

= Hector Waller =

Hector Macdonald Laws (Hec) Waller , DSO and Bar (4 April 1900 ? 1 March 1942) was a senior officer in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) . In a career spanning almost thirty years , he served in both world wars . At the helm of HMAS Stuart in the Mediterranean from 1939 to 1941 , he won recognition as a skilful ship 's captain and flotilla commander . He then transferred to the South West Pacific as captain of the light cruiser HMAS Perth , and went down with his ship against heavy odds during the Battle of Sunda Strait in early 1942 .

Born in Benalla , Victoria , Waller entered the Royal Australian Naval College at the age of thirteen . After graduating , he served with the Royal Navy (RN) in the closing stages of World War I. Between the wars , he specialised in communications and was posted as signals officer to various British and Australian warships . He gained his first seagoing command in 1937 , as captain of HMS Brazen . In September 1939 , he took charge of HMAS Stuart and four other obsolete destroyers that together became known as the " Scrap Iron Flotilla " . In 1940 , these were augmented by other ships to form the 10th Destroyer Flotilla , supporting Allied troops in North Africa .

Waller was awarded the Distinguished Service Order and Bar , and twice mentioned in despatches , for his achievements in the Mediterranean . He assumed command of HMAS Perth in October 1941 , taking part in the Battle of the Java Sea shortly before his final action in Sunda Strait . He received a third mention in despatches posthumously , and in 2011 came under formal consideration for the award of the Victoria Cross (VC) for his performance as Perth 's captain . The submarine HMAS Waller is named in his honour .

= = Early life and World War I = =

Born on 4 April 1900 in Benalla , Victoria , Hector MacDonald Laws Waller was the son of William Frederick Waller , a grocer , and his wife Helen Waller (née Duncan) . Hec Waller was named in honour of General Hector MacDonald , hero of the Boer War , and a forebear called Laws who was an admiral and a contemporary of Nelson . The youngest of ten children , of whom eight survived infancy , he attended Benalla Higher Elementary School .

Waller entered the Royal Australian Naval College (RANC) as a cadet midshipman on 31 December 1913 , aged thirteen . He gained recognition as a rugby player and became cadet captain . In 1917 , his final year at the college , he was raised to chief cadet captain and won the King 's Medal , awarded for " gentlemanly bearing , character , good influence among his fellows and officer @-@ like qualities " . Promoted to midshipman on 1 January 1918 , he was posted to Britain where , in April , he was appointed to serve in the Royal Navy 's (RN) Grand Fleet with the dreadnought HMS Agincourt . The ship did not see combat while he was on board .

= = Between the wars = =

In February 1919 , Waller was assigned to the light cruiser HMAS Melbourne , and two months later returned to Australia . He transferred to the light cruiser HMAS Sydney as an acting sub @-@ lieutenant in September ; his rank was made substantive the following month . In April 1920 he was again posted aboard Melbourne . Promoted to lieutenant in March 1921 , he went through further training in Britain before returning to join the staff of the RANC . Waller married Nancy Bowes , a minister 's daughter , on 7 April 1923 in the Sydney suburb of Lewisham ; the couple had two sons , Michael and John . In April 1924 , he was posted to the light cruiser HMAS Adelaide . Later that year , he began training as a signals officer in England ; his classmates included Lord Louis Mountbatten . Waller finished at the top of the advanced course and , in May 1926 , took charge of the Signals and Wireless @-@ Telegraphy School at Flinders Naval Depot in Westernport , Victoria . From 1928 to 1930 , he served with the RN as a signals officer aboard the destroyer HMS Broke . He was promoted to lieutenant commander in March 1929 .

By this stage of his career , Waller had acquired a strong reputation for his communications work . In July 1930 , he was posted aboard the Royal Australian Navy 's (RAN) flagship , the heavy

cruiser HMAS Australia , as squadron signals officer . He continued to perform this role upon transferring to Australia 's sister ship , HMAS Canberra , in May 1931 . In early 1932 , he was assigned to the Navy Office in Melbourne , returning to Canberra as squadron signals officer in August 1933 . He was promoted to commander in June 1934 and the following month became executive officer of the RANC . Departing the college in July 1936 , he returned to England and spent six months working in the British Naval Intelligence Division . A stint as executive officer of the repair ship HMS Resource followed . In November 1937 , Waller was given his first command at sea , the RN destroyer HMS Brazen . His ship handling was criticised early on , but was soon reported by his superiors as having " improved greatly " . Stationed in the Mediterranean , Brazen monitored progress of the Spanish Civil War , a duty that included protecting British merchant vessels and rescuing the crews of sinking ships . By June 1939 , Waller had returned to Australia to become Director of Signals and Communications at the Navy Office .

= = World War II = =

= = = HMAS Stuart in the Mediterranean = = =

At the outbreak of World War II , Waller was appointed captain of HMAS Stuart , taking charge of a group of four other obsolete ex @-@ RN destroyers ? HMA Ships Vampire , Vendetta , Voyager , and Waterhen ? that the Germans later nicknamed the " Scrap Iron Flotilla " . The ships were en route to Singapore for training when the British and Australian governments agreed that they should be assigned to the Mediterranean as the 19th Destroyer Division , under Waller 's control . Arriving at Malta in late December , Waller made a positive initial impression on senior RN commanders ; this was soon borne out by his actions during the salvage of the Trocas , a disabled tanker . In May 1940 , he was appointed to command the 10th Destroyer Flotilla , which included the vessels of the " Scrap Iron Flotilla " plus four modern British destroyers , and a month later was promoted to captain .

Following Italy 's entry into the war on 10 June 1940 , Waller was involved in the search for minefields off the North African coast . A keen shooter , he personally blew up floating mines using a rifle and armour @-@ piercing bullets . On 21 June , Stuart shelled the Italian @-@ held town of Bardia . The next month , his 10th Destroyer Flotilla participated in the Battle of Calabria . Waller 's ships carried out bombardments on Fort Capuzzo on 17 August and an Italian seaplane base in the Gulf of Bomba one week later . In September , he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for " courage , enterprise , and devotion to duty on recent engagements " ? in particular , his pinpointing of enemy minefields . The same month , he transferred to HMAS Vampire while Stuart went in for refit . As the Allied armies began to counterattack Italian forces in December 1940 , the Commander @-@ in @-@ Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet , Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham , gave Waller command of the newly formed Inshore Squadron , comprising destroyers , minesweepers , and auxiliaries . In his role as Cunningham 's Senior Officer Afloat , Waller took charge of naval support for the attack on Bardia , which fell to the Allies on 5 January 1941 . Shortly afterwards , he handed over command of the Inshore Squadron and transferred back aboard Stuart .

Stuart and other ships of Waller 's 10th Destroyer Flotilla supported the assaults on Tobruk in January 1941 and Benghazi the following month . In March , Stuart escorted Allied troop transports to Greece as part of Operation Lustre , narrowly avoiding falling victim to Axis dive @-@ bomber attacks . During the Battle of Cape Matapan at the end of the month , Waller 's ships were credited with sinking two Italian destroyers . From May to July , the 10th Destroyer Flotilla made 139 ferry runs during the Siege of Tobruk , carrying supplies to the town 's garrison and evacuating the wounded . Waller was mentioned in despatches twice during 1941 : in July for his army cooperation role with the Inshore Squadron off the Libyan coast , and in November for his service during the Greek campaign . In January 1942 , he was awarded a Bar to his DSO for " bravery and enterprise in the Battle of Cape Matapan " . Waller earned the personal admiration of Admiral Cunningham ,

who described him as " one of the finest types of Australian naval officers ... greatly loved and admired by everyone " . On the occasion of a visit to Alexandria by Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies , Cunningham escorted him to Stuart and declared : " And now you are going to meet one of the greatest captains who ever sailed the seas ? his name is Waller " . According to author Ray Parkin , who began writing while a prisoner of war , " Andrew Cunningham and Hector Waller were cast in the same mould : men would follow them , suffer , and be glad about it . These were both men made by Fate for those ever @-@ recurring Saint Crispin 's Days of human affairs " .

= = = HMAS Perth and the Battle of Sunda Strait = = =

Departing the Mediterranean , Waller returned to Australia in August 1941 for service in the South West Pacific . On 24 October , he took command of the light cruiser HMAS Perth , berthed in Sydney . Perth had also lately returned from action in the Mediterranean , where she had participated in the Greek , Cretan , and Syrian campaigns , and been damaged on two occasions by German bombers . Waller was reportedly " tired " and " quite a sick man " at this time , but nonetheless prepared Perth for action quickly . In January 1942 , the ship was assigned to American @-@ British @-@ Dutch @-@ Australian Command (ABDA) to help defend the Dutch East Indies . She set sail for the ABDA Area on 15 February , the day that Singapore surrendered .

The ABDA Striking Force that Perth had joined was crushed by an overwhelming Japanese force at the Battle of the Java Sea on 27 February . Low on ammunition , Waller made the decision to withdraw , accompanied by the cruiser USS Houston under the command of Captain Albert H. Rooks . Waller 's action contravened the orders of his Dutch superior , Admiral Conrad Helfrich , to " continue action whatever the cost , and till the bitter end " , but the Australian was convinced that further engagement would mean pointless sacrifice .

On the following night , 28 February , Perth and Houston were attempting to break through the Sunda Strait to Australia when they encountered a Japanese invasion fleet escorted by four cruisers and twelve destroyers . As senior officer , Waller was in the lead with Perth , and gave the order to fire upon making contact with the enemy ships just after 11 : 00 pm . In the ensuing battle , the Allied cruisers sank four Japanese transports and a minesweeper before they themselves were sunk , shortly after midnight on 1 March 1942 . Having fought to the last of its ammunition , Perth was struck by two torpedoes , losing over 350 of its complement of 680 as it keeled over . According to witnesses , Waller was last seen standing on the bridge after he had given the order to abandon ship , " looking down at the silent turrets " . He was officially listed as missing , presumed killed , and was survived by his wife and sons . Admiral Cunningham described Waller 's loss as " a heavy deprivation for the young Navy of Australia " , and Rear Admiral James Goldrick subsequently called him " the outstanding officer of his generation " .

= = Legacy = =

On 15 March 1946 , Waller was awarded a posthumous mention in despatches for " gallantry and resolution " aboard HMAS Perth . His younger son John followed him into the Navy , entering the RANC in 1947 . Graduating as chief cadet captain , John Waller became a weapons electrical engineer and attained the rank of commander in 1967 , before transferring to the Emergency Reserve as a senior Navy research scientist .

Hec Waller 's name appears on the Roll of Honour located at Panel 6 in the Commemorative Area at the Australian War Memorial , Canberra , and on the Plymouth Naval Memorial in Devon , England . He is also commemorated by Waller Crescent and Waller Place in the Canberra suburb of Campbell . The Benalla Costume and Pioneer Museum holds his medals and dress uniform . The Waller Division of the RAN Recruit School at HMAS Cerberus , Victoria , was named in his honour until his name transferred to a division at RAN College in 2013 .

HMAS Waller , the third of the RAN 's Collins @-@ class submarines to enter service , was commissioned on 10 July 1999 . The attendees included John Waller , Michael Waller 's wife , and surviving crewmen of HMAS Perth . On 13 March 2010 , a memorial to Waller was unveiled in his

home town of Benalla . In April 2011 , he was one of thirteen servicemen ? eleven sailors and two soldiers , including Teddy Sheean , Robert Rankin , and John Simpson Kirkpatrick ? named by the Australian government for consideration as possible recipients of the Victoria Cross (VC) for extreme valour in combat , under a review by the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal ; no RAN member had ever been awarded the decoration . Concluding its investigations in February 2013 , the tribunal recommended that no further award be made to any of the thirteen servicemen , but that the name Waller (among others) should continue to be used for RAN ships after the current bearer was decommissioned .