

50th Anniversary of the sinking of HMAS Voyager

10 February 2014

Vice Admiral Ray Griggs, Chief of Navy

- Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for making this journey today with us to this outwardly unremarkable piece of ocean, of course we all know that there is nothing unremarkable about this place.
- I am not going to go through what happened here, we all know that, it is why we are here.
- I have been very keen that Navy make this commemoration a special one, one that rightfully acknowledges the loss, the pain, the courage and the remarkable nature of the human spirit shown on that awful night and on every day in the 50 years since.
- Many of you know that Operations at sea and preparations for them are difficult and demanding. The sea is an unforgiving environment and the activities we undertake involve risks which are over and above those faced by other mariners.
- *Melbourne* and *Voyager* were not on active service, but it is important to remember that is most certainly what they were preparing for.
- There are many that have spent the last half century searching for answers as to how this happened and many more searching for a way to be at peace about that night.

- Sadly the answers to the cause of this tragic event will remain unknowable. This inability to know has been a constant barrier to coming to terms with that night. It has been a contributing factor to the inability of so many to find peace.
- Today is I hope an opportunity for us all to come together to remember, to commemorate and to honour.
- It is my heartfelt desire that our commemoration today does three things.
- Firstly, it is to honour and remember all those who served in these two fine ships, and in particular those who lost their lives serving their country – they were all good people; 67 good sailors, 14 good officers, and a good civilian member of the Navy.
- When they found themselves in the midst of a tragedy, the actions of the crews of *Melbourne* and *Voyager* spoke volumes about their courage and skill.
- The selfless courage displayed by Chief Petty Officer Jonathan Rogers, one of *Voyager's* most senior sailors, and by Midshipman Kerry Marien, one of her most junior officers, exemplify the inspirational lifesaving efforts.
- Chief Rogers received the George Cross;
- Midshipman Marien and Engineer Mechanic First Class William Condon received the Albert Medal – all three posthumous awards.
- A George Medal was awarded to Petty Officer Douglas Moore;
- British Empire Medals were awarded to:
 - o Petty Officer Geoffrey Worth,

- o Leading Seaman Raymond Rich,
 - o Leading Sick-Berth Attendant John Wilson,
 - o Leading Electrical Mechanic Brian Longbottom, and
 - o and Able Seaman Eric Robson.
- Queens Commendations were awarded to:
 - Petty Officer Engineering Mechanic Edgar McDermott,
 - Engineering Mechanic Hugh Gilvarry and
 - Electrical Artificer Anthony Page.
 - The effort to save lives was not limited to the two ships involved – other parts of the Navy reacted well, from the oft forgotten crews of the sea-air rescue vessels, *Air Nymph* and *Air Sprite* who rescued many *Voyager* crew members, to the aircraft from Nowra, to the other ships in the Fleet and the personnel based at HMAS *Creswell*.
 - I can only try to imagine the struggle that many of the men involved have waged and some continue to wage over what happened that night.
 - I want to pay tribute to their partners and loved ones who have endured much these last 50 years in giving them loving support even when it has not been easy. This has not been something of your choosing.
 - The second thing I want to do, is to acknowledge the grief and suffering of the families and friends of those lost. Each person's experience is unique and for each person who died there are dozens of family and friends who have been affected.

- For me there is a personal connection – Acting Leading Tactical Operator Arthur Teape was one of the 82 lost, he was one of my fathers closest mates, he was my brother's godfather and my parents are Arthur's son Paul's godparents.
- Through this connection to Arthur the *Voyager* story and its impacts has been something I have known about since a very young age. It is much more than an article in a history book to me.
- I am honoured that the Teape family is here today, as I am equally honoured that other families of those lost are here.
- Your fathers, grand fathers, husbands, brothers, uncles, cousins, were special people and, in our own way, all of us here share your loss.
- I would also like to acknowledge the families of the Captains, Navigators and Officers of Watch of the two ships, because yours is a particular burden.
- Those of us who have filled each of those positions at sea know all about the responsibility that each position carries, it is a heavy burden, particularly when things go wrong. It is here that the spotlight of inquiry is shone with particular intensity, it is here where accountability is sought.
- Nothing is harder than night manoeuvres at sea; in the cold light of a Royal Commission things seem clinical and obvious. They are not, things unfold hellishly quickly and the margin for error is wafer thin.
- I am honoured to have members of these six families here today. I hope today we can help acknowledge lives which were about much more than just one evening.

- My third desire, is to ensure that today's Navy continues to remember *Voyager* and to remember the lessons which we have learned from this tragedy and the lessons we can continue to learn.
- We are mistaken if we ever think that accidents could not happen again.
- Navy's reason for being is to fight and win at sea – we do so in the service of the nation. And in doing so, we must take carefully considered risks to achieve military advantage. This must, and does extend to training.
- The key for me is that we do not take risks without good reason, without preparing people and equipment for them, without knowing why we are taking a risk, for what gain we seek.
- There are important organisational lessons that we must continue to ensure we have learnt from *Voyager*.
- The focus and priority that we place on our families is very different than it was in 1964. I grew up under that system, I have seen profound change take place over my career and watch it to continue to evolve for the better.
- The Navy's relationship with the community, with Government and with the Media is I would contend vastly different to what it was at the time. We are more open and less insular.
- Our understanding of the psychological impact of incidents such as these is much more sophisticated than it was then, we see this in our approach to mental health issues across the Navy. The support we provide, the screening programs to alert us to problems and the

critical incident support we provide. We are not perfect, but *Voyager* is one of those events that has helped us develop in this field.

- Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for joining with us today to commemorate those lost in HMAS *Voyager* and those who survived that night. It is a great honour for us that you have been able to make this journey today; we are very grateful that you have and we hope that we have been able to play a small part in honouring you, your shipmates and your loved ones.
- The words Lest we Forget have a compelling meaning to them as we reflect on what happened here 50 years ago. One thing is for sure, we must never forget.
- Know though that When the nation requires, your Navy will go into action – ‘we continue to gather strength as we go’ and we are better and stronger for the experiences and sacrifices of those who have gone before us – we will be proud to go ‘Where Fate Calls.’