



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ARTV09088

ACTIVITY: World War II
CASE: GSAF 1943.05.14
DATE: Friday May 14, 1943
LOCATION: Approximately 50 miles east-northeast of Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.
 27°16.98'S, 153°59.22'E

NAME: Unknown

BACKGROUND

The *A.H.S. Centaur* was a motor passenger ship that had been converted in early 1943 for use as a hospital ship. In November 1941, she rescued survivors of the German auxiliary cruiser *Kormoran* after it was sunk by *HMAS Sydney*.



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Australian Hospital Ship Centaur

On May 12, 1943, the *Centaur* sailed unescorted from Sydney carrying her crew and normal staff, as well as stores and equipment of the 2/12th Field Ambulance but no patients. Two

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days later, at approximately 04h00, her lights were ablaze when she torpedoed and sunk by the Japanese submarine 1-177.

Of the 332 persons on board, only 64 survived. The survivors spent 35 hours on rafts before being rescued. Sister Ellen Savage, the only one of 12 nursing sisters on board to survive, though injured herself, gave great help to the other survivors and was awarded the George Medal for this work.

The hospital ship had been appropriately lit and marked to indicate that it was a hospital ship and its sinking was regarded as an atrocity. The Australian Government delivered an official protest to Japan over the incident. Japan did not acknowledge responsibility for the sinking for many years and the War Crimes Tribunal could not confirm the identify the submarine. It was eventually determined that it was Lt Commander Nakagawa of the Japanese submarine 1-177 who sank the *Centaur*. Lt Commander Nakagawa was convicted as a war criminal for firing on survivors of the *British Chivalry* which his ship had sunk in the Indian Ocean.



Ellen Savage, the only woman to survive the sinking of the Centaur, some months after the incident.

NARRATIVE: Many sharks were cruising amid the rafts and wreckage on which survivors were hanging. At least one man was believed to have been taken by a shark, because he screamed and disappeared from the timber to which he had been clinging.

INJURY: Fatal

SPECIES: Not identified

SOURCES: The Age, Wednesday May 19, 1943, page 1
<https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/centaur/>

JAPANESE TORPEDO HOSPITAL SHIP Without Warning Off Queensland Coast LOSS OF 299 LIVES; ONLY 64 SURVIVORS VESSEL SINKS IN 3 MINUTES

From the Special Representative of "The Age"

SOMEWHERE IN AUSTRALIA, Tuesday.—Within sight of a Queensland coastal light the Australian hospital ship Centaur was torpedoed and sunk, without warning, by an enemy submarine shortly after four o'clock on Friday morning. She sank in three minutes with the loss of 299 lives, including eleven nurses and a large number of medical personnel. There were no patients on board.

Only 64 of the 363 on board were saved. They included 30 of the ship's crew of the merchant marine, one nursing sister of a group of 12, a medical man (Dr. Leslie M. Outridge, of Redland Bay, Queensland) and 32 others. Captain G. A. Murray, of Aberdeen, went down with his ship.

The Centaur was steaming unescorted in clear weather and good visibility on her way from Sydney to Moresby. She was fully illuminated, marked with the Red Cross and complying with all provisions of international law regarding hospital ships in time of war, and must have been deliberately singled out for attack.

The deliberate sinking of the Centaur with such a heavy loss of non-combatant lives—it included 18 doctors—has caused profound distress. The death toll probably exceeds the total number of lives lost in all sinkings off the Australian coast in this war, with the exception of the cruiser Sydney, which was, however, a ship of war and was sunk in an engagement with a German raider in November, 1941, and not an unarmed hospital ship protected by international law.

The sinking, which is the tenth announced from General MacArthur's head quarters since the beginning of the year, is the climax of the submarine campaign referred to



Capt S. L. Thomas (Missing)

in the communique of May 1. The motive for such a dastardly attack cannot but be obscure. It may be part of a terror campaign such as is suggested by General MacArthur's words to-day.

It is recalled that the hospital ship Manunda was struck by bombs at Darwin in a Japanese raid, but at Milne Bay on a later occasion, though Japanese war ships passed almost alongside a hospital ship and attacked shipping and shore installations, the hospital ship was not attacked.

A Japanese hospital ship in Rabaul Harbor was carefully avoided by Allied airmen in raids on the harbor over a long period, and targets close to her were avoided so that she would not be endangered.

Vessel Wrapped in Flames

The Centaur sank so quickly that it was impossible to launch any of the lifeboats. Only one boat was found after she sank, and this was so badly holed that it barely supported two men who climbed in and sat waist deep in water. Those who were saved were afloat on rafts and wreckage.

The ship immediately became a roaring inferno. The decks were a mass of flame, which enveloped the bridge, then caught the spars and rigging. Thick hot oil flooded the sea all round. All who were saved were filthy with it, and the eyes of many were badly affected, but the speed with which the ship's stern reared 60 feet into the air and she dived nose first to the bottom extinguished the flames before they could spread to the floating oil.

As it was many received burns before they could leave the ship, and little could be done for them with the limited resources available on the rafts. One man was so badly burned as to be practically unrecognisable. He died in agony many hours later, and was buried at sea in the rain by his companions on a raft.

Many must have died in the original explosion or in the fire

which trapped them below. Others almost certainly were dragged down with the suction of the sinking ship, and were taken by sharks, because about 150 reached the water. As the ship went down large pieces of debris from her shattered side came bursting to the surface, and one survivor believes some may have been stunned by these objects and drowned while unconscious.

Ironically it was such an object which saved one man's life, because, although it injured his leg, it severed the logline with which he was entangled, and released him.

Sharks Attack

Those who survived remained afloat on little groups of rafts and wreckage for up to thirty-six hours, suffering with thirst and the bitter cold in heavy rain and alternate short bursts of sunshine. They paddled with one pair of oars and pieces of the shattered ship's side. Practically all were scantily clad, having been in their beds when the torpedo struck. Some were completely naked, their night clothes having been torn from them by the suction of the ship as they were dragged down with her, and

brief though the periods of sunshine were while they were afloat, many were sunburned.

One survivor had grabbed a greatcoat as he left his bunk, and Sister Eleanor Savage, of Gordon, Sydney, the sole survivor of the twelve nursing sisters and their matron, declared that this saved her life. She was clad only in torn silk pyjamas, and shared the greatcoat with exhausted Robert Westwood, the youngest member of the ship's company, at fifteen years.

Hordes of sharks cruised round the rafts, and were beaten off with pieces of wood marked with a Red Cross, which were being used as paddles. One shark attacked so fiercely that its nose went right on to a raft. It was beaten off with a spar.

Another shark snapped the end from a colored tin which was thrown into the water. Seven or eight sharks were still nosing about the rafts when later the survivors were picked up by a small Allied vessel, given medical treatment, clothed and fed before being taken ashore. At least one man is believed to have been taken by a shark, because he screamed and disappeared from the baulk of timber to which he had been clinging.