

# VICTORIA CROSS REVIEW-

## A STORY OF TWO TASMANIANS

By GUY BARNETT#

Thirteen Australians have been nominated for consideration to receive a posthumous Victoria Cross. They include two Tasmanians, being Navy personnel Teddy Sheean and Dick Emms. The Defence Honours Awards & Appeals Tribunal is reviewing the deeds of these men with public hearings throughout Australia.

Of the 98 Victoria Cross medals awarded to Australians, 94 have been awarded to Army personnel and 4 to Royal Australian Air Force personnel, but none to the Navy.

“2011 is the Centenary of the Navy and this would be a most appropriate year to formally recognise heroes like Teddy Sheean and Dick Emms,” Guy Barnett said who appeared before the Tribunal in Launceston 16 December 2011.

### **Ordinary Seaman Teddy Sheean- a selfless act**

Ordinary Seaman Teddy Sheean was born in Lower Barrington, Tasmania on 28 December 1923. His family soon moved to Latrobe and he was educated at the local Catholic school and worked as a farm labourer until he enlisted in the Royal Australian Naval Reserve at 17 years. In June 1942 he was posted to the HMAS Armidale as an Oerlikon anti-aircraft gun loader.

The Japanese were moving south ferocious and fast and on 1 December 1942 the Armidale, then in the Timor sea just north of Australia, came under repeated attack by at least 13 Japanese aircraft. By 3.15pm the *Armidale* had been struck by two aerial torpedoes and began to sink, an event that would take less than 5 minutes. Lieutenant Commander David Richards ordered the ship to be abandoned. Out of the 149 on board, only 49 would be rescued from the water.

As the ship was sinking, and the survivors in the water tried to board life-rafts, the Japanese aircraft continued to strafe the men in the water. Ordinary Seaman Sheean possibly already wounded, and seeing his mates in distress and being shot at, returned to his Oerlikon gun, strapped himself in, and began firing at the Japanese aircraft and attracting enemy fire. He reportedly shot down at least one Japanese Zero in his efforts. Witnesses report that tracer fire could still be seen leaving the gun after she sunk below the waves. Sheean would have known his fate when he returned to his gun but in an act of conspicuous bravery offered up his life for his mates and his country. He was not yet 19 years. (There is a well-known painting at the Australian War Memorial which commemorates this incident and a submarine named in his honour.)



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## A Brave Cook

LEADING Cook Francis Bassett Emms (known as "Dick"), of Launceston, joined the Royal Australian Navy in 1928 and qualified as a gunner.

During 1935, he travelled to the United Kingdom to become one of the founding crew of HMAS Sydney (II). Failing eyesight in 1936 caused a change of course. Mr Emms so loved the sea that he retrained as a cook in the navy.

Dick Emms was on the Kara Kara in Darwin harbour manning the boom gates (designed to keep out Japanese submarines) when 230 Japanese aircraft attacked Darwin in the first of their 64 bombing raids started on December 19, 1942. The aircraft were launched from the same carrier force which had been responsible for the attack on Pearl Harbour.

Rather than taking cover or abandoning his ship, this leading cook took to the machine gun to defend his mates and his ship. In the first wave of the attack he was shot in the stomach.

As another wave of Japanese zeros and bombers moved in some minutes later his mates called to him to take cover. Despite being fatally wounded he fired his gun in defence. Sadly he died later the same day from his wounds.

In recommending him for a posthumous bravery award, his commanding officer, Lieutenant- Commander Alexander Fowler, wrote:

"For courage and devotion to duty in action. While seriously wounded, he continued to fire his machine gun...during a continuous machine gun attack by enemy aircraft, thereby probably saving the ship and many of the ship's company."

**#Guy Barnett, consultant is a former Tasmanian Senator who successfully lobbied for the establishment of the Victoria Cross inquiry.**

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