

28 Speculation: the Capt Snook 'autopsy'

28.1 In his book *Somewhere Below: the Sydney scandal exposed*, published in 2007, Mr John Samuels alleged that a soldier named Capt Laurence Cecil Snook conducted an autopsy on the body of an HMAS SYDNEY sailor:

When Captain Laurence Snook was serving with the Australian Army Medical Corps, he was ordered to perform an autopsy on a male body. There wasn't anything unusual in that for an officer who had done many autopsies as routine. The only really disturbing aspect of this one was that the body was from HMAS Sydney!

...

Laurence Snook is no longer alive, but his sisters Grace Richardson, of Cobbity N.S.W., and Beulah Manea, of Bunbury W.A., have a clear recollection of what he told them. He said that he had performed the autopsy on a "very badly decomposed body". The state of the corpse, he said, caused his offsider to leave the lab. There was no mistaking where the body had come from – the deceased was wearing a life belt with the name of his ship on it, HMAS *Sydney*.

The body had been found "a surprisingly long way from where it was supposed to be," he explained.

...

It's no use looking in Captain Snook's army file. Part of it was sealed up and removed in 1997, the year the Parliamentary Inquiry began. A secrecy order was placed on the sealed envelope ensuring it could not be examined by the Inquiry. Whatever it is in Laurence Snook's World War II career that was deemed to put our national security at risk in 1997 won't be available for inspection till thirty years from that date!

Snook's superior officer at Hollywood Hospital in Perth was Colonel John Adey. Adey's file, for reasons unknown, cannot be found in the archives.

The autopsy is likely to have been conducted at what was then the Hollywood Military Hospital. Remains from the Hospital were buried in Perth cemeteries and there should be documentary records of all such burials. The records of the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board of W.A. (MCB) list some 159 "unknown" persons buried in graveyards under their care and control. Amongst these unknown burials are a

number of recording anomalies which are still being investigated with the assistance of the MCB.¹

28.2 The source of the information in Mr Samuels' book was Mrs Grace Richardson, the sister of Capt Snook. She said she recollected a conversation between Capt Snook, her sister Beulah and herself, possibly in the presence of her mother, that occurred at their house in the Sydney suburb of Bexley in September 1943, when she was aged 11 years. She made no mention of her recollection of that conversation until 2005, when she mentioned it to her son, Matthew, who, remarkably, is the owner of Halstead Press, which published Mr Samuels' book *Somewhere Below*. According to a statutory declaration sworn by Mrs Richardson on 21 January 2009, her son, Matthew, and her husband were discussing Mr Samuels' book in 2005 when she heard her son say words to the effect that no bodies had been recovered from SYDNEY. She interposed that she knew of at least one body 'as my brother Laurence had told me many years before that he had conducted an autopsy on a body he said was wearing a SYDNEY life belt'.²

28.3 Mrs Richardson gave evidence before me to the same effect. She added that since her brother's death in 1998 she had read his diaries, which did not mention the matter. She also said that although her recollection was that her brother had said the body was wearing a 'Sydney lifebelt' she assumed that was a life ring. She said:

... My memory is that he said a lifebelt. Having been on a ship, I was aware that there were lifebelts, and maybe in my memory a lifebelt might have been my interpretation of what he meant, whether it was a life jacket or some other support thing, but my memory was that it was a lifebelt.

Q: A round ring?

A: Yes. That was my assumption of what he was saying, yes.³

But later she said, 'It could have been a life support of some sort'.⁴

28.4 As noted, Mr Samuels' book was published in 2007. In it he quoted from a statement dated 12 June 2007 and made by Mrs Richardson, as follows:

In 1943, he spent his leave with us, our mother, two sisters and I, in Sydney where we then lived. I was about 11 years old. He told us

¹ PUB.001.0001 at 0110 to 0111

² WIT.026.0001_R at 0002_R to 0003_R

³ TRAN.034.0001_R at 0006_R at Line 9

⁴ TRAN.034.0001_R at 0006_R at Line 31

about an examination he had performed on a badly decomposed body, the offensive state of which had caused his offsider to leave the lab. He said the body was wearing a HMAS Sydney life belt and was found some distance from where it might have been expected.⁵

- 28.5 After Mr Samuels' book was published an anonymous letter was written to him—'Mr Samwells'. It purported to come from Subiaco in Western Australia and was in the following terms:

Subiaco Western Australia
June 2007

Dear Mr Samwells,

I have been following the story and the many letters about H.M.A.S. Sydney in the Post newspaper over here. You'll forgive me if I don't want my name used because I'm too well known locally and beside I'm too old to get the gloves on with the government.

I read your book somewhere below last year and I agree with your arguments and would not be writing to you now except for a bit of Dutch courage when I read that Jules Ingvaren [sic] had come out and said his piece about radio signals from those poor buggers on that ship.

For my part I want to tell you something as well that I've never talked about and it has to do with what your [sic] wrote about Lawrence Snook and the body he autopsied up there at the hospital. I was the ambulance driver who bought the sailor to the hospital.

I was sent up under escort to Denham where there was a lot of army blokes about when we got there. I was given a direct order by a sergeant Provo to shut my gob for good if I knew what was good for me. The next thing we went into this tent and I remember it very well because it was the first time I'd ever seen a dead man.

On the table was a stretcher and a body in putrid state of condition and I remember his face looked like it had melted but it wasn't burnt. The chap was wearing a sailor officers [sic] shirt and more important he was wearing a life belt clearly printed H.M.A.S. Sydney. The three or four army blokes in the tent with me didn't seem to be in much of a hurry and we stepped outside for a smoke. The sergeant asked me if I knew what the body inside was all about and of course I said yes because the H.M.A.S. Sydney had been sunk weeks before that. I also remember the stink getting up my nose as a sort of sweet sick smell.

When we'd had a puff we went back into the tent and I stood back while the sergeant and a corporal rolled the body onto a canvas sheet and then I held the tent flap open when they lifted the stretcher and walked it out to my ambulance. I had another escort all the way south

⁵ COI.005.0159_R

and those two provosts stayed with me when an orderly and me carried the stretcher into the building.

What happened then I only found out when I read your book but two days later after I think on a Saturday I was told I'd be going up north again and Colonel Adey read me the riot act about never speaking about any of this business. About mid afternoon I was told to get my ambulance and bring it down to the side of the boiler room. Two orderlies and my provost escort were there with a coffin they then put in the back of the ambulance and covered it over with a tarp.

We drove north in a convoy of two right through the night and got to Mount Magnet next morning which I now really was sure was a Sunday. We were met by I think five soldiers and an officer who was a Captain on the main road and proceeded out to the cemetery.

There was nothing formal just the coffin and four of those men lowering it into the ground. They'd started back filling when the sergeant tapped me on the arm and we went and got back into the ambulance.

As I said I've never spoken of it until today but I can tell you one thing and that is the poor bugger your [sic] looking for is in that old boneyard in his unmarked grave still now because the military would never had run the risky business of digging him up again.

Go after him Mr Samwells he must have family left somewhere.

All the best.⁶

28.6 The material set out in the foregoing constitutes the entirety of the material said to support the allegations made by Mr Samuels. It raises five questions:

- Did Capt Snook conduct autopsies?
- Where was the body found on which it is said the autopsy was performed?
- When was the autopsy performed?
- Did the body come from SYDNEY?
- What became of the remains after the autopsy?

⁶ PTE.005.0053

Did Capt Snook conduct autopsies?

28.7 Capt Snook was not a doctor. His degree was in agricultural science. He might have had some later scientific experience or training, but he certainly never had any qualification in medicine or surgery. His army record shows that on 19 January 1942 he was appointed 'Assistant Pathologist', which might be consistent with his scientific background and could explain his appointment to hospital units. On 2 March 1944 he was transferred from the Australian Army Medical Corps (Miscellaneous) to the Australian Army Medical Corps (Scientific).⁷

It is extremely unlikely that a person who was not a medical practitioner would have conducted an autopsy in 1941 or 1942.

Under the *Coroners Act 1920 (WA)*, a coroner was given power to conduct an inquest into the 'manner and cause of the death' of a person where there was reason to suspect that a person has died a 'violent or unnatural death, or has died a sudden death of which the cause is unknown'.⁸ If an autopsy is required it is to be performed by a medical practitioner.⁹ Non-medical practitioners did not perform autopsies. Nor were autopsies performed without an order from the coroner.

It is improbable in the extreme that Capt Snook performed any autopsy.

Where was the body found on which it is said the autopsy was performed?

28.8 The only material pointing to where the alleged body came from is the statement in the anonymous letter just quoted that the author was sent up to 'Denham where there was a lot of army blokes'.¹⁰ The body was said to be in a tent.

Denham is on the Peron Peninsula in Shark Bay¹¹—see Figure 28.1. How a body said to have come from SYDNEY could have reached Denham is unexplained. How it came to be in an Army tent is unexplained. There was no Army depot at Denham in late 1941 or early 1942.

⁷ COI.005.0159_R

⁸ COI.007.0058 at 0060

⁹ COI.007.0058 at 0072

¹⁰ PTE.005.0053

¹¹ WEB.001.0045

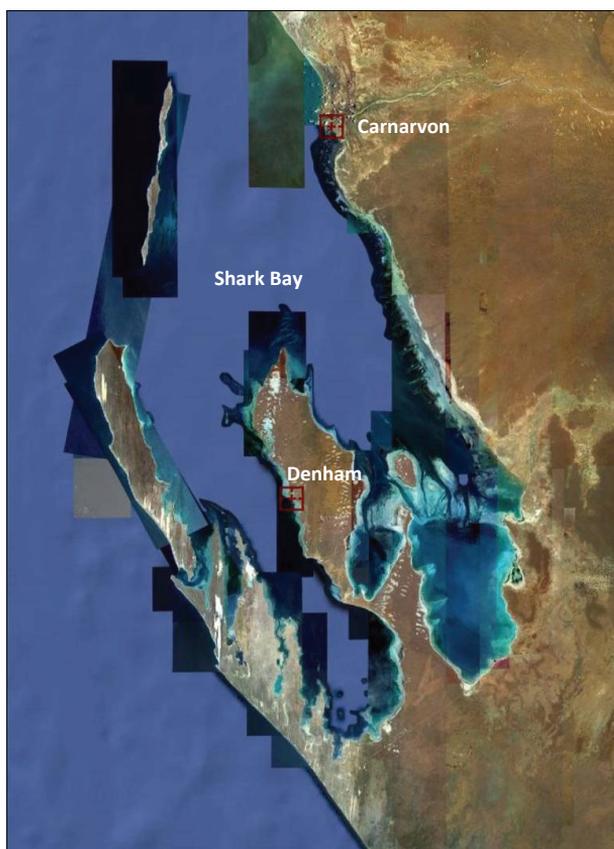


Figure 28.1 Shark Bay showing the position of Denham¹²

When was the autopsy performed?

28.9 The only evidence about when it is said the autopsy was performed on the body said to have been taken to the hospital (presumably Hollywood Hospital) emerges from the anonymous letter. Having seen the body wearing 'a life belt clearly printed H.M.A.S. Sydney', the author knew the body came from that ship, which 'had been sunk weeks before that'. Accordingly, if that is to be believed, the body was transported to Hollywood Hospital some time in December 1941 or, at the latest, January or February 1942.¹³

Here the story falls apart. That is because neither Capt Snook nor Col Adey was in Australia at that time. Capt Snook could not have performed an autopsy because he was overseas in the Middle East between 19 October 1940 and 23 May 1942. On the latter date he

¹² COI.011.0024

¹³ PTE.005.0053

disembarked from SS DUNTROON in Adelaide. He travelled by train to Sydney on 24 May, arriving there on 26 May and remaining there until 5 June, when he travelled by train to Melbourne. On 16 June he left Melbourne by train, arriving in Perth on 20 June 1942.¹⁴

Similarly, Col Adey was returning from the Middle East¹⁵ on DUNTROON in May 1942. It follows that Col Adey could not have read 'the riot act' to the anonymous author of the document Mr Samuels provided to the Inquiry to support his allegation.

- 28.10 On his arrival in Perth on 20 June 1942 Capt Snook was directed to report to COL Male, the Deputy Director of Medical Services in Perth. Col Adey was posted to the Army Hospital at Merredin, about 240 kilometres east of Perth. According to Capt Snook's son, relying on Capt Snook's diary, it was not until 10 November 1942 that Capt Snook marched into the Merriden Army camp, thus coming under the authority of Col Adey.¹⁶

It follows that, if the anonymous ambulance driver is to be believed, the autopsy could not have been performed before 10 November 1942, a year after the sinking of SYDNEY.

Did the body come from SYDNEY?

- 28.11 The only material to suggest that the body came from SYDNEY is the account of Mrs Richardson and that of the anonymous letter writer. Mrs Richardson said her brother had told her the body was wearing 'a HMAS Sydney life belt'; the anonymous author said the body was wearing 'a life belt clearly printed HMAS Sydney'.¹⁷

- 28.12 Each officer and rating was issued a life belt. Commonwealth Navy Order 163, promulgated on 28 November 1939, directed as follows:

Each officer and rating embarked, if not already in possession of a lifebelt, is to be issued with one on "permanent loan" by the vessel which he joins. The belt is to be retained in the possession of each officer or rating for the period of the War.¹⁸

- 28.13 The life belts did not bear the name of the ship on which the officer or sailor served, and they remained with the person wherever they were posted. The evidence of former SYDNEY sailors makes it clear that personnel were responsible for their own life belt, which was stored in

¹⁴ NAA.091.0005; NAA.091.0008; NAA.091.0009

¹⁵ NAA.092.0027

¹⁶ EML.003.0018_R at 0019_R

¹⁷ PTE.005.0053

¹⁸ EML.005.0112; EML.005.0112_01

their personal locker.¹⁹ Officers and sailors often wrote their name on their life belt because it was a required personal possession; they did not write the name of the ship on which they were at that time serving.

- 28.14 It follows that the supposed identification of the body by reference to a life belt either 'clearly printed with HMAS Sydney' or 'wearing a Sydney life belt' is not a possible method of identification. It is a fabrication designed to associate the body with SYDNEY.²⁰

What became of the remains after the autopsy?

- 28.15 According to the anonymous letter writer, having been read the 'riot act' by Col Adey, he was directed to take a coffin in his ambulance to Mt Magnet, where the coffin was buried in the cemetery. The writer apparently assumed that in the coffin were the remains of the body he said he had transported to the hospital and on which the autopsy was said to have been performed.²¹

- 28.16 Despite there being little likelihood of the grave of the unknown person being found, the Inquiry compared a list of known burials at Mt Magnet cemetery with the list of the lost crew of SYDNEY. There were, unsurprisingly, no matches.²²

Conclusion

- 28.17 I do not doubt that the anonymous letter is a fraud designed to support the allegations in Mr Samuels' book. Even Mr Samuels thought it was a fake. The letter was forwarded to him by his publisher, Halstead Press, to whom it is said it was sent by the anonymous author. Mr Samuels was asked:

Q: What did you make of this letter?

A: Not much, to tell you the truth.

Q: Why not?

A: I think it's too complex.

Q: You think it's a fake?

A: Yes, I do. I don't think it's a fake necessarily sir, but it's someone who may not be telling us all the truth or maybe telling us part of the truth but covering up the rest. I don't know what to make of it,

¹⁹ SUBM.006.0147_R; SUBM.006.0156_R

²⁰ PTE.005.0053

²¹ PTE.005.0053

²² COI.008.0051_R

but I don't buy the story that this fellow was present at a cemetery in the middle of nowhere. I forget exactly where it was. It was somewhere in Western Australia, up north inland. It would have been a long way to take the remains of someone, keeping in mind that they didn't want to be seen doing it.²³

Whether the document is a fraud or not, the unsubstantiated allegation contains patent errors.

- 28.18 That leaves only Mrs Richardson's recollection of what she was told when she was 11 years old, 66 years ago. The only connection between the story as she recollects it and SYDNEY is the life belt supposedly being worn by the corpse. As noted, a life belt did not bear the name of the ship on which its possessor was serving, so there is in fact no connection with SYDNEY. Either Mrs Richardson's recollection of what her brother is said to have told her is in error in relation to the life belt or if Capt Snook did recount that the life belt was a SYDNEY one he was mistaken.
- 28.19 The possibility that Capt Snook performed an autopsy is remote. He was overseas for seven months after SYDNEY was lost. Further, he was not a medical practitioner; he was an agricultural scientist who practised as a pathologist in the Australian Army Medical Corps.
- 28.20 The following can be said of statements in Mr Samuels' book:
- 'A secrecy order was placed on the sealed envelope'²⁴ of the records of Capt Snook. The Commission inspected the contents of the envelope, which contains no more than a request for a copy of Capt Snook's service record and a reply.²⁵ Copies of these documents were obtained directly from Army sources. The records held by the National Archives of Australia are not yet publicly available (see s. 31 of the *Archives Act 1983*).
 - 'Colonel John Adey's file, for reasons unknown, could not be found in the archives.'²⁶ It has been found and is referred to in this chapter.
 - There are 159 'unknown'²⁷ bodies buried in cemeteries in Western Australia. In 2005 a story entitled *Karrakatta's Secret Graves Hold the Key to Sydney's Sinking* was published. The story referred to a yet to be published book about the ship's demise—that being Mr

²³ TRAN.022.0001_R at 0118_R Line 13

²⁴ PUB.001.0001 at 0111

²⁵ CORR.018.0127_R at 0128_R to 0129_R

²⁶ PUB.001.0001 at 0111

²⁷ PUB.001.0001 at 0111

Samuels' book *Somewhere Below*. Mr Samuels is quoted as saying he believed 'bodies of Sydney crewmen are buried in the graves', those being 'Sixty-six mystery graves at Karrakatta'.²⁸

The Commission made inquiries about the unmarked graves at Karrakatta. The Western Australian Metropolitan Cemeteries Board advised that, where records showed a burial as 'unknown burial', it means that the identity of the person was not known. Other details, however, are known.²⁹ There are 111 unknown burials in the Karrakatta cemetery, Western Australia's largest. Of those, 61 were stillborn babies.³⁰ Of the remaining 50, five are of individuals recorded as being aged 16 years or less, seven are recorded as being female, 10 are recorded as people buried before 19 November 1941, and 19 are recorded as dying after 1950. The remaining nine are listed as 'unknown' and no other identifying information is recorded.

- 28.21 The Western Australian Coroner advised the Inquiry 'this office does not hold any information or record regarding any such incident or autopsy'.³¹

I have no doubt that is because there never was any such autopsy or burial.

²⁸ SUBM.008.0047

²⁹ MCB.001.0003

³⁰ MCB.001.0005

³¹ CORR.022.0145