

CALL THE HANDS

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Ken Brown: Service in HMAS *Nestor*
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Mr Ken BROWN (aged 95) a retired RAN Lieutenant Commander and World War Two veteran was recently awarded the British Arctic Star. This award recognized his service during World War II for operational service north of the Arctic Circle in HMAS *Nestor*. The following notes are intended to provide insight into Ken's remarkable career.



SBLT Ken Brown, RAN

During *Nestor's* period north of the Arctic Circle she was part of a six cruiser and destroyer escort for HMS *Hood*. *Hood* and her escorts had been tasked to search for the German Battleship *Bismark* which was causing havoc in the North Atlantic and Norwegian Sea near Iceland. The destroyer and cruisers being much smaller than *Hood* (one of the largest Battle Cruisers in the Royal Navy at the time) had to take rostered turns to leave the convoy to refuel. It was during one of *Nestor's* absences refueling that *Hood* was engaged by *Bismark* and sunk with all but three lives lost. *Nestor* was the only Australian manned ship in the hunt for *Bismark*.

The search continued by the rest of the fleet up into Icelandic waters pursuing *Bismark* which was eventually sunk south of Iceland on 27 May 1941 following notification of its position by the pursuing fleet.

All the time these two missions were taking place, there were numerous engagements by aircraft and enemy ships keeping Ken's "Pom-Pom Guns" in action and constant maintenance. He was still only 19 years of age but really doing his part for the war effort.

On 15 June 1942 in the Mediterranean, HMAS *Nestor*, under heavy and sustained aerial attacks, received serious damage from 3 x 1000lb bombs which were not direct hits but the near misses broke the back of the ship. The boiler rooms were flooded which completely disabled the ship. The four members of the boiler room were drowned and about ten other personnel received injuries. Ken's Oerlikon gun was firing nonstop at dive bombers firing their machine guns at the ships gun positions.

When the bombs exploded Ken was blown from his gun platform sustaining injuries to his back on hitting the bulkhead, then falling heavily on his left knee. First aid arrived as soon as the bombing eased off and the bandages stopped the bleeding. Further air raids continued and Ken was back on the Oerlikon gun, although still in considerable pain.

As dusk fell and attacks eased, HMS *Javelin* came to assist HMAS *Nestor*. Three attempts to tow her during the night failed. The ship was taking water fast. Dawn was near and as both ships would be sitting ducks for air attacks, *Nestor's* Captain gave the order to abandon ship. Ken was asked if he could dismantle as many of the Oerlikons as possible. He had completed two and passed them over to Petty Officer Paddy Collins of *Javelin* together with all ammunition. He had no time to get the other two at the other end of the ship.

When all the crew were safely on board *Javelin* shallow depth charges were set to hasten the sinking of



Nestor in the early hours of 16th June, to ensure it did not fall into enemy hands. Most of *Nestor's* crew had lost all of their possessions so extra clothing was provided from *Javelin's* store. *Javelin* was then ordered to go post haste to Alexandria with heavy air attacks encountered on the way. During a lull in the attacks *Javelin's* commanding officer gave an order to issue a tot of rum for each for the crew of *Nestor* only.

On arrival at Alexandria, Ken and the other injured were taken by truck and admitted to the 64th Army General Hospital. Field Marshall Rommel and his troops were closing in on Alexandria so after two days, before a doctor was available, the hospital was evacuated. Another truck took them to Royal Naval Depot HMS *Phoenix*, on the outskirts of Alexandria where tents were put up in the desert.

Ken, to my knowledge is the last surviving member of the Ships Company of HMAS *Nestor* and one of only four HMAS *Sydney (II)* sailors still alive in Australia.

My recent research with Honours and Awards in Canberra indicate that only 50 Arctic Stars have been awarded to Australians. Of these only five of these were actually presented to the recipient. The others were sent to family Members as the person had already passed away.

The 25 November presentation was a unique opportunity to honour a local boy from Frankston who joined the Navy at 16 and a half years and left 36 years later as a highly decorated Lieutenant Commander. Ken also qualified for all other World War Two stars:

- 39/43 Star later changed to the 39/45 Star
- Atlantic Star
- Africa Star
- Burma Star (with Clasp Pacific Star)

Notes:

1. The Ships Bell from HMAS *Nestor* was removed and placed in HMS *Javelin* prior to the sinking and later presented to the Captain of HMAS *Nestor*, Captain A.S. ROSENTHAL. He then kept it at the front door of his home on Olivers Hill in Frankston until the late 1990s when it was donated to the Museum of HMAS *Cerberus* on the passing of Captain ROSENTHAL, DSO and Bars, RAN Rtd.
2. When Ken and Mavis' first Son Rodney was born, Ken asked (as a newly promoted Sub Lieutenant) his ex Captain if he could borrow the bell for the christening in the Wardroom of HMAS *Lonsdale*. This was approved and Ken returned the bell the next day. The bell was recently inscribed with his sons name and date of christening unbeknown to Ken.
3. The Ships cat 'Pusser' was also rescued by LS Clarrie Atwell but it did not survive tent city. Clarrie had left the safety of *Javelin* to go back onboard *Nestor* to locate the cat that was hiding under the chart table in shock. Clarrie secured the cat inside his overalls before re-joining *Javelin* and received a fair scratching for his troubles. Allegedly, according to Clarrie in later life, he did not even like cats!
4. Ken Brown is a Life Member of the Victorian HMAS *Sydney* Association.



HMAS Nestor in North Atlantic 1941



SBLT Ken Brown and HMAS Nestor Survivors