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Call the Hands

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Sydney Harbour Minefield

Through the Society's relationship with the Australian National Maritime Museum, stories are shared between the two organizations. The following is an Article from 'All Hands' December 2017 edition, the Australian National Maritime Museum Volunteers' Quarterly Newsletter

By Alex Books

Some 20-years after Fort Denison was abandoned as a fort, arrangements were made for a minefield to be laid down in Port Jackson of which Sydney Harbour is part.

A depot was commenced in 1890 in Chowder Bay, where the Submarine Mining Corps would maintain the electrically triggered mines which were fixed to a cable laid from Chowder Bay to the other side of the harbour. The mines were designed to detonate if an enemy ship crossed over the cable. The submarine miners were specialists and the work was dangerous. An accident in 1891 killed four men and injured another ten. The base saw no action in WWI and was disbanded in 1922, but it was the first underwater defence of the harbour before the anti-submarine boom net was built near the same site in WWII from Green (Laings) Point to Georges Head.

From 1932 to 1939, Chowder Bay was used by the Royal Australian Engineers (Army) as a depot and barracks. Other military occupation followed, and in the 1970s Chowder Bay was in use by the water transport arm of the Royal Australian Corps of Transport, which later relocated to Woolwich Dock until 1997, and then transferred to Townsville.



Submarine Mining Corps buildings at Chowder Bay as preserved today.

Sometime later, all the former Defence lands at Middle Head-Georges Head, which included Chowder Bay (and other harbour Defence lands), became the responsibility of the newly formed Sydney Harbour Federation Trust.

Many of the Submarine Mining Corps' buildings and structures remained, including the boatshed and slipway, wharf, cable pond for storing cable, derrick to hoist mines in and out of boats and the main building. The main building has a wooden upper level and lower level where mines were stored. The depot's buildings were in a poor state of repair when the trust decided to undertake their revitalisation as one of its first building conservation projects.

The boatshed had a very practical use for the Trust when it acquired, for its own use, the dilapidated captain's Fast Motor Boat 45802 from the aircraft carrier ex-HMAS *Sydney*. The boat was rebuilt as a work-for-the-dole project under the supervision of Ian Smith of the Sydney Wooden Boat School. It kept the old number 45802 and was named *Sydney*.

Editor's Note:

In addition to use by the Submarine Mining Corps, Royal Australian Engineers and Royal Australian Corp of Transport, the Royal Australian Navy has made extensive use of Chowder Bay facilities.

The RAN has maintained a presence in Chowder Bay since 1936 with the location of the Naval Fuel Installation on the site. The main activity carried out at the installation is the bulk storage and distribution of fuel from the two large above ground storage tanks to the fuel wharf. Smaller above ground tanks also exist around the installation and are used to store diesel and firefighting compounds.



Naval Fuel Installation, Chowder Bay, Sydney

Also, on the site are three decommissioned World War II Camouflaged fuel tanks which were built in 1942. The tanks were given false roofs to make them resemble adjacent domestic buildings in what was part of the first large-scale use of military camouflage in Australia.