

## *Abide with Me: The HMAS Voyager Tragedy*

by Elizabeth McCarthy

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A moment forever etched on my consciousness is of standing on the bridge of the frigate *Parramatta* reading the names of the 82 men who had perished in the collision between the aircraft carrier *Melbourne* and the destroyer *Voyager* on 10 February 1964. So many of the young officers I trained and worked with died that night and the question looming large was ‘How could this have possibly happened?’ Sixty years on, we still have no answer.

Elizabeth McCarthy, daughter of Federal parliamentarian John Jess, authored the book *John Jess Seeker of Justice; The Role of The Parliament in the HMAS Voyager Tragedy*, reviewed in *United Service* in 2016. This second volume attempts a reconstruction of the events leading to the collision using evidence given by RAN (Royal Australian Navy) personnel to the first of two Royal Commissions ordered by the Australian government. These were judicial investigations, and the strong suggestion of political interference in the outcomes, which examined theories about the cause of the accident rather than the facts, gives rise to McCarthy’s claim that this is ‘...the most comprehensive study undertaken’. Her motives for writing this book are ‘...to correct history and to absolve both crews from blame’.

*Melbourne* was undertaking night flying operations with aircraft from HMAS *Albatross* at Nowra NSW. She was escorted by *Voyager*, which was to take ‘plane guard’ station astern of the carrier in case any aircraft failed to land on the flight deck or experienced difficulties in launching. It was a calm night and the first task was to find a headwind to assist in aircraft operations. That was resolved by a series of manoeuvres in company, and *Voyager* was ordered to her station, which she apparently responded to with a standard manoeuvre, known as a ‘fishtail’ - to leave her station on the starboard bow of *Melbourne*, pass down the carrier’s starboard side while losing speed and bearing and, passing under her stern, finishing up 1000 yards on the port quarter of *Melbourne*. She correctly executed the first part – a turn away to starboard and apparently a reduction in speed before unaccountably turning too far to port on the second turn of the fishtail and into the direct path of *Melbourne* now working up to maximum speed. In the seconds that remained before collision became inevitable, there was little the carrier could do but try to reduce speed. *Voyager* was cut in half, the forward section floating briefly on its side while the stern section remained upright and afloat for some time. Efforts by *Melbourne* and other craft sent to the scene rescued 242 men from the water.

A naval Board of Enquiry would have been the standard response to the accident. However, Prime Minister Menzies elected to convene a Royal Commission instead, for reasons not clearly explained. Perhaps he feared a cover-up by the Navy, and counsel assisting the first Royal Commissioner certainly and vigorously

pursued several theories to explain the collision centred on the wrong information having been passed to *Voyager*, a delay in action taken by *Melbourne* to warn the destroyer, and others. The evidence – as presented and recorded - refuted each of these, which did not prevent them being cited by the Commissioner in his findings.

There were several ways for *Voyager* to take up her new station. Witnesses stated that Captain Stevens favoured the fishtail manoeuvre in taking plane guard station on British carriers in the Far East. Naval witnesses expressed differing views on the wisdom of this manoeuvre; and it was suggested that Stephens may have misjudged the speed *Melbourne* had built up since advising that flying speed was to be 22 knots. A graphical reconstruction of *Voyager*’s manoeuvre offered by Captain Robertson of *Melbourne* was rejected by the court and suppressed by the Attorney-General’s Department, as was evidence that the destroyer had increased her speed rather than reducing it. A plot constructed by the pilot of a Gannet aircraft overflying the scene clearly showed *Voyager*’s unexplained lurch to port into the path of the carrier.

The bridge team in *Melbourne* were keeping a close eye on the destroyer. It is not so clear – for obvious reasons- that *Voyager*’s team was watching the carrier as closely - a bone of contention at both Royal Commissions. The first concluded that blame for the collision was largely *Melbourne*’s, flying in the face of naval practice and tradition. The carrier was the ‘Guide’, the ship on which the formation was centred and by tradition smaller ships keep out of the way of bigger vessels for reasons of relative manoeuvrability

The second Royal Commission convened to investigate allegations that Captain Steven’s health may have been contributed to the disaster. The outcomes were inconclusive and did not explain how this might have affected his ship’s manoeuvres that night. Examination of other possible contributory factors similarly shed no light on what had caused the destroyer to collide with the carrier. It was a bad decision by somebody in *Voyager* but what and who took it will never be known.

As no cause was determined, no blame should have been attributed to anyone, but blame aplenty was dished out wildly by the Commissioners and - quite disgracefully - by the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board. The outcome was that the men of both ships were left with a sense of guilt for the deaths of those who went down in the destroyer. That stayed with them throughout their lives; I saw that amongst my colleagues associated with the tragedy. It was a terrible price to pay for political expediency, some sharp practice on the part of members of the legal profession and the abrogation of leadership by the RAN’s senior officers.

**Ian Pfennigwerth**