

Wardroom HMAS Melbourne  
GPO Sydney 4 June 1969

Dear Mum and Dad,

I don't think anyone wrote any letters yesterday, I know I didn't want to start one as I wouldn't have known how. Everyone on the ship finds it very hard to believe that it has happened again. No doubt everyone at home feels the same way. Because there was an exercise in progress, the squadrons were flying continually night and day, and I was due to launch on an anti-submarine trip at 0330. However I was woken early and we were due for takeoff around 0300. We got airborne at five past three and on the way out to our assigned station, we had to make an alteration in our course to avoid a ship which we could see silhouetted against the moonlight. It was the USS Evans and we were not to know she would be sunk in 10 minutes. We had just completed our first sonar sweep of the area, when we were told to return to the ship. We thought that maybe they had decided to give away chasing submarines for the night. About 2 minutes later they told us to return in a hurry as they had just had a collision. This we thought was rather strange and I visualised that maybe they had sideswiped one of the small Asian ships in the exercise, but when they asked us if we were equipped with winches we suddenly realised what had happened. Unfortunately our Wessex did not have a rescue winch attached and a feeling of uselessness settled upon me. We were back at the scene in about five minutes and we saw the worst. Half of the Evans was alongside the Melbourne and the bow had already sunk. She was struck right in the middle, it couldn't have been closer. Astern of the collision there were several rescue boats and life rafts, so using our landing light which is steerable, we searched all the area adjacent to the wreckage while another Wessex with the C.O. and Jack aboard moved into the area and picked up a survivor. We were satisfied that that no one was outside the area of visible wreckage so we moved in and saw about three 20 man life rafts with some guys aboard, and then we saw two survivors swimming around. We spotlighted them until a rescue boat was able to come along and pick them up. By this time they had launched two more helos equipped with winches and we were recalled to land as there was not much more we could do. The time went pretty slowly after that. I gradually recovered from a sinking feeling and waited in the briefing room for our next launch. That was our emergency station and there wasn't much else we could do. There was no panic on the ship and everyone was helping as best he could. I was amazed at the co-ordination of the rescue operation. As the sun was coming up, they had got everyone off the stern of the Evans and everyone out of the water and they let the stern drift away to about half a mile from the Melbourne. I thought we would have several casualties on board, as many guys used to sleep up in the bow, but they must have had sufficient warning to get away. Two guys from the Evans were thrown off with the impact and landed on our flight deck, one didn't survive and the other had broken legs. We brought the doctors from other ships over to help ours, and they did a pretty fast job in patching up the injured. It was a sorry sight around the ocean in the morning with half of the Evans on the calm sea surrounded by a dozen ships all stationary. We continued a search all day in the helos right through till dark, but there were only a few tin cans left floating about. We were glad to move out of the area that night, and a tug towed the stern of the destroyer back to Subic Bay. We are making our way to Singapore at half speed. Any faster and too much water will come in the bow. The damage does not appear to be as bad as when she hit the Voyager, but no doubt, the aftermath will be worse. I feel great sorrow for the Americans as they had just given us a Navy Unit Commendation, to be thanked with a sunken ship and 73 men lost. Even if the fault is proven not to be with us, I couldn't blame them for any animosity. However being so much like

ourselves, I doubt that there will be, judging by the way we worked together during that disastrous time.

We will probably be in Singapore for one or two weeks and my guess is we will go straight to Sydney for major repairs after that. The fixed wings can't fly at present because of damage to the bow, but our squadron is continuing on, doing mail runs around the fleet, and transferring various people from ship to ship. Our C.O. decided it was time we flew as Captains of our aircraft rather than as co-pilots, and today I had my first flight in command. Jack filled up the co-pilots seat, and we picked up the Captains of two ships by winch, and flew them back to the Melbourne. It was a great confidence booster and an event I will remember. Jack will be the captain next time with me as co-pilot so that we all get a chance. By the next cruise we will have a full command I am hoping. By the way, the engine I ruined was found to have a mechanical defect, but if my general inexperience and handling was the final straw, I will never really know.

love,  
Graham