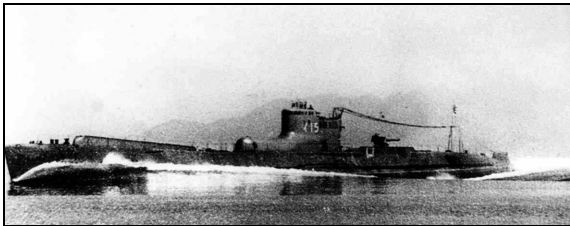


## WORLD WAR TWO SHIPWRECKS AND SUBMARINE ATTACKS IN NSW WATERS 1940-1944

### Information Sheet - Heritage Branch



IJN submarine I-15, namesake of the B-1 class of long range scouting submarines. I-21, I-27 and I-29 were of this type. Image courtesy: Stille, 2007.

#### Introduction

Wartime secrecy meant that the public knew little of the impact on merchant vessels by enemy submarines during WWII. But Japanese submarines, even a German U-boat and to a lesser extent minelayers, had significant successes operating along the east coast of Australia.

Today we know that nineteen (19) merchant ships were sunk by torpedoes, gunfire or mines off the NSW coast during 1941-1944. A further ten (10) were damaged but managed to limp into port for repairs. Approximately 214 merchant seamen and military personnel were killed in these attacks and the wrecks today serve as memorials to the war dead.

#### **Nimbin – SUNK**

The *Nimbin* became NSW's first wartime casualty when it struck a mine about 25 kms off Norah Head on 5 December 1940. Of the crew of twenty, seven were killed. A minefield laid by the German raider *Penguin* has been blamed. The 65-metre steel vessel was built at Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1927 and registered in Sydney.

#### **Millimumul – SUNK**

On 26 March 1941, the fishing boat *Millimumul* trawled a live mine north-east of Sydney. Seven of *Millimumul*'s crew also died when the mine

detonated against the boat's side. The steel screw steamer weighed 287 tons and was 39.6 metres long.

These incidents confirmed that Axis vessels were laying minefields around the Australian coast. German commerce raiders including *Penguin*, *Orion* and *Passat* (ex-*Storstad*) laid a succession of minefields off New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria, South and Western Australia.

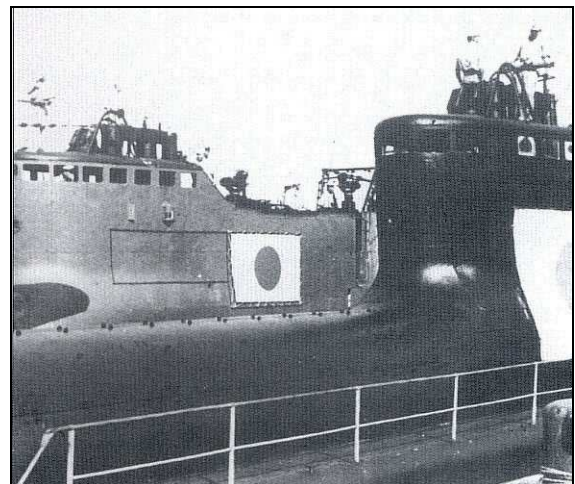
These are credited with also claiming the steamers' *Cambridge* and *City of Rayville* off the Victorian coast from November 1940, and damage to the *Hertford* off South Australia in December. The raider *Kormoran* famously sank the cruiser HMAS *Sydney* off Western Australia on 19 November 1941. German raiders had been active in NSW waters during the First World War with the raider *Wolf* laying a minefield off Gabo Island that claimed the British freighter *Cumberland* in 1917. That wreck site has been located.

### 1942: Start of the Australian east coast submarine offensive

During 1942, Japanese submarines I-11, I-21, I-22, I-24, I-27, I-29, and I-175 conducted operations in NSW's waters. The submarines accounted for nine (9) vessels sunk and four (4) damaged.

#### **Wellen - DAMAGED**

On 16 May 1942, two weeks before the midgeet submarine strike of 31 May, the Russian freighter *Wellen* was attacked by one of the I-class aircraft support submarines, I-29, using its deck gun.



IJN submarine I-27 and I-29 of the B-1 class of long range scouting submarines. The type was the largest construction group of any Japanese wartime submarines. Image courtesy: Stille, 2007.

*Wellen* returned fire with machine guns and there were no casualties. The risky attack had the potential to warn the Allied authorities of the arrival of the Japanese submarine fleet marshalling off Sydney in preparation of the impending midget submarine attack.

### **Midget submarine attack on Sydney Harbour**

The Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) began its Australian submarine offensive in earnest on the night of 31 May 1942. The initial targets were Allied capital ships. The first strike involved a coordinated attack on the Sydney harbour naval base by five I-class submarines (*I-21*, *I-22*, *I-24*, *I-27* and *I-29*), three carrying midget submarines *Ha-14*, *Ha-21* and the midget known as *M24*.

### **HMAS *Kuttabul* – SUNK**

The Sydney ferry *Kuttabul*, converted to a depot ship, was destroyed by a torpedo fired from midget *M24* whilst moored against the Garden Island naval base. Twenty-one sailors were killed in the explosion and a further ten injured. The sinking was the only Japanese victory. The *Kuttabul* wreck was completely removed during the war.



*A shipwreck inspected by divers of the club The Sydney Project, off Bermagui in 2006 was initially identified as the iron ore carrier Iron Knight, sunk by I-21 in 1943. The identification is still tentative. Photo: Samir Alhafith.*

### **3 midget submarines – SUNK**

All three midget submarines involved in the attack were sunk. *Ha-14* was destroyed by a demolition charge and *Ha-21* depth charged, both inside the harbour. The wrecks were recovered with parts now on display in Canberra and Sydney.

*M24* sank outside the harbour and was located by divers off Sydney's northern beaches in 54 metres of water in 2006. The site represents the only confirmed Japanese submarine wreck in Australian waters, other than *I-124* KRS-type minelayer lost off Darwin, Northern Territory, in January 1942 and also located.

### **The midget carrier fleet seeks revenge**

After the failure of the midget submarine attack on Sydney, three of the large ocean going submarines *I-21*, *I-24* and *I-27* sought revenge.

### ***Age* – ATTACKED**

The Australian freighter *Age* was attacked by *I-24* on 3 June 1942, 25 miles south-east of Norah Head, but escaped unharmed. The submarine fired torpedoes and its 5.5-inch deck gun against the 4,734 ton vessel.

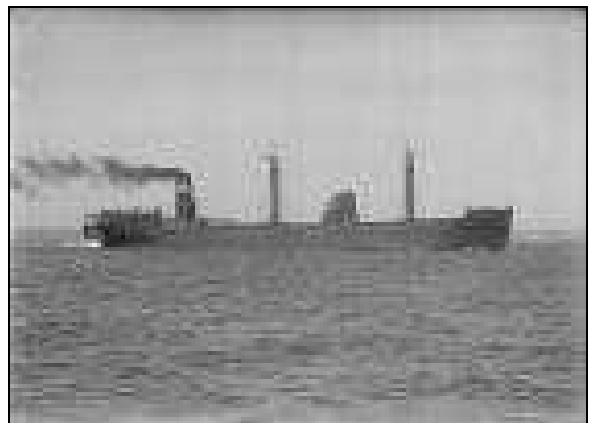
*I-24* was one of the C-1 class of attack submarines fitted with eight 21-inch bow torpedo tubes. Submarines of this class were specially fitted to carry a single midget submarine on their rear deck, had a length of 109 metres (358-feet), tonnage of 2,554-tons, and crew of 95. *I-22* that participated in the Sydney midget submarine attack was also of this class, devoid of aircraft handling facilities.



*IJN submarine I-18, namesake of the C-1 class of long range attack boats. I-22 and I-24 that deployed midget submarines at Sydney were of this type. Image courtesy: Stille, 2007.*

### ***Iron Chieftain* – SUNK**

The next vessel was not so lucky. On 3rd June 1942, the 4,700 ton BHP steel screw steamer *Iron Chieftain*, captained by L. Haddelsey, was sunk by *I-21* firing two torpedoes 35 miles east of Manly, Sydney. Thirteen of the crew died. The steamer had a length of 123.3 metres, was built in 1937 at Glasgow, Scotland, and registered in Melbourne.



*Iron Chieftain at sea. Courtesy: State Library of Victoria.*

### ***Barwon* – DAMAGED**

Meanwhile on the NSW far south coast, another of the midget fleet was preparing for attack. On 4 June 1942, *I-27*, one of the B-1 type scouting submarines, chased the Australian freighter

*Barwon* with torpedoes and fire from its 5.5-inch deck gun but failed to score a victory.

The vessel was temporarily damaged when a torpedo struck home but there were no casualties.

#### ***Iron Crown* – SUNK**

Also on 4 June 1942, *I-27* lined up the BHP freighter *Iron Crown* 44 miles south-south-east of Gabo Island, on the Victorian side of the NSW border. The vessel was torpedoed and sank with 37 lives lost. The attack was witnessed by a Hudson bomber which attempted to bomb the crash-diving submarine, without success.

#### ***Echunga* – ATTACKED**

Captain Hanabusa continued his attack in *I-24* on 5 June 1942, chasing the Australian freighter *Echunga* south-east of Wollongong, without success.

#### **Coastal cities shelled**

In a brazen but unsuccessful reprise attack, two of the submarines involved in the midget attack came back inshore. *I-24* shelled Sydney's eastern suburbs at 12.30am on 8 June 1942 and *I-21* moved north and shelled the port of Newcastle at 2.45am that same night. The submarines then moved out to continue shipping attacks.

#### ***Orestes* – DAMAGED**

*I-24* had more luck the next day (9 June 1942) when it chased the British freighter *Orestes* south-east of Jervis Bay. The 7,748 ton ship was attacked by gun fire, was slightly damaged, but escaped after a three hour chase.

#### ***Guatemala* – SUNK**

*I-21* got another victory on 12 June north of Sydney when it torpedoed the Panamanian steamer *Guatemala* forty miles east of the Central Coast, adjacent to Cape Three Points. The steel screw steamer of 5,527 gross tons and 125 metres in length, was built in 1920. Carrying coal, the other eight merchant ships in the convoy escaped with their escorts. No lives were lost.

#### **A respite: Late June to late July 1942**

The sinking of *Guatemala* signalled the final departure from NSW's waters of the I-class submarine fleet that had brought the midget submarine attack to Sydney. There were no further attacks until the end of the following month, July 1942, when a new fleet of attack submarines arrived off NSW in search of victims. The submarines included *I-11*, *I-24* on its second Australian war patrol, and *I-175*.

#### **Start of renewed attacks: July 1942**

#### ***George S. Livanos* – SUNK**

The submarine attack resumed in earnest on 20 July 1942 when the Greek-registered steamer *George S. Livanos* (4,835 tons) was attacked and sunk 15-20 miles off Jervis Bay by *I-11* on its first war patrol. The vessel was carrying a cargo of transport vehicles and all crew made the shore in boats.

The *I-11* was one of the Japanese Imperial Navy's Type A(1) long range submarines and completed in 1942. The class were designed to act as Headquarters boats to coordinate the operations of submarine squadrons. With a displacement (surfaced) of 2,919-tons, the submarine had a length of 113 metres (372 feet), a crew of 100, and was fitted with a floatplane and hangar.

The *George S Livanos* was a 4,835-ton steel screw steamer built by W. Gray and Company at Hartlepool, United Kingdom, in 1938. The vessel had a length of 134.4 metres and was powered by a triple expansion engine. The vessel was registered at Chios, Greece.

#### ***Coast Farmer* – SUNK**

Next day, 21 July 1942, *I-24* allegedly had another victory sinking the United States steamship *Coast Farmer* some 25 miles off Jervis Bay. The *Coast Farmer* was a 3,290-ton iron screw steamer built by the Submarine Boat Company at Newark, America, in 1920. Powered by steam turbine engines, the vessel had a length of 98.75 metres. One crew member was killed in the attack, with the remaining 39 saved. (Combined Fleet claims *I-11* as the culprit).

#### ***USAT William Dawes* – SUNK**

The next day, 22 July 1942, *I-11* had a major success with the sinking of the US Liberty Ship *William Dawes* off Tathra, further south along the NSW coast.



*William Dawes* was similar to the preserved *Jeremiah Obrien* at San Francisco. Photo: Graham Williams.



Under command of Captain Froberg, cargo included ammunition, army stores, 82 quarter-ton jeeps, 72 half-ton pickups, 60 one-ton trailers, 14 cargo trucks, 12 ambulances, 12 half-track vehicles and 33 half-ton CPR's.

The terrifying attack occurred at 5.30 am on 22 July 1942 about 12-miles out to sea. The first 21-inch torpedo struck the stern, which later separated. A second torpedo slammed into the hull amidships and started fires that eventually raged throughout the entire hull.

Witnesses recalled the deck cargo of jeeps and lorries on fire and described the interior of the stern section "*like a furnace*". Keen to observe the damage, the massive dark grey bulk of the Japanese submarine surfaced close by, then slowly submerged.

The *William Dawes* finally sank at about 4.30 p.m., stern first. Five lives were lost in the action including one US army soldier and four Naval Armed Guards. An RAAF Beaufort bomber from Nowra spotted the *I-11* on the surface 3 miles south of the burning ship and dropped a pattern of bombs as it submerged.

Built by the Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation, the two-decked vessel had a tonnage of 7,176 tons gross. The wreck was located by divers using fishing hook-up information, and lies in 140 metres of water. The *William Dawes* is the only located wreck of four (4) Liberty ships sunk in NSW waters.

#### **Allara – DAMAGED**

The next day (23 July), the steamer *Allara* was torpedoed by Japanese submarine *I-175* near Newcastle, but recovered.



Damage sustained to *Allara*. The vessel was repaired at Mort's Dock, Sydney. Photo courtesy: AWM. 305866. Canberra.

The detonation severely damaged the 3, 279-ton vessel's stern. Five of the crew were killed and five injured in the attack. *I-175* was a

KD6A/B type of 1,785-tons, length of 104 metres (343-feet), and crew of 70. Another of the class was active in NSW waters later in 1943, *I-174*.

#### **Murada – ATTACKED**

The submarine *I-175* attacked the Australian steamship *Murada* north of Newcastle on 24 July 1942, but the torpedo missed.

#### **Coolana – ATTACKED**

The next attack occurred again on the far south coast after *I-11* left the burning *William Dawes* then found and chased the Australian freighter MV *Collana* on 27 July 1942. The 2,197 ton vessel was shelled unsuccessfully by the submarine's aft mounted 5.5-inch deck gun when 24 miles north of Green Cape.

#### **Dureenbee – SUNK**

The small fishing trawler *Dureenbee* was attacked by twelve shells from submarine *I-175*'s 4.7-inch deck gun and two 13-millimeter machine guns off Moruya on 3 August 1942. The damage led to the 223-ton steamer being abandoned and wrecking ashore at Bateman's Bay, a total loss. Three of the crew were killed and three injured.

### **1943: Attacks resume in January/February**

Japanese submarines, *I-21*, *I-26*, *I-174*, *I-177*, *I-178* and *I-180* conducted attacks against merchant shipping along the NSW coast from January 1943. The submarines sank nine (9) vessels in NSW's waters and damaged a further six (6). *I-21* was to establish itself as the most successful of all the Japanese submarines active on the Australian station.

#### **Kalingo – SUNK**

*I-21*, one of the two float plane carrying submarines from the 1942 midget submarine attack (B1 scouting class), returned to Australia's east coast in January 1943 on its second war patrol. Commander Matsumura had a rapid success by torpedoing the New Zealand steamship *Kalingo* (using 3 torpedoes), 100 miles east of Sydney on 18 January. Two of the crew were killed, while survivors saw the submarine surface nearby and then retreat. *Kalingo* was built in Scotland in 1927, had a length of 86 metres and tonnage of 2,047-tons.



IJN submarine *I-26* of the B-1 class of long range scouting submarines. *I-21*, *I-27* and *I-29* were of this type. Image courtesy: Stille, 2007.

### **Mobilube – DAMAGED**

*I-21* continued its strong attacks, heavily damaging the 10,222-ton tanker *Mobilube* 60 miles east of Sydney on 18 January 1943. Three crew were killed and five injured, with the stricken vessel towed into Sydney and deemed a total loss. *I-21* was chased off the crippled victim by one of the escorts.

### **Peter H Burnett - DAMAGED**

*I-21* kept up its pressure, damaging the 7,170-ton United States Liberty ship *Peter H Burnett* on 22 January 1943. The torpedo attack occurred east of Newcastle. One crew member was killed and the vessel was reported to have a large hole on the starboard quarter but was escorted in safely. The cargo of wool survived.

### **Giang Ann - ATTACKED**

On 30 January 1943, *I-21* attacked the 1,036-ton British freighter *Giang Ann* off the NSW coast but her torpedo exploded prematurely and the vessel escaped undamaged.

### **Iron Knight – SUNK**

*I-21* scored a major victory on 8 February 1943 when it sank the 4,812-ton BHP ore carrier *Iron Knight* off Bermagui. Out of a crew of 50, 36 lost their lives including Captain Ross. The vessel sank in 2 minutes with the other nine vessels of the convoy OC 68 escaping. Survivors stayed in a raft for 10 hours before being picked up by the French destroyer *Le Triomphant*. A wreck thought to be *Iron Knight* was inspected in 125 metres of water off Bermagui in 2006, although its identification has now been discounted.



*Iron Knight*. Courtesy: Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

### **Starr King – SUNK**

*I-21* moved back up the coast and struck the US Liberty Ship *Starr King* with two of four torpedoes on 10 February 1943, 154 miles off Sydney. The vessel was taken in tow by HMAS *Warramunga* but sank on 11 February. The steel 7,176 ton screw steamer was built in 1942 by the S. B. Corporation, Los Angeles,

California. The vessel was 134.9 metres long and powered by a 339 horsepower triple expansion engine. Cargo included army supplies.



*Starr King* sinking. Australian War Memorial, AWM128144.

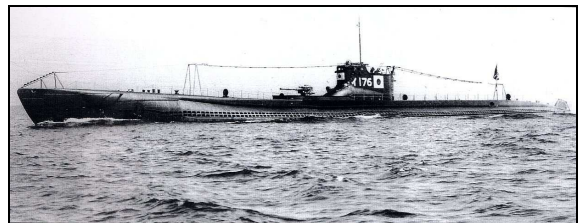
### **Another break in attacks: Late February to early April 1943**

After *Starr King*'s loss on 10 February 1943, no further attacks were made until April when four new Japanese submarines arrived on the Australian Station, *I-177*, *I-178*, *I-180* and *I-26*.

### **Recina – SUNK**

The Yugoslav steamer *Recina* was torpedoed and sank 32 kilometres north east of Cape Howe, off the far NSW coast, on 11 April 1943. The 4732-ton steel screw steamer was built by W. Gray & Co. Ltd at Sunderland, United Kingdom, in 1930, with a length of 122.1 metres.

Japanese submarine *I-26* was the alleged attacker. The vessel sank in 1 ½ minutes with 32 crew killed. Commercial fishermen believe they have snagged the wreck on the NSW continental shelf east of Disaster Bay.



IJN submarine *I-176*, namesake of the KD7 class of Kaidai submarines with a length of 105 metres and crew of 86. *I-177*, *I-178* and *I-180* that attacked shipping off NSW were of this type. Image courtesy: Stille, 2007.

### **Limerick - SUNK**

A newly arrived submarine, *I-177* is alleged to have sunk the British steamship *Limerick* 20 miles SE of Cape Byron on 26 April 1943. The single torpedo struck amidships as the 140-metre long *Limerick* was travelling in convoy.

Two of the 72 crew were killed and the 8,724-ton steamship took several hours to sink. *I-177* is accredited for sinking the hospital ship *Centaur* the following month off Brisbane (14 May 1943).



*Limerick. Courtesy: State Library of Victoria.*

### ***Lydia M Child* – SUNK**

Another newly arrived submarine *I-178* is credited with the next victory, sinking the US Liberty Ship *Lydia M Child* 145 kilometres east of Newcastle on 27 April 1943. The vessel sank within eight minutes. The 7176-ton vessel had a length of 128.8 meters and was built by the California Shipbuilding Company in 1943. The crew escaped and were picked up within twelve hours by HMAS *Warnambool*.

### ***Wollongbar* – SUNK**

The new wave of Japanese submarine attacks continued with devastating effects when *I-180* is said to have sunk the *Wollongbar* off Crescent Head. Thirty-two lives were lost including that of Captain Benson, with the five survivors rescued by lifeboat. The 2,240-ton steel steamer was built in 1922 to replace the North Coast Steam Navigation Company's earlier vessel of that name wrecked at Byron Bay in 1921. The new 87-metre steamer was built at Glasgow, United Kingdom.

### ***Fingal* – SUNK**

*I-180* backed up with the sinking of the Norwegian freighter *Fingal* off Nambucca Heads on 5 May 1943. The *Fingal* was a 2,137-ton steel screw steamer built in Norway during 1923. The vessel had a length of 84.1 metres and was powered by triple expansion engine. Twelve members of the 31 crew were killed.

### ***Ormiston* – DAMAGED**

The British steamer *Ormiston*, 5,832-tons, was attacked by torpedoes off Coffs Harbour on 12 May 1943. The attacking submarine was again believed to be *I-180*, but the vessel escaped.

### ***Caradale* – DAMAGED**

The Australian steamer *Caradale* was another near victim of *I-180* when damaged in a torpedo attack off Evans Head on 12 May 1943. The

vessel was lucky as the torpedo failed to explode on impact.

### ***USAT Sheldon Jackson* – DAMAGED**

The United States Liberty Ship *Sheldon Jackson* was torpedoed perhaps by *I-174* on 29 May 1943 off the NSW north coast but managed to escape without damage. *I-174* went north into Queensland waters about this time to unsuccessfully chase the *Point San Pedro* (1 June 1943) and the *Edward Chambers* (4 June 1943).

### ***John Bartram* – ATTACKED**

The United States Liberty Ship *John Bartram* was attacked by a submarine thought to be the *I-174* one hundred miles east of Sydney on 7 June 1943, but escaped.

### ***LST 469* – DAMAGED**

The 5000-ton United States Landing Ship Tank *LST 469* was badly damaged in a following torpedo attack by *I-174* off Smokey Cape on 16 June 1943. A torpedo struck on the port side with twenty-six crew killed and some ten reported injured.

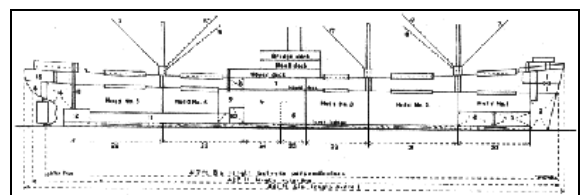
### ***Portmar* – SUNK**

The torpedo salvo from *I-174* also struck the United States vessel *Portmar*. The vessel sank in four minutes. The *Portmar* was a motorship built in 1919 of 5551-tons and length of 124.9 metres. Two of the crew of 72 were killed. This was the last recorded loss of a vessel to Japanese submarines off Australia's east coast during the war.

### ***Robert J Walker* – SUNK**

The *Robert J Walker*, a United States Liberty ship, was torpedoed, approximately 40 miles off Bateman's Bay in the early morning of 25 December 1944. Two torpedoes, fired 3.5 hours apart, struck the vessel, another being stopped by anti-aircraft fire from the ship.

The incident reveals a rare chapter in the wartime history of NSW, with the *Robert J. Walker* being the sole NSW victim of the lone German U-boat, *U-862*, patrolling around Australia. Under command of Korvettenkapitan Heinrich Timm, *U-862* was a Type IXD2 U-boat operating out of Jakarta.



*Robert J Walker* was a WWII Liberty ship with this general arrangement.

Whilst two of the crew were killed, the remaining 67 survivors were located by 5.45 a.m. on 26th December (Boxing Day). *Robert J. Walker* had sunk by 3 a.m. that morning. The United States War Shipping Administration owned the 7180-ton steel screw steamer, built by the S.B. Corporation in Portland, Oregon, USA, in 1943. The vessel had a length of 128.8 metres.

### Protected Historic Shipwrecks

World War Two shipwrecks located along the Australian coastline are not automatically protected by existing heritage legislation. This is because the Commonwealth *Historic Shipwrecks Act* 1976 protects shipwrecks only once they have been sunk for 75 years. Hence, upon discovery, heritage management agencies responsible for the implementation of the Act must request individual listing of WW2 era shipwrecks on a case-by-case basis. In NSW, the located wrecks *William Dawes*, the wreck initially identified as *Iron Knight*, and Japanese midget submarine *M24* have been granted this statutory protection in NSW.

### Merchant Seamen Memorials

The national memorial commemorating the loss of Merchant Seamen in Australian waters was unveiled at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, in 1990.



Merchant Seaman Memorial, Australian War Memorial, Canberra. ACT. Photo: Tim Smith.

Another memorial has been established at the Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney, while a third lies on the banks of the Hunter River at Newcastle. This memorial was initially

established by BHP at its Newcastle steel works, recognising the significant role the company played during World War Two, and the number of its ships and crew lost in NSW and Victorian waters during the 1939-1945 conflict.

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Text: Tim Smith. Deputy Director, State Maritime Archaeologist, Heritage Branch. Office of Environment and Heritage.

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