**Future Archives Transcript:**

**‘Covid-19 through the stories of survivors: Part 7 Cruise Ships, Coronavirus and Catastrophe’ by Lisa Rae Bartolomei**

**Audio Info:**(11:32mins)

A newscast exploring the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic 10 years on through one on one interviews with survivors. This episode tells the story of Kate Whittaker, a survivor of the Topaz Prince catastrophe. The ship was forced to wait in Manila Bay, in the Philippines after an outbreak on the ship in 2022, when a deadly Tsunami struck.

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Jo Omer:

Hi my name is Jo Omer, I’m an investigative Journalist at THE HIVE and welcome to Part 7 of our ongoing series ‘*Covid-19, 10 years on and how the pandemic reshaped the Australian nation through the stories of the survivors’*.

This week's episode will examine the cruise industry's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic through one person and their incredible story of survival.

Kate Whittaker, a coronavirus and October 22 tsunami survivor, was a passenger on the ill-fated Topaz Prince cruise ship.

They were one of the prosecuting parties of the landmark class action lawsuit, *Isuri Mendis vs Festival Cruises Pty Ltd.* That case and the outcry that followed would change the way multinational corporations do business within Australia forever.

Many got sick and died from Covid-19 from their time on cruise ships. Many got stuck in foreign countries. With little hope of going home, they were treated as prisoners, trapped in their cabins.

When finally, they were allowed to return home after a human rights campaign across continents. Many suffered post-traumatic stress disorder from the isolation. Many would never work again and required lifelong medical or psychiatric care and suffered from what we now call Covid-Cruise Syndrome.

Cruise Ships were partially responsible for the proliferation of the virus within Australia, the *Ruby Princess* was unceremoniously forced out of Australian waters in April 2020 after causing hundreds of coronavirus infections and 20 deaths in the country. Even after the extensive litigation, the cruise operators and their insatiable greed failed to learn their lesson. A crumbling industry still in the early days of recovery had only just resumed international travel when tragedy would strike.

On the 8th of September 2022, the *Topaz Prince,* cast off from Warrung for a two-week cruise to New Zealand and Pacific Islands. Sailing, despite the warnings and rumours that there was an outbreak of new, more deadly and vaccine resistant Coronavirus known now as Covid-19 -E.

Several of the staff had exhibited flu-like symptoms on the ship's previous voyage from Honolulu to Warrung. None the less the *Topaz Prince* pushed ahead with its 1000 person cruise of the pacific.  This voyage of the damned sailed headlong into disaster, the virus quickly spread through the crew and passengers with 1/4 of the ship infected within the first week, the ship tried to find a country willing to let it dock. Country after country refused, like many of the  cruise ships during the pandemic, the  *Topaz Prince* was left in limbo to circle the Port of Manila Bay, in prison-like conditions for over a month.

75 people would die.

But the worst was yet to come. Terror lurked in the Manila Trench while the *Topaz Prince* aimlessly hovered in the shallow waters of Manila Bay.

On October 10th 2022 an 8.2 earthquake and subsequent aftershocks triggered the eruption of the Taar Volcano and a series of tsunamis that would devastate The Philippines killing 142,000 people in the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam and Thailand. It was a scale of devastation not seen since the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami. The *Topaz Prince* was badly battered by the waves and only a handful of people managed to  escape

We speak to Kate Whittaker, one of the survivors of this terrible tragedy.

Thanks very much Kate for joining us. First of can you tell us about that first month on the ship? When did you find out people were getting sick?

Kate Whittaker in a whispery voice:

The first week was bliss, we sailed through the Bay of Islands the water was so clear and tranquil then the boat started to head towards Fiji.

At the nightly dinner we started to notice a few people coughing and with colds, but we did not think much of it. Then one night we were relaxing in our cabin and we decided to watch the news, it was on that news broadcast that we first heard about the new outbreak of the coronavirus.

Fear started to spread through the ship , and soon enough an announcement was made that 10 people on the ship were presenting signs of Covid and that we were all to remain in our cabins for the time being.  They told us a quarter of the people on board had become sick. So I was pretty scared, I was really scared and locked in that cabin I was going crazy.

We were so bored, playing cards and reading books and pacing in our tiny room, once a day they would let us up to walk around the deck. Around, I think it was the 22nd , I’m not sure, Ling got sick, really , really sick. They were coughing and spluttering  and could barely breathe and they had a really high fever. We called for help , they took Ling away that night and it was the last time I would ever see them. I cried every night for what seems like years.

Jo Omer:

Are you able to tell us about the night the tsunami hit?

Kate Whittaker:

We’d been stuck in Manila for about 10 days. The sound of the water made me feel sick, the relentless crash and movement of waves. I was really nauseous and seasick the whole time. All of a sudden, everything went quiet

[Pause]

And then a giant deep roar, the cruise ship reared violently, back and forth and I was thrown around my cabin. The ship's emergency sirens went off. Water was everywhere, I held onto to the rails for my  life. I could hear screams everywhere. I got to the top, people were running around and the air was full of smoke from the volcano.

A few of us managed to get into one of the lifeboats and to the shore.  There was devastation everywhere, people running and buildings destroyed as we ran for higher ground another wave came in , only a hundred of the people on the ship survived.

Once I got to the top of the hill I collapsed. I woke up in a makeshift hospital in a warehouse, barely alive, the doctors told me I had covid-19 and hypothermia but somehow, I'd pulled through the worst of it. I had extensive lung damage and spent several months in the hospital when I finally got back to Australia .

Jo Omer:

Thank you so much for sharing your story.

I can't imagine how hard it would have been to go through what you went through. After your recovery you became an activist, advocating for the Corporate Duty of Care Act. Can you tell me a little about that experience?

Kate Whittaker:

I joined a class action suit against the cruise operators, that cruise should never have sailed and they continued on, knowing the risks and that potentially staff were infected.

They didn’t test those workers and let them continue to work. Endangering all our lives.  It turns out that most cruise ships operate in Australia as shell companies making them incredibly difficult to prosecute. They pay no tax. There was so much outrage after the tsunami that we began to lobby the government to legislate against this kind of corporate activity. That companies that trade within Australia can be prosecuted under Australian law. We won the class action and the judge’s ruling created a legal framework which proved that what they were doing was illegal.

The workers had a separate legal challenge and in the end a bi-partisan bill was passed through parliament which meant corporations were liable to be prosecuted under Australian labour laws if they do business here and that they had a duty of care to both their employees and customers should they come to harm or illness as a consequence of their malpractice.

Jo Omer:

Thanks very much for your time Kate, what an incredible story.

Tune in next week for Part 8 of our series ‘*Covid-19, 10 years on and how the pandemic reshaped the Australian nation through the stories of the survivors*’.

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