A commemorative poster was produced for the centenary of the Royal Australian Navy. The poster features a central image of an unidentified Petty Officer who had served at least three years at sea during the First World War. This is surrounded by contemporary images honouring the role and contribution of the Royal Australian Navy in Australian wartime history and its strength as part of the Defence Force today. Images courtesy of the Sea Power Centre and the Department of Defence.

Background

The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) commemorated 100 years of service on 10 July this year. After Federation in 1901, Australia’s colonial forces combined to form the Commonwealth Naval Forces. At the same time ships of Britain’s Royal Navy Australian Squadron patrolled the waters to the country’s north, from the Netherlands East Indies (present day Indonesia) to China, as well as the seas and oceans surrounding Australia and New Zealand. In 1909, the Squadron was replaced by the Royal Navy’s Pacific Fleet, one unit of which was based in Australia. Two years later, in 1911, this unit became the Royal Australian Navy.

Even since 1911, the RAN has played an important role both in Australia’s defence and on offensive operations. In the First World War, ships of the RAN assisted with the capture of German colonies in the Pacific while an Australian submarine, the AE2, forced a passage through the dangerous waters of the Dardanelles at the opening of the Gallipoli campaign. The RAN also supported Allied naval forces during the Second World War. RAN ships transported troops, escorted merchant ships, carried out bombardments and provided support for Allied operations in the Mediterranean, the North Sea and the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

During the Vietnam War, the RAN carried troops and provided gunfire support against enemy targets on land. Naval divers also removed underwater mines and obstacles from rivers and coastal waters. In addition, the RAN supplied helicopter crews to assist Allied land-based operations. Today, members of the RAN are serving on operations in Afghanistan, the Sudan, the Middle East (both ashore and at sea) and East Timor, as well as protecting Australia’s borders.

Over the past century, Australian naval personnel have served with great courage and dedication. One notable example is Ordinary Seaman Edward ‘Teddy’ Sheean, a crewman on HMAS Armidale when sunk by Japanese aircraft in December 1942. As HMAS Armidale went under, survivors in the water watched as Sheean, bleeding from his wounds, strapped himself to an Oerlikon gun and kept firing at the enemy until he and Armidale disappeared beneath the Timor Sea. Sheean is the only Ordinary Seaman to have had an Australian naval vessel named in his honour.

Websites and References

Publications

- Australians in World War I: Royal Australian Navy, Department of Veterans’ Affairs, 2010

Websites

Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA)

Royal Australian Navy (RAN)
- www.navy.gov.au/The_Fleet .................................................. The RAN Fleet

Australian War Memorial (AWM)
- cas.awm.gov.au/screen_img/ART28160 ............................. Painting of Teddy Sheean

Teaching Activities
1. Some of the duties members of the RAN might perform on board a vessel are Stations and Watches.
   (a) What do these two duties involve?
   (b) Why is it important for RAN members to perform these duties properly?

2. In addition to their seamanship training, crew aboard RAN vessels can take up a trade or ‘rate’, in a variety of areas.
   Using the information on the AWM website, answer the following questions:
   (a) Choose two rates and explain what the jobs involve?
   (b) Focusing on the two rates you have just described, why is it important that seamen are trained in these areas?

3. Like the Australian Army and the Royal Australian Air Force, the members of the RAN are assigned special ranks.
   Working in groups, use the information from the AWM website and RAN website to answer the following questions:
   (a) List the different ranks within the RAN from highest ranking to lowest.
   (b) Examine the navy crew pictured in white uniforms on the 2011 Remembrance Day poster.
       What rank do you think they might be? Why do you say this?

4. Examine the Navy Fleet on the RAN website. In groups, design a poster which features the different ships, weapons, submarines and aircraft which make up the Fleet. Make sure you provide captions to each image.

5. As mentioned in the background information, Australian naval clearance divers were involved in operations during the Vietnam War. On the Australia and the Vietnam War website, read about the challenges clearance divers faced. What do you think would be the most dangerous task? Why?

6. In the 2011 Remembrance Day poster you can see women, as well as men, undertaking naval duties. Women now have the opportunity to work in all Navy positions including combat-related roles. Read about women in the Navy on the AWM website and watch the video on the RAN website. How has the role of women in the Navy changed since the Second World War?

7. Using the RAN website, read about one of the operations the RAN is currently involved in.
   (a) What is the name of the operation and where is it being undertaken?
       Print out a map and indicate the location of the operation.
   (b) What is the role of the RAN there?

8. Examine the painting of Teddy Sheean (ART28160) on the AWM website and answer the following questions:
   (a) What do you think is happening in this picture?
   (b) What is the artist trying to tell us about Teddy Sheean and the event?
   (c) What, in the image, tells you this?

9. Read more about Teddy Sheean on the AWM website. For his actions he was Mentioned in Dispatches. In the Second World War, a member of the Defence Force could be Mentioned in Dispatches if a senior officer considered their action to be gallant. Do you agree that Teddy deserved to be Mentioned in Dispatches? Why?