

Nostalgia of an Australian Veteran

Recollections of Bombay (now Mumbai) 1941 – 44

-By Able Seaman Frank Harle

October 2013

I joined the Royal Australian Navy at seventeen years of age and did my new entry training at Flinders Naval Base in Victoria, Australia. In 1942 I was drafted to *H.M.A.S. Tamworth*, a Corvette which left Fremantle, Western Australia and we joined the British Eastern Fleet under the command of Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten. The fleet was based at Addu Atoll, Maldives Islands. We proceeded to Colombo, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and then to Bombay (Mumbai), India.

We then commenced convoy duties, picking up full Tankers and empty Freighters from the Persian Gulf, Bandar Abbas and escorted them across the Arabian Sea and Red Sea to Aden. After fuelling we would then pick up another convoy of empty Tankers and Freighters and take them to the Persian Gulf. Then we would do the same exercise again after which we would return to Bombay for a “boiler clean” which took two days. In all we would be at sea for twenty eight days.

In many of these convoys we would be joined by *H.M.I.S. Orissa*, a Flower-class Corvette. *Orissa* was manned by Royal Navy Officers and the rest of the crew were from the Royal Indian Navy. The system was for one escort to zig-zag in front of the convoy and the other escort to zig-zag at the rear of the convoy. At times we would have a Destroyer around the perimeter of the convoy and as we neared the African coast quite often would have a Catalina aircraft flying around the convoy to help detect submarines.

We did fifty seven convoys whilst in the east and only lost four ships torpedoed

by German U-Boats, which we all thought was a good effort. The Indian lads aboard *Orissa* did the same as we did and when in port we often tied up alongside each other and despite the language barrier made ourselves known and found the crew lovely people.

The many times we had shore leave in Bombay a group of us would go to the swimming complex known as Breach Kandy. I had been reared near the water and was a strong swimmer. We would swim a few laps of the beautiful pool and then relax in the lovely surroundings, quite a change from an arduous life at sea.

At other times a ship mate and myself would go to Green's Hotel very adjacent to The Gateway and play billiards and snooker for a couple of hours and have a glass or two of port and lemon. We were not big drinkers in those days! On another occasion a ball was held at Green's Hotel, I think arranged by the ladies of the Royal Yacht Club. I could not attend as I was duty motor boat Coxswain. It was my job to take the officers and crew to The Gateway and pick them up about 2:00AM in the morning and bring them back to the ship safely, "What shall we do with the drunken sailor?"

We also at times played cricket and hockey in Bombay and we always looked forward to and enjoyed our shore leave.

On another occasion we arrived in Bombay the day after a ship, the freighter SS *Fort Stikine* which carried a mixed cargo of cotton bales, gold, and ammunition including around 1,400 tons of TNT explosives, caught fire and was destroyed in two giant blasts. The explosion, scattered debris, sunk surrounding ships and demolished Victoria Dock. We were detailed to assist in helping to remove the debris. This was indeed a traumatic day for the people of Bombay. I understand around 800 people died.

In July 1944 we were to leave India's shores and head back to Fremantle. When I arrived my wife-to-be's family hosted a party for me to celebrate my 20th birthday. I

was drafted back to Sydney and left the navy when the war ended, returning to the office where I worked before joining the navy. I had a lot to remember with my service overseas, some good, some not so good, however we were at war!

I will always remember my visits and wonderful time spent in your beautiful city of Bombay, as it was called then. I have been very happy to join my son Rob in making the historical photographs available to you which were taken seventy one years ago. I wish the people of Mumbai all the best for the future.



