

Basic Detail Report



HDML1321

Vessel number

HV000727

Date

1943

Primary Maker

Purdon and Featherstone

Description

HDML 1321 /RUSHCUTTER was laid down on 24 July 1942 at the Purdon & Featherstone yard in battery point Tasmania, the first of the 80 foot long Harbour Defence Motor Launches (HDML) to be built in Australia. It is double diagonal planked in Huon Pine, factors that have helped its longevity. These craft were fitted with twin engines. At the beginning of World War II the Royal Australian Navy was short of many types of craft and crews and immediately began major programmes to build the fleet. This included patrol craft and a number of versions were ordered. The big HDMLs initially came from the USA and the UK, shipped across as cargo, and of the 28 craft eventually supplied to the RAN and Army, nine craft were built locally. HDML 1321 was the first of these to be built and was commissioned on 11 November 1943 under the command of Lieutenant Norman Grieve, RANVR. His First Lieutenant was Sub Lieutenant Ambrose E (Ernie) Palmer, RANVR. Grieve already had HDML experience. He had been in command of HDML 1074, the first to be commissioned. It had been sent from the RN in the UK. Grieve joined the RAN under the Dominion Yachtsman Scheme and after initial training in England was posted to the 6th Motor Launch Flotilla serving against the enemy in the North Sea where he received a commendation for bravery. Because of his wartime experience he was brought back home to take command of the first RAN ship of this type. MLs were small and uncomfortable, where even hardened sailors could not always avoid sea sickness. In rough weather cooking was impossible and working in the engine room almost unbearable. After commissioning, HDML 1321 went to Williamstown, Victoria, before continuing to Milne Bay, New Guinea via Sydney, Brisbane and Townsville, arriving in PNG on 1 February 1944. It was placed under the operational control of the Supervising Intelligence Officer North Eastern Area with orders to conduct special wireless telegraphy intelligence work and support Allied Intelligence Bureau (AIB) personnel and Australian Coastwatchers operating behind enemy lines. The vessel had been especially modified for clandestine work and the appearance was visibly different to others of her class. The most striking feature was the bridge superstructure which was extended aft, making it look more like an island trader. Shortly after it arrived Palmer assumed command of 1321. Ernie Palmer, now promoted Lieutenant was the son of an 'old soldier' turned planter in the Solomon Islands. He had a wealth of local knowledge and had established himself as a trader, recruiter and diver. When he first enlisted for wartime service Palmer had joined the Army and had served as a commando in small ships before transferring to the RAN. Sub Lieutenant Russel Smith joined as the First Lieutenant and his reflections provide an insight into his

commanding officer and the nature of work involved: "Our captain was one of our country's unsung heroes. He was totally fearless, leading his young charges with marvellous wisdom and skill. The vessel was unique in that it had been seconded to the AIB and we were allocated the duty of servicing the famous Coastwatchers, taking in their food and equipment, bringing out their sick and so on. To do this we operated the whole time amongst the occupied islands in enemy waters. The Japanese used powerful barges and they were a constant hazard as they were armed with a 20 mm twin-barrelled pom-pom on a two-man mounting and were very accurate and dangerous. To counter the enemy menace, and with the help of our American friends, we armed our vessel in an unorthodox way. We added two automatic 37 mm cannons plus four 0.5-inch heavy machine guns to back up our 40 mm Bofors, 20 mm Oerlikon and four rapid fire .303 machine guns." Throughout 1944 HDML 1321 operated from Milne Bay and landed at isolated settlements on the Huon Peninsula between Lae and Madang. In April 1945, Z-Special Unit used HDML 1321 in a mission, codenamed Operation Copper. At Aitape It took on board eight commandoes and their four Folboats (folding kayaks), and took them into enemy territory for a night landing on the island of Muschu near enemy-occupied Wewak. There were reports of two 140 mm (5.5 inch) naval guns on Muschu Island which had sufficient range to compromise planned Allied landings for the invasion of Wewak. The purpose of the mission was to carry out reconnaissance of enemy strength on the islands, identify gun positions and, if possible, take a prisoner for further interrogation. The insertion took place on the night of 11 April but was compromised from the beginning. Although the four canoes were successfully disembarked from HDML 1321, they were swept south by strong currents. Three of the Folboats capsized after being caught in a shore break, losing a radio, two Sten-guns and a paddle. In spite of this setback, the group made it ashore, setting out immersed equipment – including their remaining radios – to dry, and then resting before continuing their mission. The following morning they encountered numerous unmanned defensive positions, including several heavy machine-guns which they dismantled and tossed into the sea. They then struck inland encountering a lone enemy soldier who was successfully captured, bound and gagged. On the return to the Folboats a wrong turn was taken and a Japanese patrol sighted. Taking cover in the jungle the patrol passed by but their captive was able to remove his gag, calling out to his countrymen. The Z Unit were then forced to shoot their prisoner and engage the advancing enemy before breaking contact and retreating into the jungle. After regrouping and resting they made their way back but observed the enemy waiting in ambush. A Japanese patrol had found the lost paddle washed ashore and then the Folboats and were alerted to the landing of Australian commandos. At night the unit moved to a cliff overlooking the pre-determined rendezvous point for recovery by HDML 1321. Without radios and their torches unusable (they were not waterproof and had been soaked on landing), they were unable to signal HDML 1321 which could be clearly heard cruising close inshore. In later testimony Lieutenant Palmer says they returned to the rendezvous for the next five nights searching for the commandos but with no evidence of survivors HDML 1321 was ordered to return to base. The commandoes then constructed a log raft but the raft broke up, and all except one commando lost their weapons and packs. With the situation now becoming desperate a vote was taken on the best plan of escape. Four voted to try again but this time using individual logs, while the other four decided to go to the western end of the island, the shortest distance from the mainland, and attempt to swim the strait. Only one member ended up surviving. Of the four who tried log rafts for a second time their fate was eventually revealed after the war. Two were drowned and their bodies were washed ashore and buried in unmarked

graves at Kairiru. The remaining two survived but were captured and killed by the Japanese. The four who went toward the other end of the island met a patrol and three were killed. The surviving member Sapper Edgar Thomas (Mick) Dennis then escaped into the jungle. Alone, he continued on to Cape Samein killing another enemy soldier and destroying a heavy machine-gun on the way. After dusk on 17 April Dennis, who was a champion swimmer and wrestler (his sister Clare Dennis was an Olympic gold medallist swimmer), put to sea on a self-made improvised surf board and drifted and swam for about ten hours to the mainland, some 5 km distant, landing in darkness at about 0400 the following morning. He was recovered by a patrol on the banks of the Hawain River on the afternoon of 20 April, nearly ten days after the initial insertion. He was able to give a de-briefing on the Japanese installations and In recognition of his actions, Dennis was later awarded the Military Medal for bravery in the field. With news of Dennis's survival two other MLs, 804 and 427, were immediately dispatched to search for any other survivors who may have escaped from Muschu, but this proved fruitless. In October 1945 after the war's end, the vessel had a refit at Brisbane. The armament was reduced to 2 x twin Browning machine guns and two Vickers machine guns, while a twin water cooled .50 caliber machine gun was removed. It was then put into service as a patrol vessel based out of Darwin. It was given the name KURU, replacing a vessel of the same name lost in 1945. The chief patrol officer for KURU was Captain F Wells. By 1950 it had been handed back to the RAN for service elsewhere. It was then made a Seaward Defence Boat (SDB 1321) and operated in Sydney Harbour, then put into reserve. Later it became an unarmed training vessel for Royal Australian Navy Reserve cadets in 1953 and remained in use until 1970, renamed as HMAS RUSHCUTTER (ML 1321). After being decommissioned it was sold and then converted to pleasure craft, renamed MV RUSHCUTTER and operated from Darwin. In 2015 it was put on the market, and inspected by a group of men in Darwin from interstate. However the Federal Police were monitoring the group, and arranged to have sound and video recorders placed on the vessel. The group did not buy the craft, and were later arrested after they bought a small powerboat and attempted to leave Australia illegally, planning to join ISIS in Syria. At present the craft is in poor condition having sunk at its moorings and then raised and taken ashore. It has been taken over by a non-profit group who wish to restore the craft to its wartime configuration so it can tell the story of its activities and the raid on the island of Muschu. Text based on research by Roger Pearson published in NAVAL HISTORICAL REVIEW and other material supplied by the HDML1321 committee. Volume 38 No. 1 – March 2017

Dimensions

Vessel Dimensions: 23.14 m × 4.8 m (75.92 ft × 15.75 ft)