

Rangitiki was in many ways the pride of the sailing ships, being one of the largest ever owned by the company, a record pace-maker, and completing an astonishing career of some 60 years' service. *Scimitar* had been built in 1863 by Martin Samuelson of Hull for Finlay Campbell and Co.; by 1872 she had been transferred to J. K. Welch, from whom she was purchased by The N.Z.S. Co. in 1873. Her name was changed to *Rangitiki* by the middle of 1874. Her dimensions were approximately 210 feet by 35 feet by 23 feet. She was an iron ship of 1,227 gross tons. Her rig was changed from that of a clipper ship to a barque after 1889.

Scimitar retained her name for her first voyage under the company's flag. *The Otago Daily Times* described her arrival on 6 March 1874: 'We have to report that the *Scimitar* is a remarkably handsome vessel, being purchased in December 1873 . . . subsequently put into dry-dock and received a thorough overhaul – nearly a re-rig from deck to truck. Most of her spars are new. That she is a clipper is evident by the remarkable passage she has made from Plymouth, the quickest on record – the time being 67 days from land to land.' In fact, the passage from Plymouth to Port Chalmers, port to port, had taken 71 days, a record which stood for more than 25 years, until 1900. Her land to land time for this voyage was, however, bettered by one day in 1888 by Shaw Savill's *Westland*. Altogether, *Rangitiki* was an extraordinarily and consistently fast clipper; in 1876 she completed a round voyage to New Zealand in just under seven months. On the same voyage, she covered 345 miles in one day – an average of 14½ knots – a speed not far short of her later motor-ship namesake!

The voyage of 1873–74 was notable, however, for reasons other than speed. The combined effect of scarlet fever, bronchitis, measles, diarrhoea and variola accounted for no less than 26 deaths. However, in spite of these calamities, there was a brighter side. *The Otago Daily Times* continues: 'Hymen's torch was also kindled on a memorable Sabbath when a strapping young Norwegian named Michael Olson was spliced by Captain Fox in a sailor-like manner to Matthia Christenson also of Norwegian birth . . . much pleasant hilarity was occasioned by the circumstance.' There were also four births on the voyage; Dr Hoskings, with some reason therefore, remarked: 'What between reading divine service every Sunday, the marriage, the baptisms and burying so many, there was enough work on the passage to have kept a parson employed.' Generally, the press report concludes: 'Both the Doctor and Captain spoke in high terms of the emigrants that were on board. . . . The appearance of the emigrants was also in their favour. The women looked healthy and comely, a few of the men were stalwart, whilst the majority seemed wanting in physique (*sic*), at least of those who lined the ship's bulwark [on arrival] the majority were undersized and wore the expression of life in large towns.'

The incidents which were experienced on two voyages of the *Rangitiki* are gruesome reminders of the hazards of navigation in the days of the sailing ships.¹ During the outward passage of 1883, according to a passenger 'we sighted what we took to be a raft with five human beings on it, all awash. The lifeboat was lowered, and we rescued two men who had been on a deck house (not a raft) for two days and nights. Eight men scrambled on this house when they left the wreck of the *Kenmore Castle*, but six were washed off.' Later, seven men were rescued from another wreck, the barquentine *Maria Agathe*: 'It was very risky work owing to the heavy seas. . . . We had to get close enough to the wreck's lee quarter to allow one man at a time to jump in and then back away as the lifeboat at one time would be almost level with the ship's rail, and three seconds later 20 feet below.' The last rescue on this voyage occurred when a doctor aboard *Rangitiki* was called to tend 'a young fellow [aboard the *James Grimsby*] who had been suffering with a broken arm for 28 days. The arm was amputated and the man greatly relieved.'

The tragedies of the other voyage (in 1897) were presaged in melodramatic fashion – a cat which had jumped aboard the *Rangitiki* from a wool-lighter in Napier had next day leapt to its death from a porthole. The following morning a great wind arose from the east, and in spite of the fact that all the cable was out the ship started dragging towards the shore. Captain Pottinger was just considering how the heavy strain could be eased on the windlass when a huge sea crashed on board, carrying away the after end of the deck house and hurling him into the sea. His body was recovered, but his neck was found to be broken, death having apparently been instantaneous.

With the advent of steam, *Rangitiki* was one of the last of the sailing ships to be disposed of by the company, passing to the control of Skibsacties Dalston, Norwegian owners, in 1899 and renamed by them *Dalston*. She disappeared from Lloyd's in 1911, but was subsequently sold to a French owner and named *Paul Bouket*, taken to Noumea and used as a hulk. She was reported as being in use in Australian waters between 1914–18 and, after the war, returned to Noumea.

Rangitiki had a unique career – only half of it in fact with The N.Z.S. Co. Her record as a great and gracious clipper is neatly summed up by *The Lyttelton Times* on her arrival after an extremely fast land to land passage of 67 days in 1876: 'The appearance of the vessel was everything that could be wished for.'