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Quarterly Newsletter

⚓ The Australian Association for Maritime History

Publisher of *The Great Circle*

Special : "Nothing is quite what it seems" issue
They deem him their worst enemy who tells them the truth - Plato

Great Circle

By now members should have received Vol. 19, No. 2 of our flagship journal *The Great Circle*, which was mailed out towards the end of May. As usual there is an interesting and diverse range of subjects. In this particular issue the three main papers originate from scholars in Norway, Greece and Holland. Members are reminded that all correspondence relating to *The Great Circle* should go to its editor, Dr G.R. Henning, Department of Economic History, University of New England, Armidale. NSW. 2351.

Bargain book offer to members

In May this year the Executive Council of the AAMH were surprised to receive a large number of copies of a weighty book, apparently sponsored by the Association prior to any of the current members of the Executive taking office. They (the books) had been in storage with former AAMH president Martin Syme who is moving house. Casebound, *Ships employed in the South-seas trade: 1775-1859* vol.2. by Jones A.G.E.(ND) contains 720 pages (it's a whopper) and is a listing of vessels and merchants compiled from registers of Lloyds, the Society of Merchants and Admiralty documents. Also included are a series of contemporary illustrations and maps relating to various aspects of the subject. The accompanying text is substantive and includes attentive discussions on navigation routes, processing and measurement of commodities including whale products. Undoubtedly the book would be of substantial interest to many members and so the current Executive have decided to move stocks as quickly as possible. The price to members in Australia is $20, post included. Double that for overseas members due to the bank charges for processing international moneys and postal charges; sorry. Alternatively copies may be collected through June and July from the Editor's house for A$10 per copy, which is well below the cost of production for such a book. Copies not sold to members will be offered to the book trade. As an added bonus with each order we will include at no extra cost a copy of the AAMH listing of theses relating to maritime history, until stocks run out. These too have to go. Cheques must be made out to the Australian Association for Maritime History and sent to the Newsletter Editor, Dr Paul Weaver, 23 Waddell Rd. Palmyra. Western Australia. 6157. Allow three weeks delivery, longer for overseas.

Old oil-measurements response

Two responses have been received for an appeal from an AAMH member in the last newsletter for information on oil measurements:

Like Joseph King I too have worried about measurements of whale and seal oil in the last century. I have come to the conclusion that perhaps in certain areas there was some consistency, but on the whole there was a very wide variation in barrel size. This is well shown in historical photographs. Oxford Dictionaries give the terms "barrel" and "cask" as interchangeable, but Webster (American) gives "cask" as a generic term for the type of container which includes barrels, hogsheads etc. From various dictionaries etc. the following English measurements are given:

1 barrel =30 imp. gallons
1 tun=210 imp. gallons
butt=large cask 106-140 gallons
hogshead=large cask=52½ gallons

Harry O'May, in *Whalers out of Van Diemen's Land*, (Govt Printer, Hobart 1978) says on page 73 that there were 10 American barrels or 7 Tasmanian barrels to the tun, and on page 94 he says that there were 10 American barrels or 8 Colonial

barrels to the tun. Certainly the 7 Tasmanian barrels to the tun fits in with the figures above (1 barrel=30 gallons, 1 tun=210 gallons). However, L. Norman, in *Haunts of the Blue whale* (OBM, Hobart 1978), in describing the whaler *Waterwitch* says the barrels each averaged about 300 gallons. In describing how the ship was loaded he also says, "To 'bung-up' correctly the casks were safely chocked with firewood and dunnage, and a riding tier of smaller casks stored in the cartlines of the ground tier" (page 86). Frank T. Bullen, in *Cruise of the Cachalot* (Penguin 1944) says "...there was only one thing dangerous about the whole business. That was the job of filling and shifting the huge casks of oil. Some of these were of enormous size, containing 350 gallons when full..." (p.40). On page 61 "When (our labours) were over we had stowed below 146 barrels of mingled oil and spermaceti, or 14 1/2 tons." That is, 10 barrels to the ton. These could not have been 350 gallon barrels. Another problem is that the words tun and ton seemed to be used interchangeably. Will Lawson *(Blue Gum Clippers and whale Ships of Tasmania*, Launceston 1949) uses tons where Harry O'May uses tuns. **Gillian Lord, Sandy Bay, Tasmania.**

I refer to the letter from Joseph King in the March newsletter on the subject of whale and seal oil quantities taken during the Colonial era. Attached is a copy of the whale Fishing Regulations dated 28/10/1872 presented to both Houses of the Victorian Parliament by the Commissioner of Trade and Customs, Edward Cohen, which states:

1872 - Victoria - Whale fishing - Regulations

The accompanying Regulations respecting a bonus for the encouragement of Whale Fisheries are submitted for approval of His Excellency the Governor in Council:-

1. A bonus of One thousand pounds will be paid for the first one hundred tuns of Whale oil obtained from fish caught from a vessel owned and registered in the colony, and landed at one time in Melbourne.
2. Applications for payment of the above bonus, accompanied by evidence of compliance with the conditions specified in Regulation No. 1, must be lodged with the Commissioner of Trade and Customs not later than the first day of June, 1873.

Edward Cohen
Commissioner of Trade and Customs
Approved by the Governor in Council 28th October, 1872
J. H. Kay Clerk to the Executive Council

If a wine gallon is assumed (One tun = 252 gallons @ 231 cu.in. per gallon), then to qualify for the above bonus of £1,000 some 25,200 gallons of whale oil would have been required. **Ian Bennet, Mt Waverley, Victoria.**

Worthy new Cook book on the stands

Just a note for the Newsletter that you might consider. I enjoyed your "promo" for Marsden Hordern's book *King of the Australian Coast*, even if the prose was a little over the top, both because I enjoyed his earlier book and I feel the *Newsletter* should highlight members publications/interests. It does imply, however, that if you publicise one member's work, then you should do so for others.

It may be in the current issue that you will provide a similar report for Ray Parkin's *H.M. Bark Endeavour*, also published by Miegunyah Press. I have only leafed through the pages, but I would expect (knowing Ray and his lifelong interest in the subject) that it is the equal of the Marsden book in content and has a wonderful presentation. You may not have seen a copy, but if not, you are exposed (obliquely) to the risk of preference, which I'm sure you are aware of.

Regarding Ray Parkin, a member of many years, you might note that he was selected to lead the ANZAC march in Melbourne this year. Ray served on HMAS *Perth*, was at the wheel when she was attacked and sunk in the Coral Sea and was one of the Burma Railway POW's. He appeared on a number of TV newsclips and was suitably surprised and humble at the honour given him. As I mentioned above, he has had an abiding interest in the *Endeavour*, and contributed, I recall, an article for *The Great Circle* some years back about the configuration of her stern. I haven't spoken with him for seven years, am not promoting him selectively, but feel that his work might be noted and recorded, and his armed service honour noted. **Martin Syme, Malvern. Victoria**

Editor's note: I am always willing to mention any member's books. Importantly there is an onus for authors or their agents to communicate effectively about the launching of their works.

A visit to Harold E. Holt Base - Exmouth Gulf

There is in some Australian television archive a piece of film from the 1960s where a rather loud US politician accepts the tenure of Northwest Cape in Western Australia for the establishment of an American communications base. The scratchy black and white footage is memorable because the exuberant politician declares that tenure has been obtained at minimal cost, a peppercorn no less, and then he flamboyantly hands over an actual peppercorn to the custody of grinning Australian officials.

For much of the Australian public at the time this seemed like a good idea. The domino theory assumed that Communism was on the verge of spreading throughout southeast Asia, then inevitably would overtake Australia. Based upon vague perceptions of the ANZUS agreement, the general consensus appears to have been, and for that matter probably still is, that if Australia was attacked, then the US would be obliged to assist in its defence. Problem is the agreement is a two way street, as several PM's who have been awakened by an unexpected phone call from a US president could well attest.

For the Americans in the early 1960s the defence of Australia was hardly on their agenda. The paranoid cold war with the Soviet Union was causing an appalling arms race, with both nations engaging in a buildup of nuclear weapons sufficient to destroy all life on the planet several times over. Intercontinental ballistic missiles could be launched to drop down on any point in the planet, and whichever side got in first was probably going to be the winner, that is until the doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD) evolved. This meant that even if one country did launch a catastrophic attack on the other, retaliation would be so enormous that there could never be a winner. No terrestrial base was safe from attack, and the best alternative was from nuclear powered submarines, which could launch missiles from beneath the oceans. The submarines had to remain submerged for long periods, and as war ships had done for much of this century, maintain radio silence unless in a case of extreme emergency. Furthermore, locations of submarines could be pinpointed from the ever growing number of military satellites if they came near the surface. Even letting an antenna break the surface for the receiving of messages had the potential to disclose a position. Most radio frequencies in general use do not penetrate well under water, but very low frequencies (VLF) in the 14 to 28.5 khz region can be utilised for passing one-way traffic to submarines trailing long-wire antennas. Even so the power required is enormous. The main VLF transmitter at Exmouth had a designed maximum output of two million watts on 22.3 mhz.

The history of the base is not generally known these days, but thankfully Desmond Ball at ANU has provided a valuable overview in his book, *A suitable piece of real estate.* (1980). Not many copies of this are about because a warehouse containing stocks was burned in mysterious circumstances, prompting a 15/11/1980 headline in *The Sun-Herald*, "Spy Books Burn in Mystery Blaze." Another volume which went up in smoke was Noam Chomsky's *Washington Connection with Third Word Fascism*, which contained material likely to impact on the federal government's sensitive relationship with Indonesia, which in view of the current goings on in the archipelago, might be worth a revisit.

According to Ball, the Exmouth base was possibly originally conceived in the late 1950s, because a team of US engineers visited the region in September 1960. In January the following year a US contract was awarded for preliminary engineering design, all without any public announcements. On 17 May 1962 Prime Minister Menzies announced that Australia would facilitate the establishment of a US base at Exmouth. Ball says at the time a conscious decision was made by the Australian government not to truthfully inform the public of the role of the base, that is that it was specifically for communication with nuclear bomb-equipped Polaris submarines. Its role was not so secret elsewhere. In 1963 a US magazine said that the Australian government was deceiving its people over the role of the base, and that it would be a priority target in a nuclear war.

The engineering was spectacular, and the enormous power requirements were satisfied by a bank of six huge diesel generators with a combined output of 18 megawatts. The antenna system was no less significant, with the suspended antenna array requiring 13 enormous towers. Tower zero in the centre measured 387 metres high. As the base developed, so was new equipment added, particularly a high frequency (HF) installation for surface communication, and over the years, various satellite links. The HF facility played a crucial role in the Vietnam war, particularly in the bombing of North Vietnam in 1972.

All this was serviced through an air base built at nearby Learmonth, intended to take the largest aircraft. As with all foreign US bases, the American personnel were well catered for with things American, with most requirements being flown in by the USAF. A naval jetty adjacent to the VLF antennas catered for shipping.

Single personnel had accommodation on the navy base, while families lived in houses in the new town of Exmouth. Australian civilians performed a variety of menial tasks on the base, gardening, swimming pool cleaning, garbage collection, building maintenance, mowing the grass on the baseball field and whatever else the Americans did not want to do for themselves.

From the outset, Australians had no access to the American communications, or any veto over the role of the installation. The Australian armed forces could have radio traffic sent, but this was handled and prioritised accordingly by Americans. Under pressure from a Labour government, the base was converted to a "joint facility" in 1974. This allowed the RAN to increase its use of the facility for its submarine communications. A separate National Communications Centre was established and an Australian deputy commander appointed to the overall facility. The peppercorn rent days were long gone, and Australia became obliged to pay about $1,000,000 annually for the new privileges. Even so Australia had little say, or idea in what was really going on in the past. As an example Ball cited a general nuclear alert for US forces which occurred in the Pacific and Indian Oceans for 25 October 1974, without Australia being informed.

In 1975 the RAN began using the American HF facility at Exmouth. Prior to this the RAN had used British HF facilities at Mauritius, Hong Kong and Singapore to overcome global communication gaps, but their closure forced the change. In 1980 Ball was highly critical of the Australian dependence on the facility. American interests always took priority over Australia's, and there was the real possibility that America's enemies could deprive Australia of its ability to communicate with its submarines. Ball felt at that time that placing the defence of Australia in such a situation was

irresponsible.

The Americans were fearful of too much Australian involvement in their operations, and particularly of Labour governments. Because Australia became so dependent on US facilities, it became vulnerable to undesirable pressure. Ball relates how a briefing about a so-called crisis in the Australian-American intelligence relationship was given to Governor General Sir John Kerr at the Australian Defence Signals Directorate at Watsonia (Vic) two days prior to his dismissing the Whitlam government in November 1975.

In recent years the US has downscaled its presence at Northwest Cape, and much of the base and town housing has been handed back to the Exmouth community. Most of the accommodation and support facilities now show signs of degrading, and perhaps significantly, a number of trees are dying. One of the accommodation blocks has been taken over by a local dive school and the navy jetty has become a tourist dive site. Many other buildings including a bowling ally and cinema are available for lease but there are few takers.

The stars and stripes still flies, along side the Australian flag, but the joint facility, named after the missing Prime Minister Harold E. Holt in 1968, does not yet carry HMAS in its name. Of course the giant VLF antenna towers still stand, and are as awesome as ever, and the heat plume from the power station shows that the massive fuel-hungry generators are still in use. One can imagine the immense cost of transmitting even a single word. Standing beneath the ghostly-silent towers evokes a strange feeling, and gives cause to reflect of the many global events which have been influenced by the existence of this facility since the early 1960s. The antenna field is closed to the public, but the public road passes within about 30 metres of the foot of one of the towers. A local historian who worked in a senior position at the facility for many years has been trying to put together a more detailed history of the base, but now finds that it is much easier to access US documentation than Australian over the same subjects..

There is of course a far richer history to relate about the base than is possible here. It was the cause of significantly large protests by Australians even as recently as a decade ago. The locals who depended heavily on the facility for jobs, perhaps not surprisingly viewed the protesters with hostility. One WA politician even said that all the protesters should be sent a white feather, echoing the sentiments of those old ladies who had sent so many young Australian men to their deaths in both world wars.

Outside the perimeter fence of the joint facility is the sawn-off bow section of an Oberon-class submarine HMAS *Otama*. (See photo in article further on) Otama according to a sign, is an Aboriginal word for dolphin. At the rear of the section is a locked door with a grubby lexon window, and those who peer inside can see a replica of a "sleeping beauty" one-man submersible which was developed by the British in WW2 and used by Australians against the Japanese. The Australian Z Force had a relationship with Exmouth during WW2, and this is particularly memorable for Operations Jaywick (1943) and Rimau, (1944?) A small ex-fishing vessel, *Krait* was also involved in clandestine attacks on the Japanese from here. All the participants in the latter operation perished in one way or another, some as a result of Japanese executions shortly before the end of the Pacific war. They are commemorated in the street names of Exmouth. **PW**

HMAS *Sydney* inquiry - public hearings

The defence sub-committee inquiring into circumstances involving the sinking of HMAS Sydney held public hearings in Canberra on 27 March, Sydney on 3 April and Perth on 16-17 April 1998. At the Canberra hearing the deputy chief of the RAN, Rear Admiral Oxenbould restated that the RAN did not know the wreck location of *Sydney*. The Perth hearings were attended by the editor.

Sydney wreck location 'found'?

WA's *Sunday Times* (29/3/1998, p.5) carried a report that Aulbury businessman and inventor of a "secret" aircraft-mounted device called the Knight Direct Location System has claimed he may have identified the locations of *Sydney* and *Kormoran*. Mr Knight was reported to have said he began his search in 1989 and that he had been doing follow up work off the west coast in 1998. This year he apparently conducted two searches. One which proved fruitless, covering an area of 25,000 Km2 westward of Carnarvon which related to information largely supplied by the German prisoners. The other covering 16,000 km2 south west of Geraldton. Mr Knight claims he has detected three wrecks in this region, one of which is close to the shipping lane between Fremantle and Sunda Strait. Another, not far from North Island in the Abrolhos Group is suspected of being *Kormoran*. If the discoveries prove to be the ships in question, it will vindicate the claims of several historians who have questioned the popularised accounts of location of the battle. Mr Knight's claims appear in more detail published submissions to the current Joint Parliamentary Inquiry into the loss of HMAS *Sydney*, but do not appear to have stimulated a great deal of excitement amongst other parties proposing their own theories.

Navy WA-head-honcho's house hived off

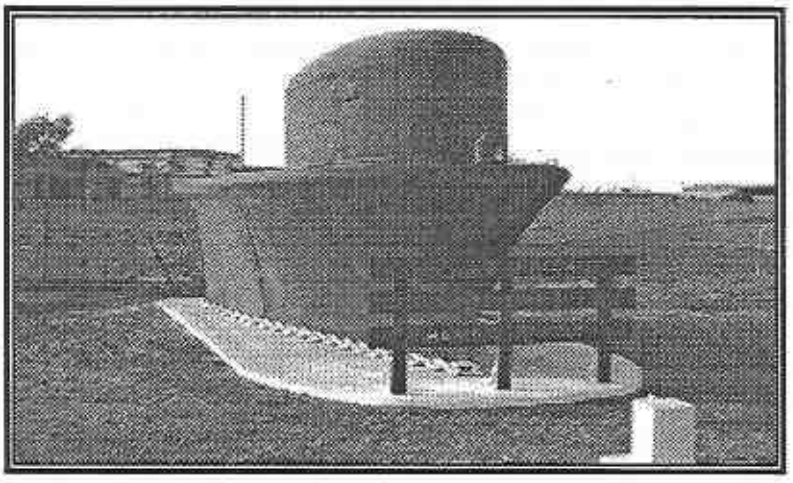
On 28 March the Defence Department sold at auction Trafalgar House, the former residence of succeeding WA RAN commanders since 1952. Not exactly a gin-palace but located in prestigious Cottesloe and described as an elegant colonial

residence, (it was built in 1915, well after Federation) the house was pleasant enough and had larger than usual dining areas. All rooms had very high ceilings which is fairly typical of other homes in the area. What was unusual was the adjoining block was part of the package and this had been utilised for a grassed entertainment area; which the auctioneer jokingly referred to as the "parade ground." The ubiquitous Aussie barbecue was present, complete with a shelter reminiscent of those which cover outback water tanks. Behind a fence at the rear of this block was a miserably plain flat where generations of sailors have been located to attend to the needs of the many commanders who have served in WA. On sale-day there was little to attest to the building's past navy history. A flagless flagpole stood on the neatly manicured front lawn, and a pair of painted-cement lions, reminiscent of those at Trafalgar Square in London, stood guard on either side of the entrance steps. Those of us peasants who thought we might pick up a bargain were quickly put in our places, because the opening bid was $1.2 million, then rose in increments of $50,000 and $20,000 until the joint was eventually knocked down for $1.4 million. A private buyer intends to maintain the property for family use.

RAN in yet another pickle

Viewers of the ABC News on 3 April may recall the lead story on various state and national editions disclosing allegations of negligence and cover-ups over the loss of two young sailors in 1987 when submarine HMAS *Otama* dived while they were still working outside the pressure hull. Interestingly the ABC's main 7pm news in WA devoted almost five minutes to the subject as it's lead story, something unheard of since the death of Princess Diana. The disclosures come as a result of submissions to a Joint Standing Committee Inquiry into Military Justice Procedures in the Australian Defence Force.

On 3 August 1987 Able Seaman Hugh Markrow and Seaman Damien Humphries became the victims of a sequence of errors and breaches of procedures intended to avoid such accidents. Volume 1, Submission 9 by Commodore M.T. Dunne, who was president of the Board of Inquiry (BOQ) into the incident has provided substantial insight into how the RAN reacts to such tragedies. Dunne says he threatened to resign his commission because of pressure by senior officers to deal with matters quickly. The inquest lasted three weeks and then the superior officers did not accept the findings. Dunne said, "A number of *Otama* witnesses were less than honest, and few would accept any responsibility for what occurred" (Submission Vol. 1 p.136). He notes that the NSW State Coroner K.M. Waller wrote a book *Suddenly Dead* in 1994, in which he records the lack of cooperation and other difficulties he had with the RAN in getting at the truth over the *Otama* incident (Submission 9. Vol. 1 p.137).



The bow section of HMAS *Otama* - Exmouth

The appendices include transcripts of control room conversations from monitoring systems known as "Big brother" and Little sister." Whether they ran or not was at the discretion of those on board.

Reading the evidence provided with the submission it is not difficult to identify inconsistencies which led to the tragedy. The final report of the BOQ recommended disciplinary action against the commanding officer of the submarine, the officer of the watch, plus four other crew (Submission 9. Vol. 1 p.164.) A Navy press release of 18 Dec. 1987 citing Admiral M. Hudson and Rear-Admiral P. Sinclair said, "...only two relatively inexperienced individuals could have been charged with offences under the Defence Force Discipline Act and tried by Court Martial...justice would not be best served by proceeding with a trial by Court martial against these two." (Submission 9, attachment. Vol. 1 pp.196-7).

The bodies of the two sailors were never recovered, due in no small part to the very rough sea conditions which prevailed of Sydney at the time of the accident. The upper section of the bow of HMAS *Otama* now sits ignominiously on the verge outside the Harold E. Holt facility at Exmouth, but there is no mention of the tragedy. **PW.**

Meantime back at the ranch

Bad news follows bad, with revelations in a series of articles in *The Australian* since March that the defence forces have

been caught out mistreating personnel with something which started out being called "discipline tours." This has involved subjecting male and female ADF personnel with alleged behavioural problems to a brief inspection tour of the Holdsworthy military prison in NSW. Holdsworthy has long held a notorious reputation for harsh disciplinary methods inflicted upon its prisoners. An *Australian* report (15/4/1998 p.4) said that the disciplinary initiative commenced in 1991 and then had the approval of three senior ADF officers which included Vice-Admiral Chris Barrie, who has been selected to become Australia's Defence Chief and a full Admiral on 4 July 1998. It is claimed that at some stage since 1991, and without their approval, the discipline tours "flipped over" into something called "attitude adjustment training." Subsequently some ADF personnel were subjected to physical assaults and unlawful confinement during their temporary visits to Holdsworthy. One person has alleged the harsh treatment she received, motivated her to attempt suicide. An official inquiry has been interviewing victims, with Defence Personnel Minister Bronwyn Bishop interpreting the results for the media. She said 19 of 42 persons interviewed claimed the discipline tours had been useful to their careers. Further advice was being sought about laying of charges against those responsible for other matters.

Oz Island nuclear test legacy is ongoing

The British nuclear tests in Australia are another of those areas in Australian history which seem to get glossed over. To be sure there is a lot of material published about them, but it tends to be obscurely located for the casual inquiry. In April came the news that Aboriginal people are to be allowed access to formerly closed areas at Maralinga, provided they don't camp at these places. Who will tell their descendants in a hundred years time? Other nuclear sites in Australia have long been accessed by Australians, ignorant of the potential dangers. For example this editor recently recorded an interview with a fisherman, who with his crew had held a barbecue in the crater of a Monte Bello Islands test site a few years after a test in the 1950s. This man has had serious problems from skin cancers on his chest and arms. Worse, several fishermen including this man, in their ignorance had collected scrap metal from the Monte Bellos and brought it to the mainland during those early days. A RN ship was the epicentre of one of the explosions, and the official line was that it has been "vaporised" but according to the informant this was not so, because they recovered material which had been widely scattered. One group of fishermen even put a vehicle on one of the islands to assist in the collection of metal. Much of this apparently found its way to WA scrap metal merchants and it was probably exported, but some, such as copper wire was utilised on numerous vessels in the Geraldton fishing fleet.

A radiation cloud from the Monte Bello Islands also swept across much of northern Australia and eventually drifted down over the heavily populated areas of southeastern Australia. Then there is the legacy of ill-health born by so many Australian service-personnel who participated in the tests. To a considerable degree their claims have fallen on deaf ears, as they gradually succumb to unnatural and appalling illnesses. Researchers now refer to one group of these illnesses collectively as SAPHO: synovitis, acne, pustulosis, hyperstosis and oesteitic syndrome. These are believed to have been triggered by radiation exposure and are capable of being inherited by succeeding generations. A British researcher Ms R. Roff of Dundee University who had reported on SAPHO in *New Scientist* in April, told *The West Australian* (3/4/98. p.5) that British documents clearly reveal that the British government led by Sir Anthony Eden "pulled the wool" over the eyes of Australians regarding the safety of the Maralinga and Monte Bello Island tests. She reportedly said her recent findings "...should not be swept under the carpet." Also present amongst the children of those servicemen is a higher incidence of spina bifida, at least double the rest of the population. Fifteen percent of servicemen surveyed in her study have also experienced fertility problems.

These days the Monte Bellos Islands are increasingly being visited by tourists, attracted not only by the mystique of the tests, but by the rich diversity of marine life on the surrounding coral reefs. **PW**

Footnote: For all the wrong reasons our Indian Ocean neighbour India detonated three underground nuclear explosions on 11 May 1998, then two more on 13 May. A few days later it announced that it was developing a ballistic missile with a range of at least 2,500 miles. A check with the dividers will reveal a lot of countries have fallen under this new nuclear shadow. On Thursday evening 28 May the message flashed onto Australian TV screens that Pakistan exploded five more atomic bombs and announced that its missile development program was well under way. On 30 May Pakistan detonated two more. For a view of the lead-up to these events; and some interesting attitudes about Oz, see: Singh, Jasjit. (Ed.) (1994) *Maritime Security*. New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis.

Careful search reveals more French curios at Dirk Hartog Island

In early April a team of volunteers and WA Maritime Museum archaeologists announced they had found a sealed French wine bottle near where a French coin was found late last year. The items were purportedly left in 1792 by French explorer/navigator Francis St Alouarn, who arrived on the west coast after a scientific expedition into the Southern Ocean in *Le Gross Ventre* .

The buried bottle was recovered intact, although the seal apparently has been compromised over time. Of very dark glass and quite heavily encrusted, the bottle failed to immediately reveal to it's finders the nature of its contents. A document claiming Oz for France is anticipated by some, but museum staff speculate that compromisation of the seal in the past may

have allowed insects in.

Bass and Flinders - A love like no other, or just good friends

It should not be surprising that heroic adventures of George Bass and Matthew Flinders in the uncharted waters of south eastern Australia should have welded an enduring bond between the two men, of a kind that only other men who have been to the brink and returned can understand. Such adventures are temporary phases in mens' lives, but the memory of them is retained and serves to reinforce the bond long after the individuals have parted ways. The inadequacy of our language means that such bonds are called love, and in the latter part of the twentieth century when a man expresses love for another, a sexual relationship is automatically suspected. And so it is with a six page letter from Flinders to Bass, written in Port Jackson in 1800, after the two men had parted company. The letter came up for auction at Christie's Travel and Exploration sale in London this year, having been put up for sale by one of the descendants of a sister of Bass's wife. What seems clear from selected brief quotations from the letter which were reprinted in a short article in *The Australian* (16/4/98 p.9) was that the younger Flinders regarded his friend as a mentor with exceptional qualities. Perhaps Flinders saw himself as Bass's fag, in the sense of the British public school tradition. Both men were in their early twenties when bobbing about off the Australian coast, and so were not far removed from their school days. Judging by Flinders' words, whatever passion he had for Bass was apparently not mutual to the same degree. In his grovelling note he wrote:

> ...when I was so completely wrapped up in you, that no conversation but yours could give me a degree of pleasure; your footsteps upon the quarterdeck over my head, took me from my books, and brought me upon the deck to walk with you...your apparent coolness towards me and the unpleasant manner you took to point out my failings, roused my pride and cooled my ardour...it is not clear to me that I love you entirely....Perhaps it is not in human nature to preserve an entire friendship for another, that one knows to be so superior....there is one circumstance that will always keep you from me: your thirst after knowledge and information.

Of course the quotations should be read in context with the entire letter, but alas that has been snapped up for a mere $458K for a private Bass family collection, so for the time being it seems we must ponder about Flinders' apparent insecurity. Perhaps too it casts light on why we always say Bass and Flinders, not Flinders and Bass?

Wooden Boat Festival down in Tassie coming up

Ever wondered what a "bum boat" was? George and Matthew probably knew, and no, it's not what you might think. Hobart will be the to find out the truth during 21-22 November when Rotary's Australian Wooden Boat Festival will be held. Lots to see and do, and lots of fun. Just turn up. If you have a wooden boat that you would like to register, or wish to be a commercial exhibitor, contact the organisers for details. Ph 03 6231 6407. Fax. 03 6231 6408.

Metal spearhead prods big bidders into action

At the same sale as the Flinders letter was auctioned, a metal spear head purported to be the one removed from Governor Arthur Phillip's shoulder in 1790 was put up, and knocked down. This was much cheaper than the Flinders letter, being a steal, or is it steel, at $158K. Metal spear-head did they say? For a peoples famous for their lithic technology? Aborigines were quick learners when it came to utilising new materials, provided it suited them. There are many examples of throughout Australia of metal and glass being crafted into spearheads, although the one from Phillip's shoulder seems unusual. From a glimpse of it on television news, it appeared to have a tang, which would have been inserted into a wooden shaft, so perhaps it was a ring-in. Maybe a jolly convict-village blacksmith showed off his skills for some sort of favour? Will we ever find out? Arguably more interesting are the circumstances in which the pale pommy was politely perforated. The local owners of Sydney Cove were apparently having a bit of a party down on a beach where a whale had beached itself. As was the manner with indigenous peoples ranging all around the Australian littoral, such occasions provided opportunity for discourse, fun, frivolity and feasting. The Governor, who was not invited, became desirous of furthering intercourse with the natives, and so with a bunch of his cohorts decided to gatecrash the party. Of course with a giant whale on the beach waiting to be cut up and cooked, there was no problem with the catering. Things were going along swimmingly until Artie decided to chuck a dagger on the ground towards a tribesman, who after considering the gesture, reciprocated in his own manner then wisely took off into the bush. Due to a barb, the spear could not be extracted on the spot and so the Governor was rowed back to town with others supporting the ten foot shaft. For a contemporary account of the event see Barnard Eldershaw, M. (1972) *Phillip of Australia.* Melbourne: Angus & Robertson. pp.180-1. Interestingly there is no mention that the spearhead was of metal.

Flea market finds by noted scrounger

The editor is something of a pack rat and often finds interesting historical maritime stuff at flea markets which no one else seems interested in. Recent discoveries include:

1. For $5, a glass lantern slide with a prayer for seamen and lighthouse keepers, *Brightly beams our Father's mercy*, hand

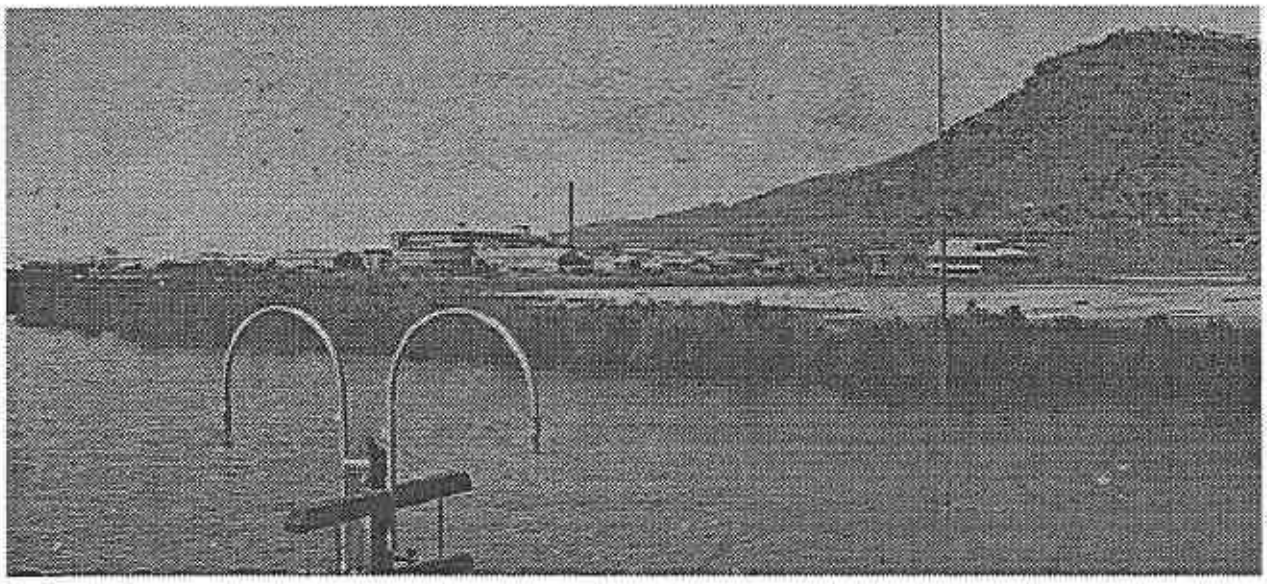
coloured, with a drawing of a sailing ship underway on the horizon and two men waving from floating wreckage in the foreground. Circa 1880s, the prayer reads: Brightly beams our Father's mercy
From His lighthouse evermore;
But to us He gives the keeping
Of the lights along the shore.
Let the lower lights be burning!
Send a gleam across the wave!
Some poor fainting struggling seaman,
You may rescue you may save.

2. For 20 cents, a book, *Around the World: A Cruise*, published in 1925 by Thos. Cook & Son for passengers on the chartered Cunard liner, *Franconia*. The world cruise, the ship's third and limited to 400 passengers, was scheduled to depart New York on 14 Jan 1926 returning 24 May the same year. For passenger ship aficionados a short extract about the beginnings of the travel firm is reproduced below.

THE FIRST WORLD TOUR

Thomas Cook, the founder of the firm Which bears his name considered the culmination of his labours to be the institution of an annual tour around the World, and in 1872, with nine companions, he set forth on what he considered an exploratory trip. The start was made from Liverpool, sailing for New York by the White Star liner "Oceanic". The principal cities of the United States, Japan, China, the Malay Peninsula and Straits Settlements, India, Ceylon, Palestine, Egypt, Greece, Italy and Prance Were visited, and after an absence of 222 days the party returned to England. The London *Times* considered this journey of great public interest, and published an interesting series of letters which Mr. Cook penned during the trip. These letters were replying with facts pertaining to the country and people visited by Mr. Cook, gave his countrymen a clear understanding of what the world was like as a whole.

3. For 20 cents, a montage of four black and white photographs mounted on card, of what could be the meatworks port of Wyndham, WA. (Part shown below) Circa 1930s? Confirmation, or any other suggestions will be appreciated?



HMAS *Westralia*

On 5 May an engine-room fire on the oiler HMAS *Westralia* while leaving Cockburn Sound resulted in the death of four sailors, three men and a woman. Five other sailors, all men, were treated at a private hospital in a Perth suburb for burns and smoke inhalation. A number of others were treated for traumatic shock at HMAS *Stirling*.

Within hours of the incident the initial problem was stated by the RAN to have been due to a leaking high-pressure fuel line. The crew had attempted a repair, but there was another leak and a flash-fire occurred. The circumstances in which the four personnel died became cause for substantial soul-searching. The fire was not under control after a mandatory seven minutes and that part of the ship was sealed with the four sailors still inside. The section was then "drenched" with carbon dioxide to displace any oxygen, but the fire failed to extinguish completely. It was finally brought under control after about ninety minutes with foam, and the assistance of personnel from other ships. Since the tragedy the Royal Navy's Royal Fleet

Auxiliary (RFA) has revealed to the RAN that a similar fire occurred last year on a sister-ship *Bayleaf*.

On the afternoon of the WA fire the commanding officer of Fleet Base West - HMAS *Stirling*, Cdr. A. Johnston attempted to focus attention in media interviews on the civilian contractors who carry out maintenance and repairs on RAN vessels. He also strongly defended the decisions of the captain of the ship, Cdr. S. Dietrich and preempted the findings of an official inquiry by saying that sealing the engine room was the only option, and the crew members were "almost certainly dead" when this order was given.

Navy Chief of Staff, Commodore G. Walpole also strongly defended the captain from Canberra, and cited a 1996 decoration for conspicuous service as evidence of his competency. The day after the disaster in an article in *The Australian* (6/5/98:1) Walpole stated that the crew were cleaning up after repairs when the fire erupted.

Built by Cammell Laird in 1974 as *Hudson Cavalier*, the ship was later renamed *Appleleaf* for service with the RN Fleet Auxiliary and took part in the Faulklands War in 1982. With the RAN it was deployed in the Gulf War in 1991. At 171 metres long with a displacement of 40,870 tonnes the vessel in the RAN's largest vessel, but has been in service with them only since 1989 when it was leased from the RN. It was purchased outright by Australia in 1994. Normal crew size is about 84 persons but on this occasion it was carrying 98. *Westralia* can convey various fuels including dieseline, aviation spirit, kerosene and bunkering oil, and was heading for the Indonesian achaepelago.

Westralia played a crucial role in the rescue of solo yachtsmen in the Southern Ocean last year, which may have been its finest hour. Tony Bullimore said from Britain that he was deeply saddened by news of the accident. A message from the Queen expressed similar sentiments. A memorial service was held dockside at HMAS *Stirling* on Friday May 8 and telecast by the ABC to the nation. The Governor General, State Governor, Prime Minister and senior service chiefs attended. The funerals of the deceased were later held in their respective home states.

On Monday 11 May a Board of Inquiry convened, and because of the many criticisms of the RAN's questionable conduct concerning inquiries into past disasters, included two highly experience civilians.

The ship has evidently had an unhappy engineering history. Its navigator, Lt Cdr. Triffit told the Board on 13 May that visiting RFA members said they regarded the ship as a "lemon" because it had been plagued by mechanical problems before being sold off to Australia. They were surprised that it had not been taken out of service completely. Australian sailors were obliged to cope with the ship's numerous faults, which have included three engine seizures while at sea. The crew had been obliged to deal with these as best as they could and prided themselves on their ability to overcome unexpected problems.

The fire in May brought about a total failure in shipboard communications, including to the engine room, and radio communication facilities. The ship's navigator raised the alarm with his mobile telephone, which begs the question, what would have happened if the ship had been out of range? On 16 and 17 May the Board was told that there had been reticence amongst some distressed crew members to enter the fire area. Another allegation were made that fire crews on ships standing by were unnecessarily restrained from assisting. The press noticed one man's allegation that some female crew members had reacted to the emergency poorly, but this claim was not reinforced by anyone else. As the disabled ship drifted perilously close to some shallows, tension was heightened by the skipper of a tug who haggled over salvage rights before he would take the tow. Mixed messages have been emerging how well people reacted to the fire. From the outset senior RAN officers in Canberra praised the crew, and one crew member addressing the Inquiry thought the entire compliment deserved a medal. However, some persons who boarded from other vessels have described scenes of grief and panic. RAN ships which responded were HMAS' *Darwin, Adelaide, Sydney, Success* and *Anzac*.

It seems clear that the firefighters who did go below showed extraordinary heroism. One sailor who took to the task said visibility was nil, and that with all the machinery stopped the engine room was eerily quiet. In the confined space the temperature had rapidly become extremely hot, like an oven. There was a real possibility that they might perish. Making their way to the depths of the ship in cumbersome suits and breathing apparatus they relied on a thermal imaging camera (TIC) to find the seat of the fire and extinguish it with foam. The emergency lighting system had failed. About them were the bodies of dead crew. Two were huddled together, a man and a woman, and the man appeared to have used himself as a shield to protect his companion, who was on her first visit to the engine room.

When the Inquiry transferred temporarily to Sydney in late May the navy PR people at HMAS *Stirling* took a select group of journalists from different organisations and dressed four of them in fire suits and respirators for a simulation exercise with full flame and smoke effects. There has been a heavy emphasis in navy media statements about the heroism of those who responded to the emergency, with very little attention to events beforehand.

One WA newspaper has already implied in an article that a coverup was manifesting in this Inquiry, because it had been refused permission to view a tendered document about the flexible fuel couplings. The couplings were a key element in the fire and were examined by the WA Police arson squad. Just before the fire a leak had been diagnosed in one in the portside engine, which was shut down and repaired, however there was also an undetected leak in a fuel coupling on the starboard engine, which was still operating. The high pressure ensured that escaping fuel through a small hole was atomised, a highly dangerous situation in any conditions. The heat from the fire had been so intense that some of the inner nylon core had extruded through a perforation in the braid. The same couplings on number nine cylinder of each engine were involved and photographs show that access to one end of these is quite awkward. The hoses were of a fairly typical design, having a nylon centre-tube inside a neoprene tube and with flexible stainless steel braided outer-jacket about an inch and a half or so in diameter. The steel connections at each end have a threaded nut for in-line attachment, and overall length of the entire

assembly was about a foot and a half long. (Similar smaller flexible couplings can be seen on the front brakes of any car.) Operating pressure was about 86 lbs per square inch or about 600 kpa. The outer stainless steel braid on the hoses was damaged, with some broken strands visible. Flexible couplings can twist and even kink when being fitted, and the uninitiated are sometimes tempted to use multigrips to hold the hose as the nuts on the end are done up. However, a final determination by the Inquiry on the cause of the damage is yet to be made.

The main purpose of the Inquiry is to determine all circumstances and make appropriate recommendations to avoid such incidents in the future. It has no disciplinary powers. Recommendations are made to navy chiefs who act as they see appropriate, which is the grey area that has got the RAN into such bother with previous incidents. Sadly the tragedy seems sure to have a deep and long lasting impact on some people. The Inquiry continues. **P.Weaver.**

Collins-sub contact 11 years old

It is eleven years since contracts were first signed in a A$5,000,000,000 project to build Australia's Collins-class submarines. That's approaching $300 for every Australian. While two boats have been launched so far, there is disquiet about some aspects of the programme, mainly as a result of serious criticisms in past auditor's reports. The submarines have been hit by fundamental technical problems which included a major replacement of hundreds of suspect fuel couplings after launching. A former RAN captain of *Farncombe* has also confirmed that the submarine was knowingly taken under with leaking drive-shaft seals and "... more water came into the people tube than we wanted." He also revealed in the media that the mobile telephone phone system had been used for cancelling a mission as the boat was putting to sea, which is interesting seeing that one of the major boasts for the submarines is the ability to monitor foreign military communications. Arguably more serious has been the continuing inability of the gee-whiz electronic combat system to deliver the goods. According to a major coverage of these matters in *The Australian* 18/5/98. pp. 1,9,12) the computerised combat system is now almost seven years behind schedule, and poses major problems for future enhancement because of it's "closed architecture." Modern systems are now open architecture, which more readily facilitates technical upgrading. The news comes during a time of significant regional instability, unprecedented since WW2.

Checklist of serious RAN incidents

The checklist below should not be regarded as exhaustive: It should be born in mind that warships engage in dangerous activities, and it is generally accepted that crew may perish in times of conflict. Inevitably these deaths can be attributed to human error in one form or another. While death in war or associated training is reluctantly accepted, what is not acceptable is when there is an attempt to cover up the true circumstances in order to hide incompetence or negligence. It is not the actual events, but the matters which occur after some of these matters which have landed the RAN with so much poor publicity. Closer scrutiny of the aftermath some of these events reveals a pattern of almost predictable cultural behaviour amongst navy elite.

1914, September: Submarine HMAS *AI* disappeared off New Britain with its crew of 35.
1940, November: HMAS *Goorangi* sunk after collision with MV *Duntroon* at Port Phillip - 24 perished.
1941, November: HMAS *Sydney* sunk in battle with HSK *Kormoran* - 645 perished.
1941, November: HMAS *Paramatta* sunk by German submarine off Libya - 139 perished.
1942, March: HMAS *Perth* sunk by Japanese in Sunda Strait - 375 perished.
1942, March: HMAS *Yarra* sunk by Japanese south of Java - 138 perished.
1942, April: HMAS *Vampire* sunk off Sri Lanka by Japanese - 19 perished.
1942, August: HMAS *Canberra* badly damaged in Solomons engagement with Japanese - 84 perished.
1942, December: HMAS *Armidale* sunk in Arafura sea by Japanese - 100 perished.
1943, January: HMAS *Patricia Cam* sunk by Japanese off Wessel Islands (NT) - 8 perished.
1943, June: HMAS *Wallaroo* sank after collision with US ship off WA - 3 perished.
1950, January: HMAS *Tarakan*, petrol vapour explosion on board - 8 perished.
1964 HMAS *Voyager* in collision with HMAS *Melbourne*. 82 perished and survivors still fighting for compensation.
19...,(?) HMAS *Melbourne* in collision with USS *Frank E. Evans*.
1981 HMAS *Tobruk*. Gas poisoning from ship sewage treatment plant - 1 perished.
1985 HMAS *Stalwart*. Gas poisoning from ship sullage tank. - 3 perished.
1987 HMAS *Otama*. Submarine - submerges with crew on deck. - 2 perished.
1998 HMAS *Westralia*. Crew members trapped by fire in engine room - 4 perished.

Waterfront reform

No doubt all our Australian members have been taking an interest in the events involving the Maritime Union of Australia and Patricks. A disturbing event which probably has not received as much attention as it should have is the Dubai incident,

where late last year a contingent of Australians went to that Arab port to learn how to operate container port equipment. Amongst these persons were serving members of the Australian Defence Forces, including men from the SAS. The ABC stated in a news broadcast (6/5/1998: 11.15am) that there were "28 Army officers" in the Dubai contingent. The government denies it had former knowledge of this arrangement, which raises some pretty interesting questions about what role the military sees itself playing in domestic issues in peacetime. Historically the RAN has intensively engaged in intensive scrutiny of waterfront unions and individuals, ostensibly to ensure the security of its vessels and their maintenance. An introduction to these activities can be found in a disturbing book by Caine, Frank. (1983). *Political surveillance in Australia.* Sydney: Angus & Robertson., particularly in a chapter about naval intelligence pp. 77-105. When the book was released the publishers remarked that Dr Cain's analysis of Australian intelligence agencies revealed they were characterised a conservative influences to harass, undermine and stifle legitimate, purely political opposition, and that there had been a systematic exaggeration of radical threats by these organisations to justify their desire for an expansion of their activities, organisation and bureaucratic importance.

Interesting *Kormoran* relic bobs up

The WA Army Museum at the Artillery Barracks in Burt St Fremantle has recently acquired an interesting exhibit in the form of the purser's keys from HSK *Kormoran*. The keys were apparently obtained by an Australian soldier during the processing of German prisoners. Will they still open the safe when it is recovered? Information about tours of the museum, and research facilities, which are all run by dedicated volunteers, can be obtained on 08 93193087. Fax. 08 93850280.

HMAS *Sydney* submissions

Volume 10 of HMAS Sydney inquiry submissions was published mid-May and contains a correction of an error made in the original Defence Department submission, which was remarked upon by several historians at the Perth hearings. Volumes 11 and 12 came out about a week later. More volumes of submissions, and Hansard transcripts of the hearings held in various states are forthcoming.

Bye Bye Botany Bay?

In May came the news that the NSW government is to change the name of Botany Bay in accordance with Aboriginal wishes. Environment Minister Pam Allan told the National Parks and Wildlife Service to arrive at a name reflecting dual significance for Aborigines and non-Aborigines. Brouhaha coming? Are there any views on this matter amongst our membership?

Aboriginal name adapted for new RAN ship.

On 23 May a $500 million frigate *Warramunga* was launched at Williamstown shipyard. There will be two years of fitting out and sea trials before commissioning. It is the second ship with this name. The first was commissioned by the RAN for Pacific service in 1942. It was decommissioned in 1959. The name is a corruption of Warramungu, which designates Aboriginal peoples ranging in the Tennant Creek (NT) region. Last year they saw victory with a High Court decision which granted freehold title to a large area north of Tennant Creek, which was the culmination of an 18 year legal battle. The ship's motto is to be "Courage in Difficulties,"and many things could be read into that. The federal government sponsored 20 Warramungu women to go to the launch and perform a dance for the assembled elite.

Yolngu peoples reassert customary sea rights

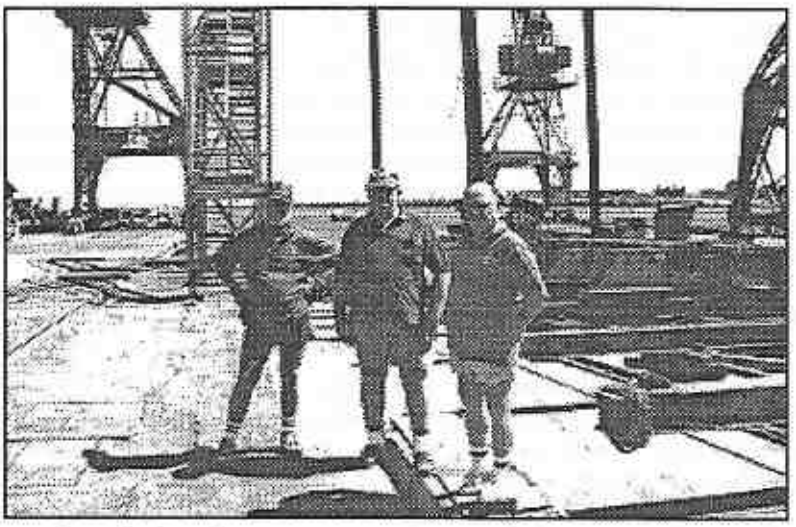
In the view of many Aborigines, neither major Australian political parties maintain a favourable attitude towards Aboriginal sea rights. There are numerous sacred sites along the foreshore of Arnhem Land which Yolngu peoples cannot visit without ritualised sanction. However, these sites are increasingly being disturbed by non-Aborigines such as unlicensed mudcrabbers and other fishers. In order to lend validation to their claims for increased protection of the sites, Yolngu artists have commenced a major collection of bark paintings which will depict the significance of the maritime environment within their culture. The paintings will incorporate sacred *miny'tji* designs in what will become a lasting statement of Aboriginal customary law. The project is a unified effort of clans in the *Miwatji* region, which is in northeast Arnhem Land.

Brouhaha building over new Fremantle Maritime Museum building

The WA state Premier Richard Court has thrown his weight behind a new maritime museum being planned for Victoria Quay in Fremantle. Rumours have circulated about this plan for the last couple of years. In an interview on ABC radio 25/5/98 Fremantle Port Authority head Ms Kerry Sanderson said that a steering committee headed by Mr Court was addressing

the details of a concept plan due to be released soon. It will then be open for two months for public comment. Ms Sanderson said the building will be at least five metres high to house the mast of Australia II, which is to be moved from Sydney's National Maritime Museum of Australia.

The Fremantle Society, the watchdog over heritage matters in Fremantle opposed the plan, saying it will be out of character to the port. Spokesperson Ralph Hoare says the building will probably be seven stories after the roof is added. He said the boat has little to do with Fremantle, having been built in Cottesloe, a suburb to the north. However, the famous winged keel was cast in Fremantle. The cup was actually won in the USA which is where so much of the preparation and fine tuning was also done. He says if the development is to go ahead, the old Fremantle power station would be a much better choice. It has the roof height and a small lagoon adjoining the ocean.



Swan dockyard management on the eve of being closed down

Ms Sanderson said on radio, the final site was chosen by a WA Maritime Museum committee. The site which has been chosen includes the old Swan Dockyards. These were closed down earlier this year when the state government stonewalled over renewal of the leases. According to the operators of the slips, this cost seventy jobs, and removal of a competitor had brought about an immediate substantial rise in slipping charges in Cockburn Sound to the south. They said that some larger fishing vessels in the area had already made plans to utilise cheaper slipways in Singapore.

Duyfken replica gets stuck into philately

The buzzing of electric planes at Fremantle ceased temporarily a couple of weeks ago for Communications Minister Richard Alston to announce that the good ship *Duyfken II* is to appear on some postal stationary in September. Mr Alston appeared enthusiastic about maritime history but wondered how those brave sailors in the olden days survived without the convenience of a MacDonalds. Polite laughter followed.

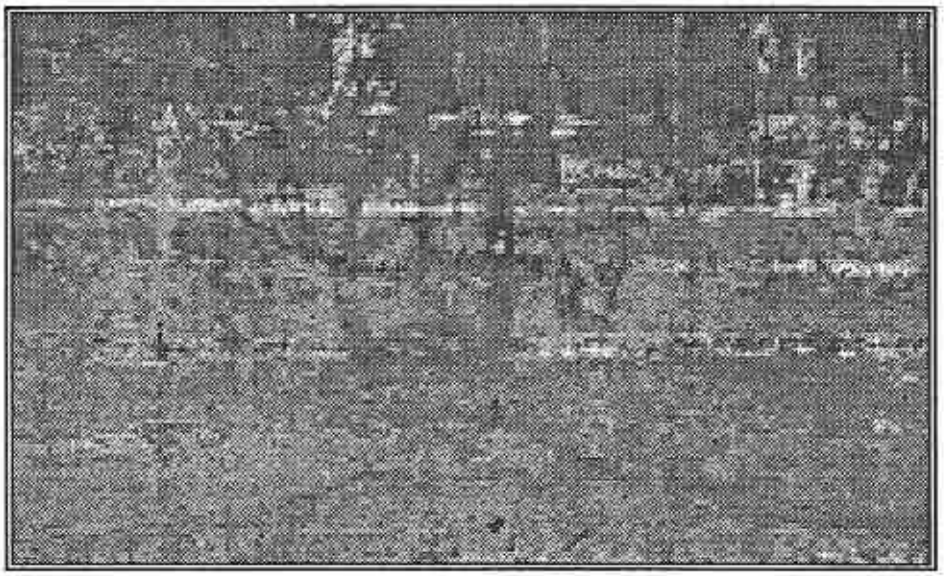
Shock! Horror! - Could Nelson have been a malingerer?

Kiss me Hardy! Is there no good news this issue? Milo Keynes in the Royal Society of Medicine's *Journal of Medical Biography* has debunked the story that Lord Nelson was blinded in one eye during the Siege of Calvi in 1794. The blindness was apparently temporary after being splattered with a shower of dirt thrown up by a stray cannon shot. Nelson was keen to get a pension from the government for various injuries sustained during his service, and later falsely promoted the notion that his eye had permanently been lost. The claim was dismissed by medical examiners who found he could see with both eyes. Reportedly, the Nelson Society has not been particularly impressed by the recent allegations. The pix on the right is from the editor's private collection.-.

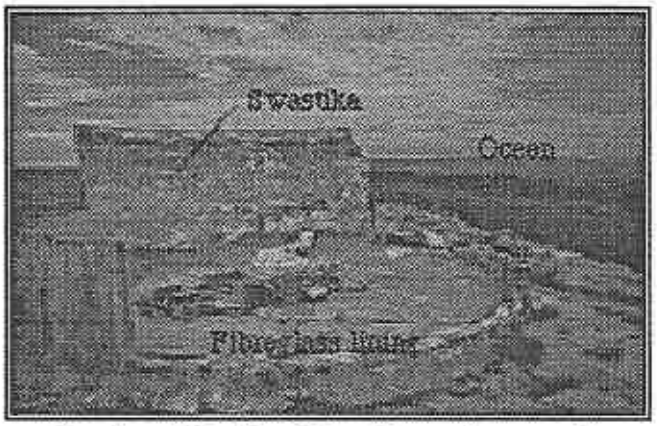
Lord Nelson - Nudge nudge, wink wink; Say no more!

Nazi graffiti still survives on NW coast

When German survivors from HSK *Kormoran* came ashore on Quobba Station, near Red Bluff on the west coast of Australian in 1941 they found themselves in a pretty bleak part of the continent. The two sites where lifeboats came ashore were at some caves just to the north of Red Bluff, and adjacent to a windmill-supplied covered water tank known as "seventeen mile," which is slightly south of Red Bluff. The tank is some distance inland on an escarpment, but is conspicuous from the ocean. Nearby was a shed to collect rainwater for another tank underneath. A German party made there way to these tanks and were eventually apprehended/rescued by Australians and taken to Carnarvon. The editor visited these locations earlier this year and photographed a faded swastika stain on the inside of 17 mile tank, which is now partially demolished. This has not been previously described, having apparently been covered over by a fibre-glass lining some time in the post-war period. Now it has emerged again, the fibre-glass having succumbed to the elements. A more detailed description of this and other matters relating to the German landings by the editor, Dr P. Weaver appears in a private submission to the HMAS *Sydney* inquiry in Vol. 10. pp. 2687-2692.



Swastika on inside of 17 mile tank



Remains of 17 mile tank (looking southwestwards)

The *Quarterly Newsletter - The Australian Association for Maritime History* is a forum for news, comment and opinion on matters involving maritime history. Contributions are welcome. Views expressed within it do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Association for Maritime History.
The newsletter is compiled and edited in an honorary capacity by **Dr. Paul R. Weaver, 23 Waddell Road, Palmyra, Western Australia 6157.** During 1998, newsletters are expected to be ready for the printer on the last days of May, August and November. Material for inclusion should be sent direct to the editor well prior to the deadline. Original articles should carry the author's signature. Enclose a stamped addressed envelope for return of material.