

**Jump TO Article**



The article on the pages below is reprinted by permission from *United Service* (the journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales), which seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888. To receive quarterly copies of *United Service* and to obtain other significant benefits of RUSI NSW membership, please see our online Membership page:

[www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership](http://www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership)



**Jump TO Article**

# *Japanese submarine attacks on the Australian coast, 1942–1943*

**Captain B. L. Swan, AM, RAN (Ret'd)**

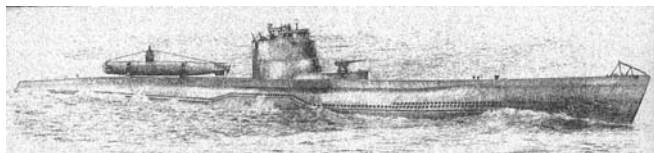
*Japanese submarines operating on the east coast of Australia in 1942–1943 attacked Sydney and Newcastle and sank 18 merchant ships (79,608 tons in aggregate) – 605 allied merchant seamen lost their lives. Another 15 ships were attacked but failed to sink. Other than three midget submarines lost during the attack on Sydney, not one Japanese submarine was sunk by Allied warships in the main target area off the east coast.*

**Key words:** submarine warfare; Japan; Australia; World War II.

By the end of 1939, Australia was at war and had sent many troops overseas. Our ships and aircraft had also been engaged since the very beginning of the conflict, but they were largely occupied on the European front and had little effect on the Australian mainland. With Japan's entry into the war in December 1941, however, things changed. On 19 February 1942, Darwin was bombed by over 200 aircraft, most of which were launched from four aircraft carriers.

## **The Attack on Sydney Harbour**

In the early hours of Monday, 1 June 1942, not six months after the war with Japan had begun, a midget submarine attack took place in Sydney harbour. Three midget submarines were involved and had been transported to the Sydney area by mother submarines.



Japanese I-class submarine – artist's impression  
[Courtesy Kangaroo Press]

The prelude to this attack was that on Friday, 29 May 1942, at about 0300 hours, the Japanese submarine, I-21, had launched her aircraft, a Glen biplane piloted by Ensign Susumo Ito. Ito flew at about 500 metres over North Head and then followed the wake of a Manly ferry up the harbour to the fleet anchorage at Garden Island. He had twice circled the American cruiser, USS *Chicago*, at a height of 500 meters, and had then flown over the Australian cruiser, HMAS *Canberra*, and four harbour patrol boats in Farm Cove.

After that, he circled Cockatoo Dockyard where two large ships were under repair. Turning south, he approached Mascot airport and passed over the tarmac with his landing lights on. Instead of landing at the airport, he flew out to sea to land near I-21, but his approach speed was too high and the plane capsized in a choppy sea. The pilot and observer were rescued. Their report was important in the decision to go ahead with the midget submarine attack.

Now, it is commonly thought that HMAS *Kuttabul* was sunk by a torpedo. That is almost right. The torpedo



HMAS *Kuttabul*  
[Courtesy Kangaroo Press]

passed under the USS *Chicago* and also under the *Kuttabul* (a shallow draft ferry in which sailors were billeted in hammocks) and hit the brick wall immediately adjacent to the *Kuttabul*. It was the concussion and debris from the explosion on the sea wall that actually sank the ship. Also damaged was the Dutch submarine, K-9, which later was towed to a safe anchorage and repaired. All of this happened on 1 June 1942.

The naval battles in the Coral Sea, which took place from 4 to 8 May 1942, and at Midway from 4 to 7 June, followed by the land battles at Milne Bay and along the Kokoda track in New Guinea from July to November of that year, dissuaded the Japanese from staging a land attack on Australia, although brief reconnaissance landings had taken place at two locations. The Japanese objective was to disrupt shipping, communications and supplies to Americans.

## **Disruption of Coastal Shipping**

Following the failure of the midget submarine attack, the mother submarines were ordered to disrupt shipping along the Australian east coast. Thus, from 3 June 1942, a series of attacks took place around the coast, mainly, but not only, on the east coast. On 3 June, two ships were sunk off Norah Head, *Age* and *Iron Chieftain*. On 4 June, another two, *Barwon* and *Iron Crown*, were sunk around Montagu Island.

Japanese munitions for their deck guns, and the guns themselves, were not very good. Many guns were from earlier wars and were very old; they had no range finders nor were they radar controlled. This explains why the surface action against the merchantman, *Echunga*, on 5 June was not successful. It also explains why only 4 of 10 rounds fired at Rose Bay and Bellevue Hill, in Sydney's eastern suburbs, exploded during an attack on 8 June. Also on that date, submarine I-21 opened fire on the port of Newcastle with 24 shells, but seven of these failed to explode.

On 9 June, I-24 had a deck-gun action against a cargo-passenger liner. The ship was hit and the bridge was set on fire, but it escaped at a speed of 12 knots. The next attack was on 12 June when I-21 attacked the cargo ship, *Guatemala* (5967 tons), firing 10 rounds from the deck gun, but the ship was not damaged. However, on 13 June at 0115 hours, I-21 fired her last torpedo at the luckless *Guatemala* which sank 45 miles north-east of Sydney Heads.

A week after shelling Newcastle, I-21 engaged an American cargo vessel and expended 60 rounds from her deck gun with no result. After two hours of effort, the ship was finally sunk with a torpedo.

### Unrestricted Submarine Attacks in Australian Waters

On 22 June 1942, Japan's Naval General Staff issued Imperial Directive No. 107. There was to be unrestricted submarine attacks on all enemy shipping around Australia and the Indian Ocean.

During the month of June 1942, Captain Sasaki's flotilla sank three ships aggregating 14,132 tons in Australian waters, while Rear Admiral Ishizaki's flotilla sank 16 ships in the Indian Ocean totalling 76,123 tons.

In late July 1942, they resumed their attacks on the east coast. Their 3<sup>rd</sup> Submarine Squadron had immediate success. I-11 struck a double blow off Jervis Bay on 20 and 21 July. She sank the *George S Livanos* first and then an American ship, *Coast Farmer*. The next day, I-24, which had launched one of the midget submarines, claimed the American freighter, *William Dawes*, also in the Jervis Bay area.

SS *Allara* defied all the rules on 23 July off Newcastle. She was attacked by I-174, which fired two torpedoes. The first missed the ship's bows and the second hit the stern, blowing off the propeller and a portion of the stern. She refused to sink and a third torpedo was fired, but it too missed. Although the crew of the freighter abandoned ship, they later reboarded and the ship was towed to port by a naval escort. I-169 sank the Dutch cargo ship, *Tjinegra* (9,227 tons), 90 miles south-west of Noumea later that month.

The final sinking by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Submarine Squadron on the east coast took place off Moruya at 0045 hours on 3 August 1942 when a 223-ton fishing trawler, *Dureenbee*, was sunk by gun fire. The next day, in the Indian Ocean, an unsuccessful attack was made on the Australian passenger liner, *Katoomba*. On 6 August, the former Burns Philp trading vessel, *Mamuta*, was shelled at close range 400 miles south-west of Port Moresby. Her crew of 32 and 82 passengers were machine-gunned in the water. There were no survivors.



HMAS *Arunta*

[Photo: Australian War Memorial negative AWM300202]

Another Burns Philp ship, the 3310 ton *Malaita*, was sunk as she entered Port Moresby harbour. HMAS *Arunta* was quickly on the scene and submarine RO-33 was sunk with depth charges. This was the second conventional enemy submarine to be sunk in Australian waters. The first success was off Darwin on 20 January 1942 when HMA Ships *Deloraine*, *Katoomba* and *Lithgow* sank the Japanese submarine I-124.

Australia had a brief respite from Japanese attacks for the last three months of 1942 when all available submarines were sent to the Solomon Islands to attack allied ships off Guadalcanal and Tulagi where they had considerable success.

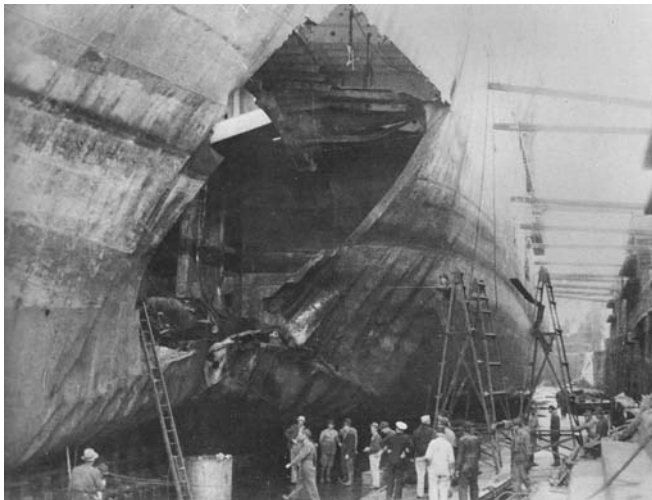
On 12 January 1943, submarine I-165 surfaced a few miles off Port Gregory near Geraldton, Western Australia, and fired 12 rounds into the area.

### Third East-Coast Submarine Campaign

The third Japanese submarine campaign on the east coast commenced on 17 January 1943 when I-21, another participant in the midget submarine attack on Sydney, sank the 2047-ton cargo vessel, *Kalingo*, 110 miles east of Sydney. The next day, the same submarine torpedoed the 9860-ton tanker, *Mobilube*, 60 miles off Sydney. The ship did not sink, nor did it explode. She was taken into tow and arrived safely in Sydney. On the same day, the I-21 torpedoed the wool carrier, *Peter H Burnett*. The crew abandoned ship, but later returned and the ship was repaired at Cockatoo Dockyard.

I-21 was not happy – one vessel for three hits! Its fourth torpedoing was an iron ore carrier, *Iron Knight*, which was in a convoy of ten vessels and was escorted by HMA Ships *Mildura* and *Townsville*. The attack took place 21 miles off Montagu Island on 8 February 1943. Two days later, *Starr King*, a 7176-ton cargo ship, was torpedoed twice. I-21 then returned to Truk Island for replenishment. There were no more submarine attacks for two months. The next recorded attack occurred on 11 April 1943, when the 4742-ton Yugoslav iron-ore carrier, *Recina*, sank with all hands on board.

A new flotilla of submarines arrived off the east coast in early April 1943, comprising five submarines: I-26, I-174, I-177, I-178 and I-180. On 25 April, the sugar carrier, *Konarra*, on her way from Brisbane to Townsville, was struck by a torpedo. Fourteen hours later, I-26 struck again

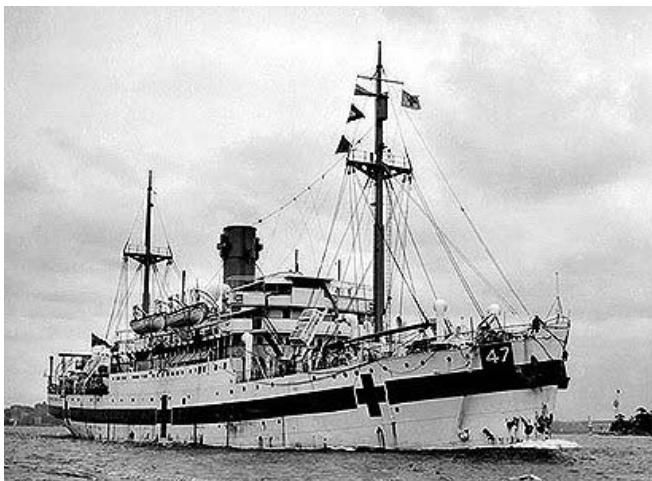


The *Peter H. Burnett* at Cockatoo Dockyard for repairs  
 [Photo: Australian War Memorial negative AWM305901]

sinking the cargo vessel, *Limerick*, which was in an escorted convoy.

I-177 claimed the Liberty ship, *Lydia M Childs*, 90 miles east of Newcastle on 27 April 1943. I-180 sank the cargo ship, *Wollongbar*, off Port Macquarie on 29 April. The crew of 32 went down with the ship. On 7 May, the same submarine claimed her second victim, the Norwegian cargo vessel, *Fingal*, off Nambucca Heads. On 12 May, two ships were struck by torpedoes: the passenger-cargo ship, *Ormiston*, which was holed; and the cargo vessel, *Caradale*, which was not damaged because the torpedo failed to explode. Both of these attacks were by I-180.

Two days later, the hospital ship, *Centaur*, was torpedoed with the loss of 268 personnel, which included 223 medical personnel. This was the greatest individual loss of life from any submarine attack around the Australian coast. The ship sank within two or three minutes of being hit. I-178 was believed responsible for the attack. It was later sunk off the Solomon Islands by the American destroyer, USS *Patterson*.



Hospital Ship *Centaur*  
 [Photo :Courtesy Kangaroo Press]

Submarine I-174 carried out the last attacks on the Australian coast. On 29 May 1943, she fired two torpedoes at the Liberty ship, *Sheldon Jackson*, but both torpedoes

missed. She later engaged the 4113-ton American ship, *Edward Chambers*, with gunfire south-east of Cape Moreton. The ship returned fire and the submarine broke off the action. On 16 June, I-174 again attacked a convoy firing two torpedoes. She missed the American cargo ship, *Portmar*, with the first shot, but hit LST<sup>1</sup> 469 which was later taken in tow and safely brought to Coffs Harbour. The second torpedo hit the *Portmar*, which sank almost immediately with her cargo of petrol and munitions.

### Conclusion

In thirteen months of action on the east coast of Australia, Japanese submarines sank a total of 18 ships of an aggregate tonnage of 79,608 tons. Another 15 were attacked but failed to sink. The cost of lives of allied seamen was 605. Not one Japanese submarine, apart from the midgets, was sunk by Allied warships in the main target area off the east coast.

Whilst this grim statistic may look very bad for the Allies, we must remember that during this period not one ship of greater than 10,000 tons was sunk, and this at a time when the world's greatest liners, *Queen Mary*, *Queen Elizabeth*, *Aquitania*, *Ile de France*, *Mauretania* and *Andes* passed through the waters where the submarines were operating.

There was one more submarine attack – in 1944 on Christmas Day. A German long-range U-boat sank the American Liberty ship, *Robert J Walker*, south-east of Jervis Bay. Why anyone would sail 10,000 miles on a round voyage to sink one ship will never be known.

With Japan and Germany withdrawing their forces to defend their homelands, there were no more submarine attacks around Australian waters.

### Literature Consulted

- Carruthers, Stephen L. (2006). *Japanese submarine raiders 1942: a maritime mystery* (Casper Publications: Narrabeen, NSW).
- Department of Veteran's Affairs (2006). *Australia's home defence 1939–1945* (Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra).
- Lind, Lew (1996). *Toku Tai: Japanese submarine operations in Australian waters* (Kangaroo Press: Roseville, NSW).
- Wikipedia: Axis naval activity in Australian waters [at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Axis\\_naval\\_activity\\_in\\_Australian\\_waters](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Axis_naval_activity_in_Australian_waters), accessed on 11 July 2012].

**The Author:** Brian Swan joined the Royal Australian Navy as an apprentice shipwright in 1956. He was promoted to sub-lieutenant in 1965. Following sea and shore postings, he was cross-trained to marine engineering and had engineering postings to HMA Ships *Torrens*, *Stuart*, *Melbourne* and *Hobart*. Promoted to captain in 1985 he served as Director of Naval Service Conditions for three years in which posting he was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia. He commanded the training establishment HMAS *Nirimba* in 1989-90 and retired in 1991.

<sup>1</sup>Landing Ship Tank