

THE GREY OLD LADY

Just an old destroyer leader,  
Built for the last great war,  
Lying at Garden Island  
Many a year or more.

Her name, of Scottish origin,  
Was Stuart, of that Clan,  
And late of the Royal Navy,  
Where her services began.

The day on which I joined her,  
She was looking worn and grey,  
But men in her were busy,  
Preparing for the fray.

Then after exercising  
In weather not the best,  
She sailed across the ocean for  
A more severe test.

Before she left Australia,  
An incident occurred,  
Which caused the folk at Terrigal  
To have their sleep disturbed.

A submarine was thought to be  
Within that peaceful Bay,  
And charges that we dropped that night  
Are spoken of today.

The whole affair discussed at length  
By people, some in error,  
Gave the Stuart some cause to be  
Known as the Terrigal Terror.

From her berth in Sydney Harbour,  
She slipped one early morn,  
With two of her flotilla,  
Both veterans, old and worn.

Through white-hot tropic temperatures,  
In ships not built for heat,  
We sweltered, swore and blistered,  
There was no cool retreat.

For many days the engines chugged,  
Though patches were galore,  
Yet miracles still happen, and  
We got to Singapore.

And so on to Colombo,  
Where for a week we lay,  
Then crossed to Deigo Suarez  
To lure the late Graf Spee.

But the raider was not sighted,  
Yet ere we reached that port,  
We had our thrills when stopping ships  
Whose identity we sought.

Oft on a lengthy voyage  
Of seven days or more,  
Our food and water would run low,  
Oh, how small was the store.

One day when in a Southern Sea,  
A ship we came upon,  
And firing a shot across her bows,  
Asked coolly, "Any mutton?"

Then came the Mediterranean,  
And winter's icy blasts,  
Rolling, pitching, wallowing  
In seas that lashed the masts.

But though so old and weary,  
Old Stuart stood it well,  
Perhaps the string that kept her whole  
Was new, but who can tell?

The war, as yet not in these parts,  
Made work for her to do,  
With convoys to and from each end,  
Our hours ashore were few.

From Marseilles across to Haifa,  
Went convoys small and large,  
And merchantmen were often thrilled  
When Stuart dropped a charge.

We put to sea one afternoon,  
Ostensibly on patrol,  
But when a certain ship gave to,  
We played a different role.

But this affair was "Hush-hush", so,  
In these lines 'twould be wise  
For me to say no more than that  
It was an exercise.

Then came a night, a wild one too,  
A tanker called for aid,  
With Stuart dashing for the scene,  
The oiler must be saved.

We found her in the darkness,  
And waited for the dawn,  
To pass a line in to her,  
A task that looked forlorn.

For hours and hours the whaler's crew  
Battled with heavy seas,  
And added to this handicap,  
A fog came down to tease.

Honest toil brought it's reward,  
And in the afternoon,  
We took the tanker in our tow,  
And saved her from her doom.

And so the days just slipped away,  
With convoys and fleet work,  
Then Italy joined in the fray,  
And things went with a jerk.

At last the Stuart got the jobs  
That she was built to do,  
The first bombardment of Bardia  
Found her guns firing too.

One day near Alexandria,  
An evil-looking mine  
Was sighted by a signalman,  
So more were sought to find.

Investigation proved there was  
A minefield all complete,  
So straight away the news was flashed,  
And thus we saved the fleet.

Then came the serious convoys,  
With hostile 'planes overhead,  
As well as lurking submarines.  
Hidden beneath the 'Med'.

Bombs fell here and bombs fell there,  
And subs lay in her track,  
But Stuart the old wily bird,  
Just knows how to hit back.

Out with the cruisers one fine day,  
A message was received;  
The Rytic fleet was out at last,  
What news that was indeed!

We linked up with our battlefleet  
The following forenoon,  
Heading to cut the Wop fleet off,  
And do it pretty soon.

Sighting the Weps mid-afternoon,  
Heading towards their base,  
Our battleships engaged them first,  
And that enhanced their pace.

Although 'twas not intended,  
Stuart got into line,  
To lead some more destroyers,  
She did it mighty fine!

When ordered to attack the foe,  
Stuart was right in front,  
Her guns abarking with great zest,  
A hound out with the huns!

With every ounce of steam to hand,  
She led, with 'Boats' astern,  
Until the Admiral signalled  
For all ships to return.

That was her first big action,  
And oh, how proud was she  
To see the Wop fleet sailing  
For home across the sea.

One day in company with the fleet,  
A steam pipe burst within,  
And though she tried to keep her speed,  
She just had to give in.

Back to her base she was ordered,  
To make good the defect,  
And when en route for Alex,  
We heard a sub, the pet!

We dropped a pattern round him,  
Then listened once again,  
To hear him vainly striving,  
His harbour to regain.

But every time he made a move,  
He was patted hip and thigh,  
And when he thought of getting peace,  
We'd drop a charge nearby.

Throughout the night we kept him down,  
And when the morning came,  
He broke the surface with a rush,  
Then down he went again.

But this time he was down for good,  
The crew took to the 'Brine',  
And when we got them all onboard,  
We counted twenty-nine.

To Malta dockyard she repaired,  
To refit for a while,  
But for all the heavy air raids,  
She came out with a smile.

Back with the fleet once more was she,  
With patches here and there,  
She took her place upon the screen,  
So now 'U' Boats, beware!

But fleet work was not ours for long,  
A few days at the most,  
Then Stuart found another job,  
Along the Libyan Coast.

As part of the Inshore Squadron,  
Cropping through sand and rain,  
She kept communications clear  
When Wops were on the wane.

Varied were dangers lurking there,  
Dive bombers, 'U' Boats, mines,  
But from Sollum to Benghazi,  
She kept intact the lines.

One afternoon, Benghazi way  
She had a private blitz,  
Four Heinkels dived from out the sky  
To sharpen up our wits.

The first plane dropped a salvo close,  
And made her stern smart some,  
Then as he scudded away again,  
Machine-gunned her, the Hun!

The other three were off the mark,  
Their salvos fell away,  
But all the same, their 'Social call',  
Kind of upset our day.

When Mr. Menzies came onboard,  
He mentioned with a grin,  
The Stuart's well-known handicaps,  
The patches and the strings!

Her deeds were mentioned way back home,  
By Ministers of War,  
The daily topic was, he said,  
"What's Stuart's latest score?"

When troops were wanted up in Greece,  
Straight over there we went,  
Escorting convoys once again,  
A momentous event.

Then came the fight off Matapan,  
With Stuart to the fore,  
The impudence she showed that night  
Has made the Wops quite sore.

She tackled three big cruisers,  
A Wop destroyer too,  
With gunfire and torpedoes,  
Her aim was good and true.

"The Leader of the Crocks", she's called,  
But crock or no, 'tis plain,  
That Stuart still can hold her own  
At the game of winning fame.

Our lines in Greece were falling back,  
Withdrawal was in sight,  
So off to that ill-fated land,  
We went with all our might.

To undertake a different job,  
We called at NAUPLIA BAY,  
And took our gallant lady onboard,  
They'll fight another day.

We who live aboard her know  
Her failings and good points,  
Just like an aged human being,  
She gets stiff in the joints.

Such was the case that early morn,  
A few tense moments came,  
Before a speedy job of work,  
Got her to go again.

When daylight came far out at sea,  
Bombs fell thick and fast,  
And though some ships were hit, some lost,  
Stuart survived the blast.

And then our Empire troops in Crete  
Were needing all support,  
So Stuart came in for her share  
When that campaign was fought.

Through those grim days with Hell let loose,  
Around that ancient isle,  
With stukas diving in their score,  
'Twas her severest trial.

But once again she stood the test,  
Though none of us could tell,  
Just when she would break down again,  
And maybe 'tis as well.

Yet once again the scene is changed,  
Our soldiers need our aid,  
To their advances in Syria,  
So for that zone we made.

'Twas steaming up and down the coast,  
To cover ether 'Boats',  
Who farther in, were blazing forth  
At vital Vichy posts.

A day or two around these parts,  
Then back again once more,  
To our old haunts up Tobruk way,  
Along the Libyan shore.

'Tweeh Alex, Marsa and Tobruk,  
With stores and troops we plied,  
A regular ferry service,  
It cannot be denied.

When in the stillness of the night,  
As moonlight shone o'erhead,  
Some hostile planes came swooping round,  
And bombs were swapped for lead.

Tho' she'd had bombings oft before,  
A moonlight blitz was new,  
But singing here and sagging there,  
We somehow scrambled through.

I've left the Old Gray Lady now,  
But still I have no doubt,  
That with a few more bits of string,  
She'll see this conflict out.

Just as our boats were made,  
That's been through every test,  
Perhaps one day will sail for home,  
And gain a well-earned rest.

LEO.

Officers, Petty Officers and Men of H.M.A.S. "Perth."

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I am more sorry than I can say to be leaving the ship at a time when so many of you are away on well earned leave, and it is not possible to say goodbye as I would have wished to do.

We have lived through stirring times together. Many of you have seen the distant seas for the first time. Others have been re-visiting places you knew when they were not twisted by the torment of war. All of you have watched with me at close quarters the bestial savagery and the devilish skill of the Nazi way of fighting.

We have left some good comrades behind; but with God's help most of us have returned safely to this great and lovely Country and have brought back our ship, a little battered, but soon to be sound and ready to fight again.

I congratulate you heartily on your bearing under stress. I thank you for the faith I have had in you and still more for the trust I think you have placed in me. Mutual faith between leader and led is the foundation of communities, be they ships or states.

I return to England to do other work. You will be often in my mind and I will follow our ships's future carefully.

My parting message to you is this :-

Do not forget the savagery we have seen and the tyranny from which it springs. Enjoy the freedom of this great Country and determine to fight for it in War and give service to it in peace ; so that it may know neither tyranny nor licence but a liberty based on service and on mutual faith.

Good bye and Good Luck.

P. Bowyer-Smyth,  
Captain, R.N.

2ND September, 1941.