

## HMAS SYDNEY: A SOLDIER REMEMBERS

Our search for answers to the riddle of the loss of the HMAS *Sydney* on 19 November, 1941 tends, naturally enough, to focus on the actual engagement that caused the sinking. But what of the circumstances of the Australian ship immediately prior to this battle? Might not some clues to the mystery be found there?

From the start the investigation into the sinking has been hampered by the absence of Allied - Australian - witnesses to it. The feeling has been that we have only one side of the story - and from the enemy side at that.

What may not be widely understood, however, is that there were witnesses to the *Sydney's* operational behaviour in the 48 hours or so leading up to the tragedy - behaviour that could well, in consideration with the other evidence that has come - and is still coming - to light, help us to understand why an Australian naval loss of such magnitude occurred.

In early November 1941 Adelaide World War Two veteran and historian, Max Venables, was a young Australian army soldier with his unit, the 8 Division Ammunition Sub Park. Between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of that month they were aboard the troop carrier HMAT *Zealandia* en route from Melbourne to Singapore via Fremantle in Western Australia. The HMAS *Sydney* was one of their escort ships for this journey.

Max describes what he saw of the ill-fated vessel in its last two days in his war history entitled, *From Wayville to Changi and Beyond*:

On 17<sup>th</sup> November 1941, HMAS *Sydney* left the escort to intercept an unknown ship on the horizon. She proceeded about halfway to the ship when she must have received the correct answer to her signals and returned to resume escort duties. During this time, life jackets were worn for some considerable time [ie by those aboard the troopship].

HMAS *Sydney* returned to escort HMAT *Zealandia* and when both ships were near each other, they stopped. An aircraft appeared on the stern of HMAS *Sydney*. Sailors were working on the aircraft for sometime but nothing seemed to happen. Then a crane was used to lower the aircraft into the ocean. The sailors working on the aircraft were, I believe, trying to start the motor without success. After some considerable time, the aircraft was lifted back onto the deck. It did not fly.

On 18 November, Max says, a British warship, the HMS *Durban*, took over the escort duty from HMAS *Sydney*. Those on board the *Zealandia* (and HMS *Durban*) must have been the last Allied observers to see the ship's company on HMAS *Sydney* alive.

According to Max, '[b]efore HMAS *Sydney* departed on 18/11/1941, she completed a ceremonial parade around HMAT *Zealandia* with all hands on deck'. It appeared, he says, that she was heading toward another operational target rather than simply returning to home base. The HMAS *Sydney* 'headed in a south-west direction instead of south-east for Fremantle'.

On the following day the HMAS *Sydney* was lost with all hands. And on the day after that Max and his unit were landed on Singapore in time for the start of the momentous events - defeat and capture by the Japanese - that were to engulf them there.

Max's eye witness account of the HMAS *Sydney* immediately prior to its sinking is undoubtedly an important part of our war history and may well contain some important pieces in the puzzle.

Was the unknown ship the *Sydney* went to investigate the German raider that was to sink her? If so, and the Captain of the *Sydney* felt he had the 'all clear' and signaled shore to this effect, does it help to explain *Sydney's* tactical approach the following day? What signal might have come back to *Sydney* in reply? Could Captain Burnett, the *Sydney's* commander, have been ordered to take another look – this time at close quarters in a certain kind of way?

And what about the ship's aeroplane? The recent Parliamentary inquiry into the sinking acknowledged that the failure to deploy the aircraft may have resulted in a tactical disadvantage contributing to the tragedy. Max's observations from the deck of the *Zealandia* raise the possibility that the plane was not deployed because it was not mechanically serviceable and couldn't be used.

Max's memoir is a strong reminder that, while we have to accept that there were no alternative witnesses to the primary event, there may still be reliable, and so far unheeded, witness accounts out there of important secondary significance that can and should be considered along with the primary evidence on the sinking.

Only in this way can we get as close as possible to the truth on what looks like remaining, even with the recent discovery of the twin wrecks, a mystery that can not be fully solved.