

## Foreword

David Bruhn's *Kissing Cousins* concentrates on the role played by the US Navy's Patrol Craft Sweepers (PCS), which were deployed late into the Pacific war in Saipan in June 1944 and at Okinawa in March 1945. Other aspects covered by *Kissing Cousins* were the interaction in the Pacific between the US Navy and Royal Australian Navy (RAN), in both bomb and mine disposal and hydrographic activities. This foreword will focus on the latter two activities from the RAN perspective.

It is not well known that armed German raiders or Hilfs Kruezers laid 230 moored mines in South East Australian waters in October/November 1940, resulting in four ships being sunk and one seriously disabled. The first US merchantman sunk in World War II, the cargo ship *City of Rayville*, was sunk off Cape Otway on 8 November 1940. Consequently, the RAN commenced render mine safe (RMS) training at Flinders Naval Depot in early 1940, with advice from HMS *Vernon*, the home of the Royal Navy's RMS activity. Some 45 German GY moored mines were rendered safe around the Australian coast in 1941.

In early 1942, after the Japanese entered the war, the RAN increased the tempo of RMS training at Flinders Naval Depot. The Australian Army also established a Bomb Disposal (BD) School at Bonegilla in north east Victoria. Army bomb disposal units when formed, were allocated to Military Districts across Australia. The first Royal Australian Air Force Bomb Disposal course was held in April 1942 and several Bomb Disposal Squads were formed at Darwin, Townsville and Port Moresby.

RAN bomb and mine disposal (BMD) personnel, some of whom trained at the Army BD School, were progressively deployed to vital ports and eventually in support of operations in the islands to the north of Australia, commencing in Milne Bay on the eastern tip of New Guinea in August 1942. The supreme commander of the South-West Pacific Area, General Douglas MacArthur, had chosen Milne Bay as a forward base from which to strike by air at the Japanese conquests in New Guinea and the islands to the north.

Broadly, each service was responsible for BMD within areas under its control, with the Navy being responsible for ordnance under water. In

practice they worked closely together and the division of responsibility between the three services, during a combined or joint operation, was determined by the commander exercising unified command.

Whilst much has been written about the few RANVR officers who conducted BMD activities in UK and Europe during WWII, and the bravery and awards – including four GCs – is acknowledged, little has been written about the men who conducted BMD in the Pacific. In fact, Herman Gill's official history of the RAN in World War II does not even mention them.

RMS operations by the RAN in the Pacific theatre were completely different to those undertaken by RANVR officers in UK who dealt with sophisticated German ground mines, lived in normal accommodation in cities, were driven to and from the mine site and were supported by a scientific community at *Vernon* who provided RMS advice. BMD in support of Allied offensives in the Pacific focused on unexploded Japanese ordnance and booby traps, while those involved lived in the field, often close to fierce fighting and relying on their own initiative and knowledge with no back up.

Photo Foreword-2



RAN officer delouses a Japanese booby trap at Alexishafen, New Guinea.  
The notice warned Japanese troops to avoid the booby trap  
Australian War Memorial photograph 017181

Except for a few German ground mines at Rabaul and Japanese mines at Darwin, the mines rendered safe in the Pacific were moored, mainly Mk XIV mines laid by the minelayer HMAS *Bungaree* in defensive mine fields and generally unarmed when adrift. BMD activity in the Pacific focussed on bomb disposal and dealing with Japanese booby traps, of which there were many.

Whilst 10 RANVR officers contributed to RMS activities in UK, more than 30 BMD officers and a similar number of sailors deployed in the Pacific. There was a gradual increase in BMD billets, peaking from the middle of 1943 to the end of the war and then rapidly declined.

Awards for BMD operations by the RAN in the Pacific were sparse, probably because the operators were administratively remote, and their activities went largely unreported. The awards given are well covered in Chapter 9, RAN Bomb and Mine Disposal Personnel.

In August and September 1943, Lieutenant Bill Billman RANVR was involved in the clearance of unexploded ordnance following the Allied landings in Nassau Bay in July. This operation was undertaken so that the Allies could secure a beachhead, to establish a supply point to shorten the supply lines for the attack on Salamaua as part of the Salamaua-Lae campaign. For his time at Nassau Bay, Billman was awarded a Mention in Despatches on 26 June 1945 'for courage, skill and undaunted devotion to duty in exceptionally hazardous operations.

Lieutenant Francis Nankivell RANVR was posted to New Guinea in early 1944 to work on the ordnance and booby traps left behind by retreating Japanese forces. He was awarded an MBE for his work in clearing ordnance in the Cape Hoskins and San Remo areas on the north coast of western New Britain in June-July 1944. Able Seaman Reginald Peel assisted Nankivell in 1944, for which he was recognised with a BEM.

Billman subsequently undertook exchange service with the US Navy and received a Commander Seventh Fleet Commendation in June 1945 that stated: 'During the period September 1944 to April 1945 you were attached to MEIU 1 and rendered invaluable assistance in clearing unexploded ordnance from the Leyte and Manila Bay areas. Because of your diligent methods and careful research, you recovered and reconstructed a new type of Japanese mine and a new enemy underwater sound making device. The Commander Seventh Fleet commends you

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upon your exemplary performance and your contributions to the success of our operations in the Philippines.’

He was awarded a DSC on 6 November 1945 with the following citation: ‘Lieutenant Billman landed on Panaon Island on 20 October 1944 with the assault forces. He displayed bravery, devotion to duty and exceptional skill over a period of four months, in dealing with Japanese mines and unexploded bombs in the clearance operations in the Philippines.’

The clasp ‘Bomb and Mine Clearance 1945-53’ was awarded for six months’ consecutive service in the disposal of bombs and mines after 3 September 1945 in almost any part of the world. 145 of these clasps were issued, nine of them posthumously. Members of the RAN received 60, mostly for work in the Solomon Islands and New Guinea waters.



Whilst the RAN survey activities relevant to *Kissing Cousins* are covered in Chapter 17, an overall summary of the RAN Hydrographic Branch contribution during World War II follows.

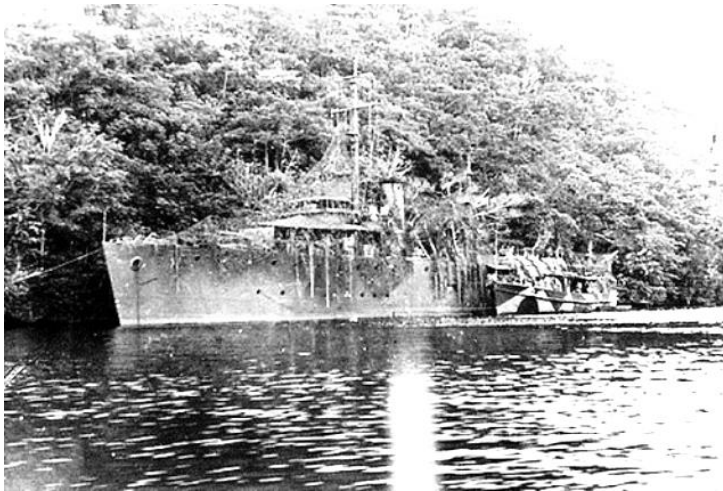
When the Pacific War erupted in December 1941, the Allies possessed poor chart and map coverage of strategic areas including the Solomons, New Guinea and Northern Australia, where large areas remained unsurveyed. Rapid hydrographic surveys would be vital to making these reef-strewn waters safe for warships and this work was entrusted to various hydrographic and topographic units. In the South West Pacific, the task of surveying New Guinea was given to the RAN Hydrographic Branch.

By then, HMAS *Moresby* was performing escort duties, whilst at times she resumed her old trade, carrying out surveys of the Great North East Channel, Great Barrier Reef openings, Blanche Bay and Rabaul Harbour.

In July and August 1942, hydrographic information provided by the small surveying tender HMAS *Kwato*, enabled ships to move into Milne Bay, while preliminary surveys by HMA Ships *Whyalla*, *Stella* and *Polaris* were to prove invaluable during the Buna campaign.

As Allied armies advanced during 1943, RAN surveying ships were formed into Task Group 70.5, part of the US Seventh Fleet and the Australian Hydrographic Branch was designated the charting authority for Allied naval forces in the South West Pacific.

Photo Foreword-3



HMAS *Whyalla* in camouflage in New Guinea. RAN

During 1944, Australian surveying vessels undertook several daring exploits as part of forces conducting initial operations preceding amphibious landings. The corvette HMAS *Shepparton* surveyed a channel through the Japanese-controlled Dampier Strait prior to the landing at Cape Gloucester. For the occupation of the Admiralty Islands, HMAS *Benalla* accompanied the invasion force, undertaking a survey of Seadler Harbour in the Admiralty Islands in New Guinea while it was still partly in enemy hands. In the landings that followed, surveying vessels routinely formed part of mine-sweeping flotillas, marking cleared channels and undertaking important preliminary surveys.

The Australian Hydrographic Branch also participated in landings at Morotai, Leyte Gulf, Lingayen Gulf, Subic Bay, Zamboanga, Mindanao, Tarakan, Brunei Bay and Balikpapan. It conducted surveys across Australia's northern waters and through the Timor and Arafura Seas, including waters largely unsurveyed since the days of the early navigators. This work provided a swept navigational route for battleships transiting from the Indian to Pacific Oceans and the mine sweeping and survey operations through the restricted waters of Torres Strait in Australia's north, enabled ships of all sizes to safely use it by day or night.

Despite its small number, Australia's surveying Branch received an impressive list of awards and decorations during World War II, including two Order of the British Empires (OBE), 13 Distinguished Service Cross (DSC), four Distinguished Service Medals (DSM), 14 mentions in despatches, as well as United States Legion of Merit awards. By 1945, the RAN Hydrographic Branch comprised the RAN sloops *Warrego* and *Moresby*; the frigate *Lachlan*; the corvettes *Benalla*, *Shepparton*, *Horsham*, *Echuca* and *Castlemaine*; the trawlers *Stella*, *Polaris* and *Winter*; the lighthouse tenders *Cape Leeuwin* and *Bangalow* and three harbour defence motor launches.

When hostilities ceased, the Hydrographic Branch had 56 hydrographic officers (15 permanent service and 41 naval reservists) classified as surveyors. All the reservists and four junior permanent hydrographic officers were graded assistant surveyor's 4th class. The surveyors were supported by survey recorders comprising mostly of petty officers and leading seamen, who had served in the Hydrographic Branch pre-war or who had trained on the job during the war. During surveying operations men were sometimes strafed, bombed and shelled, fortunately, only a small number were wounded but none were killed. The only survey vessels lost were the motor boats *Hearty* and *Sealark*.

Commodore Hector Donohue AM RAN (Rtd)