

Chapter 9

1930-1939 DEPRESSION and WAR

In October 1929 Mr Wm. Smith was again elected Commodore with Mr A. Holden Vice-Commodore and Mr G.A. Laird Rear Commodore. Mr W. Wiggs continued to act as Secretary and at the February 1930 Committee meeting he reported that members were still consuming alcoholic liquor in Club lockers. This was in direct contravention of Club By-Law Number 6 which stated:-

"No intoxicating liquors shall be consumed on the premises of the Royal Geelong Yacht Club without permission from the General Committee."

Despite the fact that the Secretary named four members, one of whom was a Committee man, no action was taken.

But the matter came to a head when, at the June 1930 Committee Meeting, Mr. Wiggs tendered his resignation as Secretary. His letter of resignation reads as follows:-

"I hereby tender my resignation as Hon Secretary of the Royal Geelong Yacht Club. In doing so it is with regret as the Club holds many pleasant memories of the years past, more especially of officers and members who helped to place the Club in its present high position . My reason for resigning is as a protest against the drinking which is taking place in lockers, more especially the behaviour of members of crew of Fairlie II, together with a Flag Officer, on the night of a dance on Thursday 19 June 1930."

After some discussion the following motion was moved:-

"It has been brought under the notice of the Committee that certain members are in the habit of drinking intoxicating liquors on Club premises. As this is a flagrant contravention of By-Law No. 6, and having regard to the fact that the continued non-observance of this By-Law will deprive the Club of that respect with which it is now regarded by the public, your Committee has decided to take such steps as will give full effect to the complete observance of the By-Law."

The motion was carried and members were to be circularised. A further motion which read as follows was carried.

"No lady, who is a non-member, is permitted upon the Club premises between the hours of 6 p.m. and 8 a.m. without the permission of the Commodore being first obtained through the Hon Secretary."

The Commodore then moved that the Hon Secretary be asked to withdraw his resignation and Mr Wiggs consented to do so.

At the Annual Meeting in October 1930 Mr. E.B. Slater, owner of the Shamrock, became Commodore with Mr. R.H. Meakin Vice Commodore. Mr Wiggs, apparently now appeased, remained as Hon Secretary.

The great depression was now well in force. Unemployment was rife and money extremely tight. Scarcely a time to be thinking of buying, and maintaining, a yacht. As an indication of these tough times only 14 boats were listed in two classes for the 1930-31 season. These were:-

A. Class: Niree, Fairlie, Gannet, Shamrock, Killara, S.J.S., Mayflower,

B. Class: Muratai, E.W.M., Nyama, Sea Wren, Irena, Vera, Rover.

As a further indication the unprecedented step was taken to allow members until January 1, 1931 to become financial. But this was to be for that year only.

In January 1931 the Federal Arbitration Court reduced the basic wage of 26 unions by 10 per cent. And more were to follow. This move was, of course, deplored by the unions but the reaction of Government Instrumentalities and other employers was more favourable and seen as recognition by the powers that be of the serious position into which Australia was drifting. Geelong's federal member, Senator Guthrie, saw the move "as being forced by national necessity and in the interests of the unemployed." The basic wage in Melbourne dropped from £4-3-0 per week to £3-18-0 while at the lower end of the scale in Brisbane it fell from £3-10-6 to £3-7-6.

However despite the economic gloom yacht racing on Port Phillip Bay carried on. On Saturday, January 24, 1931 the Geelong Advertiser reported record entries for the Williamstown to Geelong race with contestants from all Port Phillip Clubs. There were 14 entries in "A" Class and 17 in "B" Class. But finally only eight yachts took part in each class; possibly a further indication of the then unfavourable economic climate.

A flat calm at Williamstown delayed the start for an hour with the "B" Class fleet getting away at 10 a.m. followed by "A" Class at 10.30 am. Starting in a very light South Easterly the fleet was becalmed off Point Cook until variable winds "from all points of the compass" carried them to Point Wilson where they picked up a steady South Westerly which carried them through the Channel with a close haul to the finishing line. Mr B. Digby's "Independence" from the Royal Yacht Club of Victoria was the first boat to finish followed by the "B" Class boat, "Violet" skippered by Mr N. Curry from Royal Brighton.

But on corrected time Mr J. F. S. Shannon's Geelong yacht "Gannet" skippered by Mr Reg White was first in "A" Class, six minutes ahead of "Sonia" with "Independence" third.

The regatta and associated beach carnival continued on Monday, January 26 and in addition to the Geelong yachts some twenty or more yachts and motor boats from clubs in the metropolitan area took part.

Mr. Henry Jacobs, who had acquired the famous six metre yacht "Killara", ran into trouble just before the start of the combined race in the afternoon. This is how the Geelong Advertiser reported the incident:-

"In the early part of the afternoon a serious mishap resulted in the sinking of the yacht Killara, owned by Mr H. Jacobs. The Killara was entered for the afternoon yacht race, and was off Parkside Beach when the mainsail jammed. One of the crew was up aloft on the high mast, and when the wind caught the yacht it caused her to heel over so that she filled and sank. The crew were rescued from the water by another boat none the worse for their experience than that they received a ducking. The Killara for the remainder of the afternoon rested on the bottom of the sea with her mast, at an angle showing above water. It was not anticipated it would be a very difficult matter to refloat her."

The Killara was raised and subsequently about six feet was taken off her mast. She went on to win many races.

The morning race for "Al" and "A" Class yachts was won by Joe White's "Acrospire III" with George Laird's "Fairlie II" (R.G.Y.C.) second and Tommy Hopkins won the race for the 21 foot restricted class in "E.W.M." (R.G.Y.C.).

Despite the depressed times, a large number of people attended the carnival and the Regatta. Among the attractions, depression was forgotten, and business and domestic cares, for the moment, were lost in the background of the carnival.

Captain A.S. Pidgeon was Commodore of the club from the seasons 1931-32 and 1932-33 followed by Mr. G.A. Laird 1933-35.

Victoria's Centenary Regatta was arranged by the V.Y.R.A. from December 26, 1934 to January 5, 1935. The remarkable sum (for those days) of £2000 was allocated in prizes. The Centenary Council contributed £1000 towards this sum and the V.Y.R.A. was requested to raise the remaining £1000. The R.G.Y.C. agreed to raise £100 as its contribution.

A program of events for all classes of yachts, along with four Australian Championships, the Northcote Cup for the six metre class, The Forster Cup for the restricted 21 footer class, The Australian Championship for the 14 footer class and the Stonehaven Cup for the 12-foot Cadet Dinghies, was arranged. With the exception of the Stonehaven Cup series, which was held at Brighton, most events were conducted off St. Kilda.

Some of the Geelong yachts to travel to Melbourne for the regatta were, Mr. J.F.S. Shannon's Gannet, Messrs J. Jones and G.A. Laird's Rawhiti, Mr. W. Libby's S.J.S. and Mr. Neil McAllister's Windara. Windara was successful in the three event series for B Class yachts easily winning two of the three races and collecting prize money totalling £36. And with the basic wage then £4 per week this made a considerable contribution to the maintenance bills for the boat.

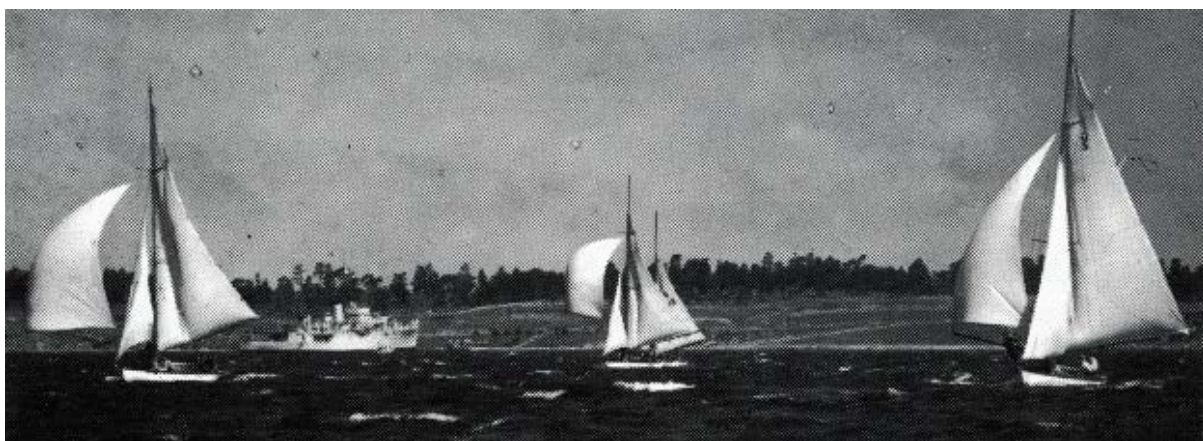
To coincide with the Centenary celebrations the Melbourne-Devonport race was run in the reverse direction. Starting on Boxing day the race drew five entries -Phyllis, Tami, Thistle, Oimara and Shamrock. A fresh westerly in Bass Strait had most of the competitors standing to west as they headed north. The Oimara with Frank Benne Jnr. at the helm and the Phyllis, W. Oxley, arrived together at Port Phillip Heads. Neither had seen each other since the start. The finish was at the Gellibrand light so the pair raced up Port Phillip neck and neck, with Oimara finally taking victory from the Phyllis on corrected time.

While all of this was going on events were taking place in Europe which were to have far reaching long term effects on the British Empire and Australia. Although this was not realised at the time, a man named Adolf Hitler was making his presence felt by forming the new German Nazi Party and rapidly taking control of the country.

Mr. A.S.M. Collins was elected Commodore of the R.G.Y.C. in 1935 and was to continue in that capacity until 1938 when Mr. Wm. Smith took over for a third term in the top position. Regular Saturday racing continued throughout the summer months of the thirties, but mainly in one class, as there were not enough yachts competing to warrant splitting the fleet.



Neil McAllister's "A" Class yacht, "Windara", racing on Corio Bay, circa 1939.



"A" Class start, circa 1938.

Left to right: "Windam", "Rawhiti", "Topsy D", "Gannet". H.M.A.S. Yarra in the background.

By 1937 economic conditions in Australia were improving with a consequent drop in the number of unemployed. This trend continued but there was growing unrest in Europe. In March 1939 the British Prime Minister, Mr. Neville Chamberlain, announced British and French guarantees to Poland and the question whether or not there would be a war was reduced finally to whether or not the German Government would order its army to invade Poland. Such an invasion would defy an undertaking by the United Kingdom Government to support Poland against "any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces." In the early morning of September 1 German forces crossed the Polish frontier, and at 11 a.m. on Sunday, September 3, an ultimatum by the British Government demanding the withdrawal of the German forces, expired. Immediately Mr. Chamberlain announced that Britain was at war with Germany.

Then, following a meeting of the Australian Government's Executive Council in the Prime Minister's rooms at the Commonwealth offices in Melbourne at which the issue of a proclamation declaring the existence of a state of war was approved, Prime Minister, Robert Menzies broadcast to the nation at 9.15 p.m. "It is my melancholy duty", he said, "to inform you officially that, in consequence of a persistence by Germany, in her invasion of Poland, Great Britain has declared war upon her and that, as a result, Australia is also at war."

And so, after just 21 years of peace Australia was, once again, plunged into a world-wide conflict. It was to be a conflict which was going to affect the country in many ways and which was to last for an agonisingly long six years.

Although it was not immediate, the Royal Geelong Yacht Club and all other sporting bodies soon became affected by the war. In mid-September, 1939, the formation of the Sixth Australian division was announced. Recruitment of a force of 20,000 men started in October. It was required of those enlisting to commit themselves to serve either in Australia or overseas. Members of the club of eligible age were soon leaving to join the Army and others followed into the Navy and the Air Force.

In all 66 members of the club served in the armed forces during the 1939-45 period of the war, and of these five made the supreme sacrifice. These five were:-

M. Cranston
J. Hocking
P. Pesservey
J. C. Stanley
G. Vautier

Members joining the forces were granted an amnesty from payment of their subscriptions during their period of service and then following the conclusion of the 1939-40 season, when the Aggregate was won by Mr. Neil McAllister's Windara, racing was suspended for the duration of the war except for the Cadet Section and the Jubilee class. And the 1940 Australia Day Regatta was the last one to be conducted by the Club until 1948.

