

## CHAPTER 7

### ON AUSTRALIA'S OCEAN COMMUNICATIONS

WHILE the events discussed above were taking place in Australian or near Australian waters, others—which concerned Australia both in the part played in them by her ships and men, and the influence they had on her existing and future welfare—were happening or shaping on the widespread western flank. In North Africa at the end of July the British stood firm at El Alamein facing an enemy operating over long lines of communication and getting less and less in supplies. The Axis, in July, finally decided to abandon the invasion of Malta. Conditions on the island had improved for the defenders. Between June and August, two convoys (“Harpoon” and “Pedestal”) were fought through from the west and 195 fighter aircraft reinforcements were flown in. In July the 10th Submarine Flotilla, which had been withdrawn from Malta to Alexandria in April, returned to the island. The effect of Malta’s revival was quickly marked on Axis convoys to North Africa, which from then on suffered increasing losses.<sup>1</sup> The determined stand of the Eighth Army at El Alamein enabled the return to Alexandria, after about five weeks at Ismailia, of the operational staff of the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, and of the ships from the rearward bases. While Rommel’s supplies proved inadequate to his needs (his lack stultified his August attack on the Eighth Army at Alam el Halfa, the objective of which was the Suez Canal)<sup>2</sup> the British were able to build up their strength via their ocean communications round the Cape.

Ocean communications remained the key to victory, and those on Australia’s western flank were of paramount importance. They were vital in preventing that German breakout through the Middle East, and junction with their Far Eastern allies, which was the vision of the “Great Plan”. They were vital to the defence of India; to the succouring of Russia; to the rescue of Burma and Malaya; and to the safety of Australia. Outweighing all else they were vital to the defence of Iraq and Persia, and the Persian oil on which all else depended. “If we lost the Persian oil, we inevitably lost Egypt, command of the Indian Ocean, and endangered the whole Indian-Burma situation.”<sup>3</sup> In July 1942 Indian Ocean com-

<sup>1</sup> Figures of Axis losses in North African convoys, July to October 1942, as given in a post-war essay by the German C-in-C, Mediterranean, Vice-Admiral Weichold, were:

Month	Total G.R.T.	Sunk	Damaged	Percentage
July . . . . .	107,000	10,000		
August . . . . .	114,000	38,000	2,000	35%
September . . . . .	108,000	23,000	9,000	30%
October . . . . .	96,000	24,000	14,000	40%

<sup>2</sup> On 29th August, because of the non-arrival of promised petrol and ammunition, Rommel limited his object to that of defeating the Eighth Army at El Alamein. “The further objectives in my directive are not obtainable.” Four days later he wrote in his war diary: “The non-arrival of petrol requested, which was the condition laid down for the successful carrying out of even limited operations, forbids the continuation of the attack.”

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide* (1957), p. 440. Lord Alanbrooke, autobiographical note.

munications were in better shape than they had been three months earlier when the Japanese carriers and battle fleet ravaged the Bay of Bengal and attacked Ceylon. That island was now strongly garrisoned, so that it was possible to return to Australia the two brigade groups of the A.I.F. which, at Australia's suggestion, had been landed in Ceylon in March to augment the garrison there during the crisis till British forces could arrive. They sailed from Colombo, a total of 12,120, on 13th July 1942, in "Schooner" convoy of eleven ships escorted by H.M. Ships *Gambia*<sup>4</sup> and *Worcestershire* (armed merchant cruiser, 11,402 tons).<sup>5</sup>

Though the Indian Ocean position had improved with the diminishing likelihood of a major Japanese descent into that area, it was desirable to build up the Eastern Fleet, not only against such eventuality, but also in preparation for a swing over to the offensive against the Japanese. But the pressure of events and of plans elsewhere led rather to the weakening than the strengthening of Admiral Somerville's force. Ishizaki's submarines continued in the early part of July the attacks on ships in the Mozambique Channel which had resulted in fourteen sinkings in June. They now raised that total by another five victims aggregating 21,477 tons. The Eastern Fleet had only two destroyers available for escort work there. Of 26 destroyers allocated to the fleet, 4 were detached to the Mediterranean, 5 had not yet joined, 5 were under repair, 5 were with the slow battleships, and 5 with the battlefleet. Of 16 sloops, corvettes etc. (3 of them Australian—*Bathurst*, *Lismore* and *Geraldton*) 12 were employed escorting trade in the India-Ceylon area, and the others supplementing Colombo's inadequate anti-submarine protection. At this period *Indomitable* and destroyers were detached from the Fleet to help to fight the August convoy, "Pedestal", through the Mediterranean to Malta; and on 24th August *Formidable* was taken from Somerville to replace *Indomitable*—damaged in the "Pedestal" operation—in the forthcoming North African operations. By the end of August, Somerville's Force "A"—the fast squadron which was the main shield against a Japanese descent in force into the Indian Ocean—comprised only *Illustrious*, *Warspite*, *Valiant*, and one or two cruisers.

Presumably unaware of this (since the Australian Combined Operations Intelligence Centre's "Daily Naval Summary" consistently showed the Eastern Fleet at its full "on paper" strength, and on 30th August detailed its composition, by names, as 5 battleships, 3 aircraft carriers, 3 heavy cruisers, 16 light cruisers, 9 armed merchant cruisers and "approximately" 25 destroyers), the Australian Government in August importuned both the

<sup>4</sup> HMS *Gambia*, cruiser (1942), 8,000 tons, twelve 6-in guns, eight 4-in AA guns, 33 kts. Commissioned HMNZS *Gambia* on 22nd September 1943.

<sup>5</sup> "Schooner" Convoy consisted of *Rajula*, *Aronda* (4,062 tons), *Ekma* (5,108 tons), *Westernland*, *Devonshire*, *Clan Macdonald* (9,653 tons), *Athlone Castle*, *City of Canterbury*, *Dunedin Star* (11,168 tons), *Mariand* (8,000 tons), *City of Lille* (6,588 tons). This last named was unable to maintain the convoy speed of 11½ knots and was detached on 16th July to proceed independently. Personnel carried in the convoy were: AIF, 13,063; RAAF, 178; RAN, 57; Nursing Sisters, 76. On 19th July *Gambia* was relieved by USS *Phoenix* and next day *Kanimbla* relieved *Worcestershire* as ocean escorts. On 28th July the first-named six ships of the convoy arrived at Fremantle. They sailed thence on 31st July for Sydney where they arrived on 6th August escorted by *Phoenix* and HMA Ships *Manoora* and *Westralia*. The balance of the convoy, escorted by *Kanimbla*, proceeded to Melbourne where they arrived on 7th August.

British Prime Minister and the American President to concentrate naval strength in the Pacific with the help of the Eastern Fleet.

In a telegram of 25th August to Mr Churchill, Mr Curtin referred to the views of the United Kingdom Chiefs of Staff, expressed in the previous April, that "when the moment is opportune, the naval forces of the United Nations should take the strategic offensive in the Pacific". Curtin suggested that the moment was now opportune, and that it was evident from the Coral Sea, Midway, and Solomon Islands naval engagements, that operations in the Pacific were "leading to a naval clash which may well decide the course of the conflict in this theatre". He concluded:

It is therefore desired to know what are the present prospects and plans for the concentration of a superior naval force in the Pacific which presumably could only be done by the transfer of part of the Eastern Fleet to that region.

In his reply to this telegram (copies of which had been sent to Roosevelt and to S. M. Bruce, with directions to the last named to follow up the question of Eastern Fleet cooperation "in your most persistent and energetic manner") Churchill said that in the British view the possible transfer of British naval forces to the Pacific from the Indian Ocean was not yet opportune. In detailed explanation Churchill said that, though India's land strength had increased, a division and armoured brigade had recently been moved thence to reinforce Persia-Iraq, and demands elsewhere had checked the planned establishment of "what we consider should be the minimum shore-based air force strength in the Indian Ocean theatre". As to the Eastern Fleet:

Our plans for naval reinforcement of the Eastern Fleet have had to be withheld, firstly on account of the need for replenishing Malta and again for operations contemplated in the near future. The present strength of the Eastern Fleet is two modernised battleships, one aircraft carrier, and a bare minimum of cruisers and destroyers. In addition there are two "R" class, unmodern and short of destroyer screen.

The situation in the light of Churchill's reply—and of advice from Bruce that "there was no prospect of altering the views set out" therein—was discussed by the Advisory War Council on 9th September, though without knowledge of the nature of the "operations contemplated in the near future" to which Churchill referred. In telegrams on 11th September to Churchill and Roosevelt, Curtin expressed surprise that naval strength to build up the Eastern Fleet to a point when it could help in the Pacific was "being disposed in theatres other than the Indian and Pacific Oceans". He went on to say that in the lack of superior naval concentration there was no alternative but to press for the land and air strength necessary for the local defence of Australia. To the request for such additional strength Roosevelt replied on 16th September that it was "clear that the United States Pacific Fleet is unable to provide a superior naval force solely concerned with the defence of Australia and New Zealand", and went on to examine the "necessity for and possibility of increasing the

ground and air forces required for the territorial defence of Australia". In an analysis of Japan's shipping resources, the President stated:

It is estimated that the Japanese have at this time a maximum of 700,000 tons of shipping available for employment in large-scale military operations, and that this shipping could support about 200,000 troops. After considering all of the factors involved, I agree with the conclusions of the Combined Chiefs of Staff that your present armed forces, assuming that they are fully equipped and effectively trained, are sufficient to defeat the present Japanese force in New Guinea and to provide for the security of Australia against an invasion on the scale that the Japanese are capable of launching at this time or in the immediate future.

Roosevelt went on to say that present commitments of Allied shipping did not permit of moving additional troops to Australia "now or in the immediate future", and concluded: "However, I am confident that you appreciate fully the necessity of rigidly pursuing our over-all strategy that envisages the early and decisive defeat of Germany in order that we can quickly undertake an 'all-out' effort in the Pacific."

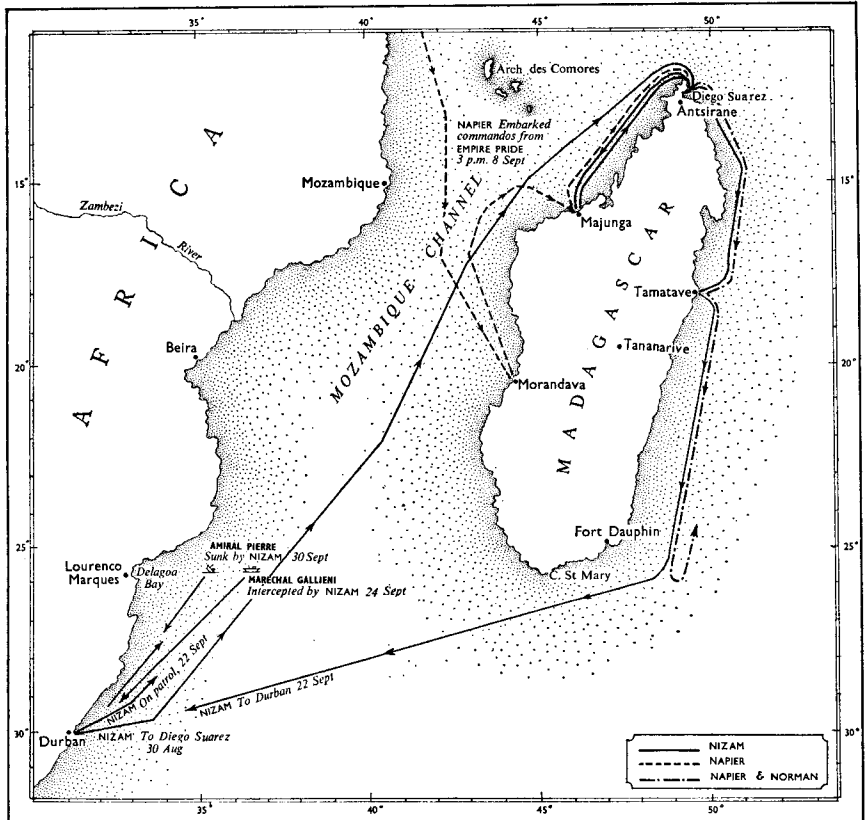
A result of this was the Australian Government's decision in October again to request the return of the 9th Division from the Middle East, which brought from Roosevelt on 1st November an offer "to ameliorate not only Australia's present position, but the position in that area of the United Nations as well", by sending to Australia an American division from Hawaii, a readjustment in the Pacific "which I feel is justified in the existing situation". Roosevelt assumed that sending this division "will obviate the necessity for the Australian War Council to call back the 9th Division from the Middle East. I cannot too strongly stress that leaving the 9th A.I.F. Division in the Middle East will best serve our common cause." The 9th Division, having played a vital part in the victory at El Alamein, was, however, withdrawn from the Eighth Army, and sailed for Australia in February 1943.

## II

One of the "operations contemplated in the near future" referred to in Churchill's reply to Curtin's telegram of 25th August—the occupation of Madagascar—was launched before this exchange of telegrams was concluded. With the occupation of Diego Suarez in April 1942, it was hoped that the Governor-General of Madagascar (M. Annet) would amend his pro-Vichy attitude. The attacks by submarines on ships in the Mozambique Channel, and the menace to the important "WS" convoys, made it necessary to secure the use of ports on the west coast of Madagascar and, the Governor-General failing to cooperate, the British Government decided in August to subjugate the entire island. The operation was in three parts—"Stream", a surprise landing at Majunga on the west coast by the 29th Brigade; "Line", an advance overland by a detachment of an East African brigade and South African armoured cars from Majunga to Tananarive, the capital; "Jane", a landing by the 29th Brigade (re-embarked from Majunga) at Tamatave on the east coast. Rear-Admiral Tennant, commanding 4th Cruiser Squadron in *Birmingham*, was in charge of the naval

operations under the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Somerville, and the four Australian destroyers of the 7th Flotilla, *Napier*, *Nizam*, *Norman* and *Nepal*, under Commodore Arliss (Commodore Commanding Eastern Fleet Destroyer Flotillas in *Napier*) took part.

On 5th September *Nizam* was in Diego Suarez where, her war diary recorded, she "paid ship's company in francs, and each rating received



Madagascar, August-September 1942

a bottle of beer". On the 7th she sailed for Majunga as one of the escorts of a convoy of assault ships. On the 9th they joined up with more assault ships together with *Birmingham*, *Illustrious*, and, among other ships, the former Australian seaplane carrier *Albatross*. The assault on Majunga next day was quickly successful, and the defenders surrendered at 8.30 a.m. *Nizam*, having escorted assault ships to the attack, spent the rest of the day rounding up and capturing small craft and sending them in to Majunga. Meanwhile, also on the 10th, *Napier* carried out a diversionary operation some 500 miles down the coast at Morandava. She had sailed with the

*Birmingham* group from Kilindini on 6th September, but had detached in the afternoon of the 7th, embarked a commando troop at sea from the transport *Empire Pride* (9,248 tons), and put them on shore at Morandava soon after dawn on the 10th. On shore, the commandos seized the wireless station, post office, aerodrome, and other key points, and penetrated some distance inland spreading disturbing alarmist rumours before re-embarking in *Napier*, which sailed with six prisoners—including the Chief Administrator of the region, and the Mayor of Morandava—at 8.15 a.m. on the 12th for Majunga, where she arrived on the morning of the 13th, and later that day sailed for Diego Suarez, where the Tamatave (“Jane”) force assembled. *Nizam*, escorting some “Jane” force assault ships, sailed from Diego Suarez on the 15th and arrived off Tamatave before dawn on the 18th. Ships taking part in the operation included *Illustrious*, *Warspite*, the Dutch *Jacob van Heemskerck*,<sup>6</sup> *Van Galen* and *Tjerk Hiddes*,<sup>7</sup> and the four Australian destroyers. The convoy entered Tamatave harbour at 5.40 a.m. *Nizam* recorded: “Town completely surprised. After being asked to surrender, the ships opened fire. The town surrendered at 7.32 a.m.” *Nizam* then proceeded to screen *Warspite*, who was waiting well off shore to bombard heavy fortifications; and in the afternoon the destroyer “proceeded to Durban with *Illustrious*, *Hotspur*, *Napier* and *Norman*”. These two last named parted company on the 19th to return to Madagascar.

Tananarive, which was declared an open city by the Vichy French, was occupied on 23rd September, but M. Annet withdrew to the south of the island, and it was not until 5th November that he capitulated at Ihosy, which town was entered by South African troops of the Pretoria Regiment who, on 29th September, had been landed at Tulear, on the south-west coast. The instrument of capitulation was signed soon after midnight on 5th November. The South Africans entered Ihosy on 8th November, and “it is related that M. Annet himself took the salute as the tired and dirty warriors of the Union drove past singing ‘Annie doesn’t live here any more’.”<sup>8</sup>

While the other Australian destroyers of the 7th Flotilla operated with the Madagascar forces, *Nizam*, who arrived at Durban on 22nd September with *Illustrious* operated out of that port on patrols to intercept Vichy French merchant ships. On 24th September she intercepted *Marechal Gallieni* (1,559 tons) about 130 miles east of Lourenco Marques, and took her into Durban in prize. On 29th September she intercepted in the same area the Vichy French *Amiral Pierre* (4,391 tons), formerly the Greek *Yiannis* which had been seized by the French in Madagascar. *Amiral Pierre*’s crew took scuttling action when sighted, and a boarding party from *Nizam* found that the extent of damage precluded her being towed,

<sup>6</sup> *Jacob van Heemskerck*, Dutch cruiser (1940), 3,350 tons, ten 4-in AA guns, 33 kts.

<sup>7</sup> *Van Galen*, *Tjerk Hiddes*, Dutch destroyers (1944), 1,690 tons, six 4.7-in guns, five 21-in torpedo tubes, 36 kts.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Buckley, *Five Ventures* (1954), p. 207. “Annie Doesn’t Live Here Any More” was a popular comic song of the period.

so she was sunk by gunfire on 30th September. In both these instances the original sightings were made, and the positions of the Vichy ships were given by aircraft of the South African Air Force. On 7th October, *Nizam* arrived at Simonstown for docking and a much needed refit.

### III

Though the various demands on the Eastern Fleet did not permit of such units as to constitute a "concentration of superior force" to be detached for service in the Pacific, calls for help did not go entirely unheard. In response to a request late in September, the Admiralty, with the concurrence of the Netherlands naval authorities, detached *Jacob van Heemskerck* and the destroyers *Van Galen* and *Tjerk Hiddes* from the Eastern Fleet in October, as soon as they could be spared from the Madagascar operations, for service in the South-West Pacific Area. They reached Fremantle on 25th October, and came under MacArthur's operational command. Before the end of 1942 Churchill was able to tell Curtin that steps were being taken for a larger scale reinforcement of Pacific naval forces by the British. In response to an urgent request by the United States—Churchill telegraphed on 2nd December—it was proposed to offer the aircraft carriers *Victorious*<sup>9</sup> and *Illustrious*, under the command of a British admiral, for service under American orders. He added that he hoped this would provide additional and important reinsurance for Australia's safety.

The preliminaries to the American request indicated a lack of liaison between the high commands of the respective navies, and lack of knowledge of what was happening in the respective theatres of operation. In the months between August and the end of the year the struggle for control of the seas in the Solomons area was bitter and unremitting between the Americans and Japanese, with heavy losses on both sides. On 20th October, Admiral Nimitz wrote to Admiral King: "Now is a golden opportunity for the British Eastern Fleet to take action on the Japanese west flank." Commenting on this, the American Naval Historian remarked:<sup>1</sup> "But the British Far Eastern Fleet" (which then consisted of *Illustrious*, *Warspite*, and *Valiant*) "remained in the Indian Ocean." Nimitz's suggestion was passed on to the Admiralty by Admiral H. R. Stark, head of the American Mission in London. The Admiralty signalled to Admiral Little, head of the British Mission in Washington, pointing out that preparations for the North African landings, which had been given overriding strategical priority by both Governments, had reduced the Eastern Fleet to one carrier and two battleships, and they "could not discover what they could do" to reduce the pressure in the Pacific. Admiral King was away from Washington when the Admiralty's message arrived, and no one there knew who had originated the suggestion of British help. Admiral Little did, however, discover American needs, and on 27th October signalled to the Admiralty

<sup>9</sup> HMS *Victorious*, aircraft carrier (1941), 23,000 tons, sixteen 4.5-in dual purpose guns, 70 aircraft, 30 kts.

<sup>1</sup> Morison, Vol V, p. 184.

urging "that one or more of the Eastern Fleet's carriers be sent to the Pacific". The Battle of Santa Cruz had been fought in the Solomons on 26th-27th October, and the Americans lost the carrier *Hornet* sunk, and were reduced to only one carrier in the South Pacific—*Enterprise*—and she badly damaged. "This," signalled Admiral Little, "is a real cry for immediate help." As it was, neither British nor Americans knew of each other's shortages and difficulties in their respective areas, and there was considerable misunderstanding and some ruffled tempers before matters were sorted out. But on 8th December Little was instructed to tell King that *Victorious*, then with the Home Fleet, would be ready to leave the Clyde for the United States and the Pacific, with three destroyers, on 19th December. Actually she sailed from Greenock at 2.10 p.m. on Sunday, 20th December, and one of her escorting destroyers was Australian—H.M.A.S. *Quickmatch*<sup>2</sup> (Lieut-Commander R. Rhoades)—the latest addition to the Royal Australian Navy's destroyer strength, which had commissioned in England on 30th September. *Victorious* and her escorts crossed the Atlantic in heavy weather in which they met a series of eleven "depressions with gale force winds in each and heavy swells", and reached Bermuda on 30th December, and Norfolk, Virginia, U.S.A., on 1st January 1943. The Eastern Fleet lost *Illustrious* in January—but not, as Churchill had said in December, by her going to the Pacific. She was sent to the United Kingdom to be brought up to date "before taking part in projected operations in northern waters". She sailed from Kilindini on 13th January, her escorts—as had those of *Victorious*—including Australian destroyers, in this instance H.M.A. Ships *Norman* and *Nepal*. The withdrawal of other ships from Somerville's command at this juncture<sup>3</sup> reduced the Eastern Fleet to a trade protection force, with even the vessels for this duty diminished in numbers owing to urgent requirements elsewhere. In circumstances in which the Allies had to scour the seven seas for ships—both naval and merchant—to meet the constantly arising and expanding demands associated with large-scale operations forthcoming, the Eastern Fleet, in the ocean least likely to be the scene of a major foray by an enemy fleet, became a "strategic reserve" to be drawn upon almost to extinction, a victim of global strategy.

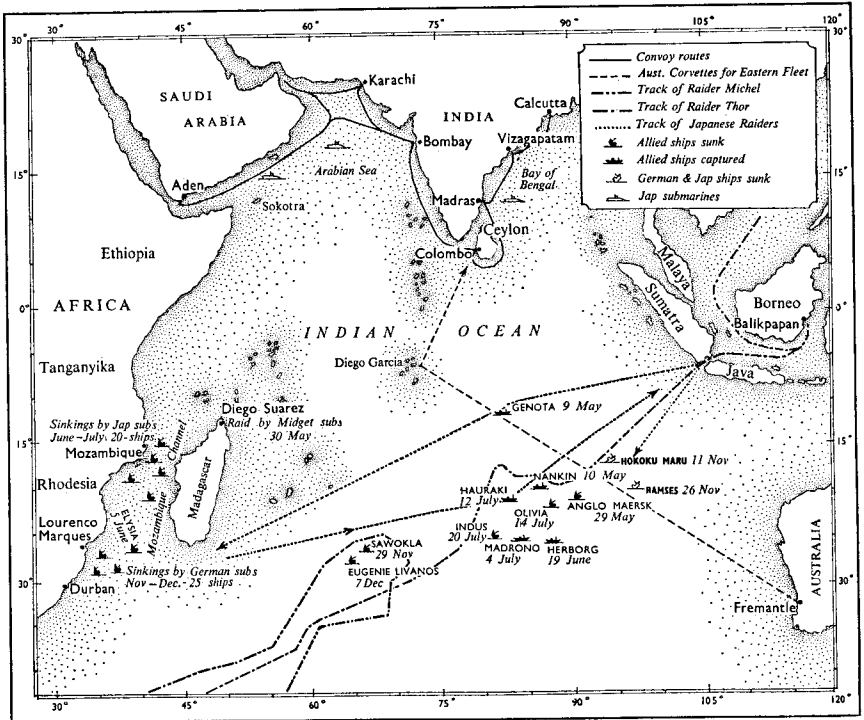
Meanwhile, in the second half of 1942, enemy action made increasing calls upon the Fleet's trade protection capabilities. Surface raiders sank or captured five ships in the Indian Ocean during the period. At 11 p.m. on 12th July, Perth radio intercepted a raider distress message from the British ship *Hauraki* (7,113 tons), bound from Fremantle to Colombo. About 1,500 miles south of her destination she was intercepted by the Japanese raiders *Hokoku Maru* and *Aikoku Maru*, then on their way to their base in Penang from their operations with Ishizaki's submarines.

<sup>2</sup> HMAS *Quickmatch*, destroyer (1942), 1,650 tons, four 4.7-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 32 kts.

<sup>3</sup> The Eastern Fleet's War Diary for January 1943, recorded: "HM Ships *Vallant*, *Illustrious*, *Ranchi*, *Hotspur*, *Express*, *Fortune*, *Inconstant*, have left the station for the U.K." (*Ranchi* was an A.M.C. The four last named were destroyers.)



At 11.20 *Hauraki* repeated the raider distress cry, and added "captured by Japanese". Her final signal, at 11.36 p.m. on the 12th was "Boat alongside now". On 20th July Esperance (Western Australia) radio station heard a raider cry from the British *Indus* (5,187 tons) which left Colombo on the 4th for Fremantle. At 3 p.m. on the 20th, about 1,800 miles west by north of that port, she met the German raider *Thor*, and there was a brief, fierce action between the two ships in which both suffered



Raiders and submarines in the Indian Ocean, 1942

casualties, *Indus* losing 63 of her company, before she was sunk. Sixteen days earlier, and 800 miles N.W. by W. of where she encountered *Indus*, *Thor* had claimed another victim when she captured the Norwegian tanker *Madrono* (5,984 tons) bound from Melbourne to Abadan and sent her to Yokohama with a prize crew. But since *Madrono* failed to transmit a distress message, her fate was not known until after the war. *Indus* completed *Thor*'s score. The raider proceeded to Japan via Sunda Strait and Balikpapan, and reached Yokohama on 9th October. During her five months (May to September) in the Indian Ocean she deprived the Allies of five ships totalling 32,500 tons, and their cargoes. Three of these (two of them tankers), totalling 21,000 tons, she captured, thus enhancing the

value of her exploits by not only depriving the Allies of valuable merchant shipping, but presenting it to the enemy.<sup>4</sup>

Coincidental with *Thor*'s departure from the Indian Ocean to the north-eastward, another German raider, *Michel*, entered from the south-west. She sailed from Germany in March 1942, and for some six months operated in the Atlantic, where she sank eleven ships totalling 77,000 tons. In the Indian Ocean<sup>5</sup> she sank the U.S. *Sawokla* (5,882 tons) on 29th November, and on 7th December sank the Greek *Eugenie Livanos* (4,816 tons). These encounters were in the south-western Indian Ocean some 400 miles south-east of Madagascar. Before the end of the year *Michel* returned to the Atlantic bound for Europe, and on 2nd January 1943, some 1,200 miles W.N.W. of Capetown, sank the British *Empire March* (7,040 tons), the final prey of the cruise. In mid-January 1943 she was ordered to go to Japan, and she again rounded the Cape, traversed the Indian Ocean and made a landfall at Bali (her first sight of land for 324 days) on 7th February. She reached Kobe on 3rd March.

Two other raiders operated in the Indian Ocean in the closing months of 1942. These were the Japanese *Hokoku Maru* and *Aikoku Maru* which returned to Penang for refit in July after capturing *Hauraki* and reappeared on the Indian Ocean traffic lanes in November. Their initial cruise was not very successful. Their second was to be less so for them, but was to be outstanding as the reason for one of the most remarkable actions of the war.

Last of the four corvettes built in Australian yards for the Royal Indian Navy during the war, H.M.I.S. *Bengal*<sup>6</sup>—of 650 tons, armed with one 12-pounder gun—was launched at Cockatoo Island in May 1942, completed two months later, and on 5th August, manned by the Royal Indian Navy, commissioned under Lieut-Commander W. J. Wilson, R.I.N.R. On 5th November she sailed from Fremantle, escorting the Netherlands tanker *Ondina* (6,200 tons) to Diego Garcia, in the Chagos Archipelago, whence *Ondina* would proceed to Abadan, and *Bengal* to Colombo.

In the afternoon of 11th November 1942, N.O.I.C. Fremantle reported to the Naval Board a signal received from *Bengal*: "We are being shelled my position 19 degrees 38 minutes South 93 degrees 05 minutes East. 0543Z 11th." The position given was about 1,400 miles north-west of Fremantle, and the time at ship approximately 11.45 a.m. Two subsequent signals from *Bengal* reported that she was still in contact with the enemy, and "raider burning strongly aft"; and at 3.58 p.m. on the 11th, local time, N.O.I.C. Fremantle signalled *Bengal*: "Report your present condition and the ship with whom you departed." *Bengal*'s reply, received via

<sup>4</sup> *Thor* met her end in Yokohama Harbour on 30th November 1942, when the tanker *Uckermark* (originally the *Altmark*), lying alongside her, caught fire and blew up, damaging *Thor* beyond repair. Also sunk on this occasion as a result of *Uckermark*'s explosion was *Thor*'s first Indian Ocean victim, *Nankin*, now renamed *Loltan*. Three of *Thor*'s five Indian Ocean ships were tankers plying between Australia and Abadan, two of them loaded and Australia bound.

<sup>5</sup> Jochen Brennecke, *Das Grosse Abenteuer Deutsche Hilfskreuzer 1939-45* (1958), p. 452. The sinking of the British *Reynolds* (5,113 tons) on 2nd November is also attributed to *Michel*. But her loss is officially credited to a submarine.

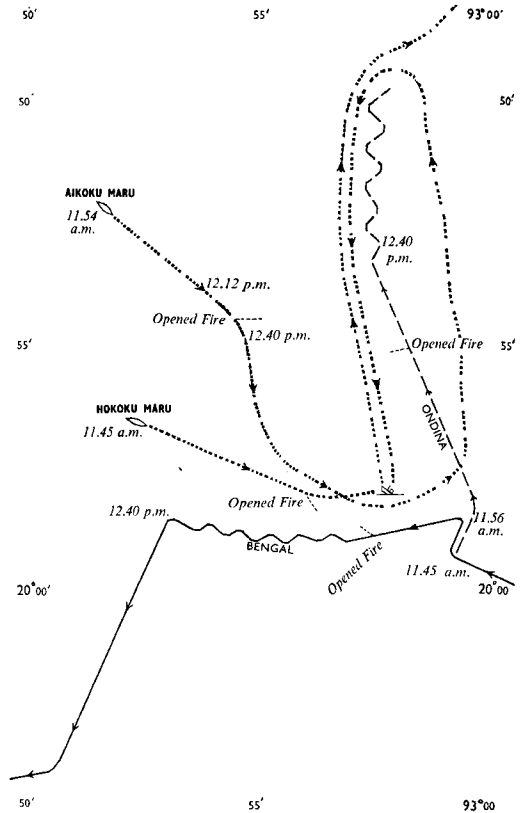
<sup>6</sup> HMIS *Bengal*, corvette (1942), 650 tons, one 12-pdr gun, 15½ kts.

Colombo three hours later, was: "Holed on waterline fore and aft. Proceeding at nine knots. Tanker hit and presumed lost. One enemy raider believed sunk other not hit." At 9.56 p.m., local time, H.M.S. *Karimbla*, then in Fremantle, was sailed to the scene of action. The partial picture provided by *Bengal's* signals was added to some 50 hours later when Colombo wireless station received a plain language signal from *Ondina*: "Want immediate medical assistance." No signal giving ship's position or other relevant information was received from her, though asked for by N.O.I.C. Fremantle. The reason, as subsequently transpired, was that

the position of the ship was erased from the chart before abandoning ship, the N.C.S.O. data were destroyed. There was no certainty that future N.C.S.O. positions were compromised. Our course was known in Fremantle. To send our position in plain language was not considered.<sup>7</sup>

Then, at 7.45 a.m. on 17th November (on which day *Bengal* arrived at Diego Garcia) a Catalina aircraft on reconnaissance flight reported sighting *Ondina* 220 miles N.W. by N. of Rottneest Island. She reached Fremantle next morning. And from the reports from the two ships, this account of the engagement was drawn.

On 11th November 1942, in approximate position 20 degrees south, 93 degrees east, *Bengal*, 400 yards ahead, led *Ondina* at 10 knots on course N.W. by W.½W. *Bengal* had a total of 40 rounds of ammunition for her 12-pounder gun. *Ondina*, a motor ship with a maximum speed of 11 knots, was in ballast except for 150 tons of fuel oil for *Bengal*, and 240 tons consigned to Abadan. She was defensively armed with one 4-inch Q.F. (U.S.N.) gun. Her gun's crew consisted of Able Seaman Hammond,<sup>8</sup>



11th November 1942

<sup>7</sup> Report of *Ondina's* wireless operator.

<sup>8</sup> Ldg Seaman B. A. G. Hammond, DSM, PA1318; RANR. *Ondina*, Michael L. Emericos, *Arkaba*. Of Adelaide; b. Norwood, SA, 6 Feb 1918.

three gunners of the Royal Artillery, four R.N. seamen; and one Dutch merchant service gunlayer.

The weather was fine, clear and windless; the sea calm; visibility good. At about 11.45 a.m. a ship—subsequently identified as *Hokoku Maru*—was sighted bearing W.N.W., almost dead ahead, distant eight miles, and steering E.S.E.<sup>9</sup> *Bengal* went to action stations, and at 11.50 altered course to N.N.E. and ordered *Ondina* to take station on her starboard beam. Nine minutes after the initial sighting, *Bengal* sighted a second ship (*Aikoku Maru*) bearing N.W.½W. distant 10 miles, steering S.E. by E. *Bengal* signalled a rendezvous for next day and ordered *Ondina* to proceed independently, and at 11.56 altered course to W. by S. “straight for the first vessel sighted”. *Ondina* also altered course four points “on a northerly course”. Lieut-Commander Wilson later told the Flag Officer, Ceylon, that his signal to *Ondina* to act independently was made

with the intention that she should make good her escape and that he was disappointed to observe that she altered course only 90 degrees instead of 180 degrees. . . . His prompt decision to steer at full speed directly towards the larger of the two enemy ships in sight was made solely with a view to giving the *Ondina* time to get away; he had little hope that his ship could survive against such odds.<sup>1</sup>

At 12.12 *Hokoku Maru* opened fire on *Bengal* at approximately 3,500 yards, from a position fine on *Bengal*'s starboard bow. *Bengal* returned the fire, and *Aikoku Maru*, some six miles to the north-westward, altered course to the southward to intercept. *Bengal*'s opening round (according to *Ondina*'s report) was short, and *Ondina* opened fire on *Hokoku Maru* at 8,000 yards. “First salvo was over, correction minus 400. Second shot was short. The fifth shot was a hit on the stern, which caused an enormous explosion there, a yellow-red flame was visible and a heavy bottom part of the stern fell burning into the sea.”<sup>2</sup> Both *Ondina* and *Bengal* claimed this scoring hit (which decided the outcome of the action) on *Hokoku Maru*. “The Japanese account says that *Ondina* hit the first raider, but the *Bengal*'s report is emphatic that it was her own gunfire which did the damage.”<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile *Aikoku Maru* also opened fire on *Bengal*. Up to this time *Ondina* had not been fired on, but after being hit *Hokoku Maru* (which had considerably slowed down) divided her fire, her port guns engaging *Ondina*, her starboard *Bengal*. The corvette received a direct hit forward,

<sup>9</sup> *Ondina*'s report of the sighting was: “At 11.25 two ships appeared at one point forward of the port beam, bearing SW½W, steering NNE. Estimated speed 16-20 knots” (from reports submitted by First and Second Officers of *Ondina*, and Naval Intelligence interrogation of the Acting Chief Engineer and Able Seaman Hammond). The discrepancy in times persists throughout the respective reports of the engagement. It is possible that the discrepancy in sighting bearings (“almost dead ahead”, *Bengal*; “one point forward of the port beam”, *Ondina*) was due to the *Ondina*'s bearing being subsequent to the initial alteration of course to N.N.E.

<sup>1</sup> Supplement to *The London Gazette*, 12 July 1948, p. 4013.

<sup>2</sup> The explosion also threw “the debris of the two planes housed on the after deck into the air, and a fierce fire resulted”. Able Seaman Hammond, from close examination of *Aikoku Maru* when she approached *Ondina* after that ship had “abandoned ship”, said that she had “two seaplanes on catapults on the after well deck . . . torpedo tubes mounted on the after well deck starboard and port sides between the guns”. *Hokoku Maru* also had “both her airplanes on the after well deck”. Each raider mounted six 6-inch guns, with a four-gun broadside.

<sup>3</sup> Roskill, Vol II, p. 272n.

and *Ondina* had her captain's gig shot overboard, and her masthead and main wireless aerial shot down. *Ondina* claimed, at this stage, "five hits in rapid succession on *Hokoku Maru's* bridge, midship structure, and stern, causing a violent explosion which blew off the raider's stern and she began to sink".

The relative positions of the ships about half an hour after the action started were, apparently, *Ondina* to the north-eastward, zigzagging between N. and N.N.E. at her maximum speed of 11 knots. *Hokoku Maru* some five miles to the southward of *Ondina*, damaged and stopped. *Bengal* some three miles to the westward of *Hokoku Maru*, steering westerly, and not engaging *Hokoku Maru* since that target was too far aft to train on to; and *Aikoku Maru* some four miles to the northward of *Bengal*, attacking, but keeping to 7,000-8,000 yards range.

*Bengal* now altered course to S.S.W. About this time she received a second direct hit, in the stern. Her ammunition was nearly exhausted. *Aikoku Maru* was in chase and firing. *Ondina* appeared to Wilson to be getting away to the northward, so he decided to break off the engagement and retire behind smoke, which he did, gradually altering to the west and north-west.

*Aikoku Maru* now shifted her attention to *Ondina*. She rounded the sinking *Hokoku Maru* to the eastward, gave chase to *Ondina*, and opened fire at 4,000 yards. *Ondina*, with only twelve rounds left, had been holding her fire. Now, thinking that *Hokoku Maru* was again attacking, she fired four rounds at her, and the remaining eight at *Aikoku Maru*, without scoring any hits. She herself received six direct hits from *Aikoku Maru's* fire, and *Bengal*, away to the south-westward, recorded at 1.8 p.m.: "Tanker observed hit abaft bridge." Soon after, with no ammunition remaining, *Ondina's* master, Captain W. Horsman, stopped engines and ordered "Abandon Ship". A few seconds later he was killed when *Aikoku Maru* made a direct hit on the bridge. The ship was abandoned, the crew of 56 got away in three minutes in three lifeboats and two rafts. *Aikoku Maru* cruised close alongside and fired two torpedoes into *Ondina's* starboard side from about 350 yards, rounded her, opened fire with machine-guns on the boats, and killed the chief engineer and three of the Chinese crew. *Hokoku Maru* sank about this time, and her consort steamed to the scene of the sinking, presumably to rescue survivors. After about twenty minutes she returned to *Ondina*, fired a third torpedo at the port side of the tanker which missed, and then made off to the north-east.

*Ondina* and her boats and rafts were thus left in sole possession of the battle area. The ship had a heavy list to starboard (the torpedoes holed Nos. 2 and 3 tanks) and appeared in imminent danger of sinking. But her Second Officer, Third Engineer, Able Seaman Hammond, Gunner Ryan, R.A., and three of the Chinese crew, boarded her, found the engines intact, got the rest of the crew on board, raised steam, righted the ship, and at 9 p.m. got under way for Fremantle.

The episode closed the careers of these two Japanese ships as raiders. *Kanimbla*, patrolling in the area of their final encounter, reported, at 8 p.m. on 18th November (the day *Ondina* reached Fremantle) hearing a raider alarm signal broadcast in the vicinity. But she sighted nothing, and there was no evidence of any later activity by *Aikoku Maru* in the Indian Ocean.<sup>4</sup> On the conclusion of her patrol, *Kanimbla* proceeded to Colombo, whence she escorted convoy "SU5" to Fremantle, and reached there on 30th December.

#### IV

There was one more surface encounter in the Indian Ocean in which Australian ships were concerned. The occasion was the interception, on 28th November, of the German blockade runner *Ramses*. A motor ship of 7,983 tons, *Ramses* left Hamburg on an ordinary trading voyage on 1st July 1939. She reached Shanghai on 25th August 1939, and remained in the Pacific—the greater part of the time lying in Yokohama, serving as a prison ship for raider prisoners—until November 1942. On the 23rd of that month she sailed from Batavia fully loaded, mainly with rubber and whale oil, to run the blockade to Bordeaux. She passed through Sunda Strait into the Indian Ocean, which she was to traverse "from raider to raider". She would navigate the Atlantic "from U-boat to U-boat", and would approach the European coast under an aircraft screen. Unarmed except for some anti-aircraft machine-guns, she relied for her protection on a constant and keen lookout and evasive action were any ship sighted. If this failed, scuttling charges were in position for immediate self-destruction. Her speed was approximately 11 knots.

On the day that *Ramses* sailed from Batavia, the corvettes H.M.A. Ships *Cessnock*<sup>5</sup> (Lieutenant Marchington<sup>6</sup>) and *Toowoomba* (Lieut-Commander Simpson<sup>7</sup>) left Fremantle for Diego Garcia on their way to join the Eastern Fleet. The British tanker *Goldmouth* (7,402 tons) was in company. Next day H.M.A.S. *Adelaide* (Captain Esdaille<sup>8</sup>) and the Netherlands cruiser *Jacob van Heemskerck* left Fremantle escorting convoy "OW1"<sup>9</sup> to the limits of the Australia Station, where they were to hand over to H.M.S. *Gambia* for onward passage. On 26th November the corvettes and *Goldmouth* joined forces with *Adelaide* and her convoy, and the group proceeded N.W. by W at 9½ knots, with *Adelaide* and *Jacob van Heemskerck* in station 35 degrees on the port and starboard bows respectively of the convoy's wing ships, and *Cessnock* and *Toowoomba*

<sup>4</sup> *Aikoku Maru* ultimately met her end on 17th February 1944, when she was sunk by American aircraft in the carrier raid on Truk.

<sup>5</sup> HMAS *Cessnock*, corvette (1942), 650 tons, one 4-in gun, 15½ kts.

<sup>6</sup> Lt-Cdr T. S. Marchington, DSC, RD; RANR. HMAS *Bingera* 1940-41; comd HMAS's *Cessnock* 1942-44, *Burdekin* 1944-46. Of Sydney; b. Doyleysden, England, 19 Dec 1906.

<sup>7</sup> Lt-Cdr J. H. Simpson, RD; RANR. HMAS's *Sydney* 1939-41, *Adelaide* 1941-42; comd HMAS *Toowoomba* 1942-45; HMAS *Manoora* 1945. Master mariner; of Sydney; b. Ayr, Scotland, 19 Feb 1905.

<sup>8</sup> Capt J. C. D. Esdaille, CBE; RAN. (1917-18: HMAS *Australia*). Comd HMAS *Adelaide* 1942-44; NOIC New Guinea 1944-45. B. Bendigo, Vic, 3 Oct 1899.

<sup>9</sup> Convoy "OW1", of three ships: *Tarakan* (8,183 tons), *Tatra* (4,766 tons), *Agovi Prince*, with oil refinery equipment for Abadan.

on the port and starboard beams respectively of the convoy. At 2.16 p.m. *Adelaide's* masthead lookout sighted a ship fine on the port bow. *Adelaide* and *Jacob van Heemskerck* proceeded to investigate, leaving the corvettes with the convoy. Six minutes after being sighted<sup>1</sup> *Ramses*—for it was she—altered course away, and shortly broadcast a “raider” distress signal in the name of *Taiyang*—“followed by suspicious craft”. *Adelaide* went to action stations—range then 15,000 yards. *Ramses* made no answer to various visual and wireless signals sent to her, but was seen to lower two boats. At 3.43 “an explosion was observed aft in the ship and almost immediately a dense cloud of smoke appeared at the stern and covered the whole of the port side, leaving only the masts and top of the funnel visible”. Esdaile at once opened fire, on the assumption that one of two things had happened: the ship was an armed raider, had sent away a “panic party” in boats and started a smoke screen to hide preparations for an attack on *Adelaide*; or the ship was unarmed, had blown scuttling charges, and had abandoned ship. “The answer in both cases,” said Esdaile in his report, “was considered to be to open fire, (a) for obvious reasons, and (b) to hasten the end and enable me to get back to the convoy which by this time was hull down”. Fire, which was opened at 3.44 p.m. at 10,600 yards, ceased at 3.52 p.m., at which time *Ramses* suddenly sank by the stern. *Adelaide* picked up survivors before rejoining the convoy to which *Jacob van Heemskerck* (who had also opened fire on *Ramses*) had proceeded as soon as *Ramses* sank. There were no casualties—other than *Ramses* herself—on either side as the result of this encounter. The survivors picked up by *Adelaide* comprised 78 Germans, 10 Norwegians from ships *Aust*, 5,630 tons (sunk by *Thor* on 3rd April 1942) and *Kattegat*, 4,245 tons (sunk by *Michel* on 20th May 1942) also “one pig and one dog”.

Five days after *Adelaide's* encounter with a blockade runner, another Australian ship, *Quickmatch*, had a similar experience, though not in the Indian Ocean. *Quickmatch* was one of the escorts of a south-bound convoy, “KMF4”, from the United Kingdom for the North African invasion operations then in progress. At 2 p.m. on 1st December 1942, out in the Atlantic about 500 miles west of Cape Finisterre, *Quickmatch* and H.M.S. *Redoubt*<sup>2</sup> were ordered by Senior Officer Escort, *Egret*,<sup>3</sup> to close and investigate an unknown ship sighted 15 miles ahead of the convoy. First on the scene, Rhoades, in *Quickmatch*, ordered her not to scuttle. The stranger hoisted the Swedish ensign, stopped, and said she was the Swedish *Nanking* bound for Buenos Aires. Ordered to lower a boat and send papers for inspection, while the two destroyers circled her with guns and tubes bearing, she

<sup>1</sup> “The importance of a good masthead lookout,” Esdaile noted in his subsequent report, “was the main lesson learnt from this encounter. It is understood from survivors that *Adelaide* was not sighted from *Ramses* until some time after *Heemskerck* and ships of the convoy. This is attributed to the comparative invisibility of *Adelaide's* foretopmast (including crow'snest, wireless and signal yards) which is painted a pale duck egg green.”

<sup>2</sup> HMS *Redoubt*, destroyer (1942), 1,705 tons, four 4.7-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 34 kts.

<sup>3</sup> HMS *Egret*, sloop (1938), 1,200 tons, eight 4-in AA guns, 19½ kts. Sunk off Portugal, 27 Aug 1943.

replied that the weather was unsuitable. Rhoades told her, by loud hailer, to "get on with it". She then struck her colours, hoisted the white flag, and lowered a boat which closed *Quickmatch*, who embarked her Italian crew of one officer and six men. The ship proved to be the Italian *Cortellazzo* (5,292 tons) bound from Bordeaux to Japan with nine German passengers and 2,000 tons of machinery. She was ordered to abandon ship, which she did, and *Redoubt* picked up the remainder of her company—one German was lost owing to the prevailing bad weather—and sank her by torpedo and gunfire. "The Italian prisoners of war," Rhoades recorded, "seemed very pleased to be picked up, and furnished all the information desired, which is scanty due to language difficulties."

## V

On the day that *Quickmatch* had her blockade runner experience, her sister ship *Quiberon*<sup>4</sup> was also involved in an incident which was, like that of *Quickmatch*, coincidental to the North African operations. As stated above, in July the British in Egypt established themselves firmly in defensive positions at El Alamein, what time they built up their strength. As also stated earlier, by June 1942 President Roosevelt, against the views of those urging a "second front" in the Pacific, leaned towards Churchill's concept of the occupation of the whole of North Africa as the "second front" effort—and the maximum that could be made—for 1942. On 24th July agreement was reached between the Allies with regard to the North African operations. Landings were to be effected both on the Atlantic coast at Casablanca, and in the Mediterranean as near as possible to the Tunisian frontier. The American General Eisenhower was appointed Supreme Commander with an American deputy, and an American chief of staff leading a combined Anglo-American staff. The fighting commanders of the advance task forces in the Mediterranean were British—Lieut-General Anderson<sup>5</sup> on land and Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham on sea. For the Casablanca landing the American General George S. Patton commanded the land forces, and Vice-Admiral H. K. Hewitt, U.S.N., the sea.

The operation entailed a great extent and detail of planning, organisation, and training. Naval forces and troopships had to be allocated, convoys arranged, ports of departure decided, and ships concentrated. On the British side:

Our orders involved the sailing, routeing, exact timing, and arrival at their respective landing places inside the Mediterranean at Oran and Algiers of two advance convoys of some 45 ships, to be followed by a main body of more than 200 vessels with 100 escorts carrying some 38,500 British and American troops of the first flights with all their impedimenta. Over and above this the orders laid down the movements and duties of all the purely naval forces inside the Mediterranean, which,

<sup>4</sup> HMAS *Quiberon*, destroyer (1942), 1,705 tons, four 4.7-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 34 kts.

<sup>5</sup> General Sir Kenneth Anderson, KCB, MC. Comd 11 Bde, 3 Div, VIII and II Corps, First Army, 1942-43; GOC-in-C East Africa Comd 1945-46. B. 25 Dec 1891. Died 29 Apr 1959.



apart from more than 100 vessels at Gibraltar, meant another 176 vessels of all types from battleships and aircraft carriers to submarines, sloops, corvettes and motor launches.<sup>6</sup>

All else, in the handling of this armada, depended on the safe passage of rather more than 400 ships through the Straits of Gibraltar—only eight miles wide—within a limited period of time. And the shores of the Strait were those of neutral Spain and Spanish Morocco, with British Gibraltar as the hinge pin. It was this narrow entry into an enclosed sea wherein were an enemy “fleet in being” and other powerful hostile forces and influences that caused the Americans strongly to oppose the Mediterranean side of the proposed operation, and to offer resistance thereto which took much British effort to overcome.

At the end of July 1942, as a result of discussions in London between President Roosevelt's representatives—Mr Harry L. Hopkins, General Marshall, and Admiral King—and Mr Churchill and the British Chiefs of Staff, the North African operation TORCH was decided upon. Early next month changes were made in the Middle East command. General Alexander succeeded General Auchinleck as Commander-in-Chief, and General Montgomery<sup>7</sup> became the Eighth Army's commander. During the junction days of August and September—the two last and two first of the respective months—Rommel made his final thrust against the Eighth Army, with Egypt as the prize, and was repulsed with heavy losses at the battle of Alam el Halfa.

On 22nd September the date of TORCH was fixed for 8th November, and plans went forward for that date. Complementary to those plans was a successful attack by the Eighth Army, and the driving of Rommel from Egypt as a prelude to the Allied landings farther west. That attack—in which the 9th Australian Division took part—opened in the full moon of the night of 23rd October. On 4th November, General Alexander could report to Churchill:

After twelve days of heavy and violent fighting the Eighth Army has inflicted a severe defeat on the German and Italian forces under Rommel's command.

By sundown on 7th November, on the eve of the Allied landings in North Africa, Rommel's rearguard was nearly 200 miles west of the battlefield in the full ebb of retreat at the Libyan frontier, across which the main stream of his transport was flowing. And “as the rain fell steadily in Egypt all that Saturday”<sup>8</sup> the Mediterranean TORCH assault convoys and their escorts steamed eastward through the sea they were soon to open again to the Allies, and that night descended southward in two streams

<sup>6</sup> Cunningham, *A Sailor's Odyssey*, p. 475.

(The American convoy and escorts which crossed the Atlantic for the Moroccan landings totalled 102 ships, ranging from battleships to destroyers and included 35 large transports, cargo ships and tankers, five aircraft carriers, more than 40 destroyers, among other ships. There were some 70,000 men in the armada, of which some 35,000 were troops for the landings. See S. E. Morison, *Operations in North African Waters* (1947), p. 17 *et seq.*, Vol II in the series.)

<sup>7</sup> Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery, KG, GCB, DSO. Comd 3 Div, V Corps, XII Corps, 1939-41, Eighth Army 1942-43, Twenty-First Army Group 1944-45; CIGS War Office 1946-48. B. 17 Nov 1887.

<sup>8</sup> Bryant, p. 518.

upon the respective targets, Oran and Algiers. The last named capitulated in the evening of the 8th. Oran surrendered two days later, and on 11th November Morocco—where the Americans landed on the 8th—also submitted. On the 11th and 12th further Mediterranean landings were made at Bougie, Djidjelli, and Bone, to the east of Algiers. Bone became the advanced supply base for the First Army and also the base for the 12th Cruiser Squadron (Force "Q") whose main task, under the command of Rear-Admiral Harcourt,<sup>9</sup> was preying upon the enemy's sea communications with Bizerta and Tunis some 130 miles to the eastward. It comprised the cruisers *Aurora*, *Argonaut*, *Sirius*,<sup>1</sup> and destroyers *Quentin*, and H.M.A.S. *Quiberon* which had commissioned on 6th July 1942, under Commander H. W. S. Browning, R.N.

On 28th November *Quiberon* contributed towards the total of six enemy submarines in whose destruction Australian ships played a part during the war, when, with *Quentin* and R.A.F. fighter aircraft, she shared in the sinking of the Italian *Dessie*<sup>2</sup> off Algiers. Three days later she was at sea with Force "Q" when, around midnight on 1st December an enemy supply convoy of four ships, with Italian destroyer escort, was intercepted about 40 miles north of Cape Bon. In an action which lasted about one hour, and in which enemy ships were engaged at point-blank range in "a ghastly scene of ships exploding and bursting into flame amidst clouds of steam and smoke; of men throwing themselves overboard as their ships sank. and motor vehicles carried on deck sliding and splashing into the sea as vessels capsized",<sup>3</sup> the four ships of the convoy and one escorting destroyer<sup>4</sup> were sunk. The action started at about half an hour after midnight. At 1.35 a.m. on the 2nd December *Quiberon* fired the last salvos of the engagement at a capsized enemy destroyer. One minute later Force "Q" was on course W by S½S, making for Bone at 27 knots—with four burning ships in sight, the last of which was still visible astern half an hour later.

The passage to Bone was without incident until 5.30 p.m. on the 2nd, when aircraft were heard overhead. About an hour late *Quentin*, ahead of *Quiberon* in the line, was torpedoed by a torpedo bomber which came in from the port side. The British destroyer was fatally damaged, and *Quiberon* went alongside her and removed her complement while both ships were under air attack, and herself narrowly escaped direct hits during the operation. While he was alongside *Quentin*, Browning later reported,

I was bombed and cannoned. H.M.A.S. *Quiberon* got clear just as a stick of bombs fell where she had been; the explosions were under my forecastle. Ship went on to

<sup>9</sup> Admiral Sir Cecil Harcourt, GBE, KCB; RN. Director of Operations Div 1939-41; comd HMS *Duke of York* 1941-42, 10th, 12th and 15th Cruiser Sqns 1942-44; Naval Secretary to First Lord of the Admiralty 1944-45; comd 11th Aircraft Carrier Sqn 1945. B. 11 Apr 1892. Died 19 Dec 1959.

<sup>1</sup> HMS's *Argonaut* and *Sirius*, cruisers (1940-42), 5,450 tons, ten 5.25-in guns, six 21-in torpedo tubes, 33 kts.

<sup>2</sup> *Dessie*, Italian submarine (1936), 620 tons, one 3.9-in gun, two 13-mm AA guns, six 21-in torpedo tubes, 14 kts. Sunk off Algiers, 28 Nov 1942.

<sup>3</sup> Cunningham, p. 505.

<sup>4</sup> One of the escorting destroyers was *Lupo*, who had figured with distinction in a similar night action against British forces in the Aegean when escorting the German Maleme flotilla from Milos to Crete on 21st-22nd May 1941. (See *Royal Australian Navy 1939-1942*, pp. 344-5.)

full speed and was attacked six more times by low-level bombing, dive-bombing, and one abortive attempt by torpedo-bombing aircraft. Sticks of bombs all fell fairly close, but thanks to good gunnery and high speed I was able to alter course as necessary after seeing the bombs begin to fall.

This was one of a number of incidents in which the TORCH naval forces were involved in the vital problem of maintaining sea communications in the face of powerful enemy air and submarine activity. While the Axis had air strength in Tunisia, large personnel ships could not be risked east of Algiers, and reinforcements and supplies had to be sent to Bone in small coastal ships escorted by destroyers. "All these convoys," the Commander-in-Chief later recalled, "had to be fought through, and no passage was without incident." The submarine menace was omnipresent, and referring to "our constant battle against the U-boats", Admiral Cunningham recorded the work done by "among others, the destroyers *Quentin, Quiberon, Wheatland, Easton, Bicester and Lamerton*".<sup>5</sup>

But by the end of December, the general situation for the Allies was much brighter than it had been twelve months earlier. Then British naval forces in the Mediterranean were at their lowest ebb; Malta was once more in serious jeopardy. In the Middle East Russia was holding along the Don and in the Crimea, but the German threat after winter loomed starkly. In the Far East the Japanese had struck and were rising swiftly to the crest of their initial unbroken successes. Now, in the Mediterranean the Allied naval forces were at their peak; and on land the Allied armies were driving the enemy before them in Cyrenaica, and pressing them hard in Tunisia and Algeria. In the Middle East the Russians had launched a great and successful offensive at Stalingrad. And in the Far East the Japanese were being forced from the offensive to the defensive. But the flood was only beginning to make. Much yet remained to be done before it lifted Allied hopes and achievements to high-water mark. It was March 1943, Cyrenaica and Tripolitania once more in British hands, before convoys were able to reach Malta from Alexandria. And two more months passed before the great Mediterranean prize was won—the ability to use that sea for passage to the Middle East and Indian Ocean, instead of being forced to the long haul round the Cape of Good Hope. The first through convoy passed Gibraltar on 17th May 1943, and reached Alexandria nine days later.

## VI

The "constant battle against the U-boats" referred to by Admiral Cunningham intensified in the second half of 1942 in the Indian Ocean and on the "round the Cape" route to the Middle East. As stated above, Ishizaki's submarines continued operations in the Mozambique Channel in July, after which they returned to their base at Penang. Japanese submarines during the first six months of the year operated in both the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. In the second half of the year they extended operations

<sup>5</sup> *Wheatland, Easton, Bicester, Lamerton*, British destroyers (1940-41), 904 tons, four 4-in AA guns, 27½ kts.

westward into the Gulf of Aden and northward to the approaches to the Persian Gulf, where they increased their activities with the ending of the south-west monsoon. The attacks on the round the Cape traffic were carried out by German U-boats, initially off Capetown but later reaching into the Indian Ocean to the Mozambique Channel. In operations against both the Japanese and German submarines, ships of the R.A.N. were employed.

The growing menace from the Japanese submarines to Persian Gulf traffic—carrying oil, aid to Russia, and British and American military cargoes—led to the establishment, in August 1942, of a convoy system for its protection. In 1942 the tonnage of aid-to-Russia cargoes which could be landed in the Persian Gulf was largely limited by the capacity of the ports, which had to be used while they were being constructed or developed; by the paucity of lifting appliances; and by the high proportion of heavy and difficult cargoes, including locomotives, railway waggons, steel rails and sheets, and so on. In September, 39,000 tons of cargo for Russia were landed, and the figures for the last three months of 1942 were 50,000, 35,000, and 37,000 tons respectively. But in 1943, with the improvement in port facilities, the figures jumped. Aid-to-Russia cargoes totalled 53,000 tons in January of that year, and 83,000 tons in February. And illustrating the swift growth in importance of the Persian Gulf communications, the cargo for Russia cleared in 1943 from Basra, Abadan, Khorramshahr and Bandar Shapur, totalled 1,608,330 tons, and in addition another 1,002,739 tons of British and American military cargoes were cleared from those ports. In the search for escort vessels for the Persian Gulf convoys, by the end of 1943 only one (*Gawler*<sup>6</sup>) of the thirteen Australian corvettes serving with the Eastern Fleet was not at one time or another allocated to this duty.<sup>7</sup> Three of them—*Geraldton*, *Bathurst*, *Lismore*—were on Persian Gulf convoy escort work in 1942.

First of the Australian corvettes to be commissioned, *Bathurst* (5th December 1940) and *Lismore* (24th January 1941) joined the East Indies Station on 5th June 1941. The second half of that year they spent in the Red Sea in the Gulf of Aden area, leaving there in mid-December for Colombo, where they arrived on the 29th. For most of the first half of 1942 they escorted in Indian waters, based on Colombo. During the second half of 1942 they were joined by more of the Australian-manned corvettes built for the Admiralty. These left Australia at intervals, in each instance escorting a tanker to Diego Garcia or Addu Atoll on its way to the Persian Gulf to load a cargo of oil. First of the newcomers to the Eastern Fleet was *Geraldton* (Lieut-Commander Harris<sup>8</sup>) which left Fremantle on 26th July, and the others followed in the order *Launceston*

<sup>6</sup> HMAS *Gawler*, corvette (1942), 650 tons, one 4-in gun, 15½ kts.

<sup>7</sup> The twelve which had Persian Gulf convoy experience were, in the chronological order in which they first did so, *Geraldton*, *Bathurst*, *Lismore*, *Ipswich*, *Cessnock*, *Launceston*, *Maryborough*, *Burnie*, *Tanworth*, *Toowoomba*, *Wollongong*, and *Cairns*.

<sup>8</sup> Cdr H. M. Harris, OBE, RD; RNR. HMAS *Geraldton* and in comd 23rd MS Flotilla 1942-44. Archdeacon of Fiji; b. Regelly, Wales, 23 Feb 1894.

(Lieut-Commander Collins<sup>9</sup>) 4th September; *Wollongong* (Lieutenant G. A. Keith) 14th September; *Burnie* (Lieutenant T. Christy) 27th September; *Cairns* (Lieutenant MacMillan) 16th October; *Maryborough* (Lieut-Commander G. L. Cant) 3rd November; *Ipswich*<sup>1</sup> (Lieut-Commander McBryde<sup>2</sup>) 3rd November; *Toowoomba* (Lieut-Commander Simpson) 23rd November; *Cessnock* (Lieutenant Marchington) 23rd November; and *Gawler* (Lieut-Commander Seymour<sup>3</sup>) 14th December. Also during the second half of 1942 the four ships built for the Royal Indian Navy left Australia to join their own forces, in the order *Punjab* (17th June); *Madras*<sup>4</sup> (4th September); *Bombay* (13th September); and *Bengal* (5th November). The last of the Admiralty group to leave to join the Eastern Fleet, H.M.A.S. *Tamworth*<sup>5</sup> (Lieutenant Deans<sup>6</sup>) left Fremantle on 27th January 1943.

*Geraldton*, escorting the tanker *Bahrein* (7,095 tons) from Fremantle, arrived at Addu Atoll on 8th August, and went thence to Colombo. She left Colombo for Bombay on 25th August but was diverted to search for a submarine which sank the *Harmonides* (5,237 tons) on 25th August, 350 miles south-west of Ceylon. Her search, however—both for the submarine and for survivors from *Harmonides*—was profitless, and on 6th September she sailed from Bombay with her first Persian Gulf convoy, "PB.54".

When, in August 1942, in view of the activity of Japanese submarines in the area, it was decided to establish a convoy organisation for Persian Gulf traffic, Bandar Abbas, on the northern shore of the Strait of Hormuz, the gateway from the Gulf of Oman into the Persian Gulf, was selected as the convoy assembly port. The cruiser H.M.S. *Capetown* was base ship *pro tem*—until the armed merchant cruiser *Alaunia* (14,030 tons) arrived on 10th September and took over duties as Naval Officer-in-Charge, Hormuz. A resident tanker was established at Khor Kuwai, opposite Bandar Abbas, at the tip of the Mussandam Peninsula on the southern, Arabian, side of the 29-mile-wide strait. Khor Kuwai was

a narrow, crooked arm of the sea . . . bounded on one side by the mainland, with high rugged mountains of red rock entirely without vegetation, and on the other by a barren island whose high stony hills support sparse, stunted shrubs and thorny bushes.<sup>7</sup>

Here the escort vessels refuelled, and spent at anchor their periods of rest and refreshment between escorting convoys or doing a spell of duty with

<sup>9</sup> Lt-Cdr P. G. Collins, RANR. Comd HMAS's *Launceston* 1942-44, *Castlemaine* 1944-45. Of Perth, WA; b. Leicester, England, 14 Apr 1901.

<sup>1</sup> HMAS's *Launceston* and *Ipswich*, corvettes (1942), 650 tons, one 4-in gun, 15½ kts.

<sup>2</sup> Lt-Cdr J. S. McBryde, RANR. Comd HMAS's *Ipswich* 1942-44, *Kalgoorlie* 1944-45. Master mariner; of Melbourne; b. Port Logan, Scotland, 30 May 1896.

<sup>3</sup> Cdr W. J. Seymour, RAN. HMAS *Westralia* 1940-42; comd HMAS *Gawler* 1942-44. Instructor; of Melbourne; b. Carshalton, England, 7 Apr 1900.

<sup>4</sup> HMIS's *Punjab* and *Madras*, corvettes (1942), 650 tons, one 3-in gun, 15½ kts.

<sup>5</sup> HMAS *Tamworth*, corvette (1942), 650 tons, one 4-in gun, 15½ kts.

<sup>6</sup> Lt W. H. Deans, RANR. HMAS *Ipswich* 1942; comd HMAS *Tamworth* 1942-43. Of Newcastle, NSW; b. Glasgow, Scotland, 14 Nov 1900. Died 24 Sep 1943.

<sup>7</sup> J. S. McBryde, in *As You Were*, 1950, p. 69.

the Straits Patrol outside in the Gulf of Oman, on the east side of the Mussandam Peninsula. It was not a salubrious spot, not, despite the romantic associations of the area, "paradise enow". The shade temperature in the Persian Gulf during September 1942 ranged between a maximum of 106 degrees and a minimum of 74, with a relative humidity of 40 degrees. In the walled-in anchorage of Khor Kuwai the conditions were sweltering, and McBryde in *Ipswich* later recalled of his spells there that "the monotony and boredom of a patrol in the Gulf of Oman was often to be preferred to a spell in Khor Kuwai". Yet it had its compensations: those in *Ipswich* found (as did the ships' companies of the other Australian corvettes who were with the Persian Gulf escort groups) that:

the adjacent seas swarmed with fish of every description, the coral shallows of the coast were alive with crayfish, and the tidal rocks of the island were covered with the largest and finest oysters we had ever seen.<sup>8</sup>

Ships with small refrigerator stowage were hard put to it in these conditions, and H.M.S. *Caradoc*<sup>9</sup> (who relieved *Capetown* in the Gulf on 15th October as guard cruiser) noted in her war diary that

some meatless periods are inevitable in the Persian Gulf. On two or three occasions H.M.S. *Alaunia* was able to come to our rescue. Once, a bullock, slaughtered on board by an R.A.N.V.R. officer in the absence of the butcher, provided a supply of meat and a good profit to the Crown. But by far the best larder-stocker was a seine net borrowed from H.M.I.S. *Sutlej*. With it a visit to Henjam, Khassab Bay or Khor Ghubb Ali always provided an ample supply of fresh fish and turtles for the whole ship.

Because of earlier Japanese submarine operations in the Arabian Sea, ships from Bombay and Karachi—as the number of *Geraldton's* initial convoy indicates—had for some time been sailed in convoy ("BP" convoys) as far as the Strait of Hormuz. Early in September the first experimental convoy outward from the Persian Gulf to Bombay was being assembled at Bandar Abbas when the sinking by a submarine of the British *Gazon* (4,224 tons) in the Gulf of Aden caused it to be split into "PA" (Persian Gulf-Aden) and "PB" (Persian Gulf-Bombay) sections. These parted company east of Ras al Hadd—the easternmost point of Oman and southern portal of the gulf of that name—where ocean-going traffic disengaged and proceeded independently and the Aden and Bombay convoys made for their respective destinations. The system then inaugurated continued, with variations according to the availability of escort vessels and the reported positions of submarines. As "Snop-gee"<sup>1</sup> wrote in his war diary on 21st November 1942: "Naturally, at that stage nothing was as strong as it should have been but, in a somewhat hand to mouth way, it worked." Conditions soon stabilised with Bandar Abbas sending out convoys every five or six days (by the end of October six "PB" and four "PA" convoys had sailed from Bandar Abbas since the inception of the

<sup>8</sup> McBryde, p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> HMS *Caradoc*, cruiser (1917), 4,180 tons, five 6-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 29 kts.

<sup>1</sup> SNOFG, short title for Senior Naval Officer, Persian Gulf.

convoy system in the Persian Gulf), and in September, arising from the appearance of submarines in the Gulf of Aden, in addition to the existing inward "BP" convoys, Aden-Persian Gulf ("AP") convoys were instituted. In the early stages air cover was non-existent, and at the end of September "air escorts in the Gulf of Oman were still embryonic owing to lack of aircraft", but the situation soon improved—partly owing to *Geraldton*.

That ship made her first arrival in the Persian Gulf with "BP.54" on 11th September, and was followed later in the month by *Bathurst* with convoy "BP.56". On 13th September *Geraldton* left Bandar Abbas with an Aden convoy, "PA.2", and was returning with a convoy from that port when, on 29th September, she attacked a strong submarine contact in the Gulf of Oman, but without tangible result so far as the submarine was concerned. There were, however, repercussions, and in October "Snop-gee" reported:

As a result of *Geraldton*'s depth-charge attack on 29th September, 18 Bisleys arrived as air reinforcements. These are based on Sharjah with an advance base at Ras al Hadd. Three Catalinas arrived about 14th October, and are based on Bahrein, with Ras al Hadd as an advanced base. All incoming ships from west of 62 E. and south of 22 N. now pass within 60 miles of Ras al Hadd and a tram line from there to the Strait is patrolled by aircraft. Outgoing convoys have air escort until clear of Ras al Hadd.

For the remainder of 1942 *Geraldton* and *Bathurst* (Lieut-Commander MacDonald<sup>2</sup>) were with Persian Gulf convoys. *Lismore* escorted "BP.61" of twelve ships in December. The rest of the corvettes as they joined the Eastern Fleet from Australia were allotted to other escorting work, with occasionally a special task. *Launceston* initially reached Colombo from Diego Garcia on 24th September, and was employed escorting between that port and Addu Atoll. In the late afternoon of 13th October the ship *Martaban* (4,161 tons) was torpedoed, set on fire, and abandoned by her crew, off the south-east coast of Ceylon. *Launceston* was one of three ships—the others were H.M.S. *Aster*<sup>3</sup> and H.M.I.S. *Netravati* (1,540 tons)—which "took part together with a considerable number of Catalinas and other aircraft" in operations to save the stricken ship and her company. By the time she was taken in tow by *Aster*, *Martaban* had drifted about 250 miles in a strong north-east current to a position 240 miles east of Trincomalee, at which port *Aster* arrived with her on 21st October. Sixty-one of *Martaban*'s crew of 64 were rescued from the lifeboats in which they abandoned ship by *Launceston*, who picked up two boats in the vicinity of *Martaban* when she was taken in tow, and by *Netravati* who picked up the other two boats only 40 miles from where the ship was torpedoed, and 200 miles from *Launceston*'s two. In both instances the lifeboats were first found by Catalina aircraft.

A Catalina was responsible for a short but unremunerative operation

<sup>2</sup> Lt-Cdr C. MacDonald, RANR. Comd HMAS's *Bathurst* 1942-44, *Bundaberg* 1944-45. Tug master; of Newcastle, NSW; b. Glasgow, Scotland, 28 Nov 1904. Lt-Cdr MacDonald succeeded Lt-Cdr A. V. Bunyan in command of *Bathurst* on 18th October 1942.

<sup>3</sup> HMS *Aster*, corvette (1941), 925 tons, one 4-in AA gun, 17 kts.

in which two of the Australian ships took part a few days later, in another Force "Q" whose formation and brief career shortly antedated that of Rear-Admiral Harcourt's Force "Q" in the Mediterranean. On the morning of 30th October a Catalina cruising westerly from Addu Atoll sighted a homeward-bound submarine which seemed to be making for the channel between Addu Atoll and the Chagos Islands to the south. A hunt was organised in which the hastily-formed Force "Q", comprising H.M. Ships *Fritillary*<sup>4</sup> and *Hoxa*<sup>5</sup> from Addu Atoll, and H.M.A. Ships *Lismore* (who had been anti-submarine escort to a convoy from Colombo to Addu) and *Cairns* (who had just arrived on the station and was making her initial visit to Kilindini after delivering the tanker *Hilda Knudsen*, 9,178 tons, at Diego Garcia) collaborated with a force of Catalinas based on Addu. The operation, which was adversely affected by bad weather and low visibility, produced no results by the evening of 1st November. It was therefore abandoned, and that Force "Q" ceased to exist.

## VII

By the beginning of the second half of 1942 the east coast waters of the United States and the Caribbean, because of the introduction there of the convoy system, were no longer the rewarding hunting ground they had been for German submarines. The main weight of the U-boat attack had to revert to the mid-Atlantic against convoys to and from Britain, and it was with this in view that the German High Command planned future U-boat operations. The increase in the number of boats becoming operational<sup>6</sup> enabled the German planners to detail two groups for operations against Atlantic convoys and at the same time to engage in certain subsidiary operations. These included a sudden surprise onslaught in the area of the Cape. It entailed a voyage of 6,000 miles from base to operational area. In mid-August four large "IXC" boats left Biscay ports for the Cape, accompanied by a "Milch cow" submarine tanker. They were known as the "Polar Bear" group.<sup>7</sup> On 12th September, in mid-ocean some 200 miles north-east of Ascension Island, *U 156* sank the liner *Laconia* (19,695 tons) whose company of 2,664 included 1,800 Italian prisoners of war. When the plight of his Italian allies was discovered, the captain of *U 156* set about rescue operations and at the same time signalled the German Admiralty for instructions. The result was an order from Doenitz to the "Polar Bear" group to break off their Cape operation and help *U 156* in rescue work. The "Polar Bear" boats, excepting *U 156* which was replaced in the group by *U 159*, were released by Doenitz on 14th September to resume the Cape operation, but two boats from the Freetown area carried on in their place, together with Vichy French warships from Dakar.

<sup>4</sup> HMS *Fritillary*, corvette (1941), 925 tons, one 4-in AA gun, 17 kts.

<sup>5</sup> HMS *Hoxa*, minesweeper (1941), 560 tons, one 4-in AA gun.

<sup>6</sup> Admiral Doenitz, *Memoirs* (1959), p. 238. "In July, August and September 1942 the exceptionally high number of thirty new boats per month were ready for operational duties."

<sup>7</sup> "Polar Bear" group comprised *U 68*, *U 504*, *U 172*, and *U 156*, with "milch cow" *U 459*. The "IXC" boats were of 1,120 tons surface displacement, with an endurance of 13,450 miles at 10 knots.



Unfortunately the U-boats, during their rescue work, were bombed by American aircraft. Doenitz, understandably, issued an order directing that survivors of ships sunk were not to be rescued. This, again understandably in view of the detailed instructions in the order, was held against him at the Nuremberg trial as a violation of the Protocol of 1936.<sup>8</sup>

The boats of the "Polar Bear" group, after this brief interruption, reached their operation area at the Cape during the first week in October, simultaneously with the first of a larger type ("IXD2", 1,612 tons surface displacement, 31,500 miles endurance at 10 knots), *U 179* whose greater speed enabled her to overtake the "Polar Bear" group on the run down the South Atlantic. The attack opened on 7th October, and within 24 hours six ships, aggregating 33,000 tons, were sunk within a radius of 100 miles of Table Bay by *U 179*, *U 172*, and *U 68*.

On the day the attack opened, H.M.A.S. *Nizam* arrived at Simonstown from Durban for a refit. Also there for the same purpose was her Eastern Fleet companion *Foxhound*. The Admiralty authorised Vice-Admiral Tait,<sup>9</sup> Commander-in-Chief South Atlantic (whose headquarters were at Capetown), to defer their refits and retain them until reinforcements arrived, and similarly to retain and use the destroyers H.M. Ships *Arrow* and *Active*,<sup>1</sup> which were at Simonstown on their way to Freetown. Meanwhile anti-submarine reinforcements were hastily concentrated at Simonstown, but did not arrive until heavy losses had been suffered.<sup>2</sup>

*Nizam* sailed from Simonstown early on 8th October to search for survivors from the Greek *Koumoundouros* (3,598 tons) sunk by *U 68* about 37 miles S.S.W. of Capetown. She sighted boats during the forenoon, and picked up all survivors by 1 p.m. For the rest of the day she carried out anti-submarine patrol with the other three destroyers. At about 10.40 p.m. the four ships were 65 miles north-west of Capetown, searching in line abreast two miles apart, when *Active* (who shortly before had picked up 99 survivors from the *City of Athens* (6,558 tons), torpedoed that afternoon by *U 504* about 55 miles north-west of Capetown) sighted a large U-boat on the surface. *Active* illuminated by searchlight and successfully attacked, first with gunfire and later, when the submarine dived and passed close down the destroyer's port side, with depth charges. *U 179*, *Active*'s victim, was the first of a total of two enemy submarines

<sup>8</sup> The London Protocol of November 1936 denounced submarine war on merchant shipping—and Germany joined with other Powers in this denunciation at that time. The Doenitz order prohibiting the rescue of survivors, issued on 17th September (the day after *U 156* was bombed) was: "All attempts to rescue the crews of sunken ships will cease forthwith. This prohibition applies equally to the picking up of men in the water and putting them aboard a lifeboat, to the righting of capsized lifeboats and to the supply of food and water. Such activities are a contradiction of the primary object of war, namely, the destruction of enemy ships and their crews." (Doenitz, p. 263.) Brevity, in restriction of this order to its first sentence, would have been better in this instance.

<sup>9</sup> Admiral Sir Campbell Tait, KCB, MVO; RN. Director of Personal Services 1941; C-in-C South Atlantic Station 1942-44; Governor of Southern Rhodesia 1945-46. B. 1886. Died 17 Jul 1946.

<sup>1</sup> HMS's *Arrow* and *Active*, destroyers (1930), 1,350 tons, four 4.7-in guns, eight 21-in torpedo tubes, 35 kts.

<sup>2</sup> These reinforcements included six destroyers from the Eastern Fleet, among them two more Australian ships, *Norman* and *Nepal*; and a number of anti-submarine trawlers from the United Kingdom and the United States, these last mentioned having been lent to the US Navy Department when the German submarine offensive opened on the American coast at the beginning of the year.

sunk in the immediate Cape area, and the second was not sunk until March 1944.

The opening of the "IXD2"-type submarine attack was thus inauspicious for the attackers. But the four boats of the "Polar Bear" group had a series of successes unmarred by losses on their side. By the end of October they sank 23 ships of 156,230 tons.<sup>3</sup> On the night 8th-9th October, *U 68* sank four ships aggregating 23,861 tons; and on the morning of the 10th *U 172* (who had opened the ball on the 7th by sinking two ships before 9 a.m.) accounted for the largest ship to be sunk in South African waters during the war—*Orcades*, a peacetime regular on the Australian run, of 23,456 tons. *Orcades* had formed part of the first convoy carrying the vanguard of the A.I.F. to the Middle East in early 1940. That day *Nizam*, who had landed the *Koumoundouros* survivors at Capetown on the 9th, and sailed again with *Foxhound* on patrol, picked up survivors from the torpedoed *Gaasterkerk* (8,679 tons) from a raft. In the evening the two destroyers were ordered by Admiral Tait to rendezvous with the Polish ship *Narwick*, which had picked up survivors from *Orcades* some 200 miles south of the Cape. Early in the morning of the 11th *Nizam* sighted and reported a submarine on the surface 150 miles south-west of Table Bay. She and *Foxhound* closed the enemy, and *U 159*—for it was she—crash dived. The two destroyers commenced a search and obtained a contact, when they were ordered to proceed to find *Narwick* and escort her to Capetown. This they did, and reached port on the 12th. On 20th October *Nizam*, after some more anti-submarine patrols in the Cape area, went to Simonstown to resume her delayed refit. This took until 28th December. On its conclusion she returned to the Eastern Fleet.

Meanwhile the six Eastern Fleet destroyers lent to the South Atlantic command arrived in the Cape area. Two days after *Nizam* and *Foxhound* broke off their search for *U 159* and left her to live to fight another day, the submarine—in the afternoon of 13th October—torpedoed and sank *Empire Nomad* (7,167 tons). On 21st October H.M.A.S. *Norman* (Commander H. M. Burrell) picked up one of the torpedoed ship's lifeboats with 15 survivors. And it was *U 159* who, on 29th October, sank the British *Laplace* (7,327 tons). That day *Nepal*, with the R.N. destroyer *Fortune*, sailed from Capetown for a position about 340 miles south of Agulhas to search for a submarine which had been detected in the area. They were diverted to the position of *Laplace* when that ship's submarine alarm broadcast was received. But *Laplace*'s survivors were picked up by *Porto Alegre* (6,105 tons) which herself fell a victim to *U 504* on 3rd November. By now the boats of "Polar Bear" group were turning for home. They had sunk 30 ships, aggregating nearly 200,000 tons. Among the last of their sinkings were those by *U 68* and *U 172* in mid-South Atlantic reaching up towards the tropics on the road to Lorient, where the four boats arrived at intervals of a few days during the period 6th

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<sup>3</sup> Roskill, Vol II, p. 269.

December to 5th January. And with that easing of the situation in the Cape area the Eastern Fleet destroyers returned to the Indian Ocean.

The departure of the "Polar Bear" group was, however, offset by the arrival in southern African waters of the three remaining boats—*U 177*, *U 178*, *U 181*—of the "IXD2" class, and these enjoyed a period of operation which contrasted happily—for them—with the brief operational career of *U 179*. During the last two months of the year the three newcomers harried merchant ships in the Durban-Lourenco Marques area. One of their first victims was the American *Pierce Butler* (7,191 tons) torpedoed by *U 177* about 200 miles east of Durban on 20th November. *Nepal* landed 93 of her survivors at that port. In their period of operations in the southern approaches to the Mozambique Channel these three U-boats sank 20 ships totalling about 102,000 tons. They made November the Indian Ocean's worst month since the Japanese Bay of Bengal incursion the previous April.<sup>4</sup> By December the situation improved somewhat when the arrival of escort vessels enabled the institution of coastal convoys between Capetown and Durban and, in some instances, northward as far as Lourenco Marques. At intervals during December the three U-boats began their homeward passages to their French bases; and none was in the area after Christmas 1942.

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<sup>4</sup> Roskill, Vol II, p. 270. In November 1942 the overall sinkings by U-boats reached the highest total of the war—117 ships of over 700,000 tons. (H. Busch, *U-Boats at War*, 1955, p. 150.)