

## Beached former sea warhorse briefly an exciting playground

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The K12 at Fairlight

SEVENTY years ago, residents and tourists could, for a small fee, descend into a Dutch submarine berthed at a purpose built structure off the front of the harbour pool at Manly.

The submarine, designated *KX12*, or *K12*, was a Kolonie-class vessel, so named because the class was designed for serve in Dutch colonies in various parts of the world.

The keel of the *K12* was laid at Maatschappij voor Scheepsen Werktuigbouw Fijenoord at Rotterdam in January 1923 and the sub was launched in July 1924.

The 67-metre submarine had a displacement of 820 tonnes and could sail at 13 knots on the surface and at 8 knots when submerged.

It was equipped with six torpedo tubes, carried 12 torpedoes and was armed with two guns on its deck.

After its sea trials, the *K12* was commissioned in May 1925 and in late 1926 set out on the 12-week voyage to Java.

The *K12* was stationed at the Dutch naval base at Surabaya in Java but after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 it was placed under the British Commander-in-Chief, Eastern Fleet and was soon in the thick of things.

On December 12 and 13, the *K12* sank two Japanese ships – the 1939-tonne freighter *Toru Maru* and the 3525-tonne tanker *Taizan Maru*.

Less than two weeks later the *K12* gave the crew of a British Catalina reconnaissance the best of all Christmas presents by rescuing them from the sea on December 25 after their plane was shot down by the Japanese.

But as the Japanese forces moved down the Indonesian archipelago in early 1942, the *K12* was forced to evacuate Surabaya in early March and sailed for Fremantle, where she arrived on March 20.

Over the following months the *K12* carried out patrols for the Dutch intelligence service, including the landing of spies on the coast of Java, and from June 1943 to March 1944, the *K12* operated under American command and was involved in anti-submarine exercises with Australian and other Allied warships off Fremantle.

By 1944, however, the *K12* was 20 years old and at the end of its service career. In March 1944 it was sailed to Sydney and briefly used for anti-submarine training before being decommissioned in May 1944.

In September 1944 the submarine was decommissioned, after which it was sold to a group of businessmen called the Sub Syndicate.

In November 1945, the *K12* was berthed beside Luna Park in Sydney and run as a concession with an admission charge.

After the war, Sydney was plagued by power shortages and restrictions, so the *K12* was used to boost Luna Park's electricity supply.

The submarine's batteries would be charged during the day to light Luna Park by night.

In late 1946 an agreement was reached between the Sub Syndicate and the Port Jackson and Manly Steamship Company under which the *K12* would be berthed between two specially-constructed jetties attached to the Manly harbour pool and exhibited to the public.

The jetty to which the *K12* was moored was perpendicular to the pool's promenade.

But Manly Cove is subject to wild weather from the south at times and the *K12* was sometimes buffeted against its jetty, which caused damage to the harbour pool.

So when huge seas battered the NSW coast in early June 1949, the ferry company was keen to spare its pool from further damage and arranged for the *K12* to be towed to safer waters further down the harbour.

On June 5 the *K12* was towed away from Manly by the tug *Warung* but before the vessels could clear North Harbour the towline broke and the submarine drifted broadside on to the rocks at Fairlight and stuck fast.

Numerous attempts were made to salvage the *K12* but it refused to budge and, on one occasion, a salvage barge was also swept on to the rocks.

But while the salvagers worked in vain and Manly Council complained about the unwanted visitor on its shores, local children were delighted – they had a real submarine on which to play.

But the fun had to end sometime.

In early 1950 a syndicate led by Les and Arthur Stephens stepped in and purchased the sub with the intention of removing it intact from Fairlight, breaking it up at a suitable location and then selling the scrap.

The syndicate's first task was to strip the submarine of as much weight as possible.

Interior flooring was removed so the heavy batteries and electric motors could be lifted on to the deck of the submarine. A flying fox was rigged between the elevated barrel of the submarine's 3.5-inch gun and the shore, so that everything stripped from the vessel could be traversed to the shoreline and taken away on trucks. But it was a year before the syndicate was ready to pull the sub clear of the rocks.

After being stripped to the bone, air was pumped into the submarine's ballast tanks and at 6am on January 7, 1951 the *K12* was finally floated free from the Fairlight foreshore – exactly 18 months after it had gone aground.

Listing slightly, the *K12* was towed to Balls Head Bay, where the demolition process began in earnest.

The superstructure of the *K12* was cut almost to the waterline and her interior gutted, leaving the submarine looking like a giant dugout canoe.

To cut the hull into manageable pieces, the submarine had to be beached, so it was towed up the Parramatta River as far as the Ryde Rd bridge. But financial disaster struck when vandals knocked out the wooden plugs in the holes where pipes and sea plugs had been removed.

The sub sank into the mud, setting the demolition back by months and costing the syndicate dearly.

Using underwater torches and explosives, the hull was eventually broken up and the pieces dragged to the shore using the same heavy rigging gear that had been used to remove the heavier items from the submarine from the rocks at Fairlight.

The long, slow demolition process was finally completed in 1961 – 10 years after the submarine had been dragged off the rocks at Fairlight.

Thus the career of the submarine *K12* came to a sad end – from warship to playground to scrap. To add final insult to injury, 20 years after sending two Japanese ships to the bottom of the sea, most of the submarine's hull was sold as scrap to Japan.