

HMAS Tobruk: Warship For Every Crisis

Ken Doolan

Reviewed by Peter Leschen

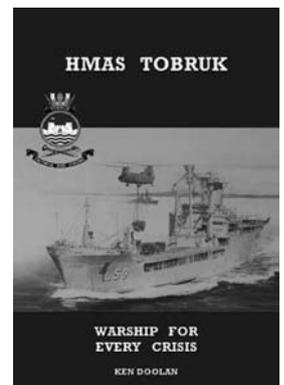
The ongoing development of ADF operational manoeuvre and especially amphibious capabilities is a key theme in Australian strategic thinking since the Vietnam War. While *HMAS Tobruk: Warship for Every Crisis* focuses on the development, build and service of a particular ship, her involvement in so many crises and operations throughout her long career enables Ken Doolan to place the story in its broader context, tracing some of the key policy developments in response to Australia's changing strategic and political circumstances. As the first commanding officer, Ken Doolan has intimate knowledge of *Tobruk* and the trials and tribulations of building and commissioning her. Later in his 41-year career, he was the Maritime Commander and the Assistant Chief of the Defence Force (Development). This breadth of experience and knowledge is evident throughout the book, so it is no surprise that it appeals at a number of levels, and to a number of audiences.

The account starts with the early history of the RAN's amphibious capabilities. He then discusses the capability gap that occurred after the former aircraft carrier HMAS *Sydney*, later recommissioned as a fast troop transport in 1962, finally paid off in 1973, and the subsequent debates about amphibious requirements. Shepherding the *Tobruk* project through a Department of Defence taking its first steps towards a unified department and a more joint-focused ADF is a fascinating story. The book then describes the build, trials and commissioning of the ship at Carrington Slipways, before moving on to her operational career.

For someone with an interest in *Tobruk* the book is a great source of information. Ken Doolan has personal insight into life onboard and his research for the book has included interviews with many people who either served in the ship or were involved in building and supporting her. As a result, there are many vignettes from life onboard throughout her career which will bring back plenty of memories to those who served in her.

The book is also of great interest to anyone involved in defence procurement or warship building. The early chapters provide an insight into the machinations of the Navy, Army and Defence staffs and their involvement with Carrington Slipways as the requirement was developed, the tender and contract were let, and the ship was built. The persistence and drive of Commander Peter Shevlin, first as champion of an ADF amphibious capability and then as *Tobruk* Project Director, is highlighted. This illustrates the important impact a single individual can have on major defence decisions, even in a large bureaucracy filled with conflicting views about the importance of amphibious capabilities.

While this all occurred some 30 years ago, anyone involved with the current Air Warfare Destroyer and LHD projects will recognise many of the issues and lessons learned.



The book also, however, illustrates how much has changed over this time as the ADF has adopted an ever-increasingly joint approach to operations and capability development. In particular, the *Tobruk* requirement was the cause of considerable disagreement between Navy and Army, in marked contrast to the development of the AWD and LHD requirements, which have a strong joint motivation and determined support from all three Service since before the 2000 Defence White Paper.

At another level, the sheer number of operations that *Tobruk* has participated in through her long career provides a window into the ADF's operational history since the mid-1970s. The book details *Tobruk's* involvement with operations in the Sinai, in Fiji following the first 1987 coup, in Somalia, Bougainville, East Timor, the Solomons, border protection through Operation RELEX, and Iraq. Additionally, she has been involved in commemoration visits to Gallipoli and in Indonesia following the Sea King crash at Nias in 2005. In short, there are not many ADF operations over the last quarter century in which *Tobruk* has not been involved.

This history, and the book's insights into the circumstances surrounding each operation, illuminate the development of defence policy and strategy, starting with the uncertainty regarding amphibious requirements when *Tobruk* was conceived. Subsequently, following the 1987 Defence White Paper and the end of the Cold War a few years later, the importance of amphibious capabilities was again questioned by some in the context of the more restrictive interpretations of the Defence-of-Australia doctrine. In the mid 1990s, when the ADF acquired HMA Ships *Kanimbla* and *Manoora* from the US, the initial intention was to pay off *Tobruk* early as a partial offset for the new ships. By 1997, however, the ever-increasing requirements for amphibious and sealift capabilities in our region led to a Government decision to retain *Tobruk*. Indeed *Tobruk* and the two LPAs have since proved to be among the most useful ships in the fleet. Their obvious utility in our dynamic strategic environment helped pave the way for approval of the LHD requirement and subsequent contract, which will in turn provide improved strategic options for future Governments.

The book is laid out chronologically and has something of the feel of a ship's report of proceedings about it. Nevertheless, there are plenty of anecdotes to bring *Tobruk's* story to life, as well as the human aspects of some of the higher-level debates in the Department of Defence. ♦

Ken Doolan, '*HMAS Tobruk: Warship for Every Crisis*', Grinkle Press, Queanbeyan NSW, 2007, Softback, 157pp., RRP \$A33.00 (plus \$A10.00 for postage if purchased from the publisher)