

## Reg Smith

Reg Smith was born at Willoughby NSW on August 9<sup>th</sup> 1915 about the same time as the August offensive commenced on the Dardanelles where many fell in the charges at the Nek and battles of Lone Pine. As his mother had been married previously he joined three half brothers and one half sister. Later he was to be given two full brothers. His general upbringing was uneventful as his family was not blessed with riches – even so the family ate well as his father was always in work and his mother an excellent housekeeper.



**Figure 2 Reg Smith - Royal Australian Navy**

Reg went to Naremburn Superior Public School, Sydney. The superior meant that students could remain at the school to the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, to do what were then termed as manual subjects. Reg took that opportunity and remained to sit for the High School Entrance Examination, a necessary step to entering High School.

Like most young people of that era he joined the Boy Scouts Association becoming a Cub and then later a Boy Scout. He enjoyed the fellowship and was able to attend the weekly meeting and camping trips. When his younger brother joined the Navy League Sea Cadets he also joined and in his second year as a cadet won a proficiency medal.

In the depressed economy between the wars work was difficult to obtain. Reg managed a job with Warburton & Franki Pty Ltd a firm of Electrical Wholesalers as a messenger boy and at one time stood in for his brother as an electrical apprentice when the brother was hospitalised and off work for 6 weeks to keep his job for him. Reg also worked as steward and part time lift driver with Tattersalls Adams Hotel in Sydney. Because of the uncertainty of the times and the difficulty in getting a regular position, when the opportunity came to join the navy<sup>55</sup> he welcomed the chance to earn a regular living. However to his dismay he found out that the navy at that time were only recruiting lads born in 1916; this, technically at least made him ineligible, but with an old Remington typewriter and the willing help of his brother his birth certificate was adjusted. The ruse did not fool his naval recruiters. However they were impressed with his enthusiasm and Navy League experience. On the 10<sup>th</sup> September 1934 he was accepted as an Ordinary Seaman, signed on for 12 years and posted to HMAS *Cerebus*, Flinders Naval Depot for his basic training.<sup>56</sup>

After completing his training he joined HMAS *Brisbane*, a light cruiser built in 1916 due to be replaced by HMAS *Sydney* nearing completion in the shipyard of Swan, Hunter & Wigham Richardson Ltd at Wallsend-on-Tyne, UK. Arriving in the UK Reg joined the *Sydney* in Portsmouth on the 29<sup>th</sup> September 1935. The growing tension in the Mediterranean and Italy's invasion of Abyssinia on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1935 and the resulting crisis found HMAS *Sydney* joining the HMAS *Australia* already on exchange to the Royal Navy's Mediterranean station. Whilst in the Med' Reg was promoted to Able Seaman on the 7<sup>th</sup> May 1936. The *Sydney's* arrival on the Australian station did not occur until the 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1936.

HMAS *Sydney* remained in Australian waters until the outbreak of WWII. This period in home waters gave Reg the opportunity to marry Lily Dodd and start a family; so Bruce and his younger brother Denis were born. Whilst in Australian waters the *Sydney* performed local patrol duties and for a greater part was based in Fremantle as the Western Force Cruiser where it was when war was declared on 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 1939.

In April 1940 HMAS *Sydney* escorted the convoy US.2 bound for the Middle East, comprising the transports *Ettrick*, *Neuralia*, *Nevasa*, *Strathaird* and *Dunera* all carrying Australian troops. Leaving this convoy in the Indian Ocean HMAS *Sydney* proceeded via Colombo<sup>57</sup> to Alexandria, Egypt. The ship arrived on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1940 joining the 7th Cruiser Squadron of the Royal Navy. The ship went into action for the first time taking part in the bombardment of Bardia on 21 June 1940, an Italian Coastal stronghold in Libya<sup>58</sup>. The *Sydney* was engaged in a number of actions whilst in the Mediterranean perhaps the most famous being the sinking of the Italian cruiser *Bartolomeo Colleoni* on

<sup>55</sup> As part of the Australian government's build up of naval strength due to the worsening situation in Europe. See: G. Hermon Gill. *Royal Australian Navy 1939-1942* AWM Canberra 1957 at pp. 31-36

<sup>56</sup> RAN Record of Service – Smith William Reginald Devine Official Number 20368

<sup>57</sup> G. Hermon Gill. *Royal Australian Navy 1939-1942* AWM Canberra 1957 at p. 110

the 19<sup>th</sup> July 1940. On its return to Alexandria the ship was given a heroes' welcome. A crew member said "it was a continuous roar for about 15 minutes – something I will never forget"<sup>59</sup>. *Sydney* reached Fremantle on the 5<sup>th</sup> February 1941 then undertook a refit at Garden Island Dockyard NSW. On the 11th February 1941 officers and men of HMAS *Sydney* for what I believe to be the first and last time as one unit, marched past the Cenotaph in Martin Place. Leading Seaman<sup>60</sup> Reg Smith would have been among them on that day it is possible his wife Lily with the two boys would have been watching them go past, not realizing it would be for the last time.



**Figure 3 The HMAS Sydney Medallion**

The ship's crew were granted the freedom of the city and presented with a replica of the HMAS Sydney medallion that is now on a wall in the Sydney Town Hall. Bruce Johnson has his father's medallion that was given to his mother for safekeeping. It is a collectors item and quite rare because many of the recipients took theirs with them to the bottom of the sea somewhere in the Indian Ocean.

After the sentimental welcome in her home port, *Sydney* went to Fremantle to commence a long period of escort duty. On the 1<sup>st</sup> July 1941 Reg was promoted to the rank of Acting Petty Officer the rank he held at the time of the fateful engagement with the *Kormoran*.

Bruce only vaguely remembers his father, as he was age 3 years at the time when the *Sydney* was lost, he can't even remember him being in Sydney. It has only been in the last 10 or 12 years that he has been able to get hold of memorabilia or early photographs of his father. After the loss his mother, Lily, Bruce, and his younger brother Denis moved to his maternal grandmother's home where they stayed until 1949. Bruce said that things were a bit dicey for a while particularly when his younger brother Denis age 8 was killed in a car accident. It was shortly after that Lily Smith (nee Dodd) married again and became Mrs. Johnson and moved to North Sydney then Chatswood. They lost

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<sup>58</sup> G. Hermon Gill. *Royal Australian Navy 1939-1942* AWM Canberra 1957 at pp. 159-162

<sup>59</sup> Australian Heritage Volume 6 p.2039, Paul Hamlyn Series.

<sup>60</sup> Reg was promoted to A/Leading Seaman on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1940 whilst still in the Mediterranean: Smith's Service Record in possession of his son, Bruce Johnson, Cambridge Street, Willoughby, NSW.

contact with the Smith family for 20 odd years – and as Bruce says being Smiths didn't make it easy for tracing. It was almost impossible to find out where they were – and to add to that they were wanderers. Les Smith, Reg's brother served in the RAAF and had lived almost everywhere, his other brother was the same running garages all through the country areas. The sister also moved around working at Dubbo, Wagga and all those sort of places and rarely if ever came to Sydney making it difficult for Bruce to pick up the pieces. It was only chance that I came to meet Bruce, due to the search for information on my own brother.

One evening I received a telephone call from a Max Scott in Western Australia who like me had been searching for information about his brother Walter a fellow member of my brother's crew. Max suggested I contact a John Gibson of Gunnedah NSW to gain further information about the loss of Catalina A24-203. John was on the same operation to mine the approaches to the Japanese Naval Base at Makung; he told me that he witnessed A24-203 hit by flak and explode on its run in. I went to Gunnedah and met the Gibson. John convinced me to attend the No1 Flying Boat Repair Depot Reunion at Lake Boga, where I met Les Smith and his son Graham. It was in the course of conversation with Les I discovered that his brother Reg went down with the *Sydney*. Les promised to give me something for this book, but said that Bruce Johnson would probably have more to offer. Les gave me some of background that is related here. Both John and Les have both passed on.