

Able Seaman Albert Purdon (H1171)

Born 1 March 1912, New Norfolk.

Killed 19 February 1942, Darwin

Bombing of Darwin

Given the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2022 Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize Study Tour was a domestic tour. We travelled to the Northern Territory to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Bombing of Darwin, the first air raid on Australian soil in which over 240 people were killed.

Able Seaman Albert Purdon is one of five members of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), and two Tasmanians, known to have been killed during the Bombing of Darwin on 19 February 1942.

His family learnt of his death in a telegram to his father:

WITH DEEP REGRET I HAVE TO INFORM YOU YOUR SON ABLE SEAMAN ALBERT PURDON HAS BEEN KILLED IN ACTION. MINISTER FOR THE NAVY AND THE NAVAL BOARD DESIRE TO EXPRESS TO YOU THEIR SINCERE SYMPATHY.

Three months earlier on 19 December 1941, Albert's brother Leading Seaman Eric Purdon had lost his life in the sinking of the HMAS Sydney.



This appears to be the only known photo of Albert. Source: *Mercury* 26 February 1942.

Early life

Samuel Albert Purdon was born in March 1912, his parents were Albert Purdon and Ethel Purdon (formerly Hardwick, nee Goudie). His siblings were Daphne born January 1909; Eric in September 1916; and Lilian (Maisie) in October 1914. It seems that Samuel *Albert* was mostly known by his second name, but also used 'Sam' on occasion.

Not much is known about Albert's early life, Albert senior was a labourer, and the family appears to have moved around the New Norfolk area, living at Montagu Street, Blackalls Gully Road, Hamilton Road, and Lachlan.

In 1925 The Mercury reported that 16-year-old Albert Purdon, a resident of the Lachlan district had been thrown from his horse in Montagu Street and suffered a fractured thigh:

'The horse took fright and bolted, and when near the Bush Hotel, collided with guard post near the gutter. The boy was unseated and thrown to the ground. The injury is not regarded as serious.

In April 1930, 18-year-old Samuel Albert joined the Militia Forces (40th Bn) for a term of three years. He was working as a farm labourer in New Norfolk. Militia records state that he was 5 foot 8 inches in height, 'fit' and had a scar on his left knee (possibly from his earlier injury).

The Militia was a part-time voluntary role. In his first year Albert was assessed as 'efficient', however in the following two years he was rated as 'not efficient'. This may not have been Albert's fault. The Militia was poorly resourced, and many soldiers were unable to attend the six-day annual camp out of fear of losing their civilian employment. Albert was discharged in April 1933.

In June 1933, Albert married Margaret Marion (surname unknown) at New Norfolk. A son, Brian John, was born in December 1933. However, it seems that it was not a happy marriage. In 1936 Margaret applied for divorce on the grounds that Samuel Albert had deserted her. The divorce proceedings were reported in all three Tasmanian papers. She stated that:

'They lived together for one night together at her mother's home [in New Norfolk], then respondent went to New South Wales with his brother. He had told her he would send for her later. He had not done so and had never maintained her. There was one child of the marriage. An order had been made for maintenance, but nothing had been paid ... Although he had been to New Norfolk since, her husband had not approached her. (As reported in the Advocate and Mercury 12 May 1936.)

A decree nisi was granted and Margaret was given custody of the child. Margaret's claims about Albert's return visits to New Norfolk appear to be borne out by the fact that in August 1936 he was called as a witness in a trespass case in New Norfolk Police Court.

Eric Thomas Purdon

Eric Purdon (20241) joined the RAN in September 1934 and was promoted Able Seaman in March 1936 and to Leading Seaman in March 1940. Eric joined the HMAS Sydney in July 1939. It is likely that Eric's naval experience influenced Albert's decision to join the RAN.

Eric married Hazel Alrita Davidson at Cooks River (NSW) in July 1938. Their address was listed as Bexley North, New South Wales. A daughter, Yvonne Lorraine was born in January 1939.

MISSING WITH SYDNEY

Leading Seaman **Eric Thomas Purdon**, who is missing with H.M.A.S. Sydney, had served in the Royal Australian Navy for 7½ years. He had previously been a member of the crews of the Canberra, Adelaide, Brisbane, and Stuart, and had seen 12 months' service in the Mediterranean, where he took part, in the Sydney, in the sinking of the Italian cruiser Bartolomeo Colleoni. He recently passed his petty officer examination.



E. T. Purdon.



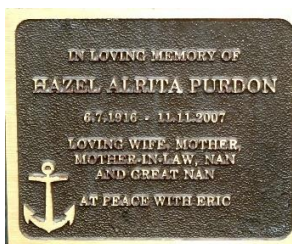
C. A. Wright.

L.S. Purdon was a son of Mr. and Mrs. **E. Purdon**, New Norfolk (where he was born), and his wife who lives in Sydney, is at present visiting his parents. A brother, Sam, is a member of the crew of H.M.A.S. Perth, and figured in the memorable Battle of Matapan.

Source: *Mercury* 10 December 1941

On 19 November 1941, the HMAS Sydney and the German auxiliary cruiser Kormoran engaged in a battle off the coast of Western Australia. The Kormoran was disguised as a Dutch merchant vessel. Both ships were destroyed. HMAS Sydney was the largest Allied warship lost with all hands (645) during World War II, and the largest loss of life in the history of the RAN.

Hazel never remarried and died in November 2007. The final resting place of the Sydney and its crew was not found until March 2008, 100 nautical miles offshore from Geraldton.

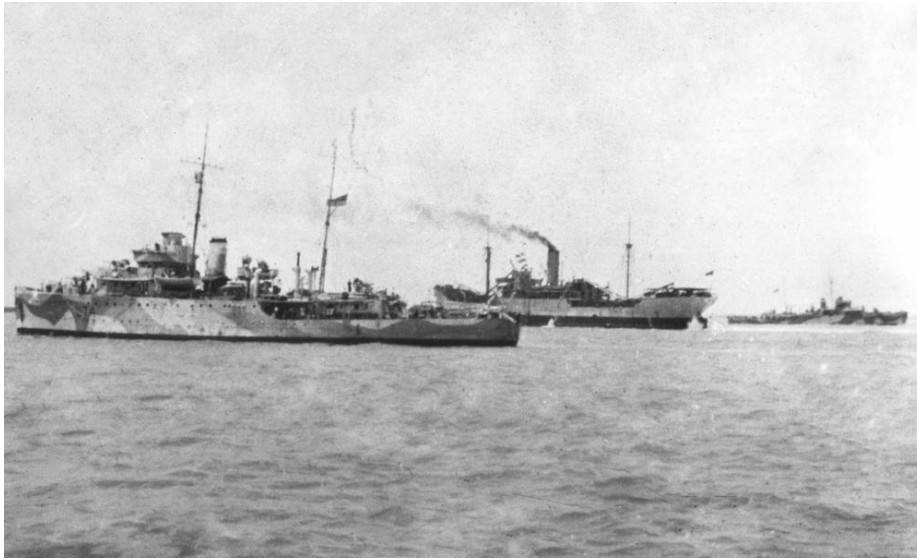


Able Seaman Albert Purdon

Albert joined the Royal Australian Naval Reserve in Hobart on 21 March 1940 using the given name 'Albert'. Unlike the Army, the RAN's records are very brief and provide only basic details. The RAN used cardboard index cards to record key details about its personnel. Albert's naval career is contained in just six lines.

From 1940 onwards, he is recorded as 'Albert' in the official records. His pay number was H1171 with the prefix 'H' denoting that he had enlisted in Hobart, and this was his home port. Albert was 5-foot 7½ inches in height, with light brown hair, grey eyes, and a fair complexion. His religion was noted as Methodist.

Source <http://www.darwin.nt.gov.au/sites/default/files/Bombing-Darwin-FEDFrontline.pdf>



HMAS Swan, USAT Mauna Loa and HMAS Warrego at Darwin, just prior to the raid of 19 February 1942. Source: www.Navy.gov.au

The Swan's Commanding Officer's Report for February 1942 simply states:

'19th. At 0700 I slipped from wharf and anchored until 0940 when I secured on SS Neptuna at the wharf to embark Lubricating Oil and ammunition from her.

At 0950 Darwin was heavily attacked by Japanese aircraft and Swan sustained severe damage *as well as having three ratings killed and eighteen wounded.*'

Another Tasmanian on the Swan, Melville Davis, provided an eyewitness account of the attack (<https://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/844> - Transcript interview August 2003)

We got into Darwin on the 18th [February] in the afternoon. We got the four ships unloaded and we went over to the ammunition ship because we'd used all our ammo. Anyway we got alongside the Neptuna, the ammunition ship, and the next morning it was the 19th of February and it was a beautiful calm morning. And we were getting the ammunition in as fast as we could and it was about a few minutes to 10 in the morning when we saw our familiar friends in their V formation with their blue lights above, and the first bombs separated the jetty from the mainland and rocked the boat a bit. And one of our fellows hopped over onto the Neptuna, threw off our lines and we got the hell out of it sort of thing.

I've got a photo that I could show you after which was taken by Captain Carroll, showing the Swan with the Neptuna background where she blew up. We were fairly close. We then went to action stations. I managed to get a photo of the flying boat which was just laying off the end of the wharf. She was taking off, and then I had to go to action stations, which in my case it was the magazine in the fore part of the ship. I was rather happy that I was in the fore part of the ship because shortly after we got there, there was a dickens of a thump and a bomb landed underneath our stern.

And when we got up top around midday, it was quite a sight to see the ships that were still afloat. I've got some good photos of the Solandier burning before she sank. And we were really shocked to look around the harbour and see the mess. All we knew about it was it was like being in a 44-

gallon drum with people hammering on the outside of it all the time. So we got the sound effects but no vision of the actual raid.

The Japanese used all the planes from the four carriers that they used in Pearl Harbor, plus 36 bombers from Ambon. Their object was to get the Houston but she sailed out the night before. And because the ammunition that was available in Darwin didn't suit their guns, the Peary and the Houston went out at nightfall on the 18th., but the Peary came back. They'd pinged a sub outside and they used a lot of oil. So she came back to get oil and some depth charges and that's how she came to be one of the casualties in Darwin. I've got a photo of her bow just disappearing under the water. And the British Motorist was another one – that was a tanker that caused a lot of smoke and what have you.

Anyway, suffice to say that Darwin was an absolutely shocking turnout. We couldn't go on our quarter deck because the stern was flapping up and down like a duck, and our carpenters did a pretty good job in tearing up the officers' shirts. We didn't have shirts, to plug all the holes on the ship's side above the water line. There was a second raid in the afternoon which didn't make things any more comfortable. About 2.00 o'clock the next morning we got the clearance to leave the harbour and make for Brisbane. We went out with the Warrego and an escort to make sure we were seaworthy.

I forgot to remark though, when we were alongside the Neptuna, our motor boat was in the water, just come back from the post office run, and when we were clearing the Neptuna, the ammunition ship, the motor boat was ordered to get the hell out of it which they did, and we just saw a cloud of water and what have you and some bombs exploded as we were leaving, and we thought the motor boat had copped it. We were very relieved when they came back at night and we got their full story, but they had made the mangroves and they were out of sight of the planes and they had a grandstand view of the raids, and the tide went out and they had to wait until about 9.00 o'clock at night before the full tide for them to be able to get back. They had a bit of difficulty finding the ship amongst all the rubbish in the harbour. They'd picked up a few fellows that had been blown off the jetty ... but we were very pleased when they came back. You know, we thought we'd lost them.

As it was **we only lost three men, a chap named Purdon**, and Bobby Breen, and Johnny Salk. Bobby Breen was a Victorian, and Purdon was Tasmanian, and Salk was, I'm not sure where he came from. And there were 26, I think it was, were wounded, and I remember taking a photo of them while they were waiting for the boat to take them over to the Manunda.

The morning after the attack, an attempt was made to transfer the three men's bodies to the Hospital Ship Manunda, however in the confusion they were not taken onboard.

Albert's War Graves Record states that he was buried 'in stream off Darwin Wharf'. While it is possible that he lies in one of the graves marked 'unknown' at the Adelaide River War Cemetery, his final resting place will never be known.

Weeks later, Albert's previous ship, HMAS Perth was sunk in the Battle of The Sunda Strait with the loss of 352 crew. Its 320 survivors became prisoners of war, of whom 105 died in captivity.

Albert was survived by his six-year-old son, Brian, his parents and two sisters. Albert's record notes a Brian was granted a pension of '20 shillings per fortnight from 24 March 1943'.

**Darwin Military Museum Garden
East Point Darwin NT**



**Plymouth Naval Memorial (1954)
United Kingdom**

The Plymouth Naval Memorial commemorates Royal Navy's war dead who were lost or buried at sea, including the Royal Australian Navy, South African Navy, and Indian Navy. Both Albert (Panel 75) and his younger brother Eric (Panel 56) are listed on the Memorial.



Commonwealth War Graves Commission

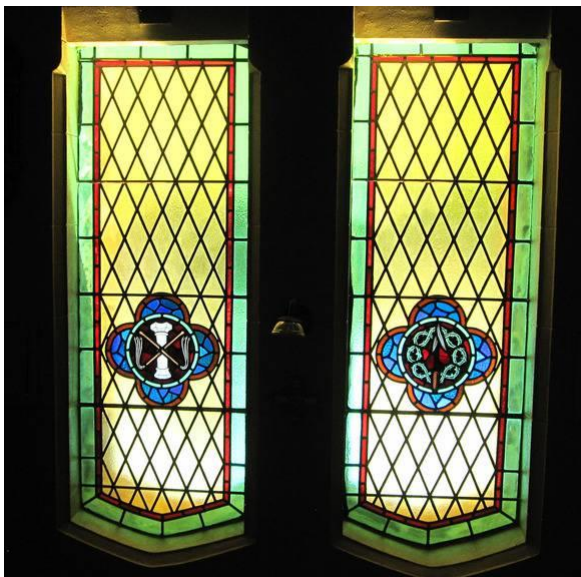
Last Post Ceremony 2014

Australian War Memorial

Every day the Australian War Memorial conducts the moving Last Post Ceremony in the Commemorative Courtyard. Each ceremony shares the story behind one of the names on the Roll of Honour. Albert's story was told on 21 September 2014. The service of his shipmates has also been recognised - Alwyn Breen (April 2014) and John Sault (October 2014).

Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception Catholic Chapel HMAS Cerebus Crib Point, Victoria

A stained-glass window and plaque ('Pray for those who gave their lives in H.M.A.S. Swan 19/2/42 Air Attack) names Signalman Breen, Leading Seaman John Sault and Able Seaman Albert Purdon.



Source: vhd.heritage.vic.gov.au

Seafarers' Memorial, Triabunna 1997

The Seafarers' Memorial is dedicated to all Tasmanian seafarers, both civilian and members of the armed services who lost their lives at sea, and to those seafarers, regardless of occupation or nationality, who lost their lives in Tasmanian waters. While Eric Purdon was also lost at sea, he is not commemorated, presumably because he had lived in Sydney from the mid-1930s.

