



**SENATOR DAVID FEENEY**  
**Parliamentary Secretary for Defence**  
**Senator for Victoria**

Friday, 1 March 2013

**Unit Citation for Gallantry to be awarded to HMAS *Yarra***

The Parliamentary Secretary for Defence, Senator the Hon David Feeney, has today announced that the World War 2 sloop HMAS *Yarra* will be awarded a Unit Citation for Gallantry based on her actions off Singapore on 5 February and in the Indian Ocean 4 March 1942. HMAS *Yarra* was sunk in March 1942 when it confronted a vastly superior Japanese force.

This Unit Citation follows Senator's Feeney's acceptance of the recommendations from the recent Inquiry into *Unresolved Recognition for Past Acts of Naval and Military Gallantry and Valour* (the Inquiry).

The Inquiry was held by the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal (the Tribunal). The Tribunal found that due to a lack of adequate evidence it would not be possible to determine what honours might or should have been awarded to three individuals from HMAS *Yarra* who were considered as part of the Inquiry.

These individuals are:

- Lieutenant Commander Robert William Rankin
- Lieutenant Commander Francis Edward Smith
- Leading Seaman Ronald Taylor

Although individual honours cannot be awarded, a Unit Citation for Gallantry will honour the ship's company for their extraordinary gallantry in the face of overwhelming odds, which is in keeping with the finest traditions of the Royal Australian Navy.

On 5 February *Yarra* was escorting a convoy about to enter Singapore Harbour when it was attacked by Japanese aircraft and subjected to intensive dive-bombing. One of the convoy ships, the troop transport *Empress of Asia*, was severely damaged and sinking. Despite the risk from the attacking aircraft and explosions in the doomed troopship, the Commanding Officer, Commander Wilfred Hastings Harrington, took *Yarra* alongside the *Empress of Asia* and rescued 1,804 men directly from the ship and from lifeboats already in the water.

On 4 March *Yarra* and her convoy of three merchant vessels were returning to Fremantle when three Japanese heavy cruisers and two destroyers were spotted. Each of these ships was superior to *Yarra* in strength and speed.

Without concern for their own safety, *Yarra's* Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Commander Robert William Rankin, manoeuvred the ship between the enemy and the convoy, made smoke to screen the convoy and closed to engage.

Senator Feeney said despite the crew knowing their fate, they conducted themselves with great distinction and professionalism.

"The ship's company showed extraordinary courage, skill and conspicuous devotion to duty in the face of a far superior enemy, as they engaged against truly overwhelming odds," Senator Feeney said.

*Yarra* was struck by heavy enemy shellfire, badly damaged and set on fire yet continued to engage the enemy. When it was obvious the ship was about to sink, the order to abandon ship was given. Despite this order the last remaining gun crew continued to engage the enemy until silenced by direct fire.

From a ship's company of 151 men there were only 13 survivors. Neither Rankin, Smith nor Taylor survived *Yarra's* final action. Despite the gallantry of HMAS *Yarra*, all vessels in the convoy were sunk.

"A Unit Citation is a fitting way to recognise the gallantry of those who served in *Yarra* during the darkest days of the Second World War. The Tribunal's view was that there was a failure of process that these acts were not properly recognised at the time," Senator Feeney said.

"Sadly, none of the 13 survivors are alive today. However, I hope the families of the ship's company will be relieved that Australia has finally recognised these heroic acts from these brave men. Each and every one of them have earned this Unit Citation for Gallantry."

The Chief of Navy, Vice Admiral Ray Griggs, said, "Rankin, Smith and Buck Taylor and the rest of the crew, have been, are, and will forever be heroes to the Navy. They are worthy of our profound respect, of our deepest gratitude and our enduring remembrance."

The Tribunal received 29 written submissions and 11 oral submissions in relation to recognition for personnel serving in *Yarra*.

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The Tribunal's report can be found at: [www.defence-honours-tribunal.gov.au](http://www.defence-honours-tribunal.gov.au)  
More information on HMAS *Yarra* can be found in Chapter Twenty-One of the report.

Imagery can be found at: <http://images.defence.gov.au/12132870>

**Note:**

A memorial for HMAS *Yarra* will be held in Melbourne this Sunday. A media alert will be issued shortly.