

# MERCHANT NAVY NEWS

Newsletter of the Merchant Navy Association and the  
Merchant Navy Chapter of Forestville RSL sub-Branch NSW

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TO FOSTER THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE SEA

## WITHOUT SHIPS - NO VICTORY



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### WITHOUT SHIPS—NO VICTORY

The Steel Industry's Part in Australia's Efforts to Meet the Demand for Shipping

By F. G. D.

IN this truly global war one paramount requisite for Allied victory is shipping. Despite the amazing development of aerial transport services, the task of moving men and munitions, maintaining supplies and communication and transporting and conveying precious cargoes of life-sustaining foodstuffs devolves upon ships of many types and tonnages.

SHIPS will also be the need of the post-war era. They will be required in the transport of food and materials for the rehabilitation of war-devastated areas, for the return to their own countries of the hundreds of thousands of prisoners in Allied hands, and the repatriation of our own prisoners of war. Resumption of international trade, with its wealth of import and export traffic, and the expected renaissance of tourist travelling are activities sure to make a heavy call on shipping.

All these factors encourage the belief that the shipbuilding industry should enjoy a busy post-war period. Here in Australia during the war years a shipbuilding industry of generous proportions and proven ability has been developed. Possibly not so economically based to battle for business as certain American and Far Eastern shipyards, the Australian shipbuilder nevertheless can confidently look forward to gaining all the customers he can comfortably handle.

Back in the dark days of 1918, the U boat menace brought England uncomfortably close to starvation. That experience carried its dire lesson; a lesson so obviously patent to the Nazis that they based much of their



Three fine examples of the Australian shipbuilding industry's productivity are illustrated on this page. Above is H.M.A.S. "Salmon," a Tribal class destroyer, shown after launching at Cockatoo Dockyard, Sydney. Inset above is H.M.A.S. "Whyalla," a novel patrol vessel and the first ship built at Whyalla shipyard. At left is A.S. "Iron Duke," a 3,000-ton freighter photographed just prior to launching at Whyalla.

grand strategy on the successful resumption of their submarine campaign in World War II. Bigger and better ocean-going submarines operating from scores of bases on the Nazi-held European coastline combined to make the enemy onslaught on Allied shipping a most formidable danger.

The significance of the enemy's devastat-

ing attacks on our shipping was brought prominently before us by Mr. Winston Churchill, who, on many occasions in the early stages of the war, singled out the U boat menace as the Allies' greatest peril. Fortunately, praiseworthy co-operation by sea and air power, plus several inspired scientific discoveries, notably radio location, materially



*Seasons Greetings to All*

This was the title given to a lead article in the BHP Review in 1944. The author spoke of shipping as a “paramount requisite” for the Allied effort during World War II, and indeed for post-war rehabilitation and repatriation.

In 1995 the “Australia Remembers” campaign focused on the many different aspects of the war for people fighting in the field and for civilians at home. At this time of reflection, we look back on the contribution that our ships and seaman made as part of Australia’s wartime merchant fleet.

At the beginning of World War II, BHP had eight Iron ships in its fleet which were supplemented by chartered vessels. The Iron ship fleet consisted of four E-class vessels – Iron Knob, Iron Master, Iron Prince and Iron Warrior – purchased during the period 1923 to 1925, and four Scottish built “Chieftain” class steamers – Iron Baron, Iron King, Iron Knight and Iron Chieftain – bought in 1936 and 1937.

When war began, BHP’s main shipping trades were carriage of South Australian iron ore and Tasmanian limestone to BHP’s two steelworks in Newcastle and Port Kembla and of steel products and coal for markets in Victoria and South Australia.

Under Managing Director Essington Lewis, BHP had already commenced preparations in case war did break out. For example, in early 1939 work began to strengthen the “Chieftain” class ships so that they could carry gun platforms. And, when war began, the blast furnace at Whyalla was already being built, in part as a defensive measure in the event of war.

### **Wartime precautions**

Once the war began, the company painted out its ships’ names for security reasons. By 1942 the strengthening work had been carried out across the fleet, and guns were mounted aft. Initially, three inch twelve-pound guns (some from the Boer War) and Oerlikons and Vickers machine guns were installed.

Gun crews were chosen from the ship’s company and usually comprised four seamen and the ship’s two apprentices. The Navy provided each ship with a Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships (DEMS) gunner and a Naval Signal Rating.

Other wartime measures for the ships included:

- Paravane booms were fitted to ships' bows, and degaussing gear was installed to protect against mines.
- Lifeboats were swung out during sailing to be ready at a moment's notice.
- Four rigid lifeboats carrying food, water-tanks and rescue equipment were fitted at the foremast and mainmast rigging on sloping ramps, ready for quick launching.
- All ships were painted in two shades of grey.

From mid-1942, with Japanese submarines attacking many merchant ships, all ships over 1200 gross tons with speeds of less than 12 knots were obliged to travel in convoys. From 1943, ships including BHP's were fitted with a greater variety of armaments, including Bofors guns, rockets and fast aerial mines.

### **Shipbuilding**

On 15 December 1939, the Secretary of the Naval Office wrote to BHP asking that the company consider building ships for the British Admiralty at Whyalla. BHP replied the same day that they were ready to start. Three slipways were soon under construction, while two more were added within twelve months. The shipyard's employees, many of whom had come to Whyalla from Scotland, could turn out quality ships faster than any other yard in Australia.

The keel plates for the first ship were laid in July 1940. The ship was the first of four "Bathurst" class minesweepers built by BHP for the Royal Australian Navy, was launched in May 1941 and named HMAS Bathurst.

Before the war, Whyalla Shipyard had launched four minesweepers, two vessels for BHP's own fleet, and four "River" class freighters for the Australian Shipbuilding Board.

Having proved its value in war, the shipyard was an invaluable asset for BHP, and Australia in meeting post war shipping demands. Over the 38 years of its life, the yard launched 66 vessels of almost 1.2 million DWT.



## *WITHOUT SHIPS - NO VICTORY*

### **Losses**

At 2230 hours on 3 June 1942, Iron Chieftain was torpedoed and sunk en route from Newcastle to Whyalla while carrying iron ore for the blast furnace and construction materials for the new shipyard. The ship sank some 35 miles east of Sydney. Twelve seamen lost their lives.

The second of BHP's ships to be lost was the Iron Knight, torpedoed at 0230 hours on 8 February 1943. Leading a convoy of ten ships from Whyalla to Newcastle, the Iron Knight was fully laden with iron ore. The ship was struck under the bridge while sailing about 15 miles north-east of Montague Island, New South Wales. Thirty-six lives were lost in this tragedy. All told, 48 people were lost in the sinking of these two ships from BHP's own Iron ship fleet.

Chartered ships were not immune from the dangers. Scott Fell's Iron Crown, en route from Whyalla to Port Kembla, was sunk on 4 June 1942 off Cape Howe, Victoria. Of the 43 men on board, 38 were lost.

On 11 April 1943, the Yugoslav-owned Recina, carrying ironstone from Whyalla to Newcastle, was also torpedoed off Cape Howe, 22 men being lost when the ship sank. These two chartered ships carrying iron ore for BHP took with them 60 men when they sank.

Between November 1940 and December 1944, a total of 40 Australian and Allied merchant ships were hit within 500 miles of the Australian coast, with 29 of them being sunk.



## **Commemoration**

Following the war, Essington Lewis spoke for many Australians when he praised the merchant seamen of BHP's fleet, especially those who had died as a result of enemy action. He pointed out that "without the effort of these mariners the work of the steelworks could not have gone on."

The capability of Australian industry to respond and play a part in the Allied victory would not have been possible without the merchant seamen of BHP and other Australian and Allied vessels.

"We all have a sense of loss in the magnificent ships that went down, but we have been more or less able to replace them, Unfortunately, not act of ours can replace the valiant men who went down with the ships. They did their duty very well indeed."

These words came from a speech given by Essington Lewis at Newcastle Steelworks wharf in August 1950, at the dedication of a memorial to the men lost on the Iron Chieftain and the Iron Knight.

In the wider community, the last fifty years generally have not brought merchant seamen in Australia and other nations the recognition their bravery and sacrifice deserved.

We can all redress some of that oversight. As we reflect on the contributions to World War II victory made by so many people in so many ways, we can all remember with special gratitude, the brave effort of our merchant mariners.

Much of this article is based on Chapter 9 "Acts of War", in our company history 'The iron Ships' a Maritime History of BHP, written by Denis Riley and edited by Dale Crisp (1992). Photographs and documents are provided courtesy BHP Archives.



S.S. River Murchison

## WITHOUT SHIPS - NO VICTORY



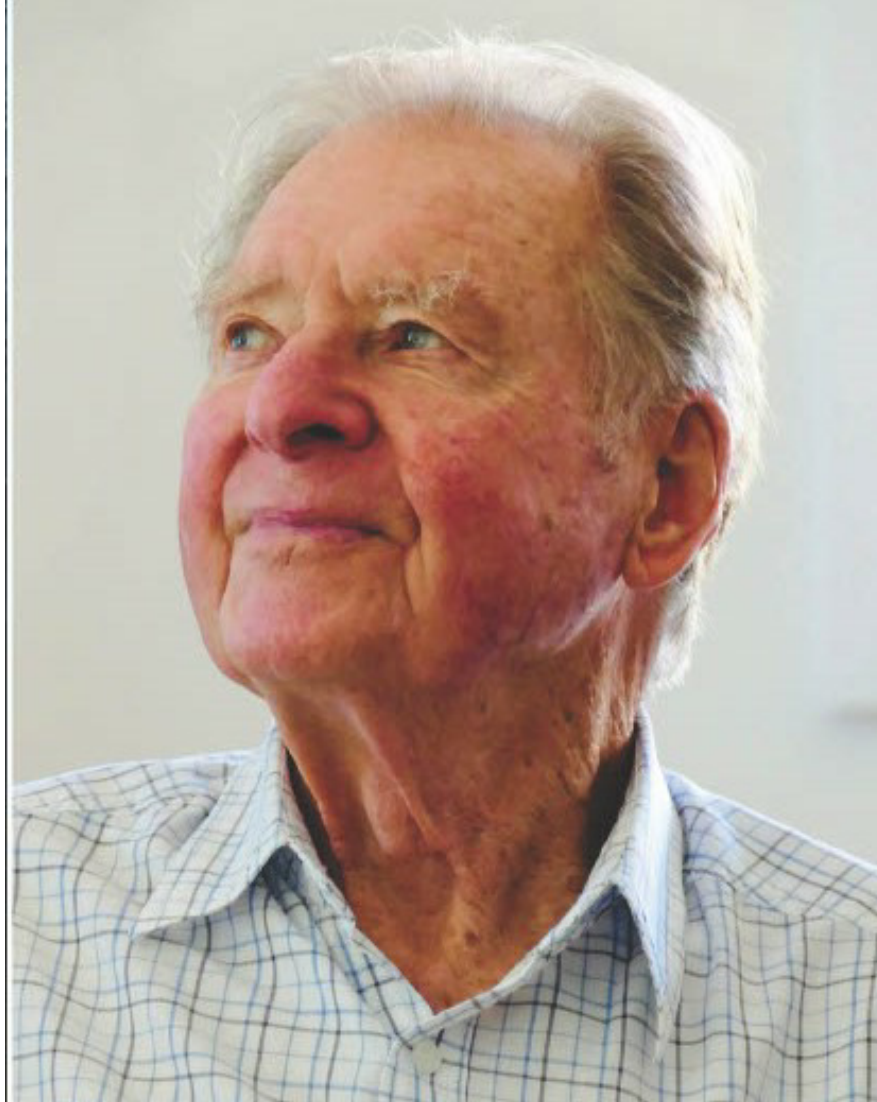
Photo: [warmemorialsregister.nsw.gov.au](http://warmemorialsregister.nsw.gov.au)

On the afternoon of 16 August 1950, at the Steelworks Wharf Newcastle, Essington Lewis unveiled a memorial to the men of the Iron Chieftain and the Iron Knight who lost their lives through enemy action.

In his address to those present, who included more than 100 relatives and friends of the fallen Lewis said:

“These men died as a result of enemy action. Their duty was to bring iron ore and limestone to the Works so that steel could be made to enable us to make munitions for the war. It was a very important duty...without the effort of these mariners the work of the Steel Works could not have gone on. They transported during World War II some 13 million tons of iron ore and limestone.

Source: BHP Transport Journal - *IRONSHIPS* June 1995 and *The Iron Ships: A Maritime History of BHP*, written by Denis Riley and edited by Dale Crisp 1992.



Comrades & Friends,....Today, is now 75 years, marking the end of WW 2 and the horrific toll and suffering it took on humanity.

I would humbly like to share with you some of the events and emotions - indelible in my memory - of how that day passed for me.

Based on Moratai Is, the official Japanese surrender (2 September 1945) was cause for much rejoicing, however, nothing seemed changed until the 9th of September.

A flying boat brought General Blamey and aids from south - my barge brought the General ashore, I asked an aid to be present at the surrender ceremony yes, and what a ideal position we got !.

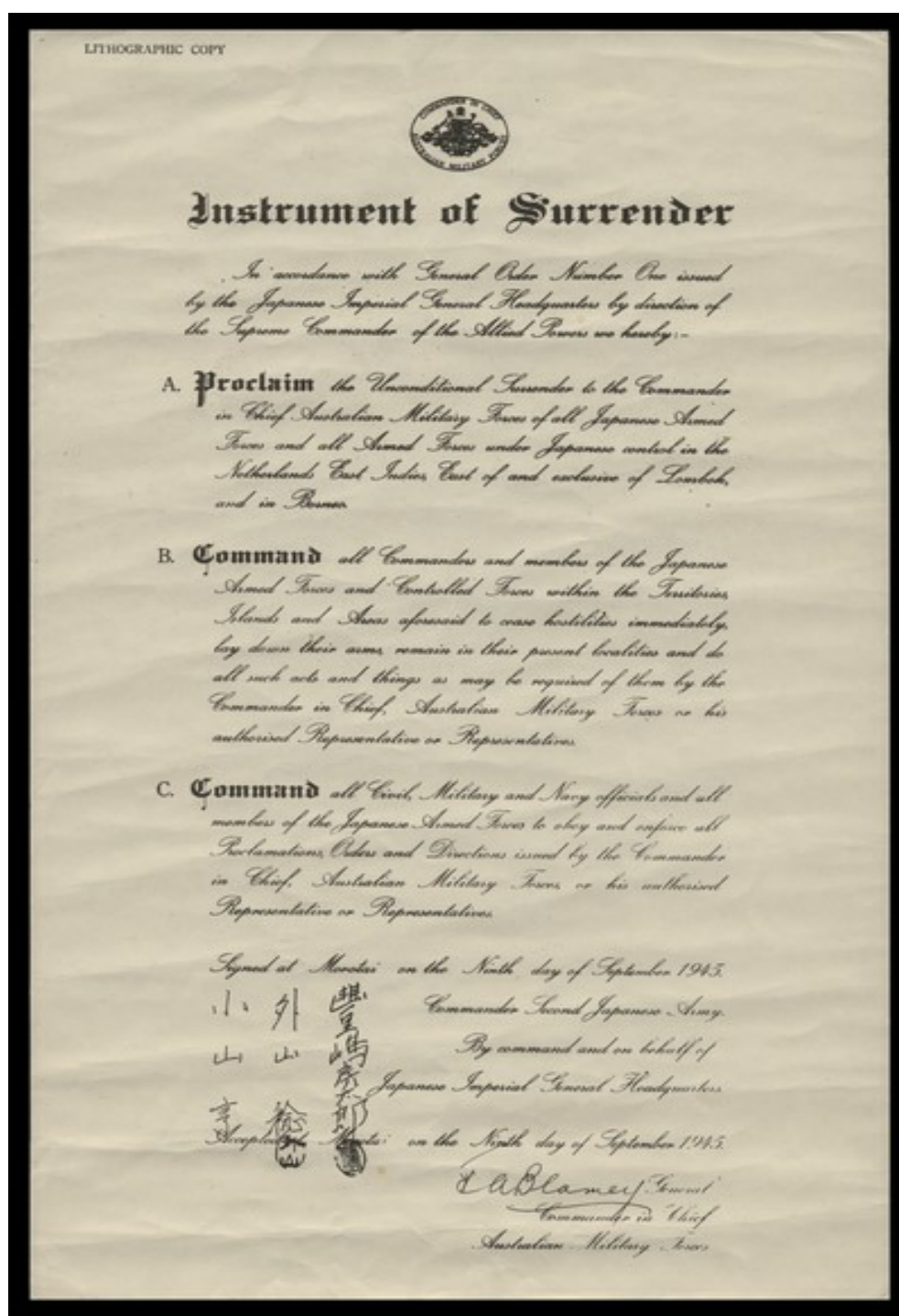
To be brief, it was in a clearing - a large covered table with aids seated - a squad of armed guards - General Blamey, facing east appeared between table and guards



Somehow, the Japanese General appeared marching towards Blamey, his sword across his outstretched arms, hands open - about two paces from Blamey he bowed, stepped forward, Blamey took the sword, holding it by the hilt for some moments before handing it to his aid, the Japanese stepped back, saluted Blamey who returned the salute, both turning toward the table, sitting (I think ) and signing the Surrender Document. ...as for us witnessing this momentous event, we were somber and some of us rolled a smoke....of course, there was more to this, this is the bones of it,.... see below a lithograph copy of the document those of us present we received.

It was only part of a very adventurous day for me, I had been at war for more than 4 I/2 years, 19 years old, and rather reflective that some of my closest comrades were no longer there to share the moment !!!.....

Ray Cox











**TYPE 08**

**32 FOOT SEARCH AND RESCUE LAUNCH.  
POWERED BY TWIN STRAIGHT EIGHT CHRYSLER  
MARINE ENGINES.**

## **Merchant Navy Chapter - Coordinator Merrill Barker**

### **Report from the Chapter Coordinator.**

Merrill Barker advised that our Chapter members listed with Forestville sub-Branch comprise 13 Service and 12 Affiliates. While we still have 15 Associate members, including George Campbell, Don Caporn, Robert Talbott and Fred Walker, present today, they are not documented, due to those members being Service members at other sub-Branches.

Advice was given to the Secretary of Forestville sub-Branch that we would be holding our first Chapter meeting today and these would be scheduled quarterly as previously in February, May, August and November.

Closure arrangements for the M. N. sub-Branch were virtually complete, with only the cancellation of the M. N. bank account yet to be finalised. The account has a “nil” balance, with all remaining funds having been transferred to Forestville sub-Branch some time ago. The account can be closed once we secure the signature of Mr. Bob Harding, the retiring Treasurer, who is still recovering from a long bout of illness.

Merrill has attended meetings with the Forestville committee which have included reports of Chapter progress and specific responsibilities, including the production of the 2023 Chapter budget, discussion regarding the safe storage of Merchant Navy flags and banners, attendance of our members at the official Chapter welcome at the Forestville general meeting on 7 December and the continuation of the Merchant Navy News, in conjunction with the M. N. Association. Merrill confirmed that every effort is being made to have a good representation of M. N. Chapter members attending the official welcome at Forestville on 7 December. It is recognised that many of our members reside in more distant suburbs and other regions, however, I assured them that all members are well aware of the benefits of this new phase of Merchant Navy history.

### **THOSE WHO HAVE CROSSED THE BAR**

**Capt. RAYMOND “RAY” JAMES COX WWII 15/10/2022**

**Capt. JOHN HUMPHREY TOMLINSON 28/08/2022 WWII**

**GEORGE LOCKYER WWII 25/07/2021**

**THEY SAIL FOREVERMORE UNDER THE RED ENSIGN**



## Merchant Navy Chapter - Deputy Coordinator Don Kennedy



As you are aware I supported the decision to close our Merchant Navy RSL sub-Branch and to become a Chapter. Of Forestville sub-Branch. There were two main reasons for this decision. One was the fact that we did not have a treasurer which was an essential requirement and the other was the fact that the annual membership fee paid by our members was completely inadequate at that time.

Some time later RSL NSW decided to discontinue charging members a fee each year but the amount we were previously collecting from our members was less than half of that which was needed just to purchase a few wreaths. Additionally, because we did not have a treasurer on our committee the duties of the treasurer were being handled by our very busy secretary, Merrill Barker. Bob Harding, whose prior service had been as a soldier in the National Service had volunteered to undertake the treasurer's duties over ten years ago when I was facing the prospect of closing the sub Branch. He did so because he told me his father had been a Merchant Navy veteran from World War Two and he did not like to see our sub -Branch close. I very much appreciated his decision and I have acknowledged his role in enabling me to keep the sub -Branch alive and operating in an efficient manner.

The same could be said in relation to Merrill Barker. At one time I did not

have a secretary and it was extremely fortunate and likewise, the generosity of Merrill who stepped in to fill that position when the elderly and very ill Doug Lane retired. Once again it was because Merrill's late father who had a distinguished career in the Merchant Navy including at sea during World War Two.

Due to the ravages of time our numbers of 'service' members had declined and unlike most other RSL sub -Branch's we found it almost impossible to recruit new members because they had to be veterans who had been to sea on a merchant ship during a period of war. That was one essential requirement.

During my time as President I have spoken at services, appeared on TV and written a great many articles about the Merchant Navy. I give credit to the staff at RSL NSW for the wonderful assistance they have afforded me re articles printed in their quarterly magazine 'Reveille'. Some have, at their insistence featured my own wartime service at sea but I always tried to give credit to the role of at merchant navy during the war and in particular to the very large death rate, especially in the 'Battle of the Atlantic'. It is not generally known that the Allied Merchant casualty rate during the war was, on a comparative basis over three times greater than the death rate of the Army Navy and Air Force combined. I have made sure that these figures were well known.

We will now continue as a Merchant Navy organisation by our decision to close the sub Branch and to become a 'Chapter' of a large well run and well -funded RSL sub Branch, Forestville. My decision to support that decision to join Forestville was also because over the past ten years they have given me tremendous support and even declared a small area in their office where they purchased and placed a new filing cabinet for us as being 'MERCHANT NAVY CORNER'.

I have no regrets stepping down from the position of president and will, while I am able, continue to assist Merrill as he takes over the Chapter duties.

We will be a very well -funded chapter and will not need our own committee previously requiring a President, two Vice Presidents, a Secretary and a Treasurer. I assure you I will remain a member and supporter of the Chapter. I also urge all our former sub Branch members to continue to remain members and to give your support to this new venture and also to give our former secretary Merrill Barker your unconditional support.

Don Kennedy OAM JP  
30.11.2022



Cyril George Cocksedg was born in 1934 in Assam, where his father was a Civil Engineer. Still in India, he attended school in Shillong.

He joined Worcester in 1951 leaving after two years, with credits in cricket and boxing, First Class in School, Extra in Seamanship, and as a Badge Cadet . He joined Ellerman Lines, his first ship being the City of Hereford. He became the Hon Sec of Dog Watch to which he made substantial contribution. In his final edition he furnished a fine pen and ink drawing of Worcester 3. During these years he was a regular entrant in the Seafarer Education Service painting competitions. In 1959 he joined China Navigation Company (Swires) where he rose to Command for his last eight years, before leaving in 1975 and moving to live in Sydney. During these years he had met his wife, Sheila, and they had two children Sarah and Ian.

Whilst waiting for a vacancy in Sydney Harbour Pilotage he served as Third Officer for a short time aboard 'Iranda' of the Australian National Line. From Sydney, in 1980 he moved to the Port Kembla Pilotage from where he retired in 1995. He is spoken of highly, both privately and professionally in the difficult job of manoeuvring fully laden Cape Size Bulk Carriers into very tight spaces. He contributed to the feasibility of building Australia's largest vessel, the BHP 250,000 ton bulk carrier "Iron Pacific". It was during these years that fellow Pilot and friend Bryan Hayes (OC 55) recalls that he had heart surgery and whilst probably not impressing his surgeon, the much lauded late Victor Chang, astounded his colleagues by quickly returning to climbing pilot ladders!



In his retirement Cyril was a senior office Holder in the League of Ancient Mariners. He was also a stalwart of the Old Worcesters Association in Australia serving as Secretary for many years. Tireless and efficient, he is remembered by all as a very proud mariner and a good chum. We thank him for his years of dedication.

After Sheila's death in 2018, Cyril moved to be near his son and spent his last few years at a retirement village in Mango Hill, north of Brisbane. He seriously missed any opportunity to talk ships and seafarers and most recently suffered from cardiac issues. In April I received a long and very poignant missive, complete with an evocative pen and ink drawing, from him in response to a Cheer Up card sent on behalf of all his fellow Australian Old Worcesters. In it he had quite clearly seen the breaking swell ahead and he crossed the Bar on May 24<sup>th</sup>. Chris Langford OW 62, also a Queenslander, and a fellow officer in both Ellermans and China Navigation had kept us in touch with his health.

Richard Pocock

This photo of the Iron Pacific was taken by Cyril Cocksedg during his time as a Marine Pilot at Port Kembla





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