

**Speech for CDRE Peter Laver Representing CN at
Solomon Islands Battle of Savo Island Commemoration**

HMAS *Canberra* and HMAS *Shropshire*

“ Never Say Die “

Today I shall speak of two Australian cruisers and of their tragedy and their triumph. It is a great story of “never say die.” It is the story of HMAS *Canberra* and HMAS *Shropshire* and the unique bond between these sister ships and the men who served in both. The destruction of the first in 1942 in Ironbottom Sound lit a fire in the belly of her survivors which drove them on to avenge her and to final victory seventy years ago on 15 August 1945.

The Battle of Savo Island was a tragic defeat for the USN and the RAN. In a night action, Admiral Mikawa surprised two groups of allied ships sinking one Australian and three American cruisers, while suffering only light damage in return.

The destroyer USS *Patterson* was the first to report the Japanese cruisers and destroyers as they entered the sound at 28 knots . Japanese floatplanes, dropped aerial flares directly over *Canberra* and *Chicago*. *Canberra* responded immediately, with Captain

Frank Getting ordering an increase in speed and for her guns to train out and fire at any targets that could be sighted. Less than one minute later, as *Canberra's* guns took aim at the Japanese, two cruisers opened fire on her, scoring numerous hits within a few seconds. Within the next three minutes *Canberra* took up to 24 large caliber hits. Early hits killed her gunnery officer, mortally wounded Captain Getting, and destroyed both boiler rooms, knocking out power to the entire ship before *Canberra* could fire any of her guns or communicate a warning to other Allied ships. The cruiser glided to a stop, on fire, with to 10-degree list to starboard, and unable to fight the fires or pump out flooded compartments because of lack of power.

Her officers and men fought a tremendous battle to put out fires and control flooding. Sailors were seen running through flame to throw live rounds over the side before they exploded. Her wardroom was converted into an operating theatre, lit by paraffin lanterns where the medical team amputated shattered limbs and treated terrible burns. Captain Getting, was taken from his shattered bridge in agony to be attended to.

He knew he could not survive his wounds and insisted that the medical officer leave him till last, and work on his injured sailors who could be saved. A day later he died on board the USS *Barnett*

and was buried at sea on 9 August. Of the 819 of those serving on *Canberra*, 193 were casualties and 85 were dead.

After attacking the Southern allied ships Mikawa's forces steamed north and crippled the cruisers *Astoria*, *Vincennes* and *Quincy* with accurate shellfire and then torpedoed them before steaming away ignoring the defenceless transport ships discharging US troops onto Guadalcanal. That night 992 American sailors died. *Quincy* lost 389, *Vincennes* lost 342, *Astoria* lost 235, *Ralph Talbot* lost 14, *Patterson* lost 10, and *Chicago* lost 2.

By morning it was obvious that *Canberra* was damaged beyond repair by the ship's company. Those dead who could be recovered were committed to the deep and her wounded and exhausted survivors prepared to be taken off by the *Patterson*.

Writing later to Rear Admiral Crutchley, *Patterson's* Captain, Commander Walker USN, paid this tribute to *Canberra's* crew:

The Commanding Officer and entire ship's company of the USS Patterson noted with admiration the calm, cheerful and courageous spirit displayed by officers and men of Canberra. When Patterson left from alongside because of what was then believed to be an enemy ship close by there were no outcries or entreaties — rather a cheery 'Carry on Patterson, good luck!' —

and prompt and efficient casting off of lines, brows etc. Not a man stepped out of line. The Patterson feels privileged to have served so gallant a crew.

After the survivors were removed, the destroyers *Selfridge* and *Ellet* sank *Canberra*. It took 300 shells and five torpedoes before she succumbed

This was a traumatic moment in the history of the young RAN. This was the third Australian cruiser to be lost in nine months; first *Sydney*, then *Perth* and now *Canberra* were gone. The Admiralty in London, prompted by Winston Churchill decided that Australia should be offered a Royal Navy cruiser to replace *Canberra*. HMS *Shropshire*, a County class cruiser and a sister ship to *Canberra*, was chosen. King George VI announced that the ship would be renamed *Canberra*. However, around the same time, President Roosevelt chose to commemorate the Australian warship's loss by renaming the under-construction *Baltimore*-class cruiser *Pittsburgh* as USS *Canberra*. So to avoid duplication HMS *Shrophire* became His Majesty's Australian Ship *Shropshire*.

Canberra's survivors were supplemented with new recruits and sent to Chatham Dockyard in UK to pick up their new ship in refit and steam her back to the Pacific. They were pleased to get to sea as Chatham Dockyard was a target for nightly Luftwaffe air raids.

Her Gunnery Officer - CMDR Bracegirdle later wrote:

"The welding together of veterans and young sailors with keenness and the possibility of retaliation against the King's enemies in the Pacific, was quite astounding. The ship was happy and efficient from the very first. A fine ship sailed into Sydney Harbour ready for battle and action."

All on board, veterans and new recruits were burning for a chance to hit back and avenge *Canberra* and their lost comrades and to show what they could do in battle when they were able to train their turrets. Inside *Shropshire's* 8 inch gun turrets the crews stencilled the name *Canberra* so that no one would doubt that this was now a very personal war. They got their chance. *Shropshire* was in the thick of the fight for 18 months in 15 engagements starting in the South West Pacific. Her big guns destroyed Japanese shore batteries for the Australian and American armies and broke up massed attacks on Americans in New Guinea.

In the mid Pacific she closed up to action stations to fight off waves of kamikaze suicide attacks 133 times and shot down at least eleven aircraft. Twice this lucky fighting lady avoided torpedoes that passed within feet of her bow and stern.

Her greatest chance to hit back came at the Battle of Surigao Straits in the Philippines in October 1944. Her target, along with other allied ships, was the Japanese battleship *Yamashiro*. *Shropshire*'s gunners fired thirty-two broadsides at her at a range of 15,800 yards closing in to 12,700 yards.

They claimed nineteen straddles and sixteen broadside hits - a phenomenal rate of accuracy. *Yamashiro* fired back and straddled *Shropshire* with massive 14 inch shells any one of which could have destroyed her. *Shropshire*'s gun crews achieved their thirty two broadsides from eight 8 inch guns in fourteen minutes forty seconds - an amazing feat of strength and determination – worthy of highly trained athletes. The weary but jubilant gunners stopped firing to witness the sinking of the *Yamashiro* by USN cruisers and battleships. The USS *West Virginia* was in the battleline. She had been raised from the bottom of Pearl Harbour where she had lost 66 men when torpedoed on 6 December 1941.

In August 1945 *Shropshire* steamed into Yokohama Bay and witnessed the surrender of Japan to the Allies on board the USS *Missouri* on 2 September 1945

In 1946 *Shropshire's* went to England and her ship's company, including *Canberra's* survivors represented Australia and the RAN in the British Empire's Victory Parade in London. It was very fitting that they should be given this high honour. Her ship's company were representatives of all those Australian sailors living and dead who had made victory a reality.

There has never been another ship named HMAS *Shropshire*, and never will be; but her name lives on as a Training base for Australian Navy Cadets. It lives on in the memories of the few now very elderly men who took her to war, and it will always live in the annals of the RAN. These young men brought great glory on their ships, on their Navy and on their homeland. *Shropshire* was manned by new recruits and by *Canberra's* survivors who at Savo Island had endured defeat, horror, fear and battle shock.

They came back from defeat, undaunted, fighting for their mates living and dead, and in doing so earned and won a very personal Victory in the Pacific.