

**ENEMY ACTION ON THE
AUSTRALIAN STATION
1939-1945**

In 1942, Australia was stunned firstly when Darwin was bombed in February and then again in May when midget submarines entered Sydney Harbour. The air attack on Darwin signalled the start of nearly seventeen months of air attacks against Northern Australia. However, the midget submarine attack was only the most startling development in the constant struggle for control of the sealanes around the Australian coastline that continued throughout the war. In 1939, Australia was responsible for the naval defence of an area known as the Australian Station which embraced the mainland of Australia and islands to the north and east of the continent and the surrounding seas. It also extended westward from the coast for some 1500 miles into the Indian Ocean. Excluding Papua New Guinea where Japanese land forces were present, this article will look at the attacks on shipping by both Germany and Japan within the Australian Station.

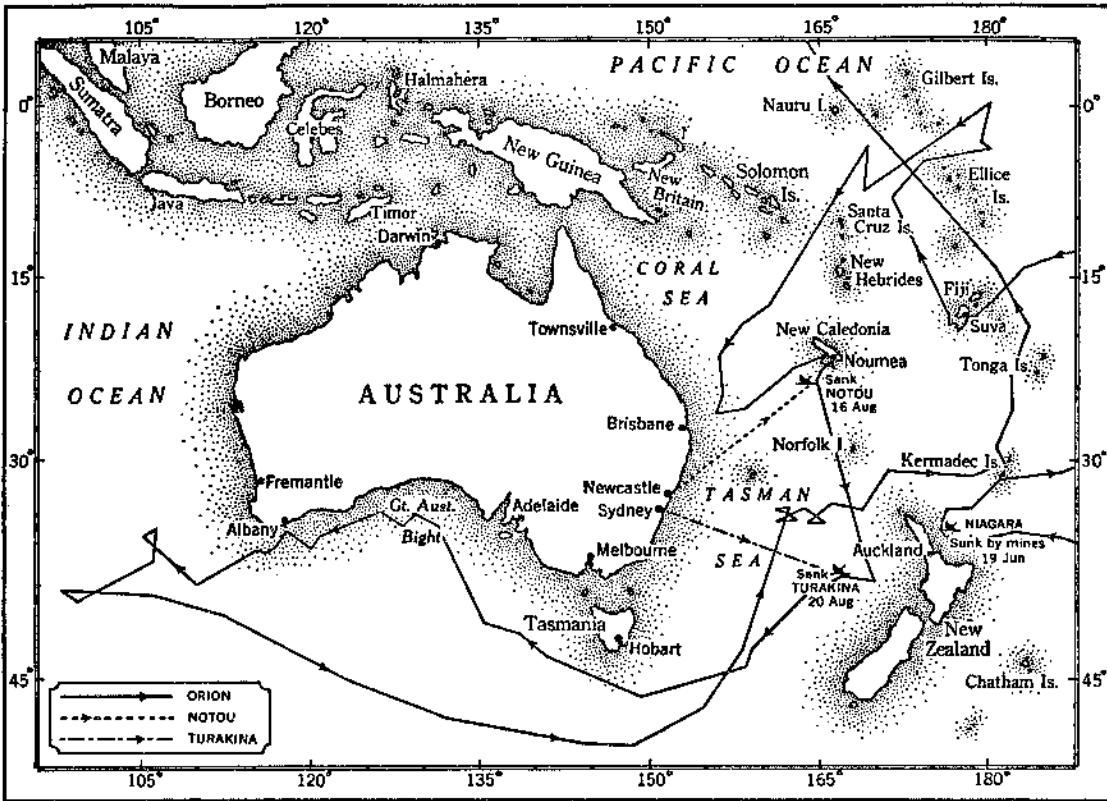
It was less than three months after war had been declared that the war at sea came near the Australian Station when a small British tanker was sunk in the Indian Ocean by the German pocket battleship, **Admiral Graf Spee**. Throughout the years 1939 to 1945, ships in Australian waters were on guard against attack from mines, surface raiders, submarines and aircraft. During 1940, four German armed merchant cruisers or surface raiders were operating in or near the Australian Station. In June 1940, mines laid by the raider **Orion** sank a ship near Auckland. Two months later the **Orion** belled and sunk two further ships; one from Newcastle bound for New Caledonia and a second from Sydney that was nearing New Zealand waters. From the Tasman Sea, the **Orion** sailed to the Indian Ocean in September 1940 where it laid dummy mines near Albany WA before retracing its steps to meet with a German supply ship in mid Pacific in October. The first sinkings in

Australian waters occurred in November from mines laid by the **Pinguin** and the **Storstad**, a captured Norwegian tanker. They laid minefields between Sydney and Newcastle, in Bass Strait, off Hobart and in the Spencer Gulf.

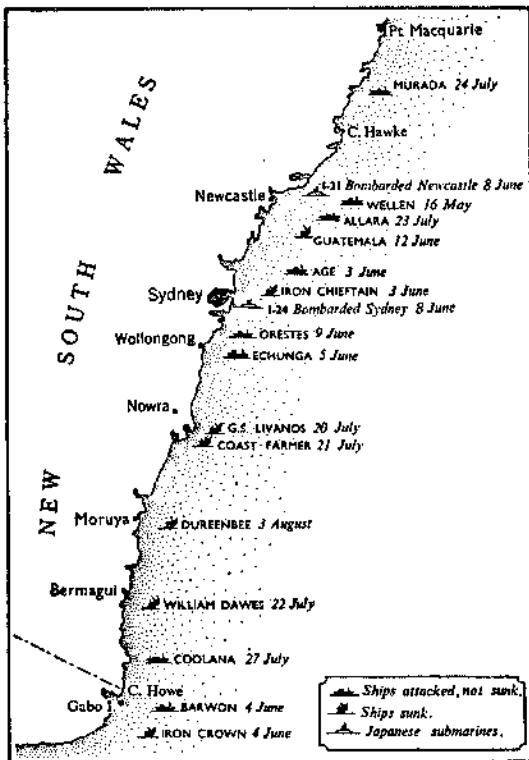
Both ships returned to the Indian Ocean and on 20 and 21 November sank by gunfire two ships 800 miles west of Fremantle. The **Pinguin**, **Storstad** and **Orion** laid 234 mines in Australian waters which sank three ships and damaged a fourth in the last two months of 1940 killing nine seamen. Casualties from mines in Australian waters in 1941 were fortunately few with only one trawler being lost. The **Millimul** sank with the loss of seven crew in March 1941 after hitting a mine that had been laid five months before by the **Pinguin**. On 14 July two ratings from a Rendering Mines Safe party were killed by a mine that had been laid in Spencer Gulf and had washed up onto a beach at Beachport, South Australia.

The German raider **Kormoran** had entered the Indian Ocean in May 1941 and in the following six months sank eight merchant ships, none in Australian waters although it sailed within the Australian Station. At 4 pm on 19 November 1941, **HMAS Sydney** returning to Fremantle from Java sighted the **Kormoran** about 200 miles west of Carnarvon, Western Australia. For 90 minutes the **Kormoran** tried to pass itself off as a Dutch vessel but when all chance of deception evaporated opened fire on **HMAS Sydney** with guns and torpedoes. The action lasted 30 minutes with both ships being crippled and set ablaze. Both sank and the entire complement of **HMAS Sydney** was lost.

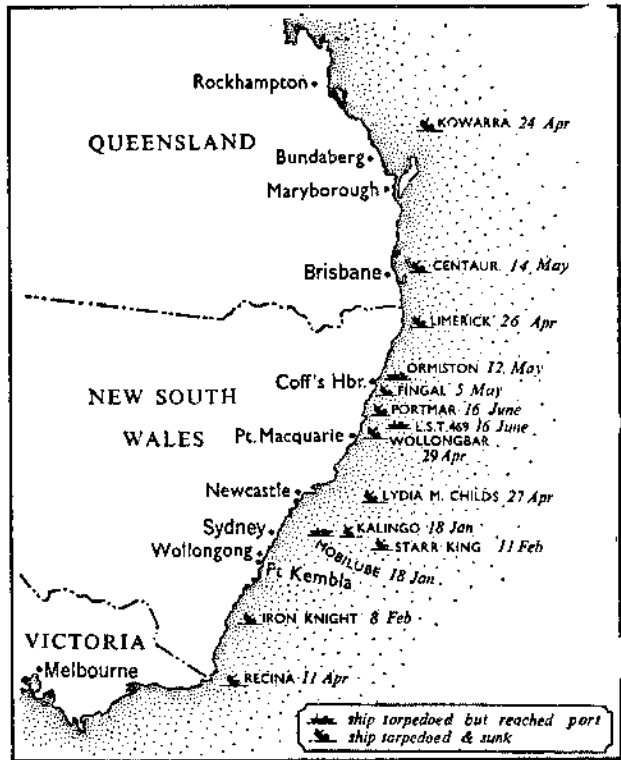
During the first two years of the war it was German surface raiders that were active on the Australian Station. As well as the increased threat to shipping from Japanese submarines, 1942 saw the introduction into the Indian Ocean of large numbers of German U-boats. On 20 January 1942, six weeks after Pearl Harbour, a Japanese submarine I-124, specially equipped for minelaying was sunk 60 miles west of Darwin. It probably laid the mines that were reported at that time in the northern approaches to Darwin, four of which



THE COURSE OF THE ORION, JUNE - OCTOBER 1940



JAPANESE SUBMARINE ATTACKS DURING 1942



JAPANESE SUBMARINE ATTACKS DURING 1943

(ii)

washed ashore on 11 February. Eight days later Darwin was attacked by carrier-borne planes which sank eight ships and damaged many more in the harbour. Less than three months later a larger carrier force was turned back in the Battle of the Coral Sea (4 - 8 May 1942). The submarines that accompanied the Japanese fleet in the Coral Sea were ordered to proceed to Truk to equip with midget submarines.

On 20 May, an aircraft from Japanese submarine I-29 carried out an unobserved reconnaissance of Sydney. Ten days later, an aircraft from I-21 carried out another reconnaissance of Sydney. The following evening, Sunday, 31 May three midget submarines entered Sydney Harbour. The midget submarines were sunk but the depot ship HMAS Kuttabul and 19 naval ratings were lost. On 8 June, the I-24 fired 10 high explosive shells at Sydney's eastern suburbs and I-21 fired 6 high explosive shells at Newcastle. This was the last enemy action against the Australian mainland from ships, although air attacks continued in Northern Australia. During the period June to August 1942, seven Japanese submarines operated along the eastern coast of Australia sinking seven ships. In November 1942, 1400 miles northwest of Fremantle, an Australian merchant ship, HMIS Bengal sank one of the two Japanese raiders that operated in the Indian Ocean.

In January 1943, Japanese submarine I-21 returned to the Australian east coast and sank or damaged five ships in four weeks. From April until June five Japanese submarines operated along the Australian eastern coast attacking fifteen ships and sinking eight. Among those sunk was the hospital ship Centaur, torpedoed off Brisbane with the loss of 268 lives. On 16 June the Portmar sank with the loss of one crewman in what was the last Japanese sinking along the eastern Australian coast.

During 1943, surface raiders and submarines operated in the Indian Ocean but mainly along the African and Indian coasts. In June 1943 a German raider sank two ships about 1000 miles off the eastern Australian coast, outbound from Fremantle and Exmouth. Surface raiders and submarines continued to operate in the Indian Ocean in 1944 to the south of

India and into the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. The last sinkings on both the eastern and western coasts of Australia were made by the same German U-boat, U-862. It left Djakarta on 17 November 1944 to operate off the west coast of Australia but then continued along the south coast through Bass Strait into the Tasman Sea. On 25 December, U-862 sunk the Liberty ship Robert J Walker, 100 miles north of Gabo Island and on 6 February 1945 while returning to Djakarta sank the motor vessel Peter Silvester. This was the last submarine attack on the Australian Station.

References

1. *Australia in the War of 1939 - 1945* Australian War Memorial. Both the Naval and Air series should be consulted. All ships attacked in the Australian Station and many ships attacked in the Indian Ocean are not only mentioned but detailed circumstances are related. In addition to the three maps illustrated there are many other relevant maps and diagrams in both series

G Herman Gill *Royal Australian Navy 1939 - 1942*

G Herman Gill *Royal Australian Navy 1942 - 1945*

Douglas Gillison *Royal Australian Air Force 1939 - 1942*

George Odgers *Air War Against Japan 1943 - 1945*

2. Steven L Carruthers *Australia Under Siege, Sydney 1942*

3. Articles

Ian A Miller, *First of the Gallant Six Thousand, The Medal Collector*, Dec 1986, Vol.37 No.12 pp.22-27

John E Price, *The Merchant Navy Memorial, Sabretache*, Jul-Dec 1986, Vol.27 No.4 pp.15-20

Maps courtesy Australian War Memorial, from G Herman Gill, *Royal Australian Navy 1939 - 1942* and *Royal Australian Navy 1942 - 1945*

DATE	SHIP (Nationality)	COAST	ATTACKER	ATTACK	RESULT
7 Nov 40	Cambridge (UK)	Vic	German Raider	Mine	Sunk
8 Nov 40	City of Rayville (US)	Vic	German Raider	Mine	Sunk
5 Dec 40	Nimbin (Aust)	NSW	German Raider	Mine	Sunk
7 Dec 40	Hertford (UK)	SA	German Raider	Mine	Damaged
26 Mar 41	Millimual (Aust)	NSW	German Raider	Mine	Sunk
7 Oct 41	Storstad (Norway)	WA	German Raider	Gunfire	Captured
19 Nov 41	HMAS Sydney (Aust)	WA	German Raider	Gun/Torp	Sunk
20 Nov 41	Maimoa (Aust)	WA	German Raider	Gunfire	Sunk
21 Nov 41	Port Brisbane (UK)	WA	German Raider	Torpedo	Sunk
16 May 42	Wellen (USSR)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Gunfire	Damaged
31 May 42	HMAS Kuttabul (Aust)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
3 Jun 42	Iron Chieftain (Aust)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
3 Jun 42	Age (Aust)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Gunfire	Undamaged
4 Jun 42	Barwon (Aust)	Vic	Japanese Submarine	Gun/Torp	Sunk
4 Jun 42	Iron Crown (Aust)	Vic	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
5 Jun 42	Echunga (Aust)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Chased	Undamaged
9 Jun 42	Orestes (UK)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Gunfire	Damaged
12 Jun 42	Guatemala (Panama)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
20 Jul 42	S Livanos (Greece)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
21 Jul 42	Coast Farmer (US)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
22 Jul 42	William Dawes (US)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
23 Jul 42	Allara (Aust)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Damaged
24 Jul 42	Murada (Aust)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Undamaged
26 Jul 42	Coolana (Aust)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Gunfire	Undamaged
28 Jul 42	Katoomba (Aust)	WA	Japanese Submarine	Gunfire	Undamaged
3 Aug 42	Dureenbee (Aust)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Gunfire	Abandoned
18 Jan 43	Kalingo (Aust)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
18 Jan 43	Mobilube (US)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Damaged
22 Jan 43	Peter H Burnett (US)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Damaged
8 Feb 43	Iron Knight (Aust)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
10 Feb 43	Starr King (US)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
18 Mar 43	Charles S Jones (US)	QLD	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Undamaged
11 Apr 43	Recina (Yug)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
24 Apr 43	Kowarra (Aust)	QLD	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
26 Apr 43	Limerick (UK)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
27 Apr 43	Lydia M Childs (US)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
29 Apr 43	Wollongbar (Aust)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
5 May 43	Fingal (Norway)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
12 May 43	Ormiston (Aust)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Damaged
12 May 43	Caradale (Aust)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Damaged
14 May 43	H S Centaur (UK)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
29 May 43	Sheldon Jackson (US)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Undamaged
1 Jun 43	Point San Pedro (US)	QLD	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Undamaged
4 Jun 43	Edward Chambers (US)	QLD	Japanese Submarine	Gunfire	Undamaged
6 Jun 43	John Bartram (US)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Undamaged
16 Jun 43	Portmar (US)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Sunk
16 Jun 43	L S T 469 (US)	NSW	Japanese Submarine	Torpedo	Damaged
24 Dec 44	Robert J Walker (US)	Vic	German U-boat	Torpedo	Sunk
6 Feb 45	Peter Silvester (US)	WA	German U-boat	Torpedo	Sunk