

A Gentleman and a Rascal



Autobiography
by
Brian Buzzard

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CHAPTER 11

A search for Sydney

Front Cover: I wish to thank artist Laura Cole for her kind permission to use the second painting from the triptych **Kimberley Grasses**.

Disclaimer: Every effort has been made to contact the people mentioned in this book, we apologise if any omissions have been made.

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CHAPTER 11

A search for Sydney

Mike Seymour, a West Australian, was the second pilot and navigator on one of the Catalinas sent over from Port Moresby to search for the Sydney. Before the war he was a teacher at Geraldton from where he enlisted in the airforce. He finished up as a Squadron Leader and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. On discharge he joined Civil Aviation and stayed with them in Sydney until he retired there. He gave his account of the search for the Sydney to Jack Riddell who was an engineer-airgunner on Catalinas right from their arrival in Australia. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal. He wrote a book on the Catalinas called *The First and the Furthest*.



The Banner of the "First and the Furthest."

Mike Seymour's account of the search for the Sydney is as follows.

***"The Search by Catalinas of 11 Squadron
for the survivors of "HMAS Sydney"***

On November the 19th 1941, the cruiser Sydney and the German raider "Kormoran" fought a naval engagement in the Indian

Ocean some 200 or more miles off the coast of Western Australia on a latitude somewhere between Geraldton and Carnarvon. Following the action both vessels sank - the Sydney without trace and with the loss of all hands - the "Kormoran" was abandoned in sinking condition and its crew came ashore on the West Australian coast and surrendered to the Australian defence forces when they were located.

Responding to a request on 24/11/41 for reconnaissance of the area, two Catalinas were dispatched urgently on 25/11/41 from I I Squadron which was then based at Port Moresby. These aircraft were required to cover areas of sea beyond the capacity of the aircraft then available in W.A.

At that time two experienced American Navy aircraft captains were serving on exchange duty with 11 Squadron, Lt. Hutchinson and Lt. Weller.

From Port Moresby A24-I I, commanded by Lt. Hutchinson of the U. S. Navy with Pilot Officer R. M. Seymour as second pilot/navigator, left Port Moresby at dawn on November 25th for Fremantle W. A. via Darwin. We landed at Darwin some nine hours later, refuelled and took off for Fremantle, arriving there soon after dawn the next day after a further sixteen hour flight. We had flown for twenty five hours in an elapsed time of about twenty seven.

On the previous day, S/L "Hoot" Gibson DFC and Lt S Weller of the U.S. Navy were delivering a Catalina A24-14 from Rathmines to Port Moresby via Townsville when they received a signal diverting them via Darwin to Fremantle. They refuelled at Townsville and flew to Darwin and Fremantle in similar stages to our flight.

Both aircraft landed on the Swan River on the morning of November 26th. While the aircraft were being refuelled and

revictualled I can recall dimly being ashore somewhere, being briefed on the task, obtaining charts and having a short sleep and a meal before taking off again that afternoon for Geraldton which was to be our operating base.

We moored to a buoy in the harbour there and were ferried ashore, leaving a guard on the aircraft and thence by truck to an RAAF flying training establishment at the Geraldton aerodrome where we had our first good meal and sleep for two days.

We were up before dawn, breakfasted and off soon thereafter on the 27th for our first search... We reasoned that after almost eight days survivors would be on boats or rafts - not afloat in lifejackets... We reached our search area at 9am and began our search. Hutch flew while I navigated... By soon after 3pm we had finished our area and sighted no boats, rafts, survivors or debris of the battle of any kind. There was one patch of oil slick which we investigated but it was freely drifting and did not have a source from which it was being fed.

We returned to Geraldton, arriving in the late afternoon where we warped the aircraft up to the jetty - with men on the nose to fend off and on the port wing tip and refuelled through hoses fed to us from the jetty and pumped from 40 gallon drums. As we carried 1450 gallons of fuel, by the time both aircraft had consumed 30 to 35 drums of fuel each it was dark and we moored again to our buoys and headed for the RAAF station for a meal and bed again. We had flown eleven hours and forty minutes that day.

November 28th was a repeat of November 27th, except on this day our search area was enlarged and further afield... We had on board this day some additional local RAAF men as observers and a senior officer who occupied the co pilot's seat once we were airborne, leaving me free to navigate... Again we saw nothing

that might have originated from the naval battle. On this day we flew for twelve hours and fifty five minutes before again mooring to the jetty at Geraldton before refuelling.

On the morning of November 29th just after dawn we were off again and into a new search area closer to the coast...

The "Kormoran survivors had been discovered ashore on the mainland somewhere near Carnarvon as I recall and it was thought that any Sydney survivors were also ashore and the search switched to the land. We were back in Geraldton after a nine hour flight this day... We had flown eighty seven hours fifty five minutes in eight days..

Our search for the survivors of the "HMAS Sydney" had not been successful - but then no other search had been successful either. The ship and all her crew disappeared without trace and remains one of the very great mysteries of the war.

*S/L R. M. Seymour
AM. DFC*

I often wonder how the Civil Aviation and pilots union would view the flying times of twenty five out of twenty seven hours, and eighty seven hours fifty five minutes in eight days, now. All of the refuelling was done by hand pumps out of 44 gallon drums and took hours. What a job.

There has been accusations about the Kormoran sailors strafing the life boats of any of the survivors of the Sydney. There were many survivors of the Kormoran who landed on the West Australian coast near Carnarvon. They were all interrogated very strongly by our military command and there was not one who did not reject the accusations, and out of their large number, if it had happened, some of them would have admitted it.

The German race are very honourable despite the atrocities which were committed. There has been a code of honour amongst all seamen, no matter what race, not to harm a survivor on the ocean in war or peace. The only exception I would make to that statement would be the Japanese. They had no code of honour and I have no doubt that they would have destroyed the seamen in the same spirit in which they executed so many of our airmen, who were shot down in their territory.

We were sworn to secrecy about having two American Navy officers engaged in our operations, before the Americans declared war on Japan. I knew Lt. Hutchinson well and flew with him occasionally. I would say that he had the dubious honour of being the first American serviceman to be killed in the South Pacific region. He was a very likeable chap and we regretted his loss.

Time carried forward		Reasons (including results of bombing, gunnery, exercises, etc.)		Flying Times Day Night	
Date	Hour	Aircraft Type and No.	Pilot	Day	Night
17.11.41	09.00	A24-11	1st Lieutenant	1st Flying	1.45
19.11.41	09.10	A24-11	1st Lieutenant	1st Flying	1.30
20.11.41	09.05	A24-11	1st Lieutenant	1st Flying	1.05
25.11.41	09.15	A24-11	1st Lieutenant	Operational gunnery, Darwin	9.00
27.11.41	10.45	A24-11	1st Lieutenant	Operational Darwin, Formosa	9.00
30.11.41	13.50	A24-11	1st Lieutenant	Operational Formosa, Guadalcanal	4.15
27.11.41	09.20	A24-11	1st Lieutenant	Operational Guadalcanal - Guadalcanal	11.35
28.11.41	06.00	A24-11	1st Lieutenant	Guadalcanal - Guadalcanal	12.45
29.11.41	05.30	A24-11	1st Lieutenant	Guadalcanal - Guadalcanal	9.00
				Total for Darwin	52.45
				COMMANDING NO. 20 SQUADRON, R.A.A.F. PORT MORESBY, PAPUA	
				SGT. NISBY HILL ENGINEER ON CAPTAIN A24-11	

Date		Hour	Aircraft Type and No.	Pilot	Duty	Time certified forward	
Reverses excluding results of bombing, gunnery, exercises, etc.						Flying Times	
						Day	Night
1.12.41	09.05	A24-11	Lt. Hackett	1st Engineer	Gardiner - Darwin	12.25	11
2.12.41	09.05	A24-11	Lt. Hackett	1st Engineer	Darwin - Port Moresby	9.50	
15.12.41	09.10	A24-11	Lt. Hackett	1st Engineer	Port Moresby to Tjate	8.00	
15.12.41	11.30	A24-11	Pt. Mumford	1st Engineer	Port Moresby	.50	
18.12.41	14.30	A24-11	Lt. Hackett	1st Engineer	Port Moresby	1.20	
18.12.41	05.35	A24-11	Lt. Hackett	1st Engineer	Port Moresby	11.40	
18.12.41	2.45	A24-11	Lt. Hackett	1st Engineer	Port Moresby	3.15	
18.12.41	05.45	A24-11	Lt. Hackett	1st Engineer	Samara - Port Moresby	1.15	
18.12.41	06.00	A24-11	Lt. Hackett	1st Engineer	Samara - Port Moresby	4.35	
20.12.41	06.00	A24-11	Lt. Hackett	1st Engineer	Samara - Port Moresby	10.45	
22.12.41	06.00	A24-11	Lt. Hackett	1st Engineer	Samara - Port Moresby	11.25	
Total 59.40						59.40	11
<p><i>Captain Cairns</i> COMMANDING NO. 20 SQUADRON, R.A.A.F. PORT MORESBY, PAPUA</p> <p>Copy of Log Book Sent NOBBY MAIL 20.12.41 on Catboat H 24-11</p>							
TOTAL TIME						164.20	16.00