

Norah Head Merchant Navy Memorial Service 3 December 2022

We meet in this beautiful setting to again acknowledge the part played by members especially of the Merchant Navy, and to all seafarers lost and injured often mentally, in times of war. We especially remember the lives lost in Merchant ships nearby, just offshore, resulting from enemy action, in an era that is now a long-forgotten memory, to all but a few of us, in attendance today. Sadly, our WW2 veterans are slowly fading away, and it is essential that Memorial Services like this, are retained, so that the generations that follow can understand and appreciate the freedoms that we all enjoy, because of the efforts of those, that sacrificed their lives.

Could I now briefly remind you all, the dangerous and precarious situation, that our Country's found itself 80 years ago.

Australia, New Zealand, and other South Pacific countries were fortunate to have avoided invasion in 1942, because of the Allied victory in the Battle of the Coral Sea, from the 4th to 8th of May 1942, in the waters between New Guinea and Queensland. This significant battle was fought between the United States Navy, with limited support of the **RAN** and the Imperial Japanese Navy. This action was a major turning point in WW2, forestalling the Japanese invasion force then heading to Port Moresby.

Unfortunately, the dangers and instability appear to have returned to our peaceful Pacific neighborhood. This has reopened concern for our future, with the nearby Solomon Islands Government (population 700,000), accepting China's largesse. The Solomon Islands is a Christian country, which gained Independence in 1978, and was familiar to older Australian Seafarers associated with the Burns Philp fleet, and more recently our own Military and Civilian Peacekeepers.

This was the Country where American Marines fought a bloody six-month Campaign, on the main Island of Guadalcanal between August 1942 and February 1943, losing over 7,000 Soldiers killed, with many more wounded. The Imperial Japanese Army, lost over 24,000, killed. Remember, those terrible battles of Guadalcanal and later other Island battles as Allied forces moved north. **Lest we forget.**

Growing up, in an immediate post Wartime era, where youngsters were expected '*to be seen and not heard*', resulted in a reluctance to talk to those, who had experienced warfare, especially WW2 Veteran Seafarers. Nor were stories ever offered willingly. We missed learning so much.

A Story of a little Ship with a local connection and its Merchant Navy Captain an unsung hero.

A recent article in the weekend Newcastle Herald, by historian Mike Scanlon, brought this to my attention with a significant local area connection. It was the story of a large wooden ship built at Beattie Bros shipyard, at Davistown on Brisbane Waters, and launched eight decades ago on 30 November 1940. The ship was named **Patricia Cam**, solidly built of hardwood, 300 tons, 37m long, (121 feet), one cargo hold, draft 6 feet (2m) and fitted with twin Fairbanks -Morse Diesel engines giving a speed of 10 knots. Intended for the Cam Fishing

Company of Sydney, to carry Coal from their Colliery, on Lake Macquarie via the Swansea Channel to Blackwattle Bay, Sydney to supply Coal for Cam's fleet of Coal burning fishing trawlers. As Cam's steam trawlers had already been commissioned into the RAN, she was soon requisitioned in February 1942, by the Royal Australian Navy, intended as an auxiliary minesweeper, being commissioned on 3rd March 1942, as **HMAS Patricia Cam**. She sailed north to Darwin and was given the role as a general-purpose Cargo ship carrying supplies, occasional passengers (Coastwatcher's) to the small indigenous settlements dotted along the north Arnhem Coast, between Darwin and Groote Island.

Following the entry of Japan into the war in December 1941, many members of the Australian Merchant Navy some already reservists were sent to man, the many small ships that the RAN had quickly requisitioned. Certainly, many of the newly built Bathurst class Corvettes were manned in their senior ranks, by numbers of Australian Merchant Navy personnel both Deck and Engine room.

The following is a story which relates to a Captain who I sailed with, in the 1960's, on a small Australian National Line ship, an unsung Merchant Navy veteran, whose story I was unaware of at that time. He was in 1943 Lieutenant A.C. (Sandy) Meldrum RANR, in command of this comparatively insignificant ship, known affectionally as '**Pat Cam**' which was sunk off the Wessel Islands group, North of Nhulunbuy/Gove Northern Territory, by a Japanese float plane. My connection to this story was that he was now back in *civvies* as Captain A.C. Meldrum. He was an excellent ship handler, a quiet reserved person, *who kept to himself*, and was in retrospect unwell which may have been a reflection on his Wartime experiences, in the days before post-traumatic stress assistance. It was not till five decades later that I discovered his unique War Time service record. He served aboard four different RAN ships, first as Executive Officer of HMAS **Deloraine**, the lead ship of three Corvettes, (others **HMAS Lithgow**, **HMAS Katoomba**) each commanded and manned by Merchant Navy Captains and reservists, that sank the large Japanese submarine (**I-124**) on January 20, 1942, north of Darwin, while attempting to lay mines. This was the only *major Submarine* sunk in Australian waters in WW2. Promoted to Command first of the steam tug **HMAS Wato** then to **HMAS Patricia Cam**, in October 1942, due to his extensive experience in small ships.

'**Pat Cam**' now armed with a 20mm Oerlikon, plus three Machine guns, she departed Darwin late Wednesday 13 January 1943 on a routine supply voyage, along Arnhem land's North Coast calling first at Goulburn Island, to pick up Reverend Leonard Kentish, Chair of the Methodist Northern Australian Mission, and co-ordinator of the Arnhem Land Coastwatcher's. Kentish joined the ship to deliver new Coastwatcher information to the various outposts. The ship then calling at Millingimbi and Elcho Island, where five local Yolngu Aboriginals boarded with their canoe who were travelling to Yirrkala.

On Friday 22nd at 13:30 a long-range Japanese float plane came out of the sun, with engines cut at a height of 150 feet (45m) and dropped a Bomb directly into the Cargo hold of the ship, which blew up and sank immediately. The life raft and lifeboat were destroyed but the canoe survived. The plane then dropped its remaining bomb, then machine gunned the Survivors in the water fortunately causing no additional casualties. The plane then started to fly off but instead, returned and landed amongst the survivors. Reverend Kentish was

ordered to swim to the plane, then bundled aboard at gun point. *Leonard Kentish thus became the only Australian to be taken as a POW captured in Australia!* The float plane flew north the 300 miles/500km to its base at Dobo, capital of the Aru Islands. Rev. Kentish who was congenitally deaf, was brutally interrogated and was be-headed on 5 May 1943, in retaliation for an allied air raid on Dobo. His interrogator was hanged in Hong Kong in August 1948.

The remaining 15 survivors, and the three surviving Yolngu men, washed ashore next morning Saturday 23rd on Guluwuru Island, with the assistance of the Canoe and floating timber. Two more survivors died after landing, and with the Yolngu men's local knowledge, with the assistance later from local tribal Galpu men. They survived by the ability to live off the land together, with supplies eventually dropped by RAAF aircraft, until rescued by **HMAS Kuru** (also built by Beattie Bros., Brisbane Waters in 1938) six days later 29 January. No one was aware that the ship and her crew had been lost. On Monday 25, Lieut. Meldrum set off by canoe to nearby Marchinbar Island then undertook a 56km trek in bare feet – shorts and shirt through the scrub, over rocks making for the Coastwatcher Station at Jensen Bay near Cape Wessel, He arrived late on Tuesday 26, alerting the authorities the following morning as to the loss of his ship, and the urgent need to rescue the survivors. Out of the 25 persons on board at the time of the sinking, 15 returned to Darwin on February 1st

In February 1943 a Naval Board of Enquiry was convened in Darwin to decide whether Lieut. Meldrum should face charges over the loss of his ship, Lieut. Meldrum was accused of inadequate and ill equipped watchkeepers in the Northern War zone and having an improperly provisioned life raft! Surely a reflection on his superiors' short comings! Following the tabling of his written report, instead he was commended for his efforts to save his crew. He was then appointed to command another specialized small ship **HMAS Innisfail** a cable repair ship.

***HMAS Patricia Cam** was one of only two RAN ships lost in Australian coastal waters due to Enemy action. The other was **HMAS Kuttabul** in Sydney.*

A memorial to **HMAS Patricia Cam** commemorating those who died in the attack, including the names of those involved was attached, Dedicated at Yirrkala, in Northeast Arnhem Land, on Anzac Day 2017, with the service led by Reverend Leonard Kentish's son, Reverend Noel Kentish.

Lest We Forget.

Presented by Captain Iain Steverson FNI, 4 December, 2022.