

THE DEFENSIVELY EQUIPPED MERCHANT SHIPS

DURING the war 37 officers and 1,070 ratings served as Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships' personnel in the Royal Australian Navy. Imperial and Allied ships numbering 251 were supplied, or partly supplied, with R.A.N. personnel (D.E.M.S.) as were 124 Australian ships.

The number of Australian naval men supplied to ships varied with the particular year in which they embarked, and with the armament, nationality and type of merchant ship's crew. In 1939 and most of 1940 the general rule was to embark when possible one rating to each gun mounted. An exception to this rule was made when the ship was manned by a coloured crew, when three ratings were embarked. Where possible a gunlayer was drafted in charge of armament but, since the number of gunlayers was limited, many ships left Australia with an able seaman gunner in charge of the armament. Three ratings were embarked in tankers, even if only one low angle gun was mounted, because of the importance of these ships.

In the early days of the German invasion of Norway and Denmark, D.E.M.S. personnel, officers and ratings, were from time to time embarked in Norwegian and Danish ships as armed guards.

As the war progressed and the armament of merchant ships increased, so did the number of D.E.M.S. men carried. Ships trading from Australia to Indian ports, and those operating in Northern Australian and New Guinea waters, carried a multiplicity of anti-aircraft weapons. Merchant ships carried from 6 to 10 ratings under a petty officer gunlayer; and troop transports had up to 12 ratings. When Bofors guns were mounted a Bofors crew of Maritime Royal Artillery was supplied in addition to the naval ratings embarked.

Thus *Duntroon*, armed with one 4-inch Mk. XIX, one 12-pounder, two Bofors, six Oerlikons, two 2-inch U.P. (Pillar Boxes) and F.A.M.'s, carried one lieutenant R.A.N.V.R. as D.E.M.S. gunnery officer, two petty officer gunlayers, 16 other ratings and eight M.R.A. as Bofors crew. She and *Reynella* (formerly the Italian ship *Remo*) were the most heavily armed Australian ships. The manning position necessitated the provision of R.N. D.E.M.S. ratings and M.R.A. details; and in 1943 a number of Australian ships were entirely manned so far as D.E.M.S. was concerned with R.N. ratings and M.R.A. details.

Queen Mary was originally armed at Sydney (6-inch O.B.L.) in May 1940, and an Australian D.E.M.S. gun's crew was embarked. When she was transferred to the North Atlantic run, ferrying American troops to Britain, she carried a lieutenant R.N.V.R. as gunnery officer, a lieutenant R.N.V.R. and 70-odd D.E.M.S. ratings and M.R.A. details—still with the same R.A.N.R. petty officer (as senior P.O.) who had embarked in Sydney in 1940. He left the ship in March 1943.

The first R.A.N. men to reach German prison camps in the war were six Australian D.E.M.S. gunners from the British ships *Maimoa*, *Port Brisbane* and *Port Wellington*, sunk by German surface raiders in the Indian Ocean.

In all, 18 Australian D.E.M.S. ratings were prisoners of war of the Germans as the result of their ships being sunk or captured. Two Australian D.E.M.S. ratings became prisoners of the Japanese in m.v. *Hauraki*, taken in prize in the Indian Ocean by the Japanese A.M.C's *Hokoku Maru* and *Aikoku Maru*.

On the other side of the ledger, when the Dutch tanker *Ondina*, in company with H.M.I.S. *Bengal*, was intercepted by *Hokoku Maru* and *Aikoku Maru* in the Indian Ocean on 11th November 1942, *Hokoku Maru* was sunk in a gun battle between the four ships.

Of the 1,070 R.A.N. D.E.M.S. ratings, 38 lost their lives when their ships were sunk, were killed on board or were "missing presumed dead". One or two were killed in air raids in England. One was drowned (from the Dutch ship *Sibigo*) when swimming from a raft to pick up a parcel dropped from a rescue aircraft.



Van HMIS Bengal bestaan geen foto's. Dit is een opname van haar zusterschip HMIS Bombay.

