

THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY ON THE SILVER SCREEN

In this day and age, technologies such as smart phones and tablets allow users to film and view video streams on almost any topic imaginable at the convenience of their fingertips. Indeed, most institutions, including the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), promote video streaming as part of carefully coordinated public relations, recruiting and social media programs.

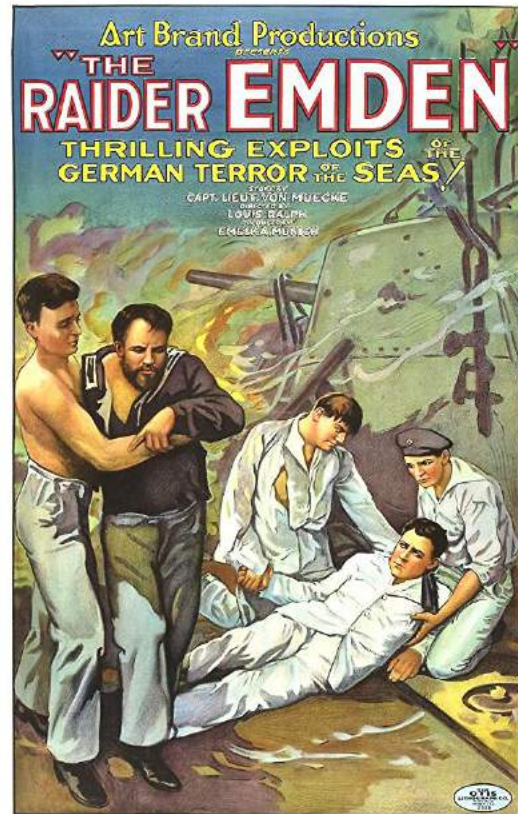
In yesteryear, however, this was not a simple process and the creation and screening of news reels, motion pictures and training films was a costly and time consuming endeavor for all concerned. Notwithstanding that, the RAN has enjoyed an ongoing presence on the silver screen, television and more recently the internet on its voyage from silent pictures to the technologically advanced, digital 21st century.

The RAN's earliest appearances in motion pictures occurred during World War 1. The first of these films was *Sea Dogs of Australia*, a silent picture about an Australian naval officer blackmailed into helping a foreign spy. The film's public release in August 1914 coincided with the outbreak of war and it was consequently withdrawn after the Minister for Defence expressed security concerns over film footage taken on board the battlecruiser [HMAS Australia \(I\)](#).

There was, however, an apparent change of heart following the victory of [HMAS Sydney \(I\)](#) over the German cruiser SMS *Emden* in November 1914. Australia's first naval victory at sea proved big news around the globe and it did not take long before several short, silent propaganda films were produced depicting the action. These were: *For Australia* (October 1915) and *How We Beat the Emden* (December 1915). In 1916, a compilation of both films entitled *For the Honour of Australia* was released in the United Kingdom, a copy of which may be viewed in three segments on the following *Australian Screen* web link: <https://aso.gov.au/titles/features/for-the-honour-of-australia/>

Interest in the *Sydney – Emden* engagement continued after World War 1 both in Germany and Australia. In December 1926 Austrian film director Louis Ralph released *Unsere Emden (Our Emden)* as a silent movie before following it up with a sound version of the film entitled *Kreuzer Emden (Cruiser Emden)* in 1932. That version was later released in North America under the title *The Raider Emden*. Australian rights to *Unsere Emden* were subsequently bought by First National Pictures and an adaptation produced for Australian release adding new footage of HMAS *Sydney (I)* and her crew simulating the battle in exercises off NSW. This added an extra degree of realism and the film was released as *Exploits of the Emden* in September 1928.

<https://aso.gov.au/titles/features/the-exploits-of-the-emden/clip1/>



The Art Brand Productions - The Raider Emden.

Further appearances of RAN warships and personnel in feature films followed. One of the more notable of these included the N class destroyer [HMAS Nepal](#) (Commander F.B. Morris, RAN) which appeared as the fictitious HMS *Torrin* in Noel Coward's 1942 production *In Which We Serve*. The film was based on the exploits of HMS *Kelly*, sunk during the Crete campaign in May 1941. Noel Coward starred as Captain E.V. Kinross, RN, portraying *Kelly's* captain Lord Louis Mountbatten. The film did well at the box office and after her brush with stardom, *Nepal* returned to the grim realities of the war at sea.

Always Another Dawn, released in 1948, and starring Australian actor Charles 'Bud' Tingwell, was the next feature film to portray the exploits of RAN personnel in wartime and was based on the service of the sloop [HMAS Yarra \(II\)](#). It followed the adventures of a young sailor, Terry Regan, who served in the Mediterranean campaign during World War II in the fictitious HMAS *Dauntless*. The ship was later sunk and Terry killed during the Java campaign leaving his best friend Warren to break the news to his loved ones. The heavy cruiser [HMAS Australia \(II\)](#) (Captain H.J. Buchanan, RAN) featured in the film while exercising with other RAN units off the east coast of Australia.



Noel Coward with Commander FB Morris, RAN on the compass platform of HMAS Nepal, during the filming of *In Which We Serve*.

The RAN's next appearance in a major motion picture was in director Stanley Kramer's *On the Beach*, a post-apocalyptic science fiction drama in which Australia features as the last surviving continent following a nuclear war in the northern hemisphere.

The film was based on author Neville Shute's novel of the same name and starred Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Fred Astaire and Anthony Perkins. The film was shot chiefly in Melbourne and was centered on the crew of a US Navy nuclear submarine, the fictitious USS *Sawfish*, which was portrayed by the Royal Navy submarine HMS *Andrew*. The RAN aircraft carrier [HMAS Melbourne \(II\)](#) also appeared in the film in scenes shot alongside in Williamstown while Lieutenant Commander A.A. Norris-Smith, RAN performed the duties of naval liaison officer on the set.

The plot follows the men of *Sawfish* as they return to the US to investigate a spurious Morse code transmission to ascertain whether any signs of life remain there. Having confirmed their worst fears, they return to Australia and face an uncertain end as atomic fallout inevitably reaches Melbourne spelling the end of life on earth.

On the Beach received a makeover in 2000, screening as a television drama starring Armand Assante, Rachael Ward and Bryan Brown. On that occasion the script was updated and a fictitious *Los Angeles* class submarine named USS *Charleston* was substituted for *Sawfish*. As with the original motion picture it was filmed in Victoria where a number of RAN *Anzac* class frigates appeared in scenes filmed at Williamstown, notably HMAS *Warramunga (II)*. Interestingly the aforementioned actor Charles Tingwell also made an appearance in this film as Professor Alan Nordstrum.



Director Stanley Kramer speaking with HMAS Melbourne's executive officer Commander Duncan Stevens on the set of *On the Beach*.

Other appearances on television by RAN ships and personnel were to follow. Between 1973 and 1977 the Royal Navy produced a popular TV series called *Warship* featuring a fictitious *Leander* class frigate, HMS *Hero*.

Altogether seven RN frigates portrayed *Hero* and in 1976 the Australian River class destroyer escort, [HMAS Derwent](#) assumed the role for scenes shot in Singapore and Hong Kong. *Warship* proved to be extremely popular extending to four seasons and was to influence Australia to create a series of its own about the RAN entitled *Patrol Boat*.

Patrol Boat was created by James Davern for the ABC Network and was first screened in June 1979. It featured a fictitious RAN *Attack* class patrol boat named HMAS *Ambush* which was portrayed by HMA Ships *Advance* and *Bombard* wearing the pennant number 83.

Starring in the production was the highly popular Australian actor Andrew McFarlane as Lieutenant David Keating who was ably supported by Robert Coleby appearing as Lieutenant Charles Fisher - the vessel's executive officer. The series followed the adventures of the crew of *Ambush* dramatising many aspects of life in small ships at that time.

The initial series comprised 13 episodes and was followed up with a second series in 1983. In that series *Ambush* was replaced by a *Fremantle* class patrol boat named HMAS *Defiance* played variously by HMA Ships *Launceston*, *Townsville*, *Warrambool*, *Whyalla* and *Wollongong*. In that guise each 'boat' carried the pennant number 207. The highly popular series was the first to secure the 7:30 pm time slot on the ABC generating an increased interest in life in the Navy. An excerpt from the series may be found on the following *Australian Screen* web link:

<https://aso.gov.au/titles/tv/patrol-boat/clip1/>





HMAS Ambush's executive officer Lieutenant Charles Fisher (Robert Coleby) with commanding officer Lieutenant David Keating (Andrew McFarlane) on the set of *Patrol Boat*.



HMA Ships Advance and Bombard in the livery of the fictitious HMAS Ambush.



The Fremantle class patrol boats HMAS Wollongong and Launceston as HMAS Defiance.

In January 1984 it was [HMAS Jervis Bay](#)'s turn to feature in a television series when the Kennedy-Miller film group made use of her wooden decks for shipborne scenes as SS *Orontes* in the mini-series *Bodyline* which told the story of the 1932/33 cricket test series between Australia and England. A number of *Jervis Bay*'s crew appeared as extras before the ship resumed her normal duties.

In 1988 reference to [HMAS Perth \(I\)](#) featured in the convoluted plot of the Ten networks five-part mini-series *Dirtwater Dynasty* directed by Michael Jenkins and John Power. *Dirtwater Dynasty* was the story of embittered rivalry, triumph and despair, spanning three generations and eight decades. Born in the London slums in 1878, Richard Eastwick comes to Australia at age 20, with nothing but a handful of courage and a dream. He acquires land, marries and raises a family, makes loyal friends and bitter enemies. Two world wars and the economic depression take their toll on his family, one of whom is lost in *HMAS Perth (I)*.¹

The bravery of World War II Australian Z Special Force operatives was highlighted in 1989 when the mini-series *The Heroes* premiered on the Ten Network. The plot recreated the heroic voyage of the MV *Krait*, which was crewed by a mixture of RAN and military personnel during a clandestine raid on enemy shipping in Singapore Harbour. Under the code name of [Operation JAYWICK](#), the *Krait*, which featured as herself in the series, conveyed the small force within striking distance of the intended target before canoes were used to infiltrate the harbour, mine the enemy ships and make good their escape. On that occasion the well-known Australian actor David Wenham portrayed RAN Leading Telegraphist 'Horrie' Young, one of the last surviving veterans of the raid who passed away in July 2011.

Fleet Base East came under the spotlight in February 2000 when several episodes of the highly popular US television series JAG (Judge Advocate General) starring David Elliot and Catherine Bell were filmed in Sydney featuring actor Australian Trevor Goddard as Lieutenant Commander Mick Brumby, RAN. The plot for the episodes, entitled *Boomerang*, focussed on a US Navy petty officer who was seemingly murdered during a visit by USS *Chicago* to Sydney in 1972; the dead man reappears, is arrested and asks to see a JAG officer of the USN.² Scenes were shot in and around Fleet Base East with HMA Ships *Brisbane (II)* and *Manoora (II)* sharing the limelight.

Between 2007 and 2011 the RAN's patrol boats returned to television in the Nine Network drama *Sea Patrol* starring actress Lisa McCune. Although not intended to be an extension of the highly popular *Patrol Boat* it was in many ways similar, following the adventures of life at sea in a fictitious *Fremantle* class patrol boat named HMAS *Hammersley*. Two of the RAN's *Fremantle* class patrol boats shared the role of *Hammersley* – HMAS *Wollongong* and HMAS *Ipswich* both of which adopted the pennant number 202. A fictitious consort to *Hammersley*, HMAS *Kingston*, portrayed by HMAS *Townsville*, also appeared in a number of episodes.



In all, 68 episodes of *Sea Patrol* were produced during the five years that it appeared on Australian television. During that time *Hammersley* mirrored real life, decommissioning when the *Fremantle* class were paid off with the name carrying over to a new *Armidale* class patrol boat. The new *Hammersley* carried the pennant number 82 with filming taking place on board HMA Ships *Broome* and *Launceston*.

globally on the National Geographic Channel in 166 countries and 34 languages.

It is reasonable to assume that there will be some RAN cameos that have escaped this author's attention and which do not feature in this article; suffice to say that the silver screen, television and the internet will no doubt continue to foster strong links between the Navy and the Nation for many years to come.

John Perryman

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dirtwater_Dynasty accessed 20 Sep 2017.
² <http://www.imdb.com/title/t0613215/> accessed 20 Sep 2017.



Lisa McCune and Ian Stenlake pose with Matt Holmes, Lieutenant Commander Aaron Nye, RAN (CO HMAS Broome) and Kristian Schmid on the set of *Sea Patrol* to celebrate the RAN's 94th birthday.



Norman Gunston (actor Garry McDonald) during a visit to one of the RAN's Oberon class submarines.

Other former RAN warships including [Castlemaine](#), [Diamantina](#) and [Vampire](#), all of which are now preserved as museum ships, have proved popular as platforms for historical documentaries while other ships of the RAN fleet have routinely hosted popular TV shows and personalities including Norman Gunston, Kerri-Anne Kennerley (Good Morning Australia), Shirley Strachan (*Shirl's Neighbourhood*), Olivia Newton-John as well as hosting the long running *Aerobics Oz Style* on the flight decks of several major fleet units.



Good Morning Australia host Kerri-Anne Kennerley broadcasting from the bridge of an RAN guided missile frigate.

On a more serious note a four-part series, *Australian Pirate Patrol*, featuring the crew of the Anzac class frigate HMAS *Toowoomba*, (Commander I. Ingham, RAN) premiered in October 2010 focusing on the RAN's participation as part of a US-led task force to combat piracy and smuggling in the Persian Gulf. The locally produced series proved extremely popular screening

