

Wartime ro

OF FORMER CUSTOMS VESSEL

On the afternoon of 25 July 1941, HMAS Vigilant, a 105-tonne former Customs patrol vessel, slipped out of Darwin harbour and headed for Timor.

Loaded with supplies for members of the Sparrow Force fighting the Japanese on Timor, she was under instructions to arrive in the vicinity of the town of Suai, half an hour before sunset on July 27. There she waited, well away from land, until a coded morse signal flashed through the darkness advising that it was safe to come ashore.

The Australia soldiers were waiting for her when she came into Suai. They quickly unloaded their supplies and sent aboard mail to be taken back to Darwin. *Vigilant* then raised her anchor and the crew set off back to Darwin at maximum speed, so as to be well clear of the coast of Timor by daylight and avoid enemy surveillance.

The operation was a success and, on July 29, *Vigilant* steamed safely back to Darwin.

By the end of September she had made three successful Darwin-Timor runs for Sparrow Force soldiers. Later she made other crossings carrying supplies for the famous "Z" Special Unit.

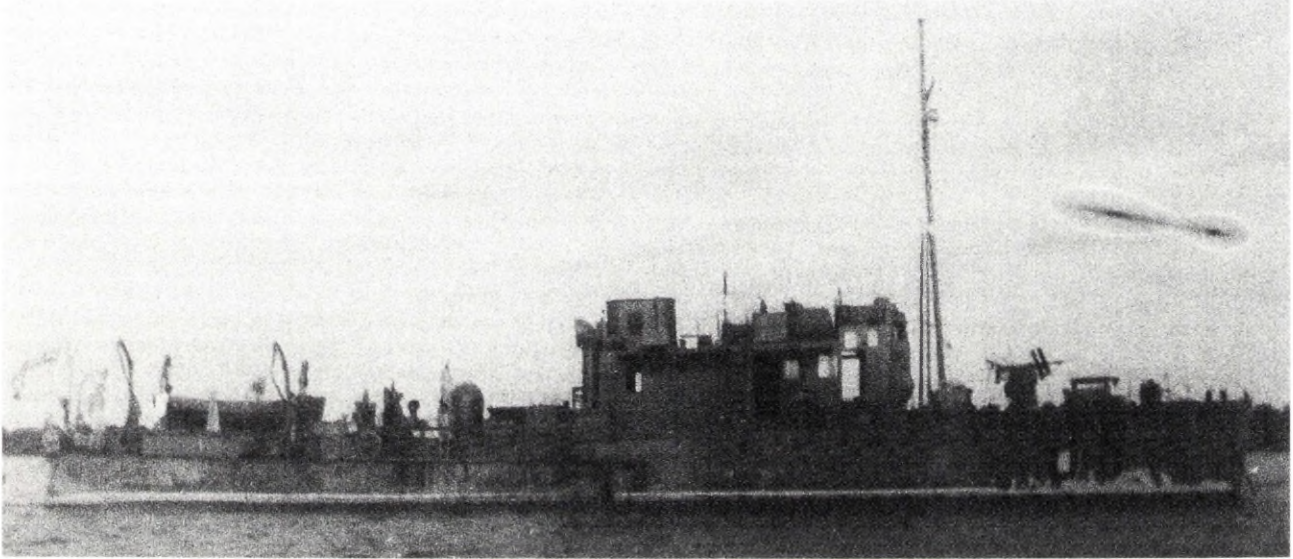
In April 1944 she was renamed HMAS Sleuth and the following year, in May 1945 she saw service as HMAS Hawk.

When the war ended the Royal Australian Navy, which had requisitioned her from the Department of Trade and Customs in October 1940, based her in Darwin, pending a decision on her future. For a year after the war she operated as a hydrographic ship, charting the northern coastline.

The *Vigilant* never returned to Customs. She was first advertised for sale by the navy in April 1946. Then, on 11 October 1946, she was sold for 2800 pounds to Mr A. Goodman of Pan Eastern Trading, 47 King Street, Sydney. For 14 years the *Vigilant* served as a whaler in Western Australia before being



The new Customs patrol vessel Vigilant on acceptance trials in 1938.



HMAS Vigilant during her war-time service.

sold, in Fremantle, to Captain Oussie Flores for \$44 000. Captain Flores sailed her to Melbourne and then had her towed to Sydney to be refitted as a cruise ship for the Great Barrier Reef tourist trade. However she sank at her berth in Sydney Harbour in April 1966 and was later salvaged for scrap metal.

Vigilant was built at Cockatoo Island Dockyard, Sydney, in 1938.

Just 30 metres long, with a beam of five metres and a crew of 10, *PV Vigilant* started her working life with Customs operating out of Townsville.

Before the outbreak of war in the Pacific, and in the early months thereafter, she patrolled a vast area covering the North Queensland coast, up along the Great Barrier Reef, around the Gulf of Carpentaria and the many islands of the Torres Strait and the Coral Sea.

In the course of one patrol carried out in May and June of 1939 the Sub-Collector, Townsville, Mr H. Mahony, was on board. His detailed report to the Collector of Customs, Brisbane, said: "The distance covered was 2260 nautical miles, and comprised the eastern side of the Peninsula from Townsville to Thursday Island, practically the whole of Torres Strait and the western side of the Peninsula as far as the Embley River."

During the patrol the *Vigilant* called at Dunk Island where Lady Zara Gowrie, wife of the Governor-General

was staying. As Mr Mahony recorded in his report, Lady Gowrie asked whether she and her staff could be taken to see the reef.

Mr Mahony wrote: "As I was satisfied that the Collector would approve I told her that the Customs Dept. would be only too happy to carry out her wishes, and the next day Lady Gowrie, accompanied by Mrs Horee-Ruthven, Capt. Windsor Lewis, ADC, Mr and Mrs J. Collins and Mr Brassey were conveyed to Beaver Cay on the Barrier Reef, where they landed. Dunk Island was reached on the return at 5.40 pm, and Lady Gowrie asked me to convey her thanks to the Minister for Customs and the Queensland Department. I later received the following letter from Lady Gowrie:

*'Dunk Island
Tully, N.Q.
Friday 19/5/39*

*'Dear Mr Mahony,
A great many thanks for having made such delightful plans for us – Visiting the Barrier Reef was a perfectly thrilling experience and we all enjoyed our day tremendously. In fact it was quite one of the loveliest sights I have seen in Australia.*

*Yours sincerely,
(sgd) Zara Gowrie'*

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(Both Mr Mahony's report and Lady Gowrie's hand-written note are now held in Customs' historical records in Central Office.)

The Chief Engineer of the *Vigilant* from 1938-1940 was Mr Richard Challinor who wrote to the Minister for Customs in 1981 seeking to have the record of the vessel "given a place in Australian Maritime History."

Mr Challinor's letter said: "I am writing to you to obtain some recognition for the *Vigilant* on account of the valuable work carried out combating the activities of Japanese fishermen infiltrating our pearling and fishing grounds as well as smuggling narcotics into Australia.

"As far as I can ascertain, this was the first Federal Government boat to operate as a Coast Guard/Customs cutter and patrolled the Gulf of Carpentaria, Coral Sea, Torres Strait up to Papua New Guinea, the Great Barrier Reef and Queensland coast line south to Rockhampton.

"It was an almost impossible area to cover in one small 100ft by 16 ft vessel.

"The *Vigilant* was armed with a Hotchkiss 3lb 1905 vintage gun fitted with a condemned barrel and provided with blank ammunition (1925 vintage).

"The gun mounted forward made the *Vigilant* an offensively armed vessel. There was also a .303 Lewis Gun of World War I, and three 1918 vintage Lee Enfield .303 rifles, bayonets and Mark VI ammunition.

"Personal defence consisted of two Webley .45 revolvers (1915 vintage) and lead bullets which contra-

vened the Geneva Conference Standards on wartime standards, which placed one in the precarious position of being summarily executed if taken prisoner.

"During the late 1930s the captains of the sampans and pearling luggers were Japanese naval personnel, obtaining local knowledge of the reefs and waters in preparation for future hostilities.

"*Vigilant* performed her duties well and to the best of our ability we tried to keep the Government informed...we were successful in chasing many sampans from territorial waters.

"Approximately two weeks before World War II was actually declared, *Vigilant* was ordered to search for a submarine reported off Palm Island, North Queensland, in co-operation with two RAAF bombers. After two days searching the 'submarine' was discovered. An attempt was made to ram the 'submarine' as our blank shells were of no use...the 'submarine' proved to be a humped back whale. The *Vigilant* log books would verify this.

"After war was declared, the *Vigilant* was stationed in Townsville from where we carried out regular patrol duties to around 6th October 1940, when the Royal Australian Navy commandeered the vessel."

Indeed, Australian War Memorial history records of the RAN confirm her wartime exploits. Some details are contained in the book *Royal Australian Navy 1942-45* by G. Hermon Gill.

Vigilant on patrol

In May and June 1939, the Customs Sub-Collector,

Townsville, Mr H Mahony, accompanied the crew of the

PV Vigilant on a patrol of northern Australia.

Here is his introduction to his report on the voyage.

"In accordance with the Collector's memorandum of 19/4/39, I accompanied the *p.v. Vigilant* on a patrol of the far north.

"The patrol commenced at Townsville on 16/5/39, and the vessel returned to Townsville on 20/6/39. The distance covered was 2260 nautical miles, and comprised the eastern side of the Peninsula from Townsville to Thursday Island, practically the whole of Torres Strait and the western side of the Peninsula as

far as the Embley River. Time would not permit going further into the Gulf and visiting the other stations and islands. The weather on the whole was good, and inspection was made of all stations and inhabited places in the area which I desired to visit, with the exception of Lockhart River and Cape Bedford Aboriginal Stations, where a landing was prevented by rough weather. I have asked Captain Haultain to visit these stations on the next patrol, if possible.

"The objects I had in view were to observe the working of the crew and vessel, and to interview the people living in the area, also to observe and report generally as to conditions prevailing, in order that the Collector might have information which would assist in the employment of the *Vigilant* to the best advantage.

"I interviewed a large number of people, both white and coloured, and found that there was a general interest in the vessel and a willingness to co-operate by

furnishing information. Most of the aboriginal stations and missions have wireless transmitting sets, and the officers in charge at all of them have undertaken to see that the natives in their control are instructed and encouraged to report to them any details of Japanese or other foreign vessels seen, which information will be transmitted by radio to Thursday Island. The Sub-Collector there will pass the information on to the *Vigilant*. I saw many police and other officials at the towns visited, and the personal contact appeared to be appreciated. There appears to be a friendly feeling of co-operation on the part of the residents concerned and this co-operation will be a valuable factor in assisting the work of the vessel.

"I found the crew of the vessel to be keen, willing workers, efficient in their various capacities and happy in their relations with each other. In such a small vessel the quarters for ten or more men are cramped, but the men appear to be content and no complaints were made. In rough weather, all deck openings have to be covered, and water finds its way below through the wheelhouse doors. Action is being taken to stop this leaking, and the possibility of providing better ventilation in rough weather is being looked into.

"Captain Haultain and the Mate, Mr Percival, are highly qualified seamen, and exercise the greatest expert care in their conduct of the vessel. Most of the patrol area is badly charted and is notoriously difficult from a navigation point of view. Often for hours at a time one of these officers directs the course of the vessel from the crow's-nest on the mast, and no unnecessary risks are taken. The Chief Engineer, Mr Challinor, and his assistant, Mr Fiskien, are very attentive to their duties and spend a considerable time when not running, in maintenance work. They are careful and economical with their stores and equipment. The Deck and Engineer's Logs are properly kept up to date.

"All Government property on board was checked with the Master's and Engineer's property lists, and new lists are being compiled, a copy of which will be supplied to the Collector.

"HOURS OF DUTY. When the vessel is on patrol, i.e., when she is not at Townsville, all hands, with two exceptions, work considerably over eight hours per day. The exceptions are Seaman-Cook Harwood and Seaman-Telegraphist Boole. Harwood's duties as cook should not take more than eight hours in each twenty-four, but the hours are spread over twelve or thirteen. He is an efficient ship's carpenter and seaman, and occasionally is called on for duties in addition to those in the galley. Boole acts as steward in addition to keeping the wireless watches, and his hours should not exceed by much those of Harwood. The four able

seamen divide the deck work and steering. While under way, two are on duty and at anchor one man is always on watch. In the case of doubtful anchorages two men and an officer are on anchor watch. The engineers have much maintenance and repair work to perform when the vessel is not under way, and their efficiency in this regard saves expenditure on having repairs done ashore. In the *Vigilant* and its two motor boats there is a large quantity of complicated and expensive mechanism under their control.

"Time off in lieu of Sundays and holidays is allowed while the vessel is at Townsville, where the married men have their families, and the Master is using every endeavour to prevent any accumulation of such time. In this respect the employment of the aboriginal John Levi, was in some degrees an economy, as he was able to act as watchman in port, thus releasing one of the crew. Levi's services were dispensed with at Thursday Island on 12/6/39, but he will be re-employed as pilot on the next Torres Strait patrol. I found Levi an intelligent, efficient boatman, popular with the other men and the Master found his services as pilot extremely valuable.

"At Cairns, Mr Baker, Lighthouse Mechanic, joined the vessel to inspect lighthouses. He was landed at all stations required except one, where rough weather prevented a landing. Carrying out this duty for the Navigation and Lighthouses Dept. added to the time taken on the patrol as a stay of three or four hours is necessary at each light, but the service rendered is valuable to that Department, and the Collector has agreed to perform it on the understanding that Customs requirements take first place."



Townsville Sub-collector Mahony and Captain Haultain on the foredeck of the Vigilant during Mr Mahony's 1939 northern tour.