

being bookish. Similarly, Spruance also excelled at engineering without becoming a technocrat. Sprinkled in the prewar part of the narrative are a few anecdotes from acquaintances that provide glimpses of the elusive personality hidden within Spruance's monumental reserve. The wartime core of the work reinforces modern perceptions of Spruance's command at Midway and in leading the Fifth Fleet across the Pacific, particularly with the infusion of newer intelligence revelations that cast new light on Spruance's decision to retire during the first evening of the Midway clash and in analysis of captured Japanese plans prior to the Saipan invasion.

However, nearly half the page count of the 1942-45 time frame is consumed with tactical summaries of the campaigns and actions beyond Spruance's direct influence. Because of this, the mid-sized *Wielding the Trident* is a welcome supplement to the previous biographies, particularly Buell's *The Quiet Warrior*, but not a successor. Indeed, much of the anecdotal material came from Buell's exhaustive research files that did not make it into his own manuscript. However, for bibliographies of famous leaders, this is not a vice. Attaining a comprehensive grasp of a warrior of Spruance's stature requires not only such collegial harvesting but several published volumes with many authorial perspectives on not only the specific individual, but on his contemporaries and on the environment that produced him. The recent spate of works examining other commanders of the interwar and evolving World War II Navy are collectively more important in interpreting Admiral Spruance than even a solitary massive tome.

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TOO FEW, TOO COSTLY: WHY AUSTRALIA GAVE AWAY ITS SUBMARINES

By Dr David Chessum

In 1923 the RAN began the process of acquiring new submarines to replace the *J* class boats that had been gifted by Britain after World War One. In 1924, having decided that Australia lacked the capability to build submarines domestically, tenders were called for the construction of two boats, and Vickers of Barrow-in-Furness was contracted. *Oxley* and *Otway* were delivered by the builders in September 1927, and the boats left for Australia in November.

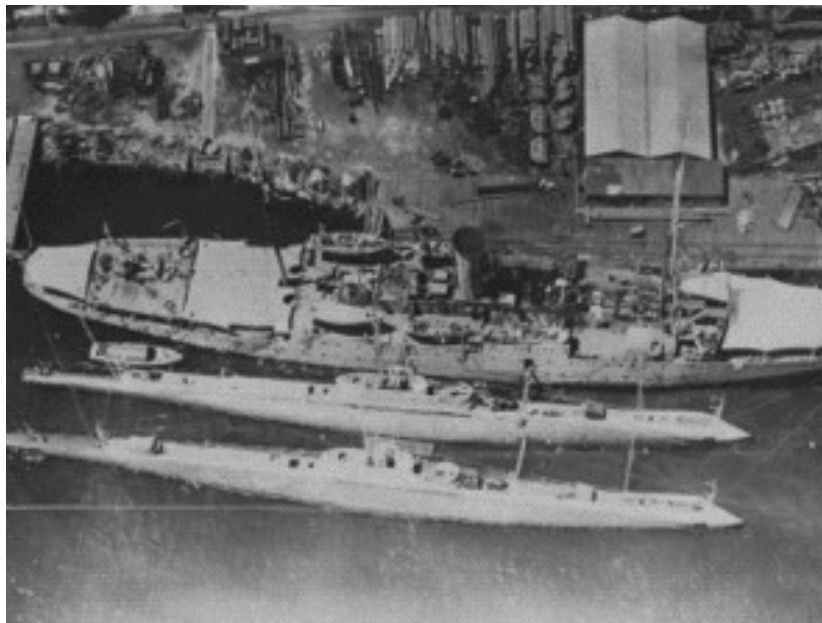
The two submarines had been ordered as part of a proposed flotilla of six, however by 1930 it was clear that there was no prospect of the remaining boats being funded. As an incomplete unit, they were very expensive to retain in commission, required specialised personnel to operate and maintain, and owing to their small number, their value for war was considered slight and not commensurate with the cost of upkeep.

Due to the onset of the Great Depression, funding was not available to keep the submarines in commission, and they were placed



HMAS *Oxley* and *Otway* moored at Townsville, Queensland. (Townsville Public Library Collection)

in reserve. The RAN considered that after an extended period in reserve, they would not be able to be restored to a safe and mechanically efficient condition without an extensive refit. Furthermore, there would then be no trained crews available due to the lapse of time. The decision was therefore made to offer the vessels as a 'gift' to the British Government. This course of action was anticipated to save the Australian Government £23,000 to £52,000 per year, which could be reallocated to procuring a replacement for the cruiser *Brisbane*.



Britain accepted the offer because the two submarines would increase the effective strength of the fleet, and would result in no increase in costs. The intent upon receiving the two ex-Australian boats was to place two existing *L* class submarines in reserve, and sell the submarines *K26* and *M3* for scrap. The cost of bringing the vessels to the UK (£5,000 to send the crew out to Australia and £2,700 for fuel) would be offset initially by the sale of the submarines *K26* and *M3* (£5,800 and £5,000 respectively). *K26* and *M3* would, in any event, have had to be scrapped as excess tonnage before the end of 1936 under the 1930 London Naval Treaty, but ultimately the cost of bringing the boats back to Britain would be covered by the scrap value of the two ex-Australian boats. In terms of recurring costs, the cost of maintaining the two ex-RAN vessels in full commission would be more than counterbalanced by the savings in annual maintenance achieved on the discarded *K26* and *M3*, and the two *L* class submarines to be placed in reserve.

The submarines transferred to the RN in 1931 and joined the Mediterranean Fleet where they served until 1935, before transferring to the Home Fleet. *Oxley* was lost in the first week of World War II when she was torpedoed in error and sunk by the British submarine *Triton* while patrolling off the Skagerrak. *Otway* survived the war, and was sold on 24 August 1945 for scrap.

Oxley and *Otway* alongside the depot ship HMAS *Platypus* shortly after the latter's transfer to Australian service in 1919. (Alchetron.com)

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4. N. McCart, "A Tragic Sinking. The loss of HM Submarine *Oxley* in 1939," *Ships Monthly*, 2024, 52-55.
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