

Argonaut II (conversation with Anthea 'Debra' Moon nee Foletta)

The Argonaut II was 174 to 200 tons, 132 ft with bow sprit¹. She was also known as the 'beer boat' as she used to deliver beer from Tasmania to the mainland, as well as timber and other mixed cargo. She was built in 1947 in St Helens, Tasmania. The Argonaut II also worked at the Truganina Explosive Reserve up until it closed around 1961.

My stepfather bought her in 1961, and we moved onto the boat not long after he had done some renovations, turning it into a 'home', I was only four years old. At this time, we did fishing charters and cruises around Port Phillip Bay. Altona was one of a few regular fishing spots for paying customers, along with Portarlington, Sorrento, Portsea, and Hastings. By 1964, what had been my home was now converted into a fully licensed floating restaurant (circa 1966), offering popular dinner dance cruises. It was hugely successful in Melbourne. Business lunches were a specialty, and it wasn't uncommon for businessmen to fly in from all over Australia to do their deals over a good meal.

In 1974, we sailed her to Magnetic Island, being encouraged by the Townsville Tourist Organisation. She operated out of this area for about the next four or five years. We anchored the Argonaut II at Horseshoe Bay, about 150 meters off the shore of the town of the same name. There are so many stories to tell from these days. Many celebrities spent time there, including Olivia Newton John for one. We operated the restaurant and cruises out from Magnetic Island until one fateful night in August 1978.

I remember the knock on the door of our house and hearing Argo was on fire! We jumped in the car and drove 8 km across the hilly island to Horseshoe Bay. As we rounded the last corner on the top of the hill, we saw the giant fiery plumes in the night sky.

My heart thumped so hard in my chest and tears sprung to my eyes ... I remember mum patting me on the knee and saying, "Hold strong, let's see what happens" But I knew Argo was gone with every fibre of my being. That plume said it all...200 tons of solid Tasmanian timbers and all those gas cylinders!

On arrival at the beach, I leapt out of the car and was immediately swarmed by crowds of well-wishers, friends and tourists all offering hugs and/or a word of comfort...

I was speechless. I stood there, the waves lapping gently over my feet as I tried to take in the spectacle before me.

I remember just standing there, hands on hips and no words coming out of my mouth. People were talking to me, but I couldn't even hear them properly! I was having trouble understanding what I was seeing. Truly surreal!

Both masts were alight (the tallest being 84ft). All the rigging was burning too, the bow sprit and the cross beams. The portholes and windows up top and what was left of the upper superstructure such as the wheelhouse and the top cabin, all glowing in gold - honestly it was really spectacular. Even if I could hardly breathe. I remember writing sometime later that if it wasn't for the personal loss involved, it looked like there was some incredible party going on out there.

¹ A Sprit is a small pole or spar crossing a fore-and-aft sail diagonally from the mast to the upper aftermost corner, serving to extend the sail.

She looked beautiful being all lit up like that. And my heart was breaking. I had never felt so helpless and confused in my life. (I'd turned 21 the previous May and it was to be the penultimate event for Argonaut II).

I could not fathom all that water and there was nothing we could do...It didn't make sense at the time! I even felt offended, others were moving their boats instead of helping and doing something about ours! But at the same time, I knew it was impossible to save her. I understand the first explosions rattled windows 2 km away.

I stood and watched my entire childhood burn...and my future. I had never imagined my life without her. Argonaut II was my home from age 4 - 21 and she was going to be mine one day. When I lost her, I lost my entire future. I still miss her. I think of her often. I was blessed to have such great adventures and travels. I mean, the ocean was my backyard and dolphins were my friends!!

There were also reports from fisherman in the area who had seen a boat go to Horseshoe Bay. Not long after it left, it returned to the port. The first cylinder went up some time later. These fishermen also said that they could see the plume way out at sea glowing against the night sky. Nothing came of this information.

When she burnt and sank, the superstructure was towed out to sea. Today, the hull has become an artificial reef in Horseshoe Bay for all kinds of tropical marine life. Still serving!! :)

I am so delighted and proud to think Argo has a place forever in my memory of her. She brought a lot of joy and what a privilege to have been the one to grow up on her.

<http://nquec.org.au/dive-sites-other-wrecks>

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