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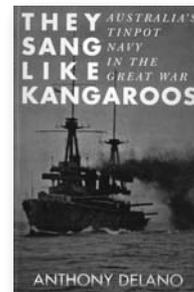


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## ***They sang like kangaroos: Australia's tinpot navy in the Great War***

by Dr Anthony Delano

*Arcadia, Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd: North Melbourne; 2012; 247pp.;  
ISBN 978-1-921875-72-4; RRP \$34.95 (paperback)*



Dr Delano outlines the contribution of the fledging Royal Australian Navy (RAN) to the Great War when its ships, men and deployments were under control of the Royal Navy (RN). The book complements and expands upon the volume *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918, Volume IX, The Royal Australian Navy* by Arthur Jose (1928). It outlines the activities of the RAN in the Great War, and the tensions between Australia, and the Admiralty and the British government.

It tells how attempts by the Australian government to develop a fleet that would support Australia's regional interests were largely thwarted by the Admiralty and how RN trained officers ran the RAN until the start of World War II. It could almost be published as a supplement to the official volume. Jose was subject to an Admiralty policy, overseen by a RN officer appointed to 'edit' his work whereby '*criticisms or discussions of the policy pursued when building up the (Australian) Fleet are not required ... criticisms or discussions of ... actual operations should be omitted*'. Jose notes in his preface that '*after the first six months of war, the ships of the Australian Navy ... formed part of various squadrons under direct Admiralty control ... the Admiralty alone can judge what should be disclosed and what should be hidden*'.

Australia was well served by Jose's skilful use of words to convey enough detail and insights to help later historians like Delano identify what really happened. The official histories of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and the Australian Flying Corps (AFC) in the Great War were not subject to these constraints.

Anthony Delano is well qualified to address this subject. A member of the RAN after World War II, he was instructed by those who had served between the wars and had been professionally shaped by their RN commanders. He had a lengthy career as a foreign correspondent for British national newspapers and is a visiting professor at the London College of Communication. There is a comprehensive bibliography but no index or chapter notes. There are many excellent photos and helpful copies of documents.

It is disturbing to read that none of the 16 flag officers of the RAN from its inception to the outbreak of World War II was Australian. This contrasts with the appointments of Australians to senior positions in the AIF and the AFC.

The author clearly knows the cultures involved and is sympathetic to the Australian experience and the contributions of Australian sailors. By 1918, they had shown the flag in every ocean, plus the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. The first land campaign of the Great

War was conducted successfully in September 1914, in German New Guinea by the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force comprising RANR members and military volunteers.

The story of Commander Harry Stoker RN and his crew in Australian submarine *AE2* is now well known. They were the first to penetrate the Narrows through Turkish minefields in April 1915 but had to scuttle the vessel and became prisoners of war. Delano suggests they would have received higher awards, including perhaps a Victoria Cross for Stoker, if *AE2* had not been 'part of the breakaway Commonwealth navy'.

The April 1918 raid on Zeebrugge (a Belgian port) that Delano describes as 'the most daring and bloody naval action of the War', was spearheaded by a team from the flagship HMAS *Australia* for which some Australian sailors were nominated unsuccessfully for the Victoria Cross. In the event, 'the *Australia* awards ... were the most collected by any ship of the Grand Fleet'.

As with Graham Freudenberg's superb volume *Churchill and Australia* (2008), this work is critical of Churchill's condescending attitude to the Dominions. It is puzzling that even *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Royal Navy* (1995) makes a patronising and misleading reference to the Australian Fleet of the Great War. It infers that HMAS *Australia* was a gift from the British government but the Australian government would not allow it to be stationed with the Atlantic Fleet although New Zealand complied with a similar request. In fact, the Australian government commissioned and paid for HMAS *Australia* and had good reason to want it for local use. New Zealand paid for a similar vessel but allowed it to become part of the Royal Navy.

On the other hand, putting such sensitivities aside, it must be acknowledged that 'Australia's Tinpot Navy', through the RN, was given ready access to centuries of experience against ruthless enemies and the unforgiving oceans, and to world-class maritime training and technology. These represented priceless benefits which still positively influence the RAN and our maritime security.

One hesitates to use the cliché 'should be essential reading', but this book is a wonderful addition to the pantheon of Australian naval history. Delano acknowledges a particular debt to the wisdom and counsel of Captain Ian Pfennigwerth RAN (Ret'd) a member of the Institute. All who read this volume will gain unique insights into Australia's rich maritime heritage.

**Ken Broadhead**