

**Dick Medcalf Part 2.** Newspaper article based on an interview with Jonathon King, Sydney Morning Herald March 15, 2008. Transcribed by Denise Ewin.



**Dick Medcalf 1922-2008**

## Survived a torpedo and sharks

DICK MEDCALF survived the sinking of the hospital ship Centaur during World War II but the horrors of that terrible ordeal haunted him for the rest of his life. Yet as the last remaining survivor of the ship's medical staff, Medcalf felt he had a duty to tell the story of the night the Japanese torpedoed the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Hospital ship, claiming 268 of the 332 souls on board.

It was May 14, 1943. "We'd had a beautiful evening with a concert on the foredeck" Medcalf wrote in his memoirs. Two days out of Brisbane en route to New Guinea to collect wounded soldiers, the ship "was lit up like a Christmas tree", the hull's large red crosses lit by floodlights. He had retired to his bunk below for a good night's sleep.

It was 4.10 am and pitch black when there was a "a crash and a roar of flames." "I found myself reaching for the life jacket and haversack and streaking across the deck in the light of the flames to the companionway. God, two decks down. Halfway up the first flight. I hang on to the handrail like grim death as a deluge of water comes down through the gratings and stairs. My haversack is gone but I still have my life jacket and tie it as I reach the top of the second flight. I take one step out onto the deck and the waves surge across, then the ship goes down dragging me with her. I gag and swallow what seems to be gallons of fuel oil, then kick like hell and, after what seems to be ages, I start to rise then I can see clearly against the horizon and the aft third of the ship heading vertically downwards. Centaur is gone. That's all it takes, about 2 ½ minutes.

"Now I'm straddling a panel of hatch grating. I hear shouts and start kicking and paddling to them. Suddenly, figures appear on a Carley float (life raft) and hands drag me on board.

"Then I began the second stage of the horrific experience: trying to survive in the ocean. I am sitting, hunched on a Carley float, huddled against a shivering companion, with more shivering bodies knee to knee. We are a filthy, oil-covered few- most are naked, some in half pyjamas, one with a piece of canvas over his shoulders, but all have that vacant, shocked staring look. Later, a couple of two-man rafts are paddled to us with two more survivors on each: one badly burnt dies later. My mate next to me is naked and shivering, so, as I have on a singlet and pyjamas, I give him my life jacket. We're not cold, just very shocked. It's morning and we realise we have visitors. Sharks. One circles each raft and rubs his back on the rope between; no wonder we've lost nearly 300 mates. Then two more survivors, one at each end of a flooded lifeboat with a shell hole straight through with sharks all around (sic). "What was it" says a voice. 'Bloody Japs- a torpedo,' says someone. 'Not a bloody hope-God knows how I got out.' Then it all comes back, flooding over me with a rush and I shake all over, and vomit fuel oil again.

"After 36 hours of hell," Medcalf recalls, the destroyer USS Mugford rescued them. When the last survivor had been rescued and taken to Brisbane, only 64 were alive of the original 322 on board. Despite the 1907 Hague and 1929 Geneva conventions protecting hospital ships, the clearly marked Centaur had been torpedoed without any warning about 80 kilometres north-east of Brisbane by Japanese Submarine 1-177. Ironically Centaur converted in early 1943 as a hospital ship, had in November 1941 rescued survivors of the German cruiser Kormoran after it had sunk and been sunk by HMAS Sydney.

Dick Medcalf was born in the Trundle Hotel on March 21, 1922, and grew up travelling around Queensland while his father was a car salesman. After leaving Randwick Boys High he joined Philips Lamps in 1938 to train as an X-ray technician at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. He joined the army in June 1940, working at recruitment centres in Brisbane before transferring to 119 AGH in Toowoomba then Greenslopes Military Hospital training as an X-ray and medical technician for Centaur.

After recovering from his ordeal he served at 114 AGH Townsville and for the 9<sup>th</sup> Division on Atherton Tablelands before serving in Borneo until war's end. On discharge, he worked in northern NSW hospitals then Sydney's Royal North Shore Hospital, where he met Shirley Smith, whom he married in 1948. They moved to Cuppacabumbalong Station near Canberra then to Kyola, a sheep station near Narrandera, as manager. In 1956 he bought a property near Wagga. He sold that in 1973, moved into Wagga then retired to northern NSW in 1977 until his wife died in 1989. He bought a small property in Cowra in 1990 before retiring to Murwillumbah in 2005.

He was a founding and life member of Wagga Alpine Ski Club in Falls Creek, a keen sailor, fly fisherman, horseman and representative polocrosse player and tennis player. He wrote many short stories, including *The Death of Drizabone*, drawing on recollections of early childhood, and was an avid letter writer to newspapers.

His death as last survivor of the medical staff of the Centaur closes a chapter in Australian war and maritime history. He leaves four children, six grandchildren and three great grandchildren.

**Jonathon King**

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/survived-a-torpedo-and-sharks-20080315-gds5b9.html>