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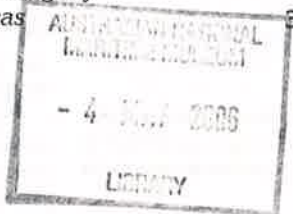
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Front cover: A crew member aboard MV Shirley Anne gets a closer look at Phil Kinsela's Couta boat Sylvia. Photo by Peter Webb.

Do you remember ...

Cam's Trawlers?

This aerial view of the 1919 Newcastle-built Goorangai, shows a typical trawler layout. She was sunk with all hands in November 1940. GKA.

by Graeme Andrews*

For 10 or so years after the end of World War Two a dozen or so small, scruffy steam ships could regularly be seen plodding in and out of Port Jackson, usually accompanied by a pall of coal smoke.

These were the days when almost all the fish consumed in New South Wales was caught by local estuarine or deep sea trawlers. These seaworthy little steamers, all well past their prime, maintained a steady schedule of 9-10 day cruises with two companies operating most of the trawler fleet.

The two best-known trawler fleets were those of Red Funnel Trawlers and of Cam and Sons Ltd. The Red Funnel ships were perhaps better known to me as they worked from Woolloomooloo Bay where I was often in port as a member of the Royal Australian Navy.

The Cam's fleet worked up-harbour, from Blackwattle Bay, just inside the south east end of the Glebe Island bridge, from a finger wharf at No 1 Bank St.

The story of Cams is not just an interesting tale of 30 years of a family company but is perhaps an even more

interesting tale of the arrival in Australia and the acceptance of an Italian family who did it all the hard way and made good.

David Cam, of Wahroonga, is a member of that family whose curiosity about his background caused him to hire historian and writer Stuart Cooke to pull together the family story in the form of an unpublished book.

I am grateful to have been allowed by David Cam to produce this brief summary of the story which is illustrated by photographs from my collection and from the Davidson Collection which is available to the public through the Sydney Heritage Fleet.

Rocco Caminiti arrived in NSW in 1881 as one of many Italians seeking a better life away from the political troubles of the Italian 'boot.'

Rocco's early efforts to find a place for himself are beyond the scope of this article but he was involved in the formation of what is now known as 'Little Italy' an early attempt to provide an Italian farming community on the NSW north



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It was a quiet foggy day on July 7, 1952 as the 1922-built *Goonambee* heads out to sea. She was broken up in 1958. Davidson Collection, Sydney Heritage Fleet.



coast. Rocco was more of a seaman than a farmer and, having gained a wife, Catarina Gava, he gave up farming and hied himself back to Sydney and worked afloat. In the 1903 census he is given as 'fisherman'.

Just four years later, in 1907, aged 58 and with five sons and two daughters, he died.

In 1913 one of Rocco's sons Carlo (then 31) who had continued harbour fishing from a small boat, opened a fish shop in Drummoyne. He continued to provide some of the fish through his own efforts with line and net. Carlo did well.

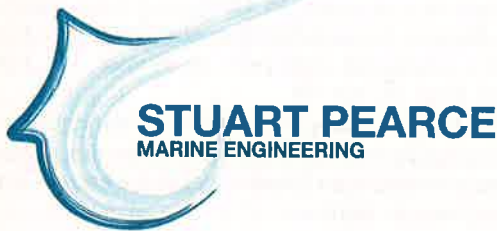
Over some years the NSW government had tried to establish and sustain a State Fishery but by about 1923, not long before the Great Depression came along, the NSW fishing fleet was placed on the market. Carlo had funds enough to buy one trawler *Goonambee* in 1923 with a second ship in the following year. From these two ships Carlo Caminiti and his family was able to develop a fishing fleet that worked from that time for about 30 years.

Carlo's business expanded and by 1932 with businesses and land values crashing all around him, he was able to

buy land at 1 Bank St, Pyrmont and erect the appropriate buildings for the fishing wharves which he then built on foreshore leased from the Sydney Harbour Trust. At this new base his expanding fleet unloaded, stored ship and carried out maintenance, all close to Sydney and all right on the tram-line!

In 1934 the company was reconstituted as Cams and Sons Ltd. With family members taking a variety of roles. The fleet included *Beryl II*, *Alfie Cam*, *Olive Cam*, *Mary Cam* and *Goorangai*. The need for a secure and economical supply of coal caused the company to lease a coal mine near Swansea. The Aberfield Mine's purpose was to keep the trawlers fuelled but excess coal capacity went onto the market. Another mine was soon acquired.

In 1939 Carlos (Charles) went to Europe intending to buy more ships and fish canning equipment. It was probably an interesting trip as Charles was getting old and Europe was heading for war. Returning to Australia, Charles appointed son-in-law John Reid as General Manager, accepting that the purchases he had made might not actually reach Australia.



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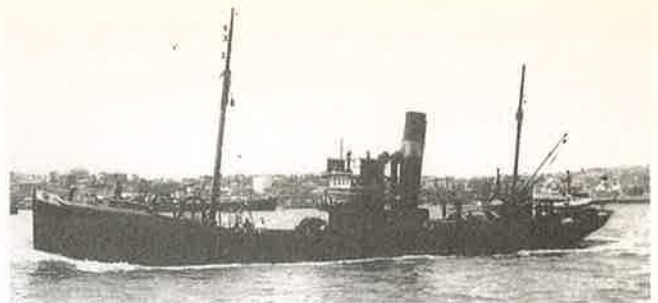


The end of the line for the Cam fleet. Mary Cam (at left) and Goonambee lie at the Bank Street wharf in August 1956. Davidson Collection, Sydney Heritage Fleet.

A good move was to Anglicize his name. As Carlos Caminetti, he felt he might soon carry a name not too popular. He became Charles Cam by Deed Poll on July 31, 1940 and, probably still anticipating loyalty questions, offered some of his fleet to the RAN for patrol work.

Steam trawlers made good coastal naval ships and soon *Beryl II*, *Goorangai*, and *Olive Cam* were taken over (all 1939) followed by *Alfie Cam*, *Goonambie* and *Samuel Benbow* in 1940. It left just one ship *Duranbee* in the 'fleet' with a looming fish shortage in Sydney.

Naturally, as the Federal Government took control of the fishing fleet it demanded that Cam and Co Ltd catch and provide more fish!



Trawler Beryl II was the first of the company's ships to be taken up for war service. She was built in 1914. Davidson Collection, Sydney Heritage Fleet.

Cams tried hard. They ordered several new trawlers to be built in wood. The first and biggest was the Brisbane Water built *Patricia Cam*. As soon as she was completed in 1942 the Government took her over. The Japanese soon sank her near New Guinea.

Cams tried again. *Mary Cam* was taken over in 1942 and the brand new *John Reid Cam* by the US Army that same year.

Cams kept pressure up on the Federal Government and *Alfie Cam* and *Duranbee* were sold back to the company but by then the company was 'groggy' and still could not supply enough fish. Then a Japanese submarine attacked *Duranbee*, killing some of the crew. The trawler was wrecked.

After the end of the war the company took a long time to get its ships back from the Government and to get the necessary repair work done and paid for. Charles was losing interest.

The company began to concentrate on just fishing, winding up several businesses while re-fitting the better ships. It took more than two years, to 1947, to extract trawlers *Mary Cam*, *Beryl II*, *Samuel Benbow* and *Olive Cam* from government's inertia but that year, on August 11, 1947 Charles Cam died. He was 66.

Son Rocco had been supporting his father during the war and continued in this role but Charles had been the 'engine' of the organization and from Charles' death the end of Cams as a company was in sight.

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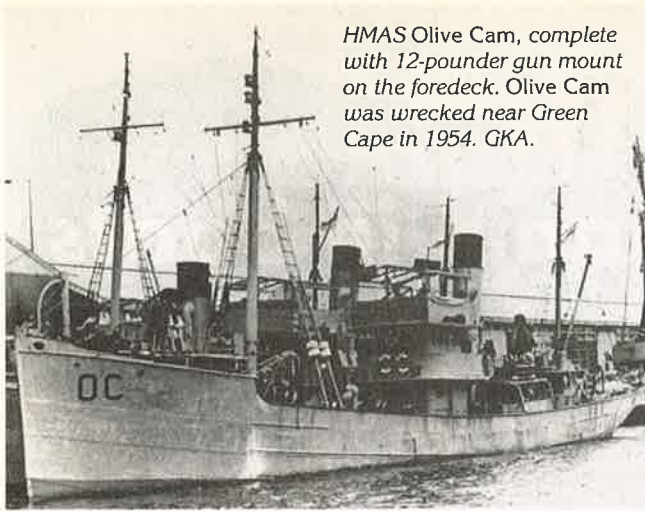
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HMAS Olive Cam, complete with 12-pounder gun mount on the foredeck. Olive Cam was wrecked near Green Cape in 1954. GKA.


Property was sold and pension funds were established for members of the family. By 1953 all the vessels were old, tired and expensive to run. Fuel was dear and fish prices were low. A new NSW government tax of five percent on fish imports was probably the last straw. Cam and Sons closed its doors and sold its ships during 1955 and 1956. The company was officially wound up in 1961, the year that Rocco died.

So ended an important and interesting, little-known part of the history of the Working Port of Sydney. ↓

↓ I would enjoy contact with people who had anything to do with Cams, either the people or the ships. Particularly I would appreciate access to photographs which would be copied and returned intact. I would also appreciate similar contact with people having knowledge experience and photographs concerning Red Funnel Trawlers, for a possible future article in *Afloat*. All such material would be copied and returned.

*Graeme Andrews' book *The Watermen of Sydney* can be had from Boat Books, ABC books and all good book stores. Mail order enquiries may be made to Stannard Marine at 02 9418 3711.





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