



**Edward Norwood 'Ted' was known for his writing he wrote two short stories on the 'Old White Lady' which he served on April 1941 - March 1944.**

## **Old White Lady - Mark II**



There was a time when she was not painted white, and there came a time when no longer was she resplendent in white, buff funnel and decorative band of maroon along her slim straight sides; but to those that know and love her she is always the "Old White Lady of the North"

She is not particularly beautiful as ships go, but a certain charm exists in her wide flared bow and the cocked-up perkiness of her unusual pointed stern. She is a brave ship and a staunch ship, and we that love her know that somewhere deep down beats a strong heart that has carried her through twenty-seven years of active

service. She has a soul too, a courageous soul that we can feel, and that feels for us, as well we know who have been with her in the perils of storm and war. She has a zest for living, and a vast liking for the tropic waters of the north. Many times she has fought against the wheel when her reluctant head has been forced to take a southward course; she shudders and baulks and throws the white spray over her bridge; rolling and staggering, willfully and wickedly she indicates her objection.

A different tale, however, is the story of her northern voyages. Here she is a perfect lady. Her pistons beat with a measured rhythm, the screw bites smoothly, powerfully, and the long hull, swaying slowly and easily, caresses the blues and greens of the seas of her choice

The "Old White Lady" is old as steel ships measure their working lives. Laid down in an English dockyard in 1917, she was designed as a unit of the anti-submarine fleet in that life-and-death struggle when waging against German U-boats. One of the famous "Q" ships, she was hastily put together, reputedly by women, as her small rivets and the large number of them show. We know that despite the haste they built truly and well, and it is fitting that this 1600-ton midget in the fleets of the Mistress of the Seas should have been fashioned by women. Who better could give life to this staunch veteran, which is now capping off long and honorable service in this latest and greatest of wars?

At the end of the First World War, she, with some others of her class, was converted to the Surveying Service, entering what perhaps may be described as the most important of the peace-time activities of the Royal Navy --the efficient charting of the manifold invisible perils of the oceans of the world' Those that go down to the sea in ships, and those that consign their goods from the four corners of the earth, owe to the surveying ships that safe guarding of their lives and trade. The findings of this service are available, through the Hydrographer to the Navy, to all that use the seas.

In 1925, on loan from the Royal Navy, she came to Australia, and has operated ever since under the aegis of the Royal Australian Navy, to the orders of the Hydrographic Branch of that Service. Australia's contribution to the charts of the world has been very great, and of the total of the "Old Lady" has, with her highly trained personnel of Officers and men, performed the greater task. Other ships there have been, and other ships there are today, but none has laboured so long, and to such good purpose, as the veteran of them all.



On the outbreak of World War II, the need for anti-submarine vessels on the Australian seas soon became apparent. Hastily re-converted to her original purpose, and painted grey from funnel to waterline, the old ship began an almost increasing vigil along the east coast, until in December 1940 a greater need arose for the services of a surveying vessel to chart the locations of the extensive minefields that were to be laid as protective measures in various parts of the Australian, Papuan, and New Guinea coasts. For twelve months she worked her lonely way through and around the mysterious passes of the Barrier Reef, Torres Strait, Port Moresby and Rabaul. Poorly armed - she had no room for really offensive weapons - she ignored the sudden annihilation that would have come to her from armed raiders and submarines.

Several times she was lucky to be not quite within an area of menace. This work was continued until the entry of Japan into the war forced her to flee at top speed to the comparative safety of Sydney Harbour. She had just left Rabaul at the time. We knew not what perils awaited us as we made our way south. That was one occasion in which no tantrums marred a southern course. The ship arrived back in record time.

Another conversion to A/S duties was the next move, and for four months south

Australian waters were her venue, whilst the Australian Sixth and Seventh Divisions, and the first of the American troops, were safely convoyed in Adelaide. Still clothed in battleship grey, the old ship lay in Antechamber Bay near Backstairs passage, venturing forth every time a convoy approached. These were met many miles out at sea after the approaches had been thoroughly investigated for hidden submarines. No ship was lost during this period.

Then commenced a long, weary, heart-breaking vigil along the east coast of the continent, and extending down Bass strait to the vicinity of Cape Liptrap. Those were days of endless watchfulness, endless listening for submarines of the Son of Heaven; endless strain, and when one allowed oneself to think, cold awareness of the sudden end of all things that would come at the warhead of a racing, lighting-fast torpedo. It is the unknown and the unseen that jag men's nerves, Day after day - sometimes seventy to eighty days passed without a break in harbour of more than a few hours each week for fuel and stores - the work went on for sixteen months. Five more times the "Old Lady" participated in attacks on the enemy, or was attacked by them. One ship, in convoy, was lost, with the sudden death of most of her crew - we picked up ten survivors out of the forty-four men on board. Another ship was torpedoed, but fortunately beached and eventually salvaged. We claim we put paid to the account of two of Toko's slinking undersea craft.

Two great storms, that forced bigger craft to flee for shelter, were safely weathered in that period. Our stout-hearted ship, despite her age, survived an easterly cyclone that put two freighters on the beach. She was hove to for thirty-six hours, struggling gamely that her men might live, for in those seas none would have survived her sinking. That was the occasion when all men not necessarily required below were ordered to don "Mae Wests" and keep to the upper deck whilst a perilous change of course was made to gather together the scattered remnants of the convoy. Well, may you have read this know how we respected the old ship's guts, and loved her for the lady she is.

With the decline of the submarine menace, late in 1943 the "Old White Lady", now painted Chicago blue, but with her small boats painted bright green, again returned to surveying. Fighting in New Guinea had made it necessary that many uncharted and poorly charted waters should be surveyed so that troops and stores could be landed where they were needed. This oftentimes was dangerous work, but the luck of the old ship held. An augmented fleet of surveying vessels undertook the task, and we assumed command of them all.

The waters of Papua and New Guinea, all the way from Mile Bay to Hollandia and the Admiralty Islands, were charted. The work still goes on and will continue until Japan is forced to her knees. Without the surveying vessels that task would be much harder than it is. Lives and valuable equipment would be lost in treacherous waters before they could be landed. Battles would be lost for lack of essential reinforcements, ammunition and stores. The Surveying Service has played a big part in the war of the Pacific.

This has been a brief sketching of the story of a "Q" ship; a mystery ship of world War I. Today, in a silent Navy, the work of this ship has been carried out in a silence even more pronounced than that generally accepted as the silence of the Secret Service. She has been a mystery to the men of even many of her sisters-in-arms. How many times have we heard the remark: "That old tub is still here! What the hell does she do?" She is unique in her appearance, and seen swinging around the buoy on an occasion, and again months later, the idea is held that she has been there all the time.



The fact is that since the outbreak of the war the "Old White Lady of the North", one time H.M.S. Silvio, and since 1925 H.M.A.S. Moresby, has probably spent more time at sea, away from the amenities of civilisation, than any other ship in the R.A.N. - Leading Writer E.W.N

## **HMAS MK III By LDG Wtr E W Norwood Cameos of the Little Ships**



The little ships have kept the seas, off the Australian coast, since the outbreak of the war. Ceaselessly they carry on, on their mysterious occasions; no glamour or limelight attaching to their endless journeying to and fro, often within sight of the coastline, but in waters lurk all the of modern war at sea. For weeks on end, with little more than a few hours in harbour at a time to relieve the monotony. Roughly, once a week, in they come to refuel, take on fresh provisions and replace ammunition. The fortunate watch ashore find a few brief moments to drink a pot or two of beer in congenial surroundings, spend an hour or so with kith and kin, and then away again.

The ships, at times, have been at sea on every day for forty to fifty days without a whole day's break, until the welcome and imperative boiler cleaning gives relief for perhaps a week at most. That is the story of the little ships, of which nobody hears. In a Silent Service this is the most silent part of it - the sloops, 'corvettes' and lesser craft, besides a host of converted merchant vessels which, with their addition of a 'sting' in head and tail, play their part in, firstly, keeping intruders away and, secondly, dealing with those that venture where their presence becomes a menace. With the advent of Hirohito's minions into the fray, the little ships found a new activity to add to the minesweeping and surveying of the earlier stages of the war.

In Australian waters the midgets had wider duties in escorting and patrolling, and tackling the screaming bomber and the lurking submarine. The threat was met with typical British doggedness and endless patience, for patience is the principal characteristic men of the little ships must learn. Patience to suffer every inconvenience and oftentimes, the murderous moods of the sea, and this is so often without tangible result for encouragement.

If Tojo does not attack because he has an uneasy feeling that our charge is too strongly guarded, if he annoys the escorts by keeping out of range, if we know he is not so far away but cannot get at him, if our vigilance cannot falter for a moment, then we curse him bitterly, but our charge is safe, a positive result of our work, out negative, not tangible, in the sense that we have not had an actual go at the enemy. Sometimes he attacks, but preferably unescorted ships. Very occasionally he risks his all and, from maximum range, speeds his metal death fish in the hope he will claim a victim, and get away himself. Now and again he has collected a scalp in this tip-and-run warfare, but he seldom gets away.

At a point on our coastline, not so far from Melbourne, and not so far from Sydney, either, a Japanese submarine made a kill a few months ago. Ten men survived the sinking their ship. Thirty-four put 'paid in full' to the debt that all men owe to their native land. Most of them were not Australians. The ship and the greater part of the crew hailed from a state which has been overrun by Hitler's hordes. They did it in the Cause, which eventually freed their homeland. It happened on a bright, sunny Sunday. The sea was calm; cheerful wavelets rippled merrily to the distant blue mountains which marked the coast. Not a setting for a tragedy, yet tragedy was presented with a dull 'crrump' echoing through the water.

Nothing had been seen or heard until the explosion threw up a great cloud of reddish brown dust, in which the escort's lookouts dimly saw the stark red-bottom bow of a ship standing on end. Briefly it poised in the murk then silently, swiftly, slipped into the depths below' She sank in fifty-two seconds.

"Action stations!" The strident alarm rattlers blare in the bowels of the escorts. Engine telegraphs jangle and speed increases to maximum. Guns are loaded, breechblocks snap home, depth charges are set. Every man is in his place, and the hunt is on. Our ship, nearest to the direction from which the torpedo must have come, casts away on the most likely course to find the lurking sneak who is now, we imagine, bent on getting away. Time passes, the screw races, and we forge ahead faster than the underwater craft can flee.

A black flag flies at the yard. We have located her. Quickly we are above her, orders from the bridge are repeated over the phones. "Bang! Bang!" go the depth-charge throwers. Two charges hit the water out on either beam. Splash, splash, splash, splash, four more charges slip into the water astern. We race away. Everybody is tense - waiting. Waiting for the stomach-sickening heave of our little ship, as in the depths the charges explode. Six times we hear the solemn 'brrriump' as the sea right aft heaves and boils, to rise angrily in a mountain of tom white spume. Have we 'got' the menace below? We hope so.

Anxiously the sea is scanned for telltale signs. Nothing appears. Again we cast around and quickly locate her again. Again we deal out death. She hasn't moved far; she must be crippled, Down, down into the depths she goes; five hundred feet down, where water pressure threatens to burst her seams. Can we force her deeper down where her plates must collapse? Once more the charges leave our ship. The sea settles; the noise and tumult have gone. The submarine has gone. Have we put paid to her account? Who knows? After the war we may learn the fate of this particular Yellowman's U-boat, but we think now that we 'got' her.

What of the ten survivors of the sunken ship whom we had seen earlier in the afternoon as we surged past masses of wreckage on our way to exact revenge? We could not stop then; they had to be left to the mercy of the sea, but we sought them on our course to resume our patrol, and found them among the spreading flotsam of the wreck. Nine men on a raft; the tenth a lonely figure, lying half in and half out of the water, supported by a heap of smashed planks to which he was feverishly adding as we drew closer. He waved; we waved back.

They were taken from the water as the result of superb seamanship by our Commander, who realised the riskiness of stopping to lower a boat. Cork and rope were scrambling nets were hung over the side. At high speed we came upon the raft bobbing in the waves a short distance ahead. Engine bells rang "Full astern!" was the order. The wheel was put over, and gently in a momentary pause touched the raft. Quickly nine pairs of hands grasped the forward net. Still going astern we swept down on the lone man's precarious heap of planks, and nearing him veered out stern away. "Full speed ahead!" was the order now, and once again we gently came up against the wreckage for a moment. He too grasped the net was hauled inboard.

Soon the ten of them were stripped of their wet clothes, those that had them; they were warmed by hot food; those with injuries were attended to, and all were reclad. One of the survivors, a little snowy-haired Australian of sixteen years, typified the spirit of them all. His first words as we drew near the raft were "Hey! what have you got for tea?" More serious was the remark of an officer among the group of bedraggled castaways, who in broken English expressed his thanks for being picked up. He said, 'We thought you would leave us. It was very dangerous to come to us.

But you did not leave us. Thank you."

The little ships, at times, have other interludes in their patient steaming here and there. Many strange things happen at sea and many stories will be told of incidents outside the common round. One such concerns an errand of mercy, the life of an Allied airman being saved when, far from the aid of modern hospitals, he had been stricken by an acute illness that required immediate and expert surgical attention. This happened at night, when a heavy and sloppy sea was running. Out of the whispering ether came a vital message from a ship, reporting the presence on board of a very sick man, and asking that he be transferred to a fast vessel for passage to the nearest port in a desperate attempt to save his life. But even our fastest ship



could not get to port under many hours. What was to be done? A valuable life was hanging in the balance.

The problem was solved. Our ship, a little bigger than most, has the dignity of carrying a doctor, and has a sick bay large enough in which to perform an operation. Two sick-berth attendants were also borne to care for the sick. The sick man's ship was directed to proceed with all speed to a large, sheltered bay. This took about three hours' steaming. We went in too and both ships dropped anchor.



“Away motor skiff” and the doctor was on his way to examine his patient. He returned a little later over the pitch-black waters accompanied by a mummy-like figure strapped tightly in a patent stretcher. Poor patient, if his pain let him, he must have many an anxious moment as he was lifted from the heaving skiff up the ship's side, in the darkness. But he was soon down below in the "bay", which had been prepared in the meantime for an emergency operation. Three days later, now well on the way to recovery, the sick man was landed in an Australian port and rushed straight to hospital where, under the care of his own nationals, he would soon recover to fight again in our joint cause.

This is the story of difficulties which had to be overcome; the reward for being solving was the life of a man. The men of the Little ships are accustomed to overcoming difficulties, and no matter what the call on them may be, they will solve them in the traditions of a Service with which so many of them have only a temporary active association. - Leading Writer E.W.N