

MERCHANT NAVY NEWS

Newsletter of the Merchant Navy Association and the
Merchant Navy RSL Sub-Branch NSW

Edition 22
Spring 2020



TO FOSTER THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE SEA

War Service

OF THE

Merchant Navy

A RECORD

OF THE PARTICIPATION

OF

THE MEN AND SHIPS

IN

HUDDART PARKER LTD

Source: HUDDART PARKER LIMITED 1939-1945



The TSMV Westralia operating in Australian waters before
World War II (Allan C. Green, State Library of Victoria).

Huddart Parker Ltd - War Service



HMAS Westralia in her first wartime role as an armed merchant cruiser

The most spectacular career of any of the company's ships was that of the "Westralia." She was taken over by the Navy on November 2nd, 1939 and was commissioned as H.M.A.S. "Westralia" on January 17th, 1940, under the command of Commander A. S. Rosenthal, A.D.C., R.A.N.

Fitted as an Armed Merchant Cruiser, she was armed with seven six inch guns, two anti-aircraft and a number of machine guns. Bridge protection and other structural alterations, and later the removal of her mainmast, considerably altered her appearance. A seaplane and catapult were carried on No. 4 hatch. In April, 1940, she proceeded to Darwin and Macassar and en-route sighted the Danish vessel "Fernlane." As Norway and Denmark were occupied by the Germans, orders had been issued to capture Norwegian and Danish shipping and carry prizes to British ports. Off Macassar "Westralia's" aircraft sighted "Fernlane" entering the port. "Westralia" waited outside, and when "Fernlane" sailed after dark she was intercepted and boarded. Lt.-Commander Komoll, Eng. Lt. Itwin and a prize crew were placed aboard. She was taken to Singapore, and Lt.- Commander Komoll and his crew rejoined "Westralia" at Darwin on May 17th, having travelled from Singapore per "Merkur". (Burns Philp)

Huddart Parker Ltd - War Service

H.M.A.S. "Westralia" then proceeded to the Indian Ocean and was engaged on escort and patrol duties between Fremantle and Colombo. Extensive searches were made for enemy raiders. In July she went to Bombay, then across to the Gulf of Aden on convoy duty, returning to Colombo, steamed south, sweeping round to visit and inspect many islands and atolls of the Maldives Group. September saw her again in the area between Colombo and Fremantle, where two wide sweeps were made. Again, steaming north till within sight of Bombay, she returned to Colombo.

During this period the activities of an enemy raider were causing grave concern. "British Commander," "Athelking" and "Benarty" were sunk. H.M. ships "Neptune," "Capetown," "Arawa" and H.M.A.S. "Westralia" were constituted as Force V to intercept the raider if possible. No raider was sighted, but "Westralia" sighted H.M.A.S. Canberra with a convoy bound for Bombay. The convoy consisted of "Orcades," "Mauretania," "Aquitania" and Empress of Japan. With an enemy raider at large whilst such a valuable convoy was in the vicinity, it is not surprising that Force V was sent to give extra cover and protection.

On September 25th, 1940, Capt. H. V. Hudson O.B.E., R.N., assumed command. Till the end of 1940 convoy duties to Mauritius, Colombo, and Sumatra were interspersed with further searches for enemy raiders. The ship was behaving very well, and gunnery tests, as well as the arduous service conditions, served to emphasise the sturdy construction and faithful upkeep of the vessel.

In January 1941, "Westralia" was engaged in escort duties round the Australian coast to Darwin and assisted in the aerial reconnaissance and photography of Admiralty Gulf. On January 24th, "Westralia" was detailed to convoy "Zealandia". After waiting for her all day, she met her off the swept channel after dark. "Westralia" signalled, "What speed are you doing?" "Zealandia's" reply was tinged with annoyance, "Seven knots until my firemen recover."

Carrying provisions and stores she visited Ocean Island and Nauru in April, and then continued escort duties which took her down to the vicinity of Bluff, New Zealand.

A.I.F. personnel for Nauru were embarked in July 1941, and she returned to Sydney with the relieved garrison. Then followed months of convoy work, escorting troops to Darwin, Koepang, Noumea, and other South Pacific ports.

SUBMARINE SIGHTED

When nearing Sydney on May 31st, 1942, a Japanese submarine was sighted. U.S.S. "Chicago" which was in company, immediately opened fire. "Westralia" was unable to engage because of foul range. The submarine dived and was not seen again. This was just before the submarine attack on Sydney Harbour. "Westralia" was in the Harbour at the time of the attack, but no damage was sustained.

This action emphasised the vulnerability of Australian ports to under-water attack, and in September anti-torpedo nets were placed in Port Stephens, "Westralia" assisting in the assembly.

In October the ship was honoured by a visit from Rear Admiral G. C. Muirhead-Gould, D.S.C., N.O.I.C., Sydney, and Vice Admiral Sir Guy Royle, K.C.B., C.M.G., 1st Naval Member. This inspection took place while the vessel was at Port Stephens.

Acting-Captain J. M. Armstrong, R.A.N., assumed command on 30th October 1942.

During November and December, H.M.A.S. "Pingwo" made several trips to Townsville, during which she was escorted by "Westralia's" aircraft. On February 9th, 1943, "Westralia" was taken to Garden Island for conversion to L.S.I. (Landing Ship Infantry).

Huddart Parker Ltd - War Service

AN ALTERED ASSIGNMENT

At this period of hostilities, the tide of the Japanese advance had turned. The headlong advance in the South Pacific area had been slowed and stopped. Bitter fighting along the Kokoda Trail and through the rain forests of New Guinea had thrown the enemy back and held him while the might of the Allied land and sea forces was being built up. Offensive strategy demanded units that could be welded into Task Forces capable of carrying the fight to the enemy. H.M.A.S. "Westralia" was one of the vessels chosen for this role. At Sydney the conversion proceeded apace. Structural alterations were made to enable heavy invasion barges to be carried. Her armament was altered, considerably more anti-aircraft defence was installed, and once again the outward appearance of the ship was greatly changed.

On June 16th, 1943, His Excellency the Governor-General of Australia, Lord Gowrie, V.C., P.C., G.C.M.G., C.G., D.S.O., LL.D., boarded H.M.A.S. "Westralia" and inspected the ship and the ship's company.

The conversion to an Assault Ship was completed by June 25th, 1943, and "Westralia" left Sydney on that date to prepare for operations. Then followed several months of hard training. Considerable practice was necessary before the co-ordination and skill could be achieved that would clear the ship of hundreds of troops and hundreds of tons of cargo within a matter of minutes to a scheduled time. Modern amphibious warfare was still in its infancy, "working up" periods, "dummy runs," "trial and error" were phrases much used. Tousle-haired boats' crews drove their barges through heavy rain, through big seas, in blazing heat, and in midnight commando raids. Crew and training troops dragged themselves aboard exhausted after a days training to snatch a few hours' sleep before another dummy run at dawn. It was monotonous, back-breaking training, but it paid dividends when the real "job" began.

At last, the weary days of preparation were over, and "Westralia" headed north for the Pacific forward areas. Her first task was to land U.S. Marines at Goodenough Island, U.S. destroyer "Bagley" escorting her. Similar duties occupied her for some months, and her trained crew was well ahead with this important participation. Eventually the day dawned when she took part in her first landing operation.

Dawn was just breaking on December 15, 1943, when "Westralia" moved in toward the beach at Arawe, on the south-eastern coast of New Britain. She was the first Australian ship of her class to be actively engaged in an amphibious operation. There was an atmosphere of tension as the destroyers commenced their bombardment. The long months of training now proved their worth as, with smart efficiency, the barges were got away. All troops and cargo discharged without mishap and on schedule, and the ship moved away without interference, despite the presence of a Japanese reconnaissance plane.

"Westralia's" next task was to assist in the landing in Humboldt Bay, on the shores of Hollandia, Dutch New Guinea. Assault waves left the ship without incident and again the mission was carried out successfully. Whilst engaged in transporting U.S. troops from Goodenough Island to Cape Cretin, "Westralia" was attacked by enemy aircraft. The attack was beaten off, the ship sustaining only slight damage and minor casualties.

In July 1944, "Westralia" was engaged in carrying troops and in operational training at Bougainville, Aitape and the Leyte Island operations. On October 30th, Lieut.-Commander E. W. Livingstone, R.A.N.R., assumed command. During December training exercises were carried out at Bougainville and Manus. U.S. troops and stores were taken aboard at Bougainville and further training exercises were carried out at Torokina.

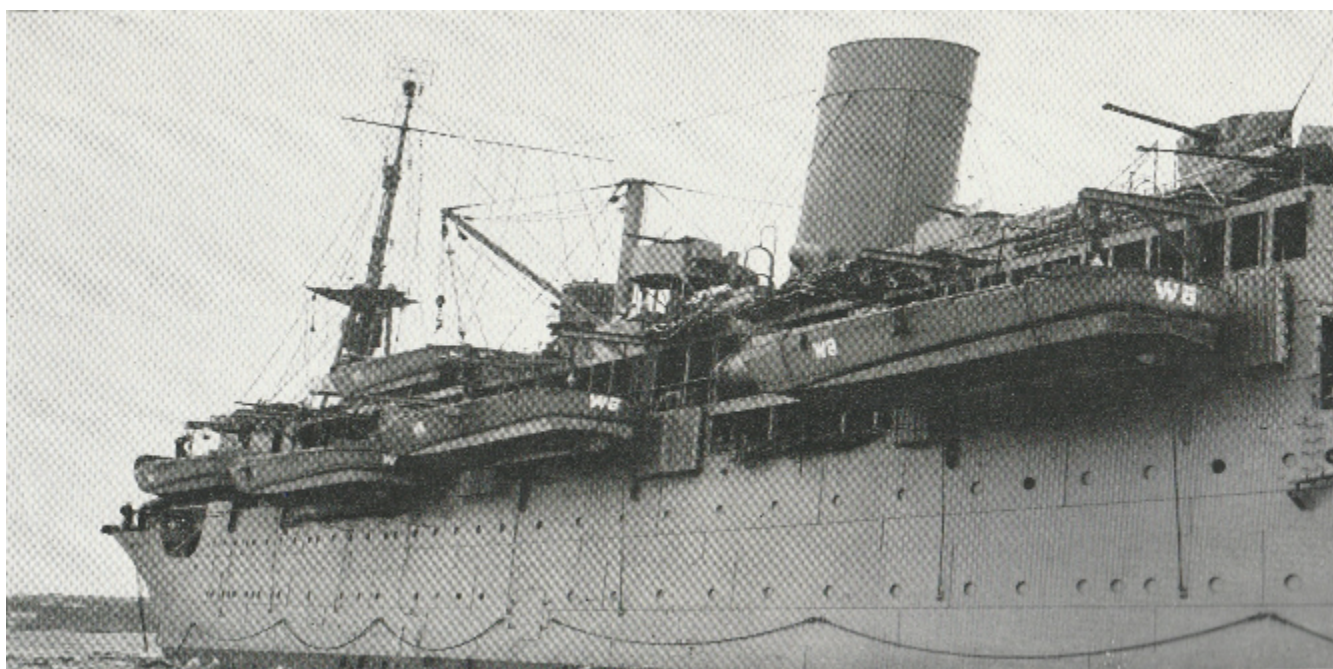
Huddart Parker Ltd

Toward the end of December, “Westralia” having embarked 60 officers and 976 men of the 3rd Bn. Combat Team of the 129th Infantry Regiment, as well as 500 tons of army equipment, left Torokina for the assembly point where ships were gathering for the next advance.



On December 21st the ship anchored in Seeadler Harbour, in the Admiralty Islands. Around her were hundreds of ships of the U.S. and Royal Australian Navies. These included eight U.S. Escort Carriers, their flight decks lined with aircraft. Preparations for the great assault proceeded, and on Sunday, December 31st, the Luzon Attack Force put to sea. It was an amazing sight as part of the nine hundred and fifty ships under the command of Vice-Admiral Kincaid moved into convoy positions. The Luzon Attack Force, known as Task Force 77, was so large that it had to be broken up into smaller convoys. Ships engaged included 3 16-inch, 4 14-inch battleships, 19 cruisers, 33 carriers, 143 destroyers, 6 amphibious flag ships, and a host of invasion ships and craft.

The convoys arrived off Leyte in the early morning of Saturday, January 6th. A lone Japanese plane attempted a bombing attack, but was shot down by two Corsairs, about a mile off “Westralia’s” port bow. Next morning the southern tip of Negros was passed, and at midnight Apo Island was abeam. On Monday “Westralia” entered the China Sea and about noon, when about 65 miles due west of Corregidor Island, an attack was made on the convoy by two bombers. One passed five hundred yards ahead of the ship, dropping two bombs which exploded harmlessly in the water. Navy fighters appeared and the enemy made off.



Photograph: Captain S. B. Komoll

L.S. I. “Westraliaa” with Landing Barges Swung

Huddart Parker Ltd - War Service



In the evening of the same day, Japanese dive bombers attacked. Watchers on 'Westralia' cheered when Hellcats engaged them and shot down the four. Just on dusk two Zero's attacked. One was hit by A.A. fire and immediately commenced a suicide dive on U.S. carrier "Kitkun Bay". The carrier was hit, and two destroyers stood by as she stopped, obviously on fire. The other Zero was hovering around apparently choosing a victim. "Westralia" put up a terrific barrage and eventually hit him with a 40 millimetre Bofors shell. This directed the pilot's attention to the ship, and he put the plane's nose in a full powered suicide dive. The roar of the engine increased as he hurtled toward the ship through the hail of shellfire. Despite the intensity of the fire he still came on and seemed certain to hit the ship just abaft the funnel. When nearly on top of the ship he dropped a bomb which exploded ahead of U.S.S. "Titania," the next ship in line.. Every man on "Westralia" not at a gun threw himself on his face and waited for the crash. Less than ten feet from the ship's stern the gunners stopped him. There was a shattering explosion and a burst of flame as the plane flew to pieces, one wing scraping the ship's stern. Slight damage was done by flying fragments and a rating was injured. In this narrow escape the poop was showered with fragments of the plane, which at once became valuable souvenirs.

Lingayen Gulf was entered at dawn on Tuesday. At daylight "Westralia" was fourteen miles north of Lingayen, where another bombing attack was experienced without damage or casualties. Upon arrival in the attack area preparations were made to land the assault wave. At 0735 the boats were lowered. Zero hour was 0930. The naval bombardment had commenced at daylight and continued until 1030. Everything from 16-in. battleships to rocket firing control boats poured missiles into the intended beach-head. The bombardment ceased abruptly, and three minutes later the first wave of troops hit the beach. Three hours after the landing the area was secured after a poor show of resistance by the enemy. "Westralia" moved into a position two miles off the beach and commenced discharging the troops and equipment. All around her ships were pouring their quotas ashore, the southern end of the gulf being filled with a vast assembly of Allied ships. An occasional bomber appeared from nowhere, the U.S. battleship "Mississippi" and H.M.A.S. Australia both being hit by death-diving planes. On December 9th "Westralia" cleared the gulf and next day moved down the west coast of Luzon in company with three cruisers and 28 other ships. Later it was learned that the troops landed by "Westralia" were amongst the first to enter Manilla, 28 days after they had landed on the beach.

From Lingayen the ship returned to Brisbane, arriving at port on March 2nd, 1945. Repairs were being effected to the refrigerating machinery when, on March 20th, a fire broke out in No 4 hold. This was soon got under control, but damage caused by the fire and the flooding of the magazine delayed the ship for ten days

On March 31st, “Westralia” sailed with U.S. Naval and R.A.N. personnel for Madang, and with barges for the R.N. at Manus. She carried also 2000 tons of cargo for the U.S.N. and R.A.N.

Having completed this mission, the ship took up formation in the Attack Group under the command of Rear- Admiral F. B. Royal, U.S.N. in U.S.S. “Rocky Mount,” and proceeded to sea bound for Tarakan Island off the coast of Borneo.

Late in April 1945, “Westralia,” with other L.S.I. units of the R.A.N. (still under the command of the U.S. Seventh Fleet) was detached for service with 1 Australian Corps. The ship participated in the final training of the Corps and assisted in several land rehearsals in the Australian areas on the beaches of Morotai and Kokaja.



One of the ship's assault landing craft, viewed from the aft gun platform of the landing ship infantry Westralia, as it swung aboard during the movement of the 2/24 Infantry Battalion

Finally, preparations were completed, and the troops trained to the minute. “Westralia” embarked a Battalion Landing Team (Infantry with supporting elements) from the 9th Australian Division, then located at Morotai, and late in April sailed for Tarakan. This is a small but strategically important island off the east coast of Borneo. “Westralia” had an important role in this attack as the troops formed the spearhead of the assault force. In the grey light of dawn on May 1st the first wave went ashore. The enemy opposed the landing determinedly from the first assault, but the Australian held their positions, and were quickly supported by tanks and heavy equipment ferried ashore in the ship's L.C.M's. For two months the enemy maintained his resistance, and during that time “Westralia” twice carried reinforcements and additional supplies from Morotai.

The next task of the vessel was to land an assault force (from 24th Inf. Brigade, 9th Aust. Division) against the Japanese held island of Labuan – off the west coast of British North Borneo. After the usual preparations “Westralia” was approaching her allotted beach as dawn

was breaking on 10th June 1945. During the early phases of the operation, a surprise “sneak” air attack was experienced. The ships anti-aircraft guns blazed into action and the enemy were driven off. There were fortunately few casualties and little damage. One again the Landing Team was placed ashore with their equipment, in accordance with the planned timetable and “Westralia” hurried back to Morotai for further supporting troops and equipment to make the landing secure.

At this stage the war in the islands quickened as the Japanese-held territory was “mopped up” and “Westralia” had no respite in the task of placing assaulting troops ashore as required by the tactical plans of the Army Commanders at the forward base.

On June 26th she left Morotai in the largest convoy ever to carry an Australian force, for the attack on the Japanese garrison in the area of Balikpapan (oilfields of S.E. Borneo). On July 1st, “H” hour was 0700 and “Westralia’s” Battalion Landing Team (from 7th Aust. Division), with tanks and bulldozers, etc., were landed on a narrow beach-head within a few minutes of the initial assault. After sending ashore reserve stores and equipment, “Westralia” returned to Morotai with her sister L.S.I’s to take forward reinforcements and further supplies. During the next four months she was employed in carrying troops and stores between Torokina, Hollandia, Morotai, Rabaul and Brisbane, and in December it was necessary for “Westralia” for engine reconditioning. In January, 1946, she was back again and trips to Darwin and Rabaul followed.



HMAS Westralia at sea

In April 1946, 787 Italian P.O.W’s were embarked at Hobart, also 1000 cases of “Food for Britain” at the request of the Lord Mayor of Hobart, for discharge at Melbourne. She then proceeded to Dredge Harbour and Rabaul and returned to Brisbane. On the next voyage, to Darwin, Morotai and Kure, a floating mine was sighted and sunk by gunfire.

July 30th saw the ship back in Sydney with cargo, stores and troops, her final trip before being paid off.

Huddart Parker Ltd - War Service

One human incident that will long be remembered by those serving in “Westralia” at the time, was a children’s party. At Morotai there was a large group of Dutch children who had been released from Japanese internment camps in the Celebes. The ship’s company arranged to entertain them. Despite short notice all hands turned to with enthusiasm and converted “B” deck into a playground. See-saws, swings, and even a merry-go-round (the latter being mounted on a rotating gun mounting from one of the boats) were soon working efficiently. Signals department supplied flags and lamps, and soon the drab grey bulkheads were covered with colourful decorations. Then the children arrived, and the decks were swarming with excited, eager little figures, whose delight with the lucky dips, balloons and refreshments was accentuated by the horrors of the months of fear and malnutrition they had suffered. Language difficulties were overcome, and when a group of tiny girls sang several Dutch songs and concluded with “My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean” in quaint English, the ship’s company vociferously showed appreciation. There were loud and prolonged farewells as the little guests, tired but happy, left the ship and those aboard felt amply repaid for their efforts by the joyous smiles of their departing guests.

After the cessation of hostilities, H.M.A.S. “Westralia” travelled 32,400 miles repatriating 13,000 troops from northern operational areas with no loss by misadventure. The total distance covered from the date of commissioning was 120,987 miles. She paid off at Cockatoo Dock on 19th September 1946, for return to Australian trade. The colours were lowered and presented to the ship for war service.

After work on her conversion had been in progress for some months, “Westralia” was again required by the Navy, this time to maintain a service between Sydney and Kure, Japan, for the Army of Occupation. She left Sydney on December 8th, 1947, for Kure, via Dredge Harbour, New Guinea and returned via Morotai and Langemak to Sydney. “Westralia” remained in this service until April 1949, making nine trips to Japan, and on three occasions returning via Auckland, New Zealand. Once again she was reconditioned for her peace-time employment, but not many months elapsed before the Navy again required her for service in the Mediterranean, and she left Sydney on August 20th, 1949, for Port Said, and from that port made ten trips to Trieste, in Italy. On her last trip she returned to Port Said, via Piraeus, Salonika and Famagusta. Homeward bound “Westralia” sailed from Port Said on January 27th, 1950, and after calling at Aden, Colombo and Singapore, arrived in Sydney on March 1st, 1950. For the third time her re-conversion was commenced, and she now returned to the service on the Australian coast in which she was such a popular ship before the war.



Officers of the landing ship infantry HMAS Westralia I.

THOSE WHO HAVE CROSSED THE BAR

KEVIN ERNEST COLLINSON (BHP Chief Eng.) 3/3/2020

Capt. GERARD HARVEY 26/5/20

ARTHUR PATRICK (PADDY) BERRY 26/8/20 WWII

THEY SAIL FOREVERMORE UNDER THE RED ENSIGN



Memorial Wreaths laid at the Australian Maritime Museum on Wednesday 29 September 2020 include Battle of the Atlantic, Hospital Ship Centaur, Loss of MV Noongah off South West Rocks, SS Lake Illawarra Disaster, Japanese Bombing of Darwin. In Memory of All Seafarers and for Seafarers on Ships of Shame. Photo sent in by Robert McMahon•

MERCHANT NAVY RSL SUB-BRANCH

President's Report.

As all of you know, 3rd September each year is Merchant Navy Day. In recent years our sub Branch has assumed responsibility for the 'Mosman' service that day. Being aware of the severe restrictions imposed by the NSW Government on meetings re the 'virus', I initially assumed it was not possible for us to hold the service this year.

Our Secretary Merrill Barker, had other ideas. He contacted me and persuaded me that despite the situation it was still possible to have a service but it must be restricted to just fifteen people.

Merrill went ahead, contacting the majority of our members and those who have supported us in the past, especially the local Mosman Council. There was a great deal of work to be done.

On the day we not only had the fifteen maximum attendees, we had a fine sunny day. It was agreed that this years' service would be for only thirty minutes with a few remarks from me, readings delivered by the Cr. Carolyn Corrigan, Patron and Mayor of Mosman and Robert McMahon, Vice President, Prayers by Sister Mary Leahy OAM followed by wreath laying.

Merrill had also arranged for the Red Ensign to be flown on the Sydney Harbour Bridge and at a local flagstaff at Beacon Hill that day.

I had persuaded Merrill to lay the sub Branch wreath at Mosman this year because of all the detailed organising work he had carried out, also in memory of his late father who had been a distinguished World War Two Merchant Navy veteran.

It should be noted that each year this sub Branch receives excellent support from Mosman Council when we conduct our service at the Merchant Navy Memorial, which is adjacent to the main Council War Memorial. Our sub Branch Treasurer and 'media officer' Bob Harding was present taking many photos, some of them may appear in MN News.

At the time of writing it seems unlikely that this year we will be able to undertake the trip to Canberra in October. The over- night stay at the motel on Saturday, dinner, and service on the Sunday are very difficult to organise, Surely, we will be able to resume that and the Rookwood service in April next year. I certainly hope so.

Plans for our sub Branch quarterly meeting at Chatswood RSL Club, due to be held on the last Wednesday of November are yet to be finalised. Merrill will issue advice closer to that date

As I have been recently been 'confined to barracks' I have spent more time than usual reading books. Daytime TV does not interest me.

Someone in the dim past had given me a book entitled 'The Navy at War – 1939-1945.' Not having ever been a member of the navy I had not got around earlier to reading it. I soon discovered that the author was a retired Royal Navy Captain and, understandably, he was only interested in the role of the Royal Navy. However, it was good reading as the author was prepared to discuss the failings as well as the successes of the RN during the second world war. What really interested me was a summary on the last pages relating to ship losses and casualties during the war.

I have often quoted those losses in my articles but I became aware that various figures had been given and in some cases the numbers varied. I feel that a distinguished retired Royal Navy Captain who was recognised as a reliable author may well have got the numbers correct. I have extracted some figures relating to naval and well as merchant shipping losses

MERCHANT NAVY RSL SUB-BRANCH

The author states that 5,150 merchant ships were lost 'caused by enemy action'. Of these 2,828 were sunk by submarines, 534 by mines, 104 by warship raider, 131 by merchant raider, 99 by E boats and 632 by 'other causes, scuttling, capture, unknown' etc.

He records that on the German side, of the 1,162 U-boats built and commissioned during the war, 785 were lost, 156 surrendered and the remainder were scuttled at the end of the war.

Re casualties he says 'Royal Navy casualties' amounted to 50,738 killed, 820 missing, 14,663 wounded. The Women's Royal Naval Service had 103 killed and 22 wounded.

The British Merchant Navy lost 32,248 men through enemy action. Those merchant navy figures only relate to British seamen. We all know thousands of other nationalities, American, Norwegian, Danes Australian and Zealand and all other allied seamen also lost their lives.

Additional figures are supplied in that book but perhaps, they are for another time. Lest We Forget.

Very best wishes to all of you.

Don Kennedy. President



Robert McMahon and Sister Mary Leahy OAM at the Mosman Merchant Navy Memorial Service 3 September 2020. (Photo by Bob Harding)

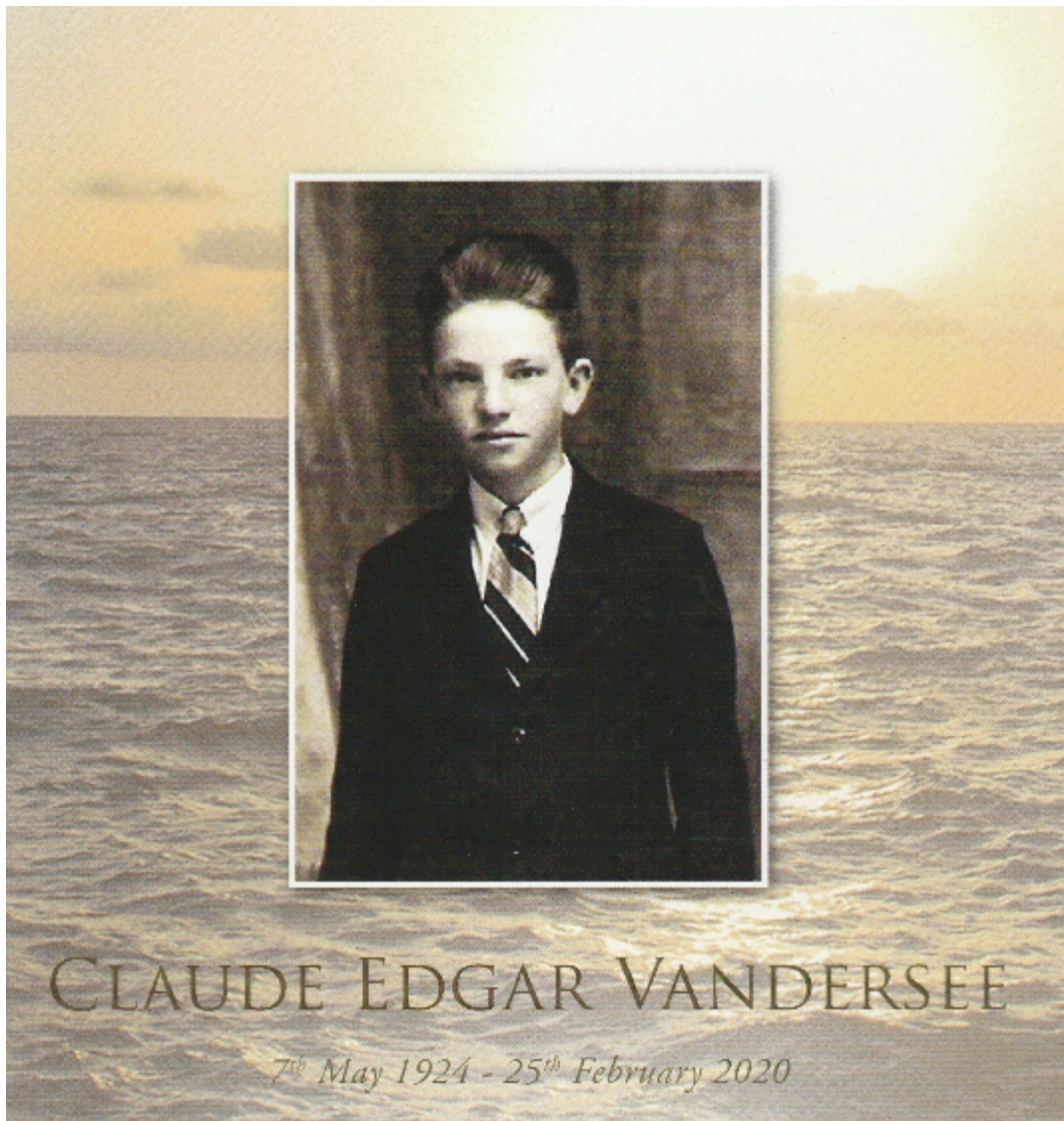


Mosman Memorial floral tribute (photo by Bob Harding)



Wreaths laid at MN Memorial Port Adelaide (Photo by <https://www.suesmithphotography.com.au/>)

REMEMBERING OUR VETERANS



Claude Vandersee's memories of the sinking of his ship 'Chloe'

6 May 1942

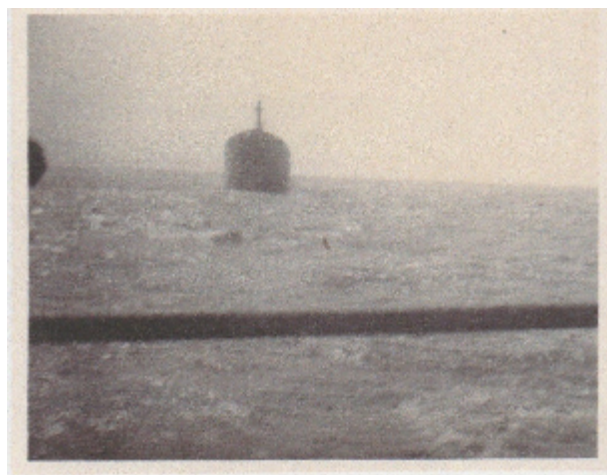
At 10.00 am, while at the wheel of S.S. Chloe, a Greek ship with a cargo of coal and coke from Newcastle to Noumea, I sighted a vessel dead ahead.

Being alone on the bridge I used the bridge binoculars and noticed that the ship was headed in a southerly direction. This seemed odd, as the next land in that direction was Antarctica.

After some minutes the ship remained dead ahead which indicated she was not underway. Then I observed smoke coming from the deckhouse abaft the funnel. At about 10.30 am Our Captain Nicholas Vaglianos arrived on the bridge and I reported my observations. He ordered me to steer hard to starboard and reverse course as he suspected the strange behaviour of the ship could indicate she was an armed merchant cruiser.

REMEMBERING OUR VETERANS

When the ship did not change position, the Captain decided to circle her. At a closer range we were able to see that she was damaged in No 4 hold and that the midship deck housing was burnt out. (Picture No 1 – white patch to rear of ship). The lifeboat falls were over the side (both sides) indicating that she was abandoned (Picture No 2).



The Chief Officer and the Bosun boarded the ship to assess the possibility of taking her in tow (Picture No 3). They found that she was still burning in No 2 and No 3 holds. She was apparently on her maiden voyage and was the US Liberty ship named 'John Adams.



REMEMBERING OUR VETERANS



The only salvage that could be done was to rescue a tabby cat (Picture No 4). During the afternoon No 3 hold blew up (Picture No 5) followed shortly after by another explosion in No 2 hold (Picture No 6). At about 7.00 pm Captain Vaglianos abandoned the idea of salvage and proceeded towards Noumea. Note: Pictures 1-6 were taken by me with a 40 mm camera which I should not have had on board.



7 May 1942

At 7.00 am the next morning (my 18th birthday) after being relieved of my wheel duties, I was required to hose down the decks. As it was raining, I went to the crew's quarters to get my oilskins. On returning on deck at the stern. Looking at the wake, I saw a white streak on the port quarter coming rapidly towards me – a torpedo!! When it hit the wake it came to the surface carrying away the log line, missing the ship and exploding with a time fuse.

Most officers, engineers, fireman and seamen left their places of work and went to the boat deck. Only one stayed on duty – the wireless operator who went to the chartroom to find the ships position and send a distress call.

The man at the wheel had evidently left some starboard helm on before walking off, precipitating a slow turn and bringing the submarine immediately astern. Another torpedo was fired going along the port side – once again exploding without making contact.

The submarine, seeing that we had no means of defending ourselves, surfaced, firing warning shots across our bow.

The crew, with their issued life jackets assembled on the boat deck when it became obvious that, the majority of the Arab firemen had used their life jacket tapes as boot laces. Consequently, they were ineffective.

REMEMBERING OUR VETERANS

The first lifeboat to be launched was lowered incompletely and capsized with three men on board and the painter (rope that holds it against the ship) carried away because the ship was still going at full speed with no one in control.

The remaining lifeboat and a small work-boat were then lowered to accommodate the remaining crew. Because of the first accident, no crew member volunteered to go in the second lifeboat whilst it was being lowered, to keep it fended off the ships side as the ship rolled, consequently, the lifeboat crashed against the side of the ship an number of times before landing in the water. Arab firemen were reluctant to slide down the manlines until a deck crew member volunteered how to do it. Then they followed one by one, without care, landing on top of one another.

After the small workboat was launched with the remainder of the crew, we stood off the 'Chloe' while the Japanese submarine I.29 which had torpedoed the John Adams two days earlier, proceeded to sink the 'Chloe' by shellfire. This event took approximately two hours because of the difficulty to sink a ship loaded with coke and coal.

Lifeboats, traditionally, are checked and maintained at regular intervals with regard to efficacy of their gear and life saving stores (high energy biscuits and water). It was discovered that the remaining lifeboat's stores were full of weevils, the water containers were almost empty and the boats rigging was rotten.

When the ship finally went down the submarine proceeded towards the lifeboats with the crew beckoning us to row towards them. This struck fear in all hands because of the stories of machine gun fire. However, the Japanese crew threw three sealed containers (about four gallons in size) into the water. Again, our crew feared they may be bombs. They turned out to be life saving biscuits albeit hard and tasteless but nourishing.

When the submarine disappeared over the horizon, it was decided to attempt to rig the lifeboat mast and sail. This exercise resulted in me being knocked unconscious by the boom when the rotten rope carried away. I came to, vomiting over the side, when I then discovered the need for continuous bailing of water by the crew with hats and boots and whatever else they could put their hands on. The reason was a length of planking (about a metre long) in the original lowering from the 'Chloe'. The carpenter retrieved light pine planks from the empty provision boxes and using kapok from the life jackets was able to make temporary, yet effective, patch to the side of the boat.

As a result of our distress signal a float plane from Noumea eventually sighted us. Our wireless operator had given our position of 30 nautical miles south west of Amadee Light (Noumea) when, in reality, we were 30 miles west.

REMEMBERING OUR VETERANS

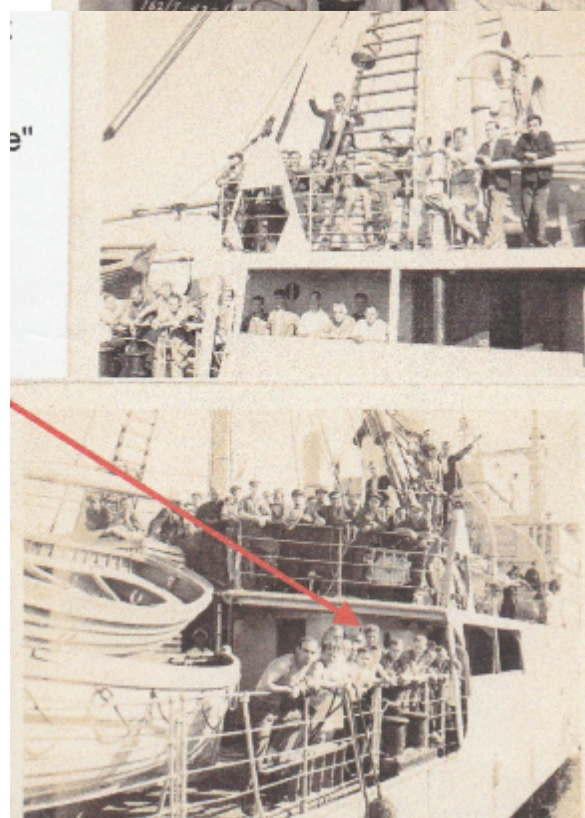
The sub-chaser HMAS 'Wilcannia' was directed to our position and rescued us seven hours after the first torpedo was fired. I souvenired the port lifeboats compass before landing in Noumea (see photo of compass).

It was hair raising for 'Chloe's' crew to have to remain on the 'Wilcannia' whilst she searched unsuccessfully for the submarine.



We arrived back in Noumea at 8.00 am the next morning.

Pictures 7 and 8 show the crew of the 'Chloe' showing our lifeboat and workboat – I am the tallest one with a lot of hair in the picture No 8. Picture No 9 shows Captain Vaglianos and Lieut-Commander Livingstone of the 'Wilcannia'. Picture No 10 show Capt. Vaglianos, and American Army Lieutenant and Lieut-Commander Livingstone. These were taken by US Army Intelligence officers on our arrival in Noumea and given to me and a thank you for giving them two reels of film of the 'John Adams' episode.



REMEMBERING OUR VETERANS

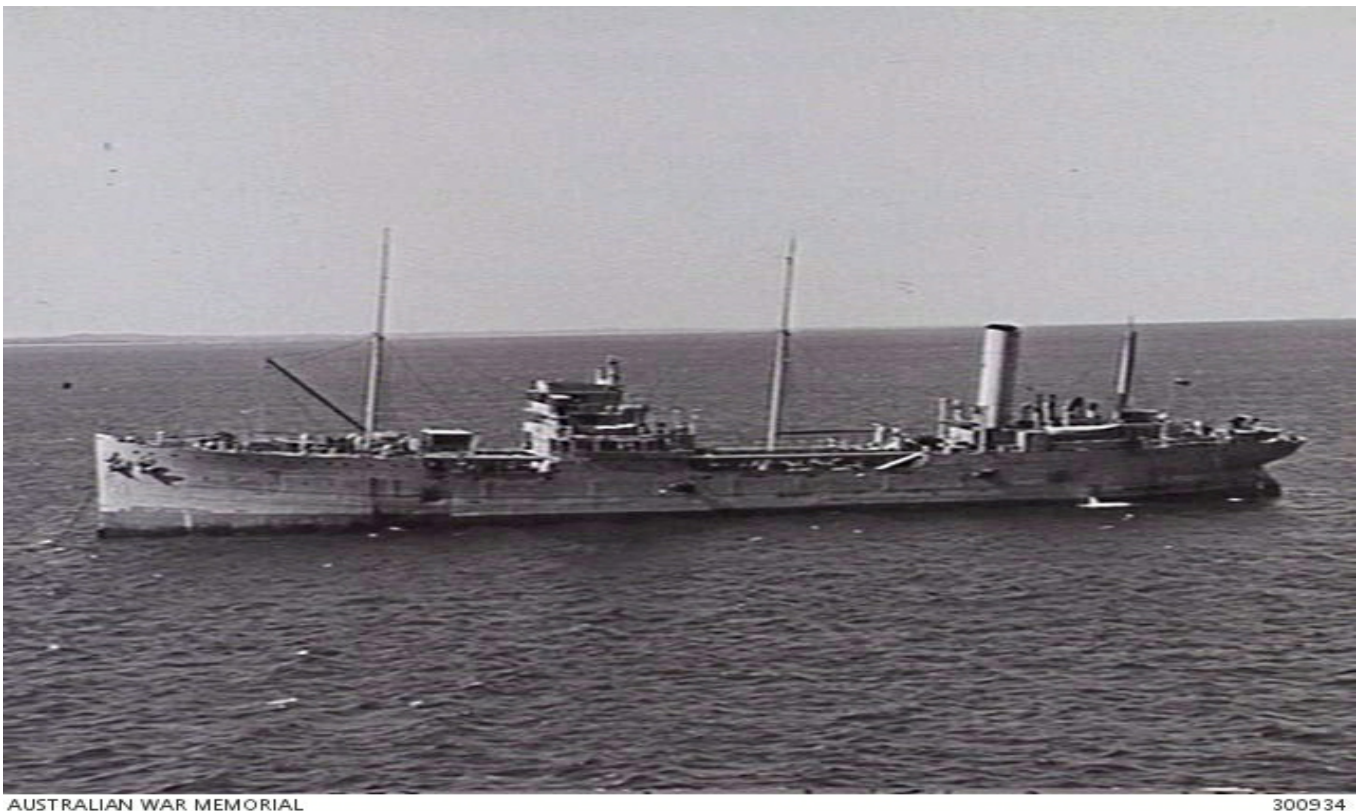
Japanese surrender

In 1944 Claude Vandersee was on the “Kurumba”, a RAFA Oil Tanker, she was part of a 100 ship convoy to the Lingayen Gulf in the Philippines. He was on Kurumba when news of Japan’s surrender came through.

Ships Claude sailed in:

1940 -1948 Australian coast, PNG, Philippines.

SS Mackarra, MV Corinda, SS Mackarra, TSS Ormiston, SS Allara, SS Chloe, SS Both, RAFA Kurumba, USAR Thomas Corwin, SS Dundula, SS Period, RAFA Kurumba, RAFA Kurumba.



1941-09-11. PORT SIDE VIEW OF THE FLEET OILER RAFA KURUMBA. ALTHOUGH NOT COMMISSIONED THE KURUMBA WAS DEFENSIVELY ARMED WITH A 4 INCH GUN ON THE STERN. (NAVAL HISTORICAL COLLECTION)



CONTACT DETAILS

MERCHANT NAVY ASSOCIATION

President/Treasurer: Geoff Walls
PO Box 4181
SHELLHARBOUR
NSW 2529
Phone: 0242956527
Email: geoff.walls@bigpond.com

Vice President: Capt. S Herklots

Secretary:

Elizabeth Sandeman-Gay
All correspondence to:
PO BOX 4181
SHELLHARBOUR

NEWSLETTER EDITOR

Geoff Walls
PO Box 4181
SHELLHARBOUR
NSW 2529
Phone: 0242956527
Email: geoff.walls@bigpond.com

MERCHANT NAVY RSL SUB- BRANCH

President:

Don Kennedy
Unit 4 11-13 Bernie Ave
FORESTVILLE
NSW 2087
Phone: 02 94516707
Email: donandwynne@bigpond.com

Vice Presidents:

Alan Read
Robert McMahon

Secretary:

Merrill Barker
PO Box 6159
NARRAWEENA
NSW 2099
Phone: 02 99447328
Email: merchant.navy.rsl@speednet.com.au

Treasurer:

Bob Harding
PO Box 470
CROWS NEST
NSW 1585