

Farewell to our last dual veteran

of the world wars

Jim Dickson

This article is based on the eulogy given by Commodore J.S. Dickson, AM, MBE, RAN (Retd) at the state funeral of Lieutenant William Evan Crawford 'Darby' Allen, RAN, held at HMAS Cerberus in Victoria on 25 October 2005.

Given the astonishing advances in medical science and technology made recently (and continuing to be made) it is not unlikely that a small but significant number of those born in 1999 will live on to see the start of the 22nd century. The equivalent could never have been said of those born in 1899. At that time the life expectancy of a male was 51 years. When you take into account also that over 60,000 Australian men – the vast majority born in the 1890s and regarded as the flower of Australia's youth, – lost their lives in World War I, and a further 40,000 in World War II, it makes it all the more remarkable that William Evan Crawford (Darby) Allen, the man we gathered together to farewell in late October, and the last man in this country known to have seen active service in both those conflicts, lived to the rare age of 106.

Destined for the Navy

Born at Bega, NSW, on 24 July 1899, and growing up in the New South Wales south coast region, records show that Darby joined the fledgling Royal Australian Navy on 13 March 1914 – four months short of his 15th birthday and five months before the outbreak of World War I – as a boy seaman. He said he was inspired to do so by the visit of the American Great White Fleet to our shores in 1908. His initiation to the Service was in the sail-training ship HMAS *Tingira*, which was no place for the faint-hearted; life was, by all accounts, tough and demanding. Time served before the age of 18 did not count in those days: if you signed on for seven years that seven years began only when you turned 18 and 'boys time' as it was known, counted not at all for awards or for pension. I doubt such considerations would have worried Darby at that time; the point is made only to illustrate how times have changed.

World War I

On completion of his basic training he joined the light cruiser HMAS *Encounter* and saw active service in the Southwest Pacific, the Malay Archipelago and the Indian Ocean. In 1918 he proceeded to the UK to join HMAS

Sydney (the first of the four RAN vessels to have carried that illustrious name). Enroute the ship in which he was traveling – the *Beramba* – called at Capetown and after departure from there an outbreak of Spanish Flu occurred on board. Darby did not contract the devastating killer which took 24 lives in the space of a few days, but this was his first close brush with death: he was to experience many more in the course of his unusually long and eventful life.

On arrival in the UK he was sent north to join the *Sydney*, a light cruiser which had already earned fame through her action with the German raider *Emden* – but, just days before he joined, the German High Seas Fleet surrendered. He returned to Australia in the *Sydney* and in the 1920s served in the first HMAS *Brisbane*, the first HMAS *Adelaide* and the first HMAS *Melbourne*. His time in HMAS *Adelaide* was the highlight of his service in the 1920s. In 1924 *Adelaide* was attached to the Royal Navy's special service squadron and visited New Zealand, Fiji, Hawaii, Canada, the United States, Panama and Jamaica enroute to the United Kingdom. It was in Vancouver in 1924 that he met Miss Ida Gwendoline Wright – of whom more later. In the UK the *Adelaide* was privileged to receive on board both King George V and Lord Jellicoe – an occasion Darby recalled with pride.

A love for the Navy

He told me that he loved the Navy from the outset, and it is clear from his impressive Service records that the Navy loved him. By the time his initial seven-year engagement expired in 1924 he was a Petty Officer (good going for the times) and he had decided to make the Navy a career – as you did in those days rather more than today. I do not base that statement that he loved the Navy on the fact that he stayed on and served it so long but rather, on the basis of what he told me when I first met him five years ago. He could recall the most remarkable detail of the ships he had served in, the names and idiosyncrasies of his shipmates, and the events in which he had participated. I am told that he was always a stickler for doing things by the book and was meticulous about adherence to the ways and customs of the Service.

Nonetheless, as he went up the line he established a popular business on the side, developing and printing photographs which he sold to his shipmates at a healthy price.

Petty Officer Darby Allen went to the UK again in 1928 as part of the commissioning crew of the second HMAS *Australia*. On 06 August that year he was washed overboard from the forecandle of that ship in the Atlantic Ocean and I found the matter-of-fact way he recounted this near-death experience quite remarkable. Washed up against the ship's side during attempts to recover him, he injured his leg quite seriously; in time he recovered from this and he treasured the 'hurt certificate' which was issued to him after the event. After return to the southern hemisphere the *Australia* visited Tahiti and Darby observed that tourists had ruined it! In 1929 he briefly contemplated leaving the Service but was persuaded by senior officers who held him in high regard to stay on. With the depression about to descend, it was a decision he did not regret. Promoted to Chief Petty Officer in 1932 he spent two welcome years based ashore in Sydney before proceeding to the UK again in 1934 to commission HMAS *Stuart*. *Stuart* and four V&W-Class destroyers were loaned by the Admiralty to the Royal Australian Navy in 1934 to form the Australian destroyer flotilla. Just a few years later, in the early days of World War II they earned renown and affection as the 'scrap iron flotilla'.

Chief Petty Officer Darby Allen was one of 25 senior sailors selected to be members of the Australian contingent

at the coronation of King George VI in 1937; this time he travelled Orient Line rather than 'grey funnel line', going over in the *Oronsay* and back in *Orama* – he recalled these trips with delight. Back in Australia he was posted as an instructor to the Royal Australian Naval College, then located at Flinders Naval Depot near Melbourne, where it had been temporarily moved from Jervis Bay at the beginning of the 1930s as an economy measure during the great depression, (it thankfully moved back in 1957 where Prince Philip remarked during a visit that Jervis Bay was 'the finest site for a naval academy anywhere in the world'). Sailors posted to the naval college were very carefully chosen in those days; the fact that CPO Allen was sent there indicates the regard in which he was held

World War II

At the outbreak of World War II he was serving in the *Moreton Bay* – a British armed merchant cruiser manned by Australians. After blockading German ships in the Far East in 1940, *Moreton Bay* was employed on convoy work between Sierra Leone (on the west coast of Africa) and the UK. He had more 'close shaves' then, with a ship next to his being sunk by U-Boats and shrapnel narrowly missing him during a bombing raid in port. Leaving the *Moreton Bay* in England in 1941 he had to return to Australia via the USA and Canada, and in the course of that journey he engineered a re-union with Ida Gwendoline Wright who, you will recall,



Sailors salute the cortege at the State funeral for Lieutenant W.E.C. Allen, RAN

he had met some 17 years earlier. They married there and then and 'honeymooned' on passage to Hawaii, where they were parted as Darby had to join a Navy ship for the rest of his return journey to Australia. He sailed from Honolulu on 01 December 1941 – just six days before the devastating Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbour – and you can imagine his delight and relief to find his bride waiting for him when he arrived in Sydney.

Promoted to the rank of Warrant Officer he was then appointed to the Officer Training School at HMAS *Cerberus*, where potential officers were being hastily trained to meet growing war-time requirements. He was described by the Officer-in-Charge as 'a man of outstanding qualities' and 'an excellent influence on the young men in his charge'. An uncle of mine was also serving at the OTS at the time: Darby's remarkable memory about his time in the Service became very apparent to me when he told me details about my uncle I had never heard before. Given that this was 60 years later and he was already well over 100 years old, I was amazed.

In 1944 the now WO Allen was posted briefly to an RAN depot at Milne Bay, New Guinea, where he is recorded as having 'created order out of the confusion that existed amongst the boats and lighters', although he had another narrow escape from death in Milne Bay when he was trapped under an American lighter under tow. From Milne Bay he was flown to Seeadler Harbour on Manus Island, where he was to join HMAS *Australia* as Bosun. He arrived at Seeadler Harbour to find he had missed the *Australia* by a matter of hours, the ship having sailed for operations in Lingayen Gulf. The officer who assumed the Bosun duties in Darby's place was killed in the kamikaze attack suffered by the *Australia* on 05 January 1945.

After the Navy

In 1946 Darby returned to *Cerberus* as a Commissioned Bosun and was employed on instructional duties until he elected to leave the Service on 30 October 1947. The Navy would like him to have stayed on but the prospect of a posting to Manus Island did not appeal and he elected to 'swallow the anchor', become Mr Evan Allen, and concentrate on providing for his wife and young daughter who was born while her father was on war service. Prior to discharge he was granted the war-service rank of Lieutenant.

In post-navy life he became a subsistence farmer on a 13-acre property at Tyabb, on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria not far from *Cerberus*, running a 5-acre orchard plus cows and chickens. In the late 1950s he bought a further 13 acres of adjoining land, built a new house and expanded his farm. He kept very much to himself, didn't join ex-Service organisations and made no attempt to maintain contacts with his former Service colleagues. He was very much the old-fashioned family man: he embraced the Navy family while he served but now he was outside the Service his attention reverted to his own kith and kin. Throughout his Service career he had written to his mother every week and

regularly sent money to support her. He continued farming, with reasonable success, for over 25 years. He stopped driving after a car accident in the 1970s and when his wife died at the beginning of the 1980s he became something of a recluse. He soldiered or sailed on at Tyabb until the mid 1980s after which he went to live with his daughter Judith and her family for his twilight years. Those years extended further than expected and in the course of them he became very close to his two grandchildren Duncan and Phillipa as they grew up. He was immensely proud of them both.

When he reached 100 he went into a nursing home at North Essendon where he endeared himself to the staff, of whom he spoke most highly. It was there that I visited and got to know him over the last few years and it was easy to see why he was regarded with such affection. For, despite failing faculties, he was invariably polite, appreciative of what was done for him by a wide variety of people – and he was always gracious of manner. He often told me how wonderful the Department of Veterans' Affairs had been to him. It was only very recently, after hospitalisation for pneumonia, from which he bounced back astonishingly, that he went into Gregory Lodge where he spent his last weeks. Staff at both the Mount Alexander retirement home and at Gregory Lodge spoke of him with genuine affection: he was never known to have said an unkindly word of anyone.

The death of any person is a poignant and sad occasion for members of the family, regardless of how prepared they are for it, and I am sure I echo the sentiments of everyone when I extend sympathy to Judy Blake, Darby's daughter, her wonderfully supportive husband Ed, and to both Duncan, who is here today, and Phillipa who is working in France.

Darby Allen's passing will inevitably be felt most keenly by his family and those who cared for him in his last years. But it is a milestone of symbolic importance to all of the Australian community and one we should stop and reflect on. For World Wars I and II were conflicts which dominated the history of the 20th Century – the first century of modern Australian nationhood – and those wars had a profound and

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lasting effect on shaping the country as we enjoy it today. On famous battlefields near and far, in the air, and at sea, lives were sacrificed, injuries suffered and unimaginable hardships endured that we might retain that commodity most precious to us – the freedom to determine the course of our own way of life.

The generations of our parents and grandparents paid an enormous price whether they were in uniform or not and it is little wonder that, taking into account the harshness of Australian life in the first half of the 20th Century, the lack of facilities, services and support networks we take for granted today, the difficulties generated by the great depression and the consequences of two world wars separated by only 20 years, precious few of those who lived through that period survived to see the start of the new millennium. A mere handful of them are still alive today – but now none who actually saw active service in any arm of the defence force in both conflicts.

An extraordinary Australian

Those of us who served in the military in the latter half of the 20th century had a special regard for veterans of World War I and World War II. They had proved themselves professionally in the most difficult of circumstances and collectively established an international standing for the Australian Services which gave us a lot to live up to. The likes of Darby Allen, who had seen service in both conflicts and had also served through the very difficult intervening years, commanded even greater respect and admiration. The veterans from both conflicts did their duty to the country – most joining voluntarily – and when that duty was done and they'd shed the uniforms they'd worn with such distinction, they returned to civilian circumstances and got on with making the very most of the wonderful opportunities life presents.

I believe Darby Allen was typical of that generation; never suggesting he was hard done by, never complaining that the country owed him a living on account of his service (but proud of that service nonetheless), accepting the consequences of that service as the price he paid for doing his duty, maintaining enthusiasm, displaying good personal values and appreciating what his community did for him as he got on with the rest of his life. He may have seen himself as an ordinary Australian but I believe he was typical of a generation to whom we owe enormous gratitude and a man worthy of holding the unique place in history which he now enjoys. It would be more fitting in many respects to describe him as an *extraordinary* Australian

Evan Allen was, by nature, a very private man. He would have been astonished at the farewell he was given at his funeral and humbled by the presence of some who took the time and trouble to attend. On behalf of his family, may I publicly record their appreciation of the wonderful final tribute the people of Australia, through their governments, accorded him.

Farewell Evan 'Darby' Allen – father, sailor, friend. May you rest in peace in calm waters, secure in the knowledge that

you have the admiration, affection and respect of the people of the country you served so long, so proudly and so well. ♦

Commodore J.S. (Jim) Dickson, AM, MBE, RAN (Retd) served with the RAN from 1950 to 1990. He commanded HMA Ships Gull (1965-66), Yarra (1975-76) and Brisbane (1980-82). From 1988-1990 he was CO HMAS Cerberus and Naval Officer Commanding Victoria.



Medals representing 34 years of RAN service including both World Wars



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