

THE DUTCHMEN

by Stephen Smith

On the night of the 28th April, 1656, the Dutch ship *Vergulde Draeck* (Guilded Dragon) was wrecked on a reef about 160 kilometres north of present-day Perth.

The ship, sailing from Holland to the East Indies, was carrying 195 passengers and eight chests containing 78,600 Dutch guilders.

The under-steersman and six sailors were sent in a row-boat by Captain Pieter Alberz to fetch help. When they reached Batavia (now Djarkata) two yachts - *Goede Hoop* and *Witte Valck* - were despatched with orders to rescue the survivors and salvage the cargo. But no trace of either people or treasure was found.

The *Vergulde Draeck's* story became an Australian legend.

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1959.

Ben strode along the sandy white track. A crude bamboo fishing rod lay over his shoulder. A "fisherman's box" hung from his hand.

The dense, scrubby heath that surrounded him was starting to thin out. The soft brown of bracken and shrubs slowly gave way to the greyish-green of banksias and casuarinas. An occasional kangaroo-paw added a dash of crimson.

He was nearly at the cliff-top. The crash of breakers grew steadily louder.

A wallaby bounded from the undergrowth in fright. Its legs pushed it into the air; its tail pounded the ground.

The cliff-top cut straight through land and air. To the east lay the bush, full of warbling magpies, cackling wattletails and twittering wrens. To the west there was a hundred odd feet of space, with the whirling, sucking, greedy sea at the bottom.

A rough trail wormed its way down the almost sheer cliff-face. It was a dangerous path, thin and crumbly and littered with loose shale that slid when Ben put his foot down.

At the bottom he deftly baited his hook and clambered over to his favourite spot.

He flicked his rod, hearing the line whisper out.

The sun slipped slightly further below the horizon.

Rocks towered over him, huge, hunched, jagged things, black against the pink sunset.

The sky dissolved to a deep red. It would soon be dark.

Mist. Wispy tendrils of whiteness creeping down the cliff, wafting through the cracks. The beginnings of a heavy fog.

Ben drew his shoulders closer together, feeling the comforting woolen jumper. It was going to be cold, he thought.

Grey waves curled to foam over the reef and came crashing through the rocks, swirling into rock-pools. Washing out, repeating the rolling motions again and again.

The rhythm went on, lulling, familiarly.

Ben loosened his tense muscles and leaned against the "fisherman's box".

Jerking furiously, the line came to life, dancing through water and air.

Tugging, twisting, dragging.

He pulled his line around, playing the fish, wearing it out.

Enormous pressure in every direction.

Suddenly limpness.

He laughed quietly and whirled the hook in. The bait, of course, was gone.

Once again the line whispered out; once again Ben sat back to wait.

The trees on the cliff-top were beginning to fade, shrouded by the mist.

Far across the ocean he could see rain, dropping down in gentle clouds.

The line remained limp.

Wind, more a breeze, breathed across the beach. Friendly, thought Ben.

The first stars burnt blue in the sky, steady, unchanging, winking down on the old fisherman.

With the stars the isolation disappeared. The miles of tough, hardy bush faded. The loneliness became filled with friends. Friends who never let you down, friends who were always there.

People must think I'm batty. "Mad Ben" who talks to the stars they probably say... He chuckled at the thought.

The mist had thickened. A blanket. Icy hands sliding round his neck, fingertips chillingly touching his face.

A shiver rippled down his back.

Out at sea he could see a light. A funny light, flickering as if it were a flame.

It was getting closer, venturing foolishly near the reef.

Ben shouted a warning into the blackness but it was swallowed by the roar of the waves.

Still the ship came on, so close he could make out the vague outline. Spray rising as it furrowed into the reef.

Ben hardly felt the rod drop from his hands and disappear beneath the waves.

Flaming lamps illuminated men in crude clothes, the kind that were worn hundreds of years ago.

An horrific mix of empty shadows and terrified white wrapped itself around the deck. A sail ballooned out into the night.

Someone shouting soundlessly, desperation streaking his face.

People running everywhere - naked children, men and women in fancy clothes, praying sailors.

A row-boat was lowered over the edge as the ship crunched through the reef and towards the rocks. Seven shadows dropping down, hastily settling themselves, heaving on the oars.

Memories rushed through the fisherman's mind. He had seen those people and the golden letters flowing across the ship's hull fifty years ago - in history books.

Dutchmen...

They never saw him, never saw anything. Just stared into space with unseeing eyes. As if they were in another world, another time. As if they were ghosts...

Ben shuddered and tried to scream as the ship smashed into the rocks. Wood, metal and bodies flew through the air.

As the first pieces of wreckage hit the ground, everything faded. The scene that had taken place centuries ago, vanished.

And Ben, trying to stand, fell, knocking himself unconscious.

Fingers of grey light reached over the horizon.

Ben crouched motionless, looking at the rocks, trying to remember if he had been dreaming. Must have been. Old age was getting to him.

He got up, stretching his stiff joints.

Lucky the tide had gone down instead of up overnight.

He hefted the "fisherman's box" up and scrambled across to the trail.

In a crevice something small flashed gold as the sun rose over the calm ocean.

Dropping the box, he bent down.

A coin...

He picked it up. He recognized the writing as the old Dutch shown in his school books. Maybe he was hallucinating...

But the coin felt solid and real in his hand.

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In 1963 skindivers found fragments of the Vergulde Draeck's wreck and a number of gold coins scattered through the reef.

But what became of the survivors and the remaining treasure is still a mystery.