

The Story of the *Allier* sailors

Eric Berti¹

The curious visitor who ventures to Cooktown, at the north of Cape York in Queensland, will still see, in the town's old cemetery, a monument bearing the inscription 'French Republic, to the sailors of the *Allier* (1879–1907)'. Until early 2010, an inscription in English, on a plaque installed near the obelisk, told the story:

French Sailors

Died 1879

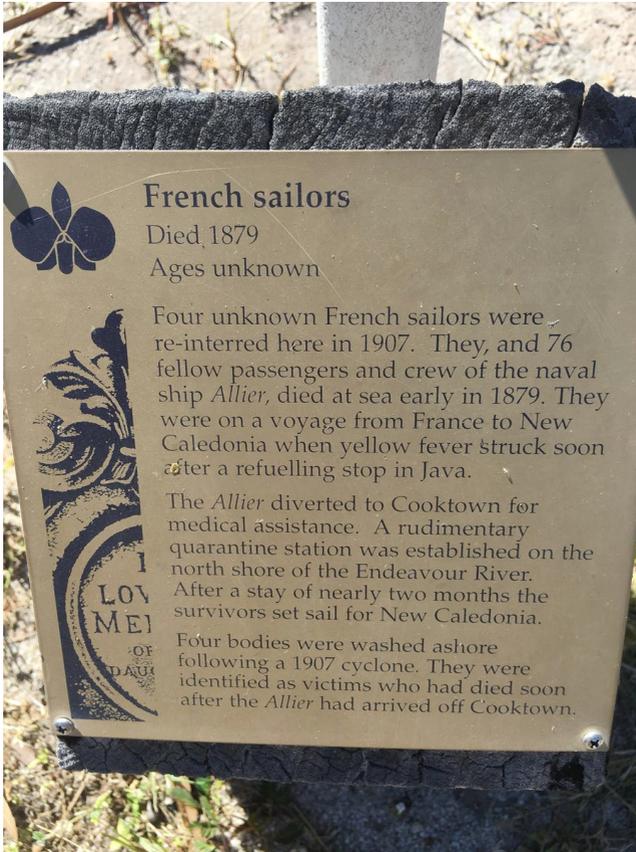
Ages unknown.

Four unknown French sailors were re-interred here in 1907. They, and 76 fellow passengers and crew of the naval ship *Allier*, died at sea early in 1879. They were on a voyage from France to New Caledonia when yellow fever struck soon after a refuelling stop in Java.

The *Allier* diverted to Cooktown for medical assistance. A rudimentary quarantine station was established on the north shore of the Endeavour River. After a stay of nearly two months, the survivors set sail for New Caledonia.

Four bodies were washed ashore following a cyclone in 1907. They were identified as victims who had died soon after the *Allier* had arrived off Cooktown.'

¹ Translated by Cristina Savin.



There seems to be little surprise at the fact that four bodies buried at sea were, extraordinarily, washed ashore by a cyclone twenty-eight years later. This urban myth was firmly rooted in the area and maritime historians such as Jean Guillou,² who studied the tragedy of the *Allier*, have recorded the story. The true tale of these unfortunate sailors is rather different, as investigations conducted by the Cooktown and District Historical Society have established, and it deserves to be told.



² Jean Guillou, 1988, 'Le voyage de l'*Allier*', Bulletin n° 75, n° 2, *Société d'Études historiques de la Nouvelle Calédonie*.

In June 1878, a major Kanak rebellion, known as the Ataï Rebellion, named after the Chieftain of Komalé, broke out in New Caledonia. In 1853 New Caledonia was declared a French colony and unrest occurred on a regular basis. The 1878 rebellion was, however, considered so serious that the French government ordered the dispatch of military reinforcements to be transported by two troop ships. The first naval vessel, the *Victorieuse*, left Toulon on 27 October 1878 and reached New Caledonia within 91 days. This was not the case with the second naval vessel, the *Allier*,³ which left the port of Lorient on 15 November 1878 with an infantry company of 228 soldiers, accompanied by women and children and a crew of 102 men under the command of Captain Félix-Guillaume Coulombeaud (1832–1909).⁴ The vessel passed through the Suez Canal and called at Aden and then Java, on 11 January 1879, where it anchored on the south coast of the island at Tjilatjap.⁵ Given its warm temperatures and swampy environment, the monsoon season in Java was infamous for the prevalence and quick spread of disease.

Indeed, shortly after passing Timor, several passengers developed conditions that were first diagnosed as malaria or gastroenteritis, then typhoid. The number of sick people grew quickly and twenty-one died even before the vessel made it through the Torres Strait. Burials at sea occurred daily, in the presence of Captain Coulombeaud. 157 ailing patients were gathered at the stern, in the most unsanitary conditions, making a stopover to seek medical care and supply the vessel with quinine a matter of urgency.⁶ The commander decided to sail south, towards Cooktown, the nearest Australian port of any significance. The vessel first stopped at the small port of Somerset, near Cape York, to bury Madame Boise,⁷ the wife of the marine troops captain. Between 5 and 9 February nine more deaths occurred before the *Allier* dropped anchor off Cooktown at the mouth of the

³ This 1650-tonne ship was later renamed the *Bougainville*.

⁴ *The Brisbane Courier*, 1864–1933, Tuesday 11 February 1879, p. 3, National Library of Australia, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article885145>

⁵ Jean Guillou, 1988, 'Le voyage de l'*Allier*', Bulletin n° 75, n° 2, *Société d'Études historiques de la Nouvelle Calédonie*.

⁶ As above.

⁷ As above.

Endeavour River, on 9 February.⁸ Captain Cook named the river after his ship, when he was forced to stop in Cooktown in 1770 to repair damages after the ship was grounded on the Great Barrier Reef at Cape Tribulation.

When the *Allier* landed, a century after Cook's visit, Cooktown—born during the gold rush a few years earlier in 1873—was a mining town with a population of 30,000. As soon as he arrived there, Captain Coulombeaud wrote a letter to the Chief Magistrate of the town explaining the alarming health situation on the *Allier* and asking him to allow the patients ashore to be treated. He finished his letter, 'I am counting on your compassion, Your Honour, to save the passengers and the crew of the *Allier*, thus avoiding a catastrophe, which would be engraved in black letters in the seafaring history of all nations'.

The Captain also asked to be supplied as a matter of urgency with quinine, fresh food and water. The vessel promptly received a visit from Dr Kortum, who went aboard to offer quinine but requested that the crew make no contact with people ashore. He advised Captain Coulombeaud to seek refuge instead on Fitzroy Island, on the other side of the bay, and remain there in quarantine. The Captain vehemently rejected the proposal: 'If you do not want to accept us as convalescents, you must accept us as shipwrecked'. Mr Howard Saint Georges, local police chief, took a more diplomatic approach, stating that he would ask the Queensland government to give the Captain permission to place the patients in the quarantine station located on the north coast of the Endeavour, where vessels had been received in the past. An observer was left on board to ensure the quarantine notes were reviewed. On the north bank of the Endeavour river, food supplies were provided and a tent camp was installed.⁹

On 13 February, the *Allier* entered the quarantine area and the patients were taken ashore to the camp set up by local authorities. Captain Coulombeaud gave the following description of the facilities:

The camp consisted of small-sized canvas tents that could shelter three people at the most, and also eight small huts built out of corrugated iron.

⁸ *The Brisbane Courier*, 1864–1933, Tuesday 11 February 1879, p. 3, National Library of Australia, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article885145>

⁹ Jean Guillou, 1988, 'Le voyage de l'*Allier*', Bulletin n° 75, n° 2, *Société d'Études historiques de la Nouvelle Calédonie*.

The interior walls of two huts were plain corrugated iron, whereas the walls of the six others were covered with a light, stretched cloth. Four of these shelters were for the sick and contained in total seventy-five beds. One of the huts was for the officers who were ill, while another was used as living quarters for the doctor and also contained all the medical supplies that were needed. The last hut was the kitchen.¹⁰

Apart from medical personnel, no one was allowed within a hundred metres of the camp, above which the yellow quarantine flag flew. Dr Boudet was responsible for the camp. A boat went back and forth between the camp and the town; members of the crew were not allowed into town.

Quarantine was strictly enforced. Nine soldiers and four sailors died ashore, bringing the death toll to eighty since their departure from Lorient. They were buried on-site, with a headstone surrounded by a fence marking the location of the graves. The names of the French people on the *Allier* who died at Cooktown were: Augustin Nicot, Jean-Marie Foucault and Jean Adolphe Bernard, all three aged 22; Emmanuel Jean Allat aged 20, Jean-Marie Pouly, Jumes Boulanger, Valentin Maze, Louis René Desmos, Victor Letourneau, Jean-Marie Urba, Louis Drouillet, Louis Marie Le Floch and Jean-Marie Duret.¹¹

Shortly before his departure, Captain Coulombeaud received a bill for around 100,000 francs for food, tents and for the payment of gardeners who worked on the camp, as well as for the hire of boats and other supplies. Coulombeaud expected the Queensland government to cover the costs. In any case, the amount requested by Howard Saint Georges seemed exorbitant and after some negotiation, was reduced to 36,000 francs. In the end, it was agreed that this sum of money offset the amount owed by

¹⁰ *Le camp consistait en un ensemble de tentes de toile de petite taille qui pouvaient abriter au plus trois personnes, ainsi que huit cabanes en tôle. Les murs intérieurs de deux d'entre elles étaient constitués de tôle tandis que six autres étaient tendues de tissu léger. Quatre de ces abris étaient destinés aux malades et pouvaient contenir au total 75 lits. L'une de ces cabanes était destinée aux officiers malades, une autre constituait les quartiers du docteur et le lieu où il stockait les médicaments. La dernière hutte était la cuisine.*

¹¹ *Cooktown Local News* n° 596, 20 Decembre 2012. Les certificats de décès figurent par ailleurs dans les registres de Cooktown sous les numéros 1879/708, 710, 711, 683, 684, 685, 686, 687, 691, 695, 699.

the Australian government for the country's participation in the 1878 Paris *Exposition Universelle*.

The *Allier* remained at Cooktown for several weeks and the quarantine was lifted in early April. After replenishing coal (in a port located south of Cooktown) and rations, the *Allier* set sail for Noumea, where it was keenly awaited, for the vessel was carrying three million gold francs to pay the salaries of French soldiers stationed in New Caledonia. Not knowing when the *Allier* would reach Noumea, the Governor of New Caledonia dispatched a vessel to meet the *Allier* to recover the crates of gold francs. The encounter occurred at sea, as the *Allier* had already left Cooktown; the transfer went ahead and news was exchanged, informing New Caledonia of the *Allier*'s tragic voyage. The ship finally reached Noumea on 14 April 1879.

On the north shore of the Endeavour River at Cooktown, the *Allier* left behind a headstone surrounded by a fence, later destroyed by fire.¹² In December 1887, the frigate *Volga*, on its way to Noumea, made a stopover at Cooktown. Her commander, Victor Bigant, accompanied by town dignitaries including Lieutenant Olive from the local garrison, visited the old quarantine station. He considered repairing the fence and erecting a monument on the burial site.¹³ This idea was revisited in 1907. Repair works to the fence do not appear to have been undertaken at the time or, if they were, the new fence perhaps met the same fate as the original. In any event, sand gradually began to cover the headstone and, in 1889 when journalist Archibald Meston visited the site, sand had already obliterated the graves and the headstone was half-buried.¹⁴ The *Allier* and its burial site slowly faded into oblivion. But, as we shall see, the story does not end there.



¹² Cooktown observers questioned whether local Aboriginal people had destroyed the fence. See *Cooktown Local News*, 2012, n° 596, 20 December.

¹³ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 1887, 1842–1954, Wednesday 28 December, p. 7, National Library of Australia, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article13675368> The article refers to the presence of thirty bodies in this grave. See also *The Queenslander*, 1887, Brisbane, 1866–1939, Saturday 31 December, p. 1080.

¹⁴ *North Queensland Register*, 1905, Townsville, Queensland, 1892–1905, Monday 24 April 1905, p. 7, National Library of Australia, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article84889468>

In August 1904, Douglas Hall, a local young man, son of the owner of the Courthouse Hotel, discovered a grave and some exposed human bones at North Shore, Cooktown, near Mount Saunders.¹⁵ He made about twelve trips from Cooktown to explore the burial site and to search for possible treasure. As Edward Duyker notes,¹⁶ Hall seems to have been little more than a grave robber. When human remains were discovered, Hall told the Cooktown police about his discovery.¹⁷ *The Brisbane Courier* reported this discovery on 30 September 1904.¹⁸ The newspaper referred to the story of the *Allier* and the visit of the French frigate *Volga* and mentioned the presence of a French officer, the son of a count, who was among the victims.

The article, which concludes ‘yesterday, some boys discovered the grave and the remains of a French officer’, did not escape Mr Carter’s watchful eye. Mr Carter, the French Consul in Brisbane, mentioned the article to the French Consul-General in Sydney, Georges Biard d’Aunet, who asked Mr Carter to investigate the remains. An article, published on 29 October 1904 in *The Queenslander*, which noted the request from the Consul-General, mentions however that these remains could have belonged to members of Captain Cook’s expedition.¹⁹ The record was soon set straight and, in April 1905, Mr Warden Lee Bryce ordered and organised the repatriation of the French sailors’ remains from the grave at North Shore. The reinterment ceremony took place on 5 May 1905 and was reported by the *Brisbane Courier* under the title ‘A Solemn Ceremony’.²⁰

¹⁵ As above.

¹⁶ Edward Duyker, ‘France’s Military Dead in Australia: an historical survey’, *The French Australian Review*, n° 56, Australian Winter, 2014, pp. 65–83.

¹⁷ In an isolated grave he found a piece of brown cloth, a brass button marked ‘Lyons’, two small shirt buttons, a round piece of candle and he also picked up a gold coin—a Napoleon—which he kept’, *North Queensland Register*, 1905, Townsville, Queensland, 1892–1905, Monday 24 April 1905, p. 7, National Library of Australia, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article84889468>

¹⁸ *The Brisbane Courier*, 1904, 1864–1933, Queensland, Friday 30 September p. 6.

¹⁹ *The Queenslander*, 1904, Brisbane, 1866–1939, Saturday 29 October, p. 10.

²⁰ *The Brisbane Courier*, 1905, *Queensland*, 1864–1933, Thursday 4 May, p. 5, National Library of Australia, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article19334424>

At 11 am the Rev. Father Dempsey received the remains—those of eight French marines and one sailor rated as third class²¹—and Sergeant King placed them in the hearse which conveyed them to St Mary's Church.

The remains were enclosed in an ornamented coffin with a heavy bronze lid, on which were the names of the nine dead Frenchmen. A candelabra of three lights was placed on each side of the coffin. Later in the day the remains were laid in state. At a quarter to four in the afternoon over 500 people mustered in the church, including 250 children from the State and Catholic schools. A solemn requiem mass was celebrated and the choir rendered suitable music, Mrs Mary Kelly presiding at the organ. The Rev. Father Dempsey, in full canonicals, conducted the ceremonies. The organist played the Dead March and the choir moved outside in procession. The Hibernians formed a guard of honour as the coffin was borne to the hearse from the church, and the police marshalled the procession in full uniform headed by Sergeant King. The pall bearers were Mr Lee Bryce (representing the State Government), Alderman Seagren (Mayor of Cooktown), Herr Kortum (German Consul), Mr Boddington (a Federal officer), Mr Quilliam (Waterside Union delegate) and Councillor Jensen (chairman of the Daintree Shire Council).

The Town Band rendered the Dead March as the procession moved off in the following order: State school boys, Catholic school boys, State school girls, Catholic school girls, the hearse (the Rev. Father Dempsey walking afoot in front), Members of the Town Council, the Daintree Shire Council, local magistrates, Hibernians, Oddfellows, Foresters,²² members of the Waterside Union, and the police. Upon arrival at the cemetery, the State schoolboys stood at attention and saluted as the coffin was borne between their ranks. The band continued to play solemn music and at the graveside rendered the Marseillaise.

Flags were hoisted at half-mast in the town. On the public flagstaff the British and French flags were entwined and at other places the tri-colour was hoisted. Mr Douglas Hall, the discoverer of the French remains, took a central place in the procession.

²¹ The burial at the Cooktown cemetery was for only nine of the thirteen dead found at North Shore. One might ask what became of the other four, whose bones were perhaps lost.

²² Fraternal organisations of Irish (Hibernians) or British (Oddfellows, Royal Foresters) origins.

For reasons unknown, the French Consulate-General Georges Biard d'Aunet was not represented at the event. He sent a warm letter from Sydney 'thanking the Cooktown people, in the name of France, for the ceremonials surrounding the reinterment of the remains of the French sailors belonging to the *Allier* in 1879 and acknowledging the bonds of friendship between France and the British Dominions'.²³

The Consulate decided to build a monument at the gravesite of the French sailors who lost their lives at Cooktown. Mr A. L. Petrie was commissioned to build the monument, which was transported by sea to Cooktown where it was unveiled on Bastille Day July 1907.²⁴

Mystery continues to surround the connection between the well-established facts of the French sailors' reinterment in the Cooktown cemetery in 1905 and the legend of the bodies washed up by a cyclone in 1907. A severe typhoon undoubtedly took place on 19 January 1907 at Cooktown, resulting in nine dead and eight missing. The event is depicted in the collection of images at the Cooktown Historical Centre. It is not unlikely that bodies were washed up from the sea following the cyclone (eight sailors disappeared at sea during the cyclone) but if that was indeed the case, they could not have been the sailors from the *Allier*. Today, the Cooktown History Centre (home of the Cooktown and District Historical Society) distributes a small brochure on the true history of the *Allier* and hopefully one day a memorial plaque recounting the story of those unlucky sailors will be placed next to the monument.

On 6 July 2015, as French Consul-General to Sydney, I carried out an official mission in Cooktown to acknowledge the historical sites and participate in a wreath-laying commemorative ceremony at the *Allier* monument. The ceremony was attended by representatives from the city of Cooktown and the local Historical Society, including Mrs Marge Scully, as well as the French Honorary Consul in Cairns, Mme Iris Indorato. This was my last consular mission in Australia before I concluded my appointment as French Consul-General to Sydney a few days later. This ceremony was also an opportunity to meet representatives from the small French community

²³ *Morning Post*, 1905, Cairns, 1897–1907), Wednesday 16 August, p. 2, National Library of Australia, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article44414389>

²⁴ *The Brisbane Courier*, Queensland, 1907, 1864–1933), Tuesday 16 July p. 4, National Library of Australia, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article19405574>

in Cooktown and, most notably, Mr Arnaud Gougeon who provided invaluable assistance by liaising with the local Historical Society and organising the ceremony.

Acknowledgments

This study would not have been possible without the research carried out by the late Mr Jean Guillou, New Caledonian historian (1916–2014)—we discussed the voyage of the *Allier* during a mission to Noumea in September 2013—and the investigations carried out by the Cooktown Historical Society, particularly research undertaken by Marge Scully. The article published by Dr Edward Duyker on French military who died in Australia was equally invaluable.

Paris



The French warship *Allier*, renamed *Le Bougainville*, Dartmouth, 1887.