

CN SPEECH**UNVEILING OF THE HEC WALLER MEMORIAL****14 MAR 2010**

Today's unveiling commemorates the man who was once immortally called "one of the greatest captains who ever sailed the seas,"¹ Captain Hec Waller, but it also recalls the character and spirit of the men whom he led and served throughout his career.

The two themes which burn brightest in the Hec Waller story were his expert seamanship in furthering the missions asked of him, but even above that his devotion to the men under his command.

Born and raised in Benalla, Captain Waller established himself early in his career as a leader. He passed out of the Royal Australian Naval College as Chief Cadet Captain and King's Medallist, and arrived in the Grand Fleet in time to see the end of the Great War.

In the inter-war period he specialised early in signal communications and developed an impressive reputation, but it was during his exchange postings to the Royal Navy that he learned and then excelled in shiphandling and seamanship.

Shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War, then Commander Waller was given command of the destroyer HMAS *Stuart* and with her the Australian destroyer squadron.

They were tasked to convoy duty in the Mediterranean, where they earned the name the "Scrap Iron Flotilla" from German propagandists.

Meant derisively, the name sums up many of the qualities which we look for in the RAN today – resourcefulness and creativity with supplies available, courage in the face of challenge, and resolute determination.

In his subsequent role in command of the combined 10th Destroyer Flotilla in 1940, Captain Waller kept up the flow of supplies into besieged Tobruk and fought off Greece and Crete.

He was first awarded the DSO for "courage, enterprise and devotion to duty" in the Battle of Calabria; and he won a bar to the award within a year at the Battle of Matapan. Honours for these great sea battles are still carried in three RAN ships today (*Stuart*, *Sydney* and *Perth*) and we hold their memory close.

On his return to Australia in September 1941, Waller was given command of the cruiser HMAS *Perth* and swiftly despatched to join the defence of the Dutch East Indies, along with the Americans, British and Dutch forces.

The combined fleet suffered heavy losses in the Java Sea on the 27th of February 1942, and that night Waller withdrew *Perth* and the sole remaining consort USS *Houston*. This action, though criticised at the time by Dutch Admiral Helfrich, who had ordered the fleet to fight to the last ship, is one of the most outstanding in Captain Waller's exceptional career, in my view.

As has been pointed out by one of Captain Waller's biographers (RADM Goldrick), there is a 'difference between gallantry and suicide.' The strength of moral character to recognise that difference and then to withdraw is worthy of the highest admiration.

The RAN is currently implementing a reform program called New Generation Navy, which focuses on Navy culture, leadership and structure.

In leadership terms, our emphasis is on restoring the role of character and ethics in leadership and I can think of no better example than that of Captain Waller in the Java Sea.

¹ Word used by Admiral Cunningham when introducing Captain Waller to the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, after the Greece/Crete campaigns in 1940.

It reminds us all that, although doing what is right for the people who have placed their trust in you can be difficult, and can bring criticism from others, we should never be deterred.

The following day, *Perth* and *Houston* attempted to break out of the archipelago but encountered a Japanese convoy at the entrance to Sunda Strait. The two ships were lost, along with four Japanese transport ships and a minesweeper, in the early hours of the 1st of March.

Captain Waller went down with his ship, and with him 362 of his crew. Another 105 died as prisoners of war, while *Houston* lost 800 of her ship's company and her Captain, Albert Rooks.

I know from my own career as well as talking to other ships' captains past and present, that the responsibilities of command at sea are heavy. The leadership shown by Captain Waller, and the decisions he made, would have been with the deepest realisation of what it would mean for his crew.

I want to read a short passage written by the novelist Joseph Conrad which sums this up:

"Only a seaman realises to what extent an entire ship reflects the personality and ability of one individual, her Commanding Officer. To a landsman, this is not understandable and sometimes it is even difficult for us to comprehend, but it is so.

A ship at sea is a different world in herself and In each ship there is one man who, in the hour of emergency or peril at sea, can turn to no man. There is one who alone is ultimately responsible for the safe navigation, engineering, performance, accurate gunfire, and morale of his ship. He is the CO. He is the ship!

This is the most difficult and demanding assignment in the Navy, There is not an instant during his tour as CO that he can escape the grasp of command responsibility. His privileges, in view of his obligations, are almost ludicrously small; nevertheless Command is the spur which has given the Navy its great leaders. It is a duty which most richly deserves the highest, time-honoured title of the seafaring world CAPTAIN."

Three times mentioned in dispatches, in addition to his DSO and Bar, Captain Waller was the outstanding Naval leader of his generation.

Admiral Cunningham wrote that his death was "a heavy deprivation for the young Navy of Australia," but even outside the Naval and military family, Captain Waller's life and service is an example to which we can all aspire.

That is why this memorial here in his hometown is so important. It captures the sense of the man and his times. The sculptor shows us Captain Waller's dedication and the concern which inspired the utmost loyalty from his crew.

We see him not looking to some far horizon but into the depths of the sea, to which his crew and so many other Australian service men and women have been lost over our history. The memorial gives us a place here in Benalla to remember them all, as we remember all those who served ashore at the Weary Dunlop memorial only 200m from here.

Captain Waller has always been one of Navy's great leaders, and the tradition he set continues in our submarine HMAS *Waller*.

I hope that future generations of young leaders in Benalla and throughout this region will remember and learn from him, as we do and as Captain Waller's family do, and keep in their minds the sacrifice of all who have served and been lost at sea.