



# CAPTAIN MARLOW'S LOCKER



## The Last Australian Troopship of WWI

The last ship to leave Australia, with troops bound for the conflict in Europe, was the s.s. *Boonah*, A36. When she departed from Fremantle on Sunday 30th October 1918 the troops aboard expected to be involved in the war within just a few weeks. We are told that when the first ships departed for the war in 1914 many of the young men expected it to all be over quickly with the opportunity of a grand adventure. There can be little doubt however that, after almost four years of war with lists of the dead, and accounts of the horrors of the Western Front in every newspaper, those aboard the *Boonah* were well aware of what they could expect. Most of the men, 762, had joined the ship in Adelaide. Troops from New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania had arrived by train to join the South Australians before departure and another 158 men embarked at Fremantle.

Upon boarding, the men complained of the dreadful smell of the ship which, though relatively new, had evidently picked up a lot of unpleasant material in her bilges during her years as a transport. This would not have helped the men who were unused to the motion of a ship at sea and much seasickness was recorded among the troops during the heavy weather while crossing the Great Australian Bight and later the Indian Ocean. Before the ship arrived at Durban on 16 November 1918, the first port of call on her passage to Europe, the Armistice had been signed and WWI had come to an end. It might be assumed that the troops would have felt a great relief when told that they would be safely returning to Australia as soon as the ship took on coal. This, however was not the case as it is reported that there was little or no excitement among the men as most felt that they had missed their chance to 'do their bit' for Australia and the Empire.

On arrival at Durban the men were disappointed that shore leave was not permitted because a dreadful Influenza, known as the Spanish Flu, was out of control in the city. In the years following this pandemic it was estimated that it took the lives of over fifty million people across the world but more recent estimates double this figure as deaths in many countries were not included then. It is also claimed that it caused three times as many deaths as did WWI. Though called 'The Spanish Flu' it began in the USA. As Spain was not at war, the strict censorship of the press in most of Europe did not apply, and reports of the devastating outbreak during May and June of 1918 were openly published, leading to the supposition that it began there. In Australia the first cases were recorded in Victoria then in New South Wales. It soon spread to the remainder of the country taking the lives of 12,000 mainly young adults between fifteen and thirty-five years of age.

The *Boonah* was anchored in the Bay of Natal in the hope of avoiding the infection but fresh fruit and vegetables had to be brought aboard and also coal for the return voyage. Many of the native labourers loading the coal evidently were ill with the flu and it is almost certain that they brought the infection to the ship. It was reported that many of the labourers were so ill that they lay on the decks unable to work.

After their time at sea the young men were keen for some time ashore in a foreign port and with the summer weather the sight of the beaches of Durban must have been very appealing. The quarantine was carefully policed, however, and as a result only a small number of troops successfully made their way ashore one night and enjoyed a short period of freedom. They were soon picked up by local authorities and put in jail. Fortunately none of them contracted Spanish flu while in Durban and because they returned home on a later ship they avoided the sickness aboard the *Boonah*.

With stores and coal aboard, the ship departed for the return to Fremantle on Sunday 24 November 1918. Within a week of departure several men came down with sore throats and tonsillitis. It was hoped that these were not symptoms of anything worse but it soon became clear that they had contracted influenza. Orders had been received that the passage would include a call at St Paul Island in the southern Indian Ocean to check on an unmanned rescue station. Though the latitude of nearly 40°S is about the same as XXXX the weather turned very cold and the shivering men in their standard uniforms and only two thin army blankets crowded into the companionways near the engine room to try to keep warm. Fortunately the ship had thirty members of the Army Medical Corps aboard, led by two doctors. Isolation areas were set up but with so many new cases of infection these were soon crowded and the number of men infected had risen to 298 by the time the ship reached Fremantle.

It seems strange after all these years that the authorities in WA were so unprepared to manage the obvious potential for a critical public health problem when the ship arrived. Radio messages had made it clear that the disease, which was already in epidemic proportion in much of the world, could be brought into Australia when the ship arrived. Despite this little was made ready to receive the men.

On arrival on Wednesday 11 December the *Boonah* was directed to anchor in Gage Roads about eight miles from the quarantine Station at Woodman's Point and a small harbour tug the *Reliance* arrived alongside to take the most serious cases to shore. This small vessel was totally unsuited to the task and in the choppy sea many of the most seriously sick men were soaked by the sea coming aboard. The choice of the *Reliance* came in for much criticism in the following days. On the day of arrival, and that following, more than five hundred troops were taken to the quarantine area. On arrival at the station it was found that preparations were totally unsatisfactory. Accommodation was mainly in tents and the medical staff was not even provided with suitable food for the critically ill. Despite constant criticism from letters to the newspapers conditions ashore improved very slowly while those not yet infected were kept aboard the ship.

I must express my indignation at the mismanagement of the authorities (Defence and Quarantine). When the *Boonah* arrived she had cases of influenza running into hundreds. Very little preparation was made for them, although the authorities had ample notification to make provision. Very many were serious cases. They had to travel eight miles in this condition to the quarantine station. Having arrived there it was found that there were no farinaceous foods, Bovril, &c., for the sick men, and the nurses had no food at all. The district around had to be canvassed for food. I would like to hear what the responsible Ministers of the departments interested have to say in reply. Yours, &c. SORROWING FATHER East St. Kilda. *The Argus*, Melbourne 17 January 1919

Many letters to the papers recommended that the men on the ship should be put ashore on either Rottneest Island or Garden Island which would have reduced the crowding and reduced the spread of infection. The authorities insisted that they were better able to check on the health of the men while together on the ship but warnings to the public of the danger of infection in crowds was in contrast to that statement. A measure of the discontent among the public is apparent from the threats by the Returned Servicemen's Association that members would forcibly remove the men and take them to Rottneest Island if the authorities did not take better care of them. Reports of the number of those infected and the rising death toll also brought much criticism of those in charge. Though the public was aware of the dangers of an outbreak of the disease, the attitude of those writing to the papers is more one of concern for the unfortunate men aboard the ship as well as the critically ill at the quarantine station. Appeals for comforts for those at Woodman's Point, by the Red Cross and YMCA, were generously supported keeping members busy with transporting the donations. Despite the support of the public, conditions at the quarantine station remained poor.

Infections among the medical staff were another major problem. An inoculation intended to control the virus was in use and the people of WA were encouraged to have the injection. Information published about the progress of the illness throughout the world resulted in large numbers attending the injection centres in Perth. The ineffectiveness of the inoculations is obvious, however, because of the number of medical staff, all of whom had the injections, who came down with the illness.

The doctors appointed to the quarantine station had asked for fifty nurses to take care of the ill and the convalescing. A request for volunteers from among the nurses aboard another troopship was so strongly supported that a ballot was needed to choose the twenty requested. This transport was the *Wyreema* which had been in Cape Town at the Armistice having departed for Europe from Fremantle six days before the *Boonah*. Radio messages from the *Boonah*, which detailed the increasing numbers of men infected, were picked up each night aboard the *Wyreema* which arrived in Fremantle two days before her. While in Cape Town the nurses were made aware of the terrible death rate amongst those engaged in nursing pneumonic influenza. They knew perfectly well the enormous risk they were taking. Along with one civilian nurse three of them lost their lives to the disease. At one period there was over twenty of the doctors and nurses all seriously ill. The public showed great sympathy for the medical staff, taking care of the seriously ill troops, recognizing that their situation was similar to that of troops engaged in battle. A tribute to the nurses by Lieut Col McFarlane was printed in *The Argus*, Melbourne on 13 January 1919 from which this extract is taken.

The fame of our Australian army nurses has spread far and wide, and everyone is cognisant of the excellent work done by them in the various theatres of war. They are all deserving of the plaudits of the community, but this striking case of courage and devotion to duty seems to me to call for the highest commendation of the citizens of Australia. To me it equals the action of a body of soldiers ordered to go 'over the top' in trench warfare. I count it an exceptional honour to have been associated with such a gallant band of sisters and would lay my tribute of praise at the graves of those who have fallen.

It is clear from the tone of many letters to the newspapers that the people of WA were not too pleased about the way, in their opinion, Federation had passed too much decision making to the Eastern States. The authorities in the east were seen to be disinterested with their concerns. Condemnation of the unsatisfactory management of the matter was also directed at the government in WA.

For the men as yet not infected and kept aboard the ship the situation was awful. There was little to do, the conditions were most uncomfortable cramped aboard the smelly ship, and the chance of contracting the infection was very high. It was deemed necessary to allow one full week with no further infection aboard the ship before it could be declared free of infection. With new cases occurring daily there seemed no end in sight.

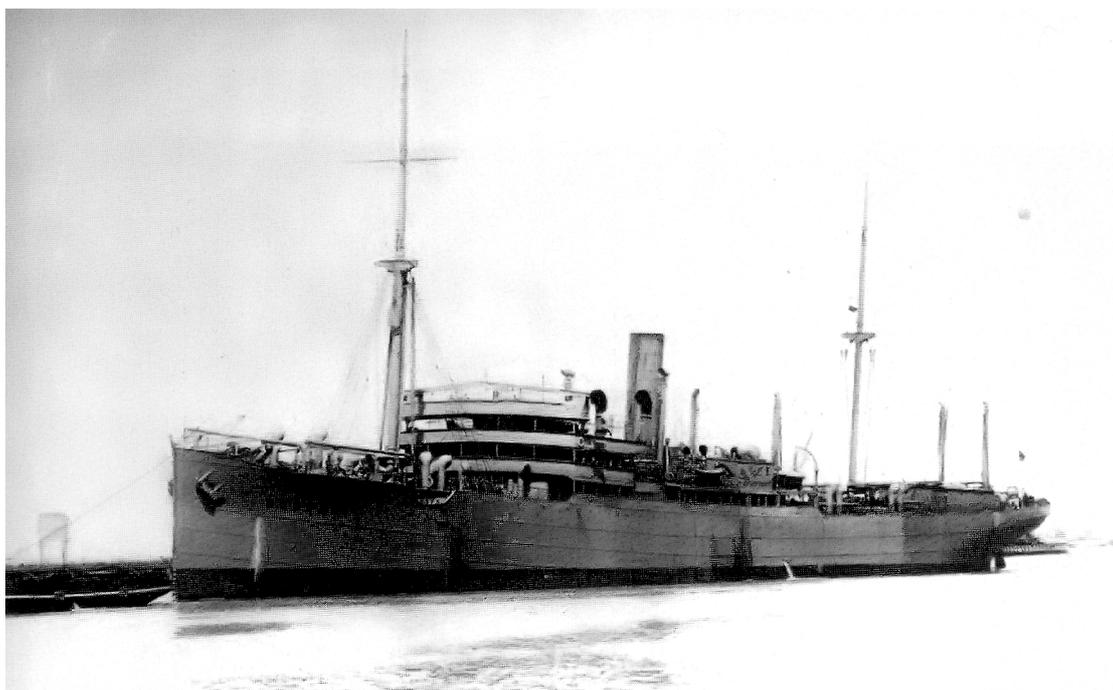
.After nine days at anchor, because of the level of feeling among the public, the ship was declared free of infection and departed for the east via Albany on 20 December. That this was not true is apparent, as four more men came down with the flu before the *Boonah* reached Albany. These men had been separated from the others during the short passage and were taken ashore to the quarantine station on arrival.

The ship required more coal for the passage to Adelaide but concerns over bringing the infection ashore had prevented this from happening while in Gage Roads. Difficulties arose with the waterside workers in Albany who had watched the drama unfolding in their local press. Understandingly they were worried about the dangers they faced if they boarded the ship. The union tried to reach an agreement with the ship's owners for compensation should any labourer become ill, lose time at work, be quarantined or die from the flu. With no agreement reached a coal hulk was brought alongside and the coal was loaded onto the ship by the crew and the healthy troops.

The final leg of the journey departed from Albany on 24 December and arrived at Adelaide five days later with fourteen new cases of Spanish Flu. These men were immediately taken ashore to the Torrens Island quarantine station. On the following day 29 December the remaining 414 men also were taken to Torrens Island bringing to an end their voyage of around ten weeks aboard the *Boonah*. All enjoyed a hot bath followed by a nourishing hot meal. Conditions at Torrens Island were a great improvement with the men accommodated in wooded buildings and provided with adequate food of good quality. During the summer days they had plenty of opportunity for sports and other outdoor activities during the daytime but there was little to do in the evenings. Those who avoided contracting the infection, together with those who had been ill, were released after a further three weeks of convalescing and quarantine. There were no deaths among the men while at Torrens Island.

By the time all those taken to Woodman's Point had been released twenty-seven Australian and New Zealand troops and four of the nurses who had been caring for them had died. The men from the eastern states in most cases returned home by train after being released. The SA troops taken to Torrens Island aboard the *Boonah* returned directly to their homes while many bound for the eastern states were carried aboard the troopship *Leicestershire* to Melbourne disembarking on 22 January. Nearly 170 Victorians had arrived in Melbourne by train two days earlier. Those from NSW and Qld returned home by train from Melbourne and those bound for Tasmania on the Bass Strait ferry, *Loongana*.

The book, *The Boonah Incident* by Ian Darroch 2004 provides a detailed account of the Spanish Flu aboard the ship and a great deal of information is available on the internet. The two best references for the story of the ship during WWI (though rather rare and difficult to find) are *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918 Volume IX – The Royal Australian Navy, 1914–1918* by Arthur W Jose, first published in the 1920s, and *Sea Transport of The AIF* by Greville Treagarthen, Melbourne, Naval Transport Board, June 1925. Information about the effects of the pandemic throughout Australia can be readily found on the internet.



**HMAT36 s.s. *Boonah* ex-Melbourne**

## **s.s. Buenos Aires, ex-Witram, ex-Boonah, ex-Melbourne (1912—1940)**

The steamship *Melbourne* was launched by Flensburger Shipyard, Flensburg, in 1912 for the Deutsche-Australische Linie, Hamburg (German-Australian Line). She was a single screw ship powered by a triple expansion engine with these measurements: 5,926 gross tons, length 137.2 m, beam 17.7 m. Fitted with refrigeration to a part of her cargo space she was typical steamer of the period with a speed of 12.5 knots.

Her career in the service of her owners was short as she was taken over by the British authorities while in Sydney at the opening of WWI and placed under Australian control. Though registered in London as the property of the King she was loaned to the Australian Navy Department. With a critical need for shipping she was quickly converted into a troop transport, re-named s.s. *Boonah* and allocated the number HMAT36. Manned by Australian officers and seamen and with her alterations completed in time she sailed with the second convoy on 31 December 1914 with Australian and New Zealand troops for the war.

Though the story of the first convoy, with the drama of the sinking of the SMS *Emden* by HMAS *Sydney*, is better known, the second convoy took a further 11,000 troops, with horses and supplies. It was made up of 14 Australian troop transports, 3 New Zealand troop transports, and escorted by the AMC *Berrima* towing the submarine AE2 (which was to later gain fame as the first submarine to enter the Sea of Marmora). An interesting fact about the second convoy, is that it included five ex-German ships which had been taken in port, or soon after their arrival, in Australia. By the time of the departure of the convoy the danger to shipping from Australia had been removed. With the sinking of the *Emden* and of Graf von Spee's squadron at the Battle of the Falkland Islands, there was no longer the need for the convoy to be escorted by warships.

By February, 1917, she had made three more trips with troops from Australia to Egypt and England. In July 1915 she sailed with Convoy 7 transporting troops from Brisbane and Fremantle. With Convoy 16 in January 1916 she sailed from Sydney and in October of the same year with Convoy 25 from Brisbane taking 1235 troops. During her war service some of her passages were carrying cargo rather than troops and she visited Glasgow, Naples, Genoa, Marseilles, Salonica, Port Said, Galveston, Pensacola, and New York. After her passage with Convoy 25, with two other Australian transports she was employed by the Admiralty for three months while carrying Nigerian troops to East Africa during the return passage to Australia.

According to, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918 Volume IX – The Royal Australian Navy, 1914–1918*, the *Boonah* experienced three attacks by U-boats. In October 1915 she was pursued by a U-boat near Salonica in the Mediterranean but managed to out-run her enemy. Her gunners were credited with the sinking of a U-boat which attacked her on her passage from the UK to Dakar in March 1917 but the latest internet sites which appear to cover every U-boat of WWI do not show this. The date, 10 March 1917 and the position, off Erris Head, Ireland, do not relate to any U-boat sunk or missing. Mentions of this incident which appear in several references all seem to quote from that in A W Jose's book.

Her third encounter was on 23 July 1918 south of the Tuskar Rock. Torpedoes fired at the *Boonah* were seen approaching and her captain was able to avoid them but they struck the AMC *Marmora*, which was escorting the convoy, sinking her in half an hour.

With the other ex-German ships she was transferred from the control of the Transport Branch of the Navy Department to the Commonwealth Line in 28 March 1918. After her involvement with the Spanish Influenza episode, she returned to her work carrying cargoes to Europe and bringing troops home until no longer required by the services.

She continued in the service of the Commonwealth Line until sold to the Bremen based Roland Line in September 1925 and was renamed *Witram*. In January 1926 Roland Line became part of Nord Deutscher Lloyd and she served with that company until January 1937 when she was sold to Hamburg Sudamerikanische Line and renamed *Buenos Aires*. She was required again for war service and taken over in 1940 but this time by the Kriegsmarine of the Third Reich. Her story came to an end on the night of 1 May 1940 when she was torpedoed and sunk by the submarine HMS *Narwhal* off the northern Jutland Peninsula with the loss of thirty lives.