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Call the Hands

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The Battles for Leyte Gulf: where Australian ships fought in one of the greatest battles in naval history

By David Scott

David Horace Ford Scott grew up on a soldier-settler block near Holbrook, NSW but his parents were forced to walk off the property during the Depression and live with grandparents. David gained a bursary to Melbourne Grammar School and on completion of his secondary education entered the navy. He served as an Able Seaman in HMAS Arunta as part of her gun's crew. Pride in his ship and affection for his mates was mixed with the horrors of combat, which included the Battles of Leyte Gulf. After the war David settled down to married life and became a director of the Brotherhood of St Lawrence and Community Aid Abroad. He was also involved in the struggle for self-determination for the people of East Timor. For his 'outstanding achievement and service' he was made an officer of the Order of Australia. He died in Melbourne on 22 April 2012.

David wrote of his experiences in Arunta in 2004. A copy of the manuscript was recently presented to the Naval Historical Society by one of his shipmates, Ray Northrop, past President of the HMAS Arunta Association. Minor amendments have been made to this previously unpublished work. Originally published in the September 2016 edition of the Naval Historical Review

HMAS Arunta

I was an eighteen-year-old Able Seaman, anti-aircraft gunner on the Tribal-class destroyer HMAS Arunta, she was a member of an Australian task force attached to the United States Navy in July 1944. The force consisted of heavy cruisers HMA Ships Australia and Shropshire and our sister ship HMAS Warramunga. Arunta was a fast ship of 2,500 tons capable of a top speed of 36 knots, an exciting and formidable speed to be pushing nearly 3,000 tonnes through the water. She was built for a crew of 260 but had 320, the number needed to man the extra guns and equipment installed during wartime. My gun was a 20mm Oerlikon positioned on the port side of the flag deck, just below the bridge.

A month earlier *Arunta* covered an American landing on the island of Biak off what was then the Dutch East Indies. It was one of the thirteen landings *Arunta* covered with the force of US and Australian cruisers and destroyers. The landing followed the familiar pattern of heavy air bombardments followed by shelling of the landing area by ships and a dash for the shore by the troops in landing craft. At night at full speed we chased Japanese destroyers but failed to catch up with them.

Sixty years later I discovered how close to destruction we were. *Battleship Musashi* by Akira Yoshimura is a splendid account: The Making and Sinking of the World's Biggest Battleship¹. Reading it, I discovered that in early June 1944 *Musashi* was on her way to Borneo where the vessels of the entire Japanese Combined Fleet were gathering for a decisive confrontation later with the US. When reports reached the Japanese fleet that the Americans were landing on the Japanese base of Biak Island, northwest of New Guinea, *Yamato* and *Musashi* (the largest and newest battleships in the world) set a course for the island with an escort of destroyers and a land based air patrol of 480 fighters (2).

On the way to Biak the Japanese General Staff advised *Musashi* that a large portion of the US Fleet was heading for Saipan (Taiwan) and ordered *Musashi* to break off its attack on Biak and rejoin the Combined Fleet. The battleships must have been very close if the destroyers escorting *Musashi* were the ones *Arunta* chased in the night. In half an hour and at long range they could have sunk every vessel in our modest task force, including *Arunta*.



The Big Picture

At this time President Roosevelt was meeting Naval and Army chiefs in Hawaii to determine a strategy for winning the Pacific War. The US Navy had been restored and strengthened and had won notable successes against the Japanese Navy. The question to be decided was how should the huge fleet, the hundreds of transports, the many divisions of troops and squadrons of aircraft now available be employed to bring the war to a speedy and victorious conclusion. MacArthur bottled up some 250,000 Japanese forces along the coast of New Britain and New Guinea and in the Dutch East Indies of West Papua. Where to next?

Arunta about to commence jackstay transfer with *Shropshire* – author.

Admiral King planned to establish a small base in the southern Philippines to contain the southern Japanese fleet around Singapore and Borneo and lock up the Japanese armies in the Philippines and along the China coast. This would isolate Japan from its supplies of coal and other raw materials. He could then sweep across the Pacific to the Marianas and Formosa (Taiwan) islands that would provide bases close to Japan for the final assault on the mainland.

General MacArthur insisted that priority be given the re-conquest of the Philippines to redeem his pledge to the 70,000 US and Filipino soldiers he had left on Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines, that he would return. Roosevelt decided on a compromise, perhaps persuaded by reports that MacArthur, a popular hero, might contest the Presidency of the United States. There would be a big leap across the heavily defended southern Philippines island of Mindanao, for a landing on the smaller island of Leyte. The Army would proceed north from there to Manila³.

Back to *Arunta*

Aboard *Arunta* on 13 October 1944 the order over the loud speakers was: Cable party of the white watch muster on the foc'sle. Hands out of the rig of the day off the upper deck. Close all X doors, scuttles and deadlights. Special sea duty men to your stations. Then from Hollandia we set out to join the immense force of six battleships, eight cruisers and twenty one destroyers, many tankers, troop carriers, aircraft carriers, supply, repair and maintenance ships, tank and personnel landing barges heading for Leyte Gulf to take part in 'the final and most decisive surface engagement of the Second World War'⁴.

The fleet of the more than 450 vessels spread out on the calm seas from horizon to horizon in every direction was uneventful. Historian Richard Hough said that Overlord, the force that launched the invasion of Europe, 'was a trifling affair compared with the Leyte Gulf operation.'⁵ The convoy speed for the journey of 1,250 miles was 9 knots. A light following wind of about the same speed created a still miasma of heat and funnel exhaust. The day before a lone Japanese aircraft had spotted the main landing on 20 October 1944 as minesweepers were clearing a passage through small islands at the entrance to Leyte Gulf.

An immense bombardment by bombers, heavy ships and seemingly endless rocket barrages preceded the landing. The wakes of hundreds of landing craft snaked across the water as they carried 100,000 men to the shore. *Arunta* fired a total of 745 rounds at targets, leaving only 369 for future use⁶. It was a watchful but uneventful time for the anti-aircraft gunners sweating in anti-flash gear consisting of a treated smock, balaclava and gloves and an uncomfortable helmet. *Arunta* with *Warramunga* bombarded gun emplacements on a hill south of the village of Tanauan in Leyte Gulf. The huge rolling bombardment moved along the coast and shifted inland as landing craft came close to the beaches. At 0945 MacArthur disembarked from the cruiser *Nashville*, waded through the shallows and walked up the beach to announce 'I have returned.' At dusk *Arunta* helped lay a smoke screen to cover the transports at the vulnerable time of the day when enemy aircraft flew at water level to take a target among the ships. They attacked frequently as we patrolled off the landing beaches. One lone pilot flew down the line of anchored heavy ships, and dropped a torpedo, hitting the US cruiser *Honolulu* and killing sixty officers and men.



Bombardment from HMAS *Arunta*'s 4.7-inch guns, RAN image

The next morning, 21 October, the heavy cruiser *Australia* was getting under way from its anchorage when its radar picked up an approaching aircraft, then two, three and four. The Japanese had chosen an angle that prevented most of *Australia*'s guns from firing at them. Sailors in *Australia* watched, aghast, as one plane headed for the bridge and crashed into the foremast. Debris and burning fuel sprayed on to the air defence positions above the compass platform killing 30 men, including Captain Dechaineux and wounding another 64, 26 of them seriously. *Australia* and the damaged *Honolulu* were escorted south by *Warramunga* and a US destroyer for repairs at Manus Island.

It was assumed *Australia* was chosen as a *kamikaze* or suicide target then and on later occasions because it looked large and clumsy compared to the sleek American cruisers. Being high out of the water it was also an easier target to hit. But John Alliston, commander of *Warramunga*, speculated that the special attention given to *Australia* could be explained by the fact that Commodore Farncomb flew his broad pennant from the main mast⁷. US flag officers, he said, were forbidden to fly their admiral's flag in action. If true it was a remarkable and lethal example of Nelsonian bravado. The suicide attack on *Australia* heightened tension as we patrolled across the Gulf. A further dimension to conflict was added by knowing that pilots were prepared to sacrifice their life to make sure they hit their targets.

On 24 October we were at action stations or 'second degree of readiness' all day. 'Action Stations' required everyone to be at his position on a gun, at signalling equipment, on the bridge, in the engine room or locked in the ammunition magazines below the water line. At 'second degree' we could relax around action stations but always with headphone link to the bridge but 'closed up' our particular action station. I thought how unbearably claustrophobic it would be below decks, in the engine room or in ammunition magazines with the heavy watertight doors 'dogged' on the outside. Meals were mostly tea and sandwiches collected from the galley. On the evening of Tuesday 24 October our captain, Commander A.E. Buchanan, announced that *Arunta* was moving south down Surigao Strait, which leads into Leyte Gulf, to engage a large enemy force. We were closed up at 'action stations' for the next twenty-four hours.

Battles for Leyte Gulf

'Look at this,' said the radar operator inviting me through the heavy black out curtains into the radar room, little bigger than a cupboard, a few metres from my gun on the flag deck. He pointed to the thin beam of light rotating from the centre of the screen. As it passed a south easterly position several maggot-like shapes appeared in line moving northwest. We learned later they were two Japanese battleships, a heavy cruiser and four destroyers, part of the planned Japanese response to the Leyte Gulf landings. It was the first stage of the Japanese *Sho*, or Victory Plan, that almost succeeded.

The Japanese command had anticipated that MacArthur would land in the Philippines and on 18 October Admiral Toyoda, commanding officer of the Japanese Navy, activated three separate naval forces to destroy the US fleets and the immense invasion force in Leyte Gulf. The decision he said was 'as difficult as swallowing molten iron' but his Admirals Kurita, Nishimura and Ozawa welcomed the plan. Ozawa was taking an immense gamble. He was prepared to sacrifice his entire force to lure the US Third Fleet away from Leyte Gulf. From then on historians recorded 'everything went wrong for the Japanese'⁸.

Suddenly star shells burst above us. It was as light as day. Bob Rule, the loader on my gun, signalman 'Spider' Currie and I peered into the darkness beyond the arena of light. A moment later water spouts from Japanese shells erupted near us. Buchanan reported that some shells fell to the right and some fell short. 'As the enemy were not engaged', he wrote in the log, 'I expected a heavy volume of fire'. Caught literally like rabbits in a spotlight we waited for 18-inch shells to crash down before we could reach the shelter of the smoke screen. I recall feeling detached, a spectator waiting for the show to begin. You could try to duck or take shelter from an aircraft or even a bomb and flex for the impact as a torpedo trail was sighted but there was nowhere to hide from an 18-inch shell. But the Japanese did not continue firing, possibly to avoid giving their position away to the US battleships.

Torpedo Attacks

Arunta, leading other destroyers, fired its four torpedoes at 6,500 yards. One from our force, credited to be from *Killen*, hit *Yamashiro*. Hearing gunfire and believing a US destroyer was engaging the enemy, Buchanan turned back to provide support. At 0345 we opened fire at a target. The fire ended abruptly at 0356 as we heard on the TBS (open talk between ships) the order to 'Happy Hour', our code name. 'This is Big Boy. Get out or be blown out', we were told as the battle force across the head of the straits opened fire.

The unassuming Commander Buchanan gives a bland account of the incident in *Arunta's* action report:

We were steaming south at 15 knots rather like Mr Micawber hoping for something to turn up. It did. We were told to cease fire and get out. With the vivid recollection of what the gunfire of our battleships and cruisers could do to the enemy, we retired at 25 knots to the north.

The Commander (C.T.G. 773) happily took charge of the situation and saved us from an engagement with our own battle fleet.

Admiral Oldendorf, Commander of the Allied Force in Leyte Gulf, watched the progress of the Japanese and the attacking destroyers on his radar screen. He had placed his six battleships, five cruisers and nine destroyers in a double line across the Surigao Strait, which was only twelve miles wide at this point. (Edwards in *Salvo!* says 'two of *Arunta's* torpedoes slammed into *Yasmashiro* but it ploughed on'. This alerted me to read historians with caution.

As soon as the torpedo attack was completed, Oldendorf ordered the deadly accurate heavy guns from his five battleships and seven cruisers lying broadside across channel to open fire. Edwards says 'these double-banked ships mounted between them over 3,000 heavy guns including sixteen 16-inch and thirty-six 14-inch – a massed array of weaponry never before seen in the history of naval warfare. In twenty minutes, 3,250 shells were loosed off⁹. *Shropshire* fired 32 eight-inch broadsides, a total of 214 shells in 15 minutes.

Other Firsthand Accounts

John Date of *Shropshire* wrote: 'The battleships *West Virginia*, *Tennessee*, *California* and *Maryland* repeatedly hit *Yamashiro*. The scene was unforgettable: the magnificent and incredible rate of fire of the Americans, particularly the cruisers with their tracer ammunition the sight of the battleship *Yamashiro*, flagship of Nishimura, on fire from stem to stern and the unbelievable use of searchlights by the Japanese, undoubtedly the last occasion in naval history'¹⁰.

The horizon crackled like a fuse as salvo after salvo arced through the air towards the Japanese. An American destroyer captain described it as 'a continued stream of lighted railroad cars going over a hill.' At 0349 the battleship *Fuso* blew up. Its two halves drifted crazily down the Strait for some time before sinking. In the confusion, as *Yamashiro* altered course, the American destroyer *Grant* came under a hail of 6-inch shells from American cruisers, killing thirty-four and wounding ninety-four before Oldendorf ordered a cease-fire.

Yamashiro had no radar and took a fearful pounding as it steamed north to find a target. Oldendorf ordered a cease-fire at 0409 when he discovered *Grant* was being shelled. *Yamashiro* was by then burning from stem to stern. She sank at 0419 and with her almost the entire crew of more than 1,000. Admiral Nishimura went 'to the warrior's death' one historian wrote, 'he seemed to be seeking' in steaming on in the hail of fire. Only the destroyer *Shigure* escaped.

As dawn broke we saw columns of smoke rising from burning oil. The ship's surgeon Shane Watson said each destroyer was given permission to pick up not more than 70 Japanese survivors but most of the hundreds in the water refused to be rescued. Watson described seeing destroyers stalking a Japanese whaler with four crew sitting upright in the stern as it chugged towards land. Some Japanese sailors were shot by fire from US ships, others left in the water and afterwards many bodies were washed up on the shores of Surigao Straits.

Admiral Halsey

Meanwhile to the north Kurita's fleet, including the newly built battleships *Yamato* and *Musashi*, three old battleships, twelve cruisers and fifteen destroyers had been detected and attacked by US submarines and 250 aircraft from Admiral Halsey's carriers. Eight-inch plates and a speed of 30 knots were not sufficient to protect *Musashi* and she was sunk together with two cruisers and five destroyers¹¹.

At this point Halsey turned away to chase the Japanese fleet under Ozawa which had decoyed Halsey well away from Luzon. Kurita re-grouped; emerging from San Bernadino Strait and heading south for Leyte Gulf he ran into a US force of six light aircraft carriers escorted by seven destroyers. 'In a courageous running fight, the US lost a carrier and three destroyers and Kurita two of his heavy cruisers. This setback, and a belief that Halsey's main force was returning persuaded Kurita to call off the fight and turn back to San Bernadino Strait'¹².



Battleship Musashi 1942 – USN

At 0420 on 25 October, after the destruction of Nishimura's fleet in Surigao Strait, Admiral Kincaid at the Leyte Gulf beachhead sent a signal to Halsey: 'Are the fast battleships guarding San Bernadino Strait?' Kincaid did not receive the negative answer until three hours after he had asked the question. Kincaid had assumed Halsey was going north with only his carriers and that his fast battleships had been left to guard San Bernadino. But Halsey had assumed that Kurita had been so badly damaged to the west of the Strait that 'he could no longer be considered a serious menace to the Seventh Fleet'.

***Arunta* once more**

Soon after Kincaid's cable, *Arunta* and the smaller ships headed back to Leyte Gulf leaving columns of smoke still rising from the battleground¹³. The news that Kurita's force had passed through San Bernardino Straits and Halsey's battleships were not there to confront them was deeply worrying. The battleships and cruisers of Oldendorf's bombardment force and our task force, with magazines and shell-rooms depleted, was all that stood between MacArthur's vast invasion fleet and its destruction.

'Consternation reigned in Admiral Kincaid's flagship in Leyte Gulf' said historian Donald McIntyre. A cable from *Blue Ridge* said: 'People here feel that the Third Fleet battle ships are chasing a secondary Japanese force, leaving us at the mercy of the enemy's main body. We are the ones trapped in Leyte Gulf. As soon as the Jap finishes off our defenceless CVE (escort carriers at San Bernadino Straits), we're next and I mean today'.

Arunta refuelled and took on ammunition in Leyte Gulf. I remember it well. I was standing on a plank between the supply ship and *Arunta*, part of a chain passing cordite cylinders and shells from the supply ship to *Arunta*. Suddenly I was flying through the air and into the water with a 55-lb cordite cylinder in my arms. I dropped the cylinder, wondering if this was a punishable offence, hit the water and surfaced to see a line of laughing faces looking down. No one had noticed the ships drawing apart until the plank and I tumbled down. I swam a few strokes through oil and rubbish and clambered up a rope ladder thrown over the side. After a clean-up I was back in the chain, but not on the plank.

We stood by the guns all day. On night patrol, two Japanese destroyers were detected but not attacked in the hope they would lead us to bigger game. They did not, but we spent a weary night at action stations. There were constant air attacks around the gulf. We escorted two small carriers, ready to pick up any pilots who might crash while landing. One evening, ten fighters returning late took over an hour to land, as the flight decks could not be illuminated.

Another evening alarm bells rang as we were going to the regular dusk 'action stations'. A carrier opened fire on our port side. I opened fire as an aircraft roared overhead, getting away almost a full drum of shells before the cease-fire bell rang. It was a US Grumman Martlett that was coming in to its carrier from the wrong direction. Another was shot down.

We went alongside the battleship *Maryland* on one patrol to replenish our depleted stores. It was a 'first' for both of us. We had never been alongside a 'battler' and they had never had an Australian destroyer alongside. About midday of the next afternoon, two Japanese aircraft hovered above the US destroyer *Abner Reid* close to us. One plane came in low as if to make a torpedo attack but continued on and hit *Reid* just forward of the gun on her stern, blowing her up with a tremendous explosion.

Nearby ships blazed away at the second aircraft coming down in a steep dive to finish off *Reid*. Nearing its target it faltered, hit the water and blew up a few yards astern of the stricken destroyer. Two destroyers stood by *Reid* as it blazed furiously. A big column of smoke billowed up and an explosion told us the magazines had exploded. *Reid* turned on her side, bows in the air and slid under, leaving a great oil blaze on the surface. Before she sank we spotted torpedo wakes from *Reid* heading for one of the battleships. All ships opened up with 5-inch and close range weapons at the trail in the water. Some shots strayed dangerously close as we scuttled for shelter on our decks. Our first sight of a kamikaze attack so close was unsettling and we were deeply sorry for the crew of the *Abner Reid*, with whom we had shared operations. A US Admiral wrote:

Among us who were there I doubt if there is anyone who can depict with complete clarity our mixed emotions as we watched a man about to die in order that he might destroy us in the process. There was hypnotic fascination to a sight so alien to our Western philosophy.

Supplies were again low. This time we went alongside the battleship *Mississippi*. As we tied up the entire crew seemed to be looking down at us from dizzy heights. One asked for an 'Aussie cigarette'. A packet was thrown up and showers of US cigarettes were thrown down to us. Next it was money and soon the air was thick with cigarettes, dollar bills, ships' tally bands, candy, chocolate and anything that could be exchanged. The stores they gave us were exotic compared to our meagre rations.

On Monday 13 November *Warramunga* arrived with our mail. It was always a great occasion for the married men and those with steady girl friends who withdrew to the quietest place they find to read and re-read the letters from their wives and families. Two days later, with salt-caked funnels and blackened gun barrels, we headed south for Manus Island. In his Report of Proceedings for 29 October, the again unassuming Commander Buchanan wrote:

It was a crowded and strenuous ten days for all. There have been long periods at Action Stations and in second degree of readiness; continual air raids and alerts were, and still are, the order of the day. A surface action has been fought.

The end of this month marks the end of the 12 months since *Arunta* sailed from Brisbane to Milne Bay. The ship has visited Sydney twice – once for 21 days and once for 17 days -total of 38 days. This is the only time officers and men have been out of the ship. The remainder of the time has been spent in the tropical waters of New Guinea and now of the Philippines. Owing to the danger of tropical diseases ashore the complete lack of facilities and the ship being at short notice, officers and men have remained on board throughout this period. That is, they have been shut up in a crowded steel box in conditions of tropical heat for almost a year. I emphasise these conditions because they represent, I believe, a fine instance of the staying power of both officers and men.

The claims of historians that the Battle of Leyte Gulf, made up of three engagements, was the greatest naval battle in history rests on comparisons of the number of ships in a battle. There were 254 ships comprising 1,616,000 tonnes and 8,826 men were killed in the Battle of Jutland in the First World War. In the Philippines 282 ships took part, the total tonnage was 2,014,000 and 10,278 men were killed¹⁴.

Notes:

1. Yoshimura, Akira, *Battleship Musashi. The Making and Sinking of the Biggest Battleship in the World.* Kodansha International, Tokyo, New York. 1991
2. Yoshimura, Akira, *Battleship Musashi.*
3. Edwards, Bernard, Surigao, in *Salvo!: Epic Naval Gun Actions*, US Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD. 1995.
4. Australian War Memorial, HMAS *Arunta* reference.
5. Hough, Richard, *The Longest Battle: The War at Sea 1939-45*, Cassell & Co, London, 1986.
6. 'Action Report' by Captain A.E. Buchanan, HMAS *Arunta* for 13-29 October 1944.
7. Allison, John *Destroyer Man*, Greenhouse Publications, Melbourne 1985
8. Steinberg, Rafael, *Return to the Philippines*, Time-Life Books, 1979.
9. Edwards p. 180.
10. Hough (1986) p 328
11. Yoshimura Akira, *Battleship Musashi*
12. Edwards p. 184.
13. 'Heroic *Arunta* Fought Jap Battleship', the *Melbourne Age* announced, saying *Arunta* was the only Australian destroyer to have tackled an enemy battleship.
14. Roscoe, Theodore, *United States Navy Destroyer Operations in WW2*, US Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, 1953.