



MOVING CEREMONY: Major Arthur Dugdale throws a weighted wreath into the sea above the spot where the Centaur now lies and where 268 died. The commemorative plaque can be seen as the robot submarine approaches the deck of Centaur to place the plaque before returning 2059m to the surface.

Pictures: Bruce Long

Plaque now lies where 268 died

Natalie Gregg

A MEMORIAL plaque laid on the wooden deck of the AHS Centaur yesterday capped off the Seahorse Spirit's successful mission of discovery.

Just after dawn, a submarine robot placed the plaque on the foredeck, 10m from the bow and 2059m below the surface, in memory of the 268 lives lost in Queensland's worst maritime disaster.

The hospital ship was on a mercy mission to Papua New Guinea when it was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine at 4am on May 14, 1943.

A moment's silence was observed during a service aboard the search ship and a memorial wreath was then laid in the ocean by Major Arthur Dugdale.

Weights on the wreath made it sink to the watery tomb.

The plaque – donated by the 300-member Centaur Association – marks the Centaur's status as an official war grave.

Maritime historian Captain

online



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John Foley – who is aboard the search ship – said laying the plaque at 5.55am yesterday followed an exciting and moving few days in which the sunken ship had been revealed in “crystal-clear” images.

“The moment it was landed on the deck there was absolute dead silence... It was very moving,” he said. “The chapter is closed on the last great (Australian) maritime mystery of World War II.”

During the mission off Moreton Island, search director David Mearns and his crew identified key features of the Centaur, in-

cluding a bright red cross, a star on the bow and the corroded identification number 47.

Capt Foley, co-author of *Australian Hospital Ship Centaur - The Myth of Immunity*, said the remote-control submersible camera also captured footage of shoes, hats, jackets and a suitcase among the wreckage.

“I’ve haven’t slept much in the last three days as any time the ROV (Remotely Operated Vehicle) has been on the seabed I have been glued to the screen,” Mr Foley said.

He said yesterday that images of a few cabins, including that of the Centaur's second mate Gordon Rippon, who survived the sinking, had been taken.

Mr Rippon's accurate navigation almost 67 years ago led to the ship's discovery in December last year.

“Because of the way the ship is lying, the door (of the cabin) is open and we were able to zoom in and see Rippon's jacket,” he said.

“We looked into the Captain's bathroom and we could see a shoe

in there and what looked like another hat.

“When everyone left their rooms that morning, no one went back for anything and the ship just went down, and everything went down with her.”

Mr Foley said that although the nation was at war, the Centaur should have had no reason to fear being attacked.

“Of the 332 men and women on board, only 10 needed to be awake... the rest would be off duty and resting, if not asleep,” he said.

The plaque contains a CD with the names of everyone who served on the Centaur and personal notes from family members.

It carries this inscription: “In memory of shipmates, relatives, colleagues and friends who paid the supreme sacrifice on a mission of mercy, 14 May, 1943.”

Today the Seahorse Spirit will go looking for expensive sonar equipment lost in the initial search effort.

It is expected to arrive back in Brisbane tomorrow.

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