Plymouth Naval Memorial, Devon, England

Lest We Forget

World War 1

4388   STOKER

R. T. HOUSTON

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY

H.M.A.S. "SYDNEY"

9TH JULY, 1917   Age 36

Robert Thomas HOUSTON

Robert Thomas Houston was born on 25th February, 1881 a Strabane, Donegal, Tyrone, Ireland to parents William & Annie Houston.

Robert Thomas Houston joined Royal Navy on 5th February, 1900 - 20 days before his 19th birthday. He was a Labourer - 5 ft 6 ½ in, brown hair, blue eyes with a fresh complexion.

He was issued an official number of 294693 Chatham & rated as Stoker 2nd Class in *Pembroke II* on 5th February, 1900.

Stoker 2nd Class Robert Thomas Houston was transferred to *Rodney* on 26th September, 1900 then on to *Anson* from 1st March, 1901. He was promoted to Stoker on 1 June, 1902 while serving in *Anson*. Stoker Houston was in Cells for 5 days from 16th March, 1902 & returned to duty on 22nd March, 1902.

Stoker Robert Thomas Houston was transferred to *Pembroke II* on 2nd October, 1902 then transferred to *Thetis* on 25th November, 1902. He was in Cells for 7 days from 13th December, 1903 & returned to duty on 21st December, 1903. Stoker Houston was transferred to *Pembroke II* on 13th July, 1905 until 21st August, 1905 when he was recorded as "run" (Naval term for deserted).

Stoker Robert Thomas Houston returned to *Pembroke II* from 21st November, 1905 then was transferred to *Albemarle* from 6th February, 1906. He was recorded as Stoker 1st Class from 1st July, 1906 while serving in *Albemarle.*

Stoker 1st Class Robert Thomas Houston was in Cells for 14 days from 4th December, 1906 while serving in *Albemarle* & returned to duty on 19th December, 1906 until 22nd November, 1907. He was recorded as *"42 days H.L. ___"* until 28th December, 1907, still serving in *Albemarle*.

Stoker 1st Class Robert Thomas Houston was transferred to *Pembroke II* from 25th February, 1910 then transferred to *Hawke* on 7th March, 1910. He was transferred to *Encounter* on 15th April, 1910. On 3rd June, 1910 he was recorded as "*30 days H.L. Absent without Leave*" & returned to duty on 3rd July, 1910 while serving in *Encounter*. Stoker 1st Class Houston was recorded again for "*30 days H.L. (absence)"* from 18th July, 1910 to 18th August, 1910.

Stoker 1st Class Robert Thomas Houston was transferred to *Penguin* from 18th August, 1910 then on 9th October, 1910 he was transferred back to *Encounter*.

The 1911 England Census recorded Robert Thomas Houston as a 30 year old, single, Stoker 1st Class with Royal Navy. He was a member of Crew of H.M.S. *Encounter* which was a 2nd Class Cruiser. On the night of the 1911 Census – Sunday 2nd April, 1911 H.M.S. *Encounter* was at Vavau, Tonga Islands & was captained by Philip Howard Colomb.

Stoker 1st Class Robert Thomas Houston was recorded as "*70 ds H.L. (absence)"* from 28th December, 1911 until 3rd March, 1912 while serving in *Encounter*. On 4th June, 1912 Stoker 1st Class Houston was recorded as *"Shore CS expd."* (Shore – Continuous Service expired).

Robert Thomas Houston, ex-Royal Navy joined the Royal Australian Navy. His next of kin was listed as his mother Mrs Annie Peebles, 28 Newton St., Paisley, Scotland. Stoker Robert Thomas Houston was issued an official number of 4388.

Stoker Robert Thomas Houston served in *Penguin* from 1st September, 1914 then was transferred to *Cerberus* from 5th September, 1914 to 19th September, 1914.

[H.M.A.S. Cerberus – previously H.M.V.S. Cerberus was renamed H.M.A.S. Cerberus when the navy became the Royal Australian Navy in 1911. By World War I, the weapons and boilers on H.M.A.S. Cerberus were inoperable & was confined to Port Phillip Bay in Victoria, Australia. The ship was retasked as a guardship and munitions store, while carrying the personnel of the Royal Australian Naval College on her paybooks.]

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Stoker Robert Thomas Houston was transferred to H.M.A.S. *Sydney* from 29th September, 1914. He was involved in the Emden action on 9th November, 1914.
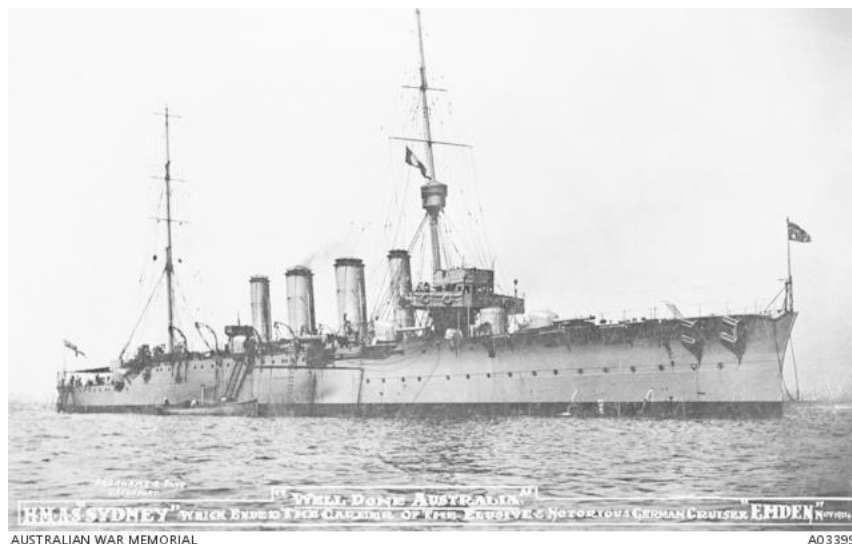
H.M.A.S. *Sydney*

H.M.A.S. Sydney was a Chatham class light cruiser of the Royal Australian Navy (R.A.N.). Laid down in 1911 and launched in 1912, the cruiser was commissioned into the R.A.N. in 1913.

During the early stages of World War I, Sydney was involved in supporting the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force, and escorting the first ANZAC convoy. On 9th November 1914, the cruiser defeated the German cruiser SMS Emden at the Battle of Cocos. During 1915 and 1916, Sydney operated on the North America and West Indies Station, before joining the 2nd Light Cruiser Squadron at Greenock, Scotland in November 1916. On 4th May 1917, the cruiser was involved in an inconclusive action against the German zeppelinL43; neither was damaged. *(Wikipedia)*

Later in 1917, *Sydney* was fitted with an aircraft launching platform and equipped with a Sopwith Ships Pup fighter. On 1 June 1918, while patrolling in the Heligoland Bight, *Sydney* and *Melbourne* launched their aircraft to engage two German reconnaissance aircraft. *Sydney's* fighter destroyed one of the enemy aircraft.

Sydney was present at the surrender of the German High Seas Fleet on 21 November 1918. She returned to Australia on 19 July 1919. After the war, *Sydney* carried out routine fleet duties until paid off in 1928. She was broken up the next year. *(The Australian War Memorial)*

H.M.A.S. *Sydney* 1914

Stoker Robert Thomas Houston, H.M.A.S*. Sydney*, died on 9th July, 1917 at Rosyth, Fife, Scotland from Accidental death (Ship Explosion). (details as per Australian War Memorial). His Service Record recorded *"Killed in Vanguard".*

H.M.S. *Vanguard*

HMS Vanguard was one of three St Vincent-class dreadnought battleships built for the Royal Navy in the first decade of the 20th century. She spent her whole career assigned to the Home and Grand Fleets. Aside from participating in the Battle of Jutland in May 1916 several months later, and the inconclusive Action of 19 August, her service during the war generally consisted of routine patrols and training in the North Sea.

Vanguard was refitted in Rosyth in December, 1916. On the afternoon of 9 July 1917, the ship's crew had been exercising, practising the routine for abandoning ship. She anchored in the northern part of Scapa Flow at about 18:30. There is no record of anyone detecting anything amiss until the first explosion at 23:20. She sank almost instantly, with only three of the crew surviving, one of whom died soon afterwards. A total of 843 men were lost, including two Australian stokers from the light cruiser HMAS Sydney serving time in the battleship's brig. Another

casualty was Captain Kyōsuke Eto, a military observer from the Imperial Japanese Navy, which was allied with the Royal Navy at the time through the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. The bodies of 17 of the 22 men recovered after the explosion, plus that of Lieutenant-Commander Alan Duke, who died after being rescued, were buried at the Royal Naval Cemetery at Lyness, not far from the site of the explosion. The others are commemorated on the Chatham, Plymouth and Portsmouth Naval Memorials.

A Board of Inquiry heard accounts from many witnesses on nearby ships. They accepted the consensus that there had been a small explosion with a white glare between the foremast and 'A' turret, followed after a brief interval by two much larger explosions. The board decided, on the balance of the available evidence, that the main detonations were in either 'P' magazine, 'Q' magazine, or both. A great deal of debris thrown out by the explosions landed on nearby ships; a section of plating measuring approximately six by four feet (1.8 by 1.2 m) landed on board the battleship Bellerophon. It was found to be from the No. 2 Hydraulic Room abaft 'A' barbette. It showed no signs of a blast from 'A' magazine, which reinforced the visual evidence suggesting that the explosion took place in the central part of the ship.

Although the explosion was obviously an explosion of the cordite charges in a main magazine, the reason for it was much less obvious. There were several theories. The inquiry found that some of the cordite on board, which had been temporarily offloaded in December 1916 and catalogued at that time, was past its stated safe life. The possibility of spontaneous detonation was raised, but could not be proved. It was also noted that a number of ship's boilers were still in use, and some watertight doors, which should have been closed in wartime, were open as the ship was in port. It was suggested that this might have contributed to a dangerously high temperature in the magazines. The final conclusion of the board was that a fire started in a four-inch magazine, perhaps when a raised temperature caused spontaneous ignition of cordite, spreading to one or the other main magazines, which then exploded.

The wreck was heavily salvaged in search of non-ferrous metals before it was declared a war grave in 1984, although some of the main armament and armour plate were also removed. As might be expected, the wreck, which lies at a depth of 14.2 metres (46 ft 7 in), and its associated debris cover a large area at 58.8566°N 3.1062°WCoordinates: 58.8566°N 3.1062°W. The amidships portion of the ship is almost completely gone and 'P' and 'Q' turrets were blown some 40 metres (130 ft) away. The bow and stern areas are almost intact as has been revealed by a survey authorised by the Ministry of Defence in 2016 in preparation for the centenary commemoration planned for 2017. The wreck was designated as a controlled site in 2002 and cannot be dived upon except with permission from the Ministry of Defence.

(Extract of information on H.M.S. Vanguard & photo from Wikipedia)

H.M.S. *Vanguard*

The Australian connection

Other men on board Vanguard that night included two Australian stokers – Robert Houston and Leslie Roberts. The two men had been serving on board HMAS Sydney, which was anchored nearby.

However, on 9 July, 1917 the two men were part way through a seven-day sentence in the Vanguard's brig. After almost a week in confinement the two men died when in the explosion. Boats from HMAS Sydney were first on the scene, but Houston and Roberts were not found.

(Information from Scapaflowwrecks)

Australians were closely involved with the loss of the Vanguard which suffered a massive internal explosion on the night of 9 July 1917 caused, it is believed, by faulty cordite charges, incorrectly stowed. HMAS Sydney was the nearest ship, anchored about half a mile away; her boats were the first on the scene and rescued the only two men to survive the disaster. Unfortunately, two of her own sailors were on board the battleship and were lost.

The Vanguard Memorial in Lyness cemetery is dedicated to all those who died in the disaster, including the two men from HMAS Sydney.

Both men, Stoker Robert Thomas Houston and Stoker Leslie William Roberts, were unlucky enough to have been sentenced to seven days cells on 3 July, and appear to have been serving their sentence in Vanguard as no other cells were available. They would have spent their last week with little or no bedding and daily picking two pounds of oakum, which was weighed when given to them and then again when received back. Like most of the 804 men who were lost in Vanguard, they have 'no known grave but the sea'.

(Information from Semaphore Issue 4, 2009 – Royal Australian Navy Publication)

Stoker Robert Thomas Houston was lost at sea at Scapa Flow, North Sea after a series of internal explosions caused the sinking of H.M.S. *Vanguard*.
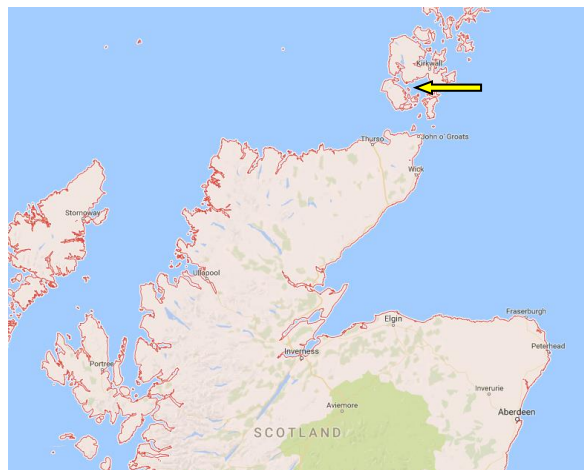
Scapa Flow marked by yellow arrow

Robert Thomas Houston is named in the *"Ireland Civil Registration Deaths Index 1864 – 1958.*" He is also named in the "*UK British Army and Navy Birth, Marriage and Death Records 1730 – 1960."*

Scotland National Probate Index:

HOUSTON, Robert Thomas, late of 28 Newton Street, Paisley, Stoker, H.M. Australian Navy, was killed on board H.M.S. "Vanguard" on 9 July 1917, at Scapa Flow, testate. Confirmation granted at Paisley, 16 March, to Annie Peebles, 28 Newton Street aforesaid, Executrix nominated In Will or Deed, dated 20 January 1917, and recorded in Court Books of Commissariot of Renfrew, 13 March 1918. Vale of Estate, £1.

Stoker R. T. Houston is named on the Plymouth Naval Memorial, Devon, England – Panel 23. He has no grave, however his death is still acknowledged by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

The Commonwealth War Graves Memorial Register for Plymouth Memorial records: *"Houston, Sto. Robert Thomas, 4388, R. Aust. N. H.M.A.S. "Sydney". 9th July, 1917. Age 36. Son of William and Annie Houston, of Strabane, Co. Tyrone. 23."*

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission lists Stoker Robert Thomas Houston - service number 4388, aged 36, of Royal Australian Navy – H.M.A.S. "Sydney". He was the son of William & Annite Houston, Strabane, Co. Tyrone.

Stoker R. T. Houston is commemorated on the Roll of Honour, located in the Hall of Memory Commemorative Area at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, Australia on Panel 1.

Roll Of Honour WW1 Australian War Memorial Canberra, Australia

R. T. Houston is remembered on Royal Australian Navy WW1 Memorial, located at HMAS *Cerberus* Protestant Chapel of St Mark, Nelson Road, Crib Point, Victoria.

HMAS *Cerberus* Protestant Chapel of St Mark, Crib Point, Victoria *(Photos courtesy of Karen Standen)*

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OUR GALLANT DEAD

INDIAN OCEAN

SYDNEY-EMDEN ACTION
(OFF COCOS ISLANDS 9TH NOVEMBER 1914)

LYNCH, T.	P.O.	HOY, A.	A.B.	SHARPE, R.A.	A.B.	
		BELL, R.W.	ORD. SEA.			

BELTON, H.	STO. P.O.	JOPE, J.C.	P.O.	NORRIS, S.J.V.	A.B.
BRYANT, W.	STO.	MATTHEWS, F.	E.A.	ROSS, G.C.	STO.
CAMPBELL, J.D.	STO. II.			WILLIS, W.E.	STO. P.O. R.A.N.R.

MEDITERRANEAN

BROWNE, E.F.	STO.	FARMER, R.W.B.	LIEUT. R.A.N.R.	McCARTHY, W.G.H.	STO.
BROWNE, R.C.	STO.	GILBERT, S.J.	P.O.	TAYLOR, J.W.	STO. P.O.
COLTON, J.N.	STO.	GODIER, J.F.	STO. II.	VARCOE, C.	CH. STO.
CHITTS, T.J.	A.B.	HERBERT, C.H.	LIEUT.	WARREN, W.H.F.	COMMR.
DWYER, J.J.	STO. P.O.	KNAGGS, A.E.	A.B.	WILLIAMS, M.	STO.
EASTABROOK, T.S.	STO.	LEEDHAM, H.F.	LDG. STO.	WILSON, A.	CH. E.R.A.
		MOORE, L.R.A.	ORD. SEA.		

ATLANTIC

BATTERHAM, H.J.	CH. WRITER.	GORDON, D.B.	STO.	MOYLAN, T.	CH. YEO. SIG.
BIDDLECOMBE, T.W.	COMMR.	GRIFFIN, J.	BOY. TEL.	McGINTY, J.J.	CARP. CREW
COOPER, D.B.	LIEUT.	HIGGS, H.C.	LDG. SIG. R.A.N.R.	NYE, G.	A.B.
CRADDOCK, W.	STO. P.O.	HOBBS, R.A.	SURG. LIEUT.	THATCHER, A.A.	STO.
DAVIES, N.S.	ENGR. LIEUT.			TOUCHELL, T.D.	SIG. R.A.N.R.

NORTH SEA

BARNETT, F.	STO.	ISON, A.V.	STO.	O'CALLAGHAN, T.	CH. STO.
BAYLEY, F.O.	LDG. SIG.	JONES, L.L.	SIG.	OWENS, C.F.	A.B.
BOND, R.E.	STO.	JUSTICE, R.D.	STO.	PATERSON, G.M.	SUB. LIEUT.
BUCK, W.K.	ORD. SEA.	KEMPSTER, P.J.	P.O.	PEEBLES, D.A.	LDG. SEA.
CAMPAGNOLO, E	SIG.	LAIDLAW, R.S.	LIEUT.	PARKER, E.M.B.	ORD. SEA.
CUNNINGHAM, E.S.	MIDS.	LANGDON, E.R.H.	CH. STO.	ROBERTS, L.W.	STO.
EMERY, H.	YEO. SIG.	MACK, J.	SUB. LIEUT.	RUSSEL, C.V.	LDG. SEA.
EVANS, R.P.	LDG. SEA.	MAKOVEYEFF, E.	S.B.S.	SHEEDY, F.A.	A.B.
GAFF, D.A.	A.B.	MATTHEWS, W.J.	STO. P.O.	STACEY, A.	A.B.
HANCEY, E.B.	STO.	MATTHEWS, C.W.	LDG. STO.	STEVENSON, G	STO.
HARDING, F.	LDG. STO.	McCLURE, J.	W. MECH.	STRETTON, C. De C.	A.B.
HARE, W.	CKS. MATE.	McLENNAN, C.	STO.	TAVENDER, F.D.	BOY.
HAYES, R.	P.O.	NIXON, O.H.	ORD. SIG.	TAYLOR, J.A.	P.O.
HICKSON, T.W.	STO. P.O.			TREGARTHEN, H.	A.B.
HODGKINSON, S.C.L.	LIEUT.			WALKDEN, H.G.	LDG. STO.
HOSE, T.J.	A.B.			WARD, T.G.J.	STO. II.
HOUSTON, R.T.	STO.			WATSON, W.J.	A.B.
HUGHES, T.	LDG. SIG.			WRIGHT, R.R.	BOY.

1914   **1918**

ERECTED
BY THEIR
MESSMATES

A Memorial to *Vanguard* is located in Lyness Royal Naval Cemetery, Hoy, Orkney Islands, Scotland.

The memorial is on the left hand side near the boundary. The 845 men lost on the Vanguard included two Australian stokers from H.M.A.S. Sydney in her cells and an observer from the Japanese Navy, a Commander Kyosuke Eto. The memorial commemorates those lost from HMS Vanguard in 1916, some of whom are buried in the cemetery. The memorial was erected by their shipmates and is separate from the graves.

The Vanguard Memorial *(Photo by Iain Anderson – CWGC)*

Memorial Stained-Glass windows to H.M.S. *Vanguard* can be found in Rochester Cathedral, High Street, Rochester, Kent, England.

(Photo from Vanguard Crew Photos – Wendy Sadler)

(2 pages of Stoker Robert Thomas Houston's Service records are available for On Line viewing at National Archives of Australia website).

Information obtained from the CWGC, Australian War Memorial (Roll of Honour) & National Archives

Newspaper Notices

THE VANGUARD LOSSES

800 PETTY OFFICERS AND MEN

The Secretary of the Admiralty announces the following losses by death in connection with the destruction of H.M.S. Vanguard:-

....

Houston, R. T. Stoker, R.A.N. 4388;……….

....

Roberts, W., Stoker, R.A.M., 4029;…..

(*Aberdeen Press and Journal* – 16 July, 1917)

SACRIFICE AND HONOUR.

(1) Mr. Henry Field, R.N.A.S., the American millionaire, who has sacrificed his life for Britain's cause. (2) Robert Thomas Houston, Paisley, killed on Vanguard.

(*Daily Record*, Glasgow, Scotland – 20 July, 1917)

Commonwealth War Graves Commission Headstones

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission cares for cemeteries and memorials in 23,000 locations, in 153 countries. In all 1.7 million men and women from the Commonwealth forces from WWI and WWII have been honoured and commemorated in perpetuity.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, as part of its mandate, is responsible for commemorating all Commonwealth war dead individually and equally. To this end, the war dead are commemorated by name on a headstone, at an identified site of a burial, or on a memorial. War dead are commemorated uniformly and equally, irrespective of military or civil rank, race or creed.

Not all service personnel have a Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone. In some instances the relative chose to have their own memorial/headstone placed on the deceased's grave. These private headstones are not maintained by the CWGC as they have no jurisdiction to maintain them.

Stoker R. T. Houston has no headstone but is instead named on the Plymouth Naval Memorial.

Plymouth Naval Memorial, Devon, England

The Memorial is situated centrally on The Hoe which looks directly towards Plymouth Sound.

After the First World War, an appropriate way had to be found of commemorating those members of the Royal Navy who had no known grave, the majority of deaths having occurred at sea where no permanent memorial could be provided.

An Admiralty committee recommended that the three manning ports in Great Britain - Chatham, Plymouth and Portsmouth - should each have an identical memorial of unmistakable naval form, an obelisk, which would serve as a leading mark for shipping. The memorials were designed by Sir Robert Lorimer, who had already carried out a considerable amount of work for the Commission, with sculpture by Henry Poole. The Plymouth Naval Memorial was unveiled by HRH Prince George on 29 July 1924.

After the Second World War it was decided that the naval memorials should be extended to provide space for commemorating the naval dead without graves of that war, but since the three sites were dissimilar, a different architectural treatment was required for each. The architect for the Second World War extension at Plymouth was Sir Edward Maufe (who also designed the Air Forces memorial at Runnymede) and the additional sculpture was by Charles Wheeler and William McMillan. The Extension was unveiled by HRH Princess Margaret on 20 May 1954. A further unveiling took place on 11 November 1956, when panels 101 to 103 honouring those who died on shore, but who had no known grave, were unveiled by Admiral Sir Mark Pizey.

In addition to commemorating seamen of the Royal Navy who sailed from Plymouth, the First World War panels also bears the names of sailors from Australia and South Africa. The governments of the other Commonwealth nations chose to commemorate their dead elsewhere, for the most part on memorials in their home ports. After the Second World War, Canada and New Zealand again chose commemoration at home, but the memorial at Plymouth commemorates sailors from all other parts of the Commonwealth.

Plymouth Naval Memorial commemorates 7,251 sailors of the First World War and 15,933 of the Second World War.

(Information from CWGC)

Plymouth Naval Memorial *(Photo from VWMA – Julianne T. Ryan 2017)*

(Photo from CWGC)

1914 – 1918   1939 – 1945
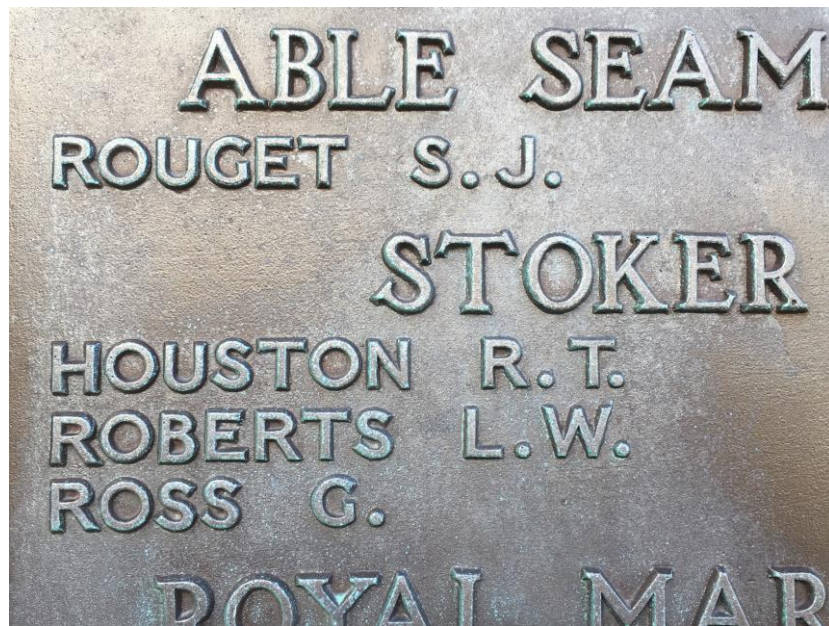
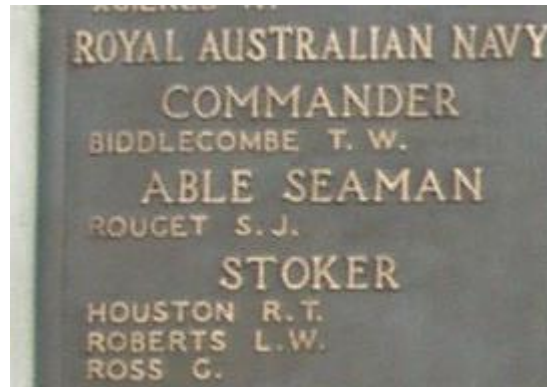*All These Were Honoured In Their Generations*

And Were The Glory Of Their Times

(Photo from CWGC)

Photo of Stoker R. T. Houston's name on the Plymouth Naval Memorial, Devon, England.

(Photo from Find a Grave – Cliff Barry)

Poppies Wave at CWGC Plymouth Naval Memorial *(Photo by Robert Pittman)*

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