

A Brief History of HMAS MELVILLE

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The shore establishment HMAS MELVILLE was originally a naval depot - named HMAS PENGUIN V - which opened in Darwin in January 1935 with a primary mission of operating as a naval reserve facility. Darwin was also a regular port of call for HMA ships, in particular the hydrographic ships GERANIUM and MORESBY. In 1939 some miles down "the Track" - the Stuart Highway, which was the only road south - the Navy established a Naval Wireless Station, named WT Station Coonawarra. This eventually became HMAS COONAWARRA, but not until 1970. On 1 August 1940 HMAS MELVILLE was commissioned.

By the time of its commissioning, the needs of wartime Darwin had seen naval facilities grow until they were spread throughout the town. The original offices had grown to encompass accommodation facilities, a refuelling station, administrative buildings and harbour amenities. HMAS MELVILLE was a busy place during World War II, surviving the 64 Japanese bombing raids and servicing hundreds of ships. The RAN took over buildings all over Darwin as the need became more urgent - one included Brown's Mart, which saw service as a torpedo workshop, and which still stands today in Smith Street. All of these buildings, tanks, and dumps became part of HMAS MELVILLE.

Post-war the demand for inner-city real estate grew, and gradually the space occupied by the RAN within the city diminished. Gradually facilities were re-located to the Wireless Station. The main naval administrative building was retained however as headquarters for the Naval Officer Commanding Northern Australia (NOCNA). With the commissioning of HMAS COONAWARRA on 16 March 1970, for some years there were two RAN commissioned establishments in Darwin.

On 25 December 1974 the main buildings comprising HMAS MELVILLE were destroyed by Cyclone Tracy, which struck Darwin with destructive winds in excess of 240 kph. Captain Eric Johnston - NOCNA - and his staff had taken shelter there. NOCNA had control of naval buildings at Larrakeyah Barracks, communications links with his four Darwin-based patrol boats, and also with Canberra. This link was lost at about half past midnight on the morning of the 25th, as the Operations Room was destroyed. At the height of the storm the staff took to the vault, which seemed to offer the strongest walls. Collapsing debris buried one sailor, who remained trapped until first

light, when he was dug out unhurt. Meanwhile, on the harbour, one of the patrol boats had been driven ashore, and HMAS ARROW had been sunk underneath the main wharf with the loss of two sailors.

Immediately post-Cyclone Tracy, naval personnel were re-located to NOCNA's residence of Admiralty House on the Esplanade. This "traditional" BCG Burnett-designed house, became the centre for the reconstruction of Darwin following the Cyclone. Captain Johnston and his wife Joan moved to the flat beneath the house and the yard became a temporary Navy cookhouse, serving hundreds of meals a week. The kitchen clock was even borrowed to mark Zulu time in a temporary Communications Centre.

Captain Johnston went on to supervise Operation Navy Help Darwin, and returned to Darwin some years later in triumph, to become an Administrator of the Northern Territory. Co-incidentally, HMAS MELVILLE's buildings had been rebuilt as the administrative headquarters for the NT Administrator. Admiralty House soon passed out of Navy ownership, eventually becoming a tearoom and for a short time home to the Darwin Club. HMAS Melville was formally decommissioned on 21 August 1975. In 1998, a new RAN Hydrographic ship is being launched which will carry the name.

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