

# THE DROWNED MAN

BRENDAN JAMES MURRAY



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*This book is dedicated to the men who lost their lives while serving aboard HMAS Australia. It is also for the thousands of Australians in the army, navy and air force who served in silence during the Second World War, and those who continue to do so today.*

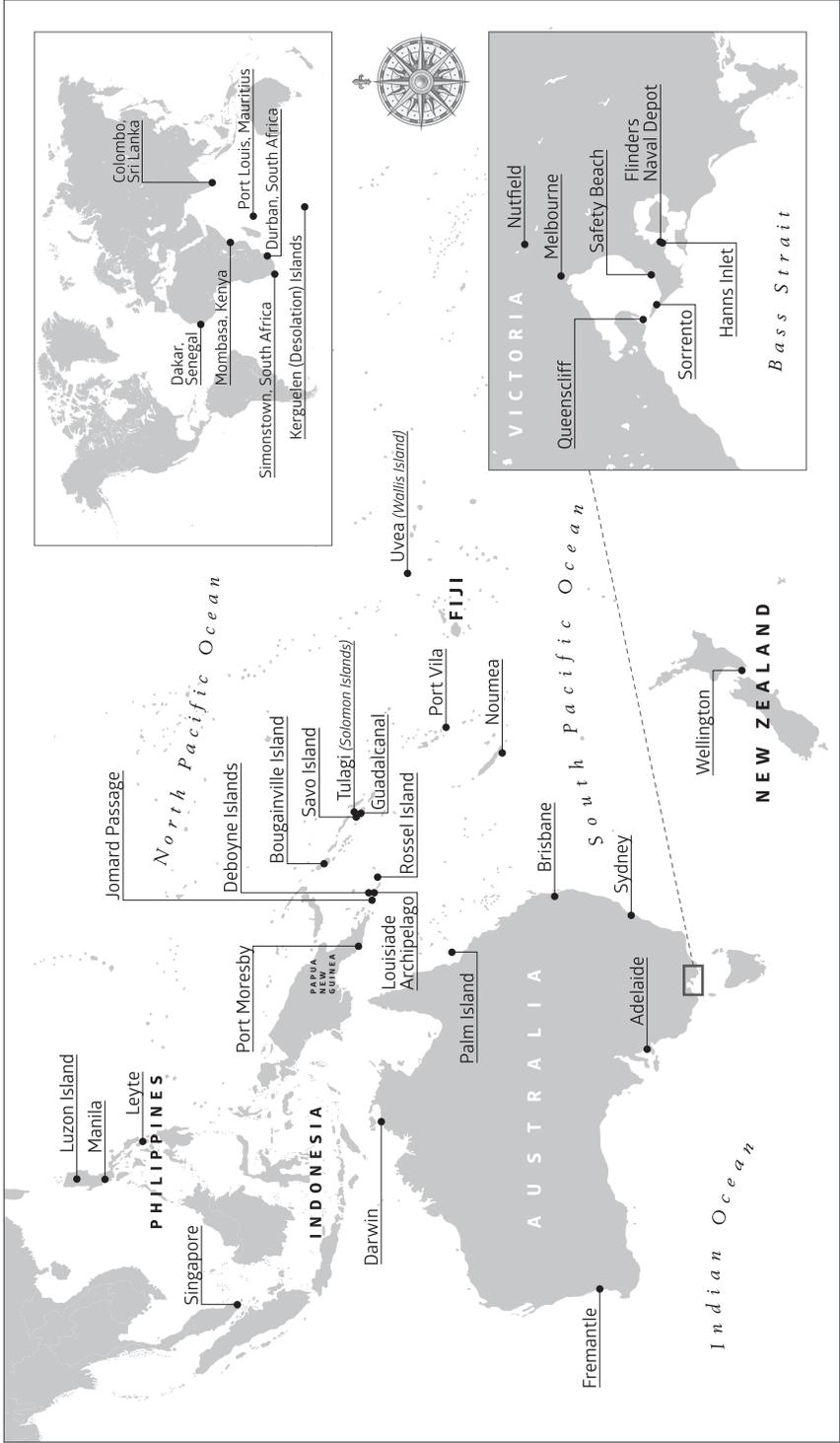
*The water in a vessel is sparkling; the water in the sea is dark. The small truth has words which are clear; the great truth has great silence.*

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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# Prologue

John Riley's first thought was that he had been punched in the back.

He stumbled, his balance unsettled by the ship's gentle movements and the near-blackness of the night. The crew were under strict orders: not so much as a match could be lit on the upper deck, lest it be spotted by some unseen enemy out in the darkness. They'd been warned that a Japanese lookout could spy a tiny flame on the horizon and bring destruction raining down upon them. Death was omnipresent in the Solomon Sea.

The young sailor managed to stay on his feet, but he was surprised to feel that the wind had been completely knocked out of him. The hit didn't seem that hard, he later told the medics. It would have been Albert Gordon who threw the punch; he was the loudmouth with the gift of the gab, a salesman before the war, and a good four inches taller than his diminutive offside, Edward Elias. And Gordon was the qualified 'leading rate'. He was in charge.

When Riley turned to retaliate, he saw the knife, already slick with his own blood, and realised he'd been stabbed.

The two men came at him. Before Riley could react, he was being gripped by both arms, tough fingers gouging into his flesh as they dragged him toward the guard rail. Riley wrenched against his attackers, the stink of sweat filling his nostrils in the hot night. He may have been outnumbered, but he was no pushover. Like his attackers, Riley was a stoker, a lower-deck man, hardened by back-breaking labour, the heat of blast furnaces, claustrophobia. At nineteen, he had already experienced more than most men would in a lifetime.

The three stumbled but managed to remain upright. Gordon and Elias dragged their victim further toward the guard rail and the yawning abyss of the ocean beyond, then Riley found his strength and pulled them back inboard.

For the moment, he was too shocked to cry out for help.

As Riley struggled like a child in some inescapable nightmare, the real world inched onward, indifferent. HMAS *Australia*'s huge fans whirred their dull, monotonous drone, and the bow waves sighed as the ship navigated the Louisiade Archipelago, about two hundred kilometres east of New Guinea. The perfect place for a pleasure cruise, if there wasn't a war on.

There was a gentle laugh from somewhere near by. Men at the anti-aircraft guns were about to go off watch for the night.

Riley opened his mouth to cry out, but almost instantly there was an arm around him, crushing more air from his lungs, so that the best he could manage was a muffled groan. Still he fought on. Gordon and Elias wanted him over the side, he knew; if he weakened for a moment, that would be it. Nobody would see him fall or hear the splash. If he was lucky, he might find himself bobbing alone, far beyond swimming distance from any land, knife-wound ringing the dinner bell for the sharks. If he was unlucky, he'd be chewed to pieces by the propellers.

Suddenly, one of his attackers released an arm. The man stood before him, an indistinct, sweat-slick shadow whose only clothing – white tropical shorts – seemed to glow with an eerie luminescence.

The shadow began to stab Riley over and over.

He was jolted by the blows and heard the wet *chump chump* of the blade entering his body but felt little pain, the shock was so great. At last, he managed to cry out.

From the ship's bridge, Lieutenant Commander Jack Donovan heard what sounded like an animal squealing. 'It was exactly like a pig being killed,' he would later say. 'I have heard pigs being killed many times and that is what it reminded me of. It was a squeal and therefore, to me, remarkable.'

On the compass platform above the three fighting men, Signal Boatswain Charlie Nichols was irritated by a 'laughing, screaming kind of noise'. As Riley fought for his life, Nichols shouted for the three men to keep the racket down.

By then, many sailors in the nearby darkness had heard the commotion. They almost all dismissed it as skylarking, which was common among the sailors, most of whom were under 25 years of age. Riley was only a teenager on the night of the attack, Gordon and Elias 24.

Riley slipped and fell to the deck with a teeth-shaking thud,

barely conscious, his cries coming out in spluttering gurgles. He lay in his own blood, which looked as black as crude oil in the gloom. One of the men was leaning over him, and again Riley felt the knife entering his body. They're killing me, he thought, the edges of his vision dimming, thoughts swirling. He needed to cry out for help; he needed to run away; he needed to hang on so he could give his attackers' names to somebody; he needed to keep them from throwing him over the side.

This last thought shrieked loudest, and in response he actually pushed himself *toward* the guard rail, dodging the bloodied hands of his attackers, who were trying to lift him. Riley gripped the cold steel of the rail with every ounce of strength he had left.

The man with the knife bent down, jaw set, and began hacking into his wrists, opening them to the bone.

Riley let go. It was over. One attacker was at his shoulders, the other at his feet, and they were lifting him. At that moment the pain hit him in a white-hot, shimmering wave.

Then he heard feet running along the deck. Not one person approaching, but many.

Maybe, he thought, there was a chance.



## CHAPTER 1

# Breaking the Lens

There is no doubt that Australian military history – particularly popular history of the kind found in mainstream books, films and television series – is reported and viewed through specific lenses. The most common is the hero lens. A staple on Anzac and Remembrance Day, this perspective highlights the ideal of the ruggedly masculine soldier. He walks the Kokoda Track, scrambles up the crumbling cliffs at Gallipoli, holds firm at El Alamein. In many ways, he is represented as the quintessential Australian.

Perhaps the next most common is the victim lens. Across the Pacific rim, stories of victimhood often relate to imprisonment by the Japanese during the Second World War.

A third lens, that of the villain, is reserved almost exclusively for the enemy.

The problem is that these lenses make many people invisible. There are always those who for whatever reason fail to slot comfortably into accepted stereotypes of the Honourable Serviceman. There are the minorities. There are some who tread a questionable line of morality or are outright criminals, victimising civilians and other servicemen every bit as brutally as our most sadistic military opponents.

For me, the safe old lenses began to crack during a chance encounter with an elderly man who told me a shameful and horrific story. Little did I know that I was about to stumble upon a 70-year-old murder mystery that had never before come to light.

\*\*\*

The year 2013 was to be a historic one for the Royal Australian Navy. Two years earlier, Vice Admiral Ray Griggs, then chief of the RAN, had invited more than fifty countries to participate in an International Fleet Review to commemorate the centenary of the navy's fleet first entering Sydney. Each nation was asked to send a

warship or historic vessel to Sydney Harbour for the event, to be held over a week in early October.

Aside from the visually stunning nature of the review, the RAN had also organised it to coincide with a Sea Power Conference and the Pacific International Maritime Congress and Exposition, to be held in Darling Harbour. It was to be a week of great public interest and significant political and military consequence.

If the Melbourne Cup is the event that stops a nation, the fleet review was surely its maritime equivalent, albeit minus the excitement of competition. Thousands of people flocked to Sydney, and spectators crowded every possible vantage point around the harbour. Television stations nationwide halted their ordinary programming to broadcast vision of over forty modern warships, sixteen historic tall ships and countless aircraft on display.

The weather was idyllic, the sky a raw, empty blue and the harbour itself pond-calm. Families stood in beaming crowds as the vessels passed, sticky-fingered children waving ice-creams at contemporary killing machines: frigates, corvettes, cruisers, destroyers, all bristling with guns, some having fired them in anger from the Persian Gulf and elsewhere.

In addition to the warships were the smaller craft, both those common to Sydney Harbour and some that had travelled there for the occasion. There were so many speedboats, sailboats, tugs, tinnies and leisure craft that at times you could barely see the water. Fighter jets tore overhead in formation, much to the cheering appreciation of the masses below.

The International Fleet Review was a jewel in the crown of the RAN. And why shouldn't they be proud? They had conducted themselves admirably – exceptionally, even – in two world wars and countless lesser conflicts. Their ships were now state of the art, their service personnel among the most highly trained and skilled in the world. Their border protection and disaster relief work was well regarded. Though a relatively small nation, Australia was known for the achievements and competency of its navy.

Personally, I followed the fleet review with more than a little interest. Although I have never considered joining the navy myself, I come from a family with a long history of service at sea. My grandfather, Richard Radcliffe, had served during the Second World War on one of our nation's most infamous ships, HMAS *Sydney*.

He was transferred off the cruiser shortly before it was sunk by the Germans in 1941 with the loss of all 645 crew members – more than the total number of men killed during the entire Kokoda campaign.

For years, the fate of the *Sydney* remained one of our greatest wartime mysteries. It was only in 2008 that oceanographer David Mears discovered the wreckage. By that stage, my grandfather was one of only a handful of *Sydney* veterans still alive. I supported him through the whirlwind that followed Mears's discovery, with visits from journalists and photographers, telephone calls from across the country and the painful reopening of some old wounds. I spoke on the radio about Richard and his experiences.

The discovery triggered a commission of inquiry headed by former judge Frank Cole, who eventually interviewed Richard in his home. When the findings of the commission were published, it mattered little that they verified the German version of the battle, or that my grandfather disagreed with them. The ship was found, and, more importantly, the men who died on it: they had been acknowledged. No longer would HMAS *Sydney* be known only to military and naval enthusiasts.

I was then in my late twenties, a writer and teacher of history. I saw our naval past – and certainly our sailors – unapologetically through the hero lens. My grandfather and his stories had stirred in me a kind of simplistic nationalism replete with blind spots and oversights. When people criticised the Australian flag, I would openly baulk. Then, in the year of the International Fleet Review, I had the conversation that changed everything.

\*\*\*

The man who would set my life on such an unexpected course could not have appeared less conspicuous, nor appeared in a less conspicuous place.

One lazy afternoon, my girlfriend Greta and I had caught the passenger ferry from Sorrento to Queenscliff, across the mouth of Victoria's Port Phillip Bay. We enjoyed the salt wind on the upper deck, saw a few dolphins and some distant seals, then arrived at our destination well before lunchtime. I vaguely remember a stroll on the beach, browsing some shops, a trip to a beautiful bookstore

housed in an old church. Rain threatened, heavy clouds making a dull charcoal drawing of the sky.

At lunchtime, Greta went off to look for a bathroom while I wandered to a fish-'n'-chip shop to order lunch.

On entering, I paid momentary attention to a pair of people bickering near the window of the shop, where there was a scattering of cheap aluminium tables. Sitting in one of the chairs was a man who looked close to ninety, his thin white hair a sweep of Brylcreem and comb, glasses reflecting back the fluorescent lights of the shop. Fussing near him, partially bent, was a woman I took to be his daughter. Beside them both was a walking frame, the kind with a padded seat, large wheels and hand-operated brakes.

By the time I ordered lunch, the woman was standing behind me in the queue. I had listened half-heartedly as she and the old man exchanged sharp, sarcastic remarks the whole time.

Without giving it much thought, I took a seat while I waited for the food.

'See this?'

I looked up. The man had his head cocked toward me and was tilting a *Herald Sun* newspaper upwards, revealing a large colour picture of then prime minister Julia Gillard with her partner, Tim Mathieson.

'No, I haven't read that one,' I said, humouring him.

He snorted. 'Bloody hairdresser.'

I knew that Tim Mathieson worked as a hair stylist. I also suspected that I knew why this drew comment from the man. He was of the old school, and if he was anything like my grandfather, he'd object to the gender role reversal of the Gillard-Mathieson relationship. I shrugged.

What happened next was bizarre. The man began a pantomime of what can only be described as a stereotypically homosexual male. He mimicked combing his hair with one hand, while the other he propped limp-wristed by his side. He made small, prancing movements side to side while he held his face in a strange, tight-lipped mask, the eyebrows arched high.

I looked over to his daughter. She was glancing between the two of us and the cashier, flustered.

'Mmm, doesn't that look pretty?' the man breathed, not laughing but seeming on edge, even aggressive. 'Mmm, lovely.'

Now I was studying him, partly perplexed, partly amused, mostly unsettled. His face had the ruddiness particular to drinkers, and was laced with spider veins like the lattices of leafless trees. The smell of liniment hung over him in a pall. In many ways, he was every bit the stereotype himself.

With a snap he stopped, pushing the newspaper away. 'We didn't put up with his type in the navy.'

I blinked, suddenly interested. 'You were in the navy?'

'My word I was.'

'Which ships did you serve on?'

'Spent most of my time on the *Aussie*.'

'HMAS *Australia*?'

'Yep. And we had a bloke like him' – he again indicated the *Sun* – 'and you know what happened to him?'

'No.'

Here the old man leaned in conspiratorially, though he made no effort to lower his voice. 'Three of our blokes grabbed him and tossed him over the side.'

'What?'

'Got rid of him. No room for homos.'

I laughed a little, convinced this had to be a joke. 'Killed him?'

The man nodded. 'And you know what? He was just listed as lost at sea, and that was the end of it.'

I was stunned. It had to be nonsense, I was sure of it. Though I knew this man's generation (perhaps my grandfather himself) harboured all manner of vicious biases and patriarchal hang-ups, it was beyond belief that the sailors who'd been heroes of my boyhood stories could cold-bloodedly murder one of their shipmates for his sexuality, perhaps only his *perceived* sexuality.

The writer and historian inside me allowed me to pose a question. 'Did you see this happen?' Even as I said it, I knew my words masked a more significant question, and one that I hadn't the courage to ask: *Were you involved?*

'No,' he said. 'But I knew about it. We all did.'

Before I could ask more, the man's daughter appeared. She began helping him to his feet, seeming almost to glare at me as she did so. They returned to their bickering and I watched, dumbstruck, as the two of them made their way out of the shop and up the footpath, passing Greta coming in the opposite direction.

I should have followed them. The old man and his daughter are phantoms; to this day, I haven't managed to track either of them down.

\*\*\*

The weather had turned sufficiently poor that we ended up eating our lunch inside the fish-'n'-chip shop beneath the buzzing fluorescent lights, then sat below deck on the return journey across the bay. I stared through the large windows at the beer-bottle green of the water, feeling the gentle roll of the ferry, thinking about my grandfather.

Greta tried to convince me that it was rubbish, a ghost story, something probably made up on the spot by a hate-filled man. At worst, it might have been an urban legend he had heard. There was no way a sailor could be killed like that without suspicion being aroused. There had to be witnesses. The victim would have cried out. People would have to *know*, and probably lots of them.

'What if there were lots of people involved?' I asked, partly speaking to myself. 'Maybe three did the deed and a whole lot of others turned a blind eye.'

The thought of a man being killed by his shipmates was bad enough, but the additional injustice of the murder being unknown – the victim's death simply written off – made it somehow more monstrous.

Truth is, I didn't want to believe it.

But there was something worse that niggled at the back of my mind as we made that short passage. I agonised over it as I stared into the water, imagining being tossed overboard: the shock of the cold, the gulping panic, nostrils burning with salt water, the ship receding into the distance.

My grandfather had served on many ships. I could name all those he had been aboard for extended periods, but countless others swirled in my memory as a confused blur of destroyers, cruisers and corvettes. Some he was only assigned to very briefly. Of these ships I was less certain, though I had a feeling that, for a time at least, he had served on the *Australia*. And the old man's words echoed back to me: 'I knew about it. We all did.'

At my grandfather's home, I knew, he had a career's worth of

yellowing documents relating to all the ships on which he had served. I had to know.

Late that afternoon, I drove alone to my grandfather's old split-level house at the back of Safety Beach. He no longer lived there, and hadn't done for some years; he lived with his daughter, who acted as his carer. Still, all his possessions remained at the house, and the two of us had spent enough time discussing them that I knew where to find what I needed.

As children, my siblings and I had occasionally been spooked by the old place, and a touch of that returned to me as I walked down the front steps. The house is relatively isolated, backed now by a sweeping marina that is all but deserted. That afternoon, a light rain was falling. The lawn was neglected and grew in ugly tufts that only partially concealed leprous garden gnomes, broken pots, blown-in rubbish.

Inside, the place looked as I remembered it, but it was different in some strange and subtle way, just as familiar locations sometimes are in nightmares. It seemed sunken. Gloom nestled like a presence in every room, hanging silently over family photographs, bowling trophies and the detritus of a lifetime. The air was cold, stale. The clocks had stopped.

I made my way to the back of the house, where a small room overlooked the marina. In this room, my grandfather had set up his 'memorabilia wall', a collection of photographs, newspaper clippings and souvenirs of his naval days. Despite the closed curtains, there was just enough light for me to make out the boxes of documents stacked near by.

I immediately knew the box I wanted. I knelt down and began shuffling through it, pushing past pages and pages of typed documents, past occasional photographs from which black-and-white faces stared. The smell of dust and history breathed upwards with the rasp of the pages.

It didn't take long for me to find it. The sheet was in my grandfather's handwriting, detailing every ship on which he had served from the day he signed up right through until his eventual discharge. I scanned down the lines, hearing the old house groan and the wind lash the windows from out over the marina.

Then I saw it: HMAS *Australia*.

## CHAPTER 2

# Bound for the *Australia*

It was something as trivial as a piece of throwaway advice that put Norm Tame on a collision course with murder. Not that he was to commit the crime – far from it – but he would come face-to-face with a pair of bloodied killers in the darkness of a distant future, and just a few words set the chain of events in motion.

Tame was a fifteen-year-old rough-and-tumble country boy from Nutfield in Victoria. That day, he had been out rabbiting with his father for most of the afternoon but hadn't hit a thing. The old man had picked them off with ease: one eyelid lightly closed and fluttering, stock of the rifle pressed against a grey-whiskered cheek, finger squeezing the trigger with the calm of an experienced farmer. Tame listened to the sharp *pop* and watched the rabbits scatter in the distance, leaving one wounded comrade to convulse its final moments amid the dead grass.

'Good shot, dad.'

Life on the farm was idyllic. Their farmhouse was right down on Arthur's Creek, their property spread over a gently rolling landscape of pastoral country and scattered bushland. It was like something out of a Frederick McCubbin painting. After the gold rush of the 1860s, some forgotten farmers had planted orchards near the homestead. Now, plum trees grew throughout the area, making excellent filling for Mrs Tame's pies and helping to fill the pocket of an exploring teenager.

'Your turn,' Norm's father said.

They marched for a while through the screaming of cicadas and the heat of a late-afternoon sun. The strap of the rifle felt heavy against Norm's shoulder. Eventually, the pair came to the top of a low rise, where they could see a group of rabbits perhaps forty metres away.

Norm sighed, unslung his rifle and lay down on his stomach, the smell of dry grass and dirt filling his nostrils. He was bored and tired – tired of missing.

Closing one eye, he peered through the site and picked a rabbit at random.

His father knelt beside him, voice low. 'Wait,' he said. 'This time, I don't want you to look *at* the rabbit. I want you to look *through* it.'

Norm raised his head for a moment, thought, then lowered it. After a moment of concentration, one eye closed, he managed to shift his visual focus.

*Pop.*

The rabbits scattered – but for one, which lay dead.

The fifteen-year-old looked up into the smiling face of his father. It was a trick he would never forget, and one that would be important to his time in the Royal Australian Navy.

\*\*\*

Just as cattle are bred to be slaughtered, so the screaming infants of the 1920s were destined to be thrown upon the gears of an approaching war machine. I would encounter dozens of these men in my search for the murder victim. Some I met in person, others only on paper and in the memories of those who had known them before their own deaths.

Norm Tame was a country boy through and through. He sent his first tomatoes to market at only nine years of age, and proved a dab hand at catching fish in the creek before most kids could ride a bicycle. It was those early experiences of water that triggered his dreams of a life at sea.

By the time he was fifteen – six months before the war had even started – he had his heart set on joining the navy. Aside from fishing the shallow creeks around Nutfield, he had no experience on the water, his only encounter with the sea being a single trip to Phillip Island on the ferry. He could swim but had very little power in the water, and he wasn't particularly interested in the team sports popular with his schoolmates. Perhaps the open loneliness of the sea created a parallel in his mind with the countryside of Nutfield; perhaps Nutfield's distance from the ocean called to the explorer in him. Either way, there was no changing his mind.

The problem for Tame was that the navy wouldn't accept him until he was sixteen and a half. A mere twelve months, perhaps, but it seemed an eternity to a young boy dreaming of a life beyond

the closed world of country Victoria. His frustration only increased when the war broke out at the beginning of September 1939: it seemed that some epic moment in history was threatening to pass by without him. Little did he know that there would be plenty of time for him and others to learn the horrific realities of combat at sea.

While life went on as normal in Nutfield, Tame calculated that he would be exactly sixteen and a half on 16 March 1940. He enlisted that day and was called up four months later.

The period of service Tame agreed to was twelve years from the time he turned eighteen, though he would commence serving immediately. The boy from Nutfield would remain in the navy until he was thirty, provided he wasn't killed first.

\*\*\*

The men of the *Australia* shared many similarities that would ultimately lead their fates to intersect. However, these similarities were counterbalanced by just as many differences, culminating in a ship that was a diverse amalgamation of personalities, backgrounds and value sets.

Des Shinkfield was two years younger than Tame and also had an upbringing replete with lessons he would later apply in the navy. He was born in Cambridge, England, and it was almost inevitable that he would serve at sea. His grandfather, father and older brother had all selected that career, though things had turned sour when his father was invalided out of the service after being blinded by a searchlight. Des was too young to recognise the deep depression this triggered in his father. Fortunately his mother – a strong and determined woman – managed to help pull her husband out of the mire by encouraging him to become a teacher, something he did after completing his degree at Cambridge University. Still, the demons would linger around him for years to come.

In 1927, when Des was only two, the Shinkfields relocated to Australia in search of a better climate, and wound up in the Melbourne suburb ironically named Sunshine. Despite his severe sight problems, Des's father taught at Sunshine Technical School, Geelong College and Melbourne High, then lectured at Melbourne Teachers' College. From there, he moved on to Carey Grammar.

Young Des settled well into his new home. At primary school, he was intelligent and fit, enthusiastic on the sporting field and quick to make friends with the other boys his age. If there was one thing he had learnt from his parents, it was the value of a strong work ethic, and he charged into his teenage years brimming with promise.

Things seemed to be improving for the young family until the Great Depression hit, costing them their home and a great deal more. It was then that Des began to witness the effects alcoholism could have on a family unit. Again, it was Mrs Shinkfield who rescued her husband.

As in many parts of the world, the coming of the Second World War stimulated the Australian economy and created jobs in the death industry where previously there had been none. Des's father established a cadet corps at Carey Grammar, and Des became a sergeant. Like Norm Tame, Des Shinkfield had no experience with boats before the war, though he had successfully represented Carey in the swimming team. He made no secret of his strong desire to continue the family line of naval officers at the nearest opportunity.

It seemed to the sharply intelligent Shinkfield that fate was telling him he was making the right decision. In 1940, aged fifteen, he decided to leave school, thinking that if the war ended while he was a student, there would be such an influx of servicemen that he would have little chance of securing employment. His sharp mind and knack for numbers helped him get a job working in the chief manager's department of the National Bank. There, he would often see Commander Eric Nave strolling about in his sharply ironed uniform with its brass buttons. As a cryptographer, Commander Nave would later prove integral in breaking the Japanese code. Seeing the commander reminded Shinkfield that there was a big, exciting and dangerous world waiting for him beyond the walls of the National Bank.

Des Shinkfield eventually joined the navy as a special entry officer at the age of seventeen. The young recruit's experiences growing up had led him to a pair of far-reaching decisions: he promised himself that he would never drink a drop of alcohol or utter a swear word in his life. This would place him at odds with almost all the men he later encountered in the RAN.

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In the early 1930s, young Alan Fenton, not yet ten years old, spent many hours gazing at the huge, illuminated face of St Kilda's Luna Park. The scenic railway clattered and creaked; below, screams of terror and delight rose from the newly built ghost train, while boys and girls on dates made their way from the palace of illusions to the revolutionary 'while you wait' photo booth. Wooden horses leered from the carousel as they spun around and around, eternal prisoners of the blinking bulbs and flashing mirrors.

Alan would look with a combination of unease and wonder through the towering jaws of 'Mr Moon', whose face – unlike its Sydney counterpart – seemed to have an almost sinister air. Smells slithered out through that gaping maw like sickly-sweet breath: fairy floss, peanuts, cigarette smoke, occasionally worse things that the boy couldn't quite pinpoint. His grandmother's cold hand would squeeze his a little tighter, and they would move on.

But it wasn't the amusement park that caught young Fenton's attention. Like Norm Tame and Des Shinkfield, he heard the call of the dark ocean beyond the lights and music of the city.

His grandmother would often walk with him to the pier on a Sunday night after tea. He'd run ahead of her down to the end, looking out over the water at the boats. There, he would imagine himself as a sailor, far out to sea.

While many young men who dreamt of a life in the army were intrigued by the possibility of killing other human beings, almost all of those drawn to the navy simply had a love of the ocean. Of course, as they grew older, these young men came to recognise that their desire to be on the water would eventually position them to be either killers or casualties. Alan Fenton was no different.

Though Fenton did not come from the same naval stock as Shinkfield, his father had served as a foot soldier in Fromelles. Indeed, the old man's unit had been in such a chaotic skirmish that at one stage he had been written off as dead, only being accounted for when he finally staggered from the bloody muck some time later. This was a distant memory by the time Alan was old enough to comprehend the horrors his father must have confronted.

When Alan asked his father about his time in Europe, the older man would say little. He described that particular battle as

a 'sideshow' and indicated that he'd had a pretty bad time there. Wordlessly, he'd roll up a trouser leg and place his son's hands on the coarse skin. Beneath, Fenton could feel the rough chunks of shrapnel still embedded deep in his father's flesh.

Fenton's upbringing was a privileged one. His father worked as a lawyer and eventually sent Alan to the elite Scotch College. Some day, Alan thought, he would like to follow in his father's footsteps and enter the legal profession, but in the meantime his yearnings for adventure and the sea were too strong.

Alan would eventually report for duty in the RAN on 3 March 1943. The Second World War still had plenty of time left in it to destroy him.

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Not all those destined for a life on board the *Australia* looked up to men as their primary role models. For Keith Levy, a quiet, sandy-haired boy from Malvern, the great source of inspiration was his sister Shirley.

Shirley was two years his senior, confident, athletic, a good-looking girl with a seemingly encyclopaedic knowledge of music. Since their parents were busy running the family business, Shirley spent hours looking after her little brother. She often played him music on their father's gramophone; even before he could walk, Keith was mesmerised by the machine's brass horn, which dominated their sitting room like some strange flower petrified mid-bloom. Later, they would play make-believe games together, sometimes in the house, sometimes in the surrounding streets. Shirley's imagination guided their adventures: they would be pirates, explorers, celebrated performers under the lights of some imagined opera. By the time he was old enough to begin school, Keith would elicit the raised eyebrows and smirks of his mates at Shelford Primary School by talking ceaselessly of his hero, who was not a footy player but a girl two classrooms away.

As it happened, he wasn't to stay in that environment for long. From his first day at school, Keith effortlessly completed the work his teachers put before him. Not that he was boastful or arrogant – he would complete his writing or arithmetic tasks and sit quietly, thinking about the sounds and interactions of different instruments

until his teacher came by and noticed that he had finished. After specialised testing and consultation with his parents, Keith found himself transferred to Melbourne Grammar School's Grimwade House, and eventually to the senior school.

Though he would always see Shirley as his closest friend, it was at Melbourne Grammar that he finally found a place he could fit in. He joined the school choir and so impressed his instructors that they were soon entrusting him with solo performances open to the public. His mother, father and sister would always attend, and sometimes even members of their broader circle. This included a close friend of Keith's father, the improbably named Ned Kelly, a thoughtful and caring man who would later become another of Keith's role models.

Keith's quiet nature was balanced somewhat when he became close friends with Ian Debenham, who was as much of a larrikin as one can be within the confines of such an elite institution as Melbourne Grammar. The straight-laced Keith would be reduced to tears by Ian's impersonations of students and staff, his absurd stories, his insistence on sharing foul jokes and opinions of the public-school girls they would see when they caught the rattling trams into the city together.

Nobody ever seemed to be able to find anything that could challenge Keith. He excelled in all subject areas; he was polite and humble but assertive, someone who couldn't be pushed around by the over-inflated sons of the ruling class. Even his own father was unable to browbeat him. When he tried to steer his son toward a university degree in accountancy, hoping to prepare him for future contributions to the family business, Keith instead enrolled himself in a musical appreciation course. Again he excelled.

Then the war started.

Unlike Tame, Shinkfield and Fenton, Keith Levy had never considered a life at sea, or any form of career in the armed services. He could do it – he was self-aware enough to be confident in his own abilities – but he much preferred musical instruments to instruments of destruction.

Still, like many young men of his generation, he felt the weight of responsibility and social expectation. Resigned to the inevitability, he chose the navy over the army or air force. Besides, by that time Ned Kelly had thrown his hat in the ring and become a naval officer.

Given Keith's stellar record as a student, he was soon snapped up for officer training.

As luck would have it, one of the smiling faces that greeted him as a trainee officer at Flinders Naval Depot belonged to none other than his friend Ian Debenham. They commenced their training alongside Des Shinkfield and Alan Fenton. Eventually all four would find themselves on board the *Australia* as junior officers.

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The childhoods of other sailors are murkier, less accessible. This is because men like Albert Gordon and Edward Elias didn't want their stories known. Both consciously disappeared from history after their time on the *Australia*.

I eventually found a close associate of one of the men, and he admitted that the ex-sailor he looked up to for so long had spent years spinning a web of lies. By the time his young friend discovered the truth, the murderer was already long dead of natural causes.

What can be said is that a man by the name of Edward Joseph Elias was born on 19 September 1918 in Newtown, New South Wales. In those years, Newtown was beginning to fall into decrepitude; by the time of the Great Depression, parts of the suburb were little more than overcrowded slums. Indeed, it may well be that Elias's height of only five feet four inches was a sign of early deprivation. Whatever the case, a prosecutor would later explain that he had 'no father to control him'. Whether this contributed to his later brutality is a matter for debate. A labourer by trade, Elias volunteered to join the navy in 1936.

Barely a month after Elias was born, another baby came screaming into the world on the opposite side of the globe, in Copnor, a suburb of Portsmouth in England. Albert Ronald Gordon began to think of joining the navy before he'd even started school. In part, he was inspired by his father, also named Albert, who had served with distinction throughout the Great War. Little Albert's older brother Frank had similar aspirations. Though the young men yearned to fight with the British, they cheerfully adjusted that dream when the Gordons relocated to Melbourne.

By all accounts, theirs was a loving family, but Albert's time with them was tragically cut short. He was only fifteen when both

his parents died within a week of one another. In early September 1934, his mother Mary became ill with influenza; her condition deteriorated to severe bronchitis, and her husband too contracted the disease. Mary died on 15 September and Albert four days later.

The effect this had on the young Albert must have been devastating. Frank had already enlisted in the navy, so he was no longer around to protect his little brother. To Albert, the world must have suddenly seemed a very cruel and lonely place. Still, he bounced back. He became a salesman, then himself joined the navy in 1936.

His gift of the gab would serve him well, first as a murderer, then as a defendant, and eventually as a family man with a dark secret buried half a lifetime away.

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The ship on which these men would serve was the third vessel to bear the name *Australia*. The first was an armoured cruiser built in 1886. Ironically, it never once travelled to the country that provided its name, serving primarily in the Mediterranean Sea and the British home fleet before being scrapped in 1905.

The next *Australia* was to prove more significant in the gradual establishment of Australia's national identity. Commissioned in 1913, the new battlecruiser became the first flagship of the Royal Australian Navy. During the Great War, it achieved battle honours at Rabaul and in the North Sea, and acted as guard ship to the German SMS *Hindenburg* after the signing of the armistice.

There is, however, a dark side to the second *Australia's* story. The ship had a perpetual reputation for low morale. An astronomical number of its sailors faced disciplinary charges during the Great War, making the ship's company one of the most unruly in the history of the RAN. While it could be argued that such 'bad cultures' are often self-perpetuating, the men's frustration wasn't entirely unreasonable. Illness rates on board were above normal, shore leave was minimal, pay was often delayed, British officers seemed to be promoted more quickly than Australians, and there were complaints of poor-quality food. Perhaps naively, men were also angry about missing out on key skirmishes they felt they should have been involved in, most notably the cataclysmic Battle

of Jutland. In that action, 250 Australian, Canadian, British and German ships had clashed, resulting in the loss of well over eight thousand lives.

This seething undercurrent of hostility came to a head in early June 1919, when the *Australia* prepared to sail again after its 'welcome home' visit to Fremantle. Feeling their stay of only three days to be unfair, a number of men approached the captain, Claude Cumberlege – an Englishman – and asked for an additional day in their home port. This was promptly refused.

In true Eureka Stockade tradition, nearly a hundred men assembled on the deck in protest. Soon the stokers had abandoned their posts, effectively immobilising the ship. Some men wore black handkerchiefs over their faces to conceal their identities, knowing that there would be severe disciplinary consequences for what was effectively a mutiny. Although a strong, legally threatening speech from the captain soon dispersed the mob, it was still necessary to order personnel from other parts of the ship to man the boiler rooms and get the *Australia* under way.

This incident came to be known as the HMAS *Australia* mutiny. A number of ringleaders were eventually court-martialled, but public sympathy for the accused meant that punishments were mostly lenient, the most severe being two years hard labour (later reduced significantly as a result of government appeals to the Admiralty).

The second *Australia* was scuttled off Sydney heads in 1924. Almost immediately, planning commenced for a replacement, and the navy decided on a 10,000-tonne cruiser whose primary armament would be eight eight-inch guns (this measurement referring to barrel diameter) in four twin turrets. These would be augmented by four four-inch guns and a series of two-pound autocannons, as well as miscellaneous machine guns and torpedo tubes. With a crew complement of more than eight hundred, the final HMAS *Australia* was a floating city filled with lethal potential.

In 1928, it entered service, a ship that bore the name of a fledgling nation still reeling from the traumas of its first taste of global conflict. In eleven years – by which time the *Australia* would already be outdated – the world was once again in a state of total war.

THE DROWNED MAN



HMAS *Australia* (courtesy State Library of Victoria, image H91.325/2311)