

The Submarine Six
Australian Naval Heroes:
Waller, Farncomb, Rankin,
Dechaineux, Collins, Sheean

Dr Tom Lewis

ISBN 970987151919

Avonmore Books

www.avonmorebooks.com.au

201 pages

Reviewed by LCDR Desmond Woods

This new book by Dr Tom Lewis has had a long gestation period. The author has been gathering information and interviewing those who knew his subjects for the last decade. Some of those he interviewed in his early research period died before the book was published. Had this research not been done, much of the first hand information and insights recorded in the book would have been irretrievably lost. Dr Lewis has done good service to posterity by ensuring that elderly eye witnesses to the deeds and lives of these great Australian sailors have had their final say.

By the time this review is published the findings of the current investigation into the recognition of unrecognised acts of gallantry may have been produced. This book has been given in manuscript form and in final format to those making those recommendations. Time will tell whether the nation will use this process to remedy the injustice done to the RAN heroes who are among those under consideration. The fog of war and national amnesia with regard to its naval history caused their deeds to be unrequited for generations. If the oversights of the past are put right then this book will have played its part in providing justice at last for these men, their families and for the Navy and the nation.

The Submarine Six comes with a foreword by VADM Crane, written in June 2011, aligning the book with the centenary of the RAN and pointing out that the Collins class are the only ships in the RAN which bear the names of individuals.

This handsomely illustrated work tells the story of those six sailors in detail. Effectively, it is six short biographies, but it also covers a very great deal of Australia's naval history from the early 1920's until the end of Collins' naval career in 1955. This is a considerable achievement. Naturally the main focus of the book is the 1939-45 war which took four of its subjects' lives. Tom Lewis builds his account of the careers of each of the five officers through the scores and remarks made on their personal reports, and through many interviews and written accounts. The four who died fighting, Waller, Rankin, Dechaineux and Sheean, have now become, at least within the Navy

and the naval retired community, men garlanded with imperishable fame. But they are still largely unknown to the general Australian public. When the author was interviewed on radio while promoting the book it was clear that the interviewers had no prior knowledge of these sailors' achievements until they had read the book and were somewhat bemused that they had never heard of these Australian heroes. The bloodied digger in trench and jungle is understandably the prevailing image in the public mind of Australians at war and it appears to be all that is taught in Australian school textbooks. This book should be a set text in Australian history classes nationwide. It should also be mandated reading for all New Entry Officers at the RANC. Five of its subjects were graduates of the RANC. The inspiring life stories are all here. John Collins, was a brilliant ship handler and victor over the *Bartolomeo Colleone*. He commanded *Shropshire* and led Australia's fight back in the Pacific until he came as close as a man can to being killed in action and yet survive. He recovered from his wounds and led the Navy into the post war world as an advocate for air power at sea and prepared the service for the Korean war.

Emile Dechaineaux, the Tasmanian son of a French artist who distinguished himself during the evacuation of Dunkirk, was the warm-hearted father of his ships' companies until he was struck down on *Australia's* bridge, standing next to Collins, by air attack at Leyte Gulf. His death from internal wounds robbed the Navy of an officer who, had he lived, would have been a very great leader at sea for the final year of the war and in the post war period. Teddy Sheean's familiar story is well told. His selfless split-second decision to return to his Oerlikon gun and fire in defence of his mates being strafed in the water should be embedded in the national consciousness as the ultimate example of mateship and duty, combined in one young lost life. His decision to sink with *Armidale*, still fighting back, was an act of sublime courage and self-sacrifice in the highest traditions of the Victoria Cross, which he so richly deserves. He brought great honour to himself and his little ship and his story has the power to move no matter how often it is told. It was told to an ANZAC Day audience in the town of Armidale a few years ago. Many of them knew nothing of this Tasmanian boy whose corvette bore the name of their town. The crowd was visibly moved.

Harold Farncomb was the consummate naval professional who never put a foot wrong while at sea in the most testing of command positions. He repeatedly distinguished himself in command of an RN carrier and the RAN's cruisers. He was a great Australian sailor who was tested in battle and never found wanting. He fought a successful battle in peacetime to recover from mental war wounds and went on to be a fine barrister.

Robert 'Oscar' Rankin, was the quiet methodical hydrographer who when given command of an under-armed 'sloop of war' *Yarra* demonstrated his fighting spirit and determination

to do all that he could to protect his embattled convoy, or die trying. *Yarra's* last fight and the gallantry of Rankin's men should be finally recognised by her CO and his gunner LS 'Buck' Taylor both receiving posthumous Victoria Crosses.

Finally there is Hector Laws Waller, the finest Captain (D) and greatest natural leader of RAN sailors in war that Australia has ever bred and the RANC trained. He took the near obsolete and mechanically unreliable flotilla of elderly destroyers, that a penurious Australian government gave him, and turned it into a sharp weapon of war. He demonstrated to Admiral Andrew Cunningham, C-in-C Mediterranean, the steely calibre of Australian sailors in battle. His deeds commanding *Stuart* at Matapan, attacking Italian heavy cruisers at point blank range, and illuminating them with searchlights, are unsurpassed in our naval annals for cool courage and elan. His death in 1942 and the loss of *Perth* and half her ship's company in Sunda Strait was the tragic finale to a heroic and full life, well lived on many levels. Mike Carlton's recent fine book *Cruiser*, published in 2010, reminded a new generation of the life and death of this great naval officer who combined being an extraordinary leader and a working seaman. In far fewer pages Tom Lewis has distilled the essence of "Hard over Hec Waller" and illustrated his account with the anecdotes that round out this kindly, wise sailor so beloved by his men. Waller too is among those rightly under consideration for retrospective honours.

Of note is the fact that only two posthumous awards were available during the war: the VC or a Mention in Despatches. Why this should be so is not entirely clear, but the effect was that Waller and Shean were both awarded only an MID for the actions in which they died. Rankin did not even receive that award presumably because there were none of his men left who were senior enough to have the credibility to speak or write of his selfless courage. This book is written to be read by those who know and understand the national significance of the men it pays tribute to, and by the general public. For those for whom 'navy ways' are new information there is a wealth of detail on the naval context in which these six lives were lived. The book contains a glossary and an opening chapter containing a wide range of information on the Navy and its people. This is a definitive work and will be consulted and enjoyed for decades to come, long after the Collins class have been superseded by the future submarines now under discussion. The names of the submarine six will be with us forever, whether or not future ships carry them, and whether or not overdue recognition is now paid to the skill and courage of these great Australians. *Submarine Six* is highly recommended.