

PRESIDENT'S MUSINGS JULY 2017

Last meeting Doug Jenkin held us enthralled with his tale of his adventures whilst a member of the crew of HMAS Culgoa F408 in 1952 off New Zealand. *Her Captain, LCDR Wright, did not underestimate the situation in regards to the storm they survived, with his conclusion that: "Looking back, it is no exaggeration to say that the ship fought for her life, and won!"*

This month we will enjoy the first of two I W M Archive Films depicting The British Pacific Fleet, its ships and their activities regarding the hostilities against Japan. I feel I should provide some background on the BPF prior to us viewing the film.

The Admiralty had proposed a British role in the Pacific in early 1944 but the initial USN response had been discouraging. Admiral Ernest King USN ,the C in C U S Fleet and Chief of Naval Operations, was an Anglophobe, and hostile to the suggestion. Fortunately President Roosevelt overruled King and relations in general with the USN were both cordial and co operative.

The RN provided the fleet's vessels and all the capital ships, but elements and personnel included units from the Royal Fleet Auxiliary(RFA), ,RCN and RNZN. The South African Navy (SAN) and the RAN contributed as well, however our contribution was limited owing to our heavy involvement with the USN. Many of the Naval airmen were Kiwis and Canadians.

Winston Churchill wrote about the BPF in book 12 of his account of WWII, entitled 'Triumph and Tragedy,' and I take the liberty of quoting some passages concerning the BPF from pages 259-263.

'The struggle in the Pacific moved no less swiftly to its climax. We had promised at Quebec to send British forces of all arms to the Far East as soon as Germany was defeated ,and on my return to London I stated in the House of Commons that the United States had accepted our offer of a fleet. Our effort on land and in the air would be limited only by the available shipping, and plans went ahead accordingly.

In December 1944 Admiral Fraser arrived in Sydney with his flag in the battleship HOWE. For the first time our main Fleet was to deploy in the Pacific, and under the operational control of an American Officer. Our chief difficulties were supply and maintenance. In three years of fighting the Americans had built up an immense supply organisation and a network of island bases. We could not hope to match this achievement, but it was essential that our Fleet should not be wholly depend on our Allies for logistic support. We had been studying the problem throughout 1944. A mission had been sent in June to consult the Australian Government about establishing a base, but Australia's man-power was already fully engaged in General MacArthur's campaigns and in supplying both themselves and the Americans and it was evident that much material and skilled labour would have to be found from the United Kingdom. The fine port of Sydney was four thousand miles from the fighting. To serve the Fleet we needed a train of store ships, depot and repair ships, hospital ships, and many other types, and huge supplies would have to be transported from the British Isles This naturally raised misgivings in the mind of Lord Leathers ,the Minister of War Transport ,but plans were made, the first essentials were provided, and expansion was still going on when the war ended.

Soon after his arrival Admiral Fraser went by air to visit both General McArthur and Admiral Nimitz, He, and later the Fleet were most cordially received, and from the outset there grew up a spirit of comradeship which overcame all difficulties and lead to the most intimate co-operation at all levels.

A message from Admiral Nimitz ran: "The British force will greatly increase our striking power and demonstrates our unity of purpose against Japan. The United States Pacific Fleet welcomes you!"

*'By the beginning of march the Fleet and the elements of the fleet train were assembled at the American base at Manus Island in the Admiralty Group and on the 18th it sailed for its first campaign in the Pacific under Admiral Spruance. Here much was happening. The time at last had come to strike at the enemy's homeland. On February 19th Spruance had attacked Iwo Jima, in the Bonin Islands, whence American fighters would be able to escort bombers from the Marianas in attacking Honshu. The struggle was severe and lasted over a month, but victory was won. Meanwhile the British Fleet, now known as Task Force 57, comprising the Battleships **King George V** and **Howe**, four fleet carriers mustering 250 aircraft, five cruisers and eleven destroyers, reached its battle area east of Formosa on March 26. That day its bombers made their first strike at airfields and installations among the islands south of Okinawa. Spruance himself was engaged in full scale air operations as a prelude to the amphibious attack on Okinawa itself, due to be launched on April 1. On March 18 his fast carrier groups attacked enemy bases near the coast of Japan, and from March 23 they switched to Okinawa. The task of the British Fleet was to stop the enemy using the airfields in the islands to the south and in Northern Formosa. From March 26 until April the Fleet ,refuelling at sea, continued its mission. Wastage in aircraft and exhaustion of supplies then forced a brief withdrawal to Leyte. The opposition had not been heavy. The **Indefatigable** had been struck by a suicide bomber on April 1, causing casualties, and one destroyer was damaged and had to be withdrawn.'*

*'Meanwhile there had been fierce fighting in Okinawa island and its capture was the largest and most prolonged amphibious operation of the Pacific war. 'The whole of Japan's remaining sea-and air power was committed. Her last surviving modern battleship, the **Yamato**, supported by cruisers and destroyers, tried to intervene on April 7, but the expedition was intercepted by Spruance's air carrier fleet and almost annihilated .Only a few destroyers survived.*

Attacks by suicide bombers reached astonishing proportions .No fewer than 1,900 were made before the island was conquered, and according to Admiral King thirty -four destroyers and small craft were sunk and about two hundred other ships were hit .These attacks and several thousand ordinary sorties constituted the most furious onslaught ever launched by the Japanese. But all was in vain. On June 22, after nearly three months fighting, the island was subdued. The battle had occupied the full strength of Admiral Nimitz's Central Pacific forces, including an army of 450,000 men'

*'The British Fleet had sailed again from Leyte on May 1. Between May 1 and 25 our air groups struck the same area as before, and on May 4 our ships bombarded the island of Mikayo. The enemy mostly fought back with suicide attacks. The carriers **Formidable** and **Victorious** were severely damaged, the former with heavy casualties ,but their armoured decks saved them from disaster and both were able to carry on .By May 25 supplies were running low, and the ships withdrew to Mannus island ,much heartened by the following message from Admiral Spruance:*

"I would express to you, to your officers and to your men, after two months' operations as a Fifth Fleet Task Force, my appreciation of your fine work and co-operative spirit. Task Force 57 has mirrored the great traditions of the Royal Navy to the American Task Forces."

End of quotes re the British Pacific Fleet contained in 'Triumph and Tragedy', book 12 of Sir Winston Churchill's 'The Second World War'.

STOP PRESS : A justifiably proud Dad has just sent me the following text :

"Young Darren has had a pier head jump as Captain Sea Training Group, and then to command Nu-ship AOR 1 , December 2019 in Spain. OLE! (Possibly will be named HMAS Supply)"

The young Darren referred to is Captain Darren Grogan CSM RAN, and the proud Dad is our Marty Grogan.

CONGRATULATIONS DARREN!!!!!!

The Shrine Of Remembrance is presenting an special exhibition this month entitled 'Nerves and Steel: The Royal Australian Navy in the Pacific, December 1941-September 1945,' which we are looking forward to attending. It opens on July 22nd and continues until July 2018.

Presentations with a Naval Theme are also presented at the Shrine on July 25th , August 9th, August 31st and October 4th! full information on <http://www.shrine.org.au/Visit-the-Shrine/Talks-and-Events> .

'Bell Bottoms, Scrambled Eggs and Lids', sounds interesting, and certainly is! That's the title of John Perryman's address at 2000 in the Education Centre at the Shrine on Tuesday July 25th. Also of great interest are 'Words From our Navy Veterans' on August 9th, at 1200 , also in the Education Centre. You will meet Jim Paizis, David Manning, Norm Tame, Hiram Ristrom ,Ray Leonard and Pamela Nicholls, WWII veterans, and all with a story to tell! From taking part in the Battle of the Coral sea, surviving POW camps in South East Asia and decoding war-winning intelligence, it is a great opportunity to hear how it all happened from the folk who were actually there! Later in August the Curator of 'Nerves and Steel' Neil Sharkey, will tell of the background of the items in the exhibition, how it all came together, the stories behind those items, and of the people involved. This will take place August 31st at 1300. Our friend and colleague, Doctor Ian Pfennigwerth, will present 'RAN In The Pacific War' on Wednesday October 4th at 1800 in the Education Centre. Our RAN, between December 1941 and August 1945, were in the forefront of the fighting ,not in backwaters, and their professionalism and skills in many warfare areas were respected, applied and recognised with awards by US Commanders.

At Defence Plaza on June 30th, I attended the Royal United Services Institute of Victoria Lunchtime Address. RADML Peter Laver, AM RAN, Commander Maritime Border Command, spoke to us on the Role, Structure and Operations of his Command. RADML Laver joined the RAN in 1979 and initially completed specialist training as a Seaman Officer and Aviation Warfare Officer. He was engaged in the operational evaluation of the Seahawk helicopter and UN sanction enforcement operations against Iraq. Appointed to his current role of Commander Maritime Border Command in 2016, he clearly explained the complexity of his Command. I was impressed by his enthusiasm for the job in hand, and appreciated learning of the scope of the Command, and of its importance to our overall security!

YOURS AYE!!

REX WILLIAMS