

## AUSTRALIAN SEA TRANSPORT 1914

*The basic fact of seapower is that it is much easier to move anything heavy by sea ...for heavy weights the sea is still, and is likely to remain, the only efficient means of transportation between the continents.*<sup>1</sup>

Norman Friedman

One of the more remarkable Australian operations during the opening months of World War I (WWI) took place neither at sea nor on the battlefield but within our national shipyards. When, on 3 August 1914, Prime Minister Joseph Cook informed Great Britain that Australia was anxious to send an expeditionary force, 20,000 men strong, to any destination desired, little thought had actually been given to the question of how to transport the volunteers of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and all their equipment. Indeed, on 5 August the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board was forced to ask the military authorities whether the Board was needed to prepare a scheme for taking up troopships, and if so 'from what ports, and to carry what numbers, what arms and what horses?'<sup>2</sup>

To deal with the transport problem the Naval Board set up a joint service committee, with the Third Naval Member, Engineer Captain W. Clarkson, RAN, as chairman, and thereafter the RAN maintained an extremely close watch on all aspects of the proceedings. A first task was to prepare a list of all merchant ships in port or approaching the Australian coast to allow for their inspection and measurement by a Naval Transport Officer. Conversion plans were prepared as soon as a ship had been assessed as suitable, so that once her current cargo had been discharged fitting out of the vessel could begin immediately. Modification work entailed the gutting of all passenger accommodation, and included the addition of galleys, latrines, hospitals, troop deck fittings and horse stalls. To save time and expense the main features were standardised, but still required major changes to each ship's electrical and water systems.

Speed of conversion grew with experience.<sup>3</sup> Even so, the fitting out of the first 28 vessels to be requisitioned proceeded astonishingly quickly, with the last transport completely equipped by 27 September 1914. Nine of these ships were over 10,000 tons, with the largest being SS *Euripides*, an Aberdeen White Star liner of 15,000 tons. Given the official number 'A.14', *Euripides* was one of three transports to be fitted out in Brisbane. When completed on 18 September she had berths for 136 officers and 2204 other ranks, and stalls for 20 horses.

The troopships might be ready for embarkation but with the whereabouts of several German warships uncertain, Imperial authorities remained unwilling to risk their passage across the Indian Ocean until a sufficiently powerful naval escort could be assembled. *Euripides*, for example, did not embark her first troops at Sydney until 19 October. Soon, however, she had onboard the Headquarters of the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Battalions and the 1<sup>st</sup> Field Ambulance. No one embarked yet knew where they were going, but the scale of the

undertaking was obvious to all. As William McKenzie, a chaplain in the expeditionary force, observed in his diary, 'Never before have so many troops left Australia in one single ship'.<sup>4</sup>



*View from the mainmast of SS Euripides with a variety of lectures and drills underway on the upper decks (RAN)*

*Euripides* made a quick passage of the Great Australian Bight, and after waiting in Albany for the remainder of what was now known as Convoy 1 to assemble, sailed with the fleet from Western Australia on 1 November. Joining with the twenty-six Australian transports were another ten from New Zealand with an escort provided by the cruisers HMS *Minotaur*, HMAS *Melbourne* and HMAS *Sydney*. Weather conditions for the departure were ideal with hundreds of onlookers lining the surrounding hills to see 'the awe-inspiring sight'.<sup>5</sup>

The Australian transports sailed in three columns with the New Zealand vessels following behind in two columns of their own. *Euripides* led the convoy's 3<sup>rd</sup> Division comprising the fastest vessels, but *Southern*, the formation's slowest ship actually set the pace. Even with heavy stoking she could barely average 10 knots. Leading the middle column was SS *Orvieto* with Captain A. Gordon-Smith, RN, Second Naval Member of the Naval Board, embarked. Acting as the convoy's Principal Transport Officer, he would remain in charge of the fleet until it reached Egypt. Two days after sailing the force

grew still larger with the arrival of the Japanese armoured cruiser *Ibuki* and two more transports she had picked up in Fremantle. The convoy now covered an ocean area some 14-15 miles long and 10-12 miles wide, with the four escorts patrolling stations ahead, astern and on either wing.<sup>6</sup> During the night the lines of ships would tend to string out and each morning the force had to allow the laggards to catch up.

In all, the transports carried almost 30,000 men and 8000 horses. For such a force, the screening cruisers provided great comfort, but in the days before radar, the risks from both collision and enemy action remained very real. Describing the convoy's slow progress, one French author eloquently laid out the dangers:

Thirty-eight merchantmen! What a mob! Think of it - all their lives these merchant-skippers have sailed one by one on their own, each man choosing his own route, each regulating his speed by the pressure of his boilers. All of a sudden they are ordered to sail in convoy at fixed intervals, regulating their speed to the quarter-turn of the screw; they are subjected to a discipline so strict, and so necessary, that naval men attain it only by long practice in exact observation and continuous watchfulness.

At night it is worse. They are much more afraid of running into each other than of being attacked by an enemy; each keeps well away from his neighbours...

...Imagine the sudden attack of a raider at midnight on this shapeless mass. She would have no doubts; every ship would be an enemy; she would use gun and torpedo indiscriminately on the mob, and then disappear in the darkness. The escorting cruisers, afraid of firing on their convoy, would be almost unable to reply. And that would mean disaster - perhaps 20,000 men drowned.<sup>7</sup>

The raider most feared was the German light cruiser SMS *Emden*. Her captain, Karl von Müller, had rapidly established a reputation for skill and daring, having in just two months of operations captured or sunk twenty-five Allied steamers, a Russian cruiser and a French destroyer. The story of *Sydney's* release from the convoy on 9 November to investigate reports of a suspicious warship off the Cocos Islands, and her subsequent triumph over the *Emden*, has been told many times. It is not necessary to repeat the details here.<sup>8</sup> But although trumpeted as Australia's first naval victory - made all the more newsworthy because it was achieved against a brilliant and cunning foe - far more important were the strategic consequences.

Writing at the beginning of the 20th century the British naval strategist Sir Julian Corbett argued that the object of naval warfare was the control of communications, and not, as in land warfare, the conquest of territory.<sup>9</sup> From this followed his maxim: 'The primary object of the fleet is to secure communications, and if the enemy's fleet is in a position to render them unsafe it must be put out of action.'<sup>10</sup> The combined naval operations conducted against the German Navy in the Pacific and Indian Oceans in the war's first months successfully removed the only immediate threats to Australia's sea communications. This result was achieved at minimal cost, and in direct consequence AIF troop convoys were able sail without

escort for the next two years of the war. For her part, *Euripides* carried out another nine voyages from Australian ports, in total carrying safely more than 13,000 officers, men and nurses to the battlefields of the Middle East and Europe.



*Seasick soldiers in SS Euripides. The need for troops to acclimatise to the maritime environment remains an important planning consideration in any expeditionary operation (RAN)*

The Transport Branch of the Navy Department eventually arranged for the requisition of 74 troop transports and, over the course of WWI, 44 convoys ferried some 337,000 men and 27,000 horses from Australia to the European theatre.<sup>11</sup> None of those carried was ever lost to enemy action while on passage. Without doubt it was among the most important services controlled by the Australian Naval Board, and an important demonstration of the mobility of resources conferred by Allied sea power.

<sup>1</sup> N. Friedman, *Seapower as Strategy*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 2001, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Telephone conversation, cited in A.W. Jose, *The Royal Australian Navy*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1935, p. 406.

<sup>3</sup> By June 1915 it was found possible to equip fully a transport for 1500 troops in just 60 hours.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in P. Plowman, *Across the Sea to War*, Rosenberg, Dural, 2003, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Plowman, *Across the Sea to War*.

<sup>6</sup> T. Gellel, 'Unlikely Partners: the destruction of the *Emden* and the paradox of Japanese naval cooperation with Australia during the First World War', paper delivered at the King-Hall Naval History Conference, 26-27 July 2007.

<sup>7</sup> C. Farrère, *Combats et Batailles Sur Mer*, 1914, pp. 110-11, cited in Jose, *The Royal Australian Navy*, p. 410.

<sup>8</sup> For readers seeking a fuller account see Jose, *The Royal Australian Navy* or : <http://www.navy.gov.au/spc/history/ships/sydney1.html>

<sup>9</sup> E. Grove (ed), J. S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 1988, p. 94.

<sup>10</sup> 'Notes on Strategy', in Grove/Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, p. 343.

<sup>11</sup> G. Tregarthen, *Sea Transport of the AIF*, Naval Transport Board, undated.

