

'It was the most ghastly thing I have ever experienced at sea . . .

Sinking of the ferry Rodney

SYDNEY was aflame with color and throbbing with life and gaiety for a month in 1938, as the 150th anniversary of the first settlement was celebrated.

But, as the festivities neared their close, the joy of the city's 1.5 million people was shattered by the worst harbor disaster since the sinking of the ferry Greycliffe in 1927.

On Sunday afternoon, February 13, 1938, the US cruiser, Louisville, was leaving, after an 18-day visit for the celebrations. Swarms of ferries and private launches were out to bid the big battleship a vociferous farewell.

Among such craft was the near-new, double-decker passenger ferry, the Rodney, gleaming with paint and varnish and polished brass fittings. It was carrying 150 people — most of them teenage girls — who had paid 10 cents each to follow the Louisville down the harbor, to give a last wave to new friends they had made among the crew.

As the big American warship neared Bradley's Head, with its 600 white-uniformed men lining the decks to acknowledge the warm-hearted send-off, the fleet of ferries came closer.

The happy scene was abruptly turned into one of tragedy, as the Rodney suddenly capsized and sank within a couple of minutes.

All on board were flung into the harbor. Within seconds, the happy, youthful crowd on the decks was struggling frantically for life. The light-hearted farewell had been transformed into one of horror, as 19 people lost their lives.

Only for the heroism of a large number of rescuers, among them sailors from the Louisville who leapt overboard to help, the Rodney toll would have been much greater.

In the 24 hours following the disaster, Sydney became a city of mourning as the bodies of victim after victim were recovered and relatives crowded hospitals to identify them.

The Louisville was one of seven foreign warships visiting Sydney for the sesqui-centenary celebrations. For nearly three weeks, the crew had enjoyed the friendship and hospitality that many of the city's young women traditionally extend to US Navy personnel.

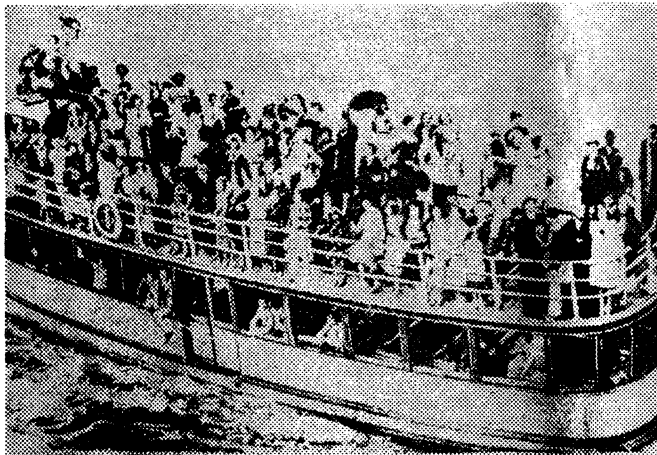
Bands played and hundreds of onlookers cheered wildly from the wharf as the cruiser moved from the Woolloomooloo berth at two o'clock that fateful Sunday afternoon. With the crew lining the decks in proud parade, it made a fine sight heading down the harbor.

The Rodney was only one of scores of boats which followed in the Louisville's wake. Among them was the police launch, Cumbria, carrying the 36-man police band to give the departure a musical accompaniment.

The 18.2m Rodney, launched only a month earlier, was

HISTORICAL

Feature



A short time after this picture was taken, the Rodney moved to the starboard side of the USS Louisville and capsized.

licensed to carry 211 passengers, with a limit of 60 on the top deck. There were only about 150 people on board but, as it drew alongside the cruiser, most of the excited girl passengers rushed upstairs for a better view. Consequently, there were many more than the prescribed 60 on the top deck.

As the Louisville reached Bradley's Head, the paraded sailors were dismissed. Ratings scrambled for positions at the railings to wave back to the escorting craft. Soon would come the last shouted goodbyes and best wishes and the police band struck up Auld Lang Syne.

On board the Rodney, many of the girls shouted to the owner-skipper to go to the port side of the Louisville, so that they could see the sailors there. The launch changed course, passed around the stern of the cruiser and swung in as close as possible.

With the new position, the passengers had to move from the port to the starboard side of the Rodney to get a better view. This sudden shift in weight gave the launch a dangerous list. Then, as it picked up speed for another circuit, it was hit by the Louisville's wash.

The Rodney tilted over even

further to starboard and poised, seemingly for several seconds. Passengers began to tumble down the steeply sloping decks and suddenly it overturned completely.

As the launch's keel came up, with the propeller clear and racing, the heads of those who had gone overboard began to break the surface. For a long moment, everyone watching the scene seemed transfixed with shock.

There were at least 20 launches, plus the Manly ferry, Barrenjoey, within hailing distance. All on board these craft suddenly came to life. The police launch shrilled four sharp whistle blasts to summon aid. Dropping their instruments, 16 bandsmen tore off their uniforms and plunged in to the rescue.

At the same time, seven sailors dived in from the Louisville. Many more would have done so had not an order immediately gone out to all crew to take up action stations. Lifebelts showered down, when released from automatic machines on board the cruiser and, within a few minutes, four lifeboats and two motor launches had also hit the water.

But it was already too late for many on the Rodney. Scores on the top deck had gone into 15m of water in a confused, struggling mass, as they clutched wildly at each other in frantic efforts to stay afloat.

Some people grabbed at floating seats for support. Others had been knocked senseless and drowned when those same seats tumbled down on top of them as the launch went over. A number were sucked under, as the Rodney, after a few minutes, plunged to the bottom. Probably worst off were those on the bottom deck behind the cabin windows. Only those capable of smashing the glass got out.

Within minutes, only an ominous oil slick and a mass of floating debris and the bobbing heads of survivors marked the Rodney's resting place. The number in the water, however, was being reduced quickly as rescue operations continued.

The Louisville took 26 survivors on board, of whom 18 were unconscious and rushed to the ship's hospital. After treatment by a Navy surgeon, only one failed to respond. Another 20 had been picked up by the police launch and they were laid out on the deck, while the bandsmen attempted resuscitation.

The Celere, a large motor cruiser, owned by a Bellevue Hill businessman, rescued 15 people, including a 21-year-old Vaucluse man, who was bleeding badly from a gashed head. He was more concerned about his 20-year-old girl friend and declined treatment until he saw her being pulled aboard the cruiser.

She was unconscious, however, and could not be revived, either on the boat or by doctors at Sydney Hospital.

Hospitals had been alerted and, as the rescued were brought to Man-o-War Steps, 12 ambulances were waiting. They delivered 135 stretchers to Sydney Hospital and St Vincent's Hospital, where nightmare scenes followed. As patients recovered consciousness, many screamed for relatives who had been with them on the Rodney.

Some could not be revived. At Sydney Hospital, one woman was rushed on a stretcher to the casualty section. A policeman ran alongside the stretcher with an oxy-



Two of the youngsters who survived their dunking in Sydney harbor when the ferry Rodney capsized.

gen mask over her face. But it was in vain, as all efforts to revive her failed and she died within an hour.

Newspaper reporters at the hospitals were surrounded by young women survivors, some were shivering and wrapped in blankets but all eager to be quoted in interviews. They particularly wanted crew members of the Louisville to know they were safe.

"Tell Frank I'm safe," one begged and gave her name and address. The reporter inquired who Frank was and she replied: "He's my boy on the Louisville. We're engaged."

Another teenager, who still proudly wore a sodden American sailor's cap, said to a reporter: "Look, I didn't lose the sailor's hat my boy friend gave me. I held it in front of me all the time I was in the water. I hit my back on the boat but I got free and someone said to me, 'Swim.' I said, 'I can't swim,' but they said, 'Yes, you can.' So I swam."

Meanwhile, hospital switchboards were jammed with callers inquiring about people who had been on the ferry. In some cases, identification of victims was difficult, for most of the Rodney's passengers were casually dressed and carried no identification. Radio broadcasts were made, appealing to anyone who had not heard from relatives or friends aboard the ferry to go to the city morgue.

By that time, reporters had interviewed the captain of the Rodney, who said: "The girls seemed to lose their heads when we moved to the port side of the Louisville. They all rushed to the starboard side of the Rodney and began to wave."

Harrowing scenes continued all through that tragic Sunday night at the hospitals as people sought news of survivors. Police believed that 27 had drowned but, before morning, eight of the supposed missing had turned up. That left the final death toll at 19 — 17 girls and young women, one man and a boy of seven.

The Louisville continued its voyage to Melbourne late that night. Two days later, after a ceremony on board, the cruiser's seaplane dropped a wreath at sea. In addition, some of the crew flew to Syd-

ney to attend funeral services for the Rodney victims the following Saturday.

Several officers of the Louisville later said they realised the possibility of the Rodney turning turtle as it followed the cruiser down the harbor. Captain R.W. Mathewson, commander of the Louisville, said: "I ordered that speed be kept at five knots to reduce the wash to a minimum, as I realised the Rodney would be easily capsized. When she did turn over, I immediately stopped all engines and ordered the boats away."

It was three days before the bodies of all the dead were recovered. The Rodney was refloated and pumped dry. Seven of the victims previously listed as missing were then found in the cabin.

On March 9, a Coroner's Inquest into the 19 deaths opened. In his evidence, the ferry captain admitted that there could have been 100 or more persons on the top deck of the Rodney when it went over.

The Coroner, Mr E.C. Oram, returned a finding on March 10 that the passengers had been accidentally drowned. He absolved the captain of criminal neglect but stated that he had broken a regulation in allowing too many people on the top deck.

A Court of Marine Inquiry into the sinking followed on March 21. It was headed by Judge Markell. In his evidence, the Rodney's captain said he had realised there were too many people on the top deck. He had sent a deckhand to tell some of them to come down. This was corroborated by the deckhand, who said that when he asked some of the passengers to go below, they ignored him.

The court held that the accident was caused by the captain's neglect in allowing more than the regulation number of passengers on the top deck. In consequence, his certificate was suspended for three years.

An officer of the Louisville had perhaps best summed up the disaster when he said: "It was the most ghastly thing I have ever experienced at sea. Everybody was so happy. We had such a splendid time in Sydney and, just as we were leaving — tragedy."