

COURIER MAIL

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# 'Pacific Triangle' claims sixth ship

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HONOLULU (AAP).— An overturned liferaft and one lifeless body spotted momentarily in wild, mountainous seas were the only things the coast guard found while searching the Pacific Triangle for the sixth ship lost in less than 15 months between Hawaii, Midway and the Aleutians.

Six times since November 1976, massive air and sea searches have uncovered frantic radio calls for help from two tankers and four freighters travelling the great circle route of the silk ships between Asia and North America.

All the ships were lost and all but one — the log-carrying Panamanian freighter Crown Pearl which sank on January 16, 1977 — took with them at least some crew members.

The latest and most tragic sinking was the 21,635-ton Chandragupta, bound early in January for Sri Lanka, Iran and India from Portland, Oregon, its holds filled with wheat. Aboard were 64 officers and crew, along with four women and two children, dependents of the Chandragupta's officers.

Eight days out of Portland, the Indian merchant ship entered the Pacific Triangle — a 2.6 million

square kilometre area stretching from Hawaii to Midway to the Aleutians, and the spawning ground for the great Pacific storms that roar eastward.

The Chandragupta's fate was similar to those of the Panamanian freighter Carnelian-1 and the Crown Pearl.

Hit by 12 to 15 m waves and battered by gale winds for hours on end, the Chandragupta began taking on water from leaks somewhere deep inside its hull. Pumps were useless against the thousands of tons of water that soaked the wheat under its forward hatches and lowered the bow deeper and deeper into the 12 degree C. water.

The last word came on January 6 when the Chandragupta's master radioed that passengers and crew were abandoning ship in the fast fading light of evening.

Coast guard and navy

searchers in Kodiak and Honolulu knew that only a desperate master would abandon his ship for rafts and lifeboats in the cold, white-capped seas and gale winds of the Pacific Triangle.

Four - engined search planes criss-crossed the water around its last reported position, finding only the overturned yellow liferaft and the body that was being tossed like a rag doll in the heavy seas.

The weather was so bad the cutter Mellon could not recover the body.

Together with the Chandragupta, the Carnelian-1 and the Crown Pearl, the tankers Irene's Challenger and Hawaiian Patriot were lost in the North Pacific in the past 13 months. The Liberian freighter Rose S went down on December 12, 1977, with all hands.

All told, 126 lives were lost in the six sinkings and the weather was a factor in

each sinking, save that of the Rose S.

"Winds of 50 and 60 knots are common to this area during the winter," a national weather service spokesman in Hawaii said.

"There is an almost continuous low pressure area up there out of which comes the storms that sweep across the Pacific to the west coast. These are the storms which create the high winter surf in Hawaii."

But the North Pacific is also the shortest steamship route between Asia and North America — the route of the fast-sailing silk ships which established record crossings to Seattle and San Francisco using gale winds to push them along.

The coast guard, the navy and the various ships agencies in Honolulu are unable to explain the rash of sinkings.

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"There is an explanation for every one of those tragedies," said a marine insurance source. "But most probably the sinkings were a combination of several factors — the weather, the cargo and the ship. But we'll probably never find out, as the evidence is at the bottom of the Pacific."

The six vessels lost in the Pacific triangle in the past 15 months are:

● Carnelian-1, a Panamanian freighter carrying a cargo of logs, sank in November 1976 with a loss of 19 lives.

● Crown Pearl, a Panamanian freighter, sank on January 16, 1977. All 25 aboard saved.

● Irene's Challenger, a Greek tanker, broke in half on January 21, 1977. Three dead.

● Rose S, a Liberian freighter loaded with logs and scrap iron. Sank on February 12. All 31 aboard lost.

● Hawaiian Patriot, a Liberian tanker, exploded and sank on February 24, 1977. Three lives lost, but 38 saved.

● Chandragupta, an Indian freighter carrying wheat. Sank on January 6, 1978. All 70 people aboard lost.