

Introduction

When I first met Les Heap in 2013, I was a new member at the Lane Cove Bowling and Recreation Club. He sat next to me on the bank of Green No. 1 and produced a thirty year history of the bowling club that he had written, which I duly purchased for \$8.00. It was my first real introduction to the club, what it meant to people, the respect for others, tradition and *esprit de' corps*.

Les has been a bowler in the Lane Cove district for forty years. After putting his name down on the waiting list for the then Lane Cove Bowling Club, he joined the Lane Cove Country Bowling Club. Admitted two years later, he remained at club for twenty-nine years, serving as President for two. After it closed, Les joined Lane Cove West Bowling Club, now the Lane Cove Bowling and Recreation Club, the sole surviving bowling club in Lane Cove. After a long and remarkable life, you still see Les today at 96, if not bowling, then he will likely be fixing or making things right, saving his community club money in maintenance and repairs.

In 2011, he was awarded the Lane Cove Council Citizenship Award, in recognition of his contribution to community life in Lane Cove.

My interview with Les was conducted on a Sunday afternoon at his home on 13 August 2017. In the interview, we first hear about growing up in Narrabri, the Depression years and early life in Lane Cove. Les then describes work as a Fitter and Turner in a shipyard in Balmain and building of the Bathurst class Corvettes for the Royal Australian Navy. This includes an untold story of the sea trial of the Wallaroo, immediately after the midnight raid into Sydney Harbour by three midget submarines of the Imperial Japanese Navy. The third part is about family but also ingenuity and the manufacture of rakes using spring steel.

I am grateful to the help of staff at the Lane Cove Library and the Community Archives section. I am also grateful to Graeme Andrews, Master Mariner (retired), ex Petty Officer Gunner, RAN, for his help with photos from the Graeme Andrews Collection.

Historical notes

Part One

Les Aidan Heap was born on the 6th November 1921 in the NSW town of Narrabri in the Namoi Valley in the northern inland of NSW. He was christened at St Aidan's Anglican Church, Longueville.

Les's father was Fred Fontaine Heap and was born in 1897 and lived in Ilkley in Yorkshire, England. His father, Fred senior owned a Bicycle and Music shop. As Les tells it, Fred senior moved his family to Chatswood, Sydney in 1911.

With the coming of World War I, Fred Fontaine Heap enlisted into the AIF and was wounded in France. After the war he joined Palings with his brother Bernard as a piano tuner. Fred met Lorna Violet Butler on the train to the city and were married in 1920.¹

At Palings, Fred's job was tuning the townships and settlements around Narrabri. Here he built the family home that according to Les, still stands today.

In the interview, Les tells us of his childhood in Narrabri and his memories of the Depression and catching rabbits. On life during the Great Les told me "If you weren't there, you didn't know how bad it was."

After scoring well in the Intermediate, Les moved to Sydney to look for work as an engineering apprentice. At 16 years of age, Les moved in with his maternal grandmother "Grandma Butler" at 13 Grace Street in Lane Cove and in 1937, Les got a start as a Fitter and Turner's apprentice at the Poole and Steel Shipyards in Stephen Street, Balmain, NSW.

¹ Lane Cove Library Community Archives unpublished monograph "*The descendants of James Heap 1740 – 2001*" 2001.



Industrial Balmain, Poole and Steel Shipyards, White Bay as seen in 'From the Skies – Aerial photographs of Sydney in 1943' RTA NSW Government.

Part Two

Corvettes

Les joined Poole and Steel Shipyards as an Apprentice Fitter and Turner in 1937 and commenced work in 1939 on the first of seven of the Corvettes at Poole and Steel, the **Katoomba**. During the course of the war, Les would build rudders, rudder shafts and gun mounts on the Bathurst class vessels, the **Katoomba, Geraldton, Wallaroo, Kapunda, Cootamundra, Cowra**, the and **June**.

An Australian designed ship, Corvette construction commenced in 1939 following the announcement of a massive Commonwealth ship building program, across eight shipyards, in ports from Maryborough in Queensland to Melbourne (Williamstown) and Whyalla in South Australia.²

In December 1940, the Minister for the Navy in the Menzies Government, Mr William "Billy" Hughes, Sir Kelso King, Chairman of the Board of Directors and Commodore G.C. Muirhead-Gould stood at Mort's Dock in Balmain to watch the launch of the Corvette HMAS **Lithgow**. Two weeks earlier the very first Corvette the HMAS **Bathurst** was launched at Cockatoo Island.

² Walker, Frank B. *Corvettes- little ships for big men* Kingfisher Press 1995 p. 20

Minister Hughes declared Australia needed ship building to become a great national industry.³

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, the need for manpower to fight overseas and build the ships was now not only answering the call of Empire, but became an all-out defense of Australia.

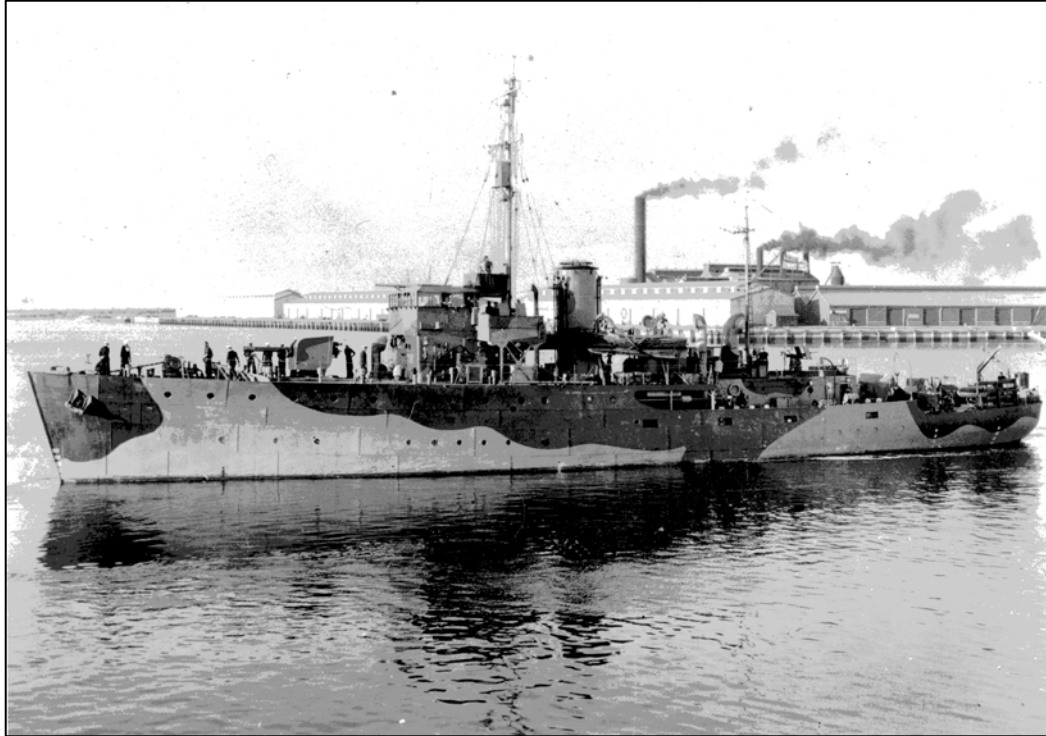
The Corvettes commenced duty primarily as escorts for shipping. They were soon engaged in all theatres of war from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean and South East Asia conducting anti-submarine warfare, protecting ships from enemy aircraft, including at the fall of Singapore in February 1942. As the fortunes of war changed, the Corvettes were used in support of amphibious landing operations. By the end of the war 53 of the 79 ships in the Australian naval fleet were Corvettes designed and built in Australia.⁴



The HMAS WAGGA built in Mort's Dock, was among the last of her class in service until 1962. This picture was taken in 1956 tied to the wharf where the depot ship Kuttabul was sunk by a Japanese torpedo 31 May, 1942. (Courtesy of the Graeme Andrews Collection).

³ *The Sun* newspaper (Sydney): Sat 21 December 1940
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-title1180>.

⁴ Walker, Frank B. *Corvettes- little ships for big men* Kingfisher Press 1995 p. 22.



War paint. HMAS Wallaroo stationed at Freemantle for escort duties (Courtesy of Graeme Andrews Collection).

The Wallaroo and the M-24

According to Les, in 1942, "we were all expecting the Japs to come" when, on the 31st of May in 1942, three Japanese Midget submarines slipped into Sydney Harbour on an audacious midnight raid.

On a still night, harbour sounds travel up the riverine coves and inlets to the northern reaches of the Lane Cove River as far as Chatswood West and beyond. It would have been sometime after 10.50 pm that Les, asleep in Grandma Butler's Grace Street Lane Cove home when he was woken by the sounds of war, naval guns hunting submarines in Sydney Harbour. The sounds that night would have included the torpedo explosion, the guns of the American heavy cruiser, the USS **Chicago**, joined by the Australian built Corvettes, HMAS **Geelong** and HMAS **Whyalla**. Depth charges were launched by the HMAS **Yandra**.

Much has been written about the raid on Sydney Harbour on 31 May 1942 when three midget submarines of the Imperial Japanese Navy sneaked into the harbour to attack naval shipping, including the battle cruiser USS **Chicago**.

A torpedo from the M24 missed the Chicago, and exploded into a sea wall, sinking the depot ship Kuttabul and killing 21 sailors on board.



Showing the anti-submarine boom net South Head to Middle Head at the entrance to Sydney Harbour - 'From the Skies – Aerial photographs of Sydney in 1943'. RTA NSW Government

The next morning, Les rode his pushbike on the seven-mile journey from Lane Cove to the Poole and Steel Shipyards in Balmain. In the interview Les recalls vividly the morning in early June 1942 on the sea trials of newly built **Wallaroo** on the “measured mile” 3 miles off Bondi. At the time, while the Navy was salvaging the wrecks of two submarines that had been destroyed by depth charges the night before, the third midget submarine, the M-24 was still missing. Was the M-24 attempting a rendezvous with the mother submarine off the coast somewhere?

While testing the engines on a sea trial, the **Wallaroo** also tested its armory or “blast trials” including depth charges filled with sand and firing the guns, using dummy ammunition. On board was the ASDIC (acronym for Allied Submarine Detection Investigation Committee), an early version of sonic radar used to detect submarines that had been installed on the Wallaroo.

While on the designated measured mile off Bondi, the ASDIC picked up the sound of a small propeller which the crew thought might be the missing M-24. Thinking it could have been the sub, the call went out to “Put the real ones on”. Les was on deck to follow the command and recalls the explosions water

spouts, stunned fish and the possibility that this was a final encounter with the missing midget submarine, the M-24. The hull of M-24 and the presumed resting place of its crew, were found by divers decades later in 2006 on the seabed about 5km off Pittwater.



“We towed up the fish” said Les (...and maybe even the M24!). This is a rare photo (35mm Box Brownie) of an explosion from a lightweight depth charge in Sydney Harbour in 1942. Provided by Graeme Andrews and reproduced with permission of the Graeme Andrews Collection.

There would not be too many alive today who were active on ships in and out of Sydney Harbour in the days after the Japanese raid in June 1942. To this day, Les is still seeking official recognition by the Royal Australian Navy for his living memory of the chance encounter between the M-24 and the **Wallaroo**.

Part 3

Family, ingenuity and production.

Gwenyth Warner was born in 1924 and Les was introduced to her at a friend’s 21st birthday party at the Longueville Sailing Club. They were married in 1947 and after a honeymoon on the Gold Coast, moved onto the block of land in Bailey Street. Les built a caravan out the back and together they lived there while Les built the family home. Together, Les and Gwen reared 3 boys at Bailey Street. Stephen David born in 1952, Christopher Charles born 1954 and Brian Richard born in 1964.

After the war, Les got a job at the Don Electric Company at Camperdown as a toolmaker making industrial battery chargers. Les became the foreman on site in charge of 28 employees.

Les had started his own tool making business in 1954. He made a machine press he called “Betsy”, an ingenious backyard press that automatically produced spring steel grass rakes. Les needed his own factory and so built two warehouses at 42 Hotham Parade, Artarmon. In those warehouses Evergreen rakes went on to produce 40,000 rakes per year for 25 years.



Sturdy, practical, ready-made and still going: The image on the far right are examples of the iconic “Evergreen” rakes. Les on the left, is photographed at his industrial oven in the Artarmon warehouse he built to manufacture garden equipment. The middle picture shows the machine (affectionately called “Betsy”) he designed and built to produce the patented spring steel garden rakes. Les estimates he sold these rakes at the rate of 500 per day.

The following interview covers a remarkable life, but only in parts. Les, at 96, is living life to the fullest, as he has always done. I am very grateful to Les for sharing some of his memories with us.

Simon Cole
Longueville Road
Lane Cove
30 August 2017



Les during the interview on the balcony at Bailey Street.