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The Dominion Yachtsmen Scheme 1940-45.

At a gathering of naval officers in Sydney in early 2002, one of the Yachtsmen Scheme officers, returned serviceman Lieutenant Max Germaine RANVR spoke of his memories of serving in the Royal Navy during World War II. His talk was light in tone, recounting with humour the experiences of his group of volunteers during their passage to the United Kingdom in December 1940. He stressed the service, honours and awards of a number of the 'Yachties' and recalled the bravery of several of them in action. But Max Germaine in fact had other less happy memories he did not share that day – memories of convoy duties and the guilt he had carried all his life, of being unable to rescue survivors of torpedoed ships. He also hid on this occasion a hurt and grievance that related not simply to the terrible history of his own and his comrades' war experiences but how he and his group had been treated since. For Germaine had not served in the Pacific throughout the war with the Australian navy, but as part of a group of men recruited through the Yachtsmen Scheme to be trained as officers in the Royal Navy for service in the northern hemisphere. Their war record was a miniscule undifferentiated part of the huge history of the RN during World War II. At home in Australia, however, their war service slipped from memory and proper commemoration as the two countries, so bound to each other by strong imperial ties at mid century, had by the century's end become distanced by competing national interests and the resurgence of an independent Australian nationalism. Hence the Yachtsmen Scheme volunteers no longer fitted the national narrative of young men who had sacrificed their youthful ambitions, their education and their health for the protection of their country from oppressive regimes. Yet they remained scarred by what they endured and witnessed through these years of service and by grief for the friends and others they saw maimed and lost. By the early twenty-first century they wanted similar recognition to their Australian compatriots and in 2002 I was approached by Lieutenant Keith Nicol and Lieutenant Commander Clive Tayler to write the story of the 'Yachties'. At the time I was offered the opportunity to research their story as a Masters' thesis. Today I will discuss several aspects of my research: the reasons for the Scheme and the service of some of the volunteers; how they were received and why there has never been the recognition accorded to the Australians, about fifteen hundred of them, of whom the 'Yachties' are a third, who served with the Royal Navy during World War II.

After the outbreak of war with Germany on 3 September 1939, the following six months made the Allies aware of just how ill-prepared they were for military conflict against a well-equipped

and organized enemy. This period has been described by historians as the 'phoney war' for it was not until the fall of France in May 1940 that many Australians began to comprehend the seriousness of the conflict. This 'phoney war' was far from the reality that the men of the Royal Navy were experiencing with the repeated German U-boat and air attacks in the North Atlantic. The losses of men and ships were horrendous and the odds against victory were becoming all too obvious. Australians were concerned that this crisis at sea placed their link with Britain at risk.

Among the surviving 'Yachties' interviewed, the belief is strongly held that the Admiralty approached the Dominions to enlist men with small boat-handling skills following the disastrous retreat of the Allied forces at Dunkirk. In fact, the Yachtsmen Scheme was already in the process of being organised by 26 May when the Dunkirk evacuation began. A memorandum from the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, requesting the setting up of the Yachtsmen Scheme, was received by the Australian Prime Minister in early May 1940.¹ It asked that arrangements be made to appoint a limited number of men to direct commissions in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve and accept a number of volunteers as ordinary seamen with a view to their promotion to the commissioned ranks in the RNVR after a period of service.

The Naval Volunteer Reserve had originated in the late nineteenth century with a nucleus of men formed from yachtsmen and members of rowing clubs. While men from all walks of life ashore were theoretically eligible, naval interests and skills were considered desirable. At the outbreak of World War II the approximate strength of the Volunteer Reserve in the United Kingdom was 1000 officers and 7000 ratings. Many were yachtsmen or had previous sea experience in the Royal Navy or Merchant Navy but others were a mixed group of stockbrokers, barristers, bankers, authors, actors, and other professionals all keen on sailing and the sea.² Most temporary officers came from the lower deck and had been marked as 'White Paper' candidates by their commanding officers and recommended to the Admiralty.

The Dominion Yachtsmen Scheme volunteers were recruited as potential officers through this method. Without the Volunteer Reserves, both from England and the Dominions, the Royal Navy would not have been able to continue the war at sea. In my investigation of the World War II honour boards of a number of Australian yacht clubs however, very few 'Yachties' were recruited through this avenue. Only one, Windas Smith, is recorded on the memorial board of the Royal Melbourne Yacht Squadron in St Kilda, of a total of 148 volunteers from the club. Ian Startup, the

¹ National Archives of Australia, Department of Defence[III], Central Office – Navy Office, Series MP 981/1, Correspondence files, multiple number series ('201' series) 1 April 1923-31 Dec 1950, Item no. 592/201/644, *Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserve – Yachtsmen – Enrolment 1940-1942*.

² J Lennox Kerr and David Jones, eds. *The Wavy Navy: by some who served*. (London: George G Harrap 1950).

son of the Customs Officer in Williamstown, who tragically went down in the *Hood*, is the only 'Yachtie' on the Royal Victorian Yacht Squadron board at Williamstown. The Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron lists seven Yachtsmen Scheme members of the total 124 members who served in World War II. Only six of the eighteen 'Yachties' I interviewed had yachting experience – all as crew members.

In July 1940 advertisements were inserted in the newspapers of each of the capital cities inviting applications for service as officers in the RNVN. Applications were invited from 'Gentleman' in two groups. The 'A' Class candidates 'between the ages of 30 and 40 for direct Commissions in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve who possess a knowledge of Navigation equivalent to that required for the Board of Trade Yachtmaster's (Coastal) Certificate' These men were appointed immediately as Temporary Probationary Sub-Lieutenants. Lieutenant Commander Bill Wallach, failed the Yachtmaster's Certificate twice before he was accepted. He already had a Bachelor of Commerce from the University of Melbourne but was very determined to succeed and qualify as a naval officer. His tenacity and determination were further exhibited when, as First Lieutenant of ML 270 he succeeded in shooting out a German searchlight during the St Nazaire raid in March 1942. For this action he was awarded a DSC.

The 'B' Class candidates were 'between the ages of 20 and 30 for entry in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve as Seamen with opportunity for appointment as officers'.³ Like many young volunteers at this time, Don Reddin put his age up a year to qualify, he was nineteen.

As a group, the initial selection of the Yachtsmen volunteers in Australia would appear to have been influenced by the same unofficial criteria that the Selection Boards used for young midshipmen for Naval College entry. The use of the term 'gentlemen' in the initial recruitment advertisements suggests certain expectations about the social background, skills and educational abilities among potential candidates for commissions in the Royal Navy. However it is also clear through the interviews that academic ability, especially in the Maths/Science field, was significant. The increased importance of technology in sea warfare opened up the selection process at this time and the Volunteer Reserve officers would bring with them different skills and a broader education which would benefit the respective navies and assist in final victory for the Allies.

The first group of fifty-eight Ordinary Seamen and fourteen officers embarked in RMS *Strathnaver* in September 1940 as RANVR although they went in civilian dress and were given no preliminary training in Australia. They were kitted out when they arrived in England and were on

³ Ibid.

Australian rates of pay. Apparently the officers (the 'A' Class) were able to have a flash, 'Australia' on the shoulder of their uniform if they applied to do so and the commanding Admiral agreed that the Ordinary Seamen could have flashes but they had to organize it among themselves.⁴ The ship was on its way to England to be converted into a troop ship and the men enjoyed the luxury of private cabins, morning tea and fruit in bed. Later groups did not experience quite the same conditions. It is believed that only twelve subsequent groups embarked, none as large as the first.

The ships in which they sailed and the men with whom they sailed to the U.K. became of great significance to the 'Yachties'. In later years these ships were the means by which they traced and contacted each other and fostered a collective memory. The work of Ken Halliwell, Bob Fotheringham and Roy Hall during the 1980s resulted in 467 Yachtsmen Scheme enlistments being identified. Later work by Clive Tayler and Keith Nicol has increased the nominal roll to five hundred. The story board in the World War II gallery in the Australian War Memorial is incorrect as it states 370 Yachtsmen Scheme volunteers.

On arrival in UK the RANVR volunteers were located at HMS *Collingwood* near Portsmouth where training was undertaken, prior to being drafted to ships for sea-time on the lower deck. As members of the Yachtsmen Scheme a personal white CW (Commission Warrant) paper was sent to each ship to which they were drafted and from then on they were under constant surveillance and some had the most difficult or unpleasant duties to perform. While some were lucky to keep together, many 'Yachties' served as the only Australian on board. They were spread across the Fleet in a variety of ships, from battle cruisers and destroyers to Fairmiles. The theatres of war in which these men found themselves were equally varied and many were initiated rapidly into the realities of life at sea during wartime. For some, the required sea-time of three months often became much longer.

Keith Nicol was delayed quite a long time with wounds. He had been drafted to a Motor Gun Boat flotilla based at Dover which was involved in landing the first commandos into France – Lord Lovett's Scouts. Keith suffered burn and blast damage when a shell exploded behind him and was hospitalised for some time. Some 'Yachties' were initiated into the grim realities of war at sea within a very short time. Lyle Miller from Adelaide was drafted with Ray McDonald to HMS *Somali*, one of the famous Tribal class destroyers and they were very proud sailors to be on such a ship.

We soon learnt what was in store for us because we joined the battle fleet ... to go down to the Mediterranean ...the *Ohio* convoy. This of course is [sic] July '42 and the position in

⁴ Lieutenant Bob Fenwick RANVR, interview 2 June 2003. Interestingly it was not until 1967 that the 'Australia' flashes were introduced to RAN uniforms to distinguish them from those of the RN. T R Frame, *Pacific Partners: A History of Australian-American Relations* (Sydney, Hodder & Staughton 1992), 68.

Malta was absolutely desperate... I think it was a twelve or fourteen-ship convoy which was virtually unknown. We had fourteen ships ... to escort. There were the *Nelson* and the *Rodney*, two battleships; three aircraft carriers, half a dozen cruisers, certainly two dozen destroyers and rescue vessels, to steam through, get through at Malta. There were fourteen merchant ships ... Appalling losses! Five of them got through to Malta, two under their own steam and three were towed in. This was life-saving for Malta. ... This had been a tremendously exciting convoy voyage and one which ... you'd think was hardly likely to be repeated.⁵

However, after a short leave these young sailors were off to Scapa Flow to join a very large Navy force to escort a convoy to Russia.⁶ PQ18 was to be the second worst Arctic convoy, as en route, heading for Archangel, the convoy was attacked by U-boats and thirteen of the forty merchant ships were sunk. *Somali* was torpedoed and finally broke in half. Ray McDonald was lost but Lyle was one of only four men rescued from the frozen waters.

Eight of the Yachtsmen; Bob Fenwick, Tom Martin, Geoff Danne, Colin Downie, Wally Washington, Frank Buxton, Alex Osborne and Ian Rhodes were drafted to HMS *Kashmir* in Plymouth. As a duty destroyer, *Kashmir* went to sea immediately, to the Mediterranean⁷ where she was based in Malta, escorting other ships through the Straits of Gibraltar to Malta and doing bombardments of the Libyan coast. In May 1941 they sailed from Malta to Crete to assist with the evacuation of Allied troops. The *Kashmir* was sunk in less than three minutes by dive-bombing Stukas. The noise was terrifying. Bob described them as 'some immense ... birds of prey'.⁸ The survivors were rescued by *Kipling*, which although damaged and listing badly, managed to limp into Alexandria Harbour. Bob describes this as the most emotional experience of his life:

Our poor little ship ... its decks crammed with miserable survivors covered in oil with red oil-burned eyes and aching limbs, then entered harbour. Almost the whole of the Mediterranean Fleet was in that harbour. Battleships, aircraft carriers, heavy cruisers, light cruisers and destroyers, they were all there. As we came in, the order was given to the Fleet to "Clear lower deck!" and every man aboard every ship came on deck and a mighty cheer went up. There were not too many dry eyes that day... and even now I have difficulty holding back the tears when I recount the experience.⁹

⁵ Lieutenant Lyle Miller, interview 11 October 2002.

⁶ For a description of the Arctic convoys see Richard Woodman, *The Arctic Convoys 1941-1945* (London: John Murray, 1994).

⁷ For more detail in relation to the Malta convoys in the Mediterranean see Richard Woodman, *Malta Convoys 1940-1943* (London: John Murray, 2000).

⁸ Lieutenant Bob Fenwick, interview 2 June 2002.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Tom, a pom pom gunner wounded in his action station, managed to cut away some rafts, thereby saving many lives and then managed to climb up the side of *Kipling* over a net, even with his spine broken. He was in hospital in the Middle East until January 1942, when he was sent back to Australia. He was posted to HMAS *Australia* before being sent to an Officer Training Course in Melbourne in late 1943.

Another Australian 'Yachtie' in this action was Ordinary Seaman Ian Rhodes who, as the *Kashmir* was sinking rapidly, climbed up to the Starboard Oerlikon (Gun) and opened fire on a dive-bombing Junkers attempting to machine gun survivors. The plane was hit and crashed into the sea. For his 'outstanding gallantry, fortitude and resolution'¹⁰ Ian was awarded a Conspicuous Gallantry Medal (CGM), ranking next to the Victoria Cross, the only one ever awarded to an Australian.

Ted Thomas and Jack Linton were drafted for their sea-time to HMS *Fiji* and both survived her sinking in the Mediterranean. Ted's action station was in the lower steering position below decks and fortunately the doors had not been bolted down, so he and other crew could get up on deck. The ship was listing badly, Ted recalled:

I took my boots off and instead of flinging them over the side ... I put them down – all neat and tidy and I walked down the side of the ship ... into the water and then I started laughing.

I thought what a really stupid thing that was to do. Some of the sailors around the ship said, "Not a bloody laughing matter, mate."¹¹

After five hours in the water, during which time the survivors were under machine-gun fire from the Luftwaffe, they were rescued by *Kandahar* and taken to Alexandria. They were repatriated to England via Port Said to Durban where they were transferred to the *Empress of Australia* for the trip back to Portsmouth in steerage. Jack Linton, with great initiative upgraded himself and his mate to Petty Officers' stewards where they learned the art of peeling grapefruit.

After serving their sea-time, the men went before a Selection Board and were, if accepted, sent to *King Alfred*, the training establishment for all RNVR officers. During the war, some forty-eight thousand officers passed through this base, of which the five hundred 'Yachties' accounted for only one per cent.

They then started on an intensive course of three months and those who passed the written examination, were commissioned as Temporary Probationary Sub-Lieutenants. Details of the training which the 'Yachties' underwent are very sketchy and reliant on the memories of the men as

¹⁰ James J Atkinson, *By Skill and Valour: Honours and Awards to the Royal Australian Navy for the First and Second World Wars* (Sydney, Spink & Son (Australia) Pty Ltd 1986), 103.

¹¹ Lieutenant Ted Thomas, interview 31 August 2003.

no records of the structure and content of the training appear to exist either in Australia or the United Kingdom. The newly commissioned officers were then sent separately to other more specialised areas for specific training, depending on their preferences. Those selected for coastal craft training were sent up to Fort William in Scotland. While there, Bob Fenwick was selected for both anti-submarine and command courses. Many did a gunnery course at the famous Whale Island.

Clive Tayler requested to serve in submarines but was told to get some sea experience and a Watchkeeping Certificate. He chose destroyers and was appointed to the ex-American destroyer HMS *Ripley* on the North Atlantic convoys for the next six months. Incredibly in that time their convoy was never attacked. He wonders at the rapidity of his promotion: '[I was] commissioned end of December 1941, I joined my first ship in February, HMS *Ripley*. Something like eight months after that I was Senior Officer-of-the-Watch of this American Destroyer as a Sub-Lieutenant with ten months seniority. That was how short they were of qualified people.' After a year on the convoys he applied for 'boats' and was sent to the submarine training depot HMS *Elphin* at Blythe on the east coast of England, possibly the only one of the Yachtsmen to do so.¹² For the remainder of his service Clive served in two submarines before being appointed as First Lieutenant to HMS/M *Vivid* in the Mediterranean.

However the majority of the Yachtsmen served on light coastal forces craft ranging from trawlers to Motor Launches (MLs) to, later in the war, Landing Craft – Tank and Infantry (LCTs and LCIs) where their particular skills were important. Some volunteered for Special Forces units.

Whatever their specialized training, most Yachtsmen served on convoy duty in the 'Battle of the Atlantic', a phrase coined by Winston Churchill. By July 1940 it was obvious that the British Isles were very vulnerable to a blockade and by September and October of that year the Germans were inflicting serious losses on convoyed shipping by U-boat 'wolf pack' night attacks. One German U-boat, U99 claimed to have sunk twenty ships and damaged two from a convoy of thirty-four in October 1940. The Battle of the Atlantic, fought between September 1939 and May 1943, was a battle on which the whole outcome of the war depended, as every ship to and from Britain had to pass through some part of the Atlantic.

From June 1941 total anti-submarine cover across the Atlantic was established and in July, convoys southbound were given continuous anti-submarine escort to Freetown in Sierra Leone. The convoys sailed in numbers of thirty to fifty ships, at the rate of the slowest, possibly six knots, were

¹² Lieutenant Commander Clive Tayler, interview 2 November 2001.

formed into columns within the convoy and could include British, Allied, American and Neutral merchant ships. RN corvettes with the escort commander in a frigate escorted them. Destroyers only sailed with the most important convoys. Eventually as the war progressed, air escort of convoys, the deciphering of the German codes, especially Enigma and the development of ASDIC (submarine sound detection equipment) and radar were all significant in final victory for the Allies in this maritime war.

Many of the 'Yachties' were involved with Combined Operations, usually in support ships and in landing craft. Lieutenant Geoff Danne though served in Operation Mermaid, a Combined Operations Pilotage Party (COPPs) in Italy, Sicily, Normandy, Burma and Holland. COPPs carried out beach, navigational and military reconnaissance to obtain intelligence for landings and deception in enemy occupied areas. Their secondary role was to pilot assault to beaches and mark mines and clear landing and exit places. Other raids in which 'Yachties' were involved were St Nazaire (March) and Dieppe (August) of 1942.

Lieutenant Ted Gregg was sent to America to commission his new LCI 260. When the ship was ready at last he took her down the Hudson River and berthed alongside the wharf at Manhattan. 'It was a bit scary for me as a brand new officer of a brand new crew with a brand new ship, going down the Hudson River with all these ferries going backwards and forwards' he recalled. After Anzio, they were in the Adriatic running supplies and guns into Yugoslavia for Marshall Tito and bringing wounded and refugees out. In all, Ted and his ship did about twenty landings and commando raids over this period, only on moonless nights. One of his best jobs he felt was to land Royal Marine commandos who penetrated behind the lines to get out over a hundred escaped Allied prisoners of war through the German convoys in Italy. He was awarded a DSC for his 'skill and daring' during various operations in the Dalmatian Islands and in Greece as well as a commendation from General Zervas.

One group of the 'Yachties' was not posted to sea and they are remembered for the incredibly courageous work they carried out in mine disposal or Rendering Mines Safe. These men were awarded the highest honours of either the George Cross and/or the George Medal. Lieutenant James Kessack died in action attempting to render a mine safe in April 1941. He was one of five who sailed with the first Yachtsmen Scheme mobilization in September 1940 in *Strathnaver*. He had in that short time in England dealt with ten unexploded mines. Another RMS 'Yachtie' was Lieutenant Hugh Syme GC, GM and Bar, the most highly decorated Australian officer of World War II.

No story of the Yachtsmen Scheme would be complete without the mention of their contribution to D-Day. Keith Nicol believes that about three hundred of the men must have served in the Normandy landings in June 1944 but Lieutenant Richard Pirrie was the only Yachtsmen casualty when HMS *Copra* capsized in heavy surf. Lieutenant Lyle Miller was posted from January 1944 to May 1945, to HMS *Sancroft*, one of the two large converted cable layers in Force PLUTO (Pipe Line Under The Ocean), designed to supply petrol for the invasion. *Sancroft* laid an eighty-seven mile pipe from the Isle of Wight to Cherbourg.

In summary, the young Australians recruited through the Yachtsmen Scheme to be trained as officers in the Royal Navy were successful in achieving their ambitions. They were a highly selected group whose level of education and social skills qualified them for acceptance within the RN. The achievement of gaining a commission gave them a sense of privilege and status. They were welcomed by their fellow officers and the men with whom they served and succeeded in acquiring the skills and professional competence necessary within the RN in various theatres of war in the northern hemisphere. Certainly Lord Louis Mountbatten believed the Australians had special qualities and reputedly requested some of 'those hot-shot Australians' for his destroyer flotilla and Combined Operations. They earned respect, acceptance and acknowledgement. Their presence in Britain was noted and they were aware how important this was to public morale. Many of the men recorded the positive comments they received from the British public. They were proud to be Australian and were welcomed also, as Dominion servicemen supporting the mother country.

The 'Yachties' became used to their status as naval officers and enjoyed the kudos that accompanied this acceptance. After four or more years they returned home to an Australia that was preoccupied with the final stages of the Pacific war and a much smaller navy where only a handful of the men were given postings commensurate with their status and competence. Lieutenant Max Germaine was offered temporary command of *Vendetta* and Lieutenant Commander Ellison Hawker was posted to temporary command of *Stuart* on his return and only a handful was offered positions in the permanent RAN. I only know of Frank Appleton who accepted this offer. Within the general public and the forces, there was no interest in their testing experiences, and virtually no acknowledgement of 'their' war which was foreign to, or at least distant from, the immediate pressures of the war against Japan. By the early years of the twenty-first century the men finally sought belated recognition. They felt recognition was due, not only for their involvement in the war on the other side of the world to which they felt they had contributed significantly to the Allied victory, but also validation of their service there, something that Australians had never formally or publicly accorded them.

The group of 'Yachties' who survived to tell their stories for this study were proud of their record and believed that as a cohort they are the most highly decorated group of Australian servicemen. In all, this group of five hundred-odd Australians were awarded 4 George Crosses, 9 George Medals, 30 Distinguished Service Crosses and 30 Mention-in-Dispatches, 3 Orders of the British Empire and a Member of the British Empire medal and a Conspicuous Gallantry Medal. Over sixty officers qualified for Qualified Officer status in the RN which meant that they were considered as equivalent in competence to permanent Royal Navy officers and could, if desired, continue to serve with that rank in the peacetime navy. I suspect that more of the men would have qualified but did not see the need.

Some comparison can be made with the Australians who served in Europe with the RAF. There has been little acknowledgment of the Australians who served, as another elite group, in Bomber Command. Few have articulated their experiences and most of the Australian public would not know of the details of their selection, training, the task they were asked to do, the huge losses suffered, nor the post-war questioning of the morality of the bombing raids. Nor would the public be aware of the memorials to these Australians at Runnymede and Lincoln in the UK. It was only in 2005 that a memorial to the men in Bomber Command was unveiled in the grounds of the Australian War Memorial. While the number of RAAF casualties in Bomber Command, some 4,050 dead, were far higher than the 'Yachties', the proportion of deaths, at 7.3 per cent of the number of Yachtsmen enlistments in the RN, was similar.¹³

Thirty-six Yachtsmen Scheme men lost their lives during World War II, of whom nine were serving in the South East Asia theatre, six of these men in the period following the fall of Singapore. Another six men were lost returning to Australia in *SS Ceramic*, *Nellore* and *Melbourne Star*. Those men who served with the Royal Navy for the duration spent some four or more years away from Australia and two men, Lieutenants Peter Mews and John Lefroy served in *HMS Euphrates* in the Persian Gulf without relief for fifty-four months. The heroism and glamour of war indoctrinated into the public perception of World War II through film and fictional accounts is rarely to be found in the men's recollections. Most of their memories are frequently harrowing and emotionally disturbing and because their involvement in the war at sea across the other side of the world and in the service of the Imperial power has not sat comfortably with the perception of Australian identity post-war, the men have received little recognition of their service. Recently I applied for a small grant through the Department of Veterans' Affairs to assist with further research towards publishing the Yachtsmen Scheme story. It was refused on the grounds that 'although the work is focused on

¹³ Hank Nelson, *Chased by the Sun* (Melbourne: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2002), 276.

Australians it concerns the Royal Navy rather than an Australian unit and as such is outside the guidelines'. The reality of past Dominion commitment and support by Australia and continuing cooperation within the Commonwealth would appear to have been, for the Yachtsmen Scheme volunteers at least, discounted and ignored.

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