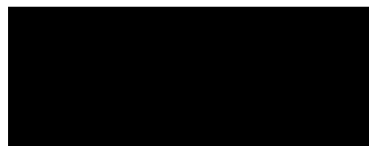


DR STRACHAN

  
SUBM.008.0170\_R



2<sup>nd</sup> September 2000.

I have been requested to give my impressions of the atmosphere at RAAF Station Pearce immediately preceding the loss of the HMAS Sydney on the 19th November 1941.

In those days the Station Sick Quarters was an entirely separate block not far from the Station Headquarters. Being separate we did not become involved so much in the usual traffic of information that travelled between the Station Headquarters and the various other sections of the Station and the Squadrons (No. 14 and 25); what we did get was the usual chit chat of servicemen and women at sick parades and in the hospital section.

But there was a general feeling of excitement which gradually built up and also that a certain problem was to be resolved. All this came to a climax at approximately 4.30 pm, 19th November 1941 when the bus that took those living in Perth was about to leave and the whole place was instantly "lit up" with the knowledge that "the Sydney was in action" and the matter would be finished with success.

The next day the whole feeling of Pearce was changed with the horror that the Sydney had been lost and the hope that there would be survivors.

From memory there were no survey flights sent to look for survivors for 4-5 days and then the news came that the only survivors were not Australian but German. As the air crews came back for rest etc. the main remark was how "cocky the Germans were".

[The German survivors were kept separate from the air crew and guarded by the Home Guard until regular soldiers arrived from Perth].

During this period I spoke with the Aerodrome Defence Officer, F/O Adrian WATTS (ex RAN 1914-18 War) and we both agreed the situation was mysterious to say the least. He came up with the remark that losing his ship would go very hard for Burnett because he was Catholic and that would go against him. He said he was in the first intake into the RAN College at Geelong with Burnett and they had a pretty hard time. [Collins was also a Catholic but changed his religion].

[This conversation was confirmed many years later when I spoke to one of NOIC Fremantle who was in the same intake with Burnett's sons in 1944. Both of them were given a hard time by the Captain-in-Charge Naval College Jervis Bay.

From 20th November the atmosphere at Pearce was one of depression and wonder that it could happen and of course the realisation that the War had come to Australia's doorstep.



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On the 29th November I was detailed to go to Carnarvon to relieve the local Doctor there as he was "worn out having to deal with such an influx of people".

F/L Cook, a very efficient commercial pilot in peacetime, was loading supplies in a Hudson and I was to take the 2nd Pilot's seat. When the time to take off came F/L Cook did not use the usual strip in the middle of the air field but went into one corner and took off with full power, just missing the trees. I was full of admiration for his professionalism but in myself quite worried that he may not make it.

When we got as far as Geraldton we received a message to say that the search had been called off and so back to Pearce we came.

Dr E G Strahan  
Wing Commander (Hon):  
RAAF Reserve (inactive)