



CALL THE HANDS

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Lieutenant Kenneth Robert Hudspeth, Distinguished Service Cross and 2 Bars, RANVR, WWII

Lieutenant Kenneth Robert Hudspeth, RANVR was one of many Royal Australian Naval personnel whose service in Royal Navy units during the darkest days of World War 2 has gone largely unnoticed in Australia. This story of the self-reliant and courageous LEUT Hudspeth who completed several hazardous missions in the then SECRET, X-Craft (midget submarine) earned him the Distinguished Service Cross and two Bars.

Thanks to a research query about Hudspeth received by the Society, the story of his remarkable war service can be told. This story was researched and compiled by Dennis J. Weatherall JP TMAFAITT(L) LSM an active volunteer of the Society. Dennis is a qualified Australian Military Historian and accredited Member of the International Guild of Battlefield Guides.

Early Life

Kenneth Hudspeth was born in Echuca, Victoria on the Murray River on 31 March 1918. His Father Robert was born in 1891 in Carlton, and mother Ada (nee Sim) in 1894 in Box Hill, Victoria. There were two other brothers born into the Hudspeth family, Bruce in 1919 and Donald 1921 in Hobart, Tasmania.

Robert Senior started work at 14 years of age and studied at night school to become a teacher. He went on to become the first Principal of Hobart Technical College having established the school, recruited and trained staff in the specific trades required.

Kenneth Robert Hudspeth, was encouraged by his father to be aware of the bushland, and became a keen bushwalker in Tasmania's south-west region. He was also interested in all water activities and subsequently became a Sea Scout and crewed local cruising yachts. With such involvement, Kenneth never lost his deep interest in maritime matters.

On finishing school Kenneth, following in his father's footsteps became a trainee in the Tasmanian Education Department and was assigned to Hythe area school in the suburb of Southport following training.

Early Career

Following the outbreak of WWII, Kenneth offered his service to the Navy and was selected as a Sub Lieutenant RANVR. His first posting being to HMAS *Cerberus* for induction followed by HMAS *Rushcutter* to undertake Anti-Submarine warfare training in the newly established school commanded by CMDR Harvey Newcomb RN.



SUB LEUT Kenneth Robert Hudspeth - 1940

During the Battle of the Atlantic up to 20 percent of all A/S Officers were Australian RANR/RANVR serving in the Royal Navy (RN).

Hudspeth departed for the UK in the “*Imperial Star*” in January. Postings then followed in quick succession and included; HMS *Ferret* and HMS *Clarkia*. After gaining his Bridge Watchkeeping Certificate and serving 15 months on North Atlantic convoy escort duties in 1941 & 1942, he volunteered for submarines and was posted to HMS *Dolphin*, HMS *Cyclops* (Submarine Depot Ship) and from October 1942 to August 1944, HMS *Varbel I* and *II*.

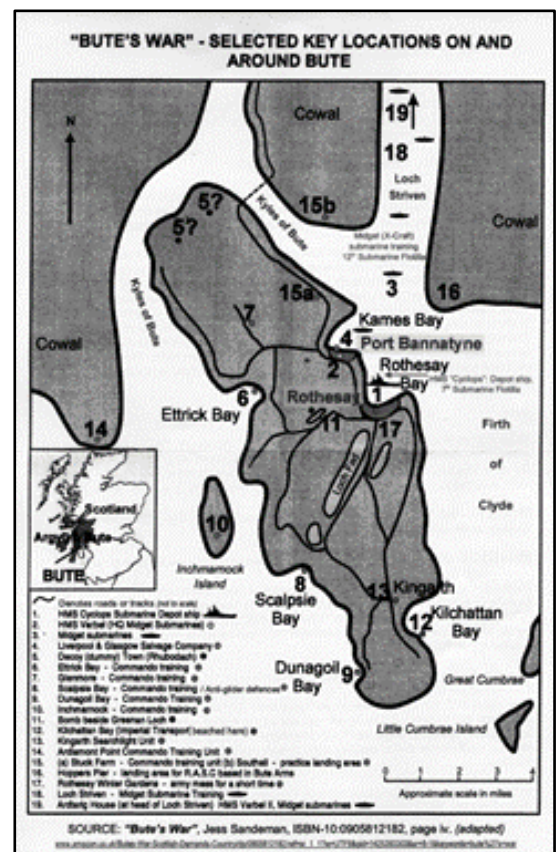
He was promoted LEUT RANVR on 15th January 1943 and assigned for commanding officer duties in Midget Submarine “X-Craft”. His first command was X-Craft X10.



HMS *Varbel I* – named after CMDR’s Varley and Bell, both RN Engineers who designed the X-Craft prototypes. Originally the “Kyles Hydropathic Hotel” requisitioned by the Admiralty, located at Port Bannatyne on the Isle of Bute, Scotland.



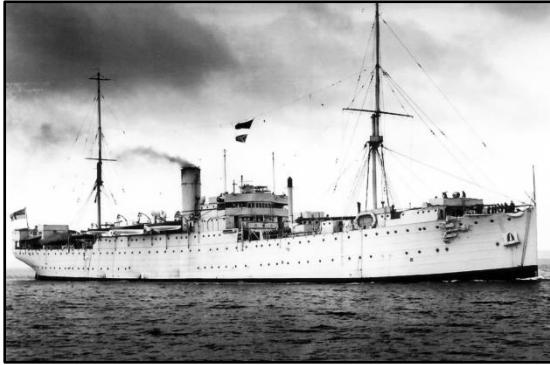
HMS *Varbel II* – “Ardtaraig House” was also requisitioned by the Admiralty early in the war and became HQ for the 12th Submarine Flotilla, located at the head of Loch Striven Scotland.



“Bute’s War”, locations of HMS *Varbel I* and *II*

Hazardous Service

The Admiralty had requested volunteers for special and hazardous service, stating they must be below 24 years of age on selection, unmarried, be good swimmers and of strong and enduring physique". After volunteering and selection interview at HMS *Dolphin* Hudspeth was accepted without an explanation of what 'hazardous service' was. He was subsequently posted to HMS *Cyclops* then HMS *Varbel* where he commenced training (and was told what hazardous service he'd just volunteered for). Training commenced immediately in the new midget submarines known as X-Craft.



HMS *Cyclops* (F31) depot ship for the 7th Submarine Flotilla home based at Rothesay 1940-1946. Originally the passenger liner "Indrabarah" built by Laing and Co. for the Indra Line Ltd. Purchased by the Admiralty whilst under construction on 27th October 1905, scrapped in 1947. Photograph taken on the Rothesay Bay Firth of Clyde Scotland.



X-Craft Surface running possibly the X21 with LEUT J.V. Terry-Lloyd SADF as CO standing on the casing.



C-Craft control room, craft number unknown. This image shows the very limited crew space available.



HMS *Bonaventure* (F139) was designated as depot ship for all Midget Submarines. Built by Greenock and Grangemouth Dockyard Co. in Greenock, Scotland for the Scottish "Clan Line", it was to be launched as "Clan Campbell" but the Admiralty requisitioned her on the day she was launched – 27th October 1942 - and once converted was commissioned into the RN on the 26th January 1943.

Operation Source: 22nd September 1943

Operation Source was a Top Secret Operation to neutralise three German Capital ships, SMS *Tirpitz*, *Scharnhorst* and *Lutzow*. Hudspeth was one of six midget submarine CO's detailed to attack these vessels. His target was the battleship SMS *Scharnhorst*, later downgraded by the RN to a Battlecruiser due to carrying only 11 inch main guns. All were at anchor in the Kaa Fjord.

X5 was the Mission commander commanded by Commander LEUT "Henty" Henty-Creer RN who was Australian born. X6 was commanded by LEUT Donald Cameron RNR and X7 commanded by LEUT Godfrey Place RNR. These three X-Craft were detailed to attack the SMS *Tirpitz*. X5 was lost with all hands either during the attack or withdrawal (there is no definitive record), although the Admiralty refuses to dive on the wreck (located in 1974) to check if, in fact, they had deployed their two tons of explosives and were actually sunk on their escape from completing their attack on *Tirpitz*. Both X6 and X7 succeeded in damaging their target, although both X-Craft were forced to the surface within the anti submarine net around the *Tirpitz*. Both were craft were scuttled. Two X7 crew members never escaped their craft. The six surviving crew members were taken as prisoners of war (POW's). Both CO's Cameron and Place were awarded the Victoria Cross.

On the 18th September 1943, X8 commanded by LEUT J Smart RNVR was en-route to attack the SMS *Lutzow* (Pocket Battleship). It was under tow by its mother submarine, HMS *Sea Nymph* when the tow line parted. It was found the next day. As LEUT Smart had been forced to jettison both saddle charges during the passage X8's participation in the mission was cancelled. Unfortunately, X8 was scuttled on the 18th September and the crew returned to the "mother" submarine for passage home.

X9 commanded by SBLT E.V. Kearon RNVR and X10 were designated to attack SMS *Scharnhorst* on the 16th September 1943. Unfortunately, X9 under tow from HM Submarine *Syrtris* had dived and failed to surface on the same day. It was found the towing hawser had also parted. All four of its crew were lost.

Other crew members of X10, unofficially named "Excalibur", the legendary sword of King Arthur, included; SBLT Bruce Enzer RNVR, 1st LEUT SBLT Geoff Harding RNVR and Diver, ERA Tilley (who been seconded from fleet submarines). Harding was the youngest of all X-Craft crewmen, he'd just turned 19. Passage CO was "Ernie" Page, a tall, red-bearded Irishman.

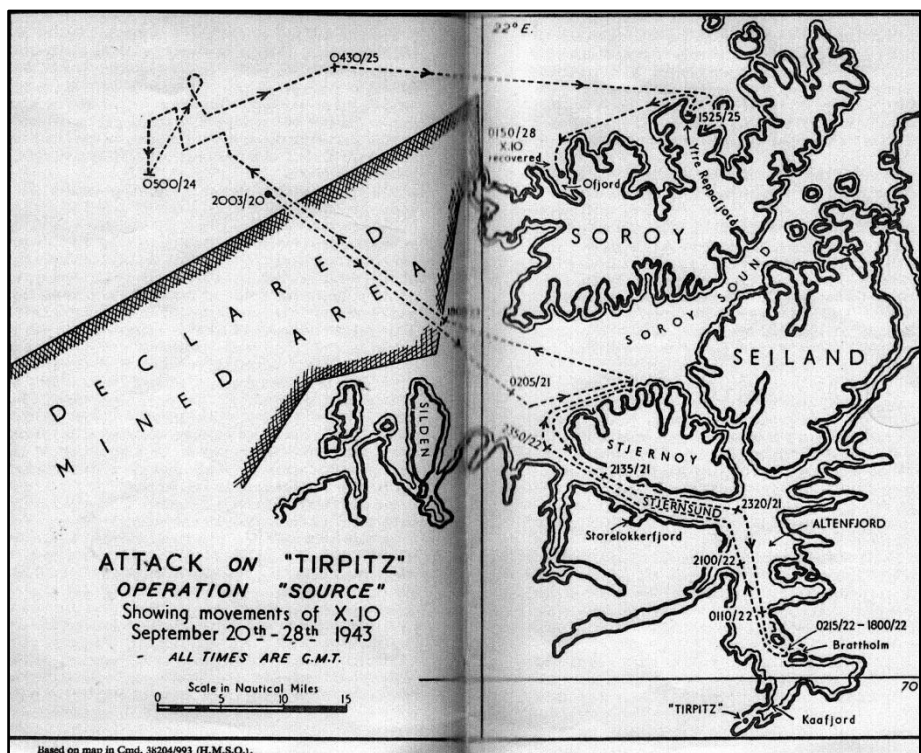
X10's target was the SMS *Scharnhorst*, believed at the time of departure from home base to be at anchor astern of the SMS *Tirpitz* in the Kaa Fjord. Unknown to X10 as at 1300, 12 September when she left base under the tow of HM Submarine *Sceptre*, the *Scharnhorst* had slipped her moorings on the morning of 22 September and headed to Alten Fjord to undertake Gunnery practice. Subsequently, *Scharnhorst* received a signal from *Tirpitz* advising she'd been under attack and had been torpedoed. As a consequence, *Scharnhorst* did not return to her berth in the Kaa Fjord. This situation unknown to LEUT Hudspeth became important post mission.



X10 Crew: Left to right: SBLT G Harding; LEUT K.R Hudspeth CO; SBLT B Enzer; SBLT E Page (Passage CO) and seated left bottom ERA Tilley.

After slipping her tow from HM Submarine *Sceptre* at 2000 on 20 September, X10 dived to test her trim. All was satisfactory, so course was set for the allocated target SMS *Scharnhorst*. Given known technical reliability issues with the X-Craft it is not surprising that Hudspeth was beset with multiple mechanical break downs. First the periscope motor started to smell pungent when raised and lowered, then the motor burnt out and the craft filled with fumes. Next the Gyro compass failed as did the magnetic compass light, finally the boat started to leak above the switchboard and all fuses blew. Every crew member, regardless of trade, was put to work in an endeavour to rectify the defects and hopefully resume X10 its mission. At 0215, X10 bottomed out at 195 feet just 4 miles from Kaa Fjord and where it was presumed SMS *Scharnhorst* was at anchor. Finally, one of the two side saddles (explosives) flooded. It seemed little else could go wrong?

LEUT Hudspeth asked his crew if they wanted to proceed to their target in the condition they now found themselves in. All responded yes. After serious consideration as their CO and having heard multiple explosions at 0815 from the other attacking X-Craft, he weighed carefully if he should continue and if forced to the surface, the consequences of losing both his craft and crew. He also considered the impact on other craft successfully attacking their targets. X10 stayed bottomed all day then at 1800 Hudspeth called off the mission and limped back down the Fjord to the rendezvous for return to Loch Striven, Scotland.



Map of Kaa Fjord showing the location of SMS *Tirpitz* and where *Scharnhorst* should have been on the day of the attack.



Commanding Officers of X-Craft on Operation *Source* with the exception of X5 CO LEUT "Henty" Henty-Creer RNVN. Left to right; LEUT T Martin RN X9, LEUT Kenneth Hudspeth RANVR X10, LEUT Basil McFarlane RAN X8, LEUT Godfrey Place RNR X7 and LEUT Donald Cameron RNR X6.

LEUT Hudspeth was awarded a DSC (Distinguished Service Cross) on 11 January 1944. His citation read: "For outstanding courage whilst in command of HM Submarine X10 during Operation *Source* in September 1943. This submarine penetrated Alten Fjord on 22 September 1943 to within four miles of where *Tirpitz* was lying. LEUT Hudspeth bottomed in this position in enemy waters throughout 22 September while he and his crew worked in trying conditions to make good the vessel's defects. The attempt was in vain and LEUT Hudspeth had to come to the correct though bitter decision to withdraw, when so near his goal. The successful double passage of the approaches to Alten Fjord required determination and skill of a high order. The application and endurance shown in the attempt to remedy defects deserve credit. The information this Officer was able to bring back was of great value".

Operation *Postage Able*: 17 to 21 January 1944

As the planning went ahead for the invasion of Europe, scheduled for the summer of 1944, it was realised that the Admiralty had no close inshore charts of the French coastline. Therefore, towards the end of 1943 (December) a group of specialised servicemen arrived at the X-Craft Scottish base to check out if it was possible to use these craft to gain the information required for the upgrade of what would become the "invasion charts". The name of the group was Combined Operations Pilotage Parties (COPP) their role was to gain all possible information on the shore line both above and below the expected tide levels. The Normandy coast was their target shoreline. COPP was a mixture of Naval and Army personnel, the latter being trained commando swimmers. It was Navy's job to take these commandos, land them unseen to reconnoitre ashore before returning to their X-Craft for passage home.

Two X-Craft (X20 and X23) were shipped by rail from Loch Striven (Scotland) to Portsmouth (south coast) for the operation. The original crew from X10 that was scuttled on its return from the aborted SMS *Scharnhorst* raid (Sep 43) were reassigned to X20 where they practised passage in the shallow waters of the Solent. Due to last minute "second thoughts" by senior officers, the

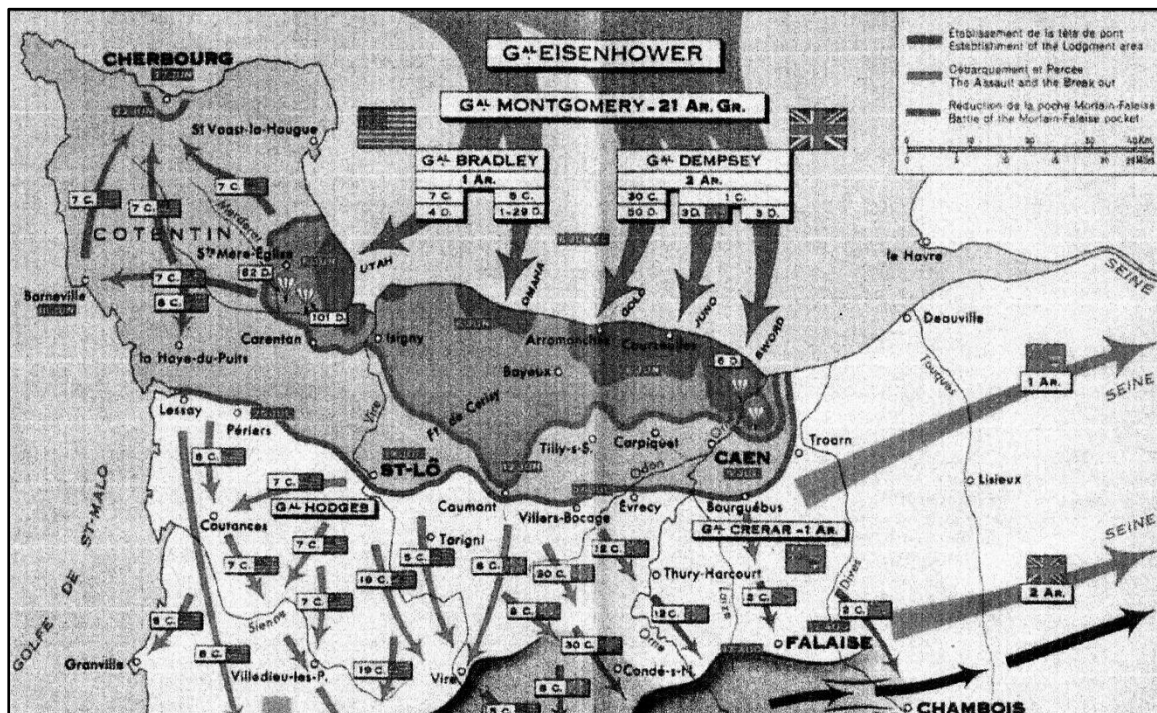
first planned COPP mission was carried out by small surface craft. The planners were concerned about the possible discovery by the enemy of an X-Craft operation close inshore.

LEUT Hudspeth was awarded a bar to his DSC on 4 April 1944 for his missions in landing COPP personnel on enemy held coasts, his citation reads; “For outstanding courage and devotion to duty whilst commanding HM Submarine X20 in hazardous operations. He showed great coolness, grasp and ability in manoeuvring his X-Craft submerged in shallow water close under enemy defences during the first attempt at putting Combined Operations Pilotage Parties on beach reconnaissance on a heavily guarded position of an enemy coast, in unknown and unpleasant conditions during the period 17 to 21 January 1944”.

Operation “Gambit”: 2 to 6 June 1944 of the Normandy Coast

Following the successful charting of the Normandy coast X20 and X23 were retained for the subsequent operation, Operation Gambit. LEUT Hudspeth continued in command of X20 whilst LEUT George Honour RNVR was CO of X23. For this operation the crew of each was to be five men. Originally designed for a crew of three, each carried divers and one other. Conditions were cramped!

This operation was part of the overall D-Day Naval Operation known as “Operation Neptune”. Basically both craft had to approach the British / Canadian allocated sector beaches and position themselves at the outer markers of Sword (X23) and Juno (X20). Their role was to sit it out until the allocated time and date of the invasion, then surface and act as navigation beacons for landing force craft heading to the two beaches.



Map showing Normandy beaches Sword (British) and Juno (Canadian) 6th June 1944

With D-Day set for Monday 5 June 1944, both X-Craft left their berths at Fort Blockhouse and set course to exit the east gate on the Portsmouth Boom Defence. Operation “Gambit” had commenced. It was Friday 2 June at 2130 hours. The X-Craft were under tow by two trawlers the *Darthem* (X20) and the *Sapper* (X23), they broke their tow the next day and headed for what

are now known as Sword and Juno invasion beaches. They positioned themselves (submerged) on the 4 June to be the leads for the biggest invasion force the world had ever seen.

The X-Craft needed to ventilate every five hours to draw in fresh air. They also had to confirm their allocated station by periscope sightings each evening. At 2200 daily they tuned into the BBC news broadcast for any coded message that would confirm the landings would commence the following morning. During one such broadcast, the code was transmitted that the invasion landings would be delayed due to weather (at the UK end) for a day. As their supplies were limited, especially oxygen backup (in bottles) this message caused some concern onboard X20. Their mission on D-Day was to illuminate mast head beacons (to sea) from the deck and periscope to give the landing armada a tested navigation course to their landing beaches of Sword and Juno.

The allocation of operation names is of interest. In this case the Admiralty had chosen *Gambit* which, as in Chess, a piece is risked so as to gain advantage later! No words were ever so true for X20 and X23.

For this mission not only did they carry extra crew but enough equipment to open a deep sea fishermen's store! Before departure Portsmouth they stowed onboard the following kit:

- Two coastal quick release anchors,
- Three flashing lamps with batteries,
- Several taut-string measuring reels,
- Two small portable radar beacons,
- One 18 foot sounding pole with two telescopic masts of similar length and
- Twelve extra bottles of oxygen in addition to the X-Crafts normal fixed supply.

The crew were given fake identification papers and told if the mission was aborted they were to swim ashore make contact with the local resistance who would help them return to England. That is of course, if they weren't drowned or shot by German sentries. If they survived and escaped, they still had to find the local resistance which was easier said than done. Essentially, they were on their own if the mission was aborted.

X20 positioned herself off Juno Beach less than a mile and a half from the coast on Sunday 4 June 1944. When the coded message was received it simply read "trouble in Scarborough" so X20 manoeuvred into deeper water to wait until Tuesday 6 June, the new D-Day. At 0502 the periscope was raised along with the telescopic mast, lights affixed (looking seaward) the radio beacons and echo sounders activated.....the final phase of the invasion of Europe was about to commence!

X20 had completed her mission successfully so had X23, so the crew hunkered down had breakfast and waited until it was time to get themselves off the beach and rendezvous with their two craft for a well-deserved return to Portsmouth.

For this operation, LEUT Hudspeth was awarded a second bar to his DSC on 28 Nov 1944. The citation read: "For gallantry, skill, determination and undaunted devotion to duty whilst commanding HM Submarine X20 during Operation *Gambit*, the Combined Operations Pilotage Parties beach reconnaissance of the French coast prior to Operation Neptune and the landing of Allied Forces on the coast of Normandy".

After D-Day LEUT Hudspeth was posted back to HMS *Varbel* (12th Submarine Flotilla – Midget X-Craft) and was involved in training new crew, he also wrote a manual on X-Craft operations, something he was well suited for having been a teacher prior to his war service.

On the 23 September 1944 LEUT Hudspeth was posted to HMS *Orwell* (G98) an Oscar Class destroyer and back to his old trade as an Anti-Submarine Officer. The *Orwell* had been launched on 2 April 1942, commissioned 17 October 1942 and assigned immediately to North Atlantic and Russian Convoy duties. LEUT Hudspeth served under LCDR John Randall Gower, CO from 15 July 44 through to 16 October 1945. During Hudspeth's time onboard most sailings were on the Russian run north until returning to Scapa Flow at the end of April 1945 *Orwell* rejoined the Home Fleet and assumed duties as required. During this period LEUT Hudspeth served as First Lieutenant until released from his RN service.



HMS *Orwell* (G98) in her war time camouflage paint

On 10 September 1945 LEUT Hudspeth was posted to HMS *President* pending return to Australia and demobilisation. He embarked on the passenger liner “SS *Aquitania*” leaving Southampton on 28 October and arrived in Tasmania in early December 1946. His service concluded at HMAS *Huon* on 5 February 1946.

Post demobilisation, Hudspeth continued to serve in the Reserve, was promoted to LCDR on 31 December 1951 eventually resigning his commission on the 21 January 1965. Thus ended, a distinguished career of 25 years in war and peace in the RN, RANVR and post war RANR.

Post war Hudspeth obtained his teaching diploma and returned to his pre-war occupation as a teacher with the Tasmanian Department of Education. He became the warden of “*Werndee*”, a hostel in Hobart for junior and trainee teachers. Then followed several appointments to several schools in northern Tasmania before becoming Principal, and Superintendent of Building for the Education Department throughout Tasmania. Kenneth Hudspeth retired from education in 1979 aged 61.

Kenneth married an English woman, Audrey Nicholson in 1959. They produced three sons: Andrew, David and Donald. None followed in their father into the services. In retirement Kenneth followed his interests in music and literature, although his chief interest was anything maritime and his love and involvement in the Tasmanian Maritime Museum.

Kenneth Robert Hudspeth passed away on the 3 December 2000 at the age of 82 years. He was a war time hero, a volunteer, a Reservist and one of the most decorated Australian Naval Officers of WWII.

Kenneth & Audrey Hudspeth in retirement.
Image supplied by son, Andrew Hudspeth



Midget Submarines Specifications – X-Craft

Overall length:	52 feet
Displacement:	30 tons
Propulsion:	Diesel engine and Electric motor
Range:	Approximately 1,000 miles
Speed:	6.5 Knots surfaced, 2 knots submerged economical speed
Armament:	Two crescent sectioned charges 30 foot long each with two tons of explosives
Crew:	Three to five subject to mission
Diving depth:	300 feet

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