

Fleet Air Arm Association of Australia HERITAGE FEATURE



OUR ORIGINAL OBSERVER

The story of Commander Henry Chesterman RAN
By Graeme Lunn

Queen Elizabeth II, only two years into her reign, arrived at Brisbane Airport by Qantas Constellation on 9 March 1954. After she had inspected the Guard of Honour Lieutenant General Sir John Lavarack, Governor of Queensland, presented to Her Majesty the State's Premier, Chief Justice and General Officer Commanding Northern Command. He next presented the Resident Naval Officer - Commander Henry S Chesterman (O) RAN.

Whilst being a Resident Naval Officer (RNO) is often a final posting, with duties wide ranging and frequently social, it is no sinecure. Henry could be inspecting the site for proposed naval facilities in Cairns one week, then running recruit interviews before having debutantes presented to him while presiding at a Ball the next.

Such a posting is a rewarding and fitting end to an often arduous service career and Henry had been Naval-Officer-in-Charge and then RNO in Brisbane since 1948. Although only 53 years old, he had worn naval uniform for 40 of them having entered as a 13-year old Cadet Midshipman in January 1915. His long service had included attending a Court Levee in 1927 where he was presented to the young Queen's Grandfather, King George V. Henry had attended that Court Levee as a result of being a founding member of the Royal Australian Navy's Fleet Air Arm. He was our original Observer!

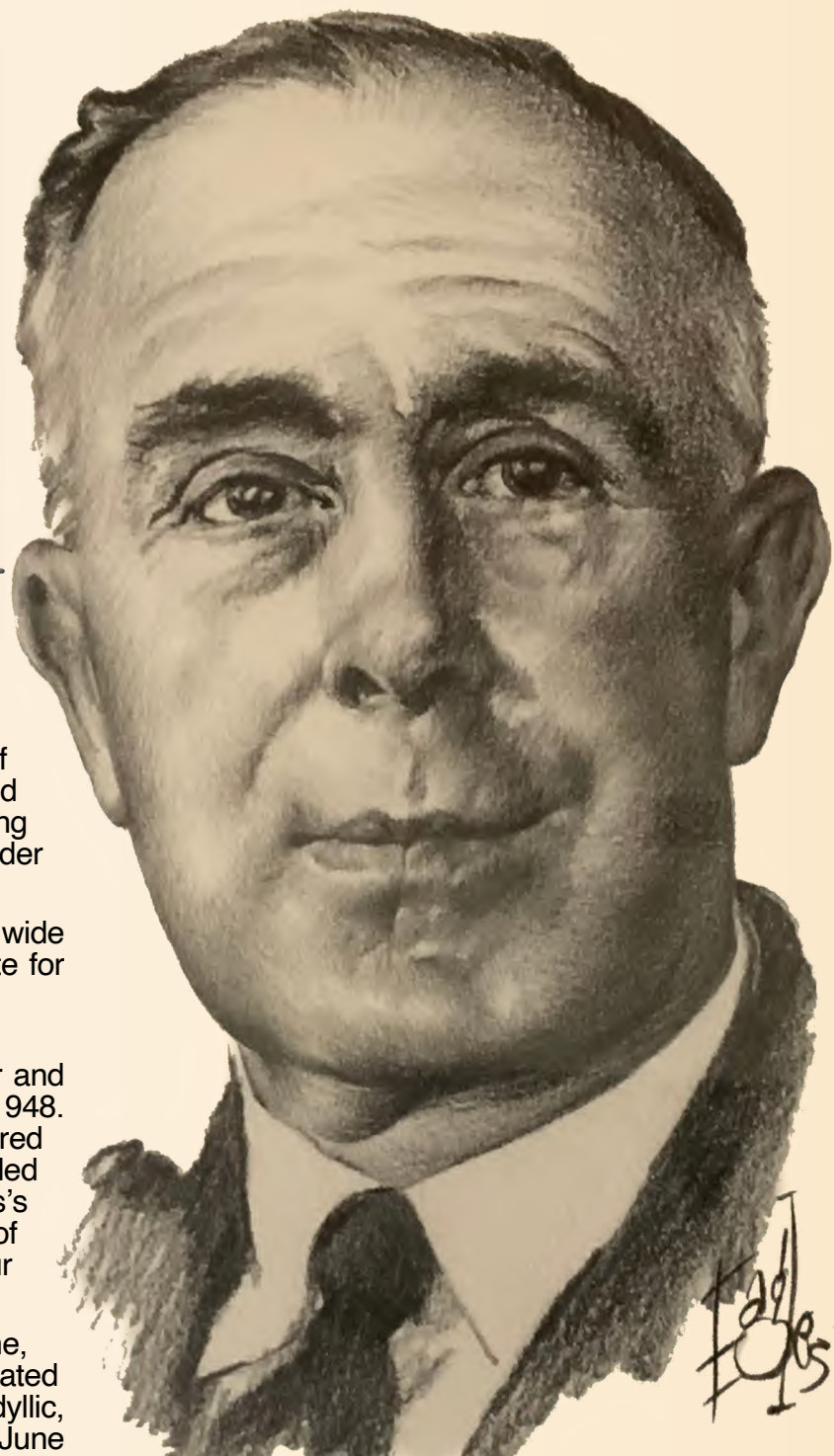
Born on 15 February 1901, not far from Williamstown Naval Depot in Melbourne, Henry joined the 1915 Class of the Royal Australian Naval College. Newly relocated from Geelong to the remote Jervis Bay the four demanding, yet intermittently idyllic, years at the College were marred by the arrival of Captain Charles Morgan RN in June 1915. Quoted as saying "*I shall teach these Australian larrikins discipline*" the accepted physical disciplining of the boys became harsh, despite the moderating influence of Commander Duncan Grant, the Executive Officer. One father even withdrew his son from the College on the grounds of excessive punishment. Morgan was eventually removed in August 1917 and replaced by Grant, newly promoted to Acting-Captain. Describing the man many years later one of Henry's classmates, Air Vice-Marshal Joe Hewitt, bluntly called Morgan a sadist and a discredit to the RN.

At the end of 1916 Henry's class paraded for the graduation of the pioneer 1913 Class. Feeling envy as they saw the newly promoted Midshipmen depart for active service abroad with the Grand Fleet they speculated on how much longer the war would last! The Armistice was declared on 11 November 1918 and at the Naval College, amidst the celebrations, there was some disappointment at 'missing out'. Yet the 1915 class was soon to experience a breadth of operational service and see sights in remote lands that would be the envy of many of their immediate predecessors, who had languished for long grey wartime months at Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands.

The 29 newly graduated Midshipmen sailed on Australia Day 26 January 1919 in the SS *Marathon* from Port Melbourne. Daily duties included 4" gun drill on the stern mounting which had been fitted when she had been taken over for troopship duties. Assisting with coaling the vessel in Albany and Durban, the final leg of the voyage was in the old wool cargo hold to make space for repatriating soldiers from Durban to Southampton.

Arriving at Whale Island, Portsmouth, on 19 March 1919 the next six weeks were arduous. The Victorian era Royal Navy had put bluejackets ashore in landing parties and naval brigades throughout the empire, and the hard learnt field craft was well entrenched at the Gunnery School of HMS *Excellent*. The Midshipmen little imagined, as they did live firings with pistol, rifle and Lewis machine guns while undertaking field exercises and battalion drill, that within the year they would use these new skills ashore on active service.

Henry joined the battleship *Ramillies* under the imposing Captain John Luce at Devonport 13 May 1919 with five of his classmates - Hewitt, Dowling, Hall, Rorke and Rosenthal. She sailed three days later for Scapa Flow where 72 ships of the German High Seas Fleet were interred. *Ramillies* joined *Revenge*, flying the flag of Vice-Admiral Sir Sydney Fremantle (whose naval forebear lent his name to Fremantle, Western Australia), along with *Resolution*, *Royal Oak* and *Royal Sovereign* making up the 1st



Battle Squadron of the Atlantic Fleet. Or, as the lower deck would have put it, the *Millie* joined the *Rammer* along with *Rezzo*, *Woody* and the *Tiddly Quid*.

Mounting eight 15" and fourteen 6" guns with a crew of 1187 officers and men *Ramillies* had a large gunroom of over 30 Midshipmen and junior officers. This included Gorringer, a young RAF pilot, as *Ramillies* still mounted a flying off platform atop X turret. As junior 'snotties', the lowest of the low, the welcome would not have been a warm one even for RN Midshipmen, but as a burly group of Australian 'larrikins' there was added wariness towards 'Chesters' and his mates. It was six weeks before they ceased being referred to as 'bloody Australians' and the English reserve gave way to the start of lifelong friendships.

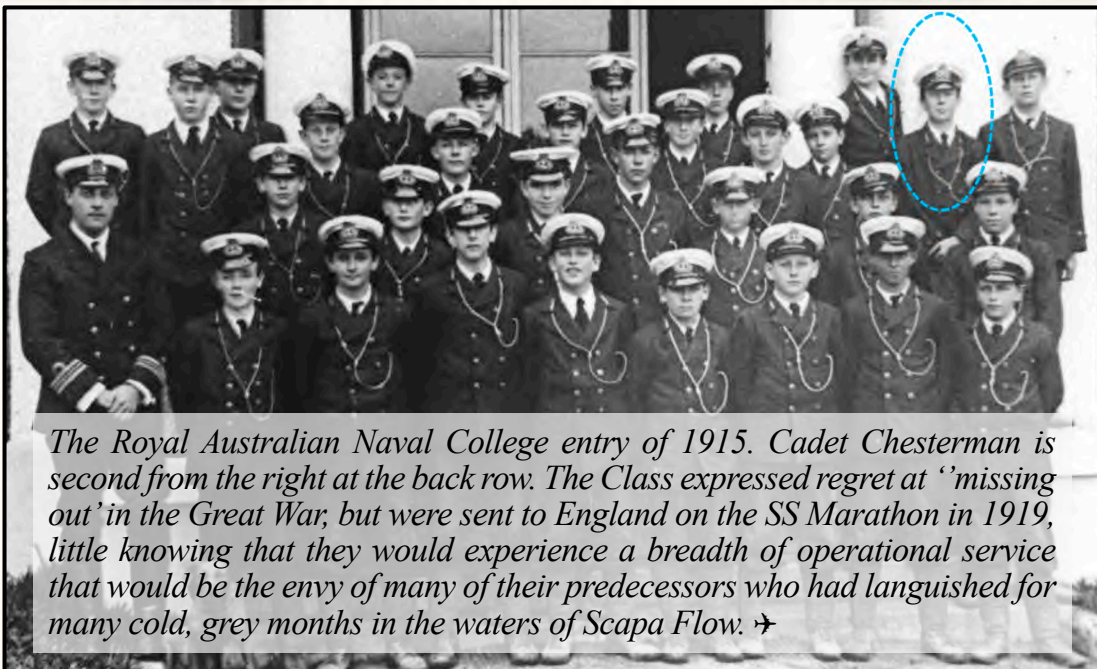
Welcome or not they were soon a part of one of the defining moments in naval history - the scuttling of the German High Seas Fleet. The Battle Squadron was conducting torpedo drills on 21 June 1919 when, as Henry records in his diary: '*At 12:45 received wireless message that all German ships were sinking. We proceeded back independently at about 18 kts*'. Steaming into Scapa at 14:30 with armed parties mustered on the quarterdeck and boats ready to be lowered: '*...only 6 left out of 70 odd ships. Saw one ship go down beautifully - the Bayern*'. Not counting those successfully beached 52 of the 72 interned vessels were sunk by their crews. Hundreds of German prisoners were taken onboard the trawlers and drifters and transferred to the battleships. Under guard on the quarter deck Henry declared '*They are*



Young Chesterman (inset, left), wearing the white patches of a 'snottie' (Midshipman), joined HMS Ramillies in May of 1919, which was then part of the 1st Battle Squadron of the Atlantic Fleet. Just five weeks later he was to witness one of the defining moments of Naval History when 52 ships of the interned German Fleet were scuttled by their crews at Scapa Flow. Within a year Ramillies and her crew of 1187 officers and men was engaged in action in the Greco-Turkish war, to protect British interests. ➔



The German battle cruiser Bayern being scuttled in Scapa Flow on 21 June 1919. HMS Ramillies, with Midshipman Chesterman aboard, was in the open sea conducting drills when the event took place, but hurried back in response to frantic signals from Scapa Flow. By the time they arrived only about six German ships remained afloat. Hundreds of German sailors were transferred under guard to the British battleships, where their meagre belongings were searched (below). ➔



The Royal Australian Naval College entry of 1915. Cadet Chesterman is second from the right at the back row. The Class expressed regret at 'missing out' in the Great War, but were sent to England on the SS Marathon in 1919, little knowing that they would experience a breadth of operational service that would be the envy of many of their predecessors who had languished for many cold, grey months in the waters of Scapa Flow. ➔



an awful looking crowd tho'. The next day the prisoners were taken to Invergordon for POW camps ashore: 'Got underway at 6am. German baggage searched in the morning. I didn't get any loot as I was on watch.' The teenage gunroom obviously desired souvenirs and Hewitt acquired an escape dagger which is now in the collection of the Australian War Memorial.

Peace Day, 19 July 1919, was celebrated with a seven mile long procession in London while 700 miles north *Ramillies* 'dressed overall' and the Midshipmen were excused duties for the day. As news of operations in the Baltic filtered back to Scapa it was obvious to the Royal Navy that they were entering a period later referred to as 'the Wars of Peace'. On 6 November 1919 Henry noted that '*The Glory*

entered harbour from Russia', where she had been the flagship of the North Russian Squadron in the Baltic supporting the White Russians against the Red Bolsheviks during the confused situation after the Revolution of 1917. The ongoing Russian Civil war, and the Greco-Turkish War which had commenced in May 1919, were about to envelop *Ramillies* and her crew.

February 1920 found the Spring Cruise interrupted and the Squadron drilling their seaman battalions and marines ashore in Malta, from where they sailed on the 17th to be part of the Allied Occupation Forces in Constantinople. Steaming past the Dardanelles the ruined forts and battle debris from 1915 was much commented on. For the Midshipmen picket boat and cutter duties plus 'ceremonial' marches

ashore made for arduous days. As the situation worsened the five ships landed 4000 officers and men on the 16 March 1920 to occupy Constantinople: 'Fell in with the battalions from the other ships....wearing our tin helmets and had plenty of ammunition'. The *Ramillies* battalion under their Executive Officer took possession of the Turkish War Office, Henry did his sentry rounds in C company, and field guns were placed in the square until they were relieved by the Cheshire Regiment the next afternoon. The squadron picket boats armed with Maxim guns stopped shipping in the Bosphorus.

By April the ships were operating out of Batum, Georgia, protecting British interests as Bolshevik troops advanced. On 18 April 1920 the guns at Trebizond were destroyed. Moving on to relieve *Resolution* off Chanak the Australian flag was seen to be proudly flying over the Australian War Graves Commission building. Conditions were stable enough to tour the Gallipoli battlefields where many of the Australian Midshipmen had family members serve. With ongoing conflict between the Anti-Nationalists and Young Turks the Midshipmen continued to exercise their initiative and leadership on shore patrols and in the ships boats.

Fighting flared around Izmid in the eastern Aegean 13 June 1920, and for the remainder of the month *Ramillies* bombarded Turkish nationalist positions with her 6" and occasionally 15" batteries. Seaplanes from the accompanying carrier *Pegasus* were aloft for scouting and spotting duties:

- 14 June. 'There was a lot of fighting and bombarding going on ashore...When we landed we marched to the Arsenal...Bombarding started about 8pm from a position to the east of us...and continued for a couple of hours'.
- 15 June. At the Arsenal 'Turned out at 3am...Bombarding recommenced and the *Ramillies* opened fire with 6"...Returned onboard arriving about 10am...We were bombarding at intervals most of day. I started running Picket Boat after dinner...Had to stand by searchlights in case of action so slept in Lower Chart House.'

Heavy gunfire became routine and the Australians had time to form a victorious gunroom water polo team with an RN goalie. A few days later *Ramillies* put out a kedge anchor:

- 17/18 June. 'The ship's stern was hauled around to get all the starboard guns to bear...During all this firing there has been no instruction for mids...Closed up at Action Stations to fire on a...Nationalist headquarters. We used 6" and 15" guns...The shooting was very good and the village caught fire...Plenty of swimming continues morning and evening.'

With the start of the Greek Summer Offensive on 19 July 1920 *Ramillies* supported a Greek landing near Rodosto, by the Sea of Mamara in Eastern Thrace. *Ramillies* then proceeded independently through the Black Sea to southern Russia and the Crimean peninsula. Amid the refugee chaos Henry still managed to see much of Sebastopol and Yalta in August before returning via Athens, Malta and Gibraltar to reach Plymouth 27 October 1920. Although the British Empire was 'at peace' entitlement to the Victory Medal had been extended to include post-armistice Allied Intervention in the Russian Civil War until July 1920. Nineteen year old Henry was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal for his service.

Dressed in a round 'bumfreezer' jacket and dirk Henry's oral seamanship exams commenced on 6 January 1921 onboard *Neptune*. Promoted Acting Sub-Lieutenant 15 January 1921 the various exams continued through the Spring Cruise to Gibraltar in March. Exam nerves were forgotten for a while when Hall (also a future RAN aviator) won the middle-weight title at the Battle Squadron Boxing Championships 21 February 1921. Successful in his exams Henry left *Ramillies* and joined the destroyer *Sorceress* for four months where he was promoted Sub-Lieutenant 15 July 1921.

Almost a year was spent on further study at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich, before the now Lieutenant Chesterman (seniority 15 April 1922) arrived back in Australia in September 1922. After leave Henry joined the light cruiser *Adelaide*.

Right: Amongst the very earliest days of organic aviation was the embarkation of a Fairey IID aboard the survey ship *HMAS Geranium*. It was clearly too large and cumbersome for a vessel of that size, but despite its shortcomings the mission was deemed a success. Crewed by Hewitt and Kennedy, the aircraft greatly assisted with a survey of part of the Great Barrier Reef. ➔

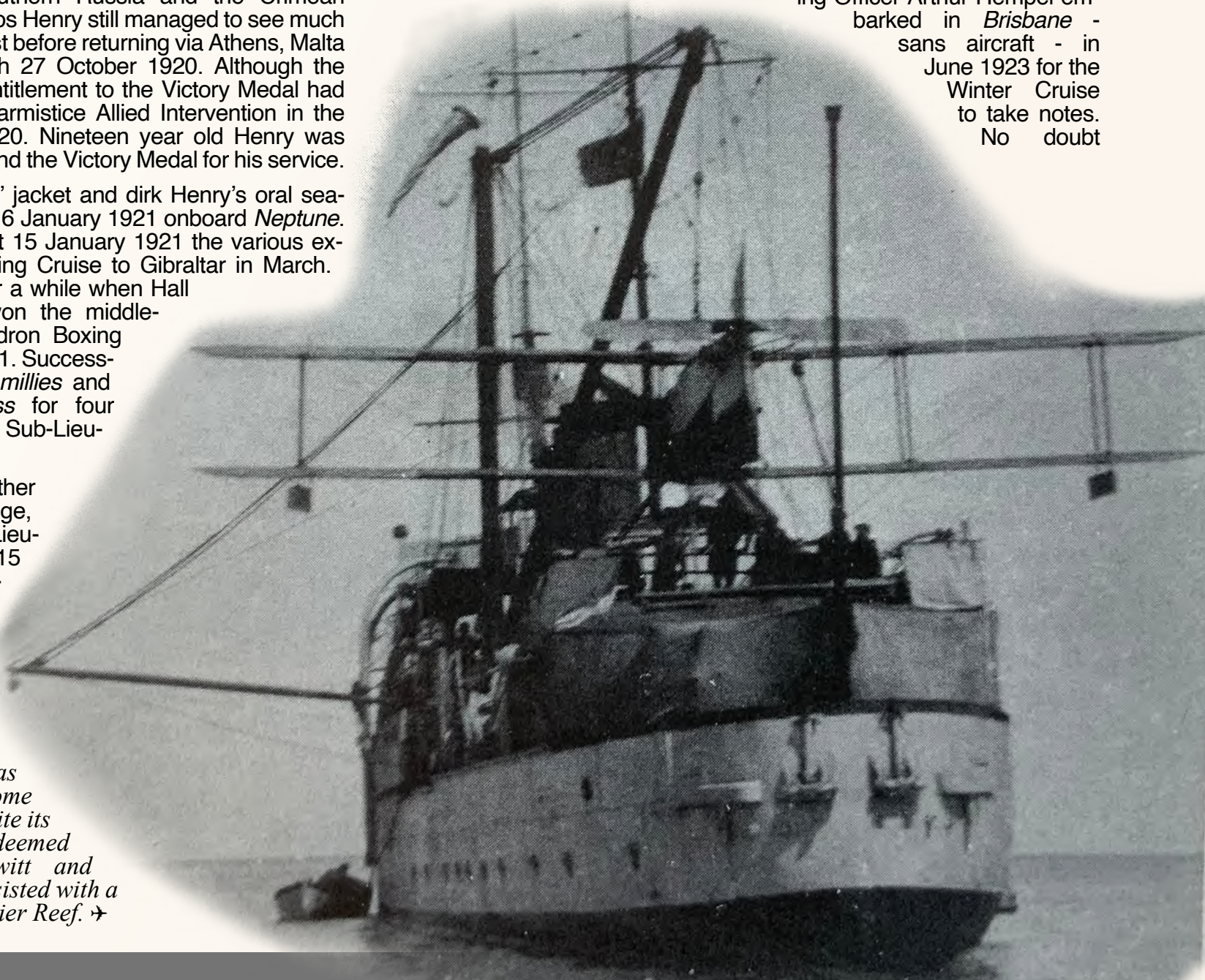
The Commonwealth Naval Board had been stuttering towards an Australian Naval Air Service for almost a decade since June 1913. In 1921 the Government approved the purchase of Fairey IID seaplanes for the RAN, apparently unconcerned that Fairey had only come third after Vickers and Supermarine at the 1920 Air Ministry competition for amphibians. Launched with Australian Naval Aviation Serial numbers ANA-1 to ANA-6 the airframes were subsumed into the RAAF on its formation in March 1921. The Committee of Imperial Defence in 1923 recommended that the RAN acquire a seaplane carrier to use as a mobile aerial base and repair shop. They further recommended that future Australian light cruisers be built to carry amphibians and that one existing light cruiser be fitted to carry a small seaplane. Such materiel recommendations of course presupposes trained personnel.

Although the RAAF had followed the RAF lead in deciding they would be predominantly an all-pilot aircrew force the RN, and therefore the RAN, realised that the Royal Naval Air Service lessons of WW1 - commencing with No.1(Naval) Squadron led by the Australian Wing Commander Arthur Longmore in 1915 - had firmly established the need for specialist observers. Under pressure from the Naval Board the RAAF offered a short Observers course for RAN officers, based on information received from the RN about aerial 'naval co-operation'. This would be run at RAAF Base Point Cook where Henry's fellow gunroom messmate aboard *Ramillies*, Lieutenant Joe Hewitt RAN, had commenced No.1 Pilots Course with 11 army and air force officers in January 1923.

Henry and Vincent Kennedy, another 1915 classmate, volunteered for the Number One Observer Course. Covering some 30 flying hours mainly in the Fairey IIDs, now sporting RAAF serial numbers A10-1 to A10-6, the instruction concentrated on navigation, wireless/telegraphy, reconnaissance, bombing and photography. The first part was at Point Cook 4 April 1923 - 9 June 1923 and the second commenced 29 September 1923. The RAAF only had 346 officers and men at this time and resources were so limited many of their aircraft remained in crates. Flying Officer Arthur Hempel embarked in *Brisbane* - sans aircraft - in June 1923 for the Winter Cruise to take notes. No doubt



Above: Number 1 Observer's Course at Point Cook in 1923. Lieutenant Henry Chesterman is on the right, accompanied by Lt. Vincent E. Kennedy on the left. By a quirk of programming, Henry passed out a week before Vincent, thus becoming our first Observer.



Henry Chesterman managed to fly in some of the ugliest aircraft ever in service, including the Avro Bison, shown here. Like all early flying machines it was prone to failure, as his did in January 1928 when it caught fire at 3000 feet. The crew of three survived after clinging to the wreckage for an hour and a quarter before HMS Vivacious picked them up. ➔



Whilst being trained as founding member of the Royal Australian Navy's Fleet Air Arm, Henry attended the Royal Levee of 15 March 1927 at St James Palace to be presented to King George V. This required full ceremonial dress rig, including a cocked hat which he bought for £2, a considerable sum for the times. ➔

due to the vagaries of weather and cancelled sorties Henry graduated a week before Kennedy on 26 October 1923, becoming the first RAN officer to gain Observer qualifications.

With the Third Naval Member of the Board adamantly opposed to adding the weight of aircraft, derrick and hangar to any existing light cruiser there were no Observer billets on graduation so Henry was posted in January 1924 for staff duties at Navy Office in Melbourne. Kennedy returned to *Anzac* as Navigator. From his desk Henry watched as Kennedy was posted to *Geranium* for surveying duties 'and as observer specialist' in May 1924. Rather precariously embarking a

Fairey IID *Geranium* sailed north. With Joe Hewitt as the pilot they operated from sheltered waters and assisted with the Great Barrier Reef Survey.

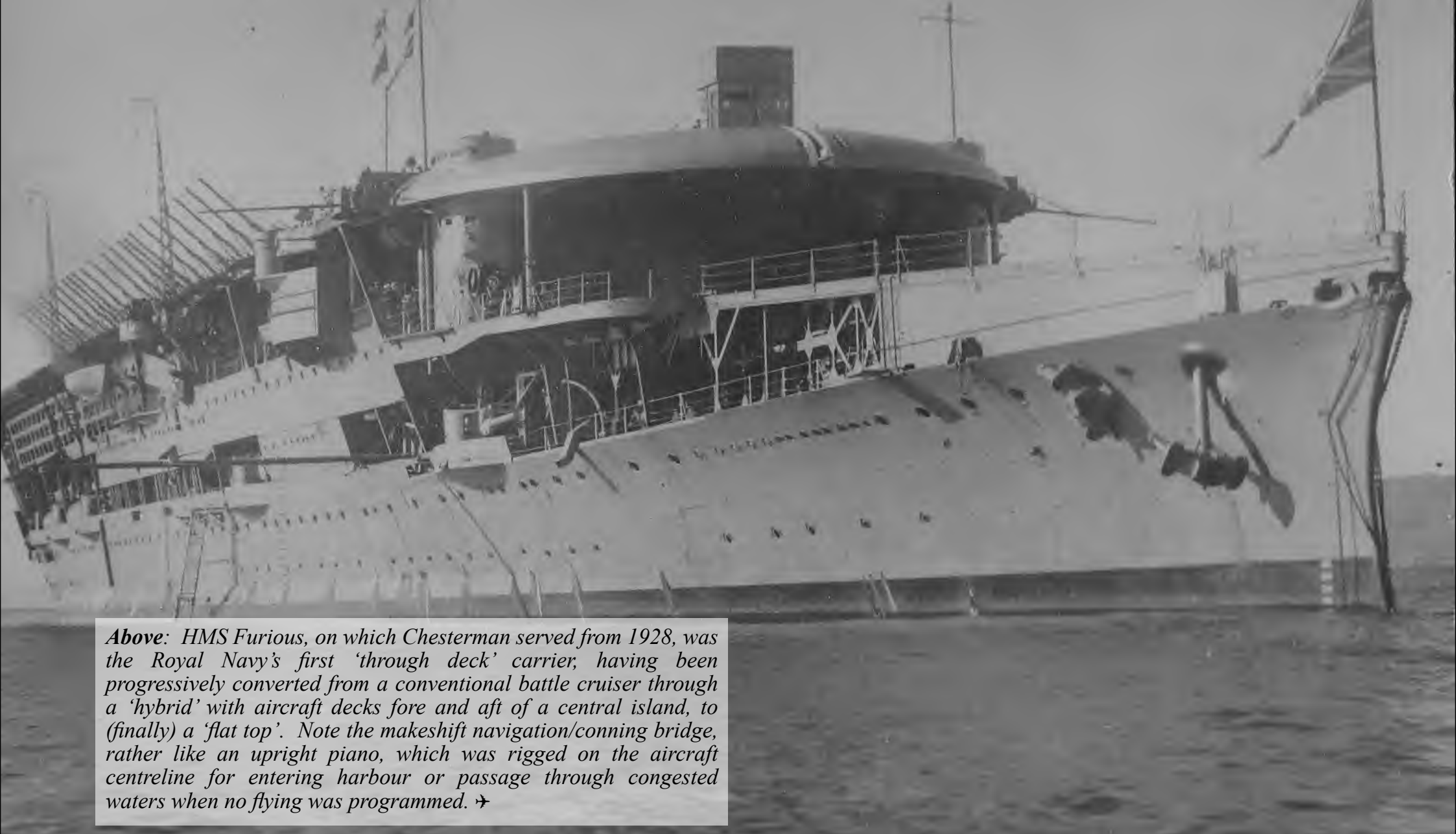
Henry, perhaps slightly bored at his desk, entered the 1924 Naval History essay competition. Coming third in this Empire wide competition he received a £20 prize from the Australian Naval Board, the equal of one months salary for a Lieutenant. Then, as later, lauded for his staff administrative abilities he was not able to escape the clutches of Navy Office until January 1925. What saved him was a further paragraph in that 1923 CID document on 'Empire Naval Policy and Co-Operation' which mooted 'a regular system of exchange, whereby the ships and personnel of the RAN spend a proportion of their time on other stations'. It also recommended 'that officers and men of the RAN be regarded as interchangeable in all respects with those of the RN'.

The 1915 class had been winnowed down by the defence cuts of the early 1920's so Henry was needed onboard the 5400 ton *Brisbane* as a seaman officer. *Brisbane* sailed in February 1925 as the exchange cruiser for six months on the China station while HMS *Concord* joined the Australia Station. As part of the 5th Cruiser Squadron she assisted in quelling civil unrest in China and Hong Kong. Entering Yokohama harbour *Brisbane* became the first RAN ship to visit Japan. Also visiting Borneo and Malaya she was decommissioned on her return to Sydney. The crew were transferred en-masse to *Melbourne* when she was brought out of reserve and sailed to the UK as the next exchange cruiser.

Henry, with only a 'local' qualification as an Observer, and with no apparent opportunity for actual Observer duties, submitted preferences for Torpedo and Signal specializations in March 1925 in response to a general Navy Order. The Naval Board recognised that his short RAAF course was not sufficient qualification for Henry to be fully interchangeable with RN Observers so the Second Naval Member, needing to qualify at least six Lieutenants as Observers for the proposed carrier, informed Henry that if he remained a volunteer an exchange was possible after attending a 'long' Observer course with the RN. Posted off *Melbourne* to the battleship *Repulse*, Henry remained in the UK.

Henry commenced No 11 Observers Course 4 October 1926 where he found himself the senior officer. After three weeks of classroom instruction the course moved in the New Year to the old RNAS Station at Lee-on-Solent. Now called the RAF Naval Seaplane Training School Henry drew his flying clothing, books and instruments on 3 January 1927 and commenced almost daily flying. Still operating in a Fairly IID with its open cockpits, he was feeling the cold of an English winter, so drew another pair of silk gloves and thigh boots from stores several weeks later. Even that did not suffice so Henry dipped into his own wallet and paid 21/- for a pair of fur lined gloves.

We get a partial feeling for his course flying, along with its inherent dangers, from his brief diary entries:



Above: HMS Furious, on which Chesterman served from 1928, was the Royal Navy's first 'through deck' carrier, having been progressively converted from a conventional battle cruiser through a 'hybrid' with aircraft decks fore and aft of a central island, to (finally) a 'flat top'. Note the makeshift navigation/conning bridge, rather like an upright piano, which was rigged on the aircraft centreline for entering harbour or passage through congested waters when no flying was programmed. ➔

- 1 Feb 1927 'Flying - took 3 films with gun camera. Spotting and R/T operator in afternoon.'
- 4 Feb 1927 'Flying in forenoon, after we got back in attempting to take off again machine hit a mooring buoy and sank, self and two others were unhurt and were rescued by motor boat.'
- 2 Mar 1927 'Flying - had some dangerous flying with Overbury. Damaged undercarriage of one machine and transferred to another. Wrote letter to C.O. asking that Cobbold and self not in future be detailed to fly with Overbury.'

Henry attended the Court Levee at St James Palace on 15 March 1927 in full dress uniform wearing a cocked hat that he had purchased for £2. In a ceremony that was discontinued in 1939 he joined the queue into the Throne Room where, as his name and rank were announced, he bowed to the seated King George V.

After completing the long 'O' course 13 May 1927, and taking leave, he was posted for 10 months consolidation training as an Acting-Observer in the aircraft carrier *Eagle*. Whilst in *Eagle* he also carried out Signal duties and volunteered to dual qualify with a Long (S) course as happened occasionally in the UK with its large carriers where they found such dual qualifications needful. Despite being strongly recommended by his Captain the RAN had no vacancies in the Signals Branch.

Operating in the Mediterranean *Eagle* normally embarked the Avro Bison spotter aircraft and Henry went for his second swim:

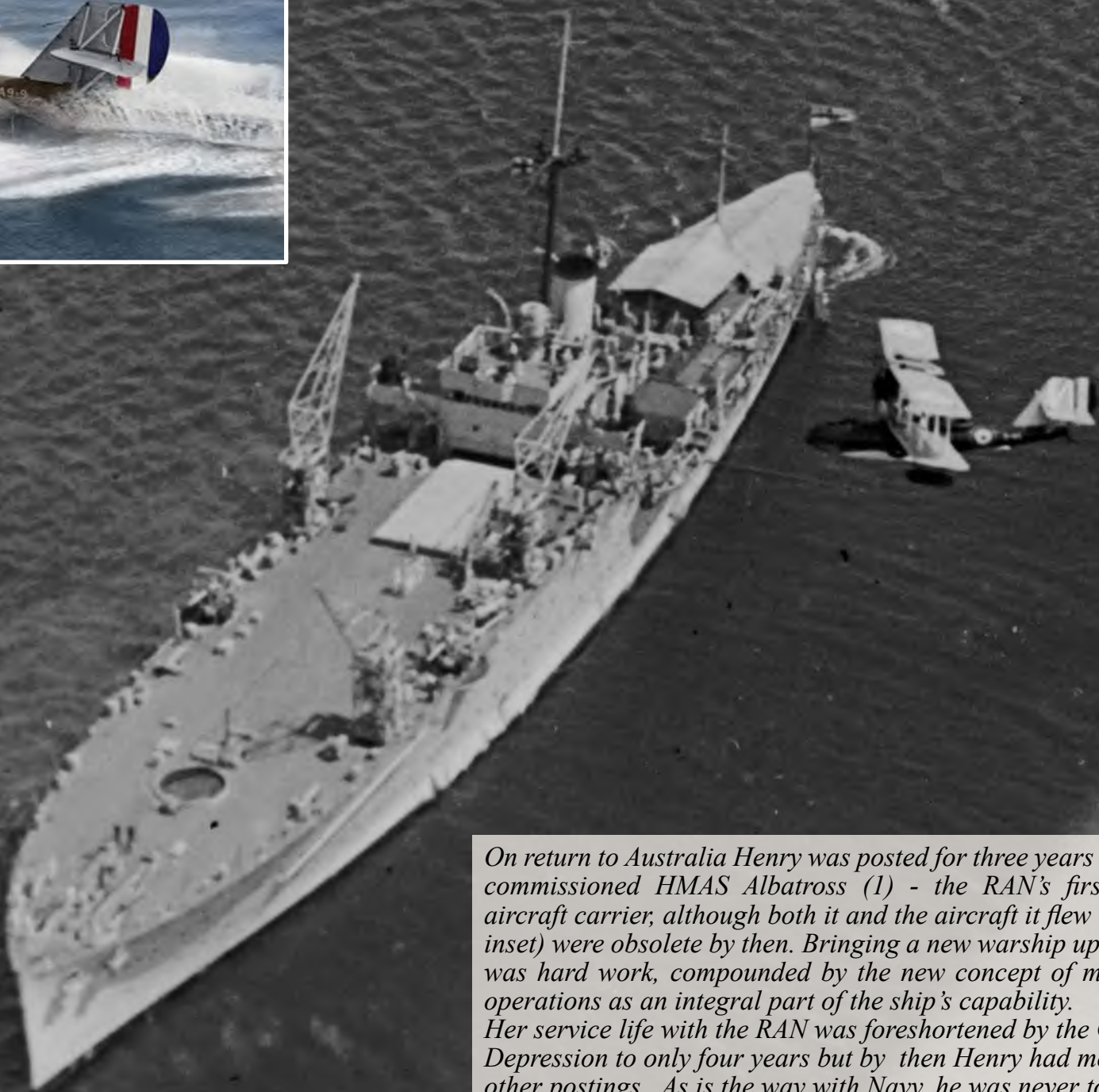
- 26 Jan 1928 'Proceeded to sea - all machines in the air. I was doing navigation exercise and just started photography when machine caught fire at 3000 ft - cleverly brought down by pilot Lea and force landed in sea - picked up by destroyer 'Vivacious' after hanging onto machine for about one and a quarter hours - was shaken and bruised but crew - Pilot Lieutenant Lea & Brett had lunch in destroyer - 'Eagle' returned to harbour in dogs. Wasn't feeling too fit, began to feel bruised - had sandwiches in lieu of dinner, hot bath and pill and turned in about 2030.'

On 21 March 1928, having survived his consolidation training, the RAN's first fully qualified Observer Lieutenant Henry Chesterman (O) joined the aircraft carrier *Furious*. Still very much the early days of naval aviation it was less than two years since *Furious* had achieved the first night deck landing with a Blackburn Dart on 6 May 1926. She embarked as fighters a flight of Fairey Flycatchers while Henry would have flown in Blackburn Blackburn or Avro Bison spotters, Fairly IIIFs in a spotter/reconnaissance role and Blackburn Darts as torpedo bombers. The Avro and Blackburns incidentally were some of the ugliest aircraft to ever embark on a carrier. Before his return to Australia Henry married Evelyn Lansdown on 24 November 1928. Evelyn came out to Australia after their two week honeymoon in a passenger liner while Henry took passage by warship. Their son Edwin 'Teddy' was born in Melbourne in October 1931.

Henry arrived back in Australia 4 February 1929 onboard the newly completed 10,000 ton cruiser *Canberra* - six years away from being



After the terrible double tragedy of losing both his wife Evelyn and young son Teddy in 1938 Henry married nursing sister Charlotte Lawrie in 1940 and they had a daughter Ann, whose godfather was Rear-Admiral John Crace RN. Charlotte died young and Henry remarried again just before his retirement. ➔



On return to Australia Henry was posted for three years to the newly commissioned HMAS Albatross (I) - the RAN's first dedicated aircraft carrier, although both it and the aircraft it flew (Seagull III, inset) were obsolete by then. Bringing a new warship up to standard was hard work, compounded by the new concept of multi-aircraft operations as an integral part of the ship's capability. Her service life with the RAN was foreshortened by the Great Depression to only four years but by then Henry had moved on to other postings. As is the way with Navy, he was never to serve in an Aviation capacity again. →

fitted with a catapult for embarked aircraft - to find the new 6000 ton seaplane carrier *Albatross* (7th of her name) had commissioned 23 January 1929 under Captain Denham Bedford RN and was awaiting her aircraft and aircrew. On 4 March 1929 Henry stepped aboard *Albatross* in Port Melbourne as the Senior Observer (SOBS) of her three commissioning Os - Chesterman, Kennedy and Brooks (RANC 1917). The previous week six Supermarine Seagull III aircraft plus stores from Point Cook had been loaded into her hangars. The Seagull III, a biplane amphibian with folding wings, had been purchased by the RAAF for seaplane training and survey work so it was entirely fortuitous that they fitted through *Albatross's* deck hatchway into her hangars. The Navigator of *Albatross* was his RANC 1915 classmate Jeff Walker.

In July 1929 Lieutenant-Commander George Deverell (O) RN arrived from the UK and became SOBS. Accompanying him was Lieutenant Ian Elliott (O) RN to make up the required number of ship's Observers. In the embarked 101 Fleet Co-operation Flight RAAF under the now Squadron Leader Arthur Hempel were eight pilots. These included Flight Lieutenant Joe Hewitt (who had transferred to the RAAF in 1928) and Flying Officer's Philip Bailhache (Lieutenant RAN) and Frank Crowther (Paymaster Lieutenant RAN). Under the byzantine rules being imposed on the Naval Board Kennedy had gone on to do a Pilot's course after *Geranium*, but was compelled to revert to Observer duties after two years with the RAAF. Hewitt had decided to transfer permanently to the RAAF instead, and both Bailhache and Crowther would in turn face the same career decision. Joining the wardroom from August 1929 for just ten weeks was another RANC 1915 classmate, Geoffrey Hall, who had completed the pilots Long Air Course in 1927 and flew with the RAAF until April 1929. He undertook acting Observer duties before passage to the UK for a Long Observer course.

Any warship on a first commission works hard and that was compounded in *Albatross* where the introduction of a seaplane flight meant new drills and evolutions for the whole ship's company. Operating from the smooth waters of Port Phillip Bay, Hervey Bay, Norfolk Bay, or Jervis Bay working up exercises and evolutions made for many 12 hour duty days. Tasks for the aircrew were reconnaissance, gunnery spotting, torpedo tracking and survey

work. Among the 450 crew complement were six volunteer Telegraphists who had recently trained at Point Cook for aviation duties.

Taking the Governor-General Lord Stonehaven and Lady Stonehaven for a vice regal tour of New Guinea in July introduced tropical conditions to *Albatross's* seaplane operations. A Wackett Widgeon was embarked for trials on this deployment in addition to the Seagull IIIs. This amphibious biplane had been entirely designed and constructed in Australia by Squadron Leader Lawrence Wackett, the brother of Ellis Wackett of Henry's RANC 1915 Class. Ellis, while at the RN Engineering College Keyham, had transferred to the RAAF in 1923 and rose to the rank of Air Vice-Marshal.

For three years until April 1932 Henry laboured with his RN and RAAF colleagues to entrench an embarked aviation capability into the RAN. A capability which it had last experienced with the Grand Fleet in the closing years of World War I. Inevitably it was not without loss. On 19 March 1930 Seagull A9-4, one of four aircraft airborne spotting for a gunnery shoot, entered a spin and crashed into the bay. Deverell was specially commended for gallantry when his pilot landed beside the crash site and the SOBS dived into the wreckage to rescue the badly injured Pilot Officer Gordon Grant and Lieutenant Ian Elliott. [Leading Telegraphist Donald McGowan](#) was lost. Grant's spinal injuries caused him to be invalided out of the RAAF, while Elliott did not fully recover and returned to the UK where he was transferred to the RN Retired List as medically unfit.

Henry was promoted to Lieutenant-Commander on 15 April 1930 and again became SOBS in *Albatross* under Captain Cuthbert Pope from June 1931, while the senior pilot was Squadron Leader Joe Hewitt who had commanded 101 Flight from February. Visiting Adelaide in October 1931 Hewitt and Chesterman were featured in the local press when they flew the Governor, Brigadier Sir Alexander Hore-Ruthven VC at 2500' over the city and environs.

Albatross only stayed in commission until 26 April 1933 before the financial stringencies and economic stagnation of the early 1930s, coupled to the delay in suitable replacement aircraft, led to her being placed in reserve. With the fleet much reduced and, at most, two aircraft intermittently embarked on the cruisers *Australia* and

Canberra as 101 Flight was pared down there was now a surplus of Observers. Among that group Henry was too senior, and too good a staff officer, to avoid a posting back to Navy Office from April 1932 to December 1933, where he was initially tasked with writing a history of Flinders Naval Depot.

With nine ships in reserve Henry was fortunate to be posted to the flagship *Canberra* (Rear-Admiral Wilbraham Ford) at the end of 1933 for two years as the Training Officer and a senior watch-keeper. Lieutenant-Commander Geoffrey Hall, returned from his Long O course with the RN, was the ships Observer and Flying Officer James Alexander embarked with his Seagull III flight. Still without a catapult the embarked aircraft operations were marginal and while proceeding to Hobart 5 April 1935 Seagull A9-8 was extensively damaged in a gale. With *Canberra's* 1935 Spring Cruise encompassing New Guinea and New Britain, Henry had now accumulated first-hand knowledge of many of the waters over which the forthcoming war would be waged.

When he came ashore at the end of 1935 Henry was to gain the experience in his next two postings that, almost serendipitously, ensured his later notable achievements in operational staff duties serving in the Headquarters of the US Seventh Fleet. From March 1936 until August 1940 he was Staff Officer (Operations and Intelligence) to the Captain-in-Charge Sydney where the major units and establishments of the RAN were based. He played an increasingly vital role as the navy gathered resources and prepared for hostilities after the September 1938 Munich Agreement and in the first year of World War 2.

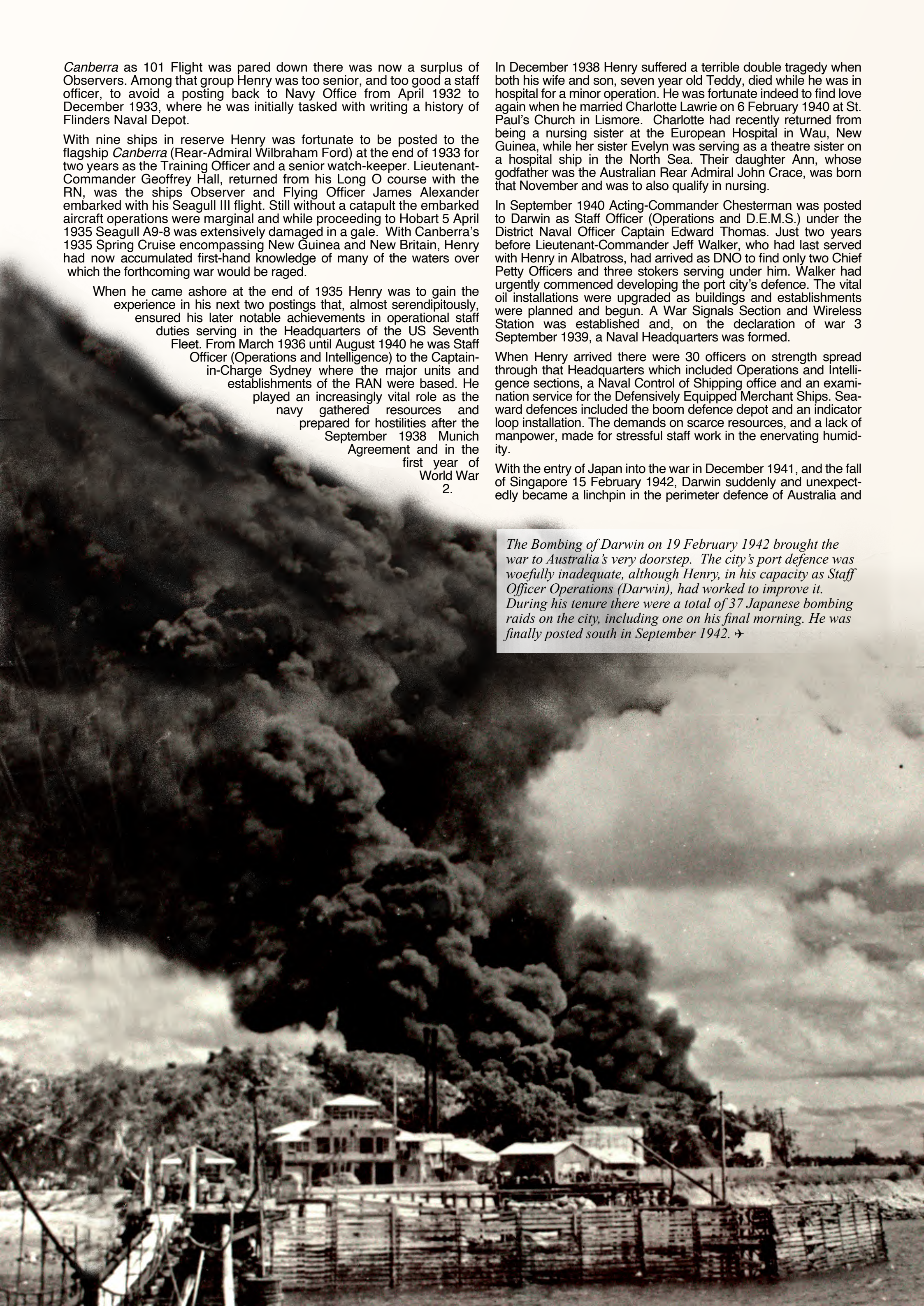
In December 1938 Henry suffered a terrible double tragedy when both his wife and son, seven year old Teddy, died while he was in hospital for a minor operation. He was fortunate indeed to find love again when he married Charlotte Lawrie on 6 February 1940 at St. Paul's Church in Lismore. Charlotte had recently returned from being a nursing sister at the European Hospital in Wau, New Guinea, while her sister Evelyn was serving as a theatre sister on a hospital ship in the North Sea. Their daughter Ann, whose godfather was the Australian Rear Admiral John Grace, was born that November and was to also qualify in nursing.

In September 1940 Acting-Commander Chesterman was posted to Darwin as Staff Officer (Operations and D.E.M.S.) under the District Naval Officer Captain Edward Thomas. Just two years before Lieutenant-Commander Jeff Walker, who had last served with Henry in Albatross, had arrived as DNO to find only two Chief Petty Officers and three stokers serving under him. Walker had urgently commenced developing the port city's defence. The vital oil installations were upgraded as buildings and establishments were planned and begun. A War Signals Section and Wireless Station was established and, on the declaration of war 3 September 1939, a Naval Headquarters was formed.

When Henry arrived there were 30 officers on strength spread through that Headquarters which included Operations and Intelligence sections, a Naval Control of Shipping office and an examination service for the Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships. Seaward defences included the boom defence depot and an indicator loop installation. The demands on scarce resources, and a lack of manpower, made for stressful staff work in the enervating humidity.

With the entry of Japan into the war in December 1941, and the fall of Singapore 15 February 1942, Darwin suddenly and unexpectedly became a linchpin in the perimeter defence of Australia and

The Bombing of Darwin on 19 February 1942 brought the war to Australia's very doorstep. The city's port defence was woefully inadequate, although Henry, in his capacity as Staff Officer Operations (Darwin), had worked to improve it. During his tenure there were a total of 37 Japanese bombing raids on the city, including one on his final morning. He was finally posted south in September 1942. ➔



was literally on the front lines. After the Kido Butai, or Main Carrier Battle Group, under Vice-Admiral Chuichi Nagumo had finished with Pearl Harbour they turned and fought west and south until focusing their attention on northern Australia.

In Darwin harbour on 19 February 1942 were some 65 vessels. The RAN vessels were a myriad mix of patrol boats, luggers, tugs, minesweepers, the depot ship *Platypus*, sloops *Swan* and *Warrego* and Hospital ship HMAHS *Manuda*. The Japanese 1st Carrier Air Fleet from four carriers, plus some shore based bombers, attacked the ships, airfields and town of Darwin with 242 aircraft. There were 236 killed, with 88 lost in the destroyer USS *Peary* alone, and 11 vessels sunk.

By July 1942, with the DNO now Henry's old Captain from *Albatross* Commodore Cuthbert Pope (newly returned from commanding the Armed Merchant Cruiser *California* in Arctic waters), there were 75 officers on strength. From that first air raid until Henry was posted south on 26 September 1942 there were a further 36 attacks on Darwin including one on his final morning.

Henry left Darwin for Brisbane to be a Senior Staff Officer on the Operational Staff of the Naval Commander South-West Pacific, and as liaison officer between the USN command and the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board. In February 1942 Vice-Admiral Herbert Leary had assumed command of Allied Naval Forces in Australian and New Zealand waters. By April 1942 the South West Pacific Area had been delineated with General Douglas MacArthur as Supreme Commander holding strategic and operational responsibility for Australia's defence. Under MacArthur the Commander Allied Naval Forces South-West Pacific Area had control of all operational RAN units, while the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board retained responsibility for the protection of coastal shipping and convoys.

Henry had been at the forefront of this defence-of-trade task in Darwin since it devolved primarily through the various area DNO's and Naval-Officers-in-Charge. When Henry joined the Command Headquarters in the AMP Building in Brisbane 27 September 1942 the building was both General Headquarters for MacArthur as well as the HQ for Allied Naval Forces and Allied Air Forces. The naval forces were popularly referred to by the Army PR team as 'MacArthur's Navy'.

Vice-Admiral Arthur Carpender had just taken over the command from Leary two weeks before Henry joined his staff, and had informed the First Naval Member Vice-Admiral Sir Guy Royle that he would control (through the NOIC system) all shipping in support of military operations north of Brisbane. The size of the convoys to the advanced New Guinea bases and Darwin can be seen in the figures: in 1942 there were 211 convoys of 1505 ships between Australian ports and 67 ships in 41 convoys between the mainland and New Guinea. The 1943 build-up saw 748 convoys with 4155 ships in addition to the approximately 60 ships proceeding independently each month requiring escort.

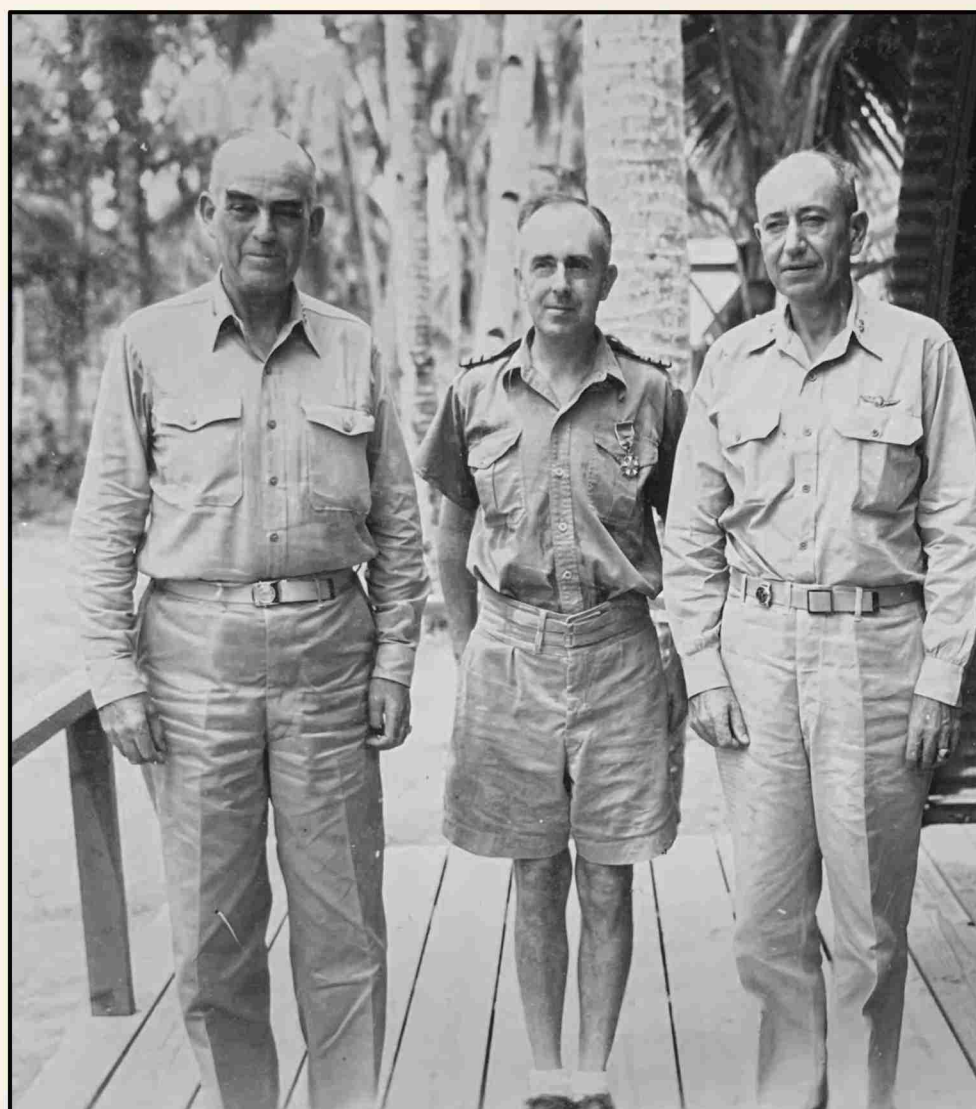
Overseeing this expansion and ensuring support for the associated amphibious operations were the senior Operations Staff in Room 514 of Captains R. Cruzen and R. Teacher with Commander Chesterman. Allied naval forces of the SWPA were re-designated Seventh Fleet on 15 March 1943. Carpender, wary of risking major naval units in the restricted waters along the New Guinea coast without adequate air cover had sparked MacArthur's easily aroused ire.

Vice-Admiral Thomas Kinkaid USN assumed Command of Seventh Fleet from 26 November 1943.

The RAN cruisers and destroyers were integral parts of Seventh Fleet in Task Force 74 and the Amphibious Forces of TF76 spent 1943 expanding and working up for operations on the northern coast of New Guinea and the proposed axis of advance north to the Philippines through the 'Bismarck Barrier'. Initially the naval forces were only a small cruiser force, submarines, four destroyer squadrons and ten MTB squadrons with amphibious assault forces and two air wings.

Keeping clear of the 100,000 Japanese troops entrenched in Rabaul, landings at Arawe and Cape Gloucester in December 1943 saw Kinkaid establish a small advanced base Headquarters in Port Moresby. Stating that "I would rather be farther forward pushing this war towards its end" Kinkaid's forces assaulted Hollandia on the north coast of New Guinea in April 1944. From Fifth Fleet he 'borrowed' TF58 with its fast carriers for a two day sweep then used two 'jeep carrier' groups of eight CVE's for a further week. Hollandia became the major base for the following six month drive towards the Philippines. With five major amphibious assaults scheduled between Hollandia in April and Mindanao in Nov 1944 plans for the next campaign were being drafted while the current operation was still being prosecuted.

In September 1944 Kinkaid moved all his staff to Hollandia to plan for the Liberation of the Philippines. With four main Task Groups Kinkaid would oversee the amphibious assaults from his command ship *Wasatch* in TG77.1. *Australia* and *Shropshire* were in the Close Covering Group of four cruisers and 7 DDs in TG77.3 while TG77.2 was the Bombardment Group. In TG77.4 alone were 16 CVEs, 9 DDs and 12 DEs. Counting what was borrowed from Third and Fifth Fleets, the Attack Force numbered more than 700 vessels.



Upper. Commander Henry Chesterman (centre) wears his just-awarded Legion of Merit medal awarded by Admiral Kinkaid (left), Commander of the Seventh Fleet, on 6th July 1945. RADM Coombs is on the right. All three men are showing the stress of the war years.

Lower. Henry (left) during the Queen's visit to Australia in 1954, at which time he was Resident Naval Officer (Queensland). ➔

While Kinkaid was watching the Leyte assault on 21 October 1944 he saw the bridge of *Australia* erupt in a ball of flame from a crashing Japanese bomber. Collecting his flagship's surgeon, Kinkaid came the mile to *Australia* by small boat to personally render assistance where they located the badly wounded Commodore John Collins (RANC 1913 Pioneer Class) on the deck of the wardroom. Collins on promotion to Rear-Admiral became the first Australian to head the RAN in 1948. Also among the wounded was a dying Captain Emile Dechaineaux (RANC 1916 Class).

Because the atomic bomb foreshortened the war and cancelled an invasion of Japan the battles of Leyte, Mindoro and Luzon from October 1944 to January 1945 remain the largest naval operations in history. Henry was a vital albeit small cog in those operations.

In January 1945 Kinkaid came ashore from *Wasatch* to Tolosa, on the northern reaches of Leyte Gulf, and moved his HQ staff up from Hollandia. In July 1945 HQ moved again to the newly liberated Manila. It was on 6 July 1945, at the Advanced Headquarters of Seventh Fleet in the Philippines that Kinkaid, newly promoted to Admiral, personally awarded the United States Legion of Merit, Rank of Legionnaire, to Henry Chesterman. Only the third RAN officer to have received this decoration to date, the Citation makes clear Henry's significant contributions to the war despite his relatively junior rank.

Remaining on the staff past the Japanese surrender of 14 August 1945 Henry would have been busy co-ordinating Commonwealth naval forces occupying Japan, the surrender of Japanese throughout the region, and the urgent need for hospital ships and the repatriation of POWs. Returned to Brisbane in October 1945 for a months much needed rest, Henry then became Chief Staff Officer to NOIC Brisbane, and was transferred to the Emergency List as a Commander in April 1946.

Henry's experience and tactful liaison was called upon again in September 1947 when the United Nations requested Military Observers to report on the conflict in the Netherlands East Indies. On 10 September 1947 his official file notes his posting as a 'Naval' Observer on the Staff of the Australian Consul General Batavia. Four Australian officers arrived in Batavia (Jakarta) on 13 September 1947. Commencing the mission several days before the British and others nations Observers arrived Australia thus had the honour of fielding the first UN Peacekeepers.

Brigadier Lewis Dyke and Wing Commander Louis Spence toured the Nationalist side while Commander Henry Chesterman and Major David Campbell covered the Dutch side. Henry did not return to Brisbane until 17 February 1948, having volunteered to extend his tour when Spence was evacuated with fever in November, and army members of the mission had to return early to Australia. This service made Henry not only the first RAN Observer, but also an original UN Peacekeeper, and the first in a line of Australian defence peacekeepers that continues unbroken to the present day.

Henry became NOIC Brisbane in April 1948 and then RNO in June. His wife Charlotte died suddenly only three months after Queen Elizabeth's visit in 1954 but Henry continued as RNO, was awarded an OBE in the New Years Honours List of 1956, and remarried in September 1956 to Eleanor Hooper.

Discharged to 'Shore' in October 1957 'Chesters' continued to be active in retirement until his death on 18 February 1985.

The best summary of Henry's life of service to the Fleet Air Arm, the RAN and Australia can be had by simply reading his two citations, shown below:

Legion of Merit - Degree of Legionnaire (Awarded July 1945)

For exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services to the Government of the United States as Naval Liaison Officer with the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board, and as a Member of the Staff of the Commander, Allied Naval Forces, Southwest Pacific Area, from September 1942, to November 1944. A brilliant counsellor of keen foresight and broad vision, Commander Chesterman applied a comprehensive understanding and sound, unbiased judgement to the maze of problems confronting Allied Naval Forces in the planning and execution of combined large-scale operations. His tactful and wise handling of the varied and complex details incident to his assignment furthered the harmonious relations between the United States and Australian Navies and his particular knowledge and advice in matters concerning the control and protection of shipping were important factors in the continued safe movement of Allied ships over long supply lines. By his outstanding professional ability, untiring energy and splendid co-operation throughout a prolonged period of intense combat operations, he made a real contribution to the prosecution of the war at sea. ➔



Observer's Wings



Henry spent two decades as the RAN's first Observer without any insignia to indicate his specialty.

During World War One wings were awarded to Observers of the Royal Naval Air Service and the Royal Flying Corps. Post war no further Observer wings were awarded, although RAF and RN pilots continued to be given distinguishing insignia on their graduation.

The Admiralty accorded Observers the same specialist status as Gunnery, Torpedo, Navigation and Signal officers by annotating them with an O in the Navy List from 1924. Into the 1930s the prevailing attitude was that Observers wished to preserve their identity as Executive Branch officers. They feared that specialist insignia could be perceived as a shift in allegiance to the very junior Air Branch which might damage their career prospects.

By the early years of World War Two naval observers were the only unbadged aviators across the entire British air services. With 80% now purely Air Branch RNVR hostilities only officers the old Executive Branch attitudes were no longer valid. Rear-Admiral Clement Moody RN (RADM Naval Air Stations) in 1941 recognised the pent up demand for Observer wings and urged a suitable badge be introduced.

On 17 September 1942 badges were approved for commissioned naval observers and rating observers/TAGs. Henry was finally able to wear the wings he had first qualified for in 1924. ➔

Order of the British Empire - Officer of the Military Division (Awarded 1956)

Commander Chesterman joined the Royal Australian Navy as a Cadet Midshipman on the 31st December, 1914.

Before World War 11 he was an officer of the Executive Branch in HM And HMA Ships. He qualified as an observer and in that capacity served in the earlier aircraft carriers of the Royal Navy and in HMAS Albatross.

From the outbreak of World War 11 until August, 1940, Commander Chesterman served as Staff Officer (Operations) on the staff of the Commodore-in-Charge, Sydney.

From September, 1940, until September, 1942, he was senior staff officer in Darwin and in September he began duty as Assistant Operations Officer on the staff of the Commander, South West Pacific Force. Commander Chesterman's next appointment was as Chief Staff Officer to the Naval Officer-in-Charge, Brisbane, until September, 1947, which was followed by five months as Naval Observer on the staff of the Australian Consul-General in Batavia.

Since April, 1948, he has served as Commanding Officer, HMAS Moreton and Resident Naval Officer, Queensland.

In recognition of Commander Chesterman's long and distinguished service in the Navy. ➔



Commander Henry Swinfield Chesterman

OBE RAN

1901-1985



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About the Author

Graeme Lunn is a Melbourne boy who was a Seaman Diver in the RANR's Diving Team Six before joining the Royal Australian Naval College as a Senior Entry in 1976. He was in the first group to be sent to the University of New South Wales for Bachelor of Arts degrees and found a love for history there. He later added a Masters degree in military history from the University of New England.

His seaman training included gaining his Bridge Watchkeeping Certificate in *Melbourne*, followed by selection for No.114 Pilots Course. FAA postings included HC723 and HU816 with the venerable Wessex in it's CT role, and a tour with the Multinational Force and Observers in the Sinai. He did an exchange posting with the RNZN flying a Wasp whose short endurance helped him accrue 1749 deck landings.

On return from New Zealand in 1988 the prospect of a desk in Canberra, sitting out the delayed Seahawk programme, was not as enticing as joining British Airways where he had a 33 year career. Qualified on almost the entire Boeing range - B737, B757, B767, B777, B747 and B787 - Graeme was in the Flight Standards Unit for three years where he flew with all the BA fleets, including Concorde, and with all BA's subsidiary and franchise airlines around the world.

With over 22,000 flying hours he retired (compulsorily) in August 2021 when he turned 65, and moved permanently back to New Zealand where his wife Rowan hails from. Their daughter's old bedroom has been converted into his library/study and his mission is to make the history of Australia's naval aviators from 1911 more widely known. ➔

