



## The Scrap Iron Flotilla

By PO Bryce Brown RAN and LEUT Danica Thompson RAN

---

### OUR VALUES

SERVICE

COURAGE

RESPECT

INTEGRITY

EXCELLENCE



# Tac Talks

© Commonwealth of Australia 2021

This work is copyright. You may download, display, print, and reproduce this material in unaltered form only (retaining this notice and imagery metadata) for your personal, non-commercial use, or use within your organisation. This material cannot be used to imply an endorsement from, or an association with, the Department of Defence. Apart from any use as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, all other rights are reserved.



---

## OUR VALUES

SERVICE

COURAGE

RESPECT

INTEGRITY

EXCELLENCE



## Introduction

World War 2 saw the world at war once again following Germany's invasion of Poland. France and most of the countries of the British Empire and Commonwealth made declarations of war. Australia declared war on Germany, following Britain declaration, on the 3rd of September 1939. However, Australia's military forces were less prepared than they had been at the outbreak of World War 1 in 1914. Out of all three services the Royal Australian Navy was the best prepared for the outbreak of war, with two heavy cruisers, four light destroyers, two sloops, five destroyers and numerous small and auxiliary warships.

The RAN was the first of the services to see action in World War 2. HMAS Sydney along with the five destroyers, HMA Ships Stuart, Vampire, Vendetta, Voyager and Waterhen sailed to the Mediterranean Theatre to work with the British Mediterranean Fleet. This group of five destroyers would later be known as the Scrap Iron Flotilla. Commander Hector M. L. Waller captained the Flagship, Stuart. The destroyers were crewed by a medley of sailors and officers, consisting of those who had seen action in the First World War, those who had served only in peacetime and naval reservists. These men, many of whom were inexperienced, learnt the ways of their ships through the conduct of exercises in Asia prior to their deployment and through experience in the Mediterranean Theatre.

## The Mediterranean Theatre

By mid-November, the destroyers were sailing to the Mediterranean Theatre following a brief stint in Singapore undertaking anti-submarine exercises. Upon their arrival in the Mediterranean Nazi Propaganda Minister, Joseph Goebbels ridiculed the Australian ships. He labelled them a consignment of scrap iron and mocked them for their lack of size, speed and armament. His words, although intended to be derogatory, were accurate, the destroyers were aged, and they had been constructed in 1918. The Scrap Iron Flotilla were entering a Theatre of War where the latest advancements in technology were in play, these ships were pitted against the finest aircraft of the Luftwaffe and the fastest ships of the Italian Fleet. However, what Goebbels did not mention was the spirit of the men who crewed these ships of scrap iron. Goebbels neglected the mindset of these men, who took the taunt and happily christened their ships as part of the Scrap Iron Flotilla. They took the insult from Hitler's most zealous follower and made it their own, uniting the ships against the odds.

The Scrap Iron Flotilla's primary role was to escort ships throughout the Mediterranean to ensure that the sea lines of communication remained open for the various Allied forces. On the 10th of June 1940, Italy entered the war alongside the Axis countries, which at the time consisted of Germany, Japan and other smaller nations. The Scrap Iron Flotilla was poised to be the frontline against the alleged fearsome Italian Fleet. The Commander in Chief, Mediterranean, Admiral Sir Andrew Browne Cunningham, K.C.B., and D.S.O made it clear that his plan for the Mediterranean Fleet was for the ships to be on the attack, regardless of their disadvantages in tonnage and fleet size. The Scrap Iron Flotilla integrated themselves with the British ships off the Mediterranean coast, looking for battle.

On the 12th of June 1940, Stuart encountered a minefield, which they deduced must have been laid by a submarine. Stuart led various ships through the minefield, while awaiting the arrival of minesweepers to remove the obstacle. With many narrow escapes, it was slow and nerve wracking work and when the minesweepers were sighted, the tension was relieved. Meanwhile Voyager was on the trail of the mine-laying submarine; her men were vigilant, but anxious, as they had never fired against an actual submarine. When the submarine was spotted Voyager chased her, until the opportunity came to fire against her, and landed a hit destroying the submarine. The Italians had lost their first submarine and Australia had sunk the first Italian U-boat of the war. Towards the end of July, the Australian ships had claimed four Italian casualties and had lost no one except Vampire's cat who had fallen down a hatch.

---

## OUR VALUES

---

SERVICE

COURAGE

RESPECT

INTEGRITY

EXCELLENCE



## The Battle of Cape Matapan

Over the following months, the destroyers undertook their regular escort duties and anti-submarine patrols; however, the tempo increased, with pressure mounting from aircraft threatening their every move. They were later tested in the Battle of Cape Matapan, which would become the Italian Fleet's greatest loss. HMAS Perth joined Stuart, Vampire and the British ships in their endeavours against the Italians. During the battle, the combined British and Australian ships suffered only minor casualties with four light cruisers sustaining minor damage, one torpedo bomber was lost and only three people died. However, this was not the case on the Italian side, with its sole battleship being heavily damaged, 3 heavy cruisers, 2 destroyers sunk, and over 2,300 people killed. The battle was so fierce, and the Italian losses so great, that the Italians did not enter the Eastern Mediterranean Sea until the fall of Crete, two months later. The Royal Australian Navy's involvement in the fall of Crete centred on the supply of provisions and later the evacuation of troops from the fallen island.

## North Africa

In North Africa, the Allies were fighting against the Italian's fortified towns in Libya. As the land forces advanced the Fleet moved, further along the coast, bombarding towns as they went, destroying the Axis's much needed supplies. Between December 1940 and April 1941 the Scrap Iron Flotilla conducted various anti-submarine patrols and escort duties.

Stuart and Vampire were sent to Sollum, and then to Tobruk, following the news that the Italian heavy-cruiser San Giorgio was attempting to dash to Benghazi. The two destroyers were ordered to stop the cruiser. The destroyers reached Tobruk and patrolled the entrance where mines had been laid. During the night a ship was seen moving along the coastline, however, it was not San Giorgio, but rather an Italian schooner. The schooner's crew were apprehended before Stuart and Vampire sank the schooner. Stuart and Vampire returned to Tobruk to find the town ablaze due to bombings from the RAF... The Mediterranean Fleet arrived and assisted in the bombing of Tobruk until there was no opposition left. Australian Infantry Troops entered Tobruk claiming the town for the Allies and Stuart and Vampire navigated the minefield, with assistance from a grateful Italian prisoner of war, thus enabling the ships to begin the ferry service that would assist in maintaining Tobruk as a fortress for the Allies.

By the second week of April Tobruk was surrounded by Axis forces that began attacking the town with tanks in the early hours of the 14th. The Allied Forces dug in for the long haul but were soon faced with the issue getting supplies, the provision of reinforcements and the evacuation of the injured. The answer to the problem came from the seaward side of Tobruk, which had not been surrounded by Axis forces and could be used to resupply Tobruk. Thus began the Tobruk Ferry Service.

On many occasions, Stuart, Waterhen, Vampire, Voyager and Vendetta along with numerous Allied ships made the journey from Alexandria and Mersa Matruh to Tobruk, laden with ammunition, medical supplies and food. They would race along the coastline wary of bombers, mines and enemy ships. When they reached their goal of Tobruk, the dangers did not cease, for the dangers that they encountered at sea were just as great in the harbour of Tobruk. While the ships docked at Tobruk, supplies were swiftly removed from the ships and replaced with wounded soldiers, before they refuelled and headed back to Alexandria.

On the 29th of June, Waterhen was making her 13th journey from Mersa Matruh to Tobruk, with her usual supplies, including jars of acid. When the British destroyer HMS Defender joined Waterhen, they were together less than two hours before a group of fifteen bombers, who focused particularly on Waterhen, targeted them. Waterhen was hit in her engine room and began to list before eventually sinking. The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Commander Swain, called for abandon ship. Defender, who attempted to tow Waterhen back to Mersa Matruh but

---

## OUR VALUES

SERVICE

COURAGE

RESPECT

INTEGRITY

EXCELLENCE



# Tac Talks

were unsuccessful, picked up the men of Waterhen. There was no loss of life on-board Waterhen and the only injury was a sailor clipped by a can of fruit.

## Australian station

In September 1941, the destroyers returned to Australia to undergo their first refit since before 1939. The ships were recrewed with new sailors and officers. Some of the old crews returned but very few of the original officers. The destroyers who had been operating in the Mediterranean for the past two years were retasked to defend Australia against the threat in the Pacific region. Vampire was the only ship of the Flotilla that was recorded as having been involved in operations in the Pacific Theatre. She picked up the survivors of the British ships HMS Repulse and Prince of Wales. Vampire's primary role was to escort the British Fleet based at Trincomalee. She was tasked as a part of the screen for the aircraft carrier HMS Hermes when Japanese aircraft attacked the convoy. Vampire was hit and although her men attempted to save her, the Commanding Officer, Commander Moran, ordered abandon ship. Two sailors from the ship's company were officially listed as killed in action, Commander Moran and Signalmen A.S. Shaw, while seven others were listed as missing, believed killed. The men returned to Australia where they became part of the crew of other Australian ships, working alongside the remainder of the Scrap Iron Flotilla.

During World War II, the Scrap Iron Flotilla encountered many dangerous situations. These included air raids, whilst transiting from Alexandria to Tobruk, evading minefields in the Mediterranean Sea, and battles with other ships, such as the Battle of Matapan.

## Conclusion

The Scrap Iron Flotilla is respected in history due to their actions under intense enemy fire and the composure they displayed in difficult situations. They remained calm under pressure and worked together as a team in order to protect themselves, and the ship, or to attack enemy forces. It was also the Flotilla's 'never say die' attitude which allowed them to not only have the confidence to take on the far superior enemies, who's ships were not only more technologically advanced, but also had more threatening fire power, but to defeat them with minimal losses. All the operations during World War II required the crews of Voyager, Vendetta, Vampire, Waterhen and Stuart to display acts of courage, bravery, and honour. The crew of the five destroyers also sum up the qualities that are sort after in the Navy today. That is, to be courageous in the face of challenge, and display unwavering determination.

Upon the Flotilla's arrival in Australia, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham commented on the performance of the ships saying, 'Nobody will ever appreciate the 'scrap' better than the officers and men of the Australian Destroyers.' This quote emphasises the passion and determination that the crew had for the ships that they served in, embracing them as home for the time they were away, and developing trust and friendship amongst the crew that they served with.

---

## OUR VALUES

SERVICE

COURAGE

RESPECT

INTEGRITY

EXCELLENCE