

Submission 185A

Mr Ralph Peter Bull

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DHAT/IN/2011/185A
Matter No 20

OUT/2012/091

To: Mary Bermingham
Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal.

From: Ralph Peter Bull
2 Surrey Close
Kanwal NSW 2259
19th February, 2012.

Re: Enquiry into unresolved recognition for HMAS YARRA 11 & her crew.

As you would be aware I submitted some information, dated 10th February, 2012, for the Tribunal's consideration, based on a book written by A.F. Parry. This was the ORIGINAL book printed in 1944 and was heavily CENSORED by the authorities in power at the time. You may have wondered how A.F. Parry could describe in detail what YARRA's final battle was. As you are aware Parry was on YARRA up until two weeks before she was sunk, so he knew the men who were left on board quite well, and on returning to Australia he found the YARRA survivors and they told him in detail what happened during the final battle.

I have since been reading the UNCENSORED book published by THE NAVAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA, which was printed in 1980, copy 924 of 1000 books printed. A.F. Parry, in ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS (which I have copied from the book for you to read) explains how he got the information on YARRA's end. From this book I have also copied the last chapter (XIV) "YARRA'S LAST FIGHT, and the EPILOGUE, which covers in detail what actually happened in the battle with the Japanese which you may find very interesting. In the Japanese reports they said that they only had three 8 inch cruisers and 2 destroyers, but in actual fact as witnessed by the survivors, there were three 8 inch cruisers and 4 destroyers. The survivors names are also listed there, 13 out of a crew of 151.

I have spoken to my sister's daughter, Christine Bermingham, and she said the only thing she remembers her mother telling her is that a survivor from YARRA came to my mother and told her that my father had been killed when the bridge was blown up. He was W.O. Ralph William Donald Bull, Gunnery Officer. This in some way made it easier for my mother to accept what had happened to her husband.

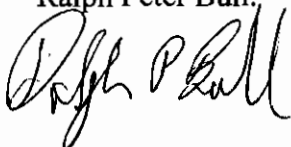
It is very difficult to get any stories from survivors or their families as they just could not speak about what happened to them. As all of the officers were killed during the final battle, there was no one to report on YARRA 11. Surely somewhere there is someone or something to confirm what happened. What has happened to Commander W.H. Harrington's report on his ship's company, THAT THEY PERFORMED THEIR VARIOUS TASKS WITH THAT CO-ORDINATION AND CO-OPERATION WHICH THEY ARE ACCUSTOMED TO SHOW IN UNFORSEEN CIRCUMSTANCES. Commander Harrington was Commanding Officer on YARRA for most of her time overseas until 11th February, 1942 when L.C. R.W. Rankin took over command.

Yes, YARRA 11 was a gallant ship, and when her time came for them to go, YARRA and her men went gloriously. In my opinion, the whole crew should be rewarded with recognition and awarded with Bravery Medals.

Yours faithfully,

Ralph Peter Bull.

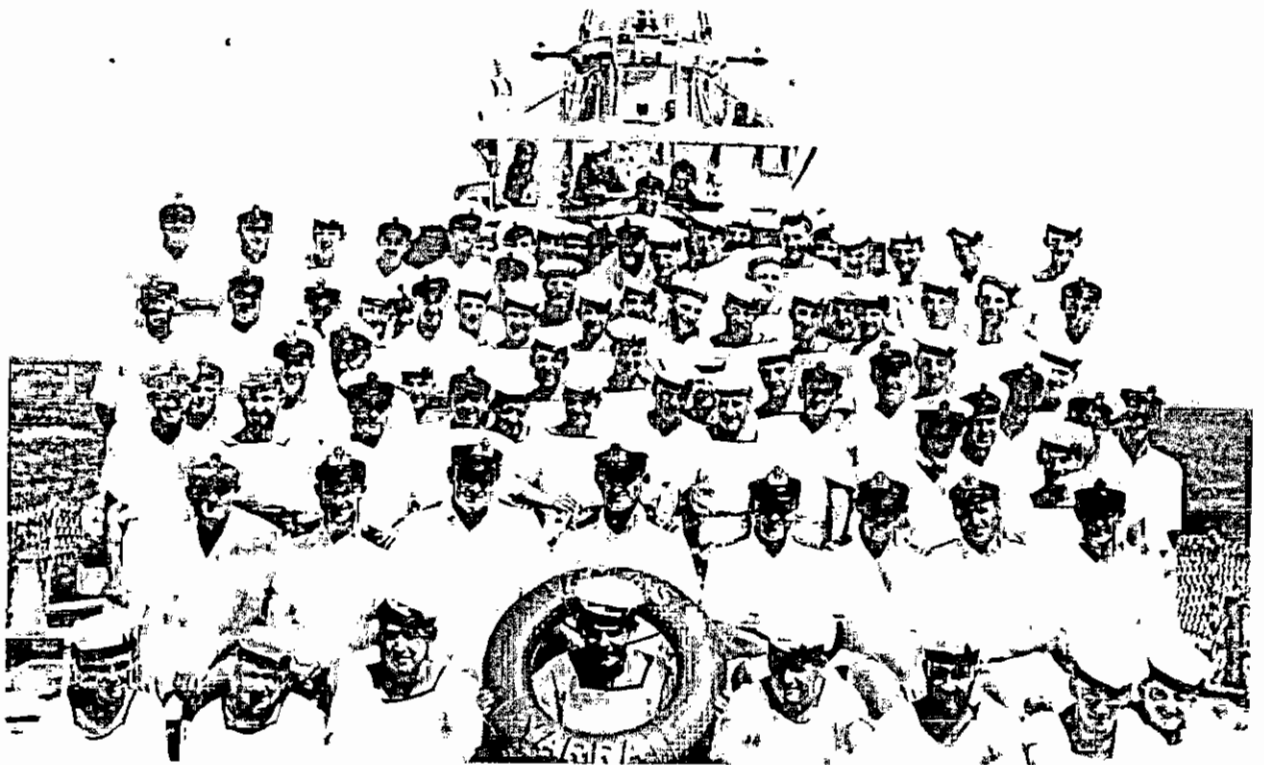
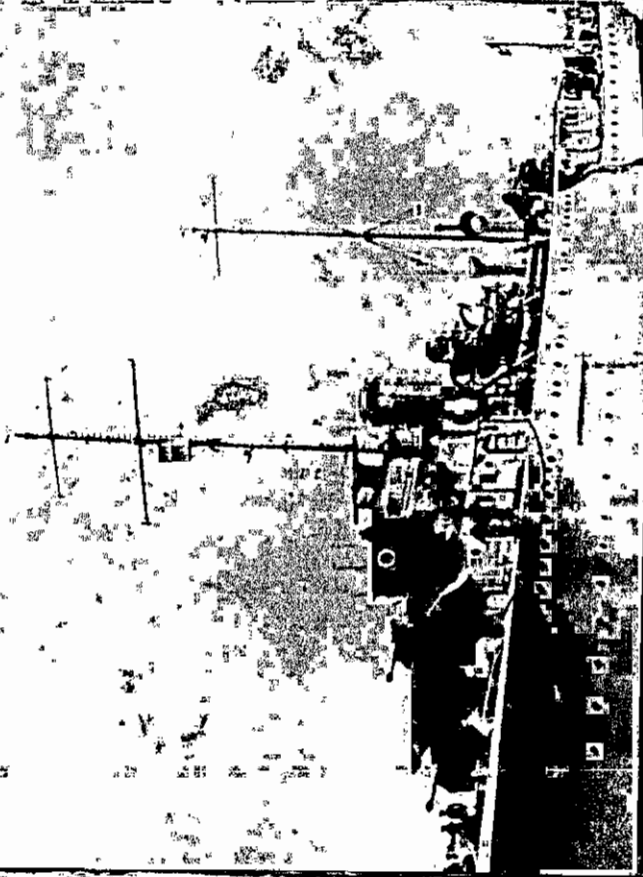
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H.M.A.S. YARRA

1936-1942



Ship's Company of H.M.A.S. YARRA 1941.

H.M.A.S. YARRA

1936-1942

The Story of a Gallant Sloop

by
A. F. Parry

Copy No 924 of 1000

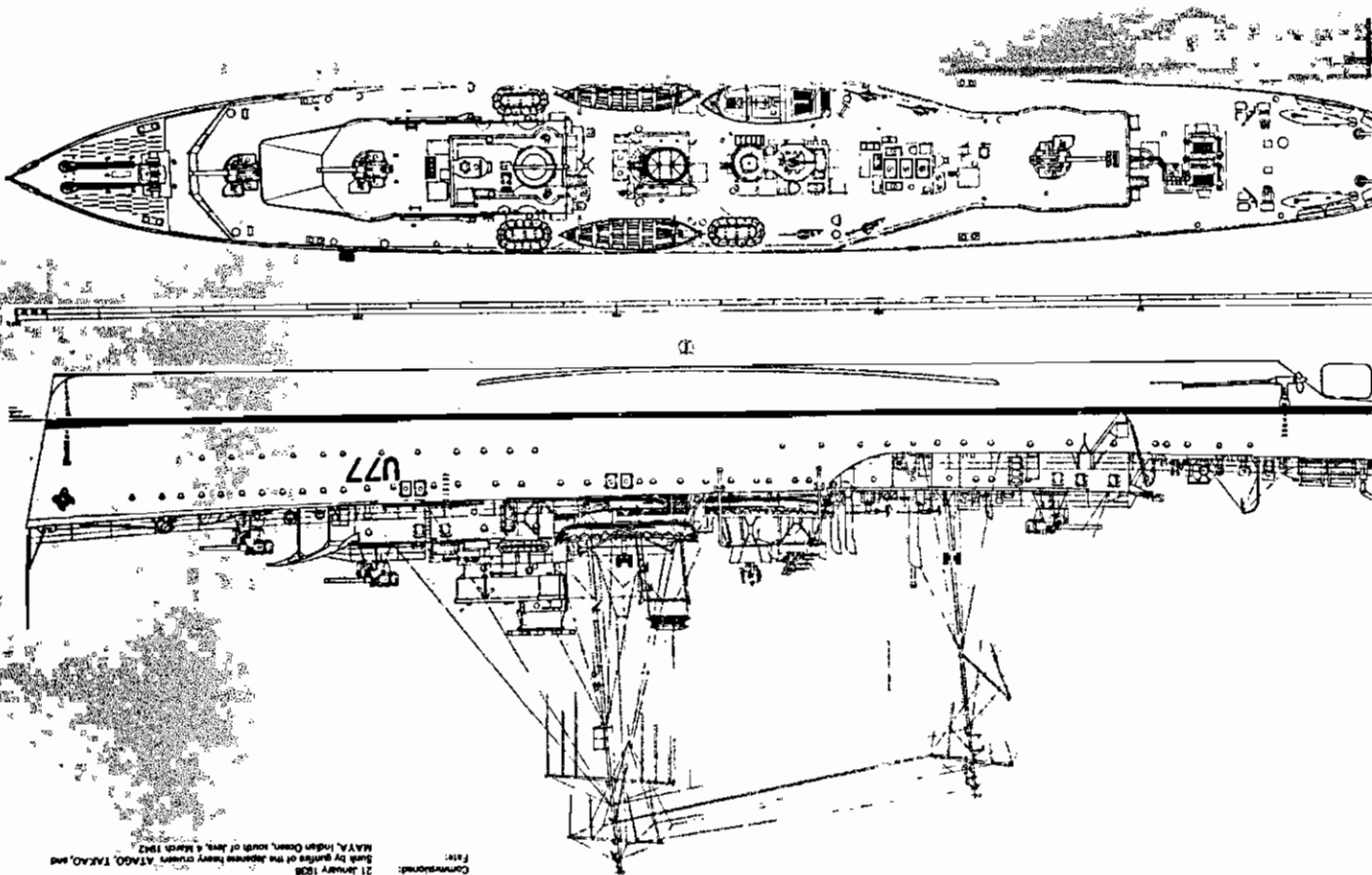
Published by

THE NAVAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA
P.O. Box 3, Garden Island, N.S.W. 2000

1980

Wholly set up and printed in Australia by
K. L. & S. E. LIND, 55 Stanley Street, Peakhurst 2210
Registered at G.P.O. for transmission through the post as a book

National Library of Australia Card Number and ISBN
ISBN 0 908153 07 8



Displacement: 1,080 tons, standard (1,975 tons, deep load)
 Three 4 inch A.A. (3 x 11), four 3 inch A.A. (1 x 4), four 3 inch
 Diameter: 25 1/2 ft. (p.p.) 26 1/2 ft. 28 ft. 30 ft. 32 ft. 34 ft. 36 ft. 38 ft. 40 ft. 42 ft. 44 ft. 46 ft. 48 ft. 50 ft.
 Machinery: Two Admiralty 3 drum boilers, 2,000 S.H.P. - 16.5 knots.
 OIL Fuel: 240 tons.
 Radius of Action: 8,000 miles at 10 knots.
 Builders: Cordaleo Dicks and Engineering Co. Ltd, Sydney, N.S.W.
 Laid Down: 28 May 1934
 Commissioned: 21 January 1936
 Fate: Sunk by gunfire of the Japanese heavy cruisers ATAGO, TAKAO, and MAYA, Indian Ocean, south of Java, 4 March 1942.



H.M.A.S. YARRA
SCALE: 1 inch = 16 feet
Ready - Class Sloop, shown in September, 1940, when she was
retired with the Royal Fleet Reserve.

PREFACE

The story of H.M.A.S. YARRA is little known to the general public. To tell it and to redeem a promise to my shipmates, I wrote the book "H.M.A.S. YARRA, the story of a gallant ship" while on leave and it was published during World War 11.

I was at the time, a young seaman with no access to official sources and, of course, the book was subject to censorship.

Joining the ship early in 1940, I served in her in Australian waters and, throughout her service overseas, leaving her only a fortnight before her final battle. The glory of that heroic fight has made the ship and her crew immortal in our naval history and it is fitting that the full story should be told.

A.F. Parry.


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author desires to acknowledge some former members of the ship's company of H.M.A.S. YARRA who gave their time to assist with checking of details of events contained in this book.


They are:
Messrs K. Avery, V. Brazier, B.F. Cairncross, R.G.A. Campbell, I.Fullerton,
F. Glover and D.L.Stevenson.

I would also like to acknowledge the services of Alan Payne of The Naval Historical Society of Australia for revising and editing the manuscript and adding a considerable amount of new information mainly from official sources. Alan Payne is also responsible for the Introduction and Epilogue.

A.F. Parry.



wonder that on the mess deck they often called him affectionately the "Black Prince". He went on to become Vice Admiral Sir Hastings Harrington and Chief of the Naval Staff.



CHAPTER XIV

YARRA'S LAST FIGHT

On arrival at Tanjung Priok, Lieutenant Commander R.W. Rankin R.A.N. took over command of YARRA, on the 11th February. The ship remained in port for several days to complete a much needed boiler clean.

Commodore Collins was anxious to move VENDETTA to a safe port as soon as possible and decided that the destroyer would leave under tow of the PING WO, an ex Shanghai ferry on the 17th. Two tugs towed the destroyer out of harbour to rendezvous with PING WO and a convoy of two ships escorted by YARRA and ELECTRA. It was slow convoy, otherwise PING WO and VENDETTA plodding along at the rear at a modest seven knots would not have been able to keep up.

The convoy lived a charmed life as it steamed slowly for seven days through waters dominated by the enemy's sea and air forces. On the 22nd February the convoy was 200 miles south of Christmas Island and here the convoy divided. VENDETTA's log recorded: '1100.H.M.A.S. YARRA passed over line her mail for Fremantle also some fresh provisions. 1600. H.M.A.S. ADELAIDE sighted off port bow. 1700. H.M.A.S. ADELAIDE takes over convoy. 1705. Goodbye H.M.A.S. YARRA. This was the last we were to see of this gallant little ship, since she was lost in action only a few days after leaving us'. After a most hazardous experience off Fremantle when the tow broke, VENDETTA was finally safely berthed on the 4th March.

YARRA arrived back at Tanjung Priok on the 24th February. On the afternoon of the 27th HOBART arrived after suffering a severe air attack only a few miles from the port, the cruiser incurred five casualties and some splinter damage. Dive bombers attacked twice that afternoon, but did not damage HOBART and YARRA which were berthed together next to the oiler. In the excitement of the attacks the cruiser's close range guns put some shells through YARRA's ensign.

On the 27th Commodore Collins gave orders to clear all remaining British auxiliary ships from Tanjung Priok. Accordingly YARRA and H.M.I.S. JUMNA sailed with a convoy consisting of three tankers, FRANCOL, WAR SIRDAR, BRITISH JUDGE, the depot ship ANKING and the small minesweepers GEMAS and MMS.51. The ships left after midnight for Tjilatjap with a calm sea and passing showers. At 0420

on the 28th WAR SIRDAR went aground off Agentium Island west of Tanjong Priok. WOLLONGONG, which had joined the convoy detached and stood by, and after dawn made repeated efforts to tow the tanker off, but was forced to give up due to enemy air attack.

There were several other British and Australian warships in Sunda Strait that day. Soon after dawn Captain Howden's force of HOBART, DRAGON, DANAE, TENEDOS, SCOUT, raced by and at that time there was no evidence of enemy activity apart from several empty life boats and a large quantity of flotsam. But later in the day the northern part of the Strait was heavily and consistently bombed. Further south were six of WOLLONGONG's sister ships of the 21st Minesweeping Flotilla under the command of Commander Cant. A number of the ships were short of fuel, and Cant decided to take the flotilla to Tjilatjap for fuel.

On the afternoon of the 1st March two of the minesweepers reached Tjilatjap which was now the port for evacuation of all personnel trapped in Java. Many tried to reach the port but did not make it. It was now known that there were strong Japanese naval forces south of the port to cut off the escape route. BENDIGO therefore broadcast a signal, authorised by Commodore Collins, ordering all British ships to avoid Tjilatjap and to proceed to Fremantle or Colombo. That evening STRONGHOLD sailed with the AZZNDAM, which had embarked refugees.

Shortly after midnight Commander Cant's four minesweepers met YARRA and her convoy making for the port and about 1100 on the 2nd March YARRA's convoy and the four minesweepers arrived off the port. A signal from Commodore Collins ordered them not to enter, and in accordance with the orders JUMNA made for Colombo and YARRA and the convoy turned south for Fremantle. BRITISH JUDGE escorted by WOLLONGONG to the westward intercepted Collins' signal and altered course for Colombo.

The first of the British warships to be sunk by the Japanese patrolling south of Java was the small destroyer STRONGHOLD, which had proceeded independently after escorting AZZNDAM for a few hours. The destroyer was forced to steam at economical speed due to fuel shortage, and when 300 miles south of Java on the following evening was intercepted by a cruiser and two destroyers of Admiral Kondo's force. The action lasted about an hour, but the destroyer had no chance at all and finally blew up after suffering heavy casualties.

The first of Commander Cant's ships was in the searched channel off Tjilatjap when the signal forbidding entry was received and it was considered safer to carry on. Cant then decided to take the rest of his

ships in as they were short of fuel. The minesweepers helped the accommodation problem for the evacuation and the BALLARAT sank the small minesweeper GEMAS which did not have the endurance to make Australia.

YARRA was now on her own with only the FRANCOL, ANKING and the little minesweeper MMS.51. On the afternoon of the 3rd March YARRA was steaming south at 8½ knots with her convoy, while about 200 miles to the south steamed Admiral Kondo's force. Late on the previous day, an enemy aircraft had shadowed them for some time.

On the 3rd March YARRA had sighted two life-boats under sail, from which about thirty five survivors of the Dutch ship PARIGI were picked up. Apart from this event the day and night were uneventful, except that a submarine contact was obtained during the night and YARRA dropped two depth charges without any effect. All on board now expected to be home in Australia in four days, but all the time the distance between the convoy and Admiral Kondo's force was decreasing.

At about 0540 on the morning of the 4th, the ship's company closed up for Dawn Action Stations. At 0630, as a glorious sunrise heralded the new day and the hands were about to go to breakfast, the dread sound of the alarm bells closed them up to Action Stations yet again. The Captain had observed flashes on the horizon and seconds later a salvo of shells roared overhead. Kondo's force of three cruisers and two destroyers had been sighted and only a miracle could now save them.

Lieutenant Commander Rankin put his helm over, sent an enemy report and commenced to lay a smoke screen between the convoy and the enemy. The Captain also ordered the convoy to scatter and proceed "independent best course and speed". The convoy was in a hopeless position with no possible chance of escape, as the enemy had all the advantages of range, speed and gun power. The enemy even had two aircraft catapulted for spotting their fire.

After laying the smoke screen, the Captain altered course towards the enemy at his best speed of 14 knots — YARRA was in need of a refit and could do no more. He knew that the only chance of saving any of the convoy was for him to close the range quickly and perhaps delay the enemy ships by engaging them, this he could only do by getting into range of his four inch guns.

As their ship steamed towards the enemy, YARRA's gun crews were grimly intent on trying to score a hit on their bigger opponents. Down below in the magazine, Stoker Petty Officer Vic Braizier called up to the captain of A gun, Able Seaman "Taff" Sheppard: "Do you need any more ammunition?, to which "Taff" replied laconically: "Reckon

"we've enough up here there's three cruisers and four destroyers up ahead" YARRA'S four inch guns, while deadly accurate in the hands of her seasoned crews, were nevertheless quite inadequate for the job they were now called upon to perform, out ranged as they were. Salvoes of eight inch shells still roared overhead as the enemy sought the range. Possibly the cruisers mistook the sloop's silhouette with her two masts for that of a larger ship.

Down in YARRA'S Sick Bay were the medical team and the survivors of the PARIGI, picked up the day before. Here the first hit was registered by the enemy guns. Having found the range the enemy ships remained outside the limit of YARRA'S guns and proceeded to pound her to ruin. Next the Transmitting Station and Bridge were hit and wrecked. Leading Seaman Bromilow, one of the few survivors of the Bridge party, he was draped over a guardrail, badly wounded and semi-conscious. Later he was put over the side by one of his shipmates and dragged into a raft.

After the Bridge had been hit, the Engineer Officer, Lieutenant Wilkes with Leading Stoker Cairncross, went aft to connect up the emergency hand steering in the Tiller flat, but communications to the Bridge had been shot away. As they started forward again, a salvo hit the engine room. This soon stopped the ship and caused a heavy list as the engine room was flooded.

All was now chaos. A and X guns were out of action from direct hits and B gun was the only remaining four inch gun capable of firing. Only Leading Seaman Taylor and two ordinary seamen were left of the gun's crew. The upper deck was a shambles - all the boats and the main-mast had been wrecked as the cruisers concentrated their combined fire power on the stricken sloop.

At about 0700 the order "Abandon Ship" was passed round the upper deck by the First Lieutenant, Lieutenant Commander Smith and elsewhere from one man to another. This was half an hour after the action had started, but it is not known for certain if the Captain was still alive at the time. The First Lieutenant then walked round the twisted upper deck, directing and assisting those small groups available to launch the two Carley floats and anything which would float, including the small rafts salvaged from the EMPRESS of ASIA.

When the Abandon Ship order was received, the captain of B gun, Leading Seaman Taylor, ordered his two remaining gun's crew to join the rafts. He remained at his gun, determined to fight on by himself; he trained the gun ahead of the leading enemy ship and then, on the layer's

platform, waited grimly for the right time to fire.

At about 0715 thirty four survivors floated away from the blackened and battle scarred side of the ship, which had carried them through so much. None of the ship's officers were among them.

The depot ship ANKING was the first ship to be sunk soon after 0630, this was about the same time as YARRA made her gallant attempt to close the range. The motor minesweeper sank shortly afterwards, but the tanker FRANCOL did not sink until about 0730.

The thirty four survivors from YARRA included the Dutch captain and two of his officers from the PARIGI. As they slowly drifted away, they watched their ship being shelled at close range in an effort to sink her - she was the only ship left afloat. For some little time they could see one man, leading Seaman Taylor at his gun. Survivors have stated that he scored a hit on the leading cruiser, some that he might have also obtained a hit on a destroyer. At all events, the gun was soon silenced, but only after Leading Seaman Taylor had fought to the end.

One of the Japanese destroyers approached the rafts and stopped. A rope ladder was lowered and it was made clear to them that they were to come aboard. This they refused to do, partly because they were unsure of the consequences if they did go on board, and also because YARRA was still afloat and they hoped that if she remained afloat and the Japanese left the scene, they might be able to reboard to obtain food and water and check for other survivors. The destroyer then sped away and now two aircraft commenced to bomb YARRA. She sank some time after 0800.

Those on the rafts compared notes - food consisted of a tin or two of soggy biscuits and there was very little water, which was immediately rationed to provide a minute quantity per man per day, the wounded to receive only slightly more than the others. In the days to follow the shortage of water would be deeply felt.

Through the twenty four hours of each day, they baked and blistered in the fierce sunlight and froze by night. Bromilow had a large open wound on the back of his shoulder, which was badly affected by the sun. The Dutch captain put his jacket round Bromilow's shoulders to cover the wound, saying: "You need this more than I".

Due to the extremes of heat and cold and lack of water, some were not able to withstand the rigours of the hell through which they were now drifting. As day followed day, the numbers became less and less. Twice ships were sighted, but after raising hopes, passed on without sighting the rafts. On the evening of the third day, Duncan Stevenson

7.

8.

saw one of his mates drifting away, so climbed onto a wooden raft and paddled after him. He was not able to save his mate, nor was he able to rejoin the others. For two days he was on his own.

It was the practice at night to spread out as far as possible to enable the weaker ones to stretch out in the rafts. At dusk on the evening of the fourth day, Bruce Cairncross took his turn on a one man raft attached to the leading Carley float by a line. After a fitful night he awoke to find the line had parted during the dark hours and he was alone — as he said later, "a nasty shock to the system".

Late on the fifth day, a submarine surfaced near one of the rafts. The castaways heard voices speaking what they first thought was German, then they realised it was Dutch. Their feeble hails were heard and they were soon hauled aboard the Dutch submarine K11.

Those in the first raft were: Stoker Petty Officer V. Brazier, who had commissioned YARRA and had continued to serve in her until the end, Leading Cook Wagland, Leading Signalmen Bromilow, who held out despite his wounds, and Able Seaman A. Orton, the sole survivor of X gun's crew.

These men were able to tell their rescuers that there were others in the area and the captain of K11 commenced a search which located the second raft with its few remaining occupants and also Leading Stoker Stevenson supported on his box and Leading Stoker Cairncross on his one man raft. There were only thirteen survivors out of a total of 151 plus those rescued from the Dutch ship.

And so ends the saga of a gallant ship and those who manned her. It was her good fortune that during her service overseas, she was called upon to perform many difficult and dangerous tasks, all of which she carried out with a measure of distinction to her name, her ship's company and the country from which she came. It can be said of the ship and her men that when the time came for them to go, they went gloriously.

The names of those who survived the sinking on the 4th March 1942 are given below:

Ordinary Seaman J.R. Archibald.
Stoker Petty Officer V. Brazier.
Leading Seaman G.G. Bromilow.
Ordinary Seaman K.P. Buckløy.
Leading Stoker B.F. Cairncross.
Ordinary Seaman W.G. Clark.
Leading Supply Assistant E.A.W. Latham.

Ordinary Seaman R.L. Manthey.
Able Seaman A.G. Orton.
Engine Room Artificer E.L. Ramsden.
Leading Stoker D.L. Stevenson.
Leading Cook H.G. Wagland.
Ordinary Seaman W.D. Witheriff.

The following decorations were awarded to personnel of H.M.A.S. YARRA for service in the Persian Gulf.

Distinguished Service Order (D.S.O.) Commander W.H. Harrington,
R.A.N. Distinguished Service Medal (D.S.M.) Petty Officer N. Fraser,
Petty Officer Steward R.J. Hoskins, Petty Officer Stoker D.D. Neal.

EPILOGUE

Unknown to the YARRA survivors, there were observers of part of YARRA's last action, in addition to the Japanese.

One of the naval officers from MMS.51 has given his account of the action: "At 6.40 a.m. on March 4, the Japanese attacked in force — three 8 inch gun cruisers and two destroyers with six aircraft..... YARRA continued firing valiantly till put out of action. She was then bombed until she sank....At 8 a.m. the Japanese steamed away."

Another observer of the action was one of the survivors of STRONGHOLD on board the Japanese cruiser MAYA. "We were taken on deck and shown, as they tried to impress us, the might of Japan's navy", reported the Royal Navy seaman. "The YARRA was the only ship left afloat and we could see flames and a great deal of smoke. The two destroyers were circling YARRA which appeared stationary and were pouring fire into her. She was still firing back as we could see odd gun flashes. The three cruisers then formed line ahead and steamed away from the scene. The last we saw of YARRA was a high column of smoke, but we were vividly impressed by her fight....."

It is possible that the "odd gun flashes" were fired by Leading Seaman Taylor who was the Captain of the last remaining gun and had been reported as ignoring the "Abandon Ship" order. The R.N. observer in MAYA would tend to confirm that Taylor did, in fact, carry on firing until he was killed and this would have been entirely in character of the seaman Commander Harrington had praised for his courage and ability.

Although the events of that last fight remains indelibly in the minds of the survivors, it is only natural that there would be some discrepancy regarding times of various happenings, if only because of the varying degrees of shock felt by each individual. However, the consensus of opinion of those in a position to know, is that the action commenced with the sounding of the alarm bells at about 0630 and that "Abandon Ship" was ordered about 0700. Similarly, with the time at which the ship sank. Here again, consensus of opinion is that she sank shortly after 0800. In the words of the Official History of the R.A.N.: "Last to go was YARRA, some time after 8 a.m."

The Australian Official History quotes part of a Japanese report covering the action, in which the three 8 inch cruisers and two destroyers are reported being present at the action. The survivor of MMS.51 is quoted above as saying there were three 8 inch cruisers and two destroyers with six aircraft. On the other hand, YARRA survivors are sure and have

always stated that they were attacked by three 8 inch cruisers and four destroyers. Suffice it to say that they were attacked by a vastly superior force, which included three 8 inch cruisers.

While the YARRA survivors were drifting along in their Carley rafts, they could not know that just over the horizon, fourteen survivors of MMS.51 were also drifting along in two Carley rafts. These survivors from the MMS.51 were picked up by a Dutch ship on 7th March, two days before K11 retrieved the YARRA castaways. Both groups were loud in their praise of the way they were treated by the Dutch. A YARRA survivor wrote: "We could not adequately thank the Dutchmen. No men in the world could have been kinder to us".

The submarine K11 arrived at Colombo on the 22nd March, it was not until then that it was known in Australia that there were thirteen survivors from the YARRA. Of a total ship's company of 151, a total of 138 including the Captain and all the Officers, went down with the ship or died later on the rafts.

Various positions have been given for the area where the YARRA was sunk, but based on her known speed and the reported positions of other ships in the convoy, it seems most likely that YARRA was sunk 230 miles to the south of Tjilatjap. If the sloop had been on her own, steaming at 12 knots or more, she might have made Australia without being intercepted by the Japanese.

On the 13th March, 1942, the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. John Curtin, announced the loss of both H.M.A.S. PERTH and H.M.A.S. YARRA without being able to give any details at all. PERTH had been lost with U.S.S. HOUSTON in the battle of Sunda Strait on the 1st March, YARRA had gone down fighting in defence of her convoy in the same manner as the Armed Merchant Cruiser, H.M.S. JERVIS BAY.

To-day, the fighting traditions of both the Royal Navy and the Royal Australian Navy are commemorated by warships of very different types — H.M.A.S. PERTH, H.M.A.S. JERVIS BAY and H.M.A.S. YARRA to name but three. YARRA is the third ship of that name in the Royal Australian Navy and it is to be hoped that this tradition will always be carried on.

The saga of the sloop YARRA covers a period of a little over eighteen months overseas, but in that relatively short period the little sloop crammed in more experiences than many other warships experienced during the whole War. The ship's company made the best of every difficult situation and she was a happy ship. YARRA's Commanding Officer for most of her time overseas, Commander W.H. Harrington had reported of his ship's

company, that they" performed their various tasks with that co-ordination and co-operation which they are accustomed to show in unforeseen circumstances." Nearly all of YARRA's service overseas was spent in very hot climates and at times the ship's company were closed up for long periods. In addition to bad living conditions, the ship had over fifty cases of malaria in two months when in the Basra area of the Persian Gulf. All they could do was to grin and bear it, but it made it very difficult at times, to man the ship under action conditions.

