

Presentation of the HMAS *Yarra II* Unit Citation for Gallantry

to the Royal Australian Navy

Acceptance speech by Chief of Navy

Vice Admiral Ray Griggs

Your Excellency, The Honourable Quentin Bryce, Governor-General of Australia and
Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Defence Force;

The Honourable David Feeney, Shadow Assistant Minister for Defence;

Your Excellency, Mrs Annemieke Ruigrok, Dutch Ambassador to Australia;

The Right Honourable Robert Doyle, Lord Mayor of Melbourne;

Families of the crew of HMAS *Yarra II*;

Veterans and other Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Can I start by acknowledging the people of the Kulin nation, the traditional custodians of this land and these waters on which we meet today, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I would also like to acknowledge the members of the Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal here today who made the recommendation for this award after a long and difficult inquiry.

On behalf of the Royal Australian Navy it is an enormous honour and privilege to accept this Unit Citation for Gallantry for HMAS *Yarra II*.

Collective gallantry is the most prized achievement in Navy. A ship's crew are all of one company. They to sea together, go into action together and, we pray, they come home together. Although of course this has not always been, and in particular in *Yarra's* circumstance, was not the case.

Ships can only fight as teams and every member of the crew plays a role in fighting the ship. You cannot leave a ship in action at sea; you are committed to seeing it through with your shipmates. They must have endurance and remain focused, hour after hour, day after day; in strength-sapping heat and in numbing-cold. They must conquer the seas and then conquer their enemy.

Make no mistake, even though most of a warship's crew do not see an enemy face to face, they know when they are in action and they know the consequences of damage or defeat.

The actions of HMAS *Yarra* and her crew on the 5th of February and the 4th of March 1942, displayed these qualities and are in the finest traditions of the Royal Australian Navy.

The shiphandling on the 5th of February showed the skill of not just the Commanding Officer and the Navigator, but that of the Engineers and Coxswains. It is great to see retired Rear Admiral Simon Harrington, son of *Yarra*'s then CO, Commander Hastings Harrington, here today. The embarkation of over 1300 people directly into *Yarra* while under enemy fire alongside a burning troopship that towered over her was a masterful example of quick thinking, seamanship and organisation by a ship's company working as a team.

On the 4th of March, faced with an overwhelmingly superior force while escorting a convoy from Java to Australia, *Yarra* displayed her fighting spirit, a spirit evident in every member of the crew as the ship turned to engage the enemy.

Every member of the crew would have known of the impossible odds.

Every member of the crew would have known of the fate which awaited them.

Every member of the crew stayed at their action station, fighting their ship to their utmost, to the bitter end, with their face turned toward the enemy.

138 of *Yarra*'s crew died in action or on life rafts, there were only 13 survivors, eventually rescued by the Dutch submarine K11.

The crew of *Yarra* served the nation; they did so with extraordinary gallantry, skill and conspicuous devotion to duty; they did so as one ship's company, even to death. In doing so, they set an enduring example to which all members of the Royal Australian Navy can aspire.

To the families and friends of the crew of HMAS *Yarra II*, we honour you and acknowledge you as part of our Navy family. For seventy two years, you have paid the price and time does not diminish your loss.

No words can change the events of 1942. Likewise no words can change quality of their gallantry, their example shines out from our past and into our future.

We have recently taken steps to ensure that *Yarra's* story lives on and is reinforced to our young sailors and young officers as they join our organisation. At both our Recruit School at HMAS *Cerberus* and our initial officer training establishment at HMAS *Creswell* at Jervis Bay, there are divisions now named after two famous *Yarra* personnel.

At Recruit School we have Taylor Division named after Leading Seaman Ronald Buck Taylor, killed in action at his gun on 4th March - it is great to see so many of the Taylor clan here today.

At *Creswell* we have Rankin division named after Lieutenant Commander Robert Rankin, the commanding officer of HMAS *Yarra* on that fateful day 72 years ago. It is a great honour to have Lieutenant Commander Rankin's daughter Patricia here today, who has flown from Canada for the event and who will visit the submarine named in her father's honour later this week.

No other ship's story is commemorated in this way in the RAN. It speaks volumes for the men who made this story a vital part of our history. This Unit Citation for Gallantry only enhances the telling of this story.

I hope it will be of some comfort to the family members here today that as you remember them as fathers, husbands, grandparents, brothers, uncles and cousins, the Navy will remember them as fighting sailors who epitomise the Navy values of honour, honesty, loyalty, integrity and above all, courage.

Your Excellency, I cannot think of a more fitting way for you to officiate at your last major military event during your term as Commander in Chief. On behalf of all members of the Royal Australian Navy, thank you for your service as our Commander in Chief and thank you for this honour, which I am humbled to accept on behalf of HMAS *Yarra II* and the Royal Australian Navy.

From today, all Royal Australian Navy ships carrying the name *Yarra* will fly the Unit Citation for Gallantry Burgee on the 4th of March in honour of the crew of HMAS *Yarra II*.

We stand on the shoulders of those fighting sailors who have gone before us and we are proud to honour the fighting sailors of HMAS *Yarra II*.

They strove, as should we, to fight and win at sea.

HMAS *Yarra* (II), Royal Australian Navy
Unit Citation for Gallantry

For acts of extraordinary gallantry in action off Singapore on the 5th of February 1942 and in the Indian Ocean on the 4th of March 1942.

On the 5th of February 1942 a convoy, about to enter Singapore harbour, was attacked by Japanese aircraft and the troop transport *Empress of Asia* was severely damaged, resulting in major fires and the ship began to sink. Despite the threat from continuing air attack and the explosions in the *Empress of Asia*, HMAS *Yarra*'s Commanding Officer, Commander Wilfred Hastings Harrington, RAN, manoeuvred the ship alongside the stern of the sinking transport, enabling 1334 men to be directly transferred across to *Yarra*. *Yarra* then proceeded to rescue a further 470 men from life rafts and floats in the vicinity. In doing so, *Yarra*'s crew showed conspicuous devotion to duty, outstanding seamanship and ship handling skills, and extraordinary courage in the face of immediate danger, directly from the enemy and from the burning troop transport.

On the 4th of March 1942, *Yarra* and her convoy of three merchant vessels were proceeding to Fremantle, having departed Java two days before. In the early hours of the morning, *Yarra*'s lookouts sighted a Japanese surface action group, consisting of three heavy cruisers and two destroyers. Each individual Japanese warship was greatly superior to *Yarra* in fighting strength and speed. Without concern for his own or his ship's safety, *Yarra*'s Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Commander Robert William Rankin, RAN, immediately manoeuvred the ship between the enemy and the convoy, made smoke to screen the convoy and closed to engage.

Despite the obvious fate that awaited them, *Yarra*'s ship's company conducted themselves with distinction and utter professionalism throughout the action that followed. They showed extraordinary courage, skill and conspicuous devotion to duty in the face of a far superior enemy as they turned towards them and engaged against overwhelming odds. *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.

Through their actions, the ship's company of HMAS *Yarra* (II) displayed extraordinary gallantry in the face of overwhelming odds, which is in keeping with the finest traditions of the Royal Australian Navy.