Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence
For Information:

PROPOSED 60 MINUTES REPORT ON ORDINARY SEAMAN EDWARD SHEEAN

OVERVIEW

- Talking points have been requested in preparation for questions that could be asked during an investigation by 60 Minutes into Ordinary Seaman Sheean.
- The investigation is expected to be carried out in Jul 01, however, no further details are known at this stage.

Sensitivity. Yes; any report is expected to cover the ongoing campaign by the Naval Association of Australia and the Royal Australian Navy Corvette Association, sparking renewed interest in the matter.

Resources. Nil

Talking Points. See attached.

AUTHORISED:

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19 Jun 01

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BRUCE SCOTT MP

28/6/01
ORDINARY SEAMAN EDWARD SHEEAN

TALKING POINTS:

- Ordinary Seaman Sheean was serving in HMAS Armidale when it was attacked by Japanese aircraft in 1942. When 'Abandon Ship' was given, Ordinary Seaman Sheean, wounded, returned to his gun and kept firing until killed. He was posthumously awarded the Mentioned in Despatches.

- Immediately following World War II, an End of War List (EOWL) was established. An EOWL provides the opportunity to review nominations for gallantry or meritorious service after a conflict.

- Shortly after the approval of the EOWL, the Sovereign decreed that no more gallantry or meritorious service during World War II would be re-assessed. This was reaffirmed by Her Majesty the Queen in 1965.

- Recommendations for decorations are best made by the commanders on the spot, as reviews many years later may be guided by emotion.

- Apart from the review of the EOWL - Vietnam in 1999, the RSL National Executive does not support retrospective reviews of conflicts. The Government agrees that it is not appropriate now to recommend the granting of gallantry and meritorious awards in hindsight.

- In attempting to retrospectively correct perceived anomalies in relation to eligibility for medals, more anomalies inevitably arise as a result.

- That some individuals are singled out for gallantry awards is fitting; but again, the reality is that many who do perform acts of great courage are never recognised. One great event in Ordinary Seaman Sheean's memory now is the naming of a new Collins-class submarine after him.
Background

The Victoria Cross for Australia was established as part of the Australian system of honours and awards on 15 Jan 91 and is the pre-eminent Australian decoration. The Victoria Cross for Australia accords recognition to persons who perform acts of the most conspicuous gallantry, acts of valour or self-sacrifice, or display extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy.

The conditions for which the award can be granted mirror those laid down in 1920 when the original warrant instituting the Imperial Cross of 29 January 1856 was amended.

Immediately following World War II, an End of War List was established. An End of War List is a final list of names, for gallantry, or meritorious service, which were not submitted during the conflict for a range of reasons.

Shortly after the approval of the End of War List in October 1945, the Sovereign decreed that no more recommendations in relation to gallantry, or meritorious service during World War II, would be re-assessed. This was reaffirmed by Her Majesty the Queen in 1965.

There has been no review of any gallantry or meritorious service award from World War II by any Australian Government since 1965.

As the End of War List for World War II was the final opportunity for re-assessment of war service, and due to the Sovereign’s decree, there is no mechanism in place to revisit the actions of Ordinary Seaman Sheean for a posthumous award.

It would also be difficult to use Gallantry and Meritorious Service Awards from within the Australian Honours and Awards System on the basis that being awards approved by the Sovereign, the decree would still stand. In particular, this would apply to the Victoria Cross for Australia as this award is approved by the Sovereign.

Ordinary Seaman Edward Sheean was born in Barrington Tasmania on 23 December 1923. He joined the RAN on 21 April 1941. After service in shore establishments he joined the corvette HMAS Armidale on her commissioning on 11 June 1942. During his service, HMAS Armidale was engaged in escort duties in Australia and New Guinea waters until ordered to Darwin in October 1942.

HMAS Armidale arrived in Darwin on 7 November 1942. On 29 November 1942, the ship proceeded to Betano, Timor, in company with HMAS Castlemaine to reinforce the guerilla forces and evacuate civilians. Upon closing Timor on 1 December 1942 to reinforce guerilla forces and evacuate civilians, the ship was attacked by nine torpedo bombers, three fighters and a float aircraft. It was hit by two torpedoes and sank within five minutes. When the ‘Abandon Ship’ order was given, Ordinary Seaman Sheean made for the side but was twice wounded by a strafing aircraft. He then returned to his gun and commenced firing, shooting down one aircraft. He continued firing until killed at his gun. For his actions he was posthumously awarded the Mentioned in Despatches.

The Victoria Cross for Australia carries on the tradition of the Imperial Victoria Cross instituted by Queen Victoria in 1856. It can be awarded to members of the Defence Force and certain other persons as nominated by the Minister for Defence (from time to time) for acts of the most conspicuous gallantry, acts of valour or self-sacrifice, or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy.
There is no provision for the immediate award of the Victoria Cross. Nominations are to be supported by signed statements of at least three witnesses of the act for which the award is recommended. Wherever possible these statements should be on oath. Awards are made with the approval of The Queen by an instrument signed by the Governor-General on the recommendation of the Minister of Defence.

An End of War List is normally established after a major conflict. An End of War List is a final list of names, traditionally compiled following a major conflict, to provide the opportunity to review previously unsuccessful nominations for gallantry or meritorious service, which were not submitted during the conflict for a range of reasons.

The End of War List for World War II was considered prudent given the extensive theatres of campaigns, the numbers of military personnel involved and the duration of the war itself. In particular, the number of military personnel involved in covert operations during the war could not, without endangering them, be recognised publicly through an award until cessation of hostilities. It was decreed following the list, and reaffirmed by the Queen in 1965 that no more awards for gallantry or meritorious service would be granted in respect of World War II service. Under the circumstances, it is unlikely now that Buckingham Palace staff would present such a nomination to The Queen for her approval.

The Returned and Service League (RSL) of Australian has also discussed the issue of reopening End of War Lists. Apart from the now completed review of the End of War List-Vietnam, the National Executive does not support any retrospective reviews. Specifically with reference to World War II, the RSL foresees serious difficulties and inequities arising in reviewing individual cases. The RSL suggests that to undertake such a comprehensive review would be impossible to do now with fairness, as well as having serious cost implications.

Along with Ordinary Seaman Sheean’s posthumous Mentioned In Despatches, he was awarded the normal World War II awards for service in the Pacific theatre which are the 1939-45 Star, Pacific Star, War Medal and the Australia Service Medal 1939-45. These medals have never been claimed by his family and are currently held by the Department of Defence.

Additionally, the deeds of this brave individual are commemorated by the fact that a Collins Class Submarine has been named after him, the first Australian warship to be named after a junior sailor. It is considered that in the final analysis, this is more important as it places him in a unique position of recognition that no award, however distinguished, would achieve.
VCs - RSL CALLS FOR "HANDS OFF"

The RSL has called for the proposal to make retrospective awards of the Victoria Cross to be abandoned and for this issue to be kept out of political debate.

RSL National President, Major General Peter Phillips, said that the RSL had consistently opposed revisiting decisions on individual honours and awards. That policy had been reaffirmed again last year by the RSL National Executive.

"We do not dispute in any way the magnificent bravery of such Australian legends as Simpson, Sheehan and Cleary to name but a few; we do not criticise the good intentions of those who argue that they should now be given an award, however, we strenuously oppose any attempt to make this a political issue", he said.

"Decisions made more than 50 and even 85 years ago cannot be fairly judged now. These awards were normally made by the Sovereign at the time and it would be improper to now ask the Governor General to award the Victoria Cross of Australia so long after an event."

"Veterans have been phoning me to ask 'what next?'. Clearly they see what an unhealthy precedent this proposal would cause. Already other worthy brave deeds are being brought to our attention."

"Veterans see this as a matter for the military and the Crown. The issue was canvassed widely at the Army History Conference this morning and it was clear that many serving military people and military historians would agree with this."

"We are also concerned for the families involved and would urge that they not be given false hopes or dragged into political controversy."

For further information contact Major General Peter Phillips on 02 6248 7199 or 0410 627 873

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