

## HMAS SWAN to SHANGHAI

**The 1981 trials of  
the 'heavenly duck'  
by Max Sulman**



*HMAS Swan sailing towards Shanghai. RAN.*

**During the 1970s there was a gradual easing of tension between China and the West. There were cautious overtures which led to visits to the country by western government dignitaries and culminated in a visit to Beijing by President Richard Nixon.**

As a result of the relaxations, by the late 1970s there were a number of visits to China by warships of western nations and such visits were regarded as highly desirable for diplomatic and political reasons.

By 1980 the British, French and Italians had each achieved naval ship visits to Shanghai. Australia was keen to join the club and, during HMAS *Swan*'s Far East deployment in 1980, the Commanding Officer (CO) was briefed to stand by in case negotiations were successful and a visit was approved, but it was not to be. I took command of *Swan* in December 1980 and, before deploying north again in May 1981, was advised that should a ship visit be arranged, it would be by *Swan*.

*Swan*'s deployment programme for 1981 was from May to December and was particularly interesting with 24 scheduled port visits in 17 different countries or territories throughout the Pacific. Apart from minor adjustments to timing all visits and exercises were successfully completed. As readers would be aware such a visit programme included a heavy social load for the officers and the Wardroom hosted 18 cocktail parties as well as participating in many return bouts.

### **Shanghai confirmed**

*Swan* was well into the deployment before it was confirmed that the Shanghai visit was a goer and was programmed from 1 to 5 September. As might be imagined there was great anticipation among the ship's company for the visit and considerable satisfaction in being nominated as the first RAN ship to visit China since the revolution. It was an exciting prospect but, as the CO, and as a navigator, I was very aware of the significant lack of up-to-date charts of the Yangtze and its approaches. The Admiralty charts held in the portfolio had been last corrected in 1949, the year of the 'Yangtze Incident' and what had occurred in the mighty river since then was an unknown. The only additional hydrographic information available comprised some poor photocopies of charts used by the Italians or French during their visits in the late 70's. It promised to be an adventure.

There had been some knowledge gleaned from the previous visitors and the procedure for entry seemed to have been consistent for their visits. We therefore expected to be met by a frigate guide at the pilot station off the mouth of the Yangtze. Two pilots would then be embarked for the passage upriver to Shanghai. We were also aware of the complex light signals that were supposed to be worn to identify us and our guide. The ETA for arrival at the pilot station off the Yangtze was 0430 local time on 1 September.

Our last port of call before sailing for China was in Japan at Maizuru, on the western side of Honshu on the Sea of Japan. Before sailing from Maizuru, Typhoon Agnes had

been reported and was being plotted. It soon became obvious from the predicted path of the storm that it would have an influence on *Swan's* passage to Shanghai. The unanswered question was just what actual path Agnes would follow and therefore what the most effective avoiding action would be. Earlier in the month before visiting Kobe we had been at sea on the edges of Typhoon Thad and while in harbour my barometer trace showed the classic signs of Thad's passage.

Having spent several deployments in the Far East with occasional brushes with them I had a healthy respect for typhoons and had no wish to get close to them.

#### **Typhoon Agnes**

*Swan* sailed from Maizuru at 0900 on 29 August and set course for the China coast. On 30 August initial Morse radio contact was made with the East China Sea Fleet Headquarters in Shanghai; an historic event in itself as being the first contact between our navies. Meanwhile we were anxiously monitoring the progress of Typhoon Agnes which had recently caused havoc in the Philippines. It was tracking fast and strongly towards the area we would soon be sailing in.

On passage we received regular weather forecasts from Guam which were of great value. During *Swan's* visit to Guam earlier in the month I had had the opportunity to visit the US Naval Oceanography Command Centre and be briefed on the typhoon analysis and warning facilities, not expecting that their output would be of vital interest so soon.

The typhoon's influence became evident as we sailed south. After clearing Korea, course was shaped as far west as possible to close the China coast in an effort to reduce the effects of the typhoon, and work into its navigable semicircle. While harbouring a strong desire to get well out of Agnes's likely path, I was also well aware of the diplomatic significance and arrangements that had been made both in China and Australia for this first visit by an Australian ship since the end of the revolution in 1949.

Just before noon on the 31<sup>st</sup> a Morse message was received from East China Sea Fleet Headquarters requesting *Swan's* position and hinting that, because of the approaching typhoon, if the rendezvous could be reached by 1800 an early entry could be arranged. The original rendezvous of 0430 on 1 September was now clearly impossible as the eye of the typhoon was predicted to be only 120 nautical miles to seaward at that time.

At this point I was seriously considering abandoning the passage south and withdrawing to the east to gain sea room but, having considered the typhoon's position, its forecast track and the effect on the Shanghai programme should *Swan* withdraw far to the east, I accepted the offer of an early entry and we ran fast down the coast into an increasingly heavy south easterly swell. The sea was deserted when

*Swan* hove to in a heavy swell at the rendezvous off the Chang Chi'ang (Yangtze) light vessel at 1715 local on the 31<sup>st</sup> and there we waited for our guide and pilots. There was no other vessel in sight.

***HMAS Swan, arriving in Shanghai, 3 September 1981.***







***The approaches to Shanghai as they might have been in 1981 (from The International Atlas, Rand McNally, 1978). The main channel in the northern part of the map is the southern estuary of the Yangtze. The Huangpu River can be seen leading south from Wusong to Shanghai. The typhoon anchorage is thought to have been between the small group of islands in the south estuary, and its southern shore. Satellite images available today suggest that the size, shape and position of the smaller islands in this map have changed almost beyond recognition. The lines of latitude are 30 minutes apart.***

### **An unpleasant place to be**

It was an unpleasant place to be. The sea was muddy and rough, and the swell was so heavy that it seemed possible the ship could bottom in the troughs. *Swan* was always immaculate but the spray from the brown Yangtze was covering the glistening superstructure as we waited. Despite all efforts we were unable to establish communications with our expected guide. The option of clearing out to the south-east was becoming more and more attractive as the minutes passed.

Daylight began to fade before a Luda class destroyer, DD 132, was observed approaching at speed out of the river around 1900. It was our escort; the intended frigate having become unserviceable. Onboard, in addition to our pilots, was our liaison officer, LCDR Bob Burns, who had been despatched from JIO for the purpose.

Conditions were such that a transfer of pilots was out of the question. There was also the complication that we could not establish any useful communications with our guiding destroyer, so Bob Burns manned the VHF circuit.

Then, taking station about five cables astern of our guide, off we went at 18 knots up the river into the night and the unknown. The river buoys were well lit, and DD 132 obligingly shone a searchlight on each as we flashed by, indeed it seemed to us gazing anxiously through the wipers in the driving rain that she bounced off one or two of them as we sped up the Yangtze with a quartering sea and wind.

### **Crossing the bar**

Upon crossing the Tongsha Bar around 2100 the effect of the swell lessened, and the ships headed towards the typhoon anchorage at Yawosha. This was a surprise; communications being less than adequate, we did not know there was a typhoon anchorage or that to shelter there was the plan. We had been expecting to proceed direct to Shanghai. Approaching Zhongsha light vessel the large number of ships already at anchor became apparent and *Swan* was given a general area to anchor by DD 132.

At 2205 *Swan* came to port anchor with seven shackles of cable off the southeastern edge of ChangXing Dao Island, in the company of Luda 132, about a mile away, and 40 merchant ships. The ship anchored up stream and up wind of the other ships and was lying back on a bar taut cable into a howling gale, at very short notice with the bridge manned and the cable party on deck.

### **Drama in the anchorage**

At 2320 a large merchant vessel, later identified as the *Da Qing 29*, was observed to be underway. Previously lying to the northwest of *Swan* at a range of 5 cables, the *Da Qing 29* turned to the east and passed close under our stern then hove to, head to wind about one cable off our starboard side. *Da Qing 29* closed steadily, despite the sounding of *Swan's* siren and was only 40 yards off before gathering headway in what appeared to be a successful manoeuvre to avoid collision. With her stern abreast *Swan's* bow *Da Qing 29* turned to starboard, thereby passing her stern over our cable and winding it up on her screw. To avoid a collision, I manoeuvred slowly astern. We advised Luda DD 132 of the situation and were told the merchantman was suffering engine problems - we knew exactly why.

The cable party were immediately ordered to prepare the cable for slipping. There was no pressing danger at that point, for *Swan* and *Da Qing 29* were well upwind of other shipping, so matters seemed to be under control, but the cable party had problems breaking the cable and events deteriorated as wind and stream took charge.

***Chinese and Australian sailors greet each other. RAN.***



Meanwhile midnight came and a new month began. Later, in my Report of Proceedings (ROP) for August 1981, I wrote "With the cable well and truly fouled, and with both ships being set down wind and stream upon other ships close by at anchor, the port cable was being prepared for slipping at the close of the month."

Of course there had been a series of signals to my superiors reporting the situation as it unfolded and the events were then in the past, but I was sorely tempted to add "see next month's ROP for the exciting conclusion", but I forbore as my experience had been that the principal readers of ROPs were not noted for their sense of humour.

On the forecastle things were not going well and the situation was rapidly deteriorating. Working in the howling wind and driving rain the cable party was unable to break the cable on the forecastle and *Swan* and *Da Qing 29* were rapidly being set down by the wind and stream onto a very large merchantman with two anchors out at very long stay. He was making his concerns obvious by lusty use of his siren.

In the cable locker the cable was broken at a point half a shackle outboard of the cable clench by 0020 but, in view of the danger to the cable party and the chance of damage to the ship by the cable whipping out from the cable locker with the weight of two ships on it, further attempts were made to break the cable near the screw slip. However, the situation was becoming critical, and the forecastle was cleared of all but the Forecastle Petty Officer, PORP Legge, and he was given the order to slip. It took an excruciatingly long time and a large number of sledgehammer blows to slip the cable, and I had to manoeuvre the ship to avoid the merchantman's cables but, at 0035 the buoyed cable was slipped, and we were free. Fortunately, the combination of engine movements and manoeuvre caused the weight to come off the cable and it trickled out through the hawse. Petty Officer Legge was subsequently awarded a Fleet Commander's Commendation for his actions that night; there was a good chance he too could have disappeared down the hawse pipe along with the cable.

***Da Qing 29* aground - possibly to an audible sigh of relief from *Swan's* bridge! RAN.**

### **Freedom gained**

Free of *Da Qing 29*, *Swan* manoeuvred clear of the other shipping and re-anchored at 0136 nearer to Luda DD 132. Unfortunately, there were only five shackles on the starboard anchor and the combination of wind and tide over the next two days resulted in the anchor dragging as the stream changed necessitating a weary series of weighing and re-anchoring until the weather modified. Luda DD 132 reported later in the day that *Da Qing 29* had gone aground, and the ship could be seen to the northwest on ChangXing Dao Island being pounded by the waves. Fortunately for her she was on mud and was later refloated. We saw her alongside on our departure from Shanghai with *Swan's* cable led from her screw to her upperdeck.

Typhoon Agnes meanwhile could be seen on radar loitering off the mouth of the Yangtze and maintaining very unpleasant weather until eventually it headed to the northwest and reduced in intensity.

### **To Shanghai at last**

It was not until 3 September that the weather had improved such that a personnel transfer could be achieved. At 0700 *Swan* weighed and provided a lee for the embarkation of liaison officers, interpreters, pilots, signalmen, quarantine officers and Australian Embassy staff. On completion *Swan*, less one anchor, made a fast passage up the Yangtze to the Huangpu River entrance at Wusong and turned at 0845 for the 15-mile passage to Shanghai. We were joined by five small official craft proceeding in arrowhead formation who shouldered aside the many junks and barges who could impede progress. Passing the long lines of ships at mooring buoys, the raucous sounding of sirens and waving greeted *Swan* at every turn, while more formal marks of respect were exchanged with naval vessels lying alongside the banks. At *Swan's* berth at Garden Bend there were large banners welcoming the ship in fractured English – Warmly Welcome Heavenly Duck seemed to be the translation, and large numbers of Chinese Navy personnel were waiting to greet us at an official ceremony.

At 1100 on 3 September 1981 *Swan* berthed alongside for a highly memorable visit to the People's Republic of China, but that's another story.

