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Not shunned by the Navy: the strange story of HMAS *Armidale*'s Lieutenant Commander David Richards

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For many years a story of how the Royal Australian Navy badly treated the commander of HMAS Armidale *after his ship was sunk has been promulgated. But it now seems this is not true. Commander David Richards RD RANR was, despite stories to the contrary, an honoured and respected member of the Royal Australian Navy.*

Key words: HMAS *Armidale*; Lieutenant Commander David Richards; Royal Australian Navy.

The Loss of HMAS *Armidale*

Australia's naval personnel know this Word War II tale. The corvette *Armidale* was sunk by overwhelming fire from Japanese aircraft. While she was sinking fast, Ordinary Seaman Teddy Sheean went back to his Oerlikon 20mm anti-aircraft gun and manned it to the end, even as the ship went down beneath him. Sheean was awarded a mention-in-despatches, but many think he should have received the Navy's first Victoria Cross.

Armidale was sunk south of Timor after an operation emanating from Darwin. A variety of small ships were supporting operations into the islands of what is now Indonesia and Timor. On 1 December 1942, *Armidale* was lost in a short sharp action. Japanese Zero fighters and Betty bombers attacked her in the early afternoon with overwhelming force and hit her with at least one or maybe two deadly torpedoes.

The Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff's memorandum to the Chief of Naval Staff at the time says that 100 personnel were killed. These were: "Two officers and 38 men of the Royal Australian Navy" and "Two officers and 58 men of the Netherlands East Indies Military Forces" according to the Board of Inquiry report (NAA 1: 4) – that totals 100 men lost. However, new research by John Bradford shows it was actually 62 members of the Dutch forces (Lewis 2016).

HMAS *Armidale* in Port Moresby in World War II
[Source: Royal Australian Navy]

The survivors took to the ship's boats and rafts. There was a long delay in search and rescue operations mainly as it was assumed the sunken *Armidale* was maintaining radio silence as ordered. A search was commenced two days after the sinking.

On 6 December, 17 naval personnel including the commanding officer of *Armidale*, Lieutenant Commander David Richards, in *Armidale*'s motorboat were rescued by the corvette HMAS *Kalgoorlie*. Following air sightings, the *Armidale*'s whaler with 29 men on board was rescued two days later.

However, another group of other survivors on a large raft was never seen again after being located by an aircraft. It is probable they died of exposure to the sun and a lack of food and water.

The Aftermath

An inquiry was held into the *Armidale*'s sinking: normal practice in such situations. It was a straightforward affair. The conclusion was that "all reasonable steps were taken and that the actions of the Commanding Officers were correct", referring to the ships present: *Armidale, Kuru, Castlemaine* and *Kalgoorlie* (NAA 1).

Over time it has been suggested that Lieutenant Commander Richards was victimised by the Navy for the loss of his ship. The reasoning behind this is unknown: if Richards was found to be correct in his actions – by the Navy – then why would the Navy seek to suggest otherwise by denying him further commands?

How did the story that Richards was shunned come about? It probably evolved in a number of ways.

The survivors of the *Armidale* were scattered by time and tide after their recovery. Some were injured; all were exhausted by their ordeal in the ship's boats. They

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were, however, still members of the Navy, and they were separated by necessity. Many were hospitalised. Many were sent south from Darwin. Others stayed for the subsequent Inquiry. They were taken into other ships' companies – posted – and tossed about by the needs of the force. If they ever saw each other again it would be a matter of luck and whether they wished to organise it themselves. Therefore an accurate picture of the career of their former commander never eventuated.

If this seems harsh by the standards of today's world, then it pays to ponder how times have changed and how hard Australia was fighting – for its life. 1942 was a terrible year: the force had lost ships large and small – from the cruiser HMAS *Perth*, to the destroyer *Voyager*, to the sloop *Yarra*, to the tiny lugger *Mavie* – all lost in northern waters to overwhelming Japanese force. The loss of life was measured in the thousands. The previous year the RAN had suffered what is still its biggest disaster of all time: 645 men sunk without trace on board HMAS *Sydney* off the Western Australian coast in battle with the raider *Kormoran*. At the height of World War II there was no time to do more than what was physically necessary for the men of *Armidale*.

Frank Walker's Book

Much later, a journalist named Frank Walker wrote a book entitled *HMAS* Armidale: *the ship that had to die* (Walker 1990). It was released in 1990, nearly 50 years after the action. Many of the *Armidale*'s survivors had passed on, but Walker interviewed several. Although the account is factual, a tinge of bitterness begins to creep in, and it soon dominates. Walker alleges more than just Richards not being given another command. He entertains, without evidence, that:

- survivors on the life-raft may have been taken on board a Japanese warship and executed;
- Japanese aircraft found them and machine-gunned them all;
- Dutch soldiers killed all of the Australians for the raft's food and water;
- unnamed naval personnel from the *Armidale* were treated badly as survivors, without proper issue of new clothing; and
- the Navy minimised any publicity to protect its senior officers.

Walker said of Richards that he: "… was never given another naval command" (Walker 1990: 99) implying that this was a sign of the Navy's displeasure over his handling of *Armidale*. He then goes into some detail:

> "… there was never any award or recognition for *Armidale*'s captain, Lieutenant Commander Richards … The lack of an award would not have worried the modest, self-effacing Richards, but what really hurt him what that although he was soon physically fit again the Navy refused to give him another command. Several members of the crew had asked could they serve under him again and he had agreed, not knowing that they would never get the chance. He grieved over that until he died in 1967."

We do not know the accuracy of these statements. The names of the crew members are not given. Nor is there a record of anyone's interview or communication of any sort with Richards.

But the allegation has been repeated many times. Crew member Rex Pullen, writing about his experiences later, remembered: "Our wonderful Skipper, Lieutenant Commander Richards, wasn't given another command."[2] The allegation has also been acknowledged unwittingly, because it was presumed his allegation was correct. For example, the historian Tom Frame, former naval officer, Bishop of the Defence Forces, and ethicist, acknowledged it in the *Journal of the Australian Naval Institute* in 1991 (Frame 1991):

> "Walker makes three serious allegations about the subsequent handling of the loss of *Armidale*. First, he asks why no medals were ever awarded to *Armidale* survivors. Second, why Sheean was only mentioned-in-despatches, and third, why the commanding officer of *Armidale*, Lieutenant-Commander Richards, did not get another command. His answer to all three questions is that the Navy wanted to cover up the loss.
>
> I cannot answer the questions he raises. For what it is worth, I find what actually happened incomprehensible and very unfortunate. However, to suggest it amounted to a cover-up or that the RAN was actively responsible is unwarranted."

Frame was only reviewing the book, and as such had no duty to check every fact asserted. But the allegation became accepted. Websites such as *U-Boat Net* also repeat it by not listing Richards' other commands, although someone there has noted he was promoted commander.[3]

Richards' Service Record

In my research for *Honour Denied* (Lewis 2016), Richards' Service Record was recovered from the National Archives of Australia. Lieutenant Commander Richards was indeed given other sea-going commands. His Service Record lists his appointments, including *Armidale* and beyond. He was next appointed to the corvette *Katoomba* as commanding officer, but this was cancelled – the reason has not yet been found. He served at the shore base *Moreton* as naval berthing

[2] *The Gun Plot*. Website. "Survival at sea: In the whaler after the sinking of HMAS *Armidale* in 1942. A personal account by Rex Pullen." http://www.gunplot.net/main/content/hmas-armidale-survivors-story. Accessed June 2013.

[3] *U-Boat Net* Website, http://www.uboat.net/allies/warships/ship/3699.html. Accessed June 2014.

officer; and then was posted to Darwin to the base HMAS *Melville* in the same capacity. Later, he was appointed in command to another corvette, HMAS *Burnie*. He then took over command of two identical ships in succession: Landing Ship (Tank) *3022* and *LST 3008*.

The LSTs were big ships, over 2000 tonnes, of 105 metres in length, and designed to carry tanks, artillery, and troops for amphibious landings. They were well defended from air attack by four 40mm Bofors in two twin mounts and six 20mm Oerlikons in two twin and two single mounts (Gillett 1988: 35). Richards probably reflected on this comparison with his lost corvette on occasion.

Lieutenant Commander David Richards RANR
[Source: Royal Australian Navy]

A year and a half after the end of the war, on 31 December 1946, Richards was promoted to full commander. This is significant for two reasons. Post-war, the Navy was contracting sharply, down from its peak of nearly 40,000 personnel to well under 20,000. There was usually no work available for a Reserve lieutenant commander; in fact there was a lot less available for Permanent Force members. It is a myth to think that "the Navy" then and now gazes down from a mountain and bestows favours, god-like, on those it likes, while dispensing thunderbolts to those it doesn't. More likely Richards' combination of experience, availability, and abilities placed him into positions.

But it is most significant that Richards was promoted commander. This is equivalent to the step up from army major to army lieutenant colonel. Most naval officers do not rise above lieutenant commander. To gain the coveted "step" upwards brings with it the conferral of a new cap, this one with gold braid on its peak, hence the expression "brass hat." Again, Navy does not bestow from a pinnacle such favours, but nevertheless the list of promotions was, and is, closely scrutinized by the very senior officers of the force.

If Richards was out of favour generally with the Navy, as Walker implies, it is extremely unlikely he would have been given this promotion. Indeed, this appointment would have been reviewed several times by the most senior figures in the force, and it could have been removed with a pen-stroke, and Richards never told of such an action. That the promotion was indeed promulgated is the reverse of what Walker was suggesting: it even implies the Navy wanted to recognize the officer who had lost *Armidale* in heroic circumstances, and was acknowledging the loss of the corvette, not covering it up.

Richards was also recognised towards the end of the war with the Reserve Decoration on 11 December 1944. This was an honour given for at least 15 years' active duty by officers of the Naval Reserve. It carried the post-nominal "RD". If Richards' career had been tainted by losing *Armidale*, he would not have been given this honour.

So why did Walker persist with his allegation? The answer may lie in the timeline: 1942 *Armidale* action; 1952 Richards retires from the Navy; 1967 Richards dies; 1990 Walker's book published; and 2004 Richards' records opened at the National Archives.

Walker most likely never tried to access Richards' Service Record which certainly was still sealed at the time he published his book. The Archives service has strict rules about opening up records, and the first time one is accessed the date is recorded. It must be doubtful that he ever interviewed members of Richards' family, and it is unknown whether he ever met Richards, although he served in the Navy himself in World War II (NAA 2). The style of his book is to use direct quotes from people he interviewed, and neither of these two possible sources is used.

Conclusion

Commander David Richards RD RANR was, despite stories to the contrary, an honoured and respected member of the Royal Australian Navy. He fought his ship in the highest traditions of a courageous and capable Service.

The Author: Dr Tom Lewis OAM is a military historian. A retired naval officer, his next book *Honour Denied: Teddy Sheean Tasmanian Hero* has just been released (Lewis 2016). It contains much analysis and new revelations about Sheean and the *Armidale* combat action.

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