



Air Force Association Victoria

Ballarat Branch Newsletter

WINTER 2026

From the President

We are pleased to have enjoyed the continued patronage of our members at our social luncheons, through the cold winter months. In fact, we have seen our lunch numbers increasing with a regular visitors Dianne McGrath and Terry Warr from the Ryder-Cheshire group and other *ad hoc* visitors. Sadly we also lost our member Fr David Turner. While not enjoying top health, David made the effort to attend the luncheons as an outing he looked forward to each month.

In a broader context, apart from the wonderful effort of our 1WAGS co-ordinator, Janet Bates, in maintaining 1WAGS heritage, our branch is also actively involved in efforts to ensure that the air force history of Ballarat Airport is not lost for future generations.

Peter Dowling

President



Events Coming Up

The end of the year will come with a rush and our last luncheon of the year will, as usual, be our Christmas lunch. This year we will enjoy the hospitality and fine food (best regional pub food for 2026!) at the Western Hotel, Ballarat.

Members will be asked to choose their meals in advance but in the meantime, diarise the date of 8 December.

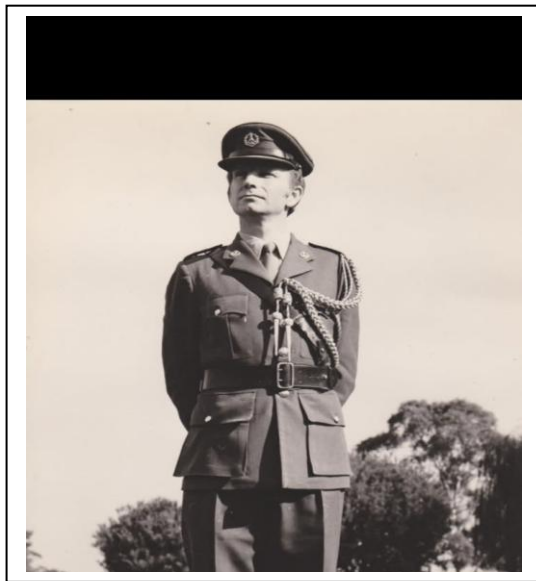


VALE Fr David Turner (2 Dec 1935 – 25 Aug 2026)

In our last edition, we honoured several of our members who have reached the great milestone of 90 years of age or more.

Sadly, in August we lost one of our nonagenarians, Fr David Turner.

David had an early career in the armed forces, following which he trained for his vocation in the Anglican priesthood. During the next decades, David was chaplain for both the navy and the SES.



Through his priestly life, Fr David belonged to the Society of the Holy Cross (SSC), a fellowship of priests committed to a common life of prayer, mutual support, and faithful service in the Church.



David was farewelled in a Requiem Eucharist Thanksgiving at St John's Anglican church Soldiers Hill, where he was attended by bishops and reverends of his faith, members of the SSC and the rector of St John's

The large congregation comprised family, friends, members of the church congregation, SES members and Ballarat Air Force Association members.

Battle for Australia Ball

The Battle for Australia Ball was held on the last Saturday in August, in commemoration of Battle for Australia Day, the first Wednesday in September.

Charlie Gaylard, "Australia's Answer to Elvis", provided a memorable act for the evening, both looking and sounding like Elvis.



President of the Ballarat Branch AFA, Peter Dowling, took the opportunity to remind guests of the significance of the date. The phrase "Battle for Australia" was first coined by wartime Prime Minister John Curtin in February 1942 immediately following the fall of Singapore.

The day honours the service and sacrifice of military personnel and civilians who defended the nation from direct attack during World War II, specifically in 1942 and 1943.

After a long campaign by the Returned and Services League (RSL) and the Battle for Australia Commemoration Council, the Australian Federal Government formally proclaimed Battle for Australia Day in 2008.

Rather than referencing a single combat event, the day collectively commemorates the network of critical defensive operations and campaigns fought in Australia and its northern approaches, including:

- **The Bombing of Darwin & Northern Coast Line:** Air raids launched on Darwin, Broome, Townsville, and other northern locales.
- **The Battle of the Coral Sea (May 1942):** Naval engagement that repelled the direct Japanese amphibious push toward Port Moresby.
- **The Kokoda Track Campaign (July–November 1942):** Jungle fighting along Papua New Guinea's interior that halted the Japanese land advance toward Port Moresby.
- **Submarine Attacks:** Naval offensives inside Sydney Harbour and off the eastern coast. (see separate article p. 9)

The specific date marks the conclusion of the **Battle of Milne Bay** (late August to September 7, 1942) in Papua. Milne Bay represented the very first time Allied forces decisively defeated Japanese land forces on shore during World War II, compelling a complete enemy retreat and providing a key morale victory.

The ball was a great success which could not have been possible without the organisational skills and personal effort of Ann and Rob Petty.





Top Left: Arguably the ball's most fashionable attendees

Top Right: Ann and Rob Petty hit the floor

Bottom Left: The ball hosts with the musical magic

Bottom Right: President Peter Dowling and Secretary Sue Alexander up close and personal with Elvis

Keith Pitman OAM

Our Ballarat Branch member Keith Pitman received a Medal of the Order of Australia in this year's King's Birthday Honours list.

Keith was formally conferred with his medal last month by the Governor of Victoria, with his family attending the ceremony. Both of Keith's sons are Captains in the Australian Army.



From left to right:

Son Captain Jason Pitman, Daughter Mrs. Nicole Bryan, Her Excellency, Prof. the Honourable, Margaret Gardiner AC Governor of Victoria, Mr. Keith Pitman, OAM, Mrs. Susan Pitman, Son Captain Grant Pitman

1WAGS Report



Sponsored by APCO Alfredton

As of September 2026, there have been **2, 248,444** individual browsers world-wide.

Two FEATURE STORIES have been added to the website:

Flying Officer Ray Merrill DFC and Pilot Officer James Leo Daly DFC.

Ray and James trained as Wireless Air Gunners at 1 WAGS Ballarat.

Both men served in RAF Bomber Command.

Ray completed thirty-six sorties as a rear gunner and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for "skill and fortitude in operations against the enemy." His favourite aircraft was the Lancaster.

Ray Merrill passed away on 16 July 2026 age 103. He was given a state funeral in his home state of South Australia.



Ray Merrill in later life and above left with his brother Fred, who also served in Bomber Command and both being awarded the DFC.





James Leo Daly known to everyone as Leo was a schoolteacher. He was 34 years old when he was posted to RAF 101 Squadron Bomber Command flying in Lancasters as a Navigator. Leo completed thirty-two sorties, twenty-two at night and guided his crew home safely every time. Leo was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for displaying “the utmost courage, fortitude and devotion to duty.”

Leo passed away on the 18 November 1985.

Read the full story of Ray and Leo on 1wags.org.au



“BOMBER COMMAND” was the focus for our September 2026 Members Luncheon at Hut 48.

The award-winning short film “A Memory Owed” was our tribute to the 55,000 airmen who lost their lives serving in Bomber Command.

About 10,000 Australians served in Bomber Command, one in three of these airmen were killed.

4,100 airmen died which made up

about 20% of all Australian combat losses during WW2.

464 1 WAGS trainees were killed serving in Bomber Command. This represents approximately 40% of the total 1 WAGS trainees killed during WW2.

LEST WE FORGET



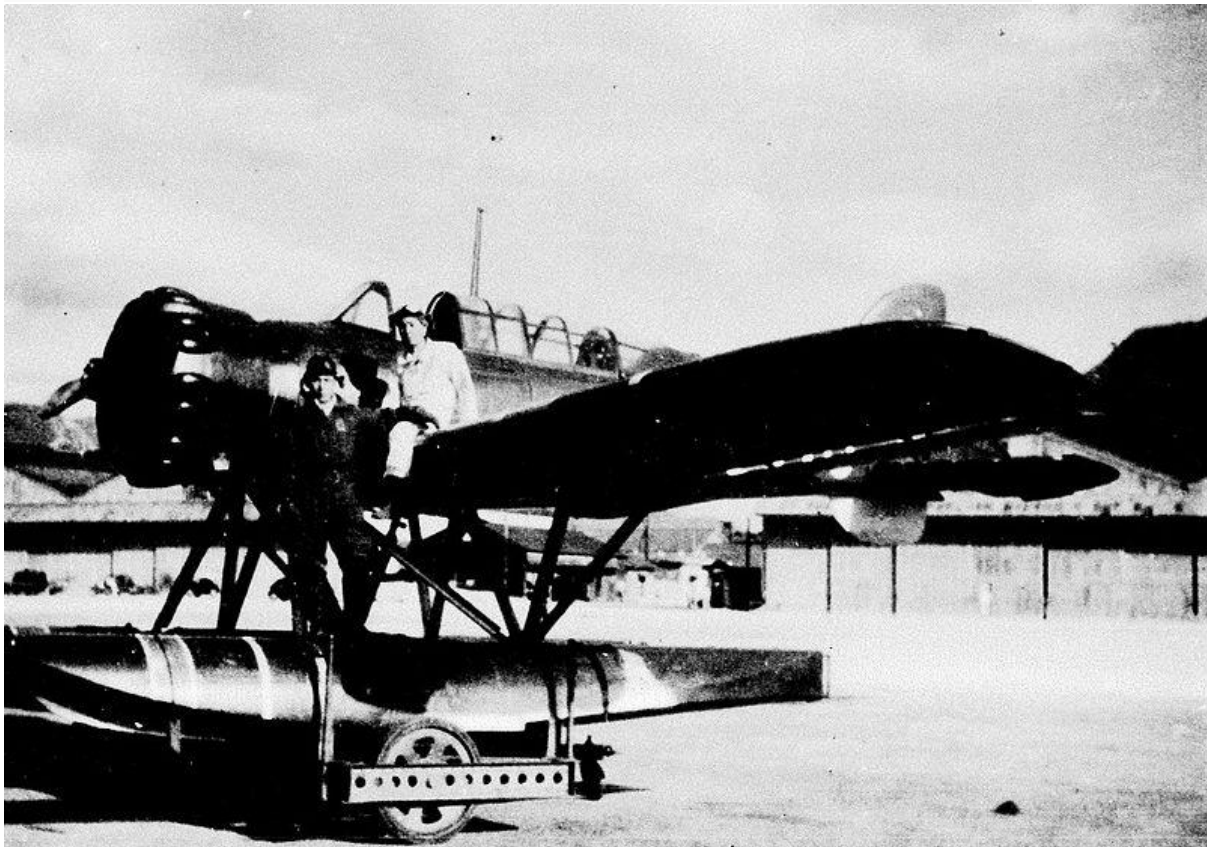
Janet Bates - 1WAGS Co-ordinator

Forgotten Sydney History: The Attack on Sydney Harbour

Most people know about Pearl Harbour. But what about the night Japanese submarines snuck into Sydney Harbour?

Tell someone under 60 that Sydney was once attacked by Japanese submarines and they'll probably call you a liar. But that's exactly what happened in 1942. It turned out the coastal metropolis wasn't as far away from the horrors of WWII as you may think.

An historical image of the Nobuo Fujita seaplane which flew over Sydney on a reconnaissance mission in 1942. Photo: DCCEEW



The secret mission

Failing their attempt to sneak submarines into Pearl Harbour in 1941 (despite doing plenty of damage from other attack methods) the Japanese tried the same tactic a year later, this time in Australia. The problem? Aussies didn't believe the war would ever reach Sydney, which meant that even a strange plane identified by a secret radar unit didn't raise an alarm.

In fact, it was part of a recon mission by the Japanese that was mistaken for an American plane, even when the New Zealand Naval Board warned Australia that they'd picked up a coded message from a Japanese submarine 20 nautical miles off Sydney's coast

The ill-fated attack

The M-22 midget submarine on display at Garden Island's Royal Australian Navy Heritage Centre shows dents the depth charges. The conning tower and control room shows the tiny access points two sailors had to squeeze through, and a portrait of the sailor who committed suicide inside. Photo: DCCEEW



On the evening of 31 May 1942, the Japanese Imperial Navy jumped on the opportunity, sending three midget submarines into Sydney Harbour from larger submarines that lurked outside the heads. These midget submarines were built for stealth, barely squeezing in two crew members each.

The first entered the harbour at 8pm, but got caught up in anti-submarine nets and attracted the attention of the HMAS Yarroma and Lolita. Once they realised they'd been caught, the Japanese crew activated an explosive, deliberately sinking the vessel and killing themselves.

The second managed to sneak past the nets and fire two torpedoes, hitting a Sydney ferry, the Kuttabul*, and killing nineteen Australian and two British

naval officers. It then received fire from a number of Australian vessels and managed to escape, but curiously never made it back to the larger submarines outside the heads (more on this later).

The third and final entered Sydney Harbour at around 11pm. By this time, Sydney was ready. It had six depth charges (anti-submarine weapons) dropped on it and was presumed sunk, until it made a comeback four hours later and tried to fire its torpedoes. Since it was pretty banged up, the attack was a bust and the submarine was sunk by allied ships at around 3am.

Did you know: Although called midget submarines, they are larger than most people think. They are defined as a midget submarine because they are under 100 tonnes. Approximately 20m long, they carried 200 batteries in the back section and two torpedoes in the front section.

The aftermath

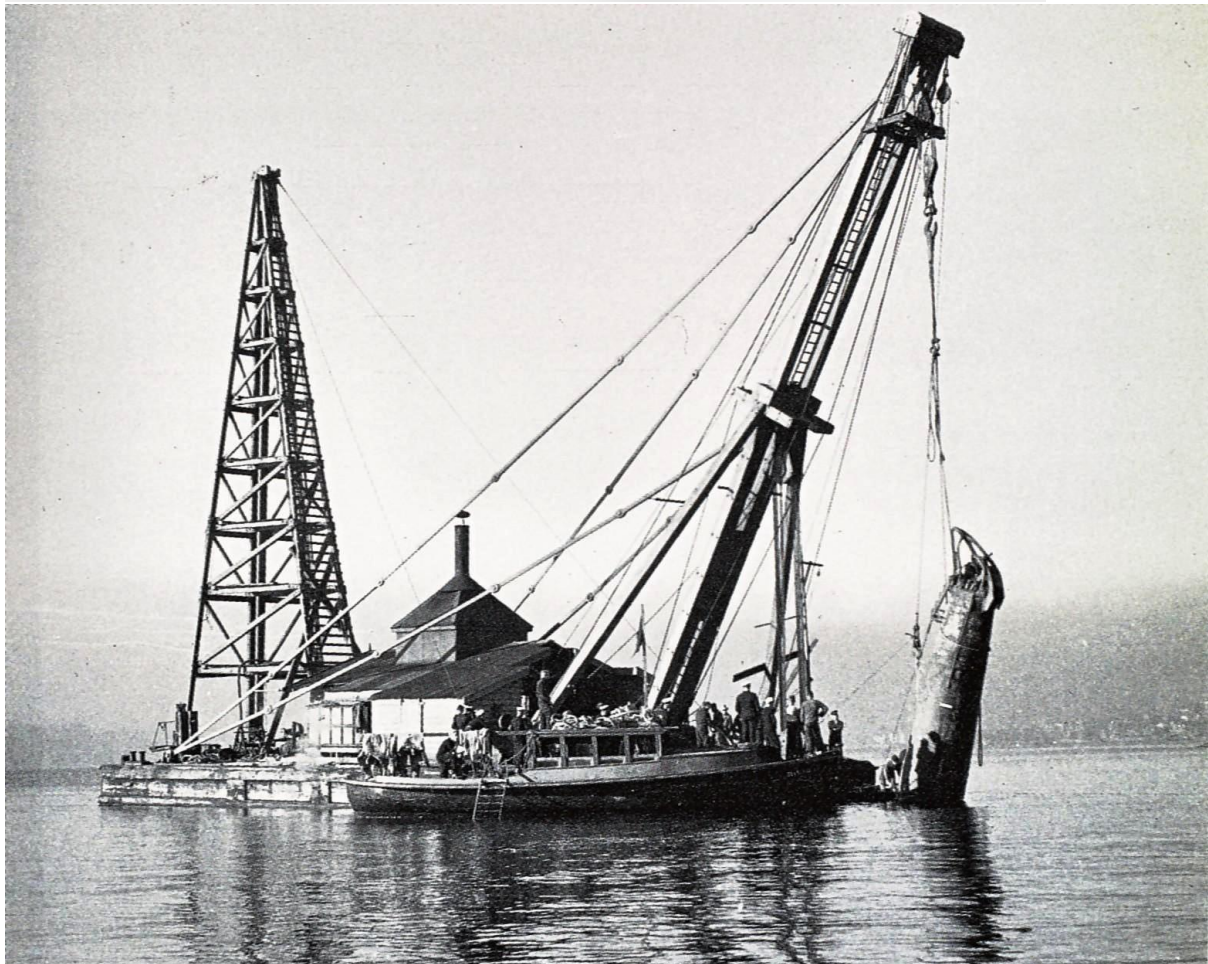
The attack lasted around nine hours, ending in the early hours of June 1st, 1942. While most Sydneysiders were spooked and some considered skipping town, many came to watch the submarines get hauled out of the harbour. Some people even waded into Taylors Bay to collect fish that had been killed by the shock of the depth charges.

An historical image of a wrecked submarine being hauled out of Taylor's Bay, 1943. Photo: DCCEEW



It took several days to recover the bodies of the men that were killed in the attack, and shortly afterwards a burial service was held to honour those killed, including the Japanese submariners (whose remains were sent back to Japan in the months to follow).

Not a gigantic fish: Japanese midget submarine M-22 being raised from Taylor's Bay, Sydney, June 10, 1942. Photo: DCCEEW



Interestingly, the second midget submarine that never made it back to the larger submarine wasn't found until 2006—64 years later!—when scuba divers from the No Frills Diving Club discovered it just off Bungan Head on the Northern Beaches.

Did you know: A resident at the time (credited as Mrs Jones) was confident that Sydney could withstand an attack, quoted in the papers as saying, "If London can take it, Surry Hills can take it!"

The historical artefacts

Parts of the two recovered submarines were joined to form one vessel, which is now on display at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

The conning tower from one of the submarines is on display at the Royal Australian Navy Heritage Centre on Garden Island, while bullet fragments from the attack are still visible on the Martello Tower (an old-school defensive fort built in the 19th Century) of Fort Denison - Muddawahnyuh, in Sydney Harbour National Park.

Martello Tower, seen through a building on Fort Denison. Photo: DCCEEW



Fort Denison – Muddawahnyuh (mud-uh-'wahn-yuh) was the last Martello Tower built in the world and the only one built in Australia.

This article was adapted from that written by Sarah Morton featured on the NSW National Parks and Wildlife web page.

*Kuttabul - At HMAS Kuttabul Naval Base, Garden Island Sydney, a silver bell mounted atop a sandstone column serves as a physical memorial artefact. The structure includes a plaque listing the sailors who died. This memorial stands adjacent to the original loss site and is one of the most tangible public artefacts connected to the event.