



## The sinking of the Australian Hospital Ship Centaur... War crime, or legitimate target?

The sinking of the Australian Hospital Ship Centaur... War crime, or legitimate target?

# Did hospital ships have special protected status in wartime?

The *Centaur* was an Australian hospital ship sunk by a Japanese submarine in the early morning of 14 May 1943, with the death of 268 of its 332 crew and passengers. Hospital ships were ships that were commissioned to return wounded and ill soldiers from the battlefield to home front hospitals. There was much outrage at the time about the sinking of a hospital ship—contrary to international agreements. The cartoon below shows an example of this.



A cartoon response to the sinking of the *Centaur* (the submarine captain is ripping apart a document labelled "International Law")

**Q. 2**

Imagine that you have the task of drawing up a set of international rules to protect hospital ships during wartime. List the provisions that you would include to achieve this. For example, you might require that the hospital ship would not be allowed to carry any weapons. You will be able to compare your ideas with the actual rules set out in Investigation 2.

**Q. 1**

Why might people want international rules to protect hospital ships during war?

When you have completed your list, look at the actual rules at the time set out in Investigation 2.

The sinking of the Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur*... War crime, or legitimate target?

Investigation 1—Did hospital ships have special protected status in wartime?

Page 2 of 13

# Was the *Centaur* correctly marked?

International agreements (the Hague Convention of 1907 and the Geneva Conventions of 1906 and 1929) clearly stated that hospital ships were not to be considered legitimate targets during war, provided that:

- they were clearly marked as hospital ships
- they were not carrying weapons, ammunition or combat soldiers
- they were carrying only crew, medical personnel and wounded combatants.

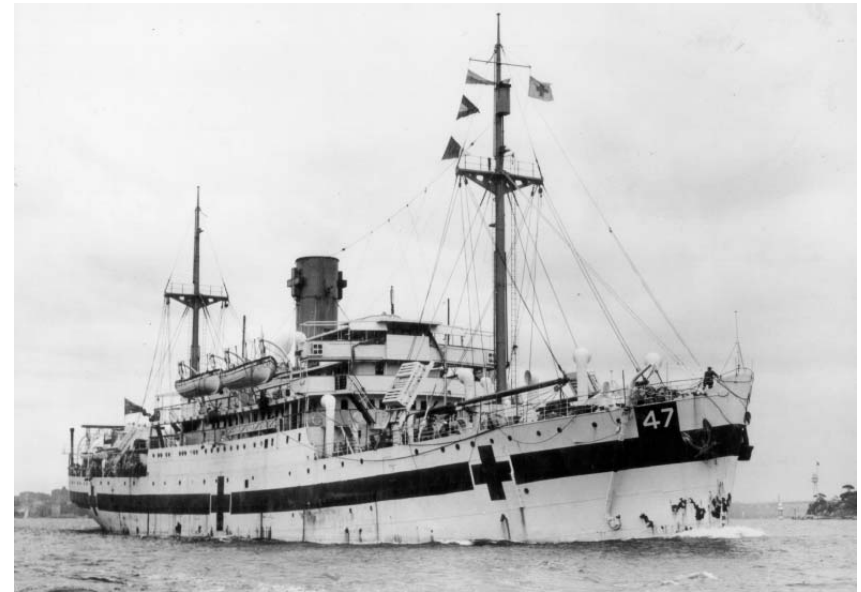
The requirements for marking were that there were to be:

- four foot (1.1 metre) green bands on both sides of the ship from bow to stern
- three large Red Crosses on the hull on both sides
- two large Red Crosses on either side of the funnel lit by internal electric light
- horizontal Red Crosses on the navigation bridge and wheelhouse
- an identifying number stencilled white on black on either side of the bow
- bright lights showing the markings at night
- notification to other countries about the ship's status.

**Q. 3** Compare these rules with the ones that you drew up in Investigation 1 and discuss why each might have been created.

**Q. 4**

The Japanese Government had been notified about the ship's status on 5 February 1943. Look at this photograph of the *Centaur* just before its last voyage from Sydney to New Guinea. Do you think the *Centaur* was correctly marked according to the international conventions? Justify your answer.



The sinking of the Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur*... War crime, or legitimate target?

Investigation 2—Was the *Centaur* correctly marked?

Page 3 of 13

# Was the *Centaur* carrying forbidden personnel or weapons?

The *Centaur* was loaded in Sydney on 10 May 1943 to sail to Cairns, and then to go to Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea to return wounded from the battles of Buna and Gona.

But at the time, and since, there have been rumours and stories that it was loading in a way that was in breach of the Hague and Geneva Conventions.

**Q. 5**

Look at the following evidence (Sources A to K) and summarise the information in the table below.

Aspect	Evidence supporting the claim that there was forbidden personnel or weapons	Evidence opposing the claim that there was forbidden personnel or weapons
The crew and passengers		
Weapons and equipment		
Searches of the ship		

The sinking of the Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur*... War crime, or legitimate target?

Investigation 3—Was the *Centaur* carrying forbidden personnel or weapons?

Page 4 of 13

### — Source A

The *Centaur's* crew consisted of 75 merchant seamen (civilians who signed up for six months at a time to run the ship), 64 medical staff (doctors and orderlies from the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps, and nurses from the Australian Army Nursing Service). This was its normal crew component.

*End of Source* —

### — Source B

There were also 149 members of the 2/12th Field Ambulance unit bound for New Guinea, with 44 Australian Army Service Corps ambulance drivers attached. These men were to provide medical support in the field.

*End of Source* —

### — Source C

When these medical support troops arrived at the dock to board, the ambulance drivers were carrying rifles and ammunition—personal weapons allowed for the protection of their ambulance vehicles. This was allowed under the Geneva Convention. This amounted to 52 rifles and two thousand rounds of ammunition. The captain of the ship questioned the legality under the Conventions of those weapons, but was satisfied that they were acceptable, provided that they were stored in the cargo hold for the trip.

*End of Source* —

### — Source D

The crew decided not to sail until they were satisfied about this also. A representative made a phone call to the union office. An official of the Seamen's Union made a thorough search of the cargo on the wharf and on the ship, and found nothing suspicious.

*End of Source* —

### — Source E

A senior member of the crew who survived the sinking, made a statement many years later that included claims that:

- Some of the passengers were commandos (combat troops) carrying automatic weapons
- The officer in charge of the troops had been ordered to allow these troops and their weapons aboard
- After an accident had caused cabins to flood, stewards found automatic weapons under mattresses in some cabins

These claims have never been tested.

*End of Source* —

### — Source F

An Army file in the Australian Archives contains a report of comments allegedly made by a pro-Japanese Red Cross representative that he knew positively that the *Centaur* was carrying personnel and equipment in contravention of the Red Cross conventions, and that this was known to the Japanese.

*End of Source* —

### — Source G

In August 1988 a member of the 2/15th Australian Field Company (Engineers) told a magazine reporter that he had helped load ammunition on the *Centaur*. He said soldiers worked through the night loading the ship 'almost to the gunnels' with cases of ammunition, rifles and machine guns.

*End of Source* —

### — Source H

A list of the survivors picked up by the USS *Mugford* included a Colonel (later Lt Col) English AAMC [Australian Army Medical Corps] as a survivor. There was no such person recorded as having boarded the ship. His name was later taken from official lists.

*End of Source* —

The sinking of the Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur*... War crime, or legitimate target?

Investigation 3—Was the *Centaur* carrying forbidden personnel or weapons? (*continued*)

Page 5 of 13

### — Source I

There is supposedly a closed file on the *Centaur* in Australian Archives, not to be opened until 100 years after the sinking.

*End of Source* —

### — Source J

Radiographer Sgt Dick Metcalf helped store weapons aboard the *Centaur*. But he says these weapons were the .303 rifles of ambulance drivers, permitted under the Geneva Convention. There were also 4,000 rounds for the rifles. There were no commandos, bombs or Bren guns. 'Captain Hindmarsh told me to put the rifles in the bottom of number one hold, between the mattresses, to avoid any chance of trouble and that's where they are to this day. But in wartime rumours are rife.'

*End of Source* —

### — Source K

One writer claims that there is a secret file on the *Centaur*, not to be opened until 100 years after the event. Australian Archives' rules do not exempt material for set periods of 100 years. There are no files on the *Centaur* restricted for that period. There are files where information is withheld from public access, but that can be reviewed on request.

*End of Source* —

**Q. 6**

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the main types of evidence included here (personal recollections many years after the event, and official documents at the time).

**Q. 7**

Do you think that the *Centaur* was carrying prohibited cargo and/or personnel? Discuss your reasons.

The information used to create the sources in this investigation has been drawn from:

- Neil Wilson, 'Sunken Hearts', *Herald Sun* 10 May 2003 page 24
- R. D. Goodman, *Hospital Ships*, Boolarong Publications, Brisbane, 1992 chapter 7
- Christopher S. Milligan, *Australian Hospital Ship Centaur: the myth of immunity*, Nairana Publications, Brisbane, 1993

The sinking of the Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur*... War crime, or legitimate target?

Investigation 3—Was the *Centaur* carrying forbidden personnel or weapons? (*continued*)

Page 6 of 13

# What sank the Centaur?

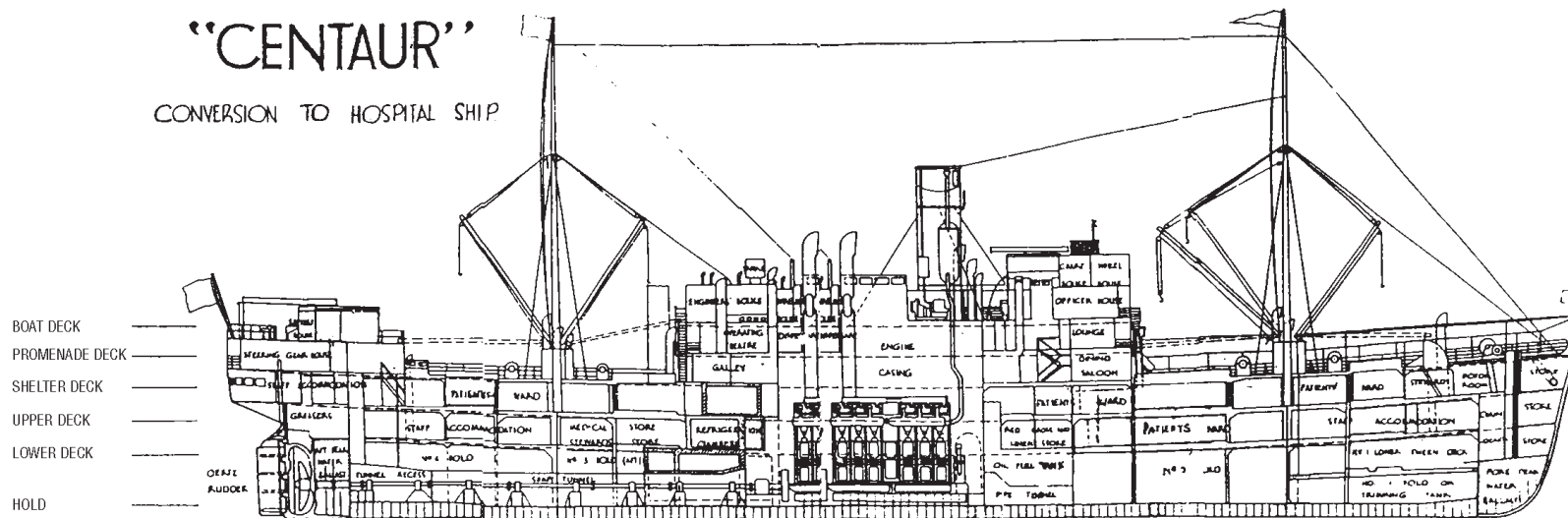
The *Centaur* sailed on 12 May, and maintained radio silence, as was normal.

At 4.10 a.m. on Friday 14 May the *Centaur* had just passed Brisbane and was about 40 kilometres from shore, and opposite the southern tip of Moreton Island. It was fully lit according to requirements, and would have been visible for many kilometres at sea.

A crewman was watching a school of porpoises that had joined the ship, playing in its wake, when he noticed a long thin line of disturbed water heading towards the side of the ship. Seconds later a single torpedo struck the *Centaur* near the engine room, the upper and shelter decks (the ward decks) and the main oil bunker tanks.

**Q. 8**

Mark the approximate place of impact on this diagram of the ship.



The sinking of the Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur*... War crime, or legitimate target?

Investigation 4—What sank the *Centaur*?

Page 7 of 13

## Investigation 4 *continued*

The bunkers exploded, sending a sheet of flame through the area. Men not killed instantly by the concussion wave of the first blast were incinerated moments later. Oil, metal, wood and water were soon everywhere. Many who survived the blast and the flame were killed by flying debris, or drowned as water rushed through the hold and ward F.

Panic stricken people had to wake, grab their life jackets, and find their way up onto the deck, through bodies, water, wreckage and fire. In three minutes the ship sank.

It has been estimated that about 200 people were alive at this stage. Once on deck they found that the lifeboats and rafts were damaged or unable to be cut free quickly. Many who made it to the decks could not swim, and soon drowned. Others who made it into the water were sucked under as the ship sank.

All were now covered in thick oil, many having swallowed some of it. Survivors, many of them with broken limbs, severe burns or internal injuries, now desperately tried to find wreckage large enough to support them. Sharks took some who stayed in the water clinging to floating pieces of wreckage. And, to the horror of the survivors, the submarine that had fired the fatal torpedo now surfaced in the dark. Many expected that they would be machine gunned, and remained as still and quiet as possible. The submarine soon submerged, to the great relief of the survivors.

The 332 people aboard the *Centaur* ranged in age from 15 to 67. Most were Australian, but with some English, Scots, and individuals from Sweden, Iceland, Finland, Norway and Canada. There were at least eight sets of brothers aboard, including one set of three all of whom perished.

There were also the usual stories of good luck and bad luck—people who should have been aboard but were not, and others who were not supposed to be on that fateful voyage but at the last moment were called on.

When the last survivor had been rescued from the water and the final tally was counted, there were only 68 people out of the original 332 alive.

Group	Location	Dead	Saved	Total
Merchant crew (civilian sailors who signed on for six months at a time).	These knew the ship well, and many were on duty at the time. Those off duty were quartered at the front and rear ends, and below decks.	45	30	75
Ship's medical staff—Members of the Australian Army, males in the RAMC, females in the AANS.	The medical staff were quartered at the ends of the ship, and between decks.	44	20	64
2/12th Field Ambulance.	These were quartered in the middle hospital ward area.	138	11	149
Attached Army Service Corps.	These were quartered in the middle hospital ward area.	41	3	44

**Q. 9** Look at the death rates for the different groups. Which had the highest, and which had the lowest death rates?

**Q. 10** Use the information supplied to explain the 'geography of death' that the figures indicate.

### The sinking of the Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur*... War crime, or legitimate target?

Investigation 4—What sank the *Centaur*? (*continued*)

Page 8 of 13



# Why did it take so long to rescue the survivors?

As the survivors clung to their supports, shock and hypothermia, and then sun and thirst began to take their toll.

They had to survive for 36 hours. There were many examples of self-sacrifice, mateship and bravery among the survivors. One of the most impressive was Sister Ellen Savage.

She led a group in prayer, helped raise their morale, provided medical care to the injured (despite her own



considerable injuries), and supervised the allocation and rationing of the meagre food and water supplies. She was awarded the George Medal for her actions.

Why did the survivors have to drift so long before rescue?

**Q. 11** Look at these factors, and explain how each would have helped cause the delay.

Factor	Contribution to the delay
The ship had maintained radio silence (as was common practice) after leaving Sydney.	
The presence of the ship in the area had not been picked up by shore-based radar—a valve had blown just before the Centaur entered radar range, and it sank before the radar was fixed.	
A shore battery saw the explosion far out to sea, reported it, but was told that it must have been a flare from a training exercise taking place in the area.	
Planes flying overhead did not see them.	
When they were finally spotted, the rescuing ship USS Mugford had to travel very carefully to the area.	

## The sinking of the Australian Hospital Ship Centaur... War crime, or legitimate target?

Investigation 5—Why did it take so long to rescue the survivors?

# Who sank the *Centaur*, and why?

There were several investigations between 1944 and 1948 about who caused the sinking of the *Centaur*.

The loss or destruction of Japanese documents and the inability of several Japanese witnesses to be questioned hampered these investigations.

The man who sank the *Centaur* was officially acknowledged in 1979 (in an official Japanese history of the war) as Lieutenant Commander Hajima Nakagawa, captain of submarine I-177 .



Nakagawa did not have an unblemished record. As a submarine commander early in the war, he had sunk three ships. Unfortunately one of them was another Japanese submarine, with the loss of 81 sailors.

Was his attack on the *Centaur* justified?

**Q. 12** Listed in the table below are three possible situations. Discuss each and decide if each would justify the sinking of the *Centaur*.

Situation	Justified or not?
<p><b>A</b> The <i>Centaur</i> was carrying soldiers or weapons prohibited by international conventions and the Japanese knew this.</p>	
<p><b>B</b> The <i>Centaur</i> was carrying soldiers or weapons prohibited by international conventions and the Japanese did not know this.</p>	
<p><b>C</b> The <i>Centaur</i> was not carrying any prohibited personnel or weapons.</p>	

The sinking of the Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur*... War crime, or legitimate target?

Investigation 6—Who sank the *Centaur*, and why?

Page 10 of 13

## Investigation 6 *continued*

If we assume that the *Centaur* was not a legitimate target, then the question arises why the Japanese captain would have attacked it. A number of possible reasons have been offered over time:

- as the ship was heading towards the war it was a legitimate target
- he was following orders
- he hated the enemy and did not care about the Hague and Geneva Conventions
- he was determined to sink as many ships as possible for his own reputation.

**Q. 13** Look at the following information (Sources A to D) and decide which of the possibilities (listed as bullet points above) you think is the most likely explanation of his illegal actions.

### — Source A

On 20 March 1943 the Japanese issued a secret order to its naval forces:

Do not stop with the sinking of enemy ships and cargoes; at the same time that you carry out the complete destruction of the crews of the enemy's ships, if possible, seize part of the crew and endeavour to secure information about the enemy.

*End of Source* —

### — Source B

In 1944 the submarine *I-37*, captained by Nakagawa, was involved in attacks on three British ships in the Indian Ocean. Witnesses said he took the captain of the British *Chivalry* and forced him to watch as the submarine machine-gunned lifeboats holding 52 survivors, killing all but eight. He also ordered the killing of more than 100 other survivors—by pistols, machine guns, sledge hammers and samurai swords. He was later tried for these killings.

*End of Source* —

### — Source C

In January 1943 a US submarine had sunk a Japanese troop transport carrying 9500 soldiers—and then killed thousands of them in the water.

*End of Source* —

### — Source D

In early March US bombers had sunk a convoy of 22 ships, most of them troop transports. For the next seven days boats and planes machine gunned the survivors, killing over 3000 men.

Christopher S. Milligan and John C. H. Foley, *Australian Hospital Ship Centaur. The Myth of Immunity*, Nairana Publications, Brisbane, 1993 page 46

*End of Source* —

The Australian Government protested to the Japanese about the sinking of the *Centaur*. The Japanese denied it, and countered with accusations about Japanese hospital ships having been attacked by Allies. There was some truth in some of these accusations, but where the Allies had attacked they had either stopped as soon as they realised that the ships were hospital ships, or the markings on them were inadequate and not able to be seen from the attacking aircraft. Australian Prime Minister Curtin was persuaded to tone down his protest for fear that there might be retaliation against Australian prisoners-of-war.

Nakagawa was put on trial in 1948 by the Allies for sinking the *Centaur*. At the trial much of the evidence against him was disallowed, and he was eventually sentenced to eight years' hard labour. He was released in 1954 after six years' imprisonment. He died in 1986 at the age of 84, having refused to talk to researchers about the *Centaur*.

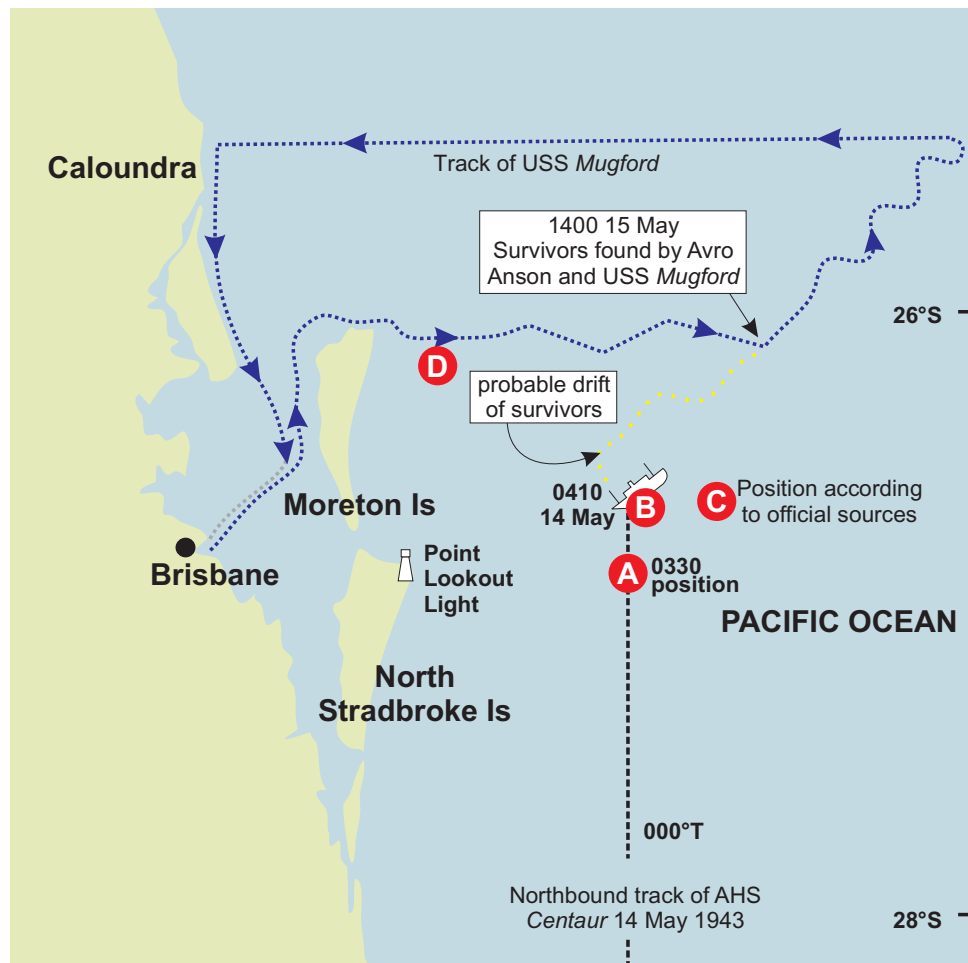
## The sinking of the Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur*... War crime, or legitimate target?

Investigation 6—Who sank the *Centaur*, and why? (*continued*)

Page 11 of 13

# Where is the Centaur?

There is continuing debate and uncertainty about the location of the *Centaur*. This has contributed to distress among some survivors and the families of the dead.



- A** A fix by the navigator 40 minutes before the attack in 1943 put the *Centaur* east of Point Lookout on North Stradbroke Island.
- B** This would put the sinking at 13.6 kilometres from there.
- C** The Government, through a mistake in transcription of the information at the time of the sinking, put it about seven kilometres further east.
- D** In 1995 a deep-sea recovery operator claimed to have located the wreck. He placed it 16.7 kilometres east of Cape Moreton, at the northern end of Moreton Island. The Australian Government proclaimed this last location as the official area.

However, the recovery operator has since been convicted of fraud and deception, and the photographs of the rudder that he claimed were the *Centaur's* clearly do not match the shape shown in naval records. They match perfectly a ship known to have been sunk in that area in 1951.

Support is growing for the most likely site as being in the area fixed by the expert navigator aboard the ship in 1943. His record is supported by the location of the survivors, which is consistent with the pattern of currents for that time of year.

A Navy hydrographic survey in May 2003 has now found that the length of the wreck at point D is too short to be the *Centaur*. The water at points A and C is too deep for a dive to be carried out.

- Q. 14** Why is it important for the survivors and families of the dead to know the exact location of the *Centaur*?
- Q. 15** Why might it be valuable to historians generally to know this?

The sinking of the Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur*... War crime, or legitimate target?

Investigation 7—Where is the *Centaur*?

Page 12 of 13

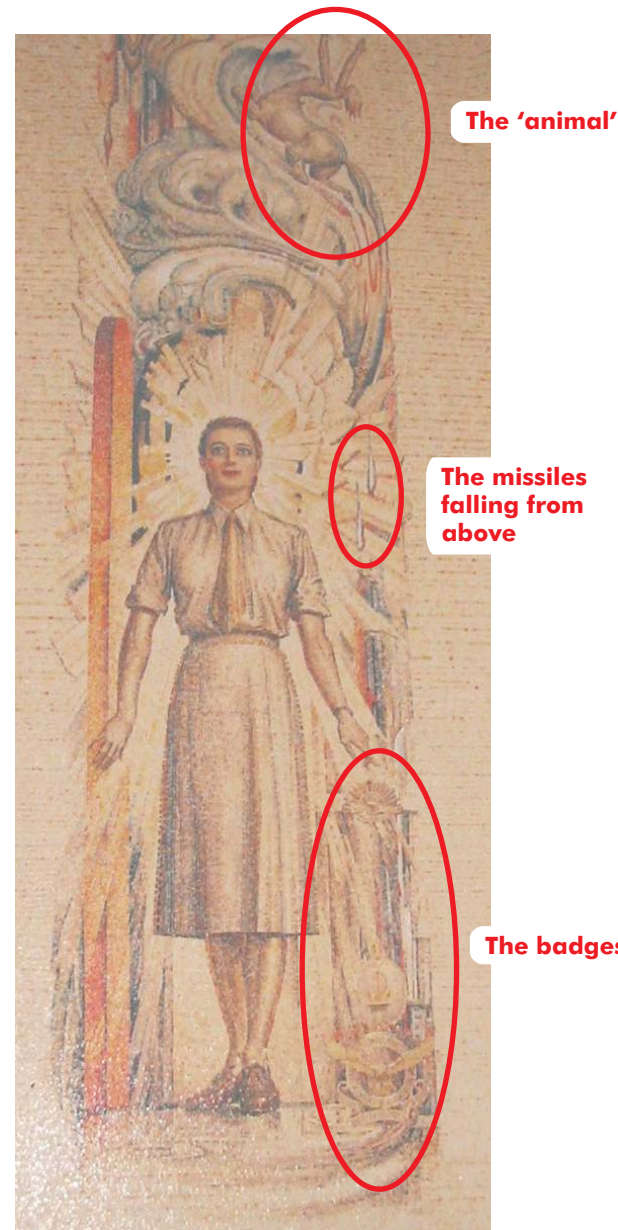
# How has the *Centaur* been commemorated over time?

There are many *Centaur* memorials around Australia, reflecting the fact that the men and women who died in the sinking came from all over the nation.

The *Centaur* features in one of the large memorial images in the Hall of Memory at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra—the Servicewoman, representing the women’s services.

**Q. 16** Examine the image opposite, and its description. Suggest what the elements listed in the table below might symbolise.

Element in the memorial	Symbolic meaning
The clothing worn by the servicewoman	
The badges	
The main figure	
The halo of winged light	
The 'animal'	
The missiles falling from above	



The 'animal'

The missiles falling from above

The badges

The figure is clothed in blouse and skirt, this part of the uniform being common to all the women’s services. The different branches of the services are included in the lower right hand part of the design. The figure has stepped forward from the open doorway, from which bursts a halo of winged light. She remembers the many sacrifices and disasters suffered by her sisters, one of which is the mythical sea-centaur monster, above the engulfing waves. Bombs fall from above.

AWM Encyclopedia [www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au)

The sinking of the Australian Hospital Ship *Centaur*... War crime, or legitimate target?

Investigation 8—How has the *Centaur* been commemorated over time?