

Book Review

Honour Denied. Teddy Sheean, A Tasmanian Hero

Avonmore Books, \$35 RRP, B5, illustrated in colour throughout

By Dr Peter Williams

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A reviewer should declare if he has a dog in the fight. I do. Four years ago I was the researcher for the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal when they considered whether or not Teddy Sheean and twelve others should be awarded a retrospective Victoria Cross.

When the Tribunal asked me what I thought, I said no. I'm sure they took little notice of my opinion, but their decision was also no. My view now regarding all thirteen cases is still no, but this book shows me that the opposition, amongst them the writer of this impressive work, Dr Tom Lewis, do have some powerful arguments well mustered.

This is a heavyweight book. Literally at first: 320 pages, B5 format; quality heavy paper. But *Honour Denied* is a heavyweight in another way too. This is the most comprehensive account of the story of Teddy Sheean and the *Armidale* yet produced. Noted military historian Lewis has gone even further than that though.

He has extensively researched and described the naval world of the 1940s when Australia was one of many Allied countries locked in a titanic struggle for victory over the Axis. We are taken through the training of naval ratings. We learn about Hobart in 1941, from its cinemas to its people such as Errol Flynn, the famous film star. Lewis shows that Sheean was one of many Tasmanians who volunteered for the Navy; in fact the Island State produced the most per capita volunteers for the Service of all of the states and territories.

A prospective reader might wonder what else fills this weighty work, as Sheean was just 18 years old when he died a hero – manning an anti-aircraft gun to the end to protect his mates as they abandoned their sinking corvette in the Timor Sea. The *Armidale* had been torpedoed by air attack and was going down rapidly. With Japanese aircraft still circling and attacking, Sheean went back to his gun to fight, rather than abandon ship. It was a gallant action which may have saved many lives.

This book is more than a simple chronological biography. Lewis conveys the 1940s world at war to the everyday reader. We see the world through the eyes of the lowliest of naval ranks, where the ship's captain was a distant deity. At the same time he takes us through the naval duties and responsibilities of all on board a fighting ship. The world of aviation is also a big part of the picture of war at sea: the Japanese bombers and fighters that sunk *Armidale* are here in detail, as are anti-aircraft weapons and warfare techniques, with some particularly good graphics, maps and photographs.

All fighting services need heroes to embrace and celebrate. Teddy Sheean is just one of those men and has a special place in naval hearts. An earlier work by author Lewis, *The Submarine Six*, features Australian naval heroes deemed prominent enough to have submarines named after them. Sheean is a lonely figure in this list: the only non-officer. So in a typical Australian egalitarian way, the teenage Tasmanian has a certain Boy's Own romance about him. The book – beautifully produced

and full colour throughout – also produces surprises: for example Sheean was secretly engaged, and his fiancée carried the diamond ring he gave her for the rest of her life.

The writer examines the history of the Victoria Cross and shows that the process leading to its award has not always been consistent. For instance, the first two fighter pilots who shot down a WWI Zeppelin were awarded VCs; the third a lesser decoration, and the fourth nothing at all. VCs have been awarded retrospectively with a considerable lapse of time as well – up to 28 years after the event. Lewis asks – why not Sheean too?

Lewis argues that at least two other Australian fighting naval men were worthy of the Cross – Hec Waller of *HMAS Perth* and Robert Rankin of *HMAS Yarra*. Rankin and his crew received nothing at the time. However, the 2011 Valour Inquiry recommended that Lieutenant Commander Rankin, along with the other members of *HMAS Yarra's* crew, receive the Unit Citation for Gallantry. Waller received a Mention in Despatches like Sheean – the only other award which at the time could have been given posthumously. The author highlights the unevenness of awards between different countries, with Captain Rooks of *USS Houston*, who fought his ship to the last alongside *Perth*, received the USA's highest award, the Congressional Medal.

Lewis does not blame the Royal Australian Navy for Sheean's lack of a VC. Rather, he argues the fault lies in the practise of the time, whereby any RAN award recommendation had to go through the parent Royal Navy's Admiralty in London. The Army and the RAAF by comparison, were not so unencumbered.

The last few chapters summarise Lewis's argument in favour of a VC for Sheean. He is critical of the 2011 Valour Inquiry while understanding that its terms of reference set limits on what it could do. Lewis believes that if it is, in the end, impossible to obtain a retrospective Victoria Cross for Sheean, then a lesser award, the Cross of Gallantry, would be acceptable.

The book is top and tailed by a foreword from the Premier of Tasmania, and an afterword from one of Australia's still living holders of the Victoria Cross: Warrant Officer Keith Payne VC AM. Payne sums up his view simply: "It is never too late for a gallantry award to be recommended and approved..."

Essential reading.