



'HMAS Voyager – HMAS Melbourne Collision'

A presentation by Noel Phelan, 22 February 2023

Report by Stephen Thomas

It was very pleasing to have 47 attendees arrive to hear Noel Phelan talk about the collision between HMAS Voyager and HMAS Melbourne on February 10, 1964.

Noel is a volunteer guide at the Australian Maritime Museum for 15 years and is the team leader of the museum's speakers. He acknowledged Lieutenant Commander Tony Reid as the author of this talk.



John Taylor, Noel Phelan and David Henry

All of the details of this event are unknown and unknowable as there was no voice or data recorders or GPS available at this time, but the facts have been revealed in two royal commissions into the event.

The Melbourne was launched in 1945 as a British aircraft carrier of 20,000 tons with a deck angled to the centre line. It was purchased by Australia and named HMAS Melbourne in 1955.

The Voyager is a Daring Class Destroyer of 3,500 tons and built at Cockatoo island between October 1949 and May 1952. It is interesting to note the gun turrets on the Voyager are not fixed to the deck but rest there held by their weight only and if the ship rolls past the horizontal they are designed to fall off.



The Captain of HMAS Melbourne was John Robertson. Captain Robertson joined the Royal Australian Naval College in 1930 as a cadet midshipman and excelled academically and in sports. He rose through the ranks and was Captain of the Daring Class destroyer Vendetta in 1958. He assumed command of the flagship HMAS Melbourne in January 1964 only one month prior to the collision.

The Captain of HMAS Voyager was Duncan Stevens who graduated from Flinders Naval college in 1939. He was promoted to Captain in December 1962 and two days later assumed command of HMAS Voyager.

In 1963 both ships were undergoing extensive refits which were completed in early 1964 and set sail from Jervis bay to undergo sea trials which included night flying exercises on February 10 1964, which was a dark and moonless night.

During these exercises, the Voyager is stationed approximately 1000 yards behind and to port of Melbourne in order to rescue any airmen that might come to grief during takeoff or landing. Melbourne needed to steam at full speed (24 Knots) into the wind to facilitate takeoff and landing and needed to turn 180 degrees to do this. The Melbourne, being a large and heavy ship, took a wide sweeping turn whilst the Voyager turned inside Melbourne and ended up in front and to starboard of Melbourne. It appeared to officers on the bridge of Melbourne that the Voyager would turn to starboard to come up behind Melbourne but Voyager, which has little or no vision from the bridge to the stern of the ship, turned to port and in front of Melbourne. The port lookout on Voyager raised the alarm and a call to collision stations was made.

Melbourne called for engines half astern and then full astern but with little effect on the way of the ship and the collision occurred. The Voyager was pushed onto its side and snapped in two. The gun turrets turned the ship upside down and the bow section sank. The stern section righted itself but the bulkheads collapsed and it sank within 45 minutes.

The younger seamen were pushed through the narrow escape hatches but many bigger men were unable to fit through. The Melbourne was able to stop within half a mile and attempted to assist.

The causes of the collision were summarised as follows: _

- Communication or lack of between the ships
- Sea room was miscalculated.
- Deficient training
- Equipment failure.
- incompetence on the bridge of Voyager.

Prime Minister Robert Menzies ordered a royal Commission in lieu of a Naval court headed by Sir John Spicer who apportioned blame to the Melbourne. Robertson was posted to a shore position and resigned thereby forfeiting his retirement benefits.

Following the first Royal Commission evidence came to light that Captain Stevens suffered from duodenal ulcers exacerbated by alcohol and was inconsistent with his ship handling and a second



royal commission was convened in 1968 by Sir Stanley Burbury, KW Asprey and GAG Lucas. John Robertson represented himself and endured six days of cross-examination.

The commissioners found Captain Stevens' medical condition made him unfit to command the Voyager and exonerated Melbourne's officers. They concluded that the collision resulted from an error on the bridge of Voyager and Steven's physical state helped to account for such an error.

The survivors of the Voyager were given 7 days' leave and new uniforms, no compensation was available in 1965. This was overturned in 1982 and 214 claims were finalised in 2009 out of a settlement of \$412,000 the payout to victims was \$72,000. There have been many improvements to operations after this disaster.

As a footnote in 1969 HMAS Melbourne and USS Frank E. Evans were participating in SEATO exercises called Operation Sea Spirit. Around 3.00am Evans was ordered to a new escort station and sailed under Melbourne's bow where she was cut into and 74 of Evan's crew were killed. The following court martial exonerated the captain of Melbourne and three USN officers were found guilty.