

## **The last days of the *Paluma***

*The story of the former Queensland Government gunboat Gayundah is fairly well known, and her sadly rusting remnants can still be found at Woody Point. But what became of her sister ship, the gunboat Paluma? The Paluma rode the waves for almost 65 years, though not always as a gunboat, nor under her original name. This is the story of her last days as a naval vessel.*

One of two iron gunboats ordered in 1882 by the Queensland Government from Sir WG Armstrong, Mitchell & Co, the *Paluma* like the *Gayundah*, cost a hefty £35000. The ship was constructed in the Low Walker shipyard in Newcastle upon Tyne. Given the yard number 469, the *Paluma's* keel was laid in June 1883 and the vessel launched in May 1884. It was completed in October 1884. The engines were manufactured by R & W Hawthorn of Newcastle, and the 360 ton twin-screw vessel could theoretically achieve a speed of 10.6knots. The *Paluma* was originally armed with an 8-inch rifled breech-loading gun forward, and a 6-inch rifled breech-loading gun to the rear. Both guns were made by Armstrong and deviated from the standard Royal Navy design. It was also armed with a variety of Nordenfelt machine guns and quick-firers.

The *Paluma* arrived in Brisbane in May 1885, crewed and equipped by the Royal Navy to act as a survey vessel for the British Admiralty, a task it undertook until 1894. At certain times in most years the *Paluma* joined the *Gayundah* and other Queensland government naval vessels for manoeuvres, and acted as a training platform for the Naval Brigade of the Queensland Marine Defence Force. In March 1899 the main 8-inch armament was replaced with two 5-inch guns that were on hand in the Naval Stores at Kangaroo Point. After Federation of the Australian colonies in 1901 the *Paluma* was absorbed as part of the Commonwealth Naval Force, but remained in Queensland waters. The Naval Board of Administration recommended In July 1905 that the 6-inch gun from HMAS *Paluma* should be replaced with a 4.7-in gun at a cost of £25. In 1908 her two 12-pounder quick-firing guns were removed and placed aboard the *Gayundah*. Two 1½-inch Nordenfelt guns were placed aboard the *Paluma*. In October 1909 the Naval authorities sent the *Paluma* to Victoria, from which, sadly, it was never to return.

At Williamstown tenders were called in 1910 for repairs and repainting of the *Paluma's* hull though the work was not undertaken. The boilers and engines were removed but progress was exceedingly slow. For more than a year the *Paluma* was shuttled from wharf to wharf at Williamstown keeping it out of the way while a decision was made on whether repairs were warranted. In mid-1911 her hull was overhauled and her boilers and engines were replaced with the intent of turning the vessel into a training ship. Repairs were also undertaken to the ship's coal bunkers in 1912.

Given her age and degree of obsolescence the *Paluma* came in for considerable scrutiny. A general survey conducted in September 1912 found that the ship's side plating in the port side after shell room was covered in a thick scale behind the cement and a leak had developed. Re-docking and renewal of the 6' x 3' plate was recommended. In light of these identified defects the Officer Commanding HMAS *Cerberus* recommended a Board of Survey be appointed to examine the ship. Captain Tickell, former captain of the *Paluma* and then Director of Naval Reserves, with Engineer Lieutenant Elgar and Ship Constructor Mr Leask

were appointed later that month. Surprisingly their survey found a *dangerous weakness, due to corrosion, is present through practically the whole ship abaft of the Engine Room Bulkhead.*

The Board of Survey formally reported to the Commonwealth Naval Board in October 1912. Their findings included:

1. *A careful survey was held on the hull of HMAS "Paluma". Several compartments shew visible signs of leakage and the plates and frames shew considerable deterioration. The removal of cement has been temporarily suspended, it being considered unsafe while the vessel is afloat to proceed further. In view of the above it is submitted that the ship be re-docked, cement and remaining linings removed, and a further survey made.*

The Commonwealth Naval Board approved of the ship being docked to find its true condition, though one board member was ...*quite at a loss to understand why this has not been previously done and consider that someone has very much neglected his duty.*" Rear Admiral Creswell agreed: *This ship was reported to me to be thoroughly repaired and efficient...* Exactly who was responsible is not revealed in public records.

The *Paluma* was docked and again surveyed on 7 January 1913. The Board of Survey, made up of the same officers who had undertaken the initial survey, found further defects:

1. *At least 13 shell plates will require renewal; shell plates were drill tested where considered necessary and in places were found to be wasted to a thickness of 1/16";*
2. *The lower portion of two bulkheads will require renewal;*
3. *Several frames, reverse frames and floors require renewal;*
4. *Upper deck stringer plates, deck plating and stringer angle require renewal in places; the stringer angle requires renewal for full length of section;*
5. *Lower strake of shell plating at erections require renewal in places;*
6. *Magazine trunks require renewal;*
7. *Frames above upper deck require renewal;*
8. *Rudder trunk requires renewal.*

On the basis of the discovered defects the Board believed there was additional corrosion in places that hadn't been examined such as beneath the wooden deck. It formed the opinion that the *Paluma* was not worth repairing. These extensive defects, and the estimated expenditure of £3000 to repair it simply for training purposes, led to a further recommendation that the *Paluma* be sold out of service.

Although one member of the Naval Board thought it might take a year to dismantle the *Paluma*, the Williamstown Naval Depot estimated in early March that it would take just 21 days to remove the guns and all special fittings. The Depot was requested to remove the *Paluma's* guns and warlike stores in mid-March. It advised that all stores were removed, and the work of dismantling was completed by the end of April 1913. The two 5-inch guns were taken to HMAS Cerberus where they remain to this day. The 4.7-inch gun was later fitted to the *Gayundah*.

The *Paluma* was advertised for sale, but no offers were entertained. The Victorian government expressed an interest in October 1913 in chartering the ship to replace the ss *Albert* and asked the Commonwealth to allow it to be docked for examination. Negotiations

with Victoria left the Naval Board with a number of alternatives; It could be sold; it could be repaired for £3000 but it was not thought worthwhile doing so; or it could be transferred to the State government who would repair it and lend it to the Navy until a tug was available to tow hopper barges at Flinders Naval Base, and thereafter it might be lent to the Commonwealth when not in use. It was suggested that the *Paluma* – ‘a vessel of peculiar type’ – was suited for the blasting works required by the Victorian Government at the entrance to Port Phillip.

The vessel was not examined by the Engineer-in-Charge of Victoria’s Department of Harbours and Marine until January 1914. He appears to have accepted the repair costs previously identified by the Naval Board. The State of Victoria formally requested transfer, without cost, of the *Paluma* from the Navy in view of the repairs that would be necessary.

Papers wound their way through the Commonwealth bureaucracy for a number of months and finally, in April 1914 the Prime Minister approved of the transfer. The ss *Paluma* was transferred to the Public Works Department, Victoria *for use in the deepening operations at the Heads*. It was transferred on the understanding that it could be used by the Commonwealth when Victoria was not using it. In early June 1914 the *Paluma* (sometimes still noted in correspondence as TSS and sometimes HMAS) was transferred from *Cerberus* Williamstown to the State Dockyard and docked for repairs and alterations. The Engineer-in-Charge requested plans for the vessel so that work could be undertaken, however the Navy had none. Eventually plans were provided for the identical vessel HMAS *Gayundah*.

As the Naval Board suggested that they wouldn’t need the *Paluma* for towing at Port Western before January 1915, the vessel was refitted by the Victorian Government and commenced work at Port Phillip. The Premier of Victoria advised the Prime Minister in October 1916 that it was unlikely the *Paluma* would be available to be loaned to the Commonwealth, and suggested the ss *Albert* be transferred in place of the *Paluma*. The Commonwealth Naval Board agreed noting that the *Albert* would be a useful vessel, and the transfer was approved in November 1916.

The *Paluma* lost her original name shortly afterwards, and was named *Rip* while in the service of the Victorian Government. She was significantly adapted for harbor duties and remained in service until 1949. She was finally broken up during 1950-51 on the Maribyrnong River.

Sources:

Australian War Memorial  
National Archives of Australia  
Queensland State Archives

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