

THE NAVY AND THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH OCCUPATION FORCE IN JAPAN 1945 - 1952

On 2 September 1945 at 9.40 am an Instrument of Surrender was signed by the Japanese Government on board the US Navy battleship USS *Missouri*, anchored in Tokyo Bay, thereby bringing the hostilities of World War II to a close. Japan was a defeated nation but it was to be another six years before the Japanese Peace Treaty came into effect. During the intervening period the nation was occupied by Allied forces, with the bulk of the occupying forces provided by the United States 8th Army. A British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) was also formed and the Australian Government quickly confirmed it would be part of this force. BCOF participation in the Allied occupation of Japan was announced on 31 January 1946 and the first Australian ground forces arrived on 21 February 1946. By this time RAN warships had already been operating in Japanese waters for many months.

Several RAN ships, attached to the British Pacific Fleet, were present at the surrender. The cruisers HMA Ships *Hobart* and *Shropshire* and the destroyers HMA Ships *Bataan*, *Napier*, *Nepal*, *Nizam*, *Norman*, *Quickmatch* and *Warramunga* remained for several weeks after to enforce the terms of the surrender including repatriation of Allied Prisoners of War and the de-militarisation of Japan. The former Imperial Japanese Navy base at Kure, near the devastated city of Hiroshima, became the main base for Australian and British warships. A Royal Navy shore party took control of the port and facilities and these were commissioned as HMS *Commonwealth* on 3 June 1946.



HMAS Bataan at Kure. She deployed to Japan five times on BCOF duties and twice for Korean War service.

By mid-November 1945 only *Shropshire* and *Bataan* remained in Japanese waters, with their main role being to patrol the Inland Sea to prevent smuggling and the illegal immigration of Koreans to Japan. On 17 November 1945 HMA Ships *Hobart* and *Arunta* relieved *Shropshire* and *Bataan* and occupation force duties commenced in

earnest. The initial BCOF naval deployments comprised two ships undertaking service of approximately four months duration. On 2 February 1946 HMAS *Warramunga* arrived to replace *Arunta* and in mid-April HMAS *Quiberon* arrived to replace *Hobart* which had departed in mid-March.

In February 1946 the Australian 34th Infantry Brigade, and its support elements, began to arrive in Japan and were based at Fukuyama, Hiro and Kaitaichi. The first RAAF Squadron (76 Squadron) equipped with P-51 Mustang aircraft arrived in Japan on 9 March and was later joined by 77 and 82 Squadrons, also flying Mustangs. The RAAF squadrons operated from Bofu air base; later moving to Iwakuni air base in 1948. The main BCOF Headquarters for the British, Australian, New Zealand and Indian forces was at Kure. The former landing ships infantry, HMA Ships *Kanimbla*, *Manoora* and *Westralia* were utilised throughout 1946-48 moving personnel and equipment to and from Japan with *Kanimbla* making 11 voyages (with *Manoora* undertaking four voyages and *Westralia* only one).



The main street of Kure, on a winter's day, showing the BCOF Headquarters on the right hand side.

The patrol duties in Japanese waters were mostly benign and the Japanese population very compliant with the directions of the occupying force. Although Australian Prisoners of War had fared badly under their Japanese captors during the war instances of retribution were limited. Fraternisation with Japanese civilians was initially discouraged but was difficult to police and over time good working relationships were developed with the Japanese civilian population.

Due to ships activities RAN personnel were less likely to travel through much of the country unlike their Army and RAAF counterparts. They were generally restricted to the ports of Kagashima, Kure, Sasebo (where the main US Navy base was located), Yokohama, and Yokosuka. Visits to nearby Hiroshima were however high on the list of things 'to do on leave' although many sailors spent much of their time in the beer halls in Kure. Regretably sexually transmitted infections were rife among the Allied occupation forces, due to significant prostitution in the

post war country and Australian personnel were not immune to this.

The RAN continued to commit two warships to the BCOF during 1946-48 including the heavy cruisers HMA Ships *Australia* (September - October 1947) and *Shropshire* (December 1946 - February 1947) and the light cruiser *Hobart* (September - November 1946 & April - August 1947). It was, however, the destroyers who conducted the bulk of the deployments including HMA Ships *Arunta* (January - April 1947 & November 1947 - March 1948), *Bataan* (September 1946 - January 1947, August - November 1947 & July - November 1948), *Quadrant* (August - December 1946), *Quiberon* (April - July 1947 & March - July 1948), *Quickmatch* (August - September 1946, April - August 1947 & March - July 1948) and *Warramunga* (January - February 1947, November 1947 - March 1948 & November 1948 - January 1949). In addition the frigates HMA Ships *Culgoa* (July - November 1947) and *Murchison* (February 1946 & April 1946) were also deployed.



HMAS Bataan being prepared for painting at Kure by both RAN sailors and Japanese dockyard workers.

On several occasions the ships operated outside Japanese waters conducting port visits to Shanghai and Hong Kong in support of Royal Navy activities in these areas. The visits to China were of particular importance because of the ongoing Chinese Civil War (1945-49) and the need to protect Commonwealth assets and people in this troubled region. In April 1949 the frigate HMAS *Shoalhaven* was at Shanghai during the HMS *Amethyst* incident; when the British sloop was fired upon, by field artillery of the Peoples Liberation Army, and disabled while transiting the Yangtze River from Shanghai to Nanking on 20 April. Despite being badly damaged and suffering several casualties *Amethyst* famously rejoined the fleet on 30 June 1949 after a pre-dawn transit of the river while under fire.

Throughout 1947-48 the British, Indian and New Zealand commitment to the BCOF began to decline and by mid-1948 the Australians made up the bulk of the force. The Royal Navy had ships based at Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore and was hard pressed, particularly after the Malayan Emergency commenced in 1948, to maintain its forces in Japan. On 1 October 1948 HMS *Commonwealth* was handed over to the RAN and commissioned as HMAS *Commonwealth* under the command of Commander M.J. Clark, DSC, RAN.



Commander Max Clark, DSC, RAN inspecting a guard at HMAS Commonwealth in late 1948.

The port of Kure remained the main logistics support facility in Japan for the RAN. It had been a major Imperial Japanese Navy port during World War II and had suffered damage from Allied bombing as a result but was repaired and provided substantial support to the warships on BCOF duty. Japanese workers were employed throughout the dockyard in a variety of technical and administrative roles. RAN personnel posted to HMAS *Commonwealth* carried out logistics and port services duties and, due to the length of their posting to Japan, some brought their families with them.

The occupation was proving successful as Japan was demilitarised and consequently the Australian forces began to draw down as well. 76 and 82 Squadrons were disbanded in October 1948 and the Army commitment reduced to one infantry battalion (the newly designated 3rd Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment) in December 1948. The deployment of RAN warships was also reduced to one destroyer or frigate only. In late January 1949 *Warramunga* departed and was not replaced until early March when the frigate *Shoalhaven* arrived on station. She in turn was relieved by *Bataan* in June and there after by *Culgoa* in September. *Culgoa* was to spend six months in Japan, over winter, before being replaced by *Shoalhaven* in February 1950.

In May 1950 the Menzies Government announced the decision to withdraw all Australian forces from Japan by November of that year. Less than two months later, on 25 June 1950, North Korean forces invaded South Korea and quickly pushed southwards. Two days later the United Nations Security Council authorised the dispatch of UN forces to the Korean Peninsula to resist the North Korean invasion. The Australian forces in Japan were amongst some of the first United Nations forces to arrive.

By chance the destroyer *Bataan* was enroute to Japan to relieve *Shoalhaven* when hostilities began. *Shoalhaven's* departure from Japan was cancelled and she commenced convoy escort duties, supporting the movement of US troops from Sasebo to Pusan, on 7 July 1950.¹ *Bataan* was in Hong Kong when the North Koreans crossed the border. She arrived at Kure on 1 July and joined US Navy warships on patrol off the Korean Peninsula on 13 July



1950. 77 Squadron RAAF was also soon involved and flew its first combat mission on 2 July. The 3rd Battalion did not arrive in Korea until September 1950.

The RAN's service in Japan then became less about enforcing the occupation and more about using the country as a forward operating base for its ships deployed to the Korean War. Japan was not in the war zone but not too far away proving ideal as a forward operating base. The base at Kure became the main arrival point for RAN warships bound for service in Korean waters for the next six years. It was there that the re-supply of provisions, stores and ammunition took place. The well trained and highly efficient local workforce carried out numerous maintenance tasks; many had worked at the former Imperial Japanese Navy shipyard for decades. Kure was also a popular leave port and the main Commonwealth Forces hospital was also located there.

During the war several RAN warships saw service in Korean waters including the aircraft carrier HMAS *Sydney* and the destroyers *Anzac*, *Bataan*, *Tobruk* and *Warramunga* as well as the frigates *Condamine*, *Culgoa*, *Murchison* and *Shoalhaven*. On 8 September 1951 the treaty of peace with Japan² was signed, coming into force on 28 April 1952 and formally ending the Allied post-war occupation of Japan and returning sovereignty to the Japanese. On 15 May 1952 the Governor General of Australia (Sir William McKell) declared that the war that was proclaimed on 3 September 1939 'no longer exists'.³ As a result the BCOF was disbanded, however, due to the war in Korea the Australian forces remained in Japan.



Australian sailors ashore in a Kure beer hall with Japanese hostesses

The fighting in Korea continued until an Armistice came into effect on 27 July 1953. RAN vessels continued to deploy to Korea in the post-armistice period including the aircraft carrier HMAS *Sydney* (November 1953 - May 1954), the destroyers *Arunta* (February - September 1954) and *Tobruk* (June 1953 - January 1954) and the frigates *Condamine* (February - November 1955), *Culgoa* (March - November 1953), *Shoalhaven* (July 1954 - March 1955) and *Murchison* (November 1953 - June 1954). The aircraft carrier HMAS *Vengeance* had also been preparing for service in Korea but instead only sailed as far as Japan. There she embarked 77 Squadron aircraft, equipment and personnel at Yokosuka and sailed on 19 November 1954; arriving in Sydney on 3 December.

Despite the cessation of hostilities, in June 1953, attempts to secure a peace treaty in Korea have to date failed and

the potential for fighting to re-commence on the Korean Peninsula remains an international issue.

In the post war period the Australian ships allotted for service in Korean waters continued to use Kure, and other Japanese ports, as their forward operating base. However, with the departure of *Condamine* in late 1955, RAN ship visits to Japan became sporadic and the need for a permanent RAN base at Kure was no longer required. In mid-November 1956 HMAS *Commonwealth* decommissioned thus severing the last link to the RAN's involvement in the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan.

On 1 December 1997 the determination regarding the issue of the Australian Service Medal 1945-1975 with clasp 'JAPAN' was gazetted. This enabled the medal to be issued to former BCOF members who served in Japan, including the waters off Japan to a distance of 161 kilometres to seaward from the coast during the period that commenced on 3 September 1945 and ended on 28 April 1952. The Australian service member had to be posted to or serving as a member of the Australian element of the declared operation for a period of 30 days, or for periods amounting in the aggregate to 30 days.⁴



Australian Service Medal 1945 - 1975 with Japan Clasp.

The RAN's involvement in the BCOF was fortuitous for the navy in many respects. In a period of post-war downsizing it ensured the navy kept a core of operational ships that were fully manned and ready to deploy; and the transition from peace time operations to war in June 1950 was a seamless activity. Additionally it proved the worth of forward operating bases which the navy continued to utilise in other conflicts particularly Singapore, during the Malayan Emergency (1948-60) and Confrontation (1964-66) and Subic Bay during the Vietnam War (1967-71).

¹ HMAS *Shoalhaven* departed Kure on 6 September 1950 for return to Australia.
² Known as the Treaty of San Francisco where it was signed by 48 nations.
³ Commonwealth of Australia Gazette 15 May 1952.
⁴ Commonwealth of Australia Gazette No. S 498, 1 December 1997.

