

A 'MINOR EPISODE' DURING WORLD WAR II

In October 1939, shortly after the outbreak of World War II (WWII), the light cruiser HMAS *Hobart*, commanded by Captain HL 'Harry' Howden, Royal Australian Navy (RAN), left Australia to operate in the Northern Arabian Sea. Based at Aden, the importance of her presence increased substantially after Italy's entry into the war on Germany's side on 10 June 1940 and the subsequent fall of France. With the Mediterranean thereafter closed to through traffic, all supplies and reinforcements for Allied forces in the Middle East had to use the Red Sea route. Even then, Italian air and naval forces remained well placed to attack since, with the exception of the 644km stretch of British Somaliland, virtually the whole East African coast was in enemy or enemy-friendly hands.

The threat of a major Italian attack on British Somaliland increased throughout July, until on 3 August 1940 seventeen enemy infantry battalions with artillery, armour and air support invaded from Abyssinia (now Ethiopia). Commonwealth forces (mainly British and African colonial troops) were outnumbered and soon in full retreat.¹ Only at sea did the Allies possess numerical strength. Yet with the simultaneous requirement to protect dispersed shipping and maintain watch on Italian territory, even these resources were over-stretched. Moreover, in the lead up to the Italian invasion, the Royal Navy's Red Sea Force, which included *Hobart*, was increasingly required to escort troopships bringing reinforcements to British Somaliland through the sole available port at Berbera.

A historian has described the subsequent events at Berbera as a 'minor episode', which is perhaps true in comparison with some other WWII actions fought by the RAN.² However, *Hobart's* varied activities certainly showed the inherent flexibility of naval forces, and more particularly their capability to project power and influence operations ashore. In addition to escort duties and surface and air surveillance, *Hobart's* tasks soon included sea lift, air defence, the provision of medical, naval gunfire and offensive air support, the maintenance of command, control and communications, and the deployment of naval landing parties.

A port in name only, Berbera possessed just two rudimentary piers and limited support infrastructure. Having carried out a reconnaissance of potential Italian coastal approach routes between 3-5 August, *Hobart* returned to Berbera where her boats were kept busy ferrying refugees and disembarking troops. In the early morning of 8 August three Italian fighters staged a raid. Quick to retaliate, Howden sent *Hobart's* Walrus seaplane to attack the Italian airbase at Zeila with hopes of catching the enemy aircraft re-fuelling. Finding no better targets, the Walrus bombed what appeared to be a headquarters building then strafed the base, wrecking enemy vehicles and silencing two machine gun posts. The aircraft returned with two bullet holes; *Hobart's* first battle scars.³

Italian forces continued their advance through British Somaliland, and by 9 August the situation was desperate. That evening, Army authorities asked if *Hobart* could provide a suitable gun for use as an anti-tank weapon. Howden accepted the challenge and soon the ship's three pounder Hotchkiss saluting gun was fitted with an improvised mounting made from a 40 gallon oil drum reinforced with welded steel plating. Sixty-four rounds of ammunition (32 each of steel shell and high explosive) were also provided along with three volunteer gunners: Petty Officer Hugh Jones and Able Seamen Hugh Sweeney and William Hurren.

Issued with military uniform, the following morning each man reported for duty at the frontline near the Tug Argan Gap, to the south of Berbera. The Gap was overrun on 15 August and the three ratings were subsequently posted as 'Missing – Believed Killed'. Only later did the Italians advise the Red Cross that the Australians were prisoners of war. Fortunately, their period in captivity was relatively brief and came to an end when British forces liberated their camp in Eritrea in April 1941. All three later received a Mention in Dispatches for 'Good service with the Somaliland Force in HMAS *Hobart* during the evacuation of Berbera'.⁴ General Archibald Wavell, Commander in Chief Middle East is reputed to have said that 'their presence and conduct were of the utmost value to the morale of the garrison'.⁵

On 10 August, *Hobart* returned to Aden to re-store, particularly with ammunition, and returned to Berbera on the 14th. The military situation ashore had continued to deteriorate and Wavell ordered the evacuation of British Somaliland the following morning. Onboard *Hobart*, Howden became the Senior Naval Officer, Berbera, and set up his day and dining cabins as a Combined Operations Room staffed by all three Services. The ship's wireless and signal systems thereafter became essential for the command and control of the dispersed military units fighting rear-guard actions, while also attempting to maintain communications with Aden. In addition, Howden disembarked three signalmen to maintain communications between the shore and ships in harbour. *Hobart's* remaining signalmen, under the command of Chief Yeoman of Signals VM Griffiths, were no less busy, processing nearly 900 visual signals in four days, many of which had to be repeated up to five times to other ships in company.⁶



The men of HMAS Hobart (I) performed distinguished service in the evacuation of British Somaliland (RAN)

Howden frequently sought first hand knowledge of the situation ashore, enabling him to make informed decisions concerning the best use of his ship's company. Their tasks were as varied as those performed onboard, and included the provision of beachmasters to control the flow of evacuees, the construction of an additional pier and the landing of two security platoons. Italian air attacks were continuous and Howden himself surveyed numerous beaches to assess their viability as evacuation points in case the harbour became too dangerous.⁷

Howden had more than a dozen vessels under his command including destroyers, sloops, trawlers, hospital ships and

merchantmen. Additionally, the cruiser, HMS *Carlisle*, operated outside the harbour using her radar to provide early warning of enemy air attack. All available ships' boats were pressed into service for the evacuation, and *Hobart's* sailors also took over the operation of two harbour tugs, *Queen* and *Zeila*, to tow boats and lighters from shore. Due to the constant air raids, both tugs received Lewis guns. Adding to the difficulties, were the strong winds known as the Kharif, which blew for twelve hours each night, often reaching gale force and severely restricting visibility and hampering small boat operations.⁸



The transfer of Punjabi troops to Hobart during the Berbera operation (RAN)

On 17 August, Howden sent Lieutenant (later Acting Captain) TM Synnot, RAN, ashore with a small team of signalmen and wireless telegraphists to provide a Forward Observation Post. Based in the Government House tower they kept a look out for straggling troops, then arranged for cars and trucks to escort them to the piers for embarkation. The vehicles were driven by local Somali's under the control of Signalman Cyril Martin who in civil life had been a lorry driver. He kept the rag tag fleet of vehicles operational and frequently drove a rescue lorry into unknown country himself. One of *Hobart's* men later wrote:

The next three days showed us an army in retreat. The bridge had been blown up before our troops could retire and many had to make a wide detour. They staggered in - in twos and threes. Some had been wandering in that hell of a desert for two days without food and water. Our trucks were constantly running into the desert to search for survivors. All were utterly exhausted and as they reached the pier were embarked to the ships. Our sick bay and waists were full of wounded on stretchers and medical staff were busy operating constantly.⁹

On the morning of 18 August, Howden had *Hobart's* aircraft catapulted off to perform a final reconnaissance of the surrounding countryside. That afternoon and evening the ship's demolition parties began setting fire to buildings, vehicles and piers. By 0745 the next morning the evacuation was complete with over 5700 military personnel and 1300 civilians relocated and several guns and heavy vehicles saved. Using her 6-inch main armament, *Hobart* then completed the destruction, with key structures such as government buildings, barracks and storehouses the primary targets. During the bombardment a last small group of British soldiers found their way to the beach near the

Berbera lighthouse. Howden ordered Synnot to take a motor boat in to pick them up. Nearing the shore Synnot realised that he could not safely land due to the prevailing seas and winds, so anchoring, he and Able Seaman Vivian Lewis swam the remaining distance. On the beach they found three exhausted and badly dehydrated men from the Kings African Rifles and, after supplying them with fresh water, guided them through the surf to safety. Howden later wrote that this was 'A most creditable performance'.¹⁰

At 0845 on 19 August, *Hobart* sailed from Berbera, escaping with only slight splinter damage from Italian bombs. There were no damage or casualties in any of the other ships, and Howden had even compensated the Somali truck drivers by offering them passage. The cruiser steamed directly across the Red Sea and arrived at Aden at 1500. The tug *Zeila* also escaped, with *Hobart's* Chief Petty Officer W Grigor in command.¹¹ Again, one of *Hobart's* men recorded the final scenes:

On Sunday night all cars and stores on shore were fired. We watched the shore for stragglers as Berbera burned. Until we left, our fast motor boat skirted the shore for survivors and a keen watch was maintained from the ship. As we steamed out we could see the Italian forces in the hollow of distant hills waiting to move in when our guns had finished firing and as we steamed away we watched eagerly to see if there might not be one more man to be saved from the shore before it receded from our sight.

Despite the Italian success, the Navy's action in supporting the forces ashore and organising and controlling an orderly evacuation, remained a highlight. Howden was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire 'For good services in the Somaliland Force whilst in command of HMAS *Hobart* and as Senior Naval Officer, Berbera.¹² In typical style he ensured that those under his command received equivalent recognition. Chief Petty Officer Grigor and Chief Yeoman Griffiths each received British Empire Medals, while several of the tug and boat crews, including Synnot, received a Mention in Dispatches for their skill and courage.¹³ Ultimately the Navy's function at Berbera was to act as an enabler, without which an effective evacuation of friendly military forces could never have been conducted. For this alone, the incident is worth recalling.

¹ G Hermon Gill, *Royal Australian Navy 1939-1942*, vol 1, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1957, pp. 201-3.

² C Coulthard-Clark, *Where Australians Fought: the Encyclopedia of Australia's Battles*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988, pp. 174-5.

³ HMAS *Hobart*, 'Report on the Evacuation of British Somaliland', Australian Archives (AA), MP1185/9, 406/201/71

⁴ JJ Atkinson, *By Skill and Valour: Honours and Awards to the RAN for the First and Second World Wars*, Spink & Son, Sydney, 1986, pp. 165, 167, 196; individual services records in AA Series A6770

⁵ LJ Lind & MA Payne, *HMAS HOBART*, The Naval Historical Society of Australia, Garden Island, 1979, p. 13.

⁶ 'Report on the Evacuation of British Somaliland'.

⁷ 'Report on the Evacuation of British Somaliland'.

⁸ Gill, *Royal Australian Navy 1939-1942*, p. 203.

⁹ Lind & Payne, *HMAS HOBART*, p. 17.

¹⁰ 'Report on the Evacuation of British Somaliland'.

¹¹ The smaller *Queen*, was inadvertently scuttled on 18 August due to some miscommunication.

¹² Atkinson, *By Skill and Valour*, p. 74; individual services records in AA Series A6769.

¹³ GP Gilbert (ed) *Australian Naval Personalities: Lives from the Australian Dictionary of Biography*, SPC-A, Canberra, 2006, p. 110; Atkinson, *By Skill and Valour*, various pages.

