

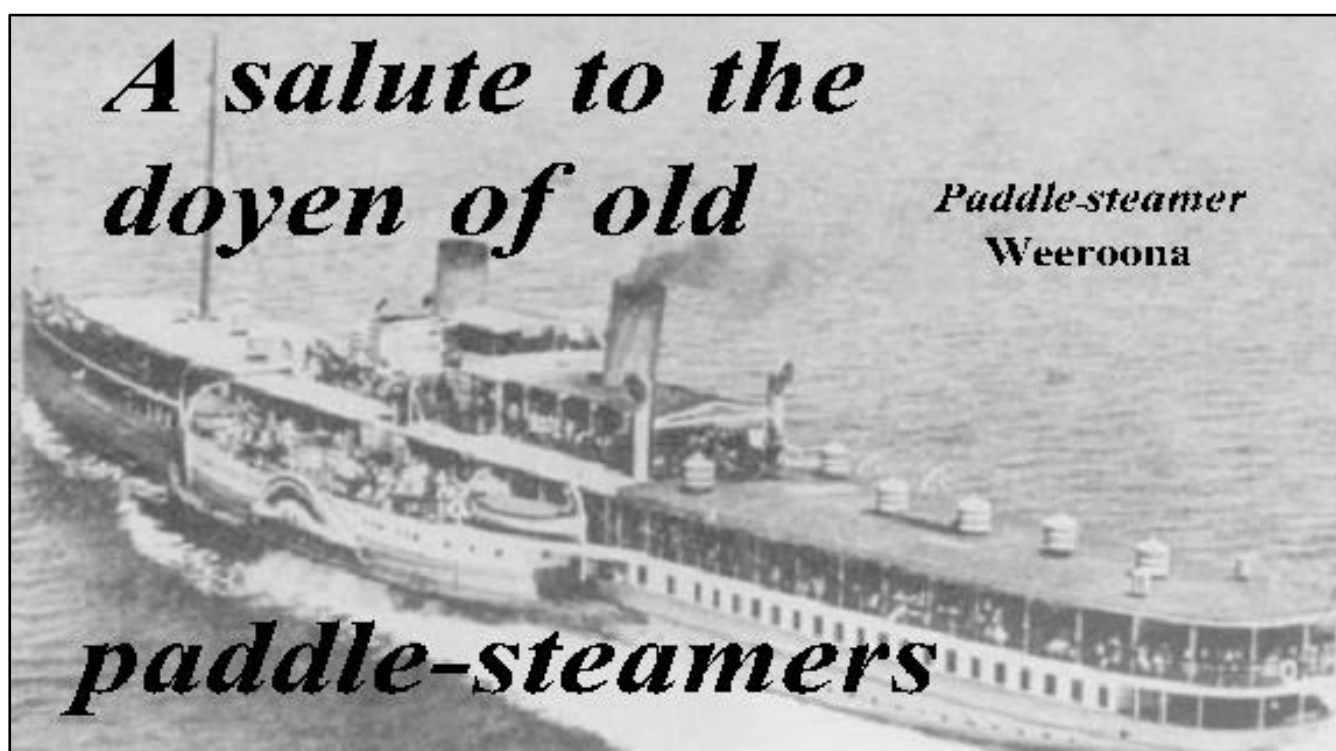
# CALL THE HANDS

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Recently the attention of the NHSA was drawn to the possibility of a paddle-steamer serving in the RAN. It appears that the closest was PS *Weeroona* built as a Port Phillip excursion steamer, originally considered as an RAN patrol vessel until wiser council prevailed, but taken over by the USN in 1942. She was used as a rest vessel around the New Guinea area and further North and brought back in 1945. This article by Max Thomson, an Honorary Life Member of the Naval Historical Society reprinted from the *Afloat* magazine July 2003 edition covers the life of *Weeroona*.



The story of what became of old *Weeroona* is a fascinating chapter in our maritime archives – especially our history of the old paddle-steamers. Built in the Scotland in 1910 for a subsidiary of the renowned Huddart Parker Company, *Weeroona* took something like 70 days on her delivery voyage from Glasgow out to Australia via the Suez Canal. Resplendent with spacious promenade decks, saloons, a most impressive lounge, dining rooms and even a hair-dressing salon, *Weeroona* was designed to carry 1,900 passengers. Becoming the doyen of Port Phillip's bay excursion steamers, *Weeroona* won widespread popularity catering for trade picnic excursions to Sorrento and Queenscliff.

With the allies at war against the Japanese following Pearl Harbour, *Weeroona* was acquired by the United States Navy early in 1942 with plans to refit the paddle-steamer for use 'up north' as a convalescence and accommodation ship. Leaving her happy bay-tripper days in Melbourne about August 1943, the venerable paddle-steamer *Weeroona* splashed and paddled her way to Sydney destined never to return to her happy day-tripper excursion days in Port Phillip Bay. Under tow, she

then proceeded to Brisbane and on to New Guinea.

When General Douglas MacArthur fulfilled his renowned “I Shall Return” promise and invaded the Philippines, there came the need to shift an immense amount of the paraphernalia of war from his forward headquarters at Hollandia, to Leyte Gulf. *Weeroona* became part and parcel of a conglomeration of vessels which came to be regarded as the queerest convoy ever to traverse the wartime Pacific. Eight columns wide, the big echelon of vessels was made up of ocean going tugs most of which had, strung on astern under tow, two or even three units so many of which comprised massive pontoons onto which big petroleum and other bulk storage tanks had been built, floating docks big and small, fuel tankers some of which had been built of concrete; plus a wide assortment of lighters and small craft. When another echelon of vessels assembled at Biak joined the convoy off Hollandia it made up a total of 96 units in the convoy – with an escort screen around them that consisted of the American destroyer escort USS *Crown* as Senior Officer of the Navy escort group; the US Patrol Cutters PC 610, PC 1241 and PC 3810, with the Australian frigate HMAS *Hawkesbury* guarding the stern of the convoy. The spread of units in the eight columns was so extensive that a Commodore of the Convoy commanded the echelon from the first ship in Column 5, with a rear Commodore away back in a vessel named *See Konk* at the rear of the echelon. Special vessels were included to refuel any units enroute and there even was a crashboat designed to speed in and out of the convoy columns for special assignments. Ever prominent was old *Weeroona*, with its sides all boarded-up for the passage to the Philippines – under tow from a big ocean-going tugboat. Four knots was signalled as the ‘speed of advance’ ... but rarely indeed was four knots ever to be achieved by the incredible accumulation of oddball vessels.

Calm weather prevailed for three days but then “All Hell!” broke loose. High winds and heavy seas pounded the convoy mercilessly. Towlines began to snap with monotonous regularity, leaving all sorts of oddball convoy units adrift. Renewing the towlines was hard enough by day, horrendous amid the darkness of night in the crashing seas. At one stage one of the large floating docks broke its tow line and wallowed helplessly. Amid great difficulties, HMAS *Hawkesbury* launched a seaboat and managed, after much difficulty, to put a crew aboard the floating dock to help renew the towline. Forever in the memory of the Australian frigate’s crew is the sight of the warship belting into heavy seas while towing the big floating dock until it could hand over the towline to an ocean-going tug. USS *Cronin* was obliged to sink with gunfire another unit of the convoy that had broken away and HMAS *Hawkesbury* used depth charges to ‘despatch’ a big pontoon made up of individual steel tanks that were breaking up and making it awkward for gun crews to sink individually. One of the small tankers was found to have its engine room flooded to add to the drama ... and on some of the big pontoons men, sheltered originally in tents to guard the towing cables, had to be rescued.

After 13 exhaustive days, USS *Cronin* broke radio silence just for a moment to alert Fleet Authorities at Leyte Gulf, in the Philippines – resulting in the American destroyer escort *Charles E. Davis* racing south to help plus two additional big heavy-tow tugboats. For its part, old *Weeroona* weathered the gales in fine style ... riding well at the end of its heavy steel towing cable and for the most part with the tug and *Weeroona* on correct station in the big echelon of vessels. *Weeroona*, still under tow amid that memorable convoy, won a place in history when it proudly saluted the massive fleet assembled in Leyte Gulf. It was as proud a moment of glory as the old paddle-steamer had ever enjoyed in her career of Port Phillip Bay excursions.

*Weeroona* eventually went on to Manila, serving there as an accommodation and convalescence ship for American servicemen. At war’s end, the valiant old paddle-steamer was towed all the way back to Sydney. She languished in the upper reaches of Sydney Harbour for five years. She was never to return to her happy excursion days in Port Phillip Bay, for the era of paddle-steamers and bay trippers had passed. *Weeroona* was broken up in 1951. Melbourne Museum holds a spectacular scale model of the venerable paddlesteamer and the Historical Museum at Queenscliff, in its museum, displays items of furniture from the ship along with other artifacts.