



The Royal Australian Navy in 15 Objects

Object 3

The pair of bells from SMS *Emden* & HMAS *Sydney*



The two ship's bells are from the World War I cruisers, the HMAS *Sydney* and the German SMS *Emden*. They are exhibited in the Australian War Memorial to commemorate the Battle of Cocos which took place off the Cocos Keeling Islands on 9 November 1914. In that battle which was the fledgling Royal Australian Navy's first victory, the *Emden* was driven ashore by the *Sydney*. The violence of the battle is evidenced by the damage to *Emden's* bell.

One of the earliest records of a ship's bell was in about 1485 in the British ship *Grace Dieu*. Since then bells have been used in ships for marking time, signalling, raising alarms and for ceremony. Before the development of accurate timekeeping devices time was measured at sea using the 'flow' of sand through an hourglass. When the sand had run through, the glass was turned and the ship's bell struck to indicate so. From this method evolved of striking the bell once at the end of the first half hour of a four hour watch, twice after the first hour etc., until 'eight bells' marked the end of the four hour watch.

The ship's bell has also been used for communication at sea. In particular it has been used as a warning signal to other vessels in poor visibility. As early as 1675 Captain William Holden of HMS *Assistance* and Squadron Senior Officer issued sailing orders which commanded that 'if it prove foggy weather by day or night, we must ring our bells...' In 1858, British Royal Naval Regulations made this warning function mandatory. Today, the International Regulations for the Prevention of Collisions at Sea requires all ships to carry an efficient bell and that vessels 12 metres or more in length whilst at anchor 'In or near an area of restricted visibility, whether by day or night.....shall at intervals of not more than one minute ring the bell rapidly for about 5 seconds.'

A naval tradition is the baptism of ship's company children on board using the ship's bell, inverted, as the baptismal font. It is customary to then engrave the child's name and date of the baptism on the inside of the bell.

Striking eight bells at 0800 is also a morning ritual in the RAN when, in harbour, all officers 'fall in' on the quarterdeck for 'Colours'. At precisely 0800 eight bells are struck and the 'still' is piped by the Quartermaster using the Bosun's Call. The officers, all facing aft towards the ensign staff are brought to 'Attention' by the Officer of the Day who makes the salute for the flag, along with the Captain and the Executive Officer, whilst the Australian White Ensign, the Colours, are hoisted.

Location: The Australian War Memorial.