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Service Story of Instructor Captain Richard Gerard Fennessy DSC RAN

By Noel Burgess

This extraordinary story concerns a country schoolmaster who mainly served through WW II in one ship in which he won the DSC and afterwards rose to become the first RAN Instructor Captain and Director of Naval Education.

Richard Gerard Fennessy was born in Warrnambool, Victoria on 25 June 1910. He was the youngest son of Pierce Phillip Fennessy, a Superintendent in the Victoria Police Force and his wife Mary (nee Kenafick). In 1931 he qualified as a school teacher and began teaching in Horsham, Victoria.

On 18 July 1938 Richard Fennessy joined the RAN as a Schoolmaster (on probation) which was a warrant rank shared by the likes of Boatswains and others selected for promotion from the ranks. From such a tenuous commencement it is doubtful many of his contemporaries would have predicted that he would have such an illustrious career.

A 'Bootlace' Schoolie

His appointment was made permanent on 21 November 1938 when he was confirmed in the rank of Schoolmaster. Schoolmasters had wardroom status as had all Warrant Officers at the time. On his cuffs he wore single gold lace stripes complete with executive curl, but the lace was only a quarter of an inch wide (6.5 mm). This was derogatively called a 'bootlace' by some. To denote his academic calling, immediately below the gold stripe was a light blue stripe one eighth of an inch wide (3 mm). His warrant was formally issued on 6 March 1940.

An initial sea posting was to HMAS *Adelaide* on 17 January 1940, but it was for only six months spent patrolling Australian and South Pacific waters. Afterwards he returned to HMAS *Cerberus* where he awaited passage to the United Kingdom to join HMAS *Nestor* on commissioning. He sailed in the Aberdeen Line passenger ship *Themistocles* with a large number of Australian naval personnel bound for the UK, many of who would join the 'N' class destroyers or other British warships. The officer-in-charge during the transit was Lieutenant Commander Arthur Callaway, RANVR, who was to become the first RAN officer credited with sinking an enemy submarine in World War II.

HMAS Nestor

On arrival at Liverpool most of the naval personnel were sent to establishments in southern England for further training prior to joining their ships. Schoolmaster Fennessy found he was the sole RAN passenger going north on a train bound for Glasgow. On joining *Nestor* he was introduced to the Captain, Commander G.S. Stewart RAN, who was a huge man. 'Big Bill' immediately chided him for being improperly dressed as he did not have a black cap which was worn by all personnel when in the UK at that time.

Although he was appointed as the Flotilla Education Officer he was soon informed that his duties included Confidential Books Officer, Cypher Officer and Wardroom Minerals Catering Officer as well as the Plotting Officer. The latter position would have been a surprise as a Plotting Officer is responsible for maintaining an accurate picture of all vessels, submarines and aircraft to enable the command to have an appreciation of the tactical situation. The plotting table was developed by the Admiralty Research Laboratories which utilised direct inputs from the log and the gyrocompass to

enable the ship's movement to be projected onto a horizontal surface, thus providing a track of the vessel. A tracing paper overlay allowed such movements to be recorded in pencil. Positions and movements of nearby vessels would have to be then determined to complete a meaningful picture. While a relatively simple task, keeping an up to date and accurate plot was one that required good organizational skills and a level head.

Nestor was commissioned on 3 February 1941 and joined the Home Fleet at Scapa Flow from where she spent the first months either patrolling the North Atlantic, or screening major warships. Her first true operation was with other ships of the 6th Destroyer Flotilla they were ordered to the Lofoten Islands. Here they were to seek out and destroy three German trawlers which were known to be operating in that area and transmitting weather information to the German command which was of considerable value to the Luftwaffe. His journal records 'Then as we approached 70 degrees North latitude the six destroyers (five 'Tribal' Class and *Nestor*) carried out a line abreast five miles apart search of the area. Within 24 hours one trawler had been boarded and captured; two scuttled themselves on sighting us. An RN Captain from Whitehall went aboard the captured trawler and took possession of all codebooks and other intelligence papers that were of value'.

On one occasion when *Nestor* was scheduled to sail on trials, the ship's company refused to put to sea under drunken officers. The Admiral (Destroyers) had the officers concerned arrested and another officer appointed in command. This culminated with the Captain, Commander George Stewart, RAN and his Executive Officer Lieutenant Commander Henry Cooper, RAN being tried by courts martial in HMS *Tyne* resulting in both of them being dismissed their ship.

The Executive Officer of *Tyne* (Commander C.B. Allers-Hankey, RN) was appointed to *Nestor* in temporary command by Rear Admiral Destroyers until relieved by Commander A.S Rosenthal, RAN who was standing by HMAS *Norman* in Plymouth. Fennessy remembered 'Rosie' as he was then known as '...a more dedicated Naval Officer I have yet to meet. The son of a Major-General, a tall good-looking man, of excellent bearing, studiously correct in all his actions whether talking to senior officers, junior officers, and all ratings he came to be respected by the whole crew'.



HMAS *Nestor* – Source: Royal Navy

Nestor was involved in the hunt for the *Bismarck*, but was diverted to Iceland to refuel thus ensuring she was only a distant witness to the loss of HMS *Hood* when *Bismarck*'s superior gunnery straddled the British battle cruiser leaving only three survivors in the frigid ocean. Fennessy in his log reflects the stunning effect on *Nestor*'s complement: 'We all had a great admiration for the *Hood* – what a beautiful ship she was? We could hardly believe it when a few minutes later came a signal that the *Hood* had been sunk'. Unfortunately the problems of alcohol in the wardroom were not yet over with the

Engineering Officer Lieutenant Commander F. Hodson, RAN also tried by court martial and dismissed his ship. He was replaced by Lieutenant Commander Parker, RAN who was reportedly a welcome addition to the ship.

While Admiral Tovey reorganized his forces to intercept the two German capital ships it became apparent that the escorts would have to detach to refuel. The weather was appalling and the German ships were nowhere to be seen. On 27 May 1941 the crew of *Nestor* thrilled to receive a signal that *Bismarck* had been sunk by torpedoes fired by HMS *Dorsetshire* and British pride was at least partially restored. 'We were on our way around the west coast of Scotland when we received orders to escort HMS *Prince of Wales* back to Scotland' wrote Mr Fennessy. 'The damage we could see in her was grim evidence that *Bismarck* had put up a great fight'.

Malta Convoys and Award of DSC

Nestor next entered the Mediterranean as a part of the escort group for a Malta convoy known as 'Operation Substance' in July and August 1941. It was then that *Nestor* had a new command team, purged from the alcoholic excesses of the previous regime, with not only a new captain and engineer but with Lieutenant George Crowley, RN as the First Lieutenant. Fennessy's journal states 'These three senior officers soon made their presence felt – Rosie exuded confidence on the bridge, as the Chief did in the engine room, and George was everywhere and it soon became apparent he was a real destroyer officer and knew everything and everyone from stem to stern...the whole crew became confident in the knowledge that we were the best destroyer in the fleet!' Thereafter she moved to the South Atlantic on further escort duties before returning to England for repairs and refit in October 1941. This involved removing the after torpedo tubes and replacing them with a high angle 4-inch gun, augmented with Oerlikons. It was then that *Nestor* had radars fitted, a Bedstead Type 286 on the foremast and a Type 285 fire control system on the director.

It has been customary in the Royal Navy for small ships of one class to be allocated to one flotilla; however the shortage of escorts was so acute in 1940/41 ships were allocated on the most pressing need. Whereas HMA Ships *Napier* and *Nizam* were allocated to the Mediterranean Fleet based in Alexandria, *Nestor* was allocated to Force H under the command of Vice Admiral Sir James Somerville based at Gibraltar.

Nestor was returning to the Mediterranean on 5 December 1941, sailing from Devonport with a Gibraltar bound convoy. Lookouts sighted a surfaced U-boat off Cape Saint Vincent on 15 December and *Nestor* opened fire with her major armament. Commander Rosenthal ordered the other escorts to close in and *Nestor* obtained an asdic contact. Launching two depth charge attacks she was rewarded a marked explosion and debris which came to the surface suggesting a kill. Schoolmaster Fennessy later recorded, 'Our Medical Officer was given some pieces of flesh which he placed in formalin – and this was later submitted as evidence. I remember one AB who picked up a glove and was taking it up to the bridge, when one interested bystander asked 'Any fingers in it?' – apparently our depth charges caused some electrical spark which caused the battery fumes to explode, so in effect the submarine blew itself up'.

Mr Fennessy was commended in the Captain's report for his skill and enterprise against enemy submarines, efficiency in operating the plot during the engagement, earning him the award of the Distinguished Service Cross. Admiral Somerville's report left little doubt that *Nestor* was responsible for the destruction of U-127; this is confirmed when he wrote: 'The safe arrival of *Sydney Star* reflects great credit on the commanding officer of *Nestor*, Commander A.S. Rosenthal, RAN who showed judgement, initiative, and good seamanship in handling a delicate situation so close to the enemy's coast and in the presence of enemy E-boats. It was appropriate that the C.O. and most of his crew should be Australians'.

On Christmas Eve *Nestor* returned to Malta. Two days later she proceeded as one of the escorts bound for Alexandria and on 30 December sailed from that port on the screen of the heavy ships for the bombardment of Bardia prior to its capture by the British 8th Army. She was also part of the escort for 'Operation Substance' a convoy of six ships to relieve Malta in July with HM Ships *Ark Royal*, *Nelson* and *Renown* among the escorting ships. At the convoy briefing Admiral Somerville warned that he expected very strong opposition with attacks by aircraft, submarines and possibly the Italian fleet. His final signal read 'This convoy must get through'.



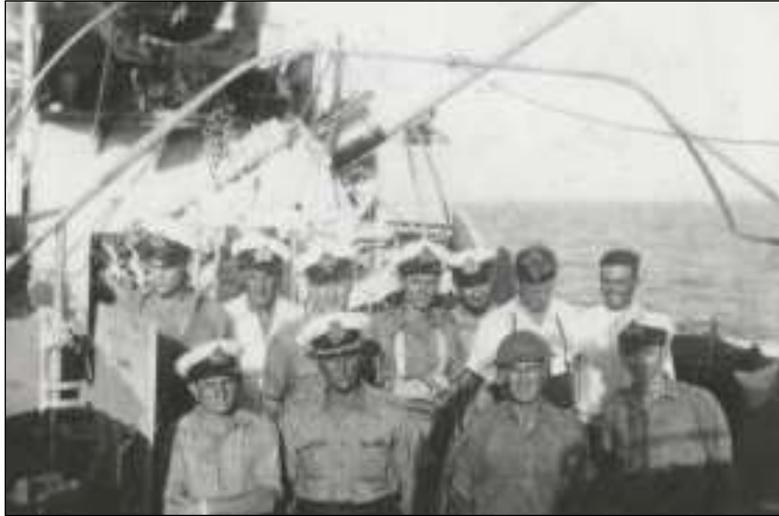
Sydney Star arrives in Malta. Source: Google

It was almost midnight on 23 January 1942 that the first attack occurred when a submarine launched her torpedoes which was detected by *Nestor's* flashing to *Renown* 'TS' – torpedoes starboard and the fleet took avoiding action. In his journal, Fennessy mentions that as he was rushing to his action station he could see one track 'bubbly luminescent in the calm sea, passing right under the ship about amidships, and I instinctively jumped in the air as I was hanging onto the lifeline with one hand as though jumping over a possible splitting deck. If I had been quick enough to realize the torpedo's wake takes some seconds to reach the surface, and that torpedo had passed well ahead of the ship'. *Nestor* quickly gained an asdic contact and launched three attacks in quick succession, but without success.

The first air attack came in the early in the forenoon by torpedo bombers coming in very low in groups of three, followed by high level attacks and then the aircraft came in coordinated attacks launching their weapons simultaneously. Meanwhile all vessels were independently taking avoiding action from the torpedoes and bombs and responding with all guns blazing. *Ark Royal's* Fulmar fighter claimed six enemy aircraft shot down and the ship's guns accounted for a similar number of enemy aircraft. While most ships skilfully avoided the bombs and successfully combed the torpedo tracks, the destroyer HMS *Fearless* on the starboard wing was not as fortunate as she was so badly damaged by a torpedo that she had to be abandoned. Similarly the cruiser HMS *Manchester* could not avoid one of three torpedoes launched against her; although damaged she could make way with difficulty, and was ordered to return to Gibraltar.

That afternoon the capital ships turned to the west to return to Gibraltar whilst the convoy and escorts made for Malta. However the enemy torpedo bombers made another strike badly, damaging the destroyer HMS *Firedrake*. During that last night Italian E-boats made a mass strike with numerous small craft darting around the convoy with little apparent effect. It was only then that *Nestor's* lookouts reported one ship in the convoy was losing way. As *Nestor* was the last ship in the screen to starboard she closed and learnt the vessel was the refrigerated cargo ship *Sydney Star* which had been torpedoed and appeared to be sinking; it was also known that this ship was carrying 600 British troops.

Nestor manoeuvred alongside the stricken ship and ascertained that her number three hold was rapidly filling with water. The troops were transferred to *Nestor*. However, *Sydney Star's* master, Captain Horn, assured Commander Rosenthal that he had the situation under control and would continue to take his vessel on to Malta. *Nestor*, the cruiser HMS *Hermione* and *Sydney Star* proceeded in convoy to Valletta. The reception on our arrival was amazing, no bands playing, no cheering, just a large crowd of Maltese civilians politely clapping. *Sydney Star* had delivered an invaluable cargo of food for the near starving islanders.



Survivors from HMAS *Nestor* on board HMS *Javelin* 1942
Mr Fennessy immediately behind the Captain. Source: Author's archive

Far Eastern assignment

Nestor was next reassigned to the Far East, supporting operations to reinforce Malaya. On reaching Aden she was ordered to join the escort of the carrier HMS *Indomitable*, engaged in ferrying aircraft to the Malaya/Java theatre. That operation completed, the group proceeded to Port Sudan to embark a second load of aircraft. They were too late to take them to Malaya as Singapore had fallen. The aircraft were launched about 100 miles off Colombo just in time to assist in the defence of the city/port against Japanese air attacks. *Nestor* proceeded to Trincomalee and joined the Eastern Fleet then being formed by Admiral Somerville.

Return to the Med and the loss of *Nestor*

With the War in Japan escalating the N Class destroyers were intended to return to Australia, but being very short of escorts Admiral Somerville requested *Nestor's* transfer to RAN control be deferred until a British destroyer could relieve her. In late March and early April *Nestor* was engaged on patrol and escort duties in the Indian Ocean and on the screen of the Eastern Fleet. She then returned to the Mediterranean via East Africa. Arriving at Haifa in June 1942 she was joined by her sisters *Napier*, *Norman*, and *Nizam* forming the 7th Destroyer Flotilla for 'Operation Vigorous', creating a convoy passage to the east and west of Malta. The total covering force comprised eight cruisers and 26 destroyers, supported by corvettes and nine submarines.

Enemy air attacks carried out almost exclusively by land based aircraft began almost as soon as the ships left Alexandria. Early attacks were focussed on the cruisers and the eleven transport ships of the convoy, but later the destroyers were targeted. On 15 June a signal was received informing a second convoy had succeeded in reaching Malta from the west (Operation Harpoon) but in view of the strength of the enemy air attacks and the presence of the Italian fleet, it was finally decided to abandon the westward passage and return to Alexandria.

At about 1800 on 15 June 1942 when the convoy was off south-west Crete *Nestor* was straddled by a stick of heavy bombs which caused serious damage to her boiler rooms. She was taken in tow by HMS *Javelin*, but at about 0530 the next morning she was going down by the bows and permission was requested to scuttle. After her crew had been transferred to *Javelin* she was sunk by depth charges. The loss of this fine ship is unique in the history of the RAN as she was the only commissioned Australian warship never to have sailed into Australian waters.

Homeward bound and promotion

Now without a ship, in October 1942, Mr Fennessy took a return passage home joining *Cerberus* 11 February 1943. He was soon to marry, with the *Argus* newspaper reporting: Mary Elizabeth Rice, second daughter of Mr J. F. and the late Mrs Rice of Ballarat is to marry Mr Richard Gerard Fennessy DSC, RAN the youngest son of Mr and Mrs P.P. Fennessy, of East Brighton. The marriage has been arranged to take place at St. Thomas's South Yarra on June 5.

While still serving in the RAN, towards the end of the war Mr Fennessy was appointed to teaching positions in two towns in Papua/New Guinea. Firstly to Ladava from 26 April 1944 to 19 January 1945 then to Madang from 20 January 1945 to 11 June 1945.

With changes to teaching positions in the services, on 13 January 1945 Fennessy became a Commissioned Officer as a Schoolmaster (equivalent to a Sub Lieutenant). On 28 September 1945 he was promoted Temporary Acting Senior Master Officer (equivalent to Lieutenant), now resplendent wearing two gold stripes, separated by a sky blue stripe designating the Instructor Branch. He became an Instructor Lieutenant on 17 January 1946. To many servicemen in the teaching profession this change was considered beneficial as Schoolmasters had been seen of inferior status.

On his return to Australia he was appointed to HMAS *Rushcutter* (for *Watson*) on 12 June 1945. In 1949 his meteorological training began when he was appointed to HMAS *Albatross* and later that year he took passage in *Orcades* to undertake meteorological training courses in England. First in the indoctrination of the meteorological codes at HMS *Fulmar*, RNAS *Lossiemouth* and HMS *Harrier*, the RN Meteorology School at Saint Anne's Head in Pembrokeshire. Early in 1950 he completed his meteorological training and returned to Australia in the *Stratheden*.

He was then appointed to the flagship HMAS *Sydney* on 17 April 1951 for meteorological duties and as Fleet Instructional Officer. He was promoted Instructor Lieutenant Commander on 15 June 1951. During 1951 and 1952 *Sydney* was involved in operations in the Korean War where she earned accolades from both the USN and RN for the high number (over 2,400) of sorties flown from the carrier. These were achieved often in appalling conditions with the ship operating in snow and ice in the freezing conditions of a severe northern winter and having to contend with a typhoon when one aircraft was lost overboard. During these periods the services of the meteorological group were in high demand.

Lieutenant Commander Fennessy was lent to HMAS *Australia* from 23 October 1952 until 5 March 1954, and joined HMAS *Melbourne* for meteorological duties and as Fleet Instructor Officer on 14 May 1956. During this period he had been promoted to Instructor Commander. On 28 January 1957 he was appointed to *Albatross* as SIO, Senior Met Officer, and OIC Meteorological School. It was at this time that I had my first contact with Commander Fennessy as a student in a class of three other would-be teenage Meteorological Observers at NAS *Nowra* where he was endeavouring to teach us the basics of the science of the earth's atmosphere. I can well remember him introducing us to the movement of air masses initiated by the Coriolis Effect which he likened to alighting from a moving tram; if one alighted from the right side one would tend to move in a clockwise direction, but if one alighted from the left side one would tend to move in a counter clockwise direction. He then went on to demonstrate this by stepping off the dais in the classroom with a dramatic stumbling effect. At the time of our course, we mere Metrological Observers and our instructor Metrological Officers, were all in tropical dress (without ribbons) and were totally unaware of the distinguished record of our commander in WW II and the Korean War, which he never once mentioned.

In January 1962 Commander Fennessy was appointed as Deputy Director of Naval Education and Naval Weather Service and in March 1963 he was promoted to Instructor Captain. The same year he reached the pinnacle of his career becoming Director of Naval Education and Director of Naval Weather Service. He was the first RAN officer to be so appointed, as the position had previously been held by Royal Naval officers on loan. After a career spanning nearly twenty-eight years of exemplary service, progressing from Warrant Officer to Captain, 'Dick' Fennessy retired on 16 February 1966. In December 1978 Dick's wife Mary died aged 72, and seven years later, on 16 December 1985, aged 75, Captain Richard Gerard Fennessy DSC, RAN, Rtd died in Canberra.