

George's War

George Edwards Toombs (born 26th August 1889) was the eldest of four Ely brothers who went to sea. The Toombs family had been barbers in Ely for over a hundred years, and at the age of eight George was already assisting in the barber's shop and was described in the Ely Standard of March 18th 1898 as "going through all the operations of lathering, shaving, sponging and powdering". He had certainly inherited the family talent – his grandfather had started working in the same barber's shop at the age of ten.



George's mother Laura died in 1905.

George planned a rather different career for himself than being a barber, and in the 1911 Census he is based in the Royal Navy Barracks at Portsmouth, where he is listed as "officer's steward second class". His Royal Navy Service Number was 365795.

George was lent by the Royal Navy to the Australian Navy, initially for a period of three years from 14th June 1913. He therefore became an officer's steward on the Australian Navy's H.M.A. S. Australia before the commencement of the War, and consequently was initially active in a rather different area of the world to his brothers. The other three brothers were: Harry, also an officer's steward, on H.M.S. Invincible; Ernest on H.M.S. Oden; and Percival on H.M.S. Electra. Later a younger Toombs brother, Reginald, was to join the Army – he was the only one of the five not to survive the conflict (his story can be found under "The Fallen" on this website).



Harry



Percival



Ernest

H.M.A.S Australia was the flagship of the Australian Navy. At the start of World War I she was



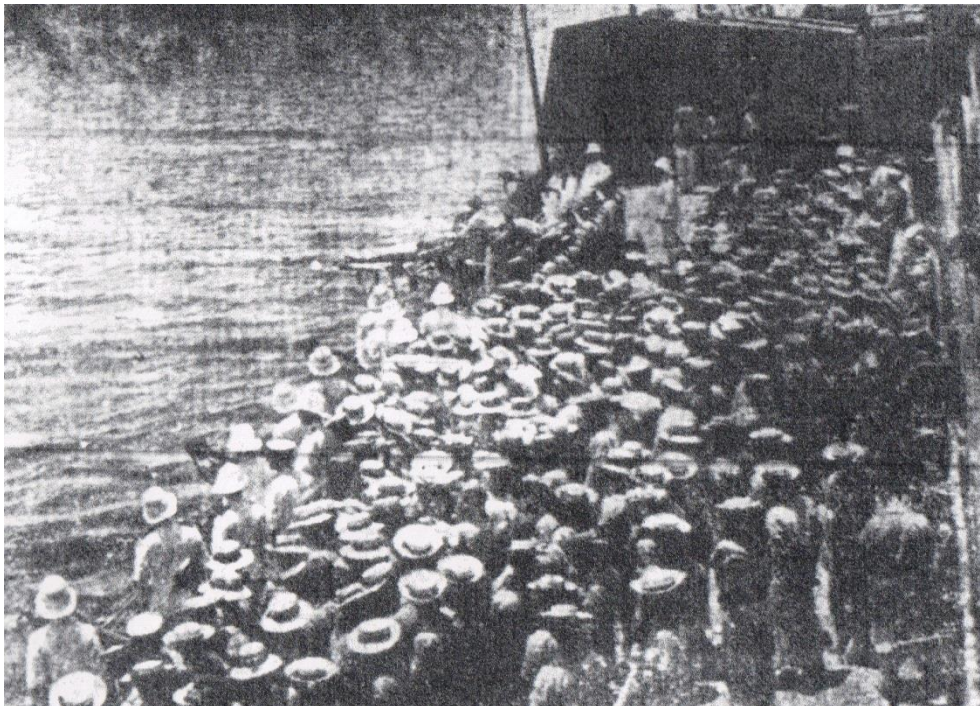
tasked with finding and destroying the German East Asia Squadron, which was prompted to withdraw from the Pacific by the battlecruiser's presence. (The German squadron's commander, Vice Admiral Maximilian Reichsgraf von Spee, had actually described Australia as being superior to his entire force by itself.) The Australia was diverted from her mission to

support the capture of German colonies in New Guinea and Samoa (which George describes below) and never actually succeeded in attacking the German squadron before it left the area and was destroyed off the Falkland Islands in December 1914.

On September 13th 1914 George Toombs wrote from Rabaul, German New Guinea.

“This place we captured from the Germans, and lost eight killed in the fight and six wounded. The fighting started directly we landed. We had to capture the wireless station, which was eight miles in the bush. All along the pathway were laid land mines, and the people we were fighting against were blacks with white German officers in command. The black men fired from the coconut trees. The fighting lasted all day, and until two o’clock next morning. The following morning they broke out again. Then the Admiral ordered one of the cruisers to shell the bush with lyddite shell. We took a lot of prisoners, and there were sixty white Germans amongst them. These we have got on board.

“We have just returned here from capturing another place, “Freidrich Wilhelm’s Haven”. They did not show fight there, nor at the capture of Samoa. We are doing a lot of steaming, about 10,000 miles since August 6th. On Saturday we filled up with 3,000 tonnes of coal, and today we have taken 300 tons on the upper deck. We expect to come into contact with five German cruisers within the next week.. we have with us a French cruiser, the *Montcalm*, and the *Sydney*, and the Japanese fleet are standing south, and us north, in hopes of getting the German cruisers in between. It is enough to burn you up out here, and the further north we get the hotter.”



A photograph showing the burial at sea of a British sailor who succumbed to his wounds following the action to capture German New Guinea. This appeared in the Ely Standard of 19th February 1915.

October 21st 1914

“Since the outbreak of war we have steamed 14,000 miles, capturing German places, and searching for some German cruisers. At last we captured one small cruiser, the *Komet*, fifty men and four officers being taken prisoners. We are now returning to Suva from searching a lot of islands as far as Samoa and back, but have not found anything. We no doubt stop at Suva a day or two. There we get bunches of bananas given to us from the plantations, and they go down all right too. This time on arrival we got a mail, the second once since the war started. We are completely in the outside world round these islands. We get a little bit of news about the war by wireless from Wellington, New Zealand. It will be quite a curio to see a newspaper....the ship’s company are dying to have a go at the German cruisers when we do come across them. We killed about 60 on shore at New Guines.

From the Falkland Islands – January 3rd 1915

“We arrived at Theses Islands this morning from Valpariso. This trip we have got right into the snow from the tropics, and it is cold, too, coming through the Straits of Magellan. It was a nice sight. On both sides of us were large mountains covered with snow, and on some of the very high ones there were glaciers. The snow and ice were the colour of Cambridge blue, and it looked very pretty. We have managed to strike some wreckage either of the *Good Hope*, *Monmouth*, or the German cruisers which were sunk. On the way from Valpariso we passed over the *Good Hope* and *Monmouth*, and stopped and held a funeral. We passed some life buoys of the German flagship yesterday afternoon and we have got the *Dresden*, which had escaped two of our cruisers, bottled up in a channel leading from the Straits. Today we are coaling ship, and the divers are down putting our propeller straight. This is Sunday, but that does not make much difference. We have not had a Sunday since the war started. Tomorrow afternoon we leave for our next place, and thank goodness we shall soon be in a warm climate again. I hear we get our mail about Jan. 25th, and that will make five months mails due to us.”

Australia only ever fired in anger twice: at a German merchant vessel in January 1915, and later at a suspected submarine contact in December 1917.

George wrote the following letter at sea, off the coast of Africa,, on 17th January 1915, but it was not posted until the ship reached England.

“Tomorrow we arrive at St Vincent, West Africa, to coal again, before proceeding to Gibraltar. Then it is a toss up if we come home or go to Jamaica to clear the Atlantic of the enemy’s ships. It was about four o’clock when we sighted something about fifteen miles ahead. We gave chase, and she tried for all she was worth to get away. At 8.10 we got within range with our 12 inch guns, and we soon found one to stop her. She must have had a birthday, for directly the shell touched the water at the side of her she went hard to port at once. We found at ten miles, and by the time we got up to her it was dark. Our searchlights were turned on, and an armed party and officers boarded her to see what she was. Her name was painted out and her funnel disguised. It looked as though she had received a coat of paint that day. The search proved her to be a German fleet liner, with stores for the Germans, so the Admiral ordered all the crew of 99 to abandon the ship in half-an-hour. That was done by the use of their own lifeboats – eight of them. Directly everybody was out of them holes were knocked into them for them to sink. When that was finished our party left the liner with all her lights full on. Now for the fireworks! The first shot from the 12 inch guns extinguished the

lights, the second one caused the boat to burst into flames; and then four-inch Lyddites finished her off. She went down stern first with her bows in the air. This happened about midnight, and it was a nice sight with the searchlights on, adding to the effect. Yesterday I cut the German captain's beard. I charged him 6d., and he gave me 1s. He also wants his hair cut before we arrive at Gibraltar, and before we hand them over to the soldiers. That will make three weeks that we have had them on board. I think they will be sorry to leave, as they are treated the same as the ship's company with regard to their food. They are guarded night and day by sentries with revolvers. I am getting sick of this. When we arrive at St Vincent it will make once more round the world, but we have done more than twice round in mileage. We have covered just upon 70,000 miles up to date. None of the crew have had any leave at all for seven months, and we have got five months mails waiting for us in some part of the world. Goodness knows when we shall get them."

Australia was then assigned to North Sea operations, which consisted primarily of patrols and exercises, until the end of the war. During this time, Australia was involved in early attempts at naval aviation, and 11 of her personnel participated in the Zeebrugge Raid. The battlecruiser was not at the Battle of Jutland, as she was undergoing repairs following a collision with sister ship HMS New Zealand

From Halifax, Nova Scotia – September 13th 1915

"Thanks for letter, as I have not had one for some time. Two lots of our mails have been sunk, one in the *Arabic* and one in the *Hesperon*, so most likely some of your letters have been lost. The other night I nearly got done in myself. I had been ashore from 7 till 10.30. From the town to where we are is a good half hour's run in our packet boat, that is the fastest boat. When we were about half-a-mile from the ship – it was pitch dark – the bowman shouted out "ship ahead" and our boat turned to starboard. And she (meaning the other boat) caught us lovely, right in the middle. A massive dockyard tug cut us in two, and we sank within a minute. There were thirty of us in the packet boat. Somehow or other when the tug hit us it knocked me so that I caught hold of the 3-pounder gun on the bows. Then I got hold of the anchor cable hanging from the tug, pulled myself up, and stood on the anchor and then on board. The alarm was give, then our ship turned her searchlights on, and all boats from our fleet came to the rescue. But it was too late. We lost three drowned. Divers went down next day, and recovered one body, and two days afterwards they got another one. The third one they have not got yet. Yesterday we had another scare. A sailing ship laden with 500 barrels of oil and gasoline, laying 100 yards from us, suddenly exploded and leaped out a mass of flames, a horrible cry coming from the people on board and gradually dying out as they got burnt up. Our doctor and Commander, with a boatload of sailors, went to the rescue. They got four men as they were blown out of the ship. One was burnt terribly, another had a broken hip, and the other two were burnt. But there were two poor fellows got burnt up alive on her. Those were the ones calling out, so there were three men lost their lives in that. I shall be glad when we go to Bermuda some time this month for docking. While that is on we are living in Admiralty House. That is A1 there, but very hot. We go in for bathing and fishing. Today I caught four fish – a cod weighing 3lbs, two large flat fish and a Pollock. Walter and I are having the codfish for breakfast. Sometimes I go with the A. Fishing and we get 60 to 70 codfish every time." (*George was known for his love of fishing!*)

The Royal Navy continued to “lend” George to the Australian Navy for further short terms, which together totalled ten years – the last “one year loan” commencing on 30th May 1923. George’s Australian record tells us he was 5 feet 7 ½ inches tall with black (or very dark brown) hair, hazel eyes and a fresh complexion. He had a number of small scars on his hands and two tattoos consisting of Buffalo Bill on his right forearm and “Death and Glory” on his left forearm. During this time he received three good conduct badges.

Back in Ely, George’s brother Reginald died on 5th October 1919 and his father, George Albert Toombs, died on 18th June 1922, less than a year after he had remarried (to Alice Harper).

After the War George himself had married Florence Lydia Giles (1893) of Alderforth Farm, Witchford, at Witchford church on 19th February 1919. Ernest, then a First Class Petty Officer on HMS Iron Duke, was the best man. Florence had also “done her bit” during the war and had been a member of the nursing staff at Ely’s Red Cross Hospital for three years.

As befits sailors, George and his brother Harry both settled at Portsmouth. After his time at sea George had become an insurance agent for Sun Life Financial of Canada and had settled at 69 Edmund Road, Portsmouth, where Florence died in 1944, and George himself in 1958.

ⁱ Photograph of H M A S Australia By Alan C. Green -
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