

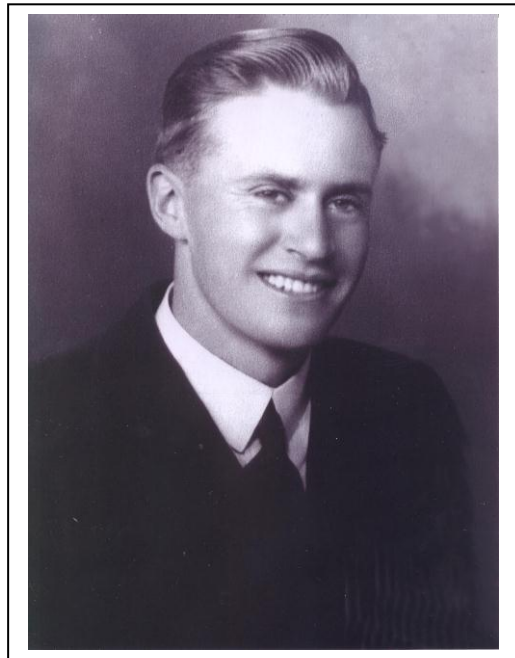


St George's College

PERTH · WESTERN AUSTRALIA

FREDERICK HAROLD SCHOCH

4 SEPTEMBER 1918 TO 20 NOVEMBER 1941



On 19 November 1941 the light cruiser HMAS Sydney was sunk somewhere off the coast of Western Australia, after a battle with the German raider Kormoran. Tragically, there were no survivors, and the loss of the Sydney remains Australia's worst naval disaster and one of our greatest wartime mysteries. Fred Schoch was 23 years old when he died, and had been married for just over a month.

Fred Schoch was born in Geraldton in September 1918, the son of Cookernup teacher, Fred Arthur Schoch, and his wife Merle. He was educated at Coolgardie and then Kalgoorlie High School, from which he won a scholarship to Perth Modern School in 1934. He lived at St

George's College from 1936 until 1939 while he gained his Bachelor of Engineering, with honours in electrical engineering.

John Scott (1936) recalled an incident at the College one evening when the Sub-Warden, Archdeacon Storrs, was conducting a religious discussion.

Fred objected to the Church's obsession with sin and repentance. He said he found the Church's attitude absurd, as he believed he had never sinned in his life. This presented Storrs with a unique approach to the subject and gave rise to our animated discussion which resulted, as usual, in no-one's views being changed. But, that was Fred.

Fred's choice of the RAN for wartime service might have been influenced by his experiences as a student engineer, which included a stint on the State Ship M.V. Kangaroo. He left the staff of Co-operative Bulk Handling and joined the Navy on 18 October 1940 and, after a course at Flinders Naval Base, he was posted to HMAS Sydney. Fred's determination to pursue his calling in the RAN was not to be diverted by his romance and wedding. But the strength of his twin passions is clear from an account of their all-too-brief marriage by his widow, Betty (nee Mary Elizabeth Ross), which she wrote for the College in March 2007.

Fred and I met at a New Year's Day picnic in 1937. I was in leaving year at school, Fred in second year Engineering at UWA and residing at St George's College.

We formed a firm friendship in the years that followed. I started nursing training at old Perth Hospital, nothing 'Royal' about it in those days! On Sunday afternoons St George's College students were allowed to ask friends for tea and scones in the beautiful refectory. On these occasions Fred would walk with me around the river and back to the hospital, or we'd have a game of tennis. In early 1940 Fred completed his engineering degree, we became engaged, Fred joined the Navy and was posted to HMAS Sydney.

Student nurses were not allowed to marry so we hoped to be married soon after I finished my training, war permitting. We were very lucky - every time HMAS Sydney came into Fremantle it was my day off duty, it was quite uncanny. Fred said he thought God must have a kindly feeling towards us!

On 15th October 1941 Fred came back having been at sea for three months; again, I had my day off. To my surprise he asked me if we could be married that day. I could tell it was important to him but I knew I couldn't ask why. I happily agreed and thought if I was dismissed from the hospital, so be it!

Before meeting me, Fred had called to see his friend John Bell, rector of Christ Church, Claremont, to ask if he could marry us. Yes he could if we had a special license signed. Off we set to Fremantle, obtained the license, bought a ring, a present for John, then back to Christ Church where John Bell was waiting for us with his housekeeper who agreed to be the witness. She looked delightful, wearing a lovely leghorn straw hat adorned with a French rose. There was I, the bride, with a scarf tied around my head! We had our own very special little service in beautiful Christ Church. We thanked John and his housekeeper, said farewell, raced down to Bay View Terrace, just managed to catch a bus into Perth and had photos taken!

That night Fred said "Cobber, if we can't spend any more of our lives together we must thank God for what we've had." Those words were so unreal that I don't think I would ever have re-called them had tragedy not struck soon afterwards. Fred sailed early next morning and returned on 10th November. We had that day together, and then Sydney sailed at dawn on 11th November – Remembrance Day.

(Though Betty did not say so in her memoir, she told a close friend that when the Captain of HMAS Sydney, Joseph Burnett, heard that his young engineer had married, he allowed Betty to spend a night aboard while the ship was docked in Bunbury, just before its final voyage.)

I was on evening duty at the hospital on 24th November when I noticed my brother standing at the entrance to the ward. It was after 8pm and no visitors were allowed into the ward, I knew something awful must have happened. My brother handed me a telegram that said the Navy regretted to inform me that my husband was missing, presumed dead, as a result of enemy action. Fred's prophetic words came flooding into my mind.

By next morning everyone in the hospital knew that HMAS Sydney was 'lost' and I had married. Nobody reprimanded me, all were sympathetic. It took me several months to come to terms with my loss; only then could I obey Fred's wish for me to thank God for the wonderful love we had shared.

Some 3 months later, the body of an HMAS Sydney sailor was washed ashore on a raft on Christmas Island and was buried in an unmarked grave. The defence forces denied that the man and the raft were even Australian, let alone from HMAS Sydney. The official announcement of the loss of the Sydney had been delayed until 12 days after the event. Because of widespread rumours of the disaster, the delay in the official announcement, the lack of any explanation as to how this disaster could have happened and the secrecy surrounding the official investigation, the Australian public were deeply suspicious that a lot of information was being concealed. The controversy and secrecy over the loss of the HMAS Sydney has troubled many people ever since.

In October 2006, the navy led an expedition to Christmas Island, where they were able to locate and exhume the remains of the Unknown Sailor. Next began the painstaking process of identification. Firstly, a dental examination ruled out almost half of the 645 crew, then more were excluded by age and height. Finally, tiny scraps of cloth were found under the press studs which were all that remained of “the Unknown Sailor’s clothing. After careful analysis and research, it was concluded that the crewman had been buried wearing white overalls - which meant that the sailor was most likely to be an officer or warrant officer from one of the technical categories. This shortened the list to three possibilities, including Fred.

However, DNA was recovered from the remains and tested alongside DNA from Fred’s sister, Mrs Merle Campbell, who was still alive. It proved that Fred Schoch was not the unknown sailor, and Fred’s final resting place as one of HMAS Sydney’s 645 crew is presumed to be at the wreck site, discovered in March 2008 and declared a war grave. Their names are commemorated at the Mount Scott memorial at Geraldton, where a bronze statue of a woman looks out to sea *waiting in vain for the cruiser to come home*.

Fred’s obituary in the 1942 Dragon notes: *Very few know of the great sacrifice he made to join the Navy – not merely a sacrifice of material position, but a mental sacrifice. He abhorred the thought of war, and the formalisation and ceremony connected with uniform, yet, after deliberation, he decided the only course of action open to him was to join the Navy. Every obstacle was placed in his way both by employers and authorities, these serving only to increase his determination to do what he saw as right.*

Betty Schoch later remarried and, as Mrs Betty Bell, had three daughters. But Fred was always foremost in her mind, and when the College launched a project to find as many relatives of our 14 Georgians as possible, “Detective Betty” threw herself into the challenge and made many connections.

Betty Schoch died in June 2007, aged 87.

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“Of his personality and disposition, much could be written; suffice it to say that those qualities which mark a truly great character – simplicity and sincerity – were the dominant features of his life and his attitude to life.”

The Dragon, 1942 (attributed to “F.G.”)