

CALL THE HANDS

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Captain Frederick Melbourne Piggott RD RNR

Captain Frederick Melbourne Piggott RD RNR was born in the UK in April 1915 and moved to Australia in 1943 where he trained young men to handle a Dutch submarine. This article is a personal reminiscence of his wartime service in submarines.

PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II and general hostilities, I had been serving as an officer in the Merchant Service with the Blue Funnel Line of Messrs. Alfred Holt & Co. Ltd. Previously I had been a cadet from 1929 to 1931 in H.M. School Ship Conway before going to sea as an apprentice. In 1938 I enlisted in the RNR and from February to May of that year trained in HMS Iron Duke in submarine L23.

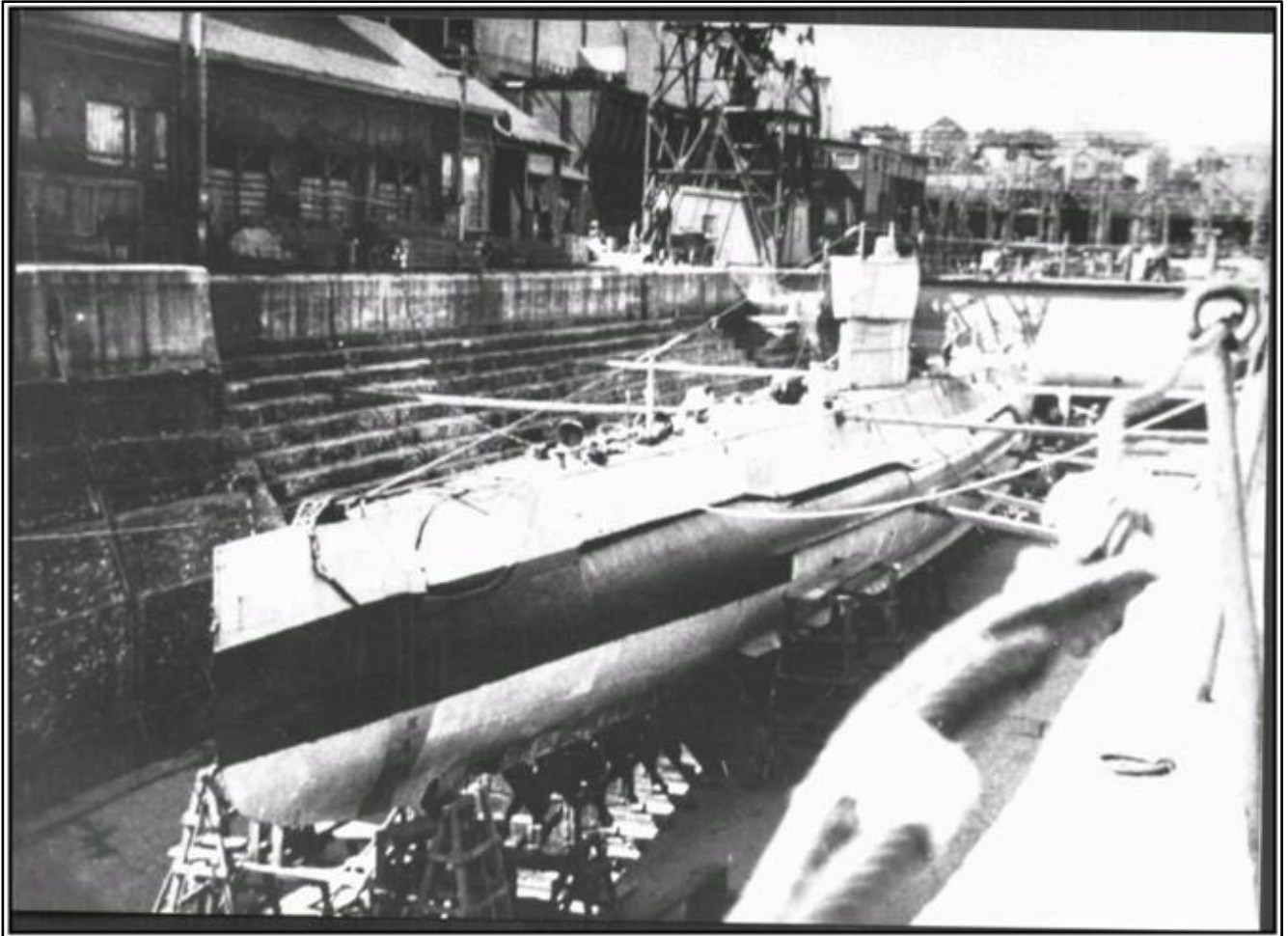
Submarine service – my choice – appealed to me in preference to destroyers and in August 1939 I went to HM Gunnery School, Devonport, and thence, in December, on active service until December 1946. My wartime submarine service really commenced with the joining of HMS Dolphin to undergo a course in August 1940, and a posting to L27 from 30.9.40 to 3.3.41 as a sub- lieutenant, navigating officer. Then followed various experiences in northern waters, including the torpedoing and blowing up of a 7,000 ton ammunition ship off Cherbourg. I transferred (on 4.3.41) as torpedo officer to S/M Otus. We sailed to Gibraltar to undergo a major refit, after which I was promoted 1st Lieutenant.

Mediterranean patrols proved exacting and one's capabilities were stretched to the limit. Operations in Otus included transporting stores, including aviation fuel, to Malta through a deep-laid minefield, sinking a 5,000 ton vessel and having to dive to 430 ft. to avoid a depth charging attack by destroyers. Next, with other units of the 1st Submarine Flotilla in Alexandria, being dispersed around the harbour during the night with our tubes trained on the French fleet, in case they attempted to leave. Another refit, because of problems with 'O' tanks, was required and this took place at Port Said. When completed and, while returning to Alexandria, Otus nearly ended up a casualty on a lee shore because the young navigator and CO had not allowed sufficient leeway to compensate for the strong northerly then blowing. To add to our troubles, and when the submarine reached Alexandria, the Torpedo Officer, on being told to do a Capt. (S) Shoot with a dummy round, took, by mistake, a practice shot, so that when the 'brick' was slammed home in the breech there was a mighty and unexpected bang! King Farouk's palace received its first direct hit from a submarine. Imagine the consequences! Shortly afterwards, a capless 2nd Cox'n came down into the submarine in a furious state to tell me his cap had been blown overboard and his ginger beard singed, because he was standing under the 4" gun when it went off. The 'brick' was never retrieved and probably is somewhere hidden around the palace today.

From S/M Otus I transferred to Porpoise to replace the 1st Lieutenant, who had been injured, and again became involved in stores and fuel runs from Alexandria to Malta. Soon after, I was recommended for command. I returned to Dolphin to do a 'Perisher' Course, joined Tribune as an additional CO; and was then appointed to command P556 ex-U.S. Navy (called 529) from November 1942 to March 1943.

In March of 1943 I learned that Australia had requested a submarine crew from the UK to take over an ex-Dutch S/M. The idea appealed and upon volunteering and being accepted for the job I was allowed to take those of my crew who were likewise interested. In this case the 1st Lieutenant, the navigating officer and ten others of my crew, which included the Chief ERA and the Chief TGM Australia House, London, thought the submarine was K14 or 15. The prospects delighted me!

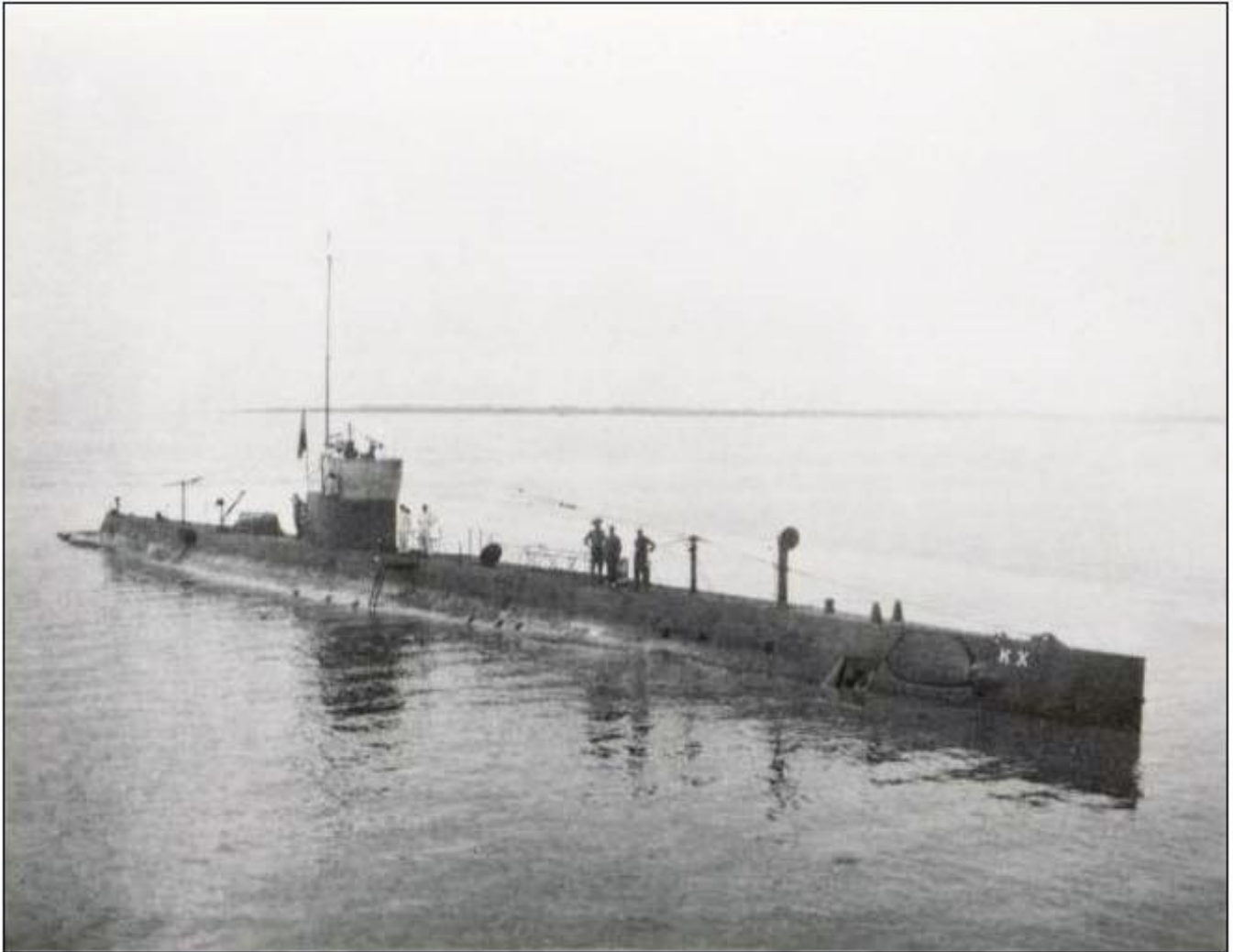
As it turned out, the S/M was a very tired old K9, launched in the Netherlands in 1922. It had defects a plenty, only railings on the bridge, and open to the sea when surfaced. She was a real challenge! A battery section had been shattered and other damage caused when the Kuttabul was sunk by a Japanese midget attack while K9 was alongside in May/June 1942. Since then a nest of 17 rats had been discovered in one of the main motors and they had eaten away the insulation from the field coils.



Familiarisation was the key to our success in repairing and then working up this old submarine to the necessary high standard. First class co-operation from all the Sydney dockyards personnel, coupled with the experience of my Chief ERA and Chief TGM and supporting crew, soon had the refitting efficiently on the move. Wherever possible K9's crew helped the dockyard hands, sometimes with both technical and construction work, and gratefully they never declared us black. However, the 'Canine', so nicknamed by my crew because in dry dock she looked like a pregnant bitch, aptly continued to have unexpected problems. These difficulties seriously slowed down progress and the re-birth.

Actually, I had to redesign and have constructed a complete new bridgework along with suitable submarine towing apparatus. Delays caused high level dissatisfaction and at one stage I was called to the office of the Chief of Staff and very impatiently ordered to have K9 ready for sea or face a Court Martial! However, next day apologies were made by the Chief of Staff who came aboard the K9. Work continued and in due course I was able to give my crew a week's training in dry diving, then a not too successful trial dive in the Rose Bay area. Apart from the date being the 13th of the month, I was unable to get the submarine to completely submerge, as she was too light and the area too restricted. Also, she was dry, having been above the surface for such a long period.

With these problems resolved we then did a one week's diving trial in Jervis Bay with HMAS Kybra as escort. More troubles and back to Sydney for alterations and improvements. This regrettably continued to be the routine, although we did some useful exercises with frigates and Australian minesweepers while K9 was attached to HMAS Rushcutter. Included in these activities was an arrangement with the RAAF to make a film of K9 at sea, diving, altering speed while submerged with periscope up, surfacing and manoeuvring. A similar exercise was carried out off Broken Bay with helicopters and Beauforts.



A main battery explosion finally decided the fate of K9. Further risks in such a submarine were not warranted and, in June 1944, I joined Adamant in Colombo. This gave me patrol experience in the Malay area and then I transferred, in August, to Tally Ho. After patrol, in which we sank a 300-ton coaster and three junks with shellfire, our return to Trincomalee saw me posted to Bombay to take command of Rover and again the job of rebuilding an older submarine. I had become a real DOCKYARD MATEY!

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