

Herbert William Rodgers

The 'N' Class Destroyer Story

H.M.A.S. Napier, Nizam, Nestor, Norman and Nepal were loaned by the British Admiralty to be manned by Royal Australian Navy crews and to replace the ageing V & W Class destroyers more commonly referred to as the "Scrap Iron Flotilla" which after an illustrious career were reaching the end of their useful lives.

These modern "N" Class destroyers mounting 6 x 4.7 guns in 3 twin turrets plus torpedo tubes and other close range weapons were built in various British shipyards and commissioned over the period 1940/1 with the exception of Nepal, which, due to extensive bomb damage during construction had to be practically rebuilt before commissioning in 1942. These ships were designated the "7th Destroyer Flotilla".

Napier and Nizam served initially in the Eastern Mediterranean where they arrived towards the end of May 1941 just in time for the evacuation of Crete in which they played a prominent part embarking hundreds of members of the Australian Army's famous 6th Division, the Captain of Nizam and the 1st Lieutenant of Napier both being awarded the D.S.C for their efforts.

After taking part in support of the land forces involved in the Syrian campaign both ships were then engaged in what has been dubbed the "Tobruk Ferry Service" supplying the besieged garrison with much needed stores, ammunition, exchange troops and bringing out wounded and evacuating troops. Nizam did no less than 14 round trips, including the last carried out in full moonlight. Other duties for both ships included fleet and convoy escort including those involved in the relief of Malta.

Meantime Nestor's area of operation was confined more to the Atlantic and Western Mediterranean where among other exploits she was credited with the destruction of a U-boat. She eventually joined Napier and Nizam in Alexandria in December 1941 after Japan had entered the war.

January 1942 saw the above 3 "N"s leave the Mediterranean escorting a royal Navy aircraft carrier loaded with fighter planes for the Far East in a belated attempt to re-supply the R.A.F trying to stem the Japanese advance in Malaya. Together with Norman, which had recently been commissioned and had taken a British Trade Delegation to Archangel the 4 sister ships were finally united in Trincomalee, then a British Naval Base on the East coast of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) where they formed part of a newly established British Eastern Fleet. However, subsequent Japanese naval forays into the Bay of Bengal and evidence of its overwhelming superiority made it necessary for the fleet to transfer its base to the port of Mombassa in Kenya, East Africa.

In June 1942 the 4 "N"s were recalled to the Mediterranean to take part in convoy "Vigorous" bound for Malta. Late on the afternoon of 16th, Nestor while returning was fatally damaged in a bombing attack. Although taken in tow by a British

destroyer, the threat of enemy "E" boats to the safety of both vessels and difficulties associated with the tow left no alternative but to evacuate the crew and dispatch this gallant ship to the bottom; thus sadly the 5 "N"s were destined never to serve together.

Returning to the Indian Ocean and the Eastern Fleet, the 3 survivors were at last joined by Nepal when they took part in various landings in the campaign which resulted in the surrender of the Vichy French held island of Madagascar.

For the remainder of 1942 and early 1943 all 4 "N"s were engaged in combating a serious U-boat threat to Allied shipping around the Cape of Good Hope designed by the enemy to interrupt the supply and build up of men and materials for Montgomery's Western Desert Offensive. This was a very busy period indeed and despite some early successes by the U-boats including the loss of the troopship *Orcades*, the campaign was finally overcome. Durban and Capetown were the main bases from which operations were conducted resulting in all 4 ships seeing service in both the Indian and South Atlantic oceans. On returning to Mombassa in March an early and worthwhile task in which they were involved was the screening of the fleet that provided distant cover for the large convoy transporting the famous 9th Division of the A.I.F. home to Australia.

By 1944 the Allied war situation had improved to the extent that the Eastern Fleet could be strengthened and return to its former base of Trincomali. All 4 "N"s were kept busy fulfilling the constant demand for convoy protection duties in addition to acting as part of the screen for the Fleet when engaged in offensive operations against the Japanese. These included attacks by carrier based aircraft against enemy strongpoints, in particular in April, the submarine and air base at Sabang to the north of Sumatra and then 4 weeks later, in company with American ships, on shipping and shore installations at Surabaya on the north coast of Java. On this occasion the fleet refuelled in Exmouth Gulf en route from Trincomali to Java and then again after raid before returning to base.

In December 1944 the "N"s were based temporarily at Chittagong at the head of the Bay of Bengal from where they were engaged in supporting the British Army troops in their push against the Japanese down the coast of Burma. Action included bombardment from the sea of enemy positions in mountainous country, transporting commandos and other assault troops and pre-landing bombardment of Japanese held beaches. On several occasions *Napier* acted as Control Centre with high ranking Navy, Army and Airforce officers aboard.

By the time the "N"s were recalled to Trincomali towards the end of January 1945 the Japanese had been driven back some 250 miles.

The formation by 1945 of a British Pacific Fleet based on Sydney meant that the fighting "N"s could at last be stationed in Australia to join with the rest of the R.A.N. in the final months of the Pacific War.

On April 1st, 1945 they left Sydney and headed north to join the Fleet which was operating in the Okinawa area, returning to Sydney briefly in June for repairs and boiler cleaning. Then northwards again to rejoin the British Fleet which had by

then linked up with 3 American Task Forces in an area close to Japan from where sustained air attacks were being made on the Japanese mainland by carrier based planes.

Following the Japanese surrender and after having been at sea for 50 days without sight of land, the Australian manned "N" Class destroyers in company with other elements of the British Pacific Fleet entered Tokyo Bay on 30th August. Captain H.J. Buchanan D.S.C. from Napier was afforded the honour of commanding a British Pacific Fleet landing force of some 600 sailors and marines, including 50 from Napier and Nizam, which was given the task of taking over the main Japanese naval base at Yokosuka.

The presence of Napier, Nizam, Norman and Nepal in Tokyo Bay on 2nd September 1945 when surrender documents were signed on board U.S.S. Missouri was a fitting finale to their illustrious record of active service in every ocean of the world since 1941.

All 4 ships then returned to Australia where, in accordance with the original agreement they were taken over by Royal Navy crews and sailed back to the United Kingdom to be placed in reserve.

They were eventually broken up in 1956.