



Naval Historical Society  
of Australia

*Victorian Chapter*

## PRESIDENT'S MUSINGS – AUGUST 2017

Our presentation of the IWM Archives Film 'British Pacific Fleet-Phase one' was very well received at our meeting last month, and it is pleasing to know that many are looking forward to viewing the sequel, 'British Pacific Fleet-Final Chapter' on August 28th. My thanks are due to our Secretary, LCDR John Redman for Chairing the July meeting in my absence.

On Thursday August 3rd Marty Grogan and I drove to Cowes on Philip Island to meet with Gordon Bick a WWII RAF Bomber Command veteran, former Journalist and TV Producer. Gordon had an historical item he wished to donate to the HMAS Cerberus Museum. It is a framed 60cms X 50cms display concerning the 6 canons thrown overboard from HMB Endeavour on 10th June 1770. She was sailing north along our east coast and at 2300 she struck a reef and began taking water. Nearly 48 tons of material were heaved over the side, including the 6 cannons. Endeavour's ballast and cannons were found, encased in coral, on the ocean floor off Queensland in 1969. Consequently the canons and ballast were conserved for posterity by a team from the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences.

Gordon, a producer with the ABC 'Four Corners' program was assigned to do a program on the subject, and hence he created the display he wished to donate to our museum. The display is unique in that it contains a copy of a letter from The Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Granville, dated 8th July 1886, giving the exact position of the cannons and ceding ownership, should they be recovered. A piece of the actual coral is displayed in a removable framed section as well. The display includes photographs and the Cook's cannons story!

The presentation of the display took place at the Cowes RSL on August 3rd, and Gordon, Marty and I were treated to an excellent lunch, by the RSL Vice President Chris Thompson.



Another highlight of the day was when we viewed our HMAS Canberra III moored off Cowes pier. The LHD was giving recruits from HMAS Cerberus a taste of big ship life, and we saw the rear doors in the stern open wide enabling landing craft to emerge, indeed we sighted one operating in the bay.

On August 9th, the Naval Association in conjunction with the Naval Commemoration Committee organised a service at our Shrine of Remembrance to remember of the 'Battle of Savo Island' which was fought on August 9th 1942, 75 years ago to the day. This conflict has special

significance to most of our members, in that a very dear colleague of ours was on the bridge of

HMAS Canberra I, when she was first attacked in the early hours of that fateful day! LCDR Mackenzie J Gregory RAN survived that attack, and many more to boot during the tumultuous years of WWII. Mac spent most of the war either afloat or on courses. He joined HMAS Australia, as a Mid-shipman in September 1939 and finished the war in Tokyo Bay whilst serving in HMAS Shropshire. I personally do not hesitate to name him as a mentor. I enjoyed very much listening to his stories, and rejoice in the fact that he left for posterity his 'Mac's Web Log' website. You too can share his reminiscences just by going to <http://ahoy.tk-jk.net/index.html>. Mac's account of when Canberra was first hit whilst he was on the bridge is well worth reading. (see below)

It was most fitting that Canberra I, the 84 who paid the supreme sacrifice, the 109 wounded plus her crew who survived to fight another day, were remembered at the service. Also commemorated were those ships and men of the USN who fought and died beside our boys in Canberra. The USN suffered 1593 casualties (including 939 who died.) United States Ships Quinsey, Vincennes and Astoria were sunk and Ralph Talbot and Patterson damaged. **LEST WE FORGET!**

Our friend and colleague, the Naval Historian and author, Dr Ian Pfennigwerth enjoys reading the THD each month and I received this comment from him re my piece about the BPF in July THD. Ian writes "I'm surprised that people might think that the RAN contribution to the BPF was 'small'. We provided them with ships-destroyers, corvettes and support tankers-built facilities for the Fleet Air Arm and provided much of the administrative services the BPF required, including communications support accommodation and barracks services, dockyard services and so on. Recalling that at its peak the RAN barely nudged 40,000, that we were largely responsible for convoy escorts in through SWPA and that our major ships were engaged in a shooting war, I think we did more than our bit for the Brits."

I very much enjoy reading Ian's publications. His attention to detail, whilst keeping the narrative interesting to the 'general reader', is to my mind outstanding. His latest book 'Bravo Zulu Volume 1-1900-1974, is by definition a tome, ie, a large and scholarly book. The more I delve into it, the more I believe it deserves wide circulation in academia, RSL libraries and the like! As a research tool it is excellent! For further research re the BPF we invite you to turn to *Chapter 6, War in the Indian Ocean, 1939-45*. On pages 225-6 we find the heading 'The British Pacific Fleet', where Ian expands upon this subject and to whet your appetite we quote the following extracts: "The main force was to arrive between December 1944 and July 1945, RN personnel would total 120,000, with 29,000 based ashore, and most would arrive by January 1945. The British requirements would require 4500 Australians. The British didn't only want RAN bases, personnel and facilities, they also wanted Australian ships - two destroyers and 16 corvettes, as well as supply ships for the Fleet train. "In *Chapter 8, War in the Pacific Theatre, June 1944 to August 1945*, we invite you to turn to pages 383-9. The heading is 'Awards For Service in the British Pacific Fleet', and from it I again quote following extracts: "The British Pacific Fleet commenced its operations in March 1945 supporting the USN in the assault on Okinawa. Its task was to neutralise airfields in the islands to the south west of the island in the direction of Taiwan. Two RAN ships, *Quickmatch* and *Quiberon*, accompanied the British battleships and aircraft carriers in this operation, which continued until May. There were *kamikaze* attacks on the force, but the Australians found the escort duties dull.

Three more Australian ships, *Napier*, *Nepal* and *Norman* of the 7th destroyer Flotilla, joined the force on 18 April. Their particular task was to protect the tanker operating south-east of Okinawa to fuel the force, and to escort ships to and from Leyte. The British force withdrew from the operational area on 25 May and reached Sydney on 5 June. On 28 June the British again sailed north to join the assault, this time on the Home Islands of Japan. *Quiberon* and *Quickmatch* accompanied them and the four N Class destroyers were again assigned to the protection of the oilers, supply ships and other auxiliaries providing afloat support to the Fleet. The British carriers were now striking Japan in the Tokyo, Kure and Kobe areas. The destroyers found themselves maids of all work, even when the battleships closed for a night bombardment of targets north of Tokyo. Less glamorously, nine RAN Corvettes had formed the 21st Minesweeping Squadron to protect the British Pacific Fleet advanced bases." End of Quotes from Bravo Zulu Volume 1-1900-1974. We look forward with anticipation Volume 2 of Bravo Zulu 1

Yours Aye!!

*Rees Williams*

### **H.M.A.S. *Canberra* and the Battle of Savo Island (extract)**

#### **We are hit**

I called the Navigating Officer and the Gunnery Officer; the P.C.O. sighted 3 ships on our starboard bow and gave the alarm and the order to load the 8" turrets. The Captain quickly arrived to be first to reach the bridge. I sighted torpedo tracks approaching down the starboard side - the Captain ordered full ahead and starboard 35 to quickly swing the ship to starboard.

The Navigating Officer reached the bridge and told me he had the "Con", thereby taking over from me. The Gunnery Officer had taken over from the P.C.O. and moved to the Port enemy bearing indicator. Further torpedo tracks crossed the bow. Ahead, star shells were lighting up the scene and aircraft dropped flares to starboard. As I left the bridge, we again altered course.

I hurried to my action station in the fore control - there was an explosion amidships, we were hit on the 4" gundeck, the Walrus aircraft was blazing fiercely on the catapult. A shell exploded on the port side just below the compass platform and another just aft of the fore control.

The plotting office received a direct hit. The shell that demolished the port side of the compass platform mortally wounded the Captain, killed Lieutenant Commander Hole, the Gunnery Officer, wounded Lieutenant Commander Plunkett-Cole, the Torpedo Officer and severely wounded Midshipmen Bruce Loxton and Noel Sanderson. I had virtually been surrounded by shell hits but luckily remained unscathed. In the fore control

standing alongside me, Able Seaman Oliver was hit from the explosion just aft of our position - he was given morphine but was a very sick young man.

The ship now lost power and took on a noticeable list to starboard. For *CANBERRA*, the war was over. Only 2-3 minutes had elapsed since the ship went to action stations.

*CHICAGO* had about 16 feet of her bow blown off by another torpedo but she could still steam and the bulkheads held. She charged off to port but did not, in fact fire her 8" armament - she fired star shell from both her port and starboard 5" guns in the direction of her perceived position of an enemy cruiser - none of these star shells functioned. *CHICAGO* did not apparently warn the Northern cruiser force, but I will return later to this ship's movements and actions.

*PATTERSON* had sighted the enemy and quickly broadcast on her T.B.S. "Warning, Warning, Strange Ships Entering Harbour". You will recall earlier I indicated *CANBERRA* was not fitted with T.B.S., so that warning was not received by us. She had also signalled to us using a small blinker tube. *PATTERSON* had opened fire, but an order to fire torpedoes was not heard, the noise of her guns firing swamped out this command given by her Captain. *PATTERSON* was illuminated by the Japanese, fired upon and hit. However, *PATTERSON* did get off star shell and 50 rounds of gun fire.

*BAGLEY* sighted the Japanese after *PATTERSON* and altered course to port so that she could fire torpedoes. But she swung too far before the primers were inserted. It took another 3 or more minutes to bring her starboard tubes to bear and 4 torpedoes were fired, but without any positive result. *BAGLEY* also proceeded to the west, but of course Mikawa had long gone.



After Mikawa had decimated the Southern Force, he swept on, split into 2 groups and opened fire on the Northern Cruisers at 0150 and 0200. Twice *CHOKAI* was hit, but not impeded. By 0240 the 2 Japanese groups were clear, they rejoined as one and made off for Rabaul and Kavieng at high speed.

*QUINCY* sank at 0235, *VINCENNES* at 0250 and, finally the last of the Northern cruisers sank at 1215 on 9 August. *RALPH TALBOT* was also damaged as the Japanese withdrew.

*WILSON* was an escorting destroyer with the Northern Force and in her report after the battle is an amusing comment

"The times in the above narrative are approximate, for the hands fell off the bridge clock on our first salvo and it was not realised that the Quarter Master was not making exact time records of the occurrences until sometime later".

### **BACK TO THE CANBERRA**

We were blazing amidships with 4" ammunition exploding and we had developed a severe list to starboard. There was no power and no water pressure for firefighting. The fore control was abandoned and I went to assist with the wounded and dump ammunition. At one stage, I went below decks in the vicinity of the Sick Bay flat - it was a shambles below. There were no lights, I used a torch, but the list made it difficult to proceed. Whilst I was below decks, the ship gave a shudder and suddenly took on an even greater list to starboard. I feared *CANBERRA* was about to capsize, I would be trapped and that this was the end for me. However the ship steadied and I scrambled back to the upper deck, and survival. I tried to move to the stern but could not pass the fierce fires amidships.