

Basic Detail Report



ANMS1479[022]

Title

Fifteen sailors

Date

after 1900

Medium

Photographic slides

Dimensions

Overall: 50 x 50 mm,

Name

Slide

History

E- and J-Class submarines were Australia's first foray into submarine warfare in the early 20th Century. The possible role of submarines for the defence of Australia was debated in the opening years after Federation but not decided upon until December 1907 by the Deakin government. Initial planning sought nine C-Class submarines and six torpedo boats to be acquired or built within a three-year period. The 1909 Imperial Conference of Defence shifted Australia's doctrine away from harbour defence with destroyers to a 'Fleet Unit' model with cruisers and a Royal Navy (RN) presence. To complement the order of surface vessels for the Fleet Unit, two of the newer E-Class boats were ordered in 1910. The three C-Class boats shifted to two E-Class due to the increased cost, but also characteristics that suggested the latter were more suitable for Australia's requirements. AE1 and AE2 were a part of the first production group of E-Class boats and were commissioned into the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) on 28th February 1914 in Portsmouth. They first arrived in an Australian port in May 1914 at Darwin. AE1 was lost during patrols east of New Britain, in waters off the Duke of York Islands, on the 14th of September 1914. AE2's main accomplishment was safely transiting through the Dardanelles, in April 1915. It spent five days in the Sea of Marmara hassling Turkish vessels before being hit by enemy shellfire and subsequently scuttled and abandoned on the 30th of April. This ended Australia's first period of submarine capability. J-Class boats were Australia's next answer to the value shown by submarines during the First World War. Initial consideration was for an array of coastal and cruiser submarines. In the 1917 and 1918 Imperial War Conferences it was determined that Australia should have a submarine capability as a matter of urgency. Under this determination, six J-Class boats were made available and gifted, alongside several destroyers, to the Australian government in 1919. This brought Australian naval strength up to the numbers suggested years before. During the war, the J-Class boats in British service operated as part of a fleet unit, and were referred to as 'Reapers', as they approached enemy vessels to torpedo them as part of a larger battle rather than individual operations. Insufficient refitting was undertaken on the submarines before their transfer to the RAN and they were

plagued with issues. On the journey to Australia, each boat suffered engine problems and were inadequately supported by the submarine depot ship HMAS Platypus (I) which had been designed for two E-Class boats. Platypus (I) had been kept in ordinary while the J-Class boats were commissioned and transferred to Australian service. Post-war budget cuts and poor management within the RAN's submarine command meant the submarines were not maintained during their service in Australia. By the end of 1921, a review showed that only one of the six boats were ready for sea. Having been placed in reserve, they were scrapped by the end of 1923. J7 remained operational, but only in capacity as a power source for the Flinders Naval Base before it was sunk as a breakwater in 1930. So ended Australia's second period of submarine usage. The J-Class boats had proved themselves capable in British service but were too worn for effective use by the RAN by the time they arrived in Australia. The Imperial Conference in 1923 recommended Australia acquire latest-model submarines, in the wake of losing their J-Class contingent. Two O-Class boats, Oxley and Otway, were built for, and delivered to the RAN in 1927. Arriving in Australia in February 1929, the two boats took part in exercises but suffered from high upkeep costs during an economic depression and the receding threat of war. In 1930, both were returned to the RN, which used them during the Second World War. After the Second World War ended, the RN stationed a submarine force in Australia from 1949 to 1969. These boats were used primarily for Anti-Submarine Warfare training for both Australia and New Zealand. In the early 1960s, a joint project between Australia and the United Kingdom was proposed for the purchase of UK-built Porpoise/Oberon-Class submarines that would ultimately replace the RN squadron. Prospective volunteers for RAN submarine service attended HMS Dolphin in the UK for qualification while several RN officers transferred/were exchanged to the RAN to command the new Australian boats. Four submarines were ordered in the first batch. Two additional boats were ordered in 1971 to complete the Australian Submarine Squadron. The first boat to be commissioned and arrive in Australia was HMAS Oxley (II), which arrived in 1967. HMAS Ovens, the subject of the photographic images in this collection, was the boat commissioned third and arrived in Australia in 1969. Ovens was the first Australian submarine to deploy to Singapore as part of the ANZUK force (in 1972) as well as fire an encapsulated Harpoon anti-shiping missile (in 1985) and fly the Jolly Roger after sinking the decommissioned HMAS Colac with a Mk 48 torpedo in 1987. HMAS Ovens was paid-off in 1994 and donated to the Western Australian Maritime Museum where it sits on a slip and is accessible as part of a museum display. The last of the Oberon-Class boats, HMAS Otama, was decommissioned in 2000. Replacement of the Oberon boats was first discussed in the early 1980s and the first tenders received in 1983. Six Swedish designed Collins-Class submarines replaced the Oberon-Class boats and are still in service today.