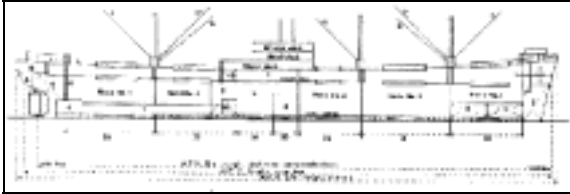


# WILLIAM DAWES SHIPWRECK 1942

## Information Sheet NSW Heritage Office



*William Dawes was a WWII Liberty ship with this general arrangement.*

### Introduction

Wartime secrecy meant that the public knew little of the impact on merchant vessels by enemy submarines during WWII. But Japanese (and to a lesser extent German) submarines had significant successes operating along the east coast of Australia. Today we know that nineteen ships were sunk by torpedoes, shells or mines off the NSW coast during 1942-1944. A further 10 were damaged but managed to limp into port for repairs. Approximately 150 crew were killed in these attacks and the wreck sites today can form war graves.

The steel 'Liberty' ship *William Dawes* was one such vessel, sunk in sensational circumstances near Tathra in 1942. These mass-produced bulk cargo freighters were constructed in American purpose-built yards during WWII. Some 2,751 Liberty ships were built - the fastest in under five days.

### The vessel

*William Dawes* (Official Number 89056) was built and registered in Portland, Oregon, USA, by the Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation. The two-decked vessel had a tonnage of 7176 tons gross, a cruiser stern and length of 126.8 metres (416 feet). It was powered by a triple expansion engine and operated as a United States Army Transport (USAT).

The *William Dawes* was laid down on 26 October 1942 and completed in three months and 12 days. Liberty ships were frequently named after important US citizens, with William Dawes being a revolutionary patriot in the American War of Independence who famously rode with Paul Revere in 1775.

### Wreck event

*William Dawes* was on US wartime convoy duty operating alone along the New South Wales

south coast when it was struck by a torpedo near Tathra. The vessel was destined for the Pacific theatre and perhaps New Caledonia. It had departed Adelaide on 19 July, with a stop planned for Sydney and Brisbane. 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 attacking submarine was a Japanese Imperial Navy submarine known as *I-11*. It had already torpedoed the *George S. Livanos* (20 July 1942) and the *Coast Farmer* (21 July), near Jervis Bay.

The first 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 entire deck cargo of jeeps and lorries on fire and described the interior of the stern section "*like a furnace*". 'Abandon ship' was ordered and the serviceable lifeboats launched. 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. The next day (23 July), the steamer *Allara* was torpedoed by another Japanese submarine near Newcastle, but recovered.



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

### Locals gallant rescue

The Merimbula Police coordinated a rescue operation by trawler operators, using vessels like *Lass*, to tow in the *William Dawes* lifeboats. The wounded were treated locally.

### Submarine I-11

The *I-11* was one of the Japanese Imperial Navy's Type A(1) long range submarines and was built by 1942. With a displacement (surfaced) of 2900-tons, the submarine had a length of 112 metres (367 feet), and crew of 114, it was fitted with a floatplane and hangar.

Leaving the burning *William Dawes*, *I-11* unsuccessfully attacked the steamer *Collana* on 26 July. On 29 July, *I-11* was caught on the surface about 22 miles north east of Gabo Island and bombed by Beaufort bombers from 100-squadron, but escaped.

The submarine had a mixed wartime record. Apart from its Australian victories, *I-11* unsuccessfully fired torpedos at the famous American aircraft carrier USS *Hornet* near Espirito Santo in 1942. The submarine was damaged by a Catalina flying boat attack that same year. 1943 saw the submarine damage the Australian light cruiser HMAS *Hobart* off the New Hebrides, and another American Liberty ship, *Mathew Lyon*, off Noumea in 1943. *I-11* was eventually sunk with all hands, allegedly by the destroyer USS *Nicholas* (DD-449), in the Marshall Islands area on 17 February 1944.

### Other Liberty ship losses in NSW

The *William Dawes* is the only located wreck of four (4) Liberty ships sunk in NSW waters. Others include the *Starr King* (0297\*), torpedoed off Port Macquarie on 10 February 1943. The *Lydia M. Child* was torpedoed 145 kilometres east of Newcastle (0720) on 27 April 1943. The *Robert J Walker* (0629) was torpedoed off Bermagui on 24 December 1944.

Two Liberty ships survive as museum ships open to the public for tours. They are the SS *Jeremiah O'Brien* in San Francisco and SS *John W. Brown* in Baltimore.

### Deep wreck dive 2004

Divers from the recreational diving group, *The Sydney Project*, conducted the first visits to the 135-metre deep site on 25 October 2004. Local charter proprietor Keith Appleby, of *Deep Sea Fishing and Dive Charters*, Bermagui, assessed the most likely location and accurately relocated the wreck site. This was based on marks provided by local commercial fishing operators and from research conducted by the dive team.

### The wreck site

Due to the extreme depth of 135 metres, dive times were severely constrained. *The Sydney Project* divers had a maximum of seven minutes on the bottom. Further dives will help

identify the orientation of the hull. Significant features included the remains of a jeep trapped under the hull.



The *Lass* towing in survivors to Merimbula. Courtesy: Merimbula-Imlay Historical Society.



*William Dawes*: looking at an American left-wheel drive jeep crushed under the hull. Courtesy: Samir Alhafith.

### Protected Historic Shipwreck

The *William Dawes* is a protected Historic Shipwreck under the Commonwealth *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976*. As a war grave, and to protect the sensitivities of next-of-kin, disturbance of the site is strictly prohibited. Diving is well in excess of established recreational diver standards.

Source:

- NSW Heritage Office Wreck File
  - *The Sydney Project*. <[www.sydneyproject.com](http://www.sydneyproject.com)>
  - John G. Bunker, 1972, *The Ugly Ducklings of World War II*. Naval Institute Press, Annapolis.
  - Miles, Patricia, 1999, "After the Battle of Terrigal: merchant navy losses off the NSW coast in WWII", *AIMA Bulletin*. Vol.23.pp.67-74.
  - Wright, Ken, 2004, "A ship is burning". Unpublished.
  - [http://marshall.csu.edu.au/html/WWII/USN\\_Chronology.html](http://marshall.csu.edu.au/html/WWII/USN_Chronology.html)
- \* designates US Maritime Commission Hull Number

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