

Harcourt Doherty and *Warrigal*: A Man and His Boat

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Peter: For as far as living memory can reach, and beyond that, the Squadron has attracted men and women of strong personality, forceful individuals, who excite anecdotes in the same way as notable teachers and similar characters. First though, comes the vessel. Information on her was supplied through John Powell from a previous owner, Tony Miers, supplemented by the detailed history compiled by Jim Bullock.

Warrigal is a Bermudan cutter, approximately 32 ft long, with a draught of 5 ft 4 in and a 'slipping width' of 9 ft 2 in. She was built in Clausen's yard at Birkenhead in 1931 for William Birnie. He was a bachelor bank manager, posted to Port Adelaide, then to New Zealand and finally back to Adelaide. Consequently he owned yachts in other states and in New Zealand. He joined the Squadron on 14 January 1897, but resigned on 19 March 1899. I have not yet confirmed when he rejoined. Each of his vessels was called *Wylo*, which can confuse tracing their provenance, as he insisted that the name did not go with the boat. The first South Australian *Wylo* was renamed *Ilex*; the second *Argo*; the third *Nautilus* and then *Warrigal*; the fourth *Nautilus* (again!); the fifth *Wongga*; and the last is the current *Wylo*. [*Squadron Quarterly* December 1995: 34. *Wylo Resurgam*.]

To add to potential confusion, this vessel was bought in the 1930s by the Verco family, who gave her their family name of *Nautilus* after their earlier boat of that name was acquired by the Livingston brothers, who called her *Kurrewa IV* and participated in several Sydney-Hobart Races. There is a half model of her hull in the Club House. Subsequently Doug Verco bought another *Wylo* and also called her *Nautilus*. This is the boat bought by Dr Bob Downing. We hope you can follow that.

Initially *Wylo*–*Nautilus*–*Warrigal* was very much a racing yacht. Running backstays supported a large mainsail on a long boom, balanced with a flying jib to the masthead over a staysail. With the help of the Burnley brothers, she won two consecutive races to Kangaroo Island. The Burnley brothers had small boats of their own and often raced with others. In the early 30s they won an Easter race to Black Point in *Ardale*, one of the Restricted 21-footers which came from Melbourne for a Forster Cup series and remained behind. In the same undated cutting there is a reference to *Nautilus*, but I had no idea this was the boat I have always known as *Warrigal*. [*Squadron Quarterly* March 1995: 15–25. *The Twenty-ones and the South Australian Forster Cup Carnivals*.]

In the early stages of the Second World War (1939–45) she was bought by Dr AK Gault, who renamed her *Warrigal*, as the Vercos retained *Nautilus* for their new vessel. Dr Gault reduced the boom and installed a fixed backstay to a bumpkin. He used her only for cruising. She had an engine similar to a single-cylinder Blaxland. There are stories of her crew on their knees in a fierce storm, 'praying' to the sound of it.

Arthur Kyle Gault was a well-known general practitioner at Belair, who graduated in medicine from Adelaide University in 1917, followed by his sister Estelle Ruth in 1919. Presumably it was their father who in the 1920s conducted there a private sanatorium for patients with tuberculosis. (This was not Birralea, which was a Repatriation facility.) Peter McBride remembers Dr Gault at the Squadron as being somewhat foul-mouthed, and David Judell acquired the rhyming slang, 'Pass the doctor.' — Dr Gault: salt.

Somewhere about 1944, Dr Gault sold *Warrigal* to Harcourt Doherty. This could not have been 'on his death', as Jim Bullock thought, because I recall him bringing a newly dead

patient to Royal Adelaide Hospital in 1952 or 1953 after a surgical procedure went terribly wrong.

Harcourt replaced the engine with a Morris *Vedette*. He balanced the staysail by shortening the boom; discarded the runners and bumpkin for a permanent inboard backstay; and installed roller reefing. He fitted a stainless steel sink and a gas stove, and dismantled the pipe berths for'ard. Being a large gentleman, he discarded the adjustable backrests to the cabin bunks. In later years he installed a toilet, raised the forehatch and fitted a tabernacle to the mast so that he could go for'ard to it more easily. He trimmed her slightly to lee helm, made the curved tiller and steered for many miles with his toe from the shelter under the dodger.

Keith: In one way or another, Harcourt Doherty was always where the action was. He was educated at Saint Peter's College and grew into a robust, handsome and very fit man. Coming from a family with a long history of Army service, he served overseas in the 2nd AIF. He could be an argumentative b—— at times, but he was always a fine seaman and scornful of those who didn't match his high standards. In all the years I knew him, and he often sailed with me in *Scimitar* days, we never had anything but a first-class friendship.

Harcourt played his due part in running the Squadron the way we used to do it. For a number of years he was a member of the Outer Harbor Committee. That involved him in a lot of work that these days is done by paid staff, especially as the Secretary spent most of his time in the Club Rooms at the T&G Building in Adelaide. Indeed one Secretary seemed to come to Outer Harbor only for Opening Days and similar events. Either the caretaker or the Members, especially those on the Outer Harbor Committee, did the rest.

The particular incident I recall concerns Mr Doherty's pipe. *Scimitar's* mooring was in the back row, and on coming ashore one Sunday afternoon, my son Ian, who was then about twelve, informed me that 'SS' had thrown Mr Doherty's pipe into the water. My first thought was that Ian had made a mistake, as HD didn't smoke. He had engine trouble and had removed the exhaust pipe. In those days many yacht engines, especially in old boats, had specially made attachments that could have been designed by Heath Robinson. Harcourt had removed his for some reason and had left it on the pontoon while looking for something else. 'SS' had already had quite a day of it, having blocked the slipway with a few well-placed rocks. Presumably he dropped the exhaust pipe into the water, to see if it would float.

Throughout Harcourt's time, the Squadron was very much a gentleman's club. Ladies came there only for Opening Day and similar social events, and children were barely tolerated at any time. When Harcourt discovered what had happened to his exhaust pipe, the commotion that followed can be left to the reader's imagination. In the words of holy writ, 'Great was the wrath thereof.' 'SS', to save his life, took off like the proverbial hare, and if he had been caught, he would have suffered a well-deserved fate. Any yachting jury and judge would have acquitted Harcourt on the grounds of extreme provocation.

Harcourt worked at the Mile End component of Hardy's Wines. There he entertained many of us in delightful surroundings and with typical Hardy friendship and generosity.

Peter: Harcourt and his diminutive wife Margaret had no children. The Squadron and *Warrigal* were a large part of their lives, although, as Keith remarked, Harcourt often raced with others. I remember seeing them leave the Town Jetty at Port Lincoln, bound for the Banks Group, with both buckets full of crushed ice and those bottles of champagne for which there was no room below. He told us how they took *Warrigal* into the big cave on Wedge Island, watching the mast rise with the surge almost (but not quite) to the roof. He urged us to give the kids a thrill by doing the same in *Kareelah*, but we never had the courage to try it. There are many stories about Harcourt Doherty. One time he gave another vessel a tow, rescuing it from a tricky situation with not much time or room. He sat in his cockpit while Margaret steered, tying double sheet bends to join successive pieces of line at great speed and

with confident dexterity as fast as the line ran out. I owe to him the firm and directive advice that if you are giving or receiving a tow in heavy conditions or when one vessel is much larger than the other, the *only* place to fix the tow line is to the base of the mast.

He raced in *Seevogel* to Glenelg, probably for a Plympton Cup in the days when we sailed a triangular course off the old jetty. The top batten blew out of the mainsail. Wes Harris put the Parrot on a heel while Harcourt climbed the mast (at least fifty feet) with a replacement batten in his teeth. From the truck he came down the leech, inserted the batten, and continued to the end of the boom, hand over hand like a monkey. If he had lost his grip or the sail had torn (as I saw it do racing to Glenelg in about 1970, on the day when *Maluna* broke her mast) he could have suffered a serious fall with major injuries.

One day Harcourt saved a life. He was standing on the hydroplane wharf when a toddler fell off the sole pontoon, to surface underneath it, screaming and bubbling as its head went below the surface. The parents were overwhelmed and stood helplessly above their drowning child, whom they could hear beneath their feet but not see. Harcourt ran down, jumped off the pontoon, pulled the child down and surfaced to put it back into the arms of its devastated mother. He squelched his way ashore in his dripping clothes, brusquely pushing away the grateful father with words to the effect that he should keep a better eye on his kids. Fatherless himself, I can only speculate on his feelings, but I can testify to his firm but gentle manner with children.

At a Quarterly Meeting in the smoky haze of the T&G basement, Harcourt produced his idea of the endless belt, which became the subject of undeserved mirth for a long time thereafter. It could be a big effort to land a heavy dinghy on the pontoon and lug it up the ramp, especially with the steepness induced by a low tide, to store it in the shed, passing through what is now Jimmy's Bar. Could the Outer Harbor Committee explore an endless belt, motor-driven, to reduce this burden? Unfortunately for Harcourt, by the time the Commodore of the day got to Any Other Business, the night was far advanced. Harcourt was tired. His speech was slurred, and he muddled some of his words. All that most of us heard was incomprehensible mumbling about an endless belt, which provoked unjust and ribald interjections. That made him irritable, he stormed out in disgust and the idea died.

There is a story from George Murphy, sometime owner of the Kingscote Hotel and now at Robe, that Harcourt would lift the craypots set by Morrie Burgess out of Snug Cove. He would replace a cray with a Hardy's Black Bottle brandy, to their mutual satisfaction.

Keith: Whenever you sail by Haystack Island, raise your glass to Harcourt Doherty. This is where I scattered his ashes, and may his memory long live on.

Peter: After Harcourt Doherty, *Warrigal's* next owner was Jim Bullock. Jim wrote of Harcourt's steering method, 'I allowed him to teach me this trick, when I acquired *Warrigal* from him in 1972. It enabled me to cruise almost "no hands" with my wife Margaret and five young children. It is largely to their energy that *Warrigal* owes the for'ard bunks, navigation and bunk lights, echo sounder, three-blade propeller and the blind and curtains to replace an old partition.'

Jim's meticulous approach was shown by the detailed inventory he prepared for his successor, Colin McKee of the South Australian Labor Party.

In the mid 1980s *Warrigal* left the Squadron pool when her new owner, Ron Wetherall, berthed her at the Garden Island Yacht Club. His favourite destination was Emu Bay, where he took her many times. Next she went to Port Adelaide Sailing Club under Peter Coombe, who then returned her to our pool. In August 1997 Tony and Sue Miers bought *Warrigal* in a somewhat run-down condition, took her back to Garden Island Yacht Club and restored her. Her current owner is Graeme Clements of Robe Hardware, who tells us that he too is restoring her to former glory. May she long continue to give pleasure.