

1964 *MELBOURNE* *RAMS VOYAGER*

It took only a few minutes for the flagship of the Royal Australian Navy, the 20 000-tonne aircraft carrier H.M.A.S. *Melbourne*, to slice in half the destroyer H.M.A.S. *Voyager* on a moonless night in early February 1964.

As the 3200-tonne destroyer sank into the South Pacific, off Jervis Bay, some 160 kilometres south of Sydney, she took with her eighty-two men, including her captain, Duncan Stevens.

It was Australia's greatest peacetime tragedy, and during the following four years it became also the most controversial.

In a surprise announcement only hours after the collision, the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, described 'the normal machinery for naval investigations' as being 'inadequate for the present purpose'. He added:

There will, therefore, be a full public investigation, conducted by a judge. I cannot yet say who the judge will be. I will also discuss with my col-

leagues whether he should be assisted by naval experts sitting as assessors. But the main thing I want to make clear at this stage is that the investigation is to be prompt, thorough, public, and conducted by a judge.

Within fifteen days of the tragedy, the Royal Commission, presided over by Sir John Spicer, Chief Justice of the Commonwealth Industrial Court, met.

Sir John was assisted by a Queen's Counsel, Mr J. W. Smyth. The late Captain Stevens and the Navy were legally represented, both at Government cost.

Similar legal representation, however, was inexplicably refused for *Melbourne's* Commander, Captain R. J. Robertson, until a Government backbencher raised the matter in Federal Parliament.

As Vice-Admiral Harold Hickling points out in his excellent study of the disaster and its aftermath, *Postscript to Voyager*, 'All these gentlemen, learned in law, knew little about seafaring matters and less about the intricacies of naval manoeuvres, signalling procedure, and the handling of ships'.

Despite this handicap, the commission was able to reach a finding by August. It laid the blame for the collision on *Voyager* for making a turn beyond 020 degrees.

'It is not possible to form any firm conclusion as to why *Voyager* did this', the commissioner said, adding:

It was not due to any fault on the part of any person on Melbourne. Nor is it possible to identify the individual or individuals on Voyager who was or

were responsible. It is not easy to understand how the collision could have occurred if an effective look out were being maintained on Voyager, and appropriate evasive action had been taken as soon as any possibility of danger was observed.

But Sir John did criticise Captain Robertson and two of his officers for not warning the destroyer. 'The absence of any warning', he remarked, 'suggests undue readiness to rely solely on *Melbourne's* undoubted right to maintain her course and speed in the belief that *Voyager*, whatever her course might be, would, as duty bound, in fact keep out of the way'.

The Navy, however, obviously took a more serious view of Captain Robertson's actions, or lack thereof.

Although no charges were preferred, he was informed that he would be transferred to a shore establishment; instead, he resigned, forfeiting a substantial pension. It was, he said, 'the only honourable course for me to take'.

Meanwhile, Vice-Admiral Hickling, while researching his first book on the disaster, *One Minute Of Time*, met Peter Cabban, an officer who had once served under *Voyager's* Captain Stevens.

Lieutenant-Commander Cabban revealed that Stevens was in the habit of drinking too much and that on several occasions he had seen the captain in such a condition that he had to be helped to bed.

This information was taken to the Prime Minister in September 1964, shortly after the Spicer report was made public, by John Jess, a Liberal M.H.R. who had earlier forced the Government to provide counsel for Captain Robertson.

Menzies suggested that Jess drop the matter, because it 'can only distress the Stevens family'.

The following year, after Robertson's resignation, Jess again approached the Prime Minister, this time handing him the full statement made by Cabban to Vice-Admiral Hickling. Although Menzies expressed concern, he again took no action.

More than three years after the collision still nothing had come of the Cabban allegations. So Jess again approached the Prime Minister, now Harold Holt, and informed him that he proposed to make the whole matter public.

In Parliament, Jess called for an investigation into Cabban's allegations, in which he was supported by another Liberal backbencher, Edward St John.

After strong initial opposition, the Government, by the end of the debate, suddenly announced that a second enquiry, this time by three judges, would be held into the disaster.

After 85 sitting days, 142 witnesses, 203 exhibits, 150 statements, and a cost estimated at \$750 000, the second Royal Commission, headed by Sir Stanley Burbury, the Tasmanian Chief Justice, absolved Captain Robertson and his two fellow officers on *Melbourne* of all blame for the collision.

It stressed that the criticism of these officers by Sir John Spicer had not been justified. The commission also rejected entirely 'any idea that the late Captain Stevens was under the influence of liquor at the time of the collision'. Soon afterwards the Navy awarded Captain Robertson an *ex gratia* payment of \$60 000.

But H.M.A.S. *Melbourne's* troubles were far from over.

On 3 June 1969, five years after the *Voyager* sinking, the ill-fated carrier again sliced an attendant destroyer in half under virtually identical circumstances.

This time it happened in the South China Sea, with the victim an American warship, U.S.S. *Frank E. Evans*. A naval court martial again absolved the *Melbourne's* captain of all blame — but he, too, was soon transferred to a shore command.