



OCCASIONAL PAPER 56

Call the Hands

Issue No. 31

June 2019



Recollections of founding the Naval Historical Society

In 1970 Lew Lind, Rod Atwill, Alan Payne and myself found ourselves with the responsibility of putting together an association which we were to call the Naval Historical Society. There were not very many founder-members, but we set to and designed, in the months to follow, an anchor logo for the mail which we sent out, and a tie for the members to wear.

I had the combined duties of Secretary/Treasurer for some time, and I remember developing a system whereby I knew when people became unfinancial, by arranging twelve envelopes addressed to individual members at the time they joined; when there were no more envelopes, then we were due for another annual subscription.

The arrangement for addressing them was itself quite ingenious – I found a stationer's shop in North Sydney, it is so long ago now that I have quite forgotten where, who sold a little roller-printer like a rubber stamp, with ink in the handle, and a typed stencil which was clipped across the semi-circular roller; once each address had been typed and the stencil fitted, it was a very easy job to run off twelve envelopes, one for every month of the Bulletins which Lew produced so efficiently. We utilised the Kalamazoo system of accounting, which was so simple and so easy that even I could operate it.

At one time, around 1974 or 1975 I had one bedroom full of the books that Lew and Alan had written; it had been necessary to store them somewhere when various buildings in the Dockyard were changed in their uses, and so my little house in Dover Heights became a book store: I had been in the habit of collecting them directly from the printers and they were stacked right up to the deckhead, and eventually, when space became available in the Dockyard again, it took dozens of carloads to shift them all down there.

There was one time when Lew and I went to see Manly Council. We had a scheme, drawn up in considerable detail, for the aircraft carrier SYDNEY to be installed alongside the old gas-works by Kurraba Point, and although they were in agreement with the scheme on the first occasion we saw them, only two or three days later when we went back to see them again, it was as though they had all been poisoned against the idea, because there was not a single consenting voice, and we were completely frozen out.

On another occasion we had a beautiful proposal for mounting the complete superstructure of the old SYDNEY by the southern pylons of the Harbour Bridge. I got hold of the drawings from the Drawing Office, and I worked out, from the plate thicknesses (remembering that 1" plate weighs 40 lbs per square foot) the total weight of the steel in the structure; but for one reason or another, the scheme never came to fruition – it was a great pity, she would have looked jolly good, mounted there, with all her navigation lights shining brightly at night.

But the one project which did actually see the light of day was the salvage of the bows and stern of the old PARRAMATTA, stranded high up on the mud of the banks of the Hawkesbury River. We had a lot of fun with that one, with the contractor's crawler crane mounted on a lighter, and

another lighter for the bow and stern sections of the old ship. She was very dangerous to crawl around, as most of the steel plating had corroded nearly right through, and was only paper-thin in most places. I shall always remember seeing the thick growth of mangroves through her bottom-plating in the Engine Room (what there was left of it). She had been there since 1934.



It was Wednesday afternoon, I fancy, when we steamed back from the Hawkesbury, with our two big trophies, and we paraded them past the ships in the Dockyard, with a big sign on the bow section – 'HMAS PARRAMATTA – FIRST SHIP OF THE RAN'.

The contractor did all the work, and he found it dangerous when his crane fell through the rotting deck of the lighter, at Church Point, while trying to get the crane back ashore; there was only the tip of the jib showing above the surface, and a great big jagged hole in the deck of the lighter. It was also difficult when he had to shift the huge pieces of the old ship down the Parramatta Road to get them into the Council's yard.

Lew's book on PARRAMATTA has photographs of these events, but not the crane having fallen through the lighter's deck; it was very fortunate that nobody was hurt that day.



HMAS Parramatta bow at Garden Island

When the time eventually came to unveil the stern section of the ship in Queen's Park, the Mayor, making his speech of introduction, got his aldermen and his admirals hopelessly confused. Admiral V.A.T. Smith was the senior officer present on that particular occasion.



HMAS Parramatta stern at Parramatta

The little tin shed between the Sign writers' Shop and the back of the Barracks Building became a general storehouse for the Society after all our various bits and pieces (and there were a lot of them) had to be shifted from the cupboards in the Personnel Building. Racks and racks of books, magazines, old pictures and historic photographs had to be sorted and sifted, and collected when needed.

During those early formative years, we had meetings all over the place; Johnnie's in Grosvenor Street in the City was a favourite spot; a grand old building, full of Naval history.

We used to tote around an amplifier and a couple of loudspeakers, with miles of wire so they could be mounted in the most suitable position. One particular occasion I remember was the launching of Lew's book on PARRAMATTA; he had invited RADM Doyle, who was her Engineer Officer in 1914; it was indeed an honour to meet him. The launch was made by Commodore 'Red' Merson.

We had one wonderful evening onboard MELBOURNE, and we got Austin Frauenfelder to come with us – he was a flying instructor before the formation of the RFC, and that's a long time ago; he used to discourage his pupils from flying over the sea, as "they might get their feet wet". He was one of the very few men who had actually flown the very aircraft in which Bleriot crossed the Channel on 25 July 1909. It was a 25-HP plane, of his own design, and the story goes that only because it was raining at the time did the engine keep cool enough on the way over.

The whole story of the Naval Historical Society is one of great credit to Lew Lind, the founder, first President and father of the Society which has gone from strength to strength since that first day in the classroom by the Post Office.

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