

THE CEMETORIAN

THE BOXER UPRISING

THE DEATH OF A BLUEJACKET

Number 54 Wheatland Road, Malvern is a neat picturesque Queen Anne-style home. When Lily Laura Robertson *née* Locke (c1879-1935) rented the residence in June 1910 from the estate of George Smith, it was the only building on the south-side between Lysterville Avenue and Tooronga Road. Located in a quiet secluded area away from the hustle and bustle of inner Melbourne, the home was to await the return to Australia of Lily's husband. But fate, so often the arbiter of the best laid plans was to leave Lily a widow with a five year old son.

William George Robertson (1858-1910) was born at Liverpool, England on 13 January, possibly 1854, the son of William Robertson (d 1901) and his wife Ann *née* Milne (d 1887) who arrived in Melbourne on 4 March 1858 on the *Merchant Prince*.

Educated at Neil's private college in Carlton, Robertson was understood to have enlisted in the Victorian Navy on 26 September 1870 and may have been one of the crewmen who accompanied HMVS *Cerberus* during its voyage from England.

He probably left the Navy to gain experience as an engineer where he worked with the shipping company Huddart Parker & Co principally onboard *s.s. Wendouree*.

Described as 5 foot 2½ inches tall, slight build, hazel eyes and fair hair, in January 1890,

Robertson re-joined the Navy as Engineer serving on the *Cerberus* and *Countess of Hopetoun*. As a member of the Permanent Naval Forces, he volunteered for service with the Victorian Naval Contingent to join the Allied forces in China - Australia's first involvement in war on terrorism. His diary (see insert) is historically significant as one of the few contemporary accounts of the conflict. It was while on active service that Robertson was promoted Chief



During his time with the Victorian Naval Contingent to suppress the Boxer Uprising from 21 July 1900 to 25 April 1901, William Robertson maintained a diary which reveals much about the man. His breezy jottings show a candid mind of insightful observations and a humorous wit which reads unlike any other war diary. On passing a boat of natives on the way to China (14 Aug 1900) - "*They probably wanted to exchange bread fruit and bananas for missionaries, as they infinitely prefer roast missionary to other delicacy*". On the Chinese, whom he admired for their engineering ingenuity (29 Aug 1900) - "*...when the Chinese learn the lessons we are teaching them - and they are apt pupils - they will be great trade rivals*". On military life (15 Oct 1900) - "*This is a hog's life. I have not had my clothes off for days, but this afternoon...I entered into a contract with a Chinese boy to wash me down daily with warm water and carbolic soap...The boy will in time become a bloated Chinese capitalist*". Ultimately, the only shot Robertson fired in anger during his time in China was to ward off a "*...gentleman who had intended to decorate me with the order of the boot*" (17 Oct 1900). (Source: Diary of William Robertson held in possession of grandson Ian Robertson)

Engineer on 22 February 1901.

Nineteen hundred and nine ushered a new era of naval defence. Australian patriotism and national pride was no longer satisfied with the annual Imperial naval subsidy for protection of the Pacific seas. As *The Age* editorial noted;

"Only an ignoble race, one sunk in luxury or sloth, would in the hour of trial look for succor [sic] and refuge from hired ships, even though manned by our brothers, while we stood helplessly by and made no attempt to strike a blow for ourselves".

In February 1909, the Fisher Labour government ordered the building of three River Class destroyers in Scotland. Then at the Imperial Defence Conference in July, a shift in policy from the Admiralty and a rise of the German war machine settled the issue.

As the most experienced and competent engineer in the Australian Navy, it was decided that Robertson should benefit from being involved in the construction of HMAS *Yarra* by Denny Bros of Dumbarton. (The other destroyer, HMAS *Parramatta* was built by the Fairfield Shipbuilding and Engineering Co. in Govan). This would enable Robertson to oversee the re-assembling at Cockatoo Island, Sydney of the third destroyer initially built in Scotland, HMAS *Warrego* paving the way for another three - HMAS *Huon*, *Torrens* and *Swan* - to be constructed entirely in Australia under his supervision.

And so on 27 May 1909, along with Lieutenants Feakes and Biddlecombe, Robertson set sail for Scotland. A pragmatic man, three days before his departure,

William Robertson in July 1900 before departing for China

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54 Wheatland Road, Malvern. The home that was awaiting Robertson's return.

Robertson wrote out his last will and testament bequeathing his estate to his wife Lily whom he married at Essendon on 11 September 1901. Their only child, William Allan Robertson (1905-62) was born on 17 August 1905.

With construction of the *Yarra* and *Parramatta* in earnest, they were launched on the River Clyde on 9 February and 9 April 1910 respectively. By 10 September with the destroyers complete, the naval force under Captain Frederick Tickell was ready to set sail for Melbourne. Lieutenant-Commander Thomas Biddlecombe was given command of the *Yarra*. They left Portsmouth nine days later sailing through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean stopping at Singapore (2 November) where repairs were made to a bent propeller, Broome (15 November), Fremantle (23 November) and Adelaide (7 December).

After an absence of 18 months, Robertson was eager to be home. In his letters to his sister Jessie Semmens *née* Robertson (1865-1955), he “repeatedly expressed pleasure at his expected return”. Indeed, Lily travelled by train to Adelaide and spent two days with her husband before returning to Melbourne.

Arriving in Victorian waters on the morning of Friday 9 December, the ships remained at anchor in Portland all day. Dignitaries formally welcomed the crew and a large number of people inspected the 700-tonne modern war vessels. A wireless message was sent to Williamstown indicating the fleet would depart Portland at 11:00pm that evening for the final leg of the 14,322 mile journey.

On Saturday, the people of Melbourne and Queenscliff put on a gay spectacular to celebrate the arrival. Some 1,150 guests crowded onboard the *Courier* forming the Commonwealth welcome party were joined by the *Lady Loch* and *Osprey* each with over 200 State dignitaries. The flotilla left Port Melbourne pier in the morning sailing down Port Philip Bay where the destroyers were scheduled to enter at 12:30pm. Up until now, the voyage had been described by Captain Tickell as “singularly uneventful”. That was until tragedy struck.

William Robertson was conscientious in his work who left nothing to chance. During the voyage, the steering gear on the *Yarra* had caused the crew some trouble. While Robertson “did not take to himself any blame for the wrong working of the gear”, he would nonetheless worry over his work. Eight miles south of Port Phillip Heads and steaming at 13 knots, the sea was moderate

with a slight swell. At 11:56am, Able-Seaman John Doherty spoke briefly to Robertson who was sitting on the tiller casing smoking. Doherty disappeared for a while and returned in time to hear a splash in the water. It was Robertson. To the cries of “man overboard!” every bluejacket swung into action and “full speed astern” was relayed immediately to the engine room. Within four-and-a-half minutes the body of their much loved officer was rescued from the unforgiving waters of Bass Strait.

In the sick-bay room, Able-Seaman Norman Sangster used artificial resuscitation until the arrival of Able-Seaman George Randall, the sick berth steward from *Parramatta*. With the third boiler in action, at a rate of 25 knots, the *Yarra* made haste for a doctor with the *Parramatta* astern. Inside the Heads, signal flags fluttered from above the rigging calling for a doctor onboard the *Courier* to the ignorance of the distinguished guests. By 12:45pm, Drs. James and Esler boarded the destroyer but it was all in vain. Robertson was a walking time bomb. With severe coronary artery disease and evidence of brain disease, he was liable to collapse at any time.

As the ships entered the Alfred Graving Dock a little after 3:15pm, some thousands of well-wishers had gathered in Williamstown to welcome the

arrival and hear the speeches. Amongst those in the crowd was Lily Robertson oblivious to the events. In his speech, the acting Prime Minister, Billy Hughes echoed patriotic sentiments of the nation when he said;

“We, as a nation, realise that to achieve our destiny, to be left free to foster the arts of peace, we must be prepared for war. We must not shut our eyes, and be blind to the facts of life. We have to face the world as it was, to be ready to protect that which we held dear”.

With the passing of the *Naval Defence Act* on 25 November 1910 thus creating the Commonwealth Naval Forces, the death of Lieutenant-Engineer William Robertson marked the first casualty of what was later renamed the Royal Australian Navy in October 1911. He was buried with full military honours on Monday 12 December 1910 and sadly lies in an unadorned grave (CofE “T” 134).

“Thunder pealed in the afternoon while from the Brighton railway

“But fate, so often the arbiter of the best laid plans was to leave Lily a widow with a five year old son”.



HMAS *Yarra* (left) and *Parramatta* arriving at Alfred Graving Dock, Williamstown, 10 December 1910

