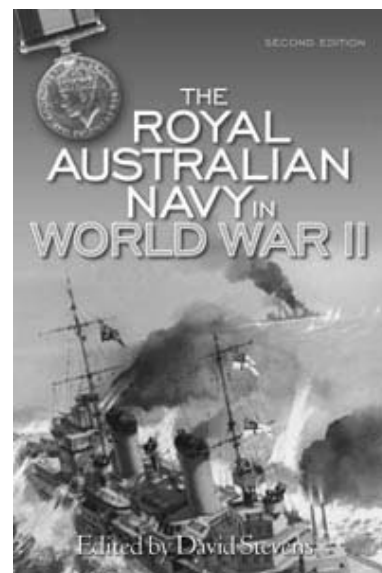


# The Royal Australian Navy in World War II

David Stephens (ed.)

Reviewed by David Campbell



The first edition of this book appeared almost a decade ago, as the proceedings of the 1995 Naval History Conference held at the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney, as part of the 'Australia Remembers 1945–95' commemorations fifty years after the end of World War II. This second edition is more than a reprinting in response to public demand (particularly at the Australian War Memorial's shop); David Stevens has taken the opportunity to expand the book by some 50 per cent (by page count) with the inclusion of additional material from other sources both before and after 1995. The result is highly satisfying.

The 1995 Conference was nicely structured with papers on strategy and operations, infrastructure and personnel, and there was a pleasing symmetry of objectivity and subjectivity. However, this was constrained by the need to fit everything into two days. The second edition of this book is freed from these limitations and is now about as good a coverage of the RAN in World War II as you could reasonably expect in a single volume. It's still not a comprehensive history in the conventional sense. Rather, twenty-one disparate chapters, each a stand-alone essay, combine to faithfully capture the essence of those six years of global conflict at sea. It is, as the editor says in his introduction, 'a few brief scenes from a substantially greater canvas'. What I especially like about the book is the retained mixture of dispassionate and professional analysis on the one hand and the very personal observations of those who were there on the other. It makes for a very flexible and lively book—one you can read determinedly from cover to cover or simply dip into from time to time. Of course, Gill's two-volume official history remains as the definitive account.

Now, for the changes. David Stevens has added a chapter on the exercise of naval diplomacy through the actions of Captain H.A. Showers in HMAS *Adelaide* at Noumea in 1940, a role, he notes, that the RAN regularly continues to undertake. Eric Grove's original paper on the Mediterranean is fleshed out by a personal account by Bill Reeve on the Scrap Iron Flotilla in 1940–41. The much neglected subject of Australians in midget submarines is rectified by Ray Worledge, who tells of their harrowing exploits from the *Tirpitz* in Bergen to cable-cutting off Hong Kong. Peter Hore (a new face in Australian naval history) has contributed a fresh study of HMAS *Sydney*.

Incidentally, the *Sydney-Bartolomeo Colleoni*

engagement is featured as the somewhat lurid front cover illustration—it's the sort of picture you used to see on J.E. Macdonnell's novels—and is the only aspect of the book that strikes a jarring note.

There is a chapter on Vice-Admiral Sir John Collins from the 1993 conference, 'Reflections on the RAN', to balance the first edition's paper on Rear-Admiral H.B. Farncomb, 'First to a Flag', also by the late Tony Grazebrook. Frank Broeze's original final chapter (a summary of the conference's proceedings) has been deleted and is replaced by an invaluable piece by Joe Straczek on further reading within the historiography, which is growing at an impressive and very satisfying rate.

There is a new and useful appendix on ships and personnel facts and figures, taken from the RAN volume of the *Australian Centenary History of Defence*. The book is well illustrated and amongst the 53 scattered halftones are a number I've not seen before—always a gratifying experience—such as that of HMAS *Hobart* in Sutherland Dock after her torpedoing in 1943, the scrapping of HMAS *Moresby* and, particularly, those from the personal collections of Bill Reeve and Ray Worledge. Finally, the book is strongly supported by notes and acknowledgements and a workmanlike index. All that's missing is a chapter by the ubiquitous Tom Frame, and that's a pity.

The book is dedicated to those who served with or alongside the RAN. It is a fitting tribute. Lest we forget: more than 2000 lives were lost in naval service, proportionately more than those of the Army or Air Force.

A reviewer would be remiss in his duty if he didn't detect at least one error. There is indeed one: John F. Kennedy was commissioned into the USNR, not the USN (p. 267). That triviality aside, this is excellent book—a thoughtful and improved second edition—and well worth the modest price. And would whoever has my first edition please give it back? ♦

David Stevens (ed.), *The Royal Australian Navy in World War II*, 2nd Edition, Allen&Unwin, Sydney, 2005, Softback, 316pp., RRP \$39.95.