

Captain William (Bill) Douglas Heighway
21st March 1920 – 25 July 1991
Member of the League

William Douglas Heighway, Head of the School of Navigation, NSW Department of Technical Education, from 1954 until his retirement in 1987, was a major figure in the development of navigation in Australia.

During this time, his influence was remarkable not only in its scope, covering both the maritime and aviation industries, but also in the period of his tenure.

This quarter of a century saw the most rapid and massive changes in growth and sophistication in history. In 1954, the principle method of navigation on sea, and in the air, was by astronomical observation, using sextant and chronometer. This system had undergone little change in the preceding 200 years.

Computers, satellites, Doppler radar and inertial systems were all unheard of at that time. But during the following 25 years, all of these, and many other technical advances, came in rapid succession. They called for major changes in curriculum, and for the introduction of new and often expensive instructional techniques, such as ship and aircraft simulators. These advances also called for a rapid expansion in the size of the school and for changes in its structure. In 1954 the staff consisted of two teachers and in 1978 this number had grown to 25, with courses operating statewide. This was the fastest rate of growth amongst all of the 24 schools in the Department.

Bill Heighway had a natural gift for teaching, combining a comprehensive knowledge of theory with a wide anecdotal ability, drawn from his diverse service practical experience. Bill went to sea as a Deck Cadet with Burns Philp in 1935, serving on some their legendary island traders including *Macdhui*, *Neptuna*, *Montoro* and *Tulagi*.

In 1940 he obtained his Second Mate's Certificate and, on the same day, the *Queen Mary* notified the Superintendent of Shipping that she required a junior Third Officer immediately. Bill seized the opportunity and quickly gathering his belongings, sailed the evening for Greenock. He was with Bissett and then Illingworth on *Queen Elizabeth* until April 1943, and lastly on the *Mauretania* until September 1943, when he was repatriated to Sydney.

During this eighteen month period, the Battle of the Atlantic was at its zenith. Admiral Doenitz could maintain over 100 U-Boats at sea, and ship losses moved to a climatic 7.8 million tons in 1942. In 1942-43, the Battle took place in the worst weather conditions for half a century, with four months of continuous gales, frequently hurricane force.

During this time Bill's ships sailed alone, zigzagging at high speed. Carrying as many as 10,000 troops.

On 2nd October 1942, *Queen Mary* met up with the cruiser *HMS Curacao*, sent to escort her through the Western Approaches. A collision occurred, and *Curacao* was sunk. Bill was relieving the junior officer of the watch for lunch when this happened.

When the war ended in 1945, Bill went to London to be a witness at the court case, which ensued. The case was heard in Admiralty by Mr Justice Pilcher, who said in his summing up: "Mr Heighway struck me as a very intelligent young man. He had obviously thought a good deal about the case and dealt satisfactory and apparently frankly with all the questions put to him. He was not shaken by cross examination. I was impressed with his evidence and attached very considerable weight to it." During this time, Bill took the opportunity to attend school for Masters and Extra Masters Certificates.

Returning to Sydney, he bought the Sydney Nautical School in September 1947 from Captain Bayldon. Bill ran the School for the next seven years, achieving an enviable record of first attempt passes at the Department of Shipping & Transport.

He was well-known for his generosity and kindness. There was not much money about in those days and some students turned up unable to pay even the very modest 18 guineas for the three months course. They would still be enrolled, but might be given some general cleaning duties in exchange for tuition.

In 1949, he was a foundation member of the Australian Institute of Navigation, becoming Executive Secretary (1955-56) and President (1961-62). He was made a Fellow in 1956, and was elected Honorary membership in 1978. He was also a member of Australian Company of Master Mariners.

Bill maintained an abiding interest in his students and he will be remembered by them with affection.

In the years since the Second World War, Australia has enjoyed a remarkable safety record in the operation of ships and aircraft. This is in part the legacy of William Douglas Heighway.

By John Brace

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