

Submission 73B

Mrs Barbara May
Hamer

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Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal.

Inquiry into unresolved recognition for past acts of naval and military gallantry and valour.

David Hamer - 9th January 1945

Summary of submission by Andrew Hamer, on behalf of David's wife and children

HMAS Australia had two encounters with Kamikazes. While the action referred to for this enquiry was in the second one (the battle of Lingayen gulf) I believe it is important to understand the events leading up to the second battle and my father's involvement in it.

On 21st October 1944, HMAS Australia had its first and most devastating encounter with a Kamikaze - in Leyte Gulf - where in a direct hit on the bridge they lost Captain Dechaineaux, the Air Defence Officer - Lieutenant-Commander Gerrett and his entire Air Defence Team. This single attack - probably the first Kamikaze of whole war - killed 30 and wounded 61 including then Commodore Collins. Most of the casualties were burned by the aviation fuel and this had a very severe emotional impact on the crew.

My father - who had been stationed aft on 'X' turret during the attack - had actually been the one to identify the aircraft as hostile and had ordered the guns to open fire. He took over the immediate safe navigation of the flagship and then volunteered to take over as the Air Defence Officer - directing the anti-aircraft guns onto threatening targets from perhaps the most exposed position possible (so you could have an unobstructed view). Perhaps a sign of the pressure and casualties they had sustained - but also his capabilities - that he was assigned this most critical assignment having just turned 21 the month before.

The ship offloaded the wounded in Manus and the Australian First Naval Member (Chief of Naval Staff), Englishman Sir Guy Royle and British Admiral of the Fleet Lord Keyes addressed the crew. Captain Armstrong then took the ship to Vanuatu for repairs (completed in only a few weeks) and was back up in the Philippines in time for the start of the battle of Lingayen Gulf on the 5th of January 1945.

This was perhaps the height of the Kamikaze threat - and the first hit on HMAS Australia was at dawn - when it missed the bridge (and my father's position above) crashing into the 4" guns killing 25 and injuring 30. Inspiringly Captain Armstrong "didn't turn a hair" (he received the DSO in this action). At 5:30pm she was again hit, again a guns crew taking the brunt of the impact with another 14 killed and 26 wounded.

Dawn on the 8th of January saw another attack with two Kamikazes shot down within metres of the ship - still hitting the ship - but causing minimal damage.

So it is with the knowledge of how devastating the Kamikazes could be, the realisation that the casualties and their horrible burns, had perhaps lessened the resolve of some of the guns crews to

want to face the next one (the Kamikazes had virtually no penetrating power so safety was literally through the nearest hatchway) that my father knew he had to stand firm – setting the example for the crew. When the next Kamikaze (the fifth in three days) came in – aiming directly for the bridge- he (and his communications number Tom Legoe - who remained with him despite being ordered to take cover) continued to direct the guns while the bridge was evacuated and moments before impact and when there was no more he could do – he jumped up on the exposed platform and shook his fist at the pilot (as he was coming straight at him), in clear view of the pilot and all the guns crews. Perhaps the pilot was put off, perhaps a few rounds hit the aircraft at the last minute, but anyway the Kamikaze went over his head by six feet (measured by the damage to the funnel) and into the sea.

I understand his action had a very positive effect on morale, and the crew themselves put him forward for an award, but the Captain had already done the same. The Gunnery Officer LCDR Peek (later Vice- Admiral and CNS in 1970) - who also received the DSC at Lingayen Gulf - described the action of my father as "Brave beyond the call of duty":

All of this is well recorded.

Does this qualify for most conspicuous bravery or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy? I think so. But I was not there, and I cannot judge this action against the many actions of other brave people at that time.

What was not recorded, was when the ship returned to Australia my father was asked to present himself to the Second Naval Member (deputy CNS) – something very unusual for a 21 year old lieutenant. They discussed the Kamikazes and then he was presented to Sir Guy Royle (CNS) who again discussed the Kamikazes. After that meeting the Second Naval Member then told him that he was to be awarded the VC, but to not tell anyone until it was announced in a few weeks' time. About a week later he was summoned again by the Second Naval Member. "He was embarrassed to advise that the Americans were trying to conceal from the Japanese the effectiveness of their Kamikaze campaign, and were very anxious that no awards should be made which would highlight the problems of defence against such attacks. So it had been decided to withdraw your VC recommendation."

Until he wrote his memoirs (only finished a few months before he died in 2002), my father had never said anything about this – even to his own brothers and sister. He was outwardly happy with the DSC, and in his family it was 'not done' to ever complain. But many of his peers including RADM Guy Griffiths AO DSC DSO, CDRE Dacre Smyth AO, RADM Sir Brian Murray AO, VADM David Leech AC CBE, have publicly recorded that he should have got a higher award.

So I believe that the initial assessment of my father's action was that it was worthy of the Victoria Cross, but that the political climate at the time - the still current Kamikaze threat and first VC in the RAN - would have created too much public attention on the effectiveness of the Kamikaze's and it was politically downgraded. I think he really should have received the award he was told by the Second Naval Member at the time he was going to get – the Victoria Cross.