

## LEADERSHIP, DEVOTION TO DUTY, SELF SACRIFICE – HMAS YARRA IN ACTION 1942

*“We were taken on deck and shown, as they tried to impress us, the might of the Japanese Navy. The Yarra was the only ship left and we could see flames and a great deal of smoke. The two destroyers were circling Yarra which appeared stationary and were pouring fire into her. She was still firing back as we could see the odd gun flashes. The three cruisers then formed a line ahead and steamed away from the scene. The last we saw of Yarra was a high column of smoke - but we were all vividly impressed by her fight.”<sup>1</sup>*

The first six months of the Pacific campaign were the darkest days in the history of Australia and her Navy. On 15 February 1942 the Malayan campaign ended with the fall of Singapore and over 15,000 Australian Service personnel became Prisoners of War. Four days later Darwin was bombed with several ships sunk and heavy loss of life at sea and ashore. The light cruiser HMAS *Perth* took part in the disastrous Battle of the Java Sea on 27 February and then on 1 March was lost in the battle of the Sunda Strait, along with the heavy cruiser USS *Houston*. Within a week the Netherlands East Indies (Indonesia) had also surrendered. Everywhere Imperial Japanese forces were victorious and nothing it seemed could stop their relentless push southwards.

Among the continuing bad news of surrender, loss, death and destruction flooding the Australian press the story of the recovery of 13 survivors from the sloop HMAS *Yarra (II)*, sunk on 4 March 1942, was a rare bright moment in a time bereft of good news. When the details of *Yarra's* last action became more widely known her story inspired a nation and its navy.<sup>2</sup> Over the last 75 years this story continues to inspire many as an example of leadership, devotion to duty and self-sacrifice to the extent that this action is now considered one of the finest fought in the annals of the Royal Australian Navy.

*Yarra* was a 1060 ton *Grimsby* class sloop mounting 3 x 4-inch guns and with a crew of 150 personnel. She was constructed at Cockatoo Island Dockyard, Sydney, during 1934-35 and commissioned in January 1936. When war broke out in 1939 she operated on the Australia Station undertaking patrol, escort and minesweeping duties. In August 1940, under the command of Lieutenant Commander ‘Arch’ Harrington, RAN, she departed Australia for service in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf. Initially she escorted convoys in the Red Sea area to prevent attacks by Italian warships and submarines operating from Italian Somaliland.

In early April 1941, *Yarra* was diverted to the Persian Gulf following a revolt by pro-German Iraqi army officers. The revolt was put down by British forces in mid-May and the pro-British Government of Nuri as-Said reinstated. The British Government placed an occupation force in Iraq to ensure the security of the Iraqi Government and the essential oil supplies for the British war effort. By August 1941 it appeared that neighbouring Iran would also

become supportive of Germany and there was concern that Nazi forces, which had recently invaded Russia, would drive southwards to the Persian Gulf.

*Yarra* took part in the subjugation of Iran on 25 August sinking the Iranian sloop *Babr*, at her berth at Khorramshahr, with No. 2 gun, under the control of Acting Leading Seaman Ronald ‘Buck’ Taylor, the first to open fire. *Yarra* also captured two Iranian gunboats by boarding party. The leaders of the boarding parties; Petty Officer Cook Norman Fraser, Petty Officer Steward Robert Hoskins and Stoker Petty Officer Donald Neal were each awarded a Distinguished Service Medal. Harrington was awarded a Distinguished Service Order.<sup>3</sup>

The sloop remained in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea area until mid-November when she was dispatched to the Mediterranean to operate on the ‘Tobruk Ferry Run’ moving troops and supplies into the besieged port of Tobruk and evacuating wounded soldiers. *Yarra* completed four voyages to Tobruk during 18 November - 16 December 1941 and was lucky to escape damage following frequent attacks by German JU87 Stuka dive bombers. *Yarra's* sister ship HMAS *Parramatta* was not as fortunate as she was sunk by a torpedo fired from U-559 on the night of 27 November with only 24 survivors from her crew of 162. One of those lost was Surgeon Lieutenant Charles Harrington, the brother of *Yarra's* commanding officer.



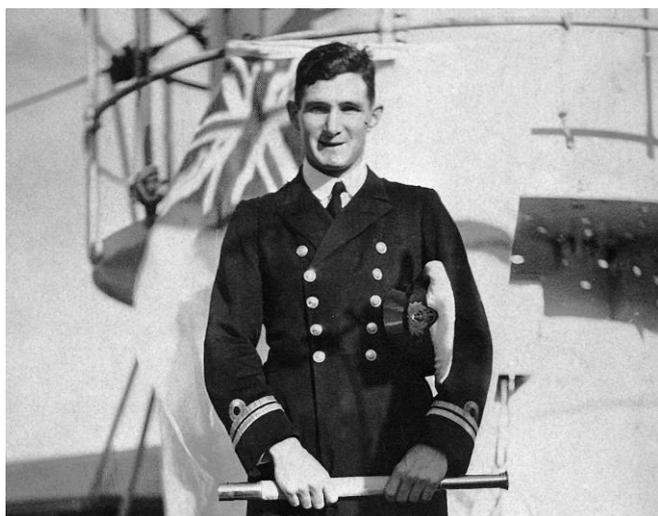
*HMAS Yarra wearing her wartime paint scheme*

Following the coordinated Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor, Hong Kong, Malaya and The Philippines on 7/8 December 1941, *Yarra* was recalled to home waters. She arrived at Tanjung Priok (the port of Batavia – now Jakarta) on 11 January 1942 and was soon embroiled in the desperate fight to stop the Japanese advance. Over the next few weeks the sloop escorted convoys in and out of Singapore experiencing several air raids.

On 5 February 1942, *Yarra* was escorting a convoy into Singapore harbour when the troopship *Empress of Asia* was attacked by Japanese aircraft. The vessel was badly damaged, set on fire and began to sink. With great skill and daring, Harrington manoeuvred *Yarra* alongside the stern of the sinking ship rescuing 1334 men who jumped

directly onto the sloop's deck. Meanwhile her gun's crews, particularly No. 2 gun under the control of Acting Leading Seaman Taylor, kept up a heavy rate of fire to keep other Japanese aircraft away, although this did not prevent one Japanese aircraft from strafing *Yarra's* upper deck slightly injuring two men. Many survivors from the troopship were left with little alternative than to jump into the water. Some 470 of them were also rescued by *Yarra's* boat crews. The corvettes, HMA Ships *Bendigo* and *Wollongong*, also provided valuable assistance in this rescue operation.

After the survivors were landed ashore, in Singapore, *Yarra* returned to Tanjong Priok on 10 February and the following day Commander Harrington<sup>4</sup> handed over command to Lieutenant Commander Robert Rankin, RAN. *Yarra* was soon back at sea escorting the disabled destroyer HMAS *Vendetta*, then under tow by the steamer *Ping Wo*, to a position 200 nautical miles south of Christmas Island. She then returned to Tanjong Priok where she collected a small convoy for escort to Australia.



*HMAS Yarra's* commanding officer, LCDR Robert Rankin

On the morning of 28 February 1942, *Yarra* and her charges left Tanjong Priok and steamed south via the Sunda Strait bound for Tjilatjap (Cilicap). The convoy, consisting of *Yarra*, the depot ship *Anking*, tanker *Francol* and the minesweeper *MMS.51*, arrived off Tjilatjap on 2 March but was ordered to steam directly to Fremantle. Warships of the Imperial Japanese Navy were now operating to the south of Java and several Allied warships had already been sunk during attempts to run the gauntlet to Fremantle. On 3 March *Yarra* rescued 35 survivors adrift in two life boats from the Dutch merchant vessel *Parigi* that had been sunk the day before.

The following day, 4 March 1942, saw the crew of *Yarra* stand-to for the routine dawn action stations. Many of her men had by then been away from home for over 18 months and were excited at the prospect of reaching Australia which was now only four days steaming away. At 0630, as the men were proceeding to breakfast, the dreaded sound of the action alarm called them to action stations for the last time. A force of five Japanese vessels comprising the heavy cruisers *Atago*, *Maya* and *Takao* each carrying 10 x 8-inch guns and two destroyers *Arisha* and *Nowaki* each equipped with 6 x 5-inch guns was bearing down on the convoy at speed. Rankin ordered the transmission of an enemy contact report by wireless

message, while at the same time directing the convoy to scatter. *Yarra* then laid a smokescreen while turning towards the approaching enemy and opened fire.

There was, however, to be no escape for *Yarra* or her convoy. Within an hour the three ships of the convoy had been sunk by the superior firepower of the Japanese warships and *Yarra* was drifting disabled with her engine room destroyed and two of her three guns out of action. Rankin was left with little choice other than to give the order to abandon ship. A few moments later a shell struck the bridge killing all in its path. Leading Signaller Geoffrey Bromilow, who was descending a bridge ladder, was blown to the deck below and badly wounded. The first lieutenant, Lieutenant Commander Francis Smith RANR, reinforced the order to abandon ship and an estimated 34 men of *Yarra's* crew of 151 entered the water on two Carley floats. One man however refused to abandon ship. Acting Leading Seaman Ron Taylor directed the two surviving members of his gun's crew to the rafts, but remained at No. 2 gun firing slowly, but defiantly, at the enemy until he was killed shortly before the ship sank at about 1000.

Over the next five days *Yarra's* survivors drifted helplessly on the two life-rafts and wreckage suffering from wounds, exposure and thirst in shark infested waters. On the morning of 9 March the Dutch submarine *K11* surfaced to recharge her batteries and quite by accident sighted the rafts supporting the pitiful 13 survivors of *Yarra's* last action. Amongst them was Leading Signaller Bromilow who had stoically held on in spite of his injuries, refusing an extra ration of water when offered. None of *Yarra's* officers survived the action.<sup>5</sup>

Following a sustained public campaign to have the heroic deeds of *Yarra's* crew officially recognised the then Governor-General, Her Excellency the Honourable Quentin Bryce AC, CVO, presented a retrospective Unit Citation for Gallantry to HMAS *Yarra (II)* on 4 March 2014 acknowledging the collective gallantry of *Yarra's* crew. The investiture took place in Melbourne in the presence of family and friends of the crew of HMAS *Yarra (II)* and the ships company of HMAS *Yarra (IV)*. This is one of only four Unit Citations for Gallantry awarded to the ADF and the only one to have been awarded to the RAN.

On 4 March 2017 the RAN will pause to remember those lost in *Yarra* during her gallant last stand 75 years ago.

**By Greg Swinden**

<sup>1</sup> Account by Able Seaman John Francis Murphy, a New Zealand naval rating who survived the sinking of the destroyer HMS *Stronghold*, on 3 March 1942, and was held captive on board HIJMS *Maya*.

<sup>2</sup> *Outgunned, Outnumbered – but Undaunted. Vain effort to save convoy.* Story of HMAS *Yarra's* last fight, *Canberra Times* 25 March 1942.

<sup>3</sup> See SPC-A *Hindsight* Issue 07, November 2011 (HMAS *Yarra* and Operation Marmalade).

<sup>4</sup> Harrington was promoted Commander in June 1941. He returned to Australia in a near empty troopship with six other men from *Yarra*, whose reliefs had also arrived on board. He later went on to have a distinguished career in the RAN and was eventually promoted to Vice Admiral and was Chief of Naval Staff 1962-65.

<sup>5</sup> A video clip describing *Yarra's* final action can be found on the Sea Power Centre - Australia website under the ship history of HMAS *Yarra (II)*.

