

## HMAS YARRA AND OPERATION MARMALADE

During 1941 a number of Australian ships were serving overseas under British Admiralty control, including the escort sloop HMAS *Yarra* under Commander Wilfred Hastings Harrington RAN. In August 1941, Britain and the Soviet Union undertook a joint invasion and occupation of Iran, to amongst other things, secure existing British oil interests vital to the Empire's capacity to remain in the war.

The Persian Gulf Division of the Royal Navy was required to land Indian Army troops in three separate operations at dawn on 25 August 1941, with the primary object being to secure the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company refinery on Abadan Island in the Shatt-el Arab River; the waterway forming part of the frontier between Iran and Iraq. The Iranian naval base upstream at Khorramshahr could pose a serious threat to both the landings and the safety of the refinery, so it needed to be captured before the Iranians could respond to the British assault on Abadan. This would be the responsibility of Commander Ughtred James RN in the sloop HMS *Falmouth* with HMAS *Yarra* under his command in an operation codenamed MARMALADE. The third landing would occur at the Persian Gulf port of Bandar Shahpur where the Australian manned armed merchant cruiser HMS *Kanimbla* would spearhead the capture of the port and sheltering Axis shipping.

*Yarra* sailed from Karachi for service in the Persian Gulf on 12 April 1941 with a ship's company of nine officers and 129 ratings. *Yarra* was an efficient and well drilled ship but after nearly four months serving through the Iraqi summer and with a poor diet, the crew was exhausted and had suffered high rates of sickness including malaria. *Yarra* had been transiting the Strait of Hormuz on passage to Bombay in India for rest and refit when recalled for the Iranian operation.

The town of Khorramshahr lies on the western bank of the Karun River as it enters the Shatt-el Arab through the tributary of the Haffar Channel and is 45 miles from the Persian Gulf. The naval depot was on the opposite side of the channel and the primary base of the small Iranian navy. Expected to be present alongside at Khorramshahr were the 950 ton sloop *Babr*, two 331 ton gunboats, depot ship *Ivy*, tug *Neyrou*, as well as around 1000 naval personnel. *Yarra* would embark a platoon of Indian soldiers while *Falmouth* would carry two platoons from C Company of the 3rd Battalion, 10th Baluch Regiment. The requisitioned tug *Souriya* was also attached to the force carrying a Royal Indian Navy (RIN) boarding party and crewed by sailors from *Yarra*. All vessels would sail from the Iraqi river port of Basra down the Shatt-el Arab whilst two separate Indian army formations approached the town from the north to engage an estimated 3000 defending soldiers.

*Yarra* sailed from Basra at 0056 to lead *Falmouth* and *Souriya* down river but *Falmouth* immediately went aground with a falling tide and could not be immediately floated off. Harrington continued while *Falmouth* languished on their mud bank for the next 2¼ hours.



Shatt-el Arab Chart (Peter Cannon)

*Yarra* arrived off Khorramshahr 0408 and lay off the entrance to the Haffar Channel, the waterway running off the Shatt al-Arab in north easterly direction. The naval base covered a 600 yard frontage of the channel on the eastern bank where five 'T' jetties provided berthing for Iranian vessels. The first ship alongside leading up the channel was the sloop *Babr* with the tug *Neyrou* ahead of her then the depot ship *Ivy* followed by the two gunboats *Charogh* and *Simorgh* lying alongside one another.

*Yarra* was to board and capture the two gunboats whilst *Falmouth* secured *Babr*, if at all possible; capturing ships intact and minimising casualties being the aim. But as Harrington was now unsupported, he decided to destroy *Babr* during his approach into Khorramshahr before she had a chance to react to the assault. Harrington had stopped behind a British cargo ship, the *Barala*, anchored midstream in order to conceal his ship from the base whilst waiting for the Abadan assault to go in; preserving the element of surprise at the oil refinery being of more concern than the execution of his own assault.

The first troops went ashore at Abadan at 0410. The British sloop HMS *Shoreham* opened fire three minutes later on *Babr*'s sister ship *Palang* lying alongside the refinery and immediately set her on fire. The gunfire, only about 8 miles distant, could clearly be seen and heard from *Yarra*'s bridge and at this point Harrington ordered the ship underway. As *Babr* came into view off *Yarra*'s port bow it became apparent that there need not have been any concern at achieving surprise as the barracks were deserted. A similar state of preparedness prevailed aboard the Iranian warships as most of their crews were ashore on overnight leave.

*Yarra* picked up speed, cleared *Barala*, and approached *Babr*. The range was so short that when the Rangefinder-Director crew attempted to open fire they found that the fire control system's safety depression cut off would not allow the electrical firing circuits to close. *Yarra*'s crew

switched into local control and individual gun captains directed their weapons over open sights. No. 2 gun under Leading Seaman Ronald Taylor was the first to engage. In keeping with his plan of making a stunning example of *Babr*, Harrington fired ten salvos into the Iranian ship before he ordered the forward guns to cease fire.

*Babr* was burning from her forward superstructure all the way aft and the fires soon touched off her after magazine; the force of the explosion blowing a hole eight feet in diameter in the bottom of the ship and she immediately sank at her moorings. Harrington now brought his ship slowly around to port to enter the Haffar Channel at 0425 and proceed alongside the two gunboats to take them by boarding.

*Yarra* approached the two gunboats, *Charogh*, and *Simorgh*, and prepared to board them but the Iranian sailors managed to man their weapons. Their two 3-inch guns were mounted side by side on the forecastle; the port weapons now being trained in the direction of the oncoming Australians in addition to their two single 37mm automatic anti-aircraft guns aft. The Iranians were yet to open fire, with the exception of a few rifles, when Harrington took any such opportunity away. His gunners swept the decks of both gunboats with a hail of heavy machine gun and small arms fire. Meanwhile the Australian boarding and Baluch landing parties, augmented by members of the 4-inch gun crews, poured .303 Bren, Lewis and rifle fire at the remainder of the gunboat's upper decks. Predictably, all incoming fire ceased. As Harrington manoeuvred *Yarra* alongside the outboard gunboat, the decks of both vessels were completely clear of personnel although some stray bullets from ashore were still flying over the forecastle.

*Yarra's* starboard bow nudged alongside the outboard gunboat at 0450; No. 1 gun's crew grappling and making fast before sailors ran out the brows that had been pre-positioned on the forecastle for boarding the enemy ships. Lieutenant Francis Smith RANR led the boarding party, comprised of cooks, officer's stewards and stokers along with No. 1 gun's crew, over the side to board the first gunboat before continuing on to take the inboard vessel.

The Australian sailors immediately secured the upper deck doors and hatches on both gunboats. Luckily for all concerned, whatever fight the enemy had possessed now evaporated as barked orders aided by a few rifle shots fired into the darkness below was enough to secure their surrender. Whilst the boarding was underway, a bus load of Iranians rounded a corner on the waterfront heading towards the action. Instead of being reinforcements, they turned out to be a group of sailors returning from leave but were encouraged to promptly swing around another corner and retire by Australian automatic weapon fire. Soon about 60 Iranian sailors were secured on *Yarra's* quarterdeck under armed guard.

At 0459, only nine minutes after *Yarra* had secured to the outboard gunboat, silence temporarily fell across the Khorramshahr naval base and Harrington considered his next move. *Falmouth* had been refloated at 0315 and was at that moment making her way at speed towards Khorramshahr, no doubt her captain and crew a little embarrassed by their experience and keen to get into the action. Harrington received a signal that *Falmouth* was on

her way and decided not to land his Baluch No. 13 Platoon to assault the barracks until she arrived with the remainder of C Company. It was thought that the sight of a solitary platoon of soldiers landing ashore may be enough to encourage the numerous defenders to fight back. *Falmouth* finally turned into the channel at 0520 and secured alongside the deserted *Ivy* before landing Nos. 14 and 15 Platoons, soon joined by the troops from *Yarra*.

Having had to await *Falmouth's* arrival and follow her alongside, *Souriya*, under the command of Lieutenant Noel Anderson RANVR, was manoeuvring alongside a barge tied up outboard of *Neyrou* when the Iranian tug's crew opened fire with rifles. The Australian and Indian sailors returned fire with small arms but *Souriya* overshot the tug on her first attempt at grappling after Anderson was hit in the right forearm. Only Sub Lieutenant Nilakanta Krishnan RIN, of HMIS *Investigator*, had managed to get aboard the barge and was exposed under heavy fire as Anderson recovered to get back alongside and support him. By the time *Souriya* was secured and the remainder of the RIN boarding party had gone over the side, Krishnan had already fought his way onto the tug and wounded two Iranians in the process. Krishnan and his sailors then exchanged gunfire with the Iranian crew above and below decks at point blank range before isolating and flushing them out to secure the tug. It appears that one Indian and four Iranian sailors were wounded aboard *Neyrou* while the tug's skipper died of his wounds after a shootout with the intrepid sub-lieutenant. Another 20 prisoners were taken aboard *Souriya* and later transferred to *Yarra*. The army went on to secure both the town of Khorramshahr and the naval base with minimal resistance and *Yarra* sailed that afternoon for the Strait of Hormuz to capture an Italian merchant vessel in the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas, rounding out her involvement in Operation COUNTENANCE. She was finally able to return to India and to be taken in hand for a well deserved refit in Bombay on 17 September while her crew was billeted ashore to a rest camp.

#### Petty Officer Peter Cannon

\* Extended version of article can be found in Rhett Mitchell (ed) *Australian Maritime Issues 2010: SPC-A Annual*.

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