

Brave cook in running for VC

BY GUY BARNETT

04 Jul, 2011 09:29 AM

Former Tasmanian senator GUY BARNETT looks at the feats of a Launceston sailor being considered for the Victoria Cross.

LEADING Cook Francis Bassett Emms (known as "Dick"), of Launceston, has been identified as one of 13 people to be considered for Australia's highest honour during wartime, the Victoria Cross.

In the coming weeks, the Honours and Awards Tribunal will review his acts of bravery during the Japanese attack on Darwin in World War II.

Mr Emms joined the Royal Australian Navy in 1928.

He trained as an Ordinary Seaman on HMAS Cerberus, and was promoted to Able Seaman in January 1930 on HMAS Canberra and later qualified as a gunner.

During 1935, he travelled to the United Kingdom to become one of the founding crew of HMAS Sydney (II).

Failing eyesight in 1936 caused a change of course. Mr Emms so loved the sea that he retrained as a cook in the navy.

Mr Emms was one of two men on the Kara Kara in Darwin harbour manning the boom gates (designed to keep out Japanese submarines) when the Japanese bombing started on December 19, 1942.

Rather than taking cover or abandoning his ship, this leading cook took to the machine gun to defend his mates, his ship and his country.

He was hit in the stomach by a Japanese zero machine gun attack.

His mates called to him to take cover, but he stood by his gun as another wave of Japanese zeros and bombers moved in devastating fashion over Darwin.

Although transferred to the hospital ship HMAS Manunda, he died later the same day from his wounds.

In recommending him for a posthumous Mention in Dispatches, his commanding officer, Lieutenant-Commander Alexander Fowler, wrote:

"For courage and devotion to duty in action. While seriously wounded, he continued to fire his machine gun on HMAS Kara Kara during a continuous machine gun attack by enemy aircraft, thereby probably saving the ship and many of the ship's company."

A letter to his wife, Mrs Sylvia Emms Fowler, said: "Your husband was killed in action under the most gallant circumstances.

"He was manning a machine gun and was constantly attacked by waves of diving aircraft; although seriously wounded early in the action, he continued to fight his gun till the enemy was finally beaten off.

"He then collapsed and died shortly afterwards."

Another letter from a friend of his to Mrs Emms said: "He was killed or rather mortally wounded on one of our boom ships and he deserved the VC.

"He was on a machine gun and hit in the stomach, but carried on until it was all over and it wasn't until he collapsed that it was realised how badly he was hit.

"He never complained and though too weak to do much, gave the 'thumbs up' as he was taken away."

Mr Emms and his wife had a daughter named Helen, who was eight at the time of his death.

She later married and now lives in Sydney where I recently met her, her daughter and grandson.

She described her dad as a quiet, easygoing, dedicated man who loved the sea.

He was all smiles and very handsome, she said.

Mr Emms has been remembered at the Darwin Defence Housing facility with a tower named in his honour.

More than 230 Japanese aircraft attacked Darwin on that first fateful day, against little resistance.

The aircraft were launched from the same carrier force which had been responsible for the attack on Pearl Harbour, now stationed in the Timor Sea.

The Japanese continued with a total of 64 bombing raids on Darwin until November 12, 1943.

Australia lost eight ships in Darwin Harbour with 15 damaged, and two merchant ships were sunk near Bathurst Island, just north of Darwin.

The wharf was badly damaged and the police station, police barracks, post office, and administrator's office were all destroyed.

The official death toll in Darwin was fixed at the time at 243, but this figure is widely thought to be too low.

A further 320 people received "hospital treatment for wounds".

The details of what happened in Darwin were apparently suppressed by authorities to control panic in the southern states. Among those details was the story of Mr Emms.

There may have been good reason for such an approach in wartime, but 70 years later it's time the story was told.

Especially as he is now being considered for a Victoria Cross, Launceston's own Dick Emms deserves his story be told.

Tasmania has already produced 13 of Australia's 98 Victoria Cross recipients.

Punching above our weight could well continue.



Leading Cook Francis Bassett "Dick" Emms died on December 19, 1942, while defending Darwin from Japanese attack.