



Launch of “Master Mariner: The Story of Captain Harold  
Chesterman” (by David Jones and Peter Nunan)  
Queensland Maritime Museum  
Thursday 3 December 2009, 6pm

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**The Hon Paul de Jersey AC**  
**Chief Justice**

I was greatly privileged to accept the invitation of my friend and colleague, the Honourable Justice Richard Chesterman, that I launch his late father’s biography, *Master Mariner: the Story of Captain Harold Chesterman*; “launch” being I suppose a less than appropriate word for the biography of a commander of ships; but I am honoured and pleased to do so.

I should first congratulate the authors, David Jones and Peter Nunan. They have done an exemplary job. David and Peter are both members of the Queensland Maritime Museum Association. David has previously published two books: ‘The Whalers of Tangalooma’ and ‘Wings on the River’; Peter has published a book entitled ‘HMAS Diamantina’; together they have penned ‘Subs Down Under 1942-1945’; and both have published various papers and articles on maritime subjects. I venture that Captain Harold Geeves Chesterman, MBE, DSC and Bar, RD, RNR would have considered it an honour for his story to be told (especially by two accomplished maritime historians), and he would certainly have had much praise for David and Peter’s hard work.

This is a story of quite extraordinary courage and achievement. It spans the period 1917 to 1997. When at the age of 36 I joined the Supreme Court in 1985, I joined considerably older men many of whom had rendered distinguished service in the second world war.



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Reading *Master Mariner* brought back the feeling of inadequacy I felt in 1985, and also feelings of awe and deep respect.

I must confess that before reading *Master Mariner*, I did not fully realize the utter dedication and drive of Harold Chesterman. Really accomplished and highly achieving people and their families tend not to speak about such things during their lifetimes. Captain Harold Chesterman was a born leader, a man who would inevitably succeed at whatever he put his mind to, and from an early age it was clear that he was destined for a life at sea.

In his early schooling years Harold was an excellent sportsman and an able student. Reading about that time in his life, I was struck by an auspicious quote from Harold's headmaster, Mr Marsden, upon completion of his final year at Malvern Church of England Grammar School. He said of Harold:

"He is truthful, courageous, and possesses a high sense of honour. He is a manly boy, thoroughly trustworthy, and a scholar in whom we place every confidence."

The Headmaster thereby revealed considerable insight, for those traits: truthfulness, courage and honour, were essential elements of the character which sustained Harold Chesterman throughout an arduous and often perilous career at sea.

I was fascinated to learn, that at just 14 years of age, Harold travelled with his father to Brisbane, to board the *SS Northumberland*, alone, bound for London where he was to join the Thames Nautical Training College and his training ship the *HMS Worcester*. I



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remember when I was 14, making the transition from Ithaca Creek State School to Churchie, which I found rather daunting. I cannot begin to imagine the strength of character required to not only travel, but work one's passage as a deck hand, on a voyage from one end of the world to the other, let alone at such a young age.

On board the *Worcester* Harold distinguished himself. He excelled as a sportsman: becoming captain of swimming; a member of the cricket, rugby, boxing and athletics teams; but most notably, being a member of the winning rowing crew in the annual six-oared whaler race between the *Worcester* and *Conway* training ships. Harold also shone academically being awarded two First Class grades, an award which would allow him to sit his Second Mate's examination after only three years at sea instead of the usual four.

He subsequently went on to take an apprenticeship with the Port Line shipping company, which involved a rigorous three year training program incorporating practical experience working on deck and two hours of study daily. Tough as it was, the apprenticeship gave Harold first class practical training, in particular what was widely regarded as the best navigation training available to an apprentice. From there he advanced to the Royal Navy Reserve, where he trained aboard the HMS *Nelson*, one of Britain's largest battleships, the *L27* submarine (which firmly put him off any ambition he may have had of becoming a submariner), the HMS *Vernon* for torpedo school and the HMS *Excellent*, completing training in various areas of seamanship and weaponry by the age of 19; and, at age 20, he sat for and passed his second mate examination. He was one of only two candidates who passed in this instance.



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Looking back at that rapid acceleration through his training over 6 years from ages 14 to 20, one sees that Harold Chesterman was a man of high expectations compelling him to strive for and achieve great success.

Although not official, I was interested to learn of his claim to be the first Australian to see action in WWII, while an officer aboard the freighter *Port Caroline*. In Harold's own words:

*"On Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> September when Sparks, the 4<sup>th</sup> mate and myself were finishing lunch a great hullabaloo arose on deck with firemen racing down the foredeck in life jackets, the passengers rushing in to ask what it was all about and the Old Man roaring first for Sparks and then for me. We both ambled out cursing gently but once clear of the passengers hurtled to the bridge. A U-boat was on the port quarter at periscope depth apparently foiled by our zig-zag. Sparks went off to send his alarm message and the Old Man turned the ship over to me with a cry of 'You're a naval man Chesterman, you take her.' I put the ship stern on. Meanwhile the Old Man called for extra watch below which resulted in much smoke but reduced speed from choked fires. Our passengers behaved admirably. Mrs Patterson sat in a deck chair near the boat knitting. Mrs Haynes sat nearby awaiting orders. We were late getting tea that night as the cook had one foot in the galley and one in the boat long after we were clear of danger. I still don't know if torpedo were fired but on the strength of this most defensive action I claim to be the first Australian in action in World War II."*

Typical of Harold Chesterman, this is nonchalant description of what could very well have been a major maritime disaster at the outset of WWII. You may be interested to hear that the *Port Caroline*, which was 480 feet long and weighed over 8000 tonnes, went on to survive WWII, being decommissioned in 1950.



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As with many of his generation, WWII was a defining time in Harold's life and, being an RNR officer, he was called up to serve in the navy. He spent the bulk of his time on Royal Navy corvettes escorting convoys in the treacherous waters of the Atlantic. These were extraordinarily demanding and dangerous times. He was a valiant and resilient seaman, being sunk not once, but twice by U-Boats, cheating death on both occasions. He was also the youngest captain of a major warship in the Royal Navy, taking command of the corvette HMS *Snowflake*, at the age of only 25. During the war, Harold Chesterman was involved in many battles with U-Boats including a 10 day attack by a 40 U-Boat contingent while escorting the convoy ONS5. There were heavy losses, with 13 ships sunk, but nevertheless emerging victorious from a clash which proved to be the turning point, in favour of the allies, in the battle of the Atlantic.

Commander Peter Gretton, Harold's friend and the man who led convoy ONS5, recommend Harold for the Distinguished Service Cross. He observed:

*"This officer commands HMS Snowflake which was outstandingly efficient during the successful defence of convoys HX231, ONS5, and SC130. During ONS5 HMS Snowflake attacked twelve separate submarines certainly destroying one, and, during SC130, Snowflake detached and counterattacked a submarine attempting to penetrate the screen, thereby preventing an attack on the convoy, and facilitating its subsequent destruction by the HMS Duncan. This officer is outstanding in every way, displaying dash and initiative."*

By the end of the war, and this is truly remarkable, Harold had been decorated 3 times; he had been 1<sup>st</sup> lieutenant on 2 armed trawlers, and 3 corvettes; and he had captained two corvettes, two frigates and a destroyer: all of this accomplished by the age of only 29.



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Post-war Harold and his family returned to Australia, where he went on to serve a long and distinguished career – three decades – with the Commonwealth Lighthouse Service captaining the tender establishing, supplying and maintaining the lights along what our authors term "the reef-girt and dangerous Queensland coast." He captained the steamer *Cape Leeuwin* and its successor *Cape Moreton*, his experiences including entertaining State Governors and, of course, his family.

Following his retirement in the early 80s he maintained his passion for the sea providing expert consultancy services. My colleague Justice George Fryberg recalls his evidence in admiralty cases in court, not only expertly based, but with a practical orientation borne of enormous experience.

During his life Harold Chesterman worked on 38 different ships, captaining nine over a period of 46 years. He was a man of integrity and, echoing the words of his headmaster Mr Marsden, 'truthful, courageous and honourable'. And as our authors demonstrate, he was also a man of catholic tastes, urbane, and a devoted husband and father.

The authors were greatly assisted by Harold Chesterman's own contemporaneous and comprehensive writings, which themselves offer a fascinating entrée to the makeup of this heroic and accomplished man.

It is with great pleasure that I launch *Master Mariner: the story of Captain Harold Chesterman*, and in doing so I thank and congratulate the authors, David Jones and Peter Nunan, for their research and hard work. It is a fascinating account of a truly remarkable life.