

George Thomas Carthy



In April 1966, a new land sub-division was established at the north-west corner of Freeman and Blackshaws Roads in Altona North. A list of names was submitted for the new streets and courts, and the Altona Council chose the first eight to be named after service personnel who were killed in action during World War 2. They were also listed on the Memorial standing in front of the council buildings in Civic Parade. One of these streets was to be known as Carthy Street, named after Able Seaman¹ George Thomas Carthy of the Royal Australian Navy.

George Thomas Carthy was born 14 June 1920 in Fitzroy, the eldest of two children born to parents George Martin Carthy and Daisy Carthy (nee Sparks). At the time of George's birth, the Carthy's were living in Seves Street, Altona, having moved to the seaside suburb just after their marriage in 1918. In March 1925, George Thomas Carthy was to lose his father who was only 47. It is believed that he died from a snake bite for which he was unable to receive treatment in time. Daisy Carthy was now left to raise her two infant children.

The family remained living in their home in Seves Street, and both children attended the local Altona primary school. When World War 2 was declared in September 1939, George Thomas Carthy immediately enlisted with the Royal Australia Navy in Williamstown. George was nineteen years old. It is believed that his father, George Martin Carthy, served in the Australian navy during World War 1, being assigned to the *HMAS Sydney*². So, perhaps George Thomas Carthy saw his enlistment as not only his duty to his country, but also as keeping up a family tradition.

George completed his training at the naval base *Cerberus* before being assigned to the *HMAS Westralia* in February 1940. The *Westralia* spent time patrolling East Indies waters for enemy shipping before travelling to Darwin for exercises and drills. She then returned to Fremantle in late May to undertake escort duties. On 25 June, the *Westralia* departed Fremantle for Colombo to begin a period of patrol and escort duties on the East Indies Station, which was to last until January 1941. It was an uneventful routine service over a large area of sea, which covered the whole of the northern and western areas of the Indian Ocean from Sumatra to Bombay, and South to Mauritius.

On 23 December 1940, the *Westralia* made her final departure from Colombo, detached from the East Indies station, and proceeded for Fremantle. On 11 January 1941, she returned to Sydney after an absence of ten months. It was here that George found himself reassigned to the *HMAS Sydney* that had recently been refitted. This would have been when fellow Altonian Douglas Knapp was also assigned to HMAS Sydney. Given the size of the crew and that both men had not enlisted at the same time, they may never have met or possibly known each other.

For the next five months, the *HMAS Sydney* with George onboard undertook escort duties around the coast of Australia, and through the islands of Indonesia and Fiji. Their key job was to ensure the safety

¹ In the Royal Australian Navy, able seaman (AB) is the second lowest of the non-commissioned member ranks, ranking above seaman and below leading seaman.

² This was the HMAS Sydney I. The first HMAS Sydney was a Town Class light cruiser; one of three ordered in 1910, which were part of the initial Australian fleet unit. It was launched in 1912 and decommissioned in 1928. It famously sunk the German naval vessel *Emden* in November 1914. The HMAS Sydney that George served on was the replacement ship bearing the same name.

of merchant and troop transport ships. It was also during this period that George announced his engagement to marry Irene Violet Payne from Seddon.



HMAS Sydney (image courtesy of Virtual War Memorial Australia)

HMAS Sydney sailed from Fremantle on Armistice Day, 11 November 1941, to escort the troopship *Zealandia* to Sunda Strait, where she was relieved by the British cruiser *HMAS Durban* for the last leg of the voyage to Singapore. The voyage was without incident. At noon on 17 November, the *Zealandia* was turned over to *HMS Durban* and the *HMAS Sydney* then proceeded back to Fremantle. She was expected to arrive on the afternoon of 20 November 1941.

However, she did not arrive on time, prompting the District Naval Officer in Western Australia to report this to the Naval Board at 11 a.m. the following day. This did not immediately concern the Naval Board as they had been advised that the *Zealandia* had arrived later than anticipated and it was assumed that the *Sydney* had been delayed too. There was also the possibility that she might have been diverted for another purpose and had not broken radio silence. When she had not returned by 23 November, she was instructed by the Naval Board to report by signal. There was no reply.

HMAS Sydney had been proceeding south along the northwest coast of Western Australia when she sighted what appeared to be a merchant vessel at about 16:00 on 19 November 1941, some 130 miles west of Shark Bay. The ship was in fact the German naval ship *HSK*³ *Kormoran*. The German navy's largest auxiliary cruiser, the *Kormoran*, now disguised as the Dutch merchant ship *MV Straat Malakka*, had entered the Indian Ocean some months ago and was making her presence felt throughout the region.

The *HMAS Sydney* challenged the vessel continuously, using her searchlight while at the same time closing the range between the two ships. Merchant vessels were known to be less efficient at visual signalling and so, the Germans exploited this knowledge through their actions on their flag deck and by their slow response to the *Sydney's* visual challenges. At 17:00, to further the deception, *Kormoran* broadcast a 'suspicious ship' message, feigning a cry for help in the name of *Straat Malakka*.

³ HSK – was used by the German navy being 'Handels-Stör-Kreuzer' meaning Military Cruiser Ship

The *Sydney's* efforts to establish the true identity of the vessel resulted in her closing the range to a point where she no longer had the advantage of her superior armament. At approximately 17:15, the *Sydney* had drawn almost abeam of *Kormoran* to starboard, less than a kilometre distant. Finally, when concealment of this vessel's true identity was no longer possible, and with the advantage of surprise, the German captain ordered the Dutch colours to be struck. They hoisted the German naval ensign and opened fire at approximately 17:30 with all armament at a range 'somewhat more than a kilometre.

It is likely that the raider's first salvo⁴ destroyed the *HMAS Sydney's* bridge, with the result that her primary control was immediately put out of action. The *Sydney's* own guns opened fire almost simultaneously with a full salvo that passed over *Kormoran* without inflicting damage. *Kormoran* again scored hits on the *Sydney*, with two salvos hitting her bridge and midship sections. According to the Germans, all of the *Kormoran's* armament was brought to bear on the *Sydney*, concentrating on her bridge, torpedo tubes, and anti-aircraft batteries.

It was reported by the Germans that the *HMAS Sydney* opened fire fast and with great accuracy, hitting the *Kormoran* in the funnel and engine room, the latter of which quickly became on fire. Smoke from the fire hid the *Sydney* from *Kormoran's* bridge, but the raider continued to engage with her guns as the range opened to approximately 4400 yards. At around this time, one of the raider's two torpedoes struck the *Sydney*.

The *HMAS Sydney*, crippled and now on fire from the bridge to the funnel⁵, steamed slowly to the south, returning only sporadic fire from her secondary armament. Although this fierce action had lasted only half an hour, both ships had been dealt mortal blows. The *Sydney* then changed course and left the area, being last seen by the Germans about ten miles away, heading approximately southeast. Thereafter, until about 22:00, all that was seen was a distant glare, then occasional flickerings until midnight, at which time the *Sydney* disappeared.

Of the *HMAS Sydney's* total complement of 42 officers and 603 ratings, tragically none survived, including George Thomas Carthy. It was some days later before the loss of the *Sydney* was realised as she had not returned to port as scheduled. A search had also picked up survivors from the German ship on lifeboats and from the shore. It was sometime later that the families and the general population were advised of the loss. The wreckage of the *HMAS Sydney* and war grave for 645 sailors was not located until 16 March 2008. So many young men, including George Thomas Carthy, gave their lives in their duty to protect our coastline and country.

George's mother continued living in Altona, having now lost the two men in her life. For a short period of time, she moved to Western Australia but returned to Altona around the late 1950s, living in Davies Street until her death in 1977. She would have witnessed the installation of the Civic Parade war memorial and the naming of Carthy Street in honour of her son. Of George's fiancée, Irene Violet Payne, we believe that she continued living with her parents in Seddon and in 1949 she married Frederick William Rosewarne who also lived in Seddon and had served in the army during World War 2.

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⁴ A salvo is a series of shots by an artillery battery with each gun firing one round in turn after a prescribed interval or the simultaneous discharge of two or more guns in military action.

⁵ Funnel is a nautical term for the ship's chimney/smokestack.

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