

BOOK REVIEW:

Honour denied: Teddy Sheean, a Tasmanian hero ... and other brave warriors of the Royal Australian Navy

by Dr Tom Lewis

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Dr Tom Lewis, noted naval historian, has pitched his latest book at a general readership, which is both appropriate to the subject matter and a pleasing development. Readers, even those with a naval background, will learn much about life in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) of the early years of World War II, including some interesting discussions on why young men decided to join the Service, what they could expect of life on the lower deck, rank, promotion and responsibility, and developments in naval warfare, particularly relating to gunnery and anti-aircraft defence.

These form an integral part of the first third of the book, which traces the progress of Edward 'Teddy' Sheean from his family home in Latrobe in northern Tasmania, towards his destiny in the Australian Bathurst-class corvette *Armidale* in the Arafura Sea between Timor and Darwin in December 1942. Readers will also discover that five of Teddy's brothers served during the War, and that he was engaged to a local lass, apparently without the knowledge of his family.

The central part of the book describes Teddy's naval career, his training as a crewman on an Oerlikon light anti-aircraft gun and his joining the ship's company of the newly completed *Armidale* in June 1942. After acceptance trials and working up, the ship was employed as a convoy escort on the east coast of Australia until detached to Darwin in October to join the 24th Minesweeping Flotilla. There the authorities were grappling with the issue of supporting an Australian and Dutch guerrilla force operating in Japanese-occupied East Timor. The major share of the task fell to the Navy and its smaller ships were engaged in shuttling between Darwin and the southern shores of Timor with supplies and personnel in the face of largely-ineffectual bombing and strafing attacks by Japanese aircraft. An operation to relieve part of the guerrilla force launched on 30 November using *Armidale*, another corvette and a small tender was detected by the Japanese within hours of sailing and the ships came under concentrated air attack on passage and while waiting off Timor to land their troops. Ordered to continue the mission despite its compromise, on the afternoon of 1 December, *Armidale* was sunk by a Japanese force comprising bombers and an unexpected weapon – torpedo bombers. Despite being ordered to abandon ship and being wounded, Teddy Sheean resumed his position at one of the corvette's Oerlikon guns and continued firing at the enemy until he went down with the ship.

The final third of the book is devoted to a discussion of whether Sheean's action met (or meets) the criteria

for the award of the Victoria Cross, which Lewis clearly believes it did (and does), instead of the Mention-in-Despatches (MID) which he received posthumously in 1943. In support of this view he discusses the rules surrounding this most prestigious decoration for gallantry and a history of retrospective awards, and provides commentary by a Canadian writer on the apparent reluctance of the British to bestow Victoria Crosses on members of Dominion navies. Lewis also draws parallels between Sheean and similar appeals on the lack of appropriate recognition for the courageous performance of duty by Lieutenant Commander Robert Rankin and Captain Hector Waller when their ships, *Yarra* and *Perth*, were sunk by superior Japanese forces a few months after *Armidale* was lost. He dissects the results of a review of the Sheean case by the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal conducted in 2012 and points up what he regards as inconsistencies in its observations and findings. The Tribunal did not support the retrospective award of a Victoria Cross to any of the naval cases referred to it, but did recommend that Teddy Sheean's courage and sacrifice be recalled through the naming of RAN ships; a Collins-class submarine currently bears his name. However, Lewis and others apparently are prepared to continue the fight.

After several years of research into the background of honours and awards, I join Tom Lewis and the Defence Tribunal in decrying inadequacies and inconsistencies in their administration by the RAN during World War II. However, many RAN people manned guns until killed, drowned or swept off the mounting by the enveloping sea during the Second World War. Except for a Conspicuous Gallantry Medal awarded to Ordinary Seaman Ian Rhodes in the Battle for Crete in 1941, the survivors were awarded Distinguished Service Medals; the dead were recognised with a MID. While respecting Teddy Sheean's spontaneous decision, consider the cool courage of Able Seaman Robert Peet in the cruiser *Australia* at Lingayen Gulf in 1945. Despite half the crew of his 102-mm gun being killed or disabled by a kamikaze aircraft, he joined a scratch crew at another gun and continued to direct the weapon at a second kamikaze before it too crashed into the mounting, leaving him badly wounded.

However, Tom Lewis has posed a question which is worthy of consideration, and I leave it to his readers to make up their minds on whether honour has truly been denied Teddy Sheean.

Ian Pfennigwerth