

“The Maori King Affair”

Bold adventure, lurking danger, mutiny, death—the story of all this, running like some tale of the days of the Spanish conquests of the New World, was brought to San Diego today by the big tramp steamer Maori King.

--San Diego Sun, May 7, 1907

The steamer was first sighted off the coast of Coronado Island. Flying a large black flag, the *Maori King* was clearly a ship in distress. A pilot from the Coronado boat house brought her into the harbor, anchoring the ship at the quarantine station at La Playa.

The ship's English captain, J. W. Duncan, brought a tale of woe. His British-registered ship was inbound from Vladivostok carrying a 1,300 Chinese and Russian workers destined for a railroad construction site near Guaymas, Mexico. After a stormy three-week passage across the Pacific, the Chinese had rioted when the ship reached the California coast. Now the captain wanted to hire guards to protect his ship so it could safely continue to Guaymas.

The job was offered to 34-year old Don Stewart, the chief clerk in the San Diego office of the Pacific Coast Steamship Company. Stewart was also the respected commander of San Diego's Naval Militia.

Boarding the ship to have a look Stewart “beheld a mess that was almost beyond description.” The filthy rear deck of the seventeen-year-old steamer held 350 European railroad laborers--mostly Russians but also Greeks, Serbians, and Romanians—who had been stranded in Vladivostok and boarded the *Maori King* to get away.

Conditions were worse on the crowded forward deck where Stewart found a “moving mass of humanity—large, strong and well-built, tough-looking Manchurians,” living in wooden bunks, three tiers high. The 980 men from northern China were dressed in heavy clothing and appeared to be infested with body lice, which the crew dubbed “seam squirrels.” They had boarded the ship believing they were headed to Hong Kong to work on the Canton Railroad. Now they were far from home and simmering with anger.

Stewart agreed to form a team of guards that would serve under his command for \$5 a day. He had no trouble recruiting reliable men—the pay was considered good—but he was careful not to let the guards see the “hell ship” until they were ready to depart.

One group anxious to see the *Maori King* up close was San Diego's Chinese community. Prominent local merchants Ah Quin and Lun Hing pulled up to the ship in a boat and collected messages passed over the side. A frantic telegram to the Chinese Consul General in San Francisco quickly followed: “One thousand Chinese on British steamer Maori King say they were kidnapped from Vladivostok, and that twenty-five were murdered by English officers, aided by Russians. What will we do?”

The consul wired back, promising to “thoroughly investigate.” But it was too late. At 5:00 p.m. on May 8, the *Maori King* headed out to sea.

It was a “pleasant, uneventful trip” to Guaymas, according to Stewart, whose men were quartered in the relative comfort of the superstructure in the middle of the ship. Each day his private army drilled in full view of the Chinese laborers. Carrying twelve-gauge shotguns, Winchester rifles, and side arms, the men tried to look as intimidating as possible.

After a week at sea the *Maori King* reached Guaymas, the chief port of Sonora in the Gulf of California. But the ship’s notoriety had already reached Mexico. As the steamer entered the bay a government official approached in a boat and through a megaphone, yelled “Thirty days in quarantine!”

Time passed slowly on the anchored ship. The tropical heat was intense. Sickness broke out and there were several deaths among the Chinese. The bodies were taken ashore at night and buried secretly on the beach.

The workers grew desperate to escape the ship. One hot afternoon they assembled on deck while a tall Manchurian harangued the crowd and “cast menacing glances” at the white guards watching from ship’s bridge. That night, Stewart recalled, “we heard the noise from the wrecking of the bunks, in order to secure the wood to use as clubs.”

The guards lined up on the bridge facing the Chinese below. “This is life and death,” Stewart told the men. “You have to stand firm and not quail. If you do, that will be it.”

As the laborers began climbing the bridge Stewart ordered his men to raise their shotguns. “The loading of 20 pump guns in unison was sufficient for even a hard-of-hearing person to perceive, and immediately there was a wild scramble for the decks below. . . . When the Chinese heard those shells go from the magazine into the barrel the riot was over.”

After two weeks the Mexicans lifted the quarantine. The workers were given cursory medical inspections and sent ashore. But all the men, including the guards, endured a delousing bath first. One guard remembered: “They herded all of us under giant sprays and shower baths, and almost drowned us in a heavy solution of sickening disinfectants.”

Disembarked, the Chinese and Russian laborers were taken to a railroad construction site to work on a Southern Pacific line to Guadalajara. The guards returned to San Diego by train, followed by Stewart ten days later with the men’s wages.

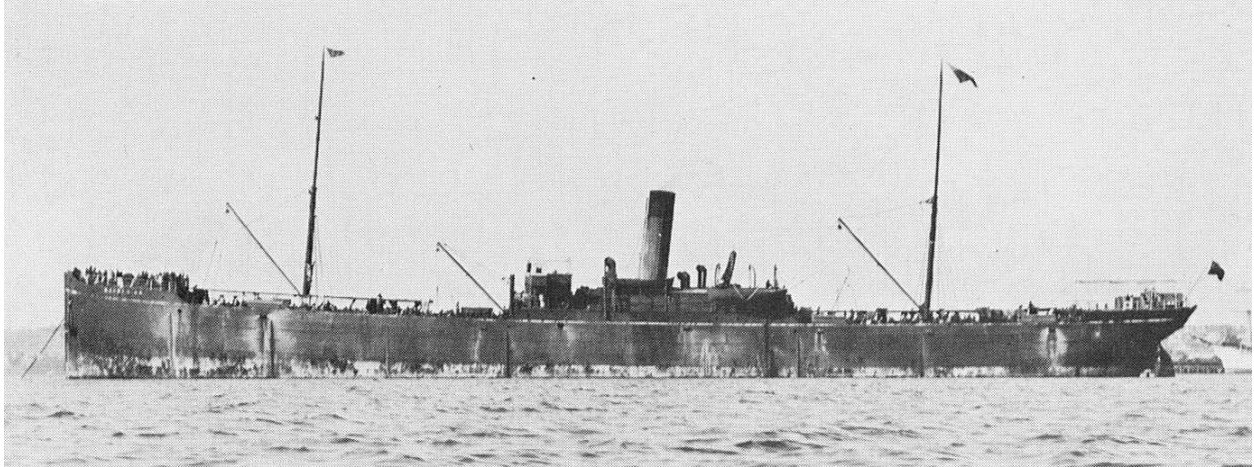
The *Maori King* steamed back to Vladivostok. One year later a news dispatch from Peking reported the ship had been confiscated in China



Stewart’s guards leaving the ship

with the owner “accused of allowing her to be used for the kidnapping of Chinese coolies, who were taken to Guaymas, Mexico, from Vladivostok. It is expected that the Chinese government will ask for the prosecution of those directly implicated.”

But the shanghaiing career of the *Maori King* would soon end permanently. It was reported wrecked off Ningbo, China on September 17, 1909.



The tramp steamer *Maori King*. Photos are courtesy of the *San Diego Maritime Museum Association*

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