

Personal Recollections of the Bombing of Darwin – 1942

Written in 1987 by George W. Boniface

It is now some forty-five years since Darwin was bombed by Japanese forces on 19th February, 1942. I have during this time felt I should set down the events I experienced on that day and during the three months leading up to that horrific event. Recollections are beginning to fade, so assisted by some notes jotted down in 1943, the following is what I recall of that eventful time.

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Records show that the *M.V. Neptuna*, a ship of some 6,000 tons gross and owned by Burns Philp Line, was at Kowloon, the Port of Hong Kong on 24th November, 1941 just thirteen days before Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour and entered the war against the Allies. At this time I was 5th Engineer and in charge of a “watch” of main engines and boilers from 8.00 a.m. to 12.00 midday and 8:00 p.m. to 12.00 midnight; that is 4 hours on duty and 8 hours off.

During *Neptuna*'s stay in Hong Kong on previous voyages, I had made the acquaintance of George Rogers who was the manager of Hong Kong tramways and when I was in Hong Kong he would show me around and extend to me the hospitality of his home. His wife and child had been evacuated to Australia in 1941. George was taken prisoner by the Japanese when they invaded the Colony and he later died of Beri-Beri in Stanley prison camp, Hong Kong.

After departing from Hong Kong late in November 1941 we proceeded to Manila in the Philippine Islands, where the harbour was crowded with United States warships. After taking on some evacuees we proceeded south, heading for Rabaul in New Britain some 3,000 miles and about 12 days away.

While at Rabaul we took on women and children who had left it a bit late to be evacuated, also others at Port Moresby, then into Sydney where we arrived on or about 31st December, 1941.

Repairs to an auxiliary generator and a wharfie strike delayed the ship from sailing until late in January, 1942 when we sailed for Darwin with a cargo of stores in the forward holds and high explosives, ammunition and depth charges in the aft holds. I had also been promoted to the position of 4th Engineer in charge of the 10:00 midday to 4 p.m., 12.00 midnight to 4.00 a.m. watch.

The *Neptuna* arrived in Darwin about 12th February, 1942. We had been escorted most of the way by a corvette who, when we were in the Gulf of Carpentaria region, left us to investigate a submarine sighting.

On arriving at Darwin, the harbour was crowded with all types of ships. I remember counting twenty-eight ships. It was rumoured that a convoy was forming to take Australian and American troops to Timor, the escort was the *U.S.S. Houston* a formidable, heavy cruiser of 10,000 tons, the *U.S.S. Peary*, the *H.M.A.S. Swan* and *H.M.A.S. Warrego*.

As the engineers on *Neptuna* were working all day, we would play cards at night and could hear the band playing on the *Houston*. On waking on the morning of 14th February, the convoy had gone, however they met with a severe attack by Japanese aircraft and they returned on 18th February.

The *U.S.S. Houston* and *U.S.S. Peary* refueled and left again, however the *Peary* made contact with a submarine and expended so much fuel and ammunition she returned to refuel and take on ammunition, arriving at Darwin in the early hours of 19th February. There were delays in doing this and the *Peary* was still in harbour when the Japanese attacked.

Meanwhile on the *Neptuna* the Chief Engineer, John F. McNamara, being under the impression that the ship would be riding at anchor for a few more days, decided to replace a piston in the Port main engine. A piston complete with rod would weigh about 1 ton – this meant that only one engine, the Starboard one, was operable. While repairs were being carried out, *Neptuna* proceeded to the wharf to unload the cargo, arriving there at 8:30 a.m. and tied up. *H.M.A.S. Swan* came alongside to load depth charges from our cargo.

As 4th Engineer I was responsible for the maintenance of all air compressors and after the ‘FINISHED WITH ENGINES’ signal on the engine room telegraph, I commenced dismantling the valves from the main compressor on the Port engine while the Second Engineer, Jim Renfrew, proceeded with other personnel to move and install a spare piston which involved

conveying this heavy piece of equipment across the engine room at high level by means of numerous chain blocks.

At about 10.00 a.m. I heard a loud explosion and immediately thought that an accident had happened with the lifting and moving of the piston. I shouted out to ascertain if they were all right. It was then I could smell cordite and could hear gunfire and a machine gun making a clatter. These noises obviously came from *H.M.A.S. Swan* which was moored alongside. Several more loud explosions followed and I realised we were being attacked and that everyone had left the engine room. I took shelter in the Portside propeller shaft tunnel which runs from the engine room amidships to the stern through the holds where tons of depth charges and high explosives were stored. I lay on the steel deck plates of the tunnel and tried to remember what one should do to avoid damage to eardrums, etc.

Several bombs struck the ship. As each bomb exploded I was thrown around in the confined space. The blast from one explosion threw me across the shaft and into the bilges cutting my left knee and causing abrasions to my knees and legs, leaving me in a shocked and dazed condition. While recovering, the lights failed and I became aware of flashes coming from the engine room and the sound of a diesel engine pounding. Very warily I made my way back to the engine room and on the Portside, there had evidently been a near miss by a bomb which had blown a hole in the ship's side and the sea, a beautiful light green in colour back lighted by the sun outside, was pouring in. It had filled the bilges and was lapping around the rotor of the diesel driven generator, water spraying everywhere and electrical shorting taking place.

I decided it was time to leave and crawled up the engine room stairs to the alleyway where our cabins were located. On stepping into the alleyway I encountered a small group consisting of Chief, 2nd, 3rd and 5th Engineers, the Doctor and two deck apprentices; with them a deck apprentice, Bob Stobo aged 16, who was severely injured by the blast and obviously dying, kept crying out for his mother. Also J. Floyd the Purser whose eyes were damaged by paint flakes blown from the bulkheads by blast, and a fire was burning in the Chief Engineer's office. The Second Engineer then ordered two of us to go below and start the emergency generator, a 23 year old machine driven by diesel with hot bulb ignition; i.e., one has to light a kerosene blow torch which heats an iron bulb to red heat and so provide the initial ignition – an old fashioned and out of date procedure in 1942 especially for emergency engines as it would take about 15 minutes to start, all of this taking place in a small watertight compartment. It was obvious that if we did not leave, the fire would overtake us so we withdrew to the deck at wharf level and moved the injured onto the wharf. The Chief Engineer ordered "Abandon Ship – every man for himself". (The only surviving Deck Officer was Brendan de Burca and from Burns Philp's own report – "*In consultation with Chief Engineer J. McNamara, now on deck as nothing further could be done in the engine room, de Burca now ordered "Abandon Ship" and saw that everyone still alive on board escaped the ship, and where possible had a lifejacket*". T.de B.)

I ran back to my cabin which was a shambles, grabbed my life jacket and a small bag I kept packed against such an emergency and regained the wharf where the noise was deafening. Heavy smoke and flames were engulfing the ship forward and burning aft and we knew what would happen when it reached the depth charges and high explosives stowed there. Also the main fuel line to the wharf had been broken and fuel was flooding onto the harbour and had caught fire and was gradually surrounding the wharf.

The ship *Barossa* tied up on the other side of the wharf and parallel to *Neptuna*, had caught fire, its smoke and noise adding to the turmoil, some of its crew appeared to be casting off mooring lines to let it drift free before the *Neptuna* exploded.

The right angle where the jetty and wharf met had been destroyed preventing any means of escape, so the 5th Engineer, Jack Eagles and myself, made our way to the eastern or open end of the wharf. It was nearly low tide and there was a drop of about twenty feet to the water which was now covered in fuel oil. I removed my wallet and ship discharge papers from my case, stuffed them in my overall pocket, adjusted my life jacket and jumped into the harbour. On surfacing I could see Jack Eagles dive into the harbour. After swimming for about five minutes to try to get away from the wharf area, I noticed a rowing boat with one person rowing, heading in our direction. He picked up Jack Eagles then myself and if memory serves me right, two other survivors. We rowed to shore just below the cliff in front of the Police Station and towards Government House.

We had just clambered ashore when the *Neptuna* blew up with the most terrific explosion, the fire having reached the depth charges and explosives. Flame, smoke and debris arose in a mushroom shaped cloud some three or four hundred feet in the air. We took cover among the rocks as shrapnel from the explosion was falling all around.

I was now dressed only in a boiler suit, saturated with salt water and diesel fuel oil, no shoes, my face and eyes burnt with fuel and oil and the taste of fuel in my mouth. The wallet with money and papers had slipped from my pocket while swimming and was lost. Other members of this group of survivors were in the same condition and the tropical sun was burning hot, making conditions most unpleasant.

We made our way up the cliffs to the roadway and it was here we were able to view the harbour - a scene of chaos with ships in various stages of sinking, on fire or moving around.

The destroyer *U.S.S. Peary* was on fire and sinking although we could see the flash of her guns still firing; an oil tanker was on fire while smoke from the *Barossa*, plus the smoke from the *Neptuna* explosion, blanketed the harbour and we could see the hospital ship *Manunda* had been damaged.

It was decided to make our way to Burns Philp office. We passed the Post Office which had been bombed and staff killed. Rescuers were still searching the ruins for survivors.

At this juncture I managed to get some drops in my eyes to ease the pain caused by fuel oil and a dressing on my knee. I cannot remember where, it must have been a first aid post of some kind.

On arriving at Burns Philp office, which, of course, was in a state of disorder, we hosed each other down to remove as much oil as we could and a Mr. McGuire, the Manager, offered his home for us to have a bite to eat and some clothes if they would fit. As we made our way to his residence the air raid sirens sounded. We all ran for cover in a ditch running beside the road and, looking up, could see two formations of twenty-seven bombers very high with anti aircraft shells exploding below them. They passed over the town and bombed the R.A.A.F. airfield.

After some time the "all clear" sounded and we made our way to Mr. McGuire's house, here I managed to get an old pair of shoes, shirt and shorts. We had a makeshift meal and Mr. McGuire said that the shipwrecked seamen were gathering at the old hospital so we proceeded there, and on our way noticed that nearly all the houses had been abandoned, the owners just walking out and leaving everything behind. Sometimes it looked as if they were having a meal and just left; this later was stated to be the case as panic had set in.

On arrival at the old hospital it was discovered that the only things available were bed, blanket and mattress. No-one appeared to be in charge and no-one wanted to be involved with shipwrecked seamen.

By nightfall it was obvious that there were no more survivors from the *Neptuna* and at the old hospital there was the Third Mate Brendan de Burca, two deck apprentices, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Engineers. The Chief Engineer was staying at Mr. McGuire's house, while the Doctor had gone aboard the hospital ship *Manunda* with wounded apprentice, Jack Knight. The white crew killed were Captain, First and Second Mates, one deck apprentice, three wireless operators, three engineers, Chief Steward and some 25 of the Chinese crew.

I also learnt from Jack Rothery, a deck apprentice, that the three engineers missing had been seen to take cover under the stairway in the main saloon. This had received a direct hit by a bomb and the whole deck structure above had collapsed and caught fire. They would have killed instantly. I was much shocked by this news as Cec Cross and Tom Fowler came from Wollongong where I also lived. I had even worked with them at Australian Iron & Steel, Port Kembla, while Noel Wilson was my watchmate and good friend.

Next day was grim - no food, sanitary facilities nil and during the day an air raid alarm. Immediately everyone took to the bush leading down to the beach. A Japanese reconnaissance plane flew about at a great height obviously taking photos of the damage done the previous day. Everyone talked in a whisper and hid from sight, although they might just as well have walked about in the open. At this time rumours were circulating that Japanese paratroops were landing further inland (not a very nice thought) and thankfully only a rumour, although it caused some concern at the time. Later each man had to dig a slit trench in the hospital grounds.

During the afternoon on 20th February it was revealed that one of Burns Philp's ships, the *Tulagi*, 2300 tons, which had been conveying American troops to Timor was on a sand bank in

Darwin Harbour and had been holed by machine gun fire, also one engine needed repairs. Volunteers from *Neptuna* were asked to go out and effect repairs. It appeared that most of the *Tulagi*'s crew was missing. Just on dark several of us were taken to the harbour and a launch took us out to the *Tulagi* and repairs were carried out. While there we had a snack of sliced tinned peaches and a couple of bottles of Hock. Having had nothing to eat since lunch this was most appreciated. The *Tulagi* had been carrying the United States 148th Field Artillery Regiment and when the ship grounded during the raid they abandoned the ship and fled into the mangrove swamp leaving all their equipment behind.

Men killed in action were still on board and in the tropical conditions were beginning to smell. We helped ourselves to shirts and cup, plate, knife, fork and spoon, plus a small haversack belonging to the U.S. troops. Incidentally, the cup was made of stainless steel and the handle became so hot when filled with tea that it was almost useless, the plate was made of Duralium and is still in use today, forty-five years later.

At about 3:00 a.m. a launch picked us up. It was returning from picking up survivors from a ship bombed and set on fire by the Japanese and had a number of badly burnt survivors on board. We returned to the harbour and a truck took us to the old hospital as dawn was breaking.

After a few days, the Salvation Army representing the Australian Comforts Fund arrived and distributed some clothing, toilet gear, razors, etc., also I managed to get a pair of Army boots and socks. All this was much appreciated. The army was also delivering a meal a day mostly baked beans and tea, sometimes bread.

Bodies from sunken ships began to float ashore on the beach below the hospital, along with sides of beef and other foodstuffs. These would be promptly blown by flies and whole areas around them would be a pulsing mass of maggots. The stench was terrible and soldiers investigating or recovering the bodies wore their gas masks. Also washed ashore, found and returned by a soldier I never met to thank, was my wallet complete with money and personal papers all thoroughly soaked with diesel fuel oil and salt water.

After some seven or eight days had passed an effort was made to evacuate some survivors south by train and tuck to Adelaide. How this was managed I am not clear but my name was the only one of the *Neptuna*'s survivors read out to go next day. I discussed this with the others of our group and the opinion was I should go, the rest to take their chances on future evacuation. Next morning approximately 150 or so survivors were loaded into cattle trucks at the railway yards. These trucks had not been cleaned and had a strong smell of urine and cattle dung. However we were soon on our way to Larrimah, some 360 miles distant, the terminus of the railway. Progress was very slow as the train never seemed to exceed 20-30 m.p.h. A couple of stops were made when the locomotive took on water and we could stretch our legs. I don't recall any food being supplied.

On arrival at Larrimah we transferred to a convoy of about twelve army trucks with canvas canopy and two rows of seats facing each other in the back. This was to be our transport to Alice Springs, some 1,000 miles to the south of over then unbitumened, dusty roads.

I was travelling with the survivors from the oil tanker *British Motorist*, who proved to be good company singing ribald songs and playing the mouth organ. Also in our truck was a U.S. marine who appeared to be 'troppo'.

That night we pulled into an army camp with tents all set up but were not allowed to occupy them in case the Japs bombed the area. We slept on the ground as best we could about a quarter of a mile from the camp.

On the second night we camped at a large army transit camp and had a meal. Bottled beer was on sale. I purchased a bottle and enjoyed it even though it was warm. Large two-up games in progress provided education and entertainment.

The next day, as the convoy passed through the Tennant Creek area, it halted at a large creek and everyone had a swim and clean up. On nearing Alice Springs one of the trucks turned over on a bend and one of the passengers was killed. He was the Chief Officer of the *S.S. Zealandia*, sunk by the Japanese in the Darwin raid.

On arrival at Alice Springs we were billeted at the showground overnight and left next morning for Adelaide in a train consisting of carriages with two wooden bench seats running the length of the carriage, facing each other. On a small platform at the end of the carriage a large canvas water bag hung to provide cool drinking water.

This train was hauled by the old "Ghan" steam locomotives and when an incline in the track was encountered, half the carriages were uncoupled and taken ahead, the locomotive returning much later to pick up the remaining carriages. At night while awaiting the engine's return, one could hear dingoes howling out in the desert.

On reaching Marree in South Australia we were treated to a wonderful lunch by the local Country Women's Association.

On arrival at Adelaide late at night, we slept on straw palliasses at Adelaide Showground. Next day as the train for Melbourne did not depart until the evening, I took the opportunity to go into the city, still in my dusty khaki shorts, shirt and boots and visited the office of Burns Philp. I told them my story and they advanced me fifteen pounds. I then purchased underwear, shirt, tie and suit plus a suitcase to carry my old gear, caught the train to Melbourne, spent a night there in the Federal Hotel, then on to Sydney where I reported to the Marine Engineers' Department of Burns Philp. Being the first survivor to return I told my story to an attentive audience. I went on a month's leave returning to work with Burns Philp ships maintenance crew, no ships being available to sign on with.

Also visited was the Institute of Marine and Power Engineers, again telling my story to Eric Cole, the secretary who had me repeat my story over the telephone to an official of the Marine Transport Board.

I returned home to Wollongong that afternoon. My parents had not know if I was dead or alive until they received a telegram sent by me through the Red Cross at Alice Springs.

During the following week I visited the Third Engineer's wife, Mrs. Harry Tobin and gave her news of his survival. Harry, who came from Perth, was later flown out from Darwin to Mt. Isa by the "Flying Fortress" bomber.

Also visited was Noel Wilson's wife and child, Cec Cross's widowed mother and Tom Fowler's parents who had no knowledge of the circumstance of the death. Tom's parents later dedicated a stained glass memorial window in St. Michael's Cathedral to commemorate the loss of their son.

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Dr. John Hyde and injured Cadet, Jack Knight returned by the hospital ship *Manunda*.

Other survivors returned to Sydney aboard the *Tulagi*.

Survivors of *Neptuna*: (11)

- | | |
|------------------|--------------------------|
| Brendan de Burca | 3 rd Officer |
| J. McNamara | Chief Engineer |
| James Renfrew | 2 nd Engineer |
| Harry Tobin | 3 rd Engineer |
| George Boniface | 4 th Engineer |
| Jack Eagles | 5 th Engineer |
| John Rothery | Cadet Officer |
| Jack Knight | Cadet Officer |
| George Kent | Cadet Officer |
| Joseph Floyd | Purser |
| Dr. John Hyde | Surgeon |

Officers killed or died of wounds: (11)

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Capt. William Mitchie | Master |
| Jack Gillies | 1 st Officer |
| Jack Forman | 2 nd Officer |
| Thomas Fowler | 6 th Engineer |
| Cecil Cross | 7 th Engineer |
| Noel Wilson | 8 th Engineer |
| Bob Stobo | Cadet Officer |
| J. Rosen | Chief Steward |
| Reg Veale | Radio Officer |
| E. Pollard | Radio Officer |
| R. Davidson | Radio Officer |

Brendan de Burca, 3rd Officer, did his best to see that survivors of the *Neptuna*'s Chinese crew received some help – 25 Chinese crew were killed.

Signed – 1987
G.W. Boniface,
4 Elizabeth Street,
Wollongong. 2500

George Boniface had been in poor health for some time and died on 2nd February, 2007. He had been the last surviving non Chinese crew member of *M.V. Neptuna*.

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Also attached to this story was this letter written by Beverley Ernshaw, judge of a Writing Competition entered by George Boniface.

Beverley Ernshaw
Writing and Research
15 Hamer Street,
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(02) 9546-1091

10th September, 2000

Mr. George Boniface,
P.O. Box 231,
Kiama. 2533

Dear George,

I was delighted to read your submission to the Veterans' Writing Competition describing your rescue from Darwin Harbour on the day of the disastrous air raid.

About twelve years ago, I was commissioned to write a history of the William Thompson Masonic Schools and I came across this same incident from the opposite perspective, that of the rescuer. Perhaps you already know who it was, but the information I found was this.

The rescuer was David Henderson, an orphan raised in the William Thompson Masonic School he was a wild short of fellow who went adventuring in the Northern Territory and in 1942 he was working as a Darwin wharf labourer. He was very athletic and under the professional name of Dave Sandos took up wrestling and won both the Welter-weight and Middle-weight Championships of the Northern Territory. On the day of the air raid on Darwin, he manned a rowing boat and was responsible for a single handed rescue of eighteen injured seaman struggling in Darwin Harbour. Many of them were burnt. He also swam 400 metres to rescue another man who unfortunately died before they reached the shore. He was awarded a civilian bravery medal.

I spoke to his sister in 1988 and she said Dave had been dead for some years then.

Kindest regards,

Beverley Ernshaw
(signed)