



Niagara Lifeboat in situ Heritage Park, April 2026 / Whangārei Museum Collection 2015.38.1

HERITAGE NEW ZEALAND VISITS THE NIAGARA LIFEBOAT

The Whangārei Museum – the guardian of 100,000 objects – is about to launch a restoration project on one of its largest pieces, a lifeboat from one of the most storied ships that ever sailed New Zealand's waters and beyond.

The Niagara – known as the 'Princess of the Pacific' – was once New Zealand's flagship liner, though she met an untimely end in June 1940 after hitting a German mine and sinking off Bream Head, carrying with her a cargo of irreplaceable gold bars and a huge stash of ammunition.

The impressive wooden lifeboat – a remnant of the Niagara's glory days and a survivor of that fateful explosion – now sits under a permanent shelter at Whangārei Museum ready to be restored back to her original condition.

"The Niagara holds many significant national stories. It also has a strong connection to Whangārei – having sunk off Bream Head on the Northland coast, with the city later serving as a base for the 1941 salvage operation. We're lucky to have it represented in the Museum's Collection," says Whangārei Museum Registrar, Ornithira Khamna.

"The lifeboat is a tangible link to important moments in New Zealand's history, including of course its untimely destruction in the first year of World War II. As we approach Anzac day, it's a timely reminder of the impact of the war on our shores and the importance of preserving and sharing these stories for future generations."

The RMS Niagara story is the stuff of legend. Launched in 1912 she was originally billed as 'The Titanic of the Pacific' – before the actual Titanic hit an iceberg and sunk on its maiden voyage. Wisely, her soubriquet was changed to the 'Princess of the Pacific' in time for her launch.

"She couldn't quite shake off the Titanic reference completely, however. The now-defunct Auckland Star described the Niagara as "an unsinkable ship" – the same words used to describe the Titanic before her untimely demise," says Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga volunteer, Jack Kemp, who has researched the ship.



*Original decoration from a gala onboard the Niagara (1937)
Whangārei Museum Collection 19875.8*

“The Niagara delivered on its media hype, however, setting records for trans-Tasman crossings and earning a reputation for reliability and stability in all weathers.”

Her prestige took a bit of a hit when an outbreak of Spanish flu emerged during a voyage from Vancouver to Auckland in October 1918 however. By the time the ship docked at Auckland, she was firmly in the grip of the virus which had been misdiagnosed as regular influenza by doctors on board – though suspicions about the virus being Spanish Flu persisted.

Minister of Health, George Russell – perhaps influenced by the fact that Prime Minister William Massey and Minister of Finance Joseph Ward were on board – advised the Governor General that Spanish Flu was not a notifiable disease and that he therefore could not quarantine the Niagara.

“Russell made the call to give clearance to disembark the ship,” says Jack.

“Immediately 28 patients were transferred to Auckland City Hospital, with a further nine cases over the next week. As a result, 160 of the hospital’s 180 nurses were infected, and two died. The Spanish Flu had well and truly arrived in New Zealand.”

An Influenza Epidemic Commission established in 1919 investigated the impact the ships Niagara and Makura may have played in bringing the virus to New Zealand. One witness, Dr Milson of the New Zealand Division of the British Medical Association, was clear where the blame fell, stating that the “Niagara was the cause of the epidemic in New Zealand”.

The Niagara, however, may have been pipped at the post by an earlier outbreak at Auckland’s Narrow Neck military camp where the first Spanish Flu case was reported on September 30. Nevertheless, the Commission’s interim report suggested that the Niagara’s arrival with Spanish Flu cases onboard was a “substantial factor” in its spread.

“Over the next two decades the Niagara continued to ply its pan-Pacific trade linking Auckland with Sydney, Canada, Suva and Honolulu – largely without drama,” says Jack.



John O'Hare and Jack Kemp review artefacts from the Whangārei Museum Collection

There was one exception in 1937, however. Three hundred cases of Chinese fireworks were being loaded into the hold in Sydney when one case exploded. Dock workers were blown through the air – five were injured, and one later died from his wounds. The incident would foreshadow the Niagara’s explosive end.

“In June 1940 the German raider Orion laid a field of over 220 contact mines across the mouth of the Hauraki Gulf, the entrance to our largest port at Auckland,” he says.

“Although a number of ships had arrived and left Auckland without incident it would only be a week before an unsuspecting vessel would set off one of the mines.”

That ship was the Niagara, which struck a mine off Bream Head. Crew and passengers watched her stern rising clear of the water then diving – Titanic-style – to her final resting place on the edge of the Hauraki Gulf Marine Park. One passenger, Hazel Royd, recorded the sight: “Even the men caught their breath as, like a great shadow in the night, she vanished from view”. The explosion ended a maritime career that had traversed 4.6 million kilometres.

Thankfully everyone on board was safely evacuated onto lifeboats, though initially there were fears for Aussie, the ship's cat, who refused to join the passengers and crew in the lifeboats.

According to the New Zealand Maritime Museum, Aussie survived by clinging to a water tank which eventually washed up on the beach at Hora Hora. Aussie, now caked in sticky fuel that was floating on the sea surface, headed to a shed where he attempted to sleep off his ordeal. A farmer found him, however, and put him into a sack to clean the oil from his fur, though Aussie was having none of it. He escaped – and no doubt survived for years to come on his wits.

“The unique cargo that went down with the ship sent chills throughout senior military and Government officials in Wellington, however,” says Jack.

“590 gold bars from South Africa – a payment from the United Kingdom to the United States for munitions – along with half of New Zealand's stock of small arms ammunition en route to Britain via Canada now lay at the bottom of the ocean.”

Losing a shipload of ammo during wartime was a big enough problem – but a cargo of gold bars for war payments was a ‘next-level’ disaster. A measure of how keen the powers-that-be were to recover the gold was reflected in a reward offered by the Bank of England – £27,000 plus 2.5 percent of the total value of any gold recovered.

“The Royal Australian Navy dismissed the possibility of salvaging the gold out of hand – though a syndicate from Melbourne indicated that they were keen to chance their arm,” he says.

“The United Salvage Syndicate set about securing use of the Claymore, a rusting old tub moored in Auckland harbour and one of the only ships available during wartime.”

The Claymore was missing a propellor blade and her hull needed constant patching – though those would be the least of the team's challenges. More pressing was how to get hold of 590 gold bars sitting room below the surface of the ocean.

“The team constructed a diving bell made from manganese bronze with several small quartz portholes designed to withstand the huge pressure. Cylindrical with a bulbous top, one man could squeeze in with only a rickety telephone line connecting him with the surface,” says Jack.

“The Claymore eventually found the Niagara by dragging her anchor over the sea bed – an imprecise method which also located two other mines laid by the Orion. Fortunately the Claymore avoided being sunk, though the most hair-raising moment came when the diving chamber, complete with diver inside, became fouled with the anchor wire of one of the mines.”

Expert seamanship and a bit of luck managed to stave off disaster.

On February 2 1941, the wreck of the Niagara was found and salvage work began. The team used the ship's grab to tear open a side of the hull and, with a man in the diving bell guiding the grab via the telephone line, was eventually able to expose the Niagara's strong room.

“In October the team blasted open the strong room door using explosives, and the first two gold bars were recovered on October 13. By December 8 the salvage ended with 555 of the gold bars safely recovered.”

In 1953 the job was almost completed when a second salvage team managed to retrieve 30 of the 35 remaining gold bars. Five bars still remain unaccounted for to this day.

Less of a priority, however, has been the need to retrieve the tonnes of oil that are still believed to remain on the wreck, making the Niagara a potential ticking environmental time-bomb. Some oil has leached out over the years – but, it is feared, not all.

“For many years, the Niagara connected New Zealand to the rest of the world. Now her story provides us with a link to the past,” says Ornthira.

“The Niagara lifeboat is an important part of that link.”

STORY - JOHN O'HARE (HERITAGE NEW ZEALAND POUHERE TAONGA)
RESEARCH - JACK KEMP

APRIL 2026



HERITAGE NEW ZEALAND
POUHERE TAONGA



What comes next? This exciting project is generating a lot of interest from our community keen to get stuck in and tidy it up. As a collection object of local, national and international significance, our goal is to have the lifeboat restored to its best self. The next step will be having it assessed by a museum level conservator to make recommendations on the pathway forward. There may be opportunities to volunteer or become involved in other ways, so keep an eye on our social media as we embark on this special journey.

@museumofwhangarei on Instagram or @kiwinorth on Facebook



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