

Victorian Heritage Database Report

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S.S. CAMBRIDGE



S101 SSCambridge
BassStrait HistoricView
dateunknown

Location

Bass Strait, 3.7nm SE of Wilsons Promontory

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S101

Date lost

07/11/1940

Official number

71571

Construction material

Steel

Hull

Poop, 67'; Bridge, 140', Fore, 45' Water ballast, cellular double bottom 482' long 2198 tons Forepeak tank 129 tons, aftpeak tank 121 tons. 9 bulkheads Partly cemented

Propulsion

Steam - Screw

Engine specification

2 triple expansion steam engines, 6 cylinders 28 1/8", 45 1/2" & 74" by 51 1/4" stroke, 1106NHP, 200lb boilers, 6 single faced boilers, 18 corrugated furnaces, Grate surface 348 square feet, heating surface 1525 square feet, wireless, electric light,

Length/Breadth/Depth

524.50 Feet / 65.70 Feet / 37.30 Feet

Builder

J. C. Tecklenborg AG

Year of construction

1916

Built port

Wesermunde

Built country

Germany

Registration Port

London

Date lost

07/11/1940

Departure

Cardiff, United Kingdom

Destination

Brisbane, QLD via Sydney

Cargo

General & tinplate

Owner

Federal Steam Navigation Company Ltd (1922-40)

Master

Captain A.J. Paddy Angell

Cause of loss

Warfare - struck German mine

Number of crew

58

Crew comments

58 including Captain

Statement of significance

The wreck of the SS Cambridge is historically significant as the first Allied vessel to be lost in Australian waters in World War II. Along with the wrecks of the MS City of Rayville (1940), HMAS Goorangai (1940) and SS Iron Crown (1942) the Cambridge represents the arrival of World War II in Australian waters, the strategic importance of the Bass Strait shipping lane, and the extent of Axis activities in the Southern hemisphere.

VHR history

On 15 June 1940 a Nazi raider named the Pinguin embarked on a mission to capture and destroy as many allied merchant ships as possible. Between June 1940 and May 1941 the Pinguin's Captain Kruder was responsible for one of the most successful operations by any German raider in World War II (Boyle: 112). Travelling from Norway to the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans - and Bass Strait - before being sunk with most of its crew by the HMS Cornwall on 7 May 1941, the Pinguin sank twelve ships and captured sixteen as war prizes. The mines laid in Australian waters by the Pinguin and one of its prizes the Storstad (renamed Passat) sank an additional four ships and damaged another. The Norwegian tanker Storstad was captured by the Pinguin on October 7 1940 in the Sunda Straits, and taking the crew prisoner Kruder converted it to an auxiliary minelayer. It was to be an important part of Kruder's plan - for both vessels to work in concert laying minefields around the Australian coast to inflict a maximum amount of damage, before the authorities would be alerted to the existence of multiple minefields - a water borne blitzkrieg. Between 29 and 31 October 1940 the Passat proceeded to lay 60 mines off the north east coast of Tasmania, 10 mines off Wilsons Promontory, and 40 mines off Cape Otway, travelling west through Bass Strait in broad daylight. The narrow and busy sea lanes between Cape Otway and King Island, and between the islands off Wilsons Promontory were targeted as the areas most likely to maximise the destructive potential of the mines. Ironically originally built in Germany as the SS Vogtland, following German capitulation in World War I the vessel was seized as a war reparation and its name changed to SS Cambridge. It was under war charter to the British government when it struck a mine that had been laid off Wilsons Promontory by the Passat. Although one crew member was killed, the other 57 were rescued. At about 11pm on Thursday November 7 as the Cambridge headed east past Wilsons Promontory a sudden explosion occurred and the vessel started to sink by the stern. The explosion occurred in the after end of the ship. An attempt to send out a distress signal on the wireless failed because the dynamos had been damaged in the explosion. The emergency wireless set was used to send distress signals. As the ship was settling quickly the crew were mustered and ordered to abandon ship, and three lifeboats were launched. Captain Angell later described the Cambridge as it "sank under the waves and disappeared leaving only a great spout of water and steam rising into the sky, then settling down into a bubbling patch of sea" with only two lifeboats surfacing. The gear from the lifeboats was salvaged but the boats themselves were abandoned because the sea was too rough to take them in tow. The crew then spent an anxious night floating around in a minefield - they knew land was not far away as they could see the South East Point lighthouse, but were additionally worried about drifting further out to sea. However they were picked up in the morning by the minesweeper HMAS Orara, and taken ashore at Port Welshpool. Bass Strait was closed to shipping and the HMAS Orara and another minesweeper the HMAS Durraween commenced sweeping off the Promontory on 9 November, and eventually 43 mines from the Bass Strait fields were detonated or rendered safe after being washed ashore. The wreck of the Cambridge was located on 21 May 1988 by the Mick Bridle on the National Safety Council vessel M.V. Blue Nabila using side scan sonar. It lies upright on a sandy bottom in 67 metres depth, in an intact condition. It was especially declared as an historic shipwreck under the Commonwealth Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976 in 1989.