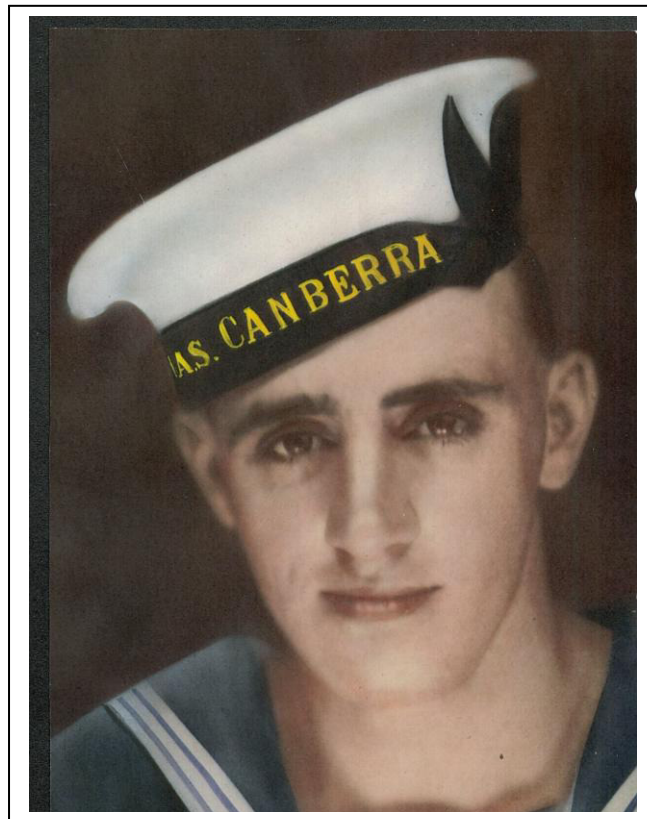


SUCH A SHORT LIFE

A memoir of my father, William Ralph Beech

14 July 1919 to 1 December 1942



"Daddy Bill"

My father, Bill Beech, around 1940 or 1941 when he was serving on *HMAS Canberra*

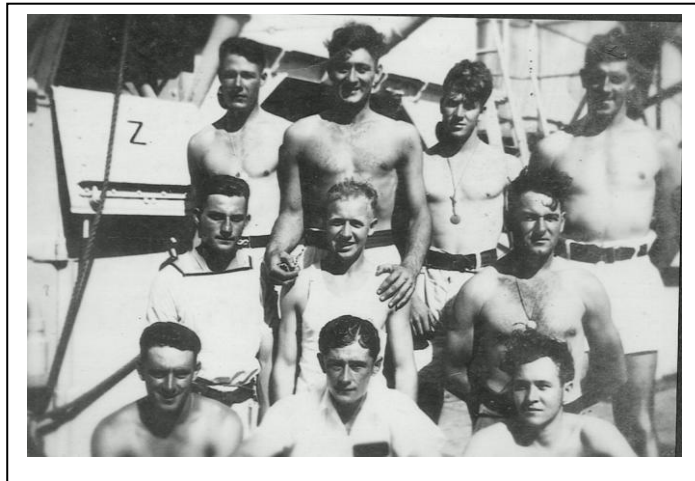
Colourised black & white photograph

“SUCH A SHORT LIFE”

My father, Able Seaman William Ralph Beech (RAN Number 22470) served in the Royal Australian Navy from 1938 to 1942. His Navy records say he was 5ft 7 ½ in tall and blond with hazel eyes. According to his family, he was actually a shade under 6 feet, had dark brown almost black eyes with a hint or a glint of blue, and had dark hair. One hopes that today's Navy keeps better records.

He was born at Sutherland NSW on 19 July 1919 as the third of four children of John and Mary Beech.

He enlisted for 12 years in the Australian Navy as a regular at Hurstville (a Sydney suburb) on 9 September 1938, and after training at *HMAS Cerberus* was posted to *HMAS Canberra* in May 1939 as an Ordinary Seaman. He was made an Able Seaman in June 1940. In October 1941 he was posted to *HMAS Adelaide*, and on 11 June 1942 his service record shows he joined the crew of *HMAS Armidale*. However, in line with Navy practice, the initial entries in his service record show the shore establishments *HMAS Penguin* and *HMAS Melville*, with the posting to *HMAS Armidale* written in later.



My father,
bottom left,
and
shipmates.

Probably on
HMAS
Canberra in
1941 in Indian
Ocean

He joined the Navy during the Great Depression, when it was exceedingly difficult to get a job. My grandmother, Mary Beech (née Williams) had been unable to keep him at school. The Navy offered a job plus training as a mechanic.

His family were immigrants from Wales, although my father and two of his three sisters were born in Sydney. My Aunt Gwen, his younger sister, tells the story that her mother came out as an assisted migrant, arriving here not long before Isobel, her second child, was born. Although she was married, she came to join her husband (who was already in Australia) as a single woman, as that meant she got an assisted passage. However, she had to hide her quite advanced pregnancy on the ship by carrying a large sewing box in front of her at all times!

The family was poor, with Isobel's crib being a wardrobe drawer. For financial reasons, my aunt Betty had to be left behind in Wales with my grandmother's sister for a couple of years. Aunt Gwen remembers "Bet and auntie came to Australia when Isobel was 4, and Isobel used to say that it was strange to meet your sister for the first time at that age."

When my father was 3 years old and his sisters were about 2, 5 and 8, their father died. My grandfather, John Beech, was quite a bit older than my gran. He was a widower when they married in Cardiff in the early years of the 20th Century. He was a Methodist, and Aunt

Gwen remembers her mother saying: “When we got married, that was the end of my ballroom dancing” as Methodists at the time did not approve of such frivolities. Still, he used to say: “If you tread a narrow path, you’ll fall off the edge.” Gwen understands that her mother’s family basically disowned her for marrying an older man, and particularly one who had other children by his first marriage. My wedding ring is the ring John Beech gave his wife when they got married around 1908 in Wales.

At one stage, my grandfather and grandmother had saved enough money to buy 13 acres at Menai. They planned to build a house there. He was a stone mason builder, and worked on quite a number of buildings in Sydney, especially churches. Once, the family travelled with him by ship to Melbourne, living there for a few months while he rebuilt a church steeple. He built or rebuilt a number of church steeples and buildings in and around Ultimo.

When the children were small, until my grandfather died, the family used to visit Menai by boat, and my aunt recalls the lovely sound of the water. She also recalls helping her brother Bill to pick wild flowers there to send to the aunt who had brought Bet out to Australia. “Auntie once wrote that she didn’t think they should be called flannel flowers, they are more like velvet flowers.” Aunt Gwen says today that “In those days, we never thought anything about picking native wild flowers.”

After she was widowed, my grandmother, a tiny but tough woman, kept the family together. They lived in Sydney, moving to a house in Hurstville in the 1920s. My Aunt Gwen and Uncle Bruce still live there. My grandmother worked hard until she retired well past normal retirement age.

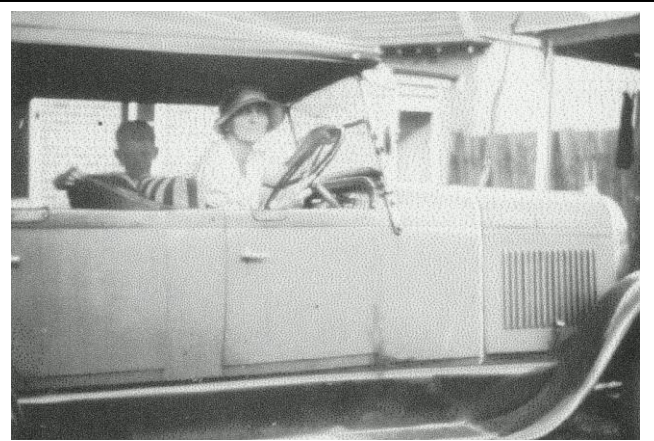
Although she was offered a teaching job after her husband died, that was not suitable, since she needed to be home when her children were not at school. My grandmother then became a contract knitter. Somehow she raised the funds to buy a large knitting machine that she used to make parts of woollen knitted goods such as sleeves and collars for cardigans. This meant that she could work from home and always be there when the children were not at school. My aunt remembers her as getting a job very quickly after having taught herself to use a knitting machine, simply by copying fashions she saw in Mark Foy’s, Grace Bros, David Jones etc.. She was hired on the strength of her 5th ever piece of machine knitting.

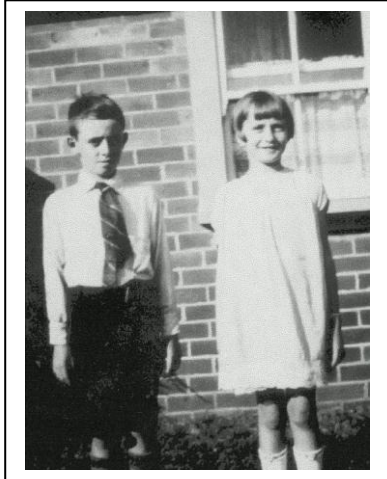
Aunt Gwen remembers that they had very little furniture, with the steamer trunks that had come out with them from Wales remaining important items as chairs, storage etc for years. They had hand-woven yellowy woollen blankets that had travelled out with her mother from Wales. But she says: “They were very warm.”



Left: My father and his older sister, Isobel

Right: My father with his mother (my grandmother) in the 1930s





Above: My father and his younger sister Gwen



Gran and her 4 children: Betty, Isobel, Bill and Gwen

From his early days at Hurstville Primary School, my father was both a keen sportsman and a gifted musician. Music was no doubt the gift of both his parents, as both had been active members of Welsh church choirs. That was how his mother and father met.

My father's particular favourite instrument was the mouth organ, and the one birthday gift his family always afforded during his childhood was an improved mouth organ as he got better and better in his playing. My aunt says that his shipmates mentioned frequently that his mouth organ playing was the centre of any singing that occurred on any ship he was on. Gwen says he could play almost any instrument he came across, more or less immediately: piano, piano accordion, whistle, flute, drums etc.

My aunt thinks that he could easily have done better academically had he tried. He was a bit of a dreamer in school, and did not pay attention. He was quite good at French. I still have his pocket Collins English-French Dictionary. My aunt said that his attention to French might have been because he thought that his young French teacher was very good looking!

Aunt Gwen remembers that my father hated fighting. On one occasion at school, she heard the kids saying "Beech and XXX are fighting." She knew that he would be as white as a sheet after that fight. "That was what always happened because he didn't like to hurt anyone". She remembers him once saying: "There's really no good in war."

Whilst on board one of his ships (probably *HMAS Canberra*) he visited Mauritius, and bought back some souvenirs made of coconut shells and a trinket box of wood inlaid with porcupine quills that I still have. My mother once said that he claimed that his French came in handy when dickering to buy them.

He was a particularly good runner, winning a NSW State level junior trophy for the $\frac{3}{4}$ mile. I still have that. He played football well, and did well in other sports, especially those where running was useful. Once he went ice skating, and with no prior experience on ice skates, showed how easy it was as soon as he got out on the ice. "It probably helped that he loved roller skating" Aunt Gwen says. She recalls that he was very fit, had a lovely physique, with well defined muscles and good legs. "A bit macho". She has shown me a small park in Hurstville near their home, where he used to enjoy running, backyard cricket and football. "Always active."

She recalled that “Bill used to grab a boat with his friends. They would hire a boat and sometimes wag school when he was in Sutherland going to school there. Mum would be furious. He sometimes used to go bush if mum got really angry.”

My cousin David (Isobel’s oldest child), told me that one of his earliest memories is of being hoisted on to his Uncle Bill’s shoulders. David must have been about 2 or possibly 3 at the time. He recalls feeling that he was nearly touching the ceiling.

At the end of this short account is the text of a letter my father wrote to Gwen in 1941. Gwen and my mother were nurses together, and it was through Gwen that my mother met my father. Gwen is still healthy well into her 80s, although her older sisters, Isobel and Betty, died years ago. She is married to Bruce Allcock, my uncle.

My father was at sea on *HMAS Canberra* when he wrote it, we think in the Indian Ocean. This letter is one of the very few things that the family has to remember him by.

Along with most of the ship’s crew, he died through enemy action that resulted in the sinking of *HMAS Armidale* at 3.15 p.m. on 1 December 1942 by Japanese torpedo bombers off East Timor. The ship sank just on the edge of the Timor Trench, a very deep part of the Indian Ocean (10°00’ S 126°00’ E). The *Armidale* had lasted just 173 days from the date of its launching, and sank more or less a year after the shipbuilders started work.

Two of the few pictures of *HMAS Armidale*. From the hills in the background, they appear to have been taken at the same time.



Above. This photograph was taken in September 1942 in Port Moresby Harbour. *HMAS Armidale* had escorted cargo and troopships from Sydney. Some of the men on deck may have been soldiers waiting to disembark. From the Australian War Memorial collection.

Below is a copy of a coloured photograph held in a museum in the town of Armidale, NSW, after which the *HMAS Armidale* was named. It was apparently sold in Post Offices as a postcard.



The location of the sinking, from the available information, is on the edge of what is now the Bayu-Undan Gas and Oil Field in the Joint Petroleum Development Area. This area is jointly administered by Australia and the newly independent nation of East Timor (Timor Loro Sa’e – “where the sun rises” or Timor Leste - East Timor).

Rex Pullen says in a letter in April 2004, “Her maiden voyage was on convoy duty from Newcastle/Melbourne, picked up another convoy ex Melb & brought it to Sydney. After that we were stationed at Townsville and Cairns & did a number of convoy trips to Moresby (mainly our Army blokes before the Kokoda Trail affair). Convoys to Milne Bay, and Thursday Is were towing an oil barge to Darwin when we got a recall and were sent to Darwin [urgently to help defend our northern coastline]. We were alongside “*Platypus*” having an engine refit for some days & then came our maiden voyage from Darwin which was so fateful...”

This was when the Japanese forces were perilously close to Australia. The *Armidale* was a Bathurst class minesweeper or corvette, a small, flimsy craft that was supposed to use speed and manoeuvrability to counter enemy attack.

During this period Darwin suffered from repeated bombing raids. During 1942 and 1943, Darwin was attacked by Japanese bombers based in easy flying distance in Timor, Indonesia and Singapore. It was a prime target, as the Japanese knew well that it was the focus of Australia's defence. They correctly assumed that the Allies' efforts to recapture the Philippines, Singapore, Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), Portuguese Timor and other nearby Asian countries would be launched from Darwin. Rex Pullen says: "Darwin almost flattened."

The purpose of the *Armidale*'s last voyage was to take relieve Allied troops and including some Australian Coast Watchers. They had been spying on Japanese military movements. The Coast Watchers were greatly assisted by the locals, and many East Timorese lost their lives in consequence. With Timor Leste gaining independence 60 years later, that history ought not to be forgotten. Rex Pullen says: "60 Indonesian soldiers 3 Dutch officers plus 3 A.I.F bren gunners took passage with us ex Darwin we were to land the 63 troops on Timor & bring back soldiers or refugees. However, most of the 63 troops were lost in the sinking but we saved the 3 A.I.F."

As the Japanese took over more and more of the islands to the North of Australia including Timor, the situation of the Australian, Dutch and Portuguese solders and the locals who helped them became more and more precarious. Because of this, during 1942 and early 1943, the Navy ran an almost regular service between Darwin and Timor, known as "Operation Hamburger". This served to ferry supplies, to relieve the troops, and later, to assist the remaining Australian coastwatchers.

The *Armidale*'s last mission was to collect some Dutch (and perhaps Portuguese) and other troops and civilians, including some AIF soldiers left from "Gulf Force" from Betano Bay. The ship was on its second attempt to rendezvous when bombed and sank; the first attempt had not made contact, but may well have alerted the Japanese.

Nearly 60 years later, when East Timor was struggling for independence from the Indonesians (who took over from the Portuguese in the 1970s), the Australian Navy once again ran a regular service to East Timor from Darwin.

However, the recent sailors thankfully did not face the same level of hazard. They would also have experienced far less discomfort. The *Armidale* was much slower (maximum speed about 16 knots) than the modern Navy's leased catamaran (35 knots or faster, and built by Incat of Tasmania) that was the mainstay of efforts in support of East Timor's moves to independence.

Also, the *Armidale* and sister corvettes often carried many more than the ship's complement (*Armidale*: nominal 85 to 90, although it was 96 on her last voyage, when there were a total of 149 men onboard), and were considered tight quarters even without the extras. Moreover, a voyage on the *Armidale*, like all corvettes, did not mean smooth sailing; one report was of sailors on another ship looking down the *Armidale*'s funnel rolling in heavy weather in the Pacific Ocean. The saying was that a corvette would roll on heavy dew in a dry dock.

My mother recalls my father being on one of the main gun crews on the ship; another crew included Able Seaman Teddy Sheean. Rex Pullen says "Your father was on our main gun 4" . We had 3 Oerlikon guns and 2 Lewis guns. Teddy Sheean was ..on the aft Oerlikon"

Teddy's heroic story is told in a number of books that cover the sinking of the *Armidale*. A painting of Teddy Sheean hangs in the National War Memorial in Canberra. In it, we see him mortally wounded, but still firing at enemy aircraft as his ship turned over and sank.

Many Australian sailors and soldiers (mainly Dutch and locals fleeing from the Japanese invasion) went down with the ship. Others escaped to the ship's whaler, the ship's motor boat, a Carley float, and various bits and pieces lashed together as a makeshift life raft.

The raft was improvised mainly from planks that floated free from the sinking *Armidale* plus two large empty drums tied together after the ship sank. The crew had been collecting planks for just such an eventuality, lashing them to the ship's side.

The survivors on this raft were sighted a number of times in the days after the sinking by an Australian Catalina flying boat, but after the 8th day they were never seen again. Some speculated at the time that they might have been killed by the enemy. However, Frank Walker when researching wartime Japanese records for his book (see sources) could locate none to clarify the fate of those on the raft. Nor could one of the survivors immediately after the war find anything in prisoner of war camp records etc. Similarly, there is nothing to explain what happened to the Carley float.

Frank Walker and others have been critical of the Naval Officer-in-Charge, Darwin, for mounting an inadequate and late search for survivors. It seems that he and his staff assumed that the *Armidale* was not transmitting simply to maintain radio silence.

Infamously, some 45 minutes after the sinking, he ordered transmitted to the *Armidale* the message "Air attack is to be considered as ordinary routine secondary warfare". This message followed two pleas from the *Armidale*, including one saying: "Absolutely essential adequate air protection be provided continuously. Large formations enemy being used." No air cover was provided, but the subsequent Navy enquiry into the loss of the ship endorsed the plea as a lesson for the future.

The "ordinary routine" message of course went unacknowledged, as were subsequent ones, including one saying "Cancel tonight's operation return Darwin forthwith..." There was then a significant but never adequately explained delay in following up the unanswered messages. That delay certainly contributed to the loss of life.

A few survivors set out in a desperate voyage in the ship's motor boat to the nearest Australian settlement, Darwin. They were picked up on 6 December by *HMAS Kalgoolie* and alerted their rescuers to others on the ship's whaler and the raft.

Of those who got to the whaler, many survived to be rescued in poor condition by *HMAS Kalgoolie*. When the *Kalgoolie* found them, the whaler was partly submerged and sinking because of leaks from many bullet holes inflicted by the Japanese bombers, many after the *Armidale* had gone down. Col Madigan (see sources) was on this boat.

According to most accounts, of the 149 men on board, 49 survived and reached Darwin safely. Forty-six of the survivors were members of the ship's company, out of 96 who sailed from Darwin. The others were A.I.F. soldiers.

The family do not know exactly how or even when my father died, although there may still be some survivors alive today who could tell. Survivor accounts indicate that one torpedo may have hit just below my father's gun.

After the sinking but still during the war, a shipmate of my father (Leigh Bool, who was on the whaler), who knew him well, went to see my mother to offer sympathy. My mother's impression was that he did know how my father had died, but if so, he would not say. All he said was "You must understand that he is dead." For my mother, it may be that this was something of a relief in a way, as until after the War's end the Navy was still only saying, "Missing-in-Action, Presumed Dead".

I was born as his only child on 6 December 1942, about the time the first survivors were rescued. I therefore never knew him, and he never knew that his child was a boy. My Christian names (Peter John) are the names my mother and father had agreed on, if the baby was a boy. After the news of the sinking, some family members thought I ought to be named after my father, but my mother didn't agree. However, my eldest son, Malcolm has as his second name, William.

When I was small, and before the Navy confirmed that he had died, I used to call him "Daddy Bill." This was because the adults around me told me that a photograph on the wall was "Your Daddy, Bill". I still have that photo.

In the 20 months between writing the letter below, he changed ships 3 times, had met and married my mother, fathered a son, and left my mother a widow. He was 23 when he died. As my Aunt Gwen said recently, "Such a short life."

My mother said recently "I don't know how our marriage would have worked out, as really, we didn't know each other for very long – and it was a long time ago." She has also only recently talked much about my father. For example, my extended family were all holidaying a few years ago with her near Taree on the NSW coast, where she lived as a young woman. On that holiday, she told the story of how she and Bill might have married sooner but she was under 21 and needed consents from both her mother and father.

My mother said that her father was still living in Taree when her fiancée got a short leave. My mother and father decided to visit Taree for a day. Her mother had already given consent, but her father was absent that day working on the Comboyne Plateau, then being opened to dairy farming for the first time. He was a master plumber, and was supervising a team of men installing farmhouse water tanks and the like. Communications were poor, with few roads and no telephones.

My prospective mother and father had travelled from Taree and eventually tracked down her father on one of the remote new farms to get his consent, but it was too late in the day to get married. My mother said that Bill's few days of leave that time was almost all taken up by travelling from Sydney, to Taree and then to the Comboyne Plateau and back to Sydney. In any event, they did not get married until his next Sydney shore leave, a couple of months later.



Pat and Bill Beech at
Circular Quay, Sydney



Bill Beech
around 1941.

"Taken by Bob Harris, in the backyard at Ashfield.. He changed into civvies for the photo. Bob got it developed by a family friend, then head of Eastman Kodak in Australia" Gwen Allcock (nee Beech) in 2004

HMAS Armidale was launched in March 1942, and was then fitted out for service, being commissioned in June. A new crew was made up of a leavening of experienced sailors from other ships, such as my father, plus many new recruits. The new crew members who were posted to *HMAS Armidale* were billeted on *HMAS Kuttabul*, whilst the fitting out was completed and the ship commissioned. A Japanese midget submarine sunk the *Kuttabul* in May 1942 in Sydney Harbour. That submarine, or its sister ship, is a major display at the War Memorial.

My father, although assigned to the *Armidale*, was not on the *Kuttabul* the night it sank. Sydney was his home port, and he was allowed to go home that night to be with his wife.

However, my father had a Navy diving certificate. Next morning, he was recalled to duty, being asked to dive into Sydney Harbour to recover the bodies of his friends and crewmates from the sunken *Kuttabul*. He said to family members at the time that this was a terrible experience.

Just before his last voyage, he told my Uncle, Bob Harris (he married my father's sister, my Aunt Betty): "I doubt that I'll ever see the baby."

Memorials to or relating to *HMAS Armidale* can be found in the main park of the town of Armidale in N.S.W., in the Chapel at *HMAS Coonawarra* (a Naval base in Darwin), the Cenotaph on the Darwin Esplanade and a display in the Australian War Memorial, Canberra. There is a memorial to Teddy Sheean at his birthplace in Tasmania. The town of Armidale also has a cadet training ship establishment called *TS Armidale*. The cadets hold an annual memorial march through the town.

Contrary to usual practice of both the Royal Australian Navy and the Royal Navy (from which we derived many of our naval traditions), the Australian Navy has never reused the name "*Armidale*" after the sinking. However, in February 2001 the Navy commissioned the submarine, *HMAS Sheen*. This was somewhat unusual, but clearly can be seen as not only a memorial to a hero, but also to his ship and shipmates.

Some commentators at the time and since would link the failure to continue to use the name "*Armidale*" to the naval enquiry on the loss of the ship. The enquiry heard evidence on

whether the *Armidale* should have been ordered to stay on station under extreme vulnerability to enemy air and naval attack for two days.

HMAS Armidale was sailing with two other Australian Navy vessels, *HMAS Kuru* and *HMAS Castlemaine*. Their task was to relieve Australian coastwatchers who had been reporting on Japanese military movements as the enemy came closer and closer to Australia. Conditions at the time were precarious, with frequent Japanese bombing attacks on northern Australia (including major raids on Darwin on 19 February 1942 and many subsequent raids for the next year or so), and Japanese occupation of most of South East Asia including Timor. *HMAS Castlemaine* is now a museum to the corvettes, and is in dry dock in Melbourne.

All three ships were ordered by the Commodore Cuthbert J Pope, Naval Officer-in-Charge, Darwin, over protests of their captains, to stay on station without air force support as the Australian Coast Watchers and others who they were trying to relieve tried to make rendezvous. This was in face of fierce and repeated attacks by the invading Japanese. During this time, the three ships were attacked repeatedly, mainly by torpedo bombers.

The other two ships were luckier.

After numerous attacks, the *Kuru*'s captain disobeyed orders to stay on station and turned back when he judged the danger was too great. The *Kuru* escaped into a fortuitous low cloud during one final bombing attack and made it back to Darwin and safety. One of the *Kuru*'s engines is in Darwin's East Point Military Museum. The *Kuru*'s captain was never censured for leaving the area, with the authorities later deciding that his decision was justified in the circumstances.

The *Castlemaine* was also attacked repeatedly, but was not hit.

The Naval enquiry into the loss of the *Armidale* did not record an adverse finding against Commodore Pope, who gave the orders. Nevertheless, commentators have observed subsequently that some of the evidence was curious, and some obvious issues were never considered. Moreover, it is said that never again in the Second World War were Australian ships sent into such situations without air support. As well, all further Timor operations involved larger and faster ships; no corvettes were used after the *Armidale* was sunk.

The enquiry did not examine in detail the Navy's failure to order a search for some days after the ship sank and after its last radio message saying it was under attack. Commentators have observed that this condemned at least all the men on the raft to death. The failure to order a search was all the more inexplicable, given that the *Armidale* was supposed to report in regularly; in an error of judgement, the authorities decided that the *Armidale*'s captain or wireless operator must have decided that broadcasting was too dangerous. The delay in getting a Catalina flying boat from Townsville was also, at least with hindsight, a significant contributor to the loss of all the men on the raft.

Commodore Pope's wife subsequently got in touch with my mother in Sydney, to offer sympathy, to enquire about how I was faring and once to send me a toy. She gave my mother a strong wooden cot, obtained from donations made other Australians and businesses. My mother says that although she was pleased to see Mrs Pope, she remembers some feeling that this was hardly enough, as she already had heard that many thought Commodore Pope had been reckless in his discharge of his duties. However, she says she never said anything recriminating or bitter to his wife.

My mother still harbours some resentment to the Navy over the fact that the Navy said that my father had neither money in the bank nor any wages owing. Although she said she guessed it was possible my father had spent all his money, she thought that unlikely. After all, the ship did not stop in any ports where there would be much to buy. Darwin, in 1942 after repeated bombing raids, would certainly not have been a shopper's paradise. Townsville and Port Moresby in war time would not have had much more to offer.

My father had received a significant amount of prize money for his actions in the taking of the German Raider *Ketty Bovrig* by *HMAS Canberra*, and they had been planning to buy a block of land at Castlecraig when he next had leave in Sydney. Where did all that money go? The Navy offered no explanation except to say it may have been gambled. Mum had never known him to gamble, but does not totally dismiss the possibility. She did not get a copy of any bank statement. At the time, she says she was too miserable to make a fuss with the Navy. "It was Bill, not the money, I wanted."

My second birthday was a grand event in the old Grace Brothers store near Sydney's Central Station, as the "Repat" (Repatriation Department) hosted a party for all war orphans in Sydney, but I was the lucky one whose birthday was on the day of the party. Again, my mother never thought that this was quite enough, but in those desperate days, anything was something to savour.

My mother remarried after the war to John Caldwell. He has been both a wonderful husband to her and a wonderful father to me. He never formally adopted me, as the Repat lawyers told him that NSW laws at that time made no provision for adoption within marriage. I have also been told that there was a concern that there would be no financial assistance for my education if I was adopted and therefore no longer an orphan. I've generally been known as Peter John Caldwell ever since, whilst still retaining the names my father gave me, Peter John Beech.

I went to University of New England on a Soldiers' Children's Education Scholarship provided by the Repatriation Department. A friend at the University (Hughie Spencer) and I were, we were told by Mr Duckett of Repat, the first war orphans from the Second World War on Repat scholarships to get University degrees. In my case, I was told that I was the first to get an Honours degree.

Basically this scholarship was the only significant thing the Government ever did to compensate for the loss of my father, apart from a scroll and some standard issue medals (I still treasure the medals). My mother got a small pension until she remarried. However, I am not bitter, as Australia was far less prosperous then, and times were still hard because of the War and the Depression before it.

My main regret was that I have always thought that I wish that I had known him, even if only for a few years as he did his own father. I hope I have been and remain a credit to him. I am truly blessed to have a lovely wife, four fine children, two lovely daughters-in-law, and (so far) four lovely grandchildren.

There have been some recent developments. I now live in Darwin, which of course was the closest Australian port to Timor, and to where the *Armidale* sank. Darwin is, as it was then, an active naval port, with many military personnel.

One such, whom I met socially in December 2002, is Bruce Bird. He was then a senior naval officer at the shore establishment *HMAS Coonawarra*. Bruce now has another job, and the Navy decommissioned the establishment in December 2003. Bruce advised me that on 29 November 2002, just before the 60th anniversary of the sinking, the Australian

Minister of Defence Robert Hill had announced that the Government had decided to name a new class of Australian patrol boats after the ship. In December 2003, a further Navy media release said that the first of the Armidale class ships would now be launched in 2005 (a year or so late), and that it would be called *HMAS Armidale*.

These developments followed years of campaigning especially by citizens of the NSW town, Armidale, and by the few remaining survivors of the *Armidale*. The new ships, and especially the new *HMAS Armidale*, are a much belated tribute to the many who died and the few who survived the sinking 60 years ago. Bruce Bird also sent me a copy of the Minister's media release of 29 November 2002 and of a newspaper clipping from the *Armidale Independent* newspaper of 5 December 2002 on the campaign and its results.

Further, the Australian National War Memorial had a special exhibit on the *Armidale* for most of 2002. This exhibit was based on Col Madigan's book and the paintings Col got Jan Stenbergs to do as a memorial to his lost shipmates (see Sources below). I was not able to visit Canberra when the exhibit was showing, but my wife, Theresa and my daughter, Emily and granddaughter, Siana all visited the War Memorial. Emily and Siana now live in Canberra, and Theresa took some time off work to visit them. I've also since been in touch with Ian Hodges, historian at the Australian War Memorial, who arranged the exhibition.

Written in Darwin by Peter John Beech, also known as Peter John Caldwell, 60 years after the sinking of. *HMAS Armidale*
August 2002-January 2003.

Updated February 2004, mainly to include the announcement of the naming of the second *HMAS Armidale*, and further reminiscences from family members who memories were prompted by this story.

Updated 2 March 2004.

Following a web search on the name *HMAS Armidale*, I came across contact details of a man called Angus Callander who was seeking information on or about the ship. He lives in Perth, Western Australia, and his father had been an AIF member who was on the ship when she sank, and had survived. Angus' father has since died, but Angus is trying to gather extra material together on the story, in part because Frank Walker is planning to update his book on the sinking and the survivors.

Angus and I exchanged e:mails, and he gave me the address of Rex Pullen, one of the survivors whose name I recognised from the War Memorial video documentary.

The following is what Rex Pullen told me when I rang his home today (2 March 2004).

"I can remember Bill well. He was a tall man. From my memory he was about 6 foot or 6 foot 1 or even 6 foot 2, one of the tallest men on the ship. Maybe the tallest. He was a seaman. I don't think he actually got off the Armidale. I think he went down with the ship."

"At no stage can I remember seeing Bill in the water. He was on the gun crew of the 4 inch gun at the front of the ship. I was on the Oerliken gun midships, so I couldn't actually see his gun from my station."

"When the torpedo hit, it hit underneath the flares of the ship, directly underneath Bill's gun. You know what the flares are; they are where the ship's hull curves in the front where it cuts through the water. There was a huge gaping hole there just below Bill's gun. The fellows on that gun didn't have very much hope. Whether he died when the torpedo hit, I don't know. I'm sure he never got off the ship."

“We spent quite a long time in the water before we eventually go away. I was on the whaler. She was knocked about a bit. We repaired it in the water. It took us 2 or 3 days. Twenty nine of us eventually got away on it. I was 25 years of age, and I was a fairly strong sort of bloke. Why Lieutenant Palmer picked me I don’t know, but maybe because I was one of the stronger men. I got to know him pretty well after the war, we were friends, but I never asked him how come he selected me.”

“I don’t know why I survived and so many did not. It was terrible. You know the story of the raft. We were very lucky fellows to be found by the aircraft when it was returning to Darwin after it had sighted the raft.”

“About your father, I have got to say that I was not one of his buddies, not that there was any (pauses) difficulty; it’s just that I never got to know him very well. A very tall man, well built and athletic. I remember Bill very well. Had he been in the water, I would, I’m sure I would remember.”

He mentioned the crew being stationed on the *Kuttabul* because there was some delay in finishing the ship, and I told him about how my father had been home with my mother when it was sunk by the Japanese. He said “He was lucky” but said “It must have been difficult for your father” when I told him how my father had been asked to dive to recover bodies of his shipmates. He said he remembered the service for those who had died then.

He then asked me if I had any questions. I said that he had told me more than I’d ever heard before about the sinking. I said none of the family knew much but that Leigh Bool had spoken to my mother in 1943 about how my father died. He wouldn’t tell her much except that he was dead.

He said, “‘Bumble Bool’, he was a very good mate of mine, a lovely fellow. If he didn’t tell your mother the details, it would be because he wouldn’t want to upset her. He would have chosen his words very carefully. He was like that. It is difficult talking to relatives, and some of us [survivors] would never do it. It was a terrible time, and some thought that talking about it made it worse. I don’t agree, never did.”

“Bumble died about 20 years ago. Bumble Bool used to take me home to his family when we were in port to have a good meal. He was a good mate.”

“It was through Bumble Bool that we were able to make the raft. When we were in Townsville, he used to say if you see a piece of wood lying about, a plank or something like that, bring it back to the ship and put it on one of the guard rails. Tie it on with ropes.”

“When the ship went down, there was all of that stuff floating in the water – I think someone must have to cut it free as the ship was going down. It took us quite a time to get the wood and other stuff that was floating near where the ship went down. The planes were machine gunning us, so it took longer to collect the stuff. We gradually got the stuff to a central point and made a raft by tying bits together with ropes. It didn’t keep us out of the water but helped to keep us from the sharks during the night.”

“I was on the raft before I was chosen by Lieutenant Palmer to go on the whaler”

“There were about 30 left on the raft; if it broke up, they couldn’t have survived.”

I told him that the place where the ship went down is where the Bayu-Undan gas field now is. He said: “It was about 2000 fathoms, I remember the Lieutenant saying so when someone asked him. One of the fellows was a bit of a joker. ‘John said, it couldn’t have been, I can remember touching the bottom when I dived to get away from the planes that were attacking.’ I can still hear him saying that” (laughs).

“I know one of the gun crew is still alive, Roy Cleland, but it will be no use talking to him. He’ll only say ‘I don’t remember.’ He never will discuss it. He was in the motor boat. He has trouble with his wounds. I was lucky; I got away with no injuries. I don’t know whether he doesn’t remember or will not remember.”

“Bill Lamshed would remember your father. He’s still alive. He lives in Mildura. Let me look up his number, ah, here it is, Lamshed. His telephone number is, area code 03 and number, 50222671.” He repeated the number to make sure I got it right. [The directory shows Lamshed, W N & B, 1 Evans Way, Mildura 3500 (03) 5022 2671].]

“Bill Lamshed was an electrician, although that wasn’t what he was called. He used to fix electrical things on board. He’d go around everywhere fixing things, so he knew everyone on the ship, all the crew.”

“Another survivor who is still alive was Ray Raymond. Ray was a stoker; his action station was down below. He would not know what happened on deck. They were no where near the guns”.

“Bill Lamshed might, however. You should give him a ring. He’ll talk to you”.

“When the ship sank, I walked down the side of the ship into the water. It was easy for me; my gun was not where the damage was. I swam far enough to get away from the suction. The ship was going one way and I needed to go another way. I’ll never know why I survived and others didn’t. I was one of the lucky ones.”

“When we were rescued, our boat broke in two when they tried to lift it out of the water. I remember that when I was rescued I had nothing – no shoes, no pants, no shirt. The men on the ship that rescued us were most kind; they gave us clothing and shoes. When we got to Darwin we asked for new kit and we were told we would have to wait until we got back home for that. I suppose we would have been naked and they still wouldn’t have given us new kit.”

“The Navy were terrible; they didn’t do anything for us. We were supposed not to talk to anyone about what had happened. Not like today. When they launched the *Sheean* a couple of years ago, they flew 6 of the survivors and our wives to the ceremony. It’s different now. They tried to hush up the story back then, if you’ve read Walker’s book you’ll know the story. He got it right.”

He told me that he didn’t think he had much longer. “Nothing really wrong, just getting old and worn out.” At one stage he answered a woman’s voice. He said, “That’s my wife”

He promised to send me his story if I gave him my address. I said I’d send him a letter. He apologised again for not remembering more, particularly about my father. I repeated that he had told me much more than I’d ever expected about the actual sinking and what may have happened to my father. He said he keeps pretty busy talking to people from the War Memorial about the sinking. He had been flown to Canberra with his wife for the Exhibition a couple of years ago. I said I had a copy of his video. “That’s where they used the video”, he said.

Update 4 March 2004.

My mother rang this evening over another matter, and I mentioned what Rex Pullen had said. This prompted memories that she had not previously shared with me.

She said, “Yes, that sounds right. I remember Bob Harris [my uncle who was married to Betty, my father’s oldest sister] saying that he had been wiring the jaw of one of the *Armidale* survivors in the Sydney Dental Hospital [uncle Bob was a specialist dental surgeon there for many years]. The sailor told Bob that Bill would have been killed when a bomb hit the *Armidale* immediately under the No 1 Gun. The sailor had a very badly broken jaw. Funny that a dentist would be the one to fix it, not a doctor. I think Bob wired a few broken jaws of survivors.” Rex Pullen says: “The sailor with the broken jaw was Ted Morley. Ted had been shot through his mouth & the jaw just hung down. None of us know why Ted survived – just guts simply guts.”

I told her that Rex Pullen was on the other gun, not the one my father had been on. She then said: “Bill was Captain of the No 1 Gun.” About how Rex Pullen thought my father had

died, she said “I think that was what Leigh Bool had been trying to indicate when he came to see me. Leigh was a close friend of Bill, they had been on three ships together, the *Adelaide*, ‘the slowest ship in the Navy’, but she survived the war, and the *Canberra*, the Yanks sunk that.” I told her that was why there was a *USS Canberra* and she said “I didn’t know that.”

I said that Rex Pullen had been a good friend of ‘Bumble’ Bool and she laughed: “I never knew they called him that.” I said that he’d died years ago. She was a little sad to hear that. She clearly remembered him as both a nice person and as a friend of my father.

“About Bill saying that he didn’t think he would ever see the baby, I didn’t know that he had said that to Bob, but he said the same thing to Viv Whitelaw, you know, Meg’s husband. Sad, really. He never said anything like that to me. Meg told me a year or so later.”

The Whitelaws shared the same Marrickville house as my grandparents, my aunt ‘Raine [Lorraine], my mother and I when I was very young. Their son Lawrence Howard (he was known by both names) was one of my earliest childhood playmates, along with my cousin Allan. The Whitelaws later moved to Armidale, as later still did my family in 1956. We had more or less lost touch, but knew that they might still be in Armidale. I recall looking up their address in the phone book and then dropping in on them, unannounced, on my way home from school, aged 16. Meg greeted me when she saw me at the door: “Why, it’s Peter Beech.” She said that I looked much like my father did when she first met him around 1941 when he was 22 or so.

Update 8 March 2004. I received a letter from Frank Walker, saying that he would like copies of family photographs to include in a planned new edition of his book, *HMAS Armidale, The ship that had to die* (see below). I sent him the ones in this memoir, and he responded in April saying that he would certainly use at least the one of my father and mother at Circular Quay in the 2nd edition. He also said that there seems a renewed prospect of a film on *Armidale*’s story.

Update April 2004. Rex Pullen has written two letters, both very greatly appreciated. His second letter (dated 17 April 2004), in particular, told me many things that I’d never known about the *Armidale* and about my father. In return, he was interested in my account and congratulated my uncle Bob on his part in reconstructing Ted Morley’s jaw.

Sources and references: Note: Perhaps not surprisingly, there are discrepancies between sources. Apart from family stories, where I could, I have relied on original Navy records, mainly as republished by Frank Walker (see below).

1. “*Armidale '42, Memory and Imagination, A survivor's account*”, by Col Madigan, and Don Watson, with illustrations by Jan Senbergs, Hardcover, Pan Macmillan Australia, 1999, & 2nd Edition Softcover 2000. Col Madigan went on to design many of Australia's great buildings, including the National Library in Canberra. My father is in one of the photographs used to illustrate the book, in a photograph that the family saw first in this book. Col told my cousin that he could not recall my father, nor indeed, almost any of those who died so very long ago. (See photograph below on this page).
2. “*HMAS Armidale, The ship that had to die*” by Frank B Walker, Paperback, Sydney 1990. Kingfisher Press. 1st edition (paperback). This is the most complete account, and covers the sinking in action, the heroism and the epic in sea survival. We have also exchanged letters in March and April 2004.
3. “*HMAS Armidale – A Survivor's Story*,” by Rex Pullen (published on the Internet at <http://www.gunplot.net/sheeanarmidale/armidalesurvivor.htm>.) Rex now lives in Hobart.
4. Letters from Rex Pullen in March and 17 April 2004 including copies of accounts of the sinking and its aftermath and telephone conversation with him.
5. “*In the Highest Traditions...RAN Heroism Darwin 19 February 1942*” by John Bradford (covers all RAN operations in Darwin in 1942), Softcover, Seaview Press, SA, 2000.
6. “*A Cruel Sea – the Sinking of HMAS Armidale*”, Events and Exhibits, Australian War Memorial, 2002 (exhibit based on Col Madigan and Don Watson's book and Jan Senbergs' sketches) as shown on the Internet <http://www.awm.gov.au/cruelsea/>. Includes a short documentary that includes interviews with three of the survivors. Ian Hodges, historian from the Australian War Memorial who arranged the exhibit sent me copies that I and other family members have found both interesting and sad.
7. Various newspapers and magazines from the time (including the Sydney papers, where the news broke the day before I was born in Bethesda Salvation Army Nursing Home near my mother's parents' home in Marrickville) and retrospective articles published more recently, including many on the Internet. The main focus of the Internet stories has been the heroism of Teddy Sheean. A good example is “The Death of HMAS Armidale”, by Mackenzie J Gregory <http://www.members.tripod.com/Tenika/armidale.htm>
8. My father's RAN service record.
9. Family stories (especially from my mother, Aunt Gwen and Uncle Bruce, Aunt Lorraine, Aunt Vina and Uncle Allan), records and photographs, and my childhood recollections eg of stories from my grandparents and my father's other sisters and brothers-in-law
10. Commonwealth Parliament Hansard; Defence Ministerial media releases; Armidale Town Council minutes of meetings (around 60 years after the sinking).
11. Letter from Vin Bool (brother of Leigh Bool) 27 April 2004
12. Correspondence with Angus Callander (son of one of the survivors) in early 2004



Members of the crew of *HMAS Armidale*. Photo courtesy of Col Madigan.

My father is at the centre in the front row. Others (anticlockwise) include Ray Raymond, Bill Sanson (KIA), Bill McKellar, Harold Schrader (KIA), Rex Pullen & Leigh Bool (names of others from Vin Bool, L e i g h ' s b r o t h e r, A p r i l 2 0 0

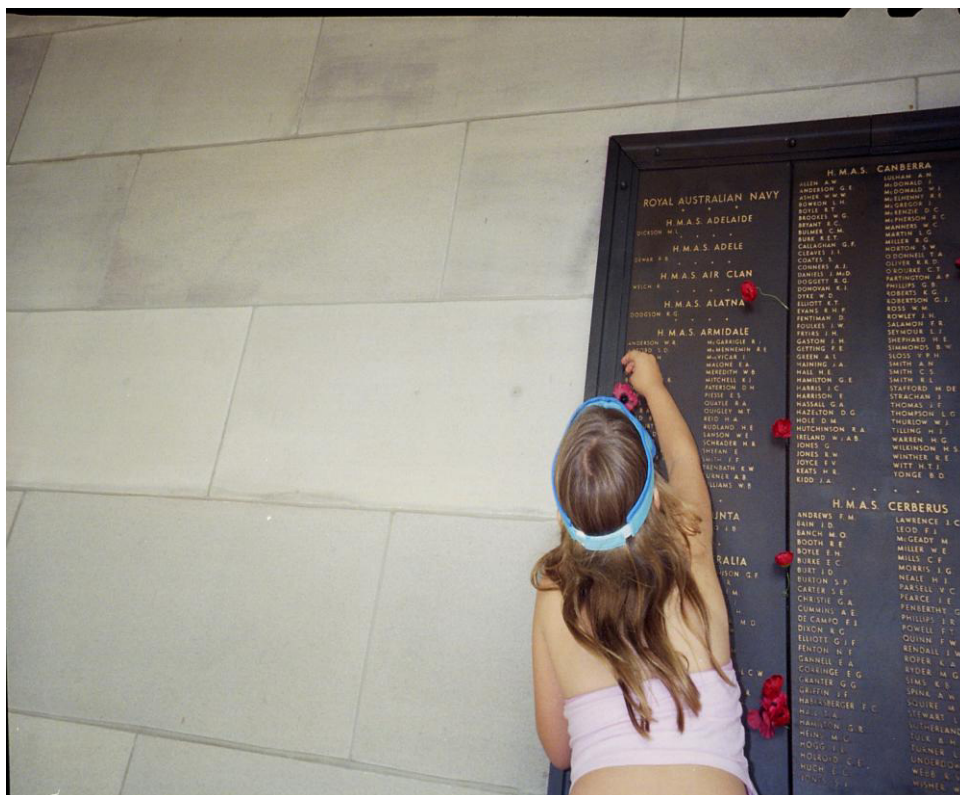
Below are photographs taken by my wife Theresa in late 2002.



Australian War Memorial

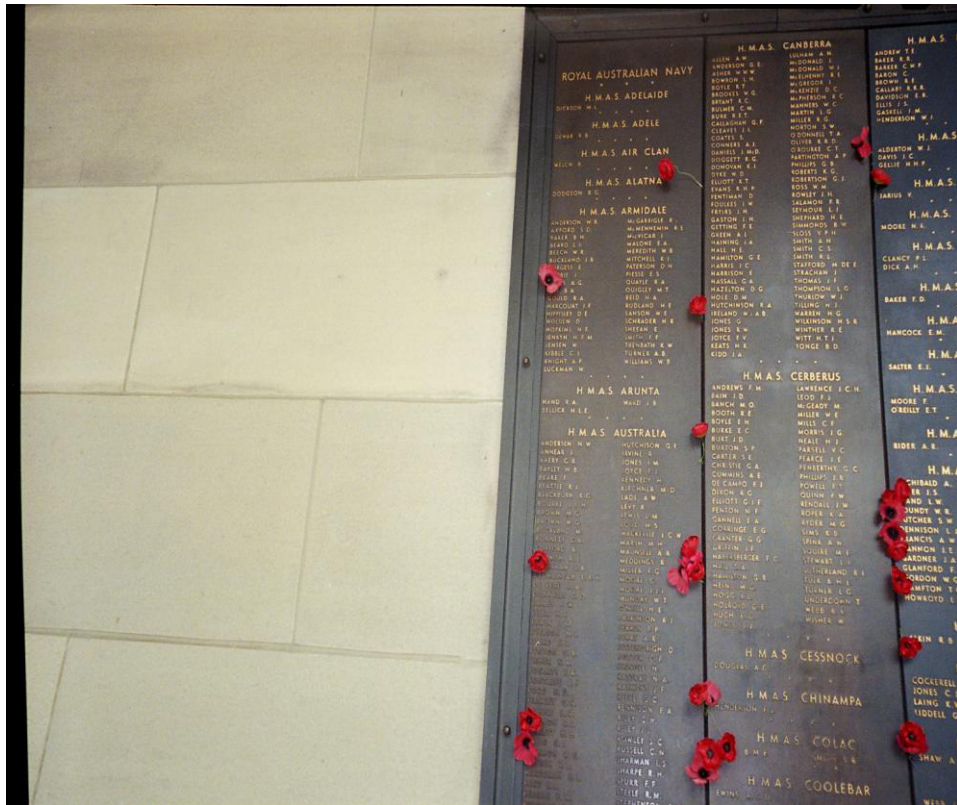
Roll of Honour.

Siana Chamings (aged 8 and Bill Beech's great grand-daughter) placing a poppy against his name, 60 years after his death.



Australian War Memorial, Roll of Honour.

Another picture of Siana putting a poppy on her great grandfather's name, 60 years after the Armidale sank.



Australian War Memorial, Roll of Honour, September 2002, showing the poppy that Siana Chamings placed against her great grandfather's name. This was 60 years after he was posted as Missing-In-Action when the *HMAS Armidale* sank as a result of enemy action off Timor.



My father and mates from *HMAS Canberra*.



W.R. Beech
30 Mess
H.M.A.S. Canberra
C/O G.P.O.
28-4-41

Dear Gwen,

Hope you received my last letter O.K. Finding I had nothing to do for a few hours I have decided to go mad again and write another letter to you; Hope you're pleased!

How are things going at the "Hosp" O.K.? and have you made any more friends since you last wrote to me, if you have let me know will you.

Things are pretty rotten being at sea all the time, but we have a fair amount of literature on at present and I play Deck Hockey (when I can) in the afternoons, so we have something to liven things up a little don't we?

Don't forget to answer all my letters will you and tell me all the news

Love Bill



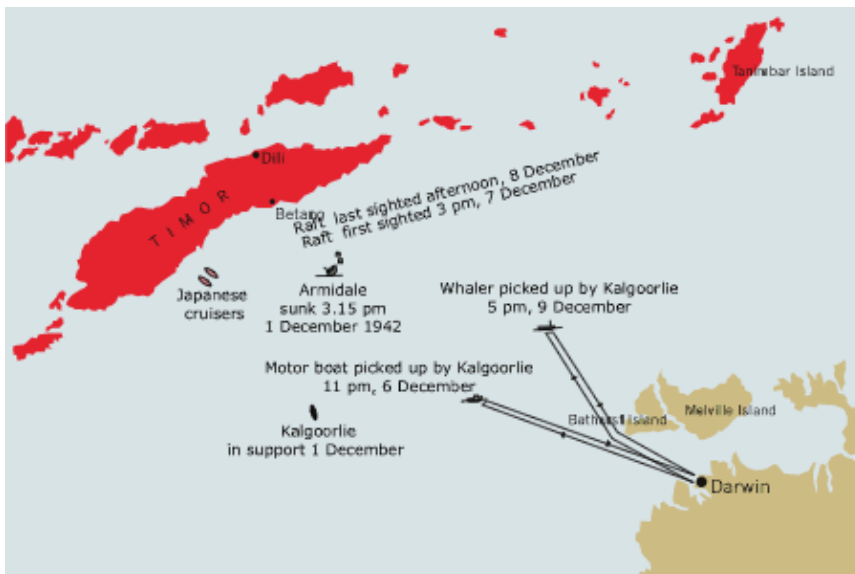
September 1942

HMAS Armidale in Port Moresby harbour after convoying troopships and supply vessels from Australia. Some of the men on deck are thought to be soldiers waiting to disembark.



23 January 1942 At Morts Dock, Sydney

The Bathurst Class Minesweeper (Corvette) *HMAS Armidale* being launched and blessed by the Reverend A G Rix. He was accompanied by a group of dignitaries and flanked by RAN seaman.



Timor Sea,
December 1942

The reported location of the *Armidale's* sinking on 1 December 1942 and later rescue of some of the survivors over the following couple of weeks.



TIMOR SEA. 7 December 1942.

The last sighting of survivors from the *HMAS Armidale* adrift on a raft. They were not rescued, and their fate is still unknown.

(Naval Historical Collection)



Darwin, NT. 7 November 1942.

Aerial starboard side view of Corvette *HMAS Armidale* (front) with the merchant ship *SS Tulagi*.

The *Armidale* was commissioned on 6 June 1942. She served in Australian coastal waters on convoy escort duties until joining the 24th minesweeping flotilla at Darwin in early November 1942. The *Armidale* was sunk on 1 December 1942 after being attacked by enemy aircraft near Betano, Timor. *HMAS ~~Armidale~~* pennant number was J240.

(Naval Historical Collection).

DARWIN CENOTAPH

41st plaque

Silhouette of ship

HMAS ARMIDALE

J 240

BATHURST CLASS CORVETTE

11 JUNE 1942 - 1 DECEMBER 1942

AT APPROXIMATELY 1515, 1 DECEMBER 1942 DARWIN BASED HMAS ARMIDALE WAS ATTACKED BY JAPANESE FIGHTER AIRCRAFT APPROXIMATELY 100 NAUTICAL MILES NORTH WEST OF DARWIN LAT 126°30' LONG 10° SOUTH [sic]. DURING THE ENSUING BATTLE, SHE WAS HIT BY TWO TORPEDOES AND SUNK WITHIN 3 MINUTES. BEFORE DISENGAGING THE FIGHTERS STRAFED THE SURVIVORS STILL IN THE WATER.

THIS PLAQUE LAID BY THE NAVAL ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA DARWIN SECTION INC. IN DEDICATION TO ALL THE PERSONNEL ONBOARD - 83 SHIPS COMPANY, 3 A.I.F., 2 DUTCH ARMY OFFICERS AND 61 INDONESIAN TROOPS FOR THEIR COURAGE AND SACRIFICE.

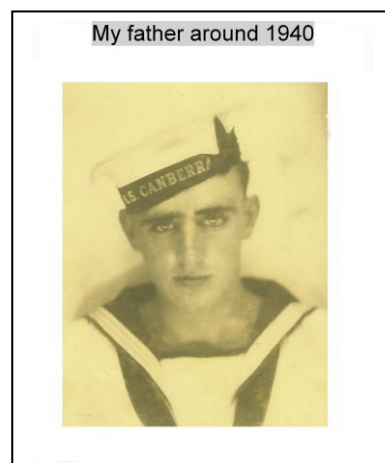
"THE SHIP THAT HAD TO DIE" SADLY MISSED BUT NEVER FORGOTTEN

10 KILLED IN ACTION, 2 DIED, 46 SURVIVORS,
MISSING PRESUMED DEAD - 28 AUSTRALIAN, 2 DUTCH, 58 INDONESIAN

11 JUNE 1998



Crest of *HMAS Armidale*
and *TS Armidale*



Digitally
enhanced
reverse
"proof"
photo
never
printed out
as a final
until 2004