



THE DEATH OF GRELKA (1910-55) — REMEMBERED IN HER CUP FOR JUNIORS

Commodore Professor Mark Ledingham Mitchell (1938-45) was very generous, especially to junior sailing. In 1927 he imported a motor vessel named *Grelka*. She was built in Southampton in 1910 for Baron von Bissing of the German Embassy, and she twice won the annual motor boat race from Dover to Cowes, but in 1914 she was seized by the Royal Navy as wartime booty. She was 55 feet (16.8 m) long but with a beam of only 10'6" (3.2 m) and a draft of 4'6" (1.4 m).

Sir Mark Mitchell owned a house on Strawbridge Point opposite the wharf at American River, with two piles to which *Grelka* could be braced. For more than ten years her sailing master was Jack Wood, (Squadron Quarterly June 1994 and passim). Squadron Quarterly of March 2001 has his account of what happened at the end.

'The engine room of *Grelka* housed an old 55 horsepower Parsons marine engine, which started on petrol and then ran on kerosene. The engine was in first-

class condition It had both magneto and battery ignition, with two sets of spark plugs. Fuel was stored in two 100-gallon tanks on either side of the engine. There was also a two-horsepower Lister lighting plant of 32 volts and its accompanying batteries, which was kept in a lead-lined box on the port side of the engine. A 12-volt generator ran off the engine for the starting batteries.

'The engine room was amidships. It was originally waterproof and fireproof, as at each end there was a steel bulkhead. The

Barcoo HMAS aground, Glenelg 1948





Mitchell Mark L.

only entrance was from on deck, through a hatch in the skylight and down a steel ladder. Unfortunately, however, an old paid hand who looked after the yacht in the early days and kept her in immaculate condition, was reputed to get a little tired of pumping her out from three positions. To remedy this he knocked lubber holes in the bulkheads, so he had to use only one pump. There were two ventilators to the engine room, one on either side of the wheelhouse, which admitted air to the front of the engine ...

'Grelka left American River on 25 January 1955 ... She carried a 11ft 6 in dinghy on a davit. There were three other crew members. We were to meet the owner at Antechamber Bay ... and it was arranged to pick them up early in the morning and then to proceed to the Pages ... to [fish] for sharks. Towards evening, HMAS Barcoo, a survey frigate, entered Antechamber Bay and also anchored there.

'Early next morning (26 January) we picked up the shore guests, but the owner decided to go ashore and fish for bream in Chapman River, a freshwater stream which enters the Bay. We had an uneventful run out to the Pages on a hot day of about 95° F. The wind was slight, although there was a long swell running on the sea, as it always does when out of the lee of Kangaroo Island. After anchoring for an hour or so near the Pages, we weighed to return, at about 1030.

'A contented crew lounged on Grelka's deck as we cruised back. The engine was throbbing reassuringly, the sun shone brightly, and the helmsman sang lustily at the wheel. Suddenly, BANG! — a terrific explosion flashed from the direction of the engine room. I ran forward, and looked down the hatch into a raging inferno. All hands raced to procure fire

extinguishers, of which we carried three of foam type and one of pyrene. One of the former was in the engine room, and it would be suicidal to venture down there. All the others were played on the fire, but it had spread forward through the bilge. Flames were shooting from the forecabin hatch. We could see that the main fuel tanks (which were nearly full) had not caught fire yet. They could blow up at any moment, so we lowered the dinghy. All hands except myself and Max Wall (the mate) clambered into the dinghy, which hung astern. Max and I tried to put buckets of water on the flames, but this only encouraged them. All hope of rescuing the yacht had ended. The extinguishers were empty, and the fuel tanks were set to explode.

'HMAS Barcoo was only smoke on the horizon, after leaving Antechamber Bay that morning. We could expect no immediate help from her, even if she saw our smoke. There was nothing for it but to abandon the yacht. Max Wall and I climbed overboard and swam to the dinghy. It was by no means certain that it would hold seven people. It did! Once more we were afloat, and we decided to make for Cape St Albans, being the nearest point of land, and we could not gamble on the Barcoo coming to our rescue. The time was about 1115.

'We started our outboard engine and headed for Cape St Albans. At this stage, another terrific explosion came from the burning yacht, accompanied by huge columns of black smoke. Probably the main fuel tanks had just exploded, confirming that we left just in time.

'We were about half a mile from shore when we saw Barcoo closing us quickly. At about 100 yards out she signalled us to turn round and head for the ship. We didn't do that for long, because we were in another sort of trouble. On our stern tagged an 18-foot shark. By this time the outboard had stopped for good and we had to row. Cape St Albans was a lot closer than the Barcoo, so it was to the Cape we headed, with the shark silently following. He kept nudging the dinghy transom with

his head, then he went on either side of the dinghy and bumped the oars with his head. He then moved underneath the dinghy, presumably to upset it and started to bump the underside. At this stage we had to do something to distract him, so I dropped the outboard engine over the stern, and luckily he followed it down. The oars were applied with great vigor for the last hundred yards, and we headed the dinghy into a crevice in the rocks on Cape St Albans, where we scrambled ashore.

'HMAS Barcoo lowered a launch and picked us up. We were treated very handsomely by the officers and crew of the Barcoo, and we will always be grateful to them. We were landed by launch at Penneshaw, and the Barcoo went back to the burning yacht, arriving as she sank, after a few shells were fired to make sure she wouldn't be a menace to shipping in a narrow passage.

'The reason for the explosion on Grelka will never be known. One theory is that a fuel pipe fatigued and fractured, causing a leak. Due to the hot weather and inadequate ventilation to the engine room, a spark from the brushes on the 12-volt generator could have ignited fuel vapour.'

HMAS Barcoo became notorious when she grounded north of Glenelg on 11 April 1948, in the great storm in which the jetty and aquarium were destroyed. Her captain was ashore at the time, for which he was court-martialled. Decrepit wooden swimming boxes survived in the general area now occupied by the Adelaide Sailing Club. An old woman came out of one, waving a hurricane lantern and calling, 'You can't come any further! It's all land here!' The vessel was eventually refloated, amid great public interest and significant humiliation for the RAN.

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