

Bygones Extra

Story of my father's gold medal a fitting subject for 50th article

■ SEA RESCUE HERO: Edmund J. Heasman

THIS is the 50th article on the history of Southwick that I have penned, writes Shoreham Herald Bygones columnist Ted Heasman.

This time, I am writing something different. Instead of writing about Southwick itself, I am writing about the adventures of a man who lived in Southwick for a considerable number of years.

He was in the South Pacific, far away from his homeland. The man is my father; the story concerns a rescue at sea.

Alongside my father's chair at home was a small chest of drawers. In the top drawer was a small jeweller's box, which contained a gold medal.

This gold medal was inscribed: "To Edmund J. Heasman, Seaman, HMAS Melbourne, in recognition of his heroic service in effecting the rescue at sea, on January 23, 1922, of the Master and crew of the American schooner, Helen B. Stirling".

On the reverse, it said: "Presented by the President of the United States".

My father would never talk about this medal. All I knew was that there was one other in this country, which was thought to be in the West Country, and there were 12 others in Australia.

It was some years after my father died that I thought I would try to find out more about this rescue.

For many years, I had belonged to the Sussex Family History Group, and I had contacts in both Australia and New Zealand.

I wrote and asked if it would be possible for them to find the 1922 newspapers that reported this rescue, and send me copies of the articles.

I received articles from Sydney and Melbourne, in Australia, and from Auckland in New Zealand.

My father was born in Keymer, Sussex, on November 11, 1897.

When he was about five years old, his father died and, two years later, his mother remarried. They moved to Southwick and lived in a shop at the top of Southview Road.

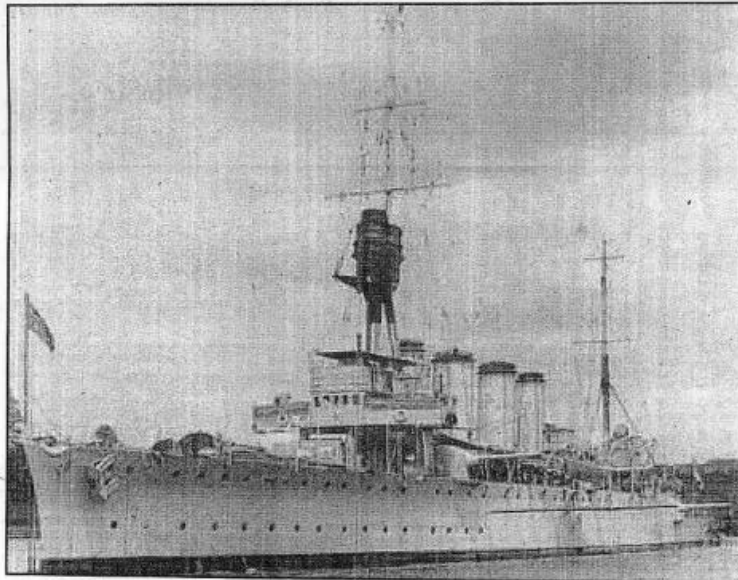
In 1915, when my father was 18 years old, he volunteered to join the Royal Navy and to serve five years active service, followed by seven years in the Reserve.

He finished his active service in 1920, and he was asked if he would volunteer to serve a further two years in the Australian Navy. This he did.

My father went to Australia and served the first year on HMAS Sydney and the second on HMAS Melbourne, a light cruiser.

In January, 1922, a large American four-masted schooner left Newcastle, Australia, with a cargo of coal bound for Papeete. This was the Helen B. Stirling.

She had been built by the Washington Shopping Corporation in Seattle in 1917. She had a wooden hull, was 220ft long, had a 43ft beam and 21ft draft, and had recent-



■ HMAS MELBOURNE: Crew - including Edmund Heasman - on one of her boats saved 18 lives

ly been fitted with radio. Later that month, the HMAS Melbourne left Sydney for Auckland, where she was going on a courtesy visit.

At 8.15am, on January 22, 1922, a radio station in New Zealand picked up a signal from the Helen B. Stirling, saying she was in a severe storm, and giving her estimated position: "My main mast has gone. We are leaking badly and sinking fast. Come quickly or we perish".

At 9.23am, the Stirling repeated the SOS, adding: "Almost gone".

She also acknowledged a signal from HMAS Melbourne that she was coming to her aid. The Stirling also sent personal messages to friends in case assistance did not arrive in time.

At 9.47am, the Stirling said her power was

liable to fail at any time. At 11.47am, the Stirling reported that her radio engine was failing and she would, if possible, call again at 2pm.

Early in the afternoon, the Stirling attempted to launch a boat, but this was smashed and three of the crew were injured. She also asked the Melbourne to hurry.

By 8.30pm, the Melbourne was in the position given by the Stirling, but could not see her. There was torrential rain that made visibility poor.

By 11pm, the Melbourne received another position, which indicated the Stirling was some 170 miles north-west of the Three Kings, a group of islands off the extreme northern coast of New Zealand.

The Melbourne signalled to the Stirling: "We hope to be with you by 1.30am".

As the Melbourne approached the position, she flashed one of her searchlights on the low cloud, the other searchlight horizontally, and asked the Stirling to give her position when she saw it.

By 1.30am, the Melbourne thought she was within six miles of the Stirling, and sighted her shortly after.

The Melbourne pumped oil onto the water to flatten the surface. At about 2am, one of her sea boats, a cutter, was launched.

The boat would have had eight oarsmen - my father was one of them - a bowman, who would use a smaller oar on the starboard side, a man at the tiller, and a petty officer or leading hand.



On this occasion, the commander of the Melbourne took charge and there were two extra hands.

They were not able to get alongside the Stirling for fear of the cutter being stoved in, but did manage to get a line aboard and rigged a breeches buoy.

The cutter then rowed away from the Stirling, enabling the line to be kept taut, and all the crew were pulled from the Stirling, through 60ft of water, onto the cutter, which then returned to the Melbourne, where it was hauled aboard.

They had, in fact, saved the skipper, his wife and child, the mate and his wife, and 13 crew.

Three crewmen were injured, although not badly, suffering mainly cuts and bruises, and received treatment in the Melbourne's sick bay.

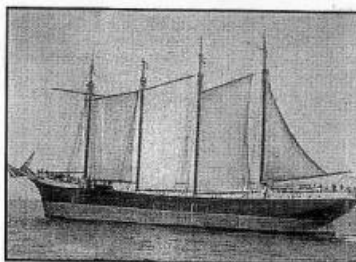
Having abandoned the Stirling, she was low in the water and not expected to float for more than a few hours in the prevailing storm. Neither the ship nor its cargo was insured.

At 6am, the Melbourne, having abandoned the Stirling, continued her journey to Auckland. She arrived 36 hours later than scheduled and landed the rescued crew.

In March of that year, the Melbourne, with other units of the Australian fleet, visited the city of Melbourne, where the officers of the ship and those men of the rescue crew were entertained at a civic lunch.

Each of the rescuing crew was given a gold watch fob. On one side was the crest of the City of Melbourne, and the reverse was engraved, on my father's: "Able Seaman Edmund J. Heasman, for devotion to duty, HMAS Melbourne 23/1/22".

In 1922, having completed his two years' service with the Australian Navy, my father returned to his home, in Southwick.



■ ILL-FATED: The Helen B. Stirling