

Bernard Joseph O'Gara

9th July 1917 – 2013

Royal Australian Naval Reserve

Offica/Service No. S/5527



Figure 1: Photograph of Bernard Joseph O'Gara in his Naval Uniform, (Family Collection, c.1940)

Part A

On the 9th of July 1917, in the small suburb Carleton, New South Wales, Bernard Joseph O’Gara was born into a working-class family. He lived with his mother Lily O’Gara, and his siblings at 39 Kensington Street, Summer Hill. Growing up in Sydney, Bernard excelled in English and advanced mathematics during his school years and as a hobby, enjoyed learning to cook. Although very talented, he often found himself unable to decide what direction he wanted his future to take. His family lived modestly; his mother worked tirelessly as a handmaiden, sewing dresses, curtains, and even clothing for wealthy families. Despite any challenges or hardships he faced, Bernard’s upbringing taught him the values of loyalty and service; values that would soon come to define his role during World War II.

Like many other young Australians of his time, Bernard’s peaceful life was disrupted by the outbreak of a global conflict. As Nazi Germany continued to invade and spread their influence, and Japan threatening Australia’s northern shores (*Australian War Memorial, 2016*), Bernard stepped up to take the call to serve. His brother, who wanted to accompany him, was unable to enlist due to an eye condition and disability, leaving Bernard to embark on this journey alone. The decision to enlist marked the beginning of Bernard’s journey into the Royal Australian Navy, where the values he had carried since childhood would now be put to the test in the long stage of war.

On the 20th of May 1941, he was mobilized into the Royal Australian Naval Reserve and posted to H.M.A.S Rushcutter, a hub for anti-submarine warfare training in Sydney.

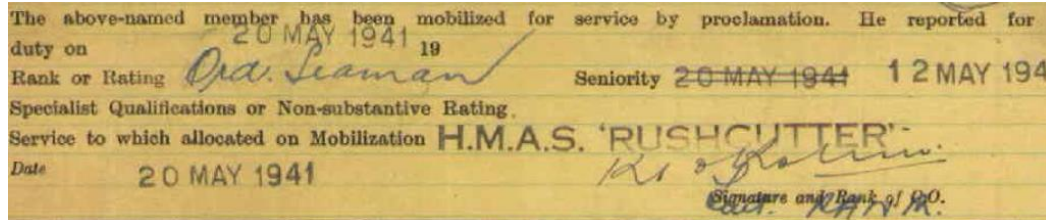


Figure 2: Bernard Joseph O’Gara’s Mobilisation (National Archives of Australia, 2015)

During his time at H.M.A.S Rushcutter, Bernard was trained in anti-submarine methods. Rushcutter had been chosen in 1937 as the site for RAN’s (Royal Australian Naval) *Anti-Submarine School*, which officially opened in February 1939. By the early 1940s, it was authorized as H.M.A.S Rushcutter and had become the Navy’s centre for anti-submarine and radar training (Naval Historical Society of Australia, 2017). Here, Sailors such as Bernard, were trained to operate radars, and were also attached to the *mosquito fleet* of harbour defence motor launches, Fairmile patrol vessels, and the Naval Auxiliary Patrol Boats. This training was critical as Japanese would soon begin to threaten Australia’s coastal waters and shipping lanes (*Australian War Memorial, 2016*). As Ordinary Seaman, Bernard would have learned all the fundamentals of seamanship, watchkeeping, and the anti-submarine duties he had to prepare himself for in his later postings. Bernard recalls that he often would cook on each ship he would rotate to, teaching himself how to prepare meals better and apply his quick hobby of cooking. This became a gesture of mateship, a way to bring comfort and connection to his fellow seamen.

Over the next two years, Bernard's experience in this field would take him to a range of ships and shore bases. His first posting was to *H.M.A.S Kuttabul*. According to the *Royal Australian Navy*, Kuttabul's primary role was to provide administrative training and logistics support to Defence personally employed within the Sydney Area. With that, it can be assumed that Bernard alongside other young men, were prepped for the future responsibilities of coastal defence at times if and when real threats posed against Australia's harbours, and shipping lanes. Several months after Bernard had completed his posting at H.M.A.S Kuttabul, the Japanese attacked Sydney Harbour in May 1942. This attack was carried out by Japanese midget submarines which tragically resulted in the deaths of nineteen Australian and two British sailors who were stationed at Kuttabul at the time (Monument Australia, 2010). Although Bernard was no longer there, this event still highlights the severity and dangers naval personal faced and the importance of training and preparation he received during his service.

Name of Ship or Depot.	Rank or Rating.	From.	To.
Rushcutter	Ind. Seaman	20. 5. 41	26. 6. 41
Kuttabul	"	27. 6. 41	16. 10. 41
PENGUIN (KATOomba)	"	17. 10. 41	15. 12. 41
RUSHCUTTER (KATOomba)	"	16. 12. 41	16. 12. 41
Platypus (Darwin)	"	17. 12. 41	16. 1. 42
Melville	"	17. 2. 42	11. 6. 42
"	A.B.	12. 6. 42	4. 5. 42
"	"	5. 5. 42	31. 12. 42
RUSHCUTTER	"	1. 1. 43	9. 5. 43
RUSHCUTTER (PLATYPUS)	"	10. 5. 43	31. 7. 43
MELVILLE (MELVILLE)	"	1. 8. 43	31. 9. 43

Figure 3: Bernard's posting record showing service at Rushcutter, Platypus (Darwin), and Melville (National Archives of Australia, 1941-43)



Figure 4: HMAS Katoomba (J204), Bathurst-class corvette active in convoy escort and minesweeping operations (Alchetron, n.d.)

After Kuttabul, Bernard rotated through H.M.A.S Penguin and H.M.A.S Katoomba through the 17th of December 1941 to 16th February 1942 (Figure 3). Penguin, based at Balmoral in Sydney, served as shore-based training and a support establishment (*HMAS Penguin, 2017*). Katoomba on the other hand, was a Bathurst-class corvette deployed in active service, tasked with convoy escort and anti-submarine patrols across Australian waters (*HMAS Katoomba, 2025*).

Bernard's next posting was H.M.A.S Platypus, located in Darwin on the 17th of February 1942 (Figure 3). This placed him directly in Darwin Harbour during the air raids of 1942. Platypus, originally built as a submarine tender during World War 1, was serving as the mother ships to over twenty small ships, including corvettes and destroyers (*Ireland, 1985*). This placed Bernard and the other men under the attack of the raids. On the 19th of February, the harbour was attacked by 18 high-level bombers, 54 dive-bombers, and 18 fighter aircrafts from Japan, which marked the first air assault on the Australian mainland. Bernard later recalled looking up from a tugboat and seeing 'tiny black specks in the sky' realising too late that they were bombs. Before the attack, the sky was clear, the sea was calm, and the harbour was a hub of activity when the bombing began at approximately 10:00 a.m., instantly killing dozens of wharf workers and causing oil fires that destroyed ships such as Benhamin Franklin and British Motorist. Platypus itself was near-missed three times, with only one bomb managing to damage Platypus's condensers (*Ireland, 1985*).

Following on from his service on Platypus, Bernard was transferred to H.M.A.S Melville, which was Darwin's naval shore base. From here, he continued to serve under the constant warnings of air raids and tropical heat, eventually earning his promotion to Able Seaman (A.B) on 5th of December 1942.

Working under constant tension, it's quite likely that Bernard and his crewmates would be relatively close and form tight bonds.

Through this, Darwin remained as one of the crucial defensive strongholds, and men like Bernard ensured supply chains, convoys, and coastal communities remained safe.

Bernard returned to H.M.A.S Rushcutter in March 1943 and from here, he completed his final posting. On the 30th of September 1943, he was officially demobilized after the war's end. Bernard's service record is marked not by his medal or his battlefield glory, but was through a diligent, strong character followed by a steady courage. He was awarded a Good Conduct Badge on 20th May 1944 and through his assessments, he was constantly assessed as "Very Good" in character.

GOOD CONDUCT BADGES.					
Date.	1st, 2nd, or 3rd.	Granted, Deprived, or Restored.	Date.	1st, 2nd, or 3rd.	Granted, Deprived, or Restored.
20. 5. 44	1st	Granted A56/348548.			

Figure 5: Bernard Joseph O'Gara's report stating his Good Conduct Badge (National Archives of Australia, 2015)

When many men returned from the war broken or disillusioned, Bernard re-entered society without strife. He received his deferred pay and war gratuity. From there, Bernard spent the rest of his life in Adelaide, where he finally found stability and a purpose. After settling in, he became a taxation officer and devoted himself to his family, embracing the everyday joys of home life and sharing his stories from the war to be remembered forever.



Figure 6: A photograph of a Good Conduct Badge (Veteran Voices Military Research, 2022)

The ANZAC Spirit is often thought as the act through courage under fire and acts of heroism through the battlefield. But Bernard Joseph O'Gara represents another face of that spirit; he was the quiet contributor and the dependable shipmate. He was the man who did his duty not for his own glory, but rather for the safety of others. His courage will be forever remembered as enduring. He stood watch, faced storms and rough weathering conditions, monitored sonar screens, and protected convoys from any unseen threats. He demonstrated perseverance, staying the full duration of the war, and he displayed mateship through cooking meals and taking care of the fellow seamen alongside him across multiple postings.

While his name may not be well known or etched into the stone of a foreign battlefield, Bernard's spirit will forever live along the safe shores he helped to defend, the convoy ships that reached their destination, and the peaceful Australia that emerged after the war.

1289 words

The word count does not include referencing and brief captions under photographs/figures etc as per guidelines

HaSS word count: 1284

Part B

When first starting this project, I had the decision to research my great grandfather Bernard. Growing up, my mother would always tell me stories about Bernard (Referred to as Jojo). To acknowledge his legacy and everlasting impact on my family, I wanted to research him so his life and sacrifices will be forever known throughout my family history.

To gather more information on Jojo besides the information I found online, I conducted interviews with relatives such as my grandmother, who also had a physical photograph of him in his naval uniform. Seeing the photograph made me feel connected to him in a way that service records alone don't. Additionally, I would listen to my mother's stories about him and events he recalled such as the Japan bombings, his cooking for people on boats, his education, and his struggles in finding a fulfilling career path. I also used the National Archives of Australia to access his naval records which showed me the exact dates of his time being enlisted. Combining both official records and the family memories I had learned allowed me to piece together the bigger picture of who Jojo was and what he experienced.

Additionally, at the date of this project, Jojo's page on the *Virtual War Memorial Australia* (Australian War Memorial, 2025a) did not include a photo of him. Considering I had a physical photograph of him in his naval uniform, I submitted a digital scan to the site to honour his legacy.

One of the challenges I faced when beginning research on him was that his service record didn't show any dramatic battles or frontline combat. At first, I thought if his story was "important enough" compared to other soldiers whose names are well known for their sacrifices. But the more I read and found out about him, the more I realised that his contribution to the war was just as crucial. Jojo served in Darwin during the Japanese bombings, and even though his duties were mainly quiet and more of behind the scenes, they still required perseverance, courage, and endurance. I now believe that his service is still an important aspect that reflects the ANZAC Spirit. He didn't serve in fame or glory, but rather in reliability, and a steady commitment to his fellow soldiers and his country.

Through this project, I learned that history isn't just about the great battles of the world, but about the ordinary people like my great grandpa Jojo who showed his strength. I also learned more about my own family, and it has made me feel proud to continue to carry on his memory. By taking part in this Anzac Spirit Award, I hope that future generations in my family will know about Jojo's service and the quiet but powerful role he played during Australia's wartime history.

Words: 464

The word count does not include referencing as per guidelines

HaSS word count: 467

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Additional Primary Sources

Photograph of Bernard in Naval uniform - Family Collection (*provided from grandmother*)