



Bass Strait Battleground

From AAMH Victorian Representative Mark Howard

The people of Victoria were reminded of just how close World War II came to their shores when a casualty of that conflict was found beneath the waters of Bass Strait in April 2019. The Australian freighter *SS Iron Crown* (3,353 tons) was sailing from Whyalla to Newcastle with a cargo of iron ore when it was torpedoed by the Japanese submarine I-27 on 4 June 1942. The ship went down quickly and only five of the 43 men aboard managed to escape the sinking vessel.



SSS Iron Crown (Wikipedia)

Japanese interest in the area began four months earlier when a Japanese submarine entered the strait and surfaced off King Island in February 1942. Attached to the submarine - forward of the conning tower - was a large watertight metal cylinder containing a small plane with its wings removed. Made of wood with fabric wings, it had floats instead of wheels. When assembled, the two-seater Yokosuka E14Y reconnaissance aircraft had a wingspan of eleven metres and a length of 8.54 metres. It had a cruising speed of 165 km per hour and a range of 880 kilometres. In

one hour, the plane was assembled and launched on a three-hour flight that took it over military installations around the shores of Port Phillip Bay.

It returned and landed safely near the submarine. It was then winched aboard, disassembled and returned to its cylinder. The enemy aircraft had been noticed during its flight and reported to the authorities but too late for any action to be taken. Four secret radar posts were subsequently built along the Victorian coast to more quickly detect any similar incursions in future. (*The Age*, April 4, 2009, p.9)



A Yokosuka E14Y Japanese navy reconnaissance seaplane (Wikipedia)

Around thirteen Japanese submarines are believed to have been active in Australian waters during the Second World War. Sightings of, and attacks by these vessels, and the losses they caused, were not always reported in the Australian media, in case it caused panic in the civilian population. One incident that could not be kept quiet was an attack made by three Japanese midget submarines on Sydney Harbour in June of 1942.

Five large I-class Japanese submarines surfaced northeast of Sydney Harbour on 29 May 1942. One of them launched an E14Y float-plane which flew over the harbour twice. Two days later, on the night of 31 May, three of the Japanese submarines approached the harbour and each released a midget two-man submarine. Each mini-sub displaced 46 tons and had a submerged speed of 19 knots. The intended targets were the navy cruisers USS *Chicago* and the HMAS *Canberra*. They entered Port Jackson but the torpedoes they fired missed the cruisers and instead hit the converted Sydney harbour ferry HMAS *Kuttabul*, causing twenty-one lives to be lost.

The earliest enemy naval intrusion into Bass Strait occurred in November 1940. The British freighter SS *Cambridge* (10,846 tons) had just left Melbourne bound for Sydney when she struck a mine in Bass Strait at 11pm at night and sank off Wilson's Promontory. All but one of the 54 crewmen survived the wreck in three lifeboats that were picked up by auxiliary minesweeper HMAS *Orara*. The following night, an American freighter, the *City of Rayville* (5,883 tons), with 1,500 tons of lead ingots aboard, struck another mine off Cape Otway, and sank soon after.

Both vessels had struck mines laid over three nights in November 1940 by the Norwegian tanker *Storstad* that had been hijacked by a German military force off

Borneo and put to work as a minelayer. *City of Rayville* was the first American vessel lost to enemy action during the war. All but one of the 38 crewmen aboard survived the incident. The wreck of the *City of Rayville* was discovered in 70 metres of water off the coast of Victoria in 2002, another reminder of the small role that Bass Strait played as a battleground in World War II.

Titanic Salvage Concerns

The International Congress of Maritime Museums has expressed concern about the recent decision of a Virginia (USA) court to permit the recovery of the radio equipment from out of the wreck of RMS *Titanic*. The ICMM sees the proposed salvage plan as ‘cherry picking’ with little regard to the surrounding fabric of the ship. It is felt that this decision is contrary to the Aland Accord (see below). For more please visit

<https://icmm-maritime.org/2020/06/01/open-letter-re-rms-titanic/>

The Åland Accord

Statement of Code of Ethics for Maritime Museums

The Accord includes an agreement that signatories will not knowingly encourage the illegal, unprofessional or unethical recovery of cultural material by purchasing or accepting as gifts objects recovered in such a manner; exhibiting objects recovered in such a manner; and collaborating with external partners engaged in the illegal, unprofessional or unethical recovery of cultural heritage.

For full details visit the following site:

<https://icmm-maritime.org/2020/05/22/icmm-announces-new-aland-accord-a-statement-of-code-of-ethics-for-maritime-museums/>

A LIBERTY SHIP TO FREEDOM - 1949

The following is a chapter from the publication “The Good Provider”, by author, Elynor Frances Olijnyk and illustrated by artist Peter Westerhoff FRSASA.

The book was launched by Jack Condous OAM on 2 February 2020 in the Royal SA Society of Arts Gallery, Adelaide.

The story is about the Olijnyk family who lived in Ukraine through the Bolshevik Revolution, the Stalinist Holodomor and WW2. It is a poignant true story of family love, hope and survival and eventual arrival in South Australia aboard the Liberty Ship General A B Stewart in 1949.

In Chapter 24, fourteen – year – old Leonid Olijnyk describes his journey aboard ship and how, together with his father Peter, mother Nadija, brother Nikolas, sister Kateryna and grandmother Alexandra (Boussa) remembered their journey with

gratitude for the care of the fantastic American crew.

Chapter 24

My fourteenth birthday, on 9 June 1949, was a birthday to remember.

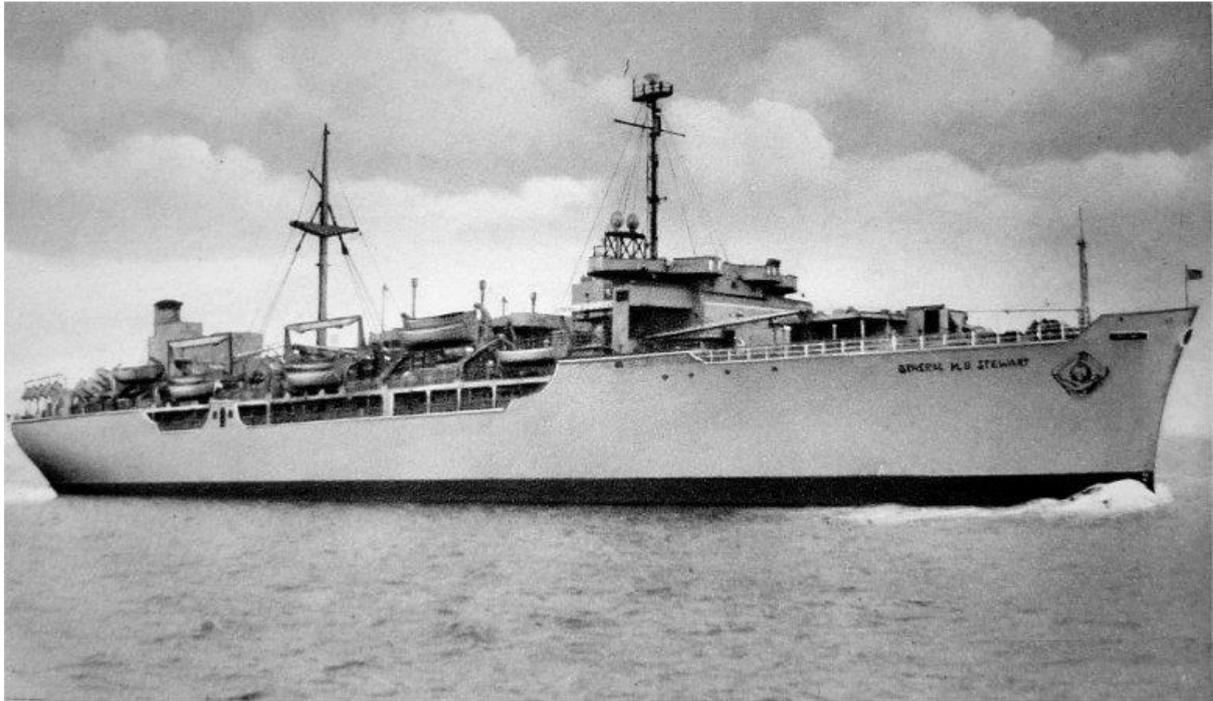
I saw the sea for the first time! Yes, there it was, a patch of emerald green invading my carriage window. I was filled with wonder and excitement as our train arrived at the seaside town of Senegalia high on the eastern coast of Italy. Once there, we were billeted in an ancient holiday hotel with sand covered steps tumbling down right on to the seashore.

White sand between my toes, blue water, calm and clear as far as could be seen; I was filled with a new found love for the beauty of nature. What stories could the small waves tell me as they rippled over and over again along the shore and soothed my feet. Friends came to share my discoveries of shells and fish and the excitement of seeing the sea for the very first time. We waded and splashed and finally abandoned ourselves to the welcoming waves that left us all gasping for breath! We were so happy!

Our stay in Senegalia was short. After three delightful days, buses to Capua carried us away. On arrival we were sheltered in a disused army barracks and allotted one huge room for everyone to share. Our family found a corner where the polished wooden floor appeared to be most comfortable and mother and Boussa spread coats and settled without complaint.

Capua markets were a delight. There was so much to see and enjoy. Singing and music filled the air and bright market stalls displaying all manner of delicious treats beckoned.

Money to buy food was given to each family by the United Nations and we wandered among benches of live fish and eels, clawing crabs, freshly picked vegetables and fruit, bread rolls and delicious Gelato Ice Cream! We were buying and tasting and laughing and communicating with the smiling Italians. The atmosphere was so different from the distressing life we had endured for nine long years and our hearts and minds were at last beginning to mend. My most vivid memories of Capua markets were absorbing the infectious joy of the happy Italians. They sang so passionately and danced so joyfully and made our world so much brighter. We were here for two very hot weeks while our boat was preparing to receive us in the port of Naples.



American Liberty Ship: *General M B Stewart* – 1949

Buses arrived on an overcast day and we waved Capua and our new found market friends a fond farewell. *The General MB Stewart*, an American Liberty ship, loomed like a kindly giant roped to huge bollards on the wharf of Naples. We were welcomed aboard immediately by carefree American sailors and each given a numbered card to find our bunks. Men and boys were directed to quarters in one area, and women and children to another. The feeling I had was so dream-like. “Is our family leaving this land and trusting a sturdy ship to sail far away forever?” I was comforted with the sight of my little sister safe with mother and Boussa and the thought of my father and brother who would be safe in the bunks below me.

When all the buses had released their pilgrims the total was 816 persons; 389 men, 283 women and 144 children, mostly refugees from Ukraine, Poland and Bulgaria. A huge assortment of cases, trunks, boxes and baskets were loaded into the hold of the ship in an amazingly organised manner by the American crew. We were soon ready for departure.

Tethers were unleashed from the wharf, a great blast bellowed from the ship’s horn and the *General MB Stewart* moved out from the wharf with a churning, frothing and swirling of oily green water. The day was 23 June 1949.

The rush and excitement was over and I felt serenely peaceful as I leant on the ship’s railing with father. We enjoyed the fragrance of the sea air that was so new to us. Flocks of sea birds were diving and calling around the ship as the Island of Capri, the sleeping volcano Mount Vesuvius, and the shores of Italy faded into distance. Ahead was the blue Mediterranean welcoming us as evening shadows darkened the sky.

I discovered later that *The General MB Stewart* was named after US Army General

Merch Bradt Stewart. Launched on 15 October 1944, the ship was originally one of many built as emergency troop carriers and were constructed by welding the huge sections of steel and not riveting them. The ships were needed to transport soldiers and machinery from America to Europe during the Second World War and most ships could accommodate 3,595 men. The General MB Stewart was 522 feet long, was propelled by a single screw steam turbine with a speed of 17 knots.

At the end of the war forty of these ships, with American crew, were known as "Liberty Ships". They were involved in transporting thousands of refugees and displaced persons like our family who had been aided by the United Nations Relief Organisation to begin new lives in countries far beyond the reach of war. The General MB Stewart made five trips from Italy to Australia. The first arrived in Fremantle, Western Australia, on 12 February 1948 with 857 persons; the second arrived in Melbourne, Victoria, on 13 April 1949 with 816 persons; the third arrived in Adelaide, South Australia, on 20 July 1949 with 816 persons; the fourth arrived in Melbourne in January 1950 with 1,262 persons; and the fifth arrived in Sydney, New South Wales, on 17 April 1950 with 1,292 persons. All refugees looked forward to a new beginning, just as our Olijnyk family did.

The American crew were just so friendly, positive that we would be welcomed in Australia, and made every effort to keep us all comfortable and happy. The captain had warned all passengers in his welcoming speech that fraternizing between men and women would be punished by head shaving. The sight of two of father's friends with shaven heads a few weeks into our voyage made us all smile. The captain was true to his word and discipline was strict.

I made friends with the young sailors and spoke to them in my Ukrainian language and they replied in their English language. The amazing thing was that we understood each other perfectly! We were treated to the most abundant, delicious food. Meals were served in relays and we had tickets to reveal our meal times. When the sea was rough I was often the only person in the dining room; everyone else was seasick.

On these occasions I had as much food and ice - cream blocks wrapped in plain paper that I could eat. I loved this situation; even Boussa had to be nursed in the ship's hospital, complaining that she had never experienced such illness in her life

Passengers made great use of the entertainment room that boasted a steel floor where steel framed chairs could slide around in the most astounding configurations. Children loved this never ending fun. Chess games, drafts and cards and concerts were our treats and I was introduced to a jig-saw puzzle for the first time. Naturally it was of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbour! One day two sailors opened a huge map of Australia and pointed to a place called Broken Hill that seemed to me far from the sea and almost in the middle of Australia. "Very hot, very hot, that is where you are going to end up!" They joked. Little did I realise that in a few days' time, my future wife, Elynor, was to celebrate her tenth birthday in Broken Hill where she was born.

Father's expertise as an Electrical Engineer was called upon as one of the ship's

generators had failed. Clever father soon found the problem and solved it and earned respect from the sailors in charge of the engine room. I was given a pair of excellent American made pliers that I still cherish and a fantastic grey flannel shirt that made me feel so proud and happy. I was also given special privileges to visit father as he worked and accompanied sailors as they went about their daily routines. I enjoyed my life on the General MB Stewart. Father often worked in the engine room, constantly solving problems all the way to Australia.

Our journey progressed. Mother and Boussa lowered baskets with money and purchased black elephant trinkets from traders on the wharf in Cairo. We entered the Suez Canal and the ship became grounded on a sand bar, the propeller churning up huge bursts of sand as it struggled to escape with the aid of tugs. The Red Sea offered no relief from the stifling heat and, as we passed the port of Aden, fresh winds from the Arabian sea were cheering. As the ship ploughed into the Indian Ocean, a spectacular storm of waves, wind and sea foam engulfed us. I ventured on deck to sit on the spare forward anchor as the ship dived through the waves. A concerned ship's officer soon put an end to my fearless wave-riding adventure.

After anchoring two days behind a breakwater, we berthed at Colombo wharf for supplies of fresh water and fuel, our last port before our destination. A magical sight greeted us as our ship plunged out into the ocean. Thousands of whales were frolicking as far as the eye could see. Blowing, thrashing tails, diving and spouting, we were so amazed at this spectacular performance unfolding before us. The General MB Stewart continued majestically through the thousands of shining black bodies playfully surrounding us. Like revelers at a farewell party for beloved friends, they waved us on our way. A lone albatross then became our keeper. I could almost touch this guardian bird as it glided above our ship night and day blessing us with a special peace.

Our first glimpse of Australia was the most southern point of Western Australia before we entered the rough waters of the Great Australian Bight. We followed the shoreline at a distance. Then Gulf Saint Vincent opened before us, so calm, like a smooth lake, the water rippling, rippling in perfect ridges as we glided towards our destination, Outer Harbour and Adelaide.

Author: Elynor Frances Olijnyk © 2019

THE HOUTMAN ABROLHOS ISLANDS – THE STORIES BEHIND THE NAMES

The Houtman Abrolhos (often called the Abrolhos Islands) is a chain of 122 islands, and coral reefs, in the Indian Ocean off the west coast of Australia.



It is the southernmost true coral reef in the Indian Ocean and one of the world's most important seabird breeding sites. It is also the centre of the western rock lobster fishery. It has a small seasonal population of fishermen and a limited number of tourists are permitted for day trips. Most of the land area is reserved as conservation habitat. It is well known as the site of numerous shipwrecks, the most famous being Dutch ships *Batavia*, which was wrecked in 1629, and *Zeewijk*, wrecked in 1727.

European discovery of the islands is credited to Frederick de Houtman, Captain-General of the *Dordrecht* in 1619, only three years after Dirk Hartog sighted what is now Western Australia.

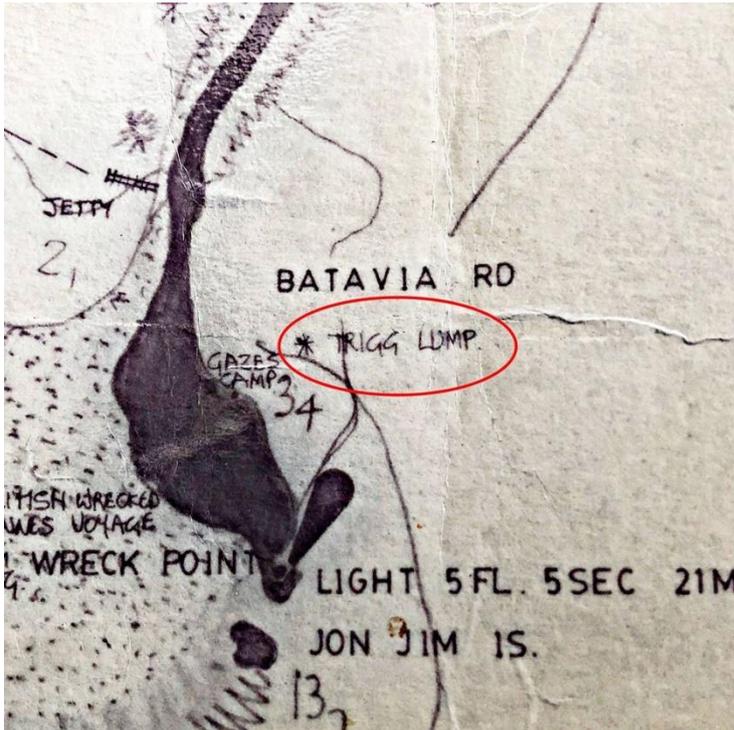
The term is commonly reported to be a contraction of the Portuguese expression "open the eyes" or "keep your eyes open". An alternative meaning "spiked obstructions" is also apt given the reefs that abound in the area (Source of information & Map: Wikipedia).

The Houtman Abrolhos has a deep and complex history as attested by the following vignette from the Batavia Coast Maritime Heritage Association.

TRIGG LUMP by Howard Gray

An interesting name that appears on some charts off the eastern tip of Wreck Point is TRIGG LUMP, well-known to fishermen. Nearby on Pelsaert Island many reports of the 1930s also mention Trigg's Hut (and that is shown on maps too – unfortunately Murphy's Law has decided that I can't find one just when I want to use it!).

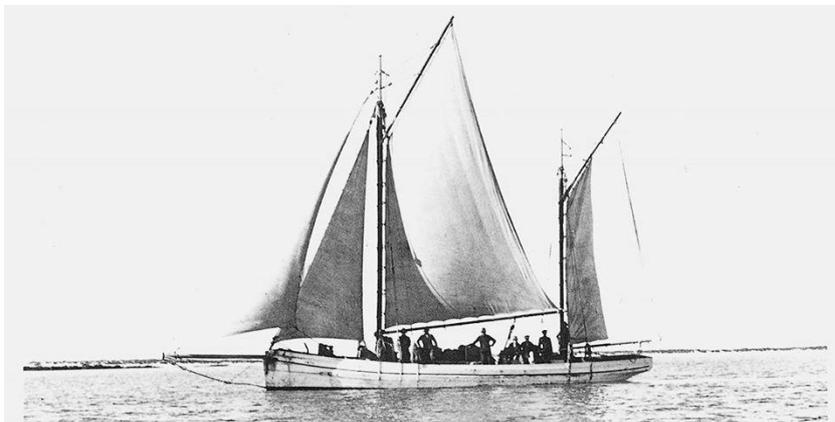
Walter Trigg was the Geraldton Manager for Winter Brant and Co., a large firm with deep sea fishing fleets and market outlets in the city and goldfields. His father William Trigg built many of the early public and private buildings in the Geraldton district, including the first school in 1861, a little stone building in Marine Terrace, now the Missions to Seamen.



In 1929 an 'Abrolhos Board of Control' was formed with the idea of promoting the Abrolhos as a tourist destination and Walter was elected Secretary. The Board worked hard but had little success in its endeavours, and its attempts to raise funding by placing a levy on crayfish proved a failure, the fishermen proving uncooperative and refusing to pay. The sea crossing, then as now, also proved a deterrent to many would-be holiday-makers.

In February 1931, Trigg was given permission to erect a 'little shelter and tanks to

conserve water during the coming winter' on Pelsaert Island. It was located where the land had been cleared by guano miners in the late 1800s near the southern tip, a blustery place with the deafening thunder of breakers on Half-Moon Reef in winter or the screeching of the millions of terns that nested nearby in early summer.



Trigg's Hut of corrugated iron with six bunks, described by Malcolm Uren as standing 'lonely and gaunt, like a monolith on a parched flat', provided a refuge for visiting fishing parties, often groups of men then as now heading out for a few days.



Transport to and from Pelsaert Island was provided by Frank Burton's fishing lugger the *WATER WITCH* with the little yacht *LILY* owned by Bill Burton (Frank's son) as a tender to get ashore.



One group that used the hut was the naturalist Vincent Serventy who with photographer Axel Poignant and journalist Norman Hall visited over Christmas in 1939/40 and 40/41; the latter two shown here inside Trigg's Hut. Poignant took one of my favourite photographs of a young osprey and in his later career it featured in his

exhibitions around the world.

Tasmanian-built schooner *Barbara* Investigated

Earlier this year the ABC reported that Flinders University-based archaeologist Wendy Van Duivenvoorde had researched the wreck of the schooner *Barbara* that was wrecked in 1852 when a northerly gale blew her into shallow waters at Rye in Victoria.

The 39-foot wooden ship was built on the Tamar River in Tasmania in 1841, and providing researchers with new insights into early Australian boatbuilding.

In February, Flinders University, Heritage Victoria and the Maritime Archaeology Association of Victoria partnered up to undertake an identification exercise, involving surveys and underwater photogrammetry.

Early Australia shipyards are not well documented, and not much is known about the people who built the vessels, and their approach.

The report said it was often assumed Tasmanian boat builders used local timbers like Huon pine or blue gum. However, the *Barbara* had planking made from jarrah from Western Australia, the frame was made of tea tree, and there was eucalypti from New South Wales and Victoria.

The ship's builder was Joseph Hind, a farmer from the Tamar Valley in Northern Tasmania who came from England to Van Diemen's Land in 1828 with his wife Barbara.

Records of shipping movements show *Barbara* transported livestock and wool up the river before being registered in Victoria from 1846.

For example, the *Launceston Examiner* of Saturday 11 March 1843 recorded that on March 8 the Schooner *Barbara*, Davison, master, arrived from Cape Portland (north

eastern tip of Tasmania), with 30 bales wool.

A closer look of these records show that other produce was shipped by the schooner. The Launceston Examiner reported that on 5 September the *Barbara* arrived from Piper's River with 500 bushels of oats.



Photo Supplied by Flinders University

Melbourne Maritime Heritage Network News

AGM to be held virtually Thursday 1 October at 4pm. Email info@mmhn.org.au for details. The MMHN reports that it is now a member of **ICMM** the world's only international maritime museum network, facilitating information-sharing and conversations around the globe.

Share your research through The Great Circle

Do you have some research you would like to share with others? Professor Erika Techera invites you to nominate your research for publishing in The Great Circle. Contact Erika at info@aamh.asn.au.

Do you have news/queries?

News stories, short research items and queries about maritime history are always welcome for our Facebook, Website and Newsletter. All three publications have a world wide audience. Contact Peter Ridgway at info@aamh.asn.au.

RAN's first VC

Edward 'Teddy' Sheean was born on 28 December 1923 in Tasmania. Soon afterwards the family moved to Latrobe. In Hobart on 21 April 1941 he enlisted in the Royal Australian Naval Reserve as an Ordinary Seaman, following in the steps of five of his brothers who had joined the armed forces (four of them were in the Army and one in the Navy).

In May 1942, Sheean was posted to Sydney where he was billeted at Garden Island in the requisitioned ferry *Kuttabul*, prior to joining his first ship as an Oerlikon anti-aircraft gun loader. Granted home leave, he was not on board *Kuttabul* when Japanese midget submarines raided the harbour and sank her on 31 May. Eleven days later he returned to Sydney to help commission the new



corvette HMAS *Armidale* (I), which carried out escort duties along the eastern Australian coast and in New Guinea waters. Ordered to sail for Darwin in October, *Armidale* arrived there early next month.

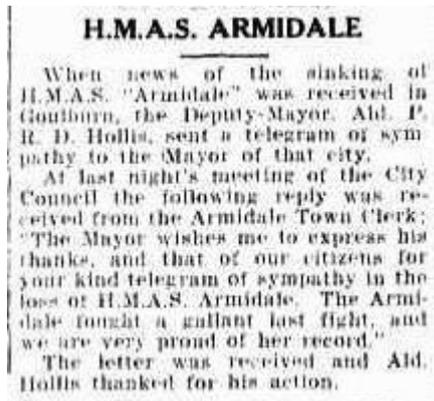
On 29 November *Armidale* sailed for Japanese-occupied Timor, in company with the corvette HMAS *Castlemaine*, to withdraw the exhausted Australian 2/2 Independent

Company, evacuate about 150 Portuguese civilians and 190 Dutch troops, and land soldiers to reinforce Dutch guerrillas on the island. Arriving off Betano before dawn on 1 December, the ships rendezvoused with the naval tender HMAS *Kuru*, which had already taken the civilians on board. When these people were transferred to *Castlemaine*, she sailed for Darwin, leaving the other two vessels to carry out the rest of the operation. From 12:28 *Armidale* and *Kuru* came under repeated attack from Japanese aircraft. Despite requests, no air cover was received.

On 1 December 1942, *Armidale*, by then separated from *Kuru*, was attacked by no less than thirteen aircraft. The corvette manoeuvred frantically. At 15:15 a torpedo struck her port side and another hit the engineering spaces; finally a bomb struck aft. As the vessel listed heavily to port, the order was given to abandon ship. The survivors leapt into the sea and were machine-gunned by the Japanese aircraft. Once he had helped to free a life raft, Sheean scrambled back to his gun on the sinking ship. Although wounded in the chest and back, the 18-year-old sailor shot down one bomber and kept other aircraft away from his comrades in the water. He was seen still firing his gun as *Armidale* slipped below the waves. Only 49 of the 149 men who had been on board survived the sinking and the ensuing days in life rafts.

Sheean was mentioned in dispatches for his bravery and in 1999 HMAS *Sheean*, a Collins Class submarine, was named after him - the only ship in the RAN to bear the name of a sailor.

In 2020, following a sustained public campaign to have Ordinary Seaman Sheean's selfless actions appropriately recognised, an expert panel recommended to the Australian Government that he be considered for the the award of a Victoria Cross.



On 12 August 2020 the Australian Governor General, His Excellency General the Honourable David Hurley, AC, DSC, (Retd) announced that HM Queen Elizabeth II had approved a posthumous award of the Victoria Cross to Ordinary Seaman Sheean.

In doing so, Ordinary Seaman 'Teddy' Sheean, became the first member of the Royal Australian Navy to be awarded Australia's highest honour for valour.

News item based on <https://www.navy.gov.au/biography/ordinary-seaman-edward-teddy-sheean-vc> and Goulbourn Evening Post (Trove) HMAS Cerberus Museum.



"The Sheen" trophy (1995) was inaugurated by then Chief of Navy Staff, this special trophy five man teams compete. Model made at Crawford's and signed A Somerville. Crawford (1995). *Trophy; The Sheen*.



HMAS *Armidale* 2020 Patrol Boat. Photo Source: RAN

More on Sheean and HMAS Armidale in the next issue

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Next Newsletter: March 2021

Send your local news story and short research items to the Newsletter Editor, Peter Ridgway before 1 March and 1 September each year via email to: info@aamh.asn.au

