

HMAS *Castlemaine* – J244/M244



Namesake: City of Castlemaine, Vic
Builder: HMA Naval Dockyard, Vic
Laid down: 17 February 1941
Launched: 7 August 1941
Commissioned: 17 June 1942
Decommissioned: 14 December 1945
Reclassified:
 Immobilised training hulk (1945)
 Museum ship (1973)
Motto: "Watch and Prey"

Battle honours:
 Darwin 1942–43
 Pacific 1942–43
 New Guinea 1942–44
Status: Preserved as museum ship



Displacement: 650 tons (standard),
 1,025 tons (full war load)
Length: 186 ft (57 m)
Beam: 31 ft (9.4 m)
Draught: 8.5 ft (2.6 m)
Propulsion: triple expansion engine,
 2 shafts. 2,000 hp
Speed: 15.5 knots
 (28.7 km/h; 17.8 mph)
Complement: 85
Armament: 1 × QF 4-inch (102 mm)
 gun
 3 × 20 mm Oerlikon
 2 × 0.5-inch machine
 guns
 and
 Depth charges chutes
 throwers

Castlemaine was constructed at Williamstown Naval Dockyard at a cost of £250,000. She was laid down on 17 February 1941 and launched, with some difficulty, on 7 August 1941 by Mrs RG Menzies, wife of the then Prime Minister. Cold weather had set hard the tallow on the slipway and the obstinate ship refused to budge. After 20 minutes she was eventually pulled into the water by the tug *Keera*.





Castlemaine commissioned at Melbourne on Wednesday 17 June 1942 under the command of Lieutenant Commander Philip J Sullivan RANR(S).



On 26 June *Castlemaine* sailed in company with HMAS *Rockhampton* escorting convoy OC5 from Melbourne to Sydney where they arrived on 28 June. There, *Castlemaine* made preparations for her shakedown cruise and working up exercises that were undertaken in waters off Broken Bay.



Many of *Castlemaine*'s crew were young 'hostilities only' ratings who were rapidly trained for war service. Able Seaman Jack Deeble (above) was one of many young men who formed the nucleus of *Castlemaine*'s wartime complement.

On successful completion of work-ups *Castlemaine* began escorting convoys between Sydney and Melbourne until she sustained damage in a collision with a Manly ferry in Sydney Harbour on the night of 11 August 1942. Repairs were completed at Cockatoo Island Dockyard between 14 August and 22 August, after which she resumed escort duties arriving in Townsville on 30 August 1942.





Thereafter, *Castlemaine* was engaged in escorting vessels from Townsville to Port Moresby before receiving orders to proceed to Darwin where she arrived on 5 October 1942 with the Dutch troop transport MV *Van Heutsz* under her escort. On 7 October she escorted the MV *Sibigo* to Thursday Island before returning to Darwin the following day.

Further escort duties followed; on 13 October *Castlemaine* escorted the MV *Joseph Lane* from Darwin to Thursday Island, returning to port on 19 October, and on 5 November she rendezvoused with MV *Darvel* at sea before escorting her into Darwin Harbour. There, *Castlemaine's* captain, received orders to prepare to take part in the hazardous task of supporting the Australian and Allied troops engaged in guerrilla operations against the Japanese occupation forces in Timor.

Later that day *Castlemaine*'s crew loaded military mail and stores, before embarking a Dutch military officer, four war correspondents and sailing the following day for Betano, Timor, where she arrived on the evening of 7 November. After embarking a number of troops and refugees, she returned to Darwin on 9 November.



Castlemaine in Port Moresby shortly before participating in Operation HAMBURGER.

On 24 November 1942 Allied Land Forces Headquarters approved the relief/reinforcement of the Australian 2/2nd Independent Company which was holding out in Japanese occupied Timor. The withdrawal of 150 Portuguese civilians was also approved and consequently plans were made in Darwin for HMA Ships *Castlemaine*, *Armidale* (Lieutenant Commander DH Richards, RANR (S)) and *Kuru* (Lieutenant JA Grant, RANR), a shallow draught 76 foot wooden motor vessel, to effect the relief operation which was code named Operation HAMBURGER.

The proposal was for the three ships to each make two separate runs into Betano. The first run was planned for the night of 30 November-1 December. HMAS *Kuru* sailed from Darwin at 22:30 on 28 November preceding the two corvettes. She was delayed en route due to adverse weather conditions and did not reach Betano until 23:45 on 30 November 1942.

Meanwhile *Castlemaine*, in company with *Armidale*, had left Darwin at 00:42 on 29 November. In *Armidale* were 61 Near East Indies troops, two Dutch officers and three members of the 2nd AIF. At 09:15 on the morning of 30 November, when 120 miles from their destination, the two corvettes came under aerial attack from a single enemy aircraft. Although neither ship sustained any damage or casualties, concerns were raised that the mission may have been compromised.

The attack was duly reported and orders were received to press on, with an assurance that Beaufighter aircraft had departed to provide cover. The ships were subjected to two more air attacks, each by formations of five bombers which dropped no less than 45 bombs and machine gunned the ships from a low level.

According to *Armidale*, the promised Beaufighters arrived in time to drive off the bombers and both ships escaped serious damage or injury, reaching Betano at 03:30 on 1 December. Disappointingly there was no sign of *Kuru* and a decision was made to return to sea and make as much ground to the south as possible before daylight.



Meanwhile, *Kuru*, with no knowledge of the attacks affecting the arrival of the corvettes, embarked 77 Portuguese before sailing without delay. At dawn, *Kuru* was sighted by *Castlemaine* 70 miles south of Betano and subsequently closed to conduct the transfer of her passengers to the corvette. Following the rendezvous, *Kuru* received orders from Darwin to return to Betano and complete the mission that night.

No sooner was the personnel transfer complete when enemy bombers again appeared causing *Kuru* to run for cover in a rain squall. As the senior officer, *Castlemaine's* captain, Commander Sullivan, quickly appraised the situation.

Kuru had orders to return to Betano, *Armidale* had troops on board to be landed there, and, to further complicate matters, a signal had been received to search for two downed airmen from a Beaufighter some 150 miles to the south-east.

Sullivan's preference was to exchange passengers with *Armidale* so *Castlemaine* might escort *Kuru* back to Timor, however, the presence of enemy aircraft ruled this out. Consequently *Armidale* and *Kuru* were ordered to return to Betano to complete the troop operation while *Castlemaine* went in search of the downed airmen en route back to Darwin.

As *Kuru* and *Armidale* steamed northwards they both came under fierce aerial attack becoming separated in the process. For almost seven hours *Kuru* dodged bombs suffering minor damage to her engine and losing her assault boat that was under tow.



The ill-fated HMAS Armidale and HMAS Kuru.

Grant reported the damage to Darwin but was told that the operation was to be carried through. This instruction was later rescinded when the presence of Japanese cruisers were reported approaching the area. *Kuru* then shaped a course for Darwin.

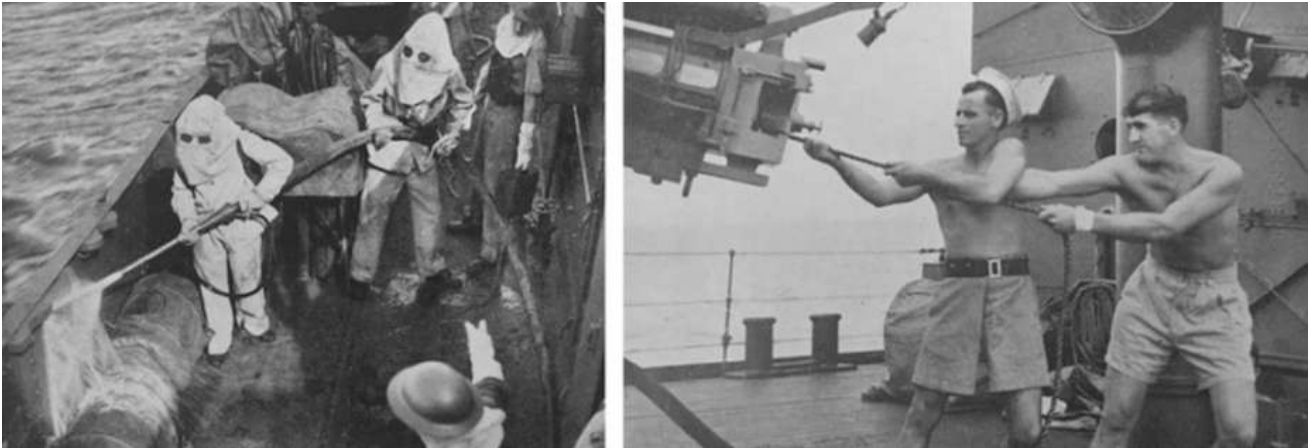
At 3:15 pm on 1 December nine enemy bombers, three fighters and one float plane attacked *Armidale* which was struck by two torpedoes and possibly one bomb. She turned over and sank in less than four minutes in position 10 degrees south, 126 degrees 30 minutes east, about 70 miles SSE of Betano.

During the action one bomber and one fighter were seen to crash into the sea some distance from the ship, victims of the ship's anti-aircraft fire. The bomber was downed by Ordinary Seaman Edward Sheean, who remained at his post at the aft Oerlikon gun as the ship sank.

Castlemaine returned safely to Darwin at 09:39 on 2 December and *Kuru* made port at 17:26 the following day. By then doubts concerning *Armidale's* safety had arisen and it was feared she may have been sunk. At 10:15 on 5 December a boat carrying approximately 20 survivors was sighted by searching aircraft about 115 miles west of Bathurst Island and HMAS *Kalgoorlie* was ordered to render assistance, arriving on 6 December, having herself come under intense aerial attack.

The rescued men were taken back to Darwin for medical treatment and hospitalisation, before *Kalgoorlie* resumed the search for other survivors spotted in a whaler and on a makeshift raft from the air. Those in the whaler were recovered late in the afternoon of 9 December but tragically the raft was not seen again. Forty-nine men survived *Armidale's* sinking and subsequent loss, but more than 100 were lost.

On 2 December *Castlemaine* resumed escort duties between Darwin and Thursday Island. On 15 December, while escorting the merchant ships *Period* and *James Cook* from Thursday Island to Darwin, a Japanese aircraft scored a direct hit on *Period*, causing casualties (four of which were fatal). Twice more that day and once the next day the ships came under air attack. The attacks were repulsed by *Castlemaine's* anti-aircraft fire and the convoy reached Darwin without further damage or casualties.



Damage control training and weapons maintenance was a constant part of daily sea board life in the Pacific.

After the force in Timor was withdrawn early in 1943, *Castlemaine* continued to operate in northern Australian waters performing escort, minesweeping and general duties until December. On 18 December 1943, *Castlemaine* was making independent passage to Cairns when, at around midnight, she was diverted to render assistance to convoy TN 192.

Seven of the eight merchant vessels in the convoy, along with one of the escorts, HMAS *Gladstone* (I), had run aground on Bougainville Reef on the Great Barrier Reef. By the time *Castlemaine* arrived at dawn on 19 December, *Gladstone* had managed to re-float herself and was waiting for daybreak, just clear of the reef, in company with the other convoy escorts, HMA Ships *Gympie* and *Stawell*.

The vessels *Colorado*, *Ambrose Bierce* and *City of Fort Worth* had also all managed to free themselves and, with *Castlemaine* and HMAS *Lithgow* arriving to assist, *Gladstone* detached just after 07:00 to escort the trio back to Cairns. *Castlemaine* assisted in disembarking troops and re-floating the stricken vessels before proceeding back to Cairns that afternoon where she arrived shortly after 19:00 that evening.





Ratings reloading one of Castlemaine's depth charge throwers



Castlemaine's ship's company, circa 1944. (J Deeble, AWM P00782.002)



Castlemaine on the slipway at Fremantle, circa March 1945

From August 1944 *Castlemaine* was engaged in survey duties in the north-west of Australia. At war's end she sailed for Morotai and the Philippines, then to Hong Kong, arriving on 29 August 1945, where she took part in the Japanese surrender ceremony before carrying out minesweeping duties. After further minesweeping *Castlemaine* returned to Melbourne in November 1945 having steamed 117,000 miles on war service. There she was paid off into Reserve on 14 December 1945.



To mother
Miss Rose from
Lucie.
10/12/45.



Two excellent profiles of HMAS Castlemaine alongside in South Wharf, Melbourne in late 1945 showing the signs of continuous war service. (Alan C Green, State Library of Victoria, Pictures Collection)



Castlemaine laid up in reserve at Williamstown, February 1949.



Laid up Corio Bay, Geelong along with sister ships.

Riverine Herald (Echuca) Fri 4 Jan 1946:

Australian Corvettes: Having been de-commissioned the Australian corvettes HMAS *Wagga*, *Cootamundra* and *Castlemaine*, now at South Wharf, Melbourne will become "sheerhulks" in Corio Bay from today onwards. First *Wagga* will lay up in Corio Bay, followed by *Cootamundra* and *Castlemaine*.

After a decade in Reserve, *Castlemaine* underwent a refit in 1958, then was transferred to HMAS *Cerberus*, Victoria, as a stationary training ship for engine-room artificers. She was also used by the Seamanship School for training in anchor work and seamanship.



Castlemaine stripped of her wartime fittings in her role as a training ship at HMAS *Cerberus*, Westernport, Victoria.

In 1971 *Castlemaine* was put up for disposal and presented to the Maritime Trust of Australia, Victoria for preservation as a museum ship. Today *Castlemaine* can be found lovingly restored at the Gem Pier, Williamstown, not far from where she was constructed. Each year she attracts many visitors from around the globe.



Departing HMAS Cerberus under tow



Three sisters, L to R: Rip (ex-HMAS Gladstone) Castlemaine & Akuna (ex-Whyalla) at South Wharf 1976.



Castlemaine alongside Gem Pier, Williamstown, Victoria, preserved as a museum ship



Castlemaine resting in the BAE Systems Australia graving dock in October 2015

In the BAE Graving Dock, workers removed more than ten years of marine growth, finding the ship's hull to be in well preserved condition, largely to cathodic protection measures in place on the historic ship.

