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# Anthropologists, Spooks, and the Boys Who Went to War

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# Anthropologists, Spooks, and the Boys Who Went to War

## **Abstract**

I became aware of the rudiments of this story during the 1970s and 1980s in my various associations with the former Seamen's Union of Australia (which amalgamated with the Waterside Workers' Federation in 1993 to form the Maritime Union of Australia), and the now defunct Communist Party of Australia. It was in these environments I first heard about, and met former members of, a strange Pacific War outfit and its links with Sydney (Australia), the US Army Small Ships Section. The legacy and memory of this outfit remained on the Sydney waterfront as part of a cultural memory, while forgotten or ignored elsewhere. Indeed the rallying point and meeting place for survivors of this outfit was, for a long time, a seafarers' mission in the Sydney maritime precinct.

## **Keywords**

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I became aware of the rudiments of this story during the 1970s and 1980s in my various associations with the former Seamen's Union of Australia (which amalgamated with the Waterside Workers' Federation in 1993 to form the Maritime Union of Australia), and the now defunct Communist Party of Australia. It was in these environments I first heard about, and met former members of, a strange Pacific War outfit and its links with Sydney (Australia), the US Army Small Ships Section. The legacy and memory of this outfit remained on the Sydney waterfront as part of a cultural memory, while forgotten or ignored elsewhere. Indeed the rallying point and meeting place for survivors of this outfit was, for a long time, a seafarers' mission in the Sydney maritime precinct.

Life and work intervened and I was not able to follow the story up. However in 2009 at a seafarer's funeral, I personally held and examined the American passport of (Captain) Sheridan Fahnestock, American adventurer, amateur anthropologist, that had enabled him to travel to Australia in 1942 and open many doors. It was authorised by US Secretary for State Cordell Hull, and Fahnestock was described as being on 'special duties'. I resumed investigating.....

In a sense this piece is not radical history, but it is an account of people who have, by and large, been written out of history, and it is an account of Australian warfare that does not easily mesh with traditional accounts of Australia at war. And it is an account of ordinary civilians caught up in the front lines of war, and their subsequent relegation to obscurity by authorities. For those interested in this story, some of my sources are evident in this account; the best starting place otherwise is the splendid Australian online site dedicated to the outfit, the [US Army Small Ships Association Incorporated](#). This should be backed up by reference to the trove of [The Fahnestock South Sea Collection](#) held by The American Folklife Center (US Library of Congress).

## websites and blogs

Antiwar and Radical History  
 Project-Pacific Northwest  
 Bristol Radical History Group  
 Capital & Class  
 Center for the Study of Work,  
 Labor and Democracy  
 Center for Working Class Studies  
 Civilisation and Authenticity  
 Class and Struggle in Australia  
 (Rick Kuhn, editor, 2004-05)  
 Connexions Online  
 Conversation with Howard Zinn  
 Counterpunch  
 Dave Renton's homepage  
 Democracy Now!  
 Edward Vallance  
 Enabling Open Scholarship  
 H-RADHIST Discussion Network  
 Hackney Radical History  
 Harry Bridges Center for Labor  
 Studies  
 Historians Against the War  
 Historical Materialism  
 Historical Materialism Australasia  
 History is a Weapon  
 History Workshop  
 Holt Labor Library  
 How to Make Trouble and Influence  
 People  
 howardzinn.org  
[http://www.openscholarship.org/jcms/c\\_6226](http://www.openscholarship.org/jcms/c_6226)  
 Hummer (Sydney ASSLH)  
 Humphrey McQueen  
 Illawarra Unity (Illawarra ASSLH)  
 In These Times  
 Interface: a journal for and about  
 social movements  
 Interference Archive  
 International Association of Labour  
 History Institutions (IALHI)  
 International Institute of Social  
 History  
 International Socialism (journal)  
 Jay's Radical History Links  
 Journal for the Study of Radicalism  
 Labor and Working-Class History  
 Association  
 Labor Studies Journal  
 Labour History Links  
 Left Flank  
 Left Foot Forward  
 Left History  
 Left Turn  
 Linebaugh on Paine  
 Logos Journal  
 London Socialist Historians Group  
 Luddite Bicentenary  
 Luddites at 200  
 Manchester's Radical History  
 Marcus Rediker  
 Marxist Internet Archive  
 Marxist Left Review  
 Melbourne Branch (ASSLH)  
 Midnight Notes Collective  
 Monthly Review

## ANTHROPOLOGISTS, SPOOKS, AND THE BOYS WHO WENT TO WAR by Rowan Cahill

They are old men now, the youngest in his 80s; at most some 200 or so of them remain. In the grim days of the war in the Pacific when Australia faced the relentless drive southwards by Japanese armed forces, they were recruited to the Allied war effort in Sydney, some as young as 15 years of age, and sailed to war in the waters of New Guinea, and beyond, some to die, serving on Australian vessels, but under the American flag and the command of the US Army.

These veterans, all that remain of some 3000 who served, do not easily mesh with masculinist renderings of Anzac mythology/military lore; the professional military history industry has largely bypassed them. Some of them were boys, not metaphorically as beloved by military cliché peddlers, but chronologically. Some of their comrades were older, the oldest in his 70s; at least one father and son team served, the father was just on 60, his son 16 and a half; some others who served only had one arm, at least one only had one leg. And their American leadership mainly comprised amateur soldiers.

Today the surviving Australian veterans remain in touch with each other, supporting each other where possible, attending the relentless parade of funerals, and campaigning and lobbying to keep alive their contributions to the Pacific war effort. It was not until 2009 that the Australian government recognised their eligibility for an Australian service award, and only then after extensive campaigning over decades by survivors. Their largely forgotten story begins in New York during the 1930s....

**ADVENTURING AND ANTHROPOLOGY:** Bruce Fahnestock (1911-1942) and his brother Sheridan (1912-1965) made three voyages in the waters of the South Pacific and Southeast Asia between 1934 and 1941. Members of a wealthy New York family, the brothers learned to sail during childhood and youth on Long Island Sound. Two of the voyages (1934-1937; 1940) were in large luxury sailing vessels they owned; the third (1941) was in a chartered vessel.

While America struggled its way out of the Depression and as Europe headed for war, the Fahnestock brothers used family money and patronage to voyage, write about their travels, broadcast, lecture, and engage in scientific, cartographic and oceanographic work. They collected Pacific flora and fauna specimens for the American Museum of Natural History (New York) and the Tulsa (Oklahoma) Zoo, recorded birdcalls and indigenous music, and pursued their own anthropological investigations.

Mounted as 'expeditions', the voyages were widely publicised. The brothers were well connected socially, and were close to the family of US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who gave their second voyage his official blessing, along with those of New York Governor Lehmen and Mayor La Guardia. The brothers made good copy, and had considerable literary, journalistic, and media skills; post-World War 11 Sheridan became a newspaper proprietor in Southern Maryland.

For much of their voyaging the brothers were accompanied by their recently widowed mother, Mary Fahnestock, herself a media friendly personality, adventurous, independent. A noted philanthropist, with a particular interest in music, Mary was an inveterate traveller, and had high profiles in the social circles of New York and Paris; her account of her voyaging, *I Ran Away to Sea*

Neoliberalism, Development, and Aid Volunteering  
 Network of Teacher Activist Groups  
 New Left Review  
 New Political Science  
 New Words (Jeff Sparrow's blog)  
 Northern Radical History Network  
 Nottingham Radical History Group  
 Occupy History  
 Occupy Together  
 Occupy Wall Street  
 Online University of the Left  
 Overland literary journal  
 past tense  
 PM Press  
 Poetics of History From Below-Rediker  
 Popular Radical History Books  
 Protest History  
 Protest! Archives from the University of Melbourne  
 Radical America  
 Radical Film and Photography: Bernadette Smith  
 Radical Glebe-Ann Curthoys  
 Radical History (UK blog)  
 Radical History Network (RAHN)  
 Radical History of Macquarie University  
 Radical History Review  
 Radical Newcastle  
 Radical Politics & the University of Queensland  
 Radical Politics Today  
 Radical Reference  
 Radical Tasmania  
 Radical Times Historical Archive  
 radicalhistory.net  
 Raewyn Connell  
 Rag-picking History  
 Raymond Williams Foundation  
 Reason in Revolt  
 Recorder (Melbourne ASSLH)  
 red pepper  
 Review 31  
 Review of Radical Political Economics  
 Roar Magazine  
 Rough Reds  
 socialist history news  
 Socialist History Society  
 Solidarity Forever! (digital version of Bertha Walker's 1972 book on Percy Laidler)  
 SPUNC (Small Press Underground Networking Community)  
 Takver's Radical Tradition  
 The International Marxist-Humanist  
 The Koori History Website  
 The Magna Carta Manifesto  
 the many-headed monster  
 The Public Intellectual: Henry A Giroux  
 The Sea-Green Society  
 The Small Press Network  
 The WTO History Project  
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 TomDispatch

at *Fifty* (1939), was a best-seller, as was her sons' account of their first voyage, *Stars to Windward* (1938).



The Fahnestock brothers and crew of *Director 11*

The second Fahnestock voyage indicates the scale of their operations. This expedition was headed by 27 year-old Sheridan in command of *Director 11*, a three masted, 137-foot schooner with a crew of seventeen, mostly young American males, but including Mary, and the wives of Sheridan and the expedition's photographer. The former Grand Banks schooner was equipped to make international radio broadcasts and had state-of-the art recording equipment. Under sail *Director 11* had done better than 16 knots, and carried 4,000 gallons of fuel for its diesel engine. A two-year voyage was planned, beginning February 1940, but ended in shipwreck, without loss of life, on the Great Barrier Reef, Gladstone, in October 1940. The crew went back Stateside, and started over again.

A focus of the second and third expeditions was the recording of indigenous music. Collectively they documented music and dance from American Samoa, Fiji, the Marquesas Islands, Tahiti, the Society Islands, Bali, Java, Madura, the Kangean islands, and New Caledonia. Intellectually the brothers were ahead of their times in many respects; they believed the indigenous cultures of Oceania and Southeast Asia had their own integrity. While remote pockets of these cultures had survived colonialism, they were now threatened by mass western culture and the burgeoning tourist industry. The Fahnestock mission was to try to document and save what remained before it was destroyed. Also, through their understanding of the indigenous music they experienced, the brothers were beginning to hypothesise that cultural links, based on past migrations, existed between the cultures of Asia and the Pacific.

In a wistful, romanticised, article in *Harpers* (January 1941), the brothers wrote of one Pacific island culture they had visited. Effectively cut off from French colonial control by the war in Europe, and much to the delight of the Fahnestocks, the island was experiencing the rebirth and resurgence of indigenous skills and culture. "We've found a spot on earth", they wrote, "to which the war has bought happiness". It was a happiness the brothers were not to share.

**A POLITICAL IMPERATIVE:** In 1937 the Fahnestock mission developed a political imperative. The first voyage terminated in the Philippines due to crew illness and the consequent sale of the expedition vessel. The brothers subsequently travelled to China and witnessed the Japanese invasion; in Beijing Sheridan was mauled by Japanese soldiery when he attempted to photograph troops. The brothers began to report the war for the American press. Their third voyage, to the Netherlands East Indies in 1941, yielded high quality recordings of rare Indonesian musical performances; but the brothers and their crew also engaged in covert intelligence gathering work, continuing a US practice developed during World War 1 when anthropologists had engaged in military and naval intelligence work in Mexico and Central America.



Union Songs  
 Unofficial Histories  
 Watermelon (Tony Harris blog)  
 Wendy Bacon: Journalist and  
 Activist  
 Workers of the World (journal)  
 Working Class Studies Association  
 Z Communications  
 Zinn Education Project

## Blog Archive

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While America was not yet at war with either Germany or Japan, at the behest of family friend President Roosevelt the Fahnestocks were to report on the preparedness of the Dutch East Indies to deal with future Japanese invasion. In early 1942, with America now actually at war with Japan, the Fahnestock brothers and a group of their former voyaging compatriots returned to Australia. They were now officers in the US Army: Sheridan was a Captain (later Colonel); Bruce, a 1st Lieutenant; the other crew members, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants. Sheridan carried a passport bearing the authorisation of Secretary of State Cordell Hull, describing him as being on 'Special Duties for the US State Department'.

American forces in the Philippines had surrendered to Japan; their commander, General MacArthur, had avoided capture by dramatically escaping to Australia from where he was now organising the long fight back, beginning with combating advancing Japanese forces in New Guinea. Stateside, and in the Pacific, American naval and military hierarchies were embroiled in frustrating their own war efforts as rival egos and strategies conflicted. On the ground in New Guinea, the American army needed maritime logistical support.

**THE SMALL BOAT SOLUTION:** The Fahnestock team was part of the solution; it was experienced in small boat operation, particularly with regard to working and navigating in shallow and island waters. Its mission was to improvise the necessary stopgap maritime capability to ferry troops, ordinance, and supplies to the war zones, and to evacuate the sick and wounded. The Fahnestock brothers brought significant leadership and organisational skills to their task, along with intellect, charm, doggedness, and imaginations not institutionally proscribed.

Assisted by the Australian Government the Fahnestock team created the US Army Small Ships Section in 1942, operating out of the Grace Building in Sydney on the corner of York and King Streets. While it was an American outfit with American leaders, the Section depended on Australian vessels, resources, and manpower until late 1943, early 1944, when American crews and purpose built vessels became available. A fleet of shallow draft vessels capable of working in reef-strewn waters inaccessible to larger vessels was variously cobbled together by requisition, purchase or hire. It comprised fishing trawlers, small cargo carrying sailing ships from the coastal and island trades, luggers, eight plywood landing craft, and some larger vessels, mainly of WW1 vintage. At the outset the Fahnestock's led from the front, Sheridan in command of one of the vulnerable landing craft; brother Bruce was killed in October 1942 off the New Guinea coast when his landing craft was mistaken for an enemy vessel by an American bomber; also killed in this incident was *New York Times* war correspondent Byron Darnton (1897-1942).

The Section hired shipwrights, labourers, boat builders, carpenters, mechanics, to service and repair the vessels and to build slipways, jetties, wharves in Australia and New Guinea. Walsh Bay, Sydney, was where the fleet was fitted out, provisioned, and in cases armed with light machine guns or World War 1 weaponry. Australian manpower authorities enabled the recruitment of Australian crews to work the fleet: any males too old, too young, or considered medically unfit for service in Australia's armed forces. In 1943, to make up for losses due to enemy action, a training school was established in Walsh Bay and 163 boys between the ages of 15-16 years old successfully trained for war; a month's training in basic seamanship, navigation, and some weapons use.

Work in the Section was dangerous, often taking place at night to avoid Japanese sea and floatplane patrols, and enemy shore fire. Service was based on American civilian contracts of 6 and 12 months duration. There was no uniform, but American work-clothes were provided; no repatriation benefits or on-going veterans' entitlements were involved; Australian income tax was paid. Before the Section was disbanded in 1947, Small Ships' units saw active service supporting American, and Australian, forces in New Guinea, the Philippines, Chosen (Korea), and Japan. At wars' end the American leadership variously returned home to civilian life; the Australians who had served went unrecognised, their service ignored by US authorities who argued they were Australians, and by Australian authorities who argued they were an American responsibility.

**AFTERMATH:** Decades of lobbying and campaigning by Small Ships' veterans partially redressed the situation. In 1986 along with Australian merchant marine veterans of World War 11, the Small Ships' veterans became eligible for benefits under the Veterans' Affairs system, but unlike merchant mariners, not to any Australian service award. In 2008 Australia's Minister for Veterans' Affairs unveiled a Sydney harbourside memorial to the boys who graduated from the Walsh Bay training school. In 2009 the US Congress approved the award of the US Army Sea Duty Ribbon to the Australian Small Ships' crews. In 2009 the Australian government recognised their eligibility for the War Medal.

Post-war, Sheridan Fahnestock abandoned his scientific work; his expeditions' collection from 1934-41 was left in storage, gathering dust and decaying. In 1986 his widow donated the material to the US Library of Congress. A significant collection, its importance is yet to be fully realised. A digitally restored collection of some of the recordings the Fahnestocks made in Bali in 1941 was released as a CD in 1994 to the acclaim of musicologists. The Fahnestocks await a biographer and credit for their anthropological work. The US Army Small Ships Section awaits the attention of historians in both the US and Australia.

**Rowan Cahill,**  
University of Wollongong,  
30 July 2012.



Small Ships' plaque, Grace Hotel, Sydney.