8 September 2008

Commander K. Radburn
The Secretary
HMAS Sydney II
Commission of Inquiry
Level 18
Defence Plaza
270 Pitt Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Commander Radburn,

Re: Identification of the Unknown Sailor of Christmas Island

I wish to make a submission to the Commission of Inquiry about a matter that bears close examination. From my reading of witness statements and testimony thus far before the Commission of Inquiry, I think that this avenue is already being followed, however if that is not the case then what I have to write here will be of some value.

Due to scientific examination at the Australian War Memorial of the press studs found with the corpse of the Unknown Sailor of Christmas Island indicated that white material of a type only worn by officers has led to a belief amongst the identification team that they should concentrate their search for a DNA match amongst surviving relatives of those members of the crew who may have been wearing white coveralls. However my examination of documents available online in the National Archives of Australia indicates that eye witness reports closely contemporaneous with the discovery and burial of the corpse on Christmas Island state that the sailor was an engineering rating wearing blue coveralls. For exposition of this, I am attaching my blog entries on this topic for your consideration.

If indeed the sailor was wearing blue coveralls, and/or was an engine room rating, obviously the team attempting to identify the corpse must concentrate their efforts to match DNA in a different segment of the crew to that which has thus far been the case.
As I stated earlier, I think the Commission of Inquiry is already closely examining this matter of the clothing the corpse was wearing together with which crew may have been wearing alike clothing.

Yours Sincerely,

Bob Meade

[Redacted]
lifeasdaddy

....a guy, his wife, and their son ... and other stuff...

Tuesday, 04 March 2008
What was the Unknown Sailor of Christmas Island wearing? Part Two.

Part One appeared here.
Part Three is here.
Part Four is here.

The holdings of the National Archives of Australia (NAA) on matters related to the disappearance of HMAS Sydney (II) are vast. They have also been trawled by many professional and amateur historians.

Let's concentrate here on what the archives have to show us about what the Unknown Sailor was wearing when he was found floating in a Carley raft off Christmas Island on 6 February, 1942. (The photograph at left shows a Carley float typical of the period. This one was from HMAS Shropshire.)

Mr. Richard Summerrell, then Assistant Director of the NAA in 1997 produced a guide to Commonwealth Government Records on this matter called The Sinking of HMAS Sydney (ISBN 0 642 34412), and it is available online here. This guide is a very significant work of research in its own right.

The eyewitness accounts of the recovery of the Carley float/raft off Christmas Island are contained in the NAA as reference [ NAA: A1980/700, NID 194/222 ] "Carley float and Corpse Recovered Off Christmas Island." It is available for viewing online at the NAA website via the "Recordsearch feature." Images of this file follow, which I have downloaded from the NAA site as Bitmap images and then converted to JPEG. Technically, there was some image compression required to load onto this blog, so if you want the higher resolution image you will need to go to the NAA site.

In early May, 1949 Mr. J. W. Brown was staying at the Carlton Hotel, Perth, Western Australia and made contact with Mr. J. K. Atkinson of the West Australian newspaper. Mr. J. W. Brown had been a resident on Christmas Island at the time of the recovery of the Unknown Sailor in February 1942.

And who was Mr. Brown? According to the Parliamentary report section 7.53, he was former Sergeant of the Christmas Island Platoon of the Singapore Volunteers.

Mr. Brown’s statement included this,

http://lifeasdaddy.typepad.com/lifeasdaddy/2008/03/what-was-the--1.html 9/09/2008
one body on board, the body of an engine room rating in blue overalls very much decomposed. Seabirds from above and fish from below had done their share to make identification impossible. A pair of boots was also on the raft which our resident medical officer said could not have been worn by the dead man, this led us to believe that there may have been others on the raft. ...." (my emphasis added)

Mr. Atkinson of the West Australian went to the Naval Staff Office in Fremantle, West Australia and sought comment. The Naval Officer In Charge at Fremantle sent his own agent to interview Mr. Brown. Mr. Brown was at that time absent, so his wife was interviewed, and she substantiated that they were residents of Christmas Island in February, 1942.

The Naval O.I.C. then, on 4 May, 1949 sent a letter to the Director of Naval Intelligence in Navy Office Melbourne seeking confirmation of any facts.

In February and March 1942 Christmas Island was in turmoil. The Japanese military were advancing. On 7 March the Japanese shelled the island. On 11 March the 27 Indian troops staged a mutiny murdering Captain Leonard Williams and four British NCOs, all part of the British Army garrison who were to protect the island. On 31 March 1942 the Japanese invaded the island, interning the Europeans, including Tom Pearson Cromwell (District Officer).

On 23 February 1942, the Naval Staff Officer (Intelligence) compiled Shipping Intelligence Report No. 137/1942. Of note was that the ship S/S Islander had arrived in port.

"The "ISLANDER" brought a total of 48 evacuee passengers from Christmas Island. From Captain J. R. Smith, Harbour Master from the Island, the following information, which throws further light on the report by J. C. BAKER (reference "HERMION" in this report), was gathered.

... The corpse was clothed in a boiler suit which had originally been blue, but was bleached white by
four plain press studs from neck to waist. "

Here is another page from the Shipping Intelligence Report No. 137/1942 relating to the visit of M/V/ "HERMION" to port.

"On board this vessel were J. C. Baker and wife, passengers from Christmas Island. Mr. Baker, for the last six years, has been in charge of the Radio Station at Christmas Island. ...

"The corpse was clothed in a white boiler suit, the pockets were empty and there was nothing to establish identity. the Shore doctor established that the body was that of a white man. All the flesh was gone from the right arm, also the eyes and nose were missing. Otherwise the corpse was decomposed in parts."

Here we have a conflict between the accounts of Smith and Baker concerning the colour of the boiler suit worn by the Unknown Sailor.

Smith said, "... boiler suit which had originally been blue, but was bleached white by exposure."

Baker said, "... a white boiler suit ..."

Well, the Naval Staff Officer (Intelligence) wrote about this conflict, "... without any suggestion of discrediting Baker's statements, which were given in good faith, it is suggested that those made by Captain Smith should prove the more reliable."
request for information from the Naval Officer In Charge at Fremantle, the Director of Naval Intelligence, who was then Captain, later Rear Admiral George C. Oldham wrote to the RAN's Director of Victualling and Director of Naval Stores seeking remarks on paragraphs 3 (a), (b) and (c) of the W.A. Shipping Intelligence Report No 137/1942.

I cannot tell from my reading of the NAA's online file if the whole of W. A. Shipping Intelligence Report No 137/1942 was forward for reading and consideration by the D. of V. and the D. N. S., or merely the page containing the account of Mr. Baker, which stated that the corpse was wearing "...a white boiler suit." The fact that the D. of V. has commented on the topic of "pressed studs" and "press studs" infers that he also read the account of Smith who said, "there were four plain press buttons from neck to waist."

The Director of Naval Stores (D.N.S.) has replied,

"Regarding Par 3(a), the boiler suit does not coincide with ratings' type stocked in R.A.N. as pressed studs had [illegible words] been adopted. A naval rating may have worn the type described although not officially uniform. R.A.N. officers purchased their own or had them made up privately. White & brown in colour [illegible word] press studs.

2. The markings on the shoes described by Captain J. R. Smith as underlined in blue pencil definitely correspond with supplies from our stores, provided they were leather not canvas shoes. I should think they had been supplied to an officer or rating."

Let's look at the conclusions which were made by Captain G. C. Oldham, the Director of Naval Intelligence. He replied to the Naval Officer in Charge at Fremantle on 2 August, 1949:

Captain Oldham concluded that the clothing could have been that of an R.A.N. rating, but that the Carley float did not belong to an H.M.A. Ship.

Captain Oldham's conclusion about the origin of the Carley float is now believed to be incorrect. Based upon substantial further evidence which Oldham did not have at his disposal, the Joint Parliamentary Committee drew the conclusion that the Carley float may well have come from an H.M.A. Ship. See the report sections 7.8 through 7.50.

SUMMARY

One eyewitness in 1942 said that the Unknown Sailor was wearing a blue boiler suit which had been bleached white by exposure to the sun.

One eyewitness in 1942 said that the Unknown Sailor was wearing a white boiler suit.

One eyewitness in 1949 said that the Unknown Sailor was the body of an engine room rating wearing blue overalls.
For this reason, I think that the current efforts to identify the Unknown Sailor by finding his surviving relatives should be concentrating on those members of the crew who would most likely have been wearing blue overalls/boiler suit - not those members of the crew who would most likely have been wearing white overalls/boiler suit.

Recall from my first post on this topic that analysis of the fabric remnants from between press studs found upon the exhumation of the Unknown Sailor's remains was conducted at the Australian War Memorial, and the conclusion was that the colour of the fabric was white. This together with the weave of the fabric led to the conclusion that the clothing had been of a type issued to officers, most likely in the Engineering branch.

Part Three coming soon.

Tuesday, 04 March 2008 in Current Affairs, HMAS Shropshire, HMAS Sydney (II), Military, Military history, Naval history, Naval, Air, and Military, Science, The Culture, The Unknown Sailor | Permalink

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Comments

HI

There is much hype since the discovery of the HMAS Sydney in the past week. I have been reading a fari amount if paper work from the National Archives, however, in regards to the autopsy of the body on Christmas Island, I cannot recall seeing any evidence of a facial construction taken place. There is notes on DNA and Dental work but no facial construction. I believe the body was found in one piece. Just wondering if this reconstruction was done especially after seeing this done on BBC History channel and with todays technology Just a note my grandfather who served with the AIF in WW2 used to tell me of some friends of his that was on the Sydney, though did not elaborate if they were still on board after their tour in the middle east

Much appreciated

Mike

Posted by: Michael Franklin | Tuesday, 25 March 2008 at 21:32

Those Dark Days I recall very vividly how we as all Australians felt at the loss of the Sydney!!! We had a neighbour who was a stoker in the RAN but not knowing if he was on the HMAS SYDNEY. We later found he wasn't. However I, in the post war period served in the RAAF for 20 years plus. During this period I served under a RAAF officer who had been on the HMAS SYDNEY when it had taken on new Crew at Sydney. I had asked him on one occasion when having a social evening "What do you think happened to the HMAS SYDNEY?" He told me that from Sydney it sailed across the south of Australia to Fremantle. While crossing the Bight, he said the new Captian swept the ship clean. Using the expression, "Like a New Broom", and had them throw all unnecessary items overboard such as cake tins and the like of personnel belongings. On arrival at Fremantle, he took ill with appendicitis and was put in hospital for the operation: this is when the ship was called to duty and escort the whatever to Sumatara which was the fatal voyage of the Sydney. He felt that this cleaning of the ship did remove the small chance of survival for anyone finding themselves in the water without a floatation device. The chance of finding anything to hang onto was very much reduced. Generally he did not have any other idea of why there were no survivors. This story was told to me back in the early Sixty's. Not alot was known publicy then about this battle. My personal feelings, I find it hard to think that the Captain had endangerd his ship by getting to close as many would have us believe. There appears to me very strong evidence of some cover-up for what ever the reason. I trust the truth will be revealed and let all be known someday. In particular I feel for the Captain's family.

Aus Huttley

Posted by: Aus Huttley | Wednesday, 26 March 2008 at 13:38

Mike

- This media conference:

http://lifeasdaddy.typepad.com/lifeasdaddy/2008/03/what-was-the--1.html
has this quote about facial reconstruction:

REPORTER: Patrick Walters from The Australian. What about facial reconstruction? Will you be attempting to do something in that area?

MATTHEW BLENKIN: I guess it is a possibility. There's no reason why we couldn't. It's something that the police have used in the past. If all other avenues of identification are fruitless, I guess that's a decision that will be made later on. I wouldn't rule out those other avenues of identification first though.

Mike, I can find nothing on the public record to indicate that a facial reconstruction has been done, but that does not mean that it has not occurred.

Aus
- On the day of the announcement that HMAS sydney had been found I saw a quick interview with Tom Frame. Prof. Frame made reference to the fact that Capt. Burnett may have been sick or incapacitated at the time of the engagement with Kormoran - and hence not to be blamed or held responsible for getting to close to the unidentified ship. Perhaps he was referring there to Capt. Burnett suffering from the operation he had.

You can probably get Tom Frame's book through inter-library loan.

Yes, it is very difficult for the Captain's three surviving children.

Posted by: Bob Meade | Wednesday, 26 March 2008 at 14:23
Dear Sir /Madam,
If only the flesh of right arm of the unknown sailor not bone was decomposed then maybe bone idea wont work.Nose?
YOURS SINCERELY
RUTH CURRIE.

Posted by: Ruth Currie | Wednesday, 02 April 2008 at 13:00
Ruth, if you can picture a human skeleton, you will see that the end of the nose does not exist after normal decomposition, leaving a bit of a bone stump for where the nose was sited. The cartilage which forms the straight end of your nose is not made of bone, and hence decomposes after death.

In the case of the Unknown Sailor's corpse, the witness reports do not suggest damage to the nose which may have also eaten away at the bone.

There was an entry wound to the skull, and a piece of shrapnel was found inside the skull after the exhumation.

Posted by: Bob Meade (lifeasdaddy) | Wednesday, 02 April 2008 at 21:15
The evidence from the Carley float suggests a possible fight between friendly survivors on the float. The secondary wound to the skull and the shoes that didn't fit the corpse suggest at one time more than one person was on the float. Can we rule out the bullet being Australian. Also was it a bullet or was it shrapnel (conflicting information). I think any checking of DNA or dental records should start with the Captain of the Ship.

Posted by: Matt Thompson | Saturday, 19 April 2008 at 13:30
Interesting Matt.

Posted by: Bob Meade (lifeasdaddy) | Saturday, 19 April 2008 at 17:13