

# Recognition at last for war-time hero

By COREY MARTIN

DICK Emms was a unique character, a war hero.

Unique for his incredible heroics during an enemy air raid on Darwin in World War II, and unique in a way for which individual soldiers are rarely singled out.

On Wednesday — Remembrance Day — a plaque to commemorate Leading Cook Francis Bassett Emms will be unveiled by his grandchildren, Adam Laws and Amanda Rawlin, at the Launceston Cenotaph.

The son of a 40th Battalion sergeant, Emms was born in Launceston in 1909 and grew up with his family in Charles Street — a family that produced three WWII soldiers — himself and his brothers, Harry and Phil.

Emms joined the RAN aged 18 in 1938 and was posted to Darwin in 1940 as a cook, however he is best known for his actions on February 19, 1942.

Emms, who had no gunnery responsibility, voluntarily manned a machine gun while seriously injured to defend HMAS Kara Kara against Japanese invaders, before eventually succumbing to his injuries.

Emms was awarded a posthumous mention in dispatches for his bravery but had his Victoria Cross consideration rejected.

Naval Association of Australia Launceston South Sub Section secretary Mike Turner, who organised the plaque, compared Emms' bravery with that of noted Ordinary Seaman Edward "Teddy" Sheean.

"Emms hasn't got the publicity of other war heroes ... he has been recognised in Victoria and Northern Territory but this is his first recognition in Tasmania," he said.

"The Launceston City Council has been most co-operative in helping us, even though their policy is not to have plaques for



A plaque to commemorate Leading Cook Francis 'Dick' Emms will be unveiled on Wednesday at the Launceston Cenotaph. Picture: SCOTT GELSTON

individuals, and the state RSL's policy has the same policy for the memorial wall behind the cenotaph.

"This is unprecedented."

Mrs Rawlin and Mr Laws, children of Emms' only daughter Rae, came from Sydney for the occasion and said it was a great honour.

"It is very special that he remembered for the sacrifices he made ... mum was 8½, nine, when he died and back then it was "get on with life and move on" and, even to this day, they are painful memories for her," Mrs Rawlin said.

Mr Laws added: "We talk about him a little bit

between ourselves and our children."

Launceston RSL will hold a service at the city's cenotaph at Royal Park from 10.40am before hosting a barbecue at its Wellington Street base.

For more information on local Remembrance Day services, visit [www.rsltas.org.au](http://www.rsltas.org.au)

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## OPINION

By GUY BA

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# at last hero

## Plaque a fitting honour for man killed while defending his mates

### OPINION

By GUY BARNETT

WEDNESDAY'S unveiling of a plaque near Launceston's Cenotaph in memory of Francis Bassett (Dick) Emms is fitting recognition for one of Tasmania's largely unsung World War II heroes.

Dick Emms' exploits remind me of the Stephen Seagal movie *Under Siege* where the cook takes matters into his own hands to save his crew.

In fact, the bravery of Dick Emms led to him being identified as a candidate for the Victoria Cross award by the Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal in 2011 for his bravery during the Japanese attack on Darwin in World War II.

I spoke in support of positive consideration of upgrading his award "mentioned in dispatches" at the inquiry in Launceston.

A multimillion-dollar Defence Force-built accommodation tower in Darwin has been named in honour of his bravery.

The Victoria Cross, awarded in the British Empire since 1856, is our nation's highest wartime honour for valour.

Dick Emms was born in Launceston and joined the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) in 1928.

He trained as an Ordinary Seaman at HMAS Cerberus, and was promoted to Able Seaman in January 1930 and later qualified in a combat role as a gunner.

During 1935 he travelled to the United Kingdom to become one of the founding crew of HMAS Sydney (II).

Dick Emms loved the navy so in 1936, due to failing eyesight, he retrained as a cook.

He was serving on the HMAS Kara Kara when the Japanese first bombed Darwin on February 19, 1942.

The Kara Kara was at the entrance to Darwin harbour defending the port from Japanese submarines and other enemy navy.

More than 242 aircraft bombed Darwin on that first day, against little resistance.

The aircraft were launched from the same carrier force which had been responsible for the attack on Pearl Harbour, now stationed in the Timor Sea. During the attack Dick Emms, rather than taking cover, resumed a combat role, obtained a machine gun and shot at the enemy aircraft in



defence of his mates, his ship and his country.

Although he was hit by machine gun fire he continued to fire his gun throughout the waves of aerial bombardment.

Sadly he was mortally wounded and gave his mates a 'thumbs up' as he was carried away on a stretcher to the hospital ship HMAS Manunda where he died from his wounds later that day.

He was one of the more than 235 who died in the attack.

In recommending him for a posthumous Mention in Dispatches his commanding officer Lieutenant Commander Alexander Fowler wrote: "For courage and devotion to duty in action. Whilst seriously wounded he continued to fire his machine gun on HMAS Kara Kara during a continuous machine gun attack by enemy aircraft thereby probably saving the ship and many of the ship's company."

The bombing of Darwin by the Japanese began on February 19, 1942, and from that time until November 12, 1943, there were a total of 64 air raids on Darwin.

Australia lost eight ships in Darwin Harbour with 15 damaged, and two merchant ships were sunk near Bathurst Island, just North of Darwin.

The wharf was badly damaged and the police station, police barracks, post office and administrator's office were all destroyed.

The Japanese surprise and comprehensive bombing of Darwin were suppressed by authorities to control panic.

Among those details was the story of Dick Emms.

It is time to reveal all the facts and the stories. Special thanks to the Naval Association of Australia (Launceston south sub-branch) for erecting the plaque.

Dick Emms was married to Sylvia and had a daughter named Helen, who was aged eight at the time of his death.

**Guy Barnett is the Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier, including Veterans' Affairs.**



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1. Picture: SCOTT GELSTON

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