

11. SPECIAL ARTICLES

(a) HISTORY HIGHLIGHTS

(3) DEMISE OF THE WARRNAMBOOL

By Dina Monks

Time: 4 pm

Date: Saturday, September 13, 1947

The instant is still etched on Hugh Jarrett's mind.

Lieutenant Jarrett was standing aft on the decks of the navy's mine-sweeper, HMAS WARRNAMBOOL, as it slowly swept the edges of a reef off Cape Grenville, north Queensland, searching for the "Black Death" - some of the hundreds of mines laid along the coast during World War II to protect our sea routes and the country from German and Japanese invasion.

For the minesweeper, it had been a successful exercise. Since the end of the war, two years earlier, HMAS WARRNAMBOOL had swept up more than 300 mines - from as far south as Storm Bay in Tasmania to as far north as Torres Strait.

"We'd been sent to do the job since some fishermen were blown up by a mine off Townsville," recalled Hugh Jarrett. His role included personally blowing up nine mines on beaches and one Japanese long lance torpedo.

But on September 13, 1947, time stopped for the WARRNAMBOOL when it struck a mine - laid five years earlier by one of our own ships, the HMAS BUNGAREE. Within minutes the little grey minesweeper was sinking.

"Four men lost their lives and 52 were injured. I remember being hurled six feet into the air, along with everyone standing near me. We were all airborne and one man jumped overboard, never to be seen again," Commander Jarrett said. "We had the dubious distinction of being the last RAN ship to sink in World War II.

"And I earned the dubious honor of being foundation member of the RAN Peacetime Disaster Society," chuckled the man who became a commander with a distinguished naval record.

In command of the minelayer BUNGAREE five years earlier was Commander R B A ("Bunker") Hunt, who, when he met Hugh Jarrett years later at a dinner in England, told him he well remembered laying the mine in the warm tropical waters in 1941.

"He told me he turned the minelayer at rest very carefully so her stern overhung the reef, gave the order for 'half ahead', and then commenced the lay, effectively laying the first mine in deep water right alongside the reef. "He told me at the dinner - 'I knew someone would have trouble sweeping that one!," Commander Jarrett said.

When the WARRNAMBOOL went down he was left in command for a time as the captain and other senior officers were knocked unconscious.

"I remember being lifted high off the deck and was astonished to see the whole ship lift out of the water, bows highest, in a flurry of white foam and then crash down with its bows nearly under water. Apart from the noise of the explosion, the ship rattled like all the saucepans one could imagine falling from a great height." He recalled there was alarm but no panic.

"Some of the crew had survived years of wartime service plus two years of post-war minesweeping with the continuing threat of what had just

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happened - it would have been extraordinary if some did not show signs of alarm".

He has nothing but praise for the devotion of the young sailors on board as the WARRNAMBOOL took two hours to sink. The captain recovered sufficiently to tell him to abandon ship. But Jarrett and his men wanted to stay on board with a small team of volunteers to try to get the ship on to a reef. It took a direct order to get him to leave the ship and he was the last person off. They were taken off in ships' boats sent by the accompanying minesweeper HMAS SWAN.

This year, as last, Commander Hugh Jarrett will be advising the ABC's outside broadcast van at the Shrine on Anzac Day. He will be there to help commentators get things right - to tell them who's who, recall wartime incidents and battles, plus lots of naval information on hand to fill in gaps during the telecast.

One man who was on board HMAS BUNGAREE 50 years ago was a Frankston neighbour of Commander Jarrett, John Groves. At 17 he was officially known as a boy sailor - "the lowest form of marine life". John Groves served in the BUNGAREE a year, including the time it escaped damage in Sydney Harbor during the Japanese midget submarine attack on May 31, 1942.

Mr Groves said of BUNGAREE, "Lovingly, we called her a rust bucket - a coal burning black baller or a pirate ship manned by a tough crew of old hands and young sailors just out of basic training from Flinders Naval Depot.

"Realistically, she was a most important unit of the Australian fleet and one of the unsung heroes of World War 11. We were told there would be a changeover crew to relieve us every six months to alleviate the stress and strain of working in a minelayer - but of course this never eventuated.

"We were also told it was not known what would happen if the BUNGAREE, which carried up to 423 mines, was hit by gunfire or torpedoed while filled with mines!"

The ship ended its mine laying in 1943 and became a survey and later a store ship, travelling around the south eastern Australian coast in well-guarded convoys.

She would "die as she had lived" - working for the Kowloon Navigation Company she struck a mine in the Saigon River, Vietnam, in 1966 and sank.

After meeting briefly at the start of the war during training duties at Toorbul Point, Queensland, John Groves and Hugh Jarrett were not to meet again for almost half a century. Three years ago, John saw Hugh's name in the local telephone book. "Yes, it was the same Hugh Jarrett - we've been friends and colleagues ever since."

Hugh Jarrett is president of the Victorian chapter of the Naval Historical Society of Australia while John Groves is a committee member.

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