

70th ANNIVERSARY OF THE LOSS OF HMAS YARRA II

04 March 2012

Councillor Peter Hemphill, Mr Bernie Finn, Mr Angus Walsh, Veterans, Commanding Officer and ship's company of HMAS *Yarra* (IV), members of the honour guard provided by the Australian Naval Cadets from Training Ship *Voyager*, students of the Hyde St Band and members of the Welsh choir, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

It is always good to be in Melbourne where of course much of the early history of the Navy was played out. It is especially good to be on this side of the Yarra River where most of the action took place. In fact in August of this year Williamstown will again be the centre of attention when our new amphibious ship, the Landing Helicopter Dock *Canberra* arrives to have her superstructure fitted and her communications and command and control systems integrated. Another important chapter in the Victorian naval story.

It is a great honour to be with you here today to join in remembering the men of HMAS *Yarra* and their brave actions 70 years ago. We remember those that died and those that

survived in that most one sided of battles. We also remember those other members of the convoy that *Yarra* was so desperately trying to protect. Like Councillor Hemphill, I acknowledge the presence of Mr Bernard Higgins, the last survivor of the action.

It has been a week of commemoration, with the Navy's 111th birthday on Thursday and the 70th anniversary of the Battle of the Sunda Strait where over 1000 Australian and American sailors were killed in a couple of short hours.

There is a common thread that runs through the character of our people who have served throughout the 111 year history of our Navy. Stoker and his crew in AE2 off Gallipoli, Waller and the crew of Perth, Rankin and the crew of *Yarra* and in more recent times the crew of ASSAIL THREE in Pirie off the rocks of Christmas Island. Each situation was different, each situation dire in its own way. The common thread was the way that they all went about their job - as a team - with calm professionalism, little fuss and did heroic things.

I am not going to talk about the action in any detail, I think it is rightly the purview of the Commanding Officer of the ship that carries *Yarra's* proud name to do so. But I think it is important

to point out that the protection of shipping, the task that *Yarra* performed so valiantly, was as vital then as it is today, vital to our security and to our prosperity as a nation - it was central to allied victory in the second world war - the battle of the Atlantic and the convoys through to Russia are two key strategic examples of the importance of this task. The protection of our sea lanes today remains a key task for navies the world over.

The story of *Yarra* is well known in our Navy, her Captain, Lieutenant Commander Robert Rankin is of course honoured with the name of one of our submarines and one of the divisions at our recruit school down at HMAS CERBERUS.

Because there are multiple parts to the *Yarra* story, be that in action in the Mediterranean, her exploits in the Middle East, off Singapore rescuing 1800 troops and crew from the troopship the Empress of Asia or the fundamentally selfless nature of the ship's final chapter, this story stands proudly alongside the stories of other great battles, ships and key players in our Navy's history. *Yarra's* story through its different layers, reinforces, in a way that few other stories do, all of our Navy

values - Honour, Honesty, Integrity, Courage and Loyalty. They are all on display in the Yarra story.

There is of course these days considerable discussion about recognition, particularly in the naval sense, for some of the key people involved in some of these past actions and of course today talking to you, Rankin's, Smith's and Buck Taylor's actions in particular. I am glad that we have an independent tribunal looking into these matters, they are complex ones which frankly get more complex and more difficult over time. They are a respected group of individuals and in the best Australian tradition we need to wait until the umpire makes the call and then accept it whatever the outcome is.

At the end of the day, nothing will change the *Yarra* story, nothing will change what happened on that day, nothing will make it any less or any more heroic, nothing will be lost in the telling of the story of a magnificent and selfless collective act or indeed of the individual stories on that day. The battle took place at a very, very dark time in our history, a time in which our homeland had come under direct attack, our shipping lifeline was threatened and no-one knew what would happen next; a time when the Japanese forces were relentlessly driving

southward. Nothing at the end of the day will stop people who hear about this story from being inspired at how everyday people can do extraordinary things.

Rankin, Smith and Buck Taylor and the rest of the crew, have been, are and will forever be heroes to me as I am sure they are to you, they are worthy of our profound respect, of our deepest gratitude and our enduring remembrance. Lest we forget.