

Victorian Heritage Database Report

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M.V. CITY OF RAYVILLE

Location

Bass Strait, off Cape Otway

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

S126

Date lost

08/11/1940

Official number

220677

Construction material

Steel

Hull

Converted to diesel in 1927. Poop 34' bridge 118' forecastle deck 38'. Water ballast, gyro compass submarine signalling device two decks, longitudinal framing.

Propulsion

Motor

Engine specification

Oil engines, 2 stroke single acting 6 cylinder 30" x 52" 938 Nominal Horsepower, new engines 1927 by Bulch Sulzer Diesel Engine Co., St Louis, Missouri

Engine builder

Bulch Sulzer Diesel Engine Co., St Louis, Missouri

Length/Breadth/Depth

401.90 Feet / 54.20 Feet / 31.30 Feet

Builder

Oscar Daniels Co.

Year of construction

1920

Built port

Tampa, Florida

Built country

USA

Date lost

08/11/1940

Departure

Port Pirie, SA

Destination

New York

Cargo

1500 tons of lead, near capacity with wool and copper

Owner

International Mercantile Marine Company, New York, American Pioneer Line, under charter to United States Maritime Commission (US Government owned). Operated by Roosevelt Steamship Company Ltd.
abcdefghijklmnop

Master

Capt. Cronin

Weather conditions

Heavy seas, strong northerly wind

Cause of loss

Struck a German mine

Crew comments

Second Officer Green
Radio Operator Fred A. Gritzer
Engineer H.S Brooks
3rd Assistant Engineer Brooks

Statement of significance

The City of Rayville has international historical significance as the first US vessel lost in World War II, and is one of four World War II wrecks in Victoria. It represents the strategic importance of Bass Strait as an international shipping lane and of the importance of Australia's raw materials to the Allied war effort. It is socially significant as the wreck and rescue of the crew by Apollo Bay fishermen is still remembered and commemorated by the Apollo Bay community, by members and relatives of the City of Rayville's crew, and by members of the American Merchant Marine.

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. Renaming it the Passat 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. Meanwhile the American motor ship City of Rayville, a unit of the American Pioneer Line, had finished loading its cargo of lead at Port Pirie and had stopped at Adelaide to load more cargo. The City of Rayville's Captain Cronin was proceeding to Melbourne and then to New York. At 7.47pm on 8 November 1940 as the City of Rayville entered the waters of Bass Strait, stars and stripes painted on both sides of its hull, it hit one of the Passat's mines. The Cape Otway lighthouse keeper reported a shot of flame, and Apollo Bay locals playing billiards heard a loud explosion. The crew reported water and planks and hatch covers raining down on the superstructure of the vessel, and ingots from the cargo of lead in the forepart of the vessel were also thrown onto the superstructure. The force of the explosion tore out the foremast. Captain Cronin ordered radio operator Fred A Gritzer to send out an S.O.S. with the ship's position. The lifeboats were swung out and launched within four minutes, and 37 of the 38 crew were able to depart the ship, which already had its stern in the air. The mine had struck forward between number 1 and 2 holds, and within 15 minutes the bridge was awash - it was to sink completely within the next 25 minutes. One of the engineers was to pay with his life for an ill-timed visit to his locker to retrieve his belongings, the only other casualties were two crewmen who received shoulder and leg injuries and a rib fracture, and the ship's mascot was killed - a 'wild black cat' picked up previously in Melbourne. Captain Cronin ordered the men in the lifeboat to keep a sharp look-out for mines, while unbeknown to him the Apollo Bay rescue fleet departed the port at 8.15pm. It was a brave mission for the Apollo Bay fishermen, who in darkness and in the face of a biting and brisk north-easterly wind, would attempt to locate any survivors in the choppy waters. The first lifeboat was sighted at 10.20pm, and eventually all the crew and rescuers returned safely to Apollo Bay and put up for the night in the Ballarat Hotel. The City of Rayville was the USA's first casualty of World War II, although the USA did not enter the war until over a year later after Pearl Harbour was attacked by the Japanese on 7 December 1941. The sinking of the City of Rayville followed that of the British cargo ship SS Cambridge less than 24 hours before, which also sank with the loss of one life after striking a mine in the Wilsons Promontory minefield laid by the Passat. Bass Strait was closed to shipping until further notice and a mine sweeping flotilla was ordered to clear the area. Rumours of Fifth Columnists working on fishing boats to help set the mines were denied by Mr Hughes, Minister of the Navy. The effect on Apollo Bay was described as "a bit like a Collingwood premiership...all the sheilas were hanging around too. Not that there was a lot to hang around for because they were pretty old blokes, just ordinary merchant seaman" (Les Barrands, one of the Apollo Bay fishermen rescuers quoted in The Age, 8/11/1990). The crew were later entertained by the Governor Sir Winston Dugan, while US Secretary of State Cordell Hull wrote individual letters of thanks to all the rescuers. Following the sinkings of the SS Cambridge and City of Rayville the sinking of the Royal Australian Navy's minesweeper HMAS Goorangai with the loss of all 24 crew on 12 November 1940 was a tragic sequel in the chain of events. HMAS Goorangai was ordered to salvage floating debris from the City of Rayville and sweep for mines in the area and approaches to Port Phillip Bay. Sunk in a collision by the Duntroon during a

brown out in Port Phillip Bay HMAS Goorangai was the RAN's first surface vessel lost with all hands, and the first RAN vessel lost in World War II. Yet another wreck in this chain of events was the running ashore of interstate cargo and passenger steamer SS Orungal at Barwon Heads on 20 November 1940 during a brown-out of coastal lights in squally weather. Following the war the lead cargo was purchased by London based salvage company Risdon Beazley Ltd, and attempts since the 1950s to locate and salvage the wreck have so far eluded a number of partnerships and companies. After years of searches for the site in August 1997 a large steel wreck believed to be the City of Rayville was verbally reported to Heritage Victoria to have been found in the shipping lane off Cape Otway by technical diver Barrie Heard. Apollo Bay cray fisherman Harry Ferrier reported a large steel wreck in the same position to Heritage Victoria in January 1999. The site lies in 82 metres depth on a sand bottom, in the shipping lane with the bow facing east. Markings on plates recovered from the wreck have the initials IMMC and Buffalo Pottery. Buffalo Pottery produced crockery for commercial clients including the US armed forces, steamship and railway companies, and the International Mercantile Marine Company (IMMC). The IMMC owned the American Pioneer Line which operated the City of Rayville on a passenger and freight service to Australia (via the Panama Canal). Among the IMMC's other interests were the White Star Line which it took over in 1902, and it was therefore the owner of the RMS Titanic when it sank in 1912.