

The Yachties' Book Launch 19 October 2023.

Speech:

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I feel very privileged and also relieved to find myself here today. For me this has been a long journey of commemoration for the Yachtsmen Scheme men and their service. I feel regret that it has taken so long and that none of the men are left to be here. Lieutenant Doug Gilling, the last 'Yachtie' passed over the bar on 15 July this year. He would have been 103 in August.

When I began this endeavour, I found that the resources about the Dominion Yachtsmen Scheme were very small and also elusive through the National Archives and official histories of the various services in World War II. I had to rely on interviewing the remaining survivors and some of the widows for their memories of their personal experiences in this war. These I could partially supplement with the letters and published recollections that the men had collected over the last years of their lives as it was only just before 1995 with the 'Australia Remembers' year that they began the exercise of tracing each other through the ships in which they had sailed to UK. They managed to get together a nominal roll of 467 Yachties which over the time I worked with them, became 502. With the publication of this book, the roll might increase.

Through the remembrance of their personal experiences in the war on the other side of the world the commemoration of their service has given a greater significance to the perspective of Australian volunteers serving under an Allied but foreign power in the greatest conflict of the twentieth century. These Australian 'Yachties' were a highly selected group and their achievement of gaining a commission and acquiring the skills and professional competence with the RN in various theatres of war in the northern hemisphere also earned them respect, acceptance and acknowledgement. But they were also proud to be Australian and serving as Dominion volunteers.

A considerable number of the men served in the new special area of naval warfare in Combined Operations and many rose to command in the 'little ships' – the MGBs, MTBs and the specific landing craft developed for amphibious landings, LCIs and LCTs. Lord Louis Mountbatten apparently described them as

those 'hot-shot Australians'. Covert operations were also important areas for these young Naval officers and gave them opportunities to show courage, initiative and style. The number of honours and awards that were achieved by the Yachties as a group are amazing.

Most of the men spent a very long four years overseas before being posted back to Australia to continue the war in the South East Asia theatre contributing to the final defeat of the Japanese. Tragically, seven of the Yachties were casualties when the Merchant Navy ships in which they were returning, were torpedoed by either German or Japanese U-boats. I hope that this book will provide some closure and validation of their service for their families and that their contribution will be better recognised and remembered amongst Australian naval exploits. It has been my privilege to tell their story.

I would like to express my appreciation for the support from Navy people I have been given over many years since I commenced the research and writing of this book. CDMRE Jim Dickson has encouraged me throughout and would have liked to be present today. The Sea Power Centre was always great to visit and the historians, David Stevens and John Perryman directed me in various ways with my initial research and latterly Alastair Cooper and his team assisted in finding photographs for publication. Ian Pfennigwerth, Les Roberts, Hec Donahue and Mike Turner commented on drafts and we all shared information which kept me going at times as writing a book can be a very lonely occupation.

Thank you also to Peter Jones and Desmond Woods who have organised this book launch and shared information over quite some time.

A special thank you to James Goldrick who agreed to edit the final draft of the book in the week after Christmas 2022 despite the fact he was very ill. He produced 14 pages of corrections, many of which were typos etc but we had some really good conversations and I had several significant footnotes I could include, which I have acknowledged in the end notes. I appreciated his input very much.

Thank you to the families who have travelled to Canberra today and for your interest over the years. It has kept me going on this long journey.

I hope that everyone here will read this record and learn what Australians can achieve during wartime. The men believed they had served Australia and her Allies well and today is a day of remembrance of that fact. Later today, the Last

Post ceremony at the AWM will commemorate their service through the memory of the first Yachtsman Scheme casualty, O/S Bill McGregor, killed in an air raid at Portsmouth Barracks within a few weeks of arrival in UK, 27 April 1941.

Thank you.

Janet Roberts Billett

14 October 2023