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PAPER NO. 162

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HOSPITAL SHIP CENTAUR

The *Centaur*, 2/3 Australian Hospital Ship, was a motor passenger ship converted in early 1943 for use as a hospital ship. In November 1941 it had rescued survivors of the German auxiliary cruiser, *Kormoran* after it had been sunk by HMAS *Sydney*.

On 12 May 1943 the *Centaur* sailed unescorted from Sydney at 0945 hours carrying her crew and normal staff, as well as stores and equipment of the 2/12th Field Ambulance but no patients. It was sunk without warning by a torpedo from a Japanese submarine on 14 May 1943 at approximately 0400 hours, its position being approximately 50 miles east-north-east of Brisbane, and 24 miles off Stradbroke Island.

Of the 332 persons on board, only 64 survived. These survivors spent 35 hours on rafts before being rescued. Sister Ellen Savage, the only one of twelve 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 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. The Japanese did not acknowledge responsibility for the incident for many years and the War Crimes Tribunal could not identify the responsible submarine. However the Japanese official war history makes clear that it was submarine I 177, under the command of Commander Lieutenant Nakagawa who had sunk the *Centaur*. 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.

The Japanese were evidently trying to blockade the east coast of Australia as the German U-boats had been able to do in north America, but they were never as successful as the Germans.

Nevertheless, by June 1943, the Japanese had sunk 18 ships in Australian waters, including the brightly illuminated hospital ship *Centaur*.

Bro. Don Davis and I have identified some of the New South Wales Freemasons who were among those lost.

There may be others whom we have been unable to identify.

- * Bouchier, Keith Percival. Age 26 NX30448.
Private, 2/12 Field Ambulance
Entered Apprentice Freemason of
Lodge Croydon Park No. 464.
Initiated - 22 April 1943.

- * Bush, George Raymond. Age 31 NX60536
Lance-Sergeant, 2/12 Field Ambulance
Master Mason of Lodge Concord No. 27.

- * Butt, William John. Age 37 NX37749.
Private, 2/12 Field Ambulance
Master Mason of
Lodge Kurri St. George No. 594.

- * McSkimming, Sydney Gordon. Age 38 NX57718.
Lance Corporal, 2/12 Field Ambulance
Master Mason of Lodge Damo No. 536.
Initiated 14 September 1927 in
Lodge Portland Temperance No. 535.

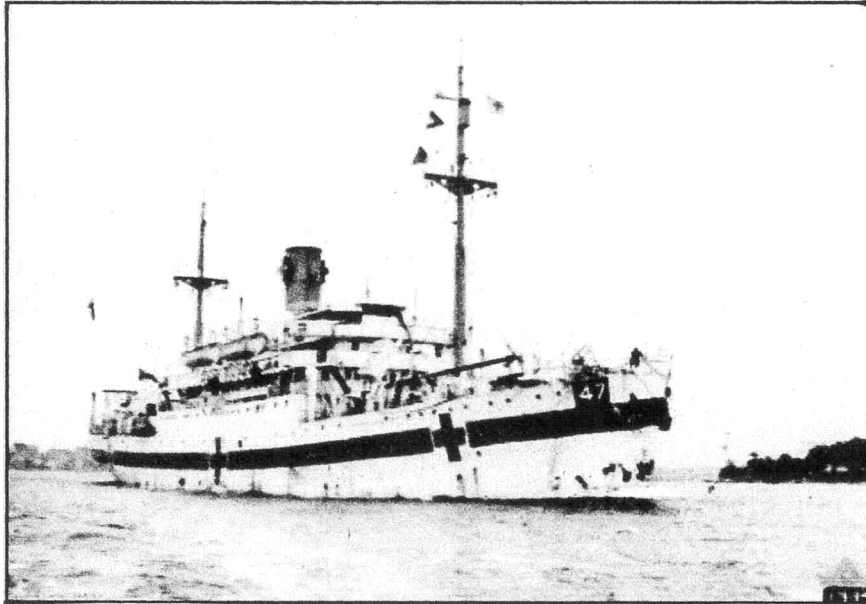
- * Owens, Elmo L.V. Age 37 NX52602.
Private, 2/12 Field Ambulance
Master Mason of Lodge Nepean No. 29.

- * Salmon, Leonard John Henry. Age 29 NX71758.
Private, 2/12 Field Ambulance.
Master Mason of Lodge Antiquity No. 1
Initiated 4 January 1937.

- * Stephens, Harold Britton. Age 34 NX48814.
Private, 2/12 Field Ambulance
Master Mason of Lodge of Truth No. 26.
Initiated 13 December 1941.

- * Wheeler, Norman Edward Wythe Age 32 NX65883.
Lieutenant, 2/12 Field Ambulance
Entered Apprentice Freemason of
Lodge Clairville No. 489.
Initiated 11 May 1943 -
The night before the ship sailed.

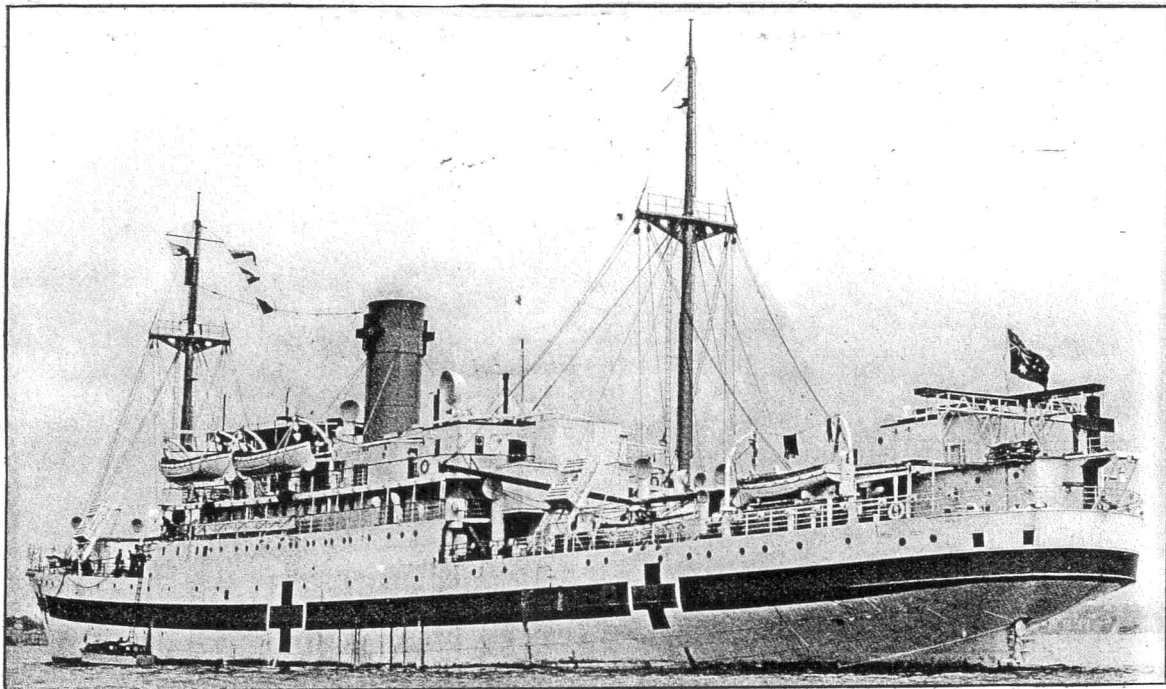
- * Cross, Harry Robert Thomas. Age 43 NX40627.
Corporal, 2/12 Field Ambulance
Master Mason of
Lodge Earl Kitchener No. 308
Initiated 1 September 1927 in
Lodge Robert Rae Dalziel No. 580.



Starboard view of the Hospital Ship *Centaur* in Sydney in 1943.
Note the prominent red crosses and green lines on her hull.

Red crosses are also attached to her funnel.

The *Centaur* was torpedoed and sunk with heavy
loss of life by a Japanese submarine on 14 May 1943.



The stern view of the *Centaur*
clearly showing the Hospital Ship markings.

REFERENCES:

- * Peter Dennis et al., *The Oxford companion to Australian military history* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995)
- * R.D. Goodman, *Hospital ships* (Brisbane: Boolarong Publications, 1992)