

MERCHANT NAVY NEWS

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

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Spring 2021



TO FOSTER THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE SEA

HEROES

By
David Partridge
October, 2002

Don't speak to me of heroes until you've heard the tale
Of all those merchant seamen who sailed through storm and gale
To keep the lifelines open in freedom's hour of need
When a tyrant cast a shadow over every nation's creed
Captains, greasers, cabin boys, mates and engineers
They stoked those hungry boilers and stood behind the wheel
Whilst cooks and stewards manned the guns and coffins made of steel
They moved in icy convoys from Scapa Murmansk
And crossed the wildest oceans, never seeking thanks
They sailed the South Atlantic where raiders lay in wait
And kept the food lines open to Malta and the Cape
Tracked by silent U-boats which hunted from below
Shelled by mighty cannons and fighters flying low
They clung to burning lifeboats where sea had turned to flame
And watched their shipmates, disappear to everlasting flame
I speak not of a handful, but of forty thousand plus,
Some whose names we'll never know in whom we placed our trust
They never knew the honour of medals on their chest
Or marching bands and victory and glory and the rest
The ocean is their resting place, their tombstone is the wind
The sea birds' cry their last goodbye to family and to friend
Firefighters, troopships, liners and tankers by the score
Fishing boats and coasters, four thousand ships and more
Flew their country's ensign as they sank beneath the waves
And took those countries heroes to lonely ocean graves
Their legacy is freedom to those who hold it dear
To walk with clear horizons and never hide in fear
So, when you speak of heroes, remember those at sea
And thank those Merchant seamen who died to keep us free

Merchant Navy Day

3 September 2021

September 3 is Merchant Navy Day. This is the anniversary of the first Allied merchant vessel to be sunk in the Second World War. The British liner SS Athenia was torpedoed and sunk without warning by the German submarine U-30. This happened only 10 hours after Britain's declaration of war in 1939.

On Merchant Navy Day we reflect on the important role merchant mariners have played during wartime.

The Merchant Navy was responsible for transporting service personnel, supplies and equipment. Some vessels were converted to military hospital ships for wartime service as well.

Unlike naval warships, vessels in the merchant navy were often unarmed. This left them exposed to attack from the enemy, both in foreign waters and closer to the Australian coastline.

Merchant mariners worked with the constant threat of attack from enemy submarines, surface raiders, aircraft and sea mines. Their work was especially dangerous because the convoys were slow.

The Battle of the Atlantic is a well-known battle involving merchant mariners. It lasted almost the entire duration of the Second World War. The battle was fought across the war's most dangerous shipping lanes. Over 3000 Allied merchant ships were sunk. Some 30,000 Allied sailors and merchant mariners were lost at sea.

The Australian War Memorial estimates that tragically more than 800 Australian merchant mariners died serving the Allied cause during the two world wars.

The Merchant Navy Memorial on the edge of Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra commemorates the contribution made by the Australian merchant navy during the World Wars.

Today we honour their memory and that of their fellow mariners who so bravely carried out their duties.

<https://www.dva.gov.au/newsroom/latest-news-veterans/merchant-navy-day>

Background to Heroes: AWM - Art V05319

Merchant Navy Day 2021 - Report by Merrill Barker

This year, once again, our annual Merchant Navy Day Commemoration has been severely impacted caused by COVID-19 restrictions.

Members may recall last year, while the commemoration actually took place, it was under very restricted conditions which stipulated, a maximum number of attendees limited to 15, compliance with and approved COVID SAFE Plan, Public Assembly authorisation approved by the local police command and the approval of Mosman Council.

Under all these conditions, we were most satisfied that a number of WWII Merchant Navy Veterans were in attendance on a lovely fine day, to participate in this most important event on the Merchant Navy RSL sub-Branch calendar. Because of their advancing age, foremost in our minds was our duty to have our veterans with us so we could share the moment with them, possibly for some, the last time. I am very pleased to report, the 14-day COVID follow up with all those present, confirmed no infections had occurred.

It was also pleasing that we had an informal “cheer squad” present, viewing proceedings from their elevated position behind the seated area, all conforming to the correct “social distancing” rules. This enhanced the importance of the service.

Unfortunately, this year despite the hopes of our committee that it might proceed, it was with great disappointment we were forced to cancel the service in early August. This came just prior to lockdown legislation being introduced, which has now resulted in this extension to the end of September.

We had hoped, following our initiative and the support of the RSL NSW, the request to have as many as possible RSL sub-Branches hoist the Red Ensign on Merchant Navy Day, has not been possible. This is because most premises are closed complying with the lockdown. However, this will become an instruction from RSL NSW for next year and those following. We will still see the Red Ensign proudly flying on Sydney Harbour Bridge, at Mosman and at the Governor Phillip lookout at Beacon Hill. Unfortunately, the ensign will not fly at the Australian National Maritime Museum due to closure.

Our committee is sure that our members will have taken a few moments of contemplation on 3 September to remember those who served and were lost during wartime.

EDITORS NOTE:

The author of the following article “**The Sinking of the SS Athenia**” by **Francis M. Carroll**, has kindly given permission, as does Legion Magazine to reprint their article published in their September/October 2019 edition.

www.legionmagazine.com

For those who would like to watch the Merchant Navy Day Commemoration from the New Zealand Maritime Museum .

maritimemuseum.co.nz/events/merchant-navy-day-2021

The sinking of SS Athenia

By Francis M. Carroll/Legion Magazine

Reprinted courtesy of the author and Legion Magazine

www.legionmagazine.com



Survivors are taken ashore after their rescue from SS Athenia.

INDEPENDENT NEWS AND MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES/534277070

After Britain declared war, Germany's first target was a passenger ship bound for Canada

Britain declared war on Germany at 11 a.m. on Sunday, Sept. 3, 1939. At just after 7 o'clock that evening, Captain James Cook of the passenger liner SS Athenia joined his first-class guests for dinner.

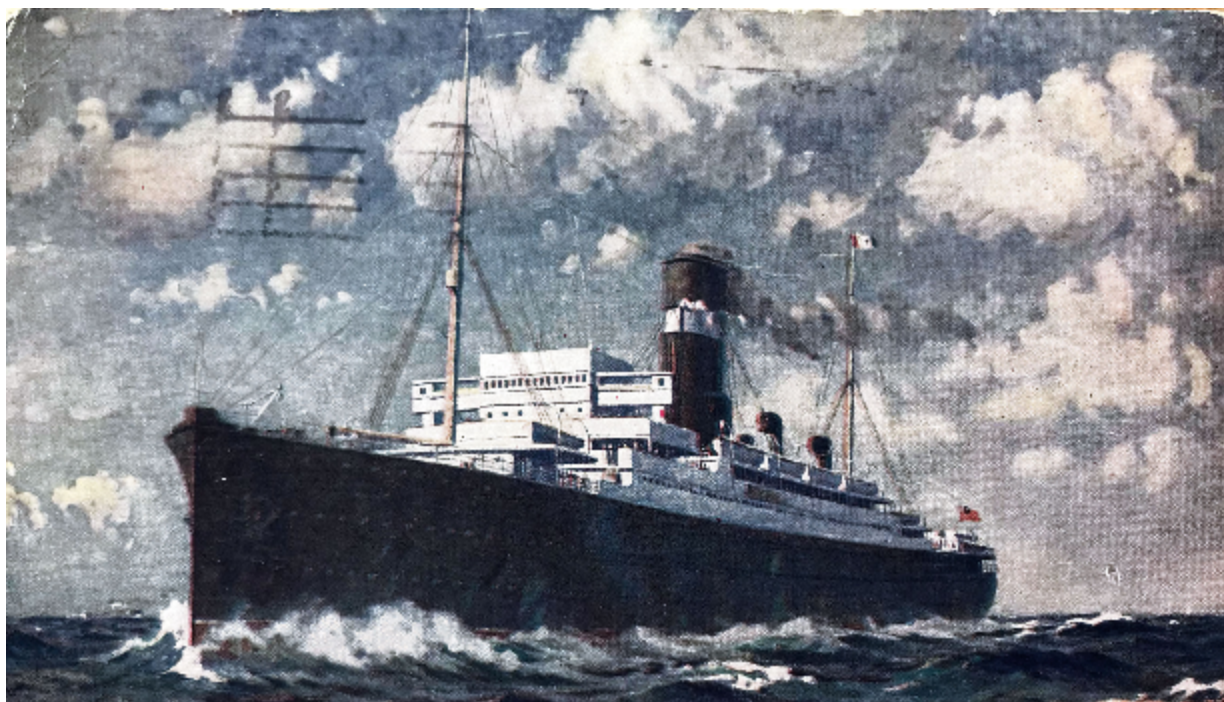
While the ship had actually gotten underway two days earlier—en route from Glasgow to Montreal via Belfast and Liverpool—Cook had felt that the urgency of the international situation demanded his presence on the bridge. But by about mid-afternoon Sunday, as Cook told one passenger, they should be far enough into the Atlantic Ocean northwest of Britain and Ireland to be out of danger.

The sinking of SS Athenia

At 7:40, just as the evening meal was being served, a violent explosion destroyed the engine room, plunging the dining room into darkness, sending tables and chairs skidding across the deck, and causing the ship to list to port and begin settling by the stern. The German submarine U-30 had attacked Athenia.

For Canadians, Britons and even Americans, this is when and where the Second World War war began. The Germans were ready. A flotilla of 19 U-boats had sailed between Aug. 19 and 22 and were on station around the British Isles when the crisis over the German invasion of Poland reached its climax.

In fact, Germany was committed by treaty not to sink civilian passenger ships, but as dusk fell that evening, the captain of U-30 sighted Athenia running without lights and sailing in a zig-zag anti-submarine pattern. He concluded it was an armed merchant cruiser. U-30 fired four torpedoes, one of which hit Athenia on the port side, striking the ship a mortal blow.



SS Athenia sailed from Scotland en route to Montreal on Sept. 1, 1939. The ship was torpedoed on Sept. 3 about 400 kilometres northwest of Malin Head, County Donegal, Ireland. COURTESY OF FRANCIS M. CARROLL

Athenia was a Donaldson Line ship, built in 1923, servicing the northern United Kingdom ports of Glasgow, Belfast and Liverpool on a regular route to Quebec City and Montreal. Unlike the large, glamorous luxury liner RMS Queen Mary on the Southampton-to-New York run, Athenia and her sister ships usually carried families visiting grandparents in Scotland and northern England, and students, tourists and immigrants.

The international crisis in August—failed alliance talks between Britain, France and the Soviet Union followed by the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact of Aug. 23—had resulted in a crush of people attempting to get home before hostilities broke out. So Athenia had more passengers than usual.

The ship left Glasgow on Sept. 1, picked up more people off Belfast that evening, and then went on to Liverpool to receive its final passengers. Some 1,102, along with 316 crew, put to sea at 4 p.m. on Sept. 2. Athenia headed through the North Channel around Ireland and was well out into the Atlantic before war was declared.

Normal shipboard routines—church services and seating assignments in the dining rooms—carried on, although some wartime precautions were taken: portholes were covered and lifeboats were readied for use. Nevertheless, the explosion of the torpedo took everyone by surprise.

While waiting to go to dinner, young Donald Wilcox of Dartmouth, N.S., had made his way to the very peak of the ship's bow and was watching the waves curl away from the prow when the ship rose up several feet and then fell back down sharply. "I was almost thrown off my feet," he remembered years later.



Three women follow a soldier carrying a baby down the gangway of the Norwegian ship Knute Nelson which delivered survivors to Galway, Ireland.

The sinking of SS Athenia

All the lights went out and the ship stopped dead in the water and began settling by the stern. The engine room, the galley, parts of the dining rooms and many staterooms flooded. People were separated and groped in the dark to find their way to the open decks before emergency lights came on. Crew members guided people with matches and flashlights, while James A. Goodson, 18, of Toronto, whose holiday in Europe had been cut short, swam through a flooded section of the ship to rescue struggling passengers, guiding them to what remained of the stairs.

All 26 lifeboats were launched, although there were difficulties in getting many of the women and children into them. Fortunately, distress signals were received by ships reasonably close by. Shortly after midnight, Norwegian freighter MS Knute Nelson arrived on the scene, followed by Swedish steam yacht Southern Cross, owned by the Electrolux millionaire Axel Wenner-Gren. They began taking on survivors from the lifeboats, looking after the injured and offering food and hot drinks.

As the night wore on, three Royal Navy destroyers reached the scene, HMS Electra, HMS Escort and HMS Fame. They also picked up survivors and provided food and dry clothing. In the morning, the American freighter SS City of Flint arrived and took people from Southern Cross and the destroyers before heading back across the Atlantic bound for Halifax. Knute Nelson took survivors to the Irish port of Galway, and the navy destroyers sailed back to Scotland, sending their passengers to Glasgow. At about 11 a.m. on Monday, Athenia heeled over and sank stern first.



A young boy is passed down the gangway from Knute Nelson in Galway, Ireland. PETER POWER/TORONTO STAR

The survival of 1,306 people was something of a miracle, thanks in part to the discipline and training of Athenia's crew in getting all the lifeboats launched, the proximity of several rescue ships and the relatively moderate seas. Tragically, 112 people were killed, either in the initial explosion or in the difficult circumstances in the lifeboats.

Among those lost was 10-year-old Margaret Hayworth of Hamilton, Ont., who was hit on the head by a fragment as the torpedo exploded and died six days later despite medical treatment on City of Flint. She was buried in Hamilton at a large public service.

While Knute Nelson was rescuing survivors, its propeller sliced through one of the lifeboats. Among those killed was William Allan, a Toronto Presbyterian minister who had a popular devotional radio program. Hanna Baird of Verdun, Que., a stewardess on Athenia, also did not survive and is regarded today as the Canadian Merchant Navy's first Second World War fatality. The death of these Canadians was a shocking start to the war.

**Just as the evening meal
was being served, a violent
explosion destroyed the
engine room.**

For many survivors, particularly families separated while getting into lifeboats, the ordeal was not yet over. Georgina Hayworth successfully got into a lifeboat with her fatally injured child Margaret, but her younger daughter Jacqueline lost hold of her skirt and was placed in a different lifeboat. "It was the worst day of my life, being separated from my mother," Jacqueline remembered years later.

David Cass-Beggs, who had accepted an appointment to teach electrical engineering at the University of Toronto, and his wife Barbara had their three-year-old daughter Rosemary with them. When it was uncertain whether there would be sufficient lifeboat space for all the passengers, the parents put their daughter into the hospital boat. They eventually boarded a lifeboat, however, and were picked up by Knute Nelson and taken to Galway, while little Rosemary was placed on City of Flint, headed for Halifax. Fortunately, Winifred "Auntie" Davidson of Winnipeg looked after Rosemary until family friends received her in Montreal.



Margaret Hayworth (at left) and her younger sister Jacqueline of Hamilton were aboard SS Athenia when it was hit. Margaret was struck by shrapnel and died six days later. GETTY IMAGES/165324337

Among the refugee passengers picked up by Knute Nelson and brought to Galway were Rudolph and Anni Altschul, who had fled Prague when the Germans occupied Czechoslovakia in March 1939. Anni, in a state of shock, kept telling her husband that she had a cousin in Ireland. In this chaotic situation, such a detail seemed irrelevant to Rudolph, but when they landed at Galway and were met by a large, hastily organized party of aid workers, Anni simply called out “Edith,” her cousin’s name, and miraculously she appeared among the volunteers.

Authorities in Galway and Glasgow received the survivors with great kindness and generosity. Medical aid was provided, hotels opened up rooms, clothing was collected, telephone and telegraph services were made available. Both the Canadian and American governments sent official thanks to the Irish and British governments, especially to the cities of Galway and Glasgow for their immediate help. Vincent Massey, the Canadian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, also requested funds from the Canadian government, and the prime minister and the Canadian Red Cross authorized assistance.



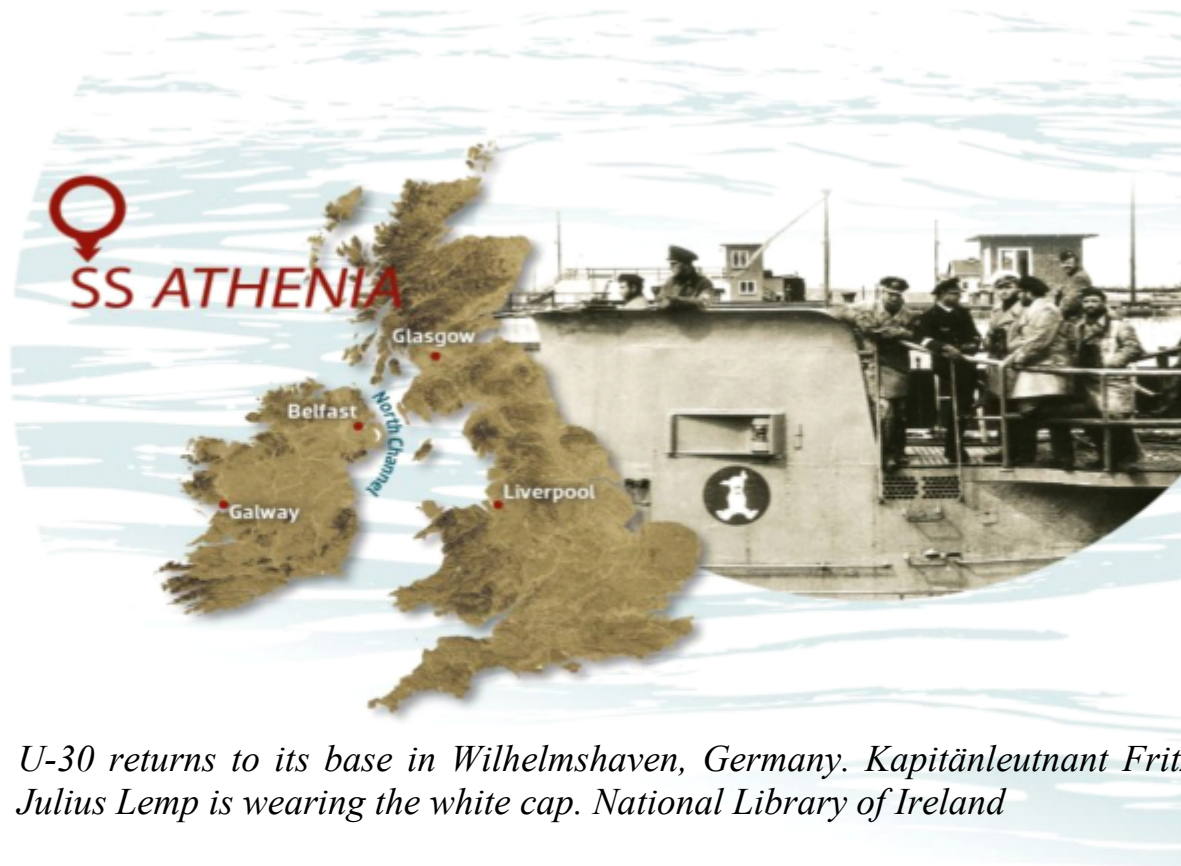
Seriously wounded Athenia passengers (left) are transferred mid-Atlantic from the City of Flint to the U.S. Coast Guard cutters Bibb and Campbell, which had medical facilities. AP/3909131264

Massey arranged for Canadian Pacific ships to bring people back to Halifax and Montreal. SS Duchess of Atholl sailed on Sept. 13 with 104 survivors and SS Duchess of York on Sept. 14 with 163; SS Duchess of Richmond and SS Duchess of Bedford left later. The United States ambassador to the United Kingdom, Joseph P. Kennedy, sent his 22-year-old son, John F. Kennedy, north to Glasgow to look after American survivors. Beside these assurances, the Americans also sent funds to assist their survivors and the State Department chartered SS Orizaba to bring people home.

**“It was the worse day of
my life, being separated from
my mother”**

The arrival of the survivors in Canada produced pain, horror, relief and joy. City of Flint was met at sea by two U.S. Coast Guard cutters and escorted into Halifax Harbour on Sept. 13. A large crowd greeted the ship, led by the premier of Nova Scotia, Angus L. Macdonald, as well as the minister of health, the mayor of Halifax, officials from the Royal Canadian Navy, RCMP, Red Cross, Boy Scouts, a number of doctors and nurses, 40 newspaper reporters and the American consul general.

Facilities were set up to give survivors fresh clothes, a hot bath, meals and transportation to Montreal and then home. A photograph of the hastily made coffin of young Margaret Hayworth being carried from City of Flint stirred the nation and brought home the cruelty of war.



U-30 returns to its base in Wilhelmshaven, Germany. Kapitänleutnant Fritz-Julius Lemp is wearing the white cap. National Library of Ireland

The destruction of this passenger ship in the first hours of the war shaped public opinion throughout the English-speaking world. Given the time difference in Western Canada, the Winnipeg Tribune printed special evening editions on Sunday, Sept. 3, announcing BRITISH SHIP SUNK BY ENEMY TORPEDO. The following day, The Globe and Mail ran headlines ATHENIA IS TORPEDOED, LINER CANADA-BOUND, 1,400 ABOARD, SUNK OFF HEBRIDES. The New York Times lead story announced BRITISH LINER ATHENIA TORPEDOED, SUNK; 1,400 PASSENGERS ABOARD, 292 AMERICAN. In London, The Times asserted THE TORPEDOED ATHENIA. NO WARNING GIVEN AND ALL RULES BROKEN. In Athenia's home port, the Glasgow Daily

Record & Mail declared that “the German leopard has not changed its spots.”

The German government publicly denied it had any U-boats in the area and charged that the British had destroyed the ship in order to bring the U.S. into the war. Public opinion in all three countries, however, was overwhelmingly convinced that the Germans had sunk the ship. This conviction was confirmed by the sinking of naval and merchant vessels in the following weeks.

The shock of the sinking pushed governments into immediate action. Winston S. Churchill was brought into Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s government on Sept. 3 as First Lord of the Admiralty. On Monday, Churchill gave Parliament the details of what was known about the sinking of Athenia and explained Germany’s obligations under the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935.

In the evening, he met with Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound and senior admiralty staff to assess the U-boat situation and the disposition of British merchant ships. Pushed by the news of Athenia and its survivors, the cabinet met each day and discussed these matters. On the evening of Sept. 6, Churchill and the admiralty staff agreed to implement convoys for merchant ships to begin the following morning.

Initially, ships sailing from the Thames River and along the east coast would be organized into convoys, but the orders were quickly broadened to all major ports and incoming ships as well. (In the First World War, convoys had not been implemented until June 1917.)

By Sunday evening, Canadians had learned of Britain’s declaration of war. Early on Monday morning, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King was informed of the sinking of Athenia. He then called a meeting of Cabinet and reconvened Parliament on Thursday, Sept. 7. The question of war with Germany was the key issue for Parliament and the fate of Athenia became one of the arguments in its favour.

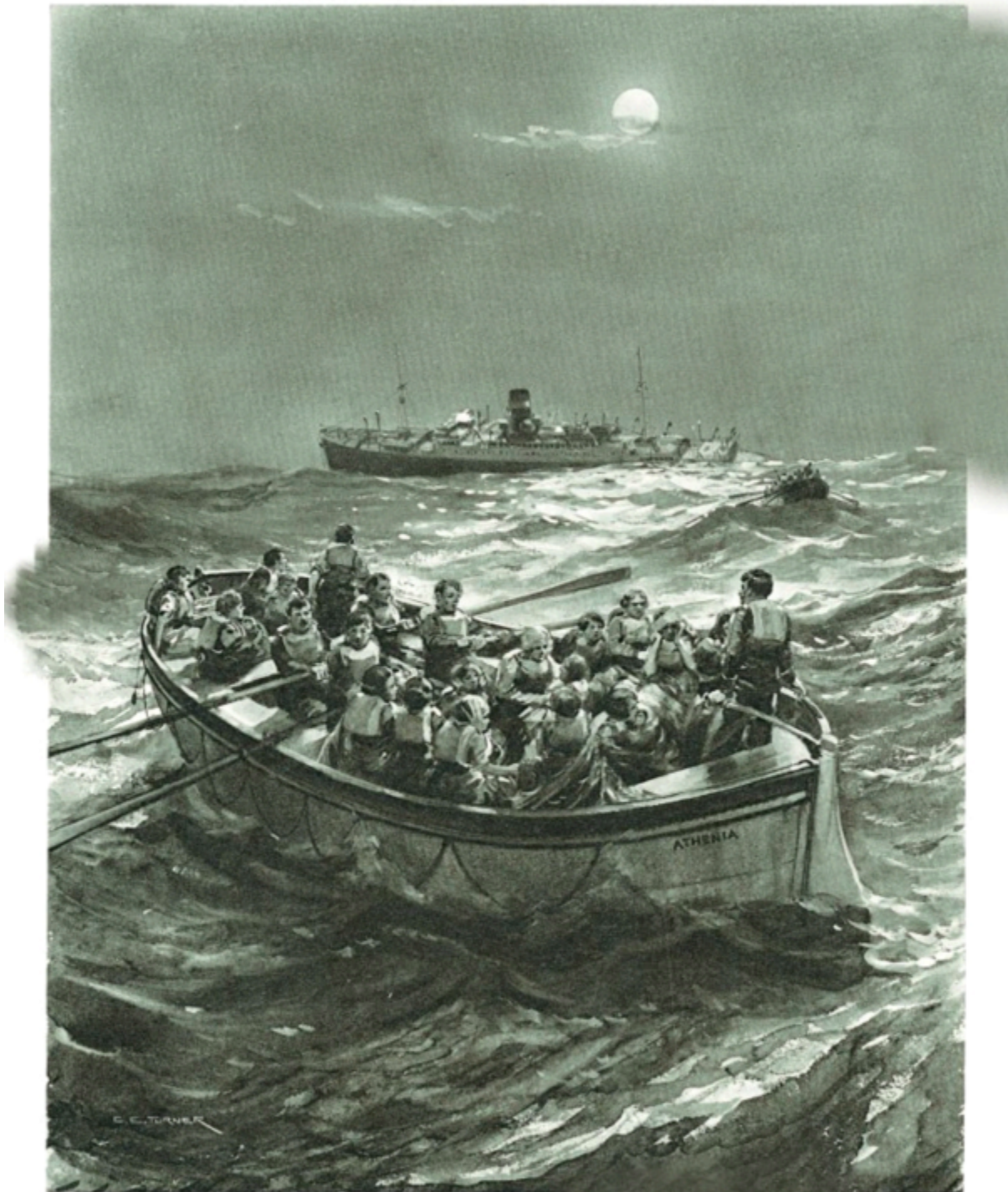
Ernest Lapointe, minister of justice and King’s Quebec lieutenant, reasoned that while some people had been claiming Canada had no stake in such a war, “at that very moment an enemy submarine was torpedoing the liner Athenia, which was carrying over five hundred Canadian passengers who might have lost their lives.”

SEPT. 16, 1939

THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS

THE SUFFERINGS OF THE SURVIVORS OF THE TORPEDOED "ATHENIA."

DRAWN BY C. E. TURNER, FROM THE DISCREPANCIES OF TWO SURVIVORS, DR. J. H. LAWRENCE AND MR. T. E. FINLAY.



LOOKING, IN THE MOONLIGHT, ALMOST LIKE A LINER PASSING NORMALLY, THE "ATHENIA" WAS
GLIMPSED FOR A MOMENT, WITH HER LIGHTS STILL BURNING, AS THE LIFEBOAT DRIFTED AWAY.

It was dark by the time that the last of the "Athenia's" boats left her. The castaways drifted about and slowly became scattered. There was a heavy Atlantic swell running, but the waves did not break, and most of the boats remained dry. The moon rose and the mournful scene was brilliantly illuminated. Then, as the boats were lifted high upon the crest of the swell, the survivors were astonished to see the "Athenia" still afloat. The 13,000-ton vessel, which a few hours before had been their home, lay heavily in the water, deeper down by the stern than she had been, but listing very little more. Her emergency

lights were still burning, and she seemed to be somewhere near her bridge. Almost no sound came from her, but she was still there. But as they watched, many were thinking of the things that were left in her cabins which they had never seen again; and others, with deeper grief, of loved ones from whom they had been separated, never, perhaps, to meet again. She stayed afloat all night, as though seeking to cheer those whom she could no longer save, and then, some time in the early morning, slid silently to her grave hundreds of fathoms below, none seeing her go.

The Illustrated London News commissioned an artist to depict a lifeboat drifting away from the foundering vessel.

ALAMY/KKFP4K

Speaking for the opposition, Thomas L. Church, member of Parliament for Broadview in Toronto, said the passengers on Athenia were not given a chance to vote on whether to go to war or not when their ship was torpedoed. "I say we owe a duty to those passengers tonight," he argued. Parliament voted for war on Saturday, Sept. 9, and the declaration was cabled to High Commissioner Massey in London, who took it to King George VI for his signature on Sunday morning.



Captain Joseph Gainard of the City of Flint comforts Elizabeth Campbell, one of the young survivors.
COURTESY OF FRANCIS M. CARROL

America had not been directly involved in the Czechoslovak and Polish crises of 1939, although President Franklin D. Roosevelt had attempted then to revise the existing neutrality laws to allow the U.S. to support friendly democracies in the event of war. Anti-interventionist sentiment in Congress was too strong to make any changes to the existing restrictions. However,

with the outbreak of the war on Sept. 3, the sinking of Athenia with Americans on board, the dramatic newspaper stories of the American freighter City of Flint bringing Canadian, American and European survivors to Halifax, and the national popularity of the ship's gallant captain, Joseph A. Gainard, the U.S. Congress passed a new Neutrality Act in November 1939 that allowed the sale of munitions and strategic goods to belligerents on a "cash and carry" basis.

The sinking of Athenia was soon overshadowed by the expansion of the war at sea and elsewhere and even greater tragedies than this. Nevertheless, the sinking marks the beginning of the war in the West. The attack may have been an error in judgment by the U-boat commander, but it touched Canadians, Americans, Britons and Europeans within hours of the declaration of war. This was the beginning of Canada's war. Eighty years later, the remaining survivors are still haunted by that traumatic experience.

Passengers and crew on SS Athenia

Glasgow	420
Belfast	136
Liverpool	546
Total passengers	1,102
Crew	316
Total on board	1,418

Note: *Southern Cross* picked up 376 people and transferred 236 to *City of Flint* and 140 to the destroyers.

Passengers lost

Canadian and British	50
American	30
Polish	7
German	4
Stateless	2
Crew lost	19
Total lost	112

Survivors taken aboard rescue ships

Knute Nelson	430
HMS Electra	238
HMS Escort	402
City of Flint	236
Total survivors	1,306





PRESIDENT'S REPORT TO MERCHANT NAVY RSL SUB BRANCH MEMBERS

My report on this occasion contains some very important information for all our members.

Firstly, at our regular quarterly meeting at Chatswood RSL Club on Thursday 27th May a motion was put seeking approval for our Hon. Secretary, Merrill Barker to write to the Hon. Secretary of the Forestville sub-Branch seeking approval from them for the Merchant Navy RSL sub-Branch to become a 'Chapter' of the Forestville sub-Branch.

At that meeting the motion was seconded, discussed at some length, and carried, without dissent.

Should the Forestville RSL sub-Branch respond favourably to our request a motion will be put at our regular quarterly meeting at Chatswood on Wednesday 24th August that the Merchant Navy sub-Branch will commence steps to cease being a separate RSL sub-Branch and will, therefore probably late in the year 2021, become a 'Chapter' of the Forestville RSL sub-Branch.

Sadly, your committee has been compelled to enter into these arrangements because, for several reasons we feel we are just unable to continue to operate as a separate sub-Branch. The two main reasons are, firstly the fact that later this year we will no longer have any member who is willing or able to perform the duties of a treasurer and secondly, even though all your committee members have refrained from claiming or receiving any personal expenses incurred throughout the year, our income will be considerably less than our essential expenses.

Our essential expenses during a year include the purchase of about seven wreaths (at \$60.00 each), the cost of printing and postage of thirty Merchant Navy News is \$165.00, (four issues each year), compulsory insurance policies (\$840) and, secretary's essential computer supplies etc. These items amount to considerably more than we could ever expect to receive from the existing membership

It is a fact that many loyal members, when paying annual RSL renewal fees include a donation. It is hardly appropriate that members should be required to do so in an effort to keep us financially viable. This year the RSL NSW in Sydney generously donated us the cost of our insurance policies but we cannot expect them to do that permanently.

These last two years have been difficult for yet another reason. All RSL sub-Branches are required to lodge their annual return for the year to 31st December, by no later than 31st March the following year. This three-month period should be more than adequate time for a small sub-Branch but, at both the two recent years we have failed to have our financial details completed on time.

It is the duty of any sub-Branch president to ensure that these reasonable requirements are met. At one time in June last year, because of our failure by that time to do this I seriously considered resigning as president. However, after talking it about with Merrill and being aware that the option of becoming a chapter was likely to be a solution to all our problems, I decided not to do so. But, to put it mildly, at age 94 worrying about financial deadlines is over. I have 'had enough'.

Our wonderful Secretary, Merrill Barker will inform all members shortly about what will happen if and when these changes come about. I wish to assure you that should we become a chapter, the name 'Merchant Navy' will continue. Our newsletter 'Merchant Navy News' will still be produced, all commemoration services, such as the NSW service at Rookwood, the national service at Canberra and the MN Day service at Mosman will continue as before. As a Chapter we will not need a President, Vice Presidents, a Secretary or a Treasurer. Any funds required for our commemoration expenditures will, in future be provided by the sub-Branch to which we will be attached. Our service and affiliate members, should they so desire will then become members of that sub-Branch.

Merrill will, in due course direct your attention to the details concerning what happens when a small sub-Branch becomes a chapter of a large, four hundred member very well-funded sub-Branch. These arrangements are clearly provided to us by RSL NSW as a small sub-Branch, in a special document.

The final decision to become a 'Chapter' will have to be made by our members at a meeting. They will at that meeting, be fully informed why the Forestville RSL sub-Branch is to be recommended.

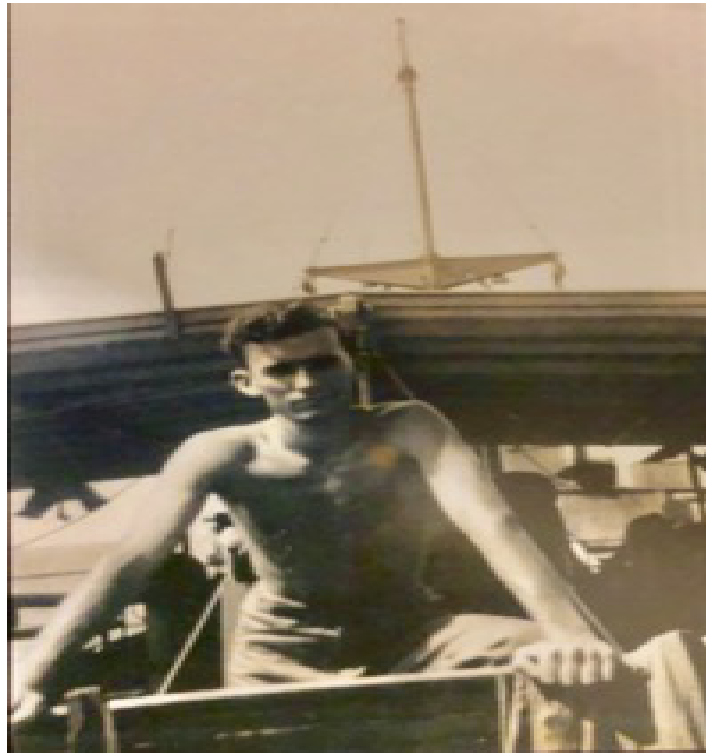
I very much regret having to make this announcement but I assure you, it is the best way forward.

Very best wishes,

Don Kennedy OAM

President. September 2021.

THE STORY OF HOW THE SUB- BRANCH PRESIDENT ENDED HIS SEA SERVICE AFTER THE WAR



Don Kennedy at 17 years of age

Following my acceptance of the offer to be discharged from the Norwegian tanker MT Seirstad in Brisbane in April 1945 I returned to Sydney by train. It was clear to everyone that the war in the Pacific was coming to an end. The Japanese forces in the Pacific were on the run.

The fighting up north against the Japanese Army was still intense with US Army units and US Marines battling the stubborn resistance of their fanatical enemy on some Japanese held islands.

I had been ashore for five or six weeks, taking it easy at home in Manly after 16 months working seven days a week at sea. While in the city for some reason I was walking down Pitt Street towards Circular Quay accompanied by a fellow seaman who I knew from 'Seirstad' when I noticed a small blackboard propped up against the wall, on my left. In words applied by chalk I read 'seamen wanted, apply downstairs, see Mr Allen.' I kept on walking a few yards and, for some reason turned back to read the sign again. The young man with me stopped but when he saw me going back, he was obviously not interested so he walked on. I went on down the stairs to ask for 'Mr Allen'

About 20 minutes later I returned to the footpath with instructions to 'come back at five o'clock with your gear.' I did just that, and at 5 o'clock that afternoon, shortly afterwards I was bundled into a taxi with two other seamen. I did not know where I was going or what ship I was to board but I

RECOGNISING OUR WWII VETERANS

felt it was probably at some wharf here in Sydney. However, the taxi took us to Mascot airport where some time later all three of us boarded an airliner, (my first time on any aeroplane). I asked the lady who took my ticket where we were going and she replied, 'Melbourne'.

A taxi awaited us at the Melbourne airport which, after an extended journey in the dark, conveyed us to a wharf. The three of us grabbed our kitbags and headed for the gangway. As I got closer to the top of the gangway, I saw on the stern the flag of the United States of America. I had boarded a US Army cargo ship which I later learned was 'USAT Point San Pedro'. Almost immediately mooring lines were slipped and the ship moved slowly away from the wharf. When we were in Port Phillip Bay I sought information about our destination, I was told, much to my surprise that we were headed for Sydney. It did seem a bit strange to be flown to Melbourne and then returned to Sydney.

Three days later at Walsh Bay loading began with frozen meat to fill the frozen cargo holds. When this was completed, we headed off north to New Guinea. However, before we got there the news broke that the US Air Force had dropped two atomic bombs on Japan and the Emperor, despite objections from his senior military commanders, had decided that Japan was defeated and surrender was the only course open to them.

We visited a couple of New Guinea ports on the western coast discharging some of our cargo. The last one in New Guinea was Hollandia, the former jumping off point for US forces heading up north. We also called into Biak where there were some American troops known as 'Seabees'. They were airport runway construction specialist but by that time they had nothing much to do. Our next port of call was Balikpapan on the south-east coast of Borneo. We remained there for at least ten days unloading most of the frozen meat that we had loaded in Sydney.

While at the wharf at Balikpapan a few interesting things happened to me. Firstly, as a member of the deck crew I was told that eighteen Japanese soldiers were coming aboard each day for a week or so and I was to supervise about ten of them as they 'chipped and scraped' the many rust areas on our steel deck. Our Captain had managed to organise this work party with either the Australian or the US Army commanders. At eighteen years of age as I was then, I did find it difficult to manage this task because I soon discovered that there was a distinct lack of enthusiasm on behalf of the Japanese soldiers to do the job properly.

Fortunately, after a couple of days I learned that one of these soldiers spoke pretty good English and, as they were guarded by an armed 'digger' with an Owen gun I eventually got the message through that if they did not do as

RECOGNISING OUR WWII VETERANS

instructed by me they would be thrown overboard. This soldier 'interpreter' later spoke to me about his family in Japan and his hopes of returning home. He then gave me some paper money which had been issued to Japanese soldiers in order to spend when in Australia. They were ten-shilling, pound and five- pound notes printed both in Japanese and in English. As he gave them to me, he said, "we will not be needing these anymore." These days you sometimes hear from 'experts' that the Japanese never had any plans to invade Australia. How wrong they are. One day a crew member accompanied me into the bush area near the port where we found a gun emplacement where there were a dozen or so Japanese 25 cal. rifles and much ammunition laying around. Each of us 'liberated' two rifles, taking them back to the ship.

A few days before we left 'Brown Beach' as it was called, I asked one of our soldiers who was walking past on the wharf, what unit they were. He said '7th Division'. Knowing absolutely nothing about the army I said, "my cousin Ken Evans, is in the 7th Division, do you know him.?' The soldier admitted that he did not know any Ken Evans. I later learned that there were about fifteen thousand soldiers in each division. An hour or so later, this soldier returned and from the wharf called out, "do you want to contact your cousin.?" Much surprised, I said that would be nice. To cut a long story short, I spoke to my cousin Ken on an army phone which was located in a tin shed near the wharf. The next day got a lift to a place called Samboja up the coast and eventually stayed the night in a tent with him. All the food they had was tinned dried eggs for breakfast. I took him back to the ship at 'Browns Beach that day where he had a very nice meal with us for lunch. Ken remembered that meal for many years when we usually met in the city on Anzac Day.

It may be difficult to believe but just before we left Balikpapan we spotted a floating mine in the harbour some hundred yards from us. There was rush to see if anyone could shoot at it so as to make it explode. I had one of my enemy rifles so I fired several aimed shots towards it. The mine suddenly exploded with a tremendous force showering us with water, so I claimed it was me, with the rifle which scored a hit. I have to admit that another seaman on the bridge was also firing at it with a machine gun, so perhaps he was right to claim the credit

Our next port was Batangas in the Philippines but I am unable to remember the reason we called there. Perhaps it was to collect a couple of hundred steel hospital beds. Some of us heard terrible stories about the behaviour of the Japanese soldiers. A few days later we left there and sailed up into Manila Harbour and anchored in Subic Bay which was a former American naval and air base. The purpose of our visit there was to have

the US Navy remove all defensive guns from the ship. This would have been about October 1945 but as there were many ships ahead of us we had to wait there until mid- January 1946 before our two large naval guns and the numerous machine guns were removed and taken ashore. That three-month wait was pretty boring but, on a few occasions, we managed to go ashore, once to Manila, another time to what was known as the 'summer capital', Baggio, and also another day to that former fortress, Corregidor. We were surprised to be met there by about fifty Japanese soldiers who appeared to be completely unguarded. One of our crew, an engine room greaser who was a big man with a well-earned reputation as a 'character'. As we were all dressed in American uniforms this man had no difficulty claiming to the POW's that he was a senior American Army officer.

He 'directed' us to line the POW's up for an 'inspection'. We did that by, once again, discovering that one of them spoke some English. Our 'officer' walked along slowly examining all the soldiers making some comments as he did so. The one who spoke some English asked him if he could do something to help them get home to Japan. His response, after carefully considering the matter was "things are not too good in Japan at present, I think you will be better off here for a while."

When all the guns were removed in late January we set out for Shanghai, China. I had no idea at that time why we were going to China and I doubt if any of my fellow seamen also knew. After a day or so at sea we ran into an extremely violent storm. We were 'light ship' so you can imagine what was happening to this ancient vessel. One night, while I was on the 8 to 12 watch I was ordered by the third mate to replace the globe in the foremast light. He was concerned that any ship in the area might not see us. I objected, saying it was a shore job and much too dangerous at sea in such a big storm. Unfortunately, he was adamant so I went to the store and located a suitable globe. It was raining and pitch black with giant waves and I was on a very unstable ship. The ship was rolling so much I wondered sometimes if it would capsize as I climbed up that metal ladder very slowly until I was able to open the foremast casing with one hand and, with great difficulty, remove the defective globe and replace it. As I looked down from up there, I could see the white wave foam which was well away from the ships side. The ship was rolling at an alarming attitude. It was really terrifying.

I will never forget that night because in the following morning we were told the ship had actually lost ground overnight even with the engine working. I thought about it and spoke about it to some of the older seamen resulting in a conversation with the young third mate at 8 pm that night, so much so that he did offer me a reluctant apology. When we got to the

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Yangtse River we initially ran aground on a sandbank. There was no damage to the hull and, due to a tidal change we soon got off by reversing into deeper water. It was nice and calm on the run up the Whangpoo River to the port of Shanghai. We then learned that we were to be discharged from the ship which was to be handed over to the Chinese Government. Several interesting things happened to me in Shanghai.

Firstly, a few weeks after our arrival we were told to prepare to leave the ship because a Chinese crew would arrive. A large barge came alongside later that day crowded with many Chinese seamen. The burly greaser who had 'inspected' the POWs' at Corregidor, was standing next to me leaning on the railing above the gangway which we had lowered. We both observed a rather well-dressed seaman step from the barge onto the bottom of the gangway. The greaser said to me, "see that bloke who just stepped from the barge, he would have got that suit from Rundles at Newcastle." As that seaman finally made his way up to the top of gangway he turned and came to us. He said, in very good English " yes, you are correct, I did get this suit at Rundles in Newcastle, how did you know."?

Our entire crew left the ship and were driven in US Army trucks up Nanking Road to a large white building which was to be our accommodation for the next three months. We learned that it had been the former office and business address of the Shanghai Racing Club. It was not luxurious accommodation but was weather- proof and reasonably warm. Also, being located on the main street, Nanking Road, it was central to just about everything we needed. As we had all been issued with US Army uniforms it was arranged that we could have them laundered free at a shop just over the road from our 'billet'. During my first visit to that address something unusual happened.

As I stood in a line with my laundry items awaiting service, I heard the sound of a woman's voice behind me which was in a pronounced American accent. When I spoke to the small young lady who was receiving the clothing it was clear that she had difficulty understanding my name. I had to bend down to assist her how to spell my surname. As this Chinese girl was doing her best, the female American voice I had heard said, "say soldier, where are you from."? I looked around and gazed at a tall American service woman who was accompanied by an armed MP. I admitted to her that I was an Australian seaman and hoped earnestly that was all I had to say. As I grabbed the piece of paper issued for my clothing and tried to escape, this lady wanted to talk. She told me she was an American (which I already knew) and that she had a number of pen-friends in Australia. I had to tell her I was from Sydney and admitted that I did not know a couple of the people

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to whom she had been writing. (We had been warned to keep well away from any American woman as they were all escorted by an armed MP.)

I assumed that was all there was to that incident but, as often happened to me in those days, I was wrong. I was to meet that very nice Red Cross lady, Eleanor Honold, once more. However, as we were to remain in Shanghai for about three months many interesting things did happen. One of the more significant one was an escapade where we, that is about four of us, managed to 'buy' a jeep from a US Army depot for the magnificent sum of ten dollars. This enabled us to travel all around the city, and nearby countryside at will. The Chinese citizens were not interested and the small US Army, they knew their jeep could not leave Shanghai but, they were not aware of our plans. On 17th April I went to the Shanghai Post Office and sent a birthday telegram to my mother. She was 44.

Around the end on April, 1946 we were told of our departure arrangements. We were to board a US 'Victory' cargo ship which had discharged some cargo and was returning to Manila a few days later. I am not sure whose idea it was but we decided it would be a good idea to 'pinch' the jeep so we could use it in Manila. Things were pretty easy in those days. The war was definitely over. We took it to the wharf where the ship was moored and I was nominated to go aboard the ship and operate the winches to lift our jeep onto the forward deck. All went well initially but just as I had got the vehicle up to deck level a voice from the bridge bellowed, 'what the hell are you guys doing.' My response was 'It's OK Sir, we are just loading our jeep, no problem.' The response from the bridge, deleting the poor language, was 'get that god-damned thing off my ship right now.'

All pleas failed so I lowered the jeep to the wharf and someone moved it to a safe place out of sight. My wife and I returned to Shanghai as tourists some forty years later but I was disappointed to discover that our jeep was not where we had left it. Such is life. The trip to Manila was not too bad but the accommodation was pretty average. On arrival in Manila we (about a fifteen of us by then) were taken by US Army trucks into the city where a tent camp had been set up by the US Army in a former city park. Nothing much happened for about six weeks except a few offers were received for us to join other ships, once by UNRRA to go back to China with an offer of big money and crew LST's up the Yangtze River with aid for China. I declined that offer. One very distasteful incident which I witnessed indicated the standard of law enforcement in that war ravaged city. While lying on my camp stretcher one day I heard shouting followed by a gunshot. I looked out the tent opening and saw a young local man running up a path nearby. I also saw a US Army MP (Military Policeman) chasing after the youth, holding his 45

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Cal pistol. He fired a second shot and the youth stopped, half turned around, and dropped to the ground. It seems he had stolen something from an army store.

A few days later, one afternoon the camp PA system roared out, 'all personnel requiring transport to Sydney Australia report to the orderly room.' I jumped up and raced to the orderly room to record my acceptance of the offer. We were told a couple of enterprising US Army Air Force pilots had somehow obtained approval to go to Sydney on leave. A condition for approval for that trip was they were to take about fifteen Australian seamen from US Army ships with them whose services were no longer required.

A few days later another trip in an army truck from our camp, this time to the former Manila hospital building early one morning to be registered and then told to 'sit and wait'. About an hour later an American Red Cross lady walked up and tapped me on the shoulder. I was astounded to see Eleanor Honold the lady from Shanghai again. She greeted me as though I was an old friend. It is a very long story about Eleanor, too long for this article, but a couple of hours later we parted, Eleanor on her way home to the US, after we had exchanged names and addresses. For the next twenty -five or thirty years we exchanged letters, invitations, one to her wedding in California and later one to mine at Manly in November 1958. She had been a school teacher before the war and had joined the American Red Cross in 1943. Eleanor Honold was very nice lady. She had supplied me with her telephone number in California, so I rang the number one day and both my wife and I spoke to her.

This is a photo of her having just graduated as a Red Cross worker.



Just before lunch that day in Manila we were moved again, this time to the airstrip where we boarded a rather worn- looking Douglas C46 cargo plane. There were no normal seats, just canvas rack seats along each side of the length of the cabin. Our kitbags were piled up in the middle between the rows of canvas seats. They had probably used that plane for troop movements. The whole trip home took three days. The first night we landed at Darwin, being billeted in some old army hut. The second day, on the way to Brisbane I noticed oil streaming from the port side engine. I went forward and spoke to the two pilots. One came back and checked what I had told him. Quick change of plans as we diverted to and landed at an airstrip at Cloncurry. A few of us got out of the plane and enjoyed the warm weather while the two pilots somehow managed to borrow a ladder. They spent an hour or so tracing the oil leak finally claiming they had fixed the problem. The flight on to Brisbane was uneventful but I am unable to recall where we spent the night. The third day we arrived at Mascot aerodrome before lunch time where some US Army people greeted us with a couple of trucks to take us into the city. I have a feeling someone provided each of us with a small amount of Australian money to enable us to travel to our homes by public transport because most of us had none. Once in the city, near the Grace Hotel we parted never to meet again so I walked down to Circular Quay and boarded a ferry to Manly.

It felt real good to get home. My mother had no idea I was coming. She was very surprised when I accidentally met her outside the Manly Post Office, just across the road from where I had left her some two and a half years earlier. My 'war' service ended that day but the very generous American Government later issued me with an honourable discharge from the US Army and two US campaign medals. I certainly had no complaints about how I had been treated during those last fourteen months. The Americans had an enviable reputation regarding their treatment of veterans.

A few weeks later I resorted to the only work skill I really knew, I went back to sea. I remained at sea for about four more years on a number of Australian ships on the coast, to Fiji, Fremantle and other local ports. My best and favourite ship was 'River Clarence' and the worst, and the last one, was 'Iron Knob'. Six years was enough of the sea for me.

Don Kennedy

Sub-Branch President.

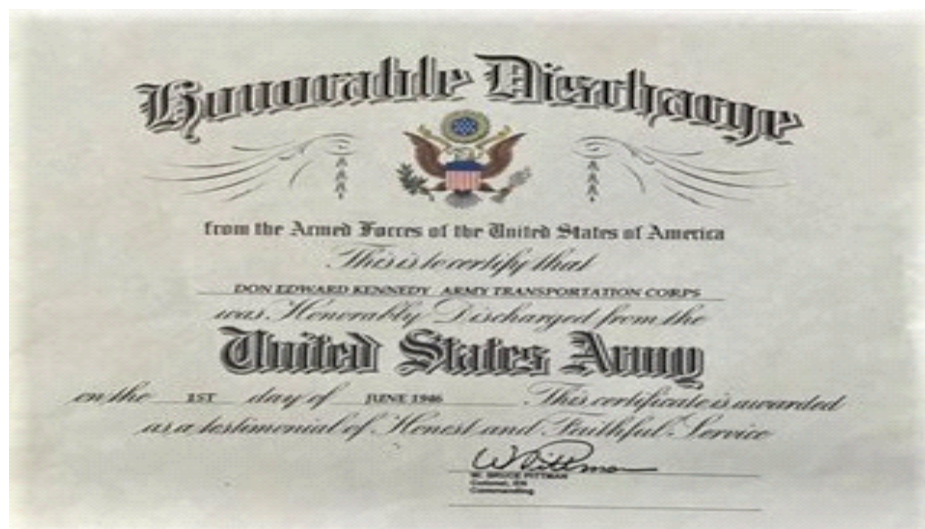
July 2021.

The following images of the *River Clarence* and the *Iron Knob* provided with the courtesy of Flotilla Australia
<https://www.flotilla-australia.com>

RIVER CLARENCE



IRON KNOB



Don Kennedy's - U.S. Army Discharge Certificate

THOSE WHO HAVE CROSSED THE BAR

ANDY SQUIBB 10/5/2021

KEITH RIDGEWAY 15/6/2021

**JOHN BIRD 15/6/2021 WWII - Survivor of sinking of S.S.
Fingal. MN & U.S.Army Small Ships**

KENNETH JACKSON 25 /6/2021 (Ex BHP Chief Eng.)

ROBERT A NICHOLSON 2 /7/2021 WWII

THEY SAIL FOREVERMORE UNDER THE RED ENSIGN

They have no grave but the cruel sea,

No flowers lay at their head,

A rusting hulk is their tombstone,

Afast on the ocean bed.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning,

We will remember them.

Lest we forget

COMING EVENTS

**All coming events are presently on hold
due to COVID restrictions**

**If you have any queries please contact
your organisation**



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