

Money and Morale: A Tale of Submarines *Oxley* and *Otway*

The history of Australian and British submarining has been closely connected since Australia's first submarines, *AE1* and *AE2*, were launched in 1914. These craft were followed by the ill-fated J-boats during the 1920s, which were themselves superseded by two Odin or O-class submarines, *Oxley* and *Otway*. These boats were destined to serve both in the Royal Navy and the Royal Australian Navy at opposite ends of the world. Their oscillating careers were a consequence of changing official policies and deepening gloom as the declining economic situation caused governments to cut defence budgets. The story of these two submarines reflects the rapidly changing defence and economic circumstances of the 1920s and 30s as the world lurched through the Great Depression and towards World War 2.

Despite these realities, the chance survival of a newspaper produced aboard the *Otway* as it voyaged back from Australia provides us with some insight into life aboard an O-class submarine. The means and methods employed by officers and crew to deal with the technical failings of their craft as well as the difficulties of such a long journey are tellingly displayed in these rough and ready typewritten pages of sometimes-forced humour and comment. The *Oxley Outlook*, as the periodical was named, was a direct peacetime continuation of the newspapers and magazines produced by soldiers and sailors during World War 1. As far as is known, the paper is a unique survival of its time and place and is of considerable historical interest and value, revealing as it does the activities, attitudes and occasional irritations aboard a submarine

voyaging from one end of the globe to the other. It also suggests that, as in wartime, the existence of such publications might have an important positive effect on morale.

‘MONEY IS NOT AVAILABLE TO KEEP THE SUBMARINES IN COMMISSION’ⁱ

Even while Australia’s post-war gift submarines from the British government, the six J-class boats, were being progressively decommissioned, their replacements were under consideration. The strategic thinking of the Australian government and Australian Naval Board was that the J-boats were obsolete and expensive to maintain. The funds made available for the Royal Australian Navy in 1923-24 were needed to avoid cutting the light cruiser contingent from four to three. Nevertheless, it was agreed by the Naval Board and government that Australia should have a submarine capability. As early as November 1923 it was likely that the number would be two.ⁱⁱ The details of type (ocean-going), tender (HMAS *Platypus*) and basing (Geelong) were finalised at the 1923 Imperial Conference in London. Tenders for construction of the submarines were called in October 1924, it having been earlier decided that Australia lacked the capability to build submarines of her own. Vickers of Barrow-in-Furness won the tender for what were to be known as O-class submarines. These were to be powered by an unproven engine, the cause of later problems. Each boat cost 439 942 pounds to construct, store and arm.

After some construction delays due to design modifications and industrial action *Oxley* and *Otway* were launched and sea trialled between June 1926 and mid-1927, both being taken over from the builders in

September 1927. The submarines travelled to Chatham for military fit out, then to Fort Blockhouse at Gosport, with a voyage to Portland taking them to the end of 1927. This period was taken up with testing and trialling of the vessels and allowing the crews to learn how to operate the submarines.

Problems began early. As Norman Shaw, who served on *Oxley* and *Otway* recounted in his memoirs:

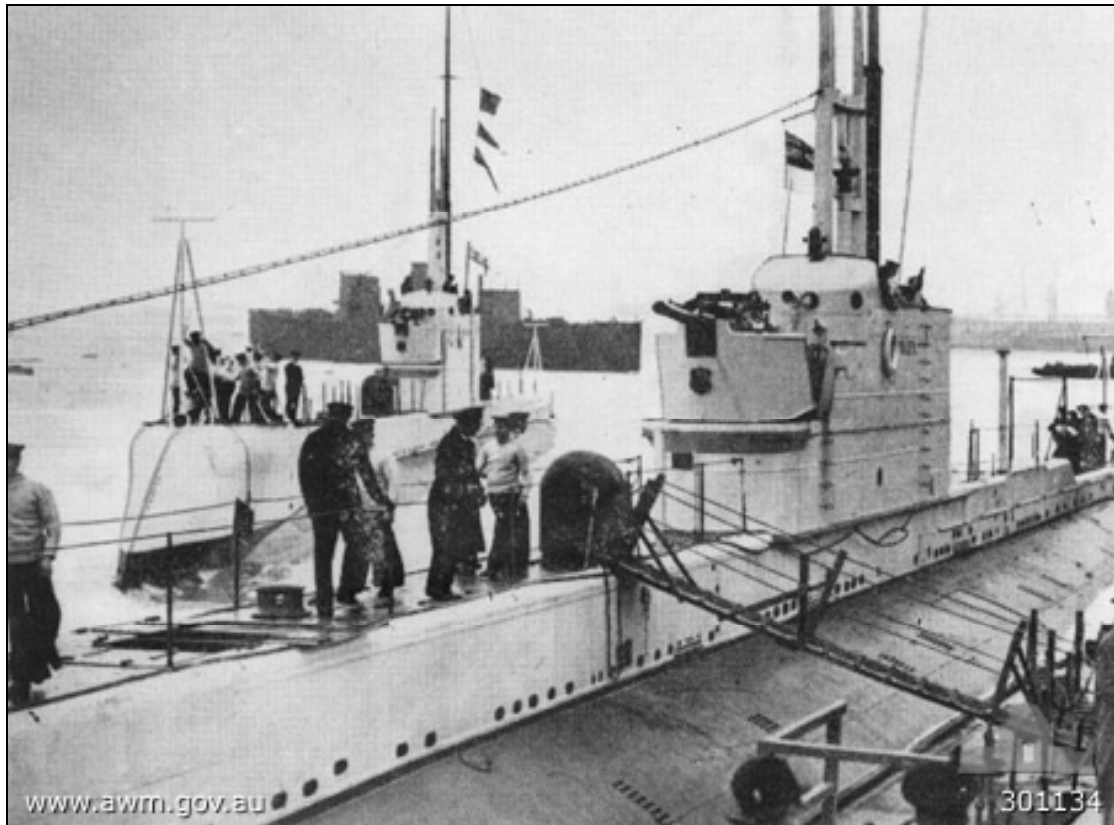
While *Otway* was at Portland we developed a serious steering defect – after clearing the breakwater one morning she would not answer her helm and started turning circles. Examination showed that the rudder crosshead had fractured, and as the rudder was “overbalanced” it would only remain in hard over position while making way through the water.

We were taken back to harbour by tugs and after the rudder had been clamped to the tail fin in an amidships position we left for Portsmouth, steering with our engines and with a tug as escort. Eventually a team from Vickers arrived to fit a new and modified crosshead.ⁱⁱⁱ

Oxley and *Otway* were powered by two sets of Vickers Diesel engines (3000BHP) and two sets of electric motors (1350HP), with twin screws. They were just over 278 foot in length and 27 foot six inches beam, with a mean draught of 13 foot 3 inches. The Odin class had a surface speed of over 15 knots, with 9 knots submerged. Armaments consisted of six 21-inch bow and two stern torpedoes, a 4-inch Mk4 gun and two machine guns.^{iv}

While these specifications were theoretically advanced and made the first O-boats into the cutting edge of submarine technology, the reality was

rather different. Many of the design features were valuable, but some of them were so new that techniques for their construction did not exist and had to be invented from scratch. This was to be the root cause of ongoing technical problems, as Norman Shaw would later note, and the source of much humour among the boats' crews.



Oxley and *Otway* Australian War Memorial ID Number:
301134.

Oxley and *Otway* were designed for optimum crews of four officers and forty-eight sailors, though numbers varied from time to time. Crews and officers were to be obtained from the Royal Navy and the Royal Australian Navy, the first two Australian commanders being Frank Getting and Norman Shaw who undertook the 'Perisher' course at Devonport from March 1926 and joined their submarines in February 1927. By February 1928 the boats were ready for the voyage to Australia.

The band played 'Waltzing Matilda' as they departed Fort Blockhouse shortly after noon on February 8. Commander H R Marrack DSC RN commanded *Oxley* and *Otway* was commanded by Lieutenant-Commander G J D Tweedy RN.^v The submarines reached Gibraltar five days later and started for Malta the following day. Two days into this leg of the voyage the engine problems that would plague *Oxley* and *Otway* for the rest of their careers began. Numerous fractures appeared in the engine columns of both boats. Effective running repairs were made by engine room officers and crews aboard both boats, and these were later the subject of official commendation. But it was clear that there were structural faults in the engines of all the O-boats due to untested casting methods being used in the construction of the untried engines. The submarines were detained in Malta for six months while new engines were built, transported and fitted. Trials were carried out and the new engines accepted, enabling the boats to proceed to Australia on November 15.



Oxley and *Otway*, Malta 1928

The new engines proved unsatisfactory in terms of fuel consumption, efficiency and exhaust and by the time the boats reached Batavia on January 2, 1929, the oil and water pump armatures on both vessels had burned out. These were replaced with the help of the Dutch Navy and both boats sailed for Timor on January 11. A week after landing a sick rating from *Oxley* at Surabaya, *Otway's* second oil and water pump armature burned out. This was replaced when the boats reached Thursday Island where depot ship *Platypus* met them on January 23, 1929. *Platypus* and the two submarines arrived at Townsville on January 31 and, via Brisbane, tied up at Garden Island on February 14.

The voyage had not been a happy one. A considerable number of men were left behind at various ports due to sickness or misbehaviour. As historian Michael White points out in his *Australian Submarines: A history* 'The high number of men left behind and the number of disciplinary incidents indicate that *Oxley* and *Otway* had a significant problem with morale during this voyage'.^{vi} This situation was not apparently repeated when the submarines returned to Britain two years later. Arguably, this was due to the probably spontaneous production of a regular magazine by and for the crew of at least one of the submarines, as outlined later in this article.

And the problems did not cease with the submarines' eventual arrival in Australia. There was an outcry in the press and among the public about the costs and mechanical problems. These issues were also causing concern within the RAN and the government, especially as the Great Depression loomed. After considerable debate in official circles, the fact that the originally envisioned six boats for the Australian submarine

flotilla would not now be a possibility, together with Britain's need to make up the number of her own submarines, would lead to the decision to return *Oxley* and *Otway* to Britain. While discussions and arguments raged through the press and within and between Cabinet and the Australian Naval Board, *Oxley* and *Otway* went into training and working up mode.

Officers and crews were without recent attack experience and needed to conduct diving exercises. Crews were partly inexperienced, with over 30% having changed since the submarines' initial working up in England.^{vii} Both boats went to Jervis Bay in June, 1929, and practiced attack methods. *Oxley* and *Otway* took part in exercises with the Australian squadron through August to October and carried out some minor gunnery exercises into the start of 1930. But on May 10 that year the submarines were placed in reserve. Lieutenant Commander Shaw was put in command of the depot ship *Platypus*, now renamed *Penguin*, his remit including the two submarines, each with reduced crews. Over the next eleven months, officers and crews were gradually dispersed and *Oxley* and *Otway* were handed back to the Royal Navy on April 9, 1931. After considerable deliberation and argumentation it had been decided to return the boats at no further cost to either the Australian or British governments and to concentrate the decreasing funding available on the building of a new cruiser for the Royal Australian Navy.

The reasons for this situation were various. They included the cost of the submarines and the view that they were insufficient in number to be effective in wartime (the original plan had been for a flotilla of six). There was also an argument that the boats were more effectively deployed as part of the flotilla in Britain, thus strengthening the Empire

defence capability overall. Finally, return of the submarines would allow Britain to maintain its allotted Empire tonnage under the London Naval treaty without the need to build further ships. This fatal combination and the decision stemming from it meant, as Michael White notes: that ‘Australia’s third attempt to establish a submarine arm was brought to an end.’^{viii}

Oxley and *Otway* were placed in reserve and the next year paid off from the Royal Australian Navy on April 9, 1931 and were recommissioned the following day into the Royal Navy. On April 29 1931 they sailed back to Malta to join the British submarine flotilla stationed there. Ironically, the arguments used to justify their disposal were the same as those used to dispose of their J-boat predecessors only a few years before. In his reminiscences, Norman Shaw expressed an opinion that was probably an accurate assessment of the decision to purchase the first O-boats:

‘It is my opinion that (a) it would have been wiser for Australia to have waited until the “O” class had been proved before ordering *Oxley* and *Otway*, for they were in fact the guinea pigs of the class, and (b) had it not been the financial depression we would have had a fair prospect of establishing successfully, on the third attempt an Australian Submarine Flotilla.’^{ix}

Brief and troubled though their careers as Australian submarines proved to be, and though they are long gone, *Otway* and *Oxley* did leave an until-recently unknown and rare archival legacy. With the exception of occasional diaries and memoirs, there is little material available to tell us a great deal about daily life aboard a submarine in the interwar years.

While personal records of this type are valuable, they are the views and experiences of individuals rather than of a whole company. In the case of *Oxley* we now have an opportunity to see something of the communal aspects of submarine life and submariner humour through the fortunate preservation of the *Oxley Outlook* in the submarine museum archives at Gosport. ^x

‘AT LEAST ONE LAUGH A DAY’: THE *OXLEY OUTLOOK*



Line drawing of Sydney Harbour Bridge by unnamed crew member

On Monday May 25 1931, the *Oxley Outlook* announced its existence to the crew of RN submarine, *Oxley*. The initial editorial stated that there were eight weeks of voyaging ahead before they tied up alongside Store Wharf in Malta. ‘Much may happen during this time’, the editorial continued with reference to the ongoing mechanical problems, ‘the *Oxley* herself might conk out, one never knows.’ The staff of the submarine’s own newspaper said they were ‘hopeful of producing at least one laugh a day.’ They finished by noting that, should their attempt to raise a regular laugh be successful the staff lived in ‘The Torpedo Arms, Fore Ends’,

and informed any potentially grateful reader that ‘They drink. Anything.’^{xi}

The first edition of what would be forty issues as *Oxley* made her way from Sydney to Malta set the bright and cheery tone, leavened with the occasional acerbic observation, that was to characterise its brief but much appreciated life. In this first issue were satirical advertisements relating to baldness and barbering, (‘Does your hair blow in your eyes or get mixed up with your Camp Pie?’), entertainment and sporting events, including a radio broadcast titled ‘By guess or by God ... In other words, obtaining the noon position’). There were fake recipes for Cornish Pasty (Take a clean plate. As this should be impossible the remainder of this wonderful recipe will not be printed’), along with ‘Engineering Notes’ on knocking in old engines. This was caused by ‘the catch retaining BM lever closed becoming entangled in the hyper-stimulated twist-grip starboard controlling permeator’.

A standard feature, carried over from World War 1 trench and shipboard magazines was the ‘Things We Would Like To Know’ column. On this occasion they included the question of ‘Whether ‘Meccano Ltd’ fitted Otway’s engines’.^{xiii} This early *Oxley Outlook* theme of concern about the engines and associated technology was a continuation of the problems that had plagued the O-boats from their first trials. They would broaden and deepen as the voyage continued, as would a number of other concerns.

THE OXLEY OUTLOOK

No. 1.

MONDAY, MAY 25th.

According to the anticipated programme, we have another eight weeks or so to get through before we take up the berths recently vacated by "E1" and "E26", alongside Store Wharf at Malta.

Much may happen during this time, "Otway" might do a complete twentyfour hours on both engines, or for that matter why the "Oxley" herself might cook out, one never knows. In any event why not try to develop a cheerful outlook on life and thus make the remainder of the trip a pleasure to everyone around you?

The old boy who said "Laugh and the World laughs with you" certainly knew a thing or two and with this in mind, the staff of the "Outlook" are hopeful of producing at least one laugh a day - not in the hope of getting red ink recommendations - but because they feel it to be their mission in life.

Incidentally, if this mission is successful in its laughter promoting campaign, all the staff live in the Torpedo Arms, Fore Ends. They drink. Anything.

* * * *

We insert advertisements gratis and by so doing refuse to guarantee the genuineness of the advertisers. Don't blame us if you get an overall suit back from the dobering firm, in place of a cap cover.

Cheers everybody
The Staff.

* * * *

Frenzied politics by Gas.

Amid loud cheers, this afternoon, the First Lord of the Admiralty, outlined the Naval Personnel Reconstruction Bill. The requests made by the Welfare Committee were all embodied in this Bill and to the amazement of the whole Navy ALL the requests were granted.

The principal features of these requests were:-

The rate of pay of O.D's to be £1.0.0. per diem.

Telegraphists ratings to wear cocked hats when employed as plenipotentiaries extraordinaries except in Home Waters, Foreign Waters, Blockhouse and Down the Gut.

The practice of allowing civilians to join the Navy to be discontinued.

West Country Dockyard Maties to take precedence over Pompey and Chatham Dockyard Maties.

The term A.B. to be discontinued. All men holding this rating to be known henceforth as Physically Fit Sea Gentlemen.

Much more was said which was equally idiotic but the M.P's cheered all the same.

* * * *

Issue No 4 included some helpful Medical Notes on curing corns. The recommended method involved a ‘dose of a 28 maul by a hefty blacksmith’. And under the title ‘WANTED’ there appeared an advertisement for a cook:

‘...Urgent. One Cook-General with keen appreciation of, and on nodding terms with, vitamins of all classes likely to reside in Camp Pie, one of the 57 varieties, Sardines etc., etc., but not the contaminated by-product of the edible excretion of the domestic cow. Must be able to drive the new Patent Cash Tin Opener Lubricator and familiar with toilet articles as used by gentlemen and others.

Aspiring applicants were directed to ‘Apply P C Wills, Near the Narrows, Oxley’.^{xiii}

By issue number 12, the *Outlook* aspired to literary achievement, previewing a new serial due to begin in the following day’s edition. It was to be an ‘amazing human drama of love amid untold dangers’. Its principle characters were to be the passionate Parisienne heroine, Norma la Spudnet, her dashing dare-devil lover, Lionel Limers and the dastardly villain, ‘the man who invented murder’, Murgatroyd Messtrap.^{xiv}

The serial duly began, grinding on through subsequent editions, avoiding resolution and rationality in equal measure. So lugubrious was this story that the wife-beating cad and villain, Murgatroyd Messtrap, was only just being introduced by issue number 15. This was squarely in the tradition of the ‘endless serial’ established in World War 1 trench publications.

WATCH OUT FOR OUR NEW SERIAL STARTING TOMORROW.
AMAZING HUMAN DRAMA OF LOVE AMID UNTOLD DANGERS. ORDER YOUR
COPY OF THE OUTLOOK IN ADVANCE.

INTRODUCING THREE OF THE
PRINCIPLE CHARACTERS.....



NORMA LA SPUDNET, THE
PASSIONATE PARISIENNE - HEROINE.



LIONEL LIMERS, THE DASHING
DARDEVIL, NORMA'S LOVER
AND OUR HERO.



MURGATROYD MESSTRAP, THE MAN
WHO INVENTED MURDER - OUR
DIRTY VILLIAN.

DON'T MISS THIS STRONG SOUL STIRRING STORY
OF PASH!

The cad, the heroic lover and the heroine

In number 14 under the heading 'Cookery Notes' an item relating to a frequent obsession of the *Outlook* appeared.

Despite the length of time we have been a-roaming, there is still a little misapprehension as to the correct method of using a tin-opener. Here is the drill as now taught in the 'Narrows'. AT THE ORDER:-

- (1) Grasp the tin gently but firmly by the Lower Band, fingers clear of the Back-sight. At the same time, with the right hand, grip the tin-opener by the butt, fingers round the barrel.
- (2) Carry out detail as laid down for saluting with swords.
- (3) Bend the right elbow, piercing end of the opener facing the tin.
- (4) Drive the opener into the outer edge of the tin taking care to miss the left thumb
- (5) Reverse the tin-opener and with the cutting edge, cut through the tin. (It is essential that silence should be preserved during the latter operation).^{xv}

No 32 included an evocative cartoon of the *Outlook's* production facilities.^{xvi}



The Outlook's production facilities and staff

As well as trying to make light of the inevitable small irritations of living and working in cramped conditions, the *Outlook's* regular focus on distance travelled and the time taken to cover it, as well as that left to

complete, suggests how strongly the crew wished to reach their journey's end. Together with the ever-present concerns about the engines and the food, anxiety to complete the eight-week passage was clearly an important element of the small, self-contained world of a submarine at sea.

The Navigator has kindly consented to furnish particulars regarding the distance run each day.

This is not being done to provide an excuse for Control Room arguments at 1130 daily between the oilybacks and the dabtoes, but to allow ardent letter writers to get in a few more words, such as :- 'Another 180 miles today Darling. Every minute I am getting nearer to you. With every turn of the Whizzers, so my heart palpitates the more and longs just for ...' etc. etc.

You all know the kind of thing I mean.^{xvii}

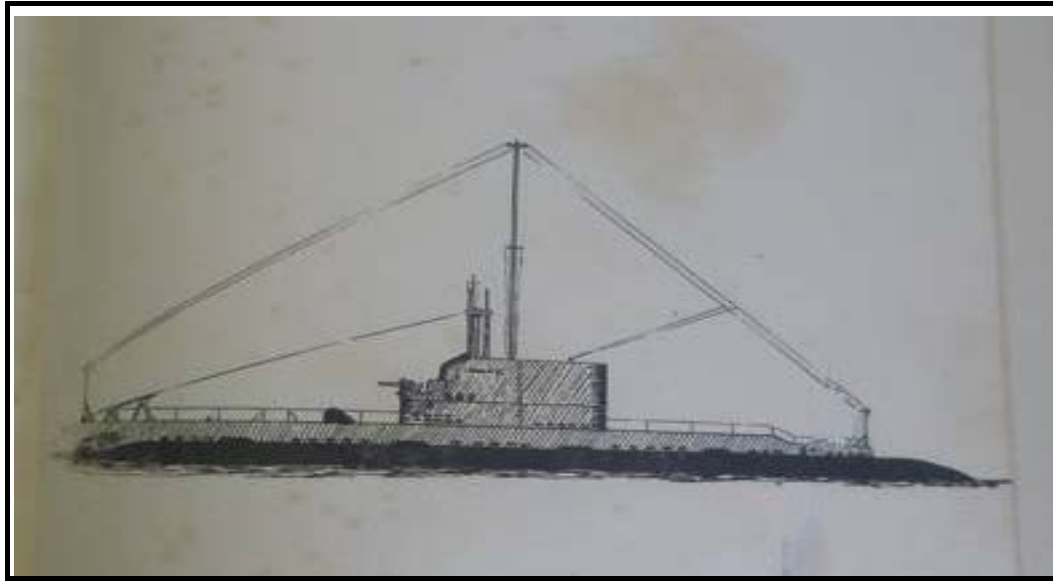
Despite the continual complaints in the *Outlook*, there is other evidence that things were perhaps not as bad as they might seem, at least from the perspective of the officers. *Oxley* and *Otway* were later remembered by Norman Shaw as being 'very good diving craft and most manageable. For their time, they were comfortable to live in'.^{xviii}

The final issue of the *Outlook* appeared on Tuesday July 21. It was number 40. 'If we have, at any time, injured anyones [sic] feelings with our little tilts, we trust they will accept our sincere apologies', wrote the editor. And although the voyage was over, the *Outlook* was still at work announcing 'Another Great Competition'. This one was called 'pear-woffling' and involved teams from each mess competing to see who

would most speedily open and down the contents of a tin of pears. The 'Rules' were 'go as you please'.^{xix}

While we can never know, it is worth speculating that the existence of the *Oxley Outlook* may well have prevented a repeat of the unhappy voyage out to Australia. The opportunity to poke fun, comment on conditions and personalities and to generally let off steam within the sanctioned, if limited, constraints of the magazine must have contributed to the maintenance of morale and a generally good-natured living and working atmosphere. Certainly, cartooning and other forms of humour are a notably strong and continual element of submariner culture.^{xx} As the editors modestly wrote in the final edition: 'It has been a pleasure to the Staff to try to raise 'a smile a day' and has been an added pleasure to know that the 'Outlook' was appreciated.'^{xxi}

Oxley and *Otway* went on to play their parts in the naval operations of World War 2. *Oxley's* role was brief. On September 14 1939 she became the first naval casualty of World War 2. *Oxley* was mistakenly torpedoed by her sister submarine, *Triton*, while both boats were on the surface off Norway. Only the commanding officer and lookout survived. *Otway* continued in service throughout the war and was scrapped in 1945.



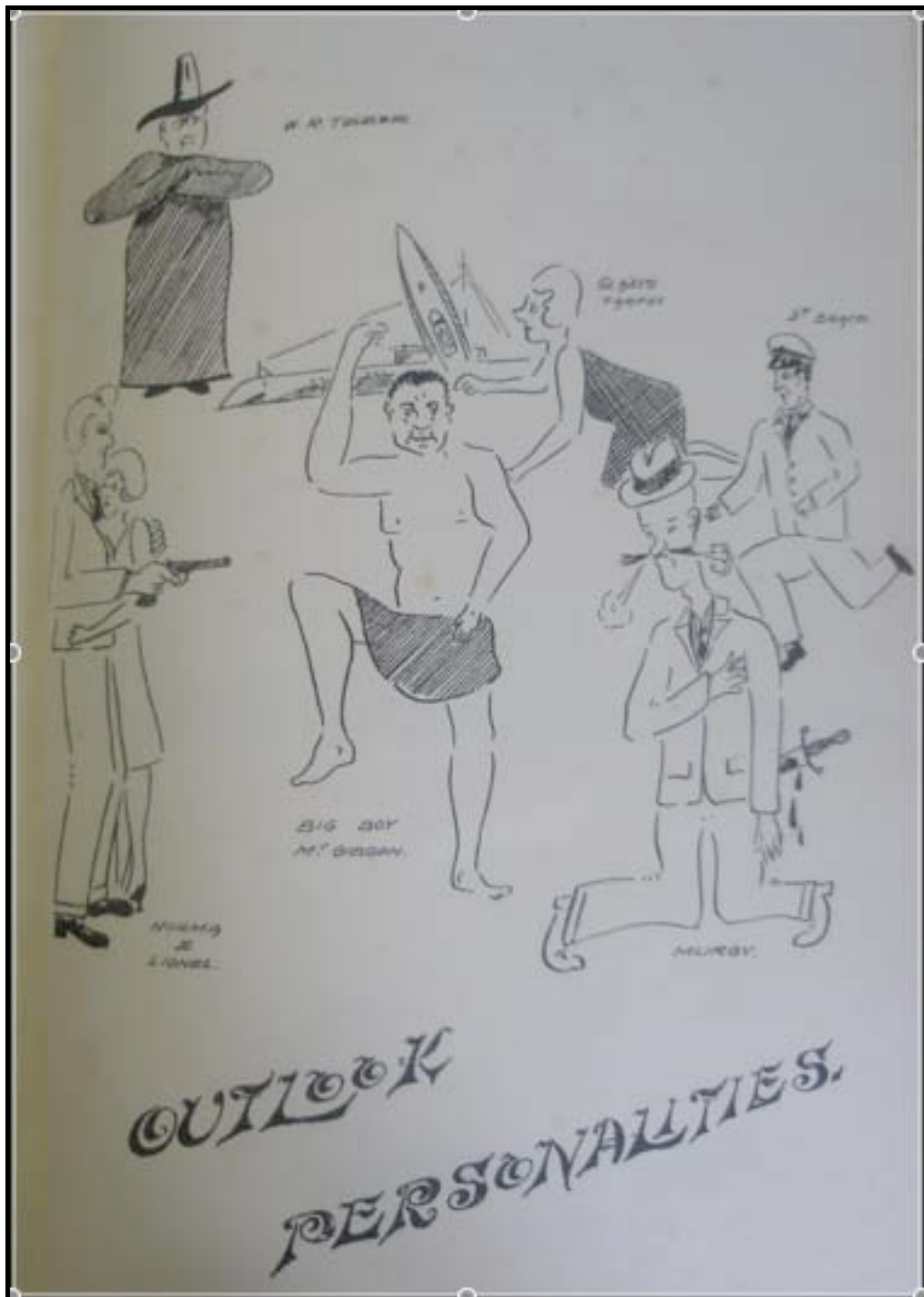
Line Drawing of *Oxley* by unnamed crew member

The unique record that the *Oxley Outlook* constitutes is valuable for its authenticity and its specificity of time, place and circumstances.

Unselfconsciously created by and for the men of one submarine during one extended voyage, it provides an unparalleled insight into the conditions, hopes, difficulties and tensions aboard a 1930s submarine.

It is also valuable as a direct descendant of the soldier newspapers and magazines that proliferated in World War 1. Aboard troopships going to and from the front at depots, camps and bases and in the trenches of Gallipoli, Palestine and the Western Front, crude but effective publications like the *Outlook* were typed, duplicated, often handwritten and distributed through the ranks. Like the *Outlook*, their aim was to lighten the gloom of service life. While the *Outlook* was not produced in combat, its style, morale boosting humour and satire are very like the trench journals of World War 1. It deserves to be respected as an authentic piece of everyday naval life from the point of view of the ranks

and to take its place among the neglected archives of soldier and sailor newspapers, magazines and similar periodicals^{xxii}.



Another item of *Outlook* humour

ⁱ From document headed 'Secret SC1937/2/15 Submarines *Oxley* and *Otway* CAO, now National Archives of Australia, quoted in White, M., *Australian Submarines: A History*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1992, p. 160.

ⁱⁱ White p. 126

ⁱⁱⁱ Shaw, N., Reminiscences online at <http://upperiscope.com.au/indepth.html> accessed Jan 08

^{iv} There were three groups, or sub-classes within the Odin class, each built at different times and places and with slightly different specifications. *Oxley* and *Otway* were, or have since become known as, the 'Oxley class' and were built at Barrow-in-Furness by Vickers. See Hutchinson, R., *Submarines, War Beneath The Waves, From 1776 To The Present Day*, Collins, 2002, also Preston, A., *The Royal Navy Submarine Service: A Centennial History*, Conway Maritime Press, London, 2001, pp. 91-92, 110.

^v Officers on *Oxley* and *Otway* at commissioning:

Oxley

CMDR H.R. Marrack DSC RN
LEUT F.E. Getting RAN
LEUT J. Donovan RAN
LEUT J.B.S. Barwood RAN
LEUT A.E. Fowler RAN
LEUT (E) F.C. Hodgson RAN
Wt ENG J.A. Hutton RAN

Otway

LCDR G.J.D Tweedy RN
LEUT N.H. Shaw RAN
LEUT J.A.A. Stocks RAN
LEUT L.R. Brooks RAN
SLEUT H.C. Wright RAN
SLEUT M.L. Power RN
Wt ENG A Nairn RAN

For a list of ratings and officers in 1928 see White, pp. 235-243. Ongoing detailed research by Barrie Downer in the United Kingdom lists officers and ratings for both submarines in 1926 and 1928. Personal communication, August 2008.

^{vi} White, p. 155

^{vii} White p. 161.

^{viii} White p. 161

^{ix} Shaw, N., Reminiscences online at <http://upperiscope.com.au/indepth.html> accessed Jan 08

^x A2007/569/1

^{xi} *The Oxley Outlook* No 1, p. 1

^{xii} *The Oxley Outlook* No 1, pp 2, 3, 4

^{xiii} *The Oxley Outlook* No 4, p. 2

^{xiv} *The Oxley Outlook* No 12, p. 3

^{xv} *The Oxley Outlook* No 14, p. 2

^{xvi} *The Oxley Outlook* No 32, p. 3

^{xvii} *The Oxley Outlook* No 18, p. 1

^{xviii} Shaw, N., Reminiscences online at <http://upperiscope.com.au/indepth.html>
accessed Jan 08

^{xix} *The Oxley Outlook* No 40, p. 1

^{xx} See Seal, G., 'Traditions of 'The Trade': The Folklore of Australian Submariners',
Australian Folklore forthcoming.

^{xxi} *The Oxley Outlook* No 40, p. 1

^{xxii} Ivelaw-Chaplain, J., *The Riddles of Wipers: An Appreciation of the Wipers Times, A Journal of the Trenches*, London, Leo Cooper, 1997, Fuller, J., *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914-1918*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991, Taylor, M., 'The Open Exhaust and Some Other Trench Journals of the First World War', *Imperial War Museum Review*, Number 5, 1990, Seal, G., 'Written in the Trenches: Trench Newspapers of the First World War', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, No 16, April, 1990, Kent, D., *From Trench and Troopship: The Experience of the Australian Imperial Force 1914-1919*, Hale & Iremonger, Alexandria, NSW, 1999. The John Johnson Collection in the Bodleian Library, Oxford has some examples online at <http://www.hcu.ox.ac.uk/jtap/pubs/>