

World War Two's great survivor dies at 103

By Ashleigh Taylor and [Tim Barlass](#)

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FRANK McGOVERN: October 1, 1919 - May 24, 2023

World War Two veteran Frank McGovern, the last survivor of HMAS Perth, has died in Randwick Rehabilitation Hospital aged 103. He was an Able Seaman sunk in Perth by a Japanese convoy in 1942, then spent two years on Thai/Burma railway as a POW. He was sunk again in the Philippine Sea by a US submarine and bombed while working in Kawasaki as a forced labourer.

The true remarkable element of Frank McGovern's wartime experience lies not only in the extraordinary level of endurance he exhibited in his six and a half years of service, three and a half of which were spent in Japanese POW camps, but the number of times in which he narrowly evaded death.



WW2 veteran Frank McGovern at his Randwick home, 2020. *CREDIT: LOUISE KENNERLEY*

Born in Paddington, he grew up playing cricket and hockey in the back lanes attending the Christian Brothers' School in Edgecliff then the Marist Brothers High School at Darlinghurst. He began looking for his first job just after the Great Depression and started at Winns department store in Oxford Street. He then worked for the board of water supply from 1936 until he enlisted just prior to the outbreak of the Second World War.

In 1939 when, aged nineteen, he and a group of mates decided to enlist in the Naval Reservists, describing his service experience simply as “quite good prior to the war”. Initially deployed with the HMAS Westralia for eighteen months, Frank later joined his older brother Vincent, who worked in the engine rooms on the HMAS Perth. The ships were regularly tasked with convoy and patrol duties in the Pacific.



Nineteen-year-old Frank McGovern. *CREDIT: FAIRFAX*

However, on the night of February 28, 1942, two weeks after the fall of Singapore, HMAS Perth met its tragic end. Perth and USS Houston, both surviving the Battle of Java the day prior, ventured into the Sunda Strait. Unbeknownst to those aboard, they would soon come into contact with the Japanese Western Invasion Convoy.

Despite an initial engagement, HMAS Perth, vastly outnumbered and with no ammunition remaining, desperately attempted to retreat at full speed. The decision, however, came too late. The first Japanese torpedo to strike HMAS Perth tore through the forward engine room. By the third torpedo, the order came to abandon ship. Frank managed to survive the sinking, however, 357 sailors ultimately perished, among them Frank's brother Vince.

The oil-coated survivors of the wreckage were ordered onto Japanese destroyers. Frank McGovern had officially become a prisoner of war. For the

twelve months that followed, McGovern toiled on the Burma railway and was starved, beaten, demoralised. In the camps and on the railway, diseases ravaged the prisoners and death remained ever-present.

By 1944, the order came for prisoners to be transported to the coal mines and factories of Japan. Frank was among the over one thousand Australian and British prisoners forced into the cramped hull of the Rakuyō Maru. For five days, he endured stifling heat, deprived of clean air, with barely enough room to sit, and was given a mere half a cup of water each day. Dysentery soon spread among the cramped prisoners.

In the early morning hours of September 12, 1944, Rakuyō Maru, along with another prisoner transport ship, were struck by American torpedoes. “We were torpedoed going up to Japan by an American submarine. It was an unmarked ship so the sub-mariners didn’t know there were POWs on board.”



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HMAS Perth in the Battle of Sunda Strait. *CREDIT:AWM*

In one of Australia’s worst maritime disasters, 1,559 POWs perished, of which 543 were Australian. Yet in another extraordinary twist of fate, Frank McGovern managed to survive the attack and locate a lifeboat left behind by the Japanese. For three days he and thirty other predominantly Australian soldiers survived in this lifeboat.

“We were in an open boat so we decided to head towards China which was a couple of hundred miles away; we had no food in the boat, very little water.”

While some survivors were rescued days later by American submarines, others were reportedly massacred by Japanese machine guns. By the third day, Frank and his crew were ordered at gunpoint to board a Japanese ship. For the second time, Frank McGovern had survived a torpedo attack only to become a prisoner of war.

Aboard the frigate, the recovered prisoners were permitted a handful of rice “which was difficult to eat because we were so dehydrated from being in the open boat.” They endured a nightmarish voyage, with further submarine attacks before they finally reached Japan. Frank remembers vividly the local people who watched as the prisoners were unloaded in Moji, “some of the fellas were sick with malaria and dysentery, we were in full view of the local people and it wasn’t very good. Half of us were half dressed; bits of clothing...some had a small old blanket around us.”



WW2 veteran Frank McGovern holding a 1942 HMAS Perth calendar, the date of the bombing of the ship is marked.*CREDIT: LOUISE KENNERLEY*

That night the prisoners were herded onto a train, “all the shutters down, we weren’t allowed to look out. We headed there on a thirty-hour trip by train up to Yokohama near Tokyo. It was a cold, wet, miserable day.”

At Kawasaki camp in Tokyo, the men endured months of arduous work in the factories until, on the night of March 9, 1945, the United States commenced the deadliest air raid in history. It is a night that Frank remembers vividly. Over the course of 48 hours, 2,000 tonnes of incendiary bombs were dropped

over just 16 square miles of Tokyo. Frank McGovern again miraculously managed to survive, despite their camp being reduced to ashes. The prisoners were transferred to another camp.

Mere weeks later as Frank sat beside his close friend Keith Mills, a bomb was dropped directly onto the camp. "There was a bombing raid a few weeks before the war ended, killed thirty of our fellas, including my mate. He was blown up, I was blown up but I got out of it with a fractured spine..."



World War II

Lying in a hospital bed with a broken leg, Frank had one choice to survive the war

Frank spent the duration of the night unable to move, surrounded by the dead as the screams of the wounded slowly faded into the night. Finally rescued the following day, he was transported to Shebora hospital, where he remained for days without treatment. He soon noticed that other former prisoners, initially healing from shrapnel wounds to their legs, were suddenly declared dead in the operating theatres. An American working in the hospital warned Frank that Japanese doctors draining the blood of those incapable of walking for the sake of transfusions. With this warning, McGovern, despite his fractured spine, managed to muster the strength to stand and walk at quick pace during an inspection by Japanese guards. This action would again narrowly spare Frank's life as he was ordered to return to camp.

Over seven decades after liberation, Frank still precisely recalls the date when the war ended in the Pacific: August 15, 1945. Despite the lack of information

provided, the mood had noticeably shifted in the camp. Food parcels began to be dropped to the emaciated prisoners. Shortly after buses arrived to transport them to the hospital ship, the USS Benevolence, where the men were examined and treated for approximately two weeks. They were subsequently transferred to Manila where they were debriefed, before boarding a plane to Darwin and another to Sydney.

It was a terrific feeling for Frank to return home and be reunited with his parents once more. He visited Keith Mills' parents to inform them about their son and provide some form of comfort. In return he was gifted a photo of the friend that had endured so much by his side. In the aftermath of the war, it took many years for Frank to adjust to being home, confronted with the many painful memories of his wartime experiences.

"I found it difficult at home, as most of our blokes did, because my older brother was on the same ship the Perth and he did not survive it...so that was difficult to come home to."



Frank McGovern aged 92, war veteran and Prisoner of War for three and a half years *CREDIT: KATE GERAGHTY*

In 2019 he was awarded the Order of Australia for services to veterans and their families. The award recognising Frank's extensive service with the HMAS Perth Association, the HMAS Perth Prisoner of War Association as well as the Coogee Randwick Clovelly RSL sub-branch.