

Commemorative Plaque for Ronald MacDonald 1918 – 1942

Article is translated from German

The German Naval Association and the Embassy of the Commonwealth of Australia were invited on Friday, April 19, 2013, for the commemoration of the plaque of Ronald Allan Heffernan MacDonald, representative of the members of the Australian Navy, in the historic Hall of the Marine Memorial in Laboe in the county Schleswig-Holstein.

The Vice-Chairman of the Board Community of Emden sailors, Hartmut Hoffman, had received an invitation to the commemoration ceremony along with his wife Gudrun and attended together with the first Chairman Addi Dreier on behalf of the Board Community of Emden sailors.

Here is Hartmut's report:



After greeting the guests there - went with a stop at the memorial plaque in memory of the battle between the Commerce raider Kormoran and Light Cruiser Sydney II – and again at the main entrance in the Tower in the Memorial Hall. Here, the wreaths of the Commonwealth of Australia and the Australian Navy with military honors were laid down in the presence of all participants.

This was followed by the trumpet solo of the poignant song 'I had a comrade'. After a minute's silence all went in to the historic Hall.

Some contemplative music was played by an ensemble of the Baltic Sea Marine Music Corp at the beginning and at the end, as well as in the breaks between speeches to hearing.

The President of the German Navy League, Karl Heid, opened the series in honor of the Australian Petty officer Ronald MacDonald (1918-1942) with his speech. His fate is representative of the fallen Australian sailors.

It was followed by the greeting of the Australian Ambassador to Germany, Peter Tesch, and the keynote speech by Rear Admiral Allan du Toit, Military representative of Australia at NATO.

In his speech, Dr. Jann M. Witt, historian of the German Navy Association, explained the concept of the historic Hall at marine Memorial.



Then the plaque was unveiled and presented to the guests of honour.

The plaque underlines the international character of the Naval Monument and makes it unmistakably clear that it is specifically designed to take in the heart of all nations in Laboe.

After the official part in the historic Hall, all the participants were invited to the reception by the German Navy League in the Scheer restaurant at the foot of the marine Memorial. There, some constructive discussions were held.



Biographical background

Ronald Allan Heffernan MacDonald was born in Footscray, Victoria, on 18 March 1918, one of eight children. He joined the Royal Australian Navy on 30 October 1935 and did his initial training at HMAS CERBERUS, the RAN's training establishment south of Melbourne. Later he joined the light cruiser HMAS SYDNEY, and in 1938 was trained in Great Britain at the Royal Navy's anti-submarine training establishment, HMS OSPREY, at Portland.

On his return to Australia, MacDonald was promoted to leading seaman and on the outbreak of the Second World War he became ASDIC operator on board the elderly destroyer HMAS STUART. In January 1940 STUART, along with four other Australian destroyers, joined the British Mediterranean Fleet. German propaganda derisively referred to the antiquated Australian ships as the Scrap Iron Flotilla and, in true Australian style, the RAN crews adopted the nickname for their own. For more than a year the Scrap Iron Flotilla took part in the struggle for control of the transport routes crossing the Mediterranean.

On 29 September 1940 STUART, on passage to Alexandria in Egypt for a refit, detected and attacked a submerged submarine. After a ten-hour hunt the damaged submarine was forced to surface, turning out to be the Italian submarine GONDAR. The submarine's captain ordered his crew to abandon ship and set scuttling charges. STUART rescued 28 Italian survivors and the British trawler

SINDONIS rescued a further 19. Only two of GONDAR's crew lost their lives. For his part in the action, MacDonald received the Distinguished Service Medal.

MacDonald was promoted to petty officer and returned to Australia on leave early in 1941. On 7 June of the year he married Mary Bates Meldrum. Later in 1941 MacDonald returned to sea in the destroyer HMAS VAMPIRE. In April 1942 VAMPIRE and the British carrier HMS HERMES were both operating from Trincomalee in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) as part of the British Eastern Fleet. On 9 April 1942 Japanese carrier aircraft attacked Trincomalee and the two Allied ships which were finally sunk by Japanese dive bombers. Nine men lost their lives in VAMPIRE including her commanding officer. Another 307 were lost in HERMES.

The hospital ship VITA rescued 590 survivors from both ships and landed them at Colombo, including the badly wounded Ronald MacDonald. On 13 April 1942, he succumbed to his injuries. Petty Officer MacDonald was 24 years old.

More photos of the event can be seen at <http://hmassydney.com/gallery.html>