



museum without walls

MANDURAH COMMUNITY MUSEUM

Drowning Tragedy of a Priest and Three Nuns

Drowning

On the afternoon of January 28th 1959 the tragic deaths by drowning of one young Irish Catholic Priest and three Irish Presentation Sisters occurred in the Peel Inlet.

The four who lost their lives were Father Joseph Gerard O'Hara (age 29), Mother Patricia Lynch (age 50), Mother Finbarr Tarrant (age 37) and Sister Joachim Delahunty (age 26). The two survivors were Sister Aquinas McMahon and Sister Augustine Goodchild.

Father O'Hara and the Sisters had been holidaying at the Presentation Convent at Mandurah. A picnic had been arranged at South Yunderup. The sun was shining and they were in full regalia, big sleeves, heavy garments, shoes, the lot.

Half the group had driven by car to the picnic spot by Ann Coughlan, the teenage daughter of the proprietor of the Brighton Hotel, the remainder had travelled by river. A few days previously Father O'Hara had purchased a 10ft 6in (3.5m) fibre-glass dinghy. After the picnic, those who travelled by road, took their turn in the boat for the journey home. What began as a beautiful Mandurah summer's day in 1959 ended in the loss of four lives.

They left Yunderup at about 4:30pm but soon the water started getting a little rougher and splashing the side of the boat. As they went along the wind and waves increased. They had a lolly tin and started to bail out some of the water as it was coming in. At about 5:30pm there was suddenly a vicious squall, the boat reared up and before they knew it they were struggling in the water.

Mother Patricia almost instantly had a heart attack as the boat upturned, she drifted away and drowned. Sister Joachim was also floating in the water dead. The other three nuns and the priest clung to the side of the upturned boat. Even though they could not swim and they were hampered by their heavy garments they remained calm and prayed as it slowly got dark. As the moon rose their hopes of being rescued rose.

Soon they heard a boat and saw a searchlight sweeping the water. They called out but no one heard them. At about midnight the water got very rough and they were all submerged again. Father O'Hara got weaker and weaker and Mother Finbarr was sick from swallowing water. They were the next to disappear. Sister Augustine and Sister Aquinas managed to cling weakly onto the upturned boat throughout the night.

The two Sisters continued praying through the long night. Sister Augustine was getting weaker and turning purple from the cold. Sister Aquinas held onto Sister Augustine with one hand and held onto the boat with the other hand. Their faces, ears and eyes were burning from the petrol and the salt water.

At 5:00am it got light again. Each hour of hanging on was terrible.

Finally at 10:00am the rescuers found them, approximately 17 hours after being capsized in the choppy, dark, cold water.



Drowning Tragedy of a Priest and Three Nuns- cont'd

Rescue

When the group had not returned by 7:30pm Father Franz Edward Hope, the Mandurah parish priest alerted the police and a search party was organized. The party searched over land and water until 3:00am. The search was then continued at 5:00am the next morning.

That evening and night, Ann Coughlan and Dudley Tuckey searched the shoreline on horseback to see if Father O'Hara had put ashore. Constable Charles Buckley, Father Hope and Dion Layton left by car to visit Coodanup, Furnissdale and Yunderup in case they had put ashore on the north side of the inlet. Fisherman John Layton went in a boat and his brother George Layton with Constable John Kiely went in another boat.

At 5:00am the next morning 29th January 1959 John Layton and Dudley Tuckey and four other boats went out again.

Two Yunderup fishermen Alfred and Joseph Okamoto, who didn't know that a search was on found the body of a nun about two miles (4.4 km) off Coodanup at 7:00am when they were inspecting their nets. They took the body to the police and returned to help with the search.

The other rescuers went to the Coodanup area and at about 10:00am John Layton and Dudley Tuckey sighted the upturned dinghy. As they approached they saw the two nuns clinging to the upturned boat.

The two rescued sisters were treated at Mandurah by Dr W.Chapman and were later taken to St John of God Hospital, Subiaco, suffering extreme exhaustion and shock.

Father O'Hara's body was discovered under the boat tangled in a rope attached to the outboard motor, another was also found under the boat and the remaining body was found floating about 25 yards (25m) away.

Summing Up

Father O'Hara was not an experienced boatman and would not have realised the danger of overloading such a small dinghy. He was unfamiliar with the estuary and its waterways. There were no life jackets on board and none of the people on board could swim.

Unfortunately, sometimes it takes a tragedy like this one to make people aware of needs required in a community and to bring about change. Shortly after this accident a rescue service was formed and a water patrol officer appointed to Mandurah.

Stained Glass Memorial Window

A magnificent triangular stained glass window created for the Church of Our Lady's Assumption in Creery St in 1994 is both a memorial and a tribute to those involved in the search and for the young priest and three nuns who drowned.

The window tells the story of that fateful day.

The empty boat in the foreground is pointing to the central figure of Jesus walking on the water with his hand outstretched in welcome. The lantern is symbolic of Nano Nagle (the founder of the Presentation Order of nuns) and those who searched through the night. The pelican is symbolic of the wetlands of Mandurah and the Celtic cross represents the birthplace of the Priest and the Irish Nuns, as well as the Southern Cross representing their adopted country.



Artwork

The artwork at the Mandurah Performing Arts Centre serves as a reminder of what was arguably the district's greatest tragedy.

