

The monograph extends the scholarship on British naval history, and in particular the period before the First World War. In addition, it provides a compelling account of the important evolution of the British Royal Navy's Home Fleet.

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Mike Carlton. *The Scrap Iron Flotilla. Five Valiant Destroyers and the Australian War in the Mediterranean*. Sydney, AUS: Penguin Random House Australia, www.penguin.com.au, 2023. 448 pp., illustrations, maps, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. AU \$24.99, CDN \$22.91, paper; ISBN 978-1-76104-201-0. (E-book available.)

Mike Carlton is an Australian journalist with a keen interest in Australian naval history and this is his fourth book concerning ships of the Royal Australian Navy during wartime. His others are *First Victory 1914: HMAS Sydney's Hunt for the German Raider Emden*, *Cruiser: The Life and Loss of HMAS Perth and Her Crew*, and *Flagship: The Cruiser HMAS Australia II and the Pacific War on Japan*. All his books display a journalistic flair, weaving an interesting story about the ship and its men that engages the reader from the opening chapter and *The Scrap Iron Flotilla* is cast from the same mould. Australian naval history only gains a passing interest from the average Australian reader, with land warfare gaining the lion's share of publications. Mike's journalistic talents have increased the navy's "market share" and enabled the history of the Royal Australian Navy to reach a much wider and larger audience. That said his work will often gloss over "bad news," enhance the "good news" and there is a liberal dose of "British Bashing" of senior officers and politicians.

The Scrap Iron Flotilla tells the story of five aged Australian destroyers during their service in the Mediterranean during 1939-1941. The ships were all built in the closing stages of the First World War and obtained by the Royal Australia Navy in the early 1930s. Already twenty years old when war broke out in 1939, they were offered to the Royal Navy for service in the Mediterranean and upon arrival, were described by the German propaganda machine as another load of "scrap metal" from Australia. The destroyer crews accepted the German slur with typical Aussie humour and quickly identified themselves as the Scrap Iron Flotilla. Similarly, when the Australian 9th Division was besieged in Tobruk, the German radio announcer William Joyce (Lord Haw Haw) described them as rats living in tunnels. The Australians soon happily identified themselves as the "Rats of Tobruk," which subsequently became a house-hold name throughout Australia. Also little known today is

that when the five destroyers (HMA Ships *Stuart*, *Vampire*, *Vendetta*, *Voyager*, and *Waterhen*) arrived in the Mediterranean, they were among the first Australian forces to serve overseas in the war; with the Royal Australian Air Force 10 Squadron already in England flying newly-acquired Sunderland flying boats and the recently commissioned cruiser HMAS *Perth*, then in the West Indies on her way home to Australia, retained for service in the Atlantic on the outbreak of war.

Carlton does an excellent job in weaving the story of the five ships and their crews across the broad expanse of the Mediterranean campaign using both official sources and first-hand information from crew members' letters, diaries, and senior officers' reports. The destroyers often operated separately on convoy escort duties and anti-submarine patrols during early 1940 in what was then described as the Phoney War. Bad weather in the Mediterranean winter of 1939-1940 was initially the main concern for the destroyer crews, but the ships were also soon showing their age as machinery failures became more common and the "Black Gang" of stokers and artificers were to labour day and night for the next two years to keep the ships operational. Living conditions on-board were spartan at best, with limited to no fresh food or hot water for washing and cracks in the deck meant the mess-decks were often awash with salt water. Mail was intermittent, although shore leave was granted whenever possible. While the weather, food and machinery were the main issues during these early days, morale was generally good.

The phoney war was not a reality for those serving in the Mediterranean and in early in 1940 a small group of the destroyer men were selected to take part in a clandestine operation in Romania, in March-May 1940, to block the Danube River and prevent Romanian oil reaching Germany. The operation was a failure, for various reasons, but all the Australian sailors eventually returned to their ships. Italy entered the war on the Axis side, on 10 June 1940 and from then on the intensity of operations at sea increased. There was also, following the fall of France, the internment of French warships in Alexandria and destruction of other French ships at Mers-El-Kebir, but the Scrap Iron Flotilla was not actively involved in these actions. Soon, however, the Australian destroyers were in actions against Italian submarines with *Stuart* involved in the sinking of *Gondar* on 30 September 1940. The Royal Navy's Mediterranean fleet, led by the brilliant British admiral Andrew Browne Cunningham (known colloquially by many as ABC) kept the pressure on the Italian fleet with significant actions at the Battles of Calabria (9 July 1940) and Cape Spada (19 July 1940); with the Australian destroyers involved at Calabria and the Australian light cruiser HMAS *Sydney* sinking the Italian light cruiser *Bartolomeo Colleoni* at Cape Spada. The Italian Fleet soon took up a "Fleet and Being" posture (staying in port or close to the Italian coastline) as it was constrained by a lack of fuel and poor air support from the Regia Aeronautica (Italian Air Force). Cunningham's

forces needed to be at sea frequently escorting convoys to Alexandria and Malta (then often under daily Italian air attack) and on land the Italian army was often content to stay within the borders of its colony of Libya.

While 1940 had been the overture, the next year was to prove to be a bitter and long campaign. On land the Italians were defeated at Bardia (3-5 January) and at sea at the battle of Matapan (27-29 March) but all was to change when Germany invaded, and captured Greece and Crete in early 1941. By the end of 1941, the Afrika Korps, under the command of General Erwin Rommel, had turned the tables on the Allied campaign in North Africa and the Mediterranean. Carlton describes the sheer hard slog for the Australian destroyers evacuating Allied troops from Greece and Crete and the "Tobruk Ferry Run" to resupply the British and Australian troops defending the besieged port city. The toll of the convoy escort work was demanding and HMAS *Vampire* departed the Mediterranean, for a major refit in Singapore, in May 1941. Soon after HMAS *Waterhen* was sunk on 30 June 1941 by an Italian pilot flying a Stuka dive bomber. Carlton does to some extent gloss over the loss of *Waterhen* as it was later officially assessed that better damage control by her crew could have saved the vessel. By the end of 1941, the remaining Australian destroyers had departed the theatre, with *Vendetta* the last to go in October, and being replaced by newer N class destroyers operated by the RAN. The Scrap Iron Flotilla's legacy is their 139 re-supply runs to Tobruk during 1941 to bring in ammunition, food and fuel and evacuate the wounded, sick and prisoners of war.

The war in North Africa dragged on for another two years, but none of the Scrap Iron Flotilla ships remained in the Mediterranean when the final victory in North Africa occurred on 13 May 1943, when the combined German-Italian Army surrendered. The four remaining Australian destroyers went on to serve in the Indian and Pacific oceans and two (*Vampire* and *Voyager*) were later lost in action in the fighting against the Japanese. Overall, Mike Carlton has produced a highly readable and interesting history of the Royal Australian Navy's V & W class destroyers in the Mediterranean during 1939-1941. It is not an official history, so his style of writing and the information provided is not at that level – but it is not meant to be. Some of the nautical descriptions could be called into question (there is no such thing as the second dog watch – it is the last dog watch) and there were some missed opportunities to explain events and people in more depth. That said, more people are likely to read this book than the official history of the Royal Australian Navy during the Second World War. I highly recommend *The Scrap Iron Flotilla* to those interested in Australia's Second World War naval history and seeking a well written and easy to read narrative.

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