

The Soldiers of HMAS Armidale

By way of background, the three AIF Soldiers Lionel Clarke, Matt Telley and Jack Callander volunteered for operations involving HMAS Armidale and subsequently joined the ship's company on Saturday 28 November 1942.

All three soldiers had previously served in the Middle East, fighting against the Axis Powers and returned to Australia in March 1942, following instructions from Prime Minister Curtin to withdraw a large Australian troop contingent serving in this theatre of war and move them home, following the bombing of Pearl Harbour in December 1941.

These troops, upon returning to Australia were based at various camps along the Stuart Highway, not far from Adelaide River, approximately 70 kilometres south of Darwin, in readiness for a possible invasion by Japanese Imperial army troops.

HMAS Armidale

Clarke, Telley and Callander initially survived the sinking of HMAS Armidale on 1 December 1942. After five days of treading water, holding onto flotsam, or taking their turn on a makeshift raft, they were chosen by Gunnery Officer, Lloyd Palmer, to be part of a 29-member crew to attempt to row several hundred miles Southeast to an area north of Bathurst Island.

The mode of transport for the men chosen by Palmer, was the repaired Montague whaler, which had broken free from the sinking ship. Whilst bullet-holed and a lying a metre under the waterline, the survivors demonstrated enormous determination and ingenuity to salvage and re float the boat and make it seaworthy. This incredible act of sheer will power to raise the whaler against tremendous odds must arguably be one of the most amazing untold stories of WW2.

On day five of the ordeal, the men in the whaler, including the three soldiers, departed the scene of the sinking, in what has been described by the survivors to be one of the most harrowing experiences of the ordeal. Here, they said farewells and left behind 48 men. To this day, the fate of these men remains unknown, and this day was become known by the survivors as "Separation Day."

After four days of rowing, the men in the whaler had covered approximately 160 nautical miles but were still well short of the reconnaissance area they were aiming to reach, when they were miraculously spotted by an RAAF Catalina seaplane and rescued the following day by HMAS Kalgoorlie.

In all, 100 men were killed in action, died of wounds, or are listed as missing presumed dead.

The three AIF soldiers spent time in hospital in Darwin and were then returned to their Battalions, serving another three years until the end of the war.

The Association can only assume the soldiers' records never mentioned they were assigned to HMAS Armidale, owing to the security surrounding the operation to disembark Netherlands East Indies Troops and embark Portuguese woman and children along with men from the 2nd Independent Company, fighting behind enemy lines in East Timor.

There were various attempts to have their military records amended to confirm that they were on HMAS Armidale. The most notable was by Clarke, who had a fellow Armidale sailor sign an affidavit to

say he was indeed on the ship. The Army, presented with this information, again refused to confirm the presence of the soldiers onboard HMAS Armidale.

It was not until 2021 Mr Ed Willis, then President of the 2/2 Commando Association, found the War Diary entry confirming the name, rank, and service numbers of the three soldiers, which confirmed they were on the Armidale.

The War Diary was then provided to our Patron, Paul Papalia, who then contacted Veteran Affairs Minister, Matt Keogh, and today, after 80 years, this injustice, has finally been resolved.

Today, we welcome home these three outstanding Australian Infantrymen and recognise their contribution to the war effort aboard HMAS Armidale, and for playing their part in this incredible story of survival at sea.