

The Sinking of the *Capitaine Torres*¹

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Every time I hear the song “Captain Torres” by James Keelaghan, I cry. Once the story is known, how could anyone not? One of the most evocative tellings of the story is James’s own, which you can hear on YouTube.² But here it is in a nutshell: On December 7, 1989, a cargo ship from the French-speaking area of the South Pacific ran into trouble when they lost their engines in a nasty storm in the Cabot Strait, not too far from Sydney, Nova Scotia. They radioed the Coast Guard for assistance, but it could not be provided due to the storm conditions, and they were told to ride it out as best they could. They managed for a while, but then a rogue wave hit them, the ship split along the keel, and they knew that they were going down. They knew they wouldn’t survive in the lifeboats but they figured they had 90 minutes before they had to try to abandon ship. They radioed the Coast Guard again. They understood that they wouldn’t receive help in time. Instead, they asked the Coast Guard to help them make sea-to-land phone calls to each crew member’s loved one for a final two-minute goodbye. Keelaghan recorded a long two-minute outro to the song to represent the length of one of those goodbye phone calls. He didn’t know what one would have sounded like, so he had Cyrano de Bergerac’s last letter to Roxanne read in spoken word over it.

He began performing the song at festivals all over the world some 10 years after the event, and he heard from a woman in New South Wales after a concert he played in Brisbane, Australia. Apparently, she found the story vaguely familiar and was explaining it to some of her neighbours who had come over for tea. One stopped her and said, “The reason you find that story so eerily familiar is that my husband was the captain. And because he was the captain, he never had a chance to call me.” She was six months pregnant at the time. Keelaghan promptly sent a copy of the CD, explaining that he wasn’t trying to profit from the crew’s tragedy, but rather that he wanted to honour their memory by telling their story. Most Canadians are completely unaware of the story because of the timing: December 6, 1989, was the date of the Montreal Massacre, and it eclipsed all other news stories for days afterwards. The captain’s widow said she couldn’t bring herself to listen to the song, but she planned to give it to her daughter when she was old enough.

When I interviewed Keelaghan about the song (this interview was published recently in *Canadian Folk Music* 46/3 [2012]), I asked him how he heard

about the *Capitaine Torres*. He explained that Silver Donald Cameron had written briefly about it in his book about travelling around Cape Breton, *Wind, Whales, and Whisky: A Cape Breton Voyage* (1991). Cameron heard the story from a man at a jetty somewhere just as he was about to take members of two of victims’ families out on the water to lay a wreath. The brother of one of the sailors threw the wreath out onto the water, turned to Donald Cameron and said, “Le mer ne pardonne pas.” “The sea does not forgive.” This line became the starting point for Keelaghan’s song.

Peter Gzowski interviewed Silver Donald Cameron on the CBC one day, and Cameron told the story of the *Capitaine Torres*. Keelaghan’s sister heard the interview and told her brother about it, knowing that it would make a great song. That’s how Keelaghan first heard the tale.

So that’s the story. It’s the story that makes me cry whenever I hear the song. But it doesn’t end there. I recently worked with a student at Cape Breton University whose father, it turns out, was on duty at the Canadian Coast Guard the night the *Capitaine Torres* went down. He claimed that there were no two-minute phone calls that night. He said that the ship was listing too heavily to allow it.

A mystery! Which account was correct?

I discovered that the Coast Guard published a report of an investigation into the circumstances of the sinking of the *Capitaine Torres*, and I eagerly read it, seeking “the truth” of the events of December 7 and 8, 1989. The report supports the student’s father: there is absolutely no mention of any personal phone calls being arranged. The report gives a “blow-by-blow” account of everything known to have happened on the fateful night, including documentation of each contact with the *Capitaine Torres*.

This is what the report tells us. The ship had been built in 1979 and named the *Sunny Isabella*. In October 1989, new owners registered it in Vanuatu as the *Capitaine Torres*. A new crew of 23 boarded the *Torres* in Germany, sailing for Illinois in order to pick up and transport a dismantled steel mill to Taiwan. Although the engine and propulsion machinery had been maintained to the standards required by the Classification Society right up until the transfer in ownership, the crew experienced numerous problems with the equipment on the transatlantic voyage, and after setting sail from Illinois back through the Great Lakes.

When the *Capitaine Torres* left its last port of call in Quebec on December 6, the weather conditions were fair, but Environment Canada had issued a storm and wind warning. The *Torres* maintained radio contact, as required, all that day and the next. Nothing out of the ordinary was reported. But at 7:36 p.m. on December 7, the *Torres* radioed to say that they had lost part of their cargo overboard and had to stop their main engine to repair the air compressors, an at-sea repair that they expected to take about three hours. The pitch and roll of the sea, with waves reported by the *Torres* at 5 metres in height and winds of 48-55 knots (approximately 89-102 kph), caused other cargo to shift, which in turn caused the ship to list some 2° to port.

The message was immediately relayed to the Rescue Coordination Centre in Halifax, and the Coast Guard ship *Sir Wilfred Grenfell*, which was berthed in Port aux Basques, NL, some 65 miles from the *Torres* and the nearest Coast Guard ship to the scene, was dispatched to assist, leaving port at 8:42 p.m. A continuous, open radiotelephone communications channel was established with the *Torres*, and they were asked if they wished to declare a Mayday. The *Torres* did not declare a Mayday at that time, but asked for any other ships in the area to stand by. Two commercial ships about 35 miles away were tasked to assist, but due to the extreme weather conditions, were released from assisting in order to keep their own damage to a minimum.

An aircraft was also dispatched from the Canadian Forces Base at Summerside, PEI, to help coordinate assistance and rescue between the ships, and to drop pumps to the *Torres*, if needed. It reached the *Torres* at 11:03 p.m., where it established visual and radio contact. The *Torres* appeared stable at the time, although its list had increased to 15°. Its own pumps appeared to be working satisfactorily. Seven minutes later, the plane was released from assisting the *Torres* in order to assist another ship, the *Johanna B.*, which had declared a Mayday. Unfortunately, the *Johanna B.* sank, along with its full crew of 16, before any assistance could be provided.

At 1:02 a.m. on December 8, the *Torres* reported losing more cargo and an increased list to 20°. Since the main engine and its supporting machinery were not designed to operate at such a strong list, the crew did not feel that they would be able to restart the engine. They declared a Mayday but did not intend to abandon ship at that time. Given the weather and sea conditions, the crew would be safer on board than in smaller life vessels. Miraculously, the main engine started again at 1:47, although it stopped again at 2:18 and the list had increased to 30°, although the rolling of the seas caused the ship to rock anywhere

from 10° to 40°. But it was still believed that the crew's safety was best served by remaining on board.

At 3:20, the *Sir Wilfred Grenfell* radioed to indicate that they expected to reach the *Torres* within 30 minutes. At 3:26, the *Torres* reported a list of 40° and announced they were abandoning ship, using one inflatable life raft and one lifeboat. At the time, the *Torres* was clearly visible on the *Sir Wilfred Grenfell*'s radar, but approximately one minute later, it disappeared. At the time, *Sir Wilfred Grenfell* reported winds of 55 to 60 knots (102-111 kph) with gusts of up to 70 knots (130 kph), and waves of 9.1-10.7 metres (30-35 feet) superimposed on a swell of 4.8-5.4 metres (16-18 feet). It was dark, and visibility was further hampered by flurries and sea spray blown from the surface of the water and the tops of the waves. The air temperature was -3°, but with the wind chill factored in, it felt like -22°.

At 3:44, the *Sir Wilfred Grenfell* reached the last known position of the *Torres*, but there was nothing to be seen. At 3:48, the *Grenfell* spotted a light on an inflated life raft and approached close enough to be able to see one or two people waving in the open entrance to the raft's protective canopy. The *Grenfell* twice attempted to go alongside the raft, but was unsuccessful. While manoeuvring for the third attempt, the raft was lost to view and not seen again for four hours.

The *Grenfell* remained on site to watch for any other lights, flares, or survivors. They saw twelve life jackets, four lighted lifebuoys, and a lifeboat radio, along with a considerable amount of wooden debris, as well as what appeared to be the remains of a lifeboat. But they found neither survivor nor body.

At 7:45 a.m., with the arrival of daylight and better visibility, the *Grenfell* again spotted the life raft and recovered it at 8:09. It was unoccupied. At 8:10, a second life raft was spotted by a search plane, and it was recovered by the *Grenfell* at 9:30. It was also unoccupied. The *Grenfell*, supported by several aircraft, searched all day in vicious weather conditions for survivors or bodies, but none were found. The search was reduced 56 hours later and eventually called off at sunset on December 11.

A life jacket from the *Torres* was found some five months afterward, floating in the Gulf of St. Lawrence on May 30, 1990. The Coast Guard report concludes its narrative of the events of the *Torres* thus: "The lifejacket, together with the two liferafts, are the total articles recovered at the time of production of this report."

So what of Keelaghan's version? It's not clear who initially told the story about the two-minute phone calls home. Was it something Silver Donald Cameron heard from the victims' family members? Was it Cameron's tale in his interview with Peter

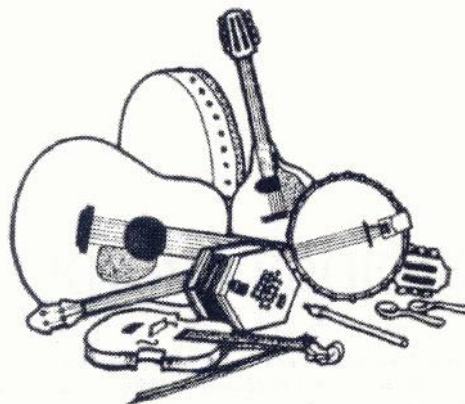
Gzowski? Or was it Keelaghan's? The captain's widow obviously did not get a phone call, but she also assumed that others did and that she did not because her husband was the captain. But given that the crew members came from many different places (France, Fiji, the Philippines, New Zealand, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, and Futuna), there's no reason to assume that the victims' families knew each other or talked to each other afterward. The captain's widow perhaps assumed the story was true but did not have any confirmation.


I don't want to suggest that anyone deliberately lied about the story of the *Torres*. Indeed, the lack of information in the newspapers, together with the brevity of Cameron's account, leaves the story wide open for elaboration, interpretation, and insinuation. It is entirely possible that certain story elements were implied, or falsely interpreted, and these eventually were elaborated and became "truth".

I will admit a certain disappointment upon reading the Coast Guard report. Keelaghan's song is so compelling in large part because of the "truth" of its associated story. It's still a spectacular song, but its effect is different knowing that the phone calls were likely a fictional element.

Gordon Lightfoot recently made a slight change to "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" in order to reflect new information about the event. I asked James Keelaghan whether he would change a song if information came to light that changed the story. He told me that he would change something minor, something on which the song did not turn. But sometimes songwriters "shouldn't let the facts get in the way of telling the story; sometimes you have to play ... not fast and loose with the facts, but you have to massage the facts in order to get the story to come out right."

So, when writing a song about an historical event, is fact more important than story?





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Notes

¹ While the ship's official name is *Capitaine Torres*, James Keelaghan alters it slightly for the song, "Captain Torres".

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kcPjpzxsMw>