



SEMAPHORE

Newsletter of the Maritime Law

Association of Australia and New Zealand



HMAS Yarra Action Reviewed

The Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal reviewed the adequacy of the process that considered recognition for the gallantry of the ship's company of HMAS Yarra during February and March 1942. The Tribunal recommended the Governor-General award a Unit Citation for Gallantry to HMAS Yarra – all of the complement who served in the Empress of Asia action and in its final action. The citation was confirmed at Victoria Harbour, Melbourne on March 4, 2014. The following is drawn from the findings of the Review.

HMAS Yarra was a 1060-ton Grimsby-class sloop and on March 4, 1942, approximately 300 nautical miles south of Java, three of the 13 personnel named in the Inquiry Terms of Reference (Lieutenant Commander Rankin, Lieutenant Commander Smith and Acting Leading Seaman Taylor) were killed in action while serving in Yarra. All three had earlier served in Yarra during the evacuation of over 1800 Allied troops from the transport Empress of Asia, which was attacked by Japanese aircraft off Singapore on February 5, 1942.

HMAS Yarra had a top speed of 16.5 knots and was armed with three four-inch Mark V guns, two 20mm guns, one quad 0.5-inch anti-aircraft gun and depth charges. Yarra and the other sloops in service with the Royal Australian Navy were versatile, small vessels that primarily served as convoy escorts, usually in an anti-aircraft or anti-submarine capacity.

On February 3, 1942, HMAS Yarra joined an American-British-Dutch-Australian (ABDA) convoy, BM12, on its passage from Bombay in the Sunda Strait. The five heavily-laden transports of BM12 carried materiel and about 5000 troops for the reinforcement of Singapore. On February 4, under the escort of Danae, Yarra and the Indian sloop Sutlej, the convoy came under air attack in the Banka Strait, but suffered no serious damage.



HMAS Yarra (Australian War Memorial)

However, on February 5 the convoy came under a heavier and more sustained attack. From Japan's entry into the war until that day, no convoy had entered Singapore during daylight hours. As the convoy approached in the forenoon, it was attacked by a large force of Japanese aircraft and subjected to intensive dive-bombing. The old transport *Empress of Asia*, crowded with troops, was set ablaze while moving at low speed into the anchorage. Despite the increased risk of aerial bombing, or of *Empress of Asia* exploding due to the already raging fires, Harrington took *Yarra* alongside and rescued 1334 men, who managed to jump onto *Yarra's* forecastle. Another 470 were rescued by *Yarra* from boats and floats. The Captain of *Sutlej* later reported that two other merchant ships, the *City of Canterbury* and *Felix Rousell*, were saved by the skilful handling and determined defence of their ships coupled with the effective gunfire of *HMAS Yarra*.

By February 12 *Yarra* was operating out of Batavia. By the evening of March 3, the Japanese had numerous surface vessels deployed to the area, including a force consisting of the cruisers *IJNS Maya*, *Atago* and *Takao*, and the destroyers *Arashi* and *Nowaki*, under the command of Vice Admiral Kondo Nobutake. In the previous three days, this force had already accounted for the destroyers *USS Pillsbury* and *HMS Stronghold*, and the United States Navy gunboat *Asheville*.

The morning of March 4 the topmasts of Kondo's force were sighted and, after immediately making an enemy report by wireless, Rankin ordered the ships of the convoy to scatter, while *Yarra* took station between them and the Japanese and made smoke to screen the convoy while *Yarra* engaged the enemy.

Yarra's main armament of three four-inch guns were no match for the ten eight-inch guns of each cruiser and the six five-inch guns of each destroyer, aided by spotting aircraft catapulted from the cruisers. One by one, the ships of the convoy were destroyed. *Anking* was sunk within minutes of the commencement of the action. *Yarra* was recorded as then being on fire, and with a heavy list to port, but still shooting. After being set alight by enemy fire, the crew of *MMS51* abandoned ship, and *Francol* was sunk at 0730.

Sometime after 0800, Rankin or his second-in-command, Lieutenant Commander Smith, gave the order to abandon ship.

This article was originally published in The Australian Association for Maritime History Inc's newsletter (September 2019, Issue 150: 2-3). Reprinted with permission.

March 2020

