

Foreword

In the Second World War, naval activity in the Mediterranean Sea was a furious struggle by both sides to keep their armies supplied with the materials and reinforcements they needed, and the regular engagement by allied forces of enemy ships, submarines and aircraft. David Bruhn's latest book *Guns Up, Depth Charges Readied*, provides an in-depth analysis of the Mediterranean campaign focusing on the actions of destroyers and escorts. For the most part the campaign was fought between the Italian Navy, supported by German naval and air forces, and the Royal Navy supported by Commonwealth and other Allied naval forces which included the Royal Australian Navy, Indian Navy, Royal Canadian Navy, naval forces of the Union of South Africa and the Polish Navy. United States naval and air units joined the Allied side in 1942.

Five Royal Australian Navy (RAN) destroyers arrived in the Mediterranean in December 1939, in what was to become the first major theatre of operations for Australian forces in World War II. The destroyers of World War I vintage, were known as the 'Scrap Iron Flotilla' and consisted of HMA Ships *Stuart*, *Vampire*, *Vendetta*, *Voyager* and *Waterhen*. Long before troopships left Australia, they had sailed without fuss or farewells or bands or streamers and three months after war was declared they were in the battle arena. They pitted their strength against an opponent, whose ships were faster and bigger and more modern and they left him beaten. Their exploits are well described in the early chapters of the book. *Waterhen* was sunk on 30 June 1941 and the last of the flotilla to leave was *Vendetta*, who sailed for Australia on 21 October 1941.

The Australian cruiser HMAS *Sydney* joined the Royal Navy Mediterranean Fleet on 26 May 1940. On 19 July, *Sydney* came to the rescue of four British destroyers on an anti-submarine patrol as they were being engaged by two Italian cruisers. After a running battle that lasted for an hour, *Sydney* sank the *Bartolomeo Colleoni* and inflicted considerable damage on the other Italian cruiser, *Giovanni Della Bande Nere*. After an action-packed seven months where her exploits would see her become a household name in Australia, *Sydney* left the Mediterranean for Australia in January 1941. She was replaced by the cruiser HMAS *Perth*, which saw action at the Battle of Cape Matapan in March 1941. *Perth* and the RAN destroyers were involved with the movement of troops to Greece and in the evacuation of Greece and Crete in April and May 1941.

On 28 May, *Perth* sailed for Crete to assist in the evacuation. She was attacked en route by a German aircraft, but escaped damage. During the return from Crete with 1,188 evacuated soldiers aboard *Perth*, the convoy was attacked five times and on 30 May the ship was hit by a bomb in a boiler room.

During this period a signal exchange between *Perth* and Commander in Chief, Mediterranean, illustrates Admiral Cunningham's sense of humour. On sailing from Crete, Captain Sir Philip Bower-Smyth RN sent a signal saying that he had 1,100 troops onboard who had not eaten for 48 hours and that *Perth* only had sufficient provisions for one meal. He rather naively requested instructions. Cunningham's purported response was rather direct: 'Take all necessary precautions to avoid being eaten.'

Following repairs, in June, *Perth* was engaged in operations off Syria against Vichy French forces. She was relieved on 15 July by the cruiser HMAS *Hobart* and sailed for Australia three days later.

During the next five months *Hobart* operated from Alexandria, participating in the Mediterranean campaign as part of the Royal Navy's 7th Cruiser Squadron. She routinely ferried troops to where they were most needed in support of the campaign in the Western Desert and took part in shore bombardments of Tobruk and Bardia during October and November 1941.

Throughout her deployment *Hobart* was subjected to frequent air attacks both at sea and in Alexandria. However, her luck held and she suffered no major damage. *Hobart* sailed on her last operation with the Mediterranean Fleet on 5 December 1941 and escorted the supply ship *Breconshire* from south of Crete, safely into Alexandria where they arrived on 7 December, the day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Shortly afterwards, with the entry of Japan in the war, *Hobart* sailed for Australia.

Three new destroyers, two 'N' class, HMA Ships *Nizam* and *Napier* and the Q class destroyer HMAS *Quiberon* served in the Mediterranean shortly after commissioning in UK. In addition, the Grimsby-class sloops HMAS *Yarra* and HMAS *Parramatta* contributed to the Tobruk Ferry Service, with the latter being sunk on 27 November 1941 whilst escorting the ammunition ship *Hanne* to Tobruk (described in Chapter 6).

Quiberon made a significant contribution, as discussed in Chapter 12, when in October 1942 she joined the British naval forces assigned to support the Allied landings in North Africa (Operation Torch). During this period of her service, which took her into the Mediterranean for the first time, *Quiberon* experienced regular air attack, sunk an Italian submarine and contributed to the sinking of an Italian convoy.

Two Australian Minesweeping Flotillas were formed at Alexandria in May 1943, each composed of four *Bathurst* class corvettes. The 21st Flotilla was formed of HMA Ships *Gawler*, *Ipswich*, *Lismore*, *Maryborough* and the 22nd of *Geraldton*, *Cairns*, *Wollongong* and *Cessnock*. Their service in the Mediterranean however, was mainly confined to escort duty. They were attached to various escort groups for convoy work, initially individually and later as flotillas. Both flotillas supported the invasion of Sicily with three ships of the 21st conducting minesweeping operations ahead of the landing, before protecting the allied ships from submarine attack while troops and equipment were landed. The air threat was serious, both in these operations and subsequent convoy escorting operations, but the class now had sufficient anti-aircraft armament to cope. After the surrender of Italy on 8 September all but *Gawler*, *Ipswich* and *Maryborough* departed for the Indian Ocean. The first two left at the end of October and *Maryborough* late November. They were the last Australian warships to serve in the Mediterranean as the RAN was now involved in confronting Japan in the Pacific.

Guns Up, Depth Charges Readied, describes in detail the excellent result achieved by the ‘Scrap Iron Flotilla.’ Led by Captain Hec Waller as Commander (D), the flotilla quickly earned a reputation for success in battle and Waller soon became a favourite of the Commander in Chief, Admiral Cunningham. Waller was promoted to Captain on 30 June 1940 and on 11 September 1940 was appointed a Companion of the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) with the citation reading for ‘courage, enterprise and devotion to duty in recent engagements.’ For ‘bravery and enterprise’ at the Battle of Matapan (March 1941) Waller received a Bar to his DSO and was twice Mentioned in Despatches—once for his courage and skill and devotion to duty off the Libyan Coast; and the second for gallantry and distinguished service in Greek waters.

The crew nicknamed Waller ‘Hard Over Hec’ as most of his wheel orders in action, were ‘Hard a Starboard or Hard a Port.’ Waller would lay back in his chair, with pipe in mouth, on the bridge and wait for the dive-bombers to release their bombs before ordering the wheel hard over one way or the other!

The ‘Scrap Iron Flotilla’ represents a good case study of how the crew made the difference and in this case, certainly not the technology they had to work with. While the senior officer of the flotilla was well recognised and was a mainstream naval officer, reservists also made significant contributions. One such officer in *Stuart* was Lieutenant Thomas Cree RANVR.

Thomas Scott Cree was born in Glasgow Scotland in 1914. When he was three, his father Captain Robert Scott Cree, who was in the

1st/8th Battalion, Scottish Rifles, died of wounds sustained in the Third Battle of Gaza in November 1917. Tom's mother took him to Australia where she remarried. Tom attended the prestigious Geelong Grammar School in Victoria where he started his rowing career. He then went to the University of Cambridge in England, where he won the coxless pairs at Henley and rowed twice in the Boat Race (1 won 1 lost). He was chosen to represent Great Britain in the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, where he partnered David Burnfold in the coxless pair, reaching the semi-finals.

He enlisted in the Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserve as a sub lieutenant in Sydney on 16 February 1939. Following initial training, he completed the anti-submarine course before joining HMAS *Stuart* on commissioning on 2 September and subsequently deploying to the Mediterranean. He was promoted to lieutenant in September 1940, being awarded a Mention in Despatches that month for 'courage, enterprise and devotion to duty in contact with the enemy' for his contribution to *Stuart's* submarine actions. He won a Distinguished Service Cross in January 1941 for his role in *Stuart's* action against the Italian submarine *Gondar* off Alexandria in September 1940. Cree was the anti-submarine control officer and directed the attacks for over eleven hours that it took to sink the submarine.

He left *Stuart* in November 1941 and completed a radar course at HMAS Rushcutter, joining Navy Office in Melbourne in January 1942 to manage the introduction of the new radar technology into the RAN. In September he spent time in the US and UK learning about the application of radar and related technologies. He returned to Navy office in December and was promoted to Acting Lieutenant Commander in January 1943. He demobilized in April 1946 but remained in the RAN Reserve, being promoted to Lieutenant Commander on 31 December 1948 and retiring in March 1958.

Another naval officer from this period also represented his country in the Olympics. Lieutenant Gordon Burn Wood SDF commanded HMSAS *Protea* a converted whaling ship which joined the 22nd Anti-Submarine Group in the Mediterranean in August 1941. On 11 July 1942, the *Protea* and the *Southern Maid* succeeded in sinking an Italian submarine, the *Ondina*. Burn Wood was afterwards awarded the DSO for his part in this action. Details of the incident are covered in Chapter 8. Gordon represented South Africa at the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome in dinghy sailing.

The Mediterranean campaign was marked by a series of flotilla engagements, supply and support missions in support of the land war, enemy interdiction operations, anti-submarine, anti-air and carrier-

based warfare. Initially, the Mediterranean Fleet consisted of five light cruisers, including *Sydney*, and twenty-two destroyers, of which five were Australian. Much of the RAN's combat capability was in the northern hemisphere, leaving many at home to fear that the country was being left susceptible to attack. However, Australia responded positively to British requests for support and it was in the Mediterranean that RAN forces first engaged the enemy. *Guns Up, Depth Charges Readied* gives an excellent account of the intensity the escort forces faced and is a significant contribution to our understanding of the nature of the war at sea in that era.

Commodore Hector Donohue, AM RAN (Rtd)