

weekender dara disaster

A night of horror on the Arabian Gulf

April 8, 1961: Riding out a dangerous storm off Dubai, the MV Dara was carrying nearly 700 passengers and crew. But an explosion and fire that claimed the lives of at least 236 people left her resting on the bottom of the sea. **Jonathan Gornall** tells the story of the Gulf's worst maritime disaster.

Few of the many customers thronging the waterside cafes probably paid much attention to the hired launch that headed out to sea one day last month from Dubai Marina, where fishing trips and joyrides are a booming business. This, however, was no pleasure trip. On board was a man on a sombre mission – a smartly dressed, silver-haired Briton, clutching a bouquet of flowers.

Two hours later, 67-year-old Ian Tew had reached his destination, a black and yellow buoy, eight kilometres off the coast of Umm al Qaiwain and some 37km north-east of Dubai, bearing the legend "Dara wreck". Below him, in less than 30 metres of water, lay the shattered remains of the ship on which, 50 years earlier, he had come of age during a long dark night of horror that had claimed the lives of some 240 men, women and children, mainly Arabs and Indians, in the Gulf's worst maritime tragedy in peacetime.

As the boat slowly circled the buoy he scattered the flowers on the calm water before returning to shore.

"I thought that some effort ought to be made to remember those who had been killed by what today would be termed a terrorist atrocity," he said later. "It's a piece of forgotten history, almost as if it never happened. I felt I had a duty to those who had died."

In 1961 Ian Tew was a 17-year-old junior cadet on board the MV Dara, a 5,000-ton cargo ship owned by the British India Steam Navigation Company and plying a three-week circular route to and from Bombay and ports around the Gulf.

Today a retired sea captain, he is on a pilgrimage of remembrance; next Friday, the 50th anniversary of the disaster, he will be in Goa as the guest of John Soares, a fellow crew member and survivor who has organised a multi-faith ceremony to remember the victims of the Dara, many of whom came from what was then Portuguese Goa.

The Dara set off from Bombay on March 23, 1961, and after making stops at ports including Muscat, Dubai, Bahrain, Abadan and Basra, had arrived back at Dubai on April 7. On board in cabins were a handful of first-class passengers and perhaps 50 in second class; the majority of the 560 passengers slept on the decks.

With no dock in Dubai in those days – a decade before the foundation of the UAE – the Dara anchored off the creek as barges ferried passengers and cargo back and forth for the final leg of her journey, home to India via Muscat in Oman.

In the afternoon the work was disrupted by a sudden storm, and after the Dara was struck a glancing blow by a Panamanian cargo



The MV Dara, which now lies on the ocean floor eight kilometres off the coast of Umm al Qaiwain, was possibly destroyed by a terrorist attack carried out by Omani rebels. Courtesy The Times

ship that was dragging its anchor the skipper decided to put to sea to ride it out. With her, in addition to the passengers and crew, went dozens of others who had come aboard at Dubai and had been unable to get ashore.

At about 4.40 the following morning, shortly after the Dara had begun its return to Dubai, a terrific explosion tore through three of the ship's decks.

John Soares, the Dara's 23-year-old deputy purser, still has vivid memories of the nightmare that began when he was thrown from the bunk in his cabin by the force of the blast, barely 10 metres from where he slept.

"It was dark ... I just grabbed my shorts and a shirt and ran out. I found total confusion on the deck; I could see a gaping hole with fire coming out of it."

Today, aged 73 and living in retirement in his home village of Aldona in Goa, he recalls heading for the upper deck, where the first-class cabins were, and discovering that it, too, had been devastated by the blast. He tried to help an officer fight the fire that was raging there, but it was hopeless: "There was no water, no pressure."

He saw that passengers were starting to leap into the heaving sea. "I tried to get people to get life jackets ... but they were not listening to anybody. It was terrible, total panic."

Many of those who had donned the old-style hard life jackets did not know they had to hold them down before jumping and broke their necks on impact with the water. "So many were floating about ..."

To his horror, he also saw women throwing babies into the wa-

ter in desperate attempts to save them from the flames.

Meanwhile, 17-year-old Tew had also been woken by the blast. "I could see the shocked face of the third officer by the light of the emergency lighting; he told me to get the other cadet and go to our fire station."

Down on the passenger deck, the sound of the wind tearing through the ship was drowned out by the sound of human screams, a noise Tew says he will never forget.

"I put my hands over my ears, but it was no use," he recalled in the prologue to *Salvage: A Personal Odyssey*, a book he published in 2007 about his later career as a ship salvor. "The screaming was inside my head, and has haunted me all my life."

In those days there was no support for the survivors. "Absolutely not," says Tew, who suffered from flashbacks for years afterwards. "I was simply told not to talk about it, because in those days it would have been seen as a form of boasting. So I didn't."

Both cadets tried in vain to get to the firefighting control panel but were beaten back by the flames; at the subsequent inquiry into the loss of the Dara, Joss Grimwood, the 18-year-old senior cadet, who died about seven years ago, was commended for his bravery.

Next they ran to the boat deck, where they found large numbers of passengers had crowded into one of the lifeboats, which the two cadets were ordered to launch. There were probably twice as many people on the boat as the 70 or so it was designed to carry, but with Tew at the helm, Grimwood nevertheless managed to lower it successfully to the water.

The screaming was inside my head, and has haunted me all my life

Ian Tew, Dara junior cadet

Then disaster struck.

"It was terrible," recalls Soares, who was also in the lifeboat. "An empty boat came drifting by and everybody started jumping onto it; our boat capsized."

In the rough sea, only a handful reached the safety of the other boat. Soares, underwater and entangled in a line, was too busy fighting for his own life to notice what happened to the others, but "I think many just went down," he says. "There were a lot of women and children in that boat."

Tew surfaced to see the fiercely blazing Dara drifting rapidly away and spent the next two hours fighting to keep his head above water. "It was rough and the waves were breaking over my head, so I was treading water with the waves behind me." Unlike many of the crew, however, he could at least swim.

Before dawn he spotted what at first he feared was a shark but which turned out to be an oar with a corpse draped over it. The body slipped off and the oar kept Tew afloat until first light, when he spotted one of the ship's lifeboats and swam to it. It was full of survivors, who hauled him on board and, as the only member of the deck crew on board, he took charge.

"I got them to get the oars out and started rowing, which made the motion of the lifeboat a lot more comfortable. The very fact that they were doing things increased morale considerably."

Eventually, they were rescued by a Japanese ship. As the survivors climbed the gangway, Tew noticed someone in the bottom of the lifeboat, apparently asleep. "I shook his shoulder but it turned out he was dead. I asked the Japa-

nese to come and get the corpse on board, because I thought the family would want the body."

Soares, meanwhile, was still in the water, where he was to spend most of the day before rescue came. He clung to a wooden bench, which at first he shared with a passenger.

"I tried to talk to him to keep him alive but he was getting unconscious all the time; it was not only the cold water, it was the big waves hitting us and really making us tired." After a while the man drifted away.

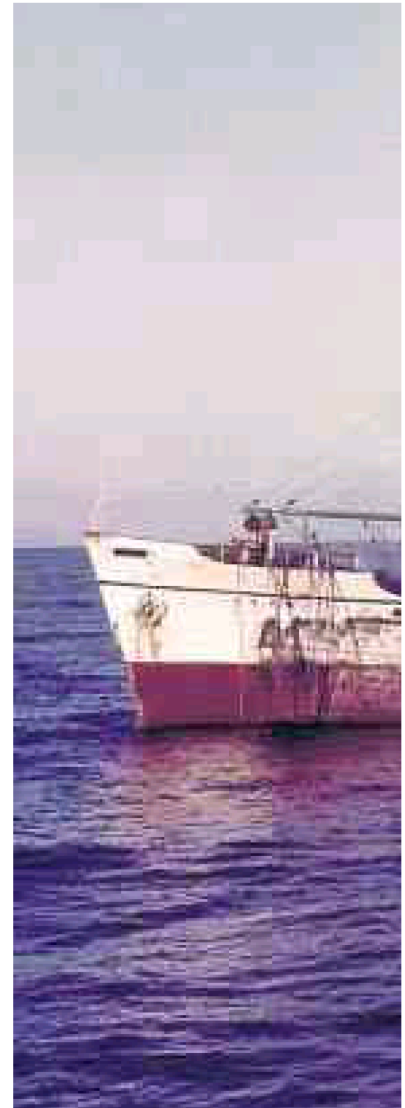
All day Soares hung on to the bench, drifting in and out of consciousness. At some point he was joined by one of the ship's Chinese fitters, but a little later he too slipped away. By nightfall Soares, who had swallowed a lot of seawater and begun to hallucinate, felt sure he was close to the end, but then a boat appeared alongside him.

"I remember someone saying 'This one is alive' ... somebody was trying to put a cigarette in my mouth and I was trying to say 'I don't smoke', and then I passed out."

He says he has no idea why he was spared. "I saw two men drown. I don't know what made me hang on, I was also getting to that stage where I would have to let go, but it wasn't my time to die."

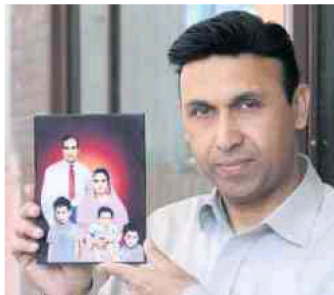
To this day many communities in India and Pakistan still feel the loss of the Dara; one village in Goa alone is thought to have lost a dozen men who were serving on the ship as stewards.

Raja Qaiser, who lives in Islamabad and was born 12 years after the sinking, has lived his entire life under the shadow of the tra-





Gary Ruaux



Raja Qaiser's mother and four sisters persisted on the Dara.
Muzammil Pasha/The National

edy; his family still mourns its "lost children" – the four sisters who perished with their mother. In 1961 his father, Raja Muhammad Yousaf, was living with his wife and family in Kuwait, where he worked as a store keeper for an oil company. The eldest of his four daughters was to be married back home in Pakistan and he booked his 34-year-old wife, Magsood, and Latifa, 17, Shuib, 7, Jamela, 5, and Hafeza, three months, onto the Dara for the trip to Karachi. He planned to follow with the couple's two young sons, Mush-taq and Khurshed, after they had sat exams in their school in Kuwait. It was a decision that probably saved their lives. "He and my uncle were on board before the departure of

the ship," said Mr Qaiser. "This was the last moment my father saw his children and their mother." When news of the disaster reached Kuwait, the oil company gave Mr Qaiser the use of a launch. "He went to where the ship sank and then to Dubai to find them. He saw many injured people and asked: 'Did you see my children?' Some said: 'Yes, we saw them'. Another said they had seen his wife and children sitting on a boat." Such hopes proved false. Mother and children were among the dead, many of whom were never found; some survivors spoke darkly of sharks drawn to the scene. After his ordeal, Mr Qaiser was allowed home on leave but, a

broken man, he remained in his village in Pakistan for three years before returning to work. Later, he married again. "Our mother told us that all his life he was not able to get over it. He would wake from sleep in shock, crying," his son remembers. As a child, Mr Qaiser recalls his father, who died aged 70 in 1987, speaking often of his lost children. "He believed they had survived. He would not let anyone cry. When people from different villages heard [about the disaster], they came to sorrow, but he said: 'Don't cry, don't cry; my children are survived, they must be somewhere, so why are you crying?'" The Dara, a burnt-out wreck, remained afloat for two more days. On April 10, awash with water from the hoses of the three British navy frigates and an American destroyer that had fought the fire, she capsized and sank while being towed to be beached north of Dubai. It remains uncertain who was responsible for the tragedy; despite an extensive investigation no one was arrested. In Britain, however, there was no doubt that the attack was the work of Omani rebels, driven out of the country by British troops in 1959. The surviving rebels had launched a series of terror attacks, frequently using plastic-cased anti-tank mines, and Royal Navy divers later found evidence on the wreck of an explosion caused by approximately 10kg of the type of high explosive used in these weapons. At the opening of the Dara inquiry in London in March 1962, Sir John Hobson, the British solicitor-general, revealed that

there had been 10 such "serious sabotage incidents" in the Gulf between December 1959 and October 1961, several of which had been connected to the rebels. In the case of the Dara, he said, they had "achieved the death of many of their fellow countrymen and Arabs to no purpose at all". It was thought that the suitcase bomb had been brought on board in Dubai – and that the man who planted it may have been stranded on board by the storm, sealing his fate as well as those of his victims. If the ship's schedule had not been disrupted, the timer would have detonated the device at about the same time as the Dara had been due to enter Muscat harbour. The London inquiry concluded that 236 people had died, though it was never certain how many were on board who had been unable to get ashore before the ship sailed: possibly there had been as many as 120 officials, stevedores, hawkers and friends of passengers. There were 560 passengers and 132 crew, including a dozen British officers and cadets but predominantly men from India, Pakistan and what was then still Portuguese Goa; about 24 of the crew were killed. For the past 50 years, to the world at large the men, women and children lost on the Dara have been the forgotten victims of a forgotten tragedy from a forgotten war. Next Friday, at least, at a multi-faith ceremony in a small village in Goa, they will at last be remembered.

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Ordeal // Aftermath

Surviving officer recalls the Dara's final voyage

Jonathan Gornall

The most senior surviving British officer on the Dara has spoken to *The National* of his sorrow that the wreck of the ship is treated as a tourist attraction by diving companies in the UAE. Peter Jordan, who was first officer on the Dara, lives in retirement in Frinton, a seaside town in the English county of Essex. He will celebrate his 80th birthday on Wednesday, two days before the 50th anniversary of the explosion that cost the lives of almost 240 people. "There must have been a hell of a lot of bodies in that ship when it went down, and as a mark of respect to those people who lost their lives I don't think it should be used as a dive site," he said. "It should be respected for what it is: a sea grave." After organising attempts to fight the fires and get lifeboats away, Mr Jordan finally jumped into the churning sea. With no life jacket, he clung to a piece of wood for more than two hours before he was picked up by a boat from a Norwegian tanker. Within hours, however, he and other officers, including the captain, went back on board the ship, climbing a rope ladder that was hanging over the stern. "She was still burning like fury. We tried to start the emergency pump at the stern but there was no pressure,

there was nothing we could do." It was then, he says, that he noticed the charred bodies lying all over the deck, where the majority of passengers had been sleeping. Many dive websites feature the wreck, which is in reasonably shallow water 8km off the coast of Umm al Quwain, about 37km from the mouth of Dubai Creek. Much more appealing than the other sunken vessels in the area – a handful of barges, a coastal tanker used by UAE armed forces for target practice and an oil-rig tender that sank in bad weather – the Dara is a popular destination for diving excursions from hotels in Dubai. One dive website features photographs of some of the "many souvenirs" taken from the Dara by expatriate divers based in Dubai in the 1970s and 1980s, including "portholes, lanterns and anything brass". A photograph shows four of the divers who pillaged the Dara; each is holding a porthole brought up from the wreck. Mr Jordan isn't the only one who thinks the site should be protected. In a 2009 discussion about the site on the website Dive Site Directory, a man who signed himself only as "Justino" wrote: "The dive site should be made a memorial resting place for the crew of our village who died on this ship. Mostly they were from a village in Goa."

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