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The Hospital Ship Centaur

Text and Photo taken from the Sydney Morning Herald of 29th March 2008. Thanks to John Leask for sending me the details.

The discovery of HMAS Sydney has spurred calls to search for another Australian ship destroyed by enemy fire. Tony Stephens, whose father, Britt, was among the hundreds killed on the hospital ship Centaur, reports.



Family's grief ... Ted Leask holds a photo of his father, Malcolm, and the three brothers he lost on the Centaur. Left to right: Harold, Alexander, Malcolm's wife Orba, Malcolm and Henry.

Photo: Glen Mccurtayne

PERHAPS the most bitter irony of World War II for Australians was how the ship that rescued survivors of the German raider Kormoran was later torpedoed and sunk by a Japanese submarine, with the loss of 268 lives.

The story of how the rescuer of an enemy became the enemy's victim reached the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, this week.

The story emerged with the Geosounder's discovery of HMAS Sydney and the Kormoran off the West Australian coast. Descendants of the men who died in the Centaur, the hospital ship sunk in defiance of the conventions of war, have urged Mr Rudd to support a similar search for it.

The Kormoran's destruction of the Sydney on November 19, 1941, taking the lives of all 645 crew, was the

Australian Navy's worst tragedy. The sinking of the Centaur, off the Queensland coast on May 14, 1943, was Australia's greatest wartime disaster in the Pacific.

Seventy-eight Germans died, too, in the Kormoran's clash with the Sydney. But the Centaur, then a merchant vessel, picked up 61 survivors and transported 160 to Fremantle.

Only 63 men – and a nursing sister, Ellen Savage – survived the sinking of the Centaur. Of those, only three, all merchant seamen crew members, are known to be alive today. And of those three, only Martin Pash is in relatively good health. Welcoming the push for a search, Mr Pash said at his home in Melbourne: "It's time the arguments over the Centaur's exact location can be settled and protected."

Ted Leask, of Canberra, lost three uncles when the Centaur went down. Alex, Harold and Henry Leask were all members of the 2/12th Field Ambulance, as was his father, Malcolm. Malcolm would have been on the hospital ship, too, except that he had taken compassionate leave to care for his wife, Orba, and authorities thought that three brothers on one ship in wartime was enough.

Mr Leask said he supported any move for a search, although some of his eight brothers and sisters believe the Centaur should be left alone, somewhere east of Moreton and Stradbroke islands.

The Centaur, painted white with a green band around the hull and illuminated with freshly painted red crosses, was bound for Port Moresby to pick up sick and wounded troops. She now lies in at least 1800 metres of water. In 1990 the Australian government declared the ship a historic wreck and a war grave.

The official Australian War Memorial history records the sinking: "There was no time to launch the lifeboats. Of those who managed to get off the burning ship, some were killed in the water by flying metal, some pulled down by the suction and others burnt by the flaming oil ... Sharks swam round the rafts..."

Under international law, hospital ships were immune from attack. The prime minister, John Curtin, described the sinking as "deliberate, wanton and barbarous". General Douglas MacArthur, commander in chief of allied forces in the Pacific, expressed his "revulsion".

The Japanese finally acknowledged, in an official history in 1979, that Commander Hajime Nakagawa's submarine I-177 was responsible. Nakagawa spent several years in jail as a war criminal for ordering submariners to fire on survivors from torpedoed ships in the Indian Ocean.

Jan Thomas, secretary of the 2/3 AHS Centaur Association, urged Mr Rudd to act while Geosounder, the search vessel, was in Australian waters.

Ms Thomas said that many association members did not want to pursue a search, preferring that the wreck remain undisturbed. But she said: "Now that the technology is available for disturbing shipwrecks at great depth, the association's committee thinks it imperative that the Centaur be adequately protected, and that can only be done when the exact co-ordinates are known."

The "official site", which is protected by the Historic Shipwrecks Act, is 80 kilometres east of Brisbane. This is about 11 kilometres east of that given by Gordon Rippon, the Centaur's second mate, who had been on the bridge only 10 minutes before the sinking. The submarine commander agreed with Rippon. In any case, the strip of

ocean that would be involved in a search is smaller than the area of the Sydney-Kormoran search.

Doug Hoare, whose brother John, of the field ambulance, died in Centaur, has told Mr Rudd that the establishment of a precise location would preclude incorrect “findings”. A “finding” reported on television in 2003 turned out to be the Kyogle, a scuttled merchant ship. This distressed some relatives.

George McGrath, the last survivor of the 2/12th Field Ambulance, died in 2006. Dick Metcalf, the last of the medical staff, died in February.

The known surviving crew, with Mr Pash, are Bob Westwood and Matt Morris.

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