

CALL THE HANDS

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THE REMARKABLE SHORT LIFE OF HMAS NESTOR – THE SHIP THAT NEVER CAME HOME

The following address was delivered Commander Walter Burroughs RAN Rtd during the 75th anniversary ceremony conducted by the RAN on Garden Island, Sydney 16 June 2017.

I am honoured to give this address commemorating the loss of HMAS *Nestor*, together with four of her gallant crew, exactly 75 years ago on 16 June 1942.

The importance of the “N-class”

I first came into contact with the formidable “N Class Association” through a chance meeting with Mrs Jennifer Cook. Jenny was the wife of the late Captain Bill Cook. Bill, one of our youngest destroyer captains, earned his spurs, first as XO, and then CO, of HMAS *Nizam*.

At this social gathering, my lack of knowledge of the N-class brought howls of derision from the glamorous Jenny, who made it her mission to insure I knew the importance of these ships in the naval hierarchy. Suitably admonished this encouraged me to further research, and to become wary of sweet older ladies, with excellent memories of ships past.

With war clouds looming in the late 1930s Great Britain went into a phase of rapid rearmament. With a shortage of destroyers there was a need to increase production using simpler designs.

This was the genesis for 24 ships built in three batches known as the “J, K & N’s”. They were fine fighting units but suffered from limited fuel supplies reducing their effective range, and the significant main armament of six 4.7-inch guns was flawed in the anti-aircraft role, being limited to 40 degrees elevation. Later improvements were made removing the after torpedo tubes and installing a high-angle 4-inch gun and, the half-inch Vickers machine guns were replaced by larger calibre, 20 mm Oerlikons.

HMS Nestor

Nestor, the third of her class was build along with her destroyer leader *Napier*, at Fairfield’s Clydeside yard. HMAS *Nestor* was commissioned on 3 February 1941 by Commander George Stewart, RAN. This

must have been an exciting if cold and miserable time for most of her inexperienced crew. Many of these young men were reservists and few had seen action.

After three weeks of trials *Nestor* sailed from Greenock for the Royal Navy's northern base situated at Scapa Flow, one of the bleakest spots in the kingdom. It did not disappoint as they arrived to a reception of snow and ice. However, they were enthusiastically greeted by the Rear Admiral (Destroyers) Sir Louis Hamilton. The work-up was brief and they were soon escorting convoys to Iceland.

Nestor was one of four destroyers accompanying the 18th Cruiser Squadron far into the Arctic Circle, to 72 degrees north, to intercept the German weather ship *Munchen*. This small ship with her crew was captured intact, most importantly with her code books. With code books secured by a mystery man from Naval Intelligence, *Nestor* was despatched at full speed to Scapa, with the mystery man flown to London for Bletchley Park to help break the Enigma code.

A few days after this successful cloak and dagger episode, and only three months into the commission, "Big Bill" Stewart was relieved of his command. There were disciplinary concerns, brought about by heavy drinking. The ship's Medical Officer, the remarkable 25 year old reservist Surgeon Lieutenant Shane Watson, was prevailed upon to go ashore and apprise the Flag Officer of the situation. Marines were sent to remove three senior officers for court martial.

As a temporary measure the Captain of the depot ship HMS *Tyne* took command with a new First Lieutenant, Lieutenant George Crowley, RN appointed. A week later Commander Alvord Rosenthal, RAN assumed command of *Nestor*. Rosenthal, an experienced destroyer captain, had been standing by to take command of HMAS *Norman*. There were no further incidents and the crew, who were not disciplined, displayed restraint and worked enthusiastically under the new command.

With troubles behind them, *Nestor* sailed with the Home Fleet to "Hunt the *Bismark*" which had just sunk HMS *Hood* with devastating loss of life. While the bigger ships, the battleship *King George V*, the carrier *Victorious* and four cruisers ploughed on and eventually cornered their quarry, *Nestor* and five other destroyers, were obliged to retire to Iceland to refuel.

In company with four destroyers *Nestor* next escorted the battleship *Nelson* to Gibraltar to join Admiral Somerville's Force "H". Somerville had the finest ships the navy could provide. They were charged with convoying seven large and fast armed merchantmen taking essential supplies to the starving Maltese garrison. The convoy sailed from Gibraltar, under cover of darkness and fog, in the early hours of 21 July. In reduced visibility the troopship *Leinster* ran aground and was left behind.

The following day, they were discovered by Italian submarines with two torpedos passing under *Nestor* and narrowly missing *Renown*. Off Sardinia, they were fiercely attacked by high level bombers and then torpedo bombers but with its immense firepower, only one destroyer was sunk and one cruiser and another destroyer retired damaged, but the merchantmen remained intact. With the worse onslaught thought to be over and coming within range of air coverage from Malta, after dark the heavy ships turned back for Gibraltar.

However, later that night they were again attacked, by Italian E-Boats, and one of the convoy, *Sydney Star*, with 500 troops aboard fell astern. *Nestor* was dispatched and found the ship had been hit by torpedo and gunfire and was in danger of sinking. In darkness a boat transfer would take forever, so at 3 am *Nestor* secured alongside *Sydney Star* and within one hour took off all non-essential personnel. *Nestor*, now with 774 souls on board, lead the stricken ship and, subject to more air attacks, eventually made Malta. In helping save Malta, Commander Rosenthal was awarded his first DSO.

Back to Gib, and then more convoy duty to West Africa. On departing Bathurst in Gambia, *Nestor* prosecuted a suspected submarine contact. However she suffered accidental damage when one of her depth charges detonated prematurely. This necessitated returning to Plymouth for repairs. It was then back up north to the Clyde where *Nestor* was joined by her recently commissioned sister *Norman*.

On 15 December when off Cape St Vincent a submarine was sighted on the surface. They closed and opened fire from A & B turrets before the target submerged. She then made asdic contact and attacked with depth charges, afterwards oil and debris was seen on the surface. *Nestor* is credited with sinking submarine *U-127*, earning "Rosie" a Bar to his DSO. And who could forget the "Schoolie" Richard (Dick) Fennessy the master of plotting tables who once he found a target could not be shaken off – for his efforts Dick received a DSC.

After her submarine adventure *Nestor* sailed for Malta arriving on Christmas Eve. It was onwards to Alexandria where she met her sisters *Napier* and *Nizam*. The three "N's" transited the Canal then escorted the carrier *Indomitable* with 50 Hurricanes, reinforcements for the Malayan campaign. The Fleet then assembled at Trincomalee expecting to meet a full-scale Japanese attack. They were joined by *Norman* in February. Their numbers were severely depleted with the loss to Japanese air attacks of the carrier HMS *Hermes* and her escorting destroyer HMAS *Vampire*. In April all four "N's" returned to the Med.

Another operation was undertaken aimed at escorting eleven merchant ships through to Malta from the east. This was a risky operation with heavy losses anticipated while transiting "Bomb Alley" between Egypt and Crete.

On 15 June 1942 there was no doubt about *Nestor's* ability but her luck ran out when she was straddled and crippled by three 1000 pound bombs during a high level air attack. Two bombs exploded almost simultaneously falling within feet on either side of the ship and the third near her stern. The impact practically blew her out of the water and broke her back. She was holed amidships with water flooding into No 1 Boiler Room. The Boiler Room was in semi darkness and filling with oily water and dangerous super-heated steam cascading everywhere. This did not stop the ship's Medical Officer, the indomitable Shane Watson, from entering the Boiler Room. He helped recover all four men but none could be revived. *Nestor* was taken under tow but the next day the decision was made to transfer her ship's company to HMS *Javelin* and confine the sinking ship to the deep. For his courageous efforts Surgeon Lieutenant Watson was awarded the DSC.

HMAS *Nestor* lived the life of the Greek hero whose name she proudly bore. She had a short life measured in months rather than years. During some of the darkest days of WWII she was always to be found near the centre of action. She fought gallantly alongside such famous ships as *Ark Royal*, *Nelson* and *Renown* and was never found wanting. *Nestor* was of course unique being the only Australian warship never to sail in Australian waters.

When HMS *Javelin* reached Alexandria the *Nestor* survivors were disembarked and most drafted to other destroyers. Lieutenant Crowley, was awarded the DSC and posted as First Lieutenant of HMAS *Norman*, he later rose to flag rank.

Today we remember and commemorate the loss of HMAS *Nestor* and pay tribute to those of her ship's company who lost their lives. These brave young men endured the winter treachery of the North Atlantic, the fierce ordeals of incessant warfare in the Mediterranean and, the uncertainties of entering into the Indian Ocean where the enemy had swept all before them. Let us remember:

Stoker Petty Officer Jack Brown Bulmer, of Penguin TAS – aged 28

Leading Stoker Campbell Hill, of Coolgarde WA – aged 24

Leading Stoker Mathew Burns, of the Royal Navy

And, Stoker Leslie Blight of Pingelly WA – aged just 19.

May they rest in peace.

THANK YOU



HMAS *Nestor* in North Atlantic 1941
NHSA Image



HMAS *Nestor* scuttling depth charges explode
AWM Image: 106670