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## World War II on the East Coast of NSW.

By Carol Herben.

Whilst I had researched the effects of the Japanese submarines on coastal shipping, there was also another story on the plane crash on Bong Bong Mountain that I had written for the Bulletin, so I decided to incorporate both stories into one, this would then give you an overall view what was occurring on the South Coast of NSW during WWII.

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Long before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour in December 1941 Australia was feeling the effects of World War II. The German Naval Fleet had penetrated the New South Wales Coast. It began in October 1940 with the arrival of 2 ships, the **Penguin** 7766 tons equipped with 250 mines and a second vessel the captured Norwegian tanker **Storstad** 8998 tons. Within four days the German ships were laying mine fields at Newcastle and Broken Bay, north of Sydney. The **Storstad** then proceeded to lay mine fields at Cape Otway and Wilsons Promontory in Victoria, while the **Penguin** laid mine fields in Spencer Gulf, SA.

Amongst the first casualties was the Federal Steam Navigational Companies' **Cambridge** 10846 tons. Whilst enroute from Melbourne to Sydney on 7th November 1940 the **Cambridge** was mined and sunk off South East Point. The survivors from this sinking were picked up by **HMAS Orara** (formerly a North Coast Steam Navigational Co vessel).

The mine sweeper **HMAS Durraween**, formerly a fishing trawler, in company with **HMAS Orara** began minesweeping in the vicinity of the sunken **Cambridge**. Within 15 minutes 2 mines were discovered and destroyed. In less than 24 hours the US steamer **City of Rayville** was also sunk by a mine, forcing the authorities to close Bass Strait. Mine sweeping continued to clear the waterways and make them safe to sea traffic.

The next casualty was the **Nimbin** which on 5th December 1940 had entered the minefield at Norah Head. The vessel blew up and sank within seconds with the loss of seven crew from the twenty crew members.<sup>1</sup>

By 1941 another enemy had entered the Australian waters. Japanese submarines were cruising up and down the eastern seaboard mapping the coastline,

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monitoring shipping movements and laying small minefields.

Amongst the early casualties were the sinking of a fishing trawler and a small steamer. The earliest known sinking attributed to the Japanese was the fishing trawler **Millimumul** which was sunk off Broken Bay NSW on 26 March 1941, after its nets had snared a mine. Before the crew could cut the net free the vessel rolled onto the mine exploding it. Within seconds the trawler sank with the loss of all seven crew members.<sup>2</sup> Various minefields up and down the coast were located. In most cases the mines were destroyed.<sup>3</sup>

The Navy commissioned three bulk carriers belonging to the Adelaide Steamship Company. They were renamed the **Toorie, Terka and Tolga**.

These vessels used to be known as the **Sir Arthur Dorman, Sir Dudley de Chair, and Sir T. Hugh Bell**. During the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge they transported the granite from the Moruya quarries.<sup>4</sup>

When the Japanese Imperial Forces, after the Pearl Harbor attack, moved southwards towards Papua New Guinea with the destination Australia, the Japanese Naval Forces became more active in our Australian waters.

As early as May 1939 work commenced on **Fortress Kembla** to protect Port Kembla Harbour and the heavy industries around it just in case war was declared. Some of the heavy industries that became involved in the war effort were Australian Iron and Steel, Metal Manufacturers and the Commonwealth Rolling Mills.

The **Breakwater Battery** was completed in 1941 and was placed under the command of Lt. H G Morton, the C Company Commander. In 1942 the Control Centre was transferred to **Hill 60**. The 13th Garrison Battalion patrolled from Lake Illawarra to Tom Thumb Lagoon. A boom and an underwater steel net spanning the harbour entrance from the northern to the eastern breakwaters were installed.

Three gun placements situated at **Hill 60, Breakwater Battery** and **Fort Drummond** formed **Fortress Kembla**. These protected Port Kembla and Wollongong and 20 miles out to sea. To complement the defence two **Searchlight Batteries** were positioned on Lake Illawarra, one at Koonawarra Bay and the other at Tallawarra Bay. By late 1942 Port Kembla and its industries were well protected.

Any shipping movements to and from the three major Ports on the east coast of New South Wales were running a gauntlet with the five Japanese "I" class submarines cruising the coastal waters.

The Royal Australian Navy instituted the use of convoys for the protection of larger ships to and from NSW ports.<sup>5</sup>

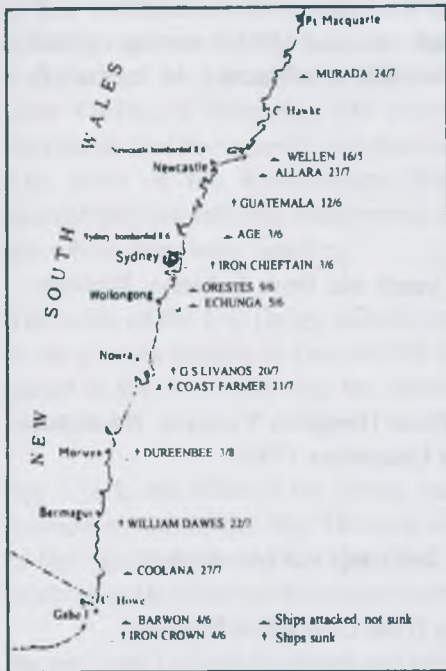
The protection of Port Kembla Harbour and shipping was justified especially after the attack in Sydney Harbour. On the night of 31 May 1942 three Japanese midget submarines were released from mother ships just outside Sydney Heads. Though one of the submarines became entangled in anti-torpedo nets which were in place for the protection of Sydney Harbour, and was destroyed by its two man crew, two others slipped through between 8 and 9 pm. By 11-30 pm that evening the crew of one midget submarine fired its torpedoes at the US vessel **Chicago**, but instead hit the old ferry **Kuttabal**, sinking it and killing 19 sailors on board.<sup>6</sup>

June and July of 1942 saw more Japanese "I" class submarine cruising the south eastern waters of NSW concentrating their attacks on larger ships mainly bulk carriers and freighters within the area from Sydney to Gabo Island. The Japanese realised that ports on Australia's eastern seaboard depend very much on shipping between Brisbane and Whyalla, SA. To disable or sink as many ships as possible would first cause delays or non-delivery of raw products for the manufacture of armaments or war related products and secondly would prevent delivery of finished products such as truck bodies, cannons, parts, etc.

Amongst the casualties were some BHP bulk carriers, eg. **Iron Chieftan** (4812 tons gross) bound from Newcastle to Whyalla, on 3 June 1942, was approximately 35 miles east of Sydney when the vessel was torpedoed and sank with the loss of her Master and 10 crew.<sup>7</sup> The following day, 4 June, the interstate steamship **Iron Crown** (3353 tons gross), chartered by BHP, laden with iron ore from Whyalla and bound for Port Kembla, was torpedoed off Gabo Island, sinking within minutes with the loss of her Master and 37 crew. The submarine I-27 was responsible for this tragedy.<sup>8</sup>

The Japanese submarine commanders were also targeting smaller steamers. On 5 June, 1942 the **Echung** (3362 tons gross), and on the 9 June 1942, the **Orestes**, were attacked 17 miles east of Port Kembla. Fortunately there was no loss of life whilst these vessels were under attack. On the 20 and 21 July 1942 the Greek steamer **George S Livanos** (4835 tons gross) was torpedoed and sank off

Jervis Bay; again there was no loss of life in this attack. That same submarine struck again 3 hours later when the American vessel **Coast Farmer** (3290 tons gross) was torpedoed. The submarine surfaced to watch the crippled ship sink with the loss of one life.<sup>9</sup>



Japanese submarine attacks in 1942

At 7 am on 23 July 1942 the unescorted American Liberty ship **William Dawes** (7177 tons gross) laden with truck and other vehicles bound for South Australia, came under attack off Tathra Heads. As the crew jumped into the water the submarine surfaced amongst the survivors and fired another torpedo into the burning ship, which drifted out of sight by 10 pm that night.<sup>10</sup>

The Japanese intensified their attacks in 1942 on any vessel on the south coast. The small steam powered 223 ton **Dureenbee** was trawling between Batemans Bay and Moruya in August 1942 when within 180 yards a submarine surfaced and opened fire. Their pleas that they were unarmed fishermen went unheeded - the crew of the submarine opened fire nevertheless. It was fortunate that many of the machine gun rounds failed to

explode. The loss was 2 fishermen killed. With the failure of the engine to restart the remaining crew launched the life boat, and once again the crew were under machine gun fire, injuring many. The following morning the remaining survivors were picked up by the trawler **Mirabooka**. The **Dureenbee** finally grounded on 5th August at Richmond Beach near Bateman's Bay.<sup>11</sup>

Due to the ever increasing attacks on shipping, the Royal Australian Navy introduced the practice of convoys and patrols for large bulk carriers between Melbourne and Brisbane.<sup>12</sup>

Coastal patrols and Naval escorts did not deter the Masters of the submarines attacking shipping. It became necessary to patrol the waters from the air as well

as by sea. The Royal Australian Air Force deployed two Lockheed Hudson bombers with crews from 32 squadron and based them at Camden NSW airfield. Other airfields around the coast were utilised as bases for search and destroy missions of Japanese submarines.

At 4-45 pm on Wednesday 4 November 1942 both Hudson Bombers left Camden airfield in search of enemy submarines reported 480 kilometres east of Sydney. The crew's instructions were that should the submarine be located it was to be attacked and destroyed.

Aboard aircraft A16-173 that day were:

**Pilot.**

Sgt. Norman Baxter (Nobby) Clark was 21 years old from Subiaco, Western Australia.

**Observer/Navigator:**

Sgt. Bernard (Bluey) Hubbard 26 years old from Hampton Victoria. He was a dairy farmer and married when he enlisted in December 1940.

**Wireless Operators/Gunners.**

Sgt. Geoffrey Alfred Rich 25 years old from Rockdale NSW, married.

Sgt. Joseph Hall Iredell 26 years old a grazier from Cavendish Victoria, .

Most of the men, if not all, had seen active service in New Guinea and all had many flying hours to their credit.

Both aircraft were returning to base at Camden after an unsuccessful mission, still fully laden with depth charges and ammunition, when they ran into bad weather and fog approaching the coast. One aircraft dropped its altitude to fly below the clouds to establish its location based on any identifying features. Shortly after 9 pm one of the planes flew across Lake Illawarra towards Mt Brown. Fog, by now, blanketed the escarpment.

On the western shore of Lake Illawarra, at Koonawarra Bay, the crew of the 57th Searchlight Co was in position, as well as the crew of the same Co at Tallawarra Bay on the southern edge of Mt Brown. They all watched anxiously as the low flying aircraft passed overhead.

At a nearby farm "Melrose", Tulloch and Vicky McPhail had just retired for the night. Lying in the darkness of their bedroom they heard the drone of the aircraft's engines approaching and getting louder. They had heard the odd aircraft overhead, but never this loud. Without turning on a light they quickly jumped out of bed and opened the curtains of the bedroom, only to see an aircraft with its landing light on flying towards their property. Tulloch and Vicky ran to the verandah of their home to watch the plane. By the time the aircraft had passed over McPhail's property, the aircraft was losing more altitude, and it was inevitable that the aircraft was doomed to crash in to Bong Bong Mountain. The crew of the Koonawarra Bay Searchlight Co frantically shone their searchlight towards the escarpment in the vain hope that the pilot or crew would see where they were heading.

The noise of the low flying aircraft over the township of Dapto caused the patrons in the picture theatre to run outside and with all the farmers on the nearby farms gazed in the sky following the aircraft with its landing light on heading for the escarpment.

Sgt. Clark, the pilot of the plane, suddenly realised what lay ahead, a mountain loomed up out of the fog. He took evasive action by sharply banking his aircraft to the right, but it was too late. The aircraft smashed in to Bong Bong mountain shattering all peace in the neighbouring area by exploding on impact.

By the time Tulloch McPhail and neighbouring farmer Len Smith, with the aid of a kerosene lantern, reached the crash site the blaze had died down. Both men were experienced in the bush and knew the area well, even in the dark. Many of the theatre goers dressed in their best clothes and not equipped for the wet conditions jumped on board a truck and also made their way up to the crash site. Whilst all were making their way up the mountain to the fire they saw many small flashes in the dark; the machine gun bullets were exploding with the intensity of the heat. At 11 pm Tulloch McPhail and Len Smith had reached the site where they found the body of a crew member lying across a large root of a tree. They searched the immediate area, but found no survivors. By midnight the police arrived escorting Army officers from the 57th Searchlight Co. and the 5th Machine Gun Battalion. They soon secured the area and the sightseers were ordered to leave the mountain.

The Hudson bomber was not giving in to the mountain. In its death throes the first of the 125 kg bombs exploded at 2 am in the morning.

At exactly 8 am Tulloch McPhail and Len Smith again led the salvage crews up the mountain. Amongst the wreckage was Sgt. Iredell's watch which had stopped at exactly the time of impact: 9-16 pm.

On Tuesday 10 November Flight Lieutenant Locke, in charge of the recovery party, reached the burnt-out wreck on the steep slope of Bong Bong Mountain. The airforce team went about setting charges in the aircraft wreckage. After setting the timing devices the team barely had time to clear the crash site when the demolition charges went off showering the surrounding bushland with shrapnel and fragments of the aircraft.

In nearby Dapto the effects could be felt and heard in the homes by the rattle of windows and household items.

All remaining debris was eventually removed from the mountain with the exception of the shrapnel fragments embedded in the surrounding trees.

The RAAF had not received instructions where to bury Norman Clark, therefore the Air Force took it upon themselves to choose a place.

Lying in a peaceful gravesite at Wollongong General Cemetery Anglican portion section 3 row M grave 12 are the remains of Norman Baxter Clark from Subiaco, Western Australia, pilot of A16-173, who is the only person interred in this cemetery who is known to have been killed on active service during World war II. Above his gravesite stands a Commonwealth War Commission headstone with the simple inscription:

**N. B. Clark Sgt. RAAF 406712 4-11-1942**

The other victims' bodies were taken to their respective towns and buried in the cemeteries selected by their families.

**Sgt Bernard James Hubbard 1916-1942**

from Hampton, Victoria was buried in the New General Cemetery at Cheltenham, Victoria.

**Sgt Geoffrey Alfred Rich 1917-1942**

from Rockdale was buried at Woronora General cemetery, Sutherland.

**Sgt Joseph Hall Iredell 1916-1942**

from Cavendish, Victoria was buried at Hamilton Public Cemetery, Victoria.<sup>13</sup>



**Sgt Norman Baxter Clark 1921-1942.**

It was not until 1st December that the inquest was held at Wollongong into the deaths of the four men whose lives were lost on Bong Bong Mountain. Amongst the witnesses was Flight Lieutenant Stuart Hermes, Commander of No 32 Squadron, who investigated the crash, and stated what he believed caused the air crash



**Sgt Bernard James Hubbard**



**Sgt Joseph Hall Iredell**

He summed up part of the events of that night. Prior to the aircraft leaving the base the aircraft had been correctly inspected and serviced. Radio contact with the



aircraft had been normal up until 8-50 pm that evening. He commented that something had gone wrong with the course the bomber was taking, for it was flying too far south of the planned flight path. He said he thought that with low cloudcover the pilot had reduced the altitude to enable him to see any landmarks. Through broken clouds, with the sighting of Lake Illawarra below them he said that the crew thought that they were flying over Botany Bay. With the direction of the aircraft being south west, this assured them that they were above Botany Bay flying on a course for Camden airfield. With these bearings the crew did not expect a mountain to be ahead of them.

Coroner Musgrave wasted no time in handing down his verdict, stating that each man had died while engaged on active war service.

Almost 58 years have passed since that unforgettable night. Bong Bong Mountain and many trees on it still carry the scars from that plane crash and the shrapnel fragments from the exploding bombs, fuel tanks, ammunition and aircraft. Bong Bong Mountain will forever carry the scars of war, and the sacrifices of the young gallant servicemen who lost their lives. They, like all servicemen, who paid the ultimate price to give us the freedom we take for granted today.

The submarine fleet continued its attacks on shipping in the coastal waters and during the following year, 1943, heavy attacks on shipping were experienced with loss of many lives and vessels. On 8 February 1943, BHP's iron ore carrier **Iron Knight** (4812 tons gross), enroute from Whyalla to Newcastle, was the leading ship in a convoy with nine other vessels. The **Iron Knight** was sighted by the Japanese submarine I-21 fifteen miles north east of Montague Island. The torpedo trail was sighted by the crew of **HMAS Townsville**. The torpedo passed straight under the hull of her and struck the heavily laden **Iron Knight**, which sank within two minutes. The Master and 35 crew members perished with the **Iron Knight**.<sup>14</sup>

The last attack from a Japanese submarine occurred on 16th June 1943 when the **Portmar** was sunk off Coff's Harbour. In all the Japanese Navy sank 18 vessels with the loss of 465 lives and damaged a further 18 vessels with a loss of 140 lives, including the sailors killed on the old ferry **Kuttabul**.<sup>15</sup>

When peace finally came in 1945, the number of servicemen who had died was staggering, but the loss of civilian life was high too, considering innocent fishermen going quietly about their business and seafarers who manned the vessels that carried raw materials for the steel making industry.

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Prior to the war there were many fine old vessels gracing our ports. A majority of these were commissioned by the Navy, renamed and converted to mine sweepers, greatly reducing the number of vessels calling at ports on the South Coast. For what the Navy did not require the Japanese and German Navy managed to destroy.

Photographs: Courtesy Illawarra Mercury.

Map of Submarine Attacks: Created by John Herben.

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1 Pig and Whistle Run. Men and Ships of the NSW South Coast. Mike Richards. p 89.

2 Pig and Whistle Run. Men and Ships of the NSW South Coast. Mike Richards p 90.

3 oper cit.

4 oper cit

5 Australian Sea Heritage No. 32 p 22

6 oper cit.

7 The Iron Ships. A Maritime History of BHP. *BHP Transport* p 148.

8 oper cit p 236.

9 Pig and Whistle Run. Men and Ships of the NSW South Coast. Mike Richards p 91

10 Pig and Whistle Run. Men and Ships of the NSW South Coast. p 91-92.

11 Pig and Whistle Run. Men and Ships of the NSW South Coast. p 92-93.

12 Australian Sea Heritage. No 32. p 23.

13 Based on Illawarra Mercury Weekender 30 December 1995 Fire on the Mountain pp 25-27, 34.

14 The Iron Ships. A Maritime History of BHP. *BHP Transport* p 147.

15 Pig and Whistle Run. Men and Ships of the NSW South Coast. Mike Richards. p 94