

GEOFFREY EVANS

Industrialist, maritime defence analyst

Born: Melbourne, 1922 **Died:** Melbourne, aged 90



Geoffrey Evans, who died on 21 June 2012, so passionately supported a strong Australian navy that he once mustered a group of military experts who designed a low-cost aircraft carrier. The plan sank without trace, unlike his private company's connection to the legend of Dame Edna Everage.

At 19 he joined the Royal Australian Navy during World War II and served in the armed merchant cruiser *Manoora* before joining the new destroyer, *Warramunga*, prior to her commissioning. The warship provided fire cover for several landings throughout the Pacific area and repeatedly came under fire, including a near miss by a kamikaze, but suffered no serious casualties.

Geoffrey rose to be sub-lieutenant and saw service in Papua New Guinea before moving to Queensland with promotion to lieutenant, ending full-time service in 1947.

He joined the re-activated Royal Australian Naval Reserve, retiring with the rank of commander in 1982. He was appointed MBE in 1967 for service with the Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserve, and OBE in 1982 for service to the Navy League of Australia, the latter group historically committed to a strong navy and stemming from a UK-based organisation begun in the late 19th century.

He was one of a small group of naval personnel who formed the Navy League of Australia from its UK branches and was federal president in Australia from 1972 to 1994.

His knowledge of maritime matters and range of contacts were encyclopaedic; successive chiefs of navy and numerous other "top brass" in Australia and overseas became his personal friends, which helped the league fulfill its main aim of "maintaining the maritime wellbeing of the nation".

Admiral friends fondly dubbed him "the Fifth Naval Member", a jocular reference to the four naval members of the original naval board of 1901.

He helped organise seminars to inform civilians about the need for a strong maritime defence capability. He assembled military "big guns" to talk on the subject

in Australia, including Britain's Lord Hill Norton who was First Sea Lord (1970–71); the RAF's Group Captain Leonard Cheshire VC; Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, former chief of the US Navy, and Admiral Thomas Hayward, former commander of the US Pacific Fleet.

In the early 1980s the Navy League rose to one of its biggest challenges when government decided to disband the fixed-wing component of the Fleet Air Arm. In addition to organising seminars and writing to the press, Geoffrey organised a group of members including a naval architect and a retired manager of a naval dockyard who, with a serving commodore provided by the then chief of navy, designed what was put forward as an affordable aircraft carrier. The government was unmoved and the effort proved to be in vain.

Frank Geoffrey Evans was born in Melbourne on February 7, 1922, to industrial chemist Frank Evans and his wife, Doris (Holden). He went to Trinity Grammar and Scotch College and, after the war in 1948, was helped by his father to start an industrial chemical company, Kemol Pty Ltd, with a partner, Mel Buller. It ran until 1976 when sold.

Kemol made products for industrial and cosmetic use, including Strawberry Shampoo, favoured by the flamboyant actress Stephanie Deste, who had played in silent movies with the likes of Douglas Fairbanks and John Barrymore.

She arrived in Melbourne in 1926 and later owned Beauty Lodge, a chain of salons in the city, where she made much of Strawberry Shampoo, promoting her belief that "the strawberries were flown in daily from New Zealand". All of this bolstered her profile, and Barry Humphries could not help but admire her handmade eyewear, studded with diamante wings, when he came to create the Dame Edna character in the 1950s.

Geoffrey helped establish the Australian Sea Cadet Corps and was a member of the Sea Cadet Council. He acted as personal assistant to the chairman of Rothmans National Sport Foundation. In 1956 he was aide-de-camp to the governor of Victoria, General Sir Dallas Brooks, and was his private secretary (1962 to 1963).

Geoffrey Evans developed emphysema in the 1980s and survived major heart surgery in the 1990s. He contracted a lung infection and died in Royal Melbourne Private Hospital, aged 90. He never married and has no close surviving relatives.

John Bird

[The author is a former federal vice-president of the Navy League of Australia.]

From *The West Australian*, Friday 17 August 2012