

The Cruel Legacy: The HMAS Voyager Tragedy

Tom Frame

Reviewed by Ian Pfennigwerth

This is the second book by Tom Frame on the collision of the destroyer *Voyager* and aircraft carrier *Melbourne* during night-flying exercises off Jervis Bay on 10 February 1964. Eighty-two men died and the accident spawned two Royal Commissions, neither of which established with any certainty the cause of the tragedy. It also opened the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) to trenchant criticism, mostly uninformed, from politicians, the media and the public. Some, including Frame, have claimed that it also ushered in a period of much-needed and somewhat overdue change and realignment within the Navy.

Frame's first book on the collision, *Where Fate Calls*, was based on his Masters thesis written while he served on the staff of the Chief of Naval Staff. It was compiled with enviable access to official and unofficial records and his perspective on the tragedy and its aftermath is thus unparalleled. However, *The Cruel Legacy* throws no new light on either the collision or its causes other than to state the obvious—something went very wrong on the Bridge of *Voyager*. Nor should revelations be expected, as the bulk of the text and all but a handful of the references come from *Where Fate Calls*, and as the intervening forty years have dulled memories and culled many of the drama's chief actors.

The Cruel Legacy follows Frame's first book in describing the circumstances of the collision and the manoeuvrings of the Australian Naval Board and government in deciding how to investigate the accident and to determine the facts. Frame shows how the government stumbled into convening a Royal Commission, despite the acute observation of the Attorney General Garfield Barwick that 'the only resemblance between a Royal Commission and a Court of Justice is the furniture in the courtroom'. Barwick was vindicated by the findings of the first Royal Commission, where forensic sparring resulted in each of the QCs representing the various parties finding it expedient to criticise the Commanding Officer of *Melbourne* and his Bridge staff. The Naval Board and other senior naval officers seem to have displayed a striking lack of objectivity, let alone loyalty to officers under their command, throughout.

Melbourne's Commanding Officer's resignation in protest at not being restored to his sea command engendered great sympathy for his cause within and outside the Navy. Parliamentary supporters seized upon an exaggerated account of the transgressions of *Voyager's* Commanding Officer by his former Executive Officer to engineer a second Royal Commission. While explicitly not in its terms of reference, this did produce a plausible

explanation for the collision, but one that has been challenged by Frame amongst others. *The Cruel Legacy* contains several very useful diagrams to help readers understand the sequence of events and facts bearing on the accident.

The 'cruel legacy' of the book's title appears to be Frame's reflections on the Australian government's reluctance to adequately

compensate those who suffered in the collision. It is difficult to be sure as there is no introduction to the book in which he might have explained his reasons for revisiting the subject. Puzzlingly, Frame suggests monetary compensation would be an inappropriate recompense for *Voyager* survivors, while he also deplores that catch-all disease: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He relates several examples of alleged PTSD sufferers whose stories were patently untrue. One part of the 'cruel legacy' was that Frame himself fell foul of officialdom over the publication of *Where Fate Calls*. The confrontation hastened his separation from the service—he might count his naval career as one of the final casualties of the accident.

Although there is little that is new in *The Cruel Legacy*, it still makes confronting reading; even those who were only bystanders to the tragedy became involved in its aftermath. The events surrounding and the conduct displayed during the two Royal Commissions evoked only general disrespect for, and suspicion of, senior officers and deep cynicism about politicians, the media and the legal profession in many naval officers.

Frame's contention that the disaster precipitated change in the outlook, nature, ethos and standards of the Navy could be challenged. It certainly accelerated a trend to assert the RAN's independence from its British roots. The 1960 decision to re-equip the destroyer force from US sources saw officers recalled as witnesses for the second Royal Commission from one of these ships off Vietnam—a conflict in which the British were not involved and from ships wearing a distinctive Australian White Ensign. While the performance of many senior naval officers over the *Voyager* collision was lamentable Frame does them a disservice in asserting that it took the disaster to set in train the forging of a modern RAN.

As a concise account of the *Melbourne-Voyager* collision *The Cruel Legacy* would be a useful read for those who do not have access to or have not read *Where Fate Calls*. However, I do not believe it matches Frame's original effort. ♦

Tom Frame, *The Cruel Legacy: The HMAS Voyager Tragedy*, Allen&Unwin, Sydney, 2005, Softback, 235pp., RRP \$29.95.

