

BE PROUD – OUR CHILDREN KNOW

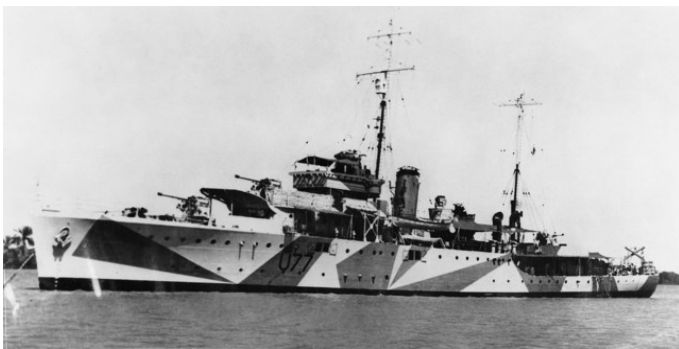
Some stories need to be told. At the time they are but a reflection of the moment. A moment when your expectations are probably low but your hopes are high.

My Dad died at age 52 in 1970. He was born in 1918 in southern Tasmania and by 14 years of age was an accomplished lumberjack. A tall man, over 6' 2", really good looking in a rough and tumble way, he had the strength of a mule.



As the 1930's progressed most males in this country heard the rumblings of war so come 1936 Cecil Harold Wilfred Westwood decided he would get in the thick of it. Up to the recruiting office in Hobart and before his mother knew, my Dad had joined the Navy. His first posting was HMAS Cerberus, Melbourne as a recruit and then later posted to HMAS Yarra II based in Sydney.

Dad loved the Navy and by the outbreak of war in 1939 was extremely proud to be a sailor and sailing out of Sydney heads to foreign lands. Little did he know at that time it would be six years before his return to Australia. He had leave overseas from time to time, but his ten service medals are testament to his commitment to serve his country. His only regret was that just before leaving Sydney he had married my mother who had given birth to my brother Richard in 1939. Richard didn't see his father for the first six years of his life.



HMAS Yarra—1941



Crew—HMAS Yarra—1942

Dad was called Bill by anyone who knew him well and I can understand why. His Christian names were a mouthful that only a mother would enjoy. The highlight of his service in the Navy was to survive the war and the sinking of HMAS Yarra II on the 4th March 1942 in the South Java Sea. His Captain at the time was L/CDR Wilfred Hasting Harrington with whom he had a lifelong friendship and who was later to become Chief of Navy, ADM Sir Wilfred Hasting Harrington. On a couple of occasions our family met Sir Wilfred on his property in western New South Wales and that friendship was reflected later in life.



Admiral Wilfred Hasting Harrington

In 1954 Dad, as Coxswain and Chief Petty Officer of HMAS Warramunga, took me on board, I was aged nine, to watch the arrival of Queen Elizabeth II for her Australian visit. The Warramunga was anchored in Sydney harbour just by what is now the Opera House. Standing on the bridge with my father watching the flotilla of ships passing by, a tall uniformed gentleman sidled up to me and asked, "who are you young man?" John, Sir, I responded, shaking a little, not recognising the person who had spoken to me. Suddenly from further behind came a bellowing voice which I recognised as the ship's captain. The voice said, "I'll take him away Sir". Almost instantly a retort from the tall uniformed gentleman, a loud and clear, "leave him alone". "Yes Sir" was the reply. Looking up at my new friend he said to me. "Hello John, I'm the Duke of Edinburgh". And a friend he was for the next two hours. Unbeknown to the Duke he really created the Navy lineage in the Westwood family.



Duke of Edinburgh



HMAS Warramunga

Bill Westwood went on to serve 26 years in the Navy having minor breaks between sign ups by working for the Post Office. My brother Richard served 12 years with the Navy and was dogged with bad luck, experiencing the terrible collision between HMAS Melbourne and HMAS Voyager and several years later a second collision between HMAS Melbourne and USS Frank E Evans in the South China sea. That's another story.

Despite my mother's protests, with my father and brother both in the Navy at the same time, I joined the Navy Reserves, later to move on to permanent service and a visit to Vietnam. I ended up doing 9 years. I can understand my mother's perspective, her direct family gave 47 years of service to the Navy and our country.

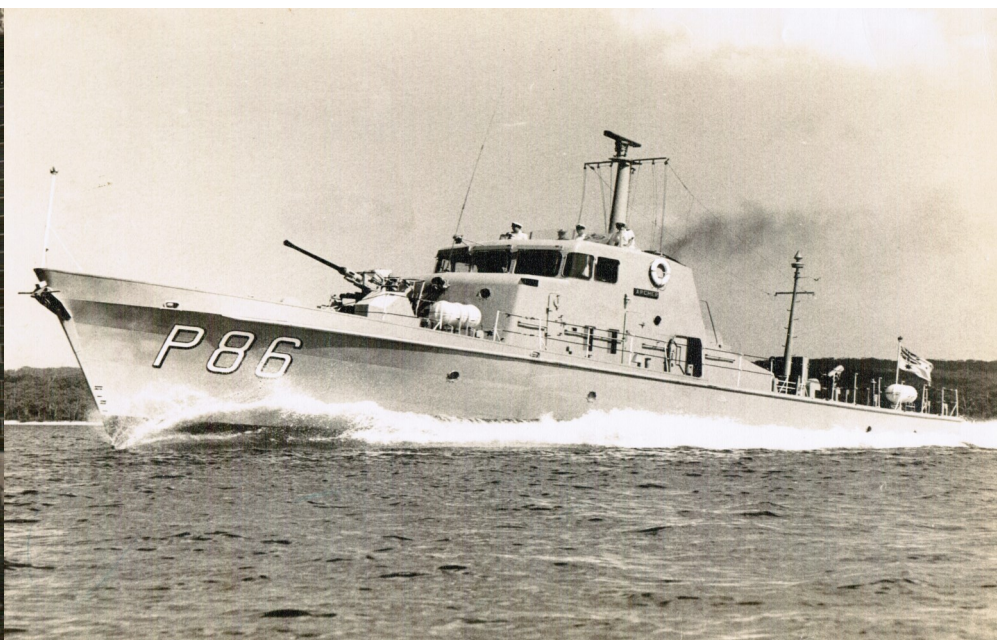


Anzac Day 1965 Sydney. Bill Westwood (banner) leads sons Richard and John (in uniform) and HMAS Yarra II contingent

On the 4th July 1970 at the age of 52 my father passed away. The war had taken its toll. This is where my father's friendship with Admiral Harrington had its reward, if you call it that. Following a funeral service at HMAS Watson in Sydney and his cremation I asked Navy whether I could take his ashes and bury him at sea. This is usually a process but not this time. Within a month I had the privilege of taking my Dad's ashes aboard my ship, HMAS Archer and with full military honours proceed to sea.



PO Bill Westwood at wars end.



HMAS Archer heading to sea at speed with ashes of CPO Bill Westwood, Dec'd. Ships company included sons John and Richard Westwood. The final journey for a family of sailors together.

This, I will never forget. Sailing to a point 12 miles off Sydney Heads, recorded in our log for the benefit of history, we braved the high seas off Sydney Heads until almost there, and without notice, the seas went calm, almost perfectly flat and directly over the burial coordinates. Together with the ship's crew of some 20 sailors and officers, the padre moved to the quarter deck. The saluting party adorned in their number ones (white uniform) with bayonets fixed paid our ultimate tribute to a fallen sailor. My Dad's ashes were committed to the sea and he now watches over all those who pass above. I've been there many times by air, by sea and by submarine but none quite as important as sailing that position in the US aircraft carrier, Kennedy. I was doing special duties with the US Navy, sailing from Cairns to Sydney when the captain piped the crew to fall in starboard for ceremonial salute to CPO Westwood RAN deceased. This mark of respect was the most moving moment of my life.

When my brother Richard passed away in 1993 I was privileged to spread his ashes with my fathers. That's another episode.



The Final Salute

The significance of this story is that today is the 4th March 2020, a day of remembrance for those who served on HMAS Yarra II. Recalling this story reminds me of travelling by train to Roma Street station on Anzac Day, 2016. Changing trains, I boarded a crowded service to Central station for the Dawn service. With only one station to travel I was happy to stand but a young man, about 12 or 13, well dressed and polite, stood up abruptly, saluted the medals I wore and offered his seat. No prompting, no parents in sight, other veterans around us applauded his respect. I took the seat. Our children know. I'm proud.

John Westwood (Member 658)

Mt Gravatt Men's Shed