

Lonely cross that may tell of a life less ordinary

The grave on Marion Island may be that of a Grassy Park man with a complex home life, Environment and Science Writer **JOHN YELD** reports

THE DEATH certificate in the national archives in Roeland Street that officially records a 1948 tragedy on far-flung Marion Island is bland and uninformative: "Died by accident at sea, 29th January".

But the very short inventory of material possessions of the dead man, one Joseph Daniels, and a few official reports that are filed with the death certificate tell a poignant tale of a short life that was clearly adventurous, if with scant monetary reward.

And these fading official records also hint at personal circumstances that were not uncomplicated, although there are not enough details for anything other than speculation.

Joseph Daniels is, as far as is known, the only person buried on Marion Island, one of a pair of subantarctic islands some 2 100km south-east of Cape Town that are collectively known as the Prince Edward Island group, and that make up South Africa's only overseas territory – and its only active volcano.

He worked for the then Department of Guano Islands and was a boatman aboard the coal-fired coaster Gamtoos which was normally used to transport guano from the bird-rich islands off the west coast of southern Africa to Cape Town.

But in early 1948 the little ship, under the command of Captain W Finlayson, was also sent to take stores and prefabricated huts to the small team that had occupied Marion Island since its formal annexation in late December 1947, and its departure under the top-secret mission code-named Operation Snoektown would have attracted little attention.

The Gamtoos arrived off the Marion Island anchorage, now named Transvaal Cove, on the morning of January 20 and over the next few days started transferring its cargo ashore.

But the weather deteriorated, and at 4.10pm on the 29th a "flatboom" rowing boat loaded with sections of the hut and timber capsized in the mounting waves. While three of its crew were rescued and a fourth made his own way ashore through the icy water, the fifth – 25-year-old Daniels, "better known as Ysterman (Iron man)" according to the slim records in the archive – drowned.

He was buried on the island the next day, with most of the men watching from the deck of the Gamtoos as they were unable to get ashore because of the weather. The ship's flag was flown at half-mast, the skipper reported.

Daniels's grave was marked by a simple white cross, which became increasingly weather-beaten and dilapidated as it was exposed to the island's harsh weather during the following decades.

Then, during the official opening of the new research base at the island last month, a new, replica cross was erected during a brief but moving ceremony.



TRACING THE PAST: UCT historian Lance van Sittert examines records in the Roeland Street archives while researching Joseph Daniels, the Cape Town man who drowned at Marion Island in January 1948. Daniels is buried on the island and a new memorial cross was recently erected at his grave. PICTURE: GREG MAXWELL

Among those who read an account of the replacement cross in the Cape Argus was associate professor Lance van Sittert of UCT's Department of Historical Studies.

Daniels's story piqued his professional interest, and he started searching for more information about the Guano Islands department's employee about whom very little was known, other than that he was believed to have lived on a Constantia wine farm – a "fact" now known to be incorrect.

In the archives, Van Sittert quickly discovered that Daniels was a member of a Grassy Park family and that his father, Manie J Daniels, was probably a fisherman, and his mother was Clara Daniels.

The death certificate records that he was born in Salt River and was married to a Johanna Jonkers of Ottery – but thereby hangs a tale.

Clara Daniels was informed by the Superintendent of Guano Islands on February 9 that her son had wages of £4.14/- owing to him at the time of the drowning.

"Our assumption is that his father was dead at that point," says Van Sittert.

Clara Daniels told the authorities that her son had been legally married to Johanna Jonkers but that she had left him and so she (Clara) was the legal heir, and she duly approached

the Master of the Supreme Court to be paid out.

But the superintendent also subsequently informed the Master that on February 10, just 24 hours after contacting Clara Daniels, he had been visited at his office by a Raai Daniels, whose actual name was Maria van der Westhuizen and who gave her address as c/o a Mr FF

Versfeld of Klaasenbosch, Constantia. This is probably where the wine farm "misinformation" arose.

"She claims to be a dependent of the deceased, although she was not married to him," the superintendent told the Master in a letter.

Neither official appeared to have been convinced of the merits of Raai Daniels's claim, and a warrant voucher for the £4.14/- was paid out to Clara Daniels on February 24.

The archive documents also record that 5/- in cash was found at Marion Island – it is not clear whether this

was among Daniels's possessions on the Gamtoos or in his pockets – and that this had been given to the officer in charge of the frigate "Good Hope", which had brought the original landing party to the islands.

The inventory of Daniels's meagre possessions, compiled on January 31, 1948, tells something of the hard and poorly-paid life of a person of colour

working at sea in that era, although Van Sittert suggests that as a boatman he was significantly more skilled than a mere "labourer", as recorded on his death certificate.

The inventory is nearly all clothing and includes just a single pair of boots, one pair of brown shoes, four shirts, two jerseys, one vest, one pair of

underpants, one pair of oilskin trousers, one woollen scarf, one felt hat and one pair of sea-boot stockings, as well as two cakes of Lifebuoy soap, one bar of yellow soap and two boxes of matches.

Van Sittert is particularly keen to

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interview the families of Daniels and Maria van der Westhuizen.

But it's a tough search: while he has found something on Manie Daniels, Van der Westhuizen is also an "incredibly common" surname, he points out. And he's particularly keen to interview family members of either of them.

Although his research into Daniels was prompted by a reading of the Cape Argus article, Van Sittert and his UCT colleagues also have funding from the national Department of Environmental Affairs via its SA National Antarctic Programme (Sanap) and the National Research Foundation to create an online archive of the public record of South Africa's involvement in Antarctica and the Subantarctic Islands like Marion.

"In this capacity we would obviously be interested to interview any members of the Daniels family still living in Cape Town who might be able to tell us more about him," he says.

• Anyone wanting to contact Van Sittert can telephone him at 021 650 2958, e-mail lance.vansittert@uct.ac.za, or call the Sanap online archive at 021 650 4069.

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