Fire Across The Pacific

By David Mattiske

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COVER H.M.A.S. Shropshire bombarding battery of Japanese six inch guns at Lingayen Gulf, Luzon, Philippines. Photograph taken by aircraft from U.S.S. Minneapolis which was spotting the fall of shots.

FIRE ACROSS THE PACIFIC

To all my grand-children and the future generations who will have to bear the burdens of security, stability and prosperity.

To my monster Melissa who as a tiny tot would look at H.M.A.S. Shropshire's famous photo taken at Lingayen gulf and say, "That's my Poppie's ship."

Little did she know, Shropshire is my ship.

Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the great waters;
they saw the deeds of the Lord,
His wondrous works in the deep.

Psalm 107 v 23,24.

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FOREWORD

To commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Battle of Leyte Gulf, the Philippine Government decided to award the Philippine Liberation Medal to all the servicemen and women, including Australians, who participated in that historical event.

The Philippine Liberation Medal is an expression of appreciation from a country, which shares with Australia a commitment to peace and freedom in the region. It is one of the important pillars of Philippine-Australian relations and a symbol of a partnership based on shared values.

David Mattiske who participated in the Liberation Campaign for the Philippines has written "Fire Across the Pacific" to document the story of an individual seaman. He served in the ship "Shropshire", a lucky ship indeed as it never suffered any major catastrophe. His vivid account of his pleasant encounters with Filipino people is a sharp contrast to the dangers he was exposed to during their exposure to enemy fire at the largest naval engagement in World War ll. To date, I have personally awarded 3,900 Australian servicemen with the Philippine Liberation Medal and David is among them.

I congratulate him for bringing into the consciousness of the Australian people an important bridge in Philippines-Australian relations; namely, that both our countries have fought side by side at various fronts for a shared common cause.

I also commend his loving wife Dee who has stood by him at all times.

DELIA DOMINGO-ALBERT

Ambassador

Embassy of the Philippines. Canberra

PROLOGUE

H.M.A.S. Shropshire reached the apogee of fighting efficiency in the Philippines campaign, which was a severe testing time for all ships and men. Shropshire's spectacular successes drew the plaudits of Australians and Americans. Yet many would have questioned the need for Australians to undergo in 1944 hardship and danger for a group of tropical islands and an unknown people who at that stage were just another place on the map with no ties to Australia.

Unknown were the trials and tribulations of the Filipino people.

Out of the attempt by a brutal Japanese occupation to destroy the soul and spirit of the Filipinos came one of the finest and most noble statements in man's history. It came from the governor of Iloilo in the Philippine's island of Panay.

"I firmly believe that it is not wise and statesmanly for our leaders, in this their darkest hour, to teach our people to avoid sufferings and hardships at the sacrifice of fundamental principles of government and the democratic way of life. On the contrary, it is their bounden duty and responsibility to inspire our people to willingly undergo any kind of difficulty and sacrifices for the sake of noble principles that they nourish deep in their hearts. Instead of depressing their patriotic ardour, the people should be inspired to be brave and courageous under all kinds of hardships and difficulties in defence of what they consider righteous and just. We shall never win or deserve the esteem and respect of other nations if we lack principles and if we do not possess the courage and valour to defend those principles at any cost."

From Tomas Confesor, Governor of Iloilo: Reply to the demand of President Laurel that he surrender, January 1943.

Shropshire can rest assured that her trials and tribulations were not in vain. Her achievements not only defeated a dangerous enemy, but helped to preserve a noble cause and the people who upheld it.

When Australians are put to the test like the Filipino people, as assuredly they shall be some day, we can only hope and pray that we will produce leaders like Tomas Confesor.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Her Excellency Mrs Delia Domingo Albert, Philippines Ambassador to Australia, offered much encouragement and graced this book with her foreword. My very special thanks.

Inspiration to continue came with the valuable advice from Mrs Dorothy Murphy and her first editing. My brother Peter Mattiske produced a veritable avalanche of constructive criticisms and corrections, as only younger brothers with literary skills can do, and without them I might never have "sailed the ship safely to port."

Anne Maree Grasso and Nikki Wood, officers of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Southport read brief excerpts of the original transcripts. Their enthusiasm and competent support led to a successful application for assistance from the Department.

Stan Nicholls who wrote the definitive history of H.M.A.S. SHROPSHIRE never hesitated with sound advice and helpful information. Stan spontaneously offered the use of his extensive material for Fire Across The Pacific. My grateful thanks to an "old shipmate."

Former members of Shropshire's ship's company came up with a variety of episodes, some forgotten and some previously unknown. Rear Admiral Bryan Castles, CBE RAN rtd, Eric (Slim) Curtis, Geoff Lund, Kevin Day, Ted Griffith, Les (Lofty) Rathbone, and Ted Trappett contributed, and also our "brother in arms" from the United States Navy, John Adams who gave me valuable insights into episodes seen through American eyes.

The initial costs of getting "Fire Across The Pacific" under way were assisted by a grant from the Department of Veterans Affairs Commemorative Activities under the "Their Service, Our Heritage" Programme.

A final and grateful thanks to my wife Dee.

She heard so many tales of the sea at Shropshire reunion luncheons that eventually she said that they must be recorded for posterity. So not for me the glory. If there is any glory it belongs to H.M.A.S. SHROPSHIRE and her gallant SHIP'S COMPANY who served their Ship and Country so faithfully.

The War Record and Battle Honours of H.M.A.S. SHROPSHIRE

17 Major operations from 1943 to September 1945

Arawe New Britain
Cape Gloucester
Admiralty Islands
Hollandia
Wakde Island
Sarmi Peninsula
Biak
Cape Sansapor
Moratai
Leyte Gulf
Surigao Strait
Lingayen Gulf
Corregidor
Brunei
Balikpapen
Surrender in Tokyo Bay

Bombarded 56 targets during operations.

Twice near missed by torpedoes in Leyte Gulf.

Battle of Surigao Strait. The last great clash of battleships, cruisers and destroyers in which Shrioshire fired 32 broadsides causing massive damage to the battleship Yamashiro.

Shot down 11 Kamikaze aircraft, confirmed, shared in 8 and many more not officially logged.

Radar telling superb, recognised as vital to USA 7th Fleet operations.

HONOUR ROLL

AN HONOUR ROLL OF THE SHIPS OF THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE CAMPAIGN TO LIBERATE THE PHILIPPINES

THEY SERVED THEIR NATION AND ALLIES
WITH DISTINCTION

H.M.A.S. AUSTRALIA

H.M.A.S. SHROPSHIRE

H.M.A.S. ARUNTA

H.M.A.S. WARRAMUNGA

H.M.A.S. MANOORA

H.M.A.S. KANIMBLA

H.M.A.S. WESTRALIA

H.M.A.S. GASCOYNE

H.M.A.S. WARREGO

H.D.M.L. 1074

H.M.A.S. RESERVE

H.M.A.S. POYANG

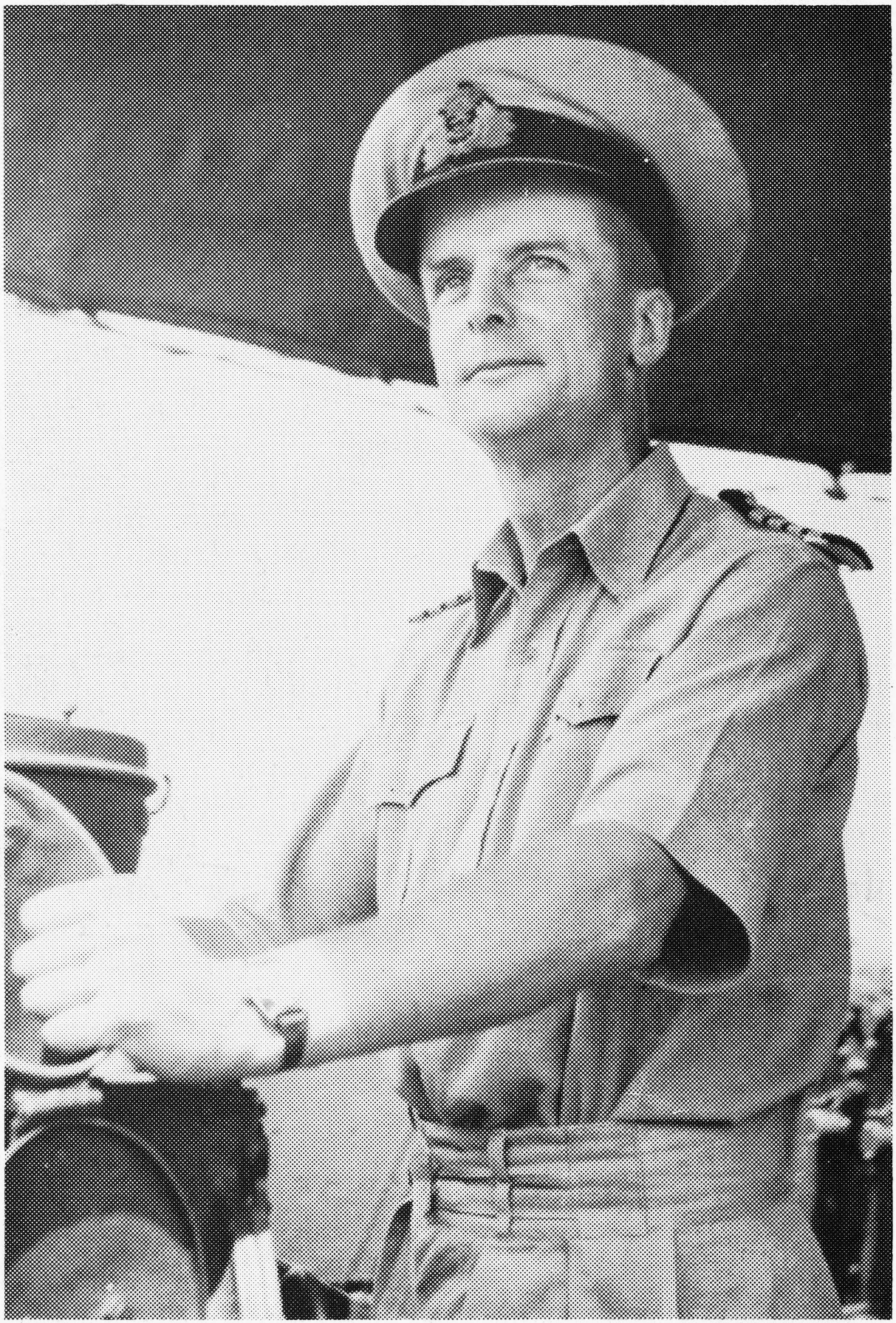
H.M.A.S. YUNNAN

H.M.A.S. BENALLA

SUPPORT SHIPS

BISHOPDALE

MERKUR



Captain C.A.G. Nichols D.S.O. (R.N.), M.I.D., L.V.O., U.S. Bronze Medal
A universally respected captain who was responsible for bringing Shropshire unscathed through the historic Philippines campaign.

INTRODUCTION

This is only partly my story, it is really a story about a ship. Without the ship there would be very little to tell. The story of an individual seaman like myself would be a very routine affair, and none who served in her would ever claim any degree of heroics, dashing gallantry, or decision making of historic importance, although there were instances of this a plenty. Shropshire's ship's company never thought of themselves as having much impact on the course of events; they just went about the routine duties of the day, obeying orders and fulfilling the job for which they were trained.

And yet, Shropshire was a remarkable ship, unique in name and record in the Royal Australian Navy. She is often dismissed as a lucky ship because she suffered no catastrophe or large loss of life. It is a peculiar aspect of Australian life that we tend to dwell on the frightful mistakes which resulted in tragedy and enormous loss of life, such as Gallipoli or the Somme, rather than glorious victories brilliantly achieved at relatively small cost. Most Australians know the tragic loss with all hands of H.M.A.S. SYDNEY, but who has an inkling of the where-abouts of Leyte Gulf or Surigao Strait?

The ship in this story bombarded 56 enemy targets in 16 major operations from its first base in Milne Bay, New Guinea, to Luzon and Tokyo. She fought against a Japanese battleship in the Battle of Surigao Strait, the largest sea battle in which a ship of the R.A.N. ever took part, survived many ferocious kamikaze attacks, was near missed by torpedoes, and could have been blown up by a mine fouled in her paravanes. Most of the ship's company suffered under extreme conditions of heat, humidity and over-crowding in a ship designed for cool or temperate climates, not for battle conditions on the equator.

So, to call Shropshire a lucky ship begs the point. Whilst a certain degree of luck is helpful, in the final analysis, Shropshire's record is due to a combination of team training, discipline, a high degree of skill, devotion to duty, and brilliant captaincy. Other ships could or may have equalled this, but none would surpass it.

It would be satisfying to think that many Australians will find this is a story worth telling and reading, not because it is my story, but because Shropshire's story is one of ordinary Australian men and boys going off to fight for their country, and doing it with determination, a fair degree of courage, and it might be said, with considerable style. Even more importantly, Shropshire's story is a very notable piece of Australia's history and sets an example for future generations to follow.

Shropshire was born of the County of Shropshire, and our ship's motto is appropriate today. To the County and Australia's future generations we say FLOREAT AMBO, which simply means, "May They Both Flourish."

GETTING CLOSE

It was another stinking hot, humid morning at H.M.A.S. Ladava, the Royal Australian Navy base at Milne Bay, on the eastern tip of New Guinea. It was stinking because the place had the hot, damp smell about it that is peculiar to, and found only in equatorial climes. For the second day in a row, a small party of four sailors was digging trenches in the wet, oozing and cloying soil. These trenches were the foundations of a new building. They were grumbling and cursing at the mud, sweat and heat, and the N.O.I.C. (Naval Officer in Command) who had the bright idea to put the party to work on such a lousy job which was only fit for lesser mortals.

The complaints were somewhat justified because this party was destined to join a fighting ship, not work as navvies, and they suspected the N.O.I.C. had been smart in giving them an unpopular job. They were under his jurisdiction waiting for their ship, and would be there only a few days, so why not load them with a dirty job that others would complain about.

The sailors had hoped that their ship would have been in harbour, otherwise, why would they have been flown in that ramshackle aircraft which looked as if it would expire any minute on its flight through that raging thunder storm all the way from Townsville. After getting to Milne Bay on a wing and a prayer, they were disappointed to find that their ship was not in Milne Bay after all, and as was common-place in those days, it appeared that the Navy's left hand did not know what the Navy's right hand was doing.

But relief was on the way. The Writer bloke from the base office wandered over to say that Shropshire has just arrived in the bay, and the party must get moving. A truck took them to the jetty at Gili Gili and the wreck of the S.S. Anshun. The Anshun was lying on its side at the waters edge were she finished up in August 1942 during the Japanese attempted invasion of Milne bay. Enemy cruisers had caught the Anshun at the jetty and shelled her until she had turned over on her side, and now she was serving a useful purpose as an addition to the jetty. To the un-initiated the Anshun was a sign that they were entering into an area where nasty things can happen in wartime.

The party was now in a motor boat which chugged off past a variety of small and nondescript looking vessels to a great, grey, three funnelled cruiser that was to be home for nearly three years. They were there at last.

I was one of that party, and I still feel intensely, the thrill, awe, and some trepidation that swept over me as I mounted the accommodation ladder and stepped on to the quarterdeck, remembering to salute as I reached the upper deck of this mighty ship of war. Would I prove worthy of the job ahead? Perhaps I would make a fool of myself amongst all the seasoned sailors who had already proved themselves in action in other ships. What jobs would I be required to do, would I be accepted by the men I would work, eat, sleep and live with? Here I was in a war zone, sailing to God knows where, thousands of miles from home, which was an Australian country town hundreds of miles from salt water.

Some assurance was forthcoming at once, as the two seamen in the party were handed over to Sub Lt. "Hank" Roberts, a great long gangly fellow who treated new chums with a degree of dignity, understanding and kindness not altogether common in junior naval officers.

As Sub Lt. Roberts showed us around our quarters, which happened to be in the Foc'sle mess deck, and our future action stations, I started to feel at home, but I also turned over in my mind the question, how on earth did I get here, and what strange twists of fate had brought me to be a member of the Ship's Company of His Majesty's Australian Ship Shropshire?

WHY THE NAVY

To follow up with an answer to the question, why would a young lad born and bred far from salt water wish to join the Navy, one needs to search into family back-ground, history and characteristics. In both my maternal and paternal antecedents there was an obvious desire to travel, explore, and try the unconventional. Otherwise the family would not have been in Australia in the first place.

My name "Mattiske" goes back to the early 1840's when the first Mattiske arrived in South Australia from a place called Trebbin, a town in what was then Prussia, some 60 kilometres south of Berlin. There are Mattiskes who also came from Berlin to Australia, so the name appears to be not uncommon in that region. Just why the first couple migrated to Australia is not clear, but was probably due to a number of factors. The persecution of Lutherans who stubbornly refused to obey the Kaiser's regulations to worship in the manner prescribed by the government was an important factor. This state of affairs had caused many thousands to migrate to Australia and the U.S.A. No doubt migration was also spurred by the prospect of accessible land in a new country, and the challenge to have a go at a new and totally different life style.

Whatever the reasons, to migrate 150 years ago in sailing ships to an unknown and undeveloped, if not savage land on the other side of the world, required courage, resolution, individual skills, devotion to a cause, and the willingness to change allegiance to a new Queen, government, and flag in their new found home. These attributes, if prevalent today, would make Australia a much more secure, prosperous and safer place. The migrants of the last decade could learn a lot from these early settlers.

My mother's family came from a similar background, which I suppose increases the possibility of at least some of these characteristics being passed on to later generations. Mother's great-grandmother must have been quite an enterprising and courageous character. She had been a Lady-in-Waiting to the Kaiserine's children in Berlin, fell in love with a brilliant theological student who was offered a job in the newly founded colony of South Australia. She left the luxury of her job, and literally swapped a palace for a tent. When they arrived in Adelaide, her husband reported to Governor Grey, who sent him to Encounter Bay, now Victor Harbour, to work among the aborigines. My great-grandmother was the first white women born in Encounter Bay.

Growing up in Murtoa, a town in the wheat growing Wimmera district of Victoria, and hundreds of miles from the ocean, would not seem conducive to directing a young lad to the Navy. But a very early memory is a picture in a "reader". Each primary school grade had a "reader", which consisted of poems, essays, stories, and articles about our State, Country, and Empire, and it was a requirement of every pupil to read through this book during the year. In one of the readers, 3rd or 4th grade from memory, there was a scene depicting an old sailor and a young lad seated on a pier or break-water. The old salt is pointing out to sea. The young lad's eyes are bright with curiosity and the prospect of sailing away to a world of adventure which is being described by his old companion.

This picture made a lasting impact on my mind, as did other adventure stories such as the Swiss Family Robinson, and Robinson Crusoe. They filled one with a desire to sail away and see the world.

The "reader", by the way, is the reason why in the 1930's, it was rare to find a child who was not a competent reader, and the children of that era had a much better command of the Queen's English than their counter-parts in the 1990's.

From school in a country town like Murtoa to a life at sea would still seem far from probable, but events and people took me down, what in retrospect, seems like a path of inevitability. The prospect of a long war loomed over every young man's head, so it seemed certain that in 1939 a lad of 14 would be enlisting before long.

In 1940, if ever there was anyone in Australia who could inspire the citizens to fight for King and Country, it was George Holland, later knighted Sir George, State President of the Victorian R.S.L., and then for many years till his tragic death, National RSL President.

George Holland came to Murtoa on a fund raising and recruiting drive after the fall of France in 1940, when things looked grim. After a rousing speech he called for war loan subscriptions and

donations. There was the usual silence which follows when a hall full of people are asked for money, and after such a stirring appeal, I was embarrassed that no one in my town had made a move. I had recently won a ten shilling prize for the best Anzac Day essay at school, so up I got and shouted out that my 10/- was on the line. There were murmurs of "good show", and "well done", etc., and the donations started flowing. 10/- was a lot of money in 1940, probably worth $100 in the 1990's, so there was something of an after-shock at having given away my valued prize money. However I was proud to have shown the town's people that I was prepared to do my duty by my country.

After the war, as an active young office-bearer in the Returned Sailors, Soldiers, and Airman's Imperial League of Australia, now known as the R.S.L., I was privileged to get to know Sir George very well, and acted as one of the two ushers in St. Paul's Cathedral who looked after the seating of the official mourners on the occasion of his untimely death.

My father would have wished that his eldest son would follow him into the ministry, as he was the Lutheran Pastor of the parish of Murtoa and Kewell. Seminary studies did not appeal to me and a degree of stubborn independence saw me off to Horsham High School where the pupils of Murtoa carried on to do Leaving Certificate and Leaving Honours, now years 11 and 12.

Boarding with a room-mate, Neil Harcourt who hailed from Jeparit, led to many escapades and a life long friendship. Neil was senior to me by a year, joining the Shell Co at the Horsham depot as a junior clerk, in which position I followed when he was transferred to Melbourne office.

I did my first stint at the Horsham depot, learning all the ropes under the depot Superintendent Bob Hutchinson. Bob was an amazing character, known through-out the Wimmera District. He was an original Anzac, landing at Gallipoli with the 8th Battalion on the morning of the first Anzac Day. Although he claimed to have had only a very limited bush school education, he was a brilliant man who was never stumped by a problem. His kind and fatherly advice was important in my growing years. Eventually, I was transferred to the Melbourne office of the Shell Company, and stayed in the home of my grand-father, the Rev. Dr. A.E.R. Brauer.

The Royal Australian Navy's recruiting office was not far from the Shell office where I worked, so the next step along this seemingly inevitable path was comparatively easy. The Navy recruited lads before they turned 18. It seemed certain that the war still had a long way to go, so I presented at the Olderfleet Buildings in Collins Street to join up.

Sailors like to think that the Navy recruited the pick of the population as they required only a few thousand men compared with the hundreds of thousands required by the Army and Air Force. There was another theory that the examining doctor tapped you on the head, checked your back, and said, "you've got a weak head and a strong back, we will make a good sailor out of you."

In any case there were no obstacles going through the system, and I was sworn in just before my 18th birthday, which made me an Ordinary Seaman, Second Class. After call up, although I had turned 18 by then, and was Ordinary Seaman, with-out the Second Class bit, I was still paid the Second Class Rate of pay until the records caught up, a pretty lousy trick we thought.

Joining the Navy produced an interesting facet of life in football crazy Melbourne. As a big, rather aggressive youngster, I had done well on the football field at Horsham, and a Melbourne Football Club scout who had seen me play at Horsham introduced me into that famous club, for which I had barracked ever since a toddler. For those not familiar with football crazed Melbourne and its love affair with its own code of Australian Rules Football, it would be difficult to convey the thrill of a young lad as he ran out on to the ground for practice matches and training with famous names like Norm Smith, Don Cordner and Percy Beames. I performed quite well in the autumn practice games, but when the Navy indicated my likely acceptance I reported to the Club President after training one night at the Albert Ground, to announce my enlistment. President J. C. (Joe) Blair was a famous sportsman in Melbourne, and Victorian manager of Vacuum Oil Company. He had taken me under his wing, presumably thinking I had some potential. On hearing the news of my impending departure he expressed his disappointment with the comment that anybody can go and join the Navy, but not many young fellows can play football for the Melbourne Football Club. Whether I would have succeeded as a Melbourne footballer will never be known, for from now on the Navy dominated my life. The call up to report for duty came in a few days.

LICKED INTO SHAPE

There cannot be anything more miserable than a winter's day in Melbourne when the wind, rain and sleet howls in from the south west, except perhaps the same weather at Flinders Naval Depot.

A motley group of Australian manhood, or more fittingly, boyhood, assembled at the Olderfleet Building in Collins Street, Melbourne, on this dreary day in early June, 1943, and after the usual checks were made, and innumerable periods of "wait and see", they assembled outside in the street, and marched down to Spencer Street railway station to catch a train to their first port of call, H.M.A.S. CERBERUS. Did they march? Hardly, they straggled along in a most un-naval like manner. Their civilian clothes meant that they could be disowned by the chaps in charge, and so avoid embarrassment to the Navy. In the 1940's there were still steam trains running which went beyond the electrified system which took commuters only as far as Frankston. This train steamed into a station in the grounds of Flinders Naval Depot. Alighting just on dusk was not exactly encouraging, because it seemed that half the establishment was there, keeping up a continuous cacophony of sound with shouts of "you'll be sorry", and other expressions of welcome. This was the traditional greeting for land-lubbers by those who considered themselves "old salts", although they had probably been in the Navy for only a few weeks themselves.

Standing in the open we were windswept, cold, and hungry, without apparent direction. Names were called, classes and mess decks allocated, and by some hidden miracle of organization a group of us were shepherded into a building containing a mess deck which was to be our home. Hammocks were provided and we were shown how to rig them and climb into them. Strangely enough, probably because of the cold, and overwhelmed by the events of the day, I slept the sleep of the just in these unfamiliar surroundings and unusual form of bed.

The first full day in His Majesty's Royal Australian Navy dawned. After showers and breakfast, which from now on we called scran, the Navy term for all food, we got to know the man who would teach us how to be professional sailors. He was a Petty Officer whose rating was not yet confirmed, so he still wore "round rig", the normal attire of a seaman, but he wore on his sleeve a red long service stripe and the insignia which told us he was someone to be obeyed. We learnt he was Petty Officer Fosdick, and the correct form in which to address him was "chief". We soon found out the title "Sir" was to apply to those people who were officers.

Officers came in two categories, the competent leaders whose authority was born out of respect, and those who were "Act of Parliament Gentlemen", a term to describe the ambitious and pompous types who used petty rules and regulations to make raw recruits' life a misery. On commissioning as an officer they assumed airs which they could never acquire in real life. The Navy had too many of the latter types. What we sometimes thought to be petty and childish punishments were explained as necessary to instil in us a keen and immediate response to orders, and to toughen us up for the hard times ahead.

Fortunately for us, "Chiefie" Fosdick was a quietly spoken Petty Officer who ruled by reason and common sense. He rapidly gained the respect of all. He had been through the mill, serving in H.M.A.S. Swan during the Darwin air raids, and subsequent operations which were vital to Australia's security. At that stage of the war in 1942, the Arafura Sea, Eastern Australian and New Guinea waters were threatened, and the Japanese offensive was at its height. It was a case of limited resources holding the fort in the face of a superior and aggressive enemy. That the Navy held on was largely due to men like Chiefie Fosdick.

Our first few days were spent in getting kitted out with uniforms and gear, or lining up for injections. It was rather ironic for me to be in a line getting a needle from Lt. Surgeon Ted Cordner. We recognized each other by virtue of training with the Melbourne Football Club. Ted was a member of the famous Cordner family who rendered such sterling service to the Melbourne Football Club and Australian Rules generally. You can get a good debate going any time amongst old Demon fans as to who was the greatest, Ted, or his brothers Don or Dennis.

Eventually we were dressed and kitted out to look like sailors, so now training could commence in earnest. Much of the training programme has long since become an un co-ordinated

blur, but there are many highlights which linger in the memory, including names and faces. Friendships were formed but most did not continue, mainly because we came from many different parts of Australia, and at the conclusion of training we were dispersed, one by one, to ships and depots all over the world. With two exceptions I never saw again any classmates. Max (Spider) Webb and Peter Mayer are the only two from our class who feature again in this story.

The name of our new home causes some confusion amongst land-lubbers, who hear constant reference to Flinders Naval Depot and H.M.A.S. Cerberus. The two names came about in this manner. Western Port had long been considered as a future naval base, and after years of reports and planning, Flinders Naval Base was officially opened on 1st September, 1920. In 1921 there was some re-thinking, and it was decided that what had been intended as a naval base would now be dedicated to training only, and the name was changed to Flinders Naval Depot, and as a unit of the Royal Australian Navy the depot was officially commissioned as H.M.A.S. Cerberus on 1st April, 1921.

Flinders Naval Depot, (F.N.D.) provided for us a totally new world. Those with a sense of history were awed by the buildings, objects, and names of people that had already become part of Australia's history. One which captivated my attention was a large scroll over the stage in the drill hall which read, "It is upon the Navy, that under the providence of God, the wealth, prosperity and peace of the Nation, do chiefly depend." Stirring stuff, and I, as an impressionable youngster was proud to be in a Service with such great responsibilities, but it made one aware that under no circumstances could any of us let the side down.

All of us were subjected to a set of rules and regulations not previously known in family and civilian life. We were subject to a rigid lights out rule at night, told when to smoke or not to smoke. The parade ground was sacrosanct and could not be crossed before 1600 hours, (4 pm), gambling in any form was contrary to Kings Regulations and Instructions. There was even a rigid procedure for getting paid, which involved stepping smartly to the Paymaster's table when your name was called, placing your cap uppermost on the table, reciting your Ships Book number, upon which your pay was placed on top of your cap. In retrospect one can see the value of instinctive reaction to any given command or situation, for the time came when a rapid and correct response could determine whether you were alive or dead, and it was not only your reaction that counted, but the correct reactions of many men around you acting in unison.

Boat drill was a daily early morning exercise. Whalers and gigs were tied up at the wharf and we would be detailed to man a boat, climb down into it and row furiously out to markers and back, racing the others who were doing the same. We dreaded being allotted to the pinnace which took, from memory, 16 men to move it, hauling away at oars that must have weighed a ton. After rowing the course at full speed, one's arms were numb and cramped. No doubt the strenuous physical effort had two benefits, it kept us fit and warmed us up on the chilly windswept mornings. But after leaving Flinders, I never rowed another boat. Although there were still some non-powered boats in existence, the trend to power had well and truly taken over. Actually, H.M.A.S. Shropshire was equipped with a pinnace which came to a sad, if not humorous end at Aitape in New Guinea, a story that appears in a subsequent chapter. Later we were impressed by the methods of the United States 7th Fleet with their abundance of power driven machinery. We came to the conclusion that in the total absence of rowing boats our American friends would not know what an oar looked like.

The Navy School Master, rank of Lieutenant, taught us about Navy traditions and heritage. We spent only half a day with this officer, not exactly the most important part of our training for the following reasons. History at school had always held for me a special satisfaction, so it was surprising to be told that Lord Nelson was not the sort of officer on which the Navy was modelled. He had been immoral, too independent, and disobeyed orders. Years later, research into the life of Nelson verified that this was technically true. The affair with Lady Hamilton, his actions at Copenhagen and the Nile were hardly conforming to Admiralty instructions. What we were hearing was the official bureaucratic line taken by many in the Admiralty in London in the early 1800's, where the great Nelson was seen as a threat to status and influence. How much of this lecture was the official line of the Navy, or the instructors personal viewpoints one will never know, but it seems that the official Admiralty view of Nelson had prevailed over the centuries. Needless to say, authoritative modern commentaries on Nelson show that his officers, and men of all ranks who served under him had a very different view to the Admiralty. His brilliant victories confirmed that his

independent mind constantly out shone the mediocrity of the bureaucrats, and his humane reforms of some of the brutal practices endeared him to the seamen who manned his ships

Learning about knots, bends, and hitches was to me a bore. You don't fight Japs with bits of rope.

By contrast with other departments at F.N.D. the Gunnery School was fascinating. It is appropriate to mention here an important factor relevant to the Australia of the 1990's. The Gunnery School's motto is Si Vis Pacem Para Bellum, which translated is, "If You Desire Peace, Prepare for War." The neglect of Australian offensive capabilities, which in the long term gives a nation the ability to protect itself, has been a crying shame over many decades. The percentage of national revenue we spend on our security is pathetic. We do not train our youth to think in terms of national defence responsibility. The Gunnery School motto could well be drilled into every member of the nation from the Defence Ministers down.

The roll of officers who have been in charge of the Gunnery School is a fascinating list of names around which is woven the history and traditions of the Royal Australian Navy; Burnett, Dowling, Collins, Buchanan, Armstrong, Bracegirdle, Becher, to name only a few of a very distinguished list.

The Gunnery School taught us about the mechanisms of Enfield 303 rifles, Vickers and Lewis machine guns, which were long since out of date, and totally inadequate for modern warfare. Never-the-less they were weapons which could fire missiles, and on the firing range I seemed to do quite well. The most interesting and testing experience was the night visual exercises. We sat in a totally darkened room gazing at a shelf or bench top, on which there were models of various kinds of warships, seen dimly in the gloom. Then simulating night battle conditions, lights flashed on and off, amidst much clattering and banging, during which the Gunner's Mate Instructor moved the models, and then, still sitting in the gloom, we were required to nominate which ships were shifted and their new positions. By good luck or good management I appeared to nominate the moves correctly and really enjoyed this exercise. Who knows whether this little achievement had any influence on my posting to Shropshire and the job of manning the Port Evershead Bearing Indicator on the Compass Platform where we were the eyes and ears of the Captain. Years later, about 1984, a friend in the form of Cmdr. L.G.Wilson, Director of Supply at F.N.D. took me through his favourite hobby, the old Torpedo School which he had turned into a Naval Museum. The old Gunnery School records were there and I found my old class records, and noted with interest that all members had received a "P" for Pass against their names, with two names noted as "E". I think I can be excused a little boasting if I report that one of the "E's" was against my name.

Grenade throwing practice during the gunnery course produced one of the few dangerous incidents we experienced at F.N.D. The class was duly instructed in what a grenade looked like, how it operated and the technique of throwing one. In bushland adjoining F.N.D. there had been erected a palisade of gum tree saplings, about chest high, and our objective was to throw the grenade over the palisade where it would explode. Our class had a number of interesting characters, including Ernie, (not his real name), who knew everything and had to be first to show his new found knowledge. Ernie was the first to volunteer to throw a grenade. He stepped up to the palisade, adopted the correct stance, withdrew the pin which triggers off the mechanism, allowing five seconds before the explosion. At that instant he froze, the instructor yelled to throw it, and Ernie, instead of a good over-arm throw, lobbed it in a gentle underarm arc in the direction of the palisade. It landed on the top rail, teetered for a moment whilst we all stood open-mouthed wondering what to do, if anything, and then it fell over to the other the side where it exploded. Needless to say, Ernie was not asked to throw any more grenades.

I doubt if any of us really thought that in the Navy we would be throwing hand grenades at enemy ships or aircraft. What we did learn though was a healthy respect for weapons and high explosives, and that we would have to have our wits about us if we were to handle them safely and efficiently.

Generally the food was substantial, balanced, and supplies adequate to feed virile growing young men. In those days before cafeteria style messing, each class nominated 2 mess cooks from amongst their numbers, whose job it was to report to the galley each meal time, carry dixies of food

to their mess deck, and supervise the serving to the class members. Although the food we consumed was of a good standard for bulk cooking in wartime, there was always those who would have difficulty in adapting from "mother's cooking". And there was always the fussy eater who regardless of quality or taste, would not touch a particular dish. I learnt an important lesson one cold bitter weekend when half the class was on leave in Melbourne, and I was the mess cook. Sunday evening scran was a dixie of tripe and onions. Greeted with derision by most of the class who had never tried tripe and onions, I told them that they had "Hobson's choice", take it or leave it, but I needed sustenance to keep me going, so I hopped into it. Those who overcame their prejudices for tripe and onions had a magnificent feast at the expense of the others.

The Navy was very traditional in its attitude to the spiritual life of all who served, and woe betide the man who dodged Sunday morning Divisions. Everyone lined up by Divisions on the parade ground, was inspected as though Royalty was present, and then marched off to the huge drill hall for Divine Service. Compulsory church attendance is a contentious issue today, and long since abandoned. The argument that you can't force Christian beliefs on reluctant individuals has prevailed. But looking at today's apostate world, the decline in moral standards, and the spiritual fibre of the nation, one must wonder whether the old Royal Australian Navy did not have a point. The traditional life and practice of the old Navy proved to be a sound bulwark when wartime stresses and trials threatened to unbalance even the toughest of men. The strength of the wartime Navy became evident when serving under men such as the brilliant, and it could well be said, "sainted", Captain Godfrey Nichols in H.M.A.S. Shropshire about whom we will hear much as our story unfolds. Today, everyone has to be "counselled" to help them over difficulties, or even minor mishaps.

The weeks sped by and we were increasingly intrigued by our fate after we were "passed out". We were sure of passing out if only for no other reason than the Navy needed sailors, whether they proved tops in class or dunces. There would be a place for all of us, in a depot, on a harbour boom defence, or at sea in a warship. As we learnt about jobs on boom defences, I came to dread such a draft, I did not join up to do slogging manual work in some dull, hot and sweaty tropical depot or port. To go to some safe, mundane job would be a frightful let-down, I had set my heart on sailing the Seven Seas.

Navy policy in that era was to rush selected people through an Officers Training School, the first requirement being that one had passed secondary school qualifications of Intermediate or Leaving Certificate. I was selected to appear before a Board for examination. Many years later, on receipt of my Service Records, I noticed the remark "not recommended for accelerated promotion." The night before the examination we had celebrated our coming of age in the Navy with a long boisterous visit to Murphies, or Murph's canteen. Murphy's was barred to what was called the New Entry School, but as our training days were practically over, our presence in the canteen was accepted, if not entirely legal. The result was an appearance next morning before three stern looking officers who comprised the Examining Board, and me with a very thick dull head. The first few questions were negotiated without much trouble, then came the curly one. A chart of an estuary was produced with two prominent landmarks, a church steeple and a tower or lighthouse. Question - you are navigating a ship up the estuary which is covered in fog, but you can see the tower and steeple in the distance. How do you determine your position in the estuary? I ran into the proverbial brick wall, stumped and without a clue. Result failure. A few hours later I worked out the answer which to anyone with a basic knowledge of geometry or trigonometry was not all that difficult, but any possibility of a career as a Naval officer was dashed.

The irony is that success would have made it unlikely that I would have ever served in H.M.A.S. Shropshire, and that I would never have experienced the remarkable adventure of seeing a part of Australian Naval history unfold before my eyes.

The draft which would dispatch me to Shropshire would soon take place.

UNCERTAIN AND WAITING

Where would the Navy send us ?

The tempo of instruction slowed down, the rules were not quite so restrictive, or pursued with such intensity, and our minds turned to thinking of drafts which would take us to the four corners of the world. We said farewell to those who were first away, in some cases to the most uninviting places like the Darwin harbour boom, or other depot jobs equally less glamorous. The two goodbyes which were of the most importance to me were Max (Spider) Webb, and Peter Mayer, who had been kindred spirits during our training. Fortunately the goodbyes were of a temporary nature, for I was to catch up with Peter later when we were drafted together to Shropshire, and Max insisted on my taking his family phone number to call if I ever got to Sydney. This was done despite a feeling of doubt; who phones people you do not know, particularly when they are hundreds of miles away ? It was a bit like today when so many people tell you that they will call you back, but nobody ever does. However, this case proved different, the Webb family was to play an important part in my life during the next few years.

Service records show that I left H.M.A.S. Cerberus on 12th October, and proceeded to H.M.A.S. Lonsdale, the Navy depot at Port Melbourne. Two interesting assignments took place before being sent on my way. The intervening weeks were relaxed and pleasant.

Wartime conditions at H.M.A.S. Lonsdale were over-crowded and chaotic. Large numbers of people were on the move to all parts of the globe, where-ever the R.A.N. had ships or establishments. In the confusion it was not hard to skulk in some place out of the way from the prying eyes of authority. To keep us occupied, all sorts of jobs were invented, or existing ones extended to occupy more bodies. Parties of us would be sent to Station or Princes Piers to handle the mooring lines of incoming ships. Security on Defence Department establishments was important so armed with rifle and bayonet we patrolled the Port Melbourne streets around the Naval Depot all night long. During these long, cold night vigils, I never saw anybody who even faintly resembled an enemy, or looked like causing mischief to His Majesty's property. We jokingly concluded that, in those deserted blacked-out streets, our rifles and bayonets were to protect us from the "ladies of the night", who from time to time made inviting suggestions which we politely refused on the grounds that we had more important duties to perform. Business in blacked out wartime Melbourne must have been poor, because even these encounters were few and far between.

Relief from boredom came in the form of a trip to Swan Island, which was the storage depot for naval mines. Swan Island is a few hundred yards off the Queenscliff beach in Port Phillip Bay, connected by a jetty carrying a narrow tram line which conveyed the mines to the railway siding. The rail lines ran parallel to the beach. A mine-layer was loading mines at the Port of Geelong, and whilst trains were being loaded to transport the mines to Geelong, a job that would take some days, an armed guard was needed at night to protect the train. Naval mines are very dangerous and explosions caused by saboteurs, or for that matter, young vandals skylarking, was not the sort of thing that the Navy could tolerate. The danger was minimal as none of the mines would be primed, but discretion was the better part of valour.

I was in the party drafted to Swan Island, and found out that even in the grimmest of wars, or the dreariest of circumstances there are moments of hilarity.

Our first night on guard was windswept and dreary. We patrolled up and down the train alert for saboteurs who might do great harm to the war effort. Surprise! Surprise! nothing happened. By the second night, the Leading Seaman in charge agreed that we should have a 44 gallon drum from the railway yard stacked with burning wood to act as a brazier to keep us warm. A few bottles of Melbourne Bitter from a Queenscliff pub would also help to while away the hours, plus the usual supply of smokes in between marching up and down the train. On one patrol, about 11:00 pm., in the pitch dark, windswept and cold, I looked out across the spinifex to the beach about a 100 yards away, and was sure I saw something move. Then there were noises that had to be investigated. Quietly I unslung my rifle, then crept through the spinifex in the direction of the noise, stopping every few feet, now tense and alert. After about 10 paces or so, there was a noisy upheaval in front, as cows that had been lying in the grass got up in a hurry and stampeded off. The incident was discussed around the fire for some time and helped to pass the night.

Next night, again pitch black and dreary, about the same hour as the previous night, noises drifted up from the direction of the shoreline. I said to my companion, "its those bloody cows again, trying to frighten us." They were illegally there on government property and had no rights, so it was time for prompt seaman-like action. I started walking through the spinifex, called the proper warning, something like "ahoy there", in true seaman-like manner, rammed a round into the breach and cocked the rifle, ready to relieve the boredom and let fly with a shot. Imagine my surprise when a voice called out in panic, "Don't shoot mate." Then coming out of the scrub was a soldier from the Queenscliff Army Barracks with his girl friend. We soothed their ruffled and embarrassed nerves with a beer around the fire, wondering if a bullet had gone through the soldiers buttocks, would he have been reported as wounded in action.

The train with its deadly cargo soon completed its loading and chugged off to Geelong to the waiting mine-layer, so back we went to H.M.A.S. Lonsdale.

During the next few days there occurred an incident which may or may not have effected my future. I can only speculate and say that strange things happen in life, and how the most unexpected and unrelated events interact with each other.

An armed guard, complete with rifle, whitened belt and gaiters was always mounted in the main entrance at the foot of the steps leading up to the Administrative Block at H.M.A.S. Lonsdale. Without getting any specific instructions, I got this job one day, standing there trying not to look too untidy, keeping the entrance clear. Whilst on guard one saw a constant stream of bodies coming and going, seamen, signallers, writers, officers and groups of people lounging about waiting for orders. Now and then a car pulled up, depositing visitors, both Naval and civilian, obviously intent on some business to do with the Navy. I noticed one car pull up and the alighting passenger bore the unmistakable visage of the much publicised and photographed Captain John Collins. Later I learned that Collins had been to Melbourne on a quick trip from Sydney where H.M.A.S. Shropshire had arrived, prior to sailing north to join the fleet. Shropshire was a gift from the British Government to replace H.M.A.S. Canberra which was lost in the Solomon Islands campaign. Flinders Naval Depot training must have stood me in good stead. I remembered that Naval officers above Lieut. Commander were entitled to a Present Arms. Quick as a flash I seized my rifle, and by the time Collins was about to pass me on the way upstairs I had come to the smartest "Present Arms" you ever saw. In the crowd of bodies milling around I was the only one who had recognized him and he threw a split second glance of appreciation as he acknowledged my salute and hurried on.

Is it too much to believe any connection between this fleeting incident and my draft to Shropshire a week or two later? Collins was a meticulous and dominating figure in the R.A.N. and he was more than well known for demanding the people who he had serving under him. One could well imagine him on a never ending lookout for people he thought may serve him and his ships well, no matter how lowly they might be in the Navy pecking order. It may be egotistical to suggest he did anything to get me drafted to Shropshire, nevertheless, the fact is that in a short time I was not only aboard Shropshire, but was a watch-keeper manning the Port Evershead Bearing Indicator on the Compass Platform, and along with 5 other members of the lookout teams, the eyes and ears of the great Captain Collins.

But before the draft to Shropshire became effective, there came about one of those delightful episodes that make life, even wartime navy life worthwhile, even though it was not the Navy's intention. The Mess Deck Chief Petty Officer cornered me and one other seaman one morning, and before long we were off to Port War Signal Station which was at Fort Nepean, at the extreme end of Point Nepean, overlooking Port Phillip Heads. The Army manned the 9.2 inch guns, and the Navy signal station challenged all approaching vessels by signal, from a concrete block house high above the beach and sand dunes.

Navy staff consisted of a Lieutenant in command, a signals Petty officer, several signallers and a team of W.R.A.N. Signallers who lived in the Australian Women's Army Service (A.W.A.S.) Barracks at the fort. The male staff lived in an old farm house not far from the signalling bridge. The visiting seamen were given two jobs, firstly to keep the quarters clean, prepare some meals, and keep the garden tidy. The Lieutenant in Charge was a delightful elderly Navy Reserve officer, who was concerned for the morale of the WRANS in his care because they lived under restrictive Army domestic rules. Point Nepean was also the Australian Quarantine Station, therefore totally restricted,

which made for a lonely existence without any social life or entertainment. Our worthy Lieutenant thought it a good idea if the visiting sailors could take off duty WRANS into Sorrento to the pictures, dances, or the pub. I immediately teamed up with WRAN Davies, who like myself, was country born and bred, and one of those personalities who stayed vividly in my memory during a long wartime correspondence. Our friendship blossomed such that our Lieutenant jokingly referred to us as his budgerigars.

At Point Nepean I nearly came to grief before I saw the enemy. Because we did not have many onerous duties to perform we made lobster pots out of the abundant tea tree. The pots were duly sunk in water holes in the reef off shore, hoping for a big catch. Before sunset one evening, we gathered our WRAN friends, and went to retrieve the pots, hoping for a beach picnic on fresh boiled lobster. The tide was coming in, and when I reached the hole with a pot in it, probably 50 or 60 yards from the shore, I was caught unexpectedly by a huge wave which knocked me into the hole, bouncing around with the swell, cut and bruised. Fortunately, the bloke who had followed me out on the reef was standing up behind me while I was kneeling, about to scoop up the lobster laden pot. He saw the wave coming and had thrown himself flat on the rocks. He was able to reach out and grab me by the shoulder, steadied me and then hauled away to get me out, before the next big wave arrived. He grabbed the pots and retreated to the beach, where we cooked lobsters in a drum of sea water over a brush fire. I have never tasted anything so delicious.

The Signal Bridge received a call that Ordinary Seaman Mattiske was to report back to H.M.A.S. Lonsdale for draft to H.M.A.S. Shropshire. This caused quite some excitement. Shropshire had received some publicity due to the unusual and tragic manner in which Australia had acquired her, and it was considered something of an honour to get a draft to a ship which was expected to play an important role in the remainder of the war. The call had come in the late afternoon, and I was to catch a bus to Melbourne early next day, so first thought was to say goodbye to my new found WRAN friends. After much delay on the phone talking to Joan Davies, I was informed that she could not get permission to leave the barracks from the Army Madam in charge of their quarters. Our helpful Lieutenant was on the bridge at the time and could see that something was amiss. On being informed of the trouble, he grabbed the phone, called the Army Madam in charge, and briskly announced, “Tell WRAN Davies to report to the bridge immediately.” On arrival, we were told to now get on our way. Perhaps this was a good lesson that even in the wartime Navy, “love will find a way”.

Next morning I was on the bus to a new adventure.

Strangely enough, my excursions to Swan Island and Point Nepean are not recorded on the Navy Service Record, but Swan Island appears on the Medical History Sheet, only proving that the Navy could miss things and was human after all.

FIND THE SHROPSHIRE

It was only natural that there would be some pangs of regret at leaving the rather idyllic atmosphere of Point Nepean. Port War Signal Station was efficient and in very competent hands, but being a long way from the Naval hierarchy it was not run on petty strict lines. The presence of the WRANS added a homely and relaxed touch. Any pangs were soon dispelled by the need to concentrate on getting one's gear ready for the journey that lay ahead. Once we started out it would be too late to retrieve any forgotten things, so it was check seabag and all its contents, lash up hammock, and make sure wallet, money and personal things were in order.

I had never seen a County Class cruiser before and had only a very hazy idea what she would look like. Shropshire had been given to the Royal Australian Navy as replacement for H.M.A.S. Canberra, after Canberra was sunk in the Solomon's campaign in August 1942. (see appendix 1) The R.A.N. suffered heavy losses in the first three years of the war, and in fact now had only one fighting cruiser left after H.M.A.S. Hobart was torpedoed. It did not take many brains to conclude that Britain's gift of Shropshire to the R.A.N. was to rebuild fighting capability. Shropshire was not going to spend many idle days in some port. This was already beginning to sink in as we packed at the depot before we were transported to Spencer Street railway station. Rather than cause any anxiety, this gave one a feeling of excitement, somewhere out there a great adventure was shaping up.

Spencer Street Station was its usual bustling wartime self with a troop train filling up with hundreds of swaddies, the Navy nick name for soldiers, and Air Force personnel. Amongst the confusion and milling hundreds there were four sailors, a Leading Stoker, a Corporal Bandsman, and two seamen, Peter Mayer a former class-mate and myself. Because we were such a small party, we thought that we were different. Perhaps even at this stage of a very modest Naval career, there was a tendency to take pride in the fact that we were the "Senior Service". If that feeling was unfair, elitist, or even snobbish, there was a reciprocal attitude from the authorities on the train. We got the impression that our little party was seen as an added burden, or hindrance, to the problem of getting all those Army bodies organized. Throughout the journey north, which eventually took six or seven days, we remained a largely ignored, tiny enclave in a sea of khaki, which tended to draw us closer together for mutual support.

The troop train departed Spencer Street about 6 pm, arriving at Sydney Central Station some fourteen hours later. A Naval Rail Transport Officer, (R.T.O.) questioned us on our destination, obviously perplexed by our presence, and on being told we were draft for H.M.A.S. Shropshire, we were told to wait and see, words that were to become very familiar during the remainder of the long journey. Shropshire's where-abouts must have been one of the war's best kept secrets. In the absence of specific information, we were ordered onto a waiting train to Newcastle, where some hours later, we went through exactly the same routine. This time orders were to stay on this train until we reached Brisbane. Next day at Brisbane we got a repeat of the same message, and as there was no waiting train going north, a Navy truck took us and our gear to the depot, H.M.A.S. Moreton.

Two days confined in Moreton Depot was a dreary time, no leave was allowed to see the sights. I recall being bored stiff, gazing all the weekend across the river at what I presumed were botanical gardens. The depot was practically deserted, every-body had gone "ashore". So we were glad to be off to Townsville to try our luck there. But guess what, no Shropshire at Townsville, but we were allowed to wander around the town. The pubs were closed. They claimed that the shortage of beer meant that they could open for restricted hours only. The place was full of Australian Army and Yanks. Not much doing for a small party of non-local Navy men.

On the second morning after arrival in Townsville we were awakened about 4:00 am. We were sleeping in an overcrowded hut, bodies on benches, tables, or the floor. A messenger stumbled through and over the sleeping bodies, flashing a torch into faces, trying to find the party for Shropshire. Our first instruction was that we could not take all our gear, only a ditty bag with toiletries, razor, soap, etc, a change of clothes, which by now was tropical gear of shorts and shirt, and spare under-clothes. Our sea-bags with all our gear would follow by ship. We would be flying to Milne Bay and there was no room for excess baggage. A truck took us through the blacked out city to Garbutt Airfield, and eventually to an aircraft parking bay and a D.C.3. aircraft. The human cargo consisted of a bunch of American soldiers who, by comparison to our restricted gear, were

carrying huge kitbags and weapons. Some R.A.A.F. officers, plus we four sailors with our totally inadequate ditty bags made up the load.

D.C.3's operating as transport aircraft had for seating arrangements bench seats along the fuselage, and human cargo was jokingly referred to as sitting "side saddle". Our gear with all the American equipment was in a great pile in the middle of the aircraft. By the sound of the engines we were almost ready to take off. Then the door to the pilots compartment pushed open, a head jutted out which yelled some epithets at the soldiers to the effect that all that gear and weight in the centre is dangerous and the load should be more evenly distributed. A few soldiers kicked some kit bags aft and some forward, so the pilot said "O.K. let's go." A fascinating scientific loading and weight distribution exercise, not exactly designed to give first time flyers like me any confidence.

Milne Bay did not come across as a very wholesome destination. In Melbourne I had befriended some Queensland soldiers who were recovering from the Milne Bay campaign, fought when the Japs had very nearly succeeded in capturing the place. This was an historic battle, in that it was the first time the Japanese Imperial Army had suffered a defeat. The fighting had been savage, casualties high, and malaria had taken a terrible toll of our troops. Milne Bay had the distinction of being the worst malaria area in the world, so the thought of flying in there provoked some trepidation as well as excitement.

This feeling was not helped by a fierce tropical thunder storm we flew into 20 minutes out from Townsville. Through the murk and black clouds lightning flashed, thunder roared as we were buffeted about by wind and air pockets which we seemed to drop into like a stone, only to roar on again trying to climb. Looking out through the porthole I could see the starboard wing and engine in the murk. Vast quantities of rain were pouring off the wing cascading into space, but so was a steady stream of oil from the rear of the engine nacelle. Would the engine make it through the storm ? Should I tell my companions or would this alarm them, and start a panic ? I decided it was better to keep quiet and hope and pray.

After several hours we were out of the gloom, the engine was still roaring on, and we soon started to descend, changing course a few times for the run in, finally coming to a safe, if somewhat bumpy landing. Years later I mentioned this oil leaking incident to a friend who was well acquainted with D.C.3s and was told they were equipped with some sort of pressure relief valve which discharged surplus oil as a normal part of the engine's operation. Pity some-one had not thought to tell me this before take off and save me from a couple of hours of fear and trembling.

The first impression on alighting was the heat and humidity, the rank smell that emanates from the tropical jungle and rotting vegetation. The heat and humidity were to be our constant companions for the next few years. But we were fortunate in that on board ship we were far away from the rank jungle smells.

The next impression was that Americans, or certainly some of them, had a different attitude to following orders and procedures. We had had drilled into us that any order was to be obeyed at all times, regardless. As we were standing around wondering what to do, some official drove up in a jeep, waving papers at the pilot, informing him that his aircraft was now scheduled to fly further up the coast. The pilot burst forth with some un-complimentary language about the system, he had already exceeded his flying time, and would follow his original orders. If this D.C.3 was to fly off again on an un-scheduled flight, they could jolly well get somebody else to fly it. With that the pilot got into an empty jeep and drove off. I had doubts as to whether this would happen in our Navy, but admired the pilot's initiative and independence.

For our Shropshire party there was no welcoming committee, nobody knew what we should do. We asked some Yanks where was the Australian Navy depot. One guy said he was heading in the general direction of the coast, so we piled aboard his jeep. After a couple of miles along a bumpy track, the driver stopped, jumped out and proceeded to walk away. Hey! What do we do now? He said to just keep driving and leave the jeep when we were finished with it. Apparently the drill in Milne Bay was that you simply grabbed a vacant jeep when you needed it, and then left it there for the next bloke to come along.

So Leading Stoker Doll got in the driver's seat, worked out the gears, and off we went, finding H.M.A.S. Ladava after many false turns and enquiries.

By the time we arrived at H.M.A.S. Ladava we were acutely aware that we looked very different to the Army and Air Force people. Everyone was a brownish yellow colour due to the anti-malarial atabrine which was taken daily, and supposed to provide immunity from the bite of the anopheles mosquito. Because of the extremely high incidence of malaria, there were strict rules about taking atabrine every day, with appropriate punishment for disobeying instructions. The drain on manpower due to malaria casualties had been horrendous, so rules were necessary. These rules made compulsory a daily dose of atabrine, also the wearing of long trousers and long sleeved shirts, but there we were in our mainland regulation shorts and short sleeved shirts. We waited with baited breath for our first brush with authority.

Reception at H.M.A.S. Ladava was not cordial. We were standing at the foot of steps leading up to a verandah which surrounds the administrative block and were told to wait by a Writer from the office. An Officer Bloke came out and on sight of us he nearly had an apoplectic fit. We heard the same story that had been repeated from Sydney to Townsville. He did not know about a draft for Shropshire; he did not know where Shropshire was, there was no place for us to feed or sleep, and why weren't we wearing long trousers and long sleeved shirts? Had we taken our atabrine, and why do idiots in Australia send him personnel who are going to add to his malaria case statistics ?

Having said all that, he told us that in the meantime, we would have to do something useful, like digging foundations for a new building down the roadway.

Then came one of those priceless moments that add fun and spice to Service life. Our Bandsman companion stepped forward and threw a salute. Not the smart naval salute, but the open palm salute used by the Army, Marines and Bandsmen. The Officer Bloke had another apoplectic fit. The conversation, give or take a word or two after many years went something like this.

O.B.	What's going on here ?
Bandsman.	I am a Corporal Bandsman.
O.B.	So what ?
Bandsman.	I play musical instruments, I can't damage my hands with manual labour.
O.B. (roaring)	While you are here under my command, you can bloody well play sweet music on a pick and shovel !

After some hard labour during the afternoon, the office Writer told us he had found a place for us to sleep. A truck took us into the hills about a mile to the north of the bay, to what was previously a planter's hut. It contained some bunks, no lights, water or mosquito netting, and nothing that could be described as modern comforts, although a balcony gave us a good view of the bay in the distance. After dark we were disturbed by distant sounds, and peering out in the direction of Milne Bay we saw red lines arcing up into the sky. This was one of the last raids by Japanese aircraft on Milne Bay, and although the tracer fire was some distance and we felt quite safe where we were, it brought home to us that this was a war zone, and people played for keeps. From now on the watch-word would be "keep alert".

The stay in Milne Bay was mercifully short. On the third morning we were digging away at the wet, muddy foundations, when the office Writer brought the message that Shropshire was in the bay. We dropped tools, collected the small amount of gear we had brought and made ready in record time. We bumped our way in a truck on the coast road along which the Japs had fought, and were eventually driven back, in their attempted invasion of Milne Bay, just over a year ago. We arrived at Gili Gili, and the makeshift wharf constructed from the S.S. Anshun, lying on her side where she capsized during the fighting. One of Shropshire's motor boats picked us up and a short cruise took us alongside this great grey monster. We mounted the Mediterranean ladder, (or gangway), where the Officer of the Watch and Corporal of the Gangway handed us over to Sub. Lieutenant (later Lieutenant) Hank Roberts. He showed us around the ship and gave us an introduction to the mess in which we will live, in my case the Foc'sle, and then took me to what was to be my action station. This signalled the break-up of our little party which had travelled some 3000 miles together. Because of the size of Shropshire and its large ship's company, I don't think I ever spoke again to Leading

Stoker Doll or the Bandsman. Life was concentrated around the men in your mess deck and the gun turret which we were all responsible for manning.

From now on I became a foc'sleman, and although Peter Mayer was allotted to the maintop division, we remained friends, often meeting at Shropshire reunions long after the war.

A few men were off-duty in the foc'stle mess, and Sub-Lt Roberts told them I was a new arrival, but this did not seem to excite them. They said hello and how are you, and carried on with whatever they were doing. With the passage of time, and living so close together, I soon found they were the salt of the earth. There was Leading Seaman Albert Childs, Kay Grace, Ray (Scrub) Knuckey, Alan (Pop) Ramsay, Ben Roberts, Alec Perry, Alan (Dungey) Harris, John Ryan, Lionel Evans and Doug (Wacker) Payne. Wacker remained a good and close friend until his recent sad death. Bluey Childs, the leading hand in charge of our mess deck table, became a wonderful mentor and friend. He was quiet, reliable, confident in everything he did, and had the happy knack of getting people to do whatever he asked without any fuss or shouting of orders.

Sub. Lieut. Roberts escorted me down through the bowels of the ship to "A" Turret shell room, which was to be my first action station. As we descended down steel ladders and through hatches the compartments were getting smaller. Armoured doors had red or blue markings on them indicating they were locked tight under certain conditions or "degrees of readiness", governed by whether the ship was in any danger. The shell room, well below the water line, was entered through a steel hatch. It was a small compartment, virtually a steel box whose space was taken up entirely with a huge bin containing hundreds of eight inch calibre shells. There was barely room to stand or move around and it was stinking hot and smelt of hot hydraulic oil, which seemed to leak from various pipes and joints. This smell was to become part of our existence. It never left us, we never got used to it, and we never stopped whingeing about it. Along the bulkheads (sides) were steel conveyors onto which the shells were loaded on their way to the gunhouse. I soon learned that the small compartments and armoured doors and hatches were designed to limit explosions from enemy hits, and preserve the water tight integrity of the ship. It was designed very cleverly to help save the ship in an emergency, but cold comfort for the blokes who might be trapped below. It did not take long for a couple of old hands to comfort us with a reassuring thought about drowning, trapped in a locked compartment. Being in a shell room and the cordite magazine next door, if we were on the end of a direct hit the explosion meant that we would not know anything about it anyway, so no worries. This place did not impress me one bit.

I would have been even less impressed had I known Ted Trappett's story, which I heard from him years later. Ted was a survivor of H.M.A.S. Canberra and like so many other Canberra men was drafted to Shropshire. On the night of The Battle of Savo Island Ted's action station in Canberra was the forward cordite magazine, arguably the most dangerous place on the ship. Canberra was the first target of the Japanese column of cruisers sweeping past Savo Island and was struck by many flights of shells which knocked out the power system. One shell penetrated into the shell handling room above the magazine and miraculously did not explode, but its friction caused enough heat which generated a lot of smoke and sparks flew everywhere. In the confusion one Petty Officer ordered the magazine to be flooded. Ted and his mates were already in deep water when someone realised that the shell had not started a fire and ordered the magazine hatch opened. So Ted lived to fight another day and stayed with Shropshire throughout the Pacific war.

However, for me at this time there was better news to come. The shell room was to be my action station, but that was only when the guns were firing. When-ever Shropshire was at sea I was to be on the Bridge or Compass Platform as a lookout. I was taken up to the starboard wing of the Bridge and instructed in the art of reporting bearings, angles, and estimating distances. There was a strict procedure for making a report from your position to the Officer of the Watch on the Compass Platform. For example you called out your own position, "starboard lookout, Compass Platform." On acknowledgement from the Officer of the Watch, you gave a clear and precise description of your sighting. The Compass Platform was a slightly elevated position in the centre of the Bridge structure. Shropshire's Bridge, unlike many other warships, was not enclosed. This may at first appear to leave those manning the Bridge exposed to either the elements or the actions of an enemy, but it also had the advantage of giving the bridge staff, officers, seaman lookouts, signal staff and messengers, a clear all round view and greater mobility. (see appendix 2)

A lookout's job on the Bridge appeared to me to have interesting, if not exciting possibilities. It was from here that the ship was controlled. The thought of any danger did not enter my head, only the excitement of sailing off on an operation, and that could not come too soon. In fact it was not at all long in coming.

THE FIRST ANGRY SHOTS

Despite the lack of comfort, I slept soundly on my first night aboard Shropshire. If you imagine sailors sleeping in row upon row of hammocks as the picture books and films show, you are quite mistaken, at least as far as tropical service in Shropshire was concerned. After leaving Flinders Naval Depot I never once slept in a hammock. My hammock was back in Townsville, but in any case, the ship was far too hot to curl up in a hammock. Everybody had a favourite spot. Men slept on the mess deck tables, on all spare space on the deck, and on the padded bench seats along the tables. These benches were only about 12 - 15 inches wide, with no back. Believe it or not, you can soon learn to sleep like a top on a 12 inch padded bench, but at first, being a new chum, I rated only a spot on the deck.

At the crack of dawn all seamen mustered in the torpedo space by divisions, and after roll call, each division was sent off to wash down and scrub decks. As a foc'sle man I went with the rest of the division on to the foc'sle and wielded a scrubber while someone manned a hose and flooded the deck. The scrubbing done, its "hands to breakfast", which was followed by the ceremony at 0800 hrs. of raising the flag on the quarterdeck. The band paraded in full tropical uniform, the flags were raised and the National Anthem, God Save the King, was played, plus the National Anthems of other Allied ships in harbour. This means a rendition of "Star Spangled Banner" for United States warships were our constant companions. This ceremony took place every morning, but only in harbour as it was not practical when at sea. The start of the ceremony was signalled by the pipe over the loud speakers, "Attention on the upper deck, face aft." Like the flag ceremony at schools years ago, this would be treated with some scorn by many of the late 20th century's generation. Such people do not know what they are missing. It is quite impressive, dignified and it helps to bind people together in a common cause.

We mustered again by divisions and were allotted jobs all over the ship. I was sent off with a party to X turret flat. The term flat is applied to most spaces on the main deck which was the first deck below the upper deck. The steel round trunk of X turret traversed through this space and the old paintwork was to be stripped off with chipping hammers and scrapers. About 10 of us started into the job. The temperature and humidity were oppressive, sweat poured off us, the ventilation system was totally inadequate, and the clouds of paint dust were choking. The noise of everyone banging and scraping was deafening. There is nobody today who would work under these conditions for 5 minutes without calling a strike. But it was a necessary task. The sailor's life was a constant battle against rust, a very deadly enemy. No ship at sea can sustain its efficiency if rust eats into its vitals, and this applies even more so to warships, where fighting efficiency depended on making sure that every piece of equipment was clean, rust free and operating at peak capacity. We can be excused for making jokes about fighting the war with chipping hammers and scrapers, for cleaning and painting were an integral part of a sailors life, important, tedious, constant, and invariably back-breaking in cramped conditions.

In the tropics it was not feasible to work men for too long, so each afternoon there were some hours which are "make and mend", the time when sailors look after their personal things like laundering clothes, ironing and sewing. I had an additional task because the look-out teams were also upper deck sentries after "lights out". To understand how we worked it is necessary to explain the way the Navy organizes its watches, or shifts. The day is divided into 4 hour watches, but this means that if men are in 2 or 3 rotating teams they would always do the same watch, because there are an even number of watches each day, that is 6.

So there is an ancient navy system to make the number of watches an odd number by having two by two hour watches, from 1600 hrs. to 1800 hrs.(that is, from 4.00pm to 6.00pm), and from 1800 hrs to 2000 hrs. (6.00 pm to 8.00pm). These watches are called the First Dog watch and the Last Dog watch. The origin of the term "Dog watch" is obscure. One authority maintains it was originally called a "dodge" watch, which sounds reasonable, when considering its function.

Bridge look-outs, always on duty when at sea, were not required on the Bridge in harbour. But there had been cases where Japanese had paddled out to ships in a harbour in the dark hours and done nasty things like throwing hand grenades. So sentries were required on deck during the night. Our main duty though was to keep a look-out for other boats plying in the bay, and keep a general

watch, reporting anything unusual. Sentries were armed with a Lancaster sub-machine gun, a remarkable and very simple to operate weapon. During instruction on the simple mechanics of this weapon we were told they had been made in England very cheaply and quickly during the desperate days when a German invasion had been possible in 1940 - 41. Years later I learnt they were based on the design of the German Schmeiser machine pistol. Keeping watch on the foc'sle consisted mainly of sitting on the cable holders on the bow of the ship, which gave one a good view all around. I would patrol the port side from time to time, walking aft to about amidships, the rest of the time taken up smoking and talking to Macca, my opposite number who patrolled the starboard side.

After being aboard for only a few days I had settled in to the routine of shipboard life quite well. Our close environment with no possibility of outside activities or contacts was a good breeding ground for rumours. These rumours are called "the buzz". Some chaps must have speculated for hours using vivid imagination. One of the mysteries to which I never found a credible answer is that the "buzz" was invariably accurate or at least had some element of truth, even though it may have been about military planning or a top secret operation in the making. The "buzz" now was that we were soon to sail on a very big operation, an assault that would take us well into enemy territory. Imaginative minds speculated on our destination, further up the New Guinea coast, or New Britain. Rabaul, at the north east extremity of New Britain was a hot favourite, and a prospect mentioned with some concern. It was public knowledge, frequently mentioned in the war news, that the Japanese had built an enormous base at Rabaul, and its importance to Japanese strategy in the South West Pacific area was such that the Japanese would defend it at all costs. An attack on Rabaul was expected to be a costly affair.

Despite the gossip, there was no evidence of any tension. A "buzz" after all was still only gossip, so why worry about something that may or may not be about to happen. We did not have to wait long.

I was on a working party sent ashore to an ammunition dump at Milne Bay and we loaded 8 inch shells which, when conveyed back to Shropshire, stocked up the shell rooms to full capacity. An R.A.A.F. officer was noticed on board, and we soon found out he was to liaise with aircraft fighter control during the coming operation. On the day before Christmas, 24th December 1943, we started the preparations which take place before a cruiser puts to sea. Before 1600 hours (4.00pm) foc'slemen were on the foc'sle where the cable holders were winding in the anchor. As the anchor cable was hauled in, sailors were directing a stream of water at the anchor cable, hosing off the mud from the seabed. Huge bottle screws tightened the anchor into place for the voyage, and as we looked over the side, water was slowly passing along the bows, a sure sign that we were under way.

I did not have to participate in all this work, because while it was going on, the ship's loud speaker system called out, "Lookout team number (so and so) close up." To close up means to man your station. I climbed up through the superstructure to the Bridge, and was handed a pair of binoculars. Where I stood on the starboard side in the middle of the wing of the bridge, I commanded a magnificent view of the surroundings. I could see from almost dead ahead around in an arc of 180 degrees to the port quarter, almost dead astern. The lookout who manned the starboard Evershed Bearing Indicator on the Compass Platform was responsible for sightings from the bows to 90 degrees on the starboard beam, or side, and the Bridge lookout was responsible for the area 90 degrees starboard to astern. However, each lookout reported any important sighting regardless in what sector it occurred.

The Petty Officer who saw that I was settled properly on the job asked me what the strap on the binoculars was for and without waiting for an answer told me it was there to hang around my neck, and to keep it there.

The purpose of the strap was to prevent the binoculars from damage by dropping on the deck, or to keep it secure in my possession in case of any sudden or violent movement. Simply common sense. I still shudder every time I see somebody put binoculars to their eyes and leave the strap hanging in front of them. It seems to be the smart thing for most of the racing fraternity to raise their glasses in this way when watching a horse race, and even after all these years my Navy training makes me react with a shudder of annoyance at this careless practice.

As the ships of our force got under way, what I saw from my position on the Bridge was an awe inspiring sight. Sailing out of Milne Bay we were in restricted waters so all ships were in line ahead. Some of the escorting destroyers were ahead, then the cruisers Australia, Shropshire, and astern of Shropshire were the U.S.Ships's Phoenix and Nashville, with another line of destroyers in their wake. Phoenix and Nashville were 6 inch gun cruisers of the Brooklyn class, and were to be our constant companions for nearly two years. Designated officially Task Force 74, we were on our way, and the combined weight of our gunfire had the potential to deliver a powerful retributory blow to an enemy who had brought fear and death to the peoples of the Pacific region. We were tangible evidence of the growing power of Allied naval forces in the South West Pacific Area, and we were going on the attack. I had enlisted, gone through a tedious period of training, travelled all the way from Melbourne to New Guinea to experience this. The sight gave one a sense of power, confidence and excitement. There is a photograph of this line of warships and when I look at it I can still sniff the breeze, smell the salt air, and feel a sense of excitement and elation.

Once we were under way, Captain Collins announced we would be covering an assault on Cape Gloucester, New Britain, bombarding the area in preparation for an assault by the American 1st Marine Division on the morning of the 26th. Late on Christmas Day we passed a great array of landing ships and landing craft carrying the Marines. It was this Division that had performed so well in the bloody fighting at Guadacanal in August and September in 1942. Towards the day's end we were approaching Vitiaz Strait, nick named "bomb alley", because its narrow waters were an ideal place for aircraft to attack ships on their way through. Japanese air power was on the decline so the area did not have the aura of fear of some time ago. At the northern end of Vitiaz Strait there is a very prominent island called Rooke or in the native tongue, Umboi. Now I had never been in this part of the world before but later on when I saw it in clear daylight, the distinctive volcano like shape of Umboi seemed familiar. I then remembered it was the site of a Lutheran Mission station, and the home for many years of Pastor Harry Freund, who visited our home in Murtoa, Victoria, in 1937 or 38 on a lecture, fund raising tour, when he showed films of the place. Harry Freund was a remarkable character. Commander Eric Feldt, who set up the famous Coast Watchers organization before the outbreak of war, had recruited Harry because from the top of Umboi one had a 360 degree view for many miles. Umboi was situated roughly mid-way between the coasts of New Guineau and New Britain. It commanded a magnificent view of a very important strategic area. When the Japanese had over-run Rabaul, Harry played an important role in organizing the small boat convoys which rescued hundreds of Australian soldiers as they were pursued by the Japanese along the northern coast of New Britain. The Australians had tried to escape by trekking along the coast to Cape Gloucester, and anyone caught was brutally killed. The survivors of the Rabaul Force, the 2/22nd Infantry Battalion designated "Lark Force", claim to this day that they owe their lives to men like Harry Freund who plucked them from under the noses of the Japanese. Harry stayed on as a Coast Watcher behind Japanese lines for two years in the Finschaven and Sattelburg areas, reporting shipping, air and troop movements. The Japanese were ruthless in slaughtering captured Coast Watchers, and Harry is one of 4 survivors of his original unit of 16. His fascinating story is told in his autobiography, "Missionary Turns Spy". During this time some of the Australian newspapers behaved in a disgusting manner. Harry Freund and his colleagues came from a background of Lutheran stock who had been loyal Australian citizens for almost a hundred years, but because of German sounding names these newspapers conjured up articles claiming that missionaries in New Guinea had been giving comfort and aid to the Japanese. Legal proceedings against the newspapers concerned resulted in printed public apologies, but this was small comfort to people like Harry who were laying their lives on the line in situations far more dangerous than most servicemen had to face

But to return to our story. Task Force 74 turned east to arrive at Cape Gloucester just before dawn. I was on duty for the first watch which is from 2000 to 2400 hrs, (8.00pm to midnight). By this time I had learnt the formation of the force, where each ship should be as we altered course from time to time on a zig zag course. As we altered course the relative bearing of the ships around us changed, and it was important to always know which was which, and whether any ship had made a wrong turn. Towards midnight, I was watching intently through the binoculars. It was a hot, humid and still night. We had been on a straight course for a while, and I spotted a ship, perhaps several miles or more away, beyond the area of our force, coming from astern, and travelling from right to left at an overtaking speed. I watched it carefully for a moment and could not recognize it as one of our destroyer escorts that had been our protective screen for the last two days. It was time to spring

into action, but I hesitated for a moment with the thought that I might be making a fool of myself. Quickly dismissing that thought, I called out "Starboard Look-out, Compass Platform." From the Compass Platform the Officer of the Watch replied, "Compass Platform, what is it?" I replied, "Bearing green 90, moving right to left, unidentified vessel." All relative bearings on the starboard are designated "green", port side is "red". There was a buzz of conversation on the Compass Platform as my report was checked out. It was eventually identified as one of ours from another section of our force and should not have normally been in that area, so we can relax. I heard the call, "carry on look-out", so I learnt the lesson that anything unusual or out of place must be checked out, and that I had been quite right in acting promptly.

After the Cape Gloucester operation I was called to the Gunnery Office and informed I would now be manning the Port Evershead Bearing Indicator on the Compass Platform. Much later I wondered if being alert on this occasion had procured for me this much more interesting and responsible job. At this stage I was eighteen and a half, still an inexperienced Ordinary Seaman, much less experienced than my other colleagues on the Compass Platform.

At midnight a relief look-out took over, so I was off below for a few hours sleep before "hands to action stations" call, which came over well before dawn. A call that tells us that it would not be long before the bombardment commences.

It might make a gripping or heart wrenching story if I painted a dramatic picture of strain and tension. Films and novels about naval ships preparing for action usually show men tense and sweating, looking grim or strained as they wait for the first blast. This was not the situation in A turret's shell room of H.M.A.S. Shropshire. In our case it was simply getting down to business. In actual fact we were whingeing about the lack of fresh air of which there was none, the stifling heat and dripping oil. If there was sweat pouring off our faces it was not fear, only the heat. Conversation was mundane about every day things. The man on the control levers that dropped the grabs over the shells, then lifted them up and conveyed them across to the steel conveyor belt, checked to make sure they were working smoothly. My job was to place the arms of the grabs over the shells, snap down the handles which lock the grab arms snug on the shell. It was then traversed across to the conveyor to start its upward journey up to the gun house. Shells weighed 250 pounds, or about 114 kgs, and the operation required that they be handled smoothly. When the guns are firing, the conveyor must have an un-interrupted supply. Our only worry was whether the machinery would work properly and that we would make no mistakes in keeping up a steady supply of these explosive monsters. Someone produced a piece of chalk, and the shells that were already waiting on the conveyor got a few messages for the Japs, such as "here's one for Tojo", or "cop this Hirohito." It all sounds a bit corny and barely raises a laugh.

The manhole in the armoured hatch above us was open, and we heard the Petty Officer in charge of A turret lower quarters call out to stand by. Then there was a mighty thump, every thing vibrated with the concussion and we were into it. Shells were disappearing upwards on the conveyor belt and the thumping of the guns was steady and constant. Shropshire fired 350 8 inch shells in this first bombardment, plus about 50 shells from the 4 inch guns. Later on we heard reports from the Marines ashore that our fire was extremely well controlled, accurate and effective.

Japanese defensive positions and their installations around the airfields, which were the top priority objective of the Marines, were virtually all knocked out by the bombardment, and Japanese casualties were high. Messages back from land later came up with figures of over a thousand dead. This carnage ashore left no impression on us. This was a deadly business, either them or us, and we would rather it was them.

Japanese bomber aircraft from Rabaul responded in strength to the assault. Fortunately for us they were mistakenly directed to Arawe, about 50 miles away on the south coast of New Britain. However some dive bombers did attack ships covering the eastern section of our area, and we lost U.S.S. Brownson sunk. Overall liaison between the RAAF and Navy worked well resulting in a strong fighter patrol over us all day.

Task Force 74 patrolled off the coast all day, and Shropshire resumed 1st degree of readiness. I was on the Bridge for the first dog watch, and then the force retired, heading back to Oro Bay, off

Buna, which was considered a safer area, but not too far away to return to Cape Gloucester if our supporting gunfire was required.

We stayed at Oro Bay until New Years Day, 1st January, 1944. A light hearted conclusion to our first major operation occurred on New Year's Eve. As we were anchored in the bay, I was upper deck sentry for the first watch, that is from 2000 hrs to midnight. A few minutes before midnight I was surprised to see bright flashes of light from ashore. An ever increasing volume of tracer projectiles was arcing into the sky from an increasing number of points, creating a dazzling display. There were no reports of enemy activity, no aircraft in the sky. We could only conclude that some trigger happy Yanks were celebrating the arrival of the new year, and often wondered if they got into trouble for their pyro-technic display.

I still had only the minimal gear brought over on the D.C.3. from Townsville but had a lucky break in stowing it. Every man was allotted a locker. There were a small number of lockers on the mess-deck and these were prized possessions, held firmly by the older and long serving members. It was a natural case of "first in, best dressed". The majority of the lockers were in compartments called "kit locker flats", down below on the lower deck. These flats were hell holes, hot and badly ventilated, and a source of constant grumbling as seamen went back and forth to their lockers for normal daily routines like changing clothes, or collecting towels and soap when heading for a shower. To have a locker on the relatively spacious mess-deck was a luxury and a status symbol. I achieved the impossible through the kindness of Doug "Dolly" Grey. Doug was a foretopman. The mess-deck was a large area extending the breadth of the ship. The starboard was allocated to the tables and benches for foc'slemen and the port side to foretopmen. Doug was an old hand in foretop and possessed a mess-deck locker. When I met him he opened up a friendly conversation and I told him of our flight from Townsville and our lack of gear. He kindly took pity on a raw newcomer and shared his locker with my few possessions. Into my locker in the boiling confines of the kit locker flat went the seldom used gear of both of us. Doug remained a good friend, and the last time I saw him was when he was in Heidelberg Military Hospital recovering from a bout of T.B. after the war, after which I lost contact and never located him again.

We arrived back in Milne Bay to commence a period of intensive training with our now familiar friends, U.S. cruisers Phoenix and Nashville. The force was further strengthened by the arrival of U.S.S. Boise. H.M.A.S. Australia was sent back to Sydney for a major refit. For our training runs we would sail out of Milne Bay and fire anti-aircraft weapons at aircraft towing sleeve targets. Shropshire was equipped with the very latest radar, and this was repeatedly tested in air and surface tracking exercises. When Shropshire was refitted in Chatham Dock prior to commissioning into the R.A.N. she had installed a variety of the very latest and most modern of British radar sets. These units were put together into an extremely efficient gunnery and plotting control system, giving Shropshire a decided edge over all other ships. This system was largely the work of radar Officer, Lt. Bryan Castles. Bryan stayed on in the Navy, retired a Rear Admiral and is now the Shropshire Gold Coast Association's Patron. He takes a keen interest in all the affairs of the Association. (see appendix 3)

Our plotting systems became so efficient that our presence on future major operations was considered a necessity by the United States 7th Fleet Command, of which we were a part. On one afternoon's exercise we were supposed to track a submarine with ASDIC, or pick its periscope up with a visual sighting. I was on duty at the port eyershead position, straining my eyes through the binoculars which are mounted on this equipment. They are big binoculars, capable of seeing for miles, even masts of ships beyond the horizon, but I did not spot anything. Nothing was said, so I presumed that the sub. did not come into my line of vision.

This intensive training meant that we would be taking part in aggressive counter offensive operations. For the time being we were satisfied with our first big operation at Cape Gloucester. It had not been all that difficult or dangerous, but Shropshire had performed smoothly and efficiently. What adventures or dangers we would face in future was an un-known. It did not seem to worry anybody. We were gaining confidence in our ship and the growing strength of our Task Force. I don't think the thought of a disaster of the like experienced by the Canberra, Sydney or Perth ever entered our heads.

PLEASANT INTERLUDE

Our exercises around Milne Bay were a clear indication that we were preparing for more operations, but before anything happened we received a surprise. Towards the end of January the mess decks were alive with another "buzz". The word was that we were going south. This rather ambitious "buzz" was greeted with two opposing reactions.

The optimistic, or should we say the impressionable, thought it was great and were dreaming of the flesh pots of Sydney, King's Cross, the Snake Pit, girls and booze, while the cynics, or the more practical were saying it was stupidity to fall for that line. In this case the cynics were wrong, Shropshire was up anchor and away within a few days of the "buzz" starting, and by 30th January we were in Sydney.

By now I had acquired a good grasp of what an Evershead Bearing Indicator could do. A set of powerful binoculars, manufactured by the London optical instrument firm of Evershead Vignoles, were too heavy to be used manually, They were mounted onto a frame on top of the unit, which revolves, and when you see something worth noting, you look at a set of dials which indicate the bearings, angles of sight, and angles of elevation if the object is an aircraft. Other dials had pointers which moved with the bearing of the guns, so you could bring your binoculars to point where the guns were pointing. The reverse applied because the operators in the Fore Director which controlled the eight inch guns could also follow the bearing of the binoculars and some of the radar sets could do likewise. The gyro numbering system was used. We always reported in numerals rather than the old method using "north, south, south east or north west". A bearing of zero was due north, and "bearing 90" was due east. When reporting objects in bearings relative to the ship we designated the bearing "green" for starboard side and "red" for port side. The port E.B.I. was mounted in the port forward corner of the Compass Platform, which was the midships part of the Bridge, and the place from which the ship was controlled. The Compass Platform was about two feet higher than the surrounding Bridge area. We were in the open without protective cover, unlike many ships where the Bridge was completely enclosed. Standing there for hours was often uncomfortable under the tropical sun, or in rough weather, but when enemy aircraft were around one got a much better sighting. Here the Officer of the Watch, the Navigator, Gunnery Officer, and signalman were on duty. Most important of all, this was where the Captain was in times of action, or at any time he intended keeping an eye on things. When on the Compass Platform the Captain sat on a high wooden stool with a back, not unlike a modern bar stool, and which was high enough for him to command a good view around him. In Shropshire his stool was only just to the side of the port E.B.I. so the look-out was under the Captain's direct scrutiny whenever he came onto the Compass Platform. Not exactly a place where one could skylark, or be lax in any shape or form.

Virtually everything that happened to Shropshire was influenced by Captain Collins, either as a captain or later as an Admiral, so a seaman's pen picture of this very famous Australian may be of interest. He was already a rising star in the Navy, and in post war years occupied important naval, government and diplomatic posts.

There were men who crossed him, or appeared before him at defaulters table for disciplinary reasons, who had little love for him. Some claimed he could be petty, harsh or even ruthless. I was the lowest rating in the Service, and he was a power at the top, but he always treated me with respect and courtesy. I spent probably several hundred hours on the Compass Platform in his presence as Captain, or later when he was Flag officer and Shropshire was Flag Ship, and I formed the opinion that he was most ambitious, driven by a powerful ego. He did not suffer fools gladly, but also treated well those who served him well. Two characteristics which are the mark of most great men.

Captain Collins was always courteous and considerate in his dealings with me, often expressed interest in what I was seeing and reporting as a look-out, and in my humble opinion and in all fairness, I can do nothing less than say he was a great cruiser captain.

His skill as a captain of a 632 foot long cruiser was demonstrated on our way into Sydney Harbour. We arrived at Sydney Heads just after dawn and I was on watch. Entering Sydney Harbour must surely be one of the unique sights in the world, with the early morning sun's rays lighting up the heads. Shropshire turned south to round Bradley's Head and then made a starboard turn to head

due west for the famous bridge. Tugs arrived to assist us and the captain ordered them away, he intended to take Shropshire into No 3 berth at Walsh Bay. Because of the early morning Sunday hour there was practically no water traffic, so we hardly slackened speed. I watched the underside of the bridge go quickly overhead, Captain Collins was holding up his hand with fingers outstretched to gauge distances and angles. At exactly the right moment he gave a rapid series of orders, stop engines, then all engines astern, then astern on the port engines, ahead starboard, and our great warship was swinging hard to port but still moving ahead. Stop all engines was ordered and we drifted in parallel to the wharf, only a few feet away. The sailors on our deck and the wharfies below, did not have to fire Costin gun lines, or heave any heavy ropes because we came gently to a stop and the heavy manilla lines were dropped onto the bollards on the wharf. Collins ordered finished with main engines and walked off the Compass Platform as much as to say "that's how its done fellows." A truly remarkable piece of seamanship.

We found out much later that our trip to Sydney was to rectify faulty shaft bearings, and we had sailed from Milne Bay on only three propellers. The reason for returning did not concern us, the fact being we were back in Australia. Sydneysiders got a few days leave, but there was no time to send interstaters home, so they got day leave only.

The second day in port was a leave day for me, from midday to 8.00am next morning. None of my new found friends were going ashore at this time so I wandered up through the city in which I was a complete stranger.

It was strange watching the busy people of Sydney rushing about their business, completely absorbed in their immediate surroundings. It felt quite weird experiencing the civilian atmosphere, and I wondered at how different it was to shipboard life and punching shells at Japs at Cape Gloucester which we were doing a few weeks ago. Not that I wished to tell anybody where one came from, for the Navy had instilled into us the need for security. Ships and their movements were supposed to be a closely guarded secret. Our cap tallys carried only the letters H.M.A.S. In wartime we could not display our ship's name, so that our identity was undisclosed. We could have been sailors from anywhere.

Gazing at the sights and people occupied a few hours and then I remembered that in my wallet was the phone number of my former class mate, Max Webb.I was at the entrance to Wynyard Station in George Street where there was a row of phone boxes. I dialled the number and a cheerful, friendly voice answered the phone and the conversation went something like this. "Is that Mrs Webb, Max's mother? I am David Mattiske, Max's friend at Flinders Naval Depot." There was an exclamation of delight and an immediate reply. "Where are you, we have been expecting a call." I told Mrs Webb I was at Wynyard Station. "David, I am ringing my husband Cliff at his office which is not far away. Max is with him today, and they will bring you home for dinner, don't leave the place where you are." I protested, "I do not want to impose on you or your family." The voice says, "Nonsense it is no trouble, just wait for Max."

Max and father, Cliff Webb arrived shortly and we caught the train to Roseville. This was the start of one of the most delightful associations of my life. Max's mother Bernice was an attractive, pleasant person, generous and hospitable to a fault, and she made their lovely home my second home away from home. Instead of being a lonely itinerant in Sydney, I found myself under the wing of a wonderful family into which I was welcomed spontaneously. For the remainder of the war the Webb family played an important role in my life, and on reflection I hope that my sudden comings and goings did not disrupt them too much. Whenever Shropshire was in Sydney and I was off duty there was always a sumptuous meal and a bed. This story will have many more references to the Webb family.

For most of the ship's company the entertainment highlight was a dance held at Grace Bros. Auditorium. Female partners were provided by the various W.R.A.N. establishments, the ships canteen fund supplied lashings of food and cold beer. The attendance of Captain Collins and many of his staff helped to further the process of turning Shropshire into a homogeneous and efficient fighting family.

We knew this was a short visit and with Rear Admiral Victor Crutchley, V.C., C.B., D.S.C., R.N., on board we became Flag Ship of the force, as H.M.A.S. Australia was still undergoing its major refit.

Shropshire sailed out of Sydney Harbour late afternoon on Monday 7th February, headed for Milne Bay.

Off Caloundra the following night we did a practice night shoot to calibrate the guns and make sure all parts of the gunnery systems were working.

Arriving off Milne Bay at dawn was another wonderful experience. We sailed through China Straits. China Straits are formed by the eastern tip of Milne Bay, and a group of islands offshore, some seeming only a few hundred yards apart. We threaded our way through a passage with tropical islands that seemed close enough to touch. I got a magnificent view from the Port E.B.I. of brilliant blue water, sandy beaches, and the buildings and homes that comprise the headquarters of the Church of England on the island of Samaria, in addition to planter's homes. Being up here on the Compass Platform was the life, while all my mess deck mates were working down below.

Apart from plenty of hot, dirty, and sweaty work, nothing happened in Milne Bay for about a week. Then we did another series of exercises, radar tracking, close range weapons firing practice, and calibrating the guns.

A party of us was sent ashore to fetch and load 8 inch shells from a dump a distance into the jungle. Years later I was told that some Jap aircraft had made a run over the beach area, but we were so hard at the heavy work of wrestling shells, and far enough away, that we were not even aware at the time of the raid, or danger, if any.

All these activities meant only one thing. Operations were being planned, and in fact the Supreme Commander, General Douglas MacArthur, was about to start his island hopping campaign in earnest, a campaign which would sweep across the Pacific Ocean to the Philippines and eventually, nearly two years later, take us victorious into Tokyo Bay.

A DARING LEAP FORWARD

During the remainder of February, Shropshire exercised with Nashville and Boise off Milne Bay. We did practice shoots with our anti-aircraft weapons on a target aircraft towing a sleeve, the idea being to hit the sleeve, not the aircraft. There was Radar testing to check the accuracy of our equipment and the operators who manned them. I recall one particular day when an aircraft was sent out more than a hundred miles and our operators tracked him, reporting course, height and speed with amazing accuracy. Repetition tended to become monotonous, but we realised that constant drilling meant that we could do important, and perhaps life saving jobs automatically, regardless of what was happening around us.

One exercise was different. Shropshire was to simulate a stricken vessel without power, lying dead in the water. Our companion cruiser, U.S.S. Nashville was to tow us to safety, and as she passed slowly down our starboard side, our lines were passed across. When the ends on Nashville were made fast, the slack had to be hauled in by us. Without any power we needed every man available to manhandle the heavy manila lines inboard and make them secure before towing could commence. There is a famous photo taken from our Bridge looking down on Shropshire's foc'sle, Nashville's stern a few yards off our starboard bow, and showing hundreds of sweating sailors hauling away on the lines as they did hundreds of years ago on sailing ships. United States warships tended to carry a lot more mechanical aids, and I suspect that our American friends were amused by our operation based on muscle power, a method from a bygone age. However, we proved that in an emergency, we could still survive by sweat and toil, even though it might have been antiquated.

One afternoon General Douglas MacArthur came on board for a conference with Captain Collins and presumably to see what we looked like close up. I was lucky enough to see him from a distance as he mounted the gangway and was greeted by Captain Collins on the quarterdeck. He was a most impressive and imposing figure. What occurred at the conference with our Captain we will never know, but it appeared that MacArthur's intention was not only to confer with our Commanding Officer, but also to look us over and get a first hand impression of how we shaped up as a warship under his overall command. His impressions must have been favourable, as Shropshire was always in demand, participating in every major operation.

MacArthur was about to set out on a remarkable military and naval adventure, a series of campaigns which would drastically change the course of the Pacific war. The Australian Imperial Force had gained mastery over the Japanese in New Guinea, while the Americans had slugged it out from Guadacanal advancing up the Solomon Island chain to Bougainville. The new campaign would see a major and revolutionary change in strategy. Instead of a war of attrition in the jungles we were now strong enough to bypass Japanese strongholds which were isolated and ineffective. The first spectacular move was motivated by both strategic interests and military politics.

This we were to learn later. For now we wondered where would be our next target. The huge Japanese base at Rabaul was rapidly being neutralised by our now superior air power. There was no need to sacrifice thousands of lives of infantry men in a land operation. On the other hand MacArthur could not afford to have his South West Pacific Area command take a back seat in the drive across the Pacific. It appeared that the initiative had passed to Admiral Nimitz and the Central Pacific forces who had just pulled off a brilliant attack on the Marshall Islands. Primarily due to strategic and military necessity, but also influenced by the chance of favourable publicity back home in the U.S.A., MacArthur decided on a bold move to attack the Admiralty Islands near the equator, in which was situated Seeadler Harbour. This harbour had been the subject of very intense Intelligence study because it was ideally placed as a springboard to strike further north and west into Japanese territory. Capture of the Admiralty Islands and its harbour would be a much better option than a costly war of attrition in the jungles of New Guinea.

Initially there was some risk in rapidly pushing a small force deep into enemy territory, especially when there was doubt about Japanese strength in the Admiralty Islands. His Army commanders were wary of too rapid expansion without detailed reconnaissance, because Army Intelligence produced figures of Japanese strength which varied considerably. Macarthur over-ruled the doubters on his staff taking personal control of the operation. In case any thing went wrong he would be the only one to blame.

On 29th February elements of the U.S. 1st Cavalry Division landed on Los Negros Island, the eastern most island of the Admiralty group, and pushed inland against relatively light opposition. Then the Japanese struck back with a vengeance, and that is where we became heavily involved in our next big adventure.

Heavy naval gunfire was urgently needed to protect the landings from disaster and to soften the way for additional re-enforcement's as they tried to force their way through the main channels into Seeadler Harbour.

Shropshire, with Task Force 74, left Milne Bay for Oro Bay, an anchorage familiar to us off Buna, and within a day's sailing of the Admiralty Islands. On our way there occurred another of those humorous incidents which lighten serious events and provide a good laugh. There are variants of the story, but it goes like this. As dusk settled on our way out of Milne Bay, Rear Admiral Victor Crutchley, on board Shropshire as Flag Officer because H.M.A.S. Australia was still in Sydney, was doing his evening walking exercises on the quarter-deck puffing away on his ever present pipe. All that was seen from the wing of the bridge was a stream of sparks on which should have been a blacked out ship. The Commander told his "runner" to go aft and tell that man to report to the bridge immediately. The runner saw Admiral Crutchley pacing the deck smoking his pipe, and instead of discreetly backing off, told our worthy Admiral that the Commander wanted to see him on the bridge. Admiral Crutchley had a sense of humour and kindly told the runner that if the Commander wanted to see him he had better come down to the quarter-deck. I don't know the sequel to this story, or if there was one. Accurate or not, the story caused many a good laugh.

We anchored at Oro Bay the next afternoon, but for a few hours only. At about 2300hrs, that is 9.00pm, the call came, "sea going parties to muster". We could come to only one conclusion. The Army ashore was in serious trouble, and the gunfire of the cruisers was needed.

Stumbling around on a darkened ship, with no lights allowed, with a torrential storm pouring down rain, lightning flashing, thunder roaring, is no fun. We tripped over deck gear, got in each other's way, but the anchor was eventually secured in the hawse pipe and the ship steamed off at a good rate of knots, in company with Phoenix and Nashville and our escorting destroyers.

By the next night our force was steaming off the north west of the Admiralty group, well into enemy territory. One of our roles was to be a blocking force in the event of the Japanese sending naval re-enforcements from their huge base of Truk, some 400 miles away to the north west.

At dawn, which was now 4th March, the pipe "hands into battle dress" was piped over the loud speakers. When in harbour doing the routine jobs to run a ship, we wore shorts, sandals, and no shirts. Battle dress was long heavy trousers, long sleeved shirt, tin hat, a hood and face visor, and life belt. The prime purpose of this gear was to protect one from burns and blast, the main cause of injury in a warship.

When the call came over to change into battle dress, I was on watch at my usual place on the Compass Platform, manning the Port E.B.I. I could not leave my post until relieved at 0800hrs. When my relief came along, I stepped down off the Compass Platform onto the port wing of the Bridge, and the Corporal of the Gangway, Geoffrey Browne accosted me and said I was charged with being out of the dress of the day. Commander Harries came onto the port side of the bridge and saw me standing there, bare shouldered in the morning sun, in a pair of overalls with the tops tied around my waist. I protested for I knew Geoffrey well. Come on Geoffrey, you know I could not leave my position while on watch, and Captain Collins had been on his high chair next to me and had not reprimanded me for my dress because he was quite aware of the situation. "Bad luck" says Geoffrey, "you appear at the Commander's table at 0900 hrs."

Fronting Commander Harries is an awesome experience. You are called to the table and the Master at Arms yells out, "Attention, off cap." The charge of being out of the dress of the day is read out, and Commander Harries asks if I have anything to say. I tell him I could not change into battle dress because I was on duty manning the Port E.B.I. when the order was piped. He glares at me with his hand cupped around his chin, stroking it between thumb and forefinger. "Ah hem!" he says, "yes, but you were still not properly dressed, you had your overalls tied around your waist." Gotcha !! The sentence is five days No 11. No 11 is a general regulation which in effect says that if the Commander thinks you are not following the letter of the law, or you are doing anything that he

thinks is contrary to good order and naval discipline, you are guilty. For five days I was to join "Men Under Punishment", which means that in the First Dog Watch, that is from 1600 to 1800 hrs, one does rifle drill, extra sweeping of decks and generally being allotted to any unpleasant job which might be waiting. The rifle drill is tough going, holding a 303 rifle in an extended arm and punching it back and forwards, changing arms at the whim of the "Gunners Mate" in charge. So I was not exactly looking forward to doing "Men Under Punishment". Punishment for what I considered a grave injustice was to start that afternoon..

During the afternoon Shropshire, along with Nashville and Phoenix were allotted targets. American landing craft bringing in re-enforcements to rescue the operation were endeavouring to sail into Seeadler Harbour through narrow passages between the small islands that cover the entrance to the harbour. On these islands were batteries of Japanese 5 inch naval guns, and smaller craft were driven back by Japanese gun fire. The cruisers task was to get in fairly close and knock out a Jap battery on one of the islands called Hauwei, the island on the western side of the main channel. Shropshire was lead ship with Phoenix and Nashville following. We cruised to within 9000 yards, which is pretty close for heavy artillery and our 8 inch guns. Our shell room crew was sweating it out, going through all the routine checks to make sure the supply of shells would not be disrupted when firing started. We fired only 8 or 9 broadsides, but this was accomplished with all machinery working smoothly, and we were pretty pleased with ourselves and the way we seemed to be settling down into a smart team.

When we ceased fire the First Dog watch had started, but we were still at action stations, so I was thinking, "You beaut, no men under punishment today." How wrong you can get. The loudspeakers called, "Fall out from action stations, starboard watch remain closed up, 'ie remain at action stations', men under punishment fall in in the starboard waist." Today, in the 1990's a civilian, or for that matter a modern navy man, would find it impossible to believe that men would undergo punishment, invariably for trivial offences, under these conditions. But there we were, about six of us, doing a strenuous work out with a rifle held out horizontally in one hand, punching it back and forwards, changing from one arm to the other to the shouted orders of the Petty Officer in charge. While this was going on we could see slightly astern on our starboard quarter, the Nashville and Phoenix, probably 600 to 1000 yards away with all 15 of their 6 inch guns, blazing away at the targets which we had engaged some ten minutes earlier. War or no war, the Navy was not going to break its routine, men were to be disciplined regardless. Just as well the Jap artillery was being knocked around by our bombardments. Wouldn't it be funny to cop a hit while doing "men under punishment".

After this bombardment our force resumed patrolling to the north and west, still concerned about a possible Japanese counter attack. During this patrolling we heard that Shropshire had crossed the equator. For me that was the first time I had been in the northern hemisphere, and it would have been the first time since early 1942 that a naval force from the south had penetrated so far north into Japanese held territory.

The Japanese were not easily subdued. Small craft were still under fire as they tried to carry re-enforcements and supplies into Seeadler Harbour. On the afternoon of 7th March we were again called in close to knock out Jap guns, this time on the island of N'drilo, on the eastern side of the main passage. The spotting aircraft from U.S.S. Phoenix reported that there could have been return fire from the Japs, but they certainly did not hit any of us. Our spotting aircraft could have been confused with so many explosions from our gun-fire bursting on or around the Japanese gun emplacements that he may have reported incorrectly. In any case, these guns caused no more trouble, apparently our gunfire was accurate and destroyed them all.

As the Army now had the situation under control we sailed back to the New Guinea coast to a harbour called Sudest, to refuel and build up our stocks of ammunition which we had fired during our recent activities. I don't remember anything about this place, except that the ammunition ship, H.M.A.S. Yunnan, tied up along side us. Derricks commenced passing the heavy 8 inch shells across to our upper deck. The shells were then lowered through a hatch using the old method of a block and tackle, the shell carefully guided down into the shell room way below. Whilst working away I heard a voice from the Yunnan yell out, "David Mattiske." It was from one of the Supply Assistants checking the stock count as the shells were transferred across. The voice came from John Bowtell, a

former Shell Co. employee I had befriended in Melbourne before enlisting. Whenever we drew supplies from Yunnan after that, having a chat with John across the guard rail was most welcome, a reminder of things in common, and that there was a civilisation back home.

The attitude to Yunnan and ammunition ships in our foc'sle mess deck was interesting. Everyone agreed that sailing off in Shropshire into Japanese held territory and bombarding Japanese targets was far preferable to sitting back in a base on a load of high explosives. It did not happen often, but despite all the safety rules, procedures and controls, ammunition ships did blow up occasionally with disastrous results.

We sailed back to Milne Bay for another brief spell with the, by now, all too familiar exercises, the monotony relieved by a concert party from America. This party featured Lanny Ross, a performer not remembered today by the junk music saturated teenagers, but in those days he was a star, perhaps only slightly lower on the popularity scale than Bing Crosby.

H.M.A.S. Australia rejoined Task Force 74 and Admiral Crutchley transferred his flag to her, so we were no longer flagship. During Australia's refit she lost her famous old Walrus aircraft. This aircraft was very much out of date and the space it took up was required for extra anti-aircraft weapons.

The whole force left Milne Bay at the end of March and sailed into Seeadler Harbour on the 1st or 2nd April. We sailed into this magnificent harbour through the narrow passages whose surrounding islands we had covered with such devastating fire only a few weeks ago. Apart from the stunning view of this stretch of water, we were amazed at the sight of so many ships and the activity in the harbour. In a few weeks the place had been transformed into what soon became the largest base in the South West Pacific Area. There were huge quonset huts by the dozen being erected along the foreshore in the vicinity of the town we learned was Lorengau. The main island of Manus forms the southern and western sides of the harbour, and butting onto Manus is Los Negros island with a long arm running north west and south east. By a freak of nature, this arm runs in the same direction as the trade winds, and was an ideal air strip. In comparatively no time, our American cousins had myriads of aircraft taking off and landing, particularly Liberator bombers that were softening up our future targets to the north west.

The rapid build up of forces in Seeadler inspired many mess deck buzzes because there just had to be a big strike coming off before long. The same atmosphere which permeated the mess before Cape Gloucester settled over us and a certain amount of tension began to build up. It was not a question of what, only when and where. We had participated in two big successful operations without any formidable reaction from the Japanese. Surely next time they would have to come out and fight.

THE PACE QUICKENS

The ship's company was kept informed of events around the world in two ways. We regularly heard the short wave broadcasts from the Australian Broadcasting Commission, but the most popular source of news and entertainment was the ship's own show over the loud speaker system, produced on most afternoons by Leading Seaman Kevin Whitby, better known as "the Count." Kevin had been an announcer with the A.B.C. in Perth, and possessed the all important qualities of a news announcer of the A.B.C. His diction was always precise and clear, grammatically and phonetically correct. A very pleasant memory when one listens to today's announcers who make frequent errors, stammer over difficult pronunciations, and often resort to slang. The "Count" did a remarkable job under difficult conditions, keeping us up to date with entertainment and world events.

For security reasons the Count never made comments about our future moves, but we could see all around us that something big was brewing. Nobody knew with any accuracy the next target, but many intelligent guesses came out of the many buzzes that raced around the mess decks. While we were trading buzzes MacArthur and his intelligence staff were very much aware of the plight of the Japanese armies due to their supply problems. Because we now controlled the sea and air in the region, we had the ability to strike at objectives of our choosing. Instead of attacking large concentrations of well fortified Japanese, MacArthur selected places that would make excellent bases with good harbours and air base potential. Intelligence reports indicated that the Japanese were gathering their forces in the Wewak, Aitape area to meet the Australian Army offensive, pushing slowly along the New Guinea coast from the east and in doing so they left the huge harbour of Humboldt Bay in Dutch New Guinea relatively poorly defended. They assumed that distance made it safe from attack. This place proved to be our next operation, but of course for the time being we knew nothing about the details because of strict security requirements.

By the middle of April all the signs told us we would soon be off. Strangely, running through my head were thoughts of sister Claire who I knew had a birthday soon, the date fixed in my mind was 20th April. We sailed on the 19th April and then I thought I had missed the bus, it was too late to now try and send a letter with birthday greetings. Memory plays funny tricks for I assumed from then on that Claire's birthday was the 20th, and only in recent years did I get it right, its the 17th. Things that happened during war service were impressed on the mind excluding the ordinary everyday civilian niceties.

Our Task Forces were now increasing in size, much bigger than our first operation at Cape Gloucester, so I don't think any of us were at all surprised when Captain Collins addressed the ship's company informing us that we were about to make a huge leap forward. We were to leave New Guinea behind and attack targets in Dutch New Guinea. The objectives were Hollandia, the capital situated in Humboldt Bay, and Tanamerah Bay. Our Task Force's target was Tanamerah Bay, a long open bay about 40 miles west of Hollandia. This penetration into enemy territory, a leap of nearly 400 miles, embodied some risk. Japanese strategy was to hold their battleship and cruiser forces at Tawi Tawi, at the south west end of the Philippines, and at Davao, in the Philippines island of Mindanao. The force assembled by the Japanese included the new mighty battleships Yamato and Musashi, 60,000 tonners armed with 18 inch guns. These battleships were to feature in the campaign in the Philippines, which was still a long way off. From these bases they were in a position to strike at any force which over-extended itself by sailing too far westward from its home bases in New Guinea and beyond the range of our fighter aircraft protection.

Fortunately for us, just as at Cape Gloucester, the Japanese did not react with any real vigour. Early afternoon before the scheduled day of the assault, we left the transports and landing craft in our wake and steamed ahead towards our target. On watch during the afternoon, I watched fascinated as we sailed past long lines of ships on our starboard side. The bigger ones were doing well in a sea with only gentle swells, but there were long lines of the smaller landing craft towed behind the bigger LST's or LCT's. The little fellows would not have the range to cover the distance so they were towed most of the way. I could not help thinking what a frightful trip it was for the infantry in these small craft. Even in a slight swell they would be bounced around, exposed to the sun and the elements, and then on arrival they were required to charge onto enemy held beaches, usually exposing themselves to savage fire from a waiting enemy when they were most vulnerable after such a journey. Watching them bouncing along from the comfort of Shropshire's Compass

Platform, enjoying the bright sunshine and deep blue of the tropical sea, I could not help but think that joining the Navy had been the right choice.

I was on duty again for the first watch, the period before midnight, and through the powerful Evershead binoculars, I could now start to make out the dark outline of mountains on the horizon, still a long way ahead. The sky was almost continually ablaze with flashes from the bombing of our long range bombers as they kept the Japanese on their toes and softened them up for our arrival before dawn in a few hours time. This sight was another confirmation that we were about to see a big show. I left the Compass Platform, descending down into A turret to get ready for the call to action stations in a few hours time.

The ships of Task Force 74 moved into firing positions before dawn, everybody closed up at action stations, everything checked out and ready to go. There were no longer any worries caused by fear of not performing well. We were now a well co-ordinated team in the shell room, confidence at a high level. Confidence did not stop us from grizzling about the heat, lack of air, or the suffocating smell of hydraulic oil.

No longer was I scrambling over the shell bins clamping on the quick-action grabs. That was the job of Macca McKenzie, a new arrival who was to become a good mate. I worked the handles that controlled the steel wires onto which the grabs were fastened. The control handles raised or lowered the grabs and traversed them back and forwards to the endless steel conveyor belt which took the shells on their way up to the gunhouse. This required careful but rapid movement, dropping the grab neatly over a shell. Macca then flicked the grab handles which locked the jaws onto the shell and I lifted the shell and conveyed it to the conveyor. The 250 pound shells had to be lifted out of the bins quickly and smoothly because any jerking movements could swing them out of control turning them into a dangerous missile, to our danger, not the Japs. Occasionally a shell travelled too fast across to the conveyor and it crashed against the steel bulkhead. The handles which controlled the movement of the steel wires were very sensitive requiring the operator to use the right pressure.

Our preparations took place under the watchful eye of Ben Roberts, in charge of our shell room gang. Ben always positioned himself on a wooden stage or shelf situated at the for'ard end of the shell room. This was at the same height as the top of the shell bins, where he could observe all activities. Ben never got ruffled or excited, and this rubbed off on us which was why we never seemed to have any hitches, everything ran smoothly. He had been a Cadet Reporter with the Sydney Morning Herald and at some time had covered the theatre circuit. He had acquired a great knowledge and love of Gilbert and Sullivan, so to pass the time or relieve any boredom, those who knew a bit of G and S would be heard singing "When I Was a Lad I Served a Term" from H.M.S. Pinafore, or "I've Got Him on My List" from the Mikado. Ben knew every word, including some parodies that would normally not be sung in polite company but caused us many a laugh.

For the bombardment at Tanamerah we used the American 8 inch shell for the first time.

A naval shell has a copper band near its base which takes up on the gun's rifling as the shell travels through the barrel. This gives the shell a spinning motion which assists in its flight and accuracy. The American driving band was further from the base than our standard shell, which meant that there was less space in the breech for the cordite charge, necessitating a slightly smaller cordite charge. The American shell was approximately 4 pounds heavier than the standard British one we used. This effected the range of our shots and we later heard that some had exploded just over and close ahead of the infantry in the landing barges, fortunately with no damage to our own troops.

As indicated at times during this narrative, we were a pretty confident team in A turret, and when the commence firing order came A turret shot off about 30 broadsides without a hitch. By the time the landing craft hit the beaches, there were virtually no Japanese to oppose them and they got ashore with hardly any casualties.

After the bombardment Shropshire reverted to "Second Degree of Readiness", and breakfast was served in the cafeteria to those not on watch. I had the forenoon watch and was back in my spot at the Port E.B.I. H.M.A.S. Australia had steamed off westward down the coast to investigate a report that Japanese vessels and barges were in the vicinity. Shropshire, with destroyer USS Mullany

as escort, patrolled up and down Tanamerah Bay parallel to the beaches, several miles out. As always I was staring hard at everything I could see through the binoculars on the EBI mounting, and as we cruised the eastern leg towards a point of land I spotted something in the water, too far away to identify, possibly a tree or native canoe. While I was reporting to the Officer of the Watch, Shropshire turned 180 degrees to port for the westward leg of our patrol. Sometime later whilst back on our eastern course, and just before we again turned, I was sure that the object that I had first spotted was a canoe with people on board, trying to clear the coast. I went through the usual reporting procedures and Captain Collins expressed a keen interest. He immediately ordered Mullany to speed off and investigate. Eventually Mullany rejoined us and instead of any reports or discussions about what she had found, there was stony silence on the Compass Platform. It was nearly 40 years later that I found out why. (see appendix 4)

The operation ashore proceeded according to plan, so Task Force 74 cruised northwards to patrol well out to sea in case the Japanese sent in relieving naval forces from Palau. A day or so later, during an afternoon watch, there was a tremendous amount of chatter coming over the T.B.S. (Talk Between Ships) and Captain Collins asked the lookouts to keep a sharp eye to the north. The voices were clearly American. Eventually I could see protruding over, but beyond the horizon, masts, the tops of superstructure and funnels of what must have been a large force. The Evershead binoculars were powerful enough to see the tops of ships, even though the hulls were invisible below horizon level. I learned years later after visiting the U.S.S. New Jersey when she was in Brisbane that the force was Admiral Spruance in his flag ship U.S.S. New Jersey with the U.S. Third Fleet Carrier Force. They had cruised west from the Marshall Islands to act as an additional blocking force in case the Japanese fleet did come out. Halsey's force turned away and we did not get any closer, but I have always made a joke out of claiming that I was the first Australian to see the mighty battleship New Jersey on active operations. Technically this is true.

The campaign in Dutch New Guinea did not require us for any immediate operations so Task Force 74 returned to Seeadler Harbour for fresh supplies and ammunition, having been at sea for just on two weeks.

Cruising home, for Seeadler had become home of a sort, with another operation safely tucked under our belts, was almost like being on a holiday cruise. I liked the job of being the eyes and ears of the Captain or the D.C.O. (Duty Control Officer) or Officer of the Watch on the Compass Platform. On a fine day it was a very pleasant task to stand there in the tropical sunshine and a steady breeze, bare backed and tanned dark brown all over, watching the movement of sea, cloud and accompanying ships as Shropshire ploughed along, thrusting gently into the brilliant blue waters of the Pacific. Dolphins would play around the bows, sometimes cruising with us for mile after mile, sea birds wheeling about the sky, and sometimes hundreds of flying fish leaping out of the water. There were times during overcast or stormy days when I have seen 10 or more water spouts scattered over miles of ocean, reaching from the water to the dark heavy clouds overhead, a truly awesome sight.

On one occasion, on a beautiful sunny morning, we were sailing south east down the New Guinea coast, approaching Huon Peninsula and Vitiaz Strait, with the magnificent Finnisterre Ranges on our starboard. The mountains rising to above 10,000 feet were topped with masses of white cloud.

Vitiaz Strait is a comparatively narrow stretch, once called bomb alley, a place to keep a sharp lookout. In 1944 Vitiaz Strait was no longer the danger of former days, but I spotted something in the water miles ahead, and reported to the Officer Of the Watch. This OOW was a humourless, dour, if not surly fellow who was busy chatting to one of his officer friends about social life in Sydney. My report was received with a curt reply, he picked up his small binoculars through which he would see very little, compared to the monsters on the E.B.I., and said, "carry on." Shropshire changed course on its zig-zag and my reported object was now on the starboard side, but later we zig-zagged again and there was my object, now much clearer. I gave my report the full treatment, "Port lookout, Officer of the Watch, bearing red 05, object in water, probably tree trunk." Chuckles, for that was this bloke's nick-name amongst the look-outs, had to stop his conversation, turned to me and said in a grumpy voice, "Its alright look-out, I heard you the first time." Captain Collins was doing his morning constitutional striding up and down the port wing of the bridge, and had heard everything

that transpired. He bounded up the few steps to the Compass Platform and dressed down poor "Chuckles" to the effect that when a seaman reports in the correct seaman like manner he shall be replied to in the correct manner. Obviously a very embarrassing situation for a junior officer. After this I was very careful never to cross the path of "Chuckles." I was sure he blamed me for his timely reprimand. If looks could kill I would have been dead on the spot. Perhaps I had over-done the reporting bit. Nevertheless, it was a very legitimate report and he was not behaving as an alert officer should at a time when he was responsible for the safety of a cruiser and 1,000 men. He deserved the reprimand from Captain Collins whom I believe was acting in the best interests of the safety and efficiency of his ship.

But to get back to our return to Seeadler harbour where I was indirectly involved in a very sad incident. On one pitch dark night during a middle watch, Macca and I were doing our usual harbour job of upper deck sentries. The harbour was quiet so we spent most of the time sitting on the cable holders up near the bow smoking and chatting. This was a vantage point from where we had a wide angle of vision, watching any boat traffic. From there we would occasionally patrol along the guard rail to the torpedo space amidships. On one of these patrols as far as the port boom, I thought I heard noises and splashing of water. Tied up to the outswung boom was No 1 motor boat rocking slightly in the water, but its lines appeared secure and the Jacob's ladder was in place. So I thought nothing more of it and returned to Macca on the bows.

Next morning we sailed out for some routine exercises, and when everybody should have been at their normal stations, A/B Laurie Sullivan was not to be found. Laurie's locker was only a few from mine. When we sailed back into harbour in the late afternoon signals from ashore at Manus advised that after we had departed in the morning a small boat near us picked up the body of an Australian seaman out of the water and identification was required. It was poor Laurie. Apparently during the night he had climbed down into the motor boat, leaned over the side and cut his throat, falling into the water and sinking. When we sailed next morning our propellers, churning up the water had brought his body to the surface. An inquiry later revealed that un-beknown to us he had some horrific domestic problems. Sometimes I have wondered with regret that perhaps more rigorous patrolling might have prevented poor Laurie from taking his life, and whether the noises I heard were the last he made on this earth? We will never know. In 1968 I attended the 25th Anniversary celebrations of the recapture of Lae. I wandered through the Lae War Cemetery, a place full of Australian history, a very sad place, but also one of great beauty and serenity. Quite by accident I came across Laurie's headstone. Casualties from the Admiralty Islands were brought back to Lae for burial after the war. I could only stand there quietly and say a prayer for Laurie and hope that he is now at peace.

Before our next operation we learnt that Captain Collins was to leave us, promoted to Commodore preparatory to taking command of the Task Force. Our senior flag officer who had commanded the force so well for a long time, Rear Admiral Victor Crutchley, was due to return to England, and Australia now had officers of the seniority and capability to command a force such as ours. Collins was to fly his flag in H.M.A.S. Australia, normally the flagship of the R.A.N. He was replaced by Captain Henry (Harry) Showers, and our second in command, Commander Harries was replaced by Commander George Oldham. Both new officers were very different to their predecessors with Captain Showers appearing as a man without the drive or sharpness of Collins. This was a deception and only a difference in personality. On the Compass Platform we soon noticed that our new and outwardly lay-back captain handled the ship with the same skill and efficiency. Commander Oldham tended to be much less abrasive than his predecessor, possessing an empathy with his charges without losing control or direction.

Our new senior officers took over in time for a hectic series of events because our advance northwest across the Pacific proceeded at an accelerated pace.

WE FLUKE A TRIP HOME

Seeadler Harbour had rapidly become a huge base. Lorengau, the only town on the largest island of Manus, took on the appearance of a huge industrial complex. Monstrous quonset huts and warehouses appeared everywhere. Occasionally supply parties were sent ashore to bring back needed goods, and I must have been one of the lucky ones, for these trips relieved the monotony of scraping and painting. Several trips ashore enabled me to acquire things like an extra pair of shoes, a top quality product for which I paid only a few shillings. The American Army store-keeper did not seem to mind if we paid anything.

To give men a chance to stretch their legs, parties were landed on beaches for swimming and any form of exercise they could think up. One day a small party of us was landed on Los Negros Island, and after swimming among the reefs, watching the brilliant hues of the little tropical fish, we came across a camp of the U.S. 1st Cavalry Division. We soon made friends and were impressed by their hospitality and kindness. They were mostly Texans, all 6 feet tall or more. We had covered several landings in which they had performed magnificently, and we were to see more of their dash and courage as the war progressed. They were a favourite regiment of General Douglas MacArthur, who gave them the honour of playing important roles in the occupation of Japan. But that was a long way off.

After chatting for a long time one of the Texans gave me his Waterman's fountain pen. It was a very expensive model, the Rolls Royce of pens at the time, and I cherished it for many years after the war.

Operations along the Dutch New Guinea coast were proceeding apace, so task Force 74 sailed from Seeadler to Humboldt Bay, which was building up rapidly into a big base, and I had the chance to catch up again with John Bowtell when we stocked up with ammunition from the Yunnan. Several times there were air raid alerts, but the Japanese must have been interested only in reconnaissance, as no attacks developed.

The next targets lined up were the Sarmi Peninsula, Wakde Island, just off Sarmi, and Biak Island. Sarmi and Wakde were routine bombardments, although along the coast at Sarmi the Japanese had artillery batteries which caused a lot of trouble, and we knocked them out without too much effort, in fact, instead of broadsides we used single gun salvoes from A turret. The only thing about Wakde that remains in my memory is that our bombardment was on 22nd May, my 19th birthday, and I remember thinking that firing 8 inch shells at Japanese was a pretty lousy way to spend a birthday. On the other hand, I suppose it was a fairly unique birthday, not many Australians ever spend a 19th birthday doing that kind of a job.

Back to Humboldt Bay for fuel and ammunition, ready for the next move. There seemed no stopping of the momentum. Off to sea and Captain Showers announced that our Task Force was to hit Biak Island as it was an important strategic spot, some 300 miles to the west. Biak is located at the top of a large shallow gulf at the western end of Dutch New Guinea. It was heavily fortified by the Japanese and the site of a number of important airfields.

At Biak the Japanese had stationed large numbers of aircraft to be used to attack the U.S. fleet should they be able to entice us into action far enough away from home bases. The afternoon before the attack we sailed past the ships and landing craft, closely observing them as they churned on their way to Biak. The same thoughts I had on the way to Tanamerah passed through my mind. How lucky was I to be on board Shropshire, with clean showers, good food, and a place to sleep. The infantry in the smaller landing craft would be cramped, sea sick, no showers for days, and then have the terrifying job of leaping out into the water and charging up a beach, probably being shot at all the time. We cruised past them at a comfortable speed and in relative comfort.

The water approaching Biak from the south is relatively shallow, so the cruisers and destroyers moving in for the surprise kill at dawn moved slowly and carefully. I had the morning watch, that is from 0400 hrs, 4:00 am for land-lubbers. In the dark I saw a cruiser with dazzle painting only a few cable lengths away on our port beam. This was the Phoenix, recognized because she was the only one with that kind of paintwork. It was overcast and very hot and humid. Everything was silent but this time there was a tenseness in the air. Through my Evershead binoculars mounted on the bearing

indicator I could see, still several miles away, the clear outline of mountains, and to the left flatter country which must be where the airfields were. The mountains dropped down to the sea, but there seemed to be behind the beaches a ledge of flat land, a few feet above sea level, and about several miles long. Behind this the land rose steeply. Then I blinked and looked again. Were my eyes playing tricks? I stared again. Along the beach front there were spots of light which looked like fires burning and I presumed they were cooking fires preparing Japanese breakfasts as cooks got to work with the approaching dawn. Some lights were moving. I believed these were vehicles, so I concluded that beyond the beaches on the flat land there must be a road running parallel to the beach. All this was absorbed as quickly as I could, and I framed my report nominating bearings and approximate distances in the prescribed manner. Somebody, and I cannot remember who because of the pitch darkness, asked questions to which I replied as best I could. A hurried discussion took place and a message was sent by T.B.S. to the Flag Ship, which in this case was the Phoenix. After some more T.B.S. chatter the sightings were picked up by others, and we heard the order to advance bombardment time. We would catch the Japs with their pants down, as it was obvious they were completely unaware of the impending rain of fire which was about to descend on them.

What happened next will never be official and certainly un-recorded, but is a tale for Ripley's "Believe It Or Not." The ship's company was now required at "action stations" earlier than expected so the order was given to the duty bugler to sound "action stations". The bugler stepped to the box containing the loud speaker system, opened it, switched on the system, and sounded "action stations", blowing for all he was worth. My position at the Port E.B.I. in the forward corner of the Compass Platform overlooked "B" deck, the foc'sle, and the water below. I heard the bugle notes echoing across the water, the sound appearing to echo on and on.

Did the Japs hear our bugle? No one will ever know the real reason, but minutes after sounding off the Jap lights started to go out and they fired a Verey Light, a signal normally used as a warning. Over the T.B.S. came a strident voice, "who blew that bugle?" We heard later that a Fleet Order was issued forbidding the use of bugles at sea.

The bombardment got under way with our force's fire as usual heavy and accurate, the infantry getting ashore with a minimum of casualties. But Biak was an important Japanese base and they soon resisted strongly, particularly defending the approaches to the precious airfields. A dozen aircraft took off from the fields but were successfully dealt with by our own fighter cover who shot down 4 or 5, and our ship's fire accounted for another four. Each time the Army ashore ran into heavy opposition, we were called on to provide supporting fire, so everybody remained at action stations most of the day. During the afternoon Liberator bombers were making a run into their targets, coming from the sea over the assembled warships. One bomber dropped, accidentally of course, what was believed to be a 1000 pound bomb which fell in our wake, close astern. It lifted Shropshire's stern and dug the foc'sle deep into the water. Friends who were stationed aft all reported a hectic time, as they slid about trying to hang on to any object for support. But Shropshire was a large ship, and down in A turret shell room we were only aware of a bit of a thump, and wondered what all the fuss was about. The upper deck was showered by bits of shrapnel, and when this was reported to the Compass Platform, our erstwhile Gunnery Officer replied, "don't worry, its only friendly." Geoff Lund, from X turret, was later sweeping up and cleaning one of the ships boats, and found several bits of shrapnel in the boat which he still keeps as a souvenir. He has also a photo which someone snapped when the bomb burst.

Other than standing by to support the army ashore there was not much we could do, and late in the Dog watches Captain Showers addressed the ship's company, reprimanding us for being slow on one occasion during the latter part of the day when we were closing up to action stations. Then, quite "out of the blue" he said in future he hoped we would be as quick getting to action stations as we would be in getting off the ship when we got to Sydney. Yes, we were on our way home, not only to Sydney, but all inter-staters would get 12 days leave plus travelling time. This surprise announcement brought smiles all around. The Navy was really looking after its hard working, fighting sailors.

Not quite!! During darkness on the 23rd May off Wakde Island, Shropshire had hit a submerged object, and major repairs were necessary. In the 1990's, my very good friend Horton Slatter, a chief E.R.A. (Engine Room Artificer), told me he had been on watch in the engine room, heard a heavy

thump which shook everyone up, and one of the starboard shafts started vibrating wildly, causing him to shut it down.

Horton said we sailed on and eventually home to Sydney on three propellers. In dry dock at Cockatoo Island it was discovered that a large chunk was missing out of this propeller. What we hit will never be ascertained, perhaps part of a submerged wreck or a prowling submarine, theirs or ours? Who knows, but I suppose that we could all say, "its an ill wind that blows nobody any good."

Shropshire sailed from the equator to Sydney in a few days. A large group of Victorians caught a troop train from Central Station on the evening we docked and I can still recall the shock of feeling so bitterly cold once the train headed south over the mountains. We were allotted 6 to a compartment, so for the overnight journey, instead of sitting up all night, we slept 2 on the floor, the lucky 2 got the padded bench seats, and 2 got the luggage racks above. I was one of them. This was not too bad. We had plenty of newspapers, so we laid half the papers as a mattress, and curled up with the other half over us as a blanket. The paper keeps out a surprising amount of cold, although the wire racks leave some funny marks in funny places on your body. Cold and stiff in the morning we were bundled out on to the platform of some country town where breakfast was served. Quite frankly, it was terrible. What should have been hot breakfast food was cold and greasy. I suppose under the conditions which prevailed, the bitter cold frost and hundreds of men to be fed in a short time in the open, we should not have expected 5 star service. Everything was white, the paddocks extending beyond the railway property looked like a scene from Antarctica as we shivered and shook.

Melbourne men went straight home. I had to catch a train to Murtoa on the Adelaide line 200 miles to the north-west. Under wartime conditions interstate train travel required permits, but from my Shell Company days I knew a man in the interstate ticket office so I got a booking for the next nights Overland express.

Having the next day to kick my heels up around Melbourne city while waiting for the train, I went into the News theatre in Bourke St. to see the latest news. This theatre did not screen films, only a continuous stream of news reels from around the world. In this way people could see a lot of the worlds events on a screen, these days of course they sit at home watching them on T.V. Interspersed amongst shots from around the world, there on the screen was the assault on Biak, with a segment showing my Shropshire blasting away firing full gun broadsides. She looked impressive if not awesome on the screen. I could have jumped up in my seat announcing that the film was spot on because a short 10 days ago I was there in person. But the Navy is the silent service, so I quietly left at the end, watching the faces of people to see if the sights they saw left any impression. Observing mostly wooden faces in the bustling crowd as they rushed back to their offices I wondered what would be their reaction if they knew that the lone sailor in their midst was part of the ship they had just seen. On reflection I don't think it would have meant much.

I stepped off the train just after mid-night, walked the length of the sleeping town of Murtoa. A hundred yards or so from home I heard loud and joyous barking from Robbie, a faithful dog who came bounding out to meet me. It was twelve months since I had seen him. I am sure he knew who I was, but how can one understand or explain the instincts of an animal, or their relations with humans.

Mother and Father were overjoyed to see me, barely able to overcome their surprise. However a quick decision was needed about what to say or not say. I quickly realised it is natural for mothers to worry or get emotional about sons at a war. I realised that to talk of 8 inch shells, firing guns, bombardments, and Evershead Bearing Indicators would focus mother's attention on situations that mother would associate with harm and danger, causing her much anxiety and worry. So I adopted the practice of talking about the locals, local affairs, in fact not talking about Shropshire or the war at all. To this day I don't think mother or father ever acquired any appreciation of my Navy life or living conditions on a warship.

I had 11 days in which to relax, enjoying civilian freedom away from the need to do everything as prescribed by the Navy. The local pubs could now be visited with impunity, for I was no longer an under-age lad sneaking in back doors. As a home from active service sailor, the old blokes,

particularly first World War fellows were pleased to chat away with a local lad who had apparently earned his spurs.

The impact of the war on the civilian population struck me when I accompanied my father to a youth fellowship meeting one night at Kewell, a congregation in his Murtoa parish. Most of these young people were doing a sterling job working on their family's farms, producing food for the war effort. They all knew me as a boy in Murtoa so I expected to be inundated with questions about life in the Navy, and what was happening in the campaigns waged in the north. Perhaps I would even be asked to give a little talk on the Navy. Surprise ! surprise ! They were so engrossed in the talk of running the farm or planning the next social event that I was hardly noticed, virtually ignored. I was not looking for some form of adulation, nor expecting any hero worship, for that would have been embarrassing. But there was absolutely no interest in my presence, or what I had been up to, which was after all, something very different when compared to life in a country town. This incident taught me that for many people, the war, men fighting and dying in far distant places, was not a factor which altered the lives of numerous Australians.

This did not apply only to isolated country centres. Many shipmates expressed similar views about the Australian population, and their attitude to the war. Sometimes in discussions on our mess deck, we would have a hate session on the perceived short comings of civilians. We were not alone in our hostility to the attitudes of the civilian population. General Sir Thomas Blamey got into serious trouble when he returned from the Middle East and accused people of leading a "carnival life and enjoying it". He went on to say, "I think the troops are more puzzled than anything else. They are puzzled by the grievances of people who are taking no risks, who are getting three times the amount of money as they are. They wonder about the making of heroes out of people who make shells but don't fire them." Today's propaganda about the sacrifices made by all Australians on behalf of the war effort would not have been well received on Mess 11.

But for now leave was to be enjoyed with family and visits to Horsham seeing my first boss Bob Hutchinson at the Shell depot, and catching up with his daughter Joan, who to this day is still one of my most loyal and faithful friends.

Back to Melbourne on the Overlander from Adelaide, boarding the train at 4.00am. Familiar faces in sailors uniform were wandering in from all directions and then we were on a troop train heading back to Sydney.

If you ever make a ship your home, do not visit it while it is in the hands of dock-yard workers. Shropshire was now covered with dirt, compressors, hydraulic gear and other pieces of docker's machinery. Fortunately I could spend most of my time off duty with my new found friends, the Webbs at Roseville.

Max was in the Persian Gulf, drafted to H.M.A.S. Gawler. Bernice Webb used up all her precious petrol ration tickets taking me on trips to places such as French's Forest and Bobbin Head on Kuringai Chase, Gilbert and Sullivan shows in the city, or the "flics" at the local theatre. Bernice's daughter Patricia usually accompanied us. Still attending high school, she was a delightful young lady and I think very pleased to be seen out with the family and her big brother's sailor friend.

By 29th June dock yard gear started to disappear and navy order took the place of docker's chaos. Shropshire was ready for its Fifth Tour of Duty. This tour was to last ten months, testing Shropshire and its ship's company to the limit.

Shropshire sailed down Sydney Harbour on a fine winter's day in the late afternoon. As we secured anchors and battened down for sea I watched the suburbs of Sydney and then the Heads glide by. Then we were pushing into the ocean swell, heading north. Strangely enough I felt very contented, perhaps even a little proud to be on the deck of this cruiser as we were watched by thousands of pairs of Sydneysiders' eyes from their homes or vantage points. Home leave had been wonderful, but compared with our mission, life in Australia had seemed hollow and mundane. There was a feeling of exhilaration as I sniffed the salt air as we ploughed on into the night. Little did I know that for the next 10 months Shropshire would be playing an important, at times dangerous, role in writing a new chapter in Australia's Naval history. The fate of the Japanese Empire would be decided in the campaign to liberate the Philippines and the Australian ships attached to the United States 7th Fleet would participate in the greatest naval battle the world has ever seen.

HEADING FOR THE TIGER COUNTRY

Shropshire cruised north, returning to our base in Seeadler Harbour. Off the Queensland coast north of Moreton Bay, Captain Showers asked for a speed trial to test engine performance after the refit in Sydney. During the trial I was manning the after Bofors gun. When on watch we alternated hour about between the Compass Platform and the guns which were manned while cruising along in the second degree of readiness. The after Bofors was mounted on the quarter deck right at the stern, where one could look over the guard rail and watch the wake as we churned along. Being directly above the four propellers which drove the ship through the water, the vibration and power of the engines could always be felt in this position.

We gradually worked up to top speed. It is difficult to find words to convey the sights and sounds of a 14000 ton warship ploughing through the ocean at well over 30 knots. That would convert to approximately 40 miles per hour, a very high speed for a ship of that size. The quarterdeck vibrated in an alarming fashion; the propellers churned up an enormous wake which streamed out astern for miles, dazzling white foam overlaid on the brilliant blue of the tropical sea, tons of water surged beneath the stern, cascading over and over to form the wake. A truly awesome display of the power of 80,000 horses.

Shropshire arrived back in Seeadler harbour on 5 July.

During a previous stay in Seeadler I had gone up to the Compass Platform one morning to check out a few things on the Evershead Bearing Indicator that I manned when at sea. Looking out across Los Negros Island, for Los Negros was a long flat strip of land no more than a few feet above sea level, and Shropshire's Compass Platform was 50 or 60 feet above the water-line, I was intrigued by the sight of some huge box-like objects just visible beyond the horizon, getting bigger as they got closer. All sorts of silhouettes of ships I could recognize, but had never seen the likes of this, massive boxes similar to an office block floating across the ocean. Before very long tugs could be seen towing these structures. They eventually negotiated the harbour entrance and were towed past us down to the lower reaches of Seeadler harbour. Men on deck gazed in amazed curiosity as they went by. What we saw was the start of a floating dry dock which must rank as one of the war's engineering master-pieces, comparable to the Mulberry docks used in Normandy. No journalist or historian seems to have written about them, although they were one of the Pacific war's unsung and forgotten engineering triumphs.

This floating dock was now ready for operation. From a relatively small cruiser force 9 months ago, the U.S. 7th Fleet had grown in size and strength by the addition of the rebuilt and modernised battleships sunk or damaged at Pearl Harbour. It was not long before we watched the 35,000 ton battleship, U.S.S. Pennsylvania move past us one morning, headed for this dock. The dock submerged, Pennsylvania was manoeuvred into place, and then lifted out of the water like a toy. The word got around that our new dock was large enough to lift almost any ship in the world.

The next two months passed rapidly, as Shropshire and Task Force 74 was called into action at Aitape along the New Guinea coast, Cape Sansapor at the extreme west end of Dutch New Guinea, and Morotai in the Halmaheras.

At Aitape the Japanese 18th Army was being squeezed between the Australian A.I.F. advancing in a brilliant and hard fought campaign from the east and the American 6th Army which we had landed at Aitape, Hollandia and Tanamerah in April. To gain access to a seafront the Japanese had consolidated their forces and were pushing hard at Aitape and at one stage it seemed that they might succeed. The Navy, as always, provided the heavy and destructive gunfire that helped save the day. We bombarded targets at various localities and one day we were given as target the Japanese Army Headquarters, which was found to be located at a small camouflaged area at Yakumul. It was smashed up after 92 of our shells hit it in a carefully devised and accurate pattern.

In 1998, the coast we bombarded was the scene of the frightful tidal wave which devastated the area causing horrendous loss of life.

The crisis at Aitape subsided, so Shropshire cruised to Humboldt Bay for fuel, stores, and ammunition. We tied up opposite a hospital ship, whose main attraction was the nurses sun-baking on the upper decks. They could be viewed by those on watch in the high places of Shropshire's superstructure. I can't prove this, but I believe a message was passed to the hospital ship to warn that the supposedly private sun-baking areas of the nurses were subject to the scrutiny of our sailors, so the order was "keep your gear on, girls."

Biak was revisited, the force anchoring in an area south of Biak called Mios Woendi. From there we sailed to support a landing at Cape Sansapor, where we were not required to fire a shot. This was all routine stuff, with nothing happening which has not been described before in detail, except to say that we were now getting many more "red alerts" from radar contacting "bogies". A bogy was an unidentified object, possibly a ship, but invariably was an aircraft. An aircraft "bogy" sent us scurrying to action stations, a tedious act if nothing eventuated, which was mostly the case. Bogies were always Japanese aircraft as our aircraft were equipped with a device which returned an identification signal when our radar beam made contact. No return signal meant enemy on the prowl. None of these radar contacts resulted in action, suggesting that the Japanese were simply keeping a close watch on our activities as we swept further and further west, threatening the vital supply lines between the Japanese homeland and their conquests in South-east Asia.

Back at Seeadler Harbour for a spell it was noticed that the medical staff had bright ideas about putting extra first aid boxes in gun turrets, engine rooms, the gunnery fire control points, and even the Carley rafts. Discussion on the mess deck was to the effect that it was nice to see the professionalism being put into our back-up medical services, but the extra attention could also indicate that someone in the know must think that we were going to places where these services were about to become a reality. My medical records show that we had been administered cholera injections in May, and again in October. As many south east Asian countries were notorious for the presence of cholera, this was as good as telling us that it would not be long before we left the New Guinea area and were heading for a rendezvous with the Japanese in places of more strategic importance. Not a nice thought, so it was thrust out of our minds on the grounds that we'll worry about it if and when it happens. Like the Boy Scouts, just be prepared.

This chapter, referring to the "Tiger Country", is taken from a much used and famous expression of "Guns", Gunnery Officer Lt Comdr Bracegirdle, who used it when addressing gunnery staff and guns crews for our next big operation. This was to be Morotai in the Halmaheras Islands, only 250 miles from the Philippines and 1500 miles from our first base in Milne Bay. Our now greatly increased Task Force, when compared with the early Task Force out of Milne bay, got ready for sea and set off. Captain Showers broadcast that the target was Morotai and that this time we could expect determined and heavy opposition from the enemy. There was one re-assuring sign. We now had in our immediate vicinity a force of "Jeep" aircraft carriers which provided us with a fighter cover constantly over our heads. Another sign of our growing strength, and the result of the colossal ship building programme in America. Jeep carriers were a smaller version of the huge Fleet carriers, the latter carrying 90 or more aircraft. The Jeeps were the converted hulls of transport ships of about fifteen thousand tons, and carried about 30 aircraft. They were relatively slow, 15 to 17 knots, only lightly armed and vulnerable if caught without protection, but they were a very handy adjunct to our Task Force when we sailed hundreds of miles beyond the range of land based fighter cover.

However, despite the warnings and forecast of strong Japanese reactions, I do not recall anything special about Morotai. Although the capture of Morotai was of great strategic benefit to the Americans, and later to Australian forces, from the point of view of a fighting operation it was a fizzer on two counts.

U.S. 6th Army Intelligence had expected an extremely savage reaction from a very large Japanese garrison. In fact we landed 28,000 troops to clean up 500 Japanese who fled immediately our bombardment and assault commenced. Japanese air or naval counter attacks never materialised for reasons unknown to us at the time. The Japanese were well advanced with their plans for countering the expected American thrust at the Philippines, but these would not to be known by ordinary seamen on the lower deck for a few weeks. In fact, already in February and March the Japanese Imperial Navy had placed its entire fleet in holding positions, waiting for the right time to strike at us as we forced our way north west across the Pacific.

Two important events which had a profound influence on Shropshire and the entire ship's company took place at this time. On our arrival back at Mios Woendi, to our initial dismay, we were told that Captain Showers was promoted and departing. Fully fledged heavy cruiser captains were in short supply in a relatively small navy such as the Royal Australian Navy, so Shower's replacement was to be a Royal Navy Captain by the name of Nichols. Now who would want a Pommie Royal Navy Commanding Officer of an Australian cruiser which was in turn part of a Task Force in the U.S. 7th Fleet. The questions flowed thick and fast around the mess deck. Will he be an R.N. disciplinarian with contempt for amateur sailors from the colonies? Does he know anything about Australians and their sometimes touchy relations with Poms? What would he know about the fast moving naval war in the Pacific and the conditions under which we operate? I can recall being off duty and watched from a vantage point as he did a tour of inspection, I think the morning after the evening he came aboard, the 18th July. He was not an imposing figure, small and slight, almost shy and hesitant, but he spoke to people without rushing around on his rounds. He had addressed us over the P.A. system telling us he had never been to Australia, we were the first Australians he had ever met, and he had flown out from England via the Panama canal, or was it America. He hoped we would all get on well and come to understand each other. A very quiet and inauspicious start.

Little did we know that Godfrey Nichols was to become the most loved and respected officer the entire ship's company had ever known. Efficient, precise, never over-bearing, wise and kind, courageous and cool under fire. As a lookout on the Compass Platform, although only an A.B., I saw him close at hand for hundreds of hours in some very testing situations, and never once saw him flustered, or as they would say today, never lose his cool.

The careers of Shropshire and Godfrey Nichols were welded together from this time on.

At the time we had no inkling of the other event. General MacArthur had attended a top secret conference in Pearl Harbour, with President Rooseveldt and the Chiefs of Staff, at which he argued strongly that the Philippines must be retaken. He argued that America must honour its promise to liberate the Filipino people, and that the Philippine Islands were strategically vital to the Japanese. In the Philippines the fate of Japan would be decided. His proposals were strenuously debated by those who proposed a strike straight across the northern Pacific or through Formosa.

MacArthur had returned from the Pearl Harbour conference to oversee the big jump to Moratai. Whilst on board U.S.S. Nashville during the Morotai operation, Washington advised MacArthur's headquarters at Hollandia that the assault on the Philippines was approved and scheduled for late October, subject in turn, to MacArthur's final approval and consent. Radio silence, always imposed on all ships for security measures during operations at sea, meant that this vital matter could not be relayed to MacArthur in person. The proposed dates meant that planning time was down to a minimum so MacArthur's Chief of Staff, General Sutherland took it upon himself to reply in the affirmative.

So the final seal of approval came from a Staff Officer, not the Supreme Commander. Of course Sutherland knew his master's mind, but nevertheless it was an unusual way in which our fate was decided. These signals started a chain reaction which led to the greatest sea battle the world has ever seen.

PREPARING FOR THE GREAT ASSAULT

My medical records show that we received a second cholera injection on 2nd October. As we had recently operated as far as the Halmaheras, this second injection was as good as a written message, telling us that the next show would be a thrust at the Philippines. There would have been no one on the foc'sle mess deck who was not firmly convinced that this would be our next target.

If anything, our training exercises intensified, including one day when we practised streaming paravanes. Paravanes were used to sweep mines. They were standard equipment for mine sweepers, but Shropshire, having been designed in the late 1920's as a multi purpose cruiser was equipped with them. Paravanes were long cigar shaped metal objects, attached to a steel wire which was in turn attached to the bow below the water-line.

They were set to travel through the water about fifty yards out from the ship's side. If the steel wire towing the paravane contacted an anchor wire of an explosive mine, the wire ran along to the paravane, where saw-toothed steel jaws cut the wire and the mine popped harmlessly to the surface. It is important to understand how the paravanes worked in view of what happened to Shropshire later on. For now, the fact that we were practising with this gear made us wonder what the "powers that be" had in mind. Naturally we concluded that we might be heading for dangerous territory infected with mines.

There was some light relief during this period. Commander Oldham was keen to keep his ship's company as happy as possible, and morale at a high level. He encouraged the formation of an amateur concert party, which actually turned out to be a very professional show. This show was so well received that it was invited to perform on other ships, as well as at an American entertainment amphitheatre ashore on Manus Island. The show bore the title of "Capricorn Capers". Our excellent ship's band provided a variety of musical items, and out of the woodwork came a host of actors, singers, and comedians of considerable talent. Surgeon Lieutenant "Doc" Bradley, later a well known paediatrician at the Melbourne Childrens Hospital, turned out to be a talented violinist, and Bandsman Chan Redding, later a star comedian at the Galleon night club in St. Kilda, laid them in the aisles with his comedy act. My role was humble. For our first performance the shipwrights erected a very serviceable stage right on the bow of Shropshire. Some of us on the Compass Platform mentioned that for stage spot lighting the portable Aldis Lamps used by signalmen on the flag deck would be ideal. So I got the job. On the night of the concert I hauled a battery on top of A turret which overlooked the stage, and with the aid of a variety of coloured cellophane paper, illuminated the various acts.

Commander Oldham passed the word around that the concert party was invited to the Gun Room after the show. The Gun Room is the name given to the mess of the junior officers, Sub Lieutenants and Midshipmen. Not a very large area, but capable of dispensing a large quantity of celebratory beers, of which we consumed copious quantities. I must have had more than my share, for next morning was a disaster. A small landing craft had come alongside to deliver a small consignment of food supplies, and I was sent over the side into this bouncing flat bottomed boat to load bags and crates into the sling for the crane which picked up the load and hoisted the goods up to the main deck. My head thumped, my stomach revolved, sweat poured off me, which was bad enough. Then I came to a sack of rotting, smelly onions which disintegrated on lifting, and spilled the putrid things over me. That finished me, I dashed to the side of the heaving barge and "threw up". This was the only time in thousands of hours at sea that I succumbed to sea-sickness.

It seemed that every day there were more ships in Seeadler Harbour than were there the previous day. The huge battleships that had been damaged and survived Pearl Harbour had been modernised in a miraculous fashion. West Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Mexico, Maryland, California, and Tennessee, some armed with 14, and some with 16 inch guns were ready for action. Aircraft carriers, troop carriers, infantry assault ships, L.S.T's, (Landing Ship Tank) and myriads of smaller landing craft stretched across the harbour. There could be no doubt that a storm was gathering, and it was not going to be an ordinary weather storm.

Our Task Force, by now a small part of the total force, left Seeadler Harbour for Hollandia in Humboldt Bay. Here was another huge array of ships of war, and enough transports to carry 40000 infantry who would be in convoy under our protective custody for the forth-coming expedition.

Shropshire's fuel tanks were again topped up, indicating a long time at sea ahead. More ammunition was loaded and our shell room bins carried a bigger stock than I could remember seeing before. An ominous sign was the increased stocks of armour piercing shells, telling us that not all our targets were likely to be shore based Jap installations that could not hit back hard. Armour piercing shells were designed to hit other warships made of steel, ships that would be hitting back. Captain Nichols had made a decision to load extra stocks of armour piercing shells, a decision that proved to be a wise and important one. This decision was made despite 7th Fleet's primary role of shore bombardment which used mainly high explosive shells. At this stage the American staffs who planned strategy and wrote up directives did not seriously consider or correctly forecast that the Japanese would use their entire fleet to destroy the Philippines invasion on the high seas. Their Intelligence Departments were sadly astray. When the time for action arrived the American battleships were embarrassed by a shortage of armour piercing shells which could have led to disaster. Our newly acquired Pommie Captain had been with us only one month but he must have had a unique capacity to read the enemy mind. His decision to load large stocks of armour piercing shells proved to be correct and in fact a remarkable foresight into Japanese counter strategy.

Friday 13th October was a dreary day in this vast harbour of Humboldt Bay. Heavy overcast, lowering cloud, and heavy rain. Late afternoon was the scheduled time for weighing anchor. With my foc'sle mates I mustered on the bows as we prepared to wash down the anchor chain as it lifted off the bottom, muddy and slimy as usual. It was hot and sweaty, rain poured down. In the murk, we could barely distinguish around us all the other cruisers of our force such as the Australia, Phoenix, Boise, destroyers Arunta, Warramunga, Ammen, Beale, Mullany, all old friends from many a past operation. They were all doing the same as we were, great activity on the foc'sle, getting ready for sea.

The anchor lifted off the bottom, the deck beneath our bare feet began to vibrate, the water below was sliding past, and we were under way, heading out into the Pacific. Some of my older mates with many years of service, and imbued with old naval superstitions were grumbling out loud, partly caused by the lousy weather, partly by the date of departure. Who were the stupid bastards who decided to sail on an expedition like this, on a Friday the 13th? And in weather like this. They must be mad, we're all doomed. I didn't feel doomed, only hot, sweaty, and suffocated by the humidity.

Better get to the cafeteria mess deck as "hands to supper" had been piped. Then it was dusk so hands to action stations. Dawn and dusk at sea were always danger times, so we closed up, checked and tested machinery to ensure it was functioning properly. When darkness settled in, the ship reverted to normal sea-going watches. The lookout team I belonged to kept the First watch, that is from 2000 hours (8:00pm) to 2400, that is midnight. So I was able to relax and rest for about an hour or so.

Captain Nichol's voice came over the P.A. system. Calmly he told us of our return to the Philippines, news that surprised no-one. His exact words were not recorded for posterity, which is a pity, but I recall his quiet confidence, his expressions of trust in us to do our duty on this great undertaking. Our exact destination was Leyte Gulf, a place quite unknown to us at the time, but a place that would be branded indelibly and forever in the minds of every man in Shropshire.

Clay Blair, in his masterly biography of General Douglas MacArthur, recounts the famous scene at the Adelaide Railway Station, in March 1942. The Allies had suffered one ignominious defeat after another at the hands of the Japanese, who appeared at that stage to be invincible. There was a mood of impending doom abroad. Reporters were pressing MacArthur for a statement. Blair wrote that his response became one of the most famous in military annals. MacArthur said he understood he was to organize an offensive against Japan, "a primary object of which is the relief of the Philippines. I came through and I shall return."

Nearly sixty years later you can quote this last passage to most young or old Australians and they know who said it and why. Well, here we were in Shropshire, fulfilling a prophecy, a promise,

and creating history. The lowliest seaman can say to his grand-children with pride, "I helped take MacArthur back."

Up on the Compass Platform at 2000hrs, I took over the Port Evershead Bearing Indicator, and carefully noted the bearings of our sailing companions. The force appeared settled with the cruisers and destroyers in their allotted stations, every now and then turning together as we pursued a zig zag course. Reports and orders were as usual given with an even voice and precise. The T.B.S. crackles from time to time with course alterations from the Flag Ship. We would hear "Course 310, execute to follow, acknowledge." Then would come our reply, "Porthole, willco." Porthole is Shropshire's secret call sign when at sea. We heard the other ships acknowledge one by one, and then comes "Execute." Our Officer of the Watch, (OOW), had his hand on the helm repeater, and you would hear the click, click as it is turned, and the call to the quartermaster below, "20 degrees starboard." A moment later the quartermaster replied up the voice pipe, "20 degrees starboard wheel on sir." Our great steel monster started silently to alter course to starboard, and I stared hard into the night as the black shapes of the ships around us changed bearing from us as we swung. I watched each one in my sector to make sure they were all turning the same way. A wrong turn crossing any other ship's course was a recipe for a possible disaster. We were now on our new course and the OOW ordered "Amidships", and the quartermaster replied, "midships sir." While still staring into the night, I could relax a little until the next zig zag order came through.

There was no special tension or indications of excitement on the Compass Platform, just the routine of an efficient cruiser at sea. But there was perceptibly a somewhat different, un-expressed and suppressed feeling.

Perhaps the very size of this operation had made an impression on the minds of officers and men. Perhaps the magnitude of the massed forces meant that this adventure would be, if not more difficult and dangerous, then at least it was going to be different.

If other men in the length and breadth of Shropshire had similar thoughts they did not realise how right they were.

THE RETURN

Our first objective was to safely convoy the mighty accumulation of troop and supply ships from Hollandia to Leyte. This meant we were in for a journey of five and a half days, chugging along at eight to ten knots, our speed limited to that of the slowest vessels we were escorting. Our course took us well over one thousand miles, and when considering the distance and the size of the operation, this was the greatest logistical feat of the Second World War. We learnt later that over eight hundred ships all up took part in the return to the Philippines.

Two days out from Hollandia, a converging force from Seeadler Harbour joined us, swelling our already enormous fleet. The weather was mostly fine, but as on other operations, we gazed at the smaller landing craft as they bounced around, and as before, thinking that we would not be an infantryman for all the tea in China. Five days of these conditions and then charging up a beach was not our idea of fun.

As usual, I enjoyed my watches on the Compass Platform. Here was history being unfolded before our very eyes. Our relatively new captain, Captain Godfrey Nichols, had quickly established himself as a leader, quietly spoken, but with a manner that inspired loyalty and affection. He would come onto the Compass Platform and speak to those on watch, obviously keen to know how we were all faring, making comments and asking questions. The Captain's high chair was only a few feet from the Port Evershead Bearing Indicator, and when assuming his seat for a look around he would invariably greet us with a "good morning", or appropriate comment. At times he would ask if I could see anything interesting and if so to let him know.

Four days out from Hollandia, we reached a point roughly two hundred miles off the east coast of Mindanao, the largest island of the Philippines. Mindanao lies to the south of our objective, Leyte. As we were steaming north west, Mindanao is way off on the port side. Towards the latter part of the morning, the T.B.S. (Talk Between Ships) crackled and some ship reported a radar warning, bogies, that is unidentified aircraft, certainly Japanese, away to the left, off the port side. A bearing was given. There was more chatter as the C.A.P. (Combat Air Patrol) was ordered to investigate. These days we had the luxury of aircraft carriers in company, so Hellcat fighters were continually overhead.

I swung the turn table of the bearing indicator, eyes glued to the powerful binoculars as they swept through the arc before coming to the given radar bearing. There quite clearly I saw five tiny shapes of fuselage and wings, but they were too far to identify the types. Radar again called their bearing which corresponded to the reading on my indicator dials. Radar's range was given as forty five miles. I reported my sighting in the usual manner, "bogies in sight", and I stated my bearing and the angle of sight.

Here was our first bit of action. Japanese aircraft were on the prowl, watching the movement and direction of the fleet. Captain Nichols had now come onto the Compass Platform, observing every thing that was happening. The Japs must have been aware that they had been spotted because they kept flying on a course diverging slightly away from us, thereby opening the range. Radar now reported them at fifty miles, and I could still see them.

Captain Nichols asked me if I was sure that I can see the Japanese and not our own fighters. I swung my bearing indicator to the right, picked up our fighters, still only about twenty miles away, as they headed for the Japs. He was intrigued that I could see so far, and asked if he may have a look. I swung back to the bearing that the Japs were on and Captain Nichols put his eyes to the binoculars while I slowly rotated the unit to keep the Japs on his line of sight. He stood erect with a look of amazement, said something like "well done lad", and suggested I keep track of them to see for how long they would be visible. Slowly the five aircraft spots merged into one big black dot, and eventually they disappeared out of sight. At this point radar was reporting them at a range of ninety five miles.

This was a remarkable phenomenon, which I put down to a combination of being blessed with good eye sight, the ability to concentrate due to rigorous training, and perhaps most important of all, that remarkable piece of equipment, the Evershead Vignoles binoculars. It was also an excellent

example of how a good Captain and leader wins the hearts and minds of his men in small but important ways.

On this day also, Warramunga's skipper, Commander McKinnon took ill. Our First Lieutenant, Lt. Commander Alliston was transferred from Shropshire to Warramunga to take over as Captain. A very fine officer, "Bluey" Alliston, and our loss was Warramunga's gain.

Our massive force sailed on and we even re-fuelled at sea again, another reminder that the coming conflict would require every available ton of fuel.

Dawn on the 20th October was the time for the main assault, but we were beaten into Leyte Gulf by a force led by U.S.S. Denver which cruised in on the 19th and started surveying and bombarding selected targets. Japanese reaction was muted as they were still not sure if this was a diversion. Shropshire and bombarding warships moved ahead of the transports on the afternoon of the 19th., and prepared to sail through the outer islands that formed Leyte Gulf. Leyte Gulf is a very large expanse of water so it was to take some six hours of slow sailing to get through the outer islands to our bombarding positions at the head of the Gulf before dawn.

Because we were now entering into narrow mine infested waters our anti-mine paravanes were streamed for this last part of our journey.

We now knew why we had practiced this operation back at Manus some weeks ago. The Japanese had mined these passages into the Gulf. Our operation was an extra precaution, for we learnt that ships like H.M.A.S. Gascoyne had done a brilliant and courageous job, sweeping and surveying right under the very noses of the Japs. An American Ranger unit had even secretly landed on and occupied one of the islands.

My first bit of excitement must have been shortly after mid-night when I was doing the middle watch on the Compass Platform. In tropical waters, bow waves and the wake of a ship give off a bright phosphorescent glow at night. The steel wire from the bow to the port paravane was a clear bright straight line in the water, and the outline of the cigar shaped paravane was clear and easily identified some forty or fifty feet from the ship's side, running straight and true.

Suddenly I was startled, I think more with curiosity than fright. The paravane was not running true, it was bobbing about and appeared much larger.

This called for a rapid report to the OOW, (Officer of the Watch.) Someone appeared in my corner of the Compass Platform, probably the OOW, and peered over the side. There was no certainty of what it was, and nothing could be done in the dark, so I was told to keep an eye on it. Then ASDIC, (Anti Submarine Device), housed down below, reported an echo, but it was an unusual echo, not immediately identified, nor could its distance be ascertained.

Listening to all this, I concluded that the bearing of the echo reported by ASDIC was the same as the bearing of the paravane to the ship. I reported accordingly. Gunnery Officer, Commander Bracegirdle was on the Compass Platform and had Captain Nichols called. He appeared from his sea cabin in his pyjamas, listened carefully to the reports that now concluded we must have a mine fouled in our paravanes, a very dangerous situation. He looked over the ship's side, said something about well done, and listened to the reports of the steps taken to ensure reasonable safety. He realised that in the dark and surrounded by other ships nothing could be done, so said to Cmdr Bracegirdle, "That's fine, call me well before action stations", and calmly retired to his cabin.

One of the amazing aspects of this incident was that nobody even thought of signalling the ships around us, or putting an announcement over our own P.A. system. Why alarm people needlessly when there was nothing we could do about it anyway? Every-one would know all about it soon enough at dawn.

At the end of the watch I headed off below for some needed sleep. Being one of the few who knew about the mine, perhaps prudence should have sent me to some spot aft, well away from the mine cruising a few yards off the foc'sle. At the time I must have thought nothing of it, just getting one's head down for an hour before action stations was more important than worrying about a mine exploding.

At dawn we mustered on the foc'sle to recover our paravanes and hopefully deal with the mine which had the explosive power to blow us into the next world. While recovery gear was being prepared, our foc'sle officer, Lieut-Commander Guy Griffiths grabbed the foc'sle locker man, "Pop" Ramsay and myself, and told us to get boat hooks from the locker and lash them together. We asked what for and were told that if the mine was hoisted out of the water and swung close to the ships side, we should fend it off with the boat hooks, preventing an impact and consequent explosion. Actually, unknown to us at the time, the real intention was to cut the steel towing wire to let the whole lot float free. While Pop and I were in the locker, wondering what a dangerous, if not bizarre situation we were in, and contemplating that this could be our last job on earth, we heard shouts and excitement outside on the upper deck. Dashing out we found that as the paravane shoe was being hoisted up, the mine popped free and started floating about twenty feet from the ships side and parallel to it. Shropshire literally inched past, while all men stationed on the port side, watched, fascinated as this deadly object floated past. When it neared the stern a smoke float was dropped as a marker, and Captain Nichols ordered a signal over T.B.S. to all ships, which said, "This is Porthole, (our code name) a Japanese mine marked by my smoke float has just passed down my port side. Porthole out."

In his account of this incident, Commander Bracegirdle wrote, "And you just think what the veteran ship's company did to achieve no panic, not to alert a line of ships and men in their bunks about their action stations. We kept the mine as our special secret until the end and then dealt with the matter, despite the extreme tension and danger to ourselves The trust put in us all by Captain Nichols and his controlled nonchalance was imparted down the line of this veteran ship's company."

Australian newspapers carried the story, to quote one, "Shropshire commanded by Captain Nichols had her first experience at mid-night. Suddenly the phosphorous wake of a mine was seen trailing abreast the bridge about fifteen feet from the ship's side."

Having got a little thing like a mine out of the way, it was time to get down to the business at hand. The battleships had already commenced pounding the landing beaches, and at 0850 hrs we proceeded through the battleship line to start our own bombardment programme along with other cruisers. Although we were very conscious that we were part of a massive history making operation, our bombardment was really no different from others. We sweated in our respective quarters, only for longer. After the main bombardment was over and the infantry poured ashore from their landing craft, we were still kept at action stations. From time to time the army ashore would run into fierce opposition, or approach a Japanese position that needed softening up, and we would fire off a few broadsides. Often reports came back on the results of these bombardments, and they were invariably complimentary about our accuracy and effectiveness.

When we finally got out of A turret to stretch our legs on the upper deck we were amazed to see amongst all the activity of ships and landing craft heading for the landing beaches, canoes, and in fact anything that would float, containing Filipinos who had got through the lines, probably at considerable risk. They had come out to welcome us as their liberators. In one small boat there was an elderly man, and a stunning looking girl, probably in her early twenties. Some of our fellows were throwing to these boats, or lowering into them, items such as cigarettes, or sweets they had bought from our canteen. I started up a conversation with the young lady by trying to talk in broken English, asking if she "speaky any English." A scornful voice said, "I speak English very well." "How did you learn ?" I enquired, and the answer was "I was educated at Manila University." So it was a case of "get back in your box." However, this welcome was a very touching incident, and we only learned much later when we could go ashore after the capture of Manila, how relieved were the Filipinos at our arrival. The cruelty of the Japanese to these people was as bad, if not worse, than that suffered by our own prisoners of war.

We had expected stiff Japanese resistance. Their air attacks were erratic, but constant during the day. Because of the huge area covered by our fleet there could be gunfire seen and heard when other ships were attacked, but this could be a long way off. Then, sometimes the attacks would be close. Towards evening a determined attack was made by Jap torpedo bombers who came astern of Shropshire, the resulting torpedo passing well astern, according to my friends who were on watch at the time. It missed several ships but exploded into the cruiser U.S.S. Honolulu, causing much damage, although Honolulu remained afloat after listing badly.

Every-body settled down for the night, mostly at or near action stations, except for watch keepers like myself who would be required to do their watches. I was glad to get up on deck into fresh air, climb up to the Compass Platform and do the morning watch, that is from 0400hrs. It was now the 21st October, and at the first signs of grey in the eastern sky it was back to action stations, this time to experience our Task Forces' first disaster. In the shell room we were doing our routine tests and checks ready for whatever the day may bring. Although down below in our secluded quarters, suddenly we heard and felt the 4 inch guns open up. A short break, and they were at it again. Silence except for the humming of machinery, then the loud speakers told us H.M.A.S. Australia had been hit.

There are several theories about this Jap attack, mainly because it was believed by many that this was the first recorded Japanese kamikaze attack. Others doubted this theory because Shropshire's gunfire may have been a factor in sending the Jap aircraft in the Australia's direction. (see appendix 5) The attacking Jap made his first run at Shropshire, our starboard side 4 inch guns were extremely quick and alert, getting away accurate fire which caused him to veer off. When well past us he turned and came back again at us low and fast, and once again the starboard guns got in bursts under his belly which thew him away from Shropshire heading for the Australia, which was also sending up a volume of fire. Unfortunately, he got through Australia's barrage and crashed into her foremast, knocking it over at an angle. Exploding around the superstructure and Compass Platform he caused frightful damage and fire.

After release from dawn action stations I was back on the Compass Platform to complete my watch, and could not take my gaze from the fire blackened superstructure, with damaged gear lying twisted all over the place. Through the powerful Evershead binoculars I could see everything as though it was only a few feet away.

The Australia was lying only a few cable lengths away, about five or six hundred yards. Men were still moving about with hoses and gear trying to get things back ship-shape. The "Aussie" looked a sad and sorry sight, with a lot of casualties, including the much esteemed Captain Dechaineaux killed and Commodore Collins badly wounded.

Commodore Collins staff was taken on board Shropshire, and Captain Nichols was given the honour of being Force Commander. This responsibility could not have been placed in better hands.

The down side of this move was that now our Compass Platform was often crowded with bodies from the Task Force command staff. It is amazing how parochial one can get even in war time. Our smooth, and by now, somewhat informal routine on the Compass Platform was disturbed by these extra people. Shropshire was our domain and a special family. Outsiders seemed to disturb the close, even though often unspoken, bonds amongst people who worked in a tight knit team, but were uncomfortable with strangers looking over shoulders.

In the late afternoon, the Australia and Honolulu, both incapable of fighting efficiently, were sent off to Manus, thence to Espirito Santo for repairs. One of our faithful escorts and companion, H.M.A.S. Warrumunga left with them as one of the guard destroyers.

For the next few days life was very much a blur. We were either on watch at the first degree of readiness, or closed up at action stations. Sleep was a very precious commodity, and I recall being at times so tired and bone weary. Our battle dress did not help, heavy long pants and long sleeved shirt being designed for temperate climates, so we were hot and sweaty, even more so than usual. Our clothes got grubbier and smellier, there being no time for laundering and showering. Contrary to regulations, and because nobody could see us, in our shell room we would work in shorts or jocks only, but when called on watch, I would have to dress quickly in the proper rig, which after all, was designed for our protection. (see appendix 6)

Japanese aircraft were monitored on our radar screens most of the daylight hours. Often they would be attacking other ships and we were not the target. However, under these circumstances it pays to be prudent, so it was a constant scramble for action stations, necessitating an almost continuous dash back and forth. When the Japs did get close our 4 inch guns and A.A. weapons were quick off the mark and accurate. We shot down our first Jap the day after the "Aussie" was hit, from then on building up a very respectable score. With so many ships firing at Japanese aircraft

coming in from a variety of angles, it was not always possible to say with certainty who shot down what.

One afternoon we cruised south down the coast to cover our destroyers bombarding Japanese strong points as the American infantry closed in on them. Through the Evershead binoculars I could see what appeared to be the remains of very old fortifications which I guessed went back to Spanish colonial days. It was a difficult place to root out Japs. I was fascinated by the way the infantry moved in to attack, dashing in and out of cover, using grenades and flame throwers.

The 24th October was a day radar kept us on our toes constantly. The Japanese were making an all out onslaught with their air force. At one stage radar had on screen as many as 80 to 100 bogies. The reason for this onslaught was not known to us until later in the day. Despite the enemy activity, battleships and cruisers were called in to tankers for re-fuelling. Tied up to a tanker while re-fuelling can be a very dangerous time, so cruisers and destroyers circled around the tankers forming a protective screen. Shropshire re-fuelled about mid-afternoon, by which time rumours were spreading. I cannot recall any official announcements, although this must have happened as Captain Nichols was meticulous in keeping the ship's company informed of important happenings. Every-one was "buzzing" with the news that the Japanese fleet was out in strength, and heading for Leyte Gulf, their object to destroy the ships that made possible the assault on the Philippines. This was why the Japanese had been so active with air attacks during the day. Japanese tactics were to weaken or soften us up for the final blow to be delivered by the battleships and cruisers of the Imperial Japanese Navy.

The first dog watch, 4.00pm to 6.00pm, passed without any untoward incidents, except more toing and froing on the Compass Platform, T.B.S. and signal traffic activity. It seemed that reports coming in about enemy ship's sightings indicated the Japanese would be on to us during the night. I have noted before in this story that prior to getting ready for action, there is an air of professional preciseness. No shouting or excitement, orders quiet and definite. It was still the same.

In our turret for dusk action stations we learnt that there was a problem with our H.E., (that is, high explosive) shells. Each gun hoist contained already five H.E. shells because we had been bombarding land targets, and A.P., (armour piercing) shells are needed when hitting enemy ships. To get the H.E. out of the system required a laborious and time consuming operation. Someone, we believe Gunnery Officer Bracegirdle, decided to leave the H.E. in place and simply keep loading A.P. after them. A fortuitous decision, for later in the early hours of the 25th, our first broadsides of H.E. shells caused havoc on the superstructure of the Japanese battleship Yamashiro.

I was back on the Compass Platform for the middle watch at mid-night. It was hot and still. Shropshire, Phoenix and Boise, with destroyer escorts, were cruising south and west of the battleship line, in what would become the right flank of the battle. Our battleships had formed a line which ran east and west across the width of Leyte Gulf. The destroyers were manoeuvring around and someone, presumably the OOW, called out to keep an eye on them. At the time I did not know what they were doing. This became clear only years later after reading the Official After Action Report of the 7th Fleet. We had taken up a position at the northern end of Surigao Straight, where the Leyte Gulf waters narrowed. It had been rightly concluded that the destroyers would not have sufficient room to attack in their current position, so they were sent a few miles to the south of us.

The T.B.S. was alive with excited American voices, reception poor and hard to follow. It was the P.T. boats patrolling the southern reaches of Surigao Straits. They were reporting their sightings of the Japanese fleet as it forged its way into the Gulf, and the P.T. boats were preparing to attack. Their reports were confusing, but I, along with every one else, now knew that the Japs were coming with a big force and we would have to face them soon. We were sent to action stations early.

Before entering A turret lower quarters there was a small space where the deck was cool because a cool room was below. I reckoned it would be some time before I was required in the shell room, so I laid down on the cool steel and dozed for a while. My mind was full of the battle that was coming, so I didn't really go to sleep.

It looked like tonight both Shropshire and men would be put to the ultimate test. We may be well trained, and we had become an efficient and deadly machine. But coming down from the Compass Platform, where I could listen to the latest reports, I knew that the Japanese navy was

about to throw at us the full weight of their remaining strength, including battleships and cruisers, and we must fight them to the finish. If they got past us into the transport area and landing beaches, they would destroy the vast operation we had brought so far and so successfully to Leyte.

I told myself there was no point in being afraid, that now was the time to be as effective and efficient as possible. Under no circumstances can I let down Shropshire or my shipmates. I thought of family and home, my Christian up-bringing and through my mind ran a few of the prayers taught to me as a child, including the all encompassing and sufficient for all needs, the Lord's Prayer.

As all this was passing quickly through my mind, I was aware of sudden activity. The time had come. I climbed down through the manhole into the shell room which was so familiar, every pipe, the steel wires, grabs and the monster bin in the centre housing the deadly cargo we were soon to fire off. I gripped the handles that operate the grabs, Mac McKenzie crawled over the shells ready to snap the grabs onto the shells, and Ben Roberts told us what we knew already, to load only Armour Piercing shells because that was what we would use that night. I gripped the control levers and ran the grabs up and down and across the shell bins and back.

We were ready to go.

ANNIHILATION

Sweating it out in our shell room, waiting to spring into action, we had no idea that we were part of the greatest sea battle the world has ever seen, or that the coming action would be the last time in man's history that war ships of the line would hammer each other to pieces with naval guns of immense calibre.

The shell room was normal, hot, noisy, smelling of hot oil and sweat. We passed the time in silence or in chatter about mundane things. There was nothing to do but wait. In our little hell hole below the water-line we could see nothing. It was like being in a dungeon cell, wondering what was happening in the outside world. Having come down from the Compass Platform where I had been on watch not long ago, I had seen and heard more than the rest of the gang. I knew that Shropshire, with our constant companions of many operations, was cruising about the middle of Leyte Gulf, and there were Japanese battleships and cruisers coming from the south through Surigao Strait, heading north. Their prime target were the all important transports and supply ships massed in the northern end of the Gulf.

Before the battleships and cruisers were in range, our destroyers had made a number of torpedo attacks which scored hits and slowed down the Japanese. Our H.M.A.S. Arunta led a group consisting of Fletcher class destroyers U.S.S. Hutchins and U.S.S. Beale. They pressed home their attack so closely that at one stage they were in the line of fire of our battleships and Admiral Oldendorf ordered them away out of danger from our own fire.

Then it was the right flank cruisers turn. In our shell room we could hear distant thumping, the sound of Phoenix and Boise opening up. Above us, through the manhole, we heard a roar from Petty Officer "Strawb" Johnson, the bloke in charge of A turret lower quarters. Strawb's nick name was derived from his somewhat bovine features, and his lack of empathy with those in his charge, although he was efficient and knew his job. He was shouting above the machinery noise that the Yanks were going to get all the glory tonight, and Shropshire must have been relegated to a minor role. Strawb was a survivor of H.M.A.S. Canberra, when she was so ignominiously sunk by the Japanese in the Battle of Savo Island, so his fierce, outspoken desire to start firing back at the Japs is understandable. He need not have worried. Our delay was due to a difficulty in our radar gunnery controls locking on the target and getting accurate range. He had hardly finished his raucous protest when above us our turret's guns went thump. Shropshire vibrated with the concussion, we were punching shells into the system as fast as we could go. This was no bombardment with methodical measured tread, ranged against selected shore targets.

We had picked as our target the Japanese battleship Yamashiro. Broadsides were fired off at an unbelievable rate. Stan Nicholls, in his definitive history titled "H.M.A.S. Shropshire", recounts that at one stage, from the firing of one broadside to the next "fire gong", that is the gong that warned of the next shot, the time was eleven seconds. There is reason to believe that this was the highest rate of fire ever achieved by an 8 inch gun cruiser anywhere. So rapidly was Shropshire firing that sometimes not all guns were loaded in time. Our gang was very proud and in fact smug about our efforts. "A" turret missed only two rounds and this was due, not to the supply of shells failing, but to some difficulty in opening the cordite canisters, the responsibility of another section of the system.

Although some of Shropshire's broadsides were five or six shells out of eight, the amazing result was that out of 32 broadsides fired, 19 straddled the target, the Yamashiro. A straddle means that most, if not all shells in the broadside have hit the target in a line, a terrible and devastating experience if you are on the receiving end.

Previously our story told of the problem we had with 5 H.E (high explosive) shells in the system, and these were to be followed by the much more important A.P., (armour piercing). By a strange twist of fate, our first straddles on the Yamashiro appeared to be a line of shells down her superstructure, where the H.E. shells started fires. After this her return fire did not seem to be co-ordinated or controlled.

Although Phoenix, Boise and the battleships were all firing into the Japanese fleet, when I listened much later to discussions on the Compass Platform about the firing patterns of all ships, it appeared that Shropshire's fire was considered to have been most accurate and played a very

important role in the destruction of the Yamashiro. The destroyer torpedo attacks and the gunfire of the cruisers was the dominating factor.

Some accounts of the battle high-lighted the destructive power of our battleships. We know that the battleships had been allocated the prime role at Leyte of shore bombardment, and they were embarrassed by a shortage of armour-piercing shells with which to fight other ships. In a bid to conserve ammunition, some of our battleships fired only four or five broadsides. One did not fire at all. After the cease fire came through, Shropshire fired one full broadside which struck the Yamashiro. This was the last hit on Yamashiro after which she turned over and sank. Whilst acknowledging the tremendous punishment the Yamashiro took from all ships, Shropshire can therefore claim, albeit with tongue in cheek, a major role in its sinking.

During the battle Yamashiro concentrated some of her fire on Shropshire, possibly because we used cordite as a propellant, which makes an enormous orange flash, so we would have been much easier seen than American ships which used a smokeless powder. Fortunately for us, and perhaps the reason why we lived to tell the tale, Yamashiro's fire was erratic. A flight of Yamashiro's 14 inch shells would have caused havoc on our relatively light armour. Four broadsides passed overhead, literally missing us by inches, and 2 fell short. Someone was protecting us that night. Eric (Slim) Curtis' action station was on the port pom pom, a weapon not used in this type of action, so he had a bird's eye view of the whole show. So fascinated was he by the roar of battle and the explosions on the Japanese ships on which his eyes were fastened, that he was not even aware of the shells which came close to us. But he clearly remembered the two great explosions as the Japanese battleships blew up and disappeared.

It took a long time to collate all the facts, some not revealed until historians started their research. The facts and figures are really an awesome indictment of man's destructive capacity. In just under fifteen minutes of gunfire, plus the time taken beforehand for our destroyers to launch their torpedo attacks, about one hour, we had destroyed two battleships and an unknown number of cruisers and destroyers. In human terms, the loss of life was estimated between 6,000 and 8,000.

There were later reports of Japanese survivors refusing to take life lines from American would-be rescuers. Such is the effect of war on attitudes that nobody gave this a second thought. If the Japs were so stupid as to refuse rescue, leave them to their own devices, and let 'em commit hara-kiri.

When we climbed out on deck at day-break to survey the sea scape after the night's encounter, we saw a dismal scene of smoke haze, oil slick on the water, and columns of smoke which indicated where Japanese ships had blown up and plunged to their deaths. Away to the south some of our ships were blasting away while in pursuit of what was one of the few Japanese survivors. This was the destroyer Asagumo, already badly damaged and she was soon put out of her misery and on the way to the bottom just after 7 o'clock.

In the meantime it was "hands to breakfast", for a long night's work and an historic battle are a good prescription for a robust appetite.

Had we known what was happening outside Leyte Gulf off the island of Samar, we would have, to use a favourite expression of my father, "our smiles on the other side of our faces."

Neither 7th Fleet commander, Vice Admiral Kincaid, or any of the Task Force commanders, had any idea that, while the Battle of Surigao Strait was being fought, the main Japanese fleet had sailed through San Bernadino Strait to the north of Leyte and Samar, and just before dawn had emerged into the Pacific Ocean, in a flanking movement to take us in the rear. This force under Admiral Kurita, consisted of four battleships, ten heavy cruisers, light cruisers and destroyers. One of the battleships was the Yamato. She was the largest battleship ever built, some seventy thousand tons, and armed with eighteen inch guns.

Kurita eventually sailed out into open waters, unmolested because the 3rd Fleet under Commander Admiral Halsey had sailed his enormous force northwards to attack another Japanese force which was placed north of Luzon as a decoy. Halsey's prime task was to guard San Bernadino Strait and protect the landing at Leyte from just such an eventuality as was now shaping up. He had fallen for a well thought-out Japanese stratagem, leaving the vital Leyte landings in jeopardy

The first thing anybody knew was when, at 0650 hours, a force of our small escort aircraft carriers, because of their size known as Jeep carriers, spotted the tops of Kurita's battleships coming over the horizon at them. Our carriers were stationed out at sea where they could manoeuvre when they launched the aircraft which provided us with our air cover. They had no adequate defence against this Japanese fleet, and they and their destroyer escorts took a terrible pounding. If Kurita's force swept aside our vulnerable carriers, and headed for Leyte Gulf, the 7th Fleet would be in dire straits. As previously stated, the 7th Fleet battleships were too low on stocks of armour piercing shells to fight another surface engagement, and in addition were in need of refuelling. On the other hand, the fighter protection provided by the aircraft from the carriers was vital to our safety. We simply could not afford to lose them.

Admiral Kincaid made a vital decision, the only one possible. Protect the carriers and meet the Japanese out at sea, even if this meant sacrificing some of his ships. Taking into account the fuel and ammunition problems of some ships, he chose a strike force most likely to stand a chance against Kurita's force. The battleships were Tennessee, California, and Pennsylvania, and the cruisers Shropshire, Louisville, Portland, Minneapolis and Nashville. By the time we were organised into a formation and steamed out into the Pacific it was 1000 hours.

Of course the dilemma of our higher command was not conveyed to us for some time, and we went about our normal duties unaware of the seriousness of the situation. In its usual uncanny fashion, the buzz was around the ship that something was up and more action was expected. By the time the Task Force was forming up and we were steaming out into the open ocean we knew for sure that there was more excitement on the way.

Captain Nichols settled all doubt by a broadcast that our force was required urgently to protect Leyte Gulf, and referring to last night's encounter and the sinking of our target, the Yamashiro, he suggested that he might be able to promise us another battleship, news which kept us on our toes and definitely indicated more action. Our new captain was turning out to be something of a fire-eater. I was not so sure any of us would have been all that excited about confronting the Yamato, had we known the circumstances.

I was not required on the Compass Platform until noon, so it was clean up ship and mess-decks in the forenoon. The top of my locker was in need of a sweep up to get rid of the dust and rust after the gunfire. I never did work out where dust comes from after being at sea for weeks because there is no dust on the ocean. Shropshire was 17 years old, so despite all our chipping and painting, there was rust hidden in joints and cracks which was dislodged by the concussion of gun-fire.

During the latter part of the morning our force adopted a blocking position, cruising north towards the scene of the battle which had been fought by our carriers, then east, then a full turn back to westward, always keeping a position between Leyte Gulf and the Japanese fleet.

Perhaps fortune favours the brave; in any case one of the war's naval mysteries then unfolded. Admiral Kurita's force had caused havoc among the small carriers who managed to evade total destruction by the gallant sacrifices of their escorting destroyers. They turned and attacked the Japanese battleships and cruisers in one of the most remarkable actions of the entire war. Behind smoke screens the carriers headed for rain squalls and escaped, but not before losing 2 carriers and 4 destroyers sunk, and 2 carriers badly damaged. Despite his overwhelming superiority in gun power, Kurita was thrown off balance by the courageous and savage counter attack of the carrier's escorting destroyers, and the air attacks pressed home by the aircraft the carriers had managed to get airborne.

In avoiding these attacks, the large Japanese fleet had become dispersed over a wide area, and Kurita had to waste an hour in re-grouping and concentrating his force. He changed course several times, at one stage heading south west for Leyte and our Task Force. He held this course for only about half an hour, then turned westward again towards Samar. At this point he would have had his huge force only fifty or sixty miles from us, a meagre distance when one considers that the guns of a battleship could fire over fifteen miles. At approximately 1030 hrs. Kurita received a signal from Tokyo advising him that Nishamura's force had been destroyed the previous night in Surigao Strait. Still harassed by air attacks, and concerned about his fate if he pressed on to Leyte, at 1130hrs Kurita

then made the decision to turn north and retire back through San Bernadino Strait. Of course, at that stage, no one knew that he was retiring.

In post war questioning by American Naval Officers, Admiral Kurita did not give convincing answers for this momentous decision. The best conclusions were that he had been awake commanding his force for over two days, his first flag ship had been sunk by American aircraft, a harrowing experience requiring transfer to the Yamato. By now he could have been beyond making clear decisions. He was concerned that American air power could strike him at any time causing severe losses. Remarkably, Japanese communications failed miserably, a sign of a navy losing its grip and efficiency, compared with its performance in 1941 and 1942. Kurita did not receive any word from Tokyo about the fate of Admiral Nishamura who we destroyed in Surigao Strait until it was too late, nor of the where-abouts of Admiral Ozawa off north Luzon. He did not know where the U.S. 3rd Fleet was, and if he broke into Leyte Gulf he was not sure of complete success. He claimed that by entering Leyte Gulf he would have lost the manoeuvrability he possessed out in the open sea. In his exhausted state he decided to save what was left of his fleet. His superiors in Tokyo made no condemnations of his action, and his courage was never questioned, although given the state of the kamikaze suicide Japanese mentality at the time, it is surprising that he did not make a charge into Leyte Gulf and take as many enemy ships with him to the bottom as he could, and he could have taken plenty. Such an action would have set back the American campaign timetable and extended the war by six months or more.

But to return to the time when we sailed out of Leyte Gulf.

For us, not knowing what was happening, the morning dragged on without sighting the enemy, and forenoon changed to afternoon. I had the afternoon watch, and for the first and only time was aware of tension on the Compass Platform. Nobody was visibly excited, but there was an extra degree of keenness, everyone feeling a need to be particularly alert, realising that we could encounter a force greater than we could handle. Nothing was said, it was a case of keeping a stiff upper lip. For a short while all those on watch recognised that we could run into deep trouble.

Today, 55 years after the event, very few Shropshire men realise what potential danger lurked over the horizon. Had Kurita pressed home an attack on Leyte, the stage would have been set for a possible naval disaster to equal Pearl Harbour or the Solomon Islands losses. At Surigao Strait we had out-gunned a dangerous, but smaller Japanese force. Off Samar the sides would have been more evenly matched, with the Yamato and her eighteen inch guns giving Kurita the advantage. But it never happened and we lived to tell the tale.

During the latter part of the afternoon watch, I made one of the few, if not the only, mistake in thousands of hours of look-out duties. I was dog tired, having had little sleep for days. The situation called for total concentration, eyes glued to the Evershead binoculars, sweeping the horizon and the square miles of water in between. I had to make special efforts to concentrate. I saw something in the water, perhaps a mile off on the port side, and immediately voiced my report, giving the bearing and calling it an un-identified object. Officers raised hand held binoculars in the direction of my reported object. Then to my horror and disgust, as I continued to stare at the disturbance in the water, I realised it was a school of flying fish, leaping up and down. Red faced I corrected my report, and got a frustrated snort from the Officer of the Watch.

Towards the end of the day it was certain that the Japanese thrust from the north had dissipated, so we cruised back to Leyte Gulf for the prime task of assisting the campaign ashore.

Although Shropshire was to experience many more months of excitement and danger in the Philippines, the surface battle, which went down in history as The Battle of Surigao Strait, in itself only a part of The Battle of Leyte Gulf, had resulted in a great victory for us. After this the Japanese Imperial Navy was no longer a force to be reckoned with. The Japanese, their Naval forces now decimated, were an impotent force, never again to pose any threat to the might of the United States 7th and 3rd Fleets. (see appendix 7)

For the victorious 7th Fleet, it was pats on the back and congratulatory signals all around. Some were posted on our notice boards, some just mentioned on the P.A. system.

General MacArthur's signal read, "The Australian navy played a full and splendid part in the successful landing at Leyte."

There were signals from Admiral Thomas Kincaid, Commander of the 7th Fleet, and Fleet Admirals Oldendorf and Weyler, all high in their praise for Shropshire's performance.

Perhaps the most touching and gratifying signal was from the U.S.S. Ammen.

The Ammen was a Fletcher class destroyer, who with H.M.A.S. Arunta and H.M.A.S Warramunga cruised as escort to Shropshire for thousands of hours. She was like a good and friendly neighbour, always ready in time of need. The Fletcher class were sleek, fast and pugnacious, and we worked together as a wonderful team. When going on watch it was good to see Ammen ploughing alongside of us or perhaps just ahead off the bows, giving one a comfortable and confident feeling. Ammen's signal is worth repeating.

"The Ammen desires to express her appreciation for the superb radar telling performance, so steadily and reliably, by Shropshire during the operations against the enemy just completed. The information supplied by Porthole (our code name) was of inestimable value in maintaining the Ammen alert and ready to deal properly with the Nips at all times. -- Captain of the U.S.S. Ammen, destroyer."

The Ammen continued to sail with us through thick and thin, until her illustrious career came to a sad end in a joust with a Kamikaze.

COME THE KAMIKAZE

The Battle of Leyte Gulf, including the important night encounter named the Battle of Surigao Strait, in which Shropshire had played such an important role, had secured the Leyte area and ensured that the Japanese Imperial Navy could no longer operate as a cohesive force. Japanese Navy Minister, Admiral Yonai said after the war "Our defeat at Leyte was tantamount to the loss of the Philippines. When you took the Philippines, that was the end of our resources." But although the Japanese Navy had retired from the scene licking their wounds, the campaign in Leyte still had a long way to go. The Japanese Army was re-enforcing its Leyte troops, fighting a bloody land battle, contesting every inch of the way. Out in Leyte Gulf we did not get a close look at the horrors experienced by the infantry, except on odd occasions when we would be called in for support when American troops ran into strong Japanese posts as they pushed down the coast south from the Palo area.

One day our Task Force was called on for a bombardment, and I will never forget the sight of our old friend, U.S.S. Phoenix firing ripple broadsides. Phoenix was armed with five turrets, each with three six inch guns. When she fired a ripple broadside the fore turret, number 1, (the Yanks used numbers, whereas we used letters of the alphabet), fired first, followed immediately by No 2, then 3 and down the length of the cruiser. By the time No 5 fired, No 1 was ready to fire again. The result was a continuous thunder and stream of shells pouring into the target. A truly awesome sight.

On the 27 and 28 October Shropshire was ordered out of Leyte Gulf to provide escort duties and cover for the Jeep carriers off Samar. Although we were not involved in any action it was an interesting experience to watch the intense activity as aircraft took off or landed. The Americans worked with a speed and precision which had to be admired. A flight of aircraft would return from bombing Japanese positions on Leyte and would have to be recovered in a hurry. One after another they would hit the deck, their under-carriage hooks would pick up the steel arresting cables and they would jerk to a stop before being man-handled into a parking bay. Four or five aircraft would land in almost as many minutes. On one occasion one pilot damaged his aircraft on landing, or perhaps his landing gear had already been hit. It crashed in a heap, and would have obstructed the next aircraft coming in to land. Rather than delay landings, this wrecked aircraft was simply pushed over the side. The courage of the pilots was phenomenal as the little carriers were usually heaving in the swell, but they took off and landed in all sorts of weather conditions, and still had to confront anti-aircraft fire or hostile attack by Japanese fighters. We owed these pilots a debt which we could never re-pay.

Although the navy was not suffering casualties on the scale of the Army ashore, we were far from inactive. The Japanese believed that the first experiments with individual pilots who committed suicide by diving onto ships were very successful. They had now organised Kamikaze squadrons on a large scale. Kamikaze can be literally translated "Divine Wind." They were now attacking in a more co-ordinated and systematic fashion. Aircraft carrying torpedoes made a more or less conventional attack, but the fighters and light bombers made no attempt to drop their bombs. They aimed straight for a target and, without deviating, crashed into the unlucky ship, the bomb and petrol fuel tanks exploding in a frightening blaze. In typical Australian fashion, someone produced the nick-name zombie, and from then on they were never referred to by any other name.

When I arrived at my post on the Compass Platform after dusk stand-to one evening, the bloke I relieved reported that Nashville had just advised a Jap had dropped a torpedo which passed only a few feet astern. In the confusion with other zombies around, no one on Shropshire had even noticed this surprise attack.

During the Battle of Leyte Gulf the powerful U.S. 3rd Fleet consisting of the huge and fast modern aircraft carriers had operated out in the Philippines Sea. The 3rd Fleet had been at sea since early October, dominating the air over the Philippines and giving the landing forces, including us, very effective air cover. Refuelling and re-ammunitioning this large force was creating problems, air crews needed rest after almost continuous flying, so they retired to bases for refits and resupply. Although we still had the services of the remarkable Jeep carriers, the absence of the 3rd Fleet gave the Japanese the opportunity they had been waiting for. They launched their Kamikazes in co-ordinated savage attacks.

The 7th Fleet in Leyte Gulf was subjected to almost constant alert with bogies on the radar screens all day. Early in November, I think the first and second day of the month, the Japs gave us an especially torrid time. The normal routine of keeping watches and dashing off to action stations when an alarm was raised went by the board. On days like this we were cooped up at action stations virtually all day because our eight inch guns could also be used against aircraft. Shropshire had perfected a system whereby we aimed an eight inch gun straight at a "zombie". When a zombie was committed to his attack, his flight path was a straight line, so it was a case of pointing a gun straight at him. We fired an high explosive shell set to explode at 1500 yards, and a shell that size, even exploding within 250 feet of the Jap, was enough to throw him off course, and if we got reasonably close was enough to bring him down. The first time we used this weapon was dusk one evening during kamikaze attacks, and after we fired there were urgent calls from some of our American companions who had never seen a gun that size fired into the air at aircraft. Every ship was quite familiar with the sight of a barrage of smaller calibre anti-aircraft weapons, but not an eight inch gun with its huge flash. Their first reaction, and concern, was that Shropshire may have taken a hit. Frantic signals were soon dispelled with assurances that we were only getting our own back.

On the busy days I was describing we had some unfortunate losses. Attacks were pressed home on some battleships and cruisers, but the Japs seemed to concentrate on our destroyers, no doubt fully aware of their superb work in escorting and protecting their larger consorts. We lost three destroyers and other ships suffered hits and damage.

One of our early successes turned nasty when a Kamikaze we hit went out of control and smashed into the destroyer Claxton, causing a lot of damage but not sinking her.

Our faithful watch dog, U.S.S. Ammen copped a beauty. A Jap appeared to be thrown off course by our gunfire, and then headed for Ammen. Its fuselage went between her funnels, the wings clipping off most of the forward funnel, and knocked off half of the after funnel. There was considerable relief that her damage was minimal. Later on, watching Ammen from my usual spot on the port E.B.I. , she looked a funny sight as she patrolled with us for the next few days, with hardly any funnels, fumes from her boilers obviously making a mess of her aft superstructure, and causing much discomfort to the men above decks. Repairs were needed, and eventually she could be relieved. We had to say a sad farewell to a gallant ship when Ammen sailed off for a refit and a well earned rest.

The Ammen had become quite a mascot to Shropshire. In fact, she might be unique in the United States Navy. The United States Navy had a rigid practice of no liquor on board ships. When appropriate, beer was provided at canteens or recreation places on shore. Australian practice was no beer at sea, but in safe harbours, and when beer was available, we received a ration, which, by the way, we paid for. The Ammen had been our close escort for nearly twelve months through all the operations, starting with training exercises in Milne Bay through to the Philippines campaign, and she considered herself very much a part of the Australian scene. She claimed the right to consume their beer on board as Australians did, and apparently won that right. My American friends deny that the United States Navy would ever break a rigid and ancient practice, but this is recorded in the first history of Shropshire printed after the war titled "Porthole."

Another Fletcher class destroyer, the U.S.S. Abner Read took a devastating blow from a zombie which set her ablaze. I still have a snapshot, taken by someone on our Compass Platform, showing her in the distance with a huge pall of smoke rising thousands of feet into the air. Then occurred a remarkable and nearly disastrous accident. Presumably caused by the fire and heat, Abner Read's torpedoes fired, running in the direction of ships around her. Astern of us the battleship Mississippi tried to increase speed and swing away, her 5 inch guns firing rapidly into the water ahead of the torpedoes, hoping to explode them before they reached her. Fortunately they missed us all and ran on until out of fuel.

Refuelling could be a problem when "bogies" were about. Ships were instructed to get alongside the refuelling tanker as quickly as possible, refuel, and move off again. It would not be very pleasant to be tied up to a tanker during a direct attack by a Kamikaze. On one occasion we had to refuel from a tanker that was anchored fore and aft at right angles to the wind. The object is to come in parallel to the tanker, throw lines across and tie up. Shropshire had to tie up port side to,

on the lee or protected side. This meant that as soon as our bows were in the lee of the tanker, the stern started to swing away, and this happened several times, leaving our bows pointing at the tanker with no alternative but to back off and try again. I was on watch at my usual spot at the Port E.B.I., observing with increasing curiosity as we botched the attempts to get alongside. I listened to the T.B.S. as our flag ship was now calling for "Porthole" to hurry up and get refuelled for there were reports of bogies prowling around. Captain Nichols was on the Compass Platform and true to his style and character, told the Officer of the Watch that he would take over. He was going to take all responsibility for this difficult manoeuvre.

Shropshire backed off, Captain Nichols ordered quite a few more engine revolutions so we could get alongside quickly. All seemed well until an extra strong blast of wind again started to swing us around. We were now moving smartly with our bows pointed at the tanker at an angle of about 30 degrees. Our line parties were on deck ready to heave lines to the tanker's seaman who were ready to catch them. Then I realised there was danger coming up. From Shropshire's Compass Platform I was looking down on the tanker's deck. Flush with her side, built on steel uprights about 10 feet high was a Bofors gun platform, and this would be the point of contact when we hit. The gun's crew was lazing about, and I saw one bloke lounging back in his seat reading a book. Then a warning shout went up just before our bows, with thousands of tons of steel behind them, ground into the parapet of the Bofors' platform.

Although this platform was a heavy steel structure, it was pushed over like match sticks at an angle and bodies were jumping out of the way. Despite the chaos, our lines were secured, first for'ard and then aft, fuel lines were across, and the precious black life-blood was pumping into our fuel tanks. We signalled all the necessary apologies to our tanker friends. I believe the bloke who jumped off the gun platform sustained only a broken ankle and the rest were OK. but frightened out of their wits. Shropshire's bow got a great dent in it which she carried to the end of her fighting days.

If Shropshire had caused havoc with a friendly tanker, she in turn suffered a blow from a friend. H.M.A.S. Gascoyne had done a sterling job in the Leyte campaign, mine-sweeping, hydrographic surveying, and repelling air attacks. She came in to tie up alongside of us on some errand, and her skipper brought her in too fast and at an angle. I was on the foc'sle waiting to secure the tying up lines, wondering what to do, at the same time knowing that it was too late to avoid a thump anyway. It is a pretty awesome experience to watch a thousand or so tons of steel come rushing at you. The impact occurred in the vicinity of the port davits, rendering them un-usable, leaving more damage to reputations than ships.

Despite weeks at sea in almost constant action of some sort or other, we were in pretty good shape, morale at a high level. The one legitimate cause for grizzling was the total absence of mail, which was our life-line to family and friends at home. Our Captains had previously made official complaints, but an adequate system seemed beyond the capacity of the naval bureaucrats back in Australia. Eventually ships were returning from a spell back in Seeadler Harbour. Some of these brought back mail, and a naval supply ship caught up with us. In a few days five weeks of mail arrived, flooding us with out of date letters. My only memory of huge piles of mail bags was a parcel from my Mother containing the standard tin of fruit cake that was sent to Australian servicemen all over the world. In its long journey this tin was battered, and now not properly sealed. On breaking it open it stank to high heaven, mouldy and rancid. The smell put me off fruit cake for years. I tossed the parcel overboard in disgust and watched it sink out of sight.

The Leyte campaign was proceeding successfully, so ships were being sent back to bases for brief rests, clean-up and re-supply. Shropshire's turn came around, so with old friends Arunta, Phoenix and Boise we set sail, this time accompanied by the battleship U.S.S. Mississippi.

Shropshire was cruising in Mississippi's wake one afternoon when Mississippi decided to do a practice throw-off shoot. A destroyer was sent out on our port side a few miles off as a target, and Mississippi prepared to open up. Watching with intense interest, because I had not seen at close range a battleship fire before, having usually been below decks at action stations during bombardments. I hoped that for the target destroyer's sake Mississippi would get her throw-off angles right. From my grandstand view on the Compass Platform I watched Mississippi's 14 inch

guns thunder away and through binoculars saw the splash of her enormous shells land comfortably in the wake of the destroyer. Good shooting!

In this era of motor racing my friends who regularly watch events like the Indy on the Gold Coast, describe their fascination of the roar and power of the hotted up racing cars. In my humble opinion, until you have seen and heard a battleship fire a broadside, as they say in the classics, "you ain't seen nuthin yet." It was an imposing sight.

We arrived at Seeadler Harbour in the Admiralty Islands on the 21 November, somewhat surprised to find it, by previous standards, quiet. So much shipping that crowded the harbour before had been drawn into the Philippines' campaign.

However it was still a busy and interesting place. The huge floating dry dock was busy occupied with, of all things, U.S.S. Canberra. Canberra, named in honour of our sister cruiser, H.M.A.S. Canberra, which was lost in the Battle of Savo Island, had been crippled by a torpedo attack whilst off Formosa on 13 October. Her journey back to Seeadler Harbour was an epic story of survival. She literally clawed her way back through storms and trials for forty eight days, at a speed of only 2 or 3 knots, arriving safely on 17 November, just before Shropshire sailed in. Some of the old Canberra hands were wondering if there was some Jonah attached to the name Canberra. A party of U.S.S. Canberra veterans visited Australia in 1994. The Gold Coast entertained them right royally, cementing fine friendships.

Apart from our 4 inch guns, Shropshire's anti aircraft weapons were mainly the 20 mm Oerlikon gun with an effective range of only 1000 yards. This weapon was not good enough to handle the new Japanese terror weapon, the Kamikaze suicide aircraft. Hitting a Kamikaze with a bullet or small shell was not enough, you had to literally blow them to pieces. We had only two Bofors guns, 40mm pieces that were effective to 5000 yards and needed more. Formal requests had been made, but these guns were needed in a hurry. The story goes that our ever resourceful "Guns", Commander Bracegirdle, did some effective lobbying and seductive entertainment on American ordinance officers. Within a matter of hours a mob of American naval construction workers descended on Shropshire, decks were ripped up, gun mountings welded into place and Bofors guns mounted. Shropshire now bristled with about 15 more Bofors, and it may well have been these guns that were to save us on occasions in the months to come.

Cleaning, painting, loading stores and ammunition was the order of the day, broken by some organised trips to Pityilu Island at the entrance to Seeadler Harbour. Pityilu had been the target for our guns 10 months ago, but now it had been converted to a recreation area for sailors. There were areas for swimming and sports, mainly baseball, plus a huge refrigerated store with ample supplies of American beer. I put away far too much beer to worry about recreational exercise, anyway I was lean and fit and did not need strenuous activities, only rest and relaxation.

We were reminded that the war in the Philippines was raging on by the arrival of damaged vessels crawling into harbour for repairs. I would go up to the Compass Platform, usually a very quiet place in harbour, and check out any interesting sights, and if my memory serves me correctly U.S.S. Houston was another cruiser that was towed into harbour with most of her stern blown off. U.S.S. Canberra, as already stated, was in dry dock when we arrived.

It is interesting that I cannot recall any grizzles expressing a desire to go home. It was a normal facet of shipboard life that there was always someone with a "buzz" that we were heading home, and with reasons why and when. After two months of the strenuous campaign in the Philippines, the Battle of Surigao Strait, and the advent of the Kamikaze counter attack, it could well be that many fellows would think that we had done a good job and deserved a spell back in Australia. If anyone did think this way, they did not say it out loud, certainly not in my presence. There was no need for any propaganda or pep talks. As we sat around and nattered about the Philippines, we worked out for ourselves that the capture of the Philippines was a nail in the Japanese coffin. We also knew enough geography to realise that Leyte was only the start, and that to beat the Japs on the island of Luzon and take the capital Manila would require another tremendous effort. Unless I was sadly mistaken, our growing confidence, particularly after the last two months performance, engendered a feeling of "lets get back there and finish the job." We were living in exciting times and proud to be a part of it. Perhaps we could be accused of a certain elitism. The tremendous thrust which was

destroying the Japanese empire was now in the Philippines and although a small force, we were the representatives of Australia in this great and historic effort.

For those in the concert party there was some light relief in a trip to Lorengau, the main base on the island of Manus. The Yanks had built a large amphitheatre holding four or five hundred, and a stage to match. Word of our excellent show, now named Capricorn Capers, had got around and a packed amphitheatre saw a really good show. The crowd particularly enjoyed the comedy and story telling of Chan Redding, who literally laid 'em in the aisles. Because the Yanks had plenty of permanent lighting facilities my job on the spotlights was made easy.

Christmas dinner was held on 17th December, a magnificent feast of turkey with all the trimmings. In old traditional Royal Navy style officers became seamen, performing many of the mundane and dirty tasks, including handling the offal drums when the offal barge came on its normal run collecting the ship's offal and garbage. The whole ship was a riot for most of the day, aided by the copious quantities of food and drink. If there had been any Japs around to attack they would have handled us with ease.

Seeadler Harbour was getting a much busier look about it, more ships, both warships that had finished a clean-up after Leyte, and transports. We knew all the signs which were now so obvious, it must be getting time to sail again.

H.M.A.S. Australia re-joined after rapid repairs at Espirito Santo, ready for action.

On the real Christmas Day, 25th December our Task Force set sail for the Palau group of islands, the first stop on the way to Leyte. If anyone had experienced the shakes during our Leyte Gulf adventures, it was just as well that they had no idea what would happen to us in the first few weeks of January.

THE ZOMBIE STRIKES BACK

Our Task Force which departed from Seeadler Harbour on 25th December consisted of H.M.A.S. Australia as flag ship, flying the flag of Commodore Farncombe, who had replaced the wounded Commodore Collins. Australia had undergone rapid repairs after the damage at Leyte and was ready for action. With the Australia was Shropshire, escorted by Arunta, Warramunga, and USS Nicholas. All very familiar, except that Nicholas was a new Fletcher class destroyer replacing our old stalwarts, Ammen and Mullany.

We cruised into Kossol Roads in the Palau Islands for a brief stopover, refuelling and taking on ammunition. Palau seemed a dreary place but I remembered it for two reasons. I caught a nasty dose of the flu, perhaps a forerunner of the Asian viruses that are now so familiar. We were to load eight inch shells. To get an eight inch shell into the shell room below, we had to open a series of hatches at each deck level. These hatches were in line. A block and tackle was rigged over the hatch on the upper deck, and the shells then lowered right down to the shell room where some blokes were waiting to swing it through the opened shell room hatch into the storage bins. On this occasion my job was to guide the rope and shell, keeping it straight and steady, down to the shell room and when the blokes below had it under control, call out to my blokes who were slowly lowering away, to let go. To do this safely required a keen eye and good judgment. My head was aching and swimming, my eyes sore and watering, I felt wretched. After about the 4th or 5th shell was lowered I misjudged the height of a shell, still a few feet above the shell room platform, called for my blokes holding the line to let go, and the 250 pound shell crashed down, fortunately missing everyone. Thommo, the Petty Officer in charge of our little party rightly started to abuse me, wondering how I could be so careless. When he saw how miserable I looked and was told how sick I was, he sent me straight off to the Sick Bay. This was one of only three times I attended the Sick Bay.

The other reason for remembering Palau was the tragic death of Damien Parer. Parer has nothing to do with Shropshire, but his work deserves a place in Australia's history. Before enlisting I had attended a lecture by Parer in the Melbourne Town Hall where he showed the dramatic and exciting films he had taken during the Milne Bay campaign. Despite his brilliant work as a war correspondent and film maker, he was shunned by Australian authorities and he soon found a job with the Americans who recognised potential when they saw it. Sadly, Parer was killed at Palau. His success was based on keeping up with the infantry to get authentic real life film. On this occasion he ventured out in "no man's land", ahead of the infantry, filming an attack on the Japanese.

From Palau we sailed to Leyte, back to familiar territory. Bogeys on the radar screen, and the by now commonplace dash to action stations were just like old times. If the bogeys and accumulation of war ships did not tell us any messages, the battle dress preparations did. At action stations we were required to wear anti-flash gear which consisted of a hood that came down almost to our shoulders. The hood had a visor in front so we could see, and a padded cloth covered mouth and nose and was tied behind our heads. This gear was designed to protect us from burns. Statistics showed that a very high percentage of casualties were burns. We were instructed to muster on deck with our anti-flash gear, which was immersed in special anti inflammatory solution to give us added protection. Nobody had thought to put us through this procedure before, so the obvious message imparted to us was that we were about to embark on a mission where casualties could be expected. Most of us were cocky enough not to bother too much about this, especially when Harry Mason refused to shave.

Harry came from England where he had attended the famous Harrow school. He was a typical un-flappable Englishman, somewhat older than most of us, enlisting as a seaman because there were no records in Australia to check his age.

Seventh Fleet Command had produced alarming statistics about the burns suffered in Kamikaze attacks. Hairy and bearded men suffered the worst burns. A crashing Kamikaze sprayed burning petrol everywhere, and if splashed into hair or a beard it caused terrible wounds. A fleet order was posted on notice boards that all beards must be shaved off before the coming operation. Within hours Shropshire's ships company was clean shaven, all except Harry. He was duly charged, and fronted the Commander's defaulter's table. Harry told us the story, which goes something like this.

Commander. Mason, you have not shaved?

Harry. No Sir.

Commander. Everyone else has obeyed the order, why not you?

Harry. Well Sir, Drake might have singed the King of Spain's beard, but the Japs are not going to singe mine.

Flabbergasted and speechless, Commander Oldham dismissed Harry with no further comment. Harry Mason must have been the only man in this vast fleet with a beard.

At Leyte we again topped up fuel and took on more ammunition. This was a continuation of Captain Nichols' very wise policy of "its better to carry too much than not enough."

Our stay at Leyte was only a short stop-over. In the early hours of 3rd January we sailed from our anchorage at the top of Leyte Gulf and by dawn had passed through Surigao Strait between Leyte and Mindanao, the scene of our great victory two months ago. We now saw the whole length of the straits up which the Japanese fleet had sailed to meet us on that fateful night of the 24th / 25th October. It was about this time that Captain Nichols gave his usual address over the loud speakers, and told us we were headed for Lingayen Gulf in Luzon, north of Manila.

The Japanese were expected to react with utmost ferocity, especially with their new weapons like the Kamikaze, so some casualties could be possible.

He made a special plea to keep firing right to the last when under attack, that last shot might be the one that throws a Kamikaze off course or knocks him down. This applied particularly to the anti-aircraft guns crews.

As a dedicated and sincere Christian, Captain Nichols reminded us that we should not rely solely on our undoubted fighting efficiency, but to also place firm trust in God and our cause. It is a great pity that his message was not recorded or notes kept for history's sake. He spoke for only a few minutes, but his tone and quiet demeanour, his frankness and honesty was both inspiring and comforting. Australians are not very emotional or responsive in situations like this, and we were by now a long serving and hard bitten ship's company. No one got excited; there were no hearty cheers; every body just carried on doing the jobs they were engaged in; but Nichols' quiet steadfastness, and the confidence he expressed in his ship's company, infused in us a determination not to let down our Captain or Shropshire.

The force now heading for Lingayen Gulf was even bigger than the Leyte operation. It was divided into three large groups, the first group with the hydrographic and survey ships that included our own Gascoyne and Warrego. Next came over fifty warships that would be the main bombardment group, battleships, cruisers and destroyers, with Shropshire in the van and Australia astern with a group of six escort carriers. The third group was a massive array of landing ships and transports, including our Manoora, Kanimbla, and Westralia. This last group extended for over forty miles from van to rear, and was due to catch up with us three days after we commenced the bombardment at Lingayen.

Our first full day at sea, 3rd January was comparatively quiet. I kept the usual watches, my flu having abated and I could man the Port Evershead Bearing Indicator with renewed interest, once again fascinated by the size and power of our force, ploughing along in formation through calm seas. Not for the first time I had that exhilarating feeling running through my mind. There I was, a young man watching important events of world history unfolding before my eyes. This was exciting stuff. Although there were reports of "bogeys" about, I cannot remember any exciting alarms on this day or through the night.

The next day, 4th January, the Japanese made their first concentrated attacks. Sometimes we were not fully aware of what was happening because our forces were strung out over such a vast area, and we could not see an attack fifteen or twenty miles behind.

Disaster struck in the latter part of the afternoon when a Jap zombie crashed into the air craft carrier USS Ommaney Bay. She eventually had to be abandoned and sunk. Towards dusk H.M.A.S. Gascoyne did us a great favour. Gascoyne was in the rear of the leading group ahead of us, approximately two miles away. We missed sighting a Jap zombie coming in over us in a dive, but

Gascoyne got away one shot from a 4 inch gun and scored a direct hit. The Jap disintegrated and bits of aircraft fell all around our quarterdeck. Excellent shooting !

During dusk our guns opened up and we wasted ammunition on, of all things, the planet Venus. Our embarrassment was minimal because we were not the only ship that opened up. The goddess of love sailed on un-molested.

The early morning and forenoon watches of the 5th., passed with many "bogey" reports, but no direct attacks in our vicinity. I was on duty at the Port E.B.I. for the afternoon watch, and as can be imagined, scanned the sky extremely diligently, as well as the vast armada around us. Two enemy cruisers were reported during the middle of the afternoon, presumably coming out from Manila Bay which was way off to the north east on our starboard side. Destroyer USS Bennion and our Gascoyne and Warrego gave chase, but the Japs, now identified as only one destroyer, turned tail and escaped back to Manila.

During the afternoon the number of bogey reports increased, so that it was time for everyone to scurry for action stations. Radar had on the screen between fifty and sixty Japanese aircraft, and these did not scout around, but pressed home relentless attacks on the ships they targeted. Fortunately for Shropshire, the majority of attacks were on ships of our rearguard, some miles astern. During the next hour seven ships sustained hits of varying seriousness. Two of the victims were the Australia and the Arunta. Shropshire was now fully alert with all hands at action stations. I was back in "A" turret shell room, nothing to do but sweat it out and wait, because the eight inch guns were not required for the moment. When our running commentary over the speakers announced that Australia had been hit we could not believe her ill luck. Knocked out at Leyte two months ago, she was back in time for this great operation. Now, two days into action she copped it again. The official report tells a sad story. Although the material damage was not great, there were fifty five casualties among the Bofors and four inch guns crews. The loss of these trained gunners made it more difficult for Australia to throw up sustained and accurate anti-aircraft fire, a condition which was exacerbated as this operation progressed.

The other casualty, H.M.A.S. Arunta, was near missed when a Jap aircraft exploded close to the ships side, sadly killed two sailors, holed her in several places, and damaged her steering gear causing her to cruise around in circles. This gave me some anxiety because two of my best friends from our class at Flinders Naval Depot, Billy Stevens and Ron Smith had been drafted to Arunta, and I believed they were manning Bofors guns.

Arunta had to stop dead in the water for repairs, a very dangerous time for her. She was protected by USS Ingraham, who circled around her until repairs were effected, and both destroyers caught up with us just before midnight.

In addition to Australia and Arunta, the Japs had made damaging hits on the battleship New Mexico, the cruisers Columbia and Louisville.

The night gave us relief from attack, so we cruised on to be off Lingayen Gulf before dawn. During the night I did one watch on the Compass Platform, but cannot remember any incident of note. Well before dawn we were up for an early breakfast, before all bombarding ships started for Lingayen Gulf and commenced the softening up bombardments. Breakfast turned out to be the only meal of the day, as we were at action stations all day without relief. Actually, Ted Trappett, then a Leading Cook, was in charge of a section of the galley which had on tap through-out the day, some large dixies of hot food for those who could pay him a visit. This was a Godsend, the trouble being that it was hard for most of us to get there.

Captain Nichols again addressed us relaying information about our firing schedules. Every man was at action stations as we moved into the gulf, and so commenced what is probably the most eventful, if not the most dangerous day experienced by Shropshire.

I do not remember leaving the shell room until after dark. We were locked away, as always, hot, dirty, and sweaty. Perhaps the worst feature of being locked in these unsavoury conditions was the worsening of heat rash, or prickly heat. Practically every man on board suffered from this at some time or other. If we were sweaty and dirty for any length of time the condition got worse. (see appendix 8)

Japanese Kamikazes were over the gulf virtually all day, diving on first one ship, and then another, sometimes in groups, sometimes singly. Shropshire had a bombardment programme which was interrupted by the activity in the air. In between our A turret's firings we sweated it out with idle chatter or just lounged about, listening to the clatter and banging of the smaller guns beating off the zombies. To keep us informed of what was happening, our Torpedo Officer, Lt. Brewster kept up quite a good commentary over the loud speaker system.

Shropshire nearly came to grief three times during the day. During the morning there were no close shaves, but about midday a Jap roared in close astern, passing up the starboard side. Our starboard pom poms got away rapid fire, as did No 2 Bofors which was mounted on top of B turret. The Jap's tail disintegrated and it went weaving off in the direction of the New Mexico, just ahead of us.

Kevin Day, the gun layer of No 2 Bofors, later brought me up to date with the day's events. He told me how he vividly recalled his shots bursting in the tail of this zombie, and watched with alarm the fire and explosion as it ploughed into the New Mexico. The signal back from New Mexico was congratulations on good shooting and an almost unbelievable report of no casualties.

Only minutes after this close shave, another Jap came in from the port side, overshot his mark, and roared literally only inches over Kevin's head where he was sitting in the gun-layer's seat. Kevin said if his loading number had been standing up on the loading platform in his usual position, he would have had his head knocked off, so close was the fuselage of the aircraft. Kevin and his mate Jeff Sim, in the trainer's seat, were blown out of their seats to the deck, and Kevin said to Jeff, "I think we are dead." The Jap plunged into the sea, a near miss, not far from our starboard side.

The third near disaster happened about 1600 hours, (4:00pm). "A" turret was not firing so we were trying to relax during a lull in proceedings. Without warning we heard the clatter of some anti aircraft guns, and then came the crash. Shropshire shuddered violently, heavy eight inch shells jumped about in their bins, the bang left noises ringing in our ears, and most alarming of all, lights went out. Damage Control Officer, Lt. Commander Henry Cooper's voice came over the speakers, "Close all red and blue openings, close all red and blue openings." This meant that to preserve the water tight integrity of the ship, all doors, hatches, manholes were to be closed and clamped, locking everybody in place in whatever compartment they may be. First reaction was that we had finally copped one. For over a year we had pursued the Japs across the Pacific without sustaining any damage or casualties. We had seen many of our sister ships knocked about but Shropshire had always come through without a scratch. On the law of averages, given the number and ferocity of Japanese attacks we were bound to suffer a hit sooner or later. The point was where had this zombie struck? In the pitch dark I felt that our shell room was still intact, but wondered what we would be required to do next and where had the explosion taken place. We were still gathering our wits about us, and wondering what to do, when we heard panic shouts from our Petty Officer on the next level, yelling to get us out of the shell room before we were trapped below. He did not want to be responsible for our demise, for which I suppose we should have been grateful. My off-sider, Mac MacKenzie, went into fits of laughter at the histrionics of Straub up above, and that relieved the tension. So now we could scramble up through our manhole as fast as possible, before we were locked in. But this created a problem. We were in our usual state of undress, and my first thoughts were to find our proper battle dress in the dark. Would we be better off risking any danger and staying down below, or going up top and getting into trouble for being out of the "dress of the day." This problem, no doubt ridiculous in the eyes of the un-initiated, was resolved without having to make a decision. Power was restored, the lights came on, and everything returned to normal.

The explosion that had knocked us about happened this way. A single Jap Kamikaze had not been detected by our fighter cover or radar. He came out of a cloud a few thousand feet up and from our port side, screaming straight for us. By great good fortune our port eight barrelled pom-pom, whose captain was Leading Seaman Roy Cazaly, was trained in the general direction of the Jap. Roy was the son of famous South Melbourne footballer who is immortalised in the song "Up There Cazaly." Quick as a flash, Roy was on target and opened up with accurate fire, shooting bits off the Jap, and throwing him off course. After Roy Cazaly opened up with his accurate fire, Kevin Day also got in some shots from his Bofors on B turret. Kevin counted a number of hits, and the Jap disintegrated, the body of the aircraft crashed into the water on the port side. But as the aircraft

broke up, the lighter fuselage dropped straight down while the heavy engine and bomb kept up their momentum going over Shropshire and exploded on the starboard side not far from where we were sweating it out in A turret's lower quarters. Which is why we received such a shake-up in our shell room.

For the courageous and skilful way Roy accounted for this "zombie" he was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, a well deserved award.

Lofty Rathbone, who was captain of one of the port four inch guns told me of the interesting finale to this exciting close shave which Stan Nichols also recounts in "H.M.A.S. SHROPSHIRE". From where the aircraft had descended out of the sky there was a Japanese floating down in a parachute. Whether he was the pilot of our target or some other aircraft we will never know. Kamikaze pilots were not supposed to parachute to safety or perhaps he had been blown out of his aircraft and his parachute opened automatically. Our blokes were calling out to "Caza" to "shoot the bastard", an act which would have caused embarrassment because the Japanese could claim a violation of Geneva Conventions. However, before anybody could take action, if any, the problem was solved when the Japanese slipped his harness and plunged to his death in the sea.

As if the attacking zombies were not enough, a Japanese shore battery opened up on us and got too close for comfort. This was a job for the "heavies", and it was our turn to punch a few shells at the Japs. We commenced a short but concentrated bombardment on this shore target. Our spotting aircraft from the USS Minneapolis reported the Jap guns out of action and buildings and oil tanks in the vicinity were ablaze. Another good score for the eight inchers.

Late in the afternoon H.M.A.S. Australia was again hit. She was astern of us when a zombie made a determined attack on our starboard quarter. Our Bofors and eight inch guns got away a solid barrage and the Jap seemed to be diverted towards the Australia where it crashed into the starboard 4 inch guns causing more havoc.

At dusk we were still closed up at action stations, so some food was sent to all stations. From memory we also had some of the American K ration little packs with concentrated products in them. These were not standard issue, but had been scrounged by one of our gang. There was also some bread and a tin of jam which I tried to open with some make-shift tool, I think a screwdriver. My hand slipped and I ran the half opened tin across the lower joint of my left hand fore finger. The cut was almost to the bone, blood spurting everywhere. Ben Roberts said to get up to the Sick Bay, so I clambered up out of the shell room and made my way through the dimly lit ship. After the long hard day there were bodies lying about, everybody too exhausted to move or talk. The Sick Bay tiffy had one look at my finger and told me to wrap my handkerchief around it again. He disappeared into the interior of the Sick Bay and soon returned with one of the surgeons. I was placed on a stool and my hand laid flat on a table beside me, while the doctor prepared his gear. Then he nodded to the Sick Bay tiffy standing behind me, who thrust my head forward near my knees, and "bang", the stitching needle was into my finger and the cut sown up. By the time I gasped for breath it was all over and I was back on my way to A turret.

Shortly afterwards we cleared the confines of Lingayen Gulf and retired out to sea which gave ships more room to manoeuvre during the night. This did not mean a spell for watch-keepers. After being at action stations all day, I now had to do a watch on the Compass Platform. Despite being tired it was a good feeling to get up high in the fresh air.

It had been a hard and sometimes an exciting day, but the main assault forces were not to arrive until the 9th., so we could expect another two hectic days. The night passed relatively quietly as we snatched a few hours rest, ready for another day in Lingayen Gulf on the morrow.

GETTING THE UPPER HAND

The 6th of January in Lingayen Gulf had clearly demonstrated that the Japanese war machine still had the capacity to hit back, and was determined to fight every inch of the way. Our assault on Lingayen Gulf had hit a sensitive Japanese nerve because for them it was becoming a desperate situation. They were prepared to sacrifice large numbers of men and aircraft to inflict heavy losses on us.

Due to a combination of accurate and efficient gunnery, skilful handling of our ships, aircraft cover provided by our aircraft carriers, and a good dose of determination, not to say courage, the U.S. 7th Fleet had got the upper hand, surviving the worst the Japanese could throw at us. There may have been some apprehension as to what the coming day would bring, but we knew that we would have to stick it out for at least two more days. The convoys carrying the infantry divisions who would make the initial landings after a final bombardment would not arrive at Lingayen until the morning of 9 January. Although a rough time was expected, there was also no doubt that we could handle what ever came our way.

Before dawn on the 7th January, after another early breakfast, we were closed up at action stations as radar already had bogeys on the screens.

Shropshire's main task was to bombard selected Japanese strong points, at the same time being on constant lookout for the Kamikazes. In addition to the close range weapons, which were our main defence against aircraft, A turret was loaded with barrage shell, the high explosive shells pre-set to explode at 1500 yards which we aimed at a Kamikaze that was heading straight for us. This tactic, previously described, was very effective. Once the Kamikaze was committed to attack his chosen target he could not deviate from his course, so if he came at us in a straight line he presented a good target. Japanese pilots must have got a rude shock when they saw eight inch guns blast away at them. During the Lingayen campaign our eight inch guns accounted for quite a few of the zombies that attacked us. Because of the vast amount of gunfire from so many ships, and the confusion with aircraft zooming all over the sky, both friend and foe, nobody was ever able to ascertain exactly how many were shot down and by whom.

Just like the previous day we were at action stations virtually all day, with only the odd toilet break when someone in need would make a dash for the "heads", navy term for toilets. But the activity in the air was not so constant. Our toll of the Japanese yesterday had been heavy. So many aircraft had been lost that they could not mount attacks with the same numbers and strength. Later estimates had Japanese losses measured at about two hundred and fifty aircraft over the northern Luzon area, shot down by the gunfire of our ships or our aggressive Hellcat and Wildcat fighters from the carriers.

Bombardment of Japanese shore installations proceeded throughout the day.

On several occasions we were the target of Japanese artillery. As on the previous day, one Japanese battery, believed to be of six inch guns, landed shells uncomfortably close late in the afternoon, and we moved in for an intense, if short bombardment. After very skilful manoeuvring we got right onto the target with a series of accurate broadsides and our spotter aircraft, the Kingfisher from the U.S.S. Minneapolis, reported that we had destroyed this troublesome battery. There is a well known and quite magnificent photo of Shropshire firing all its guns. I think this photo was taken during this bombardment. It was taken by the Observer of the Kingfisher as he was flying parallel to our starboard side below mast height, and is one of the outstanding action photographs of the war.

Eventually the day came to a close and we sailed out of Lingayen Gulf into the open sea where we could again relax and get some needed rest.

Next day, the 8th January was a repeat of the 7th., not as many zombies about, but those that attacked were ferocious, getting in some determined and accurate hits.

Very early in the morning, not long after settling down in our shell room, we heard a tremendous barrage going on up top by the Bofors, pom poms and 4 inch guns. Once more I got the story from Kevin Day who had a grandstand view from his Bofors on top of B turret, and Stan Nicholls recounted the details in his book, "H.M.A.S. Shropshire." Three Kamikazes dived out of the

sky. One flattened out behind us a few feet above the water line, and came thundering down our starboard side. All guns rapidly got on target. One Jap almost got passed us but eventually went down no doubt due once again to our accurate gunfire. Anyway we claimed him as another trophy. This first aircraft took us by surprise, but now all guns were at full alert, ready for the one following, which flew straight into our barrage. The only problem was that the second aircraft was one of our Wildcats that should have pulled out once his target got down low. Pilots were under instructions to stay above a certain level, for once a Kamikaze got down below that level it was then up to the ships to protect themselves with their own gunfire. In his excitement the American pilot just kept going after the Jap, and my mates on the Compass Platform heard him yelling over the inter-com, "keep shooting, forget me, shoot the bastard down." Not only did the Jap go down, we got the Wildcat as well. Down he went with a terrible splash. A destroyer raced to the wreckage and here was one of the miracles of the campaign. The pilot was fished out of the drink with nothing worse than a broken hip.

Captain Nichols was most concerned, sending out a message of inquiry and apology for shooting down one of our own. The reply was a quite indifferent comment to the effect that the pilot had virtually asked for trouble, it was his own fault and not to worry.

The morning had not progressed very far when H.M.A.S. Australia was again the target of the Kamikaze, this time hit twice for the 3rd and 4th time on this operation. The 3rd crash fortunately did not do a great deal of damage, but the next Jap ploughed into Australia's port side at the waterline. The exploding engine and bomb blew a large hole in her side causing extensive flooding. Australia listed five degrees to port, but prompt and efficient action brought the list under control and damaged bulkheads were shored up. Despite the serious damage inflicted on her, Australia, through sheer fortitude and stubbornness continued to carry out all her bombardment schedules until the landing was completed on the morrow. The designers and builders of the County Class Cruisers would have been proud to know how well these cruisers had been constructed, a monument to British ship building.

I cannot find in campaign histories an account of one particular incident that I was sure occurred on this day, although in the confusion it might have been the next day, or even the day before. However the incident itself is very firmly embedded in my mind. To give the action lookouts a spell other members of the lookout teams were called to the Compass Platform to relieve them. I had left "A" turret and was doing the afternoon watch. There was a temporary lull in Japanese attacks, and for the moment everything seemed under control, until a Kamikaze got past our fighter cover undetected, and was circling around the fleet. Action stations were sounded so I got ready to make a dash for "A" turret, but my relief arrived very late. When he finally got there the Jap was still circling about. I looked at the "down" ladder on the port wing of the Bridge, but it was choked with bodies all headed downwards. Our traffic rules, thoroughly instilled in us, was that we had to go down and aft on ladders on the port side, and up and for'ard on starboard ladders. This created a smooth flow of traffic, very effective when hundreds of men were rushing to action stations. Anxious about getting to my action station, I glanced across at the starboard ladder which was clear, and decided that this emergency warranted a break of the rules. I raced across, grabbed the stanchions on the top of the ladder and because stepping down each step would be too slow, jumped off intending to land on all fours on the deck about ten feet below. Just as I took off, much to my horror, I saw Captain Nichols hurrying from his sea cabin and about to put his foot on the bottom step, on his way to the Compass Platform. I twisted in mid-air to avoid him, wondering how many years you got in the brig for hitting a Navy Captain. I brushed his side as I went past, crashing to the deck, jumped up in haste and started muttering some apologies. Captain Nichols looked at me, recognising me as one of his lookouts, and must have summed up my predicament in a flash. He had a wry smile on his face and said something like, "its all right lad, get off to your action station." I kept going down , arrived on the foc'sle upper deck to find all hatches closed, as they should be by now, and the door to "A" turret gun house securely shut.

There was nothing else to do except stand at the guard rail and watch the Jap. He came flying up our port side at about a thousand feet, obviously deciding on a target. His course took him between Shropshire and a battleship cruising parallel to us on our port side, which I believed was the U.S.S. California or the U.S.S. New Mexico.

The Jap was veering from side to side as guns started firing at him. I looked about me to see what would be the safest place to run for if he came at us. He passed ahead of both ships, then did a sharp left hand turn away from us and plunged straight for the battleship, exploding on the port side of her Bridge. The incident over, we reverted to the 2nd degree of readiness, so it was a case of climbing up back onto the Compass Platform to resume my watch.

Years later I read Winston Churchill's masterly history of the Second World War, including volume V1 page 541. General Lumsden was Churchill's personal representative on General MacArthur's staff, and Churchill recounts how Lumsden was killed in a Kamikaze attack when standing on the port side of the bridge of the New Mexico. Churchill gives the date of this incident as 6th January, so it is quite likely that in the confusion of those hectic days some of my recollections were a few hours or a day out. But there is no doubt that this was the incident I have recounted.

Bombardment schedules were completed, so once again we retired after dusk to the open sea, ready for the big day tomorrow. The vast fleet of assault ships, including our Manoora, Kanimbla and Westralia, with hundreds of LST's, barges and landing craft were to make their assault across the beaches tomorrow, the 9th January.

This day has gone down in history, the day when the returning American Army started the liberation of Luzon, and General MacArthur again waded ashore in triumph. For me it was just another sweaty, dirty day, cooped up for most of the time in our shell room.

The pre-landing bombardments of the beaches, in addition to the pounding we had been handing out over the last three days, enabled the Army to charge ashore almost unopposed. (see appendix 9) The Japanese had adopted a strategy of not fighting on the beaches, but of withdrawal to better prepared lines of defence.

Our fearsome friends, the zombies, still made determined attacks from time to time, some of them finding their mark. Early afternoon, when by now the infantry was pouring ashore, two Kamikazes made a run in the area where the Mississippi and Australia had been bombarding. One got through to the Mississippi and by now we could have guessed the inevitable, the other crashed into the Australia. This was the fifth and, fortunately, the last time she was hit. I don't think anybody was killed. The Jap hit the for'ard funnel, knocking off more than half, leaving the usual wreckage strewn everywhere.

Late in the afternoon damaged ships were ordered out, now that the main objectives were accomplished. The Australia, with cruisers U.S.S.Louisville and U.S.S.Columbia joined transports that had completed their unloading and were homeward bound for Leyte.

As the day drew to a close, someone had the bright idea to hide this vast conglomeration of ships under a pall of smoke. Ships were cruising around making great volumes of black, greasy and choking smoke. I don't know if this would have prevented any Japanese from finding us should they mount a night attack, but it certainly polluted the atmosphere. We had to breathe the stuff and there were no greenies about in those days to protest about the environment.

Because of the intensity of the action during the last four days, almost the entire ship's company had been closed up at their action stations, cramped in sweaty, poorly ventilated quarters. With no chance of time out to get to bathrooms we were a pretty smelly, dirty lot. By night time after this day, I was to go up top on watch, and timed my run to get a quick shower. Turning on the cold sea water tap, for we did not fancy boiling hot showers in equatorial zones, I was surprised to feel really cold. Then I realised that we had travelled far enough north in the last week to reach a relatively cool place in the northern hemisphere winter. The cold water was no reason to grumble. I thought of how lucky we were in the Navy, compared to my friend Neil Harcourt in the 2nd/5th Commando Company. If he was in the jungle for days, or weeks on end, there was no way he could retire to a tiled bath room for a good clean-up after a fierce fight with the Japs.

Before we sailed off for Lingayen I started keeping notes, which was actually forbidden. These notes were originally intended for and eventually sent to Joan Hutchinson in Horsham, who must have given them to my father. I still have them. I recorded how after the first three days in Lingayen I finally got to the bathrooms for a clean up, then found, presumably on the foc'stle mess deck Mac

and George. George was George Hope, but I do not remember which "Mac" it was, as there were several. Both these friends manned guns in the after sections of Shropshire. We had been stuck at our action stations all this time so had not seen each other for three or four days. Because of Shropshire's size it was difficult for someone whose station was aft to know what was happening in other parts of the ship. On our first day in Lingayen when the Kamikaze which Roy Cazaly shot down, and we very nearly "bought it", Mac and George had heard and felt the tremendous explosion up for'ard and thought we might have been hit by a torpedo. Mac could now see the funny side of the incident, but at the time he said to himself, "goodbye Mat." George was so relieved to see me all fit and in one piece he made me cross my fingers for luck.

There were other examples of this concern for your mates. Ted Griffith, our Gold Coast Association's Treasurer, recounts how his brother viewed this explosion which nearly brought us undone. Ted's brother was Midshipman Ian Griffith keeping a watch on the Bridge of H.M.A.S. Gascoyne. He saw the zombie screaming out of the sky at Shropshire, next the huge explosion and Shropshire was out of sight for quite some seconds before smoke and water subsided. His first thought was "what shall I tell Mother about Ted's demise?" Fortunately we all lived to tell the tale and Ted is very much alive and kicking.

On one of these nights after a grim day when we were dead tired I was fortunate to run into Bill Mummery. Bill was a "real old bloke", and must have been past forty because he had served in the World War in the Royal Navy. Bill was a Leading Seaman who liked to sit down and natter to me when off duty and I would listen to his experiences when he travelled around Europe after the first World War. He was something of a father figure to me and after talking to him for a while on this occasion the trials and tribulations of the day faded into the background. His calm demeanour was infectious and gave a bloke added strength and determination to carry on.

Although everybody could breathe a little easier, our operations in Luzon were far from over. Admiral Halsey had brought his 3rd Fleet carriers from the eastern side of Luzon in the Pacific into the South China Sea. He was eager to strike at targets along the China coast, and if possible attack any of the few remaining Japanese ships sneaking home to Japan from Singapore and Thailand. 7th Fleet's role was to cruise west into the South China Sea and support the 3rd Fleet as its aircraft searched for these targets up and down the China coast. While out in the South China Sea the weather cut up rough, heavy seas pounding over our bows. Fortunately the weather abated before we needed fuel. Even so refuelling turned out to be a dangerous exercise. Our re-fuelling tanker was travelling light, with most of her load already delivered to other ships. On a high wave she would lift right out of the water, showing her bows down to the keel. With both Shropshire and the tanker plunging up and down, as well as rolling sideways, sometimes towards each other, sometimes away from each other, this proved a terrifying operation. At one stage the steadying line from our bow to the tanker did not have enough slack when the ships rolled apart. The nine inch circumference manila rope tightened and snapped like a piece of cotton. Good seamanship and skilful handling on the part of both ships saw us finish re-fuelling without accident.

On one of these nights I was keeping the middle watch on the Compass Platform, very dark, no moon and the weather still rough. Shropshire was part of this large force of battleships, cruisers and destroyers and it was important to note where every ship was situated as we zigged and zagged on our course. A young Midshipman was on watch, and at the given signal "execute" from the flagship, the signal for all ships to turn together, he turned the helm indicator which then notified the coxswain at the helm below, the degree of rudder and direction in which we were turning. I had always made it my practice to watch these turns closely, so as Shropshire commenced to swing alarm bells in my brain started ringing. There were battleships and cruisers where they were not supposed to be. We had turned incorrectly, so there came an urgent T.B.S. call for "Porthole" from the flagship. I heard more clicking on the helm repeater, which seemed to compound the error. The Duty Control Officer came to the rescue, just as Captain Nichols hurried on to the Compass Platform. Captain Nichols had had a small box like structure, like a six foot long dog kennel, constructed on the port wing of the bridge, next to the Compass Platform, in which he could lie down and rest but still be on immediate call. Apparently, only dozing, he had been listening to the problem, and jumped into action.

It did not take long to sort out the problem and we were back on course.

For me it was an interesting episode. It was not my place to tell an Officer of the Watch what to do, so I would have had to report the bearings of ships hoping he would catch on to the situation. It would have been difficult to stand there in silence and wait for a possibly dangerous situation to develop. An urgent call from the flagship and the Captain's prompt action solved my predicament.

Our venture into the South China Sea ended when we sailed back into Lingayen Gulf on 18th January. There were still a few alarms when bogies appeared on the radar screen, but we suffered no more hair raising incidents as happened during the main assault a few weeks before. The most annoying feature was the smoke camouflage at night. Destroyers raced around pouring out the black oily stuff, trying to hide us from any Jap who might be patrolling around.

One night I was keeping the first watch, from 2000 hrs to 2400 hrs, when we were treated to a fireworks display. The infantry had pushed east into the hills in the direction of the now famous holiday resort of Baguio, some thirty miles away. Some of our cruisers and destroyers were in close to the shoreline, firing star shell over jungle clad hills to keep the Japs on their toes. It was a brilliant sight as the star shells burst, lighting up the country side for miles. Probably not very much appreciated by the Japanese who would be cowering underneath. Incidents like this would not even be recorded by Shropshire's records, there was so much happening over a vast area, and on this occasion we were only interested spectators.

H.M.A.S. Arunta arrived back in Lingayen on the 22nd January, bringing Commodore Farncombe back from the badly damaged Australia. Arunta came in on our starboard side, a gangway was placed from ship to ship and a piping party was there to pipe the Commodore aboard. Half way up the gangway, which was heaving up and down as the two ships moved with the swell, the Commodore slipped and almost went down on one knee. Before that he appeared to be limping slightly, so one of our seamen from the welcoming party dashed down the narrow gangway to help, no doubt well meant, but a bad error of protocol. On the narrow gangway Farncombe roared to get out of the way. He might have been a very efficient commanding officer, but despite our seaman's breach of naval protocol, I thought he could have been a little more gracious to someone who had spontaneously offered help. He lacked sadly the personality and empathy others felt for their ship's company such as our beloved Captain Nichols.

The next move was to participate in another episode of historic importance, the assault on Corregidor, the island fortress at the entrance to Manila Bay. General MacArthur had left Corregidor exactly three years ago in tragic circumstances, defeated and humiliated by the Japanese. We arrived off the Bataan peninsula in the afternoon of the 15th February, and immediately carried out a bombardment of Japanese positions. Our old friend U.S.S. Phoenix drew alongside, and the Captain, using a loud hailer, called out that he had mail for Shropshire, which was good news well received by all. I have a picture of Shropshire taken from the bridge of Phoenix, showing their Captain using the loud hailer. This was sent to me by Captain Frank Costagliano, USN rtd., who at the time was a Lieut Commander in Phoenix. Frank visited us in 1993 during our Association's National Reunion on the Gold Coast.

To forestall any landing on Corregidor, the Japanese had a very large number of mines floating about, mainly in the narrow waters between Bataan and the Island. These were supplemented by suicide boats who were trying to emulate their airborne Kamikaze brothers. As far as I know only one got anywhere near us, and it was blown up smartly by one of our escorting destroyers.

The morning of the 16th February was set for the main assault and landings.

Shropshire carried out its usual accurate bombardment, after which I was on watch for the forenoon, from 0800 to 1200hrs. Then came one of the most spectacular sights I have ever witnessed. Our bombardment had caused smoke and fire on the top of the cliffs of Corregidor that face the sea. These cliffs are many hundreds of feet high. Long rows of fortress buildings and barracks could be seen clearly through my Evershead binoculars, bringing the scene very close, as though watching from a grandstand. Boston and Mitchell bombers were flying in low, adding to the conflagration. There was a lull as the bombers finished their attacks, then from beyond our stern could be heard the roar of engines.

Looking up I could see two parallel lines of Dakota transport aircraft, dozens of them heading for Corregidor, which was only about eight thousand yards distant. As the first aircraft reached the island, out tumbled the first paratroopers to be joined by a constant stream , and soon the sky above the island appeared as one mass of parachutes floating to earth. Some paratroopers landed on the roofs of the badly damaged barracks, but some had jumped too soon and their parachutes were caught on the sides of the cliffs, where their occupants were kicking and struggling to get free. One historical account I have read says that the paratroopers were not fired on while descending, but I can vividly recall rifle and presumably machine gun fire coming up through holes in the barrack's roofs, and the paratroopers swinging in their harness firing in retaliation. At only eight thousand yards our highly magnified Evershead binoculars brought this amazing scene up in detail.

Stan Nicholls relates how he too, on the starboard EBI that morning, watched this fascinating scene, and saw paratroopers fall short on the cliffs. He was later to ascertain that most were rescued. Sadly a few were killed when their parachutes failed to open.

We eventually found out that the daring drop by the paratroopers was a great success. Despite the horrendous nature of the operation their casualties were nothing like what had been expected. The Japanese had been taken completely by surprise by the audacity of the attack, which reduced their effectiveness, and minimized our casualties.

My wife Dee and I visited Corregidor in 1984 and we walked around the buildings, still wrecked and blasted from the day Shropshire had bombarded them. The surrounding lawns are peaceful and well kept, and I looked out to sea a few thousand yards to the place from where Shropshire fired her devastating broadsides. Mounted on the lawn was the re-assembled mountain gun which the paratroopers carried with them on their hazardous descent. After all these years I still felt a shiver run up and down my spine. This is a place where history was made. Here I saw men who fought and died so that future generations could live securely and in peace. I doubt if it would ever be possible to convey the atmosphere or emotions to those for whom they made their sacrifice. It would be gratifying to think posterity learnt of these deeds, never forgot them and emulated them when they in turn are beset by national trials and tribulations.

When gazing up at the Dakota aircraft with their cargo of paratroopers on their way to battle, little did I know that a few hundred feet above me was a chap named Ron Euler. Ron was an Australian (R.A.A.F.)pilot seconded to the United States Army Air Force and his photos taken from his aircraft have given me an added dimension to what I saw on that famous day. Ron has become an active member of our Shropshire Association and a firm friend. After fifty five years we found out that it was not the navy only that was present at Corregidor.

Further east along the island's beaches, infantry had also carried out a bold landing, so it was now a job for the Army. Shropshire, in company with Phoenix, sailed back to Lingayen, where we gladly unloaded the mail Phoenix brought with her.

The supply ship Merkur, chartered to the Navy, finally caught up with us with supplies of fresh meat and vegetables. For the last seven weeks our cooks had actually done a top class job under almost impossible circumstances. Despite their best efforts we were sick and tired of bully beef and dehydrated potatoes, although I can still remember the good job they did with a cottage pie made up of those ingredients. It can make quite a tasty meal, but not every day. The arrival of the Merkur was soured by a "buzz" that she could have been here weeks ago, but the civilian seamen had refused to sail her to Luzon without extra danger money. An excuse based on danger may have been valid during the first week of Lingayen, but not on the third week in February. Whether this buzz was one hundred percent true was never established, except the treatment we received at the hands of dockyard workers and others made it plausible.

We sailed out of Lingayen Gulf early on the night of 26th February, with Captain Nichols announcing "we will be sailing in a direction we all want to go." We were scheduled for Leyte, Seeadler Harbour, and Sydney. On other occasions there would have been loud cheers and continuous conversation on the mess decks. Now the feeling seemed to be largely of quiet, unexpressed relief. Most would have had a deep seated feeling, not readily or easily expressed as is the Australian's way, of satisfaction of a job well done. I for one was just plain relieved. I was tired,

sleeping whenever possible. From a strapping, thirteen stone lad of eighteen on enlistment, I was down to eleven and a half stone.

For Shropshire, this looked like the last of the Philippines campaign. The mopping up of Japanese on other Philippine islands, while dangerous for those taking part, would not require our presence.

On an official level the Japanese new terror weapon, the Kamikaze, called for careful appraisal and counter measures. Studies initiated by Admirals Nimitz and Halsey revealed that one in four Kamikaze attacks found a target and one in thirty three hits sank a ship. Experts worked hard to devise counter measures and a tight censorship cloaked the whole dismal project. In case people back home in America or Australia became alarmed at this new Japanese terror weapon a Fleet Order went out that men returning home were not to discuss the Kamikaze.

The assault on Lingayen Gulf was also the subject of concern by our Admiral Kincaid and his staff. Not since the disasters of 1942 in the Solomons had the Navy suffered so badly.

Lingayen cost the Navy nearly eight hundred killed, plus one thousand four hundred wounded, forty three ships hit, eighteen of them badly damaged, and four sunk. Of the huge force of battleships and cruisers that had participated, only Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Portland and Shropshire had come through un-scathed and these ships all had many close shaves. So there were serious problems to be solved before the next onslaught was being planned.

That Shropshire had come through unscathed and yet ships around us like sister cruiser H.M.A.S. Australia had suffered five hits in four days was at first mystifying to us and many others. Not only the Australia but almost every capital ship in company had been hit, many more than once. We did not believe that they were any less efficient or dedicated. On the other hand we did not ascribe this simply to luck as some cynics have suggested. On the contrary, there was a very important factor, a factor centred on our eight inch gun system and confirmed in official reports revealed years later.

As previously described, during her refit before commissioning into the R.A.N., Shropshire acquired the very latest radar control devices. Radar Officer Lt. Bryan Castles and Gunnery Officer Lt. Commander Warwick Bracegirdle devised a system of Barrage Fire for the eight inch guns to be used against attacking aircraft. This system now proved it's worth and vindicated the foresight of it's proponents.

An eight inch High Explosive shell weighing 250 pounds, or about 114 kilograms, created a monstrous explosion in the sky which had a devastating effect on a Kamikaze. Even without a direct hit the explosion either blew the Kamikaze off course or the pilot took evasive action and selected another target where he was more likely to succeed. The evaluation of this system which we talked about on the mess decks was confirmed years later by the discovery of Captain Nichol's Report to Dept of Navy, 2026-3-569, at the time marked SECRET. This report included a detailed account of each attack on Shropshire and in paragraph 7 of the summary said, "It was also noted that Barrage Fire from 8" guns had a great deterrent effect on aircraft and on each occasion of being fired, turned the aircraft from it's original target." There can be no doubt now that this unique and skilfully applied counter fire saved Shropshire from many attacks which had the potential to cause serious damage and many casualties.

For the time being this was of no concern of ours. All we knew was that by some miracle we had survived, and, after ten months at sea we were on our way home.

TIME FOR A BREAK

In company with US cruisers Portland and Minneapolis, Shropshire called in at Leyte Gulf, then sailed on to our old familiar hunting ground, Seeadler Harbour in the Admiralty Islands. Our escorting destroyers included H.M.A.S. Arunta, who would sail home with us. Arunta came alongside with heaps more mail proving that it never rains but it pours.

There was an interesting reaction to our mail, which included the usual magazines and newspapers. In the world wide war in which the Allies were engaged, involving millions of men and vast numbers of ships and aircraft, it was a difficult task for editors to select news stories in their correct proportion and priority. We did not appreciate this at the time, and there was strong resentment around the mess decks. Australian newspapers generally carried lots of news about the Army. They were doing a hard job, sweating it out and dying in the jungles, but they were back in New Guinea, and the war had moved on two thousand miles or more . We felt that the Navy and the Philippines, where the crucial battles were being fought, were scarcely mentioned.

Our belief was that Shropshire, and the Australian Squadron, had played an important role in the campaigns which had taken us to the very gates of Japan, where the real victories were to be won, and yet we appeared to be getting only meagre recognition. For a long time I wondered whether this was a fair assessment, and then I acquired a copy of a letter dated 26-1-45 from Captain Nichols to Merv Warren. Merv Warren was an Australian War Correspondent attached to the staff of General Douglas MacArthur, and responsible for despatches to the Australian evening papers, the London Daily Telegraph, and special assignments to American United Press. At Tacloban during the Leyte campaign, he sent to Shropshire up to date newspapers which Headquarters staff received from Australia by special courier. The same newspapers we received when they were well out of date, weeks if not months later.

Captain Nichols read these newspapers with interest and wrote to Merv Warren, "being a newcomer out here, having seen the work of the Squadron, I reckoned the world didn't perhaps realise that it is going full out and playing a very appreciable part in nipping the nips." Our captain hoped Warren could help to rectify this. His letter suggests that his feelings on newspaper reporting was similar to those of us on the mess decks, and a copy of this letter is in appendix 10.

One night on watch I listened to a conversation that had its roots in an incident that started months ago. Shropshire's Roman Catholic chaplain, Father John (Cocky) Roach, on our last trip to Sydney, had acquired a medallion of St. Christopher, the patron saint of travellers. After some negotiation it had been installed on the chest high armoured plate bulkhead or wall of the Compass Platform, besides the Port E.B.I. To fix this into the armoured steel was quite a job, but eventually it was mounted and from there St. Christopher stared at me and my fellow look-outs as we stood watches. Shortly after this our navigator, Lt Cmdr.Gellatly was D.C.O. one night and I heard him express to the O.O.W. some rather critical comments about the medallion to the effect that medallions were of doubtful value, and we would be better served by our own fire power.

Now, after the torrid months in the Philippines I was keeping the same middle watch as Gellatly, as we ploughed along comfortably through the tropical night. Gellatly was telling the O.O.W. how on the night of the Battle of Surigao Strait he was noting the fall of shot coming at us from the battle ship Yamashiro, calculating the distance these fourteen inch shells were landing from our side. From this he had calculated that shells were flying no more than a few feet over our superstructure and funnels. Then as an after thought, he said that someone must have been looking after us that night and perhaps St. Christopher had been doing his job after all. My Protestant background could not allow too much faith to be placed in a man appointed saint, but the point was made. Divine intervention cannot be dismissed when one ponders the vagaries of the battle field.

Seeadler Harbour was a short stopover, during which we held routine gunnery exercises with H.M.A.S. Hobart. Hobart was back at sea and working up to a fine state of efficiency. She had been hit by a Japanese torpedo which nearly sank her in 1943. The war had moved well over a thousand miles to the north west, and Seeadler harbour did not have the hustle, bustle, and air of excitement that had emanated from the place nine months ago.

With H.M.A.S. Arunta as our destroyer escort, we headed for home, sailing down th New Guinea coast, easily identifying landmarks and islands which sixteen months ago would have been held by the enemy. Now they were just another spot left behind on our history making sweep across the south west Pacific. China Strait was as beautiful and enticing as ever as we sailed through its narrow deep blue waters, gazing at the lush islands, sandy beaches and Anglican mission buildings. Then we were out into the Coral Sea for the run down the Australian coast.

We ran into a cyclone, the worst I have ever seen. It was almost as though King Neptune had said you have escaped harm through all your battles, but I am not yet going to let you off the hook so easily. The hurricane reached its peak during a forenoon when I was on duty. Flying spray made the Evershead Bearing Indicator useless, we did not even mount the binoculars but kept them dry and secure out of the way. Staff on the Compass Platform just hung on to anything to stop rolling about. Two or three, usually three, enormous rollers would slowly lift our bows up out of the water, pointing sky-wards, then our weight would take over and down we would plunge into the next roller, burying the foc'sle under tons of water, often obscuring A turret under foam and spray. Then we would shudder and the bows start its rise again. Captain Nichols was on the Compass Platform, keeping a sharp eye on the situation. Speed had been reduced and all hatches and doors securely battened down and Shropshire steered into the oncoming seas. Life belts were to be kept handy, and no man allowed on the upper deck. Captain Nichols signalled Arunta to keep station well out on the port beam, and shouted to me above the noise of the storm to keep an eye on her and not worry about anything else. There was nothing else to see anyway. I could not see much of Arunta because she was half buried in spray most of the time, sometimes quite out of sight. I hung on grimly, half blinded by the spray and rain which literally swamped the Compass Platform, even though it is sixty feet or more above sea level. I could not help a feeling of awe at this display of almighty power. My fascination and so far lack of worry was somewhat shaken when Captain Nichols called for the Commander Engineer to come to the Compass Platform. He and Commander Armitage were shouting above the storm and I could get drifts of the conversation. Captain wanted to know how far Shropshire could safely roll, but Commander Armitage could not give him a precise answer because of the extra weight of radar and gunnery equipment we now carried. He seemed to be saying that it would be something less than the original specifications. Up until now any thought of danger had not passed through my mind. Now I was a little apprehensive with doubts raised by hearing this conversation.

It might be that there was no possibility that this storm could do us any real harm, and our Captain was simply curious, but I kept my fingers crossed and hoped we were well within the safety limits, for nothing would survive in that sea even wearing the correct gear, and my life jacket which I should have carried to the Compass Platform was somewhere down below.

However, the Lord be praised, we ploughed through the worst and before long were cruising in much calmer waters. When it was safe for foc'sle men to get out on deck to clean up after the storm, we found the 1/2 inch steel bolts holding down the blast shield of the Bofors mounted up for'ard were ripped off by the power of the surging water. How the Bofors stayed on its mountings I could not guess.

Had we known what happened to the United States 3rd Fleet last December when north of Ulithi we might have been more apprehensive. Today we think of large steel vessels impervious to storms, not like old sailing ships. Inaccurately plotted by weather forecasters, its intensity underestimated, a violent typhoon lay across the path of the 3rd Fleet. Battleships and cruisers suffered substantial upper deck damage, aircraft carriers lost large numbers of aircraft because the anchor wires could not hold when they rolled so violently. One aircraft carrier lost 27 aircraft smashed to pieces in a below deck's hangar when they broke loose and were tossed about like castanets. Most carriers lost appreciable numbers of aircraft. Worst of all three destroyers capsized and sank with large loss of life. The power of the sea remains a potent force, never to be taken lightly.

The last day of our journey was in fine weather. We sailed into Sydney harbour just after dawn on 16 March, with our band playing on our way to No 2 Buoy. But I don't think our arrival made any impression on the Sydneysiders. Few were awake to see us, and there was the odd hoot from

small craft. Of course we could not see if anyone was watching from their bayside homes, and whether or not they were impressed by our arrival.

One of the lucky ones, I collected my rail vouchers along with all southerners who were heading for home states. We were to catch a troop train that evening from Central Station. A gang of us, including Pop Ramsay, Harry Mason, George Hope, and others I don't recall, made a beeline for the Great Southern hotel at the top of George St., conveniently close to Central Station. I had found this pub during previous visits to Sydney, and was treated well there. Despite beer rationing we were welcome in the bars, which was not always the case in some areas. Passing strangers were not made welcome in many pubs because of the limited stocks of beer which were kept for the locals. Our gang lined up schooners as though they were going out of fashion, pouring the lovely cold brown stuff down apace, until someone yelled out that we might miss our troop train to Melbourne.

Ditty bags were grabbed in a panic, and we made a dash across George Street in the evening hour traffic. Pop Ramsay, our oldest member was too slow and got caught standing between the tram tracks as traffic lights went green and trams rolled in his direction. I looked back from the kerb in horror as Pop swayed, first forward, then back, as two trams passed each other with him in the middle. Miraculously he was still standing in the middle, then made a dash for the kerb as a traffic cop roared abuse at him.

We made the gate at the Central Station platform to find a huge crowd blocking the entrance, and conductors shouting "all aboard." Quick as a flash I spotted and grabbed one of those old type four wheeled flat platform trolleys, propelled it into motion and parted the startled crowd who had to jump clear. Some howled abuse and protested our unseemly behaviour. We threw our bags on to the trolley, the ticket collectors waved us through and the train started to move as we charged down the platform. Fortunately, windows were open, our bags were thrown through them, and somehow we all got onto the train as it gathered speed. I put my head out of the window to make sure everybody got aboard and lost my cap in the rush of wind. As we gathered ourselves into our group a terrible thought went through my mind, had we got onto the right train ? Yes we did, the carriage was full of Shropshire lads going to Melbourne and Adelaide. My missing cap would be an embarrassment if stopped by someone in authority. For the next few weeks I would have to dodge officers to avoid being charged as improperly dressed. Anyway, there would be no one in my little home town of Murtoa who would care whether I had a cap or not. So then, why worry? We were homeward bound, and our wild boozy dash for the train had provided a good start to three weeks home leave which we thought was well earned after our long campaign.

Stan Nicholls mentions in his history of Shropshire that the Rail Transport Officer laid complaints about the unruly behaviour of Shropshire seamen at Central Station. I do not know if our incident was one complained about. Rail Transport Officers were never noted for their flexibility or sense of humour. Many of them were little dictators, commonly referred to by us as "depot stanchions" or in other words they held up a depot and never went to sea in a fighting capacity. So to us their comments did not carry much credibility, and besides, we did not harm anybody by our dash for the train, except perhaps by scattering a crowd of civilians and barging on to the platform without showing our passes.

There were few particular highlights of this leave. It was simply beneficial to be home at Murtoa, away from booming guns, Kamikazes and sweaty shell rooms, and be immersed in the quiet, if mundane affairs of my home town. There were few if any friends of my age group because they were working in Melbourne, or in one of the forces. If there was any war talk it was mainly about Europe, where the assault on Germany indicated it was only a matter of time before the end. I don't recall anybody knowing anything or saying anything of the campaign in the Philippines. The news about Australians in action invariably concentrated on New Guinea or Bougainville, places which the Navy and MacArthur's offensive had left far behind.

Once again I avoided any discussion in detail about Shropshire's exciting activities as I sensed mother was worried for her eldest and biggest boy. To talk of battles and Kamikazes may have been disturbing, and besides we were the "silent service", so it was better to avoid the subject or play it down.

After getting into a thoroughly relaxed mood I caught the train to Ballarat where lived the nearest Shropshire shipmate, George Hope. George had a lovely wife and child, and was almost domesticated. There were forty five pubs in Ballarat, many of which got a visit. One day we started at Meaghers pub in the east, worked our way west through to the Munster Arms, along the old Sturt Street through the city, now by-passed by a freeway, paid our respects to many a city hostelry, and must have finished up at the Western.

With leave drawing to a close it was time to say farewell to my family. I travelled via Horsham and Warrnambool, visiting old friends in Horsham, and uncle Alf Brauer, a well known doctor and racing personality in Warrnambool. Uncle Alf was one of the few people to ask interesting and thoughtful questions about the war in the Pacific.

In Melbourne I made a beeline for the depot H.M.A.S. Lonsdale. All this leave I had been without my cap, therefore regimentally undressed. Back in Melbourne this could cause trouble, so first thing, I sneaked into the store at H.M.A.S.Lonsdale, Port Melbourne, bought one, and came out feeling much safer when confronting officers and Naval Shore Patrols.

Although home leave had been restful and relaxing, one could not really escape the thought that inevitably we would have to face up to going back. Murtoa had been relaxing and enjoyable, but in the hustle and bustle of Melbourne the need to get on with the job reasserted itself, so believe it or not, I had no qualms about getting on the troop train and returning to Sydney, and what had become my real home, Shropshire.

Home was a mess. Dockyard workers, in the course of their duties, made an unbelievable mess of a smart ship like Shropshire. Dirty oily gear, compressors, welding gear, black rubber hoses etc., lay all over the decks, up top and below. There was one incident where they had lit a fire on the steel deck to boil the billy. While we were on leave there had been an incident which could have turned nasty. A crowd of our fellows were going ashore on leave, waiting for the ferry to take them off when they were informed that the ferry was for dockers. A certain amount of pushing and shoving took place as our fellows quite rightly demanded priority in going ashore.

Shropshire was dry docked at Cockatoo Island for hull and other servicing, but at one stage was declared “black”. Work proceeded so slowly and inefficiently that Captain Nichols finally made the decision that Shropshire had to meet its wartime commitments and would have to leave without important work completed.

On returning to Sydney, I was selected as a “Keyboard Sentry”. All ship’s keys were locked in a large glassed door cupboard which was mounted on a bulkhead in the Keyboard Flat, on the main deck aft towards the officer’s Ward Room. The sentry had a lectern and a log book in which was recorded all the movements of keys, the time out, time in, and signed by the person authorised to take the key. The sentry’s job was important, clean and comfortable, with a full day on duty, followed by two days off. Dressed up in white gaiters, white belt and side arms I thought I looked a pretty smart sentry.

I had a minor victory over the dockers one day when a bloke turned up and demanded in the usual dockers’ manner the key to the for’ard magazine. I was delighted to stand like a good sentry should and tell him “no key”. After some remonstrations he finally got the message. I told him if he wanted a key to a magazine he had better get the Gunnery Officer to sign the log book. This bloke never came back with any authority or further request, so I often wondered what he wanted with a magazine key in the first place.

One morning I was summoned to the phone. My old bosom buddy from Horsham High School days, Neil Harcourt was on the line. As I finished duty at midday, we arranged to meet at the entrance to Wynyard Station. Neil was serving in a famous unit, the 2nd/5th Independent Company. The Independent Companies were commando units that were given the most difficult jobs, often behind enemy lines. He had been knocked about in New Guinea, had dengue fever and other tropical diseases and had been sent back to recover at a Sydney Hospital. Army hospital patients with certain serious diseases had to wear a blue jacket and red tie so they could be recognised by publicans who were not permitted to serve them alcohol. Neil deposited his jacket and tie in a hired locker at the station, and claims they are still there to this day. We went on a bender to celebrate our reunion and safe return from the war. I can’t remember getting back to Shropshire that night, but

Neil remembers very well his return to the hospital. Arriving after lights out he was finally put to bed. Next morning, the Sister in Charge was fuming about crimes and charge sheets. Neil reminded her that he had brought her a big bunch of flowers. Demonstrating masterly public relations he had the good sense to pick a bunch of flowers from a suburban garden whose fence he had jumped while staggering back to the hospital. But the Sister said, "Yes, but you bowed over them as you presented them to me, and then sicked all over them." Fortunately for Neil the Sister was a good sort with a sense of humour, no doubt with appreciation for the job her patients were doing for their country, and no charges were laid.

Leading Seaman Bluey Childs was married during our stay is Sydney. A few of the lucky ones from our foc'sle mess deck were invited to the wedding and I still have photos of Ray "Scrub" Knuckey and myself taken in the grounds of the reception place where we all had a great celebration.

In 1993 I located Bluey in Sydney and talked him into coming to Shropshire's National Reunion on the Gold Coast. Our meeting was a very touching affair as we had not seen each other for fifty years. It could have been a break of only a few weeks. The bonds forged by common danger and duties shared that had tied us together fifty odd years ago were as strong as ever. I had phoned him several times and talked him into coming and I was pleased that I had been so persistent. Bluey was so happy to be re-united after all these years that he insisted on taking Dee and me to lunch, a most rewarding and contented occasion. But he looked very frail, and sadly, he passed on shortly afterwards. The warm and wonderful emotions generated by Bluey's visit were shattered by a call from Alec Perry who announced that Bluey was no longer with us.

Shropshire emerged from Cockatoo Dry Dock with very soured relations between us and the dockers. We were glad to get away from the place which lacked any enthusiasm for getting on with winning the war. Their priorities seemed to be in a different world.

We took on our ammunition, a long heavy back-breaking job which could mean one thing only, namely, we were getting ready to sail north. A short run to Jervis Bay gave us an opportunity to test fire all weapons, carry out sea exercises and radar calibrations. We had no means of getting ashore at Jervis Bay. Anchored out in the bay all we got was the impression of a bleak stretch of coast line. Jervis Bay did provide one meal with a change of diet. A school of leather jackets literally attacked the ship. No bait required, anybody with a line and hook, or just a bent stout pin, could throw it into the water and a frenzied leather jacket would attack the moving object. We hauled in fish and took them to the galley where arrangements were made to cook them on the spot, a delightful change.

Shropshire returned to Sydney for final preparations before sailing. As on previous trips to Sydney, the Webb family home was my home too. Max was still in the Persian Gulf on a corvette, and as usual I was treated like a long lost son. The care, attention and love bestowed on me was truly wonderful, and I often marvelled at how my erratic comings and goings were not just tolerated, but were accepted without the blink of an eye. Bernice Webb would sometimes fix me with wicked twinkle in her eye if I had played up a bit, but never a word of criticism. She was wise and kind enough to know that I would soon be heading back to the war, and for my part, I never did anything obnoxious, and reciprocated their love and friendship.

Shropshire lost men through drafts ashore, and some of these were long time friends. The hands who had been through the mill since we fired our first shot in the Pacific had acquired a subdued, but distinct, pride in their ship. New draftees on board were not ostracised, but they were scrutinised carefully and soon got the idea that they were joining a ship with a proud record that they were expected to maintain. Up until now there had been little change in the ship's company, partly because it was good policy to keep a well trained complement together, partly because our distance from home made replacing men difficult. Now some old faces were missing, and new faces were occupying their places.

Among the changes were the loss of Cmdr. George Oldham, Lt. Cmdr. Gellatly, our navigator, and "Guns", Comdr. Warwick Bracegirdle. Bracegirdle was not only a brilliant "Guns", he was an engaging character who could say in any situation, "come on fellows, let's go", and every man would

follow. In talking about our Gunnery Officer we had a joke which said the only thing that made him happy was the sound of his beloved eight inch guns.

Germany had capitulated, causing much jubilation among the civilian population. I cannot remember where I was or what I was doing when the news was announced. Important though it was, it was of little interest to us. If anything the German capitulation sent a bitter feeling through the mess deck. The "civvies" could dance in the streets and throw a great party and while the party was in progress we were preparing for another grim campaign. Articles in newspapers were predicting that the defeat of the Japanese would still require long and bloody campaigns. The universal belief was that the Japanese would fight like men possessed when we invaded the sacred soil of the homeland, and extremely heavy casualties were to be expected. We knew this first hand from our experience with the suicide Kamikaze in the Philippines.

Shropshire quietly slipped out of Sydney Harbour early on the 3 June, heading first for our old stamping ground of Seeadler Harbour in the Admiralty Islands.

I believe most of us were glad to be on the move again, even though our Philippines experience indicated that we would be in for some more torrid times.

AN UN-NECESSARY OPERATION

After our spell and refit in Sydney, we were on our way again on a north bound course for Seeadler Harbour. It did not take more than a few hours to settle into our sea-going routine, and the seductive flesh-pots of an easy civilian life were soon forgotten. In fact, after the first dusk phase action stations, it was good to know Sydney was far behind. One of the main armament eight inch gun turrets did not traverse and there was a momentary panic until George Leaver, Petty Officer electrical artificer, found some object fouling cables in the turret. A highly coloured buzz went around that this object was placed there deliberately. George became a very close friend years later after the formation of the our Gold Coast Association, and when talking about this incident he was adamant that it was no accident. It was most unlikely that the offending object could have fallen there by mistake, and it was either sheer carelessness or a deliberate act. In wartime who wants friends like that ?

Shropshire sailed into Seeadler Harbour on 7 June. Now that the war had moved over a thousand miles to the north west, the harbour looked depressing. There was garbage in the water, empty boxes and crates floating around. Under 7th Fleet administration the harbour had been well organised, in fact there were strict rules forbidding anything being tossed overboard and the offal barge made regular visits to all ships. I don't know who was now responsible. We presumed that the recently arrived British Pacific Fleet had taken over and simply did not have the resources of our American friends, but whoever was responsible was not doing the job as before.

The only time I saw a diver in action was during this visit to Seeadler Harbour. At this time there was no such thing as the modern light weight gear used by scuba divers today. The diver was encased in a heavy suit with lead weighted belt, and a brass helmet with glass visor. Our Foc'sle Petty Officer "Knobby" Clark was one of the few qualified divers, and he was required to do a job below the water-line. A steel rivet in the hull was missing, noticed because from the vacant space left by the missing rivet, oil was leaking. Knobby drove a wooden plug into the hole and stopped the leak. This plug stayed there until at least the end of the war, a good example of Aussie ingenuity and initiative. My job was not very exciting. Knobby went into the water from a boat in which there was an air pump supplying him with air. The pump was operated by hand and that was my task, a hot and muscle aching job.

We cruised on to Morotai, scene of our bombardment last September, then to Tawi Tawi, arriving there on 13 June, to join H.M.A.S. Hobart, H.M.A.S. Arunta, and the destroyers U.S.S.Hart and U.S.S.Metcalf. Shropshire became flag-ship of this force when Commodore Farncombe transferred his flag from Hobart to us. The Hart and Metcalf were new Fletcher class destroyers taking the place of old long lost friends like the Ammen and Mullany.

Tawi Tawi is an island at the south-west tip of the Philippines, only a short distance from the north-eastern end of Borneo. The region has a very interesting history, for from this area pirates had operated for centuries, causing havoc in the South China Sea. The people still retained a fierce independence, and although a few made a profit from relations with the Japanese, there were many fine examples of assistance to Americans and Australians who had escaped from the Japanese. An Australian, Major Rex Blow, D.S.O., escaped with a party from the Sandakan area in 1943, and with the Moro people conducted an active guerilla war on Tawi Tawi. Transferred to the main island of Mindanao, Major Blow was a key figure in attacking Japanese strong points, working with American officers left behind after the take over by the Japanese.

Listening to the news, we knew that the Australian 9th Division had landed at Tarakan on the east coast of Borneo, and then Labuan and Brunei on the north-west. Shropshire and force headed for Brunei where we joined old friends Phoenix and Nashville.

We were all elated that we would be supporting our own kith and kin, particularly these famous Australian Imperial Force's infantry divisions. In our sweep across the Pacific, Shropshire had taken a lively part in thirteen major assaults, including the great battles that had raged around Leyte and Luzon, but on no occasion had we seen our Army in action. The time had arrived when we would be working with the A.I.F. in a combined operation, a very gratifying state of affairs.

But being of a curious mind, and having watched the Navy's sweep from the shores of New Guinea to the successful liberation of the Philippines, my mind was exercised by many questions for which there were no obvious or apparent answers.

Why were we in Borneo ? To attack Borneo we had literally to sail some eight hundred to a thousand miles south of Luzon, where a few months ago we had crushed the Japanese, and sent their navy scurrying for home. Nearly two thousand miles to the north the Americans had concluded two brilliant, if bloody, campaigns to capture Okinawa and Iwo Jima. Allied forces were now only four or five hundred miles from Japan's shores. The British Pacific Fleet had joined in these attacks and, barring some sort of miracle, the next major offensive would surely be on the Japanese home islands.

So why send the best infantry troops in the world to attack a beleaguered force of Japanese, who had no naval or air support, in a place that had no strategic value? We were quite sure that this was the case because on occasions on watch, we would be handed the weekly intelligence surveys. Sometimes we thumbed through these top secret documents because they contained statistics of enemy strengths, equipment and capabilities. They could help a look-out to know what types of enemy aircraft or ships we might encounter and have to identify. At this stage of the war the Japanese had in the whole of the South West Pacific an estimated hundred aircraft or so, most of them unfit for combat, and manned by poorly trained pilots. Their few remaining navy ships were trying to sneak home from Singapore area hugging the Asian and China coast. The Allies did not need Borneo's oil, and Major Rex Blow had already walked the Sandakan track to discover that it was too late to save our P.O.W.'s lives.

It was only years later, as historians examined records and more information came to light, that some of my questions could be answered. Studies such as John Hetherington's biography of Sir Thomas Blamey, Peter Charlton's "The Unnecessary War", and Sir Paul Hasluck's official history, "The Government and the People, 1942-45", revealed situations and facts that were quite disturbing, of how politics can effect the lives of men serving their country. The Labour Government was embarrassed by its policy of not allowing the conscripted Australian Military Force, (A.M.F.) to fight outside Australian territory, and this resulted in the use of the A.M.F. taking over places like Bougainville when the Americans departed. American policy was to simply contain the Japanese and let them wither on the vine because they had no supplies or naval and air support. The 6th Division had been in the Wewak area fighting a savage campaign against the trapped and beleaguered Japanese 18th Army. The A.I.F.'s 7th and 9th Divisions went through an extensive reorganisation and training programme which kept them out of the limelight for many months.

There was extensive and sometimes bitter debate in the Australian Parliament over strategy. Should the Army be used to attack the enemy on the most forward fronts, or occupy by-passed territory still held by the Japanese?

Hetherington questions the value of the Ist Army campaign in Bougainville, and then writes, "Did the assaults on Borneo, for all their excellence as military operations, hasten by a day the reconquest of Japan's brigand empire? It is to be doubted if they served any war-winning purpose whatever." (see appendix 11)

Because large parts of the Army had been inactive for a long time, there had been adverse criticism in some Allied quarters about Australia's effort. From the politicians' point of view, Borneo was a place for a belated attempt to demonstrate that they were entitled to a prominent place at the coming peace table.

Although our operations in the Philippines gave us a different view of the value of a campaign in Borneo, as said before, we were thrilled with the idea of supporting our Australian brothers in arms, so it was a case of getting on with the job we were ordered to do.

At Labuan and Brunei we did some routine bombardments, one particular incident once again demonstrating the remarkable accuracy and effectiveness of Shropshire's gunnery. The Australian infantry was pinned down miles inland, fifty to hundred yards from a strongly fortified position they had to capture. To carry the position a bombardment was needed to blanket the Japanese, and the Army's field artillery was having difficulty in knocking out the Japs. Shropshire's eight inch guns were called for. If I remember correctly the range was extreme, in the vicinity of twenty thousand

yards, and the Army did not believe it possible for us to hit the Japanese successfully without causing casualties among our own waiting infantry. However, our bombardment was successful, and was a considerable help for the infantry who eventually occupied the position with minimum casualties.

We returned to Tawi Tawi for ammunition, supplied by old faithful, the Yunnan. Fuelled up, the whole force proceeded south to Balikpapan half way down the east coast of Borneo. The place was to be softened up before the arrival of the 7th Division, A.I.F. On arrival we were warned that mine sweepers were having a busy time sweeping up and exploding mines, but we did not encounter any of them at close hand.

For several days we systematically wrecked the place, including the huge Shell refinery and tank farm, situated along the crest of a long ridge which ran parallel to the shore. There was some fear that the Japanese would direct burning oil flows on to the assaulting troops. The bombardment was designed to give the Japs no rest, so we sometimes went through long periods, both day and night, where only one or two turrets were manned, but they would fire every ten minutes or so. The Army was concerned also that the Japanese had an estimated eighteen defence guns and medium and light anti-aircraft weapons which could oppose a landing. During the first days these guns did cause some anxiety amongst the mine sweepers operating close inshore, but within a short time our bombardments had reduced Japanese counter fire to virtually nothing. In fact, for those off duty in the evening, films were shown in the large space of the cafeteria mess-deck. It would have been a bit rude to show them in the open on the foc'sle.

After eighteen months as a foc'sleman, I was given a change of duty. It was sad to leave old friends on mess deck 11, but a change is as good as a holiday. I was soon established in the quarterdeck mess amongst some friends of long standing like Jimmy Newton and Stuey Stewart. Instead of action stations in "A" turret shell room, I was glad to get the job as loading number of a Bofors in the port waist, and at cruising stations, or "2nd degree of readiness", I was a look-out in the A.D.P.,(Air Defence Position.) The A.D.P. is the highest point of the superstructure so I could look down on the Compass Platform at my old position. On this small platform there were six look-outs on watch as a rule, three on the starboard side and three on the port side. From this position the Officer in Charge could direct the gun fire of the four inch guns.

I liked this job and quickly got acclimatised. One forenoon watch our duty officer was Lt.Austin, who was also the permanent bloke in charge. He was directing a bombardment with our starboard 4 inch guns at the Balikpapan area where the landing was planned. On his knees he had a chart with grids and reference points for our targets, and over the target area a Piper Cub aircraft acted as spotter, reporting over the earphones our fall of shot. Lt. Austin was called below for some reason, and he looked at me, handed me the chart and ear-phones, and said to carry on until he got back. So there I was, having the time of my life, calling out the corrections up or down, left or right, then "shoot," and the four inch guns would blaze away. On the chart was a large substantial property, clearly marked, so we aimed for that and got a ribald comment from the spotter in the Piper Cub. On asking why, our spotter called back that we had just landed our shots on the Governor's tennis court. I never did find out if the spotter was pulling our legs, but apparently we were aiming at the Governor's summer residence.

Lt Austin returned and said to carry on while he stood there watching the results of the bombardment. He knew of my employment with the Shell Company, and we were watching the fire and smoke from the refinery. He said to me with a wry grin that the Shell Company should dock me five pounds every time I said "shoot."

Early on 1 July we stood by for the landing. An intense bombardment is followed by the landing craft bearing the assault troops heading for the beaches. I stood on the foc'sle watching as the landing craft came up our port side, turned under our bows, for Shropshire acted as a marker, and from there they headed in a straight line for the beaches. One bloke was sitting on the top of a gun turret of a tank in a landing craft, cheekily waving to us to come on in with them, suggesting we were nice and safe out at sea. "B" turret let fly with a salvo directly over the landing craft and the blast nearly knocked our friend off his perch, so we all had a good laugh. Serve him right, but as I have said before, we did not envy the foot-slogger. The sea was our place and we were happy to stay out of the jungle.

Shropshire made a quick trip to Tawi Tawi for fuel and ammunition, then back to Balikpapan to support our Australians ashore, who were doing a magnificent job.

One night near midnight we were sent to action stations as radar had on their screens a bogey, an un-identified aircraft nosing about at a few thousand feet. I was standing on the loading platform, over the gun layer and the trainer who were sitting in their seats. I dropped a clip of shells into the breech to be ready if anything happened. Our Bofors was elevated pointing in the general direction of the last reported bearing of the bogey, now presumed to be a Japanese on the prowl. Suddenly our Bofors fired a couple of shots into the night sky. Our gun captain had accidentally nodded off, slumped forward, foot on the firing pedal and away she went. There were the usual demands for an explanation, but one good thing resulted for radar reported the Jap now disappearing fast off the screen. Whether these shots frightened him off we will never know, but I thought this was not an auspicious start to my career as a member of a Bofors gun's crew.

The campaign at Balikpapan proceeded according to plan, naval gunfire having done its job. Shropshire's presence was no longer necessary and we cruised back to Tawi Tawi. Here I witnessed a very sad event.

I was pottering about the Compass Platform on a fine morning, listening to the chatter on the T.B.S. A new voice broke in and asked for ships in harbour to keep a lookout for parachutes from a Liberator bomber which was flying around. The bomber had been on a mission but a bomb or bombs had jammed in the bomb bay, so the crew was instructed to let the Liberator ditch in the sea after every body bailed out. Should any member of the Liberator's crew parachute into the bay, ships were asked to keep an eye on them and pick them up if possible. I think eleven or twelve parachutes were counted as bodies tumbled out of the aircraft. Then control could be heard talking to the pilot who said he would try to bring the Liberator in safely by himself, now that everybody else was safe.

The airstrip at Tawi Tawi ran roughly parallel to the shore line, but part of it was obscured by a hill about a third of the way down the strip from the touch down end. Liberators are very big bombers and had a reputation for being difficult to control under certain conditions, so there was some apprehension as we watched this drama unfold. Will this bloke make it? We held our breath as this huge bomber turned away to our left, banked in an hundred and eighty degree turn, lowered height and straightened up for the run in. At first I thought he was going to make it safely. It held steady, getting lower, seemed to get close to touch-down and then passed momentarily out of sight behind the hill. Then boom, an almighty explosion rent the air, sending flame and a huge black pall of smoke thousands of feet into the air. I felt devastated by this tragedy. What an equation? The life of a courageous, conscientious pilot in exchange for the cost of a machine of war. Few men would have attempted such a difficult feat, especially a difficult one where failure meant instant death. Nations with men who do their duty like that are lucky indeed.

We said farewell to Tawi Tawi and headed north for Luzon, leaving Borneo behind. (see appendix 12) We cruised into Subic Bay at the southern end of the Bataan Peninsula, the original and permanent home of the U.S.7th Fleet. Hardly acclimatised to Subic Bay, we upped anchor and passed close by Corregidor, watching with amazement the cliffs, beaches and little bays which had been the scene of such murderous fighting only a few months ago. Manila Bay was full of countless masts and funnels of Japanese ships which protruded out of the water. We anchored not far from the city, the "Pearl of the Orient."

Commodore Collins had recovered after his wounds received at Leyte last October, and would soon arrive to take over as Flag Officer with Shropshire as his flag ship. Shropshire must look at its best for his arrival, so it was all hands to paint ship. However the wet season made painting slow and panic set in, in case the job was not finished in time.

The stern of the ship where Admirals' quarters are located is a strategic spot and one cannot have old paint-work there, rain, hail, or shine. Perhaps the biggest laugh of all time occurred doing this job. Stuey Stewart and I had been given this job, standing at each end of a stage, painting in the rain. Each end of the stage was tied to a stag horn on the deck above us, and after painting a section we yelled out to have each line lowered a bit more. The lowering was done by the bloke in charge, Petty Officer "Bonc" Hewitt, who lowered first one end and then the other to make the stage level

again, and then we continued painting in the rain. Bonc was newly elevated to Petty Officer, previously being a popular Leading Seaman, so we were all on good terms. On the previous trip to Sydney Bonc had his teeth removed, but before his false teeth arrived we sailed. After many weeks of discomfort, and teasing from his friends, the teeth arrived and Bonc showed them proudly to all and sundry.

On this day, miserable in the rain, Stuey and I were continuously yelling at Bonc to come out from his shelter to lower away, so we could finish the job. Our stage was still eight or ten feet above the water-line when Bonc dashed out in a hurry to lower us a bit further. He loosened the line on Stuey's side and in his haste let it run out of control. The stage was now swinging vertically, with me hanging onto my end for dear life, while Stuey had plunged into the water with pot and paint all over him. We shouted abuse at Bonc who put his head over the side and roared with laughter at our plight. Then he gave an anguished cry because his brand new teeth had fallen out and splash, they were a white shimmering object in the water, slowly sinking to the bottom of Manila Bay.

Bonc yelled out in despair, "Dive! dive!" Our shouted reply,- "Dive yourself you dopey bastard."

We finished the painting job at last, and when Commodore Collins came aboard he would notice a fine paint job, but would never realise what it had cost Bonc.

Being anchored not far from the city in Manila Bay was a change from bases and anchorages that offered views only of jungle and mountain. We were close to civilisation and I was lucky enough to get ashore several times.

Having heard of the famous old walled Spanish fortress called Intramuros, I hoped to explore this place. Unfortunately it was out of bounds as the Japanese used it in a last ditch stand, fighting to the last man. Clearing the area of explosives and wreckage was still being carried out. Not until years later did I see this fascinating place, full of Filipino and Spanish history.

I came across members of the U.S. Ist Cavalry Division. We had first come across this famous outfit when they had stormed the Admiralty Islands. We swapped opinions on our next moves, and they disclosed that they had been issued with winter clothing. This meant only one thing, next stop Japan. This was not really good news, for universal opinion of the Japanese was that an assault on the homelands would inspire them to fight with a fanaticism that would lead to enormous losses of ships and men. We had already had a taste of the Kamikaze and its costs at Leyte and Lingayen.

For now we were enjoying a run ashore. A bombed out building housed a bar where our little party had a few drinks of some terrible moonshine liquor, and a pedlar sold me a silver engraved ring made from an old silver peso. It was never quite big enough for my fingers and my wife Dee has worn it with pride for years.

For recreation of a different sort, someone got the bright idea to organise water polo teams. Teams dived off the side and the goals were suspended from the ship's booms. Shark fins were occasionally seen, so while we played the jolly boat patrolled up and down the perimeter of the playing space, manned by a sentry armed with a Lancaster sub-machine gun. In typical Australian fashion, or perhaps being young and careless, we would have played for the fun of it regardless of armed protection.

Shropshire moved back to Subic Bay to join the new Task Force 74. A training period of exercises at sea and gunnery practice was the order of the day. When not exercising at sea I was lucky enough to organise a few trips to visit other ships calling on Americans I had met. One memorable visit was to the U.S.S. California, and for a cruiser man it was an experience to see the size of 14 inch gunhouses compared to our 8 inch. Discussing the Battle of Surigao Strait, my host, whose name I cannot recall, told me that his turret had fired only seven shots on that memorable night. This of course confirmed our view that Shropshire's fire had been far more weighty and effective than had been acknowledged. I stayed on board for their evening "chow", and surprisingly found that although American Navy food was very tasty and even looked better than our own "scran", in fact it was not as substantial as our more solid, homely fare.

One night we were stirred into action. Sea going parties were called out urgently to get ready for sea, and the Task Force charged out of Subic Bay westward in the direction of the Asian coast.

The buzz went around that a Japanese cruiser or destroyers were making a run for Japan, and our job would be to intercept. However, during the next day our force reversed course and headed back home for Subic Bay. It must have been a false alarm. As we cruised along a mine was detected ahead and on our port side.

A good chance for some gunnery practice. The four inch guns, pom poms, and Bofors all blazed away, but although we expected an explosion, nothing happened. I was loading our Bofors as fast as I could, but as the mine kept drifting aft the guns on my right, and therefore forward of me, kept training aft, and I copped the blast from them in my right ear. In the hurry to do this practice shoot I had forgotten to put in my ear-plugs. At the end of the shoot my right ear was bleeding and ringing. I mopped it up, and stupidly did not bother to report to Sick Bay, for that would be a sign of weakness.

Back at Subic Bay, Chaplain Alcorn called for me and told me he had arranged for me to visit an American Lutheran Chaplain. This was a very kind act. Cyril Alcorn knew that I was one of the few Lutherans on board, if not the only one, and he thought I would like to receive the Sacraments from a fellow Lutheran. The ship's motor boat took me over to a ship whose name I do not remember, nor do I recall the name of the chaplain, but remember his story. This ship was an infantry assault ship which had taken part in the attack on Iwo Jima. He told me of the carnage and the ferocity with which the Japanese had fought back. Some of the infantry units had lost sixty per-cent of their men. This information, added to the news of winter clothing issued to the Ist Cavalry Division, brought home the stark reality of our prospects when we hit Japan.

There was not much mess-deck talk of the coming operation, although every-one knew it would be Japan. We were not over-emphasising or dramatising the situation. I believe we were simply being practical and down to earth, and we would take every thing as it comes, as we had done for a long time. The supreme confidence in Shropshire and what we could achieve was un-diminished.

What we talked about was correct. Although unknown to us at the time, American Presidential approval had been given for an assault on the island of Kyushu, the western most island of Japan. The date was set already and planning under way. Initially, the date was set for 1st September, but was postponed on account of the delays experienced in the Okinawan campaign. In its own inimitable fashion, the "buzz" reckoned that the 7th Fleet would be used to do the initial bombardments, and cover the first landings. As so often happened, the basis of this buzz was correct.

The implications of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima did not sink home at first, but we realised something big was happening. The second on Nagasaki caused much more excitement. Could this be that Japan was about to be knocked out and down for the count?

VICTORY WITHOUT A BOOM

The buzz for some time had been about the "invasion of all invasions", the assault on Japan. There were even predictions as to where we would land, and as usual, they were surprisingly accurate. The buzz said that the initial bombardments were to be carried out by the US 7th Fleet because our force consisting of the older battleships was expendable. Of course seamen in the mess decks were not told or consulted about top military planning, but the buzzes were close to the mark.

President Truman had approved plans for an assault on Kyushu, time fixed at 1 November. We did not dwell on the subject a great deal, but when we did, we knew that this assault would make some of our other operations pale into insignificance. This time our chances of coming away unscathed were rather slim; the odds against us were growing. In no way did this diminish confidence or faith in ourselves. Rather the growing feeling was that we would rather get on with the job and finish it off, regardless of the consequences. After the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, gossip about another dangerous campaign started to recede, and was over-taken by vague thoughts lurking in the back-ground. Perhaps victory was now possible without further risk.

On 15 August Captain Nichols announced that the Japanese were making moves to sue for peace. This announcement was, we found out later, prompted by the remarkable and now famous speech by Emperor Hirohito to the Japanese people. On 16 August we dressed ship because the announcement was now official. This raises a very controversial point. Australia celebrates the end of the conflict with Japan on 15 August, and this is probably because Prime Minister Chifley announced in Parliament that the war was over. However for the men at the firing line, such announcements were misleading. Hirohito emphasized the need to end the conflict to save further hurt to the Japanese nation. He did not admit defeat, only that the war had not gone well for Japan. But given the state of unrest in the Japanese Army and the Generals who bitterly opposed a surrender, there was no guarantee that the occupation of Japan would proceed without more bloodshed. In fact, the flight of the Japanese deputation to arrange a cease-fire with MacArthur in Manila had to be escorted and protected by American fighter aircraft for fear of them being shot down by their own side. The war party in Tokyo regarded anyone who negotiated with the enemy as traitors.

There was no certainty of a peaceful entry into Japan. When we finally landed in Japan we were given very strict instructions for protecting ourselves against attack and sabotage. It was not until the formal surrender took place in Tokyo Bay on 2 September that we could say the war was really over, and should be the real date for final victory over Japan.

Details for the surrender of Japanese troops and our transit to occupation of Japanese territory were set in place when Japanese Lt. General Kawabe and party reached Manila, landing at Nicholls Airfield on 19 August. I still have a photo of him stepping off the aircraft where he was met by General Willoughby, MacArthur's Chief of Intelligence.

One sign of better things to come was the arrival of supply ship Merkur, whose most treasured item was an ample supply of beer. This resulted in an extra victory ration, I think two bottles per man, bought for cash, not a gift. I promptly told my tee-total friends to acquire their issue for those who were more in need, and this gave the thirsty souls enough stocks for a reasonable victory party.

Shropshire was showing all the signs, now so well known, of getting ready for sea, and on 25 August we sailed from Subic Bay with Hobart, Warramunga, and Bataan for first stop Okinawa. Our force now bore the title of Task Force 70.9, still in the U.S. 7th Fleet, but as we were to become part of the Japanese Occupation Forces we were attached to the U.S. 3rd Fleet which was already in Tokyo Bay. Shropshire was flag ship, with Commodore Collins Flag Officer.

About this time I was called to the Ship's Office for a change of duty, a job with the lengthy title of Signals Distribution Office Messenger. This office was up in the superstructure on the same level, but abaft the Compass Platform, amidships, with the flag deck on either side. A Petty Officer Signalman manned this office and typed out signals which had to be dashed off to the Captain, Commander and other officers or departments. The messenger was equipped with a clip-board on which signals were clipped, and his job was to dash off and find the recipient, and return with a reply if that was required. Sometimes the Petty Officer would turn a signal face down, indicating it was confidential and we were not to peruse it. A first class job which was neat and clean. It kept me

in the Bridge and Compass Platform area where I had been a lookout for so long and where everything was happening.

Because of the frightful campaign which took place on Okinawa a few months earlier, I was looking forward to sighting this historic place, but possibly due to dull weather, I considered it a dreary place. A wide open harbour full of warships and transports was all we saw. The campaign at Okinawa had the doubtful distinction of surpassing Lingayen Gulf for the ferocity of kamikaze attacks, if that was possible.

American Naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison notes an interesting comparison between Lingayen and Okinawa. Japan was only some three hundred miles from Okinawa so kamikaze attacks could be mounted in greater numbers from home bases. But by this time Japanese pilots were trained in the absolute minimum of time and their tactical skills suffered accordingly. At Lingayen the numbers of aircraft available to Japan were less but the pilots were much more skilful and they pressed home their attacks with greater accuracy.

We sailed into Tokyo Bay in the early daylight hours of 31 August. The weather was warm and humid with a heavy overcast sky. Whenever I had the opportunity I would use the Evershead binoculars on the Port Evershead Bearing Indicator, my old look-out position for so long, and scan the coastline. I could sweep from the huge naval base and shipbuilding yards at Yokosuka in the south, up the coast to Yokohama, and further north to Tokyo.

September 2nd was another dull overcast day, the grand day when the Instrument of Surrender was signed, after which we could truly say that we were the victors. The battleships, including U.S.S. Missouri where the signing ceremony took place were in the distance to our north. My lasting and vivid memory was the magnificent sight of hundreds of aircraft in a Victory Fly Past. All types, shapes and sizes of aircraft in formation, the heavens reverberating with the roar of engines. I can distinctly remember wondering what would be going through the minds of millions of Japanese as they witnessed these foreign invaders roaring through their skies. I still thought of them as the enemy, a dangerous people who had yet to be put in their place.

An official post mark was struck for Shropshire ship's company to send a souvenir letter to family and friends. I still have the envelope I sent to my mother, bearing the stamp, "Tokyo Bay, Japan, 2nd Sep. 1945, Japanese Surrender."

On the back of this letter are the signatures of numerous shipmates. The names are a veritable list of well known if not famous Shropshire identities, bringing back some stirring memories. There is Les (Lofty) Rathbone, Ginger Giles, Geoff Strahan, Gordon Urquhart, Ray Knuckey, Kaye Grace, Jock Epstein, Harry Mason, Lionel Evans, Alan (Pop) Ramsay, Col Smith, Ben Roberts, Ron Hateley, Clive Johnstone, John Ryan, just to name a few of the signatures of men who were an important part of life in those historic days.

Some time later I was on a list of names called to the Ships Office. This call initiated what proved to be one of the most interesting days in my otherwise humble naval career. We were told we would be part of a guard at the British Embassy to raise the British Flag at a special ceremony. The organisers of the ceremony had decided that there should be a colonial representation. But it was necessary to get priorities right. We could not appear in Australian uniform, and for the sake of consistency, we would be in British uniform. Our tropical dress of shirt, shorts and long socks were khaki, and we wore our shorts in typical Australian fashion, neat, short and snug fitting. The British sailors rig was white, with black socks, and those, dreadful, to our eyes, "bombay bloomers" or "parachute pants".

Next morning we were taken by the ship's motor boat to battleship H.M.S. King George 5th., to be fitted out with the British gear. To a man we were disappointed with the state of the famous K.G.5. She was scruffy and not up to Shropshire standards. The barrels of her 5.2 inch guns were depressed so I looked into them and wiped my finger around the inside of the barrels, bringing out rust and dirt. I asked a sailor how could guns be in this condition and was told they had been at sea for months. All I could reply was that Shropshire had been at sea for ten months at a stretch and there was no way our guns, decks, or any piece of equipment would be in that state. Something in the great British Navy had slipped on K.G.5.

We collected our white uniforms and headed for Shropshire. Most of us dashed off to find any of our amateur tailors, or anybody with scissors, needle and thread. Our new shorts were ripped apart and transformed into neat snug fitting shorts to be worn as only Australians could, (or used to) wear them.

Back on board Shropshire we were issued with a page of instructions for safety ashore. Do not talk to people; do not accept any food or drink; stay in groups and ignore Japanese invitations to singly leave the group. If accosted, stay together in a group, form a circle and face outwards. As it turned out, these instructions were un-necessary, but indicated that there were still concerns about possible reprisals to Allied servicemen at the time.

The great day arrived, 17 September, and a duty destroyer came alongside to transport our 30 strong party to the wharves south of Tokyo city.

We lined the guard rails of our destroyer as she slowly came alongside the wharf, eager to step ashore on conquered territory. A party of Japanese wharfies was scurrying about getting ready to take our lines and tie us up. As we got within line heaving distance, a Japanese in some sort of uniform shouted orders and jumped on to a platform or dais, threw a smart salute whilst everybody else stood to attention. I could not believe my eyes. Here was a party of our recent deadly enemy honouring us with the proper naval courtesies. Then a peculiar, but very significant thought passed through my mind. For the last two years I had been part of a warship and a naval force which had literally slaughtered thousands of Japanese. We had killed them as they manned their shore installations, sunk their ships at Surigao Strait, shot down many of their aircraft. And up until this moment of my life I had never seen a Japanese. There he was, this little brown man, a picture of correct etiquette and discipline, apparently welcoming us with a display of good naval manners.

On disembarking we climbed aboard U.S. Army trucks which took us in the direction of the city. The scene through the suburbs was sobering. I had seen the devastation of Manila, but at least there were concrete or brick buildings which could be seen as buildings, even though they were gutted, knocked about and leaning at an angle amongst the rubble. Here there were huge areas with virtually nothing, just burnt out wastes with not a stick standing, the result of the saturation incendiary bombing by the B29 Super Fortresses. There were odd groups of people, women, children and the elderly scratching about in the ashes. My mind was exercised by the question; were we, as conquerors, entitled to detest these people, and their treatment of prisoners alone was a good reason for dealing severely with them, or should we revise our attitude to the ordinary Japanese who were victims of the conduct of the nation's leaders? What guilt do these people bear for their nation's atrocities? I still do not know the answer, except to say that the pitiful sight of the women and kids made me stop and think.

But to return to flag raising ceremonies. Our Army trucks transported us through parts of the bombed out city and then to the boulevard around the Imperial Palace. In ordinary times this would have been an impressive sight. It still was, except that everything looked grey, dull and dirty, due to the hammering that Tokyo had taken from the air. The palace showed little, if any, sign of damage.

Then past the Diet building, often seen today on T.V. news, and we pulled up outside the British Embassy. The front steps were opposite the main gates, and a driveway extended along the front of the building to left and right. The flag was to be unfurled over the front steps, so we Australians were placed out of the way at the extreme right of the driveway. I suspected that our re-designed uniforms sent a message that these blokes had better be put as far as possible out of sight. To see the ceremony, the blokes on the end of the line leaned forward and looked left, and soon we were all doing this and our line was bent like a dog's hind leg, much to the annoyance of some Pommie Petty Officers. The guests arrived, Supreme Commander General MacArthur, Vice Admiral Bruce Fraser R.N., Commodore Collins, General Blamey, our Captain Nichols, and a host of other military and diplomatic officials. A Royal Navy Band played the National Anthem in fine style and the flag was unfurled. The Captains and the Kings departed and it was all over. But not quite.

The sailors were provided with a picnic lunch in the Embassy grounds, hampers of sandwiches and lots of lovely, ice cold Japanese beer. We persuaded our Pommie friends to hop into the sandwiches, while we grabbed a goodly ration of beer and proceeded to have a grand victory party to make our trip worth while. I had no idea the Japs could brew such good beer. Before the party

broke up a few of us decided that as some rear doors appeared open, the Embassy was worth exploring. In what must have been the Ambassador's office was a very fine, very large desk, in which I found a pile of cards. I presumed the Ambassador used them as visiting cards or to write notes to colleagues. They were made of very fine white cardboard, embossed in gold with the Royal Coat of Arms, the edges gold lined, and were about 3 by 4 inches in size. A stock of these cards disappeared inside my shirt, and we also souvenired a linen bag full of gramophone records of Japanese classical opera.

Eventually the Army trucks transported us back to the wharf area, which was littered with bombed out sheds and wharehouses. One roofless shed contained some drill rifles and tin helmets which were worth souveniring, and I added a collection of Chinese coins. The Japanese had been short of metals for their war industries, so they ransacked vast amounts of bronze and copper coin from places like China. In this wharehouse there were tons of the stuff, all done up in calico bags.

On the way back to Shropshire across the bay, we thought it prudent to toss overboard the military gear and gramophone records. There was the possibility that we might have been questioned about looting, but I regretted this decision years after, for the records of Japanese opera would now be extremely valuable antiques.

Next morning I showed my souvenirs to Jimmy Newton and "Stuey" Stewart and decided that the Ambassador's cards were of sufficient interest to embellish them with the autographs of the members of this historic party. So down aft I went, rapped on the Commodore's cabin door and got a rude reception from some flunky. Commodore Collins looked up from the desk at which he was seated, recognized me from the days when I was one of his look-outs and he was Captain. He seemed amused by the situation and called me to come in. I told him of the Ambassador's cards, showed him what they looked like and asked for his autograph. He examined the card with interest, and with a chuckle penned his signature.

Then next door to the Captain's cabin. Captain Nichols was highly amused, was delighted to sign, and said something about a good show and that I had something worth keeping. My friends later were amazed at my audacity in getting these signatures. Able seaman do not normally confront Admirals and Captains in their cabins un-announced, or for that matter, announced.

The rest of the morning was spent in getting the names of practically all members of this party on the same card with the signatures of Collins and Nichols. Three or four of them, like Ted Griffith and Kevin Day, are now my friends living on the Gold Coast. Stan Nicholls, author of our history titled H.M.A.S. Shropshire, included in his book a picture taken in the grounds of the Embassy, our crowd with jubilant grins on their faces each holding up a bottle of Japanese beer. The anti-climax of this episode was when we were called to the ship's office and told to hand back the British uniforms. We handed them in, highly amused at the probable reaction when our tailoring alterations were discovered. We considered it rather paltry that we could not keep a few shillings worth of clothes as a souvenir of this historical event.

Life on board Shropshire was slowly reverting to peace time routine. Not for David Henry. My job in the Signals Distribution Office kept me away from the dirt, paint, rust and hard yakka which was the lot of the average seaman. In a harbour with no hostile enemy the Bridge and Compass Platform was usually un-attended. I made the smart and sensible move of sleeping in the little emergency shelter that Captain Nichols had had constructed against the for'ard bulkhead of the port wing of the Bridge, for his cat-naps when we were at sea. This shelter was about six feet long, only a few feet high, and just big enough to hold a stretcher. Now it was unused and forgotten, a very nice quiet spot compared with the over-crowded mess decks. Shropshire had increased its war-time complement to eleven hundred men, but had been designed to accommodate under seven hundred.

The lucky ones got leave to go ashore, which I did on a number of occasions. Impressions of Tokyo are still vivid. In those years taxi drivers the world over were notorious for knowing the black markets and the rackets. Tokyo seemed no different to any other city. One day three or four of us hired a taxi and one of our party paid off the driver who quibbled over the fare. We demanded change as the price seemed exorbitant. The driver pulled out a wallet which was choked with Japanese notes. My offsider neatly pulled out most of this and told the driver to beat it. This was a dangerous act because American policy was to treat the civilians with due care, no looting or

violence. The Japanese were now our friends. I recommended a fast withdrawal from the scene in case any American M.P.'s were around, at the same time being pretty sure that the taxi man was a crook and would not want his affairs placed under scrutiny.

Tokyo Railway Station was an experience never to be forgotten. I was certain that every time a train stopped, 10,000 Japanese rushed the open doors, trying to get in. Once aboard, the crush and sweaty smell was worse than the days in "A" turret's shell room.

Tokyo's Ginza, now known worldwide as a famous shopping centre, was not all that exciting. Bombing had caused much damage, buildings were being repaired, and shops endeavouring to clean up and get back in business. Goods were generally of makeshift quality, and not much of them. I bought a kimono and watched the girl attendant operate an abacus, reflecting, as she flicked the beads along the wires and calculated the change, that it was a most remarkable piece of equipment. A skilled operator can make complex calculations with unerring accuracy into the millions.

The reputed oriental politeness was not evident. As in all cities, people rushed and pushed, always in a hurry. Far from deferring to us as their newly arrived conquerors, and despite the fact that we were physically half again their size, we could have been part of the scenery there for years. We got pushed around in the crowds just like everybody else. Whether on the streets or in the trains we were just part of the mob.

About a dozen of us walked into the Japanese Tourist Bureau one day and were attended to by the manager who spoke very good English. His dress was a bit of a shock. Dressed to the "nines" in morning dress and resplendent with starched butterfly wing collar. Whilst I was buying a tourist guide book from him he noticed my friends rummaging amongst books and souvenirs at the back of the shop. He dived out from behind the counter and remonstrated with them, telling them to keep hands off and keep the place tidy. A pint sized little fellow, he was not going to allow his big blustering conquerors to upset his establishment. When things settled down again he asked me where we came from. When told Australia he took a deep breath and said, "Ah! Australia, very powerful country." I could assume that the Japanese had heard something of the Australian Army's brilliant victories in New Guinea

On one trip to Yokohama I noticed a pavement artist. For two shillings he did a colour drawing of me which I still have in the family file. It does not look much like me, and would never win an Archibald Prize, but it is an interesting memento. I suppose this is how we looked through Japanese eyes.

To relieve boredom of "swinging around the pick", we cruised to Wakayama, a port city at the entrance to the inland sea. Instead of staring at more city sights, a few of us walked along the beach front for miles through fishing villages dotted along the coast, with humble houses built right down to the waterline. The smell of drying fish permeated the air. We came to a village with a small temple and a man in robes, who knew enough English to answer our questions. He gave us permission to see inside the temple, and as we stepped up the front steps he remonstrated in no uncertain manner. Of course, we had to take off our shoes. An altar bore objects obviously used in their worship, but also a number of framed photos of young men in naval uniform. The priest told us these were lads from the village who had joined the Navy and were killed in action. We quietly left the temple and village. Even Japanese villages and their inhabitants must be suffering with the loss of their young stalwarts.

At Wakayama our escorting destroyer was H.M.S. Whelp, which tied up alongside us. I befriended two Kiwi Signalmen when taking signals back and forth. The only Kiwis on a Pommie ship, they were far from happy, so I invited them to our cafeteria mess deck for "scran", and saved up some of our beer ration whenever possible. To return the hospitality they invited me onto the Whelp for dinner, (lunch), and commandeered most of the messes rum ration, explaining that today most of the rum was to repay their guest's hospitality.. This proposition was amazingly accepted by the rest of the mess. I never did find out if they thought the rum quality was lousy and were not keen on it or whether they were simply doing what the Kiwis told them. The Kiwis, although only two in number, seemed to have their own way in the mess. Late afternoon I staggered back up the gangway to Shropshire and how I got back was a mystery, and the reason I never drink rum.

Our Association's Patron, His Highness the Duke of Edinburgh, was an officer in the Whelp at the time.

Back in Tokyo Bay the weather was getting cold, in fact this was the first time I saw snow. Away to the west on a clear day could be seen Fuji Yama, a spectacularly beautiful sight, as vivid as the picture books and travel brochures show. Now with snow on its near perfect cone, it looked its best. Every few days one could see that the snow was further down the mountain. There are probably few people who would have seen the remarkable sight I saw one morning. Wide awake early, I got out of my shelter, (or should say, the Captains) and casting my eye around, saw a little pre-dawn grey in the east. Then scanning westward I saw above the horizon, a bright slash of strawberry pink colour, a resplendent isosceles triangular shape pointing upwards. I had to pinch myself to make sure I was not having visions or hallucinating. It gave one a weird mystic feeling, until I realised what was happening. The sun's rays were not yet visible above the eastern horizon, the sky above was still dark, but the top of Fuji was high enough to catch the invisible sun's rays passing overhead. The sun's rays changed the snow to pink. As the sun came nearer to sunrise, the bright strawberry colour spread out down the mountain to the snowline, until the sun's light got too bright and then the colour faded. A truly remarkable phenomena.

Although Tokyo Bay was a busy place, there was not a lot for ordinary sailors to do. Gradually there descended over me a feeling of boredom. What was going to happen to us next? A rumour said we were going to Shanghai or Hong Kong, but another buzz said that there were difficulties with the Chinese Government. Also, Shropshire was officially still a part of the U.S. 3rd Fleet, and there were some protocol difficulties in getting permission to sail into areas under British control.

Then came the obvious signs which set tongues wagging. Commodore Collins transferred his flag to H.M.A.S. Hobart on 17 November, and on the 18th we sailed out of Tokyo Bay. There was Fuji Yama in all her glory. Folk lore says that if you see Fuji when sailing out of Tokyo Bay, you are destined to come back. I have never been back, and given the reasons why we were there in the first place, I don't think I want to.

HOMEWARD BOUND

During Shropshire's stay in Tokyo Bay, the occupation of Japan proceeded smoothly and surprisingly rapidly. The main burden fell on the Army. There was not a lot to do for a cruiser like Shropshire.

Our first fears that the population would be organised in a campaign of covert armed resistance and sabotage were not warranted. The Japanese people's response to American rule as imposed on them by General MacArthur was quite remarkable. After the savagery with which the Japanese had treated their conquered victims, MacArthur's rule was firm, fair and far-sighted. No doubt this is the reason why we could walk the streets with impunity. We seemed to be regarded virtually as part of the scene, as though our presence was quite normal. Accepted and tolerated but not warmly welcomed.

However, the impressions of Japan receded from our minds as we sailed for home. Our thoughts now centred on getting out of the Navy as soon as possible. The awesome task of demobilising the Australian Armed Forces was well under way. The Government had devised a points system based on length of service, age on enlistment, marital status and occupation. Shipmates who had been on service for 5 or 6 years, were married or had dependents, had already been drafted off and sent home on ships returning to Australia. Being young, single, signed up at 17, and with no civilian obligations, it was predicted that another 6 or 9 months would be my lot. To this we were un-happily resigned.

It may be controversial, but it is perfectly true that the war had been exciting. Without the excitement of war-time operations to start the adrenalin flowing, life was becoming dull and un-inspiring.

Sailing out of Tokyo Bay, bound for Sydney, brought a combined sense of relief and pleasure. When Shropshire was well out to sea, I climbed up to X deck, which is the deck above the upper deck where X turret gun house was mounted, just abaft the main mast. I sat on the deck and breathed deeply of the ocean air, clean, fresh and invigorating. It was good to get away from a land-locked bay and gaze at the endless sky and horizon. A following sea made the ship gyrate slightly, so gazing up I could see the top of the mainmast writing an elliptical pattern among some puffy clouds way above us as we gently rolled from side to side and up and down. Staring at the gyrating mast would make any land-lubber seasick, but I had never been sea sick and enjoyed the gentle rolling and swinging motion. For a moment I felt an integral part of the sea and sky, as though I was suspended up there with the top of the mast as it swayed. I experienced a quiet but deep emotion, akin to what Robert Browning felt when he wrote "God's in His Heaven, all's right with the world." My day dreaming soon ceased as I prepared for the next watch.

The homeward cruise was distinguished by two events. Shropshire crossed the equator during the morning of 24 November, which we had done many times before on previous operations. On this peace time cruise there was opportunity for initiations and celebrations. Officers and men joining in good clean fun and sky-larking with none of the crudities that seem to mar this ceremony today.

Not long after 1200 hours I was in the Signals Distribution Office on duty when the Petty Officer in charge gave me a signal which he turned over on my clip-board so I could not see it, and told me to take it to the Captain who I found on the Compass Platform. Captain Nichols read it, then called for Commander Morrow and the chief Supply Officer. The reason for this was to calculate how many extra bodies Shropshire could accommodate. The signal I had taken to Captain NIchols was an enquiry asking if and how many Army personnel we could transport home. After consultations Captain Nichols announced that we would divert to Wewak on the New Guinea coast to pick up soldiers and take them home. The figure arrived at was 200 to 250 extra bodies. Early next morning on arrival in the harbour at Wewak, we lowered the accommodation ladder, and were surrounded by every sort of craft that could float, loaded with soldiers, all clamouring to get aboard. Our visit to Wewak had been passed around the previous night through the Army bush telegraph. Shropshire was coming to take men home, so they came out of the hills in droves. Talking to them later I gathered that many of them just picked up their gear and "shot through", and there were

many diggers who clambered on board "unofficially". Each man had to step from their rocking craft onto the accommodation ladder platform, then start up the steps which to us was a gently sloping stairway. They tripped and fell, getting tangled up with their gear. Off duty seamen were called on to help. We formed a line outboard on the steps of the ladder, the bottom man grabbed a digger from his boat or whatever he had paddled out in, lugged his gear and him up to the upper deck on the inside, or ship's side of the ladder. Then the next man did the same and so on, in an endless chain. I got two South Australians and acting as host, showed them where to sleep, shower and eat. They were not interested in eating, they said they could go hungry all the way to Sydney. All they wanted to do was get away from New Guinea and head for home. Shropshire actually brought home 597 soldiers.

They were everywhere, a great mass of humanity, blocking gangways, always in the way. As infantrymen they were the greatest in the world, but as sailors, when climbing a ladder or when the ship rolled, I have never seen anybody so clumsy. Out on the high seas fighting a naval war, we had often expressed the view that we would never go ashore into those dreaded jungles where Japs could shoot at us. Land warfare was too dangerous. Strangely enough the soldiers were just as frightened of the sea as we were of the jungle. They did not like the idea at all of that vast expanse of water in which you could drown. When I showed them the lower quarters and shell room of my former action station in A turret, they thought that being battened away down there below the water line was an horrendous idea.

Shropshire sailed into Sydney Harbour with her motley complement of khaki. In the few days we had been together I had become very friendly with my two South Australian charges. They were much older than I, but because they were in totally unfamiliar territory they had become very dependant on me. Sadly we said goodbye and, like so many wartime encounters, that was the finish of a pleasant relationship. We never met again.

We were sent off on leave, interstaters first as usual. Strangely enough I cannot recall anything about home leave. Australia was fast returning to normal peace time conditions, so a sailor on leave did not attract any special attention, not even in a country town. I do remember back in Sydney taking "Macca" MacNamara to Webb's home for New Year's Eve. Macca was a rare bird on our mess deck because he was old enough to be married. Naturally he was lonely away from his wife and family in Prahran, Victoria. I took him out to Roseville where the Webb family hospitality overwhelmed him during a relatively quiet but very pleasant New Year's Eve.

Max Webb was back from a tough tour of duty in corvettes in the Persian Gulf, and about to announce his engagement to Joan Detmold at a party to be held at a Surf Club. I think it was the Clovelly Surf Club. This was to be a very special occasion as Max was my old friend from Flinders Naval Depot days, and our friendship had led to the wonderful association with his family. I had met his lovely girl friend at the Webb home on a number of occasions. Alas, during the week before the Saturday night of the party, Shropshire shifted to Cockatoo Island Dry Dock for work on her hull and painting. I had watch keeping duties for the weekend and ferries did not run from Cockatoo after Saturday midday, so while the party was on I would be marooned on the island.

Then that vaunted Aussie initiative that we are supposed to possess came into play in an episode that could have left us at the bottom of Sydney Harbour. Stuey Stewart and I conferred on how to get to Clovelly. It would be easy to get off Shropshire after dark. In dry dock the ships heads cannot be used, so calls of nature required a trip to the toilets on the island. During Saturday afternoon we scouted around and found some old rafts under the wharf where the ferries tied up. We scrounged some paddles from our Carley rafts, and after dark we quietly slipped down the gangway with our tiddly uniforms under our arms. Changed into party dress, we climbed down onto a raft and silently paddled in the direction of Balmain. The raft was beached, dragged above the water-line, and we found our way through the backyard gate of a house, sneaked up the side and out onto the street. Well, the party was a humdinger. Long after midnight we got back to the correct street, having remembered its name, but could not recognize the house. After some noisy explorations, falling over garden shrubs, I was sure we had the right place, but the back gate was now locked, so over we climbed, got to the beach and found our raft, high and dry with the tide out. We dragged it to the water's edge, making plenty of noise. House lights came on as we pushed

off, paddling furiously followed by the angry shouts of the good citizens whom we had awakened from their slumbers.

Halfway across the harbour, and hoping we were paddling in the right direction, Stuey called softly,-ssshh, not far away was a boat with a spotlight, which we promptly labelled a police boat. We stopped paddling and lay flat. After a while, a few seconds that seemed like hours, the boat cruised off. Whether it was a police boat or not we never found out, nor did we trouble to enquire. We paddled on and by now the raft was water-logged and slowly settling deeper in the water. By sheer good luck our navigation was spot on and we were under the Cockatoo Island wharf and climbing up onto the decking. I think the raft expired and sank. It had fortunately lasted the distance across the harbour, but only just. We quietly groped our way up Shropshire's gangway, miraculously without a challenge from anyone on duty, and collapsed into a sound sleep, safe on board at last.

The work at Cockatoo Dock was completed and Shropshire shifted to one of the bouys off Sydney Cove, near the heart of the city. Peace time conditions in harbour did not require Flag deck staff or a messenger in the Signal Distribution Office. I landed another pleasant duty, bowman on one of Shropshire's unofficial toys, our landing craft. During the Aitape operation, which seemed like an eternity ago, we had lost our pinnace in somewhat amusing circumstances. It had been rowed ashore, broached in the surf and got stuck in the sand. Japanese infantry were threatening the Aitape perimeter so an American P.T. Boat patrolled up and down for protection while our fellows tried to salvage the pinnace. Then a well meaning but in-experienced American bulldozer driver ran a tow rope around the stem which parted from the hull of the pinnace when the bulldozer took the strain. The Navy was not amused at the loss of this boat and Shropshire was now without the services of a boat this size. Most of us reckoned its loss was a bonus because it was too big to handle and row, being 36 feet long with no engine, only sailor's muscle for power.

Eventually its loss was made up by an L.C.M. which stands for Landing Craft Mechanised. I think it was acquired simply because there were so many available that our generous American friends said to take it and forget where you got it.

The L.C.M was the smallest of the various types of landing craft. Flat bottomed, designed to carry a jeep and a small squad of men on close inshore operations. Powered by a Grey marine diesel, they were a nippy, highly manoeuvrable craft, ideal for dashing about the bays and inlets of Sydney harbour on all sorts of errands. We did all sorts of fetching and carrying errands, and I got to know a fair area of Sydney Harbour like the back of my hand. The most pleasant jobs were when Captain Nichols would wish to travel incognito to private functions. Some evenings we heard the call, "Away landing craft", so we would dash for our craft, and when ready to push off, Captain would appear in civvy clothes and ask us to take him to a jetty near where he was going, and request us to pick him up at a given time later that night. Being the kindly considerate gentleman that he was he never kept us waiting more than a few minutes, and seemed to enjoy "roughing it" in the L.C.M.

Shropshire sailed south in early February to show the Flag in southern ports. First port of call was Western Port, Victoria, to our old stamping ground, Flinders Naval Depot where we anchored out in the bay. I did not get ashore, but watched parties of new recruits who came aboard to see what a County Class cruiser looked like. I wondered if I looked as green as they did when I joined the Navy.

On February 5th we sailed into Port Phillip and secured alongside Station Pier Port Melbourne. Melbourne honoured us by allowing a march through the city, but as we were back at sea I was again a watch-keeper in the Signals Distribution Office, and on the day of the march I was off watch enjoying a day ashore. I stood at the barricades along Swanston Street outside Young and Jackson's pub with a beer in hand, cheering the fellows as they swung past. They looked magnificent and proved to me once again that for precision marching and making a colourful spectacle, the Navy will leave the other services far behind.

Towards the late afternoon I met Neil Harcourt, my close mate from school-boy days, and a couple of friends whose names I cannot recall. Neil was waiting demobilisation at a depot in South Melbourne. He was back from service in the famous 2/5th Independent Company, flying into Singapore at war's end to rescue our prisoners of war and rounding up Japanese, particularly those

who had treated our diggers so brutally. There were many easily identified criminals who were rounded up, charged, brought before a Military Court, and if found guilty, summarily executed, mostly by hanging. In this way, at least some of the guilty got their just desserts.

But for now we were celebrating our reunion by going out to dine and forget about the war. We decided to have dinner at a hotel, I think it was at the corner of Swanston and Collins Street. The dining room was down steps below ground level. Neil and the others led the way, being shown to a table by a waiter. I was in the rear and some flunkey stopped me as the others walked on and told me to leave.

On demanding an explanation I was told that the shorts I was wearing were not acceptable. Now the weather in Melbourne had been hot and our "dress of the day" was tropical rig, that is shorts and shirt. I told this chap that this was the uniform that the Navy required me to wear and I would follow my friends. Curious as to why I was not at their table, Neil came back to the scene of the argument, for by this time I was getting belligerent. I considered that this non combatant civilian had insulted my uniform and I was ready to punch him in the snout. Neil discreetly calmed me down, which was quite a feat for a commando who never backed away from a confrontation under any circumstances, and so we stormed out of the place.

The next day on board Shropshire we "cleared lower deck", normally a tiresome exercise. With the entire ship's company present, Captain Nichols was presented by the American Naval Attache with a decoration, the United States Bronze Medal, and not one member of the ship's company minded assembling to witness our much respected Captain receive this well deserved award.

On 14 February we sailed for Hobart, for a reception by the people of that city which could not have been surpassed anywhere. The hospitality of Hobart people to complete strangers was unbelievable. People stopped and talked, inviting you to socialise with them in their pubs and clubs.

Hobart provided me with another very amusing incident. Before Shropshire left Sydney, Cliff Webb, who was eastern states manager of a large shoe manufacturing firm, Bedggood Shoes, told me to look up Hobart City Councillor Cuthbertson. The Cuthbertson family owned a large city shoe store which had excellent relations with Cliff, and over many years of doing business they had become firm friends. Cliff wrote to Cuthbertsons about my impending arrival. I called at the shop and was told that the Mayor of Hobart was away and as Councillor Cuthbertson was Deputy Mayor he was at the Town Hall. On presenting myself at the Town Hall a rather prim and proper lady looked me, a common garden sailor, up and down, telling me to wait outside the Mayoral Chambers. After a lengthy interval doors opened and out trooped Captain Nichols with some of his senior officers. As is customary with a visiting warship, they had been paying their respects with an official visit to the number one citizen of the city. I have often thought that they must have been intrigued by my presence and wondered what I was doing there. Little did they know that I would soon be consuming the Mayoral whiskey and receive an invitation to dine with the Deputy Mayor and his family. The Cuthbertsons were a fine family. I was invited to bring along some of my friends, and the good Councillor made arrangements for dinner with his family, and next day a drive around Hobart and a trip to the top of Mount Wellington. The family were very early Tasmanian settlers, and the family home was literally a fascinating museum with many historic and antique artifacts. These included a locket containing a wand of hair from Trugannini, a very dignified figure, the last so-called Queen of the Tasmanian aborigines.

The visit to Hobart ended all to soon and it was back to Sydney, entering harbour on 25 February.

Shortly after securing at No 2 Buoy, the Ship's Office started reading out a long list of names of men to be drafted to home base. At first I ignored this as I expected to be in Shropshire for some time. Then I realised that there were men being called who had not seen anything like the active service I had, and sure enough my name came up. We were given little time to pack up and catch the night train to Melbourne. There was such a rush that, sadly, I did not say farewell to dozens of friends with whom I had sailed for so long and on such exciting operations. The wartime bonds were snapped by the desire to go home, a strong emotion that took priority. Fortunately two good

mates in Stan Sellick and Johnny Muir were in the party and we travelled together, and in fact remained inseparable until final demobilisation in April.

On arrival in Melbourne we reported to H.M.A.S. Lonsdale, Port Melbourne. Chaos reigned supreme with more bodies milling about than the authorities could control. We shot through. Next day was the same, so we again shot through. Eventually the Chief Petty Officer of the mess decks caught us and said he would get into trouble if he did not have us on his watch-bill with a job. This C.P.O. was the same bloke who had sent me on my way to Shropshire nearly three years ago and remembered me, possibly as my name was uncommon. He was a fair and reasonable C.P.O., so we asked what was offering. We baulked at some jobs at Williamstown for that was too far away, so he gave us some bus tickets into Melbourne, and asked us to report to 333 Flinders Lane, a place I had never heard of. He said this was the Navy's shore patrol office. "No way", we protested, that would be police work. He said to just go, see the place and come back next day if we did not like it. On arrival at No 333 the Writer at the front desk took us into the Warrant Officer in charge. What a coincidence, it was W.O. Muir, Johnny's father. He explained that the policy was to look after sailors who got into mischief, not to arrest anybody if at all possible, simply get them out of harms way and back to their ships or depots. This applied particularly to old hands who had done their share of war service. The job was to support your mates and ensure that the Navy did not get any bad publicity. W.O. Muir then introduced us to the Leading Seaman in charge of our squad. None other than John Kumm. John had been a well known figure at Longernong Agricultural College near Horsham where I went to school, had survived the sinking of H.M.A.S. Canberra at Savo Island, and had been drafted to England to pick up Shropshire. We all made a terrific team. In pairs or singly, we patrolled Melbourne's streets, showing the flag. An easy job, one day on duty, then two days off. This Shore Patrol Office was equipped with a galley for dining and making endless cups of tea and coffee, and a dormitory with bunks when we were off duty. A good place to see out our days in the Navy. Sometimes we drove around in our utility paddy wagon, two way radio connected to Russell Street Police Headquarters, the famous D24. Our vehicle call sign was Car 131. We looked smart in our white gaiters, belt and side arms. The cashiers and the ushers at the picture theatres loved us. We would wander into theatres such as the Capitol, Regent or Plaza in the evenings, and tell them we were there to keep order if any naughty sailors played up or were too boozed. This of course gave us an entry into the theatres at any time to see the best films from the best seats. Johnny Connell's pub at the corner of Flinders Lane and Elizabeth Street was our office away from home, and on one occasion the office writer had to summons us urgently. Friendly barmen used to place our gear behind the bar out of sight so at the call to duty we came running out of the pub fastening on our belts to make us look official. In all our wanderings around Melbourne, I recall only once rescuing an old salt who had got into some trouble. He looked the victim rather than the offender, and we soon got him back to his ship after making him a strong cup of coffee at our base at No 333.

There was only one occasion when we applied the full weight of our authority. One glorious sunny Sunday afternoon we acquired a dozen Melbourne Bitter and headed for the Dandenong Ranges for a picnic. Hardly out of the city we got an urgent call from D24 to proceed to Albert Park Lake where sailors were drunk and molesting women. This was a shock to the system, for no matter how hard old salts partied on, they didn't molest women in parks. Annoyed at the disruption to our picnic plans we roared off in the direction of Albert Lake. The offenders were raw recruits on their first leave from Flinders Naval Depot, boozed half stupid and out of control. Their behaviour tarnished the good name of the Navy and they were a disgrace to the uniform of which we old battle hardened sailors were so proud. They badly needed an unofficial lesson in Naval discipline and they got it. They compounded their errors by shouting obscenities at us about being "screws", the derogatory name for Military Police. We hammered the ring leader onto the ground, threw him into our ute, followed by the others in a writhing heap, and delivered them to the old Melbourne Watch House. The Police Sergeant locked them up in a cell and what happened to them after that we could not have cared less.

If some morning duties took us near the suburb of Malvern, we occasionally called at John Kumm's home for tea or coffee. His wife Gloria had recently presented John with a bouncing baby boy. Gloria is one of those wonderful people with an empathy with the world, making everyone feel at home. John and Gloria did what so many of us have done, retired on the Gold Coast, where we have continued a friendship which started over 55 years ago.

My auspicious career in the Navy came to a close on a very sad note. We had been taken aback by the unexpected gesture of goodwill in drafting us off Shropshire to our home base. I had thought this was an uncharacteristic piece of Naval generosity. On 2 April the Melbourne Herald carried headlines that Shropshire was to take Australia's Victory Contingent to London for the Commonwealth Victory Parade. After surviving all the duties and obligations of war time service, many of us were denied participation in this historic event in British history. Raw recruits and sometimes un-deserving depot personnel came out of the woodwork to man our famous fighting ship. This left a nasty taste in the mouths of those who justifiably felt they had been poorly treated after bearing the brunt of the fighting, and were now side stepped when the rewards were being handed out.

Soon after this announcement I was called in for final medical examinations, including a debriefing to prepare for civilian life. On the 5 April I walked out of the Royal Park demobilising establishment a free man.

Did I say a free man? The war time service in the Navy had branded and bonded us together so indelibly that the bonds will never be broken. Today I look around at all my old Shropshire friends and I know that they all feel the same.

We are all marked men. The Navy, the sea, and the common dangers we shared had made us so. The mind blowing thump of the 8 inch guns, the crack of the 4 inch, the gale whipping at our clothes while standing watch on the Compass Platform, the miles of foaming water in our wake, Divisions on Sunday mornings in harbour when we paused for Divine Service, the dolphins bounding at our bows, the Kamikaze screaming out of the sky, mornings in harbour when the flag was raised and the band played God Save the King, the hot cloying smell of oil and sweat in shell or engine room, the hot, still, dark middle watches under a brilliant canopy of stars, the sight of hundreds of paratroopers descending on Corregidor, these were infused deep into our minds and hearts.

We shall never be free of it. That is the way we were shaped, and that is the way we shall be for as long as we live.

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APPENDIX 1

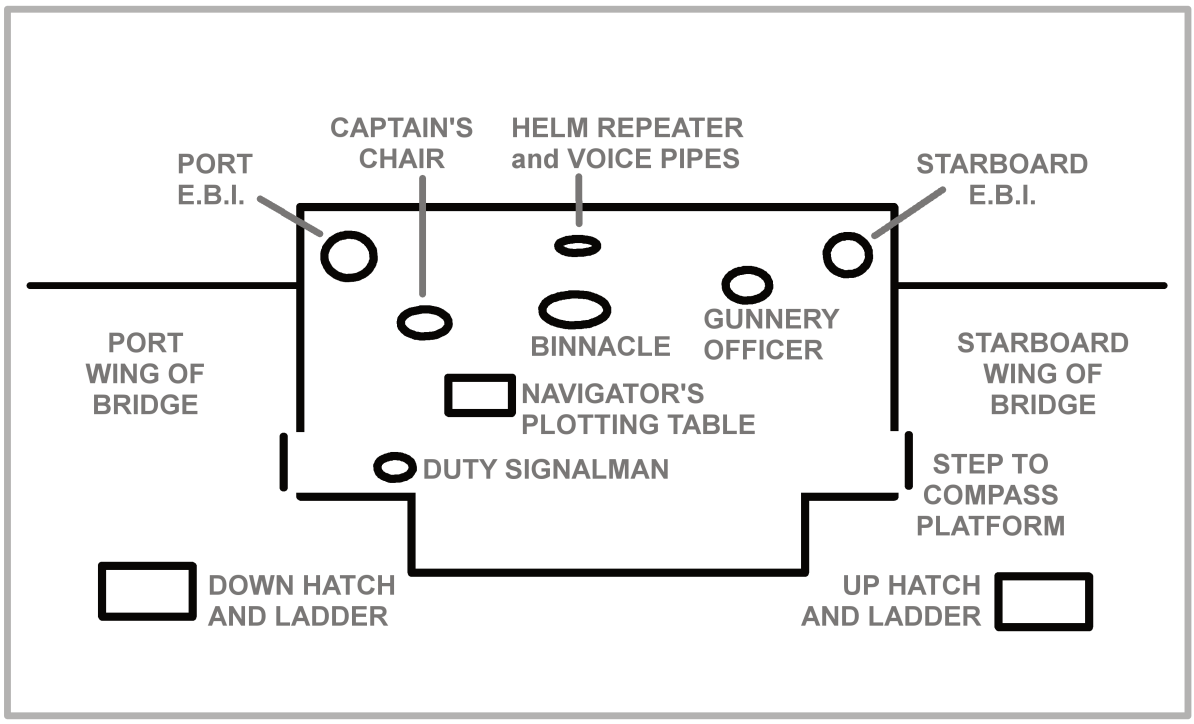
H.M.A.S. Canberra was sunk in the Battle of Savo Island on 9th August 1942 under tragic circumstances and with heavy loss of life.

Canberra was part of Task Force 44 which covered the American landings on Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands. The subsequent attack by a Japanese naval force resulted in the loss of four heavy cruisers, including Canberra, in what some American commentators have described as America's worst naval disaster of the war. Because of Australia's loss, President Rooseveldt approved the naming of the next heavy cruiser, intended to be U.S.S. Pittsburg, as U.S.S. Canberra in our honour.

Britain's decision to give Australia H.M.S. Shropshire, caused some controversy over its future name. Two factors decided on retention of the name SHROPSHIRE. It would be unwise to have two ships in the Allied navies named Canberra, and Captain Collins and many others considered it bad luck to change a ship's name, and bad manners to rename a gift ship.

Collins was to receive a C.B. at Buckingham Palace from King George V1. At the investiture the King asked him did he want his ship's name changed and Collins said "no." King George then said, "I thought so, I am going to do something that I don't often do. I agree that she should remain Shropshire, and only approved the change because I thought the Australians wanted it. I am going to reverse my decision. She will remain Shropshire, but don't say anything until the announcement is made tomorrow."

APPENDIX 2



A simplified plan of H.M.A.S. Shropshire's compass platform (not to scale). The ship was controlled from this point and the area is surprisingly small, approximately 10 feet by 8 feet. The Port EBI (Evershead Bearing indicator) was the position from which I witnessed many events described in this story.

APPENDIX 3

Some naval personnel who did not serve in Shropshire regard her as something of a glamour ship, and there was professional rivalry over her achievements. In showing forth Shropshire's amazing performances it is not intended to down grade the magnificent performances of other R.A.N. ships.

However, Shropshire commenced life in the R.A.N. with decided advantages.

When the first draft arrived at Chatham in late 1942 it was of some considerable concern that the condition of the equipment was well below acceptable standards for a County Class cruiser.

Admiral Bryan Castles reports, "All 'department' heads took on the task with determination to refit and outfit this County Class cruiser to out smart all others of this class of ship, and this was achieved with distinction as recognized by our Allies on important occasions."

Particular emphasis was laid on the marriage of the Gunnery and Radar systems. The very latest of Britain's radar equipment was acquired, often not according to instructions laid down in the Supply Manuals.

New systems which turned Shropshire into a modern fighting warship were tested and made operational by (then) Lt. Bryan Castles and Lt-Commander Warwick Bracegirdle.

The ship's company was already highly trained and experienced. Lt-Commander Bracegirdle, formerly Gunnery Officer in H.M.A.S. Perth selected what he called "a real bunch of gunnery experts" he had formerly known in the Perth, and a large proportion of the first draft were survivors from H.M.A.S. Canberra, experienced and eager to atone for the former ships loss.

Admiral Castles has said that the gruelling and intensive "work-up" of Shropshire was the most thorough in his long naval career.

APPENDIX 4

Captain Collin's letter No SC269/190 dated 27 April 1944 headed "Report of Operation and Bombardment - Tanamerah", briefly reports this incident mentioning a Dutch Intelligence Officer and information about Japanese troops. The letter reads as follows:

"At 0920 on the 22nd April, 1944, whilst on patrol to seaward of the transport area H.M.A.S. Australia with H.M.A.S. Arunta and U.S.S. Ammen proceeded to bombard lighters and warehouses to the westward leaving H.M.A.S. Shropshire, U.S.S. Mullany and H.M.A.S. Warramunga on patrol. Shortly afterwards what appeared to be a small boat was observed about (5) five miles to the eastward apparently clearing the coast. This was at first thought to be another of the many tree roots that are constantly being taken for boats in this area. I however detached U.S.S. Mullany to investigate, who later reported that the boat contained a Dutch Intelligence Officer, the sole survivor of a party landed from the U.S. Submarine Dace. There were about (4) four natives in the boat. U.S.S. Mullany conveyed the party to the Headquarters Ship where no doubt full use was made of the Intelligence Officer's local knowledge which was reported to include details of the trails and whereabouts of Japanese troops. At 1020 the Flagship rejoined the patrol."

This incident is also recorded in "H.M.A.S. Shropshire" by Stan Nicholls. A more detailed account is told in "Coastwatchers" by Cmdr. Eric Feldt.

By strange coincidence, an ex Army friend Lionel Veale, now living on the Gold Coast, and formerly an operative with A.I.B.(the Army Intelligence Bureau) filled in details of the tragic fate of those who participated in this incident.

On March 10 1944, the month before the main assault, submarine U.S.S. Dace secretly landed a party at Tanamerah Bay. This party was commanded by Captain G. (Bluey) Harris, who had been the Officer in Charge of the scratch fleet of little boats that rescued Australians in New Britain, in which Pastor Harry Freund had been of great assistance, see Chapter 5.

The party was immediately betrayed and after two days in the bush they were ambushed by Japanese and only four escaped. Harris was mortally wounded in the fight, was propped against a tree and finally bayoneted to death when the Japanese tried to question him and he would give no information.

The man I spotted was Sgt. Launcelot of Dutch Indonesian extraction, who joined the party as an interpreter. How he escaped was never made clear. In addition to Launcelot two Australian survivors trekked overland back to base.

Lionel Veale had the responsibility of de-briefing these two Australian survivors and had grounds for believing that Launcelot had a "bit each way". He spoke to the Dutch New Guinea natives only in "place talk", pidgin for local dialect, which the others could not understand so the Australians had reason to believe Launcelot did not reveal the full contents of his "place talk". Information about the supposedly secret arrival of the party was in Japanese hands immediately.

Another strange co-incidence. Lionel Veale was in charge of the first Australian party to re-possess Rooke Island. He came across Harry Freund's packed trunks and belongings which were still unmolested after nearly three years of Japanese occupation.

APPENDIX 5

The Japanese aircraft which hit H.M.A.S. Australia was claimed to be the first kamikaze attack delivered by the newly formed, and officially sanctioned Shikushima Unit.

American accounts state that the first recorded kamikaze attack was made on the Jeep carriers during the Battle of Samar on 25 October, four days later.

Leading Seaman Les (Lofty) Rathbone on the port 4 inch guns went over to the starboard side to observe the action. He clearly recalls that this Jap aircraft came at Shropshire from the starboard quarter, our guns got several bursts near and under him. He was low over the water and after our accurate fire, veered towards the Australia and was climbing when he rammed into Australia's mast before plunging onto the fore director and bridge.

However this does not rule out entirely a suicide action. In his definitive account titled "The Battle of Leyte Gulf", author Lt. Commander Thomas Cutler, U.S.N. rtd, reveals an interesting anecdote. On the 21 October, the morning Australia was hit, a Japanese Lieutenant, less patient than his comrades, had taken off from Luzon by himself, determined to fly to Leyte Gulf and expend himself on a target. He was never heard of again. There is no record in American reports of a suicide attack on the morning of the 21st other than the hit on Australia.

Because of the absence of Japanese records, his take-off time is not known and probably never will be, but it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that he was the pilot who hit H.M.A.S. Australia.

APPENDIX 6

By the end of the Philippines campaign most seamen on board wore at action stations the American standard working dress of blue cotton shirt and dungaree trousers. This was much more serviceable and comfortable. How vast numbers of men suddenly appeared in this gear was a tribute to the ability to scrounge from the American friends we met, and the unfailing generosity of Americans in general. As far as is known nobody was ever apprehended for wearing un-authorised dress, and in fact we were the fore-runners of what is standard dress today in the Royal Australian navy.

APPENDIX 7

For those who enjoy a tale of the sea, and a detailed account of the greatest naval battle in man's long sea-faring history, there are excellent accounts as follows.

Leyte, June 1944 - January 1945. Volume X11.
History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War 11
by Samuel Eliot Morison.

The Battle for Leyte Gulf
by C.Van Woodward.

The Battle of Leyte Gulf
by Lt. Commander Thomas Cutler U.S.N. rtd.

The Battle of Leyte Gulf was spread out over thousands of square miles of ocean and in fact consisted of four main battles. The Battle of Sibuyan Sea, The Battle of Surigao Strait, the Battle of Samar and The Battle of Cape Engano. It was fought over four days and each action was inter-related and crucial to each other. The Australian cruisers, destroyers and landing ships, although small in numbers compared with the size of the fleets engaged, played a very significant part.

APPENDIX 8

What we called prickly heat, or ickies, appeared as masses of tiny red spots on various parts of the body, between legs and under the crotch, armpits, or in severe cases on any part of the body. The prevention and cure of prickly heat was never accomplished.

In a harbour routine with regular work and meal times it could be controlled by showering often, if necessary several times a day, and changing into clean clothes as often as possible. The itch drove one mad, the scratching causing more damage. Extreme cases of the heat rash and other skin diseases were painted by the sick bay daily with Gentian violet. We had one case so bad the sick bay recommended that the only cure was to return to a cool climate. This recommendation was rejected because the man was an expert on the four inch gun deck and could not be spared.

APPENDIX 9

The Filipino people were overjoyed at the arrival of our force, despite the dangers from our bombardments. On one occasion they had crowded a beach about to be bombarded and aircraft were quickly despatched, dropping messages telling them to clear out.

Rosalina Romuar, a young girl of seventeen, lived on the family farm at Manaong, between Dagupan and St Fabian, places which we bombarded heavily. Her first reaction was one of tremendous relief that the Americans had arrived at last. At this stage they were unaware of any Australian presence. For the three days of bombardment they had no idea what was happening, or where a landing might take place, because the whole area was blanketed with fire and smoke from our constant barrage. An aircraft flew around with signs, not unlike the present aerial advertising signs, telling people to keep clear of the beaches. Rosalina tells that the Japanese soldiers were moving about in all directions, confused because they did not know where to go or where the coming assault would be. They seemed as confused as every body else..

On marriage after the war Rosalina became Mrs Corpuz and still lives on the same family farm in Luzon. Her interesting story has been written to her daughter Mrs Nellie Ward who is a good friend of the author and his wife Dee. Nellie resides on Hope Island on the Gold Coast.

APPENDIX 10

Letter from Captain Nichols to Merv Warren.
Dated 26.1.45

Dear Warren,

Very many thanks for sending me the clipping from the Melbourne Herald of Jan 17th.

I asked Lt Moyes to write up the story as, being a newcomer out here, having seen the work of the Squadron I reckoned the world didn't perhaps realise that it is going full out and playing an appreciable part in nipping the nips! I hope I am not publicity mad!

I quite appreciate your many difficulties as regards personal contact with the ships but when you can come we are always glad to see you.

We shan't get copies of the papers of the 17th Jan until May at the earliest-how do you do it?

Thank you again

Yours Sincerely,

C.A.G. Nichols
Capt. R.N.

APPENDIX 11

The management and strategy of the Australian Army in the last two years of the Second World War has been much criticised and is surrounded by controversy. It can be a source of inter service rivalry, political dissension, and unlikely ever to be resolved.

Their are many opinions which are critical of either MacArthur, Blamey, American policy and/or Australian policy, but there is not a comprehensive study which provides a satisfactory answer. For the interested reader who might have some doubts of the views expressed here, a study of the three books mentioned in Chapter 18, "Blamey" by John Hetherington, "The Government and the People, 1942-1945", by Sir Paul Hasluck, and "The Unnecessary War", by Peter Charlton are recommended reading.

Perhaps of abiding interest is the comparison between the use of the A.I.F. in France in 1916-1918, and the 6, 7, and 9th Divisions in 1944 and 1945.

Australia provided the Allies with the best attacking infantry Divisions in both wars. In France the A.I.F. was largely instrumental in determining the course of the conflict and the ultimate victory. It had been used in every important engagement, especially ones of a critical nature. For example, at Hamel in August 1918, the Australian Army sealed the fate of the German Army.

After 1943, the A.I.F. was never given the opportunity to fight in a campaign which would effect the final outcome, thereby largely wasting the training, fighting ability and courage of an Army capable of much greater things than the role it was allotted.

APPENDIX 12

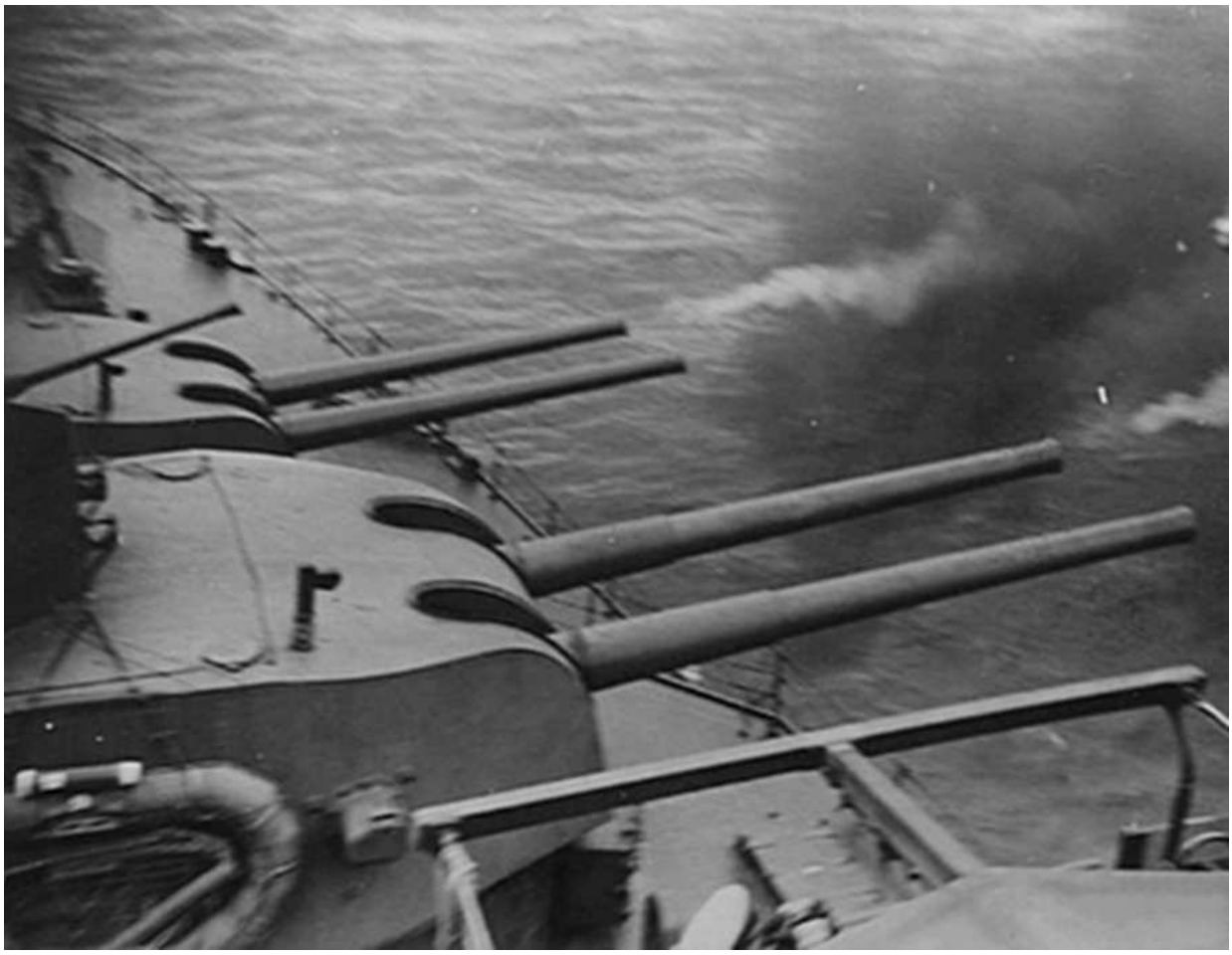
Although the Borneo campaign did not contribute directly to the defeat of Japan, it was significant for a number of reasons.

The Australian Imperial Force demonstrated that it had lost none of its dash and fighting ability after a long period of re-training. It achieved all its objectives with a remarkably low ratio of casualties to enemy killed. Balikpapan was of particular interest. It was the last amphibious assault of the Second World War.

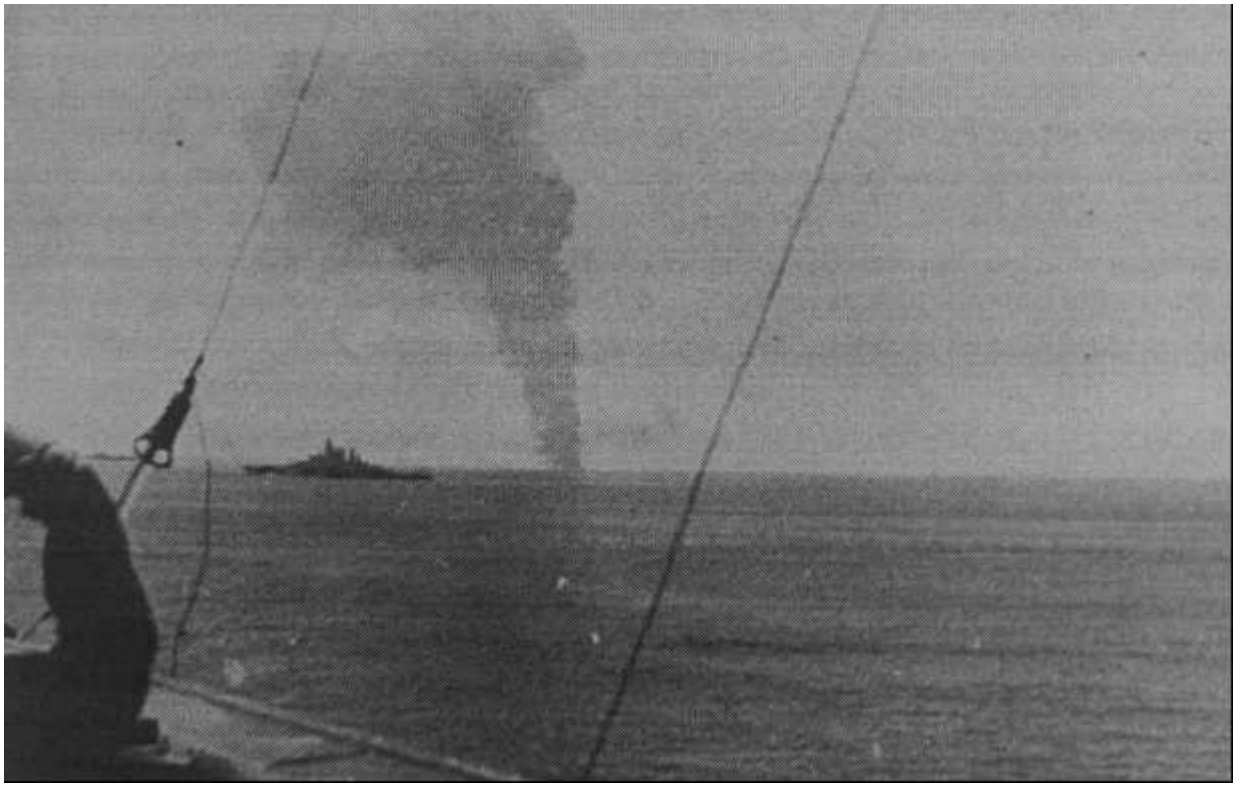
The campaigns success was in large measure the result of the excellent relationships between the U.S. 7th Fleet and the Australian Army Commanders. At Balikpapan the 16 days of pre-landing naval bombardment was the longest of any amphibious operation in the Second World War.

United States Navy official historian Morison lists the official ammunition expenditure of 46,809 rounds of 4 to 8 inch, and 114,000 rounds of 20 to 40 mm guns. For ammunition fired in support of a one Division landing these figures beat all records. It resulted from the requests of the United States Army for more and more naval gunfire support as the Pacific War progressed.

It could be argued that Australia's excellent post war relationships with North Borneo States is the result of the fine performances of the A.I.F. in Borneo.



A and B turrets blasting away.



U.S.S. Abner Read blows up, Leyte Gulf. Taken from Shropshire's Bridge. U.S.S. Mississippi in foreground. (Nov. 1944)

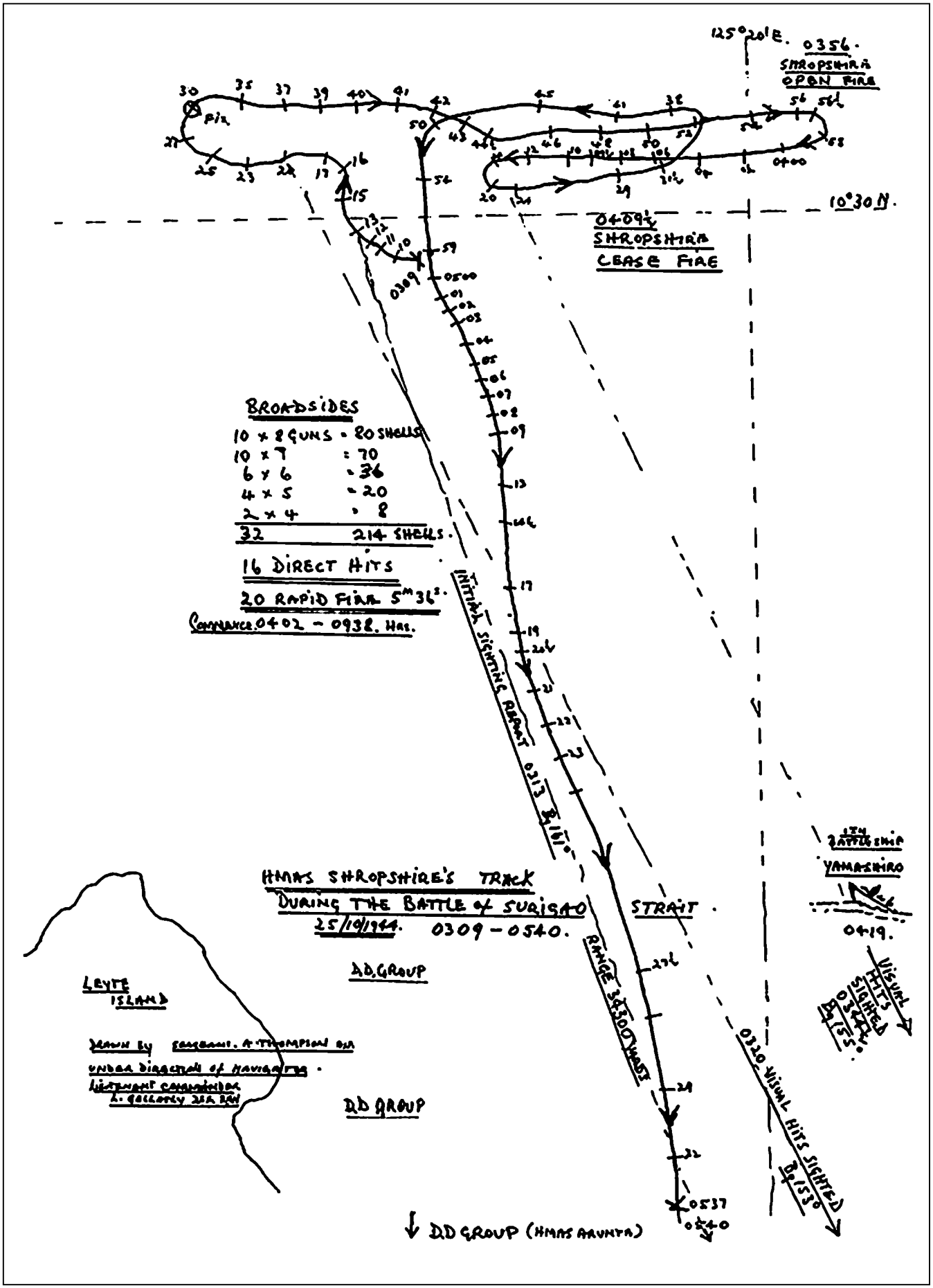
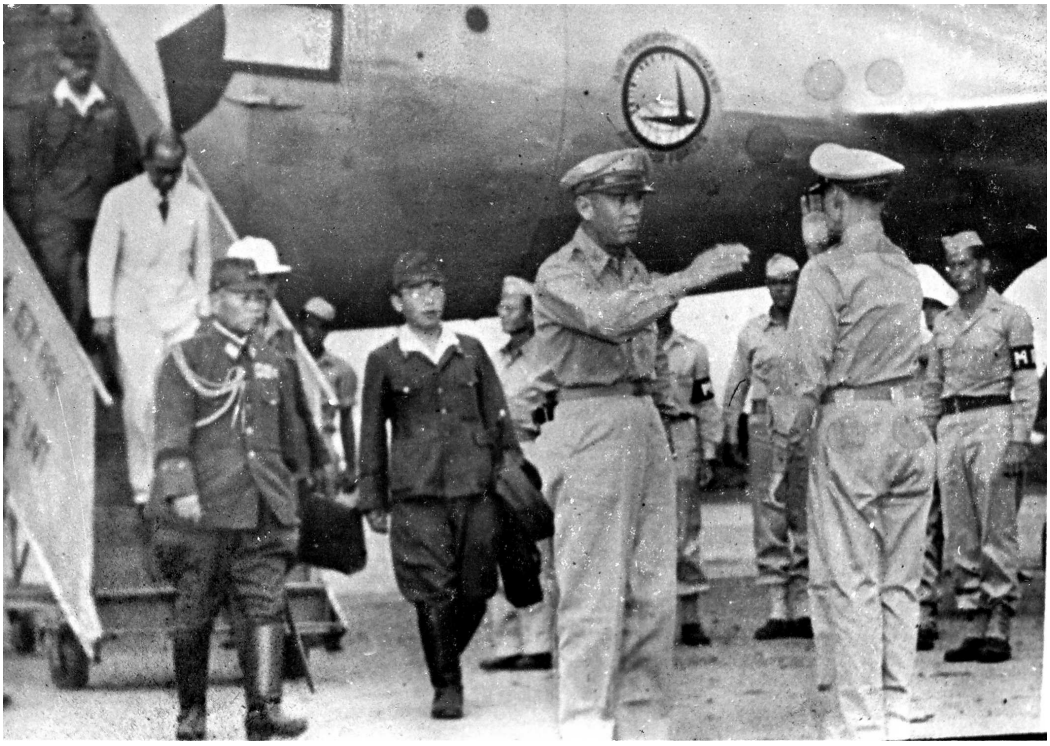


Chart of the action in the battle of Surigao as recorded by Shropshire's plotting staff.

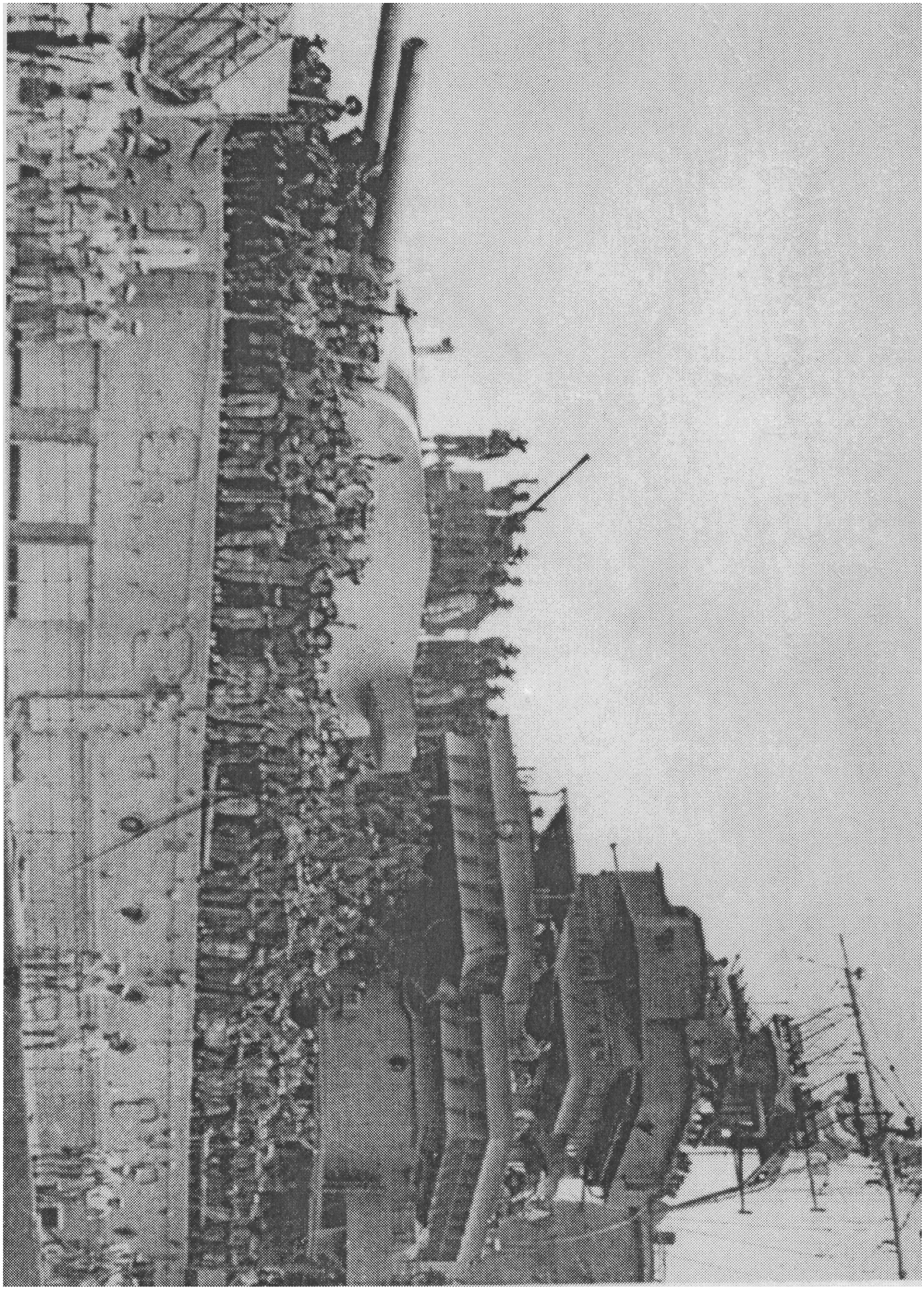
The author at "Bluey" Child's wedding reception in Sydney after the Philippines campaign.



Japanese Surrender Delegation arriving at Manila Airport

Victory celebrations at the British Embasy, Tokyo.
(Author third from left in front row)

The author as seen through Japanese eyes.
Portrait by pavement artist.



Triumphant homecoming, 30th Nov. 1945. The Port Evershead Bearing Indicator position is in the corner of the Compass Platform which juts from the Bridge structure forward.

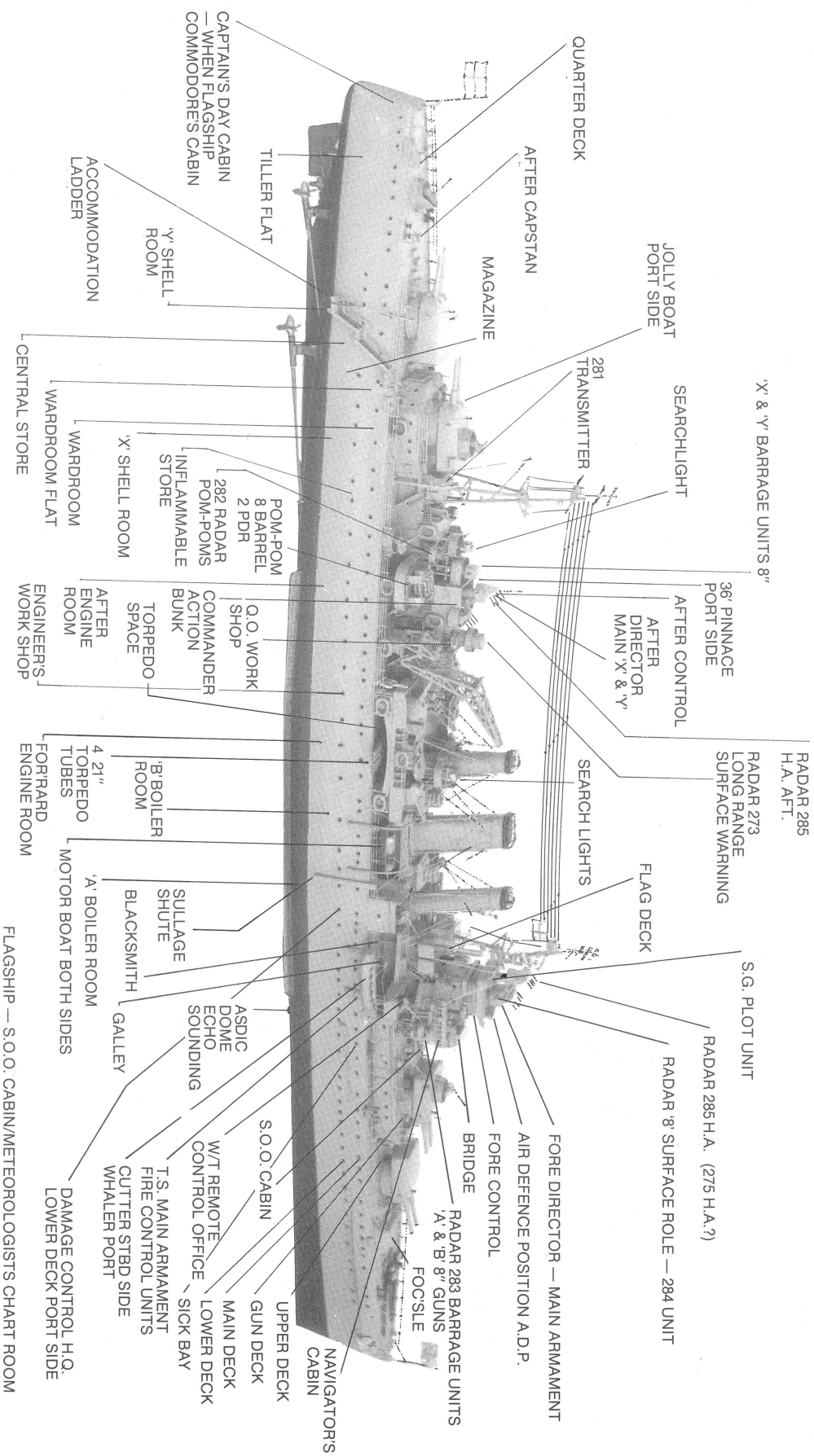
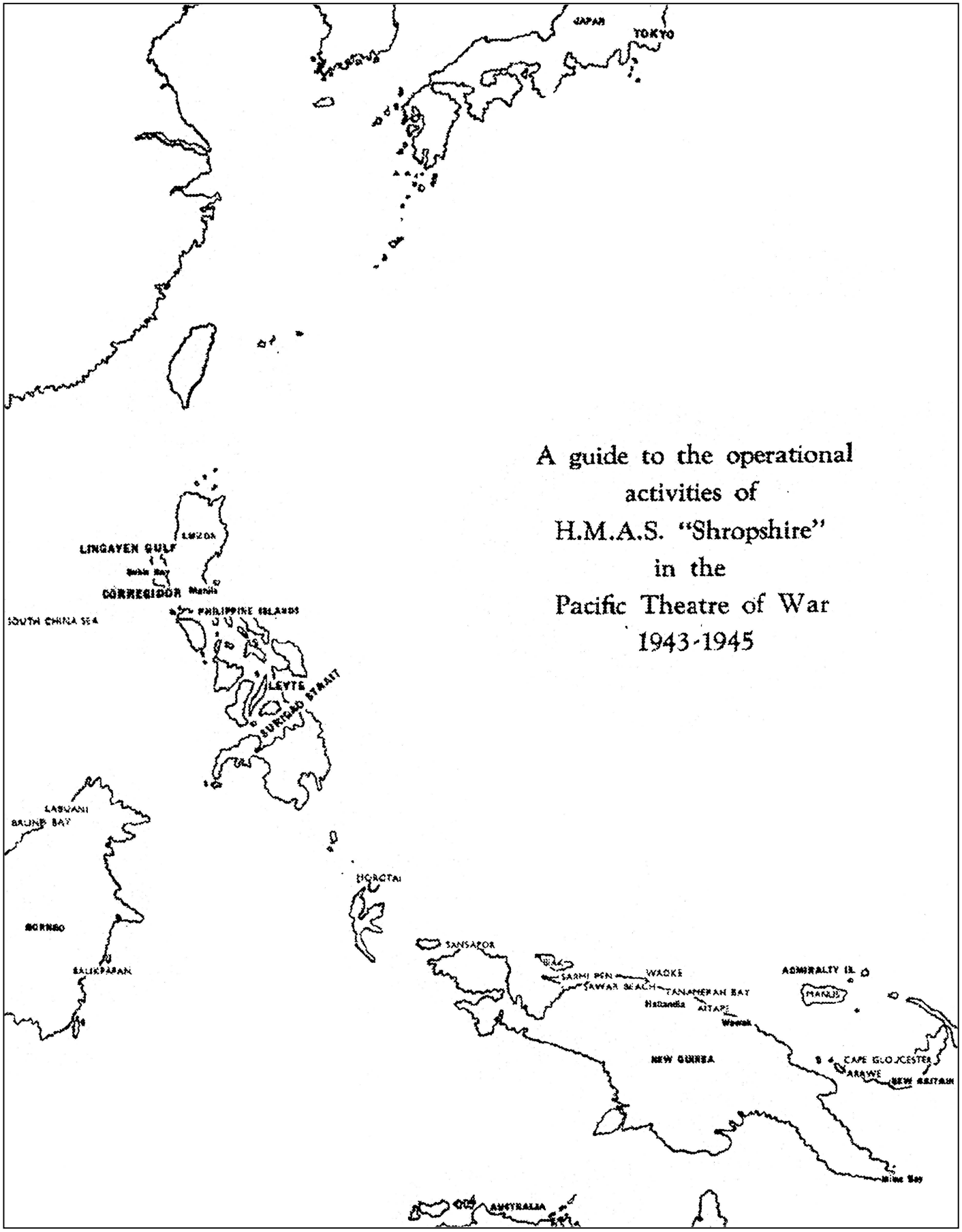


Diagram of Shropshire.



A guide to the operational activities of H.M.A.S. "Shropshire" in the Pacific Theatre of War 1943-1945

Delia Domingo-Albert, Ambassador of the Philippines,
presents David Henry Mattiske with the Philippine Liberation Medal.

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. . . . . .

AN AUSTRALIAN STORY

"Fire Across the Pacific" is a tale of the sea, an exhilarating, often exciting, adventure of a young Australian lad from a Victorian country town who enlisted in the Royal Australian Navy during the Second World War.

It throws a new and interesting light on the Royal Australian Navy's role in the defeat of Japan. An Australian Naval Task Force, including heavy cruiser H.M.A.S. Shropshire, the ship in this story, fought its way across the Pacific from Milne Bay in New Guinea to a triumphant entry into Tokyo Bay, in one of the most brilliant and audacious campaigns in man's long sea-faring history.

The Royal Australian Navy's part in this campaign has never been fully told. Few Australians would know that H.M.A.S. Shropshire and H.M.A.S. Arunta played a conspicuous role in the greatest naval engagement the world has seen, the Battle of Leyte Gulf, which brought liberation to the Philippines and the end for Japan.

This is both a great adventure story and an account of a very exciting and important episode in Australia's naval history.

After leading a busy life in private enterprise, including tourism, country pubs, and a paddle steamer on the Murray River, author David Mattiske retired on the Gold Coast with his wife Dee. Keenly interested in ex Serviceman's affairs, he has served in the R.S.L. in Victoria occupying a number of senior posts. On the Gold Coast, David initiated the formation of the Gold Coast Division of the H.M.A.S. Canberra / H.M.A.S. Shropshire Association and in 2000 is serving his 11th year as President.