

= Otto Becher =

Rear Admiral Otto Humphrey Becher , CBE , DSO , DSC & Bar ( 13 September 1908 ? 15 June 1977 ) was a senior officer in the Royal Australian Navy ( RAN ) . Born in Harvey , Western Australia , Becher entered the Royal Australian Naval College in 1922 . After graduating in 1926 , he was posted to a series of staff and training positions prior to specialising in gunnery .

A lieutenant commander at the outbreak of the Second World War , Becher assisted in the extraction of Allied troops from the Namsos region of Norway while aboard the heavy cruiser HMS Devonshire , and was decorated with the Distinguished Service Cross . Following service in the Mediterranean theatre , he returned to Australia in 1942 as officer @-@ in @-@ charge of the gunnery school at HMAS Cerberus . He spent two years at Cerberus before being given command of the Q class destroyer HMAS Quickmatch in March 1944 . While commanding Quickmatch in operations against Japanese forces in the Pacific , Becher earned a Bar to his Distinguished Service Cross .

At the war 's end Becher was posted to the Navy Office and later to the aircraft carrier HMAS Sydney ; in 1951 he was given command of the destroyer HMAS Warramunga . Warramunga formed part of Australia 's contribution to the United Nations forces engaged in the Korean War ; Becher was promoted to captain and awarded the Distinguished Service Order while carrying out operations in Korean waters . On returning to Australia , he filled several staff positions and commanded the aircraft carriers HMAS Melbourne and HMS Vengeance . Promoted to rear admiral in 1959 , he served as Flag Officer Commanding Australian Fleet from 1964 to 1965 , before taking up the post of Flag Officer @-@ in @-@ Charge East Australia Area . Becher retired from the RAN in 1966 , and died in 1977 at the age of 68 .

= = Early life and career = =

Otto Becher was born in Harvey , Western Australia , on 13 September 1908 , to Francis Joseph Becher , an orchardist , and Antonia Amalie ( née Vetter ) . On 1 January 1922 , at the age of thirteen , he enrolled in the Royal Australian Naval College at Jervis Bay , where he performed well both academically and at sport , receiving colours for hockey and tennis . Graduating in 1926 , he served as a midshipman aboard HMAS Adelaide and later HMAS Brisbane , before being posted to the United Kingdom in September of that year for further sea @-@ training and professional development with the Royal Navy .

Becher was promoted to acting sub @-@ lieutenant in September 1928 ; the rank was made substantive the following March . He returned to Australia in January 1930 and was raised to lieutenant , gaining further seafaring experience over the next two years on HMAS Australia and HMAS Canberra . Deciding to specialise in gunnery , he attended an advanced course at the Royal Navy 's gunnery school at HMS Excellent in England from 1932 until 1934 . Returning to Australia after completing the course , on 7 January 1935 , Becher married Valerie Chisholm Baird at St Michael 's Anglican Church in Vacluse , New South Wales ; the couple would have three sons .

From May 1934 to June 1935 , Becher was posted to the gunnery school at the shore establishment HMAS Cerberus in Victoria . He later completed two years aboard HMAS Canberra as intelligence officer , and in 1937 was transferred to HMAS Stuart for flotilla duties . Promoted to lieutenant commander on 16 June 1938 , Becher briefly returned to Cerberus before embarking for the United Kingdom on exchange with the Royal Navy in January 1939 .

= = Second World War = =

Becher was serving as squadron gunnery officer aboard the Royal Navy heavy cruiser HMS Devonshire ] when the Second World War broke out . In May 1940 , Devonshire was dispatched to the Namsos region of Norway to assist in the extraction of Allied troops . Commended for his " daring , resource and devotion " during the operation , Becher was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross . The notification for the decoration was published in a supplement to the London

Gazette on 19 July 1940 , and the investiture ceremony was held by King George VI at Buckingham Palace on 11 March 1941 .

In late November 1940 , Becher transferred to the recently launched destroyer HMAS Napier as part of the ship 's commissioning crew . While completing working @-@ up exercises , Napier was tasked with transferring British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and his wife from Thurso in Scotland to the battleship HMS King George V , and later returning them to the mainland . With her working @-@ up complete , Napier was initially posted to convoy duties in the North Atlantic , before setting sail in April 1941 with HMAS Nizam for the Mediterranean Sea . Arriving in May , she formed up as part of the Mediterranean Fleet .

Napier assisted in the evacuation of British and Commonwealth troops from the island of Crete in late May , following the successful Axis invasion . On one such occasion the vessel embarked 296 soldiers , three women , one Greek and one Chinese civilian , ten sailors , two children and a dog . Returning to Alexandria , the destroyer came under attack but arrived unscathed . Two days later Napier was less fortunate ; having taken 705 soldiers on board , she was targeted on her return journey by a formation of twelve German dive @-@ bombers . The ship was struck twice by bombs and suffered damage to the stern , the engine room and boiler room . One of the aircraft was shot down and a further three damaged . Although no allied casualties were sustained and the destroyer arrived safely in Alexandria , she spent the next two @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half months in Port Said under repair .

Becher returned to Australia in early 1942 , and from 17 May was appointed officer @-@ in @-@ charge of the gunnery school at HMAS Cerberus . He remained at this post for almost two years until , on 12 March 1944 , he was given command of the destroyer HMAS Quickmatch ? formed up as part of the Eastern Fleet . On 22 July , Quickmatch was among a 23 @-@ vessel strong task force that set out from Trincomalee to assault the Japanese naval base off northern Sumatra at Sabang Island . The formation approached Sabang on the night of 24 / 25 July , launching fighter strikes on airfields in the area at first light . At 06 : 55 , the fleet bombarded the harbour installations , coastal defence batteries and the military barracks . As the formation 's two battleships maintained their fire , Quickmatch joined three other ships that entered the harbour to carry out close @-@ range bombardment . After completing their task , Quickmatch and her fellows withdrew under the cover of fire from two cruisers . Praised for his " outstanding courage and skill " in pressing home the assault , Becher was awarded a Bar to his Distinguished Service Cross , announced in a supplement to the London Gazette on 31 October 1944 .

In October 1944 , Quickmatch was transferred to Australian waters and underwent her annual refit at Sydney from November to December . Once the refit was completed she operated mainly off the Australian coast . During the early hours of 25 December 1944 , the Navy Office in Melbourne received an SOS from the SS Robert J. Walker , reporting that she had been torpedoed by a submarine while travelling from Fremantle , Western Australia , to Sydney . Aircraft were dispatched to provide aerial cover , and HMA Ships Quickmatch , Kiama and Yandra were directed to Robert J. Walker 's position . Quickmatch and Yandra were to operate against the submarine , while Kiama was to take the Robert J. Walker under tow . Arriving at the reported location at approximately 23 : 30 that evening , Quickmatch , under the command of Becher , and Kiama patrolled the vicinity in search of the submarine and Robert J. Walker 's crew . Sixty @-@ seven men were discovered in lifeboats at 05 : 45 the following morning and were taken aboard Quickmatch ; Robert J. Walker had sunk two hours earlier with the loss of two crew .

Becher was promoted to commander on 31 December 1944 , and the following month Quickmatch was transferred to the recently established British Pacific Fleet . On 28 February , the British Pacific Fleet , including Quickmatch , sailed from Sydney Harbour for Manus Island to prepare for its role in support of the planned United States invasion of Okinawa . The fleet engaged in eleven days of exercises at Manus before departing for Ulithi , and on 23 March was attached to the United States Fifth Fleet with the designation " Task Force 57 " . Setting sail for Okinawa two days later , the fleet launched air strikes against airfield targets in the Sakishima Islands on 26 and 27 March . During these operations Quickmatch formed part of the escort for the fleet 's aircraft carriers . Becher later stated : " These two days ' operations were successful , the enemy airstrips being neutralised and a

number of aircraft being destroyed on the ground . " Task Force 57 continued operations around the Sakishima Islands for the following two months to cover the United States ' left flank , with Quickmatch forming part of the carrier force 's escort throughout this period .

On 25 June 1945 , Becher relinquished command of the Quickmatch and returned to Australia , where he was attached to the shore base HMAS Penguin . For his " distinguished service ... in the Pacific " he received a Mention in Despatches . In August , he transferred to HMAS Cerberus for duties with the Navy Office .

= = Interbellum and Korean War = =

Becher remained with the Navy Office until November 1947 , when he was posted to the United Kingdom to join the aircraft carrier HMAS Sydney 's commissioning crew . Embarking from Melbourne during February 1948 , he was temporarily attached to HMS Drake and later HMS Glory until Sydney 's commissioning on 16 December . His service aboard the aircraft carrier lasted for two years , and was followed on 23 January 1950 by an appointment as Commanding Officer to the shore establishment HMAS Watson . However , Becher 's time at Watson was cut short when , on 28 July , he relieved Captain Alan McNicoll as commander of the destroyer HMAS Warramunga , which had been selected for service in the Korean War . Warramunga was to be attached to a force of five Royal Navy destroyers led by a captain , making it expedient to have the Australian ship commanded by an officer of lower rank .

Warramunga arrived in Korean waters in late August 1950 . After some initial escort work , the destroyer joined HMAS Bataan as part of the carrier HMS Triumph 's protective screen while the latter contributed air cover to the Allied landing at Inchon on 15 September . For the next three months , Warramunga engaged in patrol and screening duties , in addition to transporting food for famine relief .

On 4 December , Warramunga and Bataan supported the emergency withdrawal of Allied troops from Chinnampo . Becher decided to sail up a channel of the Taedong River known as Short Cut , which according to his charts should have allowed him five to ten feet of clearance . The chart proved inaccurate , and Warramunga ran aground at 23 : 15 ; Becher 's only option was to wait for the rising tide to float the destroyer off . Warramunga came free at 23 : 50 without having sustained damage , and was able to resume her mission , escorting troop transports south . Later , Becher brought Warramunga alongside Bataan and entreated the latter 's commander , via megaphone , to keep quiet about the incident . With Becher 's promotion to captain due , he was concerned that if the Naval Board became aware of the grounding his promotion would be delayed until an investigation had taken place . His " well @-@ earned " rise in rank came through as scheduled on 31 December . On the journey south , Warramunga 's crew developed a new way of signalling between ships that was considerably quicker than using international code flags . Known to the crew as the " Murphy Method " , it involved wrapping messages around potatoes and throwing them from one ship to the other .

Warramunga participated in the Siege of Wonsan during late February 1951 , where she engaged and partially destroyed North Korean shore batteries , as well as shelling buildings and transport infrastructure . Despite coming under fire the destroyer sustained no damage . For the remainder of her tour in Korea , Warramunga took part in patrols and shore bombardments , earning special praise from Vice Admiral C. Turner Joy , Commander US Naval Forces Far East , for the accuracy of her gunnery .

On 17 July 1951 , it was announced that Becher had been appointed as an honorary aide @-@ de @-@ camp to the Governor @-@ General of Australia for a period of three years . Following Warramunga 's departure from Korean waters on 1 August , Rear Admiral Alan Scott @-@ Moncrieff , Commander West Coast Blockade Force , commented : " She has been a tower of strength and done an incredible amount of steaming with no troubles at all . I cannot speak too highly of Captain O. H. Becher and his men ... " Together with Bataan , Warramunga had borne the brunt of Australia 's naval contribution to the Korean War . Noting his " courage , skill and determination " , a recommendation for Becher to be awarded the Distinguished Service Order was

approved by the Australian Government on 17 August 1951 , and announced in the London Gazette the following month . For his " meritorious service ... as C.O. of HMAS Warramunga " , Becher was also decorated by the United States with the Legion of Merit .

= = Senior command = =

Becher retained command of Warramunga until October 1951 , when he was posted to the shore base HMAS Lonsdale for service with the Navy Office as Deputy Chief of Naval Personnel and Director of Personal Services . In September that year he was additionally appointed trustee of the Services Canteens Trust Fund ; a position he held until October 1952 and for which he received a letter of appreciation from the Minister for Defence . The same month he assumed the position of Deputy Chief of Naval Staff . On 25 August 1954 , Becher was given command of the aircraft carrier HMAS Vengeance , and in October he returned with his new command to the Korean theatre to transport the aircraft , equipment and personnel of No. 77 Squadron RAAF back to Australia .

In 1956 , Becher embarked for the United Kingdom to attend the Imperial Defence College . A month after his December graduation , he travelled back to Australia and assumed command of HMAS Melbourne . Becher remained with Melbourne until December 1958 , at which time he returned to the Navy Office at HMAS Lonsdale to resume his role as Deputy Chief of Naval Staff . He was promoted to acting rear admiral on 3 January 1959 , the rank being made substantive twelve months later . In the Queen 's Birthday Honours of 1961 , Becher was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire .

Relinquishing his position with the Navy Office in 1962 , Becher was sent to the United Kingdom as Head of the Australian Joint Services Staff in London . In January 1964 he returned to Australia , and was made Flag Officer Commanding HM Australian Fleet . During his time in this role Becher became embroiled in the controversy that followed the collision of HMA Ships Voyager and Melbourne , which took place in February that year . Prior to giving evidence before the Royal Commission that had been established to investigate the incident , Becher had discussed events with Melbourne 's Commanding Officer , Commander Ronald Robertson . The discussion became public knowledge , and led to suggestions of conspiracy . Becher stated to the commission that Melbourne should have questioned Voyager 's final movements ; his evidence is alleged to have influenced the Royal Commissioner , Sir John Spicer , to place a degree of blame on Robertson . In 1965 , Becher assumed his final command as Flag Officer @-@ in @-@ Charge East Australia Area , before retiring from the Royal Australian Navy on 6 March 1966 .

= = Retirement = =

Following his retirement , Becher accepted the position of Director @-@ General of Recruiting for the Australian armed forces from 1966 until 1969 , a period during which conscription was in effect . Minister of Defence Allen Fairhall asked Becher to find enough volunteers to fill the armed forces , and Becher believed that conscription eroded professional standards , but he found this task difficult given that the military was " competing with industry , and the country was short of labour . " He also held the post of chairman of the Council of the Institute of Marine Sciences at the University of New South Wales . On 15 June 1977 , aged 68 , Becher died from a myocardial infarction at Sydney Hospital . Survived by his wife and their three sons , he was cremated .