



# "Nurungi"

Remembered

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE CONCORD HERITAGE SOCIETY

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#### MEETINGS General Meetings

2nd Wednesday of month  
(except January)  
at 7:30 pm in the  
City of Canada Bay  
Museum  
1 Bent Street, Concord  
9743-3034

#### Executive Meetings

4th Wednesday of month  
at 7:30 pm in the  
Museum  
(all members welcome)

**Walker Estates Committee**  
meets when required.  
Bob Jones, 8765-9347

#### Tours Organiser

Sandra Elliott  
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#### Museum Committee

meets irregularly at the  
museum  
For details contact  
Lorraine Holmes, 9743-2682

#### Oral History Committee

Betty Fletcher, 9713-1384  
Julia Stewart, 8765-9067

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## CITY OF CANADA BAY MUSEUM

1 Bent Street, Concord

Open Wed & Sat  
10am to 4pm

No.165

January 2010

## 2/3 Australian Hospital Ship Centaur

by Jan Thomas

*"We'd had a beautiful evening with a concert on the foredeck but at 4.10am there was a crash and a roar of flames ... then the ship goes down, dragging me with her... Centaur is gone. That's all it takes, about 2-1/2 minutes...: What was it?" says a voice. 'Bloody Japs - a torpedo' says someone. 'Not a bloody hope - God knows how I got out.' Then it all comes flooding back ... I shake all over and vomit fuel oil again"* (from the memoirs of Dick Medcalf, survivor)

Times were good for ship owners in the early 1920s, and the Liverpool-based Ocean Steamship Company, better known as Alfred Holt's Blue Funnel Line, was foremost in expanding its fleet. A tall blue funnel with a black band encircling the top was the hallmark of its vessels, and gave the company its popular name.

Since 1903 one of their ships, *Charon*, had been providing a regular passenger, cargo and livestock service between Fremantle and Singapore, but eventually it became obvious that the elderly *Charon's* days were numbered, and a replacement for her was built at Greenock in Scotland in 1924. In keeping with company policy of naming its ships from Greek mythology, the new ship was christened *Centaur*, and in keeping with company tradition, she had a tall blue funnel despite being a modern motor vessel, driven by a diesel engine, and having no need of a 10.7 metre smoke-stack!

Her life in the eastern Indian Ocean was lucrative for the company but uneventful till one day in 1938 when she answered a distress call from the Japanese *Kyo Maru* which had broken down and was drifting towards the infamous Houtman Abrolhos Archipelago. Captain Murray altered course and threw a line to the stricken vessel then towed it to Geraldton. Compatriots of those rescued would later be responsible

for the loss of *Centaur* with most of her personnel, including Captain Murray.

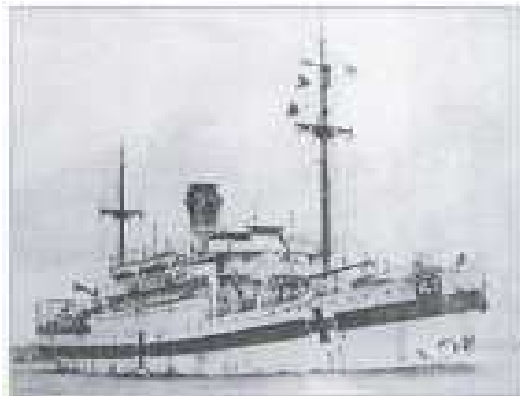
In November 1941 when Britain and Australia were at war with Germany, *Centaur* rescued some of the survivors of the German raider *Kormoran* which sank *HMAS Sydney*. With a couple of flares *Kormoran's* Captain Detmers and sixty one of his crew attracted the attention of *Centaur* which changed course to rescue them. Captain Dark, replacing Captain Murray who was on

shore leave, summed up the situation — a boatload of fully trained sailors of the German Navy with their Captain, whereas *Centaur* had only Merchant Navy seamen expected to learn survival in war by experience. Prudently, Captain Dark allowed the nine sailors who were sick or

injured to come aboard; the rest were towed. When their unseaworthy boat capsized, *Centaur* lowered two of her own for transfer, and safely brought the survivors to Carnarvon. Together with those rescued by *Koolinda*, she transported them under armed guard to Fremantle where they were interned.

As the situation in New Guinea worsened, the need for a new hospital ship with a shallow draught for negotiating tropical waters became urgent. Australia had no Merchant Navy ship capable of being converted to such a specialized vessel and the British Ministry on request placed *Centaur* at their disposal.

In January 1943, *Centaur* was converted in Melbourne into a modern fully equipped and staffed floating hospital, a vessel of mercy, capable of carrying 280 cot cases under tropical conditions in a voyage of eighteen days. She was decked out in the traditional hospital ship colours — wide green band around the pristine white hull, with large red crosses visible from all angles. Her name was painted out. She became officially 2/3



AHS 47, commonly known as 'Centaur', and she travelled unarmed, unescorted, and illuminated at night. Her hospital status was made known to the Axis powers through the League of Nations in Switzerland. Japan received its notification on February 5, 1943.

After several trial runs along the Australian coast to ensure the smooth functioning of the hospital, *Centaur* set out into the war zone carrying Australian and American medical personnel to Port Moresby. Here wounded Australian and American soldiers were taken on board as well as a small number of injured Japanese prisoners-of-war, all destined for Brisbane. *Centaur* then proceeded to Sydney to prepare for her second (ill-fated) voyage. This time she carried the 2/12th Field Ambulance, destination Cairns, for later transfer to New Guinea. They embarked in jungle greens which gave rise to rumours that they were commandoes. All their equipment, minus their ambulances, was loaded in large crates, claimed by the rumour-mongers to be arms and ammunition. Had *Centaur* been allowed to continue her errand of mercy unmolested, those rumours, like so many other wartime rumours, would have long since died. Her fate ensured the doubts would never go away.

She sailed out of Sydney mid morning on Wednesday May 12, 1943, and at 4.10am on Friday May 14, off the South East Queensland coast, she was struck amidships on the port side by a torpedo fired from Japanese submarine I-177, commanded by Hajime Nakagawa. She sank in less than three minutes, taking with her 268 non-combatant lives. After 36 hours, 64 survivors were picked up by the American Destroyer, *USS Mugford*. They were taken to Brisbane and landed late on Saturday May 15, 1943. Nakagawa was never brought to justice

for sinking *Centaur*, though he was tried and convicted of atrocities in the Indian Ocean. In 1979, the Japanese Government belatedly admitted that one of its submarines sank *Centaur*, but it has never accepted responsibility for issuing the order.

After the war, there were too few survivors to form an Association of their own, so they joined with the remaining veterans of the Netherlands Hospital Ship *Oranje AIF* to form the Oranje-Centaur Group. Eighteen of those who lost their lives on *Centaur* had previously served on *Oranje* before the Australian Government pulled Australian personnel out of the Middle East.

For 50 years, families grieved in isolation. Then, with the unveiling of the Memorial at Point Danger on the NSW/Qld border, we began to find each other. The need to stay in touch with people who shared our experience became imperative and we formed the 2/3 AHS *Centaur* Association Inc., for Survivors, Descendants, Relatives, Friends and Organisations interested in *Centaur*.

We aim to honour our dead, to help the healing process by providing a means of communication, to ensure the memory never fades nor the facts be forgotten, to turn a tragedy into a triumph and foster a peaceful and forward-looking attitude.

The whereabouts of *Centaur* are still unknown. Second Mate Gordon Rippon, who survived, took the last sighting ten minutes before the torpedo struck. His estimate is 24 nautical miles ENE of Point Lookout, though the 'official' location is some 7 miles to the east.

A revised location given in 1995, placing *Centaur* in relatively shallower waters nearer to Caloundra, was proved by the RAN on the 60th anniversary to be fraudulent.

*Centaur* has never been declared a War Grave, and her status as an Historic Shipwreck gives her no more protection from predators in peacetime than her vessel of mercy status did in times of war.

Since the finding of *HMAS Sydney*, the Association is mounting a campaign for political assistance and funding to search for *Centaur*. Information as it comes to hand, and calls for assistance from the general public can be found on our website [www.centaur.org.au](http://www.centaur.org.au)

*Jan Thomas, the author of this story, is a Legacy Widow and a former Junior Legatee. She is the daughter of Captain Bernie Hindmarsh, Ship's Medical Staff, who was lost on the Centaur*

References:

*Three Minutes of Time — The Torpedoing of the Australian Hospital ship "Centaur" by A.E.Smith. ISBN 0 646 07631 0*

*Australian Hospital Ship Centaur - The Myth of Immunity by Christopher S Milligan & John C.H.Foley ISBN 0 646 13715 8*

(Printed in Legacy Torchlight, Vol.50, No.2, Winter 2008)

## Centaur Update

Shipwreck hunters confirmed on 20th December that they had found the WWII hospital ship *Centaur*. It is about 30 nautical miles east of Queensland's Moreton Island and 2059m below the surface.

Queensland premier Anna Bligh has stated that the wreck is a significant military gravesite and would be protected by an exclusion zone. She also said that early next year we will look at some type of memorial service where we can finally lay these brave Australins to rest and to rest in peace.

**Note:** *There is a stained-glass window memorial to the Centaur at the main entrance to Concord Hospital*

## Everything I need to know, I learned from Noah's Ark.

1. Don't miss the boat
2. Remember that we are all in the same boat
3. Plan ahead. It wasn't raining when Noah built the Ark
4. Stay fit. When you're 60 years old, someone may ask you to do something really big.
5. Don't listen to critics; just get on with the job that needs to be done
6. Build your future on high ground
7. For safety's sake, travel in pairs
8. Speed isn't always an advantage. The snails were on board with the cheetahs
9. When you're stressed, float awhile
10. Remember, the Ark was built by amateurs; the Titanic by professionals
11. No matter the storm, when you are with God, there's always a rainbow waiting.

## Congratulations to . .

Mervian Dixon, Instructor for the Heart Support exercise group at Concord RSL.

She was the winner of Terry Robinson's delightful painting of the "Abbotsford Point Boat Shed" with purple ticket number 55 in our Christmas Raffle

Thanks also to Terry for kindly donating the painting.

If you were disappointed at not winning maybe you should approach Terry to get him to paint something for you.

## exams, exams, exams, exams.

After scouring exam papers and speaking to teachers, humorist Richard Benson has collected the worst student howlers in a new book; rather than admit defeat in the face of tricky questions, some decide to take a more creative approach to their answers. You won't know whether to laugh - or cry.

What was Sir Walter Raleigh famous for?

He is a noted figure in history because he invented cigarettes and started a craze for bicycles

What did Mahatma Gandhi and Gengis Khan have in common?

Unusual names.

Name one of the early Romans' greatest achievements.

Learning to speak Latin

Name six animals which lived specifically in the Arctic

Two polar bears. ~~Three~~ Four seals.

Assess Fashion House pic's choice to locate its factory near Birmingham. Is Birmingham the right location for this type of business?

No. People from Birmingham aren't very fashionable.

Name the wife of Orpheus, whom he attempted to save from the underworld.

*Mrs. Orpheus*

Where was the American Declaration of Independence signed?

At the bottom

Where was Hadrian's Wall built?

Around Hadrian's garden.

What is a vibration?

There are good vibrations and bad vibrations. Good vibrations were discovered in the 1960s.

What happens to a boy during puberty?

He says goodbye to his childhood and enters adultery.

What is the highest frequency noise that a human can register?

Mariah Carey.

What is the meaning of the word 'varicose'?

Close by.

What is a fibula?

A little lie.

The race of people known as Malays come from which country?

*Malaria*

Explain the phrase 'free press'.

When your mum irons trousers for you.

Why would living close to a mobile phone mast cause ill health?

You might walk into it.

State three drawbacks of hedgerow removal.

1. All the cows will escape

2. The cars drive into the fields

3. There is nowhere to hide.

Joanna works in an office. Her computer is a stand-alone system. What is a stand-alone computer system?

It doesn't come with a chair.

Steve is driving his car. He is travelling at 60m/second and the speed limit is 40 kph. Is Steve speeding?

He could find out by checking his speedometer.

Give a reason why people would want to live near power lines.

You get your electricity faster.

## The Story Behind the Hymn

### "Hark, The Herald Angels Sing"

Charles Wesley is, without doubt, one of the two most productive hymn writers of all time, the other being Isaac Watts.

Strangely enough, Wesley was able to get one hymn poem into one edition of Church of England's Book of Common Prayer, and that one by error!

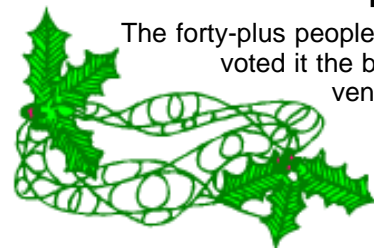
An eighteenth century printer didn't know that the established Church of England frowned upon Wesley's hymns. He had need of material to fill in empty space in the Book of Common Prayer and took it upon himself to insert a Christmas poem called "Hark, How All the Welkin Rings!" by an Anglican Clergyman named Charles Wesley. When the error was discovered, attempts were made to have it removed, but it proved so popular that it was allowed to remain.

This is not the end of the story. "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" well might not have reached its tremendous Christmas popularity if it hadn't been for other twists of fate.

Wesley had called his poem "Hymn for Christmas Day" and it was sung with mild enthusiasm for over a hundred years. It might have slipped gradually into the mist of oblivion if it had not been for a tenor, William Haymen Cummings, who when vocalising on a bit of Felix Mendelssohn's "The Festgesang", noticed how the arrangement was perfect for Wesley's "Hymn for Christmas Day". Re-titled "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing", and strengthened by the powerful music of Mendelssohn, Wesley's hymn became one of his greatest.

(Reprinted from *The Parish Paper of St. Andrew's Strathfield-Concord*, December 1997)

## Christmas Break Up Party



The forty-plus people who joined us on Wednesday, 9th December voted it the best Christmas party we have ever had. Good venue. Fantastic food. Delightful company. What more could you ask?

There were quite a few new faces who joined us for the evening and all voted it a most enjoyable evening. We hope they will be encouraged to become regular visitors.

Our thanks to all those who brought along such a diverse collection of party food, both hot and cold, and to Errol Grace who made sure we had a good variety.

Mark the date on your new 2010 calendar - next year it will also be at the museum and will be on Wednesday, 8th December.

## Out of the Mouths of Babes

A little girl had just finished her first week of school. "I'm just wasting my time", she said to her mother. "I can't read, I can't write, and they won't let me talk!"

On the first day of school a little boy handed his teacher a note from his mother. The note read: "The opinions expressed by this child are not necessarily those of his parents."

On the first day of school, the Kindergarten teacher said, "If anyone has to go to the bathroom, hold up two fingers." A little voice from the back of the room asked, "How will that help?"



## Our Museum needs you!

Calling all members!

You joined our society for a reason, why not become an active part now that we have something worthwhile to show for our efforts.

The museum display is up and running so we now need to concentrate on other aspects.

The major job, at the moment, is to tidy up our two storage areas. This is a job for people with the ability to move heavy objects around.

In the parking bay area there are items of furniture, large metal objects, etc. which need to be tidied and stored correctly.

We have tentatively selected 3 groups of times to do this work. They are

- \* Tues 29/Wed 30 December
- \* Wed 6/Thur 7 January
- \* Wed 13/Thur 14 January

We will meet at 10:00 am to get started on the job.

If you can help on any of these days please contact the organiser, Ray Lane on 9746-6170 or email [relane@bigpond.net.au](mailto:relane@bigpond.net.au).

We need to have at least four helpers on each occasion otherwise the work will be too hard to manage.

If you don't fit into the above category, we still need help with lots of other work that needs to be done.



There are lots of skills needed for museum management from marking and describing objects so they can be readily recognised, to packing and storing them so they can be easily accessed when needed.

We have people, and books, that can teach you these necessary skills

We need people who can do sewing/mending; research some of our objects; research local properties; families; simple handyman(woman) skills; typing and filing; sorting and identifying photographs. And so the list goes on.

You don't need to have a university degree to do this work, just normal common sense.

Do you have a flair for mounting interesting displays that tell a story?

Do you have some business/management skills? We have to start producing Policy and Procedure Manuals so that the work of running our museum can be passed on to others. We also need more people to help man the museum during opening hours.

Mostly we need people who want to be an important part of this new venture.

Why not come along on any of the days listed above and join us for morning and/or afternoon tea. It would be a good chance to just to sit around and have a chat about the importance of preserving our past for future generations.

# GET INVOLVED!

## Thanks for the Memories

"A trip down memory lane may be as good as a trip to the doctor", or so say experts who have researched the health benefits of reminiscing. For pensioners, talking about the past boosts memory because it makes use of parts of the brain that have been dormant for a long time, and provides comfort.

Did you grow up in Concord or Drummoyne? Then come and take your "trip down memory lane" by visiting the City of Canada Bay Museum during Seniors' Week. You will be able to see old photographs of the area and objects from days gone by, all of which should bring back many happy memories.

It will be a great opportunity to speak to others about your memories of the past and tell of growing up in the area. We would also love to record these memories to pass on to future generations,

Please come and see our displays and slide shows about our local area. It has certainly changed a lot in the past 100 years.

We welcome everyone to visit the Museum, at 1 Bent Street, Concord, on Saturday 20, Sunday 21, Wednesday 24, Saturday 27 and Sunday 28 March between the hours of 10:00 am and 4:00 pm. Morning and afternoon tea will be provided.

This is an event our Society is planning as part of Seniors' Week next year. Do you have any old photographs of places, people and events connected with the City of Canada Bay Council area? We would be delighted if you would allow us to copy them to add to our files for this occasion. When we had a sneak preview of our collection at our November meeting it proved to be an outstanding success.

We also intend to use it as an enticement for residents to allow us to tape their memories so they can be preserved for future generations.

We will also need help from many members to come along on the days to help with the work. How about you?

## From the Secretary's Desk

**Events at the Museum:** The Museum Committee is currently planning various events as a means of bringing visitors to our museum. For the new year some events discussed have been a Posties Party (like Tupperware only with clothing), Fire Safety in the Home and an Art Exhibition.

Would you be prepared to support these events by attending and bringing visitors?

Do you have any suggestions of what you would like to see take place?

These functions will be open to the general public as well as our members and will be a means of raising funds for the museum.

Please contact the secretary, by phone or email, to indicate your support and offer any suggestions.

**Next General Meeting** will be held on 10th February. Please mark it in your diary now.

**Next Executive Meeting** will be held on 27th January. Ditto.



A special "thank you" to everyone who helped during the past very busy twelve months to get our museum to the stage it's at. It has been a long, hard voyage but what a wonderful result.

The one comment that always seems to be on the lips of visitors is "what a professional facility it is".

We now need to spread the word about its existence. We need more people to visit. Tell you friends, your neighbours, your local social group, anyone and everyone at all.

We are very proud of our museum and we want to show it off.

Currently we are looking for anything to support our proposed Bushells display. Anything from objects, to photographs, to oral histories from people who worked there. Can you help?

We also need more people to join our committee so we can make the museum even better in the future.

