Douglas John Knapp

In April 1966, a new land sub-division was established at the north-west corner of Freemans and Blackshaws Roads in Altona North. A list of names was submitted for these new streets and courts, with the Altona Council choosing the first eight to be named after service personnel who were killed in action during World War 2. These names were also listed in the Memorial, situated in front of the council buildings in Civic Parade. One of these streets is known as Knapp Street, named in recognition of Stoker 2nd Class[1] Douglas John Knapp of the Royal Australian Navy.

Douglas John Knapp was born on 8 July 1923 in North Kensington, London, the third child born to Frederick Marlow Knapp and Rose Louisa Knapp (nee Daley). By the time that Douglas was born, his father had already sailed to Australia (February 1923) to find a new home and life for his growing family, as well as to seek out employment opportunities. Having found both in the Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy, he sent for his family to join him in Australia. In May 1925, Rose and their three children, aged five, four and nearly two, arrived onboard the *SS Berrima* at Port Melbourne to be reunited with Frederick.

Following a short stay in Fitzroy, the family moved to Footscray where Frederick took up employment at the Defense Explosive Factory, commencing around 1927. Douglas and his two elder siblings attended the local schools whilst getting used to the Australian way of life and change in climate. The family remained in Footscray until about 1939/1940 when they moved to the seaside suburb of Altona and into their new home in Davies Street. It was around the same time (September 1939) that World War 2 had commenced and Frederick's role at the Defense Explosive Factory became more critical to Australia's war efforts.

On 6 January 1941, at the age of 17, Douglas enlisted into the Royal Australia Navy in Williamstown. At about the same time as Douglas' enlistment, the *HMAS Sydney* was on its way back to the port of Sydney after a successful and eventful campaign within the Mediterranean Sea. Both Douglas and the *HMAS Sydney* were now on course for a fateful destiny in history.

Douglas completed his training at the naval base *Cerberus* before being assigned to a refitted-out *HMAS Sydney* on 23 May 1941. For the next five months, the *HMAS Sydney* with Douglas 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 of merchant and troop transport ships. In July 1941, Douglas celebrated his eighteenth birthday on board the ship.

On 1 November, the *HMAS Sydney* sailed from Fremantle to rendezvous with the *Zealandia*, which was on passage from Melbourne with the *HMAS Adelaide* as her escort. *HMAS Sydney* relieved *HMAS Adelaide* off King George's Sound, Albany, before escorting the troop ship to Fremantle where they arrived on 9 November. Two days later, the *HMAS Sydney* sailed with the *Zealandia* on the familiar 'milk run' to the Sunda Strait, signalling shore authorities before she would return to port in the PM of Thursday 20 November.

The *HMAS Sydney's* passage to the Sunda Strait was without incident, and at noon on 17 November, she rendezvoused with the *HMS Durban* which assumed responsibility for escorting the *Zealandia* on to Singapore. Relieved of her escort duty, *HMAS Sydney* reversed course and resumed the now well-worn navigational track that would take her and her crew back to Fremantle.

---

[1] Stoker – was someone who specialized in Engine-Room duties on a ship.

HMAS Sydney c1940

As she disappeared over the horizon, none of those watching aboard the Zealandia or *Durban* suspected that they would be among the last to see her. It would be another sixty-six years before friendly eyes once more gazed upon the pride of the Royal Australian Navy.

The *HMAS Sydney* proceeded 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[2] 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 previously 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 slow response to *HMAS Sydney*'s visual challenges. At 17:00, to further the deception, the *Kormoran* broadcast a 'suspicious ship' message, feigning a cry for help in the name of *Straat Malakka*.

The HMAS *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, *HMAS Sydney* had drawn almost abeam of the *Kormoran* to starboard, less than a mile distant. Finally, when concealment of the vessel's true identity was no longer possible, and with the advantage of surprise, the German captain ordered the Dutch colours to be struck. The German naval ensign was hoisted and they opened fire at approximately 17:30 with all armament at a range 'somewhat more than a mile'.

---

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

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

For a few seconds after her initial salvo, the *HMAS Sydney* did not reply. It appeared that her forward 'A' and 'B' turrets were put out of action, leaving only her after turrets 'X' and 'Y' to respond. It was reported by the Germans that *HMAS Sydney's* 'X' turret opened fast and accurate fire, hitting the *Kormoran* in the funnel and engine room. The 'Y' turret is said to have fired only two or three salvos, all of which went over. At about this time, one of the raider's two torpedoes struck *HMAS Sydney* under its 'A' and 'B' turrets. The other passed close ahead of the stricken ship, which was subjected to enfilading fire.

With her bow low in the water, the *HMAS Sydney* then turned sharply towards the *Kormoran* as though attempting to ram. As she did so, the top of 'B' turret was blown off and flew overboard. The cruiser then passed under the *Kormoran's* stern, heading southward. The *Kormoran*, maintaining her course and speed, was now on fire in the engine room where hits by the *HMAS Sydney's* 'X' turret had caused severe damage. Smoke from the fire hid *HMAS Sydney* from *Kormoran's* bridge, but the raider continued to engage with her guns as the range opened to approximately 4400 yards.

The *HMAS Sydney,* crippled and on fire from the bridge to the after funnel, steamed slowly to the south, returning only sporadic fire from her secondary armament. Although by now the range had opened to 6600 yards, *HMAS Sydney* continued to receive steady hits from the *Kormoran's* port broadside. At 18:00, at a range of 7700 yards, *Kormoran* then fired one torpedo that missed *Sydney*'s stern. This fierce action had lasted only half an hour, but both ships had been dealt mortal blows.

With the gathering gloom, the form of the *HMAS Sydney* was last seen by the Germans about ten miles off, heading approximately south-southeast. Thereafter, until about 22:00, all that was seen was a distant glare then occasional flickering until midnight at which time all traces of *HMAS Sydney* disappeared.

Of the *HMAS Sydney*'s total complement of 42 officers and 603 ratings, none survived, including Douglas John Knapp. It was some days later before the loss of HMAS Sydney was realised as she had not returned to port as scheduled and a search picked up survivors from the German ship on lifeboats and from the shore. It was sometime later that the families and general population were advised of the loss. The wreckage of *HMAS Sydney* and the war grave for 645 sailors was not located until 16

March 2008. So many young men, including Douglas John Knapp, gave their lives in duty to protect our coastline and the lives of others.

The Knapp family continued to live and serve the community of Altona until 1978 when Douglas' parents, Frederick (1972) and Rose (1978), passed away. Both parents would have had the honour of attending the unveiling of the eternal flame memorial in Civic Parade, bearing their son's name and the naming of Knapp Street in his memory.

Research: Graeme Reilly (ALHS 2023)

Edited: Adam Virgona

References

- Altona Star, 28 April 1966 p 4.
- Ancestry.com, UK, World War I Service Medal and Award Rolls, 1914-1920, Publisher-Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014.
- Ancestry.com, UK, Commonwealth War Graves, 1914-1921 and 1939-1947, Publisher - Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.
- Argus (Melbourne), 1 December 1941 p 3.
- Department of Veteran Affairs, https://nominal-rolls.dva.gov.au/, Douglas Knapp.
- HMAS Sydney II Memorial, http://www.sydneymemorial.com/, accessed 14 June 2023.
- National Archives Australia, Douglas Knapp RAN Records – Item 4434142.
- Royal Australian Navy, https://www.navy.gov.au/hmas-sydney-ii, accessed 20 June 2023.
- UK and Ireland, Outward Passenger Lists, 1890-1960 accessed 19 June 2023
- Victorian Electoral Roll 1931-1967