

Extract from *Dangerous Games* by Larry Writer

ALL AT SEA

On the morning of 13 May 1936, *SS Mongolia* lay at anchor in Sydney Harbour awaiting precious cargo. The P&O vessel was a fourteen-year-old passenger, mail and cargo one-class steamer which normally plied the Australia to United Kingdom route. This voyage would be different. The 37-day voyage would end in Marseilles in the south of France, where the Australians would travel by trains to Paris, Cologne and, nearly six weeks after leaving home, disembark in Berlin.

Excitement ran high as the athletes gathered at Circular Quay in drizzling rain. By late morning, 5000 had crammed onto the quay, bursting through a barricade erected around a police band. The male athletes preened in their new green and gold blazers with an emu and kangaroo emblem on the breast pocket, green ties and caps, the two women team members promenaded in white wide-brimmed hats, green blazers and cream frocks.

The athletes greeted each other and farewelled loved ones amid coloured streamers and Australian flags. Boarding in Sydney were team members swimmers Pat Norton and Kitty Mackay, hop, step and jumper and broad jumper Jack Metcalfe, hop, step and jumper Basil Dickinson, cyclist Dunc Gray, boxer Len Cook, wrestler Eddie Scarf, scullers Cecil Pearce, Bill Dixon and Herb Turner and the NSW Police rowing eight. (Swimmer Bill Kendall was already travelling in Europe and would unite with his teammates in Berlin.) There, too, were the support staff—including manager Harry Alderson.

As haul-anchor time neared, the police band honked out 'Auld Lang Syne,' 'Advance Australia Fair' and 'Waltzing Matilda,' the large crowd waved their flags more frantically than before, 'Hip-hip-hurrayed' and cried 'Godspeed!' Hats were thrown high and happy tears shed.

At 1 p.m. *Mongolia* steamed through grey harbour waters past the four-year-old Harbour Bridge and on out of the heads. Basil Dickinson took off his shoes and socks and ran fifteen times around deck.

Early on 15 May, *Mongolia* docked in Hobart where the mayor of Hobart presented the team with two cases of apples, and Harry Alderson bought a further 12 large cases to be stowed in the *Mongolia's* freezer to be consumed on the voyage. It was the athletes' job to load the fruit.

Two days later, when the ship docked at Port Melbourne, Prime Minister Lyons presented Olympic blazers to the departing Victorians: high jumper Doris Carter, hurdler Alf Watson, middle distance runner Gerald Backhouse, pole vaulter Fred Woodhouse, diver Ron Masters, cyclists Chris Wheeler and Tas Johnson, boxers Les Harley and Harry, Cooper, wrestlers Dick Garrard and Jack O'Hara.

To the bemusement of the other passengers, makeshift training facilities were set up on board. An eight-man rowing machine was installed on the emergency bridge deck aft, and rubber mats were strewn on the deck for calisthenics and wrestling. Athletes ran laps around the deck and swam as best they could but, to avoid collisions, only at times when regular voyagers were dining or sleeping. Training was strictly voluntary. Years later, Dick Garrard recalled, 'They sewed ship mattresses together and put a canvas cover over them and I wrestled with Eddie Scarf, but I couldn't wrestle on a rocking ship. Gray rigged up a makeshift bike treadmill by attaching to the deck a pair of metal cylinders on which he set up his cycle and pedalled. 'It was unsatisfactory,' he would say. We were fit when we boarded the boat but we were blown out when we got off. I felt sorry for the runners and the swimmers. The swimmers dived into the pool and hit their head on the other end. And the runners, they had it rough trying to avoid bumping into passengers and negotiating corners on the deck.'

'They had a makeshift salt water pool, a canvas tarpaulin stretched over a wooden frame, barely one metre deep,' recalled Dickinson. 'The swimmers tried to train by attaching a rope to a fixed object at the poolside, tying the other end around their waist and swimming on the spot. It was hopeless, and funny to watch. Apart from being shallow, the blazing sun turned the water into hot soup. Poor Ron Masters, the diver, had no chance! Dive into that pool and you'd end up with a spinal injury.'

In Fremantle, swimmers Evelyn de Lacy and Percy Oliver boarded. They weren't the only distinguished Australians to join *Mongolia* in Fremantle. Team supporter A.V. Sundercombe stepped forward to present the team with a mascot, a grey kangaroo, which they christened 'Aussie'.

Once steaming north-west through the Indian Ocean, Alderson formed a sports committee, and games and activities were organised. A makeshift picture show was erected, with films projected onto a sheet. The team performed handstands, skipping, boxing and wrestling for the passengers. The musicians among them—Oliver strummed a ukulele, Backhouse and de Lacy blew harmonica, and Masters played the fiddle—held impromptu concerts. Flyweight boxer Harry Cooper was a dervish at the Irish jig. In those days, too,

everyone sang, and reeled off, in varying degrees of tunefulness, popular songs of the day. Fred Woodhouse was the team scallywag. 'It was he who stole the drinks off the waiters' trays at the big British Embassy party in Berlin,' laughed Dickinson. 'That's why we locked him in the bus.'

Dickinson began the voyage as the sole occupant of a tiny, 1.8m by 2.4m three-bunk steerage cabin. Gradually the cabin filled. In Hobart, he was joined by a large crate of apples that would not fit in the hold, and then by Woodhouse and Cooper after they boarded in Melbourne. 'Harry, Fred and I were on top of each other. There was no air conditioning. Going through the tropics, the heat in our cabin was unbearable. The apples rotted. We took our mattresses and slept on the deck overnight. Sailors swabbed the decks and drenched us. There was little respite from the heat in the small, sea water pool, and the showers too were tepid salt water. We couldn't train properly, so grew unfit and gained weight . . . There was lots of alcohol on the boat if you were so inclined. And you could buy six cigarettes for three pence!'

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