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BOOK REVIEW

John Jess, seeker of justice: the role of Parliament in the HMAS Voyager tragedy

by Elizabeth McCarthy

Sid Harta Publishers: Glen Waverley, VIC; 2015; 320 pp.; ISBN 9781925230888; RRP \$29.95.



This book was written by a daughter of John Jess (1922 – 2003) who was the Member for La Trobe in the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth Parliament from 1960 – 1972. As she was researching material for a biography of her father, she became aware of his involvement as a parliamentarian with the second Royal Commission into the collision between HMA Ships *Voyager* and *Melbourne* on 10 February 1964. Elizabeth McCarthy was aged four at the time of the collision and says that her father did not discuss his involvement in subsequent events. Her research took her to press reports, Parliamentary records, the National Archives of Australia (NAA), the current Royal Australian Navy historian, the sons of Captain Robertson, Commander Everett, Lieutenant Commander Cabban and the President of the *Voyager* Association. Jess donated his papers to the NAA and these include correspondence from a concerned public, both naval and civilian.

She opens with an outline of the collision, loss of life and rescue of survivors. Unlike today, survivors were left alone to cope with the trauma and in particular they were ordered not to talk to the press. Those considered fit were back at sea a week later. Prime Minister Menzies decided to establish a Royal Commission rather than agreeing to a Naval Board of Inquiry. The author indicates Menzies sought to protect the Government and the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board (ACNB). As the Royal Commission proceeded the public began to suspect there was something to cover up. Survivors were required to record their recollection of events. On being returned from Navy Office for signature, some related later to Jess that their reports had been edited. Cabban, who was executive officer of *Voyager* until a month before the collision, sent a report to the Naval Board. It was not used as evidence. Jess's misgivings arose from a combination of his distrust of power in general and senior Liberal politicians having control of that power.

At the Royal Commission it became evident that the commissioners struggled with the minutiae of ship handling, manoeuvres and communications required by a navy operating an aircraft carrier with a destroyer as plane guard – in particular, that the plane guard, at all times, must keep clear of the carrier. The commissioners seemed keen to challenge the actions of *Melbourne's* bridge team. Captain Stevens and his family had secured legal representation whereas, initially, Captain Robertson had none. Following the Commission, junior MPs sought access to transcripts of the commission. They were advised certain sections could not be tabled.

The author covers the backgrounds of Captain Robertson and her father who was a cousin of Mrs Robertson. She says her father was inclined to speak out and records that the Menzies' government was ruled by secrecy and strict obedience. Following the release of the Spicer Report of the Royal Commission, a debate was scheduled for parliament. John Jess sought to speak and raise, in particular, that Captain Robertson had not been interviewed by ACNB, that his appointment to HMAS *Watson* was not only sideways but downwards, and that as a consequence he resigned his commission.

By then Vice Admiral Hickling, RN, then retired and living in New Zealand, was keen to write a book. Captain Robertson spent time with Hickling who sought to clear Robertson's name. Also Hickling was aware of Cabban's report although he did not refer to it in *One Minute of Time*, published in April 1965. Furthermore, Jess realised that Menzies was aware of Cabban's report, however Menzies advised Jess to forget the matter. Later Jess realised his in-laws had been contacted by Menzies, urging them to persuade Jess to drop the issue. By this time Jess was sandwiched between Robertson, who did not wish to re-ignite the matter, and Cabban, who did. Harold Holt became prime minister in January 1966 with the retirement of Sir Robert Menzies. Jess had a copy of Cabban's letter delivered to Holt and sought to have the matter raised in the Liberal Party room. Even though scheduled, it was removed four times and Jess was alone with his colleagues curious of his motives. A year later he was gaining some support from Liberal colleagues and he sought to make contact with the medical officer in *Voyager* during the ship's deployment in 1963. This contact was denied as it became evident the Secretary of ACNB was keen to protect the Board. In March 1967, despite the obstruction of two prime ministers and two ministers for the Navy, a second Royal Commission was approved. John Jess advised Cabban that he would be subjected to intense criticism. The second Royal Commission found that Captain Stevens was unfit to command at sea.

The book is well illustrated with photographs of *dramatis personae*, ships and the tracks of *Melbourne* and *Voyager*. There are over 600 footnotes but no index. The author challenges some aspects of Tom Frame's book, *Where Fate Calls*, written in 1992. She has not one word of criticism of her father; nevertheless, her book will be of great interest to all Australians familiar with the tragedy of the collision and subsequent events.

John W. Ellis