

## Preface

*Linked inseparably with combat is naval logistic support, the support which makes available to the fleet such essentials as ammunition, fuel, food, repair services--in short, all the necessities, at the proper time and place and in adequate amounts.*

*In 1940 the Base Force Train [later called the Service Force] included a total of 51 craft of all types, among them 1 floating drydock of destroyer capacity. By 1945 the total was 315 vessels, every one of them needed.*

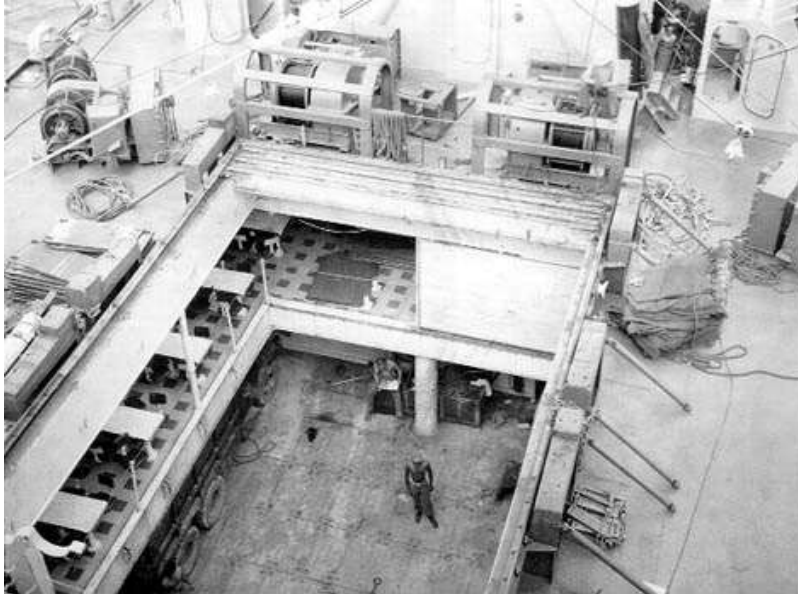
—Rear Adm. Worrall Reed Carter, USN, in his seminal book on U.S. Navy fleet logistics, *Beans, Bullets and Black Oil*, 1953.<sup>1</sup>

Photo Preface-1



Attack cargo ships USS *Aquarius* (AKA-16) at left, and *Titania* (AKA-13) at right, at Pavuvu, Russell Islands, 28 April 1944. U.S. Marine Corps photograph #USMC 86265

Photo Preface-2



One of the attack cargo ship USS *Rankin's* (AKA-103) cargo holds, opened. The upper level is the main deck, with cargo-handling winches visible. The lower level is the deck onto which cargo is combat loaded. Housed in the "tween decks" area are the mess decks where the crew and, if embarked, troops, ate their meals.  
U.S. Navy photograph

Readers of a certain age will likely be well familiar with the comedy-drama film *Mr. Roberts*, starring Henry Fonda as Mister Roberts, James Cagney as Captain Morton, William Powell as Doc, and Jack Lemmon as Ensign Pulver. The 1955 film was nominated for three Academy Awards, with Jack Lemmon winning the award for Best Supporting Actor. The action takes place aboard the fictitious U.S. Navy cargo ship *Reluctant* in a "backwater" area of the Pacific, which services combatant ships on their way to the ever-expanding battle front. The executive officer/cargo officer, Lt. (jg) Douglas A. "Doug" Roberts, feels that the war, in its waning days, is leaving him behind. He yearns to be aboard a destroyer, repeatedly requests a transfer, and finally gets his wish.

Some U.S. Navy and Royal Australian Navy cargo ships, and those of the British Merchant Marine supporting the British Pacific Fleet, all the subject of this book, did serve in backwater areas. Most did not, and went in harm's way while supporting the fleet, and combat forces ashore. Naval commanders well understood the advantages of supply logistics afloat and near areas of fleet operations. Having cargo ships,

oilers, ammunitions, and other such support close at hand was often the only option, particularly early in the war in the Pacific.

In the spring of 1942, Japanese forces were pushing south and southeast from newly gained positions in the Philippines, Netherlands East Indies, and the northern coast of New Guinea; and older established bases in the Caroline and Marshall Islands. The battles of Midway and Coral Sea were yet to be fought, and Australia and New Zealand were threatened. The only American naval establishment south of the Equator was at Tutuila, America Samoa. The British and New Zealand forces had some facilities at Suva in the Fijis. It was not known then, how near the enemy it would be safe to establish major supply bases, yet it was highly desirable to provide logistics support to the U.S. Navy's limited South Pacific Force as close to areas of potential operations as possible.<sup>2</sup>

### **BREADTH OF *READY TO HAUL, READY TO FIGHT***

Before progressing further into this preface, it's important to clarify for readers exactly what the book encompasses, and what it doesn't. When war broke out in the Pacific, on 7 December 1941, United States and Royal Australian naval forces were miniscule in comparison to the threat posed by Japan. As overburdened shipyards already fully engaged in supplying the European war began building desperately needed combatant ships, both navies acquired and commissioned civilian merchant vessels to meet fleet auxiliary ship requirements. The U.S. Navy took up existing freighters for use as cargo ships and, as the size of the sea service expanded greatly, acquired hulls laid down by the Maritime Commission as merchant vessels, for completion as USN cargo ships. (The identity of these type hulls, and brief explanation of their differences, may be found in Appendix A.)

Needing increasingly more cargo ships as the war expanded, U.S. shipyards began mass producing the famous Liberty ship. Americans are rightly proud of the contributions of the Liberties and their successors, Victory ships, in World War II. These type vessels served both as commissioned ships and as merchantmen, with Navy Armed Guard units aboard the latter to man naval guns fitted in the civilian ships to provide a means of self-defense.

The U.S. Navy sent nearly 300 cargo vessels to sea in World War II in all theaters. Summary information about ship numbers may be found in the following table, and identities of the ships in Appendix B. Fourteen cargo ships (AK) later converted to attack cargo ships (AKA) are counted once in the table, and the small numbers (7 in total) of net cargo ships (AKN) and aircraft ferry cargo ships (AKV) are omitted.

General stores-issue ships (AKS) are included in the table, because they are referenced in this book although there is little material devoted to them. There is no mention of the AKNs and AKVs.

**U.S. Navy Cargo Vessels (AK, AKA, AKS) in World War II**

<b>Ship Class</b>	<b>AK</b>	<b>AKA</b>	<b>AKS</b>
Miscellaneous cargo ships (14 of 47 AKs converted to AKAs in 1943)	33	14	
<i>Carter</i> -class cargo ships	66		
<i>Alamosa</i> -class attack cargo ships	48		
<i>Andromeda</i> -class attack cargo ships		30	
<i>Artemis</i> -class attack cargo ships		32	
<i>Tolland</i> -class attack cargo ships		32	
General stores-issue ships			16
Total (271 cargo vessels)	147	108	16

Canadians are proud of the many Park and Fort ships their yards churned out during the war for use by Canada and Britain, respectively. (It was North American shipyards that won the war of attrition against the German submarine wolf packs replacing ships faster than they could be sunk and ultimately prevented the British from starving.) The ships retained by Canada were named after parks, and those constructed for use by Britain, forts.

The Liberty and Park/Fort ships were closely related, “kissing cousins” so to speak, owing to the design of each type being based on working drawings for the British “North Sands” vessel, a product of the J. L. Thompson & Sons North Sands shipyard in Sunderland, England. (Greater information about this may be found in Appendix C.)

The freighters and ships built on other types of merchant vessel hulls, formerly known as AKs (cargo ships) pressed into duty as commissioned USN cargo ships, were faster than the more pedestrian Liberty ships. In early 1943, AKs fitted with additional guns (in some cases), and in receipt of other modifications, including the ability to carry amphibious landing craft, were reclassified AKAs (attack cargo ships). Attack cargo ships assigned to divisions of transport ships carrying assault troops, participated in amphibious landings and, thus, generally were in harm’s way more than AKs, which also participated but more often landed their cargos after beach heads were established.

The U.S. Navy owed much to the efforts of America’s shipyards, and was fortunate to have merchant vessels, and hulls under construction, that could be taken up for use as cargo ships. The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) also had a need for cargo ships, but very limited resources available to acquire them. Although a large country, Australia

had then only a small population. In this respect, Australia and Canada were very similar. The RAN found cargo ships, which it termed “stores-issuing ships,” wherever it could; most were former British merchant ships. Some of these ships were from among the lucky few able to escape Singapore, before it fell to Japanese forces.

It’s important to note that the RAN, having only a modest number of ships in comparison with the much larger USN, employed some of them in varying roles during the war, in an effort to meet its most immediate needs. Thus, as examples, following their acquisition, some of the stores-issuing ships were initially classified and used as minesweepers, or as harbor entrance control vessels before their ultimate role. Because cargo ships often worked closely with transports (meaning they carried troops) in amphibious operations, a portion of the book is devoted to the RAN’s three infantry landing ships (LSIs). Former passenger ships, they first served as armed merchant cruisers before their modification for service in amphibious assault roles.

British merchant ships played an important role in the Pacific war, first as acquisitions for the RAN, and later as units of the Fleet Train (logistics force) in support of the British Pacific Fleet, which joined in the final operations against Japan in 1945. General Douglas MacArthur opposed the Royal Navy under his Southwest Pacific command unless it was in the form of a task force attached to the U.S. Seventh Fleet. Admiral Ernest King did not want the Royal Navy in the Central Pacific at any price, allegedly because of logistics.<sup>3</sup>

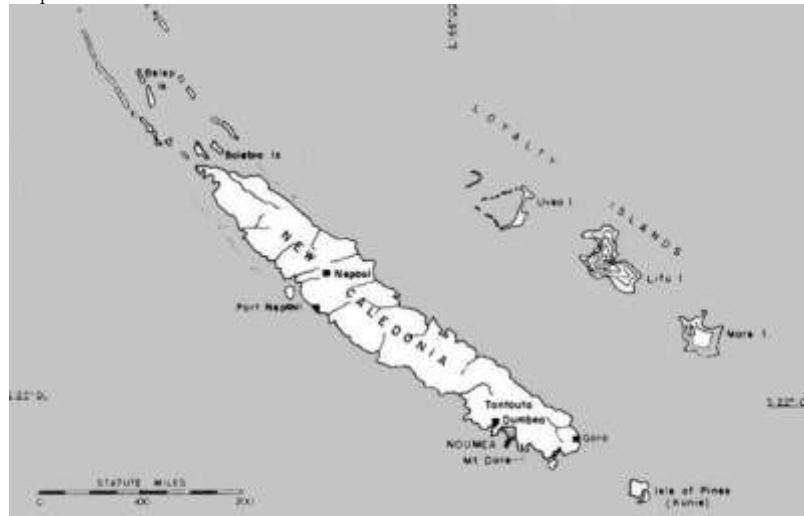
Ships of the Royal Navy were “short-legged,” accustomed to putting into a base every two or three weeks for replenishment and upkeep. American Navy ships were long-legged, able to “keep the sea” for months at a time, supported by a mobile Service Force. At the time when the entry of the British was under consideration, this force was stretched very thin. King feared that the RN fleet would be a drain on the USN supply system and would hamper their attack forces.

The Royal Navy’s solution to this problem was to bring a Fleet Train to the Pacific to support the British Pacific Fleet. This logistics service force was comprised of Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) units and civilian merchant ships cobbled together from Britain and other Allied countries. Among the force were some “Fort” stores-issuing ships, an important Canadian contribution to the war effort.

## U.S. NAVY'S MOST EXTOLLED CARGO SHIP

On 21 November 1942, the cargo ship USS *Alchiba* (AK-23) left Noumea, New Caledonia, with a cargo of aviation gasoline, bombs, ammunition, and provisions for American forces in the Guadalcanal-Tulagi area. She was a part of Task Unit Baker, which also consisted of the transport *Barnett* (AP-11), and the destroyers *Lardner* (DD-487), *Lamson* (DD-367), and *Hughes* (DD-410).<sup>4</sup>

Map Preface-1



The French Colony of New Caledonia (comprising dozens of islands, located to the north-northeast of Brisbane, Australia, across the Coral Sea)

*Building the Navy's Bases in World War II History of the Bureau of Yards and Docks and the Civil Engineer Corps 1940-1946 Volume II*

Noumea, at the southern end of the island of New Caledonia, had recently been developed as the main fleet base in the South Pacific, and served as a staging area for the development of other advance bases such as Guadalcanal. It also served as headquarters for Vice Adm. Robert L. Ghormley, USN, commander, South Pacific Force.<sup>5</sup>

On the morning of 28 November, *Alchiba* was at anchor off Lunga Point, on the northern coast of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. At 0616, without warning a torpedo fired by the Japanese submarine *I-16*, hit her port side at approximately frame 125. It seemed inconceivable such an attack could have succeeded. She and *Barnett*, which lay at anchor nearby, were being screened (protected) by the destroyers *Lamson*, *Lardner*, *Hughes*, *McKean*, and *Manley*.<sup>6</sup>

Photo Preface-3



Attack cargo ship USS *Alchiba* (AK-23) afire off Lunga Point, Guadalcanal. She was torpedoed, on 28 November 1942, by the Japanese submarine *I-16*. U.S. Marine Corps photograph #USMC 66457

The explosion from the warhead of the torpedo opened *Alchiba's* hull to the sea, and set her aflame. She quickly took a 17-degree list, with No. 2 hold a mass of flames, and fire spreading to No. 1 hold. Acting quickly, her commanding officer, Comdr. John S. Freeman, beached the ship to prevent her total loss. Details about the heroic actions of her crew following this combat damage, and after she was again torpedoed, on 7 December 1942, are provided in Chapter One.

The fact that the cargo ship was saved under these circumstances was the result of superlative leadership by her captain and resolute efforts of his crew. Navy "top brass," which initially believed *Alchiba* had been lost, recommended her for award of the Presidential Unit Citation (PUC). She was the only cargo ship in the war to receive a PUC, the highest unit award for heroism, considered to be equivalent to receipt of the Navy Cross by an individual.<sup>7</sup>



Presidential Unit Citation (PUC) pennant. Awarded in the name of the U.S. president for extraordinary heroism in action against an armed enemy. Pennant is yellow with broad stripes of “Old Glory” blue and red along the upper and lower edges.

## RAN SUPPORT OF MACARTHUR’S ALLIED FORCES

Map Preface-2



Northern Australia and surrounding areas

[https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building\\_Bases/maps/bases2-p278.jpg](https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/maps/bases2-p278.jpg)

While the U.S. Navy was supporting U.S. Marine and later Army ground forces fighting on Guadalcanal, prior to a push up through the Solomon Islands toward the Japanese stronghold at Rabaul in New Britain, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) was fully engaged in the Southwest Pacific. Over the course of the war, the RAN acquired thirteen stores ships, mostly merchant vessels formerly under British charter, and pressed them into more hazardous duties. Danger was not new for two of these ships (Chinese steamers *Ping Wo* and *Whang Pu*) which barely escaped Singapore before its fall to the Japanese.

The activities of the stores-issuing ships involved delivery of critical supplies and cargo to outposts in Northern Australia and points north. These included Cairns, Darwin, Thursday Island in the Torres Strait, and Port Moresby, Papua. Later, as MacArthur’s Allied forces moved forward to Milne Bay, and then began fighting their way up the New



Guinea coast, the operations of these stores ships were extended to those dangerous waters. Passage in these New Guinea waters exposed them to the likely chance of attack by Japanese float planes, operating from captured bases in the Netherlands East Indies, and enemy bastions in and around New Guinea.

Of the thirteen RAN stores ships identified below, two were sunk by Japanese aircraft—HMAS *Maroubra* and HMAS *Patricia Cam*. A third ship, HMAS *Matefele*, disappeared at sea while en route Milne Bay, and was never seen again. (Additional information about the characteristics of all thirteen ships may be found in Appendix D.)

Ship	RAN Service	Ship	RAN Service
HMAS <i>Adele</i>	24 Oct 39- 7 May 43	HMAS <i>Mombab</i>	Mar 44-48
HMAS <i>Baralba</i>	31 May 42- 11 Feb 43	HMAS <i>Patricia Cam</i>	9 Feb 42- 22 Jan 43
HMAS <i>Falie</i>	17 Jul 40- 2 Aug 46	HMAS <i>Ping Wo</i>	22 May 42- 26 Jun 46
HMAS <i>Gerard</i>	1 Jul 41- 8 Apr 46	HMAS <i>Poyang</i>	6 May 43- 6 Mar 46
HMAS <i>Maroubra</i>	20 Mar 42- 10 May 43	HMAS <i>Wang Pu</i>	1 Oct 43- 22 Apr 46
HMAS <i>Matefele</i>	1 Jan 43- 24 Jun 44	HMAS <i>Yunnan</i>	20 Sep 44- 31 Jan 46
HMAS <i>Merkur</i>	12 Dec 41-1949		

HMAS *Matafele* and HMAS *Patricia Cam* earned Battle Honours NEW GUINEA 1942-44 and DARWIN 1942-44, respectively. (This subject is taken up at the end of the preface.)

### **ALLIED CHINESE SHIPS THAT SERVED THE ROYAL NAVY AS VSIS SHIPS**

In addition to the four Chinese steamers—HMAS *Ping Wo*, HMAS *Poyang*, HMAS *Wang Pu*, HMAS *Yunnan*—commissioned into the RAN and mentioned in the previous section, there were two others that served as RFA (Royal Navy Fleet Auxiliary) ships. Before the war, SS *Changte* and SS *Tai ping* (4,500-ton sister merchant ship) plied between Melbourne and Tokyo for the Australian Oriental Line, carrying general cargo and frozen meat. *Changte* was requisitioned by the Royal Navy as a VSIS (victualing stores-issuing ship), on 27 August 1939, and designated RFA *Changte* (Y1-9). She was returned to her owners in 1946. *Tai ping* was similarly acquired in 1941 for the same type duties, and returned to her owners in 1947.<sup>8</sup>

Photo Preface-4



Plaque commemorates those who served aboard Allied Chinese Ships during World War II, at Garden Island Naval Base, Garden Island, NSW, Australia. Courtesy of Peter Williams

## **HALSEY'S MOVEMENT UP THE SOLOMON ISLANDS**

*Before Guadalcanal the enemy advanced at his pleasure—after Guadalcanal he retreated at ours.*

—Adm. William F. Halsey Jr., USN, commander,  
South Pacific Force and South Pacific Area.

On 18 October 1942, Admiral Chester Nimitz, commander in chief, Pacific Fleet, appointed Vice Adm. William F. Halsey as commander, South Pacific Force and South Pacific Area, relieving Vice Adm. Robert L. Ghormley. After forces under Halsey's command defeated the Japanese in the Battle of Santa Cruz, on 26 October, and the following month routed them in the battles at Guadalcanal, Halsey was promoted to full admiral. In February 1943, the Japanese evacuated their remaining troops from Guadalcanal.<sup>9</sup>

In subsequent movement of his forces up the Solomons, Halsey became the first practitioner of the bypass strategy. After a bloody campaign on New Georgia, he executed the first “leapfrog” when he bypassed Kolombangara for Vella Lavella. It was a major contribution to American strategy, and General MacArthur took note and utilized this tactic in New Guinea.<sup>10</sup>

Map Preface-3



Central Solomon Islands

Halsey remained at the helm of the South Pacific theater until early 1944, when he took command of the U.S. Third Fleet, occasionally coordinating with MacArthur's adjoining Southwest Pacific theater.<sup>11</sup>

### **USN AND RAN SUPPLY SHIPS JOIN IN PHILIPPINES**

In autumn 1944, after MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Force, and Halsey's U.S. Third Fleet (the former South Pacific Force) breached the Bismarck Archipelago, they joined forces for assault landings at Leyte, marking the return of MacArthur to the Philippines. The naval component of MacArthur's force was the U.S. Seventh Fleet, commanded by Vice Adm. Thomas C. Kinkaid, USN.

The Bismarcks, stretching between the northwest coast of New Guinea and the Green Islands (northern part of the Solomon Islands), were the site of powerful Japanese air and naval bases at Rabaul on New Britain Island and at Kavieng on New Ireland. These bases were repeatedly attacked, but not occupied by Allied forces.

Map Preface-4



Bismarck Archipelago

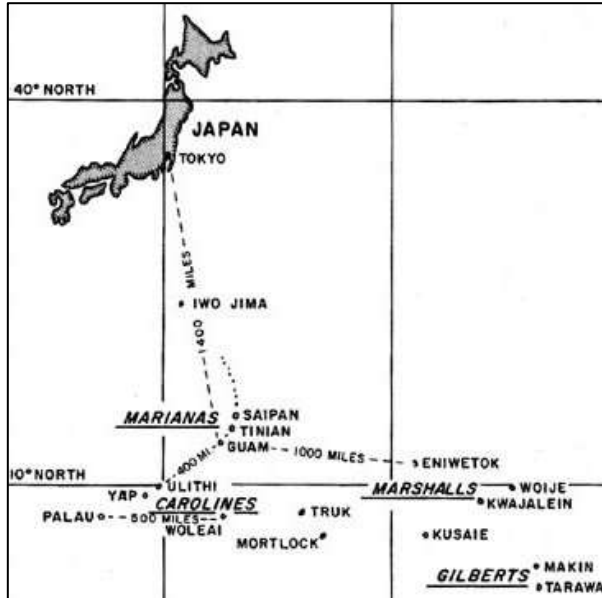
Courtesy of Australian National University

Forming part of Task Group 77.7 (the Leyte Gulf Service Group of the Seventh Fleet) were the ammunition ships HMAS *Yunnan* and *Poyang*, the provision ship HMAS *Merkur*, and the oiler HMAS *Bishopdale*. The service group was a component of the larger Leyte Gulf Force of some 550 ships, consisting of battleships, cruisers, escort carriers, destroyers, destroyer escorts, attack transports, cargo ships, landing craft, survey vessels, mincraft, and supply ships. In total, thirteen RAN ships were a part of the Leyte Gulf Force:

- Task Force 74: Heavy cruisers HMAS *Australia* and *Shropshire*, and destroyers *Arunta* and *Warramunga*
- Supply ships HMAS *Bishopdale*, *Poyang*, *Yunnan*, and *Merkur*
- Landing ships HMAS *Manoora*, *Westralia*, and *Kanimbla*
- The frigate HMAS *Gascoyne* and motor launch *HDML 1074*, both of which were part of the minesweeping and hydrographic group<sup>12</sup>

As the Philippine Islands Campaign continued into 1945, with support from the U.S. Seventh Fleet, the Third and Fifth Fleets continued their march across the Pacific toward Japan.

Map Preface-5



Japanese home islands

George C. Dyer, *The Amphibians Came to Conquer:  
The Story of Admiral Richmond Kelley Turner*

## BRITISH PACIFIC FLEET ARRIVES IN THEATER

*American warships being "dry," the daily British rum ration was a source of great envy. On one occasion the battleship King George V requested an American destroyer to come alongside. Facing one of the perennial British Fleet Train shortages, the British warship offered to exchange a bottle of whiskey for certain key radar components. The signalman on the American destroyer achieved a certain brand of immortality with his immediate response, "Hell, for a bottle of whiskey you can have the whole damn ship!"*

—When the Royal Navy returned in force to the Pacific to help finish the war with Japan, there was much to learn of Pacific warfare, 12,000 miles from home. Moreover, His Majesty's Ships suffered limitations in comparison to those of the U.S. Navy, such as their design for shorter-range operations and fitting of far fewer anti-aircraft guns. However, they were the envy of USN sailors in at least one respect.<sup>13</sup>

With the Allied invasion in Europe well advanced in late 1944 and aircraft carriers no longer required there in great numbers, the Royal Navy offered to assist the U.S. forces by supplying a fleet of carriers and other vessels to work in battling the Japanese in the Pacific. Initial U.S. opposition to this offer was overcome when it was established that the British force would be largely self-sufficient and would not put additional pressure on an already stretched America logistics system. The British Pacific Fleet (BPF), ultimately mobilized to aid in the potential invasion of Japan, was the most powerful strike force ever assembled by the Royal Navy. It included 6 fleet carriers and their squadrons, 4 light carriers, 2 maintenance carriers, 9 escort carriers, 4 battleships and dozens of cruisers, destroyers and lesser combat ships, as well as a huge train of supply and maintenance ships, oilers, and assorted auxiliaries.<sup>14</sup>

The Fleet Train supporting the BPF was a remarkable example of the national British genius for what is known as “muddling through.” A masterpiece of improvisation, it was formed from what ships were available, manned by such personnel as were available, and sent out to the Pacific as they became available in various states of capability, efficiency, and morale. An American remarked, after coming alongside one of the British Fleet train vessels (an old tramp steamer), that “the work of getting the lines across was being carried out by a Geordie mate (in a waistcoat and bowler hat) assisted by three consumptive Chinamen.”<sup>15</sup>

The BPF Fleet Train was the most extraordinary motley collection of shipping ever assembled in British maritime history. It included Norwegian masters and Chinese deckhands, Dutch mates and Lascar firemen, Royal Navy captains and Papuan winchmen. Commonwealth Navy personnel abounded, with officers and men from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India and Canada. Ships ranged from brand new to 30 years old: There was a Panamanian collier, a Dutch hospital ship, a Panamanian tanker, and Norwegian and Belgian ammunition ships. There were also floating repair ships, floating docks and, presumably for fleet morale, a floating brewery.<sup>16</sup>

Providing other fleet requirements were ships and netlayers, salvage tugs, water distilling ships, aircraft ferry ships, aircraft maintenance ships, and armament stores, air naval stores, and victualling storage and supply ships, with personnel of different nationality, different charter parties, and articles of agreement. The problems of administration were enormous. U.S. Navy men, with their modern Service Force ships, each one commissioned and under naval discipline, looked upon the British Fleet Train (Task Force 117) with frank amazement.<sup>17</sup>

Only the stores-issuing ships are identified in the table. While many Fleet Train units, particularly the oilers, were a part of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA), all of the stores ships were civilian merchant vessels.

#### **British Fleet Train Stores-Issuing Ships (August 1945)**

<b>Stores-Issuing Ships Victualling)</b>	<b>Air Stores-Issuing Ships</b>
British SS <i>Fort Alabama</i> (B577)	British SS <i>Fort Corville</i> (B531)
British SS <i>Fort Constantine</i> (B578)	British SS <i>Fort Langley</i> (B532)
ing British SS <i>Fort Dunvegan</i> (B579)	<b>Mine-Issuing Ship</b>
British SS <i>Fort Edmonton</i> (B580)	British SS <i>Prome</i> (B432)
British SS <i>City of Dieppe</i> (B558)	<b>Armament-Stores Carriers</b>
<b>Stores-Issuing Ships (Naval)</b>	Danish MS <i>Gudrun Maersk</i> (B538)
Norwegian MS <i>Bosphorus</i> (B557)	British MV <i>Kistna</i> (B542)
British SS <i>Glenartney</i> (B584)	British MV <i>Kola</i> (B543)
British SS <i>Fort Providence</i> (B582)	<b>Armament Stores-Issuing Ships</b>
British SS <i>Fort Wrangell</i> (B583)	Australian MV <i>Corinda</i> (B536)
British MV <i>Hickory Burn</i>	British SS <i>Darvel</i> (B537)
British MV <i>Hickory Dale</i>	Norwegian MS <i>Hermelin</i> (B539)
British MV <i>Hickory Glen</i>	British SS <i>Heron</i> (B540)
British MV <i>Hickory Stream</i>	British SS <i>Kheti</i> (B541)
Dutch SS <i>Jaarstroom</i> (B562)	British MV <i>Pacheco</i> (B544)
(unknown country) SS <i>Marudu</i> (B563)	Belgian SS <i>Prince de Liege</i> (B545)
Norwegian MS <i>San Andres</i> (B564)	Belgian SS <i>Prinses Maria-Pia</i> (B546)
(unknown country) SS <i>Slesvig</i> (B565)	Danish MS <i>Robert Maersk</i> (B547)
	Danish MS <i>Thyra S.</i> (B548) <sup>18</sup>

## ROYAL FLEET AUXILIARY

Importantly, Royal Navy discipline existed aboard Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) units of the Fleet Train—many of the oilers, one water carrier, and one distilling ship. The Fort ships listed above, became members of the RFA after the war.<sup>19</sup>

**Royal Fleet Auxiliary established in 1905**

**RFA personnel wear Merchant Navy rank insignia with naval uniforms**

**Personnel are part of the naval service and are under naval discipline**

**Ships carry the prefix RFA, and fly the Blue Ensign defaced with an upright gold killick anchor**

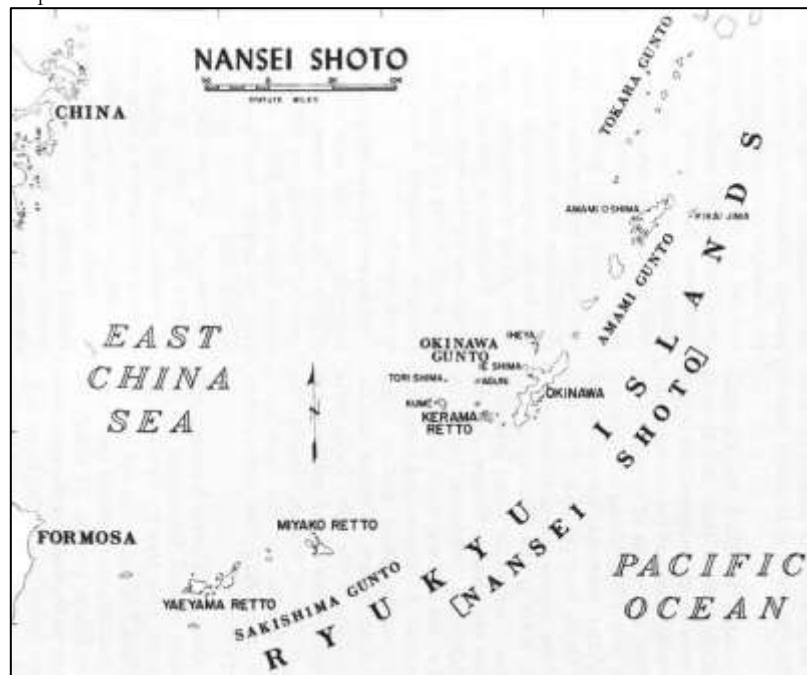


## BPF SUPPORTED FROM ADMIRALTY ISLANDS

Original plans to base the Fleet Train at Sydney proved untenable, it being 3,500 miles to where British Pacific Fleet carrier forces would be conducting combat operations against the Empire of Japan. From 26

March to 20 April 1945, while supporting the invasion of Okinawa, the British Pacific Force was responsible for neutralizing Japanese air bases in the Sakishima Islands and on Formosa (Taiwan), which were a constant threat to the Allies from the southwest. Gunfire and air attack were used against potential Kamikaze staging airfields that might otherwise be used to support attacks against U.S. Navy ships at Okinawa. The Sakishima Island Group, southwest of Okinawa, are a part of the same Ryukyu Island chain as is Okinawa.<sup>20</sup>

Map Preface-6



Ryukyu Islands

With American assistance, the defeat of a small Japanese garrison and a great deal of hard work, a base was constructed on Manus in the Admiralty Islands. Though nominally British, 37,000 Americans were stationed there as well, making the British Fleet as much a “visitor” as an owner. Apparently, Seadler Harbor was not greatly beloved by at least one British sailor—perhaps because of its isolation and lack of amenities ashore, as Sydney would have offered—who described the island as “Scapa Flow with bloody palm trees.”<sup>21</sup>



## BATTLE HONOURS AND BATTLE STARS

Photo Preface-5

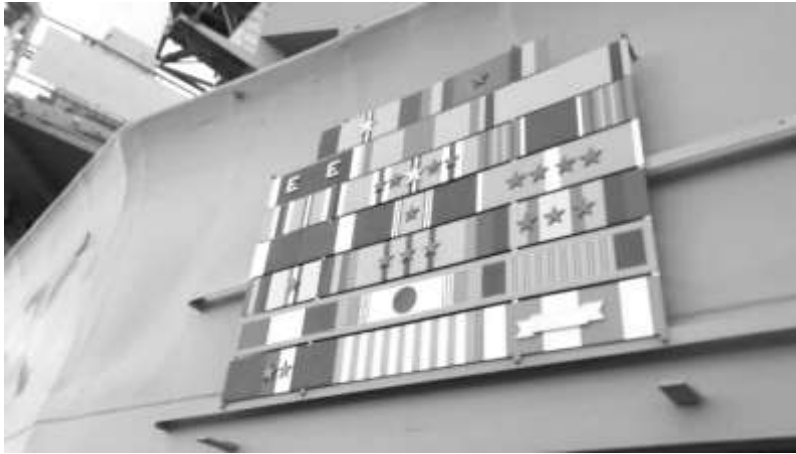


Battle Honours board of the Royal Australian Navy infantry landing ship HMAS *Manoora*, depicting the ship's battle honours and badge. Australian War Memorial photograph 118843

The ships of the Royal Navy and the other Commonwealth navies, with successful war service, earn “Battle Honours.” Because His/Her Majesty’s warships (whether RN, or units of other Commonwealth nations) do not carry Army regimental colours, battle honours are instead displayed on a battle honour board. Traditionally teak, this solid wooden board is mounted on the ship’s superstructure, carved with the ship’s badge and scrolls naming the ship and the associated honours. The board is either completely unpainted, or with the lettering painted gold. To pay tribute to past ships of the same name, their honours are displayed as well. Battle Honours (which date back to the year 1588, when ‘ARMADA 1588’ was authorized for the first honor ever) are awarded for six types of action:

- Fleet or Squadron Actions
- Single-ship or Boat Service Actions
- Major Bombardments
- Combined Operations
- Campaign Awards
- Area Awards<sup>22</sup>

Photo Preface-6



Ribbons board on the bridge wing of the battleship USS *New Jersey* (BB-62). Her Asiatic-Pacific campaign ribbon, with one silver star and four bronze stars (denoting nine battle stars), is the one located in the center, third row from the top. Courtesy of John Werda

The United States had a similar method of battle honours for naval vessels and their crews based on campaign ribbons and “Battle Stars.” Naval personnel serving in the Pacific in World War II warranted sporting on their uniform blouses an unadorned Asiatic-Pacific campaign ribbon. Those whose ships earned one or more battle stars were authorized to affix representative stars to their campaign ribbon. Ships similarly proudly garnished their Asiatic-Pacific campaign ribbon, displayed with other type ribbons earned, on their deckhouses.

The *Navy and Marine Corps Awards Manual*, 1953, specified that U.S. Navy ships and units had to meet one of the following criteria to be considered to have participated in combat operations (and thereby earn a battle star):

- Engaged the enemy
- Participated in ground action
- Engaged in aerial flights over enemy territory

- Took part in shore bombardment, minesweeping, or amphibious assault
- Engaged in or launched commando-type raids or other operations behind enemy lines
- Engaged in redeployment under enemy fire
- Engaged in blockade of Korean waters (Korean War)
- Operated as part of carrier task groups from which offensive air strikes were launched
- Were part of mobile logistic support forces in combat areas<sup>23</sup>

### **USS *LIBRA*'S COMBAT SERVICE IN THE SOLOMONS, CENTRAL PACIFIC, PHILIPPINES, AND JAPANESE HOME WATERS**

Photo Preface-7



USS *Libra* (AK-53) working cargo in the port of Wellington, New Zealand, in July 1942 while preparing for the upcoming Guadalcanal campaign, in September 1942. National Archives photograph

While entertaining, the movie *Mr. Roberts* suggests to viewers that duty aboard a U.S. Navy cargo ship in the Pacific was tedious, but benign, with the only excitement being “high jinks” by the crew. This tranquil portrayal is belied by the fact that 119 cargo ships—67 attack cargo ships (AKA), 49 cargo ships (AK), and 3 stores-issuing ships (AKS)—

collectively earned 254 battle stars in the Pacific Theater in World War II. Top honors went to the cargo ship USS *Libra* (AK-53), which was later redesignated an attack cargo ship (AKA-12).

Connection of the geographic areas in which *Libra* earned her nine battle stars would yield a general track of the movement of Allied naval forces across the Pacific into the heart of the Japanese empire:

- Guadalcanal-Tulagi landings
- Capture and defense of Guadalcanal
- Guadalcanal – Third strike
- Consolidation of Southern Solomons
- New Georgia Group operation: New Georgia-Rendova-Vangunu occupation
- Treasury-Bougainville operation: Occupation and defense of Cape Torokina
- Marianas operation: Capture and occupation of Guam
- Luzon operation: Lingayen Gulf landing
- Iwo Jima operation: Assault and occupation of Iwo Jima

Twenty-one AKs/AKAs (including *Libra*) were awarded four or more battle stars for duty in the Pacific Theater. Some ships also earned additional stars for service in the American and/or European Theaters. The three AKSs (stores-issuing ships) each earned three or fewer stars in the Pacific. (Appendix E provides summary information for all the AKs, AKAs, and AKSs awarded battle stars for Pacific combat operations.)

**Top Twenty-one Pacific Theater AK/AKA Battle Star Recipients**

<b>Ship</b>	<b>Battle Stars</b>	<b>Ship</b>	<b>Battle Stars</b>
<i>Libra</i> (AKA-12)	★★★★★★★	<i>Auriga</i> (AK-98)	★★★★★
<i>Aquarius</i> (AKA-16)	★★★★★★★	<i>Electra</i> (AKA-4)	★★★★★
<i>Alyone</i> (AKA-7)	★★★★★★	<i>Fomalhaut</i> (AKA-5)	★★★★★
<i>Thuban</i> (AKA-19)	★★★★★★	<i>Hercules</i> (AK-41)	★★★★★
<i>Virgo</i> (AKA-20)	★★★★★★	<i>Mercury</i> (AK-42)	★★★★★
<i>Centaurus</i> (AKA-17)	★★★★★★	<i>Amed</i> (AKA-56)	★★★★
<i>Jupiter</i> (AK-43)	★★★★★★	<i>Bellatrix</i> (AKA-3)	★★★★
<i>Titania</i> (AKA-13)	★★★★★★	<i>Betelgeuse</i> (AKA-11)	★★★★
<i>Alhena</i> (AKA-9)	★★★★★	<i>Capricornus</i> (AKA-57)	★★★★
<i>Almaack</i> (AKA-10)	★★★★★	<i>Chara</i> (AKA-58)	★★★★
<i>Alshain</i> (AKA-55)	★★★★★		

## THREE AKAS AWARDED NINETEEN TOTAL NUCS



Navy Unit Commendation (NUC) - Authorized 1944. Awarded for outstanding heroism in action against the enemy or extremely meritorious service in support of military operations. Pennant is hunter green with bands of royal blue, Spanish yellow, and scarlet along the upper and lower edges (blue at the edge).

Three attack cargo ships from the above group—*Libra*, *Alcyone*, and *Titania*—collectively received an astounding nineteen Meritorious Unit Commendations (MUCs) during the war. The first was earned for the landings in North Africa, America's initial entry into the war in Europe. The final one was for landings on Borneo—an operation that cost the lives of many Australian soldiers, and which remains controversial to this today, regarding whether questionable gains were warranted so late in the war.

### MUC Recipients

#### EUROPE

North African Landing (Africa)	
USS <i>Titania</i> (AKA-13)	8-14 November 1942
Sicilian Occupation (Italy)	
USS <i>Alcyone</i> (AKA-7)	10 July 1943

#### PACIFIC

Guadalcanal – Tulagi Landings (Solomon Islands)	
USS <i>Libra</i> (AKA-12)	7-9 August 1942
Capture and Defense of Guadalcanal (Solomon Islands)	
USS <i>Libra</i> (AKA-12)	11 November 1942

Battle of Rendova (Solomon Islands)	
USS <i>Libra</i> (AKA-12)	30 June 1943
Battle of Bougainville (Solomon Islands)	
USS <i>Libra</i> (AKA-12)	1-8 November 1943
USS <i>Titania</i> (AKA-13)	1-8 November 1943
Gilbert Islands (Central Pacific)	
USS <i>Alyone</i> (AKA-7)	20 November 1943
Kwajalein Atoll (Central Pacific)	
USS <i>Alyone</i> (AKA-7)	31 January-6 February 1944
Marianas Operation (Central Pacific)	
USS <i>Alyone</i> (AKA-7)	15 June-22 July 1944
USS <i>Libra</i> (AKA-12)	21-25 July 1944
USS <i>Titania</i> (AKA-13)	21-26 July 1944
Leyte Landings (Philippines)	
USS <i>Alyone</i> (AKA-7)	20 October-18 November 1944
USS <i>Titania</i> (AKA-13)	20 October-13 November 1944
Lingayen Gulf Landings (Philippines)	
USS <i>Alyone</i> (AKA-7)	9-13 January 1945
USS <i>Libra</i> (AKA-12)	11 January 1945
USS <i>Titania</i> (AKA-13)	8-12 January 1945
Iwo Jima Occupation (Japan)	
USS <i>Libra</i> (AKA-12)	19 February-6 March 1945
Borneo Operations (Netherlands East Indies)	
USS <i>Titania</i> (AKA-13)	27 April-5 May 1945

### ODE TO WAR SERVICE OF STORES-ISSUING SHIPS

George Ruxton, South Australia's secretary of the RAN Allied Chinese Ships' Association, noted "the record of service for these ships ranks high among the units that were formed to meet emergencies in the Pacific war zone" about the old, "clapped out" former Chinese steamers, pressed into wartime duties when their contributions were desperately needed. An engineer aboard HMAS *Po Yang*, Stoker Butler, paid tribute to her, as well as to his shipmates, in verse:

So proudly we hailed her	By men who were thoughtless
Though she's battered and worn,	Of a job so well done,
And there's no doubt about it,	While she carried ammo
She came in for scorn	To defeat Jap and the Hun <sup>24</sup>

## CARGO SHIPS FIGHT WITH BOOMS

*It is said that the wars are fought with guns and that Navy ships fight with guns, but the AK-110 fought this war with cargo booms in a manner in which the American people and the American Navy may be well proud.*

—From the war history of the cargo ship USS *Alkes* (AK-11)

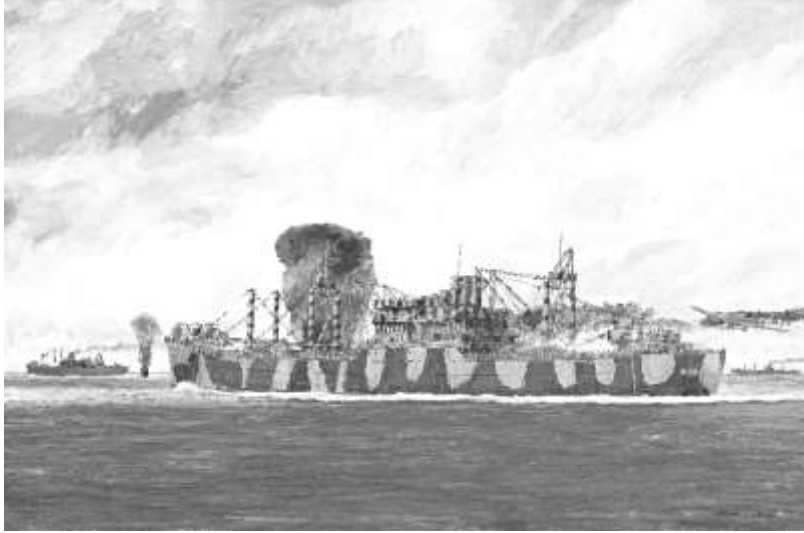
The above sentiment metaphorically describes, fighting the war with cargo booms, in reference to the contributions of cargo ships to the Pacific war. However, by happenstance, as shown in the sketch, USS *Mercury* (AK-42) literally employed a boom, in addition to her guns, in combat action to down an enemy aircraft. (Chapter 16 offers a more detailed account of this incident.)



USS *Mercury*, Ship's History, 17 April 1946

With this introduction to the stalwart cargo ships of the U.S. Navy, Royal Australian, and British and other Allied merchant navies, it is time to stand out of port, and (vicariously) ply enemy waters and dangerous coasts with the crews of these ships.

Photo Preface-8



Cover art by Richard DeRosset depicting gun crews aboard the cargo ship USS *Betelgeuse* (AK-28) shooting down two Japanese torpedo planes. Her attackers were part of a group of twenty-one Mitsubishi, type 96, heavy bombers attacking shipping off Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, on 12 November 1942.