



HMAS Tarakan fire 71 years ago

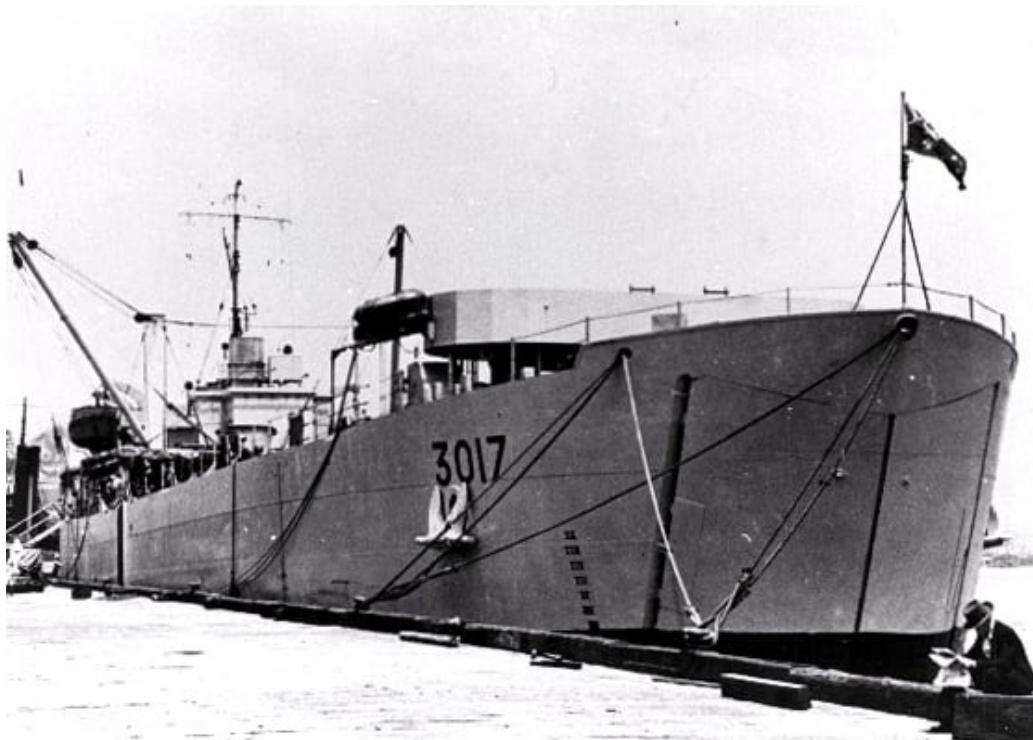
With Australian's focussed on celebrating Australia day and long weekends the anniversary of the tragic explosion and fire in HMAS Tarakan (I) on 25 January 1950 passes relatively unnoticed most years. This paper revisits the disaster which claimed the lives of seven sailors and one dockyard worker.

By David Stratton

LST 3017 was one of six Landing Ships Tank (Mark 3) which were loaned by the Royal Navy to the Royal Australian Navy in 1946. The others were LSTs 3008, 3014, 3022, 3035 (renamed HMAS Lae) and 3501 (renamed HMAS Labuan).

LST 3017 was taken over by the Royal Australian Navy and commissioned at Trincomalee as HMA LST 3017 on 4 July 1946, under the command of Acting Commander George M Dixon DSC RANVR. She was renamed Tarakan on 16 December 1948.

Tarakan served in Australian and New Guinea waters as a general purpose vessel, but was mainly used for dumping condemned ammunition at sea.



The Fire

At precisely 8.26 on the morning of Wednesday 25 January 1950, a violent explosion punched across the water. A mushroom of black oily smoke speckled by 44 gallon drums rose high in the sky above HMAS Tarakan moored alongside at the naval dockyard.

Tarakan was a tank landing ship, one of thousands mass produced during World War II. In the post war years she had become a supply ship for the Royal Australian Navy. She had ferried supplies to Heard Island in the Antarctic and Manus Island on the equator, and was used to dump obsolete ammunition off the coastlines of Australia.

'It was a strange bang – it seemed to go var-oom and sweep on for minutes until it swelled into a great rattling boom,' said an eyewitness, who was walking 100 feet from the doomed ship. 'The Tarakan seemed to swell like a boxer expanding his chest, wisps of dust eddied from the ship's plates and then, like a flash of lightning, a flame swept the ship from end to end. Dust and smoke mushroomed to mast height and then came the explosion. Forty-four gallon petrol drums rose in the air like patterns of depth charges,' he said.

Lieutenant-Commander Ferguson, Captain of HMAS Lae, a sister ship of Tarakan, was one of the first to reach the ship's deck. He leapt from his vessel berthed alongside and dragged an injured worker across the deck. He could hear the roar of flames beneath his feet and feel the heavy fumes of petrol and methyl chloride, a dangerous refrigerant, hanging over the ship.

Lt Cdr Ferguson passed the wounded workman over the ship's side to two first aid men and then mustered a rescue party to search for other casualties.

Altogether 25 men were caught in the burning ship. A quick inspection revealed that two decks had been crushed together by the explosion – there was no exit. Within minutes the steel decks became so hot that the rescue party had to leave the ship.

Twenty-two of the trapped men were in the seamen's mess which the explosion had plunged into inky darkness. Fittings were torn from the bulkheads and the whole space was littered with distorted tables, forms and bunks. The darkness did not last for long. A dull red glow aft showed through the swirling dust and smoke. The glow spread and trapped men moaned and screamed as the heat seared their bodies.

One man fought his way to a porthole and pushed his head through. He saw rescuers on the wharfside and pleaded hoarsely, 'Hurry for God's sake, we're roasting alive'.

Two seaman were trapped under a fallen bulkhead close to the flames. Three of their messmates crawled through the debris to reach them. Sobbing with pain as the hot steel burnt the flesh from their hands, they lifted the bulkheads and dragged the trapped men clear.

Five and a half minutes after the explosion, dockyard and civil firemen in asbestos suits and wearing respirators boarded Tarakan. Water and foam was poured on to the deck but after a few minutes the rescue party was forced back; there was no way of reaching the trapped men.

Flames close to fuel tanks

A second explosion was expected at any minute. Flames were now close to the ship's fuel tanks. Great clouds of oil and bitumen-fed smoke blanketed out the sky. Fire parties from the cruiser Hobart berthed nearby were pumping hundreds of tons of salt water into the ship. There was a danger that the weight of water would capsize the vessel so the pumps were stopped.

In the early afternoon the still smoking Tarakan was taken in tow by a tug and moved into dock for an inspection of the hull. The ship was flooded to prevent a second explosion.

The death toll rose to five within 24 hours; by the end of the week it was eight. Seven of the victims were sailors and one a dockyard worker. A mass funeral for five of the dead was held in Sydney and the cortege passed through silent streets lined with thousands of bare-headed mourners.

Outcome:

Eight days after the catastrophe a Navy board of inquiry reported: 'Apparently the explosion occurred when an electric fan which had been circulating fresh air into the men's mess was turned off. Petrol fumes had been noticed previously, and when the fan stopped, the circuit was broken, throwing an arc. This ignited the petrol vapour in a 2,000 gallon fuel tank adjacent to the ill fated mess deck'.

Tarakan was not decommissioned by the Navy although a survey showed the hull to be sound. On 12 March 1954 she was sold on behalf of the United Kingdom Ministry of Transport to EA Marr & Sons Pty Ltd, of Mascot, Sydney, for breaking up.

TERRIFIC EXPLOSION WRECKS

H.M.A.S. TARAKAN

THREE RATINGS KILLED; 18 INJURED

Herberton Man Included In Casualty List

SYDNEY, Jan. 25.—Three naval ratings were killed and 18 injured—many of them critically—in a terrific explosion aboard the 2300-ton tank landing ship **H.M.A.S. Tarakan** at Garden Island dockyard shortly before 8 o'clock this morning. The names of the killed and injured were released by the Navy Department this afternoon.

The killed are: Stoker-Mechanic J. S. Bolton, of Essendon, Victoria, who was killed outright. Two others, Able Seamen F. A. Manning, of Malvern, Victoria, and W. F. Tysoe, of Katanning, Western Australia, died of injuries.

Three Queenslanders are on the seriously injured list. They are Stoker R. F. Grace, of Herberton; Stoker-Mechanic B. D. Creedon, of Maryborough, and Cook D. Graydon, of Buranda, Brisbane.

Doctors at Sydney Hospital to-night were fighting to save the lives of nine of the ratings who are critically ill.

RATINGS TRAPPED IN WRECKAGE

Most of the 25 ratings aboard the **Tarakan** were sitting chatting in the ship's two messes when the terrific blast rocked the ship. The disused petrol tank, where the explosions occurred, was over the vessel's tail shaft and almost between the mess decks.

Without warning the explosion suddenly lifted the vessel almost completely out of the water, blasting her insides to shambles and leaving 19 of her ratings trapped and screaming in the wreckage.

Dockworkers standing near the ship were seized and hurled to the ground by the blast. Two of

rails were twisted like wire.

FLAME CUTTERS MANNED

Hundreds of dockyard workers watching the firemen battling could hear the screams of ratings trapped inside. Unable to reach them from the deck, the firemen brought two oxy-acetylene flame cutters along to the **Tarakan** and two dock employees began to carve a section out of the side plates of the vessel.

Two men, Frank Geddes (34), welder, and John Mc-

they entered the messrooms they could hear men moaning.

"When we dashed our torches around we could see men lying everywhere among the debris," stated Third Officer J. Edga. "Splintered fittings were pinning some of the men down. Most of the men were wearing only shorts and already huge blisters from burns were forming about the naked sections of their bodies. We found it difficult to lift them without causing them further suffering," he added.

FIREMEN OVERCOME

FUTURE OF PETROL RATIONING

ANNOUNCEMENT BY
MR. MENZIES

LIKELY NEXT WEEK

CANBERRA, Jan. 25.—The Prime Minister (Mr. E. G. Menzies) said to-day that he hoped to be able to make an announcement about the future of petrol rationing next week. He disclosed that to-day he had again cabled the British Prime Minister (Mr. C. R. Attlee) on petrol.

Mr. Menzies denied that the British Government had given a point blank refusal to any Australian request to Britain concerning petrol. He would not comment on a report that an extra three million dollars were required from the Empire pool to enable the immediate lifting of rationing.

Mr. Menzies said it might be possible for him to announce a petrol rationing decision before Cabinet met next on February 7.

The Prime Minister explained the problem confronting the Government. He said that first of all it became necessary to collate the facts relating to petrol supplies and prospective supplies. The fact that they had won the elections did not increase the supply of petrol in Australia next morning.

The Government had also to ascertain the rate of consumption and importation. This now had been done. Then it became necessary to have communications with the British Government, as petrol had been the subject of discussion between the British Government and the Chifley Government.

There had not been a long series of communications with Britain at all. There had been one long and substantial cable from himself drafted as a result of a lot of close Cabinet consideration and one long considered reply from Mr. Attlee. As a result of Cabinet discussion he would be sending a further cable to Mr. Attlee to-day.

MINISTERS CONFIDENT

Ministers to-night said they now firmly believed Mr. Menzies would be able to announce that rationing would be lifted early in February. They said they based this belief on the cable Mr. Menzies had dispatched to Mr. Attlee. Ministers stated the Government had assured itself of adequate supplies of sterling petrol being available to Australia to lift rationing.

Source: Cairns Post, Thursday 26 January 1950, available at NLA Trove,

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/42654939?searchTerm=terrific%20explosion%20wrecks%20h.m.a.s.%20tarakan>

COURT EXONERATES OFFICER OF H.M.A.S. TARAKAN

Admiral Was Critical Of Ship's Maintenance

SYDNEY.—The first of the two courts martial in connection with the explosion on H.M.A.S. Tarakan in Sydney Harbour on January 25 resulted yesterday in a verdict of acquittal in the case of the chief executive officer (Lieut. John Ferguson).

It was revealed that at an Admiral's inspection of the Tarakan on January 3, general maintenance had been found to be below standard, and the Admiral's staff had made recommendations for bringing Tarakan to proper standard.

At the conclusion of the case for the prosecution, the five officers who comprised the court under the presidency of Captain F. M. Cook, conferred in camera.

Subsequently Captain Cook announced that the court considered no prima facie case had been made out against Ferguson and he was acquitted without being called upon to present his defence.

In the explosion of Tarakan in Sydney Harbour on January 25, eight men lost their lives and several others were injured.

The chief executive officer, Lieut. John Ferguson, was charged yesterday at Naval Headquarters, under the Naval Discipline Act, with having failed to take proper precautions to prevent an accumulation of petrol fumes on the vessel before the explosion.

Another officer may be charged at a later date.

Evidence was given by the commander of Tarakan, Lieut.-Commander Cecil James Cochrane, that he was absent from the vessel from 4 p.m. on January 24 until 8.40 a.m. on January 25 and that in his absence Lieut. Ferguson was senior executive officer aboard.

Warrant Officer E. R. A. Hoy, one of the victims of the explosion, was engineer officer.

Smell Of Petrol

Lieut.-Commander Cochrane said that in a report submitted to him since the explosion, Lieut. Ferguson had stated that he had noticed a smell of petrol in the lobby and ordered that men were not to sleep on mess decks and electrical appliances were not to be used, but it was not until after the explosion had occurred that

he had learned that the top had been removed from a petrol tank.

This fact had not been reported to the officer of the day.

In answer to Mr. F. B. Treatt, for Ferguson, Commander Cochrane said that the inspection had taken place at a time when some of the ratings were on leave.

He said that Hoy, as engineer officer, was responsible for ventilation of the petrol compartment, and would report to the Commanding Officer only in the event of some unusual factor arising.

In a report by the prosecutor, Captain D. H. Harries, made on March 13 to the flag officer in charge, regarding Ferguson's alleged actions on January 24, it was stated that after Hoy had instructed two ratings to open the petrol tank and ventilate it on the afternoon of January 24, air had been pumped into the tank with a fan.

Banned Smoking

When Hoy had reported to Ferguson that complaints about the smell of petrol had been made Ferguson had issued instructions against smoking or use of electrical appliances, and against sleeping in the mess deck.

The report continued that petrol was found in the bottom of the tank three days after the explosion.

It also declared that, in Captain Harries' opinion, Ferguson should have examined the fan when the petrol fumes were drawn to his attention.

In this case he would have noticed that the top was off the tank, and should have noticed petrol there. In this event, he should have ordered the closing of the tank and the removal of the fan.

Source: Launceston Examiner, Wednesday 22 March 1950 page 9, available at NLA Trove,

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/52776087?searchTerm=court%20exonerates%20officer%20of%20h.m.a.s.%20tarakan>

Tarakan to be sold

The British Ministry of Transport will sell H.M.A.S. Tarakan, a director of Birt and Company announced yesterday.

Birt and Company are Australian agents for the British Ministry of Transport.

Tarakan would be sold in its present condition, the director said.

[An explosion on Tarakan on January 25, 1950, killed seven naval ratings and a dockyard worker.

Thirteen naval personnel were injured.

A Naval inquiry found that the explosion was due to a spark from an electric fan igniting petrol fumes in the ship's petrol-tank compartment.]

Source: The Daily Telegraph, Tuesday 19 January 1954 page 10, available at NLA Trove,
<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/248764572?searchTerm=tarakan%20to%20be%20sold>

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