



TASMANIAN SEAFARERS' MEMORIAL ANNUAL SERVICE
ADDRESS BY
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE CAROLINE WELLS
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
TRIABUNNA, SUNDAY 18 OCTOBER 2026

Good morning, everyone. I feel really honoured to join you all here at the Tasmanian Seafarers' Memorial for the 2026 Memorial Service.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Palawa people as the First Peoples of lutruwita/Tasmania and the Traditional Custodians of the land we're gathered on today.

For countless generations, they have cared for this island, its landscapes, its waterways and its communities, and I'm grateful to be able to live here.

I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and to any Aboriginal people with us today. Your continuing contribution to the cultural, social and spiritual life of our State is deeply valued.

For many of you, the third Sunday in October is a fixed point in the year. For others, like me, this may be your first time at the Memorial, and you have come because a name belongs to you, whether it was placed here recently or a great many years ago. Whatever has brought you, you are welcome.

Tasmania has always been an island that lives by the sea and, all too often, loses to it. Our coastline runs to some 2,500 kilometres, much of it open to the Roaring Forties, and more than a thousand vessels are known to have been lost in Tasmanian waters since records began.

Those losses reach back to the earliest years of the colony.

In 1835 the convict ships *George III*¹ and *Neva*² were both wrecked in Tasmanian waters. Ten years later, in the dark early hours of 4 August 1845, the emigrant ship *Cataraqui* struck a reef off the west coast of King Island. Some four hundred people died. Only nine reached the shore alive, and many of the dead were buried on the island. It remains the worst civil maritime disaster in Australia's history.³

The tragedies did not end with the age of sail. Many here will remember the night of 5 January 1975, when the *Lake Illawarra* struck the Tasman Bridge and twelve lives were lost.

Many will also remember December 1998, when the Sydney to Hobart fleet met a storm of exceptional violence north of this island, and six sailors did not come home.

Behind each of those events, and behind every smaller one that never reached the newspapers, there was a family waiting for news. Whalers and sealers, convicts and free settlers, naval ratings, merchant seamen, yachtsmen and fishermen. The sea has made no distinction between them, and neither does this Memorial.

This Memorial began with one young man.

On 19 December 1995, Gavin Batchelor, a Triabunna fisherman, drowned in rough weather off Maria Island. He had taken the place of a less experienced crewman in a dinghy under tow, and it overturned.⁴

¹ <http://seafarersmemorial.org.au/memorials/vessels/george3.php> accessed 8 Oct 26

² <http://seafarersmemorial.org.au/memorials/vessels/neva.php> accessed 8 Oct 26

³ <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/cataraqui-shipwreck> accessed 8 Oct 26

⁴ <http://seafarersmemorial.org.au/memorials/batchelor.php> accessed 8 Oct 26

Local fishermen searched for him. His loss moved this community to act, and in 1996 the Glamorgan Spring Bay Council established the committee that still cares for this place. His plaque was the first to be laid.

The Memorial was dedicated on Sunday 26 October 1997.

Its design, by Kath Fergusson OAM and J. G. Castle, is deliberately modest: low curved walls in the form of a fish, an early Christian symbol, enclosing an anchor cross and looking out over the port of Spring Bay. Today those walls carry 132 plaques, recording the loss of 1,593 lives.⁵

The committee set out several purposes for this place. One of them deserves particular mention this morning.

The Memorial gives a place to grieve for those whose bodies were never found, or who were committed to the deep. A family in that position has no grave to visit. They do, however, have this wall, and they have this service.

The words of dedication, written in 1997 by Don Paton, are read here every year. They close with a promise that I would ask us all to keep in mind today: *for those who grieve such a loss, we care.*

I am glad to say that no new plaques have been added since you last gathered. A year without a new name on these walls is not something any coastal community takes for granted.

Vessels are better built than they once were. Forecasts are more accurate, and safety equipment is better than at any time in our history.

Yet the sea has not changed. A calm morning in Spring Bay can turn within hours, as everyone who works these waters knows.

⁵ <http://seafarersmemorial.org.au/index.php> accessed 8 Oct 26

That is why this Memorial was also given the purpose of promoting water safety. The most fitting tribute we can pay to those named here is to wear a lifejacket, check the forecast, log the trip, and look out for one another.

Shortly the fleet will be blessed, as it is each year. As we watch, I invite you to hold three groups of people in mind. Those we remember, whose names surround us; those who mourn them, some of whom stand beside you; and those who are at sea today, on fishing boats, on naval and merchant vessels, and on small craft, and who, we trust, will all return safely.

Thank you.