John Hyde was a New Zealander, an F.R.C.S. London (?), who, in earlier times, specialised in bowel operations. His thoroughness bordered on the extreme as was demonstrated when joined a dancing academy as a beginner and finished up by winning a ballroom championship while partnering his teacher. He spoke rather quickly, which is unusual in a man who spoke softly and he had the knack of being completely at ease in Vice Regal company or any other in which he found himself. He had a wonderful sense of humour and took an impish delight in knocking over hardened drinkers with his cocktails. He was an accepted authority on wines but just why he chose the mantle of a somewhat poorly paid ships doctor, no one knows.

When the raid started he prepared the dispensary as best he could before joining a number of us who were sheltering in the saloon vestibule. The first warning had come in the form of a near-miss, which caused some under water damage in the engine room.

After fifteen minutes or so, I developed an acute attack of claustrophobia and went out on deck while the doctor and a few of the others moved down the stairs to ‘D’ deck. A minute later the vestibule took a direct hit.

I make no attempt to describe the utter destruction except to say that some incendiary material had been used and the whole pile of rubble was alight. A minute later she received another in almost the same spot, followed by a third some seconds later. Hearing no more dive bombers, I ceased trying to claw my way into a four inch teak deck and set about doing something. (When the first bomb dropped cadet Knight and the doctor each became pinned down by the legs and were unable to move. While in this desperate situation the doctor was wondering if death by burning was as horrifyingly painful as his medical training had let him to believe. The second bomb shook up the whole burning mass so much that they were able to free themselves and hobble to relative safety.)

On the other side of the deck, my first discovery was the Captain lying in the scuppers. Cadet Kent showed up so I sent him off to get the doctor and immediately afterwards I dispatched cadet Rothery to the engine room to get the engineers to start the pumps in an endeavour to put out the fire. He came back with the news that the pumps could not be operated, so now it was a race against time. A burst oil main under the wharf was spewing crude oil by the ton, something had set it alight and the early ebb tide was taking it slowly along to our point of escape. The ‘doc’, visibly distressed, attended the Captain but it was too late - he died a few moments later.

By this time the list was such that it would have been impossible to launch the starboard boats even if I could have spared the hands to do it. Every one in sight was needed to help the wounded. The doctor attended many victims, one of whom we managed to dig out from the saloon rubble - with a thumb and index finger of one hand hanging uselessly on the end of a thread of skin. The doctor snipped them off, threw them over the side and told the wharfie (?) to get going. The last time I saw him he was swimming in fine style.

On reaching the end of the saloon deck I came upon an unrecognisable figure covered in blood from head to toe - it was cadet Knight. When he realised that he was not alone and that help was at hand he started to ‘give’ at the knees. I half seriously told him that he could not collapse just now because so many needed attention and he would become a bloody nuisance.
I still marvel at his response. You could actually see the resolve moving through him as he straightened up under his own steam, made for the improvised gangway.

At this point we heard a cry of “water, water” coming from the other side of the ship. In spite of his wound, the doc was right on my heels and it was to discover cadet Stobo (we carried four cadets) sitting on the deck with his hands supporting the weight of his torso - one leg below the knee smashed to pulp and half of his intestines on his lap. In this condition he was dragged himself about one hundred feet from where he suffered his injuries.

The doctor now gave his undivided attention to the boy. A plank was used to support the leg and sheets from a cabin were used to secure the rest of him and make the unfortunate lad as comfortable as was possible at the time. After we got the boy ashore, I had to leave them to attend to other things, so we lost contact for a while.

By this time the burning oil had passed the gangway, so we were actually moving about over the flames. After satisfying myself that there were no living beings left on board, I went to the end of the wharf, kicking off my white shoes, threw my cap into the water and, like Lots’ wife, felt compelled to turn and view the awful spectacle.

The fire was getting uncomfortable close to the end of the wharf so diving into a sea of crude oil was not a difficult choice. After swimming for a few minutes I spotted a Qantas (?) launch not far off and a spirited dash of a minute or so enabled me to intercept and grab her stem. The cox decided that he could make better time by stopping and taking me on board than by leaving me where I was. After climbing in I was delighted to see that cadet Knight was already there together with a couple of our Chinese crew.

When standing in the launch I was able to see the doctor and his charge about a hundred or so yards out into the harbour and had no difficulty in getting the cox to alter course and pick them up. When he saw the boy’s condition he decided to take us to the *H.M.A.S. Platypus* and then come back again. I helped Knight up the gangway with a fireman’s lift while many willing navy hands took Stobo to the sick bay. A P.O. directed me and Knight to a companionway that led down to the wardroom, which had been converted to a temporary sick bay. On laying him down I said to him “O.K. Knight, you can do what you like now”. He literally went out like a light!

The Navy medics were wonderful, I am sure our doctor appreciated their efforts for he was now showing signs of collapse. After all, he was not a youngster, having been a Major in the first war. Unfortunately Stobo was beyond their help, he died an hour or so after boarding. A tragic side to this story was the fact that his own father had been lost at sea a few months earlier and the boy was symbolically taking on his father’s role. It was his first trip at sea. One can only imagine how his mother felt. Knight and the doctor were transferred to the hospital ship Manunda that evening.

Later on I had the pleasure of sailing with John Hyde for more than three years and during this period he told me about his time in that ship. To say that the treatment they received was perfunctory would be praise indeed. They were down in the bowls of the ship somewhere, until one day a senior surgeon, while on his rounds, stopped and said “Don’t I know you from somewhere?” J.H. replied “Yes, In Yvonne’s Cafe in Vienna in 1912 when you were so drunk we had to leave you under the table - Mitzi said she would look after you”. A deck cabin was immediately laid on, complete with Royal treatment - but J.H. would not move an inch until similar treatment had been afforded Knight. After that the trip was quite pleasant.

I got ashore from the Platypus about four in the afternoon and found my way to Burns Philp’s office where quite a number of the crew had gathered. The manager had few ideas and little information, but we did glean the fact that a new hospital had been opened a short time before and that the old one was vacant - “But” he warned us “No one is allowed in there”. We found it easily enough and promptly staked our claim to part of it. All it contained were beds and mattresses and a few mosquito nets. I returned to the office with the idea of getting some food for the crew but the manager had one of his ideas and it wasn’t the same as mine. He would
not even accept my signature as senior surviving officer of the ship. I can’t imagine who broke into his bulk store later that night. Whoever it was didn’t leave his name.

Some of the crew had minor injuries but they did not go near any hospital that day as we were all well aware that they would be far too busy getting the injured to the Manunda and treating other more serious cases. The following day they all received prompt and friendly treatment and came away feeling that in spite of all the havoc some people actually cared about those who only had minor wounds. I would claim that as a large plus for the N.T. nursing service.

I spent the next day thumbing lifts to Bagot and Berrima and other places, trying to locate our surviving Chinese and the final tally showed that we lost eleven Europeans out of twenty two, and twenty five Chinese out of one hundred and four.

It was more than two days before we got regular food. No one wanted to take us over. The Navy had no spare food (it was all in the Neptuna) and the civilian administration had broken down completely. We were finally rescued by - of all people, the A.R.P.! We each received one piece of bread (if you were within thirty of the head of the queue you got a little butter) and a ladle of baked beans. You got the same issue for dinner - there was no lunch.

In the early hours one morning, we had discharged a ship of lorries and other military equipment, returned her to her anchorage and were coming back when we pulled alongside a small vessel to pick up some badly burned victims including a doctor (I think they came from the Don Isidoro on Melville Island). I had forgotten just what he said but the substance of it was that we were a mob of loafers with no sense of responsibility, we were taking up space that he wanted for fighting men and if we did not get out he would throw us into the water. I think he might have even called into question the sleeping habits of our parents, but I am not sure. Strangely enough, not one of us uttered a word. I think it was because the outburst was so irrational that we sensed he was under great stress. As it turned out, he had been working for three days almost non stop and with no sleep at all. I met him a few days later - he was charming - and I said not a word. He was truly a dedicated doctor.

Ballots had been drawn for seats on the first train out of Darwin and cadet Kent had secured one but he relinquished it to join me in helping to man the Tulagi - cadet Rothery came too. We left with a very mixed crew about midnight on the 28th February, I think. She carried her own Master while the Mate from the sunken “British Motorist” signed on as Mate, I filled the Second mate’s spot and the third Officer from the B.M. came as third Mate. The Tulagi’s Purser took on the job of chief cook and her second radio operator filled in as second cook and baker - and I can vouch for the bread he made with Enos. The Tulagi’s own engineers were all there and three from the Neptuna acted as supernumeraries, as there were no greasers or other engineroom crew. The other two radio men did all the radio watches. The two cadets from the Neptuna acted as wheel hands while the navy loaned us two more. One of them could steer, but we had to teach the other. The Navy also gave us three lookout men. One was a bomb-happy E.R.A, the second was a W.O. with a chronic appendix and the ulcerated legs, and the third had to be seen to be believed. The navy also provided a spare man - he had never been afloat before and with this merry mix we reached Sydney.

There have been many articles and books published - by journal and others, much of it is sheer rubbish. In “Darwin 1942” Timothy Hall states that the Neptuna was ‘loaded down to the gunwhale with explosives’. Had this been so, Darwin would have been another Halifax of the first war or a Bombay of the last one. No, so far as I can calculate, she carried no more than eighty tons of explosives. As for the wharfies who ‘felt rumblings under their feet’ just before she blew up, I am quite safe in saying that the nearest wharfie at the time was the one who was minus a finger and thumb. When I last saw him he was swimming to such purpose that I was convinced that not only did he intend to get away from the Neptuna, but from the Port of Darwin, too!

M.V. Neptuna – Before the attack