

DHAAT HEARINGS – TEDDY SHEEAN  
MINISTER BARNETT -- SUMMARY  
TUESDAY, 26 MARCH 2019

- Mr Chairman, Tribunal members and Vice Admiral Noonan
- I again thank those present for their support in enabling this hearing to progress as it has.
- Based on the evidence provided—which is overwhelming—there can be no doubt that Ordinary Seaman Edward ‘Teddy’ Sheean’s actions onboard HMAS Armidale on 1 December 1942 demonstrated exceptional bravery and deserves the Victoria Cross for Australia.
- Thankfully, this is a merits review of his actions—the first that I am aware of since the Second World War—we need only look at the Royal Australian Navy’s summary of his actions:
- *Sheean independently decided to forego his opportunity at survival by not abandoning ship but rather returning to the gun. Despite being wounded enroute, he strapped himself in to shoulder mounts and harness, potentially giving up any chance of survival, and commenced to fire the gun at the enemy, shooting down one aircraft and possibly damaging others whilst also attempting to disrupt and distract the enemy aircraft from strafing and killing his defenceless shipmates in the water. He sacrificed his life trying to save his shipmates and despite his severe and possibly fatal wounds he continued firing the gun as the ship slipped under the waves dragging him with it to his grave.*
- As I outlined in this place yesterday, I am of the strong view that Sheean’s actions as outlined met all four of the eligibility criteria of the Victoria Cross, where only one must be met.
- I also emphasize the following pivotal moment in Sheean’s actions as he stood beside crewmates at the rails of the sinking HMAS Armidale, ready to obey the order “abandon ship”.
- He must have observed that the enemy aircraft, having disabled the ship, were now turning their attention to strafing the survivors.

- Something prompted him to head back to the Oerlikon gun. Had he continued to abandon ship **he had a fair chance of survival**, because many crew mates did survive.
- He wasn't stuck with his Oerlikon gun because of his wounds. He made for the side of the ship where crew-mates were abandoning the corvette, but then while he was still able, and amid all the chaos of those minutes, he made a conscious decision to leave the side of the ship and head back to his Oerlikon gun.
- **He turned back** - in an act of conspicuous gallantry as described by Navy.
- I put to the Tribunal that this is an act of **most** conspicuous gallantry.
- He exercised a pre-eminent act of valour and self-sacrifice, because he knew the dire consequences of his actions in a hopeless situation, and he exercised extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy.
- It would have been heartbreaking and frightening for all aboard the Armidale - but Ordinary Seaman Teddy Sheean, a mere teenager with less than two years' experience in the navy, decided to fight on.
- Seven witnesses including the ship's commander observed his actions, as I quoted. There is no doubt about what he did.
- According to the **Director of Navy Honours and Awards** on 5 February this year -
- *"There is no doubt that Sheean's actions demonstrated gallantry under all the guises of bravery, courage, heroism, valour and daring and that it was conspicuous to those who were there..."* (\* (Item 53.)
- As Vice Admiral Noonan from the Navy said yesterday, in 2019 he would have been recommended for a gallantry award of some kind.
- His actions, in returning to the aft gun, without being ordered or coerced; strapping himself into the shoulder harness and firing upon the enemy to try to save his mates, who were in peril from the strafing aircraft, demonstrates his most conspicuous gallantry, irrespective of the duration or sequence of events. On top of this was his self-sacrifice for his mates.

- It really doesn't matter whether he spent 30 seconds or 10 minutes firing at the enemy. The fact is he selflessly went back to the aft Oerlikon gun to fight on, to save his mates.
- What more did he have to do – to satisfy any one of the four requirements of a Victoria Cross?
- We are told of the risks in comparison with other actions, but consider navy's recount of Leading Seaman Jack Mantle of the Royal Navy:
- *“Leading Seaman Jack Mantle was in charge of the Starboard pom-pom gun when HMS Foylebank was attacked by enemy aircraft on the 4th of July 1940. Early in the action his left leg was shattered by a bomb, but he stood fast at his gun and went on firing with hand-gear only: for the ship's electric power had failed. Almost at once he was wounded again in many places. Between his bursts of fire he had time to reflect on the grievous injuries of which he was soon to die but his great courage bore him up till the end of the fight, when he fell by the gun he had so valiantly served.”*
- Consider the actions of Lt Colonel Harry Murray VC, another Tasmanian from Evandale in Northern Tasmania, who survived the Great War at Gallipoli and in France, and who emerged from World War I as the most highly decorated soldier in the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) and in the entire Commonwealth of Nations.
- Harry Murray won a VC and a host of other medals. On 5 February 1917 during an action at Gueudecourt in France he led 140 men on an assault of a position known as Stormy Trench. He distinguished himself by encouraging his men, leading full frontal attacks with bayonets and hand grenades and by rescuing the wounded and carrying them to safety. He lost 70 per cent of his men.
- Jack Mantle and Harry Murray had something in common with Teddy Sheean. They exercised extreme valour and the most conspicuous gallantry as they tried to protect their mates in the face of enemy fire.
- What they don't have in common with Teddy Sheean is that they were awarded a VC for their selfless devotion to duty, but Teddy wasn't.
- Yesterday Chief of Navy Vice Admiral Michael Noonan highlighted the respect and high esteem that Teddy Sheean's legacy is held by all personnel in the Navy and also by the wider community.

- A submarine is named after him—the only vessel in the RAN named after an ordinary seaman. Naval awards are named in his honour. Memorials, facilities, grant programs—all named after a boy from Latrobe.
- In a sense, Teddy Sheean is the navy's surrogate Victoria Cross recipient.
- He is so highly regarded, deservedly, and held in such high esteem by the navy that anything less than a VC could diminish the navy's—and indeed nation's--glowing regard for Teddy's bravery and example to all sailors.
- The Tribunal has an extremely difficult task in assessing any award that could potentially be seen to adversely affect or dilute that esteem and legacy.
- As the Tribunal has stated this is not a review of the British Admiralty's award process in 1943 no matter how flawed it was.
- Now is it an inquiry process as per the Tribunal's Valour Inquiry of 2013.
- This is a merits case review of Sheean's actions.
- So I urge the Tribunal to consider carefully this merits review of a teenager from Latrobe – a mere navy recruit, who joined HMAS Armidale in June 1942 and gave his life fighting to save her crew a mere six months later.
- The conscious decision to forego a chance of survival for none as the ship sunk beneath him.
- The conscious decision to take up a position that was not his own, as a loader, at the aft Oerlikon gun.
- The decision to engage with a numerically superior enemy, which had overwhelmed the defences of his own ship. One man—a boy, really—against more than ten enemy aircraft.
- The conscious placing of himself between a numerically superior and far more heavily armed enemy and his defenceless shipmates struggling in the water, under attack, as they sought to save their lives, helpless to defend themselves.
- The deliberate sacrifice of his own chances of survival, strapped to his gun on a sinking ship, for the sake of others.
- I submit that the overwhelming evidence put to this Tribunal supports the view that Teddy Sheean deserves a Victoria Cross.

- I hope to republish my book '*Our Heroes – Tasmania's Victoria Cross Recipients*' with a new chapter on Teddy Sheean.
- As was said in this place, by this Tribunal yesterday: What more could Teddy Sheean have done to deserve a Victoria Cross?