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## Surgeon Lieutenant Mervyn Clive Townsend & HMAS Sydney

The recent discovery of HMAS Sydney has reminded many of us of the tragic loss of life on board that vessel when it sank on 20th November 1941. Included in the numbers lost was Surgeon Lieutenant (Dentist) Mervyn Clive Townsend.

Mervyn Clive Townsend was born in Bairnsdale on 5th February 1917. His father Edward Townsend was an early headmaster at Bairnsdale High School from 1916-1929. The family moved to Bendigo in 1930 and Mervyn attended Bendigo High School until 1933 where his father was headmaster. In 1934 he attended Melbourne High School for a final year before enrolling as a student in the Faculty of Dental Science at The University of Melbourne.

He was a high achieving student, graduating with a Bachelor of Dental Science in Sept 1939, just as World War II was declared.

Mervyn worked as a locum in the Toorak practice of the late Max Casley before accepting a commission in the Royal Australian Navy on October 14 1940, joining HMAS Sydney as a dental officer on the ship's return from the Mediterranean in April 1941.

In November 1941 HMAS Sydney was on patrol off the north-west coast of Western Australia when it became engaged with the German raider HSK Kormoran. As a result of this action HMAS Sydney was sunk with the loss of all crew. Mervyn served on board the Sydney with his dental assistant, Sick Berth Attendant Stewart Thomas Laxton. Both men's names are included on a commemorative plaque in the Chapel at HMAS Cerebus which honours all members of the Dental Department to lose their lives during World War II.

As the first of five members of the Victorian Branch of the Australian Dental Association to lose their lives during World War II, the ADAVB established an annual prize in Lieutenant Townsend's honour: the Mervyn Townsend Memorial

Prize in Orthodontics. This prize is awarded annually to the student in the Bachelor of Dental Science course at The University of Melbourne who attains the highest academic achievement in orthodontics in final year. The award is presented to the student at a ceremony conducted by the ADAVB and attended by staff from the School of Dental Science.

Mervyn Townsend was the younger brother of Professor Sir Lance Townsend, who held the Chair of Gynaecology and Obstetrics at the The University of Melbourne from 1951-1977. Professor Townsend was appointed the University's first Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in 1951 and was knighted for his services to Obstetrics and Gynaecology in 1971. From 1971 to 1977 he was also Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and in 1978 he was appointed Assistant Vice-Chancellor of the University.

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**Pictured Top :**  
Dental Follies. c.1937. While Mervyn was a high-achieving student, he also took time off for fun. Mervyn Townsend pictured (far right) hearing the ordinal "6th". Photograph from the Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum.



## A Word From the Head

The School of Dental Science has increased student numbers in the Bachelor of Oral Health (BOH) and Bachelor of Dental Science (BDSc) courses at the request of the Department of Human Services and the Australian Dental Association in an approach to address the dental workforce shortage in Victoria. The intake into BDSc and BOH in 2008 is 76 and 28 respectively.

### Expansion of Infrastructure

The space in the Royal Dental Hospital of Melbourne (RDHM) building at 720 Swanston Street is inadequate to accommodate the current School's activities. The School urgently requires additional space and infrastructure for the increased student numbers. The infrastructure required is student teaching and learning facilities, student laboratory space and staff and graduate student offices. The financial viability of the School depends on the expansion of student numbers and the School's infrastructure to cope with the increased student numbers.

### Teaching and Learning

The School is progressing in the development of a 4 year graduate-entry Doctor of Dental Surgery (DDS) degree to be introduced in 2011 as the BDSc is phased out from 2010. This professional course will involve advanced clinical training, be research-led, evidence based and international in focus, producing graduates who will become the leaders of their profession.

### Research and Research Training

The School of Dental Science is the major research provider in the CRC for Oral Health Science. Through the School the CRC for Oral Health Science employs 44 researchers and administrators who make a major contribution to research, research training and commercialisation activities of the School and University. The School now has a record number of students, including dentally qualified students, enrolled in a PhD with most engaged in a CRC research program. The School has support from all its industry partners to submit a re-bid to the CRC program in 2009 for a second round of funding and hence continue this outstanding contribution to research, research training and commercialisation at The University of Melbourne.

### Workforce Planning

The School is engaging in a detailed workforce plan in parallel with development of the DDS course. The advanced clinical training and greater contact hours will require an increase in academic staff to deliver the DDS. The School faces a number of challenges with its academic workforce, the most critical is the global shortage of dental academics which is exacerbated by the establishment of new dental schools at La Trobe University, Charles Sturt University, James Cook University and Griffith University. A significant challenge is to remain competitive with the new schools which have received substantial set up and ongoing funding from the Federal and State governments.

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Recent newspaper articles have linked the human remains found in an unmarked grave on Christmas Island with possible survivors of the Sydney. Brendon Nicholson in The Age on March 18, 2008, writes:

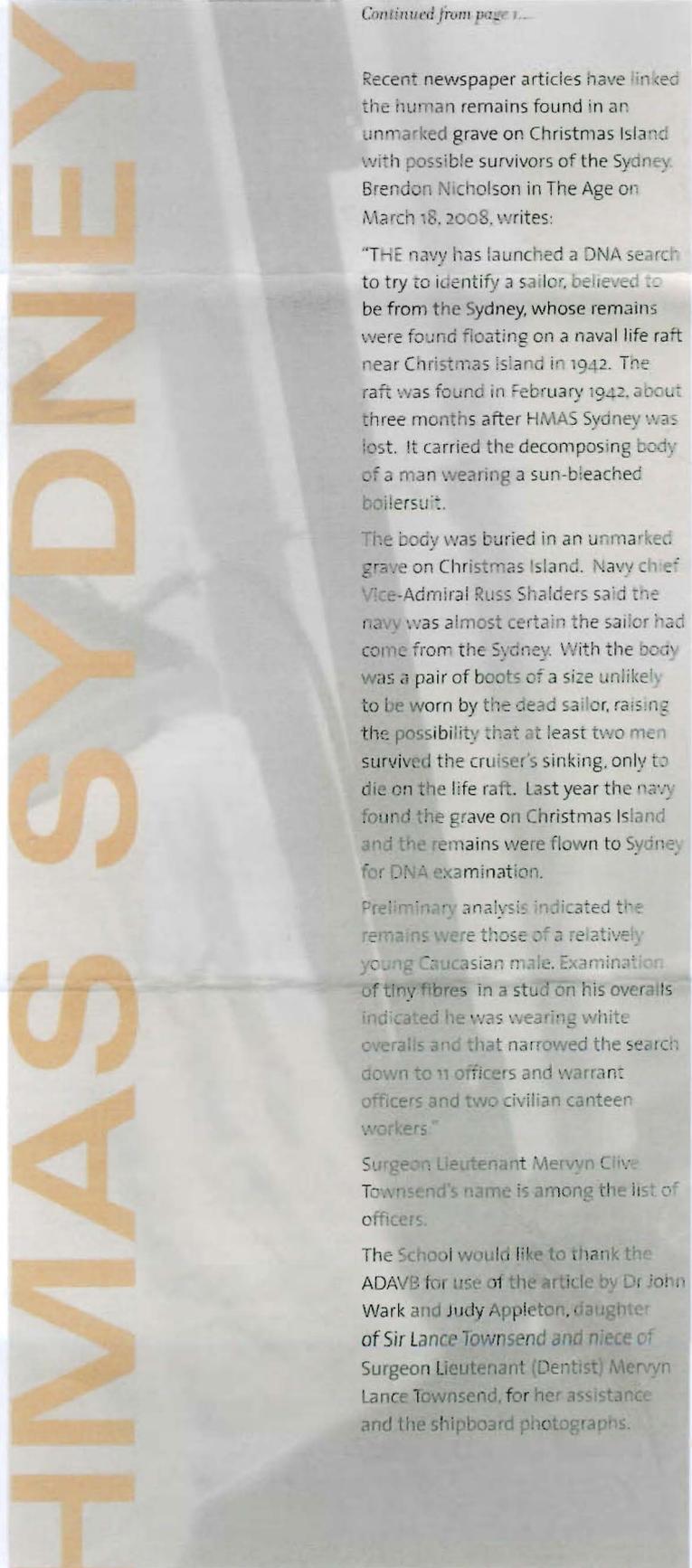
"THE navy has launched a DNA search to try to identify a sailor, believed to be from the Sydney, whose remains were found floating on a naval life raft near Christmas Island in 1942. The raft was found in February 1942, about three months after HMAS Sydney was lost. It carried the decomposing body of a man wearing a sun-bleached boilersuit.

The body was buried in an unmarked grave on Christmas Island. Navy chief Vice-Admiral Russ Shalders said the navy was almost certain the sailor had come from the Sydney. With the body was a pair of boots of a size unlikely to be worn by the dead sailor, raising the possibility that at least two men survived the cruiser's sinking, only to die on the life raft. Last year the navy found the grave on Christmas Island and the remains were flown to Sydney for DNA examination.

Preliminary analysis indicated the remains were those of a relatively young Caucasian male. Examination of tiny fibres in a stud on his overalls indicated he was wearing white overalls and that narrowed the search down to 11 officers and warrant officers and two civilian canteen workers."

Surgeon Lieutenant Mervyn Clive Townsend's name is among the list of officers.

The School would like to thank the ADAVB for use of the article by Dr John Wark and Judy Appleton, daughter of Sir Lance Townsend and niece of Surgeon Lieutenant (Dentist) Mervyn Lance Townsend, for her assistance and the shipboard photographs.



Pictured below:  
Surgeon Lieutenant Mervyn Clive  
Townsend on board the HMAS Sydney with  
his assistant c1941

Dental Surgery on board the HMAS Sydney  
c1941

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