



**THE TERRITORY
REMEMBERS
75 YEARS**

Commemorating the Bombing of Darwin
and defence of Northern Australia

The tiny vessel HMAS Kuru, more suited to in-harbour work than the open sea. (RAN)

The Territory Remembers

The Little Ships

By Ian Pfennigwerth

The series of Japanese air raids on Darwin which commenced on 19 February 1942, and the decision made by General MacArthur's General Headquarters on advancing towards the Philippines up the Papua and New Guinea coasts, made the use of Darwin port as a major naval base unlikely. That proved to be the case but, for the remainder of the war against the Japanese, Darwin became a key element in the work of smaller ships. These had a variety of tasks, including search and rescue of downed Allied airman, escorting Allied submarines in and out of the port to avoid their being attacked by over-zealous (and poorly briefed) Allied aircraft, and the resupply of outlying posts along the north coast of the continent. More particularly, the little ships also found themselves involved in clandestine operations into enemy held waters and territory in support of Allied objectives.

Forces Available

Even before the Japanese attack of 19 February 1942 the very limited facilities of Darwin as a port and a military and naval base precluded its use by major naval vessels, except as a refuelling stop. Thus the forces available to the naval commander headquartered in Darwin, the Naval Officer-In-Charge, Darwin (NOIC D) were severely restricted. Given that Allied warships of any kind were in short supply everywhere in Southeast Asia and the northern approaches to Australia throughout that year, NOIC D was often reduced to using requisitioned vessels as small as the tiny

Kuru, a timber patrol vessel of 55 tonnes with a maximum speed of nine knots. Her big sister, *Vigilant*, a former Customs vessel, was a steel ship of 106 tonnes. He did receive 850 tonne Bathurst Class corvettes during 1941 and, in January 1942, three of them sank the Japanese submarine I-124 off Darwin.¹ Very occasionally for a special task, a destroyer would be added to his command, but his principal force was that associated with the boom protecting Darwin Harbour, an assorted collection of purpose-designed ships and a motley collection of other vessels supporting them. This was to remain the case throughout the war.

In April 1943 the first of the 'Fairmile' motor launches (ML) arrived in Darwin and the strength of this element grew to six by mid-1944. Of timber construction, these tough little ships were 36 metres in length, displaced up to 90 tonnes and a top speed of around 22 knots. Importantly, the ML had a range of 1500 miles at economical speed, making it most suitable for longer-range employment. Fitted with sonar and radar and armed with depth charges, and a variety of weaponry up to the 40 mm Bofors gun and lighter anti-aircraft guns. They were as useful operating out of Darwin as they proved elsewhere.

Resupply

In 1941 and 1942 the Australian Defence Force established a number of outstations along the northern Australian coastline, including RAN Coast Watcher stations, to support its naval and air operations. Allied forces were

also placed in parts of the Netherlands New Guinea, including Merauke on the southern coast and, briefly, on Tanimbar Island and the Aru Islands in the Arafura Sea directly north of the Northern Territory. These were withdrawn later in the year in the face of a Japanese advance in force. Sea was the only practicable means of establishing and resupplying these remote sites, and both naval and merchant vessels were assigned to this vital task. The prevalent threat to the ships involved in resupply missions was from Japanese air attack, either conventional bombers and fighters or float planes, a particular scourge for the small ships operating to outlying stations on the Australian coast in the Cape Wessel area. The auxiliary minesweeper, converted trawler *Patricia Cam*, was bombed and sunk in that vicinity on 22 January 1943 with the loss of eight men. A missionary taking passage, the Reverend LN Kentish, was captured by the float plane crew and later executed.

Milingimbi in Arnhem Land was an outpost established by the RAAF in 1941 to provide a base for aircraft protecting Allied convoys in the Arafura Sea against air attacks and as a forward airfield from which Allied aircraft could raid Japanese positions in Netherlands New Guinea. It was difficult to reach from the sea up a complex channel but the MLs and other ships were employed on the task of resupplying that station with provisions, spares and fuel. Navigational hazards aside, this was not an easy task. In a series of raids in May 1943, Japanese bombers and fighters sank the requisitioned ferry *HMAS Maroubra* and damaged another merchant vessel, as well as inflicting casualties on the station and its personnel.

Another RAAF advanced operational base was in Napier Broome Bay in Western Australia, developed as an advanced base for transports, fighters and bombers and later named Truscott. The Japanese in Timor paid this station particular attention and the RAAF returned the favour. The MLs provided escorts for the supply ships involved in supporting the base and through improvisation solved the problems of getting the stores, fuel, equipment and men ashore in the absence of port facilities of any kind.

Escorts were also provided for ships carrying stores, personnel and equipment to bases as far from Darwin as Derby in Western Australia and for convoys sailing between Thursday Island and Darwin, and for the movement of Australian Army detachments north west of Merauke at the end of the war. The recovery of prisoners of war from Ambon and Timor was also conducted by Darwin-based ships in September 1945.

Search and Rescue

In the air battles over Darwin it was reassuring for the pilots to know that the RAN had stationed small craft across the approaches to Darwin to go to the rescue of airmen forced down. Several owed their lives to these vessels after being forced to bail out over the ocean. As one wrote after the war of being rescued after eight hours afloat in his dinghy: "...the sound of the engines and the sight of the approaching Fairmile created an indescribable feeling of joy and relief that could never be repeated." These operations were not only conducted in the vicinity of Darwin. When RAAF aircraft raided Japanese positions,

similar arrangements were made, with ships sent well into the range of Japanese aircraft to attempt to rescue downed Allied aircrew. This was a lonely and dangerous mission, exposed to the full force of Japanese air attack if detected.

Escorting Allied Submarines

Another task involving bobbing about on an open ocean, watching for a roving Japanese aircraft waiting to rendezvous with and escort into harbour a submarine, usually American but sometimes Dutch. If the boat was American, the vessel making the rendezvous would carry US Navy officers who, alone, were authorised to use American codes to establish communications. Following an exchange of recognition signals, the submarine would follow the escort into harbour. They were usually visiting only to refuel en route to or returning from a war patrol in Southeast Asian waters. MLs were favoured for this role because they had the speed to stay ahead of the submarine.

There was, still, the odd chance that a Japanese submarine might be prowling off Darwin and the ML skippers took the challenge and reply procedure seriously. One took it so seriously that after an offending submarine's failure to respond to a repeated challenge he ordered the unmistakable challenge of a shot from the Bofors gun across its bows. The correct reply was instantly forthcoming!

Support of Forces in Timor

In December 1941 the RAN landed a 1400-strong Australian Army unit known as Sparrow Force at Koepang in Netherlands (West) Timor to stiffen Dutch defences. However, when the island was invaded by the Japanese in February 1942, the majority of the Allied forces were surrendered. Out of radio contact with Australia until April, remnants of Sparrow Force, some Dutch soldiers and the 2/2nd Independent Company of the Australian Army – about 700 in total – reported that they were maintaining a guerrilla campaign against the Japanese. General Headquarters agreed that the campaign should be supported and, after initial air drops of food and supplies, the RAN was tasked with providing 40 tonnes of supplies per month across the beaches on the south coast of East (Portuguese) Timor and with being prepared to evacuate the entire force at one week's notice. *Kuru* initiated the resupply service in May and was joined by *Vigilant* in July. The corvette *Kalgoorlie* joined the program in September. All these voyages escaped Japanese interception.

In June it was decided that a second Independent Company – 2/4th – would take over from the force in Timor in September. The exchange involved the transportation of 400 men and their supplies and equipment into Timor and the recovery of 600 men from the island. This called for bigger ships and a speedier passage and the destroyer *Voyager*, veteran of the Tobruk Ferry Run in the Mediterranean, was assigned to the task. During the landing of the 2/4th on the night of 23 September she ran aground in Betano Bay and was destroyed by her crew – assisted by a concentrated attack by Japanese bombers – to avoid her falling into Japanese hands. All were recovered by the corvettes *Warrnambool* and *Kalgoorlie*. In mitigation of this setback, the charts



The life-line is firm
thanks to the
MERCHANT NAVY

being used by RAN ships to access Timor had been compiled by Lieutenant John Septimus Roe RN, later a senior figure in the West Australian colony, in 1824.

This left NOIC D with the problem of how to get the Sparrow Force and 2/2nd survivors off the island. In the absence of larger ships he attempted this in December with the corvettes *Castlemaine*, *Armidale* (on her first Timor operation) and *Kuru*, with two sequential recoveries of the troops. The result was a disaster. *Kuru* and *Castlemaine* escaped the fury of repeated Japanese air attacks but *Armidale* was sunk by torpedo bombers and most of her crew and the Dutch soldiers she was carrying to be landed in Timor were lost. The task was finally accomplished in mid-December by the Dutch destroyer *Tjerk Hiddes* loaned to NOIC D from Fremantle. Then in January the 2/4th Independent Company was taken off Timor by the Australian destroyer *Arunta*, leaving one small party (S Force) to observe and report on Japanese activities.

Clandestine Operations

The lodgement of Allied troops in places like Timor, Merauke and the Aru Islands had been of regular forces. Thereafter, it became an increasing task of the small ships in Northern Australian waters to land and recover parties of irregular soldiers and agents. This can be somewhat confusing, so a simple explanation of the 'irregulars' is attempted here.

World War II generated an array of 'special' or 'irregular' parties intended to carry the war to the enemy by infiltration into occupied territories. This was a special talent apparently possessed by the British, and these 'private armies' quickly proliferated and were exported to the war in the Indian and Pacific Theatres. They were not favoured by the Americans who, however, also maintained contact with guerrilla groups in the Philippines. The Dutch, similarly, maintained or hoped to develop contact with sympathetic groups in the Netherlands East Indies after their ejection by the Japanese. All required organisation, funding, communications, recruits, training facilities and, above all, transport to enter and leave Japanese held-territory. 'Messy' is probably the most appropriate description of the situation until the RAN Director of Intelligence, Commander Rupert Long, proposed the establishment of an umbrella organisation within General Headquarters to organise and coordinate, or at least stop separate groups from going after the same target. This was the genesis of the Allied Intelligence Bureau (AIB), formed in June 1942.

The new Bureau had four sections. Section A was 'Special Operations' known by various titles but the one used in this account is Services Reconnaissance Department (SRD). Its job was to infiltrate parties into enemy held territory to patrol and to collect intelligence to assist Allied war aims. Section B was the Secret Intelligence Service (SIA) with the aims of spying and subversion. Section C went by several names but the principal unit it controlled was the Coast Watchers. Later, a separate Philippines Regional Section was set up under US control and the Dutch established the Netherlands Forces Intelligence Section (NEFIS) set on collecting intelligence from its former colony. Section D was the oddly-named Far East Liaison Office, whose task was propaganda. Nominally funded through General Headquarters from a common fund, each had its own separate sources as well.

Headquartered in Melbourne, SRD established a forward base for clandestine operations base at the old Quarantine Station on the east arm of Darwin Harbour, known as the Lugger Maintenance Section (LMS). 'Lugger' was a generic term for a variety of local and Netherlands East Indies sailing vessels whose ordinariness provided a element of protection from Japanese investigation. In due course, the RAN would construct and commission seven of these vessels for clandestine operations, named the Snake Class. Thus 'lugger maintenance' provided a useful cover for the SRD activities in Darwin.

However, the issue of control over the means of transportation of 'irregulars' continued to be a sore point between the clandestine organisations and the Navy, which was also concerned about the irregulars operating vessels independently in enemy held waters – a recipe for disaster through 'friendly fire' incidents. The situation was resolved in June 1944 when small, 9m 'workboats' were assigned to SRD control, although crewed by RAN personnel. Two larger vessels previously used by SRD were commissioned into the RAN. All other shipping remained under the operational control of Naval Officers-in-Charge. This edict was also applied to two vessels operated by SIA, *Lady*

Emma and *Bintang Siang*. These operated into the Sulawesi area of the Netherlands East Indies and to the islands of the Banda Sea, but were skippered by RANVR officers, both of whom were appointed Members of the British Empire for their courage after the war ended.

Even as the problem of exchanging the Allied forces in Timor was being resolved, the SRD had requested and obtained RAN help in inserting a small reconnaissance party near Bacau on the south coast. Supported by airdrops by the RAAF, the SRD party and S Force came under increasing pressure from the Japanese through betrayal by unfriendly Timorese, and in January 1943 both were recovered by a US submarine. However, resistance to the Japanese in Timor continued by a mixed group of Portuguese and Chinese and a second US submarine landed a SRD-trained leadership group in July 1943 to take charge of them. This force then became 'Legato'. One of the new leader's first tasks was to separate out the non-combatants of this group for evacuation to Australia, and two of NOIC D's MLs were detailed to effect this recovery. After one false start, the rescue was completed in early August with 87 Portuguese and Chinese nationals evacuated to Darwin.

A return voyage to Timor was only just within range of an ML, and a refuelling stop was frequently made on Melville Island, either from facilities established at Snake Bay, which had become the advanced base for SIA, or from stocks of petrol loaded in a cargo ship detached for this purpose. When the MLs began their trips into enemy-held New Guinea it often became necessary to have another boat standing by at a night rendezvous position in the Arafura Sea with drums of fuel embarked to top them up on the return voyage.

A second SRD party, 'Cobra' was inserted into Timor at the end of January 1944 by ML and in May a third, codenamed 'Adder', was also landed by ML. However, this had to be recovered quickly as it had landed in the vicinity of a Japanese camp. The landing boat was accidentally destroyed during the recovery and the mission aborted. Although rescheduled in June, the 'Adder' operation was

cancelled shortly afterwards. The Navy then became involved in a SIA mission, 'Bazooka', to land Indonesian agents on the island of Selaru in the Aru Islands, a task made hazardous by the very poor navigational information available and the onset of a tropical cyclone. Two of the agents were successfully landed in June.

In August, 'Adder' was rescheduled, over the protests of the Navy. It seemed madness to land brave men in an area where the wreckage of their landing boat made clear that an earlier attempt had been made, not to mention the potentially heightened risk to the vessel landing them. The party was nevertheless inserted near the north-eastern tip of Timor on 21 August. When nothing had been heard from the men after three weeks, the RAN was again tasked to send a vessel to recover them at an arranged rendezvous. Two MLs were dispatched to accomplish this on 19 September, but no contact was made in the absence of the correct recognition signals. It transpired that there was a very good reason for this, as Adder had been compromised and its personnel captured and killed within three hours of landing.

Growing unease over the state of the Legato and Cobra groups prompted the SRD to arrange the parachute drop of two parties into Timor in July 1945 to rendezvous with them. The first, 'Sunlag', established unequivocally that Legato had been compromised by the Japanese. The second fell into enemy hands and made no report. With 1000 Japanese hot on their trail, the men of Sunlag needed to be extracted. The first attempt was aborted by bad weather and navigational difficulties, but the second, on 5 August by a Harbour Defence Motor Launch (a smaller version of the ML) succeeded. A planned recovery of the second party of parachutists was called off, fortunately. The Japanese had arranged a 'welcoming party' of anti-tank guns and infantry at the scheduled rendezvous point.

Legato had been captured in September 1943 and the Japanese took over communications with Australia. Alerted by SRD of the arrival of Cobra, they captured that party on its arrival and its communications operator was forced to establish and to remain in contact with SRD. The Japanese

Voyager aground in Betano Bay. (RAN Historical Heritage Collection)



gained all the information they needed on SRD activities and intentions in Timor via these sources, despite the personal bravery of the Cobra operator in trying to alert Melbourne to the fact. On 12 August, three days before the Japanese surrender, SRD received two messages from the Japanese in Timor thanking them for their stores and information.

Conclusion

Even before the Japanese attacked Darwin in February 1942, the little ships of the RAN based there had been engaged in essential war tasks and they continued to provide this service throughout and war and beyond the Japanese surrender. Much of their work was mundane and repetitious but, until the air threat from Japanese bases in Timor and the Netherlands East Indies had been neutralised, even these tasks involved an element of danger. Other Darwin-based vessels were engaged in the highly-risky procedure of landing and recovering reconnaissance parties and secret agents in occupied territories, frequently encountering or risking danger from the sea and the poor quality of the hydrographic information they had at their disposal. That more vessels were not lost or damaged is a tribute to the capabilities and professionalism of the ship's companies, most frequently Reservists. They also showed remarkable resilience and determination in climactic and onboard conditions that can only be described as difficult.

After the conclusion of hostilities in 1945 there were many awards of honours to RAN officers and men who had served in the New Guinea theatre and onwards to Borneo and the Philippines for their long and dedicated service under arduous conditions over a prolonged period. Personnel serving in Darwin-based ships missed out, perhaps because their service was not considered significantly worthy by higher authority. It is to be hoped that this short chapter has dispelled that view for posterity.

Notes

1. Although the primary attack on *I-124* was carried out by the corvette *HMAS Deloraine*, two other HMA vessels, *Lithgow* and *Katoomba*, were also involved in depth-charging, as was the destroyer *USS Edsall* and some other small vessels.

Following 35 years in the RAN, Captain Ian Pfennigwerth was awarded his PhD in 2005 and has since researched, written and published nine books on Australia's naval history. The first volume of his tenth, on Australian naval honours and awards recipients was released in May 2016.