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A Middle Class Man: An Autobiography

Chapter 21: The Martindale

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After I spent the better part of a year instructing in motor engines and cleaning mess decks - interspersed with a stint of watch-keeping - the great draft arrived. Six Victorian ratings were to be drafted onto HMAS Martindale to head for New Guinea despite the fact that most of that zone had already been cleared of Japanese. I knew I was going as 'engineer' and that my bank colleague Don Deany would also be coming. Though the sub-lieutenant in charge, a South Australian, was reported to be a good navigator and a tough disciplinarian, we knew we could handle such a situation. In the end the crew was only half Victorian and half South Australian, which slightly altered the balance of power because the Victorian NAPs had been thoroughly trained.

HMAS Martindale was an auxiliary yacht of sixty-six-foot length which had been built for a millionaire grazier. Its hull was jarrah with teak decks and fiddleback blackwood fitting. When I first saw her flared bow, cruiser stern, and flush decks complete with two fourteen-foot dinghies, I was simultaneously excited and nonplussed. I thought she would have been bigger but for the fact that so much of the midship section was taken up by a superb engine room which even included a bunk and a Heads. The motor was a large Gardner diesel - about which I knew nothing - but I was told by the motor mechanic whose place I took not to worry because nothing ever went wrong with it. The Martindale shared the pride place in the NAP fleet with the Lauriana of Sydney, which preceded her to New Guinea and was credited with disposing of half a midget submarine in Sydney Harbour and half an aircraft in Milne Bay.



The Martindale in the 1930s

Our version of the submarine incident was somewhat different, however. It consisted of the Lauriana finding a new buoy, near the Sydney heads, which she tried to tie up to; but the buoy kept shifting as she approached it, and finally disappeared from sight altogether. This phenomenon was reported to base. Then it emerged that after HMAS Kuttabul had been sunk in the wild scenes of the next night, when the harbour was ablaze with gunfire, there had been a midget submarine attached to that moving buoy at the heads. It was a case of HMAS Lauriana having greatness thrust upon her, rather than of having conducted a search-and-destroy mission.

The greatest night of my sea career followed the day we left Port Adelaide after the commissioning and benediction by the local commander of the NAP fleet. The first thing I recall thinking as we proceeded out into the teeth of an angry southern ocean reinforced by a gale-force westerly from the roaring 'forties was the firm belief that our time on earth was about to come to a sudden end. As I think back, I can distinctly taste the fried onions of my departing dinner as they went overboard towards evening. My prayer and desire was that the Martindale should founder quickly so that our erstwhile impossible

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lives might disappear in the turbulent sea and the hissing foam. Don Deany was my opposite number in the engine room, and by some mischance we found ourselves consigned to alternative four-hour watching. I tried to relieve my seasickness a little by squeezing up into a tight ball and jamming into a small space above the hatch that gave external entrance to the engine room. As night descended, I watched the port rail dip under at every roll; I hoped and prayed for our early demise.

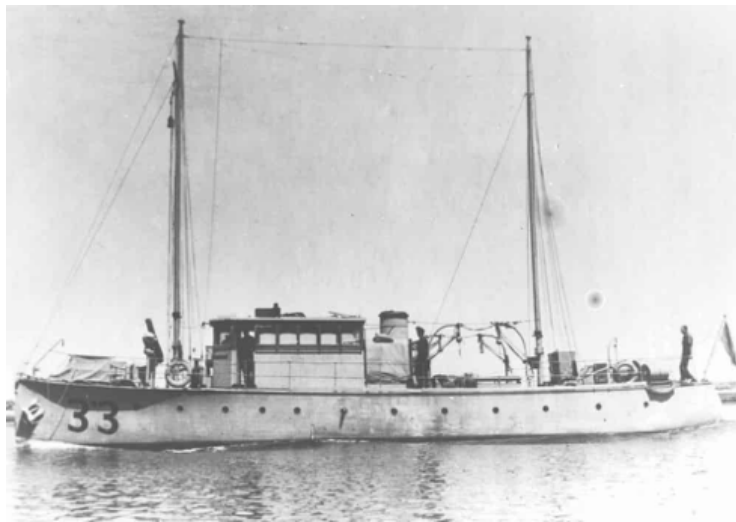
I had the first watch from 8 a.m. until noon, and from my vantage-point I saw members of the crew come up at odd times and vomit over the stern. It was not a pretty sight for one in my condition, but I did have to commend the efforts they made to bring up their internal organs along with their dinners. It was a chequerboard sea of waves in excess of five metres coming at us from the four quarters of the compass as the westerly gale crisscrossed the long rollers of the great southern ocean. In addition, the sea from the west was moving eastward at twice the speed of the ship; our stern would rise first, followed by our bow, so that we appeared to stand on the crest of the waves for a moment and then slide down backwards into the trough.

At one stage the crew attempted to set a shortened mainsail to give some stability, but it was blown out after a few minutes; the operation was repeated with similar results, so we finally just let her ride as she would. My only watch requirement was to top up the day tanks with fuel every hour, which meant descending into the engine room. Each time I did so, my nose was assailed by diesel fumes because the top of the fuel gauges had been broken and the neat fuel was filling the air with its penetrating, sick-making effluvia.

At midnight, the watch changed. Men who had fallen into a coma from seasickness were shaken back to life and told to get going by others, equally incapable, who took their place on the bunks. I stumbled down the companionway between the waves which covered the whole ship, only to be met by air so thick it could have been cut with a knife. It was steamy and warm and reminded me of soiled babies' napkins, though with an added mix of superimposed special smells. First, there was the ever-present penetrating diesel fume from the engine room; next, the fresh lacquer which had been applied to the galley walls two days earlier. On the starboard side some twenty rolls of toilet paper had fallen - at the first roll of the ship - into the elegant bath, which had taken on a few inches of water; the rolls were then converted into a grayish, rancid hash by the continual movement. This guaranteed that any hopeful who politely sought the refuge of the toilet to vomit would instead become an impulsive regurgitator without conscience. Tins of paint had spilt in the tiller flat the fuel of that special unctuous, oily flavour. The 'Saloon' (the official name for the mess deck) was a heap of saltwater-soaked blankets lying in heaps on bunks and covering exhausted men who had come off watch. At each change of angle caused by the sea a large sack of sugar, hardened by the water, slid up and down the deck like a demented billy goat. The only escape was to get one's feet into the bunk to prevent them being forcibly removed by the sack's forceful, unpredictable actions.

The relief of lying down was soporific. Even though an occasional wave crashed over the deck and allowed about a bucket of seawater to penetrate the skylight ventilators, the effect was cool and refreshing. Within five minutes Sleep descended on me within five minutes, so that even ideas of a quick sinking temporarily receded. Thoughts of home and the bank and middle-class certainties faded, except for my last conscious question: How could we continue such an existence for another day when the war might not terminate for an indefinite number of years?

At about 2 a.m., I dreamed that the ship's infamous motor was cutting out. In another second, I was being rudely awakened with cries of 'Engineer!' close to my ear. It was no dream. They were dragging me from my bunk and telling me to attend to this unthinkable dilemma. As I stood up and hung onto my bunk to avoid the lunging sugar sack, I kept regurgitating and could not get my breath. I fought my way into the engine room, where I took in the dimly-lit scene like a man in a nightmare. The great flywheel was partly under water, which caused it to send showers of water around the walls and deckhead of the engine room. Even the hiss of air entering the motor was unable to drown out its noisy irregularity; this machine was reputed never to have missed a beat in its whole life. The skipper came down from the wheelhouse as I tried both to look wise and to suggest a cure. After a minute, I told him I would have cut out the engine; I was hoping he might suggest heaving or some such magic formula, that he would wait for the morning. His answer was, 'Cut out when you're ready. You can work on it all night; we are fifteen miles off shore'. My knowledge of diesel engines had been confined to one week in an army school and included no practical experience. I had just enough common sense remaining to realise that the failure must have occurred because of a fuel problem of some sort. The dying motor made me conscious of how much water was in the bilges and that we must have sprung a leak as the craft turned side onto the biggest rollers, like a whale in its death throes. I cleaned the filters without any hope of a success. I checked the fuel lines of the pump which injected into the cylinders; I bled all the lines in case there were air bubbles in them which could cause the damage - but without result. Because the ship's round bottom caused her to move quickly from side to side, it was essential to hold onto the guard-rail with one hand and use the tools with the other. The violent movement still caused cuts, scratches, and bruises as I worked alone through the night - Jonah in the whale's belly. At one point, I found a resistance in the main fuel line which I assumed must have been due to its length. I could not imagine the possibility that it might be solid dirt, but it was all I could find anywhere. I got it all together again, dragged the great flywheel up to top dead centre, and adjusted the timing for a trial start. I was hopeless, seasick, and homeless; I vowed that if the motor did not start, I would crawl up the hatch and go overboard. As I held the throttle in one hand and the starting valve in the other, I could feel my heart choking with excitement in my throat. The air supply allowed for about ten firing strokes before it had to be pumped again and retried after a delay of twenty minutes. This was all a long way from counting copper in the bank, and I could sense the silent hatred of the crew as they awaited the outcome and were busy calculating that Nattering Knox was all talk and could never do it. I touched the air pressure and heard the motor miss four strokes; then, on the fifth, it burst into glorious life. Not a miss - just total success. I suddenly felt better, much better, as I realised I would not die after all. Don came into the engine room and offered to clean up, and as I returned to the Saloon I felt like David returning to camp after killing Goliath. The stabilising movement caused by the motor bringing the ship to a steadier course also had an effect on the piles of damp blankets covering the other crew members as they moved cautiously and made sure they were still in one piece. As I lay down to grab an hour's sleep, I suddenly became aware of the prayers of my family and how close they were to me at that moment despite the barriers of space and time.



The Martindale now commissioned as the HMAS Martindale in 1944

The engineer who went on watch an hour later was a different man than the seasick, defeated, ready-to-drown figure of the night before. I had survived my first struggle against the sea in good shape. We decided to call into Port Fairy for two hours to clean up and restore sanity to the ship. We went ashore half at a time for an hour each to get a shower. As we stepped onto the jetty we found it was moving like the ship, and as we ran up the deserted street the squalling rain and the driving wind lashed our backs like whips. But nothing could dampen the sense of accomplishment we felt in our victory over the elements. Back on board, we cast off immediately and found that the cook, Keith, had prepared curry for us. I sat down with George Sangster, a South Australian, who had been appointed coxswain because the others had all finished eating and were on duty. The ship was rolling so steeply that the drawers under our bunks rolled out in sympathy with them at about every second roll. It was essential to hang on to our plates and the table as we ate. At one moment I would be towering over George at an angle of forty degrees, and the next he would loom over me. We laughed with exhilaration at being able to eat again. George had been an insurance salesman before he enlisted - an occupation we would employ to good effect later on - but this did not assist him in the heavy seas. In a moment of distraction he let go his plateful of curry; it immediately shot off the sloping table and landed upside-down in the drawer under his bunk, right on top of his clean uniform. As the ship rolled the other way the drawer closed, and as George moved his fork toward his food, he saw that it had vanished and only the bare table remained. He groped around in disbelief. It was like the Marie Celeste in reverse. The drawer did not re-open for a couple of rolls and when it did, the orange-coloured curry formed a fascinating design about his shoregoing gear - a double blow for George because he always used his higher rank as an excuse to be first ashore at any port. When I recovered my composure, I went on deck to tell the others. The aft companionway was close to the stern, where Norm Ellis was stood looking out at the black waves which towered around us in all directions. I recalled the Prayer Book quotation about those who go down to the sea and do their business in great waters. They do indeed see the works of the Lord and His wonders of the deep. 'For He commandeth and raiseth the stormy wind which lifteth up the waves thereof. They mount up to the heavens, they go down again to the depths; their soul is melted because of trouble. They reel to and fro and stagger like a drunken man and are at their wits' end. Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and He bringeth them out of their distresses. He maketh the storm a calm so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad because they be quiet; so He bringeth them into their desired haven'.

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