

Death Railway

T O U R S

HMAS Sydney II – Location Visit

HMAS Sydney II was a light Cruiser of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) that had served overseas and had several scalps to her credit including an Italian ship and another larger vessel that she sunk.

On 19 November 1941 off the coast of Western Australia she came up against the Kormoran of the Kriegsmarine (German Navy). 645 RAN men were lost in that battle in the Indian Ocean; the Kormoran lost 80 with 317 rescued who later become POWs in Australia.



Watching the men carrying the wreaths for HMAS Sydney II.

It has been said the Kormoran had hidden her true identity in a ruse to get closer to the Australian Ship and to open fire first which was a common occurrence in those times. She disguised herself as a merchant ship and the ruse was up when the German Raider did not know the secret password of the ship she was purporting to be. The Australian got too close – her first salvos when over the Kormoran which may have been the difference between winning and losing.

The loss of the Sydney was Australia's greatest wartime mystery and naval loss where the wreck was not located until 2008; conjecture, speculation and innuendo surrounded the fate of the Sydney as it was only German Sailors who could comment on her fate.

You can only imagine the pain and heartfelt loss of the families of those on board – that's nearly 1300 parents grieving for their boys across Australia – it's a pain that we cannot understand (thank god).

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Several weeks after the sinking; PM John Curtin made several announcements about the Sydney to an already frustrated public.



Several of the wreaths for HMAS Sydney



The ship's crowd gathering for the service.

'The controversy over the loss of the *Sydney* continued to trouble many Australians and in 1997 the Minister for Defence asked the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade to inquire into the circumstances surrounding the loss of the vessel. The Committee, which was assisted by an historical adviser, received in excess of 400 submissions, and took evidence at hearings held in most Australian capital cities'. (National Archives of Australia).

Up early around 0500 hours for our visit over the top of the grave of Sydney, we got ready for the service topside. Met up with family and we got a good spot where we could see the main screen and hear the ceremony about HMAS Sydney. The Last Post played and three wreaths were dropped into the ocean as a commemorative mark of respect – we also spoke 'The Ode'.



HMAS Sydney II (from the NAA)

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HMAS Sydney is a mass grave and she was situated on our starboard side of our ship (the same side our cabin is situated); and we slowly sailed past her. We dropped some ANZAC \$1 coins into the ocean on the port side – well past (several kilometers) from the grave side as a mark of respect.

In a six degrees of separation; I spoke of Donald McCabe; a Sub Lieutenant Pay Master who died in the sinking. Only recently I went to Melb Uni to seek out his brother's book (Pacific Sunset 1946 – by Graeme McCabe) that he wrote post war on his experiences as a Japanese POW. He was with my dad in Selarang Barracks (Singapore) and Kobe House Japan.



Shell hits on the port side of the ship



AWM nos: 09281.288 & .296

His brother (Don) was lost on the Sydney and his other brother killed in action in New Guinea. It would have been a very sad time for the McCabe family in WW2 back in their home state of Tasmania and Hobart.

Sub Lieutenant Donald McCabe age 19; a Pay Master of the Royal Australian Navy is remembered on Panel 56 Column 2 of the Burnie Cemetery in Tasmania. Please visit him if you're ever are in Burnie.

Thank-you to all who served on HMAS Sydney and I hope she is the last RAN Ship to ever be sunk.

Lest We Forget.

References:

- Australian War Memorial
- National Australian Archives (NAA)
- Pacific Sunset by Donald McCabe (1946) – Baileau Library Melbourne University