

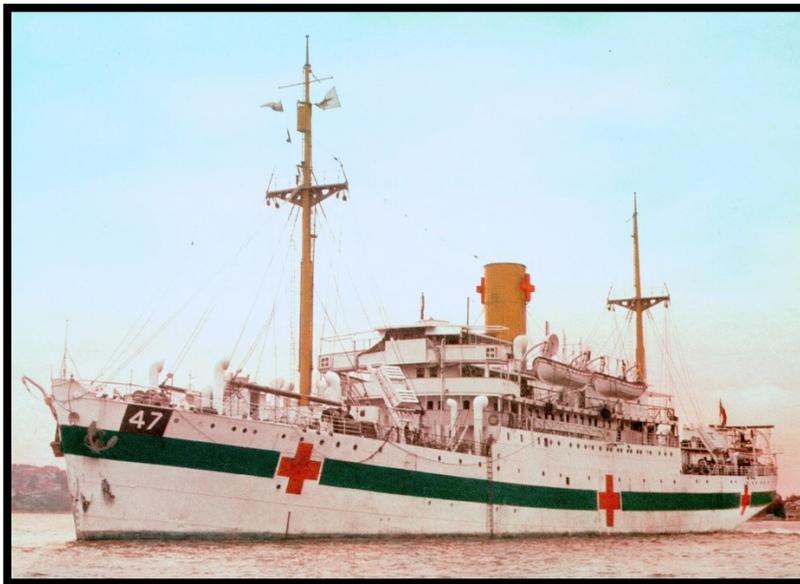
The Loss of AHS Centaur

Commentary By Geoff Walker



Without doubt, one of the most tragic losses of WW2 was that of the **Australian Hospital Ship "Centaur"** on 14th May 1943, off the coast of Queensland. Of the 332 people on board, only 64 survived the attack.

The ship was on passage from Sydney to Cairns, and New Guinea, when she was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine just south of Moreton Island. The submarine was believed to be I-176. The deliberate sinking took place despite the vessel being highly conspicuous and lit in its guise as a hospital ship, not a man-of-war, and was most certainly a deliberate act of war criminality by the Japanese.



(Victoria State Library)

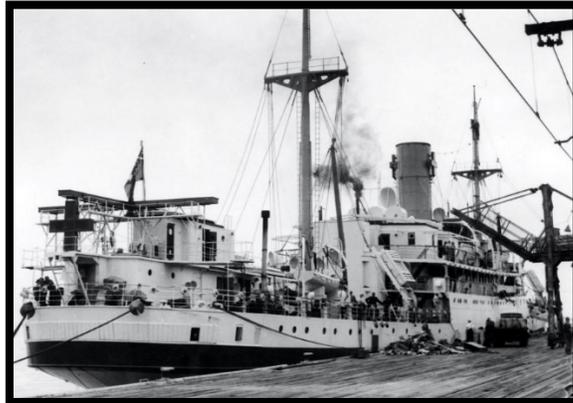
AHS Centaur, 3222 GRT, in her colors as a Hospital Ship.

The ship had originally been ordered for the Ocean Steamship Co, (Blue Funnel Line) and built in 1924, by Scotts Shipbuilding and Engineering Co. Ltd., Greenock.

On 12 May 1943 the "**Centaur**" sailed unescorted from Sydney at 0945 hours, carrying her crew and normal medical staff, as well as stores and equipment for the 2/12th Field Ambulance, but no patients. It was sunk without warning by a torpedo from a Japanese submarine on 14 May 1943 at approximately 0400 hours, in approximate position 27°17' S, 153°58' E about 50 miles east north-east of Brisbane.

Only 64 of the 332 persons on board survived. The survivors spent 35 hours in or clinging to life rafts before being rescued. **Sister Ellen Savage** was the only one of twelve nursing sisters on board to survive, though injured herself, she rendered great help to the other wounded survivors. Sister Savage concealed her own injuries, and gave what help she could to the other survivors. After sharks circled their raft, and

when ships and planes passed without sighting them, a sing-along was organized to help keep up the spirits of survivors. For her "**conspicuous gallantry**" Sister Savage was awarded a George Medal.



(Victoria State Library)

The **MV Centaur**, seen at Melbourne in March 1943, after her conversion and having been commissioned as a Hospital Ship.

"**Centaur**", pictured above, was launched in 1924 as a combination passenger liner and refrigerated cargo ship, she operated a service between Western Australia and Singapore via the Dutch East Indies' Javanese ports, carrying passengers, cargo, and livestock. At the start of World War 2, "**Centaur**" was requisitioned and placed under British Admiralty control, but after being fitted with defensive equipment, she was permitted to continue normal operations. In November 1941, the ship rescued German survivors of the engagement between **Kormoran** and **HMAS Sydney**.

Centaur was relocated to Australia's east coast in October 1942 and used to transport supplies, equipment and personnel between Australia, and New Guinea. In January 1943, **Centaur** was lent to Australia and handed over to the Australian military for conversion to a hospital ship, as her smaller size made her more conducive for operating in Southeast Asia waters and ports. The refit was completed in March, and the ship undertook a trial voyage, transporting wounded from Townsville to Brisbane, then from Port Moresby to Brisbane.

After replenishing in Sydney, now designated the **AHS Centaur**, and fully painted in colors compliant for Hospital Ships, she embarked the 2/12th Field Ambulance for transport to New Guinea and sailed on 12 May. Before dawn on 14 May 1943, during her second voyage, **AHS Centaur** was torpedoed and sunk by a Japanese submarine off Moreton Island, Queensland.

The torpedo struck the port side oil fuel tank approximately 2 meters below the waterline, creating a massive hole 8 to 10 meters across, igniting the fuel, and setting the ship on fire from the bridge aft. Many of those on board were immediately killed by concussion, or perished in the raging inferno. **AHS Centaur** quickly took on water through the gaping hole in her hull caused by the torpedo impact, she quickly rolled to port, then sank bow-first, submerging completely in less than three minutes.

The rapid sinking prevented the deployment of lifeboats, although two broke adrift from **AHS Centaur** as she sank below the waves, along with several damaged life rafts.

The incident resulted in public outrage as attacking a hospital ship is considered a war crime under the 1907 Hague Convention. Protests were made by the Australian and British governments to Japan and efforts were made to discover the people responsible so they could be tried at a war crimes tribunal, but without success. The Japanese issued an official statement denying any responsibility for the attack. The Japanese maintained this stance, even after the war was over, but after many years of investigation and research, it was concluded that the Japanese submarine I-176 although never proved beyond doubt, was most likely the culprit for the sinking.

Australian politicians urged the public to use their rage to expand the war effort, and **AHS Centaur** became a national symbol of Australia's determination to defeat what appeared to be a brutal and uncompromising enemy. The Australian Government produced posters depicting the sinking, which called for Australians to "**Avenge the Nurses**" by working to produce materiel, purchasing war bonds, or enlisting in the armed forces.

Below, the propaganda poster which was issued by the Australian Authorities calling for Australians to avenge the sinking of hospital ship **AHS Centaur**.



(Australian War Memorial)

Torpedo attacks in Australian waters was common at this time, with 27 Japanese submarines said to be operating in Australian waters between June 1942 and December 1944. These submarines attacked almost 50 merchant vessels, 20 ships confirmed to be sunk as result of a Japanese attack, plus 9 more unconfirmed. This was part of a concentrated effort by the Japanese to disrupt supply convoys from Australia to New Guinea.



Banner of the 2/12 Australian Field Ambulance

(Australian War Memorial)

End

Bibliography: Archives AHS Centaur, Australian War Memorial, The Sinking of Centaur, various online sources in the Public Domain.

Disclaimer: This is a “**Not for Profit**” document. Unless otherwise specified, images are from various unknown sources on the Public Domain and used under the Fair Use category for review, commentary, and educational purposes only. Photographs of unknown copyright – All reasonable attempts made to source copyright holders have proved fruitless. Owners of these images should make themselves known by contacting me via oceanicsolutions@gmail.com and I will be pleased to give due accreditation or have them removed. No infringement of copyright is intended.