

The Exchange Cruiser Program 1924-1936

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Today, when we are used to seeing Australian ships operating all over the world, it is perhaps hard to appreciate that between the two world wars the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) was generally tied to cruising in local waters. A conservative political outlook combined with a lack¹ of ships and funding, meant that other than the occasional foray into the South Pacific, the Australian Squadron usually confined its exercises to Queensland waters during the colder months and southern waters during the summer. It was a program that ensured naval officers and sailors were seen at the Hobart Regatta, the Melbourne Cup and the Brisbane Agricultural Show, but one that did little to encourage recruitment, training or retention. As the Committee of Imperial Defence warned in 1923: 'A small local Navy with no scope for ambition and no variety of scene, cannot in the long run, secure the right type of Officers or men, or maintain a high standard of efficiency.'²

And small the Australian Navy was, as Figure 1 illustrates.

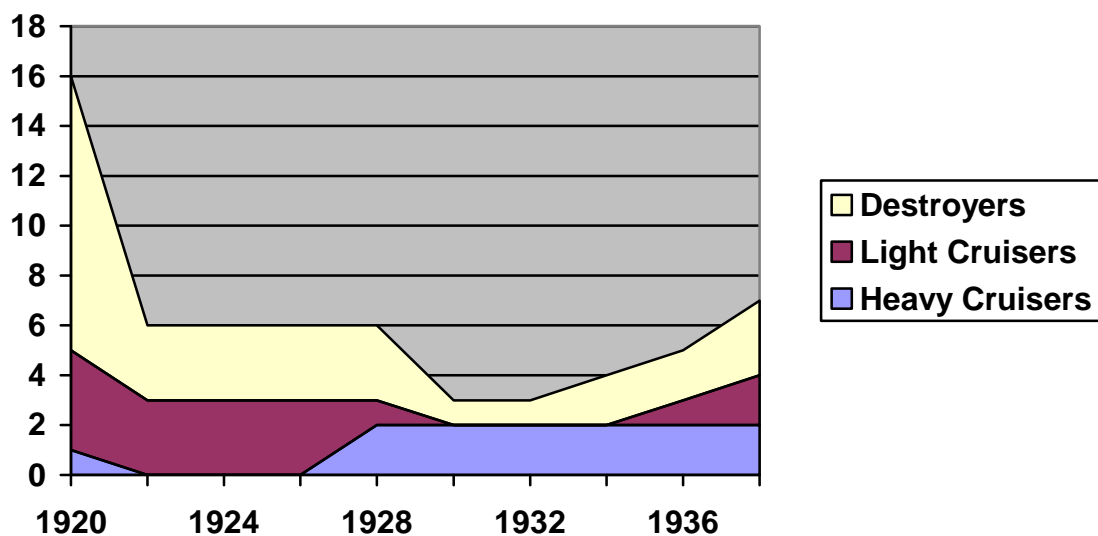


Figure 1. RAN Combatant Strength 1920-38

The risks posed by this unsatisfactory situation extended well beyond the issue of local maritime security. Although the Australian government maintained the final say on its employment, it was generally accepted that in time of emergency the Navy needed to dovetail into any imperial formation with which it might be required to cooperate. At the 1921 Imperial Conference, the First Sea Lord, Sir David Beatty, had stressed that the various navies of the Empire must be similarly trained, adhere to a common doctrine and use a common system of command. Indeed, with Dominion cruisers expected to play an important role in British offensive operations against the Japanese and the protection of imperial convoys, it clearly made perfect sense that Australian ships and personnel should be wholly interchangeable with the ships and personnel of the Royal Navy. Uniformity reached out to the furthest corners of the Australian Service, extending from the specifications of the grey paint used on ships

through to the design of uniform and badges, where only the buttons were allowed to differ.³

The idea that Dominion and Imperial navies were just separate parts of a whole was not new. Between Australia and Britain, agreement to the full interchange of personnel had been reached as early as 1908,⁴ and the close connection had certainly proven extremely successful during the First World War.⁵ But in the immediate post war years Australia's naval investment sharply declined making it increasingly difficult for the RAN to maintain a credible contribution to Empire Defence. Commenting of the 1920/21 naval estimates, the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board declared that the,

Naval Defence as outlined in this statement cannot be regarded in any way as adequate for the defence of the country, and for this we must rely on the British navy. ...what is being done is to endeavour, with the funds available, to keep the sea-spirit of Australia alive, and to provide for a nucleus of a fleet on a local defence basis, which can be expanded when circumstances permit.⁶

In the Naval Board's opinion the best result would be achieved by maintaining the RAN's cruiser fleet, and it assessed that three cruisers was the minimum with which exercises and general training could be efficiently conducted. The British Admiralty, keen to secure the greatest possible Dominion support for collective naval defence remained extremely supportive,⁷ offering loan personnel and training in the United Kingdom for executive officers and specific ratings, but also recognising that long service on one station with a limited number of ships must make the majority of Australian personnel stale. As a partial solution, in 1923 the Admiralty proposed that an Australian cruiser should be attached to either the Atlantic or Mediterranean fleets for six to twelve months.

The plan looked attractive to the Naval Board, but only if a British cruiser could be spared to replace the Australian vessel, thereby avoiding a prolonged period when only two cruisers would be in company. Moreover, a reciprocal arrangement would sooth Australian political sensitivities, making it far easier to obtain additional funding. In April 1923, the Commodore Commanding HMA Fleet, AP Addison, identified the RAN's newly commissioned, HMAS *Adelaide*, as the most suitable exchange cruiser and work immediately began to maximise the number of Australian ratings and officers on board.⁸ In 1913, just 30 percent of the RAN's personnel were not on loan from the the Royal Navy,⁹ but after a decade of development the Naval Board managed to get *Adelaide*'s crew up to 75 per cent Australian, including the captain and four of the eight executive officers.¹⁰

Details for a regular exchange were to be confirmed at the 1923 Imperial Conference, but here Australia's prime minister, Stanley Bruce, discovered that the Admiralty's plans to send the Special Service Squadron, centred on the battlecruisers, HM Ships *Hood* and *Repulse*, on a flag-showing 'Empire Cruise' had taken precedence. Although *Adelaide* would be welcome to join the Squadron during its return trip, the additional expenditure on fuel did not allow for a British cruiser to take her place in Australian waters.

Despite this obstacle, Australia's Chief of Naval Staff, Vice Admiral AF Everett, who was in London with Bruce, did his best to not only reiterate the benefits accruing directly to the RAN's personnel, but the more general benefits to the collective security of the Empire and Australia's international reputation:

The display of the Flag of the Australian Commonwealth by a Cruiser named after one of the State Capitals, built in Australia and manned by Australians in the ports of other Dominions who do not yet contribute appreciably to Empire Defence will be a unique gesture, and may possibly tend to induce the people of those Dominions to be more favourably disposed (by touching their pride) towards naval defence and expansion.

[Furthermore] The visit of an Australian ship to United States ports will bring home more than anything else the fact that Australia has cast off the leading strings and has taken her place as a nation, and doubtless will call attention to Australian production and resources thus indirectly advertising the Commonwealth, which at present is not well known to Americans.¹¹

Bruce received Cabinet approval to agree to the exchange, with legal authority coming from Section 37 of the Australian *Naval Defence Act* 1910, which provided for Australian and British warships to act together for joint or mutual action in relation to training or service.¹² Although the general employment of the ship would be subject to Admiralty orders,¹³ the RAN's regulations and instructions were to continue to apply to the personnel and internal organisation during the ship's absence.

The Special Service Squadron arrived in Australian waters at the end of February 1924 and remained for two months before sailing from Sydney for New Zealand, Fiji and Canada. On 25 June the Squadron entered Vancouver where the welcome was judged more enthusiastic than anywhere else but Sydney. Tens of thousands of cheering Canadians lined the shores and hundreds of small craft escorted the big ships in. *Adelaide's* presence as a representative of Empire did not go unnoticed. 'Excitement' said the *Morning Sun*,

was intense from the moment when the advance guard of watchers at the look-outs first sighted the massive *Hood*. Behind her steamed *Repulse*, a Battle Cruiser second only in impressiveness to the *Hood*, and HMAS *Adelaide*, the Light Cruiser from the Royal Australian Navy, carrying the message of Empire co-operation in Naval defense.¹⁴

Adelaide became the first Australian warship to pass through the Panama Canal and after visiting Jamaica and the Canadian east coast eventually arrived at Portsmouth in September 1924. She spent three months with the home fleet, then a brief period with the First Cruiser Squadron in the Mediterranean before returning to Australia via the Suez Canal and Singapore. A major naval conference was underway in Singapore and in a rare show of Australian naval strength *Adelaide* joined briefly with HMAS *Brisbane* and HMAS *Sydney*. The former on its way to the China Station for six months as the next exchange cruiser and the latter bound for Australia with HMS *Concord*, thereby fulfilling for the first time the British side of the exchange.

Adelaide returned to Sydney in April and was promptly decommissioned, but the cruise had been a great success. Prime Minister Bruce declared the training opportunity to have been of incalculable benefit, both stimulating much greater interest in the Navy generally and assisting in recruiting naval personnel.¹⁵ The Admiralty too, saw continuing advantage in the interchange, arguing that since,

...an increasing proportion of the One Power Standard of Naval strength for the Empire may be provided by the Dominions, it is essential that the cooperation between the ships of the RN and those of the Dominion Navies should be as perfect as if all the ships belonged to one Service. This can only be achieved if the ships of the RN and Dominion Navies continually work together.¹⁶

The exchange program had started well, but the potential difficulties were to be plainly illustrated during *Brisbane*'s attachment to the China Squadron. Arriving in late February 1925, *Brisbane* became the first RAN unit to visit Japan and all seems to have gone well until June. At this point, news reached Australia of industrial disturbances in Shanghai with many hundreds of Chinese killed during riots. The papers, quick to see a story, noted that *Brisbane* was in China and operating under Admiralty orders, was no doubt involved in keeping the peace and that her shallow draught might prove particularly useful in riverine operations.

When asked in Parliament about *Brisbane*'s whereabouts and operations, the Minister for Defence, Sir Neville Howse, could only respond that she was due back in Australian waters about the middle of August. The Labor opposition went on to the offensive. The Navy, the opposition's parliamentary members declared, had been created for the sole purpose of defending Australia, and not to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. Expressing sympathy with the efforts of China to emerge from centuries of foreign oppression, members pointed out that the Labor party would never allow the Australian Navy to be used in any industrial conflict in Australia, and god forbid it should be used to help foreign capitalists crush the Chinese proletariat.¹⁷ The Leader of the Opposition, Mr Charlton, declared himself entirely against the exchange program because it was unnecessary, '...our naval men, in efficiency, compare favourably with those of Britain, or of any other country. They need no tuition other than what they can gain here. That was proved during the recent war.'¹⁸

The Government responded as best it could, but was hampered by a lack of information, all communications having to go via London. In fact, the cruiser's only involvement in the troubles had been at Hong Kong, where her crew had been employed on 'essential military naval services' during a strike by Chinese workers.¹⁹ This involved such unexceptional tasks as assisting at the naval hospital and manning tugs. Nevertheless, the harm had been done. The Australian government asked the British authorities to ensure that in a crisis Australian cruisers 'should not be employed unless absolutely necessary in order to protect lives and property of British subjects.'²⁰ The Admiralty recognised that these restrictions seriously restricted the stations on which it would be wise to employ Australian cruisers, and the standing orders to the Commanders-in-Chief of these Stations thereafter maintained a caveat:

If the urgency of the case requires it you are permitted to use any Australian Warship attached to your command, for operations solely for the protection of

British lives or property without reference to any high authority. If possible, however, the sanction of the Commonwealth Government should be obtained beforehand, and that government should invariably be informed of any action taken.²¹

Although in time of war, these restrictions were likely to disappear, there would undoubtedly be occasions when Dominion support might be hesitant or refused altogether. In 1925 the RAN had two new 10,000-ton cruisers, HMA Ships *Australia* and *Canberra*, building in British shipyards. They had been ordered partly on Admiralty advice and partly in response to delays in the construction of the Singapore base, and Prime Minister Bruce described them as ‘an effective and fair contribution’ to Empire Defence.²² But commentators in the United Kingdom were quick to point out the practical limits of collective defence:

[British] naval authorities must reckon with the fact that the cruisers ...are entirely Australian, and are liable to be diverted by Australian political crosscurrents of which we have no knowledge...Those who would cut down British cruiser construction because the Dominions are building, and advise us to rely on our brethren overseas for assistance, lose sight of this sort of thing. If the operations of Australian ships are to be tied down by local political considerations, things would be in a sad way with the British navy and commerce.²³

In the meantime the exchange program continued and, demonstrating the paucity of Australian naval resources, *Brisbane* was also allotted to the 1925-26 season, this time exchanging with HMS *Delhi* of the Mediterranean Station. The Australian cruiser had nevertheless returned from China with a substantial defect list, and the Navy Board decided it would be better to pay off *Brisbane* and recommission HMAS *Melbourne*. Almost all *Brisbane*’s officers and men simply transferred across to *Melbourne*, meaning that they were already a particularly experienced ship’s company.²⁴

Melbourne became an independent command on 4 November 1925 with attachment to the Mediterranean Station a month later. She thereafter operated in both the Mediterranean and Atlantic, being treated as if a British ship in a succession of exercises. Her effectiveness may be judged by an efficiency test conducted in May 1926. Allowances were made for the portions of the test in which *Melbourne* was unable to compete, but she placed a creditable third among the four more modern cruisers in her squadron.²⁵ On occasion she even operated as a flagship for a destroyer squadron. After six months of exchange service, the Commander-in-Chief’s farewell signal read in part: ‘If the Australian Fleet possesses other ships which are as efficient as *Melbourne* there can be no doubt as to the part they will play in the defence of the Empire should the occasion arise’.²⁶

By August, *Melbourne* was back in Australia, where the local press took a somewhat more measured tone, noting that two of her greatest distinctions had been to be sunk by *Hood* in one exercise and a submarine in another. Nevertheless, *Melbourne* had ‘spread the gospel of Empire’ and met the rest of the cruiser squadron in aquatic sports giving them a ‘bad licking’.²⁷

The British, however, were not to get their sporting revenge anytime soon. Because of the long passage time required, and differing leave and exercise periods in the RN and RAN, the exchange scheme invariably reduced the in-company time for the remainder of the Australian Squadron.²⁸ The next exchange period was due to begin in November 1926, but the RAN declared that it would be fully occupied with the huge effort required to recruit and train the ratings needed to man *Australia* and *Canberra*, both of which were due to commission in 1928. Rather than a rotating six monthly exchange the Naval Board proposed a twelve month exchange every alternate year. This was soon after extended further to an exchange every third year.

Nevertheless, once *Australia* and *Canberra* had been completed, their workups did allow for some interaction with British units. HMAS *Canberra*, for example, commissioned on 9 September 1928 and accompanied the Atlantic Fleet on its Autumn exercises. Despite being newly commissioned, her ship's company earned praise from the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Brand, who declared that *Canberra* '...proved that the Australian Navy worthily maintains the high standard of efficiency and smartness expected of it.'²⁹ On board *Canberra*, the Australian journalist Trevor Smith was told that that the interchange had become practically indispensable for the Australian Navy. The effect on training being 'beyond the most sanguine expectations'.³⁰ Indeed, he found that the attachment

...was something much more than casual association. It was another step in furthering and strengthening the alliance of the British and Dominion Navies, generally, bringing them together under a working scheme that closely resembles the new conception of the British Empire itself, autonomous communities, but owing allegiance to a common bond. It is obvious that a self-contained, self-supporting, and self-protecting British Empire and British Empire Navy are one and the same thing. One cannot exist without the other.³¹

These sentiments were clearly aimed at more than just the Australian public, for Smith, went on to argue that the success of the interchange had proved that Australia had got it right. The other Dominions must follow.³²

Despite this apparent enthusiasm for Empire defence, the other Dominions did not follow, and even in Australia the return of a federal Labor administration in 1929 somewhat dampened enthusiasm for the Imperial connection. When combined with the effects of the Great Depression it is not surprising that money available for naval defence went sharply into decline. Between 1926 and 1932 Australia's naval expenditure fell from £5 million to less than £1.5 million. Personnel strength reduced from 5000 to 3500.

The next exchange was due to take place in 1930, but using the excuse that *Canberra* had only recently been in English waters the Naval Board allowed it to be delayed for twelve months. On this next occasion *Canberra* was due to exchange with HMS *Shropshire*, but with just two weeks to go the Australian Defence Minister ordered a review. The Naval Board pointed out that the recently signed London Naval Treaty had included Australia's two heavy cruisers in the fifteen allowed to the British Empire, that the exchange system was vital to maintain efficiency, and that sufficient provision existed in the estimates. The relative value of the Australian pound was so

low, however, that Cabinet decided to cancel the exchange on grounds of cost. The scheme thereafter stood in abeyance until the financial situation improved.

The sudden cancellation did nothing for morale in either *Canberra* or *Shropshire*. But while the latter's crew bemoaned the amount of effort already expended preparing for sporting competitions in Australia,³³ the situation in the Australian Squadron was far more serious. With just the two heavy cruisers in commission, the Rear Admiral Commanding Australian Squadron, ERGR Evans, pointed out the difficulty of maintaining a competitive spirit as officers and men simply passed from one cruiser to the other.³⁴

The Admiralty likewise grew increasingly concerned. Not only could the RAN not maintain the efficiency of the two heavy cruisers in commission, but there seemed no likelihood of replacements for the two elderly light cruisers still in reserve. Rather than attempting to build new ships, Admiral Sir Francis Hyde the new Chief of Naval Staff, proposed that Australia use any available funds to operate additional cruisers paid for by the Royal Navy.³⁵ The idea was similar to a suggestion already made by the Admiralty to the Canadian Navy, but altruism had its limits. The British simply could not afford to risk losing operational control of tonnage they had paid for. A compromise eventually allowed payment for a new cruiser - HMAS *Sydney* (II) - to be staggered over several years, but in the meantime British officials reminded their Australian counterparts of their responsibility to maintain the RAN's efficiency as an integral part of the Empire's naval strength.³⁶

For the Admiralty this meant renewed attempts to revive the exchange program, and in March 1933 the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs received a clear statement of the declining state of naval cooperation. The number of senior officers on loan to the RAN had decreased, as had the number of higher Australian ratings coming to England for training. Without a resumption of the cruiser exchange 'the close touch that ought to exist between the two navies' was certain to diminish.³⁷ The message passed to Canberra, but here the government again used excessive cost as grounds to reject the recommencement of the exchange program. Instead the RAN was directed to take fullest possible advantage of the combined exercises with the New Zealand Squadron due to take place during the Australian Squadron's Spring Cruise.

There the matter might have rested, but in October 1933 Admiral Hyde noted the likelihood of a Royal visitor attending the Victorian centenary celebrations in 1934. A British cruiser would no doubt make the outward voyage and an Australian cruiser could be used profitably for the return.

Australia's Governor General raised the issue with the King and in short order the matter was settled. HMS *Sussex* with the Duke of Gloucester embarked would arrive in October 1934 and HMAS *Australia* would return him to Portsmouth in March 1935 travelling via New Zealand and the Panama Canal.³⁸ Thereafter, *Australia* would join the Mediterranean Fleet for twelve months. The result satisfied all stakeholders, but in effect naval efficiency and economic conditions had been subordinated to affairs of state. The Naval Board was among the last to be informed, but on hearing the news went public, expressing its 'pleased surprise' with the government's decision.³⁹

Australia's captain was a British officer, but almost all her remaining officers were Australian, including her executive officer, Commander Harold Farncomb, one of the first entries to the RAN College and a man later to become Fleet Commander. According to one source 75 percent of the crew were Australian born and of these a third had never before been to sea. This had the potential to become something of a liability when working with the fully worked-up British ships operating in the Mediterranean, but Farncomb's personality had much to do with the subsequent success of the exchange.⁴⁰

Australia joined the First Cruiser Squadron in the Mediterranean in May 1935 and was still there in August when the worsening crisis between Italy and Abyssinia threatened to drag Britain into war. With the Mediterranean Fleet below required strength the Admiralty began the movement of reinforcements from around the world. By October, the Mediterranean held the most powerful British naval force assembled between the wars, and had required not only the retention of *Australia*, but also the return of *Sussex* from Australian waters. Furthermore, the Commonwealth agreed to make available the newly commissioned *Sydney*, at the time on her way back to Australia. The Labor Party was again in opposition and claimed that the cruiser was being 'decoyed there by Imperial intrigue', but do not seem to have raised the issue to the same heights as *Brisbane* and China.

In any case, a near continuous series of exercises at the fleet and squadron level brought the two Australian cruisers of the self-styled 'Foreign Legion' up to near wartime efficiency. Still retaining echoes today, one among these exercises was the tactic for dealing with an asymmetric attack launched by Italian motor-boats. Carrying a crew of three, these consisted of not much more than a shell, a torpedo and a powerful engine, but had proven very effective against the Austrian Navy during the late war. Within the Mediterranean Fleet, at the order 'Man and Arm Boats', all power and pulling boats were rapidly loaded with machine guns, rifles and rockets, launched, and then began patrols with the aim of using automatic fire to keep the threat at distance.⁴¹

Yet even in the midst of the crisis, sporting reputations maintained their priority, and we know far more about *Australia*'s successive victories in the rugby and the cruiser regatta than we do about her preparations for a possible war. Yet we do know that both Australian cruisers were fully integrated into the British sanctions campaign and in the planning for attacks on the Italian Navy. *Australia*, for example, was on the outbreak of war tasked to take HMS *Berwick* under her orders and cover the withdrawal of the aircraft carrier HMS *Glorious* after an air strike on the main Italian base at Taranto. The crisis eased without the need for offensive action but, commenting on Australia's ready cooperation, a British journal made much of this reminder to the world of the 'unity of British Empire sea-power. Noting particularly that the material contribution, although substantial, shrank 'into relative insignificance as alongside the moral effect of the step'.⁴²

With the return of *Australia* and *Sydney* to home waters in August 1936 the exchange scheme finally came to an end, although it is not clear whether this was a deliberate decision or simply a result of the outbreak of war in September 1939. It is noteworthy, however, that despite the recent successful integration of the two Australian cruisers into the Mediterranean Fleet the Admiralty remained mistrustful of Australian

politicians. In the event of an approaching war with Japan, the Admiralty had previously intended to use the most modern of the RAN's cruisers to exchange with the old cruisers accompanying the British Main Fleet when it arrived in Eastern waters from Europe.⁴³ However in 1938, apparently prompted by continuing uncertainty as to when or if, Australian warships would be released by the Commonwealth government, the Admiralty chose to remove the uncertainty. Instead of providing reinforcement, the RAN's object in the early stages of a war became solely the defence of trade in Australian waters.⁴⁴ This was the state of play when the war in Europe began, and only when it was clear that the likelihood of immediate Japanese entry had diminished did Australia gradually release vessels to Admiralty control.

Conclusions

It is difficult to be definitive about the achievements of the exchange cruiser scheme. Although the archival record contains much on the behind the scenes discussion, very little exists on the practical aspects. Certainly, the RAN's effective integration during the Abyssinian crisis and more particularly World War II would indicate that the scheme's aim was achieved. Yet in view of the extensive and multi-level contacts between personnel, doctrinal compatibility and technical interoperability between the Royal Navy and RAN between the wars was never likely to be a problem. Indeed, rather than the cruiser exchange, the routine exchange of executive branch officers was probably of equal or greater importance to long-term operational performance.

But what we can say, is that when tested the system cooperative naval defence worked, and that British commanders seem to have been genuinely satisfied with the performance of the Australian exchange cruisers they had operating with them. This is reflected not only in British comments on performance and contribution, but also in the regular use of the Australian vessels as fleet flagships. Moreover, the specific experience gained by Australian officers such as Farncomb and John Collins when operating with the Royal Navy,⁴⁵ must have been very useful when it came to commanding combined forces later in their careers. Likewise, the juniors ratings in the exchange cruisers got to see the world, and they would have become the senior sailors who ensured the efficient running of the wartime RAN and kept it working post-war. Undoubtedly, the confidence gained by successfully matching their performance against the most professional navy in the world would have done much to assist the efficient coming together of the Australian crews.

In finishing, however, I would just like to note that in 2005, 81 years after HMAS *Adelaide* sailed from Sydney with the Special Service Squadron, HMAS *Anzac* embarked on her own around the world deployment. In what might almost have been a paraphrasing of Admiral Everett's 1923 remarks, *Anzac*'s objectives were to demonstrate and benchmark the RAN's capabilities, enhance proficiency, promote goodwill, demonstrate Australia's commitment to global security, support Australian industry and encourage job satisfaction in the naval workforce. Describing the deployment as a great success *Anzac* recommended that it be repeated at four year intervals, and in 2009 HMAS *Sydney* and *Ballarat* did just that.

Times change, but many of the requirements of naval operations have a certain permanence. Perhaps, seven decades after the last cruiser exchange, there are still a few lessons we might learn from their experience.

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- 29 Admiral Hon. Sir Hubert Brand, 'Introduction', in T Smith, *Fleet Moments*, London, Selwyn
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- 30 Smith, *Fleet Moments*, p. 39.
- 31 Smith, *Fleet Moments*, p. 36.
- 32 Smith, *Fleet Moments*, p. 14.
- 33 During afternoons and evenings *Shropshire's* upper deck was described as a circus arena,
'with shadow boxers, sparrers, men skipping, running, jumping, and whenever possible the
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