

John William Mathews 1920-1941

John Mathew was the first child born to Nellie Mathews on September 3, 1920. During his formative years John attended Elwood Central State School and later Brighton Grammar. He excelled at sport and as well as being on the school football teams he played matches interstate. John was also a Scout and later joined the Sea Scouts in Williamstown while staying with his uncle Hamilton. John was an outdoors person and a good all rounder with a lively and genuine personality and regard good looks. John deeply loved his family and always tried to protect and guide his younger brother and sisters.

His stepfather, George Pickering died in 1934 and Uncle Hamilton arranged, against his Mothers wishes or consent, to put John and his brother James into the Linton Boys Home at Olivers Hill in Frankston where they would be more or less looked after with good food, exercise and schooling in what was a very spartan existence Some months later the family made arrangements for John and Jim to return home

Schooling for John was finished and so he then attended Hassetts Business College in Prahran for some clerical training and worked for a time in a clerical capacity at the Airedale Weaving Mills at West Footscray with his Uncle Hamilton Mathews. He was waiting to get into the Navy during this time. A consent paper was signed for him to enter the Royal Australian Navy on November 10, 1937 at the age of seventeen as an Able Seaman. John's initial training was carried out on the HMAS Vampire. He was later promoted to the position of Gunner.

At the outbreak of World War II on September 1, 1939 John travelled to England on the HMAS War Spite, where he then joined the HMAS Canberra. He wrote home from Mess 26 HMAS Canberra on September 9, 1939 *"...we will be joining the Mediterranean Fleet or the Grand Fleet soon...everyone is excited on board but like the typical Aussie very cool."*

Mess 28 HMAS Canberra 19.2.1940 *"...The other day a notice went up asking for men who were in excellent condition and with high recommendations from their Officer in Charge to volunteer for special service till the duration of the war. (We call it the suicide squad.) It means boarding parties are needed, firing squads etc. mainly submarines. I put in for it, many got rejected but I was lucky in my usual way for getting into anything. My Div.Officer called me into his cabin today and gave me a good chat about it. He told me that if we are required for anything it will lessen our chance of coming through the war alive. He tried to put me off all ways, but I am sure he was glad I still stuck to it. I have nothing to lose - no love affair, unmarried, nothing to miss like other chaps.... I am only nineteen I know and I fully realize what might happen. The honour and glory is the last thing I would think of. I might as well have some real thrills sometime in my life and it's for a good cause."*

Mess 31 HMAS Canberra 17.5.1940 *"I am taking the chance to drop a line because things are getting very serious now. We are stripped to the waist all day expecting anything. At present heavy seas are coming up. This is definitely my long suit, big seas and expecting action anytime. I am not romancing though strangely this all appeals to me, though I hope it's all over soon. It's a great strain on us all."*

After coming home on leave around April 1940 he joined the HMAS Sydney. John's affectionate nickname on the "Sydney" was Argus, a name derived from the Melbourne newspaper of the day and John's wonderful knowledge of current affairs. His letters home give an insight into ship board life, but mostly tell us of his mates and current doings of the ships dog Cordite and later Little Soho the puppy, the ships cat Gally Dodger and her five little Gally Dodgers.

The HMAS Sydney spent some time patrolling in the Mediterranean area around Greece and Egypt. Mess 31 HMAS Sydney July 14, 1940 John writes *"Here I am again quite fit and feeling 'good O' even*

though now I know how real war is and how terrible too. The second action I have seen was the action with the Italian Battle Fleet of which you must have heard ...they were stronger than us at the moment but they retreated from the Royal Navy as quick as they could to the protection of their shore batteries, even though they made a smoke screen we gave them some lively moments."

While in the Middle East on July 19, 1940 they met and sunk in action the Italian cruiser "Bartolomeo Colleoni" which was at that time one of the fastest ships in the world. From his letter of July 25 John

says *"...we entered harbour (Sydney) after the 'battle'...we were all tired and glad that one was over though our spirits were very high and we were looking forward to making our ship also Australia's name rank high in the worlds news."* The crew was then on leave and Jim remembers meeting his brother John at the Spencer Street Railway Station in Melbourne, and all the crew arrived to a heroes welcome and marched down the streets of Melbourne.

Further convoy duty followed when the ship returned to duty. Mess 31 HMAS Sydney August 22, 1940 *"...I am now on the bridge for action...you should see me in tin helmet, flash masks, ear-phones. One has a birds-eye view of anything going on though the height of thrills is when the bombers attack. It is an exposed position but a better job than in the gun turret. Anyway as far as bombers are concerned they are terrible shots..."*

Mess 31 HMAS Sydney September 8, 1940 *"I suppose you have read or heard about our latest war games. Wait till this Ity (Italian) fleet can manage to cut away. There are several anchors which must keep them in harbour. I wonder if they will come to sea and have a battle. First since Jutland anyway. No need to worry about the British Navy especially on this occasion...many cruisers or destroyers may be lost but still the whole enemy then would be sunk, but still I don't worry about this ship. It's got so many white elephants onboard it couldn't sink. If we did go I guarantee we would take double enemy ships down with us. The difference between us and them is 'we go down fighting' they abandon when things don't look too good."*

Mess 31 HMAS Sydney September 18, 1940 *"...It doesn't matter who receives a parcel in the Mess he always hands it round. Sometimes we even have debates on which chap's Mother cooks the best. Little do many loving Mothers know that they are not only pleasing their son but generally his Mess too and my word the lads are grateful to many unknown people."*

Mess 31 HMAS Sydney September 26, 1940 *"Well from my position, which we soon found out is in the thick of war, I know that we are winning the war on every hand. In some places moderately winning, other places opposition is very poor. We are taking the offensive with great success. The air war over Britain is neither here or there. The main thing is that it isn't making her use all her resources and she is playing the same game. The Huns will soon give up in that direction. We must not underestimate Jerry, he is powerful, but the stupid way he takes the offensive. So far he has lost pounds and men but still has no hold on his major enemy... the British Navy is not just tradition, 'we can back it up' and don't they (Italians) know it."*
(Huns & Jerry – Germans)

Late June 1941 John completed a three week gunnery course and was planning to become a Leading Seaman. In July 1941 the Sydney crew was home on leave, soon returning to sea. Mess 31 HMAS Sydney August 1, 1941 *"... Life is pretty sweet these days, plenty of sea time, but it's all peaceful and uneventful, even boring at times. We have a Gunnery shoot now and again just to keep in trim, pity it's not Japs (Japanese) we are firing at. 'Might be soon' but I doubt it."*

John's last letter home dated November 1, 1941 was full of family chit chat and news of his mates and ship life. *"I don't think we will be away from Sydney too long, still one never knows."*

The HMAS Sydney left Fremantle, Western Australia on November 11 and were called in to investigate a merchant ship flying a Dutch flag. This ship turned out to be a German armed raider the "Kormoran".

The battle was brief and brutal. At point-blank range, the two warships exchanged a frenzy of shells and within five minutes of the initial volleys thundering from the big guns both ships were doomed. In less than an hour it was all over. The "HMAS Sydney" was lost on November 19, 1941 after sinking the "Kormoran" about three hundred miles off the coast of Western Australia. Out of a crew of six hundred and forty-five on the Sydney there were no survivors.

TELEGRAM - URGENT RATE November 26, 1941

"WITH DEEP REGRET I HAVE TO INFORM YOU YOUR SON JOHN WILLIAM MATHEWS ABLE SEAMAN IS MISSING AS A RESULT OF ENEMY ACTION STOP MINISTER FOR THE NAVY AND THE NAVAL BOARD DESIRE TO EXTEND THEIR DEEP SYMPATHY...NAVAL BOARD"

So John William Mathews Nellie's son John who was born 3/9/1920 and died 20/11/1941 on the HMAS Sydney when it was sunk by the Germans in WW2 with all hands on deck.

Naval Memorial in The United Kingdom in Plymouth England

John William Mathews -
Born September 3, 1920 in North Carlton -
Mother : Nellie Pickering Hamilton Mathews
Died November 20, 1941

John is also remembered at other memorials:

HMAS Sydney Memorial, Memorial Park, Geraldton WA – with an eternal flame & virtual on site memorial

HMAS Sydney Memorial, Margaret River WA (erected by friends and family the initiative of John Murray John's friend and Jim Pickering)

Naval Association of Australia – Sydney II Virtual Memorial – on line

The Australian War Memorial, Canberra ACT

On March 16, 2008 after a 66 year of search for the wreck it was located 207 km (128 miles) from the west coast (Steep Point) of Western Australia at a depth of approximately 2468 meters. The wreck will be protected under the 1976 Historic Shipwreck Act and be treated as a war grave.

HMAS SYDNEY II - A LEGEND OF YOUNG, FREE AND INDEPENDENT SPIRITS WHOSE MILITARY CUSTOMS AND MATESHIP SHOULD NOT BE FORGOTTEN. THESE MEN WERE NOT JUST ORDINARY MEN BUT BECAME THE HEROES OF WAR WHO ENDURED HARDSHIP, SHOWED COURAGE, WERE BOLD AND RESILIENT AND STUCK TOGETHER TO THE END.