

THE WARRAMUNGA'S AFTERMATH OF WAR

by

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Photograph on front cover: From Life Magazine 1945; J. Sewell collection.
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to
Elizabeth, Henry, Katrina and Emily with love.

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CHAPTER 1

In 1945, the wet in the Top End started in November and increased in intensity, producing its heaviest rain and strongest winds by Christmas.

Jamie Munro hung onto a stanchion on the port side as the harbour pilot's cutter crashed through the choppy white caps just off Wagait Beach on the north coast of the Cox Peninsula, five miles west of Darwin. Although it was early afternoon, the low swirling dark clouds created an impression of nightfall occasionally pierced by distant lightning. With his eyes slitted against the heavy rain, the sea spray whipped up by the wind, and the vessel lurching and pitching in the wild seas, Jamie had difficulty seeing ahead. Every now and again he caught a brief flash from the beam of the Point Charles Lighthouse about eight miles ahead.

He glanced across at his friend and colleague, Jack 'Jacko' O'Brien, who was clinging to a metal bar on the starboard side and peering forward with screwed-up eyes. Like him, Jacko was wearing a life jacket and had given up any effort to keep dry. The skipper of the cutter, Jason 'Jazz' Nicholls, was keeping the vessel well out from the shore to avoid the shoals that stretched out from the shoreline between them and Point Charles where they were headed.

Jamie and Jacko headed the Darwin office of the Commonwealth Investigation Service (CIS). This organisation was responsible for intelligence and counter-espionage as well as for more traditional investigations of criminal activities throughout northern Australia and the surrounding regions. They had met on the battlefield during the World War II Syrian campaign, having both been involved in counter-espionage activities with MI6 during the desert war in North Africa and later with intelligence units during the Pacific war. At the end of the war they had established the Darwin office of the CIS with direct contacts to MI6, OSS and Interpol, and they had already been responsible for the apprehension of a gang of murderous criminals operating in the Northern Territory and the Kimberley region of Western Australia. The success of the operation had been largely due to the tracking skills of Jacko and his half-sister, Sarah, who was a

Warramunga Aborigine from Tennant Creek in the central Northern Territory.

As the sea spray lashed his face, Jamie reflected that his first Christmas in Darwin had become much more eventful than he had bargained for. He and Jacko had joined a crowd of local and naval people for a Christmas lunch at the fine old Hotel Darwin, a colonial-style building which had been damaged at one end by Japanese bombing during the war. The wet season had set in with a vengeance and Jamie had been looking forward to a relatively uneventful day with a hot lunch in the Green Room at the hotel, where he and Jacko also lived and had their headquarters.

Halfway through a succulent roast turkey course, the Christmas lunch had been interrupted. One of the radio operators of VID Darwin, part of the communications network covering the movements of small shipping off the north coast, rushed into the Green Room and informed the Darwin Harbour Master, Commander Eric Downy, that a vessel was in distress in heavy seas just to the north of Point Charles. Also dining at Commander Downy's table was Jazz Nicholls, the Darwin Harbour pilot, and the men immediately decided that the pilot's cutter would be the most suitable vessel to investigate. When Jazz called for volunteers, Jamie and Jacko amongst others had put up their hands. Now, as the little cutter crashed along the northern coastline of the Cox Peninsula, Jamie was not so sure that his stomach would be equal to the task, but he was clear that he wouldn't volunteer so quickly in the future.

After another hour that seemed like an eternity, the cutter was directly abeam of the Point Charles Lighthouse to the south and all on board searched through squinted eyes, pelted by the spray and rain, for any sign of another vessel. Suddenly the seas around them were briefly lit by a nearby bolt of lightning followed by a loud clap of thunder which almost drowned the cry of 'Ahoy!' from the foredeck where one of the crew was pointing towards the northwest. As the cutter turned away from the distant shore, Jamie could make out the shape of a boat pitching and rocking in the rough seas. They drew closer and it was apparent that the other boat was not moving under its own power. With the skill of a sailor familiar with these seas, Jazz edged the cutter slowly alongside the unstable boat, which looked like

a fishing vessel about 65 feet long. Carefully judging the rock and pitch of both vessels, the for'ard hand leapt aboard the stricken vessel holding a rope and quickly secured it to the bow of the boat. Another crew member secured the other end of the rope to a cleat on the stern of the cutter, which then turned to the south and started towing the other boat towards the pier at the north end of Charles Point.

Jamie was thinking about the daring of the for'ard hand when he thought he saw something floating on the water just ahead of their port side. He pointed at it, yelling above the sea noise to Jazz, who slowed the cutter. As they came alongside the object, it appeared to be a small human body. They hauled the body into the cutter using a gaff and saw that it was indeed the body of a small boy with Asian features, probably about nine or ten years old. One of the men tried to give the child artificial respiration but he had been dead for some time. Revving up the engine of the cutter, Jazz continued to steer it towards the jetty which came into view through the rain with the red and white lighthouse on the hill behind it.

About 500 yards off the Charles Point jetty, Jazz shouted above the noise of the sea and rain to Jamie, Jacko and the rest of the crew that the seas were too rough. There was more than 20 feet between high and low tide at that time of year, and to attempt to land there would be too dangerous. The cutter turned away to the east and set off towards Darwin Harbour towing the other boat, bobbing around like a large cork.

In the late afternoon, with the sky becoming increasingly darker, the cutter finally tied up at the main wharf inside Darwin Harbour where the protected waters were relatively smooth. As soon as they landed, Jamie and the others stepped ashore and inspected the fishing boat. They were greeted by the cutter's for'ard hand who had leapt aboard earlier.

'There are two adult Asian crew members and a whole pile of junk aboard,' he told them. 'I don't know where they came from. They look like Malays but they don't seem to speak any English.'

'Do they know anything about the young child we found floating in the sea?' asked Jamie.

'A young child? Dunno, mate,' said the crew member. 'You'd better ask them yourself if you can work out their language. I haven't

understood anything they've said. You might have better luck with them. I'm bloody wet and I'm goin' home.'

He stepped ashore and helped pull the two Asian men out of the boat. Dressed in old shirts and shorts with no shoes, they looked a soggy forlorn couple standing on the wharf staring at the Australians. The problem over what to do with them was solved when Harbour Master Eric Downy appeared and said he would take them to his office, give them some dry clothes and hot cocoa, and call the police to help investigate where the vessel had come from and where it was bound.

After he had led the two men off, Jamie jumped aboard the rescued boat to check for clues to the boat's intended course. The boat shuddered slightly as Jacko jumped in beside him and looked around.

'Looks like a bit of a mess, Cap,' he said. Jacko had always referred to all officers as 'Cap' during the war and he continued to bestow this title on his colleague, Jamie, reflecting his previous army rank.

'Yeah, bloody mess all right,' said Jamie. 'Clothes, bedding, cans of food and drink spread higgledy-piggledy all over the place. It's a mystery to me that such a large fishing boat is swanning around in the Timor Sea with only two crew members and not much fishing gear. What were they doing?'

'Yeah, well, it's worth a closer look,' said Jacko.

He started sorting through some of the clothing lying around and caught Jamie's attention as he held up some very small shirts and two small pairs of pants.

'These must belong to that poor drowned kid we found,' he said. 'Although I find that very strange, Cap.'

'How so?'

'Well, Cap, the dead child seems to have had a hell of a lot more clothes than the crewmen,' said Jacko. 'Something weird here, I reckon.'

'You're right. I think we'd better search a bit more,' said Jamie. 'What's that noise?'

From the bow of the boat, they could just make out a faint cry like a cat mewling. Moving some lifebelts and boat fenders, they saw a

large pair of brown eyes staring out at them. The eyes belonged to a small boy who was shaking with fear and staring at the strange men with nervous confusion.

‘Don’t be afraid. You’re safe with us,’ said Jamie soothingly. ‘What’s your name, young fellow?’

They pulled the little boy out from the bow and helped him to his feet. Looking apprehensively at them he cried out in a high-pitched voice, ‘Kuya! Kuya ko?’

‘I have no idea what language that is,’ said Jacko. ‘Sounded like a question.’

Jamie addressed the child. ‘Do you speak English?’

‘Engliss?’ the child cried. ‘Nasaan ang aking kapatid?’

‘No idea what that is. We’d better get him out of this wet boat, take him to the hotel and dry him off,’ said Jamie. ‘Grab some of those children’s clothes and we’ll try to dry them for later. He’s obviously frightened of something but he might feel better with a bit of food in him.’

‘Yeah, Cap, I reckon,’ said Jacko. ‘We’d better get the police to go over this boat carefully. There’s something really weird here.’

‘Yeah, fair dinkum.’

The child seemed to be willing to go with them and, after a short ride in the jeep to the Hotel Darwin, the child was bathed and wrapped in dry towels. Jamie ordered some chicken and chips, which the boy consumed as though he hadn’t eaten in days, all the time between mouthfuls asking, ‘Kuya?’

After he had finished eating, Jacko sat down opposite him and counted on his fingers, ‘One, two three, four, five.’ The child stared at him.

Jacko then counted again, but in French: ‘Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq.’

The child showed some understanding and then, counting on his fingers, said, ‘Hindi! No, no. Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco.’

‘Aha, you speak some Spanish. Español?’ asked Jacko.

‘Pequeña cantidad,’ was the answer.

‘He speaks Spanish but only a little,’ Jacko told Jamie. ‘That might be a clue as to where he’s from.’

‘Can’t be Malaya or the Dutch East Indies then,’ said Jamie. ‘It could be the Philippines.’

The child suddenly smiled, sat up and nodded, saying, ‘O-o, ako ay mula sa Filipinas.’

‘Tu nombre?’ asked Jacko in Spanish.

‘Manuel Fernandez,’ said the little boy proudly but then with a look of despair asked, ‘Kuya? Dónde está mi hermano?’

‘Hermano is brother,’ said Jacko, ‘I think he’s asking where his brother is.’

‘Yeah, this doesn’t sound good,’ said Jamie. ‘I’ll call Police Superintendent Fitzgibbon this evening and ask him if there are any Filipinos in Darwin who can translate for us and we’ll get this young fellow off to bed for the night.’

‘Yeah, good idea, Cap.’

‘By the way, where did you learn to speak Spanish, Jacko?’ asked Jamie.

‘We were taught some Spanish at that boarding school in Charters Towers, but I’ve forgotten most of it,’ said Jacko. ‘I could never actually speak it. Just some words.’

Jamie then turned to the child and said, ‘Buenas noches, Manuel!’

With a nervous smile the boy replied, ‘Buenas noches.’

‘Where did you learn Spanish, Cap?’ asked Jacko.

‘My only words, Jacko!’ replied Jamie. ‘You can put the young fellow to bed in the spare room and I’ll go and make that telephone call.’

‘Okay, Cap. Vamos, Manuel.’

At the temporary desk set up next to the bomb-damaged part of the Hotel Darwin, Jamie asked to use the telephone and dialled the police station. Luckily, Superintendent Russell ‘Fitzy’ Fitzgibbon was still at the police station and was keen to talk to Jamie.

‘Commander Downey dropped those two fellas from the boat here and they’ll be bedding down in the lockup here tonight,’ said Fitzy. ‘A couple of my constables are collecting all the gear off the boat and we’ve also sent to the coroner for examination the body of the child who was scooped out of the sea.’

‘That’s good, Fitzy. Hang on to those two men from the boat because I think there’s more to this than meets the eye,’ said Jamie.

‘We also found another young child hiding in the bow of that boat and we think he might be Filipino. Do you know if there are any Filipinos in Darwin who could translate for us?’

‘Wow! This gets interesting. I think Jazz, the harbour pilot, is married to a Filipina lady,’ said Fitzy. ‘I’ll try to get on to him and arrange something for tomorrow if she is indeed from the Philippines.’

‘That’d be great, Fitzy. The young lad’s tucked up in bed for the night and perhaps we can find out what’s going on tomorrow.’

‘Yes, good plan, Jamie. See ya tomorrow, mate.’

‘Yeah. Buenas noches.’

‘What?’

‘Never mind.’