



CASTLEMAINE CHRONICLE

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An Occasional Newsletter

Issue #15 – Mar 2026

Welcome to the first edition of our newsletter for 2026.

After a busy Christmas/January period where we were open every day for three weeks, apart from a couple of real hotties, we are now back to our normal weekend and public holiday opening. On behalf of the committee I would like to thank everybody who manned the ship for those open days. Those few weeks of opening really help to boost our coffers in particular as our insurance becomes due in January, so thanks once again.

I'll start this issue with a look into the past. Many of you will remember Alf 'Bluey' Thornton who was a long-time volunteer on *Castlemaine* and who passed away a few years ago aged 99 years. During WW2 Bluey served on the corvette *Geelong* and also the *Sydney*. Amongst some donated papers from the now defunct Corvettes Association was the following article about Bluey written in 2007.

News 2007
Fairfax Community Network

Fate kept 'Bluey' off sinking ship

By **Marianthi Kypuros**

AS he helps out at Williamstown's Gem Pier maritime museum, Alf Thornton's thoughts often return to those who died on HMAS Sydney — and how close he came to being one of them.

"It is the fickleness of fate [that] I was on another ship," he said. "It's fate [that] I'm alive — that's all it is."

'Bluey' Thornton, 87, served in Sydney's A turret (twin gun) section — and was transferred off the cruiser just three weeks before its fatal run-in with German raider *Kormoran* on November 19, 1941.

The loss of all 645 sailors aboard the *Sydney* remains Australia's worst-ever naval disaster.

Mr Thornton was aboard the HMAS *Geelong* when he heard the news. Sixty-seven years on, memories of the disaster still play on his mind, never more so than when the ship was discovered this week.

"It's something you try to keep out," the former Able Seaman, number PM 2164, said. "I still had HMAS Sydney on

'I was one of the lucky ones ... you've got to be grateful.'

my cap. I didn't believe it. I was one of the lucky ones ... you've got to be grateful.

"On big ships you are a number, [but] for the six months I was on the *Sydney* we were family. It wasn't the type of place you could run home to mummy ... I lost a lot of mates."

An easy-going rabble-rouser by his own admission, Bluey — so named because of his crop of red hair — said his section hardly made a fuss about the difficult life at sea, except when they tired of eating a constant diet of haricot beans and bacon.

"We went crook and complained ... and then they gave us bacon and haricot beans."

One of his fondest memories was escorting the *Queen Mary* and *Queen Elizabeth* in 1941.

"We picked them up in Sydney, circled them and gave them three cheers.

"We were going 28 knots, which is pretty fast for a ship, and the sailors were standing up on deck.

"It's hard to fathom the same poor *Sydney* went down."

Soon after his transfer, he had a second brush with death when he narrowly escaped going down with the HMAS *Geelong* in New Guinea.

After 6½ years of service, Mr Thornton left the navy. He was married to his late childhood sweetheart, Joan, for 62 years. The couple had two girls, three grandchildren and 10 great grandchildren.

Unable to shake naval life from his bones, for 15 years Mr Thornton has found sanctuary through volunteer work at the maritime museum on HMAS *Castlemaine*, docked at Williamstown.

Surrounded by former seaman and navy buffs, he is in his element tinkering on board, sharing his memories and taking people on guided tours.

"I am getting a fair bit of attention — everyone is talking about the *Sydney*. Most of us volunteers are men though, we show it differently."

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Survivor: Alf 'Bluey' Thornton was a crewman on the HMAS *Sydney*. Picture: Matthew Furneaux

Bluey was a much loved crew member and his stories were always interesting, even at the tenth telling!

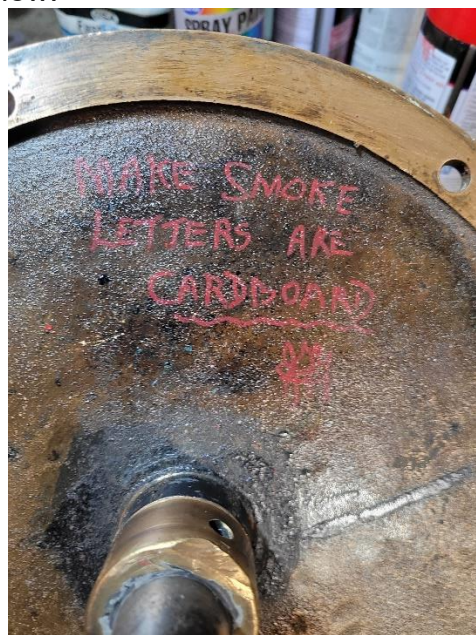
Geoff and his helpers continue with the work of bringing the engine room back to its former glory. Firstly by the application of paint on pipes to get the colours right (a previous edition gave a list of colours). And secondly, over the last few weeks, refurbishment of the engine room to boiler room telegraph.

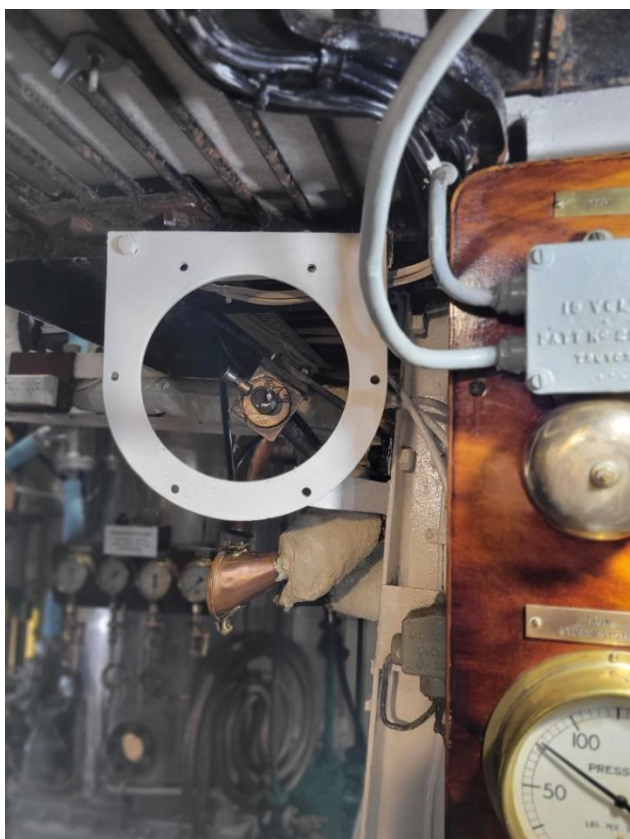


Whilst taking the telegraph unit apart Geoff noticed a few peculiarities. I'll let Geoff take up the story:

Here is a bit of communication from a past volunteer, my guess it was done in 1996 which was the same date inscribed on the back of the engine room clock. I wondered why the 'Make Smoke' lettering would not polish up like the rest of the boiler room telegraph. Finding the inscription on the back that the lettering is cardboard explained everything.

So I applied multiple coats of clear lacquer to completely seal the whole face and also sealed the back face so not to lose the message. As a long shot you may be able to recognise the initials. But I think even if we cannot discover who the volunteer was it gives a small example of the restoration process history. See picture below.





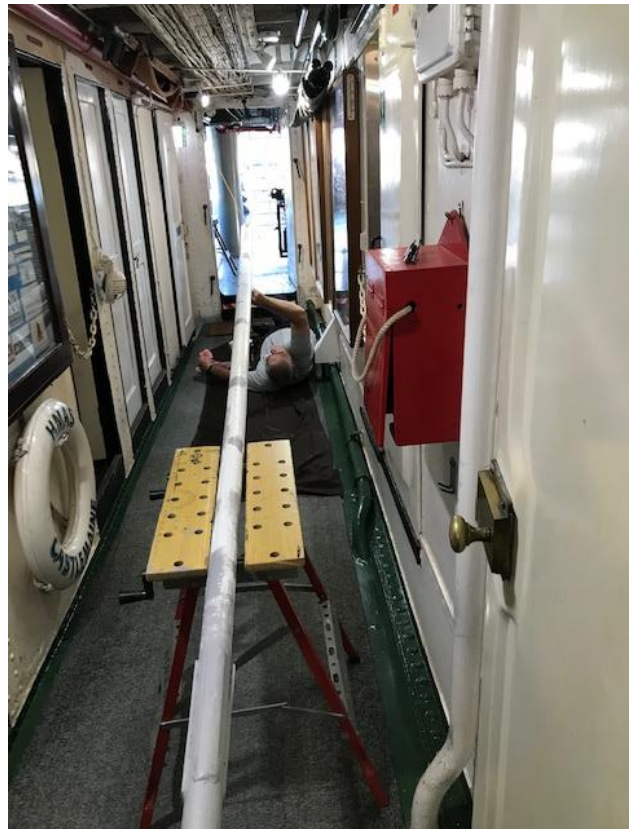
Now more words from Geoff:

Repair completed. Thank you to Dick for finding the 6 brass tapered head screws to replace the 4 existing round heads and also thanks to his friend Ray for manufacturing the coupling sleeve. To give that some context here's a bit of back ground. I believe this face was removed from another corvette because the shaft was gas axed and when it was installed on *Castlemaine* they attempted to weld the two shafts of dissimilar size together, hence the need for a connecting sleeve to join the two shafts together. Going by the date inscribed on the back of the engine room clock (1996) and the inscription on the back of the telegraph (see above) that would lead me to think that these were installed at the same time. Unfortunately Geoff Middleton, a long-time volunteer in the engine room crossed the bar in 2024. He may have been able to provide the name of the volunteer who did the work, although I would like to think it was him. In the end we now have a permanent fix that will last the life of the ship and links to the volunteers of the 1990's.

Another refurbishment programme occurring at the moment is the bridge. Over time various items start to look a little tired (like us humans) and need a bit of TLC. Below you will see Deano applying the umpteenth coat of lacquer to the chart table to ensure it lasts another forty years. And on the right he is seen on Gem Pier sanding back part of the helmsman's platform before it too receives its share of lacquer. Even though we have no need for a helmsman the platform has been stood upon by many feet over the years as visitors like to climb up and hold the wheel and dream!



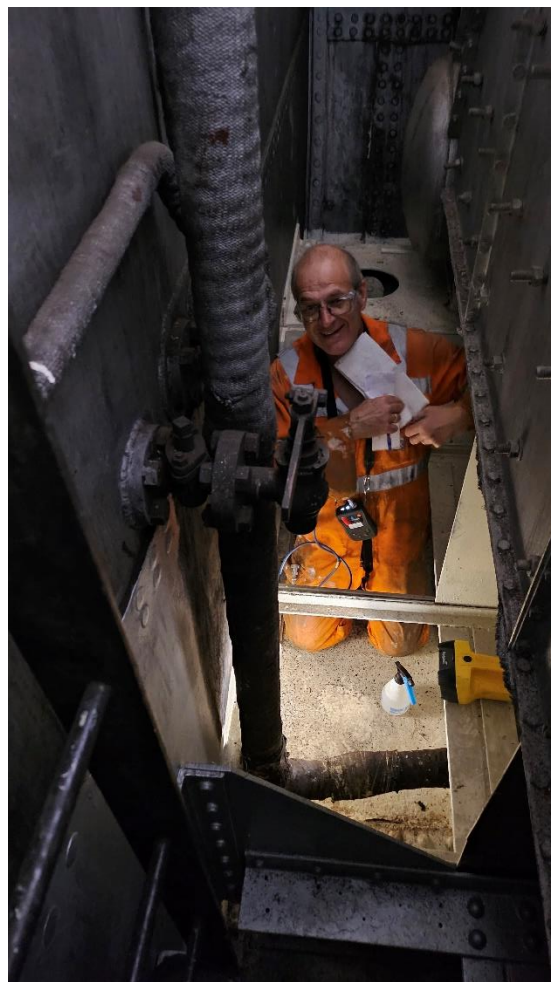
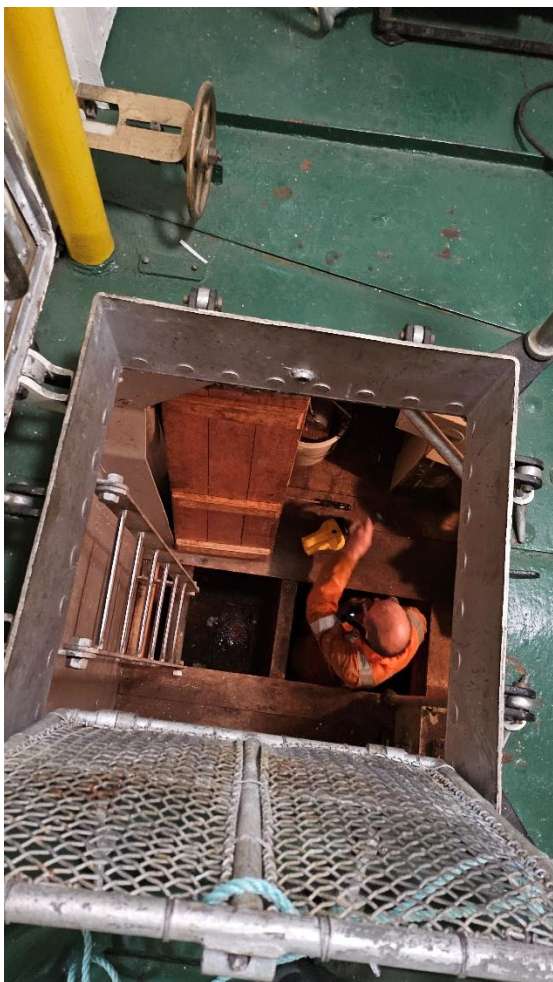
As you know the *Castlemaine* is a sort of floating men's shed (that accepts ladies), a home away from home for ex-Navy types. People like Buffer who love to keep their hand in at the old skills. Here he is below left putting his rope work skills to good use and right his laying down on the job skills.



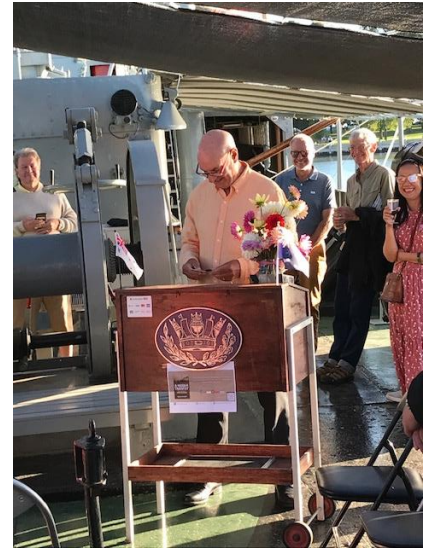
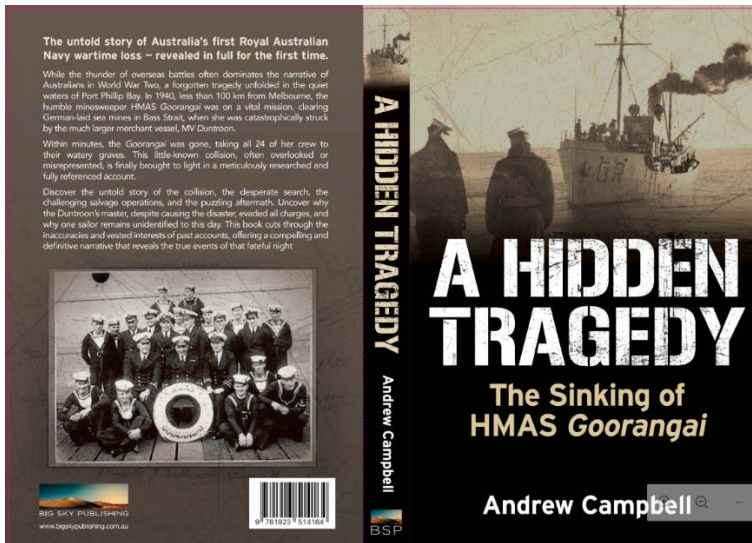
The ship is getting old and as a consequence the deck plating has acquired slight indentations which collect dust. The dust comes down with the rain and settles when the water evaporates and you can't just hose it off you have to swab the decks as in the picture below. Andy, Andrew and Martin getting stuck in.



Andy is currently conducting ultrasonic hull thickness testing. This requires him to dive deep into the nether regions of the ship.



One of our volunteers Andrew Campbell has recently published a book. This book, *A HIDDEN TRAGEDY – The Sinking of HMAS Goorangai* is an in depth look at the circumstances around the sinking and the aftermath. I thoroughly recommend it. In February Andrew held the launch of the book on the *Castlemaine* and kindly donated all sales on the night to the ship – thank you Andrew.



Last year we completed a deck plate doubling job that was paid for by a grant from the Australian National Maritime Museum. Earlier this year we had a visit from the Program Coordinator Liam McGeagh. While he was here he took the opportunity to present the ship with a pennant signifying our membership of the historic ships register.



As you know we are always pleased to receive photos of WW2 crew members. During January a lady came on board and spoke to Dick, she said she was the grand-daughter of Stoker James Wylie who served from July 1944 till de-commissioning in December 1945. Dick asked her if she had any photos and she kindly sent through the one below.



Now, a reminder of Dick's email from last week. The AGM of the Maritime Trust of Australia Inc. has been scheduled on Tuesday 7 April 2026 on board at 1200.

This is a voting AGM and the following positions are available for nomination: President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer and four Committee Members.

Please advise by email your nomination or just nominate on the day.

Also, our annual membership fee is now due for 2026. Still a very modest and nominal \$5.00.

If you need to contact me with any complaints, suggestions or articles for inclusion please use this email newsletter@hmascastlemaine.org.au

Apropos 'articles for inclusion', I haven't received any in recent times. I would really welcome a different slant on anything *Castlemaine* or general naval/maritime. There are plenty of readers of this newsletter with experience with nautical matters so how about it. You don't have to worry about spelling/punctuation/grammar etc., AI will fix all that!

Remember that all editions of this newsletter are available on the website at www.hmascastlemaine.org.au

TTFN
Bob