

# **CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2023**

## **2313 Explosion in Bombay**

**by Wendy Noonan**

## EXPLOSION IN BOMBAY

My grandfather, Cecil Herbert Speer, was born in Goulburn and raised in Bungendore, Collector and finally Bowral. He joined the Australian Army and although no record can be found of his pre-WWI service, his AIF papers state he "Enlisted in 2<sup>nd</sup> A.I.R. 20.3.09. --- At present 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieut in 43<sup>rd</sup> Infy."<sup>1</sup>

Cecil served at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. Towards the end of 1917 he applied for a transfer to the British Indian Army, which took place in January 1918.<sup>2</sup>

Within the British Indian Army, he served in the 2/119<sup>th</sup> Infantry before settling into the Ordnance Corps. He gradually rose through the ranks and was a Major at the beginning of WWII. Although India itself was initially not involved in WWII, as a British Commander he served in the Middle East 1940-42. After Japan entered the war, he served in Burma 1943-44 and was Acting Brigadier in Charge of Ordnance on the Eastern Front.<sup>3</sup>

One particular family story always intrigued me. It went as follows: "In April 1944, Cecil Speer received intelligence, while in Burma, that some Indians, who were intent on Indian independence, intended to blow up an ammunition ship in Bombay Harbour. Cecil flew to Bombay, and reached there just as the ship was destroyed. His skull was fractured during the incident, yet he spent four days making Bombay Harbour safe from further trouble before seeking medical attention. "

I decided to search for details behind this story. Initially I researched the Australian newspapers through *Trove*. There were a number of articles but, being wartime, they appeared to be somewhat censored. The first article found basically stated that "SIXTY-SEVEN persons have died from injuries suffered in a fire which broke out in a congested part of Bombay on Friday night. Altogether there were 1000 casualties. About half of this number were taken to hospital. Several thousands of people lost their homes in the fire."<sup>4</sup> A month later more details: "The disaster in Bombay began, April 14, with two shattering explosions in the harbour."<sup>5</sup> This item expanded my knowledge base but it was still not enough for me.

I Googled "Bombay explosion 1944". The first article found was on Wikipedia, which gave a very good, highly referenced account of the incident. The second article found, by Michael Mahoney, on the National Archives (England) website was one of the best articles written on the incident. The author works in the National Archives but his father was also one of the sailors lucky to survive the disaster. Hence Michael's narrative began with interviewing his father followed by the examination of the records. He documented the ship's arrival, the mixed cargo it carried (including ammunition) and the repair work on the ship that had made it immovable. Michael went on to describe what happened over the 4 hours following discovery of the onboard fire and the resultant explosion just after 4 p.m.

"At 16:06 there was a massive explosion. Fort Stikine was blown in two; its boiler, still intact, was found a half mile away. A huge tidal wave swept across the dock and ripped ships from their moorings, with one ship finishing astride a warehouse. At 16:33 a second explosion occurred, damaging or destroying the remaining ships in Victoria and Princess Dock, including the SS Tinombo, of which my father was a crew member. He survived by jumping into the dock. In Victoria Dock alone, 13 ships were lost.

Many people were killed outside the dock area by falling shrapnel and shells which exploded on impact. Approaching channels to the docks were littered with obstruction, and a vast land area was utterly devastated. It took four days to

extinguish the main fire and for a further two weeks smaller fires continued to smoulder in the ruins.

Overall, 231 people attached to the various services were killed, and another 476 injured. Outside the docks over 500 civilians were killed and a further 2,408 were injured. Thirteen ships were lost and 50,000 tons of shipping was destroyed, with a further 50,000 tons severely damaged.”<sup>6</sup>

The third article was by Ana Kumar on the *Scroll.in* website. Ana also wrote about the aftermath of the explosion. According to her article, “it took three days and more for military troops to fight the raging fires.”

I now know what happened and now believe my grandfather arrived at the dock just as the explosion took place. This timing resulted in his head injuries; if he had been just five minutes earlier, he could well have been killed. Here, also, was my answer to why we were told that Cecil spent “four days making Bombay Harbour safe”<sup>7</sup> before obtaining medical treatment.

However, these articles did not fully explain the family story. There was the statement of why it happened: that Cecil Speer received intelligence, while in Burma, that some Indians, who were intent on Indian independence, intended to blow up an ammunition ship in Bombay Harbour. In the hope of there being more information available, I wrote to the National Archives, addressing my email to Michael Mahony. I explained who I was and what I was trying to find. He told me that he did not come across my grandfather’s name in the documents he looked at and that the conclusion of the enquiry was that it was an accident. He also commented that “lots of families have stories” with the inference that mine was “just that”.

There was one other reference I later found. “The accident may have been no accident at all, for evidence of possible sabotage was later discovered amid the ruins.”<sup>8</sup>

My father had also added a rider to the story that the government would not have wanted to admit to sabotage by the group fighting for Indian Independence. My question, in response to Michael Mahony’s dismissal of our family story is: why would Brigadier Speer, who was in charge of Ordnance on the Eastern Front, have flown to Bombay in response to intelligence, if this was not the case?

1. Application for a Commission in the Australian Imperial Expeditionary Force.
2. Application to transfer to the British Indian Army. British Library IOR/L/MIL/9/495/152-73: 1916-1918.
3. Indian Army Record for Cecil Herbert Speer. British Library IOR/L/MIL/14/66218: 1914-1947
4. *The Sun* (Sydney) Sunday 16.04.1944
5. Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph* Sunday 21.05.1944
6. *Anatomy of a disaster: The Bombay Docks Explosion* by Michael Mahoney (2017) - National Archives (England) website.
7. *Remembering the day a ‘floating bomb’ brought death and destruction to Bombay* by Ana Kumar (2015) – *Scroll.in* website
8. *Warfare and Armed Conflicts: A Statistical Encyclopaedia of Casualty and Other Figures, 1492-2015* by Michael Clodfelter