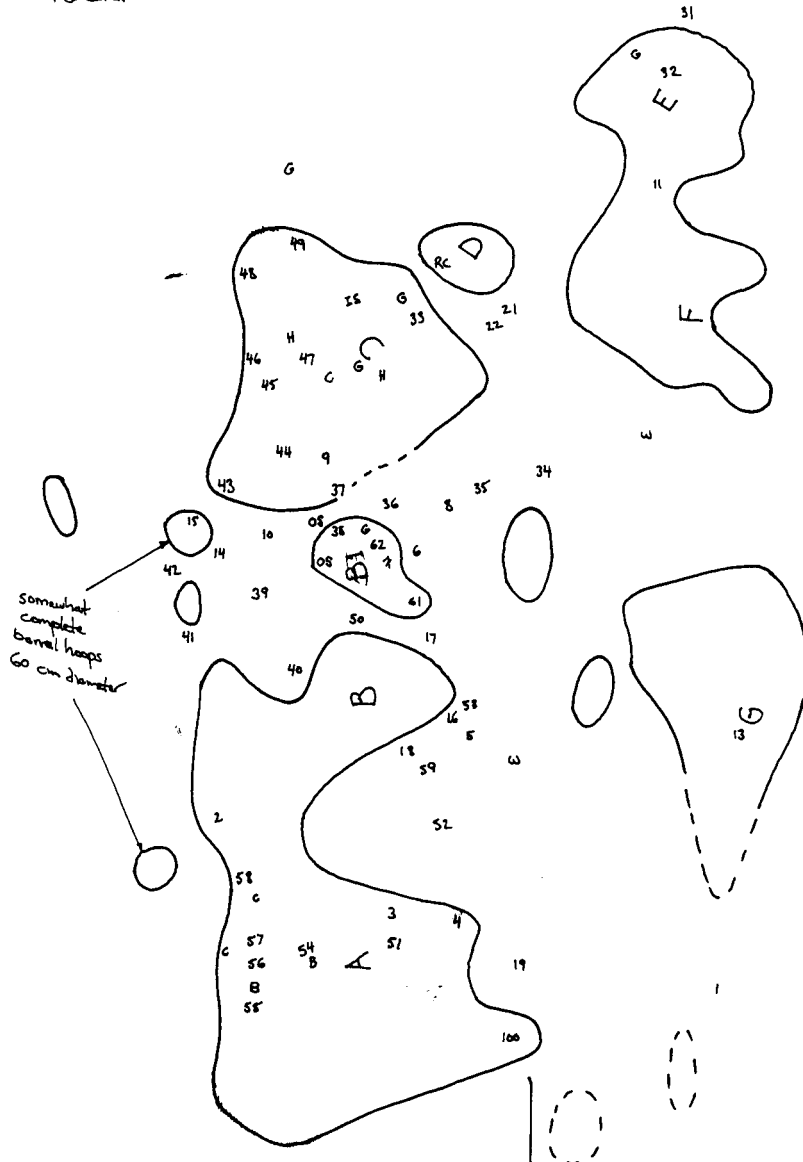
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This drawing has been prepared for Mike McCarthy (as a (nearly) direct copy of the plan made on site.

23  
24



- A large letter indicates direction Jan's photo
- c ceramic frag
- B bone
- w wood
- os oyster shell
- G glass
- IS iron spike(s)
- H iron hinge fragment
- RC red canal








23  
25  
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31

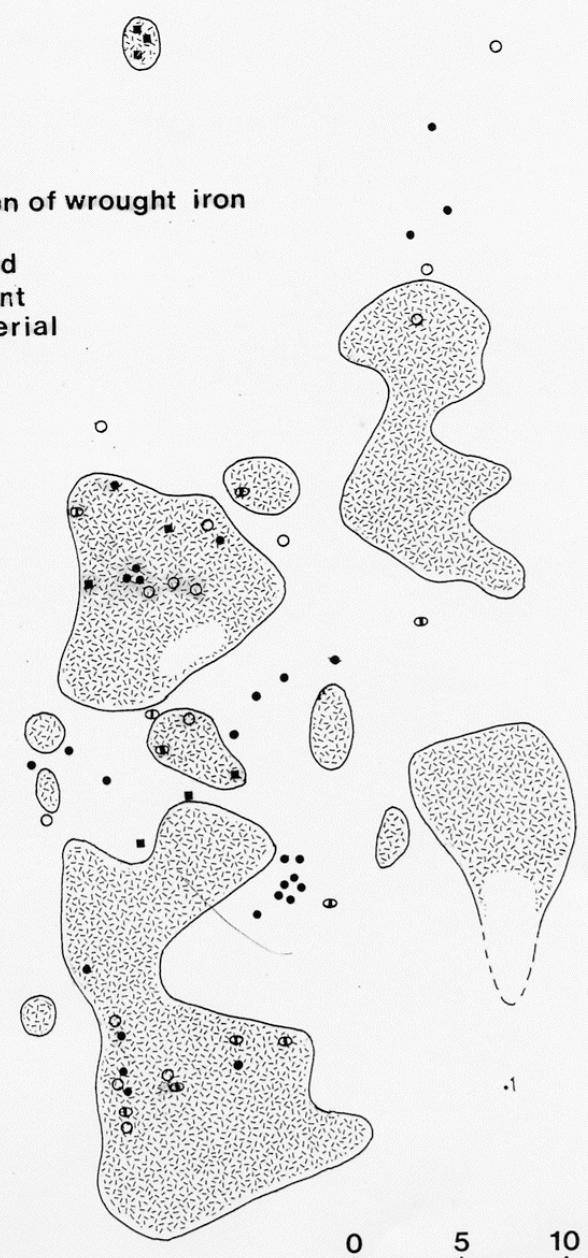
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Summary of  
Preliminary  
Excavations  
1962

Key to symbols

-  concentration of wrought iron fragments
-  ceramic sherd
-  glass fragment
-  organic material
-  fastener



0 5 10  
metres