

## 4 - THE BATTLE OF SYDNEY HARBOUR

On that night, Sunday 31 May 1942, Sydney was attacked by a Japanese naval force.<sup>82</sup> There were 41 naval ships of the combined Australian, United States, Indian and Dutch navies in the harbour.<sup>83</sup>

Australian ships included the cruisers HMAS *Canberra* and HMAS *Adelaide*, the armed merchant cruisers HMAS *Westralia*, HMAS *Manoora* and HMAS *Kanimbla*, and the destroyer HMAS *Arunta*. Other Australian ships included three corvettes; HMAS *Geelong*, *Whyalla* and *Launceston*, two anti-submarine vessels; HMAS *Yandra* and *Bingera*, five mine sweepers; HMAS *Goonambee*, *Samuel Benbow*, *Doomba*, *Heros* and *Birchgrove Park*, minelayer HMAS *Bungaree*, the barracks vessel HMAS *Kuttatubul* and the examination vessel HMAS *Adele*.

United States ships in the harbour included the heavy cruiser USS *Chicago* with her protecting destroyer USS *Perkins*, the destroyer tender USS *Dobbin* and the destroyer USS *J D Edwards*. Additional naval ships included the Free French destroyer *Le Triomphant* which was being refitted, the Indian corvette HMIS *Bombay*, and the minesweeper HMIS *Madras* which had been recently launched and completed at Cockatoo Island. Two Dutch submarines, RNS *K-9* and *K-12* together with the Dutch anti-submarine escort HNMS *Abraham Crijnssen* were also in the harbour.<sup>84</sup> There is also evidence of a 'Yankie' cargo vessel fully laden with explosives on the 'ammunition buoy' off Rose Bay.<sup>85</sup>

This was a significant gathering of allied naval force – twenty-nine naval vessels plus the twelve Channel Patrol Boats of the Hollywood Fleet, a score of smaller Naval Auxiliary Patrol boats, and a cargo vessel fully loaded with explosives.

Many more merchant ships were moored west of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Other ships were being repaired or were under construction at Cockatoo Island Dockyard.

The attack was audacious.<sup>86</sup> Using three midget submarines, the Japanese aim was to penetrate the harbour defences and attack the naval ships in the harbour - in particular the USS *Chicago* which the Japanese mistakenly believed was a battleship. The enemy wanted to inflict a killer blow on the allied fleet and halt the rise of the allied war effort in the Pacific.

Over several months, there had been numerous warnings of a possible attack that went unheeded.

Two days before the attack, the Japanese launched a seaplane from one of the fleet submarines. The plane flew unchallenged over the harbour and confirmed the size of the assembled fleet and the significant warships available to attack. As with the earlier warnings, no action was taken by the port commander, Rear Admiral Muirhead-Gould, to better guard against an attack.

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<sup>82</sup> In researching this publication, I have examined many post war accounts of the Battle including the official account by Hermon Gill, *Royal Australian Navy 1942-1945, Vol. 2*. The two most accurate accounts in my view are – *Japanese Submarine Raiders 1942* by Steven Carruthers and *A Very Rude Awakening* by Peter Grose. Both are based on extensive research and provide in-depth analyses of the Battle and the roles played by the vessels of the Hollywood Fleet. If any criticism can be laid with Carruthers and Grose, it is their failure to cite the sources for the specific evidence on which they rely. If, however, it is accepted that the material on which they rely is contained within the numerous documents and archives included in their bibliographies, then we can have confidence that their accounts provide an accurate portrayal of the Battle of Sydney Harbour.

<sup>83</sup> AWM78, 418/1 - Sydney Log, plus Carruthers, S., *Japanese Submarine Raiders 1942*, 2006, p.39 and Gross, P., *A Very Rude Awakening*, p.98, 99

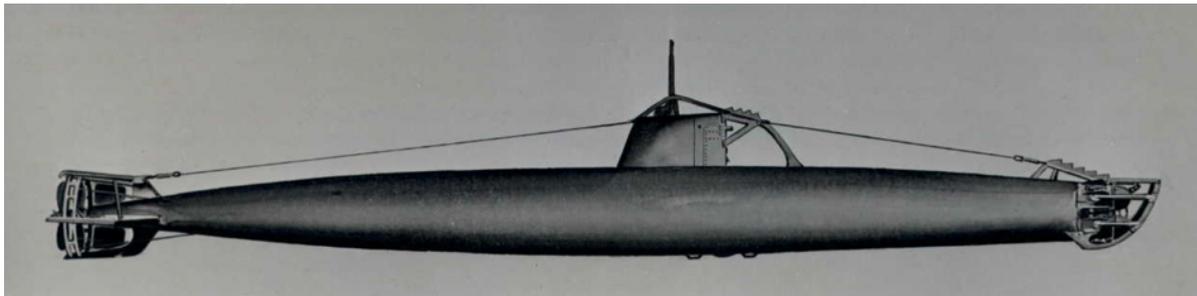
<sup>84</sup> The RAN Daily Narratives for 1<sup>st</sup> Feb 1942 to 31 May 1942 records HNMS *Tromp* arrived at 0600k/31 from Townsville and did not depart until June. However the Sydney Log records *Tromp* departed on 31 May with HMAS *Warrego* and USS *Selfridge* escorting a convoy en-route to Townsville.

<sup>85</sup> AWM PRO3229 - Papers of Horace Frederick Doyle

<sup>86</sup> Podcast S1E1 – Midget Submarines – The Attack on Sydney Harbour, UNSW Canberra hosted by Prof. Tom Frame, 3 October 2017, Rear Admiral Peter Briggs agreed 'Yes audacious – it certainly is'.

According to the Navy, HMAS *Westralia* when nearing Sydney on the 31 May, sighted a submarine. The USS *Chicago* which was with *Westralia*, opened fire but the submarine dived and was not sighted again.<sup>87</sup>

During that day, the Japanese Third Submarine Company of five large I class 'mother' submarines assembled well off Sydney Harbour. These submarines which were 110 metres in length with a displacement of 2,550 tonnes, were some of the largest submarines of any of the world's navies at the time. Three of the 'mother' submarines each carried a midget submarine on their rear deck. The remaining two each carried a small float plane, housed in a waterproof hanger on their foredecks, immediately in front of their conning towers.



This is an image of the type of Japanese midget submarine that attacked Sydney Harbour.<sup>88</sup> Each was approx. 24.5 metres in length with a diameter of 2 metres at midships and weighed between 40 and 50 tons. The conning tower rose 1.4 metres with an additional guard and periscope which could be raised and lowered. The midgets were fixed to the mother submarine with steel straps during passage to Sydney. Each had a crew of two and carried two torpedoes, each carrying 350kg of explosives. The torpedoes could run at about 44 knots. The bow guard and wire to the conning tower were installed after the attack on Pearl Harbor to enable the submarine to cut through anti-submarine nets. Each midget carried two self-destruction charges – one forward and one aft. The craft was powered by batteries driving a 600hp electric motor for the twin contra rotating 1 metre diameter propellers. The propellers were protected in a steel guard. Maximum speed on the surface was approx. 23 knots and 19 knots submerged. Running at maximum speed would exhaust the batteries in about one hour but at low speed, the submarines had an endurance of about 25 hours and a range of up to 200 kilometers.<sup>89</sup>

After sunset, the three submarines carrying the midget submarines closed the distance to within seven miles (11.2km) of the harbour entrance and launched their midget submarines. Each had a crew of two – Lieutenant Chuma<sup>90</sup> and Petty Officer Ohmori<sup>91</sup> in M14,<sup>92</sup> Lieutenant Matsuo and Petty Officer Tsuzuku in M21 and Sub-Lieutenant Ban and Petty Officer Ashibe in M24.

If one was to believe the official account of the war<sup>93</sup>, HMAS *Lolita* played no part in the Battle. The official report of the Battle, by Muirhead-Gould makes no mention of HMAS *Lolita's* action,<sup>94</sup> while today, the Navy's own narrative of the attack published on the Navy's official website, fails to include any role of *Lolita*, or her commander and crew, except that she was '*ordered to investigate*'.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>87</sup> <http://www.navy.gov.au/hmas-westralia-i>. No source is cited for this. There is no evidence in the Sydney Log of HMAS *Westralia* or USS *Chicago* being at sea on 31 May 1942.

<sup>88</sup> NAA: B6121, 162I - Midget Submarines - Attack on Shipping in Sydney Harbour. Official Reports. Newspaper Cuttings.

<sup>89</sup> NAA: MP1049/5, 2026/21/79 - Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour., p.70-73., B6121,162K: Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour, p.42., and Grose, P., *A Very Rude Awakening*, p.54

<sup>90</sup> Carruthers uses the name Chuma being the name used by Koichi Ban in the Letter of Appeal to the Australian Government on 13 April 1978, p.18. The Australian War Memorial (AWM) uses Chuma. But both Grose and Jenkins use Chuman without explanation. I will use Chuma respecting the name used by Koichi Ban and as adopted by the AWM.

<sup>91</sup> Grose spells the name Omori without explanation.

<sup>92</sup> Official reports use a consistent numbering of M14, M21 and M24 (First referred to as Midget A) adopting the numbers painted on the submarines (eg See NAA: B6121, 162K, p.13 for Midget 21). Authors of various accounts have used a combination of numbers and commander names. Grose includes an explanation at p.88 and uses the commander's names rather than any number. To enable readers to better understand the Battle of Sydney Harbour, I have adopted the system used in the official reports. This approach is also consistent with the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal, Report of Review dealt with in the chapter '*Anderson's Appeal*'. Also see Appendix C – Midget Submarine Nomenclature.

<sup>93</sup> Gill, Hermon., *Royal Australian Navy 1942-1945, Vol. 2*

<sup>94</sup> NAA: MP1049/5, 2026/21/79, - Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour., p. 23

<sup>95</sup> <http://www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/japanese-midget-submarine-attack-sydney-harbour> (As at 6 May 2019)

However, following in-depth research by authors Steven Carruthers and Peter Grose, we now know *Lolita* played a decisive role in the Battle of Sydney Harbour – a role and a Battle that are yet to be officially recognised.<sup>96</sup>

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On the night of Sunday 31 May 1942, Sydney Harbour was protected by three sets of induction loops<sup>97</sup> laying on the sea bed. The Outer Loop – No's. 1 to 6 was well outside the Sydney Harbour heads. A second, No. 11 lay across the sea bed between North and South Heads, at depths from 22 to 36 fathoms (40 to 65m).<sup>98</sup> A third shorter Inner Loop – No.12, lay across the harbour floor between Middle Head and Lady Bay on South Head. The Inner Loop was at a depth of approximately seven fathoms (12.8m). While the loops could pick up electric pulses generated in the loop wires caused by the magnetic fields from large vessels including large submarines, there is no evidence the loops had been tested to determine they were able to detect a midget submarine – despite such submarines having been used by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor, less than six months earlier.

In addition, the main branch of the harbour leading to the naval fleet and the city was partially protected by an incomplete anti-submarine 'boom net' between Georges Head at the western end, and Laings Point<sup>99</sup> at the east. The net was to have been completed in March 1942. The main fixed central section of the net had been completed, however, the 'boom gates' across the east and west shipping channels had not been completed. Each of those openings were being patrolled by HMAS *Lolita* at the eastern channel, and HMAS *Yarroma* at the west.<sup>100</sup> Both vessels were anchored rather than conducting 'active' patrolling.<sup>101</sup>

Chuma, in midget submarine M14 arrived first. He crossed the Inner Loop at 8.01 pm, approximately two minutes after a ferry<sup>102</sup> and whilst the crossing was detected on the Loop equipment, the personnel in the Loop Station believed the detection was caused by the ferry. Chuma then proceeded along the western channel and slipped through the opening, undetected by *Yarroma*.

There are accounts from two eyewitnesses of the events that followed. Melding those, we can reconstruct the most probable course of events that arose within the 'fog of war' that night.

At about 8.15 pm, a maritime worker – James Cargill, with his colleague William Nangle, aboard a construction barge adjacent to the incomplete net noticed '*something unusual*' between the net and the West Channel Marker located inside the net.<sup>103</sup> He recounted in his statement he thought it was a fishing launch without lights. He rowed his work boat across the '*50 yards*' (45m) to investigate, went alongside and found the object to be of steel construction with two large cylinders with iron guards. He

<sup>96</sup> Carruthers, S., *Japanese Submarine Raiders – A Maritime Mystery.*, Grose, P., *A Very Rude Awakening*

<sup>97</sup> Induction Loops consist of electrical cables that are laid on the seabed. As a submarine or ship passes over them, the magnetic field of the vessel causes an electrical current to flow in the cable. The detection of the current indicates the presence of the submarine or ship. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-submarine\\_indicator\\_loop](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-submarine_indicator_loop).

<sup>98</sup> NAA: B6121, 162K – Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour – Signals., p.224

<sup>99</sup> Referred to in some documents as Green Point and sometimes Laings Point, the NSW Geographic Names Board in 1977 resolved the confusion, formally adopting the name, Laings Point.

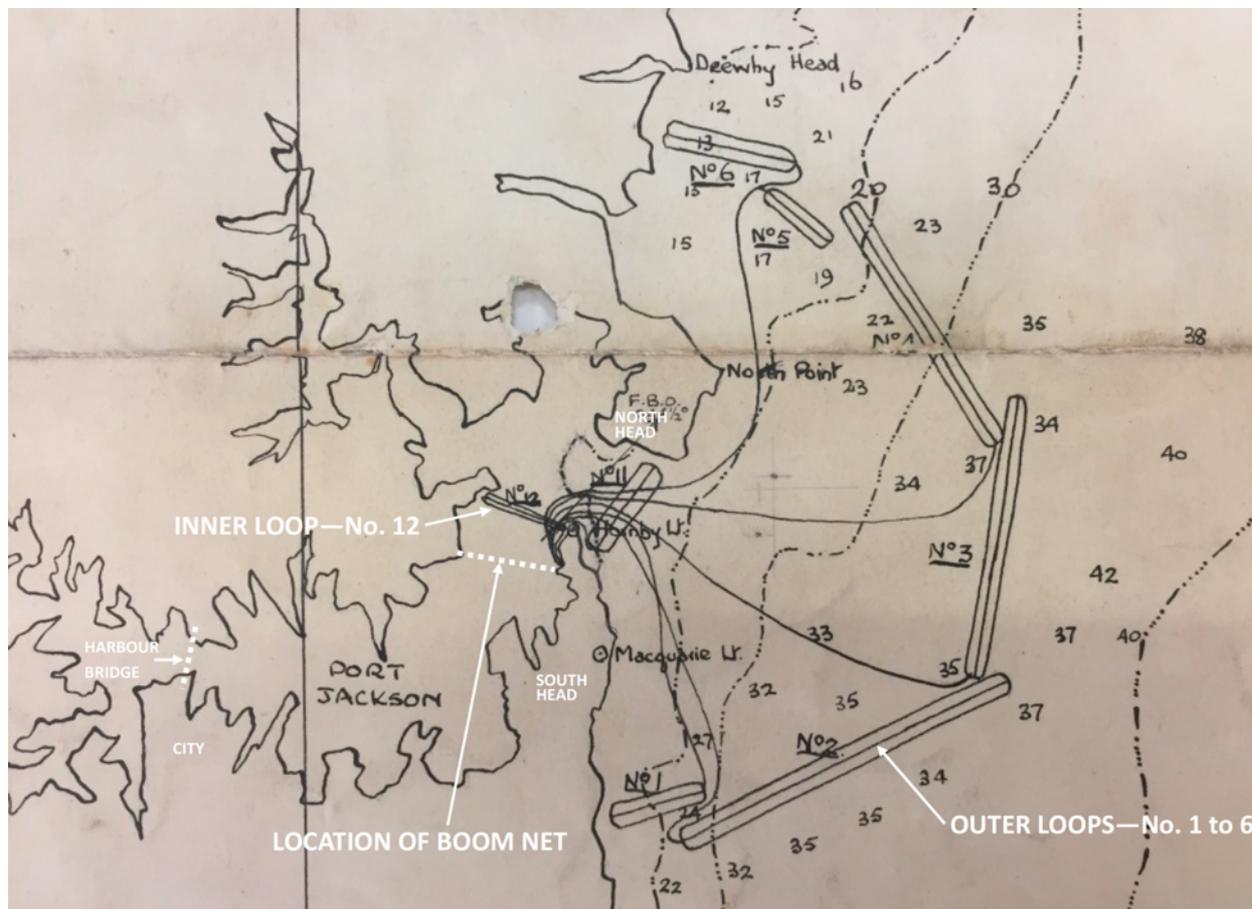
<sup>100</sup> It was later discovered that *Yarroma* had anchored, rather than conducting active patrolling. Carruthers, S., *Japanese Submarine Raiders 1942*, p.37

<sup>101</sup> NAA: SP338/1, 201/37 – (Japanese) Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour, May 31<sup>st</sup> June 1<sup>st</sup> 1942., p.43, Minute Paper signed but signature cannot be determined.

<sup>102</sup> It is said that M14 followed a ferry across the loop, but there is no evidence to support this. As the loop equipment did not give a position along the loop, M14 could have crossed the loop at the western end whilst the ferry passed into or out of the harbour via the eastern channel. Given Chuma was caught just inside the western end of the boom net, it is most probable he proceeded down the western channel of the harbour.

<sup>103</sup> James Cargill, Statement made 3 June 1942. NAA: SP338/1, 201/37 - (Japanese) Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour, May 31<sup>st</sup> June 1<sup>st</sup> 1942., p.58

then paddled to *Yarroma* to report his investigation and informed the commander, Sub-Lieutenant Eyres, the object was a submarine or a mine. He suggested Eyres should 'come and investigate'. Eyres did not, but weighed anchor and moved closer. With the assistance of a searchlight, Eyres determined the object was just naval wreckage and at 9.52 pm, Eyres reported a 'suspicious object' in the net to the Operations Room at Garden Island. He was asked for further information.



Extract from certified survey dated 24 June 1942 showing the location of the three sets of induction loops – No. 1 to 6 (Outer Loop) outside the harbour, No.11 between North and South Heads, and No. 12 (Inner Loop) between South Head and Middle Head. Loops 7 to 10 had not been installed.<sup>104</sup>

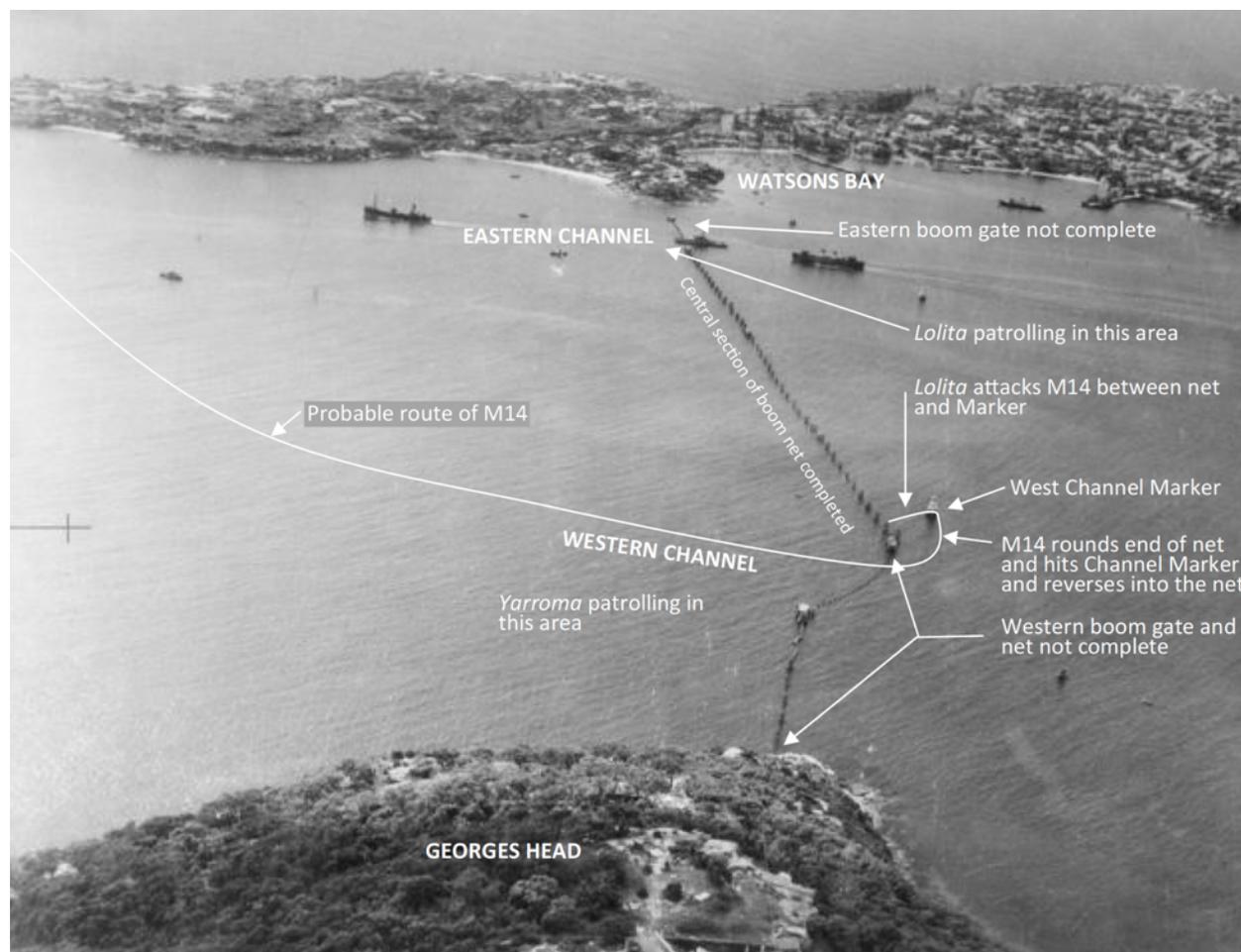
At 10.10 pm, Eyres signaled the object was 'metal with a serrated edge on top' moving in the swell. This time he was ordered to investigate further. Eyres did not. Not wanting to approach the object fearing it may be a mine, at 10.20 pm *Yarroma* signaled *Lolita* to 'come over' from her position at the eastern end of the net. The eastern gate was then left unprotected, as no backup vessel was on duty at the net.

With a sailor from *Yarroma*, Cargill again rowed to the object. This time the object was higher out of the water, and the sailor recognised it as a submarine. He asked to be returned to *Yarroma* as quickly as possible. Cargill took him back. Eyres took Cargill's name and told him to return to his barge. Cargill said the time by then was 10.30 pm, but it was probably earlier as *Lolita* was still coming across to the western channel. Having received that information, Eyres should have sent a third signal reporting the object was a submarine. However, there is no record of any such signal, possibly because subsequent events negated the need.

<sup>104</sup> AWM 246, 9/26 – Sydney: Approaches to Port Jackson show A/S [Anti-Submarine] defences, 24 June 1942

Later, Cargill was of the view,<sup>105</sup> the submarine had come around the western end of the completed part of the net, hit the West Channel Marker, and then went astern. However, in doing so, it inadvertently reversed into the net, catching one of the protection rings around its propellers in the net.

The Coxswain of *Lolita*, Able Seaman James Nelson in an interview with Carruthers<sup>106</sup> continues the account.



View of the Sydney Harbour Boom Net.<sup>107</sup>

The commander of *Lolita*, Herbert Spencer Anderson, fondly referred to as 'Tubby' by his crew, bought *Lolita* across to the western end of the net and approached the object. By using their Aldis signaling lamp, Nelson and Able-Seaman James Crowe, also onboard *Lolita*, immediately recognized the object as a 'baby submarine'. To them, it appeared the submarine had become entangled in the net and was thrashing about in an attempt to break free.

Anderson consulted Nelson and together they immediately realised the implications and risk to the fleet, if the submarine was to break free and escape into the harbour. Anderson ordered a message to be sent to the Port War Signal Station – 'Have sighted enemy submarine and proceeding to attack'. Nelson said, the message was acknowledged by the Signal Station.<sup>108</sup>

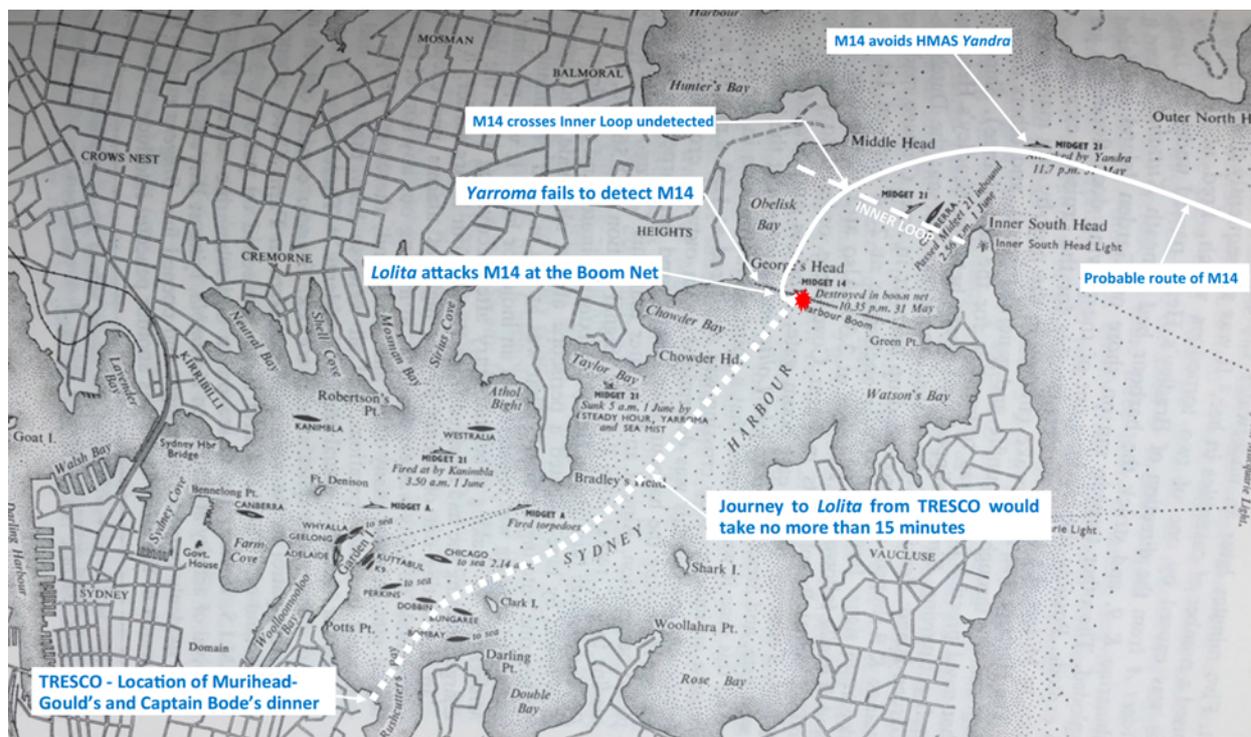
<sup>105</sup> Testimonial and map, Carruthers' Collection, held by RAN Sea Power Centre - Australia. See also Carruthers, S., *Japanese Submarine Raiders 1942*, p.119

<sup>106</sup> Interview with James Nelson, handwritten transcript in Carruthers Collection held by RAN Sea Power Centre - Australia. See also Carruthers, S., *Japanese Submarine Raiders 1942*, p.121, 253

<sup>107</sup> AWM Photograph P00444.048

<sup>108</sup> Interview with James Nelson, Handwritten transcript in Carruthers Collection held by RAN Sea Power Centre - Australia See also Grose, P., *A Very Rude Awakening*, p.115

Given the submarine was between the net and the West Channel Marker,<sup>109</sup> it was not possible for *Lolita* to make a passing run to attack the submarine. Anderson maneuvered *Lolita* astern towards the sub where the first depth charge was pushed over the stern under the submarine's bow. Expecting a massive explosion, *Lolita* sped away, but there was silence. Nothing! No explosion! The charge failed to explode. They reasoned, the charge was set to explode at the required depth of 100 feet (30.5m) – the depth at which they had been instructed to set their depth-charges.<sup>110</sup> According to Nelson, they attached floats to a second depth charge in the hope it would slow its rate of descent so the pressure trigger would fire. They again reversed close to the submarine, pushed the second depth-charge over the stern and sped away. Again, nothing – there was no explosion!



Attack on M14 and Muirhead-Gould's journey to *Lolita*. Base map by Gill.<sup>111</sup> Note – the disposition of ships and the torpedo tracks from Midget A in the base map are not correct – see Grose, P., *A Very Rude Awakening*, p.140.

As Anderson, with *Lolita*, approached a third time, Nelson saw the periscope rotating on them. Nelson knew they had been spotted by the crew of the submarine. Nelson recounted:

*We then made a third run and as we came up alongside the submarine to drop it, the explosion occurred. We listed very heavily as we were caught in the force of the explosion.*

In a later interview,<sup>112</sup> he added;

*We were just getting away from them when it [the explosion] lifted our stern, keeled us over and covered us with debris and thick orange flames and black smoke. We got out of it.*

The time was 10.35 pm.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>109</sup> Also referred to by other authors as the 'west channel pile light' and the 'pile light'. The West Channel Marker identifies the south-east end of the western channel leading from the harbour.

<sup>110</sup> NAA: SP338/1, 201/37: (Japanese) Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour, May 31<sup>st</sup> June 1<sup>st</sup> 1942., p.4. This was an order from the Naval Officer in Command (NOIC) of Sydney Harbour Rear-Admiral Muirhead-Gould.

<sup>111</sup> Gill, H., *Royal Australian Navy 1942-1945, Vol. 2*, p.69

<sup>112</sup> *Australian's at War* – Transcript of Interview with James Nelson, Archive number: 1639, 30 June 2004. UNSW Canberra, Time: 03:23:30:00. This interview suggests, the third depth charge was dropped. At Time: 03:16:00:00, Nelson said '... all told we dropped three but none of the charges went off.'

<sup>113</sup> The official report records 10.35 pm - MP1049/5, 2026/21/79 - Attack File, p.29

The explosion was not from the third depth charge, but was the explosion of the forward self-destruct charge in the submarine. *Lolita* signaled the submarine had exploded, and resumed her patrol.

Meanwhile, Muirhead-Gould, was dining at his Navy residence – Tresco, located above Elizabeth Bay. He was with Captain Bode, Commander of the USS *Chicago*. In his later report, Muirhead-Gould held that Bode left the dinner at 10.20 pm and as he left, he suggested to Bode that he should take *Chicago* to sea. At 10.27 pm, Muirhead-Gould ordered all ships to '*Take anti-submarine precautions*' and at 10.36 pm issued a further signal '*Presence of enemy submarine at boom gate is suspected. Ships are to take action against attack*'.

Just nineteen minutes later at 10.54 pm, the Naval Auxiliary Patrol vessel *Lauriana* and the anti-submarine ship HMAS *Yandra*, then near the entrance to the harbour, sighted the conning tower of another midget submarine. At 11.07 pm *Yandra* fired a full pattern of six depth charges. The effect of the explosions temporarily damaged *Yandra's* steering gear and sent the noise and shock waves of further explosions across the harbour and into surrounding suburbs.<sup>114</sup>

Wanting to know what was happening in his harbour, Muirhead-Gould boarded his vessel and travelled down the harbour. He stepped aboard *Lolita* at midnight, 1 hour and 25 minutes after the explosion that destroyed M14.<sup>115</sup>

There is nothing in Muirhead-Gould's subsequent reports of what he discussed or discovered. Whilst there will always be some doubt about the exchange between Muirhead-Gould and Anderson, there is little doubt in Nelson's recollection. Nelson referred to Muirhead-Gould as being '*a little bit icky ticky*', '*a little bit under the weather*' when he came aboard. As recounted by Nelson, Muirhead-Gould said, '*What are you? What are you yachties playing at, running around dropping depth charges in the harbour*'. The response from Anderson was unambiguous, '*We saw a submarine Sir, and we reported it*'. Muirhead-Gould responded, '*Did the captain have a black beard? I've been told all the Japanese submariners have got black beards.*'

Just as Anderson responded, '*No Sir*', there was the sound of a massive explosion from further up the harbour.

As recounted by Nelson, Anderson said to Muirhead-Gould, '*But Sir, if you hurry back up town, you might be able to find that captain yourself, he's evidently working up town*'.

Muirhead-Gould told Anderson that was an insolent way to talk to a senior officer and ordered him to place himself on report to his office in the morning. The further response from Anderson was, '*Okay Sir, yes Sir*'. The Rear-Admiral re-boarded his barge and disappeared up the harbour and nothing more was heard of the incident.

Whilst it is conjecture, it may have been that exchange between Anderson and Muirhead-Gould that was to write HMAS *Lolita*, Anderson and his crew out of the history of the Battle of Sydney Harbour.

The explosion heard from further up the harbour was the detonation of a torpedo from the second midget submarine. It had slipped into the harbour past *Yarroma* while Cargill was trying to persuade Eyres to act. The torpedo had exploded under HMAS *Kuttabul* killing twenty-one naval personnel – nineteen Australians and two from the Royal Navy. By this time, the harbour was swarming with vessels and the sound of guns firing. *Chicago* and other ships, further up the harbour and around Garden Island, had opened fire on sighting submarines. Ferries continued to run across the harbour through the

<sup>114</sup> NAA: SP338/1, 201/37: (Japanese) Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour, May 31<sup>st</sup> June 1<sup>st</sup> 1942., p.17

<sup>115</sup> NAA: MP1049/5, 2026/21/79: Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour., p.30

mayhem - because Muirhead-Gould had ordered them to, in the belief that more vessels would keep any submarines submerged and unable to attack.

At 2.14 am *Chicago* slipped her moorings and steamed down the harbour heading to sea. Whilst heading down the western channel outside the boom net, *Chicago* sighted a submarine coming into the harbour. It would be the third submarine *Yarroma* failed to detect that night at the western end of the boom net. *Chicago* was unable to lower her guns sufficiently to take any action. She alerted the authorities.

Throughout the turmoil, the off duty vessels of the Hollywood Fleet remained at anchor in Farm Cove. Out of sight of the action, and out of sight of the signal station on Garden Island, and with no radio telephone sets installed on most vessels, they were unable to receive any orders. Those vessels that were fitted with radio telephone sets had turned them off – because they were not on duty. Notwithstanding, and according to Carruthers, *Marlean* and *Toomeree* got underway to investigate the commotion and patrol at the boom net.<sup>116</sup> Of the remainder, *Esmeralda* was unable to move due to engine repairs, and *Leilani* was unmanned – her crew were on shore leave. At 3.10 am, a message was finally hand delivered to the commanders of *Seamist* and *Steady Hour* to get underway. Townley, the commanding officer on *Steady Hour* ordered Reg Andrew with *Seamist* to patrol between Bradleys Head and the western boom gate and set his depth charges at 50 feet.

After several runs in the designated search area, at 4.30 am *Seamist* was called by the auxiliary minesweeper HMAS *Goonambee* to investigate an object in Taylors Bay.<sup>117</sup> Only a buoy was sighted and *Seamist* resumed her patrols. At approximately 5.00 am when passing Taylors Bay, Andrew on *Seamist* sighted an object in the Bay. Andrew with *Seamist* moved into the Bay and recognising it to be the conning tower of a submarine, he moved *Seamist* into attack. Coming to the area where the submarine had just submerged, commander Reg Andrew ordered the first depth-charge, to be dropped, and fired a red flare. There was a tremendous explosion followed by a massive column of water. *Seamist* rode the resulting wave like a surf boat.

Andrew swung *Seamist* around and again saw the submarine. He called for another flare and a second depth charge. As he steered *Seamist* back towards the submarine, both Andrew and the coxswain thought there were two other submarines behind them in the Bay. Andrew fired another flare and dropped the second depth charge. Again, there was a massive explosion as *Seamist* tried to escape. But this time the concussion from the explosion disabled one of *Seamist's* twin engines.

Realizing he would be unable to launch another attack, Andrew signaled *Steady Hour* for assistance. Following a fruitless search by *Steady Hour* for the additional submarines, *Yarroma* with her submarine detection ASDIC equipment was called to assist. At 6.40 am, *Yarroma* obtained a contact. She was ordered out of the way and *Steady Hour* ran in and dropped two depth charges. Eighteen minutes later, *Yarroma* picked up a contact and dropped a depth charge. The explosion caused her engines to be lifted off their mounts and she too had to retire.<sup>118</sup> *Steady Hour* continued the action for another two hours. In total, it was said nine depth charges were dropped in Taylors Bay that morning, but with *Seamist* and *Yarroma* out of the action, it was likely to have been just seven.

Nelson recounted, that having seen the flares and hearing further explosions, *Lolita* moved to the area. Eyres on *Yarroma* ordered Anderson to stand-by. Whilst doing so, a ferry heading to Manly approached the battle area. Anderson ordered the ferry back to the Quay. But having received a belligerent '*I'm not going back to the Circular Quay*', from the ferry captain, Anderson sought advice from Nelson. Nelson suggested '*machine gun shots across the bow*'. Anderson agreed and according to Nelson, that's what

<sup>116</sup> Carruthers, 2006, p.157. Carruthers relies on the account given by Lieutenant Wilson, the duty officer at Garden Island during the Battle. The account was given to the AWM historian H Gill. See also NAA: Sp338/1, 201/37: (Japanese) Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour, May 31<sup>st</sup> June 1<sup>st</sup> 1942., p.181

<sup>117</sup> NAA: SP338/1, 201/37: (Japanese) Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour, May 31<sup>st</sup> June 1<sup>st</sup> 1942., p.47

<sup>118</sup> AWM PRO3229: Papers of Horace Frank Doyle. Doyle was an Able Seaman aboard *Yarroma*.

was done – *Lolita* fired across the bow of the Manly ferry. The ferry immediately turned and headed back to the Quay, averting a potential disaster as the battle continued.

With the last detonation of the Hollywood Fleet’s depth charges at 8.27 am on the morning of Monday 1 June 1942, the Battle of Sydney Harbour came to an end. Two enemy submarines had been destroyed and the third, M24, had snuck out of the harbour. She was detected leaving the harbour across the inner loop in an outward direction, but again, the loop operators ignored her as they thought it was ‘just another ferry’.

The wreckage of M21 was retrieved from the bottom of Taylors Bay, and Chuma’s M14, attacked by Anderson in *Lolita* was cut free from the boom net and lifted.<sup>119</sup> Both were placed on Clarke Island to be examined. It was another 64 years before the third midget submarine, M24 was found on the seabed off Bungan Head, north of Sydney. The wreck of M24 is now a protected site.<sup>120</sup>



Conning tower and stern section of M14 being transported to Clark Island.<sup>121</sup>

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At 1.05 am on the Monday 1 June whilst the Battle raged, a trawler *San Michele*, reported the sighting of a large submarine off Cronulla steaming south at 2 to 3 knots. The report advised the submarine was clearly observed in moonlight and appeared to be about 200 feet (60m) in length.<sup>122</sup> There was no immediate air search.

Air patrols were launched the following morning in search of the mother ships or mother submarines. Nothing was found.<sup>123</sup> The following day, the Minister for the Navy, Mr Maikin, provided a brief narrative of the Battle to the House of Representatives of the Federal Parliament. The Minister informed the Members he had visited Sydney to ‘acquaint’ himself with the circumstances of the attack and had interviewed the ‘officer in charge’ of the defences. Maikin said he was completely satisfied with the efforts of all those associated with such defences for the protection of Sydney Harbour during the Battle.<sup>124</sup> The following day, Prime Minister John Curtin addressed the House regarding the war situation facing Australia. Of the Battle of Sydney Harbour, he said:<sup>125</sup>

*The recent attack on Sydney Harbour has brought the battle closer to our daily lives than did any previous incident in the war. The vigilance and prompt action of the naval forces guarding our shores prevented any material success from being achieved by this desperate venture. The Government extends its sympathy to those who have been bereaved. Whilst the outcome must strengthen our*

<sup>119</sup> NAA: SP338/1, 201/37: (Japanese) Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour, May 31<sup>st</sup> June 1<sup>st</sup> 1942., p.92

<sup>120</sup> See <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/M24/index.htm>

<sup>121</sup> AWM Photograph P00416.002

<sup>122</sup> NAA: B6121, 162K: Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour - Signals, P.197

<sup>123</sup> NAA: B6121, 162K: Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour - Signals, p.180 onwards

<sup>124</sup> Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, Tuesday, 2 June 1942

<sup>125</sup> Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, Tuesday, 3 June 1942

*confidence in the men who protect us from the enemy, the attack itself emphasizes the need for ceaseless vigilance, and dispels any lingering doubt that any one may have had that Australia is not in the front line.*

Whilst the search for the mother submarines or ships continued, the British Admiralty issued a warning that the attacks in Sydney showed the *'Japanese can transport these weapons very far afield'* and ordered that *'Every possible precaution is to be taken'*.<sup>126</sup> The advice was extraordinary, because less than 24 hours before the attack on Sydney, the British had already suffered a similar attack in the western Indian Ocean. The Japanese Western Attack Group dispatched two midget submarines into the allied harbour at Deigo Suarez at the northern tip of Madagascar. The British battleship HMS *Ramillies* had been struck by a torpedo which blew a 9 metre square hole in her.<sup>127</sup> But it is disturbing, the Admiralty failed to inform the commanders at other allied ports. Had the Admiralty properly informed Muirhead-Gould, the Battle of Sydney Harbour may have been curtailed by allied anti-submarine actions off the coast of Sydney.

Over the following days, divers found a submarine in Taylors Bay – M21. She was hauled into shallow waters and lifted and taken to Clarke Island. Charts salvaged from the remains revealed the attack had been carefully planned and was preceded by a number of over-flights. The charts included photographs from those flights showing the location of vessels in the harbour. The collection included details of Port Kembla and Newcastle harbours and other targets.

To add to the tension, two *'small submarines'* were reported in Vacluse Bay at 4.10 am during the night after the Battle. Depth charges were dropped by one of the Hollywood Fleet vessels – *Nereus*.<sup>128</sup> For a city on edge, the further explosions after those on Sunday night and early Monday morning, would have caused further anxiety for all surrounding residents and the commanders of the moored vessels of the Allied naval fleet. The submarines were not sighted and the report was dismissed.<sup>129</sup>

Whilst casualties were minimal, the attack was a disaster for the Navy – the enemy had breached the allies major naval base. Had M24's torpedoes found their target, the loss of USS *Chicago*, or any one of the other major ships, would have been a major blow to relations between Australia and the US.



Forward section of M21. The stern section was severed during the depth charge attack.<sup>130</sup>

<sup>126</sup> NAA: B6121, 162K: Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour - Signals, P.185

<sup>127</sup> Grose, *A Very Rude Awakening*, p. 80, 81

<sup>128</sup> NAA: SP338/1, 201/37: Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour, May 31<sup>st</sup> June 1<sup>st</sup> 1942, p.145

<sup>129</sup> NAA: B6121, 162K: Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour - Signals, p.167

<sup>130</sup> AWM Photograph 042982

Commander Ford of the USS *Perkins* said in his 2 June report '*It was good fortune rather than good harbour defence which prevented great damage*'.<sup>131</sup> McInerney, Commander of the Destroyer Division Nine in Pearl Harbor said on 4 June, '*From personal observation, entering Sydney during daylight and darkness, the control over entering ships leaves a great deal to be desired*' and '*I believe that an enemy surface ship, flying false colors and making false signals, could enter the harbour during daylight or darkness, under present conditions*'.<sup>132</sup> These were hardly ringing endorsements of Muirhead-Gould's protection of Sydney Harbour! On 12 June 1942, Vice-Admiral Leary USN, Commander of the allied naval forces in the South-West Pacific Area, directed '*that necessary action be taken to provide maximum protection to vessels in Sydney Harbour from enemy submarines*'.<sup>133 134</sup>

In the weeks following the attack, the submarine attack group dispersed along the east coast of Australia attacking merchant shipping. There were over 20 submarine incidents that resulted in the sinking of three vessels and damage to another two.

On 8 June, Sydney and Newcastle were shelled by submarines from the group.

The Battle of Sydney Harbour and subsequent shelling, remains the first and only time in history that Australia's largest and most populous city – Sydney, has been attacked! And, the Battle included more ships of the Royal Australian Navy, than any other battle in which the Navy has participated.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> NAA: B1049/5, 2026/21/79: Midget submarine attack on Sydney Harbour., p.78

<sup>132</sup> NAA: B1049/5, 2026/21/79: Midget submarine attack on Sydney Harbour., p.76

<sup>133</sup> Leary had been appointed as overall commander of naval resources in the South-West Pacific Area (SWPA) in April 1942. However, by delegation, the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board retained responsibility for the protection of coastal shipping and convoys around Australia. David Stevens, *The Royal Australian Navy in World War II*, p.152

<sup>134</sup> NAA: MP1049/5, 2026/21/79: Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour, p.74

<sup>135</sup> Podcast '*S1E1 – Midget Submarines – The Attack on Sydney Harbour*', UNSW Canberra, Hosted by Prof. Tom Frame, 3 October 2017

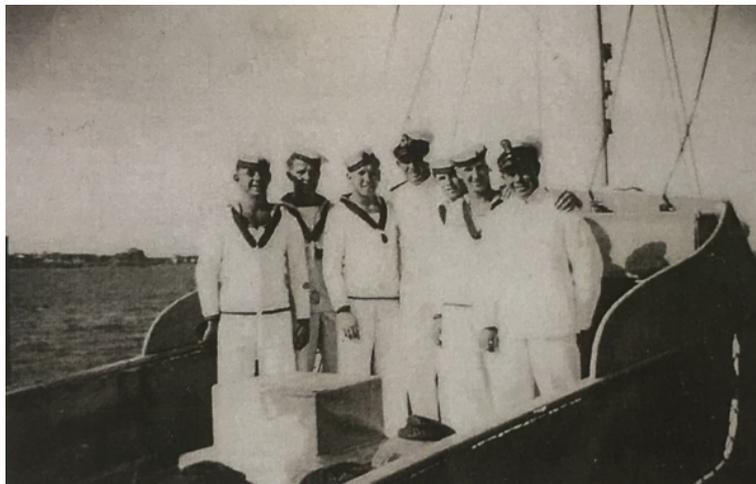
## 5 - POST BATTLE OPERATIONS

HMAS *Lolita* continued her patrol work following the Battle.

Three weeks after the Battle on 28 June 1942, Small received payment for his *Lolita*.<sup>136</sup>

Anderson left *Lolita* and his crew on 1 October 1942. He was posted to HMAS *Baralaba*, a merchant steamship requisitioned to carry freight between North Queensland and New Guinea. When she was subsequently 'paid off', Anderson was posted to the survey vessel *John Oxley*, and later to command HMAS *Kangaroo* and *Kookaburra* at the Boom Depot in Darwin.

Three weeks before Anderson left her, Leading Seaman Coxswain Ken Brown was posted to *Lolita*. Brown recounted his three enjoyable weeks working under Anderson.<sup>137</sup> The new commander to replace Anderson was Sub-Lieutenant Norman K Cox. Brown recalled the new commander gave no orders and left the running of the vessel to him. He described the situation as a most unsatisfactory arrangement which abruptly came to an end when Cox disappeared, just six weeks after his appointment. Reg Andrew who was to be *Lolita's* new commander, stepped aboard on 17 November 1942. He was to be her commander for the next 17½ months.



*Lolita* crew in November 1942. The commander in the centre is most probably Reg Andrew.<sup>138</sup>

*Lolita* was posted to the port of Newcastle and remained there until her recall in 1944 for refit. Ken Brown recounted he worked well with the new commander and how Andrew respected his crew and gave them 'every' assistance and guidance.

Brown finished his stint with *Lolita* and Reg Andrew on 17 February 1943, and was posted to HMAS *Platypus* at Cairns.

The following month, on 13 March 1943, *Lolita* would have been destroyed if it was not for the quick actions of Andrew and his crew. That evening the two burner 'blue flame'<sup>139</sup> stove blew up causing the galley and crews quarters to be engulfed in flame. Extinguishers were used and the fire was kept under control until the local fire brigades arrived and took charge of the operation. Andrew described the considerable loss of clothing and bedding and expressed his view, that much of the loss could have been avoided had a 'smoke helmet' over the stove with an automatic fire extinguisher system, been fitted to

<sup>136</sup> NAA: MP138/1, 603/246/6400: *Lolita* - Sinking due to explosion in engine room 13/6/45., p.24. Commonwealth Government Gazette No. 177 of 25 June 1942

<sup>137</sup> Interview of Ken Brown by author - 27 November 2018

<sup>138</sup> Carruthers Collection, RAN Sea Power Centre - Australia. Carruthers initially understood the photo was the crew of *Seamist*, however Reg Andrew, commander of *Seamist* confirmed the photo was the crew of *Lolita*. The photo is also included in Ken Brown's personal memoir.

<sup>139</sup> The stoves used kerosene which when ignited burnt with a blue flame, hence the name.

the galley. He also advised the subsequent Board of Inquiry, the pyrene fire extinguishers had caused the personnel to vomit which kept the crew away from the seat of the fire.

The Board found the fire was accidentally caused and that no blame was attributable to any officer or man. They also found that fire drills were regularly conducted on *Lolita*, in accordance with the Port Orders, and had been conducted the previous day. They also found the two seamen on board at the time made every endeavor to cope with the fire and acted in a prompt and efficient manner.

*Lolita* returned to Sydney on 13 April 1943 for repairs before returning to duties. A new commander, Sub-Lieutenant Keith A Ross was appointed on 1 May 1944. Reg Andrew was appointed to administrative duties at the shore stations of HMAS Kuranda at Cairns, and later to HMAS Madang on the north-east coast of New Guinea. He was entirely unsuited to administrative duties having received no elementary naval training, and was more suited to his capacity as a yachtsman,<sup>140</sup> a skill he readily demonstrated during the Battle of Sydney Harbour and his later command of HMAS *Lolita*.

\* \* \*

In early 1939, before the commencement of the war, my father – John Miller Blunt was appointed to the Navy's armaments and stores supply section at Spectacle Island.<sup>141</sup> At the time of his appointment, he was 18 years of age. His position was a designated essential war role. On every occasion from early 1941 when he first applied for permission to be released to enlist, permission was refused. Whilst continuing his work, he joined the Volunteer Coastal Patrol (VCP) and was offered berths on Sydney based boats where he was fortunate to be allocated to the sailing yacht *Wayfarer*, and so began a great friendship with the owner Peter Luke. The friendship lasted decades and both were foundation members of the Cruising Yacht Club of Australia formed in 1944. After the war, both sailed together in many of the early Sydney to Hobart yacht races. My father wanted to sail in the very first race that departed on 26 December 1945, but defence officials refused to grant him leave for the inaugural event.

Further applications to enlist in mid 1942 were fruitless.

Through the VCP, he was offered a position to command one of the small tugs of the US Small Ships Section. The task was to tow lighters with stores and to operate very near the front lines in New Guinea and Solomon Islands areas. The pay offered was about four times what he was receiving at Spectacle Island. But once again the manpower authorities refused permission for him to accept the offer and '*that was that*' as he said.

Finally, in December 1942, the defence officials relented and he was advised he would be allowed to enlist. He '*rushed around*' putting his affairs in order, arranged leave from the VCP and sold *Spray*, his 30 foot gaff yawl sailing boat. By March 1943, clearance to enlist looked no closer and he purchased a small 24 foot sailing vessel so he could continue his work with the VCP.

He finally reported for duty on 10 September 1943, and was duly appointed as a Seaman on HMAS *Marynong*. He spent nearly a year on her patrolling at Newcastle and Wollongong, before being appointed to HMAS *Miramar* for a week, and onto *Lolita* on 23 August 1944.

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<sup>140</sup> NAA: A3978, 2009/00992645: Service record of Andrew R T. Carruthers makes no mention of Andrew's appointment to HMAS *Lolita*.

<sup>141</sup> In this and the following sections, details of my father's work and service including aboard *Lolita* have been drawn from his unpublished personal memoir. Spectacle Island is located in the upper reaches of Sydney Harbour between Drummoyne and Woolwich.

## 6 - THE LONG VOYAGE NORTH TO NEW GUINEA

In August 1944, HMAS *Lolita* and HMAS *Leilani* received orders to proceed to New Guinea. At the time, both vessels were being refitted at the Sayonara Slipway at Rushcutters Bay. *Lolita* was there for a number of weeks, being fitted with new Ford V8 engines with 'Vosper' conversions.<sup>142</sup> Additional fuel tanks were installed to increase her range.

*Lolita* had been repainted. Gone was the navy 'grey', replaced with a new black hull and yellow superstructure. She was said to look very smart in the new colours with her varnished interior woodwork. Seaman Blunt found her to be 'very comfortable' and a 'reasonably good sea boat'.

After the usual trial, *Lolita* picked up her outfit of stores which the crew managed to stow in all the 'odd corners' of the boat. The crew was increased to eight including a telegraphist/signaler to handle the recently installed radio equipment and a trained 'mechanic/stoker' to maintain the engines.

Blunt described the vessel in some detail:

*Lolita was a beautiful looking craft being 55 feet (16.76m) long with a beam of 12 feet [3.66m] and draft of only 3½ feet [1.07m] - she was fitted with twin engines and small balanced twin rudders. Accommodation was fairly good with a tiny cabin and toilet and washbasin forward, a good large galley, a saloon with a table and lockers and bunks for four, then up steps to a large wheelhouse/bridge deck with controls and engines underneath and accessible for major work through large hatchways though normal access was through a small door on the aft side and headroom in the engine room was only sufficient to crouch. Aft of the bridge deck were steps leading down to a passage with a full bathroom to starboard (later to be filled with extra fuel tanks) a small cabin to port and a large double cabin aft used by the skipper. Duplicate controls were fitted on a flying bridge over these cabins and more fuel tanks were under the aft deck. Our armament was the same as Marynong<sup>143</sup> with the addition of a 1/2 inch [12.7mm] 'Vickers' machine gun on the flying bridge<sup>144</sup> - this was my particular toy but our first skipper did not like it being used as it made a very loud noise close to his ear.*

According to my father's memoir, *Lolita's* destination was to be Madang via Port Moresby and Milne Bay – a distance of some 3,000 nautical miles (5,555km) – a daunting voyage for a small former pleasure cruiser.

However, the Navy had found that by the time other small vessels had steamed (a nautical expression) such long distances, the engines needed a major overhaul. To overcome this, the Navy decreed that such vessels would be towed most of the way – if not all the way. It was believed this was to be the first major tow over such a long distance of such a small craft, and the Navy was 'feeling its way'.

The towing rig was described as follows:

*We had a number of wooden blocks secured about 4 feet (1.2m) apart all around the boat just below the gunwale; grooves were cut in the blocks and a 4 inch (100mm circumference) wire inserted in the blocks and held in place by steel strips screwed into the blocks and over the wire. The wire terminated at each end in a large eye splice complete with thimble and just below the deck at the bow.*

<sup>142</sup> This is a standard V8 engine commonly used in trucks that was converted by Vosper and Company of Portsmouth, UK for marine use. See Beaudesert Times (Queensland), 18 July 1941, p.1. See also NAA: MP138/1, 603/246/6400: *Lolita* – Sinking due to explosion in engine room 13/6/45, p.11

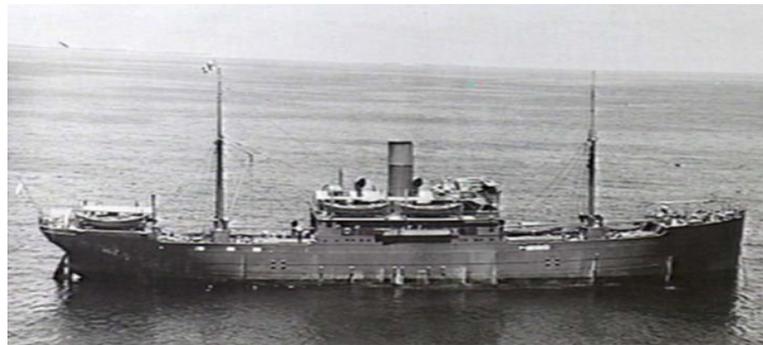
<sup>143</sup> Two large depth charges aft with a number of smaller ones in various positions around the deck amidships and the main armament was a .303 inch Vickers machine gun set up in the middle of the foredeck. From Blunt memoir.

<sup>144</sup> The Navy Ship Record Card held by Sea Power Centre – Australia, identifies *Lolita* was fitted with '2 x .303 Vickers' machine guns. However, Vickers also manufactured a .50 calibre (1/2 inch) machine gun that was also acquired by the RAN. The heavier caliber machine gun referred to by John Blunt, may have been fitted to provide greater fire power for operations in New Guinea. The Record Card may not have been updated.

Blunt takes up the story of the northerly voyage:

*We set off for Brisbane<sup>145</sup> at the end of an 80 fathom [146 metres] heavy wire towing hawser with a section of chain in the middle and astern of H.M.A.S. 'Yandra', an ex-coastal trader taken over by the Navy and fitted out as an anti-submarine vessel. Generally, the trip was uneventful but we found that, as our craft veered and yawed from side to side in the seaway, our rudders, without our engines directing propeller wash on to them, were rather ineffective and our towing bridle kept slewing round the boat cutting into the blocks, tearing off the forward 2 or 3 on each side and chafing through half of the strands on the steel strips. We did get to Brisbane and posed quite a problem to the authorities.*

*We had new blocks fitted, a new bridle made and fitted but this time with wires spliced into it and secured to cleats on the shoulders of the boat. By this time 'Leilani' had caught up with us and we were told that both craft were to be towed by [HMAS] Yunnan, an armament store ship loaded with explosives and bound for Townsville which was to be our next port of call. New tow lines were made up with a 20 fathom [36 metres] section of manila rope in the middle and our tow line was 20 fathoms shorter than Leilani's.*



HMAS Yunnan.<sup>146</sup>

*Yunnan was of about 8,000 tons and with a full load of explosives would have at least made a loud bang if she had been torpedoed. Naturally she did not wish to linger and we set off for Townsville at 15 knots - well beyond the normal speed of both Leilani and ourselves. Outside Moreton there was the usual strong and unpleasant South East wind which had been blowing for some days and had worked up an uncomfortable sea with short steep waves. These did not affect Yunnan but gave us a hard time. Once again, we veered from side to side in spite of our wheel being manned continuously and our two towlines criss-crossed as we were first on one quarter of Yunnan and then on the other. Periodically we would pick up a wave and shoot it like a surfboat with Leilani doing the same and coming within a couple of feet before dropping off her wave. It was certainly exciting. After dropping off the wave the boat would slow down until the towline would tighten with a terrific jerk - in spite of the weight of the line we would often have it out of the water for 20 to 30 seconds at a time. Eventually the towline parted in the middle of the manila section when we were about 100 miles [160km] from Townsville. The Yunnan did not wish to linger and pass another line, so it was decided that she would leave us and we would proceed under our own engines after recovering our part of the broken line. Manhandling the heavy wire and rope proved a very difficult and exhausting job on the wildly heaving fore deck in the half light of dawn. Eventually we had it all aboard and proceeded on our way with Yunnan and Leilani going on further.*

*Once again, our towing bridle had been severely damaged and we spent some weeks in Townsville whilst the expert's heads were scratched deciding what to do with us. Whilst we were in port we visited Magnetic Island, went swimming from the beaches and attended dances and other (rare) entertainment in town.*

In mid-November 1944, there was an exchange of 'Minute Papers'<sup>147</sup> within the Department discussing the transit of *Lolita* to New Guinea. When *Lolita* had sailed from Sydney, it was decreed she was 'not to

<sup>145</sup> AWM78, 418/1: Sydney Log., p.70, 4 October 1944

<sup>146</sup> AWM Photograph 301779

<sup>147</sup> NAA: MP138/1, 603/246/4470: *Lolita* – Sailing

*be towed across the Coral Sea* and consequently, the Naval Officer-in-Command (NOIC) Townsville had built a cradle for her to be shipped aboard a suitable cargo ship. It was found possible to ship her onboard the troopship MV *Duntroon*, but due to her size she would be carried in the cradle on the forward hatch. However, *Duntroon* was first sailing for Cairns and *Lolita* would have to be off-loaded into the water while *Duntroon* took on cargo. There would then be no means at Cairns, to lift *Lolita* back onboard as *Duntroon*'s derricks were insufficient. Despairing of locating a suitable ship to carry her, NOIC Townsville proposed to sail *Lolita* in company with *HDML 1327*, via the Great North East Channel. In anticipation of approval to do so, *Lolita* was readied to sail the following Wednesday, *'if such a course were approved'*.

*It was agreed that we should proceed under our own power and we had an uneventful trip to Cairns where we stayed for a couple of weeks.*

At Cairns on 28 November 1944, Commander Ross of *Lolita*, submitted a list of necessary repairs. The gear boxes for the Ford V8 engines required oil top ups every 8 hours, the port engine generator was possibly burnt out, the temperature gauge was defective, oil was leaking past the spark plugs and the vessel was *'making considerable water'*, possibly caused by the *'strain of the towing'*, and the throttle controls required adjustment.<sup>148</sup>

The very next day, the Engineering Officer at the Fairmile ML base<sup>149</sup> forwarded the list of 'defects' to the Base Engineering Officer with a critique of the 'Vospers' (the Ford V8 engines with their Vosper conversions) fitted to *Lolita*. The nub of his submission was that at 25 ton displacement, the engines in *Lolita* were not suitable for the vessel, and when driven at high revs to maintain a reasonable speed, they would need *'continuous maintenance'* and were liable to fail *'rapidly and will be most unreliable'*. His recommendation was clear – *'it is strongly recommended she be despatched to a Southern Base for re-engineering'* and sent as *'deck cargo'*.<sup>150</sup>

A week later, the NOIC of Cairns base, requested instructions from the Secretary of the Naval Board in Melbourne regarding the *'destination of HMAS Lolita in view of the Engineer's report'*. The following was included in his request:

*Since Cairns is the last refitting port for small vessels before departure for New Guinea area, it is a matter of some concern whether HMAS Lolita should be sent north on completion of repairs or else sailed to a southern port for use as a local harbour craft.*<sup>151</sup>

By mid-December, the NOIC Cairns was directed that *Lolita* was to be retained at Cairns and that *'suitability for service in the New Guinea area is at present under consideration'*.<sup>152</sup> On 29 December 1944, it was decided *Lolita* and another vessel, *Lucy Star* would be *'despatched to Townsville'* in view of the *'reduction in status of Cairns'*.

In the meantime, unaware of the engineering issues and consideration of *Lolita* serving in New Guinea, the crew passed their time visiting local sites and attractions:

*I had a trip to Green Island with its displays of coral and to Kuranda with its beautiful park and railway station almost covered in ferns - also on this trip I saw the Barron Falls which were a magnificent sight with a lot of water passing over them and thundering down. Whilst berthed in the river it was fascinating to see the big black Catalina flying boats commencing or finishing their patrols. Usually they needed a long take off and it was most unusual to see a flying boat suddenly round a bend in the river and take off out to sea or sometimes the other way and following up the river to gain height.*

<sup>148</sup> NAA: MP138/1, 603/246/6400: *Lolita* – Sailing., p.22

<sup>149</sup> The base had been established to maintain the Fairmile ML class of high speed motor launches.

<sup>150</sup> NAA: MP138/1, 603/246/6400: *Lolita* – Sailing., p.21

<sup>151</sup> NAA: MP138/1, 603/246/6400: *Lolita* – Sailing., p.19

<sup>152</sup> NAA: MP138/1, 603/246/6400: *Lolita* – Sailing., p.9

Blunt describes the passage back to Townsville:

*For some reason we were ordered back to Townsville and on the way received radio instructions to investigate and sink a floating mine. Quite a sea was running and we had to stand off a fair distance in case it blew up so we had a lot of target practice and I finally sank it with a burst from my 1/2 inch [12.7mm] machine gun.*

Signals were exchanged regarding the speed at which the engines had been run on the passage from Townsville to Cairns, and the speed at which they should be run, and on 3 January 1945, a Minute Paper of the Department of the Navy<sup>153</sup> recorded details of the engines that had been fitted to *Lolita* in Sydney before her voyage north. At the time, it had originally been decided as general policy that Channel Patrol Boats would be fitted with diesel engines of the 'Gardner make' but in the case of *Lolita* and *Leilani*, such engines could not be fitted as they would require extensive alterations and the hull was 'too light'. As a result, an order was placed for a pair of alternate engines to be imported through Lend Lease. But due to 'complications', they had not arrived. In lieu, engines of 'any reputable make' were ordered from the Admiralty and as a result, the Ford V8s with 'Vosper' conversions were recommended and in due course a number were delivered. A pair were installed in *Lolita*, which were being found to be unsuitable.

The Minute paper concluded:

*The time has arrived, when all the 'Luxury' type of pleasure craft should be superseded by boats built for hard usage, and at present 45 boats of the 75 foot Trawler class are under construction as general purpose boats, 9 of which have not been allocated.*

But *Lolita* was not 'superseded', and again, Seaman Blunt takes up the story:

*After spending some days at Townsville, we set off north under tow of a minesweeper. All went well until just South of Cooktown we had the usual trouble with the towing bridle chafing nearly through and we had to drop the tow - this time our towing vessel the 'Alfie Cam', an old steam trawler had the task of recovering the towline.<sup>154</sup>*

*We set off for Cooktown under our own power - the steep breaking seas were on our beam and we rolled dreadfully dipping alternate gunwales in the water but with a sigh of relief we entered the Endeavour River and berthed at Cooktown.*



HMAS *Alfie Cam*.<sup>155</sup>

<sup>153</sup> NAA: MP138/1, 603/246/6400: *Lolita* – Sailing., p.11

<sup>154</sup> *Alfie Cam* had been launched in 1919 in Cardiff, Wales as *Asama*, operated in Australian waters from 1928, renamed *Alfie Cam* in 1929 and requisitioned and operated as an auxiliary minesweeper by the RAN during World War II. She was returned to her owners after the war and was scrapped in 1953. Source [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMAS\\_Alfie\\_Cam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMAS_Alfie_Cam)

<sup>155</sup> AWM Photograph 300137

*We stayed at Cooktown for two days and found it a real ghost town. It had been established last century as a port for the Palmer goldfields and at that time there was a permanent population of some thousands and an itinerant population of many more but when we were there the population was only about 200 and only two of the towns more than fifty hotels were operating. There were a lot of derelict buildings in town. All supplies were brought up from Cairns by ship which called monthly - periodically the beer supplies at the pubs were exhausted when the boat was delayed through bad weather. We went to the pictures in a ramshackle old hall and on the way back to the boat were chased down the main street by a herd of wild pigs.*

*We sailed from Cooktown under our own power again and the trip to Thursday Island was fascinating - navigation was difficult owing to the need to keep within known channels with large tides and sometimes unpredictable currents. We found it easier to proceed at night as you are always in sight of one or often more lighthouses and their lights are dependable. An examination of the most up to date chart available at that time showed many areas had only been charted by Matthew Flinders.*

There was a delay at Thursday Island as both Commander Ross and the 'Mate' had medical issues and were invalided back to Sydney. The replacement commander was a Lieutenant John Trim of the Naval Reserve. Seaman Blunt said he was a '*most capable and outstanding individual*'. Blunt was promoted to 'acting Mate' and Leading Seaman.<sup>156</sup>

The crew found it fascinating to see so many pearling luggers manned mostly by Thursday Island natives who were most efficient at handling the boats. Tides were over 20 feet (6.1m) and presented some problems in getting on and off the *Lolita* which was berthed at the T shaped wharf at the main island. At times it was necessary to climb up or down the mooring lines and there were many near misses.

The waters near the island abound with fish and, at night, they are attracted to lights shining in the water. Frequently the crew would shine their powerful Aldis signalling light into the water and watch all kinds of fish swimming near and under the boat and wharf. One night a shoal of 'Long Tans', like large Garfish, came around the boat and one of our crew jumped into the dinghy and started baling in fish and water. There were so many, another crew member jumped into the dinghy to bail out the water and leave the fish. They finished with the dinghy half-full of fish which was sent to the local hospital next morning.

Now 'Mate' and Leading Seaman, Blunt, continues the voyage:

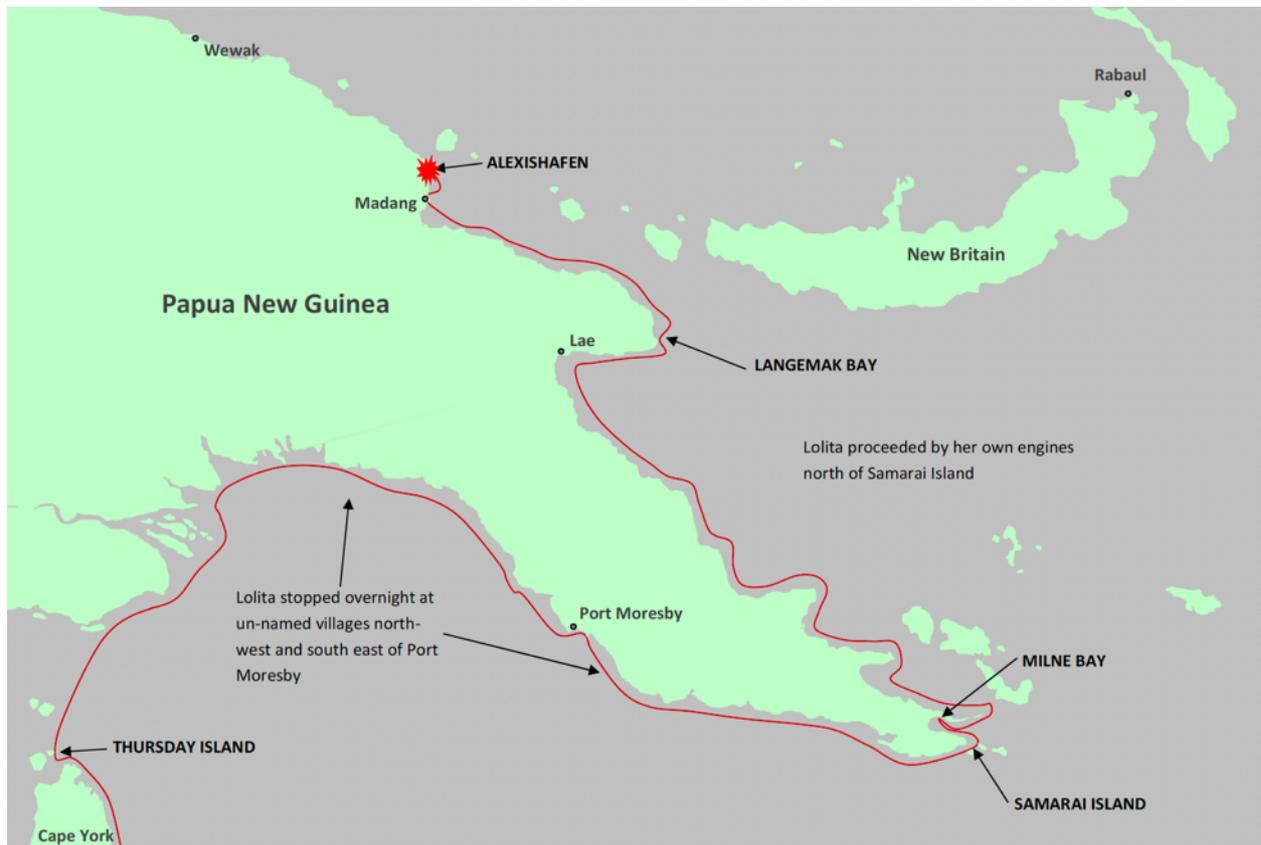
*The authorities once again decided that we should save our engines and proceed under tow. This time our towing craft was a 60 foot [18.2 metres] long tug of the American Small Ships Section exactly the same as those the U.S. authorities had wanted me to skipper earlier. It was rather frustrating to say the least. The tow through the Torres Strait islands was fascinating and we stopped overnight at a small village North West of Port Moresby. This was our first contact with New Guinea natives and it was interesting to see how clean and well laid out the village was. Some of the men were hollowing out a large tree to make a dugout canoe but they were using modern steel axes instead of their old stone-age implements. Next day we went on to Port Moresby for a quick stop and on to an overnight stop at another small village some 50 or 60 miles [80 to 96km] down the coast. The water was quite shallow and it was necessary to keep one of the crew up the mast to warn of coral niggerheads which abounded and were only just below the surface. Again, this was a clean well laid out village but it had been hit by American dollar culture and the natives all wanted steep payment for any souvenirs. The tug later dropped us near Samarai Island and from there we were on our own and proceeding under our own power. It was quite a change and we all enjoyed the responsibility and felt so much better.*

*A day or two at Milne Bay was enough to introduce us to their intense heat and the regular afternoon downpours - we were glad to be on our way again. We next called at the American base at Langemak where I managed to borrow an American jeep and go for my first drive since getting my licence quite a while ago. I found the jeep very powerful and, with such a short wheelbase and light responsive*

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<sup>156</sup> Blunt Memoir

steering, it was essential to concentrate very hard and see that I returned it in one piece and none the worse for wear. Whilst at Langemak we acquired the usual uniform of cape groundsheet and army hat - this was so much better than the normal sailors gear in the regular downpours and made picture shows, all outdoors sitting on cocoon logs, so much better but sometimes the noise of the rain on our capes and hats drowned out the sound. On later returning to Sydney one of the joys was being able to go to a picture show or theatre inside a building which had a lid (roof) on top and so one was not worried about the rain. Our final run was to our destination, Madang, where we were welcomed by the local naval staff and promptly given a lot of work. This was mostly patrol work but we all enjoyed the change from sitting around or being at the end of a towline.



Route of Lolita from Cape York to Alexishafen.

A day or two at Milne Bay was enough to introduce us to their intense heat and the regular afternoon downpours - we were glad to be on our way again. We next called at the American base at Langemak where I managed to borrow an American jeep and go for my first drive since getting my licence quite a while ago. I found the jeep very powerful and, with such a short wheelbase and light responsive steering, it was essential to concentrate very hard and see that I returned it in one piece and none the worse for wear. Whilst at Langemak we acquired the usual uniform of cape groundsheet and army hat - this was so much better than the normal sailors gear in the regular downpours and made picture shows, all outdoors sitting on cocoon logs, so much better but sometimes the noise of the rain on our capes and hats drowned out the sound. On later returning to Sydney one of the joys was being able to go to a picture show or theatre inside a building which had a lid (roof) on top and so one was not worried about the rain. Our final run was to our destination, Madang, where we were welcomed by the local naval staff and promptly given a lot of work. This was mostly patrol work but we all enjoyed the change from sitting around or being at the end of a towline.

One day some of us were taken to an adjacent island in a native outrigger canoe and fitted with a large sail. In spite of several of us sitting out on the outrigger it was mostly well out of water and we roared along at 20 knots or more - quite exhilarating.

It appears *Lolita* arrived at Madang on or about 9 April.<sup>157</sup> Before *Lolita* would sail further north to Wewak, the hull needed to be cleaned of weeds and adjustments were required to the engines. Blunt confirmed *Lolita* was therefore directed to the small repair base at Alexishafen, approximately 15km north of Madang.<sup>158</sup>

Alexishafen, on the shore of Sek Harbour, was the location for the first Catholic Mission Station established by Societas Verb Divini (Society of the Divine Word) in the Madang province by German missionaries in 1905. The mission became an extensive gathering of schools, carpentry and mechanical workshops, a sawmill and an extensive fleet of fishing vessels.<sup>159</sup> In 1942, the missionaries and other Europeans abandoned the mission and the area was subsequently occupied by the Japanese.



The Catholic Mission Headquarters at Alexishafen in 1914.<sup>160</sup>

Following the capture of Madang by the allied forces in March 1944, the Australian 30th Battalion continued up the coast in the direction of Alexishafen.



HMAS *Bunderberg* alongside the remnants of the Alexishafen wharf, disembarking troops in April 1944.<sup>161</sup>

The road had been well mined by the retreating Japanese, resulting in casualties to Australian troops. The battalion entered Alexishafen on 26 April 1944, where there was evidence of the enemy's retreat. Large quantities of stores, many of which were undamaged, had been abandoned. By the capture of

<sup>157</sup> NAA: AWM78, 387/1: Coastal Craft [ML] Administration, New Guinea: Reports of Proceedings., March Report dated 4 April 1945, p.2

<sup>158</sup> NAA: AWM78, 387/1: Coastal Craft [ML] Administration, New Guinea: Reports of Proceedings., May Report dated 4 June 1945, p.2

<sup>159</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01296612.2015.1072352>, and <http://www.pngbuai.com/300socialsciences/transport/railgerman2a.html>

<sup>160</sup> AWM Photograph H15097

<sup>161</sup> AWM Photograph 300481

Madang and Alexishafen, the Allies had possession of two first-class, deep, well-sheltered harbours.<sup>162</sup> Little remained of the extensive mission station.

By mid-June 1944, men of the US 91st Naval Construction Battalion had arrived to commence reconstruction works and establish a ship repair base. By early August the number of Construction Battalion (CB) personnel had swelled to over 250. With the construction works complete, the last CBs departed the area on 7 October 1944. In late December, a 'CB battalion detachment' arrived to '*roll up the base*'.<sup>163</sup> As the harbour and facilities were useful to the Australian forces, the Australian Navy continued to use the base.

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<sup>162</sup> <http://clik.dva.gov.au/history-library/part-1-military-history/ch-2-world-war-ii/s-6-campaigns/new-guinea>

<sup>163</sup> <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/dam/museums/Seabee/UnitListPages/NCB/091%20NCB.pdf>

## 7 - THE EXPLOSION

On 13 June 1945, HMAS *Lolita* was at Alexishafen. She had moored to *HDML 1327* with HMAS *Martindale* outside. *ML 816* was further inboard with *ML808* alongside the wharf.

The work required on *Lolita's* engines had been completed and she was to go on trials.

Blunt again takes up the story:

*I had been writing in my cabin but was called on deck and was sitting on the rail just outside the wheelhouse door when the engines were about to be started. Instead of starting however there was a great explosion in the engine room under the wheelhouse and I was enveloped in sheets of flame and the deck collapsed into my cabin where I had been only a moment before. Fate plays many tricks. I was helped ashore and promptly lost interest in what was happening as I was quickly taken to hospital with the skipper and two of the shore staff who had been in the wheelhouse at the time.*

Blunt recalled the fire created pandemonium at the base with *Lolita's* fuel tanks, explosives and ammunition exploding in all directions. The fire was so fierce and the explosions so dangerous that personnel could not fight the fire and the boat had to be abandoned - it drifted to a reef on the far shore and was finally burnt to the waterline. *Lolita* was a complete write-off.

The two mechanics who had been in the wheelhouse and engine room were very seriously injured. Alfred Smith was listed as '*dangerously ill*'. William Bertalli was listed as '*seriously ill*'. The skipper John Trim suffered severe burns and Blunt was burnt severely on the front of the body, arms and legs. Blunt's hair had been burnt off and something heavy had given him a scalp wound which required stitches. He said, '*I was literally covered in bandages*'. The injured were transferred to Madang hospital which was staffed by Royal Australian Air Force (**RAAF**) medical personnel and nurses.

By 15 June, Lieutenant Trim was said to have improved slightly, and Blunt's condition was satisfactory.

But on 17 June, Alfred Smith and William Bertalli died.

The Acting Engineer at the base, Lieutenant Commander Purves, submitted an initial report on 15 June – just two days after the explosion and loss of *Lolita*.<sup>164</sup> He confirmed there had been a violent explosion in the engine room at 4.10 pm. Other craft had taken immediate action to '*clear the burning craft of the other ships moored alongside in the basin and on the Floating Dock*'. He wrote in his report, *Lolita* had been a mass of flames and assisted by the strong wind, had rapidly drifted clear and '*bought up on the reef about half way between the Floating Dock and the opposite point of land*'. Being in that location and despite not being a danger to the base, HMAS *Potrero* was directed to '*fire a drum of 20mm [ammunition] along the water line of the blazing hull in order to admit water to the vessel to keep her fast on the reef*'. *Lolita* continued to burn till 10 pm that evening when she was '*completely consumed*'.

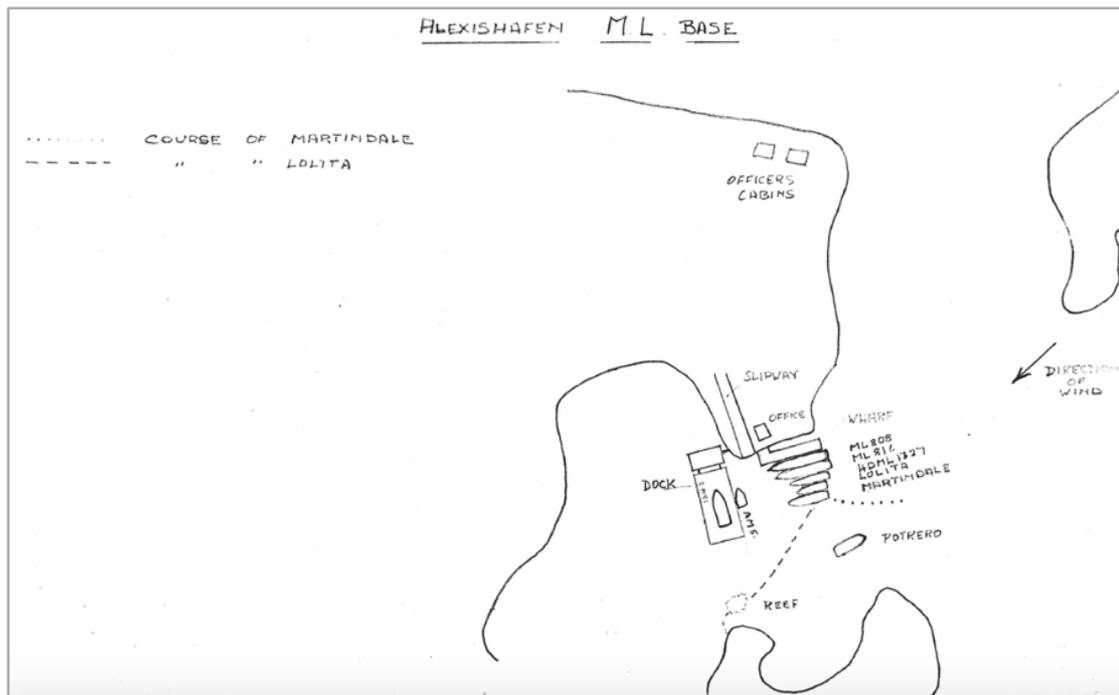
At the time of writing his report, Purves advised the cause of the explosion had not been determined. He attached a sketch of the base showing the disposition of the ships during the incident and attached statements from other personnel.

\* \* \*

A Board of Inquiry was formed consisting of senior officers from the shore base HMAS Madang: President - Acting Commander Reid, Members - Surgeon Lieutenant-Commander McLean and Acting Lieutenant-Commander Nichol. The Board formally examined witnesses over several days. The key task

<sup>164</sup> NAA: MP1049/5, 2026/27/197: Loss of "*Lolita*" due to explosion in engine room

for the Board was to ascertain the cause of the explosion, and identify actions that should be taken on other vessels in the future.



Sketch made by Lieutenant Commander Purves showing the location of *Lolita* and the other vessels in the harbour at the time of the explosion.<sup>165</sup>

The Board commenced by examining the base personnel. The first witness was the assistant base engineer – Lieutenant Moore. Moore had been in his quarters and upon hearing the explosion dashed to the wharf. Two other base engineers were interviewed. Neither had been working on *Lolita* and at the time of the explosion were working on other vessels.

The fourth witness was Lieutenant Trim. He had been temporarily released from the hospital for the purpose of the Inquiry. He described sitting on the wheel house seat looking down into the engine bay. Motor Mechanic Smith was with the engine, and Motor Mechanic Bertalli was in the wheel house at the starting controls. As Bertalli pressed the starter of the engine, there was a flash up through the carburetor about six inches (150mm) high, and a second later, '*a large gout of flame came from the inboard side of the engine – about two feet high*'. Trim said, that immediately following, '*the whole wheel-house filled with flame and there was a terrific explosion*'.

Trim was extensively questioned about the work that had been undertaken on the engine, whether there had been any smell of petrol during the day or at the time the engine was to be started, if any work had been done on the wiring system, and his understanding of the engine room and bilge ventilation systems. Trim was questioned extensively about the clothing worn by the mechanics which he '*did not notice at the time*', but believed they had been wearing shorts.

Able Seaman Blunt was the next witness. He described sitting on the starboard side near the door of the wheel house when Bertalli started the engine immediately followed by the explosion. Blunt then went onboard *HDML1327* from where he heard Trim calling for fire extinguishers and observed Trim to be still aboard *Lolita*. Blunt was then assisted to the wharf and to the base sick bay.

Ordinary Seaman Peoples was questioned next. Peoples had been on the wheel house, starboard side, when the explosion lifted him into the air before dropping him on the starboard deck. Peoples said he had not smelt petrol in the ship at any time. He said the last time he had seen the Captain before the

<sup>165</sup> NAA: MP1049/5, 2026/27/197: Loss of "*Lolita*" due to explosion in engine room

explosion was when he was standing on the starboard side of the steps leading to the wheel house of *Lolita*. After the explosion he saw the Captain calling for extinguishers and hoses. He confirmed the mechanics along with other members of the crew were in shorts.

The next of the crew to be questioned was Able Seaman Zanoni. He had been on the deck, port side. Zanoni said the explosion lifted him *'over the side into the water'*. He was thrown a rope from the neighbouring HMAS *Martindale*. Zanoni also recalled the Captain calling for fire hoses. Once *Martindale* came in to tie up, he went up to sick bay suffering burns to his leg and side.

On the third day, Trim was recalled and questioned regarding the instructions and Standing Orders applicable to the vessel and work on the engines. The questioning was directed to the fire precautions, including clothing to be worn in compartments containing petrol and petrol engines.

A particular question was put to Trim:

*Had you any knowledge of the fire which occurred in a Motor launch at Milne Bay about April, 1944, in which several men were burned and some subsequently died?*

His answer:

*No Sir. I heard about it after our own, but not before.*

Trim was asked if he had seen an Order issued by NOIC New Guinea dated 3 April 1944. Trim said he had a copy in his list of New Guinea Standing Orders. He said he received some 'Standing Orders' at Thursday Island, some at Milne Bay and others at Madang, and confirmed he had read all such Orders.

Trim confirmed for the Board, he saw a flash from the carburetor on top of the engine and then a flame from the bottom of the engine about the height of the engine itself, followed immediately by an explosion that filled the whole of the engine room with flame.

Stoker Cameron of *Lolita* who had not been questioned earlier, was called to give evidence. Cameron had joined the ship at Madang in April but had no experience with internal combustion engines, but as Stoker, he was responsible for the operation of the engines. He said he had been standing on the deck halfway between the wheel house and the stern when the explosion occurred. Cameron was questioned about the engine and the engine room – cleanliness, smell of fumes, ventilation systems and if they had been running before the explosion. He said he could not remember if the fans were running *'but they could have been running'*.

Trim was again recalled. This time he was questioned about the ventilation fans for the bilges and if he was aware of the Order which required the bilges to be ventilated before petrol engines were to be started. He said *'No Sir'*, and went on to say he could not remember that Order, but could remember the Order that required ventilation of the bilges after fueling. Trim said he had previously requested that Cameron be replaced as he had very little knowledge of petrol engines *'at all'*.

He confirmed the number of seamen allowed for *Lolita*, and confirmed he was not permitted by the Navy to have a mechanic to maintain the engines.

In response to further questioning about the engines, Trim said he believed the engines were fitted when *Lolita* was refitted in approximately August 1944 at the Sayonara Slip in Sydney. He confirmed he had read the report from the Base Engineer in Cairns recommending return of *Lolita* to Sydney, which he said was on the file in the engine room. Trim considered the report had *'condemned'* *Lolita* because of the engines.

In addition to the crew of *Lolita*, base personnel were also called to give evidence.

The Board of Inquiry issued their findings on 20 July 1945 confirming the explosion and fire originated in the engine room caused by a *'back flash from the carburetor at the moment the starter button was pressed'*. The Board said it was the flash that ignited an *'explosive mixture of petrol vapour'* which from some cause had accumulated in the Engine Room bilges. It was the view of the Board, the bilges were not adequately ventilated despite ventilating fans being fitted which were considered to have been *'efficient'*.

The Board found that following the explosion and fire, *'no more effective means than were employed could have been used to extinguish the fire'* and the officers and ratings concerned acted with *'promptitude'* in casting off *Lolita*, thereby allowing her to drift clear, reducing the fire risk to other ships alongside.

In addition, they determined that the extensive burns suffered by Bertalli and Smith would have been minimized by wearing overall clothing as had been laid down by the Orders arising from the earlier incident at Milne Bay. It appeared most probable that the life of Bertalli would have been saved had those orders been complied with. The Board recommended that to prevent a recurrence of the accident strict compliance was required with the existing Orders.

The Board commended the actions of the Sick Berth Attendant W E Conroy for his correct, *'promptitude'* and efficient initiative for the comfort and early hospitalization of the casualties.

A copy of the Order arising from the earlier accident at Milne Bay was attached to the report. The Order was explicit that engine room staff in vessels with petrol engines were to be fully clothed. The Order confirmed that commanding officers who have the immediate direction of such work would be held *'personally responsible'*.

Given the finding of the Board that Bertalli and Smith were wearing shorts, it is inexplicable that no commanding officer was held responsible. Neither the commanding officer of the Alexishafen shore base, nor the supervising engineers were held to account. None were held *'personally responsible'*.

In addition, it is extraordinary that the true extent of the work completed on *Lolita* was never disclosed to the Board of Inquiry.

Just over a month before the Board of Inquiry, the Naval Officer in Command, New Guinea informed the Naval Board by way of his regular Report of Proceedings,<sup>166</sup> that *Lolita* was undergoing repairs at Alexishafen and there had been *'considerable trouble experienced in refitting' Lolita*. He said the engines showed signs of *'neglect'* as no stoker/mechanic formed part of the crew, and went on to advise that a new *'auxiliary engine'* had been fitted. After just one small operation, *Lolita* again developed a *'major engine defect necessitating the removal of the engines'*. New pistons, crank shaft and bearings had been fitted and as no spare parts were available, diving operations were commenced to salvage a *'worn out American motor'* from a sunken vessel. The necessary parts he said, had been *'dismantled and reconditioned'* before being used. The date of his report was 4 June 1945 – nine days before *Lolita* was destroyed.

There was no mention of the Report of Proceedings in the Board of Inquiry's findings.

His June report dated 7 July, confirmed the loss of *Lolita* *'after an explosion whilst reconditioned motors were being installed'*.<sup>167</sup>

<sup>166</sup> NAA: AWM78, 387/1: Coastal Craft [ML] Administration, New Guinea: Reports of Proceedings., May Report dated 4 June 1945, p.3

<sup>167</sup> NAA: AWM78, 387/1: Coastal Craft [ML] Administration, New Guinea: Reports of Proceedings., June Report dated 7 July 1945, p.2

There was no reference to '*reconditioned motors*' during the inquiry, or of salvaging and reconditioning parts from a sunken vessel, before they were used. Neither report is referred to in the records of the Inquiry

With the benefit of hindsight, those matters may have been material facts for examination by the Board. Perhaps the cause of the explosion was not from a simple '*back flash*' from the carburetor, or because the mechanics had pre-primed the carburetor. Perhaps there had been a catastrophic failure of a '*reconditioned*' part from the sunken vessel, that caused the engine to explode giving impetus for an explosion of fuel and vapours.

Given two mechanics died and *Lolita* was destroyed, there was a necessity for all the facts to be examined so the cause of the explosion could be properly determined and blame would not be wrongly attributed. It appears there were further significant matters that should have been examined.

## 8 - THE AFTERMATH

William Bertalli and Alfred Smith were buried at the Lae War Cemetery in New Guinea. Their names have since been incorporated on Panel 3 in the Commemorative Area at the Australian War Memorial. Both left behind wives.



In his memoir, thirty years after the explosion and loss of *Lolita*, John Blunt recalled the remainder of the crew visiting him in the Madang hospital and telling him what had happened at Alexishafen. He spent some weeks in the hospital and fortunately the burns healed well and all physical scarring eventually disappeared. He praised the work of the medical staff and the professional treatment and care of the nurses. He was discharged from the hospital and posted to the corvette HMAS *Cowra* for return to Sydney. With a small advance of pay he was able to purchase a lined American jacket for the voyage home, which would be in the middle of winter. As a supernumerary on *Cowra*, he did not have to perform any technical duties but he joined the rest of the crew to keep watches. His action station for the voyage was with the anti-aircraft Bofors gun which he said was exercised frequently. Although it was late in the war, it was generally accepted that Japanese submarines had been positively sighted off the east coast of Australia.

On arrival in Sydney, he was given ten days leave. Soon after, he succumbed to a nasty attack of malaria and was admitted to the Navy's Canonbury Hospital - on the waterfront at the end of Point Piper – not far from Muirhead-Gould's former Tresco residence. Treatment, he recounts, was excellent and he recovered, but tests showed the explosion had given him 'bad nerves'. He was discharged as '*physically unfit for naval service*' on 22 November 1945.

He returned to the public service and after many years '*catching up*' in seniority with those who did not enlist, he recovered his career which culminated in being appointed to the position of Chief Superintendent of Supply for the Navy. With the position came an entitlement to live in the two storey heritage house at the northern end of Spectacle Island in Sydney Harbour – the very place he had spent his early working life in the public service before being permitted to enlist. In the mid 1980s and over a few years, he suffered a number of heart attacks and died in 1986 at the premature age of 65 years and 10 months. Years later, the Department of Veterans Affairs found his heart condition was attributable to the explosion.

It appears, that of the crew of *Lolita* who sailed from Sydney in 1944, Blunt was the only member of the ship's company to have been with the vessel for the whole voyage to Alexishafen and witness the destruction of *Lolita*.

By the end of August 1945, Lieutenant John Trim had returned to Australia and was demobilized in February 1946.<sup>168</sup> Nothing more is known, other than a brief mention by John Blunt in his memoir:

*The skipper also had severe burns and was still in hospital when I returned to Sydney and I understand that he suffered a very severe nervous breakdown as a result of his experience.*

As described to the Board of Inquiry by members of his crew, Trim stayed with *Lolita* endeavouring to save her till nothing more could be done. It may have been those commendable actions to the last, that resulted in his severe burns and later medical conditions.

<sup>168</sup> NAA: A6769, Trim J., Service Record

## 9 - BRADLEYS HEAD

In late 2017, I undertook a series of walks around Sydney Harbour from North Head to South Head. On the third day while approaching Bradley's Head I noticed a series of sandstone blocks beside the path. Each held a plaque inscribed with the name of an Australian warship. HMAS *Geelong*, HMAS *Warrnambool*, HMAS *Perth* and HMAS *Sydney* were included – twenty-two sandstone blocks in all. The plaques were inscribed with the names of HMAS vessels, and the date and reason for their loss. At the end of the row of blocks stood a memorial, dedicated in 2014 by then Prime Minister and local member, The Hon. Tony Abbott M.P. It read:

*This memorial walk commemorates the loss of twenty-two commissioned Royal Australian Navy ships and submarines as a consequence of war since 4 October 1913 when the first RAN fleet entered Sydney Harbour. This walk was dedicated in 2014 by the Hon Tony Abbott MP, Prime Minister of Australia and member for Warringah.*

*Three trees in this walk were planted on the same day the adjacent HMAS Sydney I mast was dedicated on 12 March 1964. Those trees were dedicated to HMA Ships Sydney II, Perth and Canberra lost in World War Two.*

*This historic site also serves as a reminder of the sacrifice made by all naval personnel lost or injured whilst serving in commissioned ships, ashore and in the air, both in peace and war.*

LEST WE FORGET

I walked back along the path beside the blocks which held the plaques of those twenty-two ships. As I walked, my concern grew!

Where was *Lolita* - HMAS *Lolita*?

She was not there! Why not? How could *Lolita* not have been included – she had been lost in a war zone performing official naval duties before the declared end of the war - and two naval Motor Mechanics from the shore station working onboard *Lolita* had died?

Surely, this was wrong! The absence of *Lolita* from the memorial had to be corrected – not just because it was the vessel on which my father John Blunt had served, but for the other men who served on her and for the two sailors who had died when she was lost. And for the ship herself.

I wrote to the former Prime Minister and asked if he could explain why '*HMAS Lolita, and many other HMAS vessels had not been included and recognised in this very important memorial*'. There was no answer and thinking he had forgotten, I wrote again. But Tony Abbott had not forgotten my request and had been making his own enquires. As a result of his enquiries, he referred me to various NSW Ministers and suggested an approach to the Minister for Defence. He added a personal message:

*I can appreciate your strong feeling in this issue*

[I can appreciate your strong feeling in this issue.]

And then a week later I received a call from the President of the HMAS Sydney Association. Tony Abbott had suggested he should call me. He explained the Association had assisted with the memorial and put forward a list of twenty-six ships for dedication in the memorial. But he could not explain why the Navy had reduced the list to the twenty-two. I was told the Association was of the view the memorial should

recognise all HMAS ships lost at sea – both *'in peace and war'* – just as inscribed on the memorial. The Navy however rejected that purpose and limited the memorial to only those ships lost during wartime.

It was at that time, I became aware that Brian Anderson, a son of Herbert Anderson – commander of HMAS *Lolita* at the time of the Battle of Sydney Harbour, had petitioned the Navy for his father to be awarded an honour for his deeds during the Battle. His petition had been refused in 2013.

That was the year before the Bradleys Head memorial was dedicated – when there was no acknowledgment of the loss of HMAS *Lolita*!

What I have learnt since, is that HMAS *Lolita*, like her fellow vessels of the Hollywood Fleet, has a history of action and service that has been forgotten.

## 10 - ANDERSON'S APPEAL

Unfortunately, Brian Anderson died in 2017 before I was able to speak with him. So, had his two brothers. All I had was a copy of the review report from the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal which had considered his petition and had ultimately dealt the blow to Brian in 2013.

From the information I have gathered, it appears Brian Anderson began his action in 2004. In August 2007, the Directorate of Honours and Awards of the Department of Defence dealt the first blow when the Awards Directorate rejected Brian's petition on behalf of his late father. Anderson was not to be recommended for recognition by an honour, or for an award for his service during the Battle of Sydney Harbour.

Brian did not accept that decision and in 2008, he sought a review of the decision through the Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal. But in November 2010, the Tribunal upheld the earlier decision – they refused to recommend, to the Minister for Defence, that an honour or an award should be made.

Again, Brian Anderson did not accept that determination and lodged an application with the Federal Court for a review of the earlier determination. There must have been a process of negotiation as the application was settled on the basis that Brian Anderson would make a new application to the Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal - for a new review of the original decision. The Tribunal would be composed of new panel members.

Brian provided an initial submission and a further eight submissions.

The Tribunal conducted a hearing on 5 July 2012. When one listens to the recording of the hearing, one can only be impressed by Brian's passion and dedication for the true story of the Battle of Sydney Harbour to be told, together with the actions of his father, his crew and HMAS *Lolita*. His children can be proud of their father's quest, and the actions of their grandfather, Herbert Anderson.

Brian claimed *Lolita* had immediately attacked the Japanese submarine M14, and it was because of his father's quick actions, the Japanese submarine commander '*knew the game was up*'.<sup>169</sup> He contended, *Lolita* had on two occasions dropped depth charges on the midget submarine which failed to explode and was preparing to drop a third depth charge to detonate at a shallower depth, when Chuma destroyed his submarine. Brian Anderson was of the belief, as was Coxswain Nelson,<sup>170</sup> that *Lolita's* attacks led Chuma to destroy his submarine.

Brian contended his father played a much greater role in the defence of Sydney Harbour than was acknowledged by Muirhead-Gould in his reports.

In addition, he argued his father's actions, on that night, had greater strategic impacts on the defence of Sydney Harbour because the destruction of the submarine led to the element of surprise being taken away from the other two submarines. Having caused the element of surprise to be eliminated, Brian argued his father's actions, may therefore have saved many lives. He submitted that if the other two submarines had been able to successfully approach the allied ships and accurately strike with their torpedoes, the loss of life and loss of the significant warships in the harbour could have been far more substantial.

Crucially, Brian submitted his father's actions were deliberately overlooked by Muirhead-Gould and the Naval Board, and as a consequence it was right and proper for an award to be made in response to his petition.

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<sup>169</sup> *Report of the Review of a Decision by the Department of Defence regarding recognition for Commissioned Warrant Officer Herbert Spencer Anderson (Deceased)*, para.33

<sup>170</sup> Australian War Films Archive, Archive No. 1639, Interview with James Nelson, 30 June 2004, Timecode 03:23:00:00

In support of the submission, Brian provided a *'wide range of evidence'*. The Tribunal took account of a transcript of the Carruthers interview with James Nelson, the Coxswain on HMAS *Lolita*, at the time she attacked M14.<sup>171</sup> It was in that interview that Nelson confirmed Anderson had immediately maneuvered *Lolita* to enable the object at the boom net to be investigated, and having confirmed the object was a submarine, Anderson took immediate and decisive action to attack. In Nelson's opinion, Anderson put *Lolita* in danger so as to destroy the submarine.

In addition, the Tribunal took account of a draft report written by Herbert Anderson, together with his record of service, which they accepted revealed he was *'highly thought of by his superiors and considered utterly reliable'*.<sup>172</sup>

At the hearing, Brian Anderson told the members of the Tribunal that Muirhead-Gould had deliberately written his report so his father, would receive no credit for his actions.

Mr Carruthers gave evidence in support of the application - that Herbert Anderson had put *Lolita* *'in the line of fire to do his duty'*. He informed the Tribunal the midget submarine had *'kept quiet so that the other two submarines could still launch a surprise attack'* and that having been discovered, Chuma blew up his own submarine, M14 in the hope of destroying *Lolita*. Carruthers held the view that if *Lolita* had not forced the submarine to be destroyed, *'far more damage could have been caused that night'*. Finally, Carruthers said, no person received recognition for their actions that night, because the Navy had been embarrassed by the attack.

In opposition, Dr David Stevens,<sup>173</sup> then Director of Strategic Historical Studies at the Sea Power Centre – Australia, gave evidence for the Department of Defence. He said Herbert Anderson *'was not forgotten'* and all the documents submitted by Brian Anderson had been added to the *'naval historical record'* and that future historians would be able to include and acknowledge his father's actions and the role of *Lolita* in the defence of Sydney Harbour.

In addition, the Department of Defence argued that no award should be made to Anderson. In their submission, the Department referred to its *'policy on retrospectivity'* as it applied to WWII service,<sup>174</sup> but failed to acknowledge to the Tribunal, that while some personnel within the defence establishment may hold *'views'* regarding retrospectivity, there is no *'policy'*.

In addition to the Department of Defence submission, the Tribunal also *'noted'* there were *'certain procedures'* for recognizing actions of individuals during WWII, and found those *'certain procedures'* had not been *'commenced'* in relation to any person's actions in the Battle of Sydney Harbour. Yet, neither the Department of Defence, nor the Tribunal, identified those *'certain procedures'*.

The Tribunal for Anderson made its decision upholding the original determination, *'not to recommend'* to the Minister for Defence that Anderson be considered for a defence honour, and that he not be recommended for an award.

Brian Anderson appealed directly to Tony Abbott seeking his support for recognition of his father's actions.<sup>175</sup>

<sup>171</sup> Carruthers Collection, RAN Sea Power Centre - Australia

<sup>172</sup> Anderson's Service record, NAA A3978, Anderson H S., includes *'a very reliable officer'* and *'handles a small ship very satisfactorily'* and *'entirely to my satisfaction'* from the NOIC Darwin. Yet in February 1944, Muirhead-Gould said Anderson *'lacked the initiative necessary to make a good Commanding Officer'* and *'I would not recommend him for command at present'*.

<sup>173</sup> Dr David Stevens is also the author of *'A Critical Vulnerability'* and other publications.

<sup>174</sup> The Department of Defence did not include a copy of the alleged *'policy'* in their evidence, and no such *'policy'* has been found.

<sup>175</sup> *'Plea to honour father who foiled Sydney Harbour mini sub'*, The Australian, 20 October, 2014

*Now Mr Anderson has appealed to Tony Abbott to correct the record after an eight-year legal battle with defence to seek recognition for his father's actions, which he claims saved many lives. "My father was involved in the pivotal point of the whole attack", Mr Anderson told The Australian. "But he has been written out of history."*

There has been no recognition for Herbert Anderson or HMAS *Lolita*. Townley and *Steady Hour*, and Eyres and *Yarroma* and others received letters of thanks for their efforts – but Anderson and HMAS *Lolita* were inexplicably ignored.

As for the memorial at Bradleys Head, it was revealed in late 2018 by the Minister for Veteran's Affairs, HMAS *Lolita* had been '*inadvertently excluded despite having two of her ships' company killed in the fire that destroyed the vessel*'.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Letter from Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Minister for Defence Personnel – The Hon Darren Chester MP, dated 25 November 2018