

VIRTUAL MEMORIAL HMAS SYDNEY II

Chief Petty Officer Writer Leonard William Whitfield

Leonard's father and Mother, Richard James and Martha Whitfield of Summer Hill, NSW had two sons and three daughters. Leonard was the younger of the sons born on September 2, 1906. His father Richard was employed in the Furniture Industry and in latter years as a Caretaker of Deceased Estates.

The family moved to Old Guildford, NSW from Summer Hill around 1912 where Leonard (Len, as he was known) attended Old Guildford Public School.

In 1922 at the age of 15 he joined the Royal Australian Navy, Port Division, Sydney as a Boy II Sailor and was posted to HMAS "Tingara" a Naval Training Ship.

In August 1923 to September 1923 as a further part of his initial training he was transferred to HMAS Cerberus Training Depot in Victoria, after which he was posted to "HMAS Geranium" a Hydro-graphic Ship as a Writer where he remained until February 1925.

Len, again on the move was posted to "HMAS Penguin" (a shore base in Sydney since 1913) as a Writer where he remained until July 1926. The next move was to "HMAS Platypus" a Submarine Depot Ship moored in Sydney Harbour with the submarine fleet.

In August 1929 it was back to "HMAS Penguin" for one month, then on to "HMAS Cerberus" in Victoria where he was promoted to Petty Officer. He remained there until November 1930 when he was posted back to "HMAS Penguin" until November 1932.

It was during this time on 18 April 1931, Len married his sweetheart, Lilian Stephens at St. Annes Church of England, Ryde, NSW. Another happy event followed on March 21, 1932 when their first child was born, a baby girl which they named Nanci Lavina.

It was a pleasant change to be stationed in Sydney for these two years and to be at home with the family.

Another 11 months at "HMAS Cerberus" for training before in October 1933 he was posted to "HMAS Canberra" for two years. During this period he was promoted to the rank of Chief Petty Officer Writer.

In November 1935 it was back to the shore base "HMAS Penguin" for 2 ½ years a welcome relief to be home again with the family. It was during this period a second child was born, this time a boy, whom they named Colin Leonard. Their family was now complete.

In April 1938, Len was posted back to "HMAS Cerberus" in Victoria. This time the family joined him, occupying a house on the base. These were very happy days for the family and they made many friends during this time.

When World War II was declared in September 1939, security changed at the Naval Base. The large iron gates at the entrance were guarded by armed sailors and passes were required to enter and exit the establishment. This was particularly difficult for Nanci (daughter) who had been attending the local school outside the base.

The war changed Len's job description dramatically and after some time he became very unsettled as most of his mates were on their way overseas.

In early 1941, Len requested a posting to sea and it wasn't until mid year his request was granted. The posting was to "HMAS Sydney" which had recently returned from heroic duties in the Mediterranean.

Prior to joining the ship Len packed up the family and their belongings and headed for Lilian's mother and father's home at Meadowbank in Sydney.

He joined the ship on September 2, 1941 on the day of his 35th birthday, 11 weeks later the ship was lost with all hands. Len had spent 19 years and 10 months in the Royal Australian Navy.

The news of the loss devastated our family. My mother collapsed into a coma and was very ill for some time. Although she lived to the age of 92, she never fully recovered from the loss. The support from family members was extraordinary, this enabled her to recover enough to bring up her 2 children and give them the love and affection as if Len was by her side. After 9 years she was able to build a house on the block of land at Meadowbank which she and Len had purchased prior to the war.

At the time of the announcement that a search was being organised to find the ship we were asked by some how would we feel as descendants if the ship was found. Our only request was that the ship be left as a war grave.

The Prime Minister, Mr Kevin Rudd, announced the discovery of the HMAS Sydney II and HSK Kormoran off the Western Australian coast on March 16, 2008. He mentioned in the announcement that the ships would be left as war graves. This gives us the satisfaction which we required.

We feel we were blessed to have our father for the 3 ½ years living with us prior to the tragedy, where other families of crew members were not as fortunate.

Nanci Ellich (nee Whitfield) and Colin Whitfield – Daughter and Son
29/01/09