

The Avaneta

Hugh Gill (62) owner of the Avaneta and Symond Bevan Hahn (33) skipper both of Mandurah went missing while cray fishing on Thursday night March 7, 1968.

The two men had last been sighted moving craypots some 25 miles (36km) from Halls Head. An intensive search by local fishermen, a Dakota from RAAF Peace, horsemen on the beach and a coastal sweep by a flotilla of yachts returning from Bunbury's Koombana Regatta failed to turn up any clues.

The disappearance was a mystery and deepened as time passed with no sign of the 30 foot (9m), 22 year old vessel.

The first sign of the missing cray boat Avaneta was on Monday night March 18 by Fisherman Salvitorio Raffa of Rockingham. He handed to the Mandurah police a wooden crayfish sorting box measuring 30 inch x 18 inch x 20 inches (76cm x 46cm x 51cm) with 2 floats attached, bearing the Avaneta's number M63, found about 4 miles (6km) north from Mr Gill's and Mr Hahn's last known position.

These were identified as being part of the boats gear by a friend who worked on the boat some years ago. Fishermen believe that the box went to the bottom with the Avaneta but broke loose and came to the surface during heavy weather over the weekend.

Local fisherman John Layton recalls that after a couple of weeks of searching, about 40 floats were found and in amongst them was the aerial of Hugh Gill's boat, a box with M63 branded on it and other gear from the boat. A float with a big Rangoon cane pole and a black flag on it was placed at the location. By the time divers were brought in, the float had broken off and was found near Rottnest. The location was lost.

Ann Layton, local resident recalls the theory of some cray fishermen. They believe that while Hugh and Bevan went in the cabin for a coffee, that a large unexpected wave hit the boat, tossing the stern in the air causing the craypots that were stacked there to be sent forward and locking them in the cabin. The two men would have been trapped as the boat capsized or was swamped.

John Layton, local fisherman and resident of Mandurah worked with Hugh as his skipper for several cray fishing seasons between Safety Bay and Mandurah.

John recalls a time when he wasn't working with Hugh, that the skipper and Hugh got lost. When he found them, he told them to follow him. They took a wrong turn twice. The second time a wave hit the boat and it sank. John saved Hugh, who couldn't swim and the echo sounder and two way radio from the boat.

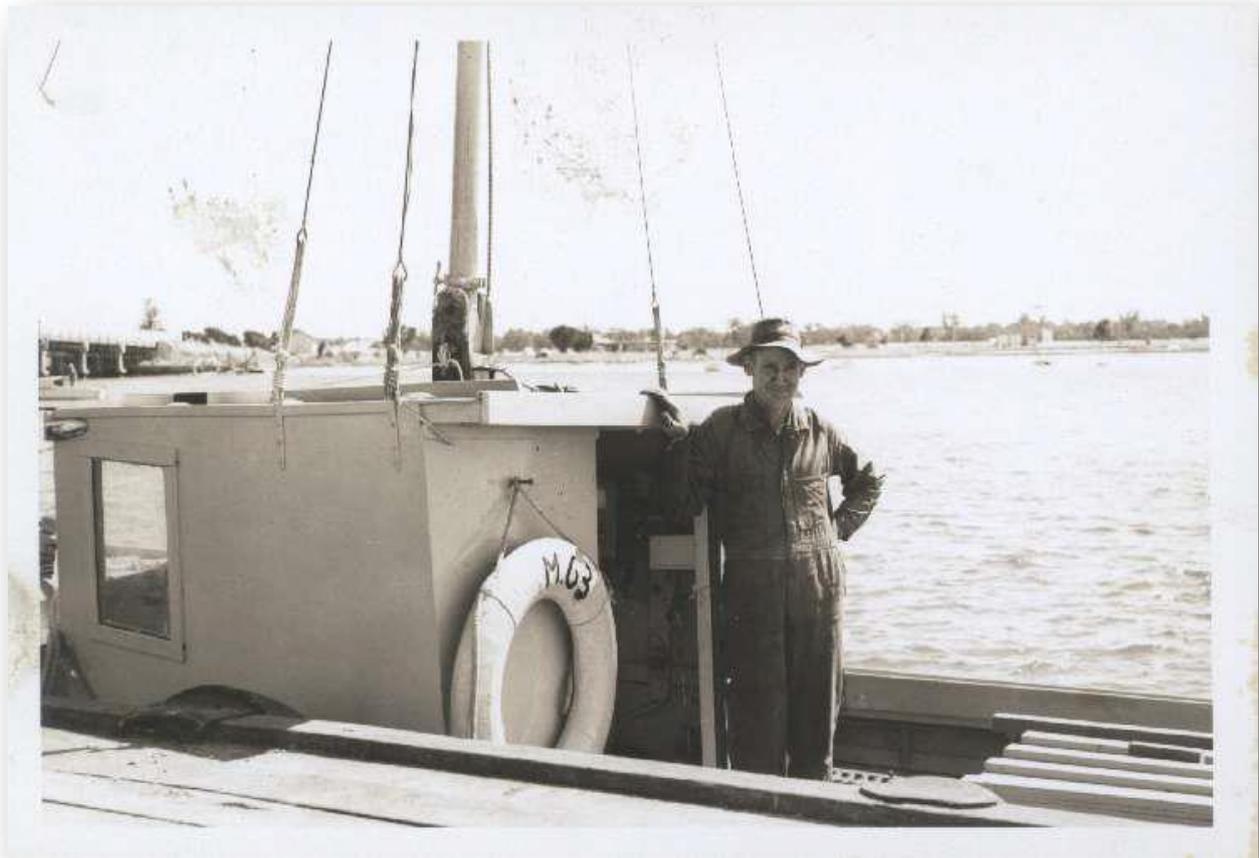


The Avaneta continued

The next day John pulled the boat out of the river. Hugh repaired the damaged hull of the boat but without foam which would have made it unsinkable. Hugh said he would put foam in it after the crayfish season.

The next season the boat was beached. John helped free the boat. Shovels were used; ropes attached to another boat for pulling and man power for pushing the boat. It was checked over and it continued with the crayfish season.

John noticed the next season the stern tube was leaking water into the boat. Hugh said it was alright. It was the next day he disappeared.



Whatever happened to the Avaneta and her crew is a mystery that is unlikely to be solved.

References: Local newspaper articles and Ann & John Layton's Oral History.

