

The nightmare happened again. Connor was standing on the deck of the ship and something made him scared. It was night and he began to run inside the ship. His heart was pumping fast and he was in an awful hurry. There was an almighty jarring to the ship and the sounds of metal shearing, tearing and scraping, punctuating the air. The shrill noise was worse than someone running their fingernails down a classroom blackboard. Connor was thrown hard against a steel wall splitting open his forehead. Lights flashed on and off and suddenly water was filling the room. Sounds of men screaming, crying, and yelling began to echo throughout the ship. Connor felt something grab his leg and he looked down to see the face of a sailor he knew trying to hold onto him. The sailor looked directly at him with a face contorted in pain and awash with blood and foaming water.

“Please post this for me ...” the sailor said before his face rolled into the water and his grip loosened around Connor and he floated away. Connor breathed rapidly and shallowly. He sat up and began reaching out in mid-air before crying out loudly: “Who are you? Where are you from? What is it you want me to post and to whom?”

Blain reached his son's bedroom door first, quickly followed by Ruth. He turned on the light and froze as he saw Connor with a vacant death stare, his mouth open and his arms reaching for something imaginary in space.

“What the hell's going on son? Are you okay?” Blain asked as he rushed to Connor's side.

Connor snapped out of his groggy state and took a few seconds to focus on his parents. His eyes blinked as he adjusted to the light and saw the worried looks on their faces and then blushed.

“Sorry dad, mum, it happened again - that darned nightmare about being on some kind of sinking ship. I didn't mean to wake you.”

Ruth held Connor's hand and gently rubbed his face.

“It's okay, you're alive and safe,” Ruth said calmly. “It was just a bad dream.”

Blain took a different tact as he tried to assess the situation.

“Do you want to get up for a while and talk about it or try and get back to sleep?”

Connor thought for a few seconds and told his parents he was sorry for waking them. “I'll be fine now. I think we all just need some sleep.”

Ruth nodded and kissed her son on the cheek before starting to move to the door. Blain also nodded and then smiled as he ran his hand along Connor's bed and joined Ruth before flicking off the light and exiting the room.

Connor lay back down on his pillow and tried to analyse what had just happened. It was the same nightmare about a ship. He knew the sequence off by heart but it still sent shivers down his spine. Was it an omen or portent of what was to come in his nautical career? Was it something he had seen on TV that disturbed him and kept replaying in his mind? There was something about the sailor who grabbed him and died. He was Australian and had looked knowingly directly at him before he took his last breath. Connor knew him and the sailor trusted him. What ship were they on? Where was it and when? The questions kept playing out in Connor's mind as he tried to calm himself and allow sleep to take him.

Four hours later Blain was on the wooden deck outside the living room drinking his morning coffee and reading the online newspaper on his tablet computer. Connor took out his coffee and toast and joined his father. Blain stopped reading and looked directly at his son.

"Feeling okay?"

"Yeah, thanks. Sorry for waking you and mum."

"It's okay. We heard you screaming out and weren't sure if there were intruders in your room or you were having a nightmare."

"Dad it is so real. It's like I could lift an imaginary veil and suddenly be on that ship. Something pretty bad happened to it and I keep getting caught in the one scene. It's weird."

"I think maybe you need to consider whether you should seek some sort of professional help, you know, maybe a psychologist or someone who can assist you analyse what's happening."

"I've thought about it. Darren and I will be going to Darling Harbour today to have a look around so maybe that will help. He says there's an old warship and submarine on display there so we're going to clamber all over them."

"Good, at least you'll get a feel if one of them is the sort of ship in your nightmare or something else. Who knows maybe you watched one too many episodes of *Patrol Boat* when it was on TV."

"That was a good show but I can't remember an episode that had my nightmare details in it. We'll see in a few hours."

Blain and Connor enjoyed sitting on the deck in the sun together. It was their way of sharing time as father and son. They may not have spoken much to each other as they each read articles on their computer tablets but they were in the same space.

Darren arrived half an hour after Connor finished his breakfast and grimaced when he saw his best friend.

“Shit mate, are you okay?”

“Yeah; why?”

“You look like you haven't slept for a few days.”

“I sort of had a rough night. Tell you about it on the way.”

The pair drove off in Darren's car. Connor filled in his mate about the nightmare and became slightly agitated as he went over the details.

“So, what you're saying is this was the same nightmare you told me about at the pub?”

“Yeah but it leaves me grasping to answer imaginary questions.”

“Like what?”

“Like what ship am I on? What happened to me? When did the event take place? Is this dent in my forehead a leftover from whatever happened to the ship? For all, I know it could be a scene from World War Two or something. Maybe I was alive then and I've reincarnated or something. I just want to know so I can be rid of it.”

Darren listened carefully as he drove and calmly put his left hand on Connor's shoulder.

“Hopefully today we'll bring things to a head as we look around some of the old ships. Who knows maybe you were an Admiral, some other high-ranking officer or a mere sailor in another life who went down with the ship and all that crap. Hell, I may have to salute you!”

Both laughed as they made their way into Darling Harbour which is a small inlet near the centre of Sydney. It is surrounded by a giant pedestrian and recreational area that overlooks where dragon boat racing and other special events are held regularly both on the water and adjacent walkways. The State Government spent millions of dollars upgrading the area that was once populated by old wharves, factories and warehouses from the time Australia was a British colony in the 1700s and 1800s. The site now houses all things nautical including a maritime museum; a lighthouse, a former ferry that used to steam between Sydney's Circular

Quay and Manly, a former Royal Australian Navy submarine HMAS Onslow and a former destroyer called HMAS Vampire.

“Where the hell are we going to park?” Connor said as their car approached the Maritime Museum area. The museum’s car park was full but a car pulled out of a parking spot adjacent.

“Mate, we’re in luck, there’s a spot. Someone’s looking after us today.”

The two friends parked, fed the hungry parking meters, and walked across the road where a throng of people had gathered.

“What gives with the crowd?” Darren asked a woman who was reading a tourist brochure on Darling Harbour.

“The next tours of the submarine and destroyer are about to start,” she said. “They seem pretty popular.”

“Thanks. It all makes sense as it’s not every day you can inspect former warships I suppose.”

The woman nodded and laughed as she went back to reading her brochure.

“Well there you go – an instant crowd – just add us. Ta daa!”

Connor laughed as the crowd started surging through the entry area and into a vast, cathedral-like area that looked after large groups until tour guides broke them into smaller parties to visit the various exhibits.

Connor could just see part of the bow of the destroyer and some of its superstructure above the crowd. A cold feeling swept over him as he craned his neck to see more of the ship.

“Come on mate, let’s see the submarine first, that should be a real hoot,” Darren said.

“Ahh, do you mind if we see the destroyer first mate?”

“How, come?”

“The moment I saw the bow with the huge D11 numbering I started getting this weird feeling all over my body. It was almost like this is the ship I was meant to see.”

“Okay, the Vampire it is, my young Captain.”

Darren smiled as he tugged Connor to the group of visitors forming on the right. A senior tour guide with white hair a craggy face and wearing a sleeveless vest with several military ribbons sewn above his left chest pocket held up a sign saying ‘*HMAS Vampire tour.*’ The crowd comprising mainly adults formed up around him while the younger visitors went with

younger guides to see the other ships and exhibits. The old guide took his group of 20 people out of the foyer and stood next to a gangplank leading up to the former destroyer.

“Folks, make your way on board at your own rate,” the guide said. “My name is Peter Craig and”

Connor went rigid. His face started to pale and he went limp before he began to collapse. Darren was watching his best friend and quickly caught him before he hit the hard pavement. He lifted Connor to the side of the wharf and laid him down in the shade in the recovery position he was taught in first aid. The guide came over; bent down and felt Connor’s face and neck for a pulse.

“He’ll be alright,” the guide said. “It looks like a bit of heat stroke.” He then sprinkled some water from a water bottle he carried around his waist on Connor’s face and neck.

Connor opened his eyes and looked up to see the weathered face of the guide looking at him. A whimsical smile slowly slid across Connor’s face as he nodded and began to sit up.

“Thanks, Petty Officer Craig, I don’t know what came over me.”

The guide was about to walk away when Connor opened his eyes but when the youth spoke to him it was his turn to freeze.

“You’ll be okay son, just have plenty of water and keep in the shade,” he said slowly as he searched Connor’s face for clues and saw the small indentation on his forehead.

“I’ll make sure of that,” Darren piped in as he helped straighten Connor’s T-shirt.

The guide couldn’t take his eyes off Connor as the boy adjusted himself and took a long sip of water from his own water container on the side of his backpack.

“Just now, you called me by my former military rank and surname,” the guide said. “Do you know me?”

“Oh, sorry, it just sort of slipped out. I didn’t mean any offence.”

“None taken, son. It’s just that only a handful of people here at Darling Harbour would have known my former rank as a Petty Officer. How did you know it?”

Connor’s eyes narrowed as he searched the older man’s face.

“I have had a series of dreams lately I was on a big metal ship of sorts. The time is not now but some other time. I see myself trying to escape the ship.”

“That’s why we’re here today to see if this ship triggers any memories,” Darren chimed in.

“Well, many people served on the Vampire and its sister ship HMAS Voyager. Maybe you know someone who has and heard some of their conversations. They could have stayed in your mind.”

“No, that’s not it. I’ve checked with my family and we don’t know any sailors or have a history of being aboard anything bigger than a Manly Ferry.”

“Alright, son, good luck with this. I better get aboard in case some of the other folk need me.”

“Thanks, Petty Officer for helping me out.”

The guide smiled and shook his head as he turned and slowly walked up the gangplank.

“Are you okay mate?”

“Yeah, thanks, Darren. I just felt very light headed and then went blank until I felt the water hitting my face.”

“Do you know the guide?”

“No.”

“Then how did you know his former rank and name, maybe a lucky guess?”

“I’ve got no idea. It was a spontaneous remark as if I knew him. He never argued but agreed he was a former Petty Officer and I think he said his name was Peter Craig when we first saw him.”

“I knew this would be a fun afternoon. Come on let’s go aboard and start poking around.”

The two friends walked up the gangplank and caught the former Petty Officer giving a group of tourists his spiel about the warship.

“Welcome aboard one of Australia’s finest destroyers built in an era before the electronics and gizmos you know today drive ships at a touch of a button or the turn of a tiny wheel in the palm of your hand,” Craig told the group.

“The Vampire is 119 m long and around 13 m across at its widest part. She weighs more than 3,900 tonnes and has a superstructure of aluminium. This makes her light and fast with a top speed of more than 30 knots or 56 km per hour.”

Connor and Darren had positioned themselves under a modern-day canopy strung up over the deck to allow private functions to be held in the shade and away from any rain. Darren kept ensuring Connor drank plenty of water and kept a good eye on him as the ship’s guide continued his talk.

“If push came to shove and Australia was involved in a major armed conflict now, this ship could be brought back into service. The problem is it would take a helluva lot of money to make it happen.”

The guide’s talk continued for a few minutes before the tourists gave a round of applause and then started to explore the ship themselves on self-guided tours. Connor noticed a young couple wearing headphones listening to their mobile phones and seeing images of the Vampire on their phone screens. He noticed they had downloaded an application from the Maritime Museum for their mobile phones which gave a talk on the Vampire and explained the various areas of the ship. Connor spoke to the couple and within a few minutes, both he and Darren had their own copy of the self-guided tour app on their phones.

“Ahh, this is better,” Darren said as he played around with the app. “We can at least go where we want to go and have our own private guide tell us what we are seeing. Where do you want to go?”

“Let’s have a look at the bridge first and work our way down the ship.”

The pair went inside the ship and climbed a set of stairs on the port side of the ship. When they exited to a narrow deck they were in front of a set of 40 mm Bofors guns. Darren took his earphones off and played his phone app on the loudspeaker. The broad accented Australian male voice said the Vampire was armed with six Bofors 40 mm guns in three twin mounts - one each side of the forward superstructure and the third on the aft superstructure behind the rear funnel. He watched Connor as he played the app and saw his mate freeze and start turning pale again. Darren quickly put his phone and earphones in his pocket and put his arm on Connor’s shoulder, ready to grab him in case he was going to faint again.

“What’s up, mate? Do you remember something?”

Connor’s gaze was initially fixed on the ship’s bow and his body started to tremble slightly. He then turned and looked over his shoulder and back to the bow.

“I don’t know Darren, but there’s something about this exact spot that has me rattled.”

“Do you need to sit down or want some more water?”

“No, I’m fine thanks. It’s my dream, it sort of starts here.”

“Maybe you were a sailor on the Vampire before it became, what’s the term?”

“De-commissioned.”

“That’s it.”

“No, it’s not this ship but something very similar. In my dream, I was doing something here ... looking at the water or something ... and then something happens.”

“Maybe you were on a similar ship in the last war and German or Japanese warships suddenly appeared on the horizon or their planes were in the air ready to strafe you?”

Connor shook his head and looked at the bow again and then instinctively over his shoulder.

“It could be, but I’m not sure. Whatever it was started here and made me do something before the ship started flooding.”

“Was it a similar looking ship to this one?” an older voice asked from behind them.

Both friends turned around and saw Petty Officer Craig standing behind them just forward of the exit door.

“I think so, but in my dream, there was nothing about enemy ships. Just something I was doing here that made me go somewhere else and then lots of water flooding into a small steel-walled room.”

“I think I know what you were dreaming about.”

Both Connor and Darren were now mesmerised by the former sailor. Connor looked more searchingly into the older man’s face as his mind raced to find a memory of him. The Petty Officer was familiar. He was older but familiar. Connor knew this man but had no direct memory of him.

“Come on back inside and let’s go down one level to the Operations Room, this could really jog your memory.”

All three turned and walked through the doorway and climbed down a series of stairs. The guide led Connor and Darren to a small pokey room lit by red lights.

“Welcome to the Operations Room – it was the same design for all of Australia’s Daring class destroyers,” Craig said. His gaze was intent as he searched Connor’s face. It seemed like he was trying to see past his eyes to something or someone else.

“This is the nerve area of the ship where all weapons commands were given ...”

“I don’t mean to interrupt, but is this room always lit by red lights?” Connor asked.

“No, it is usually lit with white lights except during operational times when it must be bathed in red as this light is hard to see at a distance at night by other ships.”

“This was your post wasn’t it?”

“Why do you think that?”

“I just have this feeling you worked in the Ops room but not here. I can’t quite piece it together.”

Craig sat down on a console chair and his mouth opened for a few moments as if he was going to say something but had forgotten what. His focus returned and a whimsical smile enveloped his face.

“Let me tell you a quick story. I was a young Petty Officer and worked on HMAS Voyager, the sister ship of this one. The Voyager was exercising with our aircraft carrier HMAS Melbourne off Jervis Bay some decades ago. The Melbourne rammed the Voyager by mistake and cut it in two killing more than 80 sailors. Luckily more than 200 crew members made it to safety.”

“It must have been very frightening for you all,” Darren said as he felt his throat tighten.

“It was absolutely frightening. We had a series of observers on various parts of the ship looking out for the Melbourne as she was in manoeuvres close by and we were going to slip behind her. One observer had been having a smoke where we just were in front of the Bofors. He never saw the Melbourne sneaking up on us until it was too late. In a blind panic, he came tearing into the Ops room to tell me and I argued with him about what he saw.”

“Surely, you couldn’t miss the shape of a huge aircraft carrier coming at you,” Connor said.

“That wasn’t the real problem. The Captain was a control freak and if the lookout sailor was wrong the Captain would have torn both of us a new arsehole.”

“So, what happened?”

“I told the sailor to alert the others below and I mustered my courage to call the Captain on the special phone down here. The Captain didn’t believe me at first, as no one else had spotted the Melbourne, especially the radar room. When he realised it was true what I said, it was too late. The Melbourne rammed us at speed and we were thrown around like rag dolls.”

Connor’s face tightened, his eyes widened and his forehead throbbed as he listened to the Petty Officer tell him part of his dream from a real account. He became mesmerised with Craig’s description of events and the fact he knew the sailor Connor had seen in his dreams or nightmares.

“Who was the lookout sailor who came into you?”

“A young bloke called And, ah, what was his name ... I know, Andrew West – that’s it.”

“So now I know who is in my dream, a sailor called Andrew West. Do you know what happened to him? Did he make it out?”

“No, Andrew died not long after he jumped from the Voyager into the sea. I go to Voyager reunions and the survivors re-live the collision often with all sorts of yarns. I remember about West because he was the last one I saw before the Melbourne hit us. He was a nice kid, but a bit of a dreamer.”

“I am truly amazed,” Connor finally said after a few moments gap in the conversation. “I know the person I see in my dreams or nightmares is an Andrew West. Now I have to find one more sailor to try and close this loop.”

Craig stood up and pulled out a business card from his jacket pocket and gave it to Connor.

“What other sailor are you after?”

“Well in my dream I, I mean Andrew West, try to get out of a flooded compartment. West is grabbed on the legs by a sailor who has been injured on the head and he asks, no make that pleads, with him to post a letter for him. I don’t know to whom or what it’s about.”

“Okay, I think I know a man who can help you. Ring me tonight after 7 pm and I’ll see if I can get his details for you. In the meantime, I had better get back to my job here. By the way, thank you for telling me about your dream. You are not the first to tell one of us survivors about contact with someone who died on the Voyager – even though it’s been quite some years since she sunk. I think you are a rarity though – a sort of time traveller who has gone back and forth to the past. Ring me tonight.”

“Maybe I’m a time voyager, seeing my past is associated with the destroyer.”

Craig laughed as he shook hands with both Connor and Darren and made his way out of the Ops room to another deck.

“So, what do you think of that? The old guy put the shivers up my spine,” Darren said as he started taking photos of Connor. “What was his name again?”

“Petty Officer Peter Craig. I feel like I have now only partly solved the dream. However, the guy’s opened up a bit of Pandora’s box for me.”

“What do you mean? He’s almost solved the jigsaw for you, well except for the guy with the letter.”

“Yeah, I’d like to know what West looked like now we have the name of the ship and then maybe in any ship’s company photo I may be able to pick out who it is that gave West the

letter.”

“Will that solve your dream or nightmare for you?”

“No, as I then would like to know what was so important in the letter that a dying man used his last breaths to have someone post it for him. Also, where did he want the letter to go and to whom?”

“Jeez, you don’t want much.”

“I know, but we’ve come so far and solved so much today. I really believe I’m on track to solving the issues. Maybe then my nightmares or dreams will go away.”

“I hope so, however, it would be interesting to find out what sparked them in the first place. Maybe you’re possessed.”

Both youths laughed as Darren brought his hands up in front of his face and started wiggling his fingers and making a ghoulish sound.

“Oh sorry, we thought this room was empty,” a middle-aged man said as he and his wife started entering the room.

“That’s okay, we’re just leaving. We’ve got the info we need from here,” Darren said with a smile.

The teenagers made their way past the couple and back on deck where they stopped near the ship’s side railing. Connor again looked to the bow and then over his left shoulder.

“Mate, the Melbourne’s not coming now. She’s been made into a gazillion razor blades by now and this is not the Voyager,” Darren said as he laughed.

“I know but it’s an interesting feeling all the same. Do you mind if we go below? Maybe I can find where this West guy met up with the other sailor.”

“Okay, let’s head back into the doorway and down the next set of stairs. They should head us somewhere.”

