



ANZAC Day 2020

Inspired Naval Leadership in the Pacific War

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By the time the forces of Imperial Japan brought war to the Asia-Pacific Region in December 1941 the Royal Australian Navy had already been at war for two years in the bitter struggle against Axis forces in the Northern Hemisphere. Many R.A.N. ships had received their baptism of fire and many men had made the supreme sacrifice. As the ships and their war-weary crews returned to continue the fight in the Asia-Pacific region it fell to the captains of those ships to inspire their men through self-sacrifice and leadership. This is the story of three such men, cruiser captains, who took the fight to the enemy in actions alongside our US Allies; actions that would ultimately cost them their lives.

Captain 'Hec' Waller, Captain Frank Getting and Captain Emile Dechaineux were men who had each joined the R.A.N. as teenage cadet midshipmen. They were schooled at the Royal Australian Naval College where they learnt the fundamentals of naval life. Consolidation training followed in battleships and battle cruisers of the Royal Navy. For a young man, life in a modern British battle-cruiser was both exhilarating and demanding. Studies in navigation and seamanship consumed much of their time but they soon proved themselves capable and efficient young officers.

In Frank Getting's case the allure of serving in submarines captured his imagination prompting him to volunteer to serve in the 'silent service'. On being accepted he undertook training in the UK and in 1926 he became the first Australian naval officer to pass the Royal Navy's submarine commanders course after which he was promoted lieutenant-commander. He was later appointed in command of one of the RAN's early submarines, HMAS *Oxley*, in 1928. Later appointments saw him gain considerable experience in the heavy cruisers *Australia* and *Canberra* in which he served as the second-in-command. When war broke out he was given command of the armed merchant cruiser HMAS *Kanimbla*.



Captain Frank Getting, RAN, in command of HMAS Kanimbla c.1940



For Hec Waller, developments in communications saw him specialise in that field and he gained an impressive reputation as an expert while serving as the Squadron Signals Officer in the heavy cruiser HMAS *Australia*. It was, however, in destroyers that he developed and fine-tuned his seamanship skills and he was rewarded with command of the British destroyer HMS *Brazen* in 1937. He would later earn fame in the Mediterranean as the captain of HMAS *Stuart* in which he earned the nick-name 'Hardover Hec', a reference to his violent manoeuvring of the ship in avoiding enemy aerial attacks. For his 'courage, enterprise and devotion to duty', Waller was awarded a Distinguished Service Order. A second award of that decoration saw him add a Bar to its ribbon for the role played by *Stuart* in the battle of Matapan in March 1941.

Emile Dechaineux found his forte in torpedo gunnery, topping the advanced torpedo gunnery course in 1929 and winning the Ogilvy Medal. He honed those skills in both destroyers and cruisers demonstrating a sound understanding of this developing weapon of war. When war broke out in Europe Emile was serving in the UK and in 1940 he was given temporary command of the destroyer HMS *Vivacious* during the Dunkirk evacuation. He subsequently commanded the destroyer flotilla-leader, HMS *Eglinton*, in which he patrolled the North Sea conducting successful searches for German E-boats. For 'outstanding zeal and devotion to duty', he was awarded a Distinguished Service Cross in 1941.

As tensions grew in the Asia-Pacific towards the end of 1941, Waller, Getting and Dechaineux had each made significant contributions to the war effort both at sea and ashore. They were, however, about to be asked to give more.

At the beginning of 1942 Captain Hec Waller was in command of the light cruiser HMAS *Perth* which had recently been appointed as part of the American, British, Dutch & Australian (ABDA) forces sent to defend Java. The hastily assembled allied naval forces proved no match for the superior Japanese naval forces suffering severe losses in the battle of the Java Sea on 27 February.



Captain Hec Waller, RAN, on the compass platform of HMAS Perth, c. 1941.

SEA POWER

SEMAPHORE



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Low on fuel and ammunition HMAS *Perth* and USS *Houston* were lucky to escape, and the following day Waller made plans for both ships to attempt a break out of the archipelago through the Sunda Strait. It was during that breakout that the two ships again encountered a superior enemy invasion force. In the ensuing action the Allied cruisers destroyed at least four enemy transports and a minesweeper, but both were eventually sunk in the early hours of 1 March 1942.

On the bridge of *Perth*, Waller calmly gave his final orders, manoeuvring his ship violently in an effort to avoid incoming gun fire and torpedoes. When ammunition ran out he ordered blank practice rounds to be fired to maintain the illusion that *Perth* was still 'in the fight'. However, when the first of several torpedoes struck *Perth*, Waller realised that her luck had run out, quietly uttering the words 'that's torn it' before issuing orders to prepare to abandon ship. Moments later he was killed at his post on the compass platform.

Lieutenant Hamlin, USN, a survivor of the USS *Houston* described *Perth's* participation in the Battle of the Java Sea as follows:

"there was Perth, a beautiful white bone in her teeth...three battle flags streaming...smoke pouring...firing all the time...rapid salvos...shells falling all around her...It was one of the finest sights I have ever seen."

The first of the three had fallen...

On 17 June 1942 Captain Frank Getting was appointed in command of the heavy cruiser HMAS *Canberra* a ship he was familiar with having previously served in her as the Executive Officer. On the 14 July 1942, following an extensive refit and change of personnel, HMAS *Canberra* took part in offensive sweeps into the Coral Sea as part of Task Force 44, before being assigned to Operation Watchtower, the invasion of the Solomon Islands by US Marines.

In August 1942 *Canberra* was operating as a component of a large Allied naval force supporting the US landings at Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. On the evening of 9 August the Allied fleet was cruising in darkness near Savo Island when a large Japanese cruiser force executed a surprise night attack on the Allied ships. As *Canberra's* action stations alarms rattled, Getting arrived on the bridge ordering his guns to train on three unidentified darkened warships while increasing to full speed. It was to no avail, for moments later *Canberra* received the first of 22 hits from enemy gunfire. The second enemy salvo found *Canberra's* bridge. Shrapnel flew in all directions killing many in its path and injuring others, including Getting who was manning a bearing indicator. When a ship's medical party arrived at the scene, Frank Getting was found slumped against a bulkhead. His right leg was shattered and he had suffered multiple shrapnel wounds. In spite of his injuries Getting issued orders for the doctor to see to other men first, refusing to be moved.

Canberra had been dealt a knock-out blow. Uncontrollable fires were raging in the ship which soon took on a list of ten degrees. Reluctantly orders were eventually given to



abandon ship. Frank Getting and other injured personnel were transferred to the troopship USS *Barnett*. There *Canberra's* surgeon, Commander Downward, supported by Signalman 'Nobby' Hall tended to their captain's wounds until he finally succumbed. Hall later remarked:

To me he was God! I assisted Surgeon Commander Downward to operate on him in an American [destroyer] following Savo Island. He was wounded in many places. What we did was not enough for him. He was kind to his men.

HMAS *Canberra* was scuttled soon after but many of her crew survived and went on to serve in her replacement, HMAS *Shropshire*, which continued the fight alongside our American allies.



HMAS Canberra listing heavily and with fires burning within shortly before orders were issued to scuttle the ship.

In November 1942, Emile Dechaineux, by then a commander, was appointed captain of the new Tribal class destroyer, HMAS *Warramunga*. He soon found himself assigned to the Pacific theatre and in June 1943 he was

appointed the Commander of Task Group 74.2 and given tactical control of a formation of Allied destroyers. At that time *Warramunga* was operating in Australian and New Guinea waters conducting shore bombardments and escort duties and supporting allied landings throughout the region. During his command of *Warramunga* Emile Dechaineux was promoted captain and on 9 March 1944 he took command of the flagship of Task Force 74, the heavy cruiser, HMAS *Australia*.

In adapting to the much larger vessel, Emile realised the need to rely on the expertise of specialist officers; he appreciated the merit of his staff, and endorsed proposals to improve the equipment and armament of the ship through unofficial American channels. Between April and September *Australia* supported landings at Hollandia, on the north coast of Netherlands New Guinea, and at the nearby islands of Biak, Noemfoor and Morotai; she also participated in the bombardments of Wakde Island and of Aitape, New Guinea. By October Dechaineux and his crew were in the Philippines.

Tall, with a misleadingly remote bearing, Dechaineux was regarded by his officers as an approachable, generous and humane captain; his sailors found that he held high expectations of them and that he was fair, quick to praise performances out of the ordinary, though hard on wrongdoers. He kept the ship's company informed of impending actions and their likely outcomes, and constantly tried to foster the men's welfare and to maintain their morale.

At dawn on 21 October 1944, while supporting the US landings at Leyte Gulf, HMAS *Australia* was attacked by a Japanese Navy dive-bomber. The ship's anti-aircraft guns engaged the plane, but in spite of the fire, on it came. Able



Seaman Phillip Turner could clearly see the pilot's head and shoulders in the aircraft's cockpit until at last it struck the forward funnel, rupturing its fuel tanks and causing an explosion that showered the bridge with debris and burning gasoline. Turner survived but was badly burnt. As medical and repair parties closed up Captain Dechaineux was found crouched on the compass platform suffering severe injuries. As with Frank Getting his concern was only for his men. He died later that day.



Captain Emile Dechaineux, RAN, on the bridge of HMAS Warramunga c.1943.

When news of his passing spread throughout the cruiser his crew lamented his loss. At the age of 42 he was the third Australian cruiser captain to be killed on active service in the Pacific War.

War Correspondent Kenneth Slessor was to later write of Dechaineux:

Australia's Navy is young in history, but old in battle. Its traditions have been bitterly won, yet the men who have written them in their own blood would not have wished otherwise. Emile Dechaineux, who died from wounds received while commanding HMAS Australia at the Philippines landing, was a captain who will pass into that naval story. In every way, in every moment of his life, he made his men feel that they, too were part of a tradition.

The US Government posthumously appointed Captain Dechaineux an officer of the Legion of Merit for his seamanship, professional skill, leadership and devotion to duty.

Conclusion

During World War II the RAN undertook the largest and most varied operations of its history. Those operations saw personnel deploy variously in both hemispheres throughout six years of bitter conflict in vessels ranging in size from motor launches to battleships.¹

While this Semaphore focuses on just three of the RAN's wartime captains, numerous other RAN personnel, of all ranks, demonstrated exceptional leadership during World War II. For many of them who continued to serve in the post war navy, fell the task of leading it into an uncertain peace, the atomic, missile and jet ages and a new Cold War.

¹ A number of RAN personnel served in battleships & battle cruisers of the Royal Navy.