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WORK OF THE R.A.N.

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O.B.E.

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In conformity with the policy of making its ships available for service wherever the war is being fought, the Royal Australian Navy has sent its units far and wide during the present hostilities.

Much of their activities, and sometimes even their whereabouts, must, of necessity, remain secret; but, coupled with their ceaseless routine work of war at home and abroad, there have been numerous incidents which have focussed attention on them, winning praise from the Admiralty and compelling respect on the part of the enemy.

The Navy never has courted publicity, maintaining silence on most of its activities, or describing them in as few words as possible. But the fact that R.A.N. ships were doing their job very thoroughly came as early as March, 1940, in the form of a message from the Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean (Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham).

This message, which did not disclose the actual operation involved, read:-

"On the conclusion of the important operation which I entrusted to H.M.A.S. Stuart, I wish to convey to the Commanding Officer, officers and ship's company my appreciation of the way in which this duty was carried out. The interception of the ship and the subsequent embarkation of the personnel and stores and their final disposal, were carried out in a most able and seamanlike manner, which reflects great credit on all hands.

"Subsequent to this, H.M.A.S. Stuart again showed her mettle in the way in which she brought help to S.S. Trocas. In the weather conditions prevailing this operation called for particularly seamanlike judgment, and it was carried through with a determination for which there can be nothing but praise.

"I am very glad to have the Australian destroyers under my command, and these two incidents have shown ready they are to seize any situation and cheerfully carry it through to a successful conclusion.

"While the present situation makes our seem monotonous at times, we must remember that the enemy will attack us when and where he thinks weak and unprepared.

"I know full well that if he ever gives us a chance, nobody will appreciate the 'scrap' better than the officers and men of the Australian destroyers".

Putting an enemy destroyer out of action, H.M.A.S. "Australia" was in the thick of the firing during General De Gaulle's attempt to win over Dakar to the side of the Free French. Prior to that she rescued the crew of a disabled Sunderland Flying Boat during particularly heavy weather.

During the trying days of Britain's strategic withdrawal from British Somaliland, the men and ships of the Australian Navy played a distinguished part in covering the evacuation. The barrage from H.M.A.S. "Hobart" was of very material assistance in retarding the enemy during the most crucial stage of the embarkation. ^{Three} ~~Two~~ of her seamen, who elected to man a machine-gun ashore to further hamper the Italians, were believed to have been killed during their gallant stand, but news has since been received that they had been captured, to be liberated later during the British African campaign.

The importance of the part played by the "Hobart" during the Somaliland action was reflected in subsequent decorations for several of her personnel. The effect of her own armament was enhanced by the daring dive bombing work of her aircraft.

In October last came another success for an Australian destroyer in the Mediterranean, behind which lies the untold story of the ceaseless watch maintained by the ships of Britain and her Dominions in that important Empire highway.

The destroyer was cruising with British forces when a steam-pipe burst. Temporary repairs were effected, and she was ordered to port alone. During the night an enemy submarine was located and depth charges were dropped. These so crippled the submarine that, when a patrol plane arrived at dawn, it was found that the Italian had been unable to make a getaway. She was promptly destroyed.

In the defence of Malta, too, the R.A.N. has not been found lacking. Early in March of this year, Vice-Admiral Ford, of Malta, had occasion to commend H.M.A.S. "Perth" for the assistance given by her during dive-bombing attacks on the port. Expressing his appreciation of the work of the Officers and men of the Perth, the Vice-Admiral said: "These services were invaluable, and were carried out with a complete disregard of personal safety."

March, 1941, is, of course, memorable for Britain's triumph in the Battle of Matapan. Italy lost three 10,000 ton cruisers, and two destroyers, as well as probably a further cruiser and destroyer. In addition, one of her battleships was so severely damaged that it was extremely doubtful whether she would be saved. Britain's ships suffered no damage or casualties, the only entry on the debit side being the non-return of the crew of one aircraft.

Here, again, Australia was ably represented. Their part is simply but aptly described in a tribute by Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, in which he said that they had carried out distinguished service "of a standard which I have come to expect from ships of the Royal Australian Navy".

Admiral Cunningham's message revealed that H.M.A.S. "Perth" and H.M.A.S. "Stuart" were among the ships in the battle. He described how the "Stuart", with three destroyers of the Royal Navy, finished off enemy cruisers damaged in action with the battle fleet.

The "Stuart" fired ^{Torpedoes} ~~destroyers~~ into damaged cruisers, and was in action with them as well as with enemy destroyers which attempted to interfere.

One of Italy's losses in the Battle of Matapan was the cruiser "Giovanni delle Bande Nere", which had narrowly escaped destruction in July, 1940, during the action in which H.M.A.S. "Sydney" sank the cruiser "Bartolomeo Colleoni".

Nor has the work of the men of the R.A.N., in this war been confined to the Mediterranean. Obviously the whereabouts of individual ships and personnel must usually be kept secret; but Australian Officers and men are on service in many parts of the world, and several times their exploits have brought them awards and public recognition.

Lieutenant W.G. Wheeler, for instance, was mentioned in despatches for his work in the R.N. destroyer "Afridi", and later for his part in the daring exploits of the "Cossack" in the "Altmark" encounter. Another to win honours in Norwegian waters was Lieutenant-Commander O.H. Becher, R.A.N., who gained

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the D.S.O. Commander S.H.K. Spurgeon won a similar honour in H.M.S. "Echo". The Distinguished Service Medal went to Petty Officer R.J. Fleming as a reward for his bravery during the Norwegian campaign, and to Petty Officer A.J. Fisher, of the submarine "Truant".

Men who joined the Royal Australian Volunteer Reserve straight from civilian life also have won high praise from the Admiralty. Among them are Sub-Lieutenants A.P. Read (a survivor from H.M.S. "Cape Passaro"), and H.B. Brassey (rescued from H.M.S. St Goran). Naval Reservists serving as gunners in defensively equipped merchant ships are playing a vital, if silent part in winning the Battle of the Atlantic for Britain.

Even in the evacuation of Dunkirk at least one Australian was destined to fill a vital role. Commander H.^J. Buchanan was called on to play the part of pier master in that historic undertaking, after the death of the English officer allotted to that post. He also achieved fame while in command of Royal Navy destroyers overseas.

