

Rear Admiral Frederick William Purves, CBE, RAN

Frederick William Purves was an unusual officer of the Royal Australian Navy. A civilian-trained engineer, he entered the service as a reservist, served in a variety of different situations in WWII, and was then offered a permanent commission. He rose to the rank of Rear Admiral, and throughout his career retained his love of engineering, being associated with the area in a variety of ways, including seeing diesel engines brought to the fore in the RAN. He was one of the few officers in the history of the RAN to reach flag rank without having had the privilege of an education at the Naval College.

Born on 13 March 1912 in the English Midlands, the young Fred Purves came to Australia his family in the early years of his youth.¹ They settled in 1920s North Sydney, close to the Harbour, where Fred was in his element. He was interested in boats and engines, swimming and scouting activities, but not the academics of education. He left school as soon as he could, and at the age of 15 years and eight days was indentured to the Adelaide Steamship Company as an apprentice fitter and turner.² He joined the Army in a part-time capacity as part of the Citizens' Military Forces, with the ability to be able to operate a lathe leading to his developing early expertise as a gun-layer.³

On 15 March 1930, aged nearly 18, Purves joined the Naval Reserve, his occupation noted as an 'Apprentice Marine Engineer'.⁴ He attended training for almost the next two years, while training as an apprentice was completed in May 1932.

Throughout the 1930s he served on a variety of the Adelaide Steamship Company's vessels as an engineer. The first of these was *Oorama*, from early January 1933, where he was certified as the Third Engineer. A variety of short engagements followed, probably reflecting a direction for Purves to gain experience at sea in his chosen field.



Purves in later life with his beloved engines

The ships were many and varied: *Manoora*, *Manunda*, *Aldinga*, *Allara* and more.⁵ In June 1935 he gained his Certificate of Competency as an engineer⁶ and continued to serve in such ships, sometimes returning to vessel he had previously served in. His Certificates of Discharge were invariably stamped 'VG' for Very Good in Efficiency, Conduct and Ability.

In late 1936 Purves travelled to the United Kingdom to further his engineering knowledge, but was also able to be employed by the Adelaide Steamship Company to assist in the construction of the engines of a new steamer, *Bungaree*.⁷ He joined this vessel as Fourth Engineer for her inaugural trip to Australia, arriving back in the country in July 1937. He continued to work for the Company in *Manunda* and *Ulooloo* until February 1939. The Company parted reluctantly with his services at his own request, and

¹ Personal details on Purves's life are generally drawn from material supplied by his son, Robert Purves.

² Indenture paper. Robert Purves Collection (hereafter known as RPC).

³ Telephone interview with Robert Purves – son of the Admiral – 28 March 2002.

⁴ Certificate of Service. (RPC)

⁵ Reference from the Adelaide Steamship Company, 28 February 1939. (RPC)

⁶ Application for Examination as an Engineer. (RPC)

⁷ *Bungaree* was requisitioned by the Royal Australian Navy during WW II and commissioned as Australia's only mine-layer.

armed with glowing references⁸ Purves entered the service of Burns Philp and Company as Chief Engineer in the *Lakatoi* in her operations in Papua New Guinea waters.

Purves made a studious habit of obtaining references from the Chief Engineer and often the Captain of every vessel he served in up to this point. They all speak of a keen, energetic personality; a man vitally interested in engines, ships and the sea. In the manner of the time they comment upon his 'sober habits'. In all cases the references expressed opinions along the lines of being most regretful of losing his services and urged him to return at his convenience.

Between 1936 and 1939 Purves visited Germany, primarily to study diesel engines. He was able therefore to see at first hand the preparations Germany was making for war, and something of the nature of the Nazi party; which included the souveniring of a Nazi flag from the front of a staff car.⁹ Around this time Purves decided to change directions a little. He was a keen observer of international affairs and, according to his later reminiscences, had seen the political winds blowing towards war for some time. He decided to join the Navy. Naturally enough, this took time.

Athol Rose, who knew Purves in later life, suggests¹⁰ that a chance encounter with the Australian armed forces precipitated Purves's application. He assisted an Army unit get a boat ashore 'up a steep slope' by using a tank to pull the vessel. The next day the officer in charge of the Army unit boarded Purves's vessel to pass on his thanks through the Captain. Purves's qualifications were noted and the application facilitated.

While waiting for the wheels of bureaucracy to turn Purves furthered his education by enrolling as a marine engineering student at a Technical College. For the next year he continued to voyage in *Lakatoi*, and with an excellent reference behind him he finally left the company on 26 July 1940.

While onboard *Macdhui* in transit from *Sydney* to Samarai, New Guinea, the previous year, he had met a nurse by the name of Lilian Mawson. Romance took hold, and Purves soon proposed marriage.¹¹ The couple were wed, on 3 April 1940, at a mission station in Kwato.¹²

On 1 December 1940 Purves was appointed 'Probationary Temporary Engineer Lieutenant' in the Royal Australian Naval Reserve. He initially attended the NSW shore establishment HMAS *Rushcutter* as an Engineer Lieutenant, probably for a short training session, but then was attached to his first Navy ship. HMAS *Tolga* became his home from 30 December 1940 to 21 May 1942. This former coastal steamer of 418 tons had been requisitioned by the RAN only a month earlier. Now fitted with a 12 pound gun and half a dozen machine guns, she was working as a minesweeper.¹³ 'Hard-working, intelligent and most trustworthy', was the commanding officer's reference to his engineer's service.

During 1941 Purves's marriage to Lilian saw the birth of twin boys – William and Robert.¹⁴ He escaped a certain death that year. A signal posting him to the doomed HMAS *Sydney* as an engineer was rescinded. The engagement with the German raider *Kormoran* on 19 November saw no survivors from the *Sydney*.

The attacks on Darwin in February 1942 saw Fred Purves in the thick of the action.¹⁵ Although a member of *Tolga*, he had been seconded to *Platypus*, the largest ship in the harbour, but also the least moveable. A veteran of many years, *Platypus* was by now merely a floating workshop. On the night of the 18th February Purves attended a party held by his friend Tommy Minto on board the hospital ship *Manunda*.

⁸ Various copies as supplied by Robert Purves to the author.

⁹ Frederick William Purves 1930s photograph album. (RAN College Historical Collection)

¹⁰ Rose, Athol, Commander RAN (Rtd.) Letter to the author, November 2001.

¹¹ Letter to the author from son Robert Purves, 4 May, 2001.

¹² Canberra Times newspaper article. 'Wartime romance goes for gold'. April 1990. (RPC)

¹³ Straczek, Josef. *The Royal Australian Navy: Ships, Aircraft and Shore Establishments*. Sydney: Navy Public Affairs, 1996.

¹⁴ Newspaper – unknown title. Year also unknown, but contextual reference to 1990. 'Wartime romance goes for gold'. (RPC)

¹⁵ Letters to the author, March-May, 1996. (Letters penned for his father by son Robert Purves with his observations also added)

Purves's first job the next morning was the repair of the engines of the *Mavie*, a captured Japanese lugger now brought into the Royal Australian Navy. Upon return from harbour trials, and after rigging some awnings to ward off what looked like one of the normal hot Territory 'Wet season' days, Purves and others saw approaching Japanese aircraft. He recalls:

I dashed to my cabin in *Platypus* to obtain my helmet and respirator, hanging on a hook near the porthole. As I grabbed them, bombs exploded and I saw an extraordinary sight through the porthole: the wharf outside, a locomotive, trucks and a large number of wharf labourers were flying through the air. I went down into the engine-room, my action station...five bombs landed under the vessel, and exploded simultaneously. *Platypus* seemed to have been lifted almost out of the water, and then fell back with such force that the heavy foot-plates in the engine-room became air-borne, and I found myself in the bilge, with both hot and cold water upon me. The condensers had shattered, and water reached waist-level before it could be stopped.¹⁶

Purves witnessed an attack on the hospital ship *Manunda* during the first raid. Some controversy surrounds this attack: there have been suggestions it was accidental, with others vehemently holding to the view it was deliberate. Purves, with a clear view of *Manunda* from *Katoomba*, witnessed the attack by a group of dive bombers. He is certain that this group acted in concert, and that the attack was deliberate. For him, the only uncertainty lies in the reason for the Japanese reluctance to sink, rather than merely disable, the hospital ship, the floating dock and *Platypus*.¹⁷

After the raiders had departed, Purves recalls he went – 'covered in blood' – to the floating dock where the corvette *Katoomba* was under repair. She needed only a little welding to her asdic (sonar) dome to be ready for service, and Purves and his work team intended to get this done so she could be put back into action. It was while there that the second raid came over, and Purves recalls it was about then the ammunition ship *Neptuna* – burning fiercely at the main wharf some distance away – blew up, showering all of them with debris.

The subsequent work in Darwin was somewhat disorganised, and also took place in an atmosphere of trepidation, for the Japanese raids of the 19th were the forerunners of many more – 64 raids were made against northern Australia during the war. Purves remembers working on the beached US freighter *Port Mar*: Robert Rayner's *The Army and the Defence of Darwin Fortress* lists 'eight 75mm guns plus jeeps and thirty two trucks' as being recovered, with all of the work being done under cover of darkness.¹⁸ He worked on other vessels as well, generally as a diver: 'I spent many hours under the surface applying patches to the hulls'.¹⁹ Conditions in Darwin are remembered as 'chaotic', but the work went on: 'Japanese raids sometimes took place while I was under water, which was often the safest place to be'. Incidentally, he had no qualifications as a diver, but was persuaded to give it a try by the famous 'Johnno' Johnstone, who had been brought to Darwin to try to enter the submarine *I-124*. Well known for his exploits recovering gold from the sunken *Niagara* off New Zealand, Johnstone would have been well qualified to enter the *I-124*, but due to a number of factors his team was prevented from diving on the submarine.²⁰

It was while working on *Port Mar* as a diver, on one of his breaks, that Purves was told he was to join HMAS *Deloraine* on a temporary basis. This corvette had just achieved local fame in sinking the *I-124*, the first Japanese submarine to be destroyed by the RAN. On 20 January that year (a month before the attacks of 19 February) *I-124* and her three sister boats had attacked a convoy outside the harbour. Failing to sink their prey, the submarines became the target of the local corvettes, and on the afternoon of the 20th the *I-124* had made the mistake of attempting to sink a modern anti-submarine vessel. *Deloraine* charged down the track of the sighted torpedo and commenced depth charging the Japanese

¹⁶ Letters from Purves to the author, March-May, 1996.

¹⁷ Alan Powell in *The Shadow's Edge* gives opinions from both sides. See also Rupert Goodman's *Hospital Ships*. Brisbane: Boolarong Publications, 1992.

¹⁸ Rayner, Robert. *The Army and the Defence of Darwin Fortress*. NSW: Rudder Press, 1995. (239)

¹⁹ Letters to the author, March-May, 1996.

²⁰ See the same author's *Sensuikan I-124*.

boat until she surfaced and was depth-charged at point blank range.²¹ It was this loss and the failure of the minelaying to neutralise Darwin that caused the attacks of a month later by carrier-based aircraft.

The combat proved too much for the engineer of the corvette, Lieutenant Ken Graham, and he was despatched to hospital with a nervous breakdown. Purves took his place, '...for some weeks, on a number of missions', as he put it. It was perhaps later in Darwin – Purves is not specific about the time – that he suffered a number of small injuries as a result of '...my being a bit late diving into a trench during a Japanese bombing raid'. The catalogue of wounds was comprehensive: Purves had been 'temporarily blinded', his right foot had been crushed and pieces of shrapnel had been lodged in his right leg, one piece behind his knee. Removed from Darwin by flying boat for sick leave in May 1942, some consolation was gained by a brief reunion in Bombala NSW with his wife and their twins.

Purves admitted later that he suffered from his wounds for the rest of his active career, and indeed later that year when he was given a medical examination it was enough for the American doctor to certify him unfit for active service. However, in his own words, he 'suppressed' this, and continued service.²²

The American doctor was necessary by then because Purves had voyaged across the Pacific on a secret mission – to carry uranium to America for the Manhattan Project. He had received puzzling orders on his convalescent leave; so puzzling that Purves queried the telegram.²³ But they were certain enough: he was to travel to Albury in civilian clothes and board a train that would be held until his arrival. The train travelled to Melbourne, and there Purves and others in a specially picked crew were given unusual clothes – at the tailors Buckley and Nunn's – with radiation measuring devices sewn into the clothing. They were escorted to the 'Overlander' train which ran overnight to Adelaide. There they boarded a diesel-engined ship, flying the neutral Swedish flag and with a crew of Swedes already on board.

The Australians were to accompany a special cargo, the nature of which was unknown to the Swedes. Destined for the Manhattan Project, it was uranium 'yellowcake', disguised as wool bales. In the event of an attempt to stop and search by enemy personnel Purves was to destroy the vessel by running the diesel engines at top speed with their lubricating oil turned off – the resultant explosion sinking the ship. Fortunately the voyage passed without incident. The uranium was delivered to San Francisco, and the rest is history. In the New Year's List of 1965, Purves was accorded the honour of Ordinary Officer in the Order of the British Empire (the OBE) – an award he viewed with some surprise – and he presumed then it was belated recognition for this secret voyage. The citation simply states: 'For Distinguished Service'.

On 23 June 1942, while he was away, the Commonwealth of Australia awarded Purves his certificate of Competency as a First Class Engineer.²⁴ While in America he was able to do some more diving, first in connection with the salvage of the *Tucker*, and then on the wreck of the *Normandie* in the Hudson River.²⁵ He saw some voyages with the USN on the eastern seaboard, rescuing survivors of torpedoed ships. The memory of these times traumatised him to the extent that he would dream of them occasionally for the rest of his life.²⁶

Upon returning to Australia, Purves served as an Engineer Officer of the cruiser HMAS *Australia*, from 23 March to 28 August 1943, attached to Task Force 74 as part of the US Seventh Fleet. The force was made up of three cruisers: *Australia*, *Hobart* and USS *Phoenix*, and five destroyers.²⁷ The ships firstly were placed on 'stand-by' for some months inside the Great Barrier Reef. On 29 June the Task Force was deployed to the Coral Sea to search for the enemy but was withdrawn after a short time. On 20 July while operating to the west of the New Hebrides *Australia* was leading *Hobart* at a distance of some

²¹ See the same author's *Sensuikan I-124*.

²² Letters to the author, March-May, 1996

²³ The sources for this are somewhat vague, but this is unsurprising, given the nature of the mission. The story derives from accounts as relayed by RADM Purves in later life to RADM Max Reed, AO, RAN (Rtd.), and Robert Purves. On Purves's Confidential Report for 21 May 1942 the Occasion for Report is filled in with 'Discharged South Category X'. This term is unknown to the writer, and has not been seen on other WWII reports, up to and including the 'Most Secret' used then for the highest levels of security. It may be that the writer was not given a reason for Purves's discharge south so simply used 'X' as an unknown quantity.

²⁴ Original document (RPC)

²⁵ Letters to the author, March-May, 1996.

²⁶ Cited in letters to the author from Robert Purves.

²⁷ Payne, MA. *HMAS Australia*. Sydney: Naval Historical Society of Australia, 1988. (118)

600 yards and three destroyers operating an anti-submarine screen. At 1845 *Hobart* was hit by a torpedo on her port side. The torpedo, fired by Commander Tagami in the submarine *I-GO11*, had actually been fired at *Australia* but had missed.

Hobart lost all electrical power and began to list to port. Most of the damage was in the wardroom area, and seven officers and one rating had been killed. No further action took place, and *Hobart* was escorted to Espiritu Santo by two of the destroyers. The RAN's cruiser strength was now down to two from the six with which it had commenced the war. *Hobart* took 18 months to repair.

Australia returned to Sydney and Purves posted off the ship. Captain Farncomb signed his Certificate with the comment '...he has conducted himself to my entire satisfaction'.²⁸ However, his Personal Report, which gave more detail, carried some negative comments:

This officer carried out his duties with zeal and enthusiasm, but lacks the attribute of being able to command a body of men. He recently completed a short diving course in with a United States salvage crew and produced some very good information on shallow water diving and underwater cutting. His behaviour has been excellent and his fault of fraternising too much with subordinate officers has been checked. If his power of command were stronger I would have no hesitation in strongly recommending him...

A 'half-yearly promotion' report near that time – of 15 July 1943 – sheds more light on this situation:

...He is contented in his Service life but prior to joining this ship he apparently made a habit of fraternising with subordinates (Warrant Officers). This habit has now been checked and some good may come of it.

Naval protocol still – and did so even more in 1943 – separates social occasions into three ranks: officers, senior sailors, and junior sailors. Although inter-mess functions operated then, and do so now, they are governed by invitation and expectation. It would appear Purves was flouting the convention enough to draw attention. The comments on 'power of command' were bolstered in their strength by the medium numerical ratings Purves often received around this time. In later years this was to change however, with a distinctive upward trend.

It is worth noting here that Purves had changed his eating and drinking habits around this time too. In one of his son's words he had possessed the 'silhouette of a modern tennis star' when he married, but he had always had a liking for sugary things and he began to indulge it. He was also able to consume alcohol, which he did so in moderation, usually in the form of beer. In later years his liking for sweet things were to cause him to put on weight, and in his retirement diabetes would make an appearance.²⁹

Purves's next appointment – from 29 August 1943 to 7 February 1944 – saw him return to America as Engineer Officer of HMAS *Reserve*. A new fleet tug built in Texas, she displaced 800 tons and mounted a 4" gun and four machine guns.³⁰ This ship was brought back to Australia, although not without incident: some members of the largely civilian ship's company, drunk on Christmas Day, refused to sail, and threats were made with some of the disaffected members entering the engine room to damage the engines. Purves drove them out with drawn pistol, and had an equally curt response to a union official who later reproached him in Australia over the matter.³¹

He was posted to another fleet tug – *Sprightly* – as Temporary Engineer Officer on 24 January 1944. This small ship was also built in Texas and similarly armed to *Reserve*. Another small ship appointment followed: to *Koopa* on 17 July 1944. This converted river steamer was used as a training ship, repair ship and depot vessel for Fairmile motor launches used on patrol duties in Australian and Papua New Guinea waters. On 30 September Purves was promoted to Lieutenant Commander.

²⁸ Officer's Certificate (original) from the collection of Robert Purves, as are all other Certificates cited.

²⁹ Purves, Robert. Letter of 11 February 2002.

³⁰ Straczek, Josef. *The Royal Australian Navy: Ships, Aircraft and Shore Establishments*. Sydney: Navy Public Affairs, 1996.

³¹ Drawn from three of the RPC letters.

On 21 May, 1945 Purves was posted as Engineer Officer of the PNG shore establishment HMAS *Madang*. The base's primary purpose was to serve as a depot for the many Allied ships which had participated in the attacks on the Japanese positions in Papua New Guinea. Fairmile launches, freighters, landing ships, and other small warships utilised the busy establishment. The slipway was without a winch, and Purves 'acquired' a British tank to serve this purpose. Post-war it was noted that he was still liable for the 'purchase' of the tank, but this accounting anomaly soon disappeared.³² Purves posted out on 21 July with a month of well-deserved leave.

He was next posted to the *Sydney* shore establishment PENGUIN for duty at the Qantas Refitting Shops from 21 August 1945. However, much of the duty was at Alexishafen – north of Madang – for maintenance of Fairmile launches and other small ships.³³ This was followed by a change in jobs under the command of the same establishment; on 1 April 1946, Purves became the Officer in Charge of the Care and Maintenance party at Port Stephens. He was posted to the Mornington Peninsula training establishment *Cerberus* from 10 September 1946, and effective a month and a half after that transferred to Permanent Service.

Ron Osborn, later a Commander in the Navy, remembers meeting the Purves family at the RAN College, then located at *Cerberus*. Invited to tea, he recalls: 'Fred at that time was still wearing the 'chain gang' stripes of an RANR Engineer Officer. The Purves family were most kind to us and it was I think our first break from the daily grind at the college.'³⁴

In 1948 Purves returned to sea on board HMAS *Australia* as the Senior Engineer Officer. His Personal Report commented that given his lack of experience in steam engineering he had done very well, and also noted 'Not very keen on games except rifle shooting'. His numerical scores were all 'fives' with a 'six' for 'Personal Qualities'. Max Reed, (later Rear Admiral) then the Senior Watchkeeper in the ship, remembers Purves's first instructions: 'I'm very knowledgeable about diesels but not too hot about steam turbines – so I'll leave it to you. If you want any help let me know, but remember to keep me informed of what is going on'. Reed thought though, that 'his knowledge...wasn't as minuscule as he made out'. This attitude of 'get on with the job but keep me informed...inspired a great respect for the man'.³⁵ Petty Officer Colin Price remembers meeting Purves as a 'young Engineer Lt. Cmdr.' when he was requested to make up on a lathe a 'lead screw and half nut'. 'I succeeded in producing a good job, and he was that pleased that the next day he presented me with a pint bottle of Johnny Walker Whisky'. Naturally enough, Price remembered the officer's face, and met up with him again on an appointment to HMAS *Nirimba*.³⁶

Some overseas training in London was necessary; for a year and a half Purves was attached to the RN Aircraft Repair Yard at Donibristle in Fife, Great Britain, accompanied by his family.³⁷ There he was attached in turn to every section of the repair yard, and went to sea in various aircraft carriers. The report of the Captain in charge of the Yard to the RAN commented that he was a 'most able, conscientious and knowledgeable officer' and concluded with the words 'I...most strongly recommend his immediate promotion'.³⁸

Purves was promoted to Commander while in Britain – he and his wife celebrated with champagne and a short visit to Paris. They sailed from Tilbury, with Purves's next appointment to *Penguin* with effect of 25 January 1951. Later that year, on 5 October, he was posted to the Port Melbourne shore establishment *Lonsdale* as Engineer Overseer at the Williamstown Naval Dockyard. From 25 January 1952 to 18 December 1953 he served in Navy Office in Melbourne. His Certificate at the end of that time noted: 'A most loyal and hard working officer and an excellent practical engineer. With more experience of administration he should do well in the higher ranks of the Service'.

³² Drawn from two of the RPC letters.

³³ As noted on Personal Report of 21 March 1946.

³⁴ Osborn, Ron, Commander, RAN (Rtd.). Email to the author, December 2001.

³⁵ Reed, Max, Rear Admiral, AO, RAN (Rtd.) Letter of 11 December 2001.

³⁶ Price, Colin C. RAN member. Manuscript: 'A Tiffy's Odyssey: being the recollections of a Royal Australian Naval Artificer 1941-1961.' December 1995. (In the author's possession.)

³⁷ Conversation with Robert Purves, 10 December 2001.

³⁸ Foster, WG, Captain, RN. Superintendent of the RN Aircraft Repair Yard, Denibristle, Fife. 21 September 1950.

The boys of Purves's new family had been growing fast through the war, and after a short time living in Katoomba, he settled them with their mother Lilian on a six-acre property at Dural.³⁹ There Purves designed his own house in a style he had seen in America, supervised the building, and named the residence *Fairmile* after the Navy fast attack vessels he had so often repaired at Alexishafen. Although the house remained in the family for many years after that, it was often left by the family as Purves's appointments took them afar and abroad: Robert Purves remembered in later years attending 12 different schools: nine in Australia and three in Britain.

The next appointment was to the naval air station HMAS *Nirimba* on 21 December 1953. Purves served here for a year to 30 September 1954. One incident that took place there demonstrates his sense of fun – and dedication. He met up with Colin Price, then Chief Instructor at the School of Aircraft Maintenance. Price was on his motor bike, and met Purves by chance at the guard house when returning from a country tour. The Commander requested a ride on the motor bike back to the wardroom, with Price to drive the car, but this wasn't possible, as the motorcyclist did not have a car licence. Purves then suggested Price report to him at the Wardroom each time he was on duty where driving lessons duly took place until Price was able to sit for a licence.⁴⁰

Bruce Ziegler, later a Commander, remembers meeting Purves in the '50s. He described him as a 'Brilliant Engineer', and 'Popular'. Purves called Ziegler to his office one day and announced that Ziegler had been promoted a Commander in HMAS *Vampire*. He added: 'You will need a Brass Hat.⁴¹ Take mine – and if it fits you take my chair and I will go to *Vampire*'. The handing over of Purves personal headwear was a pleasant way of being told of a promotion.⁴²

One senior officer notes that perhaps Purves was a little out of his depth in the field of aircraft engineering as opposed to that of ships. 'In my opinion (he) never really appreciated the philosophical differences of approach to the branch of engineering compared to the marine engineering on which he had cut his teeth'.⁴³ Nevertheless his Personal Report on leaving saw Purves awarded a most positive set of scores.

After a stint as Staff Officer in Navy Office (1 Oct 1954 to 24 Jan 1955) Purves was appointed to sea once more. From 25 January 1955 he served as Engineer Officer of HMAS *Sydney* – the aircraft carrier – to 7 February 1956, with Captain WH Harrington noting that he performed in '...a capable and energetic manner'. This contrasted with the somewhat grievous comments of Captain GC Oldham on 5 July of the previous year in his Personal Report when he wrote:

Good moral standard – not particularly cheerful but at least he sticks to the job with determination when things are going wrong. His weakest point is his general bearing: he dresses adequately; but his figure – short, thick and roundish – combined with a pleasant but by no means commanding personality renders it improbable that other attributes however well marked, will result in a high assessment for Leadership.

His son, Robert Purves, later noted that such comments were probably accurate and justified: indeed Purves himself often remarked that he was 'just a rough old engineer'. He sometimes resented a little others of privileged background flaunting their learning: on one occasion he came home fuming because his RN Commanding Officer had asked him to find out what the 'cacophony' outside his office was all about, and Purves – having no Greek – was acutely embarrassed not to know the meaning of the word.⁴⁴

³⁹ Purves, Robert. Letter to the author, 9 October.

⁴⁰ Price (26-27)

⁴¹ The promotion to Commander sees the recipient assume a gold-laced cap, traditionally known as a 'Brass Hat'. Purves was giving Ziegler a gold-laced cap to wear immediately.

⁴² Ziegler, Bruce M, Commander RAN (Rtd.) Letter to the author, 28 February 2002.

⁴³ Letter to the author from RAN officer, November 2001. The officer wished to remain anonymous. His position and experience were such that his comments were deemed worthy of retention.

⁴⁴ Letter to the author from Robert Purves, May 2003.

Time as an Engineer Officer for the air station at Nowra, New South Wales, HMAS *Albatross*, followed from 1 May 1956. His Certificate there on to 14 January 1957 noted that Purves was: 'A trustworthy and capable senior officer who is handling a big task with zeal and enthusiasm'.

Athol Rose recalled him at this time when 'we were all overworked with seven air squadrons operating' – his own department had five officers, for example, instead of the billeted 13.⁴⁵ Purves was able to get 'maximum cooperation for his staff and other departments'. Rose remembers one Herculean effort of getting a Fairey Firefly engine changed overnight, which Purves achieved through '...good relationships with other departments...and good leadership'. On a personal note, Rose recalls Purves's love of classical music and his efforts to get others to appreciate it through the loan of records to anyone expressing an interest.

On the negative side however, some thought that Purves appealed more to the sailors than to officers. One senior officer later was of the opinion he: '...undoubtedly impressed senior technical ratings with whom he could empathise easily, but engineer officers, at least on the aircraft side, were not so impressed.'⁴⁶ This is perhaps not surprising given that he was a marine, not an aeronautical, engineer.

His promotion to Captain took effect on 4 July 1957, when he was appointed to the air base HMAS *Albatross* as Air Engineer Officer. As Fleet Engineer Officer, serving in the aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne*, Purves served from 26 July 1957 until 9 July 1959. His Certificate noted: 'A very efficient, reliable and conscientious officer' and 'I have great confidence in him'. Ron Osborn remembers an incident which sums up Purves's love of engineering:

...on my posting to *Quickmatch* I recall a visit to Lieutenant Harry Rouse, the ship's Engineer Officer. Fred was greeted at the brow by our Captain Andrew Robertson and invited up to his cabin for a cuppa. Fred – rolled white overalls tucked under his arm – replied 'No thanks Andrew. I'll just get on with the job with Harry'.⁴⁷

This attitude of wanting to get down to work quickly is borne out by the Personal Report of 19 January 1959: 'He itches to do any job himself and has self disciplined himself to resist this great temptation'.

On 3 January 1961 Captain Purves was appointed to the apprentice training establishment *Nirimba* in command. The year was one of tragedy otherwise – his son William, by then a 20-year old engineer, died in a residential fire at Wollongong.⁴⁸ Bruce Ziegler, who was Officer of the Day of *Nirimba* at the time, recalls meeting Purves '...near his quarters...when he, against a flood of tears, told me of the news he had received'.⁴⁹

The tragic start to the decade might have well seen Purves brought to despair, but he continued on with characteristic fortitude, and it was indeed now that the Navy's confidence in him was to be justified even more than ever. Malcolm Baird, who knew him well, sums it up as being at attitude where 'practical perception dominated'.⁵⁰ The sixties was to be a time of great change in the Royal Australian Navy. British domination in all things was to give way to looking further afield for ship and weapons designs. Baird recalls that Purves had 'a major part to play' in the design, construction and entry into service of an escort maintenance ship design, which eventually culminated in HMAS *Stalwart*. Baird, who was a destroyer captain, noted that because of Purves's input, one could always be assured of the best of things when operating with that support ship in the future.

It was around this time that his old acquaintance Colin Price was 'paying off' from the Navy after 20 years of service. Price recalls:

⁴⁵ Rose, Athol, Commander RAN (rtd.) Letter to the author, November 2001.

⁴⁶ Letter to the author from anonymous RAN officer previously cited in this chapter.

⁴⁷ Osborn, Ron, Commander, RAN (Rtd.). Email to the author, December 2001.

⁴⁸ Newspaper – unknown title. 'Wartime romance goes for gold'. Year also unknown, but contextual reference to 1990. (RPC)

⁴⁹ Ziegler, Bruce M, Commander RAN (Rtd.) Letter to the author, 28 February 2002.

⁵⁰ Baird, Malcolm, RAN officer (rtd.) Letter to the author, 5 November 2001.

One day Captain (E) F. Purves sent for me and questioned me regarding my future prospects. I told him I did not have a job to go to. He then asked me what sort of employment I wanted. When I replied, he picked up the phone and rang Melbourne and arranged an interview with the Director of AID (Aircraft Inspection Directorate) which was part of the Department of Defence and with whom I was to be employed for the next 20 years...I have letters addressed to me and written by Admiral Purves which I have kept as treasured keepsakes. They are written on official Navy Office note paper and are simply signed Fred Purves. What a man. What a friend.⁵¹

As Rear Admiral Neil McDonald remembers, Purves was '...one who could talk to anyone with the greatest of ease. He understood the feelings of the many who were not in authority'.⁵² The Price incident is an illustration of his trait of getting straight to the problem and fixing it. Rear Admiral Max Reed thought:

As far as 'leadership' goes he always 'led by example'. Never one to say 'Well go away and fix it' he would sit down and discuss the problem with you be it mechanical or whether it related to some personnel problem. He had a good grasp of human behaviour...⁵³

Purves returned to *Lonsdale* from 12 November 1962, as Director of (Williamstown) Dockyard and Fleet Maintenance. Meanwhile his wife Lilian had continued nursing, as she had through the 50s and would continue to do so in the 1960s, only giving up her profession when later promotions to flag rank for her husband demanded more of her time too.

From 28 February 1963 Purves served as the Deputy Chief of Technical Services and Assistant Naval Attache in Britain.⁵⁴ Although this was a diplomatic position, his engineering role prevailed, with frequent visits to Germany to check on machinery being manufactured at Friedrichshafen by the Zahnradfabrik factory, for the RAN's *Oberon* class submarines. This was certainly appreciated by his superiors. 'His great practical ability and long experience have been of immeasurable value to the RAN...he has achieved the admiration and respect of all at Navy Office' were comments in his Certificate of 16 November 1964. His Report bore that out, with a choice of phrases including: 'Extremely hardworking'; 'entirely forthright'; and 'extremely popular'.

⁵¹ Price, Colin C. RAN member. Manuscript: 'A Tiffy's Odyssey'.

⁵² McDonald, Neil, Rear- Admiral, RAN (Rtd.) Letter to the author, November 2001.

⁵³ Reed, Max, Rear Admiral, AO, RAN (Rtd.) Letter of 11 December 2001.

⁵⁴ Purves, Robert. Letter. February 2002.



The completion of the first hull section of an Oberon-class submarine – Purves 2nd from left presiding

From 6 January 1965 Purves was posted to HMAS *Cerberus II*, as Chief Staff Officer (Technical) to 15 December of that year.⁵⁵ He was noted on his Certificate as conducting himself ‘...in an outstanding manner. He is an exceptional senior technical officer.’ However, in some ways he probably had trouble fitting in. One senior officer was of the opinion: ‘He had little time for naval protocol, had a poor opinion of seaman officers and was more comfortable with a spanner in his hand than walking the corridors of naval power’.⁵⁶ Certainly the Personal Report – as opposed to the Certificate – was not kind. Commodore JM Ramsay wrote many positive comments, but also rated his ‘Suitability for promotion’ as ‘Slight’ and commented:

He seems to me to possess all the professional attributes to qualify him for promotion to fill the post of Chief of Naval Technical Services, but I hesitate in assessing his chances at more than slight because his appearance, manner of speech and general bearing do not fit in with my idea of an Admiral.⁵⁷

On 25 January 1966, while in Kent, Britain, Captain Purves attended the 164th Celebration of the Greenock Burns Club, to toast the memory of the great poet. The event, complete with pipers, dancers, musical celebrations and recitations, must have been a memorable event – Purves kept the program for many years afterwards. The appointment was full of similar social events, such as the New Zealand High Commission’s Cocktail Party, events which were much more than social occasions; the term from later years of ‘networking’ is perhaps a better description of their true purpose.⁵⁸

On 19 May 1966 Purves was notified of his impending appointment – to succeed Rear Admiral FL George – as Third Naval Member of the Naval Board with promotion to Rear Admiral from 14 March 1967. The position also carried the title of ‘Chief of the Naval Technical Services’.⁵⁹ The new responsibilities saw travel arranged for the beginning of the following year to the United States – part of

⁵⁵ This was a convention in posting: Dr Sam Bateman, a retired RAN Commodore, advises: ‘RAN personnel in the UK in the 50s and 60s used to be posted to HMAS *Cerberus II*’. (*Cerberus II* was only active from 1917 to 1921.)

⁵⁶ Letter to the author from anonymous RAN officer previously cited in this chapter.

⁵⁷ 15 December 1965.

⁵⁸ New Zealand High Commission. Invitation to Cocktail Party. 22 March 1966. Robert Purves Collection.

⁵⁹ Department of the Navy. Letter to Captain FW Purves, 28 June 1966. Robert Purves Collection.

the Royal Australian Navy's change in focus from British platforms to American ships. Again, notes Malcolm Baird, Purves was:

...legendary in his practical perceptions of work being done for Australia....FP's down-to-earth manner, his practical approach, his single-minded application of fundamental principles, and his Australian irreverence for pomp, marked him as a leader who was willingly followed because he was a thorough professional and never lost sight of the aim.⁶⁰

Despite a swing to acquiring some American vessels, the RAN remained committed to several British designs, amongst them the excellent *Oberon* class diesel-electric submarines. Ron Osborn is of the opinion: '...to the best of my knowledge he looked after the RAN's interest with his usual expertise.'⁶¹

Once in Britain, on 17 June 1966, Purves officiated for the Navy in a ceremony to place the first hull section for HMAS *Ovens*. On 29 November 1966 he attended the launch of HMAS *Otway*, one of the six *Oberon* class submarines being built in Britain for the RAN.⁶² His expertise in diesel engines was certainly brought to the fore in these years, as well as in the design of the engines for the new *Attack* class patrol boats being brought into service. As Malcolm Baird again points out, in these areas and more, Purves showed: '...an endless capacity to improve a design that it might better suit Australia's unique circumstances'.

Purves celebrated his promotion to Rear Admiral the following year with a cocktail party on 13 March 1967, and a dinner the following day, in his new flag-rank capacity.⁶³ Both were attended by a distinguished group: the latter event by Vice Admiral Sir Alan McNicholl and his wife, and by no fewer than three Rear Admirals, including the notable Vice Admiral VAT Smith. The Minister for the Navy – the Honourable Don Chipp, then Minister for the Navy, was also in attendance with his wife.

⁶⁰ Baird. Letter to the author.

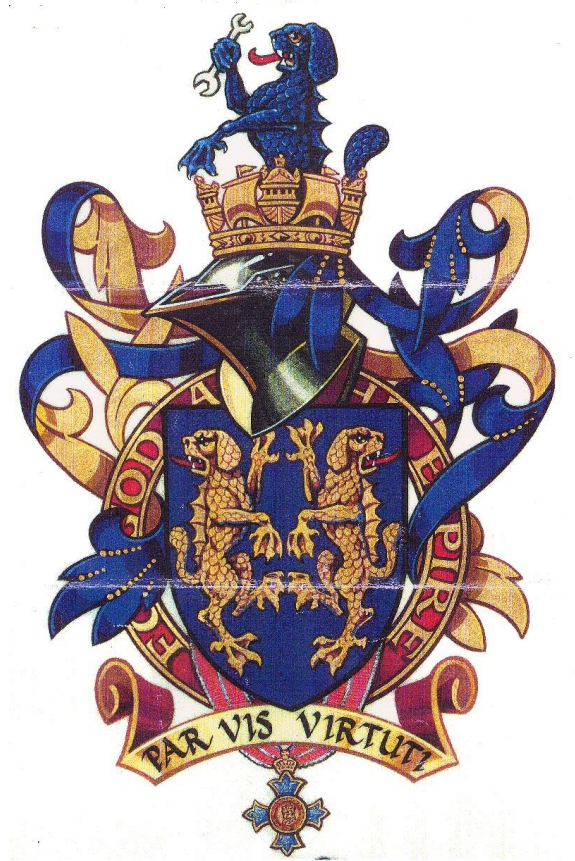
⁶¹ Osborn, Ron, Commander, RAN (Rtd.). Email to the author, December 2001.

⁶² Official program. (RPC)

⁶³ Handwritten guest lists. (RPC)

Purves's first letter in his capacity as Rear Admiral, on new headed notepaper, was to his wife, '...as you are mainly responsible for my reaching this rank.' With her he also attended one of his first functions in the new position – the launching of one of the RAN's fleet of *Attack* class patrol boats – HMAS *Bayonet*.⁶⁴ Unusually, the new vessel was not slipped down into the water however, but rather lowered by crane at the Evans Deakin shipyard, Brisbane.⁶⁵

Socialising in high ranks was a feature of the new position, with the reality of the situation being that such events were unique opportunities to get to know overseas politicians, defence officials or foreign officers, and thus open doors to conducting the business of Australia's defence, trade and international relations. At this time the Purves family sold the Dural property to purchase a house in Deakin, ACT.⁶⁶



The Purves coat of arms

On 8 June 1968 he was promoted a Commander in the Military Division of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire – the CBE.⁶⁷ On 14 March 1969 Rear Admiral Purves was officially 'transferred to shore' for placement on the Emergency List of the Reserve. In a letter dated the previous day, the Naval Board noted their appreciation for his 'distinguished services' over 29 years. They wrote:

In all the many appointments you have held, you have demonstrated the highest standards of technical expertise as well as judgement, integrity and loyalty. In addition your cheerful nature and keen sense of humour have made you a delightful messmate and colleague.⁶⁸

Similar accolades followed from the Minister for Shipping and Transport, Ian Sinclair, and various other politicians and officers who had served with Purves.

The Admiral and his wife undertook a programme of travel to the USA and Britain lasting several months later that year. Lilian Purves was continuing to rise in her nursing career, and eventually became the Director of Nursing at Morling Lodge, Red Hill.⁶⁹ She managed finances, administration and fitted in some nursing too, enjoying hard work as much as her husband always did. In 1985 Lilian was awarded the OAM – the Medal in the Order of Australia – for her services to nursing.⁷⁰

Offers of further employment came in quantity for Admiral Purves, including approaches from the Indonesian government, private enterprise and indeed the Royal Australian Navy as well.⁷¹ Purves

⁶⁴ Purves, Robert. Letter. 2002.

⁶⁵ Newspaper article in the RPC collection.

⁶⁶ Purves, Robert. Letter to the author, 9 October.

⁶⁷ Original Citation. (RPC)

⁶⁸ Letter from the Naval Board dated 13 March 1969. (RPC)

⁶⁹ Newspaper – unknown title. 'Wartime romance goes for gold'. Year also unknown, but contextual reference to 1990. (RPC)

⁷⁰ Purves, Robert. Letter. 2002.

⁷¹ Landau, Sam. Secretary to the Navy. 9 April 1969. (RPC)

became a member of the 'Retired Senior Officers' Symposium', and made many valuable contributions, especially in his specialised field of technical requirements.⁷²

The 'Purves Adjustable Pipe-Hose Coupling' was manufactured by Flowline Couplings of Sydney during this time, and met with some success – it was a coupling designed to allow different sized ship hoses to be mated together.⁷³ It was a Fred Purves design. The Admiral also became involved in Osmarine Australia, supervising the construction of MV *Bass Shore*, an oil rig tender.⁷⁴

In 1971 he accepted an offer of a position as consultant to Kinhill, a marine services organisation which ranged over management services, naval architecture and port and harbour facilities.⁷⁵ Some of this involved advisory work to Indonesian companies.⁷⁶ In the mid-1970s Purves was diagnosed with 'hypertensive cardio-vascular disease'. This is basically a heart disease, with '....altered function of the heart muscle, and lessened ability to pump blood'.⁷⁷ It can lead to heart failure. Some of this condition might be traced back to previous work in the defence forces. In any case, Purves's condition was fully covered by the naval service. Unfortunately, this was the start of many years of medical problems. Through October 1985 to September 1986 Purves had both legs amputated, and consequently faced confinement to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Nevertheless, he remained actively interested in many things. In 1990 he celebrated his golden wedding anniversary with wife Lilian, the celebration seeing the cake cut with the Admiral's sword, and the party being graced by no fewer than six admirals.⁷⁸

In 1995 the English College of Heralds in London, on Royal Authority and under the Seals of Garter, Clarenceaux, and Norroy and Ulster, granted arms to Fred Purves. The principal element in the grant is, appropriately enough, the heraldic beast known as a 'Sea-Dog', with two of them dominating the shield 'combatant regardant' – in other words, in fighting posture but looking back over their shoulders. Robert Purves notes that this is a deliberate allusion to Fred's having to guard his back not only when fighting the Japanese in the jungles of New Guinea, but also – much later – when he was fighting for the Navy in the political jungle of Canberra. The shield is surmounted by a helmet, upon which sits a Naval Crown (traditionally allowed only to officers of flag rank), and from which emerges a half Sea-Dog holding a double headed spanner in its right paw. This spanner is an allusion to Fred's love of engineering. The Latin motto might be translated as 'Strength and Gentlemanly Attributes in Equal Qualities'.⁷⁹

In his last years the Admiral was cared for largely by his son Robert, after his wife, who had been his chief carer, had a heart attack and stroke in 1994. The Admiral became slowly blind, so could no longer read, a source of some depression to him.⁸⁰ In 1996 he was visited by old friend Colin Price, with whom he had often worked over the years. As Purves's son Robert notes, Price was '...very upset to see my father so reduced and sick'. Price handed the Admiral a copy of his own manuscript 'A Tiffy's Odyssey' describing Price's 20 years of eventful service. On the fly leaf Price wrote:

For my greatly respected and admired Rear Admiral. I live today in comfort thanks to the help you gave to me during my naval career. I shall never forget you and thank you with all my heart. During my civilian life I made a determined effort to maintain the standards you would expect of me.

Rear Admiral Purves died on January 11, 1997 at the age of 84, and the Royal Australian Navy gave him, in his son's words, a 'splendid ceremonial farewell in Canberra'. From Port Hedland in Western Australia the guided missile frigate HMAS *Adelaide* took his remains to sea for the last time on 12 May 1997, and his ashes were scattered to the ocean he loved so much.

⁷² Leach, DW, Vice Admiral, RAN. Letter. 9 April 1985 (RPC)

⁷³ Brochure, undated. (RPC)

⁷⁴ Purves, Robert. Letter. 2002.

⁷⁵ Kinhill Pty. Ltd. Letter of appointment, 17 August 1971. (RPC)

⁷⁶ Various letters of advice through Kinhill in relation to Indonesian consultations.

⁷⁷ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, CD-ROM version, 1997.

⁷⁸ Newspaper – unknown title. 'Wartime romance goes for gold'. Year also unknown, but contextual reference to 1990. (RPC)

⁷⁹ Letters to the author from Robert Purves, 2002.

⁸⁰ Letter to the author from Robert Purves, 1996.

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How can we summarise Purves's leadership characteristics, given the comments of others through his career? Especially considering the disadvantage of his permanent Navy career – starting without attending the RAN College and as a Reservist – Purves was more than competitive in the promotion stakes. He surely ascended the heights. However, his main achievement is in engineering achievement: supervising the best acquisition of platforms for the Navy and cementing the relatively new force as capable of managing its own maintenance and repair work.

It seems a measure of the rationale behind his promotions that he was outstanding in his branch. Purves was singled out by the Navy as the quintessential engineer who was also an officer capable of carrying the responsibilities of Flag rank.

There are many testimonies to Purves' ability to inspire others. He is an example to those who did not attend the Naval College, and who started from comparatively humble beginnings, that they too can achieve distinction.

He was an officer who possessed a considerable degree of empathy. All of his life, Purves was willing to join in with others' work, which must surely have led his sailors to respect him and to imitate his enthusiasm and attention to detail. He must have been a great example to engineers especially.

We might label him an average communicator, but let us recognise that Purves was an excellent adviser in the field of his beloved engineering, and when necessary, he was also an excellent man-manager who understood his people. In terms of the physical, Purves cannot be said to look the part of the movie-version naval officer. But in terms of acting the part of a leader, he did well. He also had the gift of directness, in that he went straight to the job at hand without delay – an attribute that illustrates moral courage.

Never one to hold back, it was due to Purves's willingness to move forward that he achieved so much. In summary, an extremely capable engineer, a competent leader, and a master of his craft. A role-model for all engineers and for those members of armed forces who work within logistical areas.

The writer: Dr Tom Lewis OAM is a military historian and the author of 16 books. He served in the RAN for nearly 20 years, including service in Baghdad, commanding an American unit, and in East Timor. His latest works are *Teddy Sheean VC*, a reissue of his earlier work *Honour Denied*, and *Eagles over Darwin*, how the USAAF provided the sole aerial defence of northern Australia for half of 1942. He has also diversified into *Medieval Military Combat*, a study of battlefield techniques in the Wars of the Roses.