

BIOGRAPHY - TREVOR JAMES ARMISTICE JOHNSTONE

Trevor James Armistice Johnstone was born at Queenscliff, Victoria on 4 January 1919. He was the first child of Louis, a soldier at Fort Queenscliff, and Vera (nee Trigg of Bamba). Trevor was given the name of Armistice in celebration of the end of World War I that had occurred only a few weeks before his birth.

Trevor was described as a typical boy of his time growing up in this seaside town located at the entrance of Port Phillip Bay. Maybe it was watching the constant flow of ships coming and going through the Heads that inspired him to go to sea. On 2 October 1935 at the age of 16, on his brother Vern's 10th birthday, Trevor joined the Royal Australian Navy. At the time of enlistment, he was described as being 5' 4 1/4" (163 cm) with brown hair, blue eyes and a fresh complexion. After training at Cerberus, Ordinary Seaman Trevor Johnstone [No. 20901] was assigned to the Yarra (II) which was engaged in minesweeping activities in coastal waters. Later he was to serve on the Canberra (I), Voyager (I) and the Vampire (I) all engaged in patrolling coastal waters.

In March 1939, with war looming Trevor was posted to the Adelaide (I) which had been re-commissioned under the command of Capt H.L. Howden to participate in trade defence exercises in company with units of the Australian and New Zealand Squadrons, mercantile marine and aircraft of the RAAF.

Australia purchased a British ship called the Amphion and recommissioned it as the HMAS Perth (I). On 17 May 1939 Able Seaman Trevor Johnstone (as he was by this time), and the rest of the crew of the Adelaide, were transferred to the SS Autolycus for passage to Portsmouth, England to take over the HMAS Perth.

One of the first tasks for the newly refitted HMAS Perth was to represent Australia at the World Fair in New York. There she remained for 2 weeks in early August 1939 with the crew no doubt enjoying the little time that was left before the outbreak of war. Later while Perth was bound for Australia, she received new orders to stay and protect oil tankers and shipping operating in the West Indies and western Atlantic as it was fast becoming apparent that war was imminent. Apart from a short period in late November 1939 when the Perth passed through the Panama Canal and on to Cocos Island to fuel the Royal Canadian Navy destroyers, Ottawa and Restigouche, the Perth engaged in escort and patrol activities in the West Indies and western Atlantic until March 1940.

HMAS Perth finally arrived at Garden Island, Sydney on 31 March 1940 where most of April was taken up by a further refit followed by engine trials. On 5 May 1940, Perth briefly escorted the troopship Queen Mary as part of the third convoy of Australian troops going to the Middle East before returning to Sydney for further escort work, patrols and practice firings around coastal Australia. It may have been during this time that Trevor met his future wife, Ester Oyberg a Norwegian girl of Neutral Bay, Sydney.

Prior to joining the HMAS Sydney (II), Trevor spent 6 months at HMAS Cerberus becoming a Qualified LTO. It was during this time that Trevor and Ester married at St Andrews Church, Queenscliff on 22 March 1941. A month and a half later he was posted to the Sydney.

The HMAS Sydney (II) had achieved much success in the Mediterranean and the returning crew were feted with a civic reception and street parade with school

children being given a public holiday to attend. It would have been with mixed emotion that Trevor received this posting.

Trevor joined the ship on 7 May 1941 but his time on the Sydney was to be brief. Apart from a short visit to Noumea, Auckland and Suva while escorting convoys, the Sydney performed patrol and convoy escort duties in Western Australian waters. Ironically it was Armistice Day, 11 November 1941 when the Sydney left to escort the troopship Zealandia to Sunda Strait en route to Singapore. The outbound voyage was without incident but while returning to Fremantle the HMAS Sydney engaged in combat with the German cruiser Kormoran and on 20/11/1941, sank off the coast near Carnarvon. None of the 645 officers and crew survived. Trevor's wife of 7 months, his family and friends were left to mourn his tragic loss. The pain made so much worse by not knowing what had actually happened, not knowing what to believe and long clinging to the hope that he may one day return.

Trevor James Armistice Johnstone had 7 brothers and sisters, Millie (m Earle) of Newcomb (1920 - 2000), Nellie (Tiny) (m Thwaites) of Queenscliff (1921 - 2000), Coral (1923-1924), Vera (Johnnie) (m Hancock) of Bribie Island (1924-2000), Vern (1925 - 2003) former Mayor of Queenscliff and former President of Geelong Football Club, Noel of Geelong (1926 - 2002) and Lou of Bendigo area (1928 - 2004). Sadly all had passed on prior to the wreck of the HMAS Sydney being located, but they left behind a generation of offspring that recall the undercurrent of sadness at family events. There was always a pervading grief for the loss of a popular and much loved son and brother that should have been there, and the loss of an uncle that the next generation would never have a chance to meet.

Trevor's wife Ester returned to Norway after the end of the war. She later remarried and had 4 children but remained in touch with the family.

Trevor and the officers and crew are well remembered at the incredibly emotive memorial at Geraldton WA, the last Australian port of call for the HMAS Sydney before her encounter with the Kormoran.

Biography prepared by: Jeanette Johnstone - Nov 2008

Official Sources: National Archives of Australia (Serviceman Records), Royal Australian Navy website (Ship histories), Public Records Office of Victoria (Births, Deaths & Marriages).