

U3A AUSTRALIAN HISTORY.

The Attack on Sydney Harbour, 31st May 1942.

On the 31st May 1942 the grim reality of War came to Sydney Harbour.

You may think that only a few months after the attack on Pearl Harbour and the fact that Darwin, Broome, Townsville and Cairns had been bombed , the wartime Port of Sydney Harbour would suffer a similar fate.

How wrong you would have been.

At this time the residents of Sydney had been having trial blackouts and there were Air Raid Wardens on patrol in every suburb. The citizens were not happy about these trials and many did not take them seriously.

There were also some citizens who were giving their spare time acting as Volunteer Wardens, Aircraft Spotters and Fire Wardens. There were a few who had even built an Air Raid Shelter in their backyard.

These people were quick to spring into action on the 31st May.

The Gunners on North and South Heads and the Patrol Boats on the Harbour were ready but they lacked one important item- ammunition.

The Leaders of all this were not ready and failed to come to terms with the fact that an attack was taking place.

Information that came quickly from the Gunners, the Wardens and the Patrol Boats was ignored.

The enemy was able to fly an aeroplane over Sydney on two occasions with little reaction by those in charge and three submarines were able to enter the Harbour and one was able to fire its two torpedoes before the alarm was raised.

It was by not obeying orders that Gunners and Patrol Boats were able to destroy two submarines and they showed great bravery on that night.

There were no medals for this bravery.

The Admiral in charge of the *Defence of the Harbour* would be Court-martialed. 27 young men died on this night. 21 Australian and British sailors and 6 Japanese Submariners.

This is their story.

In Wartime, the element of surprise is important and during the 1939-45 War, four Nations sought to exploit this by developing *Human Torpedoes* and *Midget Submarines*. These Nations were Britain, Italy, Germany and Japan.

It came as a shock when three Japanese *Midget Submarines* attacked Sydney Harbour in May 1942.

Australia was at war with Japan since December 1941 and things were very grim in our Nation at this time.

Malaya and Singapore had fallen and the Japanese Army was advancing in New Guinea with Port Moresby likely to fall. There had been many bombing raids on Darwin, Broome, Cairns and Townsville.

Our 8th Division, of 30,000 men and women, were POW's in Malaya and most of our Fleet had been sunk in the Sea Battles in the North. Our Army and Air Force were in Britain or Egypt.

In Sydney Harbour, on the 31st. May 1942, were the old Light Cruiser *HMAS Canberra* and the heavy Cruiser *USS Chicago*. They were the only major Warships left for the defense of Australia and they were a big target for the Japanese.

In Sydney Harbour there were large naval guns on North and South Heads, facing out to sea and several smaller guns facing into the Harbour.

From Bradleys Head on the North there was a gun battery and a net ran across the Harbour to the south side. In the centre was a lighter that could raise or lower the net when ships entered or departed. There were several warning alarms on this net.

At Bankstown there was a Squadron of *Airocobra* Fighters manned by young US Marine pilots who had little flying experience. These aircraft were only able to fly in the daytime as they had no night-flying instruments.

There were no other combat aircraft in Australia at this time.

On the 11th May 1942, Japanese submarines *1-22, 1-24, 1-27 and 1-28* were ordered to sail to Truk and each load a midget submarine on its deck *1-21 and 1-29* were to join them and these two Subs each had a light aircraft, with its wings folded, in a hanger in its conning tower.

These were all very large, long-distance submarines.

On the voyage to Truk, *1-28* was sighted by the US Submarine *Tautog* and was sunk.

The five remaining submarines set sail for Sydney with three Midget submarines on their decks and two aircraft in their conning towers.

There was a Radar Station in Brisbane and it was manned by a very inexperienced crew. Radar was very new at this time and those manning this station had never seen any action. As the five submarines passed Brisbane they showed up on the screen and an Officer was notified. He said that they were too small to be Warships and as submarines were supposed to be underwater the 'blips' must be whales.

No warnings were raised.

The five subs arrived off Sydney and a Floatplane, piloted by Lt. Ito was launched and flew to Sydney which was 12 miles away.

It was easy to find Sydney as it was not blacked out and the graving dock at the Naval Base at Garden Island was floodlit.

At the height of 500 feet the small plane, with its lights on, circled the *USS Chicago*, which was anchored off Garden Island. It then flew up the North Shore railway line, guided by the red and green lights

Lt. Ito had a *Railway map of Sydney* tied to one knee and a small torch tied to the other knee.

He then flew back down the North Shore line and drew a line across the *Chicago*. He then flew over the City to Central Station then back to the *Chicago*. Where the two lines crossed was now the target.

He also noted the positions of other ships in the Harbour, then he set off back to the Japanese submarines.

His Commander now had a map of all the targets for his Midget submarines.

The small plane was seen by many people in Sydney and it was said that it was the *Curtiss floatplane* from the *USS Chicago*. Several people who were Air Spotters on several Sydney tall buildings said that they were sure that the *Curtiss* was still sitting between the two funnels of the *USS Chicago*.

It was a much debated topic the next day.

It was decided that it must be friendly as it had its lights on and there were no Japanese markings on it. Even the Crew of the *Chicago* thought that it was “one of ours” as it had its lights on.

The man who was in charge of the *Defense of Sydney*, Rear Admiral Muirhead-Gould, was not interested in all this as he was more interested in his Dinner parties. He hated being away from Britain and did not like being in the Colonies.

Lt Ito would fly back to Sydney two days later and would once again fly at 500 feet, with his lights on, to check that all the targets were still there.

At first, all went well but several of the Air Spotters were sure that this was a Japanese plane and sounded the Alarm.

Sydney was blacked out but the Graving Dock was still floodlit.

Lt Ito flew back out to his submarines but the sea was too rough and he crashed when he landed. He was rescued and reported that the targets were still there.

The next day was the 31st May and there was much discussion about the night visitor. Some said that it was a Japanese floatplane but the authorities said that this was not possible. Where would it have come from?

The Admiral was not interested as he had an important dinner party with the Captain of the *USS Chicago* that night and he did not want it to be interrupted.

At 4.30 pm on the 31st May Japanese submarines 1-22, 1-24 and 1-27 released their Midgets 7 miles off Sydney and the Attack on Sydney Harbour had begun.

The first Midget with Lt Chuman and Petty Officer Ohmori arrived at the net at 8.30 and the alarm sounded but was ignored and not reported. The Midget ran into the net and became entangled. This was reported and a Naval boat with Lt Evers in charge of an armed crew of sailors was sent to investigate. After approaching with caution, Lt Evers sent a rating to see what was in the net. He reported that it was a submarine and the sailors wanted to attack it with their rifles.

Lt Evers hastily left the scene and reported to his superiors that it was a mine.

The two Japanese men had decided that there was no escape so they detonated an explosive charge in the Midget and were killed. The other two Midgets with Lt Ban and Petty Officer Ashibi and Lt Matsuo and Petty Officer Tsuzuku passed the net and sounded the alarm.

Rear Admiral Muirhead-Gould had been told that something was happening but he refused to leave his Dinner Party. When he heard that there was a submarine in the net he sprang into action and ordered that the General Alarm be sounded at 10.47pm

He also ordered that the Graving Dock lights be left on and that the Ferries keep running, with their lights on.

He did not order *All Ships be darkened* until 11.14pm.

He finally ordered that the Graving Dock turn its lights off at 11.30pm.

The Gunners on South Head had sighted a Midget with their searchlights and it was attacked by two Patrol boats, *Yandra* and *Sea Mist*. These were formerly privately owned boats manned by several young sailors and Captained by their owners who

were local business men. Each boat had a 4 pounder gun (but had no ammunition) and several Depth Charges.

Yandra rammed the Midget and bent its periscope. Both *Yandra* and *Sea Mist* attacked with depth charges and the Midget was destroyed at Taylors Bay.

This left the last Midget with Lt. Ban and Petty Officer Mamoru still in the Harbour causing a great deal of panic.

The Captain of the *USS Chicago* had left the dinner party and returned to his ship and ordered it to get steam up and head for the open sea. It was firing all of its anti aircraft guns into the sky and the red and green tracer bullets could be seen from miles away.

It was quite a sight from where I was at Gore Hill, where the Royal North Shore Hospital is today.

Lt. Ban was only 600 m from his target, the *USS Chicago*, which was clearly outlined against the floodlit Graving Dock. He fired his first torpedo which did not run true and it missed the *Chicago* and headed for the wall of the wharf where there was a Dutch submarine *K9* moored alongside an old Sydney Ferry, *HMAS Kuttatul*. The torpedo went under the K9 and hit the wall where it exploded under the *Kuttatul* which was reduced to matchwood.

The Kuttatul was a place where sailors who were on leave from their ships in the Harbour could spend the night and be taken to their ships the next day by small boats.

19 Australian and two British sailors were killed and 10 others were seriously injured,

Lt. Ban fired his second torpedo which also missed its target and it would run aground on Garden Island and it failed to explode. He then sailed back down the Harbour and was recorded by the alarm as he passed the net at 1.58am. His Submarine would never make it back to the waiting subs and would not be found until 2006.

Meanwhile there was total panic in Sydney Harbour. Small boats were running about. Searchlights were criss-crossing the waters. Every gun that could be fired was firing. Tracer bullets were going up into the sky.

The *USS Chicago*, with Captain Bode, went down the Harbour with all its guns blazing headed for the open sea. The fact that there were five large submarines out there did not occur to anyone on board. There could have been a huge Japanese task Force out there. *The USS Chicago* survived by pure luck.

The records of the RAN show that luck was certainly on the side of Sydney and its defenders in the early stages of the attack when inactivity and indecision were manifested.

The five Japanese Submarines waited for several days for the Midgets to return before setting sail for the long voyage back to Truk. Before leaving they surfaced and fired a dozen shells into Sydney. These landed in Rose Bay and caused some property damage but no casualties.

The price of houses in the Eastern Suburbs dropped and many local residents fled to the Blue Mountains.

On the 8th June the Submarines bombarded Newcastle for 30 minutes and there was considerable property damage but again no casualties,

Coastal Defense guns fired 4 rounds, it was all that they had, but they could not see the targets.

On the 9th June the bodies of the crewmen of the two Midgets were cremated in Sydney with full Naval Honours and their ashes would be returned to Japan. After the War a plaque was erected at Garden Island and Lt Matsuo's mother would make the journey from Japan for the ceremony.

There is a memorial to the 31 Australian and British sailors killed and wounded at Garden Island.

Rear Admiral Muirhead-Gould, The British Admiral in charge of Sydney's defense, who did not take reports that Sydney was being attacked and refused to leave his Dinner Party, was returned to Britain and was Court-martialed.

From the remains of the two Midget Submarines recovered from the Harbour, a complete vessel was constructed and was loaded onto a truck and taken by road to Melbourne, Adelaide and back to Canberra, stopping at many Country Towns on the

way. This allowed the public to see a Midget and it raised money for The Naval Relief Fund.

This composite Submarine is now on show at the Canberra War Memorial.

The third Midget with Lt Ban and Petty Officer Mamoru was found on the 20 November 2006, off Long Reef on the Northern Beaches.

Divers from the Royal Australian Navy would check the condition of the explosive charges in the submarine and declare that it was now a War Grave and should be untouched.

In Japan the brother of Lt. Ban said that the submarine should be untouched.

In 1968 the RAN honoured the Submariners when Mrs. Matsuo came to Sydney to honour her son. They provided a workboat and uniformed ratings to assist the 83 year old mother to scatter cherry blossoms on the water at Taylors Bay.

So ended the story of the Attack on Sydney. It is known that there was confusion and stupidity by those who were in charge. It is also important to remember that many servicemen behaved bravely. The Naval Patrol Boats manned by 17 year old sailors and captained by civilians fought bravely and were a credit to the RAN.

The US Marine Corps Pilots at Bankstown were young, poorly trained and equipped with unsuitable aircraft and their Officers told them that they could not take off. However one Pilot disobeyed orders and took his *Airocobra* into the air but it had no instruments for night flight and it crashed and killed its pilot. There is a Memorial to him at Bankstown but this was not approved by the US Military.

The Young Gunners on the Sydney Heads could not get the Admiral to issue orders for them to obtain ammunition as he did not want to leave his Dinner Party. They held up the store at gunpoint and took the ammunition which they used carefully. They would be Court-martialed and sent to remote camps in Northern Australia.

Submarine activity was to continue off the Australian Coast for the rest of the War and many Allied ships were sunk or damaged. RAAF Aircraft were engaged in patrols, flying from Evans Head, Coffs Harbour, Nowra and Moruya and many attacks were made on submarines. There were casualties on both sides.

I wish to dedicate this to all the young men- Australian, British, American, Dutch and Japanese who fought and died bravely and were wounded on the 31st May 1942 when the War came to Sydney Harbour.

(John Imrie, August 2020)