

# Stories from the Honour Boards

Stories of those who served and are remembered on the Honour Boards in the Merrington Anzac Memorial Peace Chapel at Saint Andrew's Uniting Church

Booklet Number 112

# **SYDNEY MERCER-SMITH 1894 - 1975**



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## Private Sydney Mercer-Smith

Sydney Mercer-Smith was born in Brisbane on 21 April 1894, the third child and second son of Sydney Mercer-Smith and Amy Maud née Robjohns.



*Commander Sydney Mercer-Smith*

His father was Commander Sydney Mercer-Smith who at the end of his long nautical career was in charge of the Brisbane pilot service and chief examination officer for the Port of Brisbane. His mother was the daughter of a Congregational minister, Rev Henry Robjohns. (1837 – 1906)

His older brother Harry<sup>1</sup> lost his life in World War 1 and his younger brother Victor served in the Royal Air Force in the First and Second World Wars. The names of the three brothers were listed on the Wharf Street Congregational Church Honour Boards now in the Merrington Anzac Memorial Peace Chapel.

Sydney attended Brisbane Grammar School in 1909 and 1910. He joined the Royal Australian Naval Reserve and on 4 August 1914 was mobilised as Petty Officer Yeoman of Signals. He served in waters off Queensland and New South Wales on board HMAS *Gayundah*, a ship on which his father had earlier served as navigating lieutenant. However, at the age of 21 years and 2 months, Sydney Mercer-Smith enlisted in Brisbane to serve in the Australian Imperial Force on 5 July 1915.

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1. See Stories from the Honour Boards, No 11, *Harry Mercer-Smith*

He was assigned to the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion and at the end of the year 1915, embarked from Brisbane on board HMAT<sup>1</sup>*Itonus*, acting on the voyage as company sergeant major.

His unit stayed for a while in Egypt before proceeding to Armentières via Marseilles. While in action there on the Somme, Sydney Mercer-Smith was severely wounded. He suffered a bullet wound to his left eye and was moved to England for hospital treatment. He was discharged from the Number 1 Auxiliary Hospital in London on 11 July 1916 and returned to Australia soon afterwards on the ship *Marathon*. He was discharged from the AIF on 25 October 1916.

Back in Brisbane, Sydney Mercer-Smith resumed his employment as a clerk in the shipping agent firm, Gibbs, Bright and Company until 30 June 1926.

On 9 June 1928 Sydney Mercer-Smith was in the large crowd that welcomed his cousin Charles Kingsford Smith and Charles Ulm to the Brisbane airport after their famous trans-Pacific flight in the *Southern Cross*.



*Charles Kingsford Smith's arrival in Brisbane*

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1. His Majesty's Australian Transport

Sydney Mercer-Smith lost his mother and father during the year 1933. His mother died on 11 March. Mrs Amy Mercer-Smith had taken a prominent part in numerous public welfare activities in Brisbane. During the Great War she was an active worker for the Red Cross Society and regularly contributed articles to the Queensland Red Cross Magazine. She was also connected with the formation of the Junior Naval Cadets of the Institute of Social Service and later with the Loyal Wirt Brigade<sup>1</sup>. After the war Mrs Mercer-Smith worked for the formation of a troop of boy scouts at Redcliffe.

She was an active member of Coorparoo Presbyterian Church. The death of Commander Sydney Mercer-Smith occurred on 16 August 1933. He was a mariner of wide experience. In his notable career at sea he was government agent supervising the recruiting of and later the repatriation of kanaka labour.

He carried out these duties on many sailing ships including the *Ariel* which in 1894 struck an uncharted reef and foundered off the island of Santa Catalina in the Solomon Group. Through his organisation when this catastrophe occurred, the crew and kanakas on board safely reached the Island of Santa Anna where after some weeks they were picked up by a passing ship. Sydney's parents are buried at Bulimba Cemetery.

Sydney Mercer-Smith enlisted again in the Second World War, serving as a lieutenant based for most of the period in Sydney. In November 1955 he was appointed Head Attendant, Communication Services, Engineering Branch of the Maritime Services Board of New South Wales, a position he held till his retirement from the public service at age 65 in 1959.

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1. Rev Loyal Wirt was minister of the Wharf Street Congregational Church from May 1904 till October 1907

He lived for a while on Congi Station, a grazing property at Woolbrook, New South Wales where he was the bookkeeper. Sydney Mercer-Smith did not marry. He remained in close touch with his family who remembered him as a sensitive and retiring man with high principles. They said Syd had inherited the artistic talent of his parents and grandparents and also wrote poetry. He died at the Narrabeen Soldiers' Home in Sydney on 17 June 1975.

### **Select Bibliography**

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*Lest we forget*