

MATTHEWS, Peter Harold (23494 RAN)



Name	MATTHEWS, Peter Harold Signalman RAN
Service Number	23494
Date of Birth	28th January 1920
Died	22nd October 1989
Place of Birth	Adelaide SA
Resident	Victor Harbor SA
Cemetery	Victor Harbor Cemetery SA

Image 1 © Chris Matthews collection 2020
Studio portrait taken in late 1939, early 1940.

Peter Harold Matthews was born on 28 January 1920 in Adelaide to William Harold and Dorothy Matthews (nee Byrnes). He was the fourth of their five children, who all served in the Australian armed forces during World War Two.

After completing his education at Victor Harbor High School, Peter worked as a butcher's assistant. He was active in the community; being a member of the Fire Brigade, Drum Major of the Municipal Band and played for the senior football team.

Peter enlisted in the Royal Australian Navy on 14 August 1939 for twelve years, completing recruit and communications training at HMAS Cerberus, Flinders Naval Depot in Victoria. After basic training and specialist training he was classed as an Ordinary Signalman and joined the cruiser HMAS Perth in Sydney on 4 May 1940. The next day the HMAS Perth set sail escorting RMS Queen Mary carrying Australian soldiers. On 20 October 1940, Peter was promoted to Signalman while the Perth patrolled Australian waters until late November 1940. The ship escorted a convoy to Aden then reached Alexandria in Egypt after passing through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean in late December 1940.

During the ensuing five months, HMAS Perth was damaged by a near bomb miss in Malta; later it ferried troops to Greece and Crete. The ship evacuated soldiers from Crete where the ship narrowly missed being hit by another bomb. It was however, hit by a German bomb on another trip, causing casualties. HMAS Perth spent most of June being repaired at Alexandria.

In July 1941, Perth bombarded Vichy French positions in Syria as allied forces fought to capture Syria. Peter was transferred to the destroyer HMAS Stuart on 17 July 1941. Over the next five weeks this ship, often under attack by German aircraft, completed 12 ferry runs to Tobruk. After several days aboard the destroyer HMAS Vendetta he joined the newer destroyer HMAS Nizam on 28 August 1941.

During the remainder of 1941 Nizam undertook ferry runs to Tobruk, escorted convoys to Malta and rescued survivors from the British battleship Barham when it exploded after being torpedoed by a German submarine.

It was during Peter's service in the Mediterranean that he managed to souvenir the Battle Flag of Admiral Andrew Cunningham, the most senior naval officer in the Mediterranean during the Second World War. Post-war, Peter wrote the retired admiral, then 1st Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope, telling the retired admiral how he had come in possession of the flag. Viscount Cunningham acknowledged the transgression and wished Peter well for the future. Peter later donated the Flag to the Victor Harbor RSL.

During January 1942, Nizam, with sister ships Nestor and Napier, was sent to Singapore to join the British Eastern Fleet. Afterwards she was based in Ceylon as a convoy escort and as part of a battle group sweep across the Indian Ocean which unsuccessfully searched for Japanese ships.

In June 1942, Nizam was part of the escort of an important convoy to Malta. During September 1942, Nizam was part of the screen during the British operation to capture Madagascar from the Vichy French. The ship then underwent three months of refit at Simonstown, South Africa.

It appears Peter left Nizam at Mombasa in early 1943 to return to Australia. He remained at Adelaide's naval depot from 8 February to 1 July 1943. Service in the Melbourne naval depot, HMAS Lonsdale, followed before returning to Adelaide on leave on 10 March 1944. He would have been involved in communication duties at both depots. Further training followed at HMAS Cerberus where he passed the Visual Signalling qualification for Leading Signalman.

On 17 July 1944 he joined the frigate HMAS Barcoo. Barcoo was deployed escorting convoys around New Guinea and rescued two American fighter pilots from the sea in August, before spending September in Sydney for a short refit. November and December 1944 the Barcoo spent time at New Britain where the ship provided naval gunfire support to shore operations, before returning to Sydney for maintenance during February 1945.

Returning to New Guinea, Barcoo proceeded to Moratai, where Australian forces were assembling for the coming Borneo landings at Tarakan and Brunei. Barcoo fired her last shot of the war at Borneo on 3 August 1945. Thereafter the ship transported troops and former allied prisoners-of-war in the islands, while conducting surveillance patrols prior to returning to Australia in early February 1946.

Peter returned to Adelaide on 10 February 1946. After a fortnight in hospital, he received his release and discharge from the Royal Australian Navy on 28 February 1946, after paying 26 pounds to buy out the remainder of his unfinished twelve year engagement.

Being a Signalman, Peter was on duty near the ship's bridge while at sea. There he had the advantage of seeing much of what was happening around the ship, together with understanding the situation from the signals being sent and received.

After serving in five warships around the world, Peter returned to Victor Harbor and butchering.

He married Margaret (nee Leicester Smith), and they had children. Peter and Margaret were the principal developers of the Maude Street industrial area in Victor Harbor.

Peter died on 22 October 1989 and is interred in this Cemetery, General Section, Row 13, Lot 1317B.

Peter's siblings all served in uniform during the Second World War:

William Ashton Matthews (born 16 April 1912) served as SX25329 Warrant Officer Class One W.A. Matthews, enlisted in the 2nd AIF on 1 July 1942, demobilised on 14 May 1946.

John Miller Matthews (born 28 January 1914) served as 416357 Flight Lieutenant J.M. Matthews, enlisted in the RAAF on 24 May 1941, demobilised on 29 September 1945.

Yvonne Matthews (born 3 February 1916) served as N391900 Lieutenant Y. Matthews, enlisted in the Australian Army Nursing Service on 21 May 1942, demobilised on 31 October 1942.

Roy Hamilton Matthews (born 17 July 1922) served as SX28172 Corporal R.H. Matthews, enlisted on 26 January 1943, demobilised on 14 March 1946.

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Compiled by the Victor Harbor RSL History Research Team (researched by Lt-Commander Dean Watson, RAN retired), December 2020. Updated by T.Young 26/07/2025

Appendix



Image 2 © Chris Matthews collection 2020
 Peter (left) is shown with a fellow sailor and the bands around the caps indicates they are at HMAS Cerberus, Flinders Naval Station. This would indicate they are undergoing basic training so the date could be circa September 1939. From the Chris Matthews collection.



Image 3 © Chris Matthews collection 2020
 Peter is shown here aboard the HMAS Nizam with two soldiers just evacuated from Tobruk on 17 October 1941; the soldier on the right is SX5011 Alan Francis of Victor Harbour, the soldier on the left is only identified as "Laurie". Alan served with the 2/43rd Infantry Battalion. From the collection of Peter Francis.



Image 4 © Chris Matthews collection 2020
 Peter (left) is shown with two fellow sailors, the date and location is unknown. From the Chris Matthews collection.

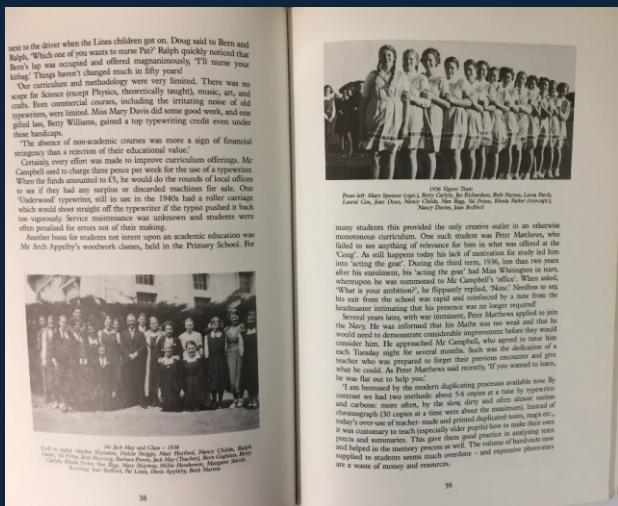


Image 5 © Chris Matthews collection 2020
 From the book *Fumes, Fleas, Fervour – Victor Harbour High School in the 30's*, by Peter Webb



Image 6 © rumbelow.net 2025

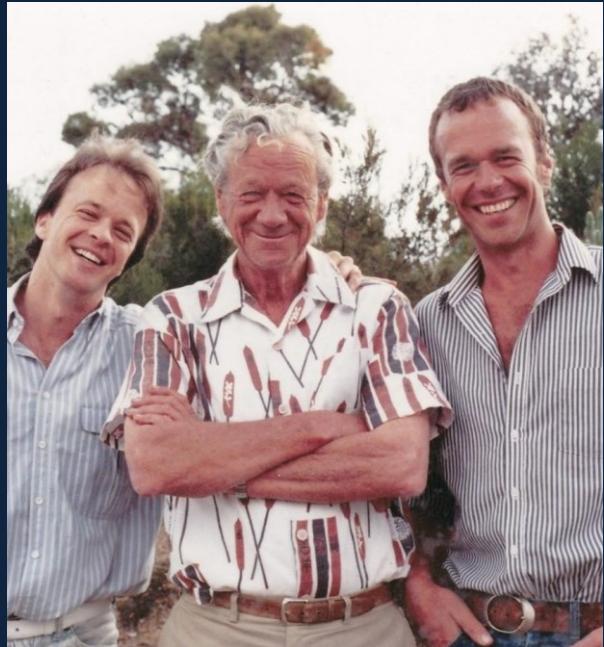


Image 7 © rumbelow.net 2025

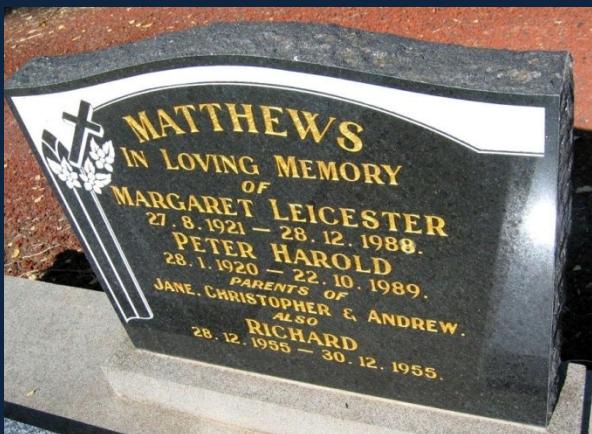


Image 8 © rumbelow.net 2025