



(ABOVE) THE BOMBING OF DARWIN AT 9.57 AM FEB 19, 1942 PAINTED BY KEITH SWAIN, (BELOW) THE MACDHUI IN ITS PRIME AND IN ITS GRAVE.

# Kevin O'Dwyer's war

Kevin tells how some boats sailed, some flew and many sank

WHEN THE WAR WAS DECLARED, it was around the time I was coming up to the end of my radio operator's course. I had planned to be an electrician, testing radio equipment and testing radio valves and that sort of stuff, but I ran into this fellow who got me interested in doing a radio operators' course at the Marconi School of Wireless in Sydney. He suggested it to me and I said, "oh, yes". I started to think it wouldn't be a bad idea to go to sea on ships as the correspondence man.

No sooner had I finished the course than I got a call — would I go to sea that night? So I only had one day and

could I go that night. That's how important it was to get radio men on the passenger ships.

I was to go to sea on the *Neptuna*, and it was leaving that night. I had no uniform, no gear or anything. So I went madly down George Street and



bought some sailors' uniforms but in the end they had to transfer me to another ship called the *Macdhui*.

I was on the *Macdhui* for twelve months and did eight round trips to New Guinea. We used to go right up as far as we could go and there was always a threat with the Japanese coming down. It didn't get very serious for a while — I didn't take a lot notice of it — but then they started coming



KEVIN DURING THE WAR.

closer and closer and then they took over Rabaul and we were one of the last ships out.

We thought we'd be bombed on that occasion, but we weren't. So I did seven return trips to New Guinea, mainly bringing women and kiddies out of New Guinea and taking troops back in. We used to go to Port Moresby, mainly with the troops.

I was taken off the *Macdhui* and put on another freighter and while listening to the news the first day out to sea from Sydney I heard the news. The *Macdhui* had been pattern bombed in Port Moresby harbour and sunk.

It got five direct hits on it and blew all the bridge and everything off the

damned thing. It was really a wrecked ship. Fifteen of the crew had been killed on it — so I thought I'd been very lucky with that.

We had a couple of raids where we'd been machine-gunned and that going into the Barrier Reef right on the north of Australia if you come inside the Reef all the way down. We were coming in near Horne Island there right on Cape York and the first day that place had been bombed, and we were watching the bombing going on because we were coming in near the Island. We thought we would be away from it all, and all of a sudden they came down and started to strafe us on their way back to Rabaul, but they couldn't spend much time, luckily, because they had to get over the Stanley Ranges back to Rabaul.

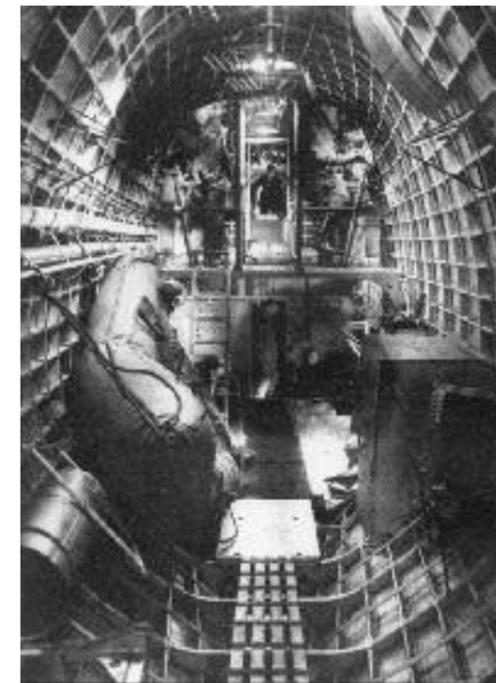
Then I went onto a ship called the *Katoomba*, an AUSN ship with Captain Snowball in command. I did a lot of trips up there on that, and we went into Milne Bay which was a danger spot where the Japanese tried to land. I did four or five trips on that ship.

In Sydney one day I bumped into Lyle Lowett, the chap that had got me into radio operating in the first place. He'd come in off a sea voyage and transferred to Qantas as a plane operator. I said, "What did you do that for?"

He replied, "I couldn't stand the sea, I got seasick all the time." And he said, "Do you want a job with them too?" He told me where to write to them; they wanted new extra radio blokes.

I started off on the flying boats. The Sunderland flying boats. They had three Sunderland flying boats. You should have seen them in Sydney Harbour — beautiful. Everybody used to love watching them take off, like a big bird.

The Sunderland could carry a lot of guns but we didn't have any armament whatsoever on the aircraft I was in. We were mainly transporting troops all around the coast of Australia. We'd go up as far as Townsville, then across to Darwin, across the Gulf of



INSIDE A SUNDERLAND FLYING BOAT.

Carpentaria, then land at one of the islands there.

Darwin had the hell bombed out of it, and people down south knew nothing about it. We'd fly up there and two days later come into Sydney on our flying boat and I'd tell all about the mess that Darwin was in. Everything was blown to pieces there, they'd just about flattened Darwin. The airport and everything was just wrecked. There were over a hundred raids on Darwin. They had more bombs dropped on them than the Hawaiian islands.

When I joined Qantas they were only flying locally, around Australia, in these big old flying boats. The radio man used to have to do the radio work, then he'd dive down into the bowels of the flying boat and up into the bow to help with the landing and mooring. We used to have these big paravanes, they call them, you'd drop them out over the sides. They were like a parachute opening up and dragging in the water to slow it up because



OUTSIDE A SUNDERLAND FLYING BOAT.