The bombing of Darwin, the first armed attack on mainland Australia, though not well known beyond the city and the Northern Territory, is now recognised as a significant event in Australia’s history. The 70th anniversary on 19 February 2012 will be the last major commemoration of this historical event, as each year passes there are fewer remaining of those who experienced the attack.

For us, as dentists, it is significant that one of those killed in the first raid was Captain Boyns Hocking, the dental officer in the Hospital Ship *Manunda*. The following is a short article about Captain Boyns Hedley Hocking, his life and death.

**WHO WAS CAPTAIN BOYNs HOCKING**

Some years ago, as I read about the bombing of Darwin, I noted reports indicating that among those killed, in the first of two raids [in which some 243 were killed and between 300 and 400 wounded] on 19 February 1942, was the dental officer on the Hospital Ship, *Manunda*. It niggled; dentists are not supposed to be killed in wars.

I needed to find out more about this dentist; surely, we in the profession should know: Who was he? Where did he come from? Was he buried here? Did he have a family? Had he been remembered? In a way I feel, we owe him that at least.

**THE SEARCH BEGINS**

Unanswered enquiries over the years brought little information. All I could ascertain was his name, Captain Boyns Hocking and the fact that he was an older Victorian.

I was determined to seek and find answers to my questions when next in Melbourne. I embarked upon a grand, but fruitless, tour of dental organisations and archives. Left with one last, reluctant shot I phoned a dentist of the same surname. Why, I felt, should any of my subject’s relatives be a dentist? But he is, and was most helpful. He is a grandson of Boyns. He referred me to his father, John [Boyns’ son] “If you can catch him,” he said, “He’s 92, but still out and about, spending much of his time at the MCG.”

Of course! He was “out and about”; there was no response when I phoned. However, I tried again next morning, carefully timing the call – late enough that he should be out of bed and early enough that he should still be at home. Spoiling his breakfast was not my intention. Kindly, John Hocking took the time to tell me a little of his father and the circumstances of his life and death. He also sent me a charming ‘life’ written by Captain Hocking’s rightly proud great-grandchild. From these I now know a little more of his life. Boyns was anything but the ordinary fellow dentists imagine themselves to be and I imagined I’d find.

**BOYNs’ STORY UNFOLDS**

Boyns Hocking came into the world in 1887, just two days early as a Christmas present for the Sergeant of Police serving in the small Victorian township of Rupanyup and his wife. However, Boyns spent his childhood and early school years in Healesville. Here, Boyns was able to embark on studies at the Melbourne Dental Hospital and thus the University of Melbourne whence he gained his dental degree.
DENTISTRY AND OTHER INTERESTS

Boyns worked in Hawthorn where he established his own practice. He had a keen interest in nature and took himself off on hikes, recording the details of each of his trips where he went and what he did. He collected fossils and snakes, and over time built these into a collection. In 1917, at 29, he married Florence Elizabeth Taylor and in the following years their two children, John and Jean, arrived to complete the family. But, for someone with a wide range of interests and pursuits, life was going to involve more than the ‘tugging and plugging’, the ‘drilling and filling’ that was the daily grind of a between-the-wars dental surgeon working in a modest suburban setting when money was tight and interest in dental care rudimentary.

He served with the Red Cross Emergency Service and was also actively involved with the Scouts. Combining his interests he was able to put together an exhibition of local fossils to raise funds for his Scouting Group. As a leader, he took part in Jamborees in Sydney and Frankston. While serving as District Commissioner of the Hawthorn District he founded a camping ground at Llydale (now Wishard Lodge), arranged the purchase of a church hall and for its transport from Heidelberg, across the river, to Auburn Park where it remains today.

Life must have seemed uneventful, though never bland, for this middle-aged, suburban dentist who lived his life through his profession, his pursuits and his community.

FROM PRACTICE TO MANUNDA

War came to Europe and the Empire in 1939 and an increasing threat of war with Japan hovered over the Far East and Australia. His son, John, enlisted in the RAAF, and daughter Jean, in the AAWAS. On 31 May 1940, Boyns enlisted in the CMF and the threat of war with Japan hovered over the Far East and Australia. War came to Europe and the Empire in 1939 and an increasing range of interests and pursuits, life was going to involve more than the ‘tugging and plugging’, the ‘drilling and filling’ that was the daily grind of a between-the-wars dental surgeon working in a modest suburban setting when money was tight and interest in dental care rudimentary.

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Manunda was converted as a hospital ship and commissioned as such on 22 July 1940. She arrived in Darwin on 14 January 1942, a week after leaving Sydney, having been diverted from Singapore due to the debacle overtaking Malaya. Anchored in the harbour her crew were kept busy with routine tasks and the staff with training. Medical staff visited military hospitals in the area, and it is possible that Captain Hocking lent his hand in local dental sections. On the morning of 19 February, while the hospital personnel were in the wards honing their skills in anticipation of the grim trials ahead, the Japanese struck.

Despite being identified as a hospital ship in compliance with Geneva Convention Regulations, Manunda twice came under attack from dive-bombers. In the first, a 250-kilogram bomb, a near miss, blasted a wave of shattered steel into the ship’s side punching 76 holes in her plates and scythed shrapnel across her decks causing four deaths. In the second, a similar bomb plunged through the open deck by the bridge and exploded well down in the confined spaces between decks causing fire, widespread damage and further deaths. In all, 12 were killed, 18 seriously wounded and 40 less seriously injured.

The Memorial for those with no known graves at the Adelaide River War Cemetery, Northern Territory.

One of the dead was Captain Hocking, no doubt at work in his surgery. With her boats already out collecting casualties and survivors, crew aboard the severely damaged Manunda set about controlling the fires and damage while, aft, in the hospital, now serving more as a casualty clearing station, the staff continued in their role – treating the wounded. That evening there were 76 patients in Manunda’s wards; by next morning 266 were being cared for as 190 sick and wounded were evacuated from hospitals ashore to the wards in Manunda.

Given his age, I asked John the obvious question, “Why did your dad join the Army?” In his mid-fifties he certainly didn’t have to do so. John replied very simply: “He felt that he wanted to do his bit.” He went on to add that the Army considered him too old for service in a field unit (a role, I suspect he would have relished). I imagine his superiors felt that a posting to a hospital ship would be less demanding, less arduous.

Notices in the ‘Killed in Action’ section of The Argus (28 February 1942) indicate his achievements, but one stands out – “Captain Boyns Hedley Hocking, AIF – A tribute of respect and affection to “Skip’ a great scout and a gentleman” with their military informality and in their choice of words “The Officers and Men of the Dental Section, Puckapunyal” – men with whom he had worked for but for a few months, reveal rather the nature and character of the man.

 Bodies were removed from Manunda before she sailed, en route to Fremantle for repairs, on the day after the first raids. Captain Hocking’s may have been one for he has no known grave. His name appears, recorded with those of his comrades, on a plaque on the special Memorial in the Adelaide River War Cemetery.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author gratefully acknowledges those who have provided assistance with the preparation of this article, including John W Hocking, the Hocking family, and The Northern Territory State Library.

WF (Fred) Mitchell

FURTHER READING

A list of the articles, personal communications and online information researched for the preparation of this article can be obtained from newsbull@ada.org.au