

2016 - REFLECTING AND LEARNING FROM AUSTRALIA'S NAVAL PAST

This year the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) will continue to commemorate a number of significant anniversaries in connection with the centenary of Australian service in World War I. It will also mark a number of other significant dates as part of a broader campaign of historical recognition and remembrance.

World War I

One hundred years ago the ships and men of the RAN and its reserve forces were dispersed throughout Australia and around the globe performing all manner of tasks in support of the war effort.

In January 1916, the 1st Royal Australian Navy Bridging Train (1st RANBT), the last Australian unit to be evacuated from Gallipoli in December 1915, was being reconstituted on the island of Imbros before being sent to the Suez Canal zone where it became responsible for the maintenance and operation of many of the swing bridges traversing that important strategic waterway. Two of its number succumbed to enteric fever during the unit's time in Suez while another was accidentally drowned.

In December 1916 the 1st RANBT took part in the advance on El Arish, building a number of piers which enabled the use of waterborne logistics to resupply the armies ashore.

<http://www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/1st-royal-australian-naval-bridging-train>

During the first eight months of 1916, in waters off Africa, the light cruiser HMAS *Pioneer* was participating in her second year of an ongoing Allied naval blockade of German East Africa. In July 1915 she had provided naval gunfire support during successive operations which led to the destruction of the German cruiser SMS *Königsberg* which had secreted itself in the Rufiji River. The neutralisation of *Königsberg* removed a prevailing threat to commerce and trade in the western Indian Ocean.



Members of HMAS *Pioneer*'s ship's company c. 1916.

Pioneer continued to provide valuable service in the area until August 1916 carrying out patrol and blockade duties, shore bombardments as well as taking part in the capture of Bagamoyo. During that time her crew was complimented with the addition of African sailors known as Seedie boys. She returned to Australia on 22 October after 18 months arduous service.

<http://www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/blockading-german-east-africa-1915-16>

Elsewhere, in South East Asian and Indian Ocean waters, HMA Ships *Encounter*, *Psyche*, *Parramatta*, *Warrego*, *Fantome* and *Una* were performing important maritime security patrols. Unrest in those areas was actively being fomented by Germany and plans had been exposed revealing that the smuggling of arms and other war material from the Far East to Europe by sea was likely.

Several of the ships formed part of the Rangoon-based Burma Coast Patrol operating variously in support of operations in the Bay of Bengal, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Elsewhere patrols were routinely conducted in waters off Ceylon, Malaya, Java, the Philippines, Hong Kong and China.

In 1916 the newly commissioned destroyers *Huon*, *Torrens* and *Swan* supplemented the wearisome and trying work, relieving their sister destroyers. The broad distribution of Australian naval forces reflected a change in nature of the German threat and a growing appreciation of the versatility of the fledgling RAN fleet.

<http://www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/hmas-psyche-forgotten-cruiser>

Meanwhile in the northern hemisphere, HMA Ships *Australia*, *Sydney* and *Melbourne* were operating in support of the Royal Navy (RN). *Australia* became the Flagship of the 2nd Battle Cruiser Squadron of the Grand Fleet while *Sydney* and *Melbourne* were attached to the West Indies-North American Station for patrol duties. Until the end of August 1916 both ships carried out patrols throughout the West Indies and off Long Island from a base in Halifax. In September 1916 they joined the Grand Fleet in England as part of the 2nd Light Cruiser Squadron.

This year also commemorates the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Jutland. This much anticipated naval action took place between the British and German fleets in the North Sea off the coast of Denmark between 31 May and 1 June 1916. Damage to *Australia* caused in a collision with HMS *New Zealand* precluded the Australian Flagship from taking part in the battle but a number of Australian officers and ratings were present in ships of the Royal Navy, several of whom were killed when the ships they were serving in were sunk. Both sides claimed victory and the outcome of the action remains a topic of debate to this day.



Petty Officer Telegraphist Donald McKenzie who served on the signal staff of Rear Admiral Pakenham in HMS New Zealand during the Battle of Jutland.

World War II

When World War II came to an end following the formal surrender ceremony in Tokyo Bay on 2 September 1945, pressure was placed on the government to bring Australia's service personnel home as expediently as possible. There was, however, important work still to be done and much of it fell to the Navy. There were hydrographic surveys of damaged harbours and ports to be carried out, minefields to be swept, garrisons to be established and resupplied and prisoners of war (POWs), from both sides, to be processed and repatriated.



Members of HMAS Junee's ship's company tend to former POWs liberated from Amboina in September 1945.

This work, performed chiefly by the small ships of the RAN, continued throughout the remainder of 1945, into 1946 and beyond. The tasks were not without danger as a

number of Australian minesweepers discovered when mines they were sweeping detonated.

Humanitarian work was also a prominent feature of the work undertaken by the small ships. Many of their crews were confronted with the pitiful sight of former POWs suffering the effects of malnutrition and ill-treatment and their compassion towards their fellow servicemen and displaced civilians drew high praise. One observer recorded that 'The crews of HMA Ships performed most admirably, and turned over their mess decks completely to the women and children. Very few of the crew had any sleep whatsoever. In addition they mothered the women and children who were very seasick.'

When the small ships began to return home in 1946 there were few victory ticker-tape receptions for them. Instead, their crews were quietly demobilised and many of the small ships were paid off into reserve status. Before long, rows of mothballed corvettes, motor launches and auxiliary vessels could be seen in Australian ports as they awaited disposal or, in some cases, reactivation at a later date.

<http://www.navy.gov.au/hmas-junee>

<http://www.navy.gov.au/hmas-rockhampton>

<http://www.navy.gov.au/hdml-1347>

Post-World War II

The decades following World War II did not bring the much-hoped-for peace and stability to the South-East Asia region, the maritime environment of which remained of great strategic significance to Australia. Consequently, the RAN soon found itself involved in a number of operations and conflicts aimed to assist in securing this vital area from Communist aggression.

In 1955 a Commonwealth Strategic Reserve was established and in January 1956 a directive was issued giving it two roles. The primary role was to provide 'a deterrent to further Communist aggression in South-East Asia'. The secondary role was 'to assist in the maintenance of the security of the Federation of Malaya by participating in operations against the Communist Terrorists'. This became known as the Malayan Emergency.

In practice the secondary role was to dominate the 1950s and numerous RAN ships deployed in support of maritime security operations, some of which saw action such as HMA Ships *Anzac* (II) and *Tobruk* (I) which bombarded terrorist positions 24km south of Jason Bay in the Johore Strait on 29 September 1956. Between 1955 and July 1960 a total of 13 RAN ships served with the Strategic Reserve until the 'Emergency' was lifted.

<http://www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/ran-strategic-reserve-and-malayan-emergency>

The work of the Far East Strategic Reserve continued until 1971, encompassing the Indonesian Confrontation, at which time the Five Power Defence Arrangements came into effect replacing the arrangements of earlier years associated with the Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement.

<http://www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/indonesian-confrontation>





The Battle class destroyer HMAS Tobruk (I) was just one of the many RAN ships that served with the Far East Strategic Reserve.

The 1960s saw Australia commit forces for service in Vietnam and 50 years ago RAN Clearance Diving Team 1 was amongst the first to deploy between May and June 1966. Altogether some 13,500 members of the RAN saw active service at sea, on land and in the air during the Vietnam War.

<http://www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/naval-operations-vietnam>

The Gulf War 1990-91

2016 will mark the 25th anniversary of the RAN involvement in Operation DESERT STORM which was to significantly shape the course of RAN operations over ensuing decades.

On 2 August 1990 Iraq invaded and then annexed neighboring Kuwait. In response, the United Nations Security Council placed a trade embargo on Iraq, and on 10 August the RAN deployed three warships to the Middle East to help enforce those sanctions. Under the codename Operation DAMASK, the despatch of the first RAN task group with just 72 hours notice was a clear demonstration of the readiness, flexibility, reach and responsiveness of naval forces.



HMA Ships Brisbane (II), Success (II) and Sydney (IV) in the Persian Gulf during Operation DESERT STORM, 1991.

The United States Navy ran the overall campaign, but throughout the embargo's evolution, the RAN played an important partnership role. The embargo was an effective first step, but sanctions alone were insufficient to bring about a solution. US President, George H Bush, had set 16 January 1991 as the deadline for Iraqi forces to withdraw from Kuwait and when it passed, Operation DESERT STORM was initiated the following day.

Australian warships operated closely with other coalition ships during Operation DESERT STORM which resulted in the successful expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Thereafter maritime patrols aimed at ensuring Iraq's compliance with UN sanctions continued, and for the next decade Australia maintained a regular presence with the Maritime Interception Force in either the Persian Gulf or the Red Sea.

Operaton ASTUTE

This year also marks the 10th anniversary of the RAN involvement in Operation ASTUTE in 2006 which saw the Navy's amphibious ready group respond to a call from the government of Timor Leste to bring 'security, peace and confidence' to the East Timorese people.

<http://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/semaphore-june-2006>



HMAS Tobruk (II) in Dili Harbour during Operation ASTUTE.

It is important to not only remember and commemorate these historical milestones but to take heed of what they can teach us as the RAN shapes its new fleet for the challenges that lie ahead of it in the future.

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