HMAS MELVILLE was first commissioned in August 1, 1940. The shore establishment had started off its life as a naval depot, established in Darwin in January 1935 as a naval reserve facility. Commanded by Lieutenant-Commander HP Jarrett, RANR, the depot came under the command of the Naval Reserve district of Queensland. It is presumed that the establishment was named after one of the two large islands to Darwin’s north, Bathurst and Melville islands.

Darwin was not visited by many naval ships during the 1930’s, but the town was a regular port of call for HMA hydrographic ships GERANIUM and MORSEBY.

Down “The Track” southwards, the Stuart Highway, in 1939 the Navy had established a Naval Wireless Station. This eventually became HMAS COONAWARRA in 1970.

In 1937, the Naval District of the Northern Territory became a separate district, and the first District Naval Officer, LCDR JH Walker, RAN, was appointed. He arrived in Port Darwin with his wife to find the naval residence had just been built, but it was not furnished. Conditions were extremely uncomfortable, and it was eight months before the Walkers acquired a refrigerator. LCDR Walker, who must have had a valuable sense of humour, hired an old car for five pounds a week as his “flagship” - he had no ships to command. One Christmas he distinguished the naval presence in Darwin by “commissioning” an old truck as HMAS PENGUIN, and with bicycles as “destroyers” steered his flotilla to Christmas dinner through the Darwin streets.

By the time of its commissioning, the naval facilities, located mainly on Darwin’s Esplanade in the middle of Darwin - at 56 Mitchell St, one kilometre from the wharves - had grown to become accommodation facilities, a refueling facility, 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 ship visits through the port. The RAN took over buildings all over Darwin as the need became more urgent, and all of these buildings became part of the organisation 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. Eventually the decision was taken to relocate much of the naval facilities to the Wireless Station. The main naval building was retained as the headquarters for the Naval Officer Commanding Northern Australia (NOCNA) and consequently COONAWARRA was commissioned on 16 March, 1970.

On 25 December 1974 the remaining buildings comprising HMAS Melville were destroyed by Cyclone Tracy, which struck Darwin with winds in excess of 240 k/ph. HMAS ARROW, a patrol boat, was lost during the storm with two sailors killed. The resident NOCNA at the time, Captain Eric Johnston, together with his staff, took shelter in the vault of HMAS MELVILLE, and survived the storm. The buildings of MELVILLE, however, were destroyed.

The many sites once occupied by HMAS MELVILLE are now claimed by modern buildings which have been part of the rapid expansion of Darwin. HMAS COONAWARRA is a growing base to the south of the city, but the Fleet Base component occupies land within the Army base of Larrakeyah Barracks. A Navy workboat based there carries the name of “Melville”.

Sources:

Books

Files, articles
Royal Australian Navy files, HMAS Coonawarra registry, various dates.

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