HMAS *Katoomba* – J204

Namesake:	Town of Katoomba NSW
Builder:	Poole & Steel
Laid down:	9 September 1940
Launched:	16 April 1941
Commissioned:	17 December 1941
Decommissioned:	2 August 1948

Battle honours:
- Darwin 1942
- Pacific 1942–45
- New Guinea 1942–44

Fate:
Katoomba arrived in Fremantle on 16 January 1948, and was paid off into reserve on 2 August. She remained in reserve until 2 May 1957, when she was sold for breaking up as scrap to the Hong Kong Rolling Mills

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
Speed:	15 knots (28 km/h; 17 mph) at 1,750 hp
Complement:	85
Armament:	1 × 12-pounder gun, 3 × Oerlikons (1 later replaced with 1 × Bofors), Machine guns, Depth charges chutes and throwers

HMAS *Katoomba* was laid down at Poole & Steel Ltd, Sydney, on 9 September 1940. She was launched by Mrs Lloyd, the Deputy Mayoress of *Katoomba* on 16 April 1941. Commissioning on 17 December 1941 under the command of Commander Alan P Cousin RANR(S).

Katoomba was the first RAN ship to carry the name of the Blue Mountains town, situated some 110 kms west of Sydney.

HMAS Katoomba on the launching cradle at the yards of Poole & Steel Ltd shortly before being launched on 16 April 1941

HMAS Katoomba takes to the water for the first time prior to fitting out and later undertaking acceptance trials.

HMAS Katoomba

The ship began her active wartime career in the Darwin area where she arrived on 19 January 1942. At that time Japanese submarines were suspected of being in the area, a suspicion which proved well founded, for at noon on 20 January *Katoomba*'s sister ship, HMAS *Deloraine*, then at sea off Darwin, received a signal 'proceed forthwith to position 12°08' south, 130°10' east, for submarine sighted 06:30 today Tuesday'. At 14½ knots *Deloraine* proceeded as ordered

Earlier the same day a Japanese submarine had been detected and attacked by the United States destroyer USS *Edsall*, but it was not known if she had succeeded in inflicting damage. It was hoped that *Deloraine* would regain contact on the given course. At 1:35pm a torpedo was seen approaching, the ship swung sharply and it passed ten feet astern.

Immediately a good echo contact was obtained and within a matter of minutes the ship dropped a pattern of six depth charges. Large patches of oil and great air bubbles burst to the surface. The attack continued and after *Deloraine* had expended all her charges she was joined by *Katoomba* and another sister ship, HMAS Lithgow, before departing to reload with depth charges from the auxiliary vessel HMAS *Vigilant*.

Re-joining *Katoomba* in the early hours of the following morning, Deloraine obtained a second contact and dropped a further series of charges over the position.

A post war investigation of Japanese records showed that the first attack had been successful, and *Deloraine*, *Katoomba*, *Lithgow* and *Edsall* were officially credited with destroying the Japanese submarine I-124, the first enemy submarine sunk in Australian waters.

A vessel of 1142 tons, I-124 was one of only four minelaying submarines in the Imperial Japanese Navy and loaded forty two mines and twelve torpedoes. On 28 June 1977, the Minister for Administrative Services signed a declaration under the Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976 that the remains of I-124 are an historic shipwreck.
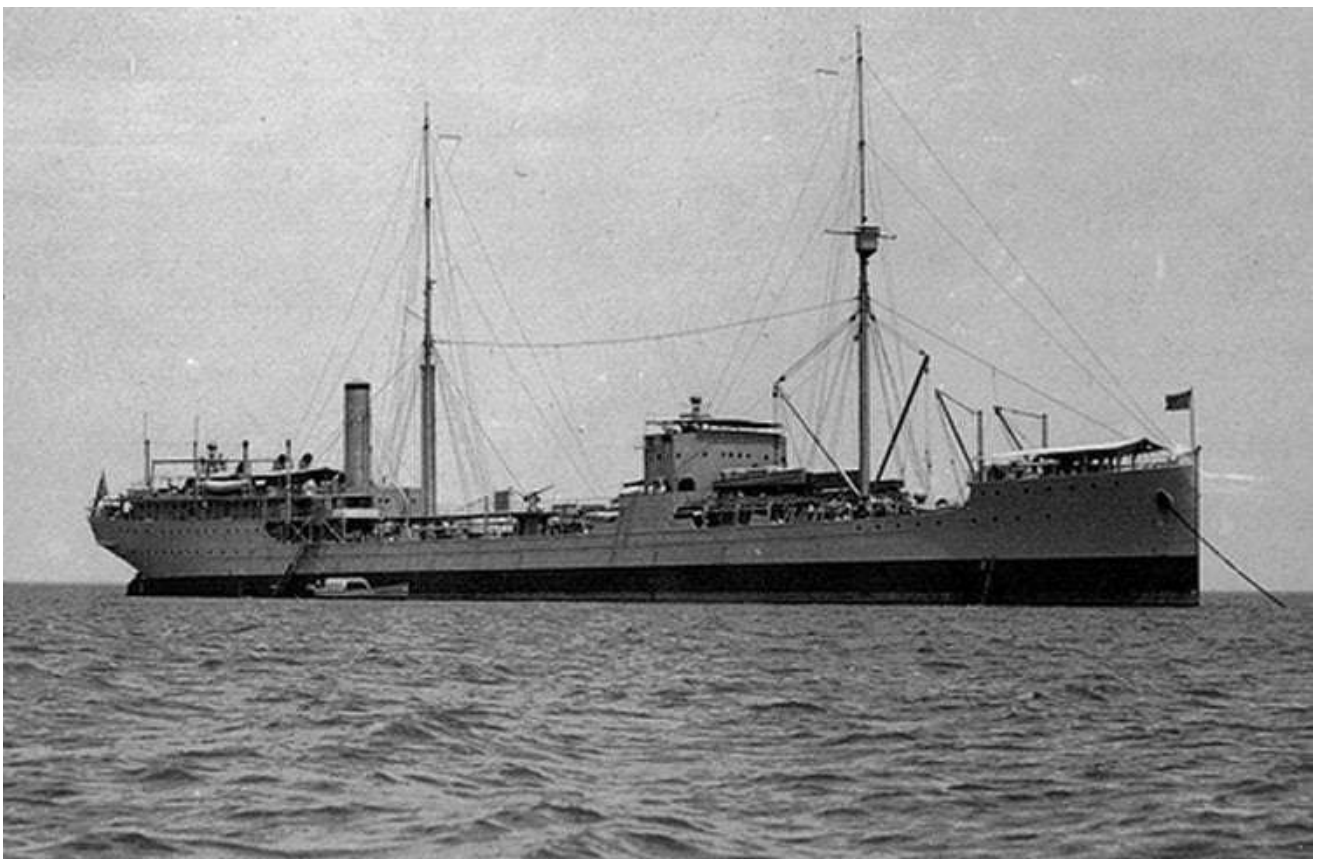
USS PECOS AO6

At approximately 02:00 on the morning of 22 January 1942, *Katoomba* was involved in a collision with the US tanker *Pecos* just outside Darwin Harbour. Holed on the port side and taking water, she was in danger of sinking. She was subsequently secured alongside her sister ship HMAS *Lithgow* and towed into Darwin Harbour where she was immediately taken into the floating dry dock (AD1001) during the afternoon of 23 January.

Katoomba Collision damage

Katoomba secured in floating dock AD1001 in Darwin Harbour following the collision with the US tanker Pecos

In floating dock under repair


Broken plates on dock floor

Damage to Katoomba was extensive, breeching her hull and destroying many of her fittings

Katoomba's Commanding Officer wisely decided not to de-ammunition, as was usually the case when docking for repairs, and on 19 February, when the first of the Japanese air raids on Darwin began, *Katoomba*'s ship's company manned their weapons putting up a spirited defence.

The corvette was showered with debris when the merchant vessel *Neptuna* exploded and survived a near miss when a bomb released from an attacking enemy aircraft narrowly missed the ship and the dry dock in which she was held fast. Nineteen ships were either sunk, put out of action or damaged in the raid. Remarkably, *Katoomba* and AD1001 escaped serious damage.
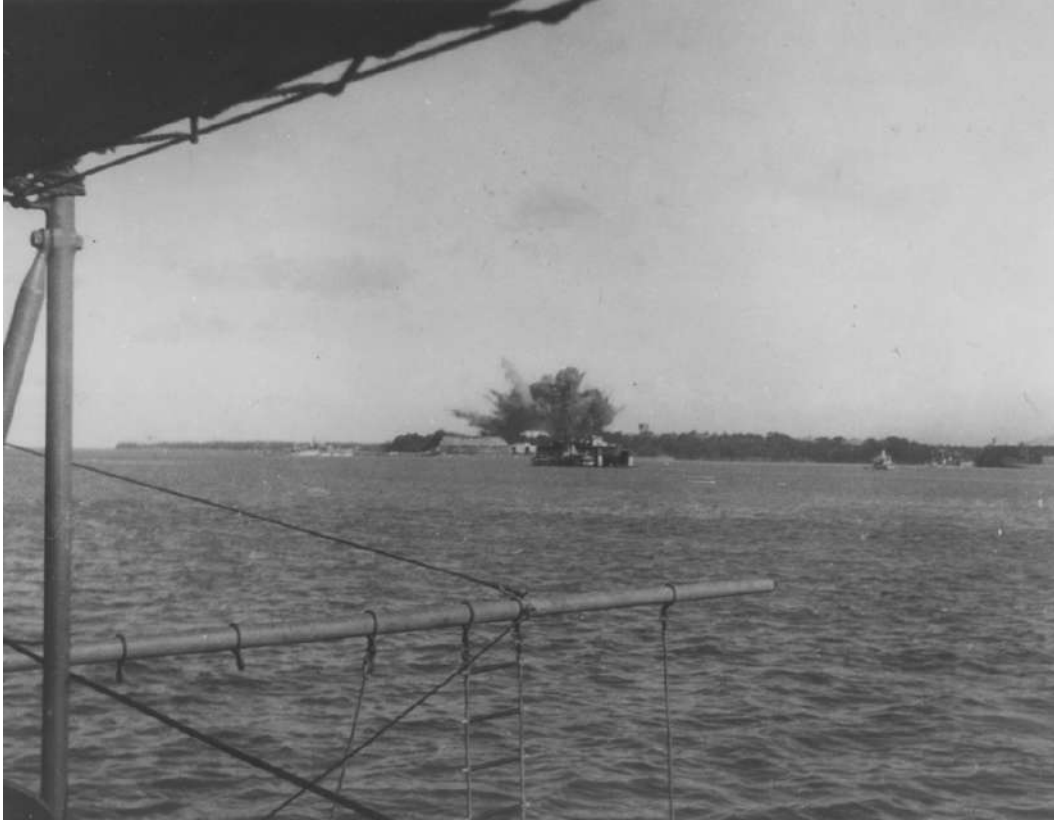
The air raid on Darwin 19 February 1942. Katoomba can be seen in floating dock AD1001, with one of the first bombs dropped striking the Darwin Post Office in the background

In 1975 former RAN rating Keith Swain, himself a corvette sailor, painted a depiction of Katoomba under aerial attack on 19 February 1942. It was accessioned into the collection of the Australian War Memorial the same year. (AWM ART 28075)

On 28 June 1942 *Katoomba* began a period of escort duty to New Guinea, shepherding convoys between Townsville and Port Moresby, Milne Bay and Oro Bay. For the next two years the ship was in almost constant service, departing Queensland ports for the forward areas on 31 occasions, interspersed with anti-submarine patrols in New Guinea waters.

Enemy Aircraft attack report from 28 November 1942, when HMAS *Katoomba* and HMAS *Ballarat* were attacked by 10 Japanese dive bombers.

On 14 August 1942 *Katoomba* went to the assistance of American submarine USS S-39, which was ashore on Rossel Island Reef. Reaching the scene the following day an attempt was made to re-float the submarine but it was unsuccessful.

Despite very rough seas *Katoomba* was able to sail for Townsville on 16 August with all of S-39's crew of four officers and forty three enlisted men safely embarked. The submarine's Commanding Officer had burnt out the boat internally, destroying everything possible and flooded all compartments.

Twice in this period she was attacked by Japanese aircraft. On 28 November 1942, off Buna in company with her sister ship HMAS Ballarat, she was fortunate to escape serious damage when ten dive bombers made a determined assault on the two ships.

Again in January 1943, six aircraft attacked *Katoomba* and her convoy, the Dutch ship *Van Heutz*. *Katoomba* suffered only superficial damage but the freighter received a direct hit which killed one man and seriously wounded three.

Van Heutz. bomb damage

At the end of February 1944, *Katoomba* escorted her last mainland to Milne Bay convoy, and

after a period on anti-submarine patrol in Grafton Passage, she proceeded to Sydney for refit.

The pride and affection held for HMAS Katoomba by her ship's company can be seen in this model, built by a founding member of the HMAS Katoomba Association, John (Jack) Aldred, from materials held on-board while serving in WWII. Able Seaman Aldred served most of his wartime naval career as an Oerlikon gunner aboard Katoomba (John Aldred collection)

Returning to New Guinea waters in the first week of May 1944, the ship began four months duty in the forward areas with anti-submarine patrols in the Solomon Sea. In September she returned to mainland for three weeks leave and maintenance.

Returning to the operational area in the first week of October 1944, *Katoomba* spent a further five months in New Guinea waters, based on Mios Woendi and mainly patrolling and escorting in the Morotai, Biak and Sansapor areas. On patrol in Kaoe Bay in the Halmaheras on 15 October, *Katoomba* shelled two Japanese barges drawn up on the beach.

Katoomba sailed on 5 March 1945 from Madang for Townsville, ending her wartime service in New Guinea waters. She had steamed over 100,000 on operational duty.

On the last day of March 1945, *Katoomba* proceeded to Fremantle and spent the next three months based at that port, before departing for Darwin in July. She was present at the surrender of the Japanese forces on Timor in September 1945.

Troops leaving Wewak 13 Oct 1945 on-board Katoomba

In the post war period, *Katoomba* became a unit of the 20th Minesweeping Flotilla and operated in New Guinea, New Britain and the Solomons, and in 1946 was based off the Queensland coast.

Stoker and a groper on the Barrier Reef 1946

A mine in the hawse pipe

Mine shooting party on Katoomba. Usual dress of the day, shorts and sandals. Top—from left—Lieut. Speed Gordon, A/B D. Johnson, A/B Anderson; lower—L/Sea Pedro Palmer, A/B J. G. Scott, A/B Nick Crotty. Photographer Mick Leslie

One morning in, 1946, one of the cable party while weighing anchor, looked over the bow just in time to see a mine being pulled into the hawse pipe. It had its cable snagged in the anchor chain. He yelled out "weigh enough" and the mine dangled in mid-air.

Don't know where A/B Johnson got the axe from, but he flew down the cable with one arm and cut the mine off with a single blow. When we thought about it, we realised we had anchored in a minefield overnight.

Johnson is an Australian born in Fiji, lives in Kedron. When we blew mines up there was a terrible waste of fish. Johnno who was the tanky solved the problem. On fish nights it was round the buoy. A/B Scott and Mick Leslie took over as Bren gunners on the roof of the bridge. We must have sunk hundreds of mines, most just sinking but every now and then a good bang.

In October 1946, at Sydney, the ship began preparations to pay off, but in January 1947 she re-joined the 20th Minesweeping Flotilla, spending the following twelve months in sweeping operations off the Queensland coast. *Katoomba* berthed at Fremantle on 16 January 1948, bringing her seagoing career to an end.

She paid off at Fremantle on 2 August 1948, having steamed 152,804 miles. On 2 May 1957 *Katoomba* was sold to Hong Kong Rolling Mills Ltd to be broken up in Hong Kong.

HMAS Katoomba

Departed Fremantle 25 November 1957 for Hong Kong along with Parkes and Glenelg, towed by the tug Bustler