

# Chapter 3

## A Peaceful Pacific



**Know your ship. From a model of Achilles... Left the deck from for'd showing A and B turrets. Some of the 5 inch AA turrets can be seen too. Right Looking from aft X and Y turrets. X turret is traditionally manned by Royal Marines.. Five inch AA turrets and torpedo tubes can be made out as well as the crane for the seaplane.**

AUCKLAND has always been enthusiastic about its Navy. On 25 September Achilles crossed the Waitemata to Western Wharf, and when we came off watch for meals, the messdecks were full of civilians; we went through crowded passages to our bathrooms, where supposedly shocked females opened marked doors to scrutinise us under steaming showers. We almost had to bar our lavatory doors to inquisitive happy people.

We concluded 1936's NZ cruise by calling at Lyttelton, Akaroa, Dunedin, and New Plymouth to spend a few days showing our ship to man, men and



women interested in the Navy, in addition to the constant stream of girls more interested in Navy personnel.

One old couple, gazing upward intently at our Walrus, waylaid me as I passed. 'Tell me, young man,' the husband queried, 'how does that machine become airborne?'

After explaining the launching procedure - catapult swivelled across-ship and extended, plane revved, charge fired, Walrus roaring off at 80 miles an hour - it appeared that I'd satisfied the elderly man, but his wife expressed considerable agitation: 'Oh lord be.' she gasped, " the young man who flies that thing must be brave to land back up there at eighty miles an hour".

Back in Auckland, Achilles entered dock for minor alterations according to Admiralty- approved recommendations from other Leander-class cruisers and those of the two-funnelled Improved Leander-class. Half of our ship's company went on a three-week Christmas leave, and when they returned, the remainder left for a similar period to spend New Year in home towns. Many Imperial ratings had made friends ashore or brought their wives out from England, so that they too enjoyed our summer festive season on local beaches or away at baches around Hauraki Gulf, later returning suntanned to find Achilles preparing for an extended New Zealand cruise.

To Wellington in late January to spend two weeks at Trentham military camp, sleeping in long wooden barracks dating back to World War 1, eating in barracks messhalls, and showering under early morning cold plumbing. While seamen-gunners pounded around assembling field-pieces, racing wildly along prescribed courses, setting up for firing, and then hurtling back to dismantle in vivid language team competitions, we telegraphists humped our 'portable' shore station to awkward sites, rigged aerials and communicated by Morse with Achilles.



We telegraphists, being responsible for all communications, sped about the camp on bicycles, carrying messages with holstered .45s flapping on our hips as protection against any Germans encountered. They'd have been fairly safe, as the pistol range proved. We stood straddle-legged, side-on to man-shaped metal targets at 50 yards. with our unused hands on hips, we waited excitedly for the enemy to charge, immediately took straight-arm eye-level aim and fired. The pistol bucked upward, had to be brought down, resighted, and fired again, again, and again until all six rounds were gone and the enemy stood almost face to face. I'd missed completely, could count myself a dead man; did better with my left arm, and eventually managed to keep the .45 low enough to score hits - but I'd make no Starsky - or Hutch.

Leaving Wellington on 1 March, we headed through Cook Strait to enter the mile-wide Tory Channel between Arapawa Island and Lucky Point, turning to starboard upon entering Queen Charlotte Sound and cruising quietly north to Ship Cove, where Captain Cook's monument marked one of his landings. Volunteers cleaned and repainted the structure, those with cameras recorded their visit for personal albums; while others lowered boats to spend leisure hours hauling in gurnard, snapper, blue cod, and tarakihi, which abounded. We were alongside Picton wharf on Saturday with decks spotless, paintwork glistening, as visitors streamed aboard from the picturesque countryside and friendly town.

Hundreds packed Picton's town hall that night, dancing to our popular marine band, slipping out into a moonlit warm setting where young couples whispered words of love, mostly impermanent but sometimes initiating lifelong partnerships, before returning to the dance to separate in embarrassed agreement, or sit together contentedly. Others hung about the door meeting cobbles from school, now also grown to manhood, and going outside to locate cars with boots full of grog with which they 'shouted'. And next day most came down on board to talk about the dance, laugh, and groan about the hangover, renewing friendships made last night.

Hauraki Gulf for exercises; a weekend in Auckland; and off we went to Wellington's Clyde Quay, staying alongside from 24 March to 5 April, chasing our caps, along windy, cold, showery streets from Courtenay Place to Taranaki Street, where the Panama Hotel's wide fireplace offered warmth and more experience at Cardinal Huff.

The weather treated us no better in Taranaki Bight, where we later rendezvoused with Australia's Canberra and Sydney, whose V & W Class destroyers engaged in mock battle, coming at Achilles with spray over bridges before helming hard and launching collapsible headed torpedoes. We ranged on the tall County-class and Improved Leander-class cruisers, applied throw-off, and fired full-calibre, reduced-charge salvos corrected by our enemies' rake-party reports of fall of shot, while ourselves becoming the target for their 8" and 6" gunnery. Integrated unofficial ANZAC squadron manoeuvres tidied up our rusting experiences from Aden and Gibraltar after we had stopped heaving things at each other and exercised as an entity while visiting Wellington and other New Zealand ports.

June through August could usually be termed New Zealand's winter, a period set aside in our Navy's wisdom as the time to go around tropical islands showing White Ensigns, Blue Ensigns, and Union jacks of momentous proportions to remind the inhabitants of their British allegiance. So it was that 12 June saw Achilles setting out from Auckland with all sorts of tinned goodies to leave in stores on unpopulated atolls and small islands in case of strandings within New

Zealand's protectorate. Five men living on Sunday Island were given fresh and canned food, books, timber and other building materials. At the Friendly islands - so named by Captain Cook in recognition of their hospitality - we anchored off Tonga's capital Nukualofa and welcomed the six-foot-tall 18-stone Queen Salote aboard with full ceremony. She'd been born in 1900, the date Britain guaranteed Tonga's protection with New Zealand appointed as guardian, came to the throne in 1918 and now, married to Prince Tugi and aged 37, ruled benevolently but firmly over 38,000 intelligent Tongans, 2000 whites who acknowledged her authority, and an enormous scarred and broken-shelled Royal Turtle alleged to have been seen as a youngster by Captain Cook.

Still within her realm and three hours' steaming from Nukualofa, Navi and our gunnery experts trained their instruments over Falcon Island. The times and dates of their observation were recorded against meticulously checked calculations for posterity. First seen as a reef by HMS Falcon in 1865, the island has played hide-and-seek with many navigators, being 1 1/4 miles in length and 153 feet high in 1885; awash in early 1894; but three miles long and 50 feet high after an eruption in the same year, before disappearing completely in 1895. A low reef appeared in 1918, and another eruption hiccupped it high and dry in 1927. HMS Veronica logged it as smoking and steaming in 1928, and two years later the Navigator's Almanac recorded its height as 475 feet, length 1.2 miles. When I had seen it from Dunedin in 1935 it had appeared every bit that high, and now on 20 June 1937 Achilles' records showed it to be 85 feet high by one mile long.

We took off way 520 miles north, nosed into a wide bay lined with whitewashed buildings below densely vegetated low hills, slipped our sea-boat and secured to one of Apia's huge buoys on the seaward side of a submerged reef. There, the substantial remains of the German 900-ton steel gunboat Adler still bore witness to the hurricane of 1889 which drove her broadside on to the reef, thereby saving all but 20 of her crew. The American cruiser Trenton, corvette Vandalia, and sloop Nipsic foundered; the German corvette Olga and gunboat Eber grounded on the sandy beach; the British cruiser Calliope slipped her anchor, exceeded her 4000 hp and fought her way against the hurricane at less than one knot, using New Zealand Westport coal. Some 200 men lost their lives in all those ships.

Ninety miles to the east at Pago Pago on Tutuila, the instant contrast of American influence was evidenced by spotless US Navy buildings, enormous canteen and recreation spaces, neat township laid out in mown lawns, tidy bungalows, kerbed macadam roads, and modern cinema, sited below Navy Radio NPU's towering basket masts. As Achilles berthed to the military strains of an excellent uniformed native silver band, barefooted girls in hula skirts danced their customary welcome, and each day the band returned to be applauded for their lively entertainment on Pago's clean concrete wharf.

In turn we staged from Pago to Nassau Island to offload stores for New Zealand's white resident and its two dozen islanders, then Danger Island, also in the Tokelaus, as were Manahiki and Pakahanga; and Tongareua, better known by its Welsh name Penrhyn, then the richest pearling lagoon in the world and probably the worst smelling by reason of stacks of rotting shellfish intermingled with the strong smell of copra. Three hundred and fifty islanders dwelt on Penrhyn and two white traders, one of whom invited Colin Malcolm and some of his messmates into his open-style bungalow to see a cashbox container of perfect pearls worth many thousands of pounds. He stood with drawn .45 as self-insurance while each in turn approached to view the lustrous beauty of these jewels of the deep, to feel their liquid texture and know for the first time why murder might well be committed to gain possession of such flawless specimens.

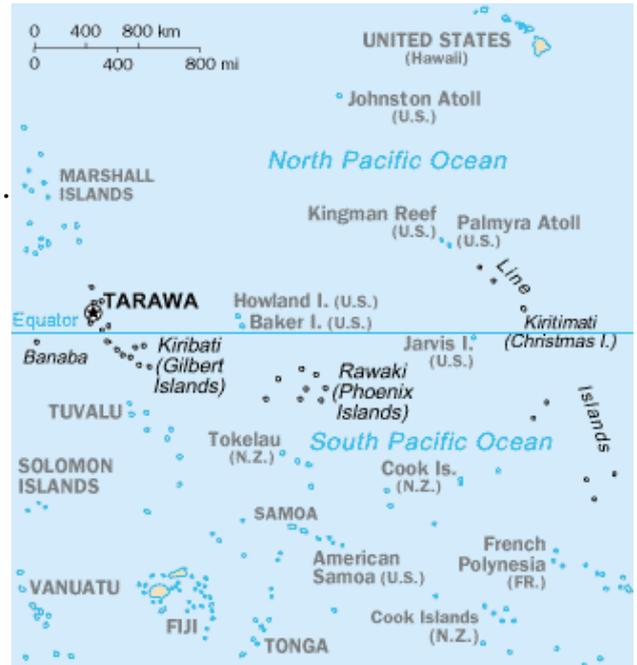


While still at anchor there was a sudden excitement in our radio department. Some months previously Amelia Earhart, with her copilot Captain Harry Manning and navigator Fred Noonan, had crashed on takeoff from Honolulu for Howland Island on the second leg of their westward attempt to circumnavigate the equator from California<sup>1</sup>. Their red-painted Lockheed Electra damaged its undercarriage and was transported to the States for repair, and Captain Manning returned to his ship SS Roosevelt. Because of seasonal winds

Amelia Earhart and Lt Cmdr Noonan decided to fly around eastward; took off from Miami, Florida, and touched down in successive countries for two thirds of their journey without incident. Their next hop from Lae, New Guinea, to Howland Is of the Gilbert group would be some 1800 miles, but they'd done longer hops than that. And then the drama started.

Navy Office Wellington ordered us to set a continuous listening watch on Amelia's radio frequency. On 2 July American monitoring stations received a message from the Lockheed in morse: '... circling ... cannot see island ... fuel running low. Atmospheric made further reception impossible.

Our course through the Tokelaus and Line Islands was taking us around the circumference of a sector whose two 900-mile radii met at Howland Island; watch after watch logged the receiver to be working correctly, and recorded heavy bursts of atmospheric static - but no signals from Amelia. Powerful US coast stations were logged, asking her to make a sequence of longs on her morse key if she was hearing them. No replies; only intervals of silence shattered by electrical disturbances, rattling earphones indicating an approaching storm.



Then came a week wherein Achilles steamed past Starbuck and Malden Islands, stopped at Christmas Island to entertain the local chief on board while seamen pinched more of his bosun-bird's tail feathers, and swung at anchor for three days. Our sparkers were tiring of the dreary listening watch still kept for an aviatrix who had probably ditched and drowned long since, but US planes were still assisting the American 3rd Fleet in its determined search. Strong transmissions still called her by morse, and spoken messages asking her to make longs. But listening periods were logged monotonously as 'silent'.



We arrived off Fanning at 0900 on 9 July, anchored, and sent boats ashore to bring the cable-station staff off for a Commodore's at-home on the awning-shaded quarterdeck. We caused an international sensation when the afternoon watch-keeper logged the customary calls to Amelia Earhart and prepared to record another period of silence. His hair almost stood on end. Distinct from bursts of atmospheric, he heard a string of evenly-spaced longs. 'Dahhh Dahhh Dahhh Dahhh ... Dahhh XXXXXXh h h Dahh XXXXXXh h h Dahhh ... and then more electrical storm interference and overpowering US coast stations blotting out the coarse notes of those faint signals.

'Incredible!' as the Signal Officer interrogated. 'Are you sure this couldn't have been imagination?' 'No way, sir! This' a specially allocated frequency.' He couldn't be talked out of it.

'But how could she be transmitting from a ditched plane after all this time? Are you certain about this reception? This from Captain Glennie. The operator was adamant. There might be no answer to the mystery, but he'd heard those longs under and between atmospheric bursts. 'Yes, sir'.

So the Commodore's guests went ashore earlier than arranged, and Achilles sailed at 1830 to mount a hopeless search which became even more frustrating when the weather broke, whipping up strong seas and making our night-watch lookouts miserable. We contacted Pearl Harbour's Navy Station NPM after failing to raise KHK Honolulu on 500 kc/s, passed Captain Glennie's

report of what had been heard, and stirred a hornet's nest among America's news media. Oh man! What those Yankee reporters made out of those weak longs!

We received unrestricted financial offers for the exclusive rights to the story of our 'rescue' of Amelia Earhart. radiogram after radiogram. But by the time our search was cancelled through shortage of fuel, counter-signals had all but convinced the States we had no more than an entry in our radio-log to offer. The weak transmissions were never heard again. Planes and warships searched with renewed enthusiasm, but they found no wreckage, nothing on nearby islands, no sightings by island inhabitants.

Those weak signals will live beyond the operator who logged them. The enigma of Amelia Earhart's disappearance lives on in myth and conjecture. There have been many theories. Only one of them can be true.

So Achilles made her way to Hawaiian Oahu, feeling the groundswell which produces Waikiki Beach's big surfing rollers, just after breakfast on 13 July. Approaching America's 'Malta of the Pacific' whilst flying Commodore New Zealand's pennant, Captain Glennie was more strict than he'd been about uniform at Gibraltar, where we carried no Commodore.

A slight humming in our speakers preceded a shrill bosun's call and then: 'CLEAR LOWER DECK FOR ENTERING HARBOUR. ALL HANDS OUT OF THE RIG OF THE DAY - OFF THE UPPER DECK. QUARTERDECK AND FOC'SLE PARTIES STAND BY TO GO ALONGSIDE, PORT-SIDE TO.'

Those who valued their freedom maintained a weather-eye for the Crusher and jaunty, while catching last glimpses of Diamond Head beyond the Royal Hawaiian Hotel and the huge breakers pounding its early morning beachfront. Then they disappeared like sea anemones at the sound of approaching voices, and left Achilles correctly dressed to enter harbour with our band playing British Navy traditionals. We slid in easily to No. 2 Pier without error, brought our cruiser to a standstill with propellers racing astern, heaved light lines to waiting Yankee hands who hauled mooring lines on to bollards, and hung plaited fenders against wharf-strakes when our 7200-ton ship pressed sideways before coming to rest.

Immediately one hears of Hawaii one thinks of Honolulu, but the Hawaiian Island chain stretches far to the west in a long submerged arm, reaching towards Midway Island but not quite making it. The islands best known to visitors are Hawaii with its capital Hilo; Maui with Maalaea; Oahu with Honolulu; and Kauai with Hanalei. Right now we were making our way ashore past khaki-uniformed guards carrying holstered revolvers, our blue-collared uniforms of white drill showing little resemblance to the whites of Yankee sailors.

Not all of the 3rd Fleet was out looking for Amelia Earhart. Battleships of the Tennessee class lay side by side, anchored off Ford Island. Along Battleship Row there must have been seven or eight of the 30,000-ton giants. The cruisers Astoria, Augusta, Raleigh, Honolulu, Phoenix, and others lying in dock or alongside the shipyard, hid from view a cluster of submarines and lesser vessels. Some said there could be 30 or more destroyers across the bay from Pearl City. Airfields seemed to be located in all directions, Hickam Field, Wheeler Field, Bellows Field, naval airstations at Barber's Point, Ford Island and Kaneohe, and Marine Corps air stations wherever the Navy and Army had left some space.

Instead of going on to San Francisco we sailed some 80 miles to Kealakekua Bay on Hawaii Island, where Captain James Cook met his death. The incident was recorded by one of his lieutenants, James King, as follows: 'An accident -\_ happened which gave a fatal turn. The boats, having fired at some canoes, killed a chief The [islanders] armed themselves and a general attack followed. Our unfortunate Commander was stabbed in the back, and fell with his face in the water. His body was immediately dragged ashore and surrounded by the enemy, who ... showed a savage eagerness to share in his destruction. Thus fell our great and excellent Commander!'

When Achilles arrived at 0630 on 27 July, 157 years after Cook's death, we anchored in 13 fathoms off a deserted shore, cleaned and repainted the memorial obelisk, photographed our Commodore and Captain standing either side, and departed south to drop off mail and stores at Fanning Island.



Still retracing our northerly trip, we steamed south-east to Christmas Island and sent a colonisation party ashore, comprising a portable wireless station, several ratings and wireless operators, and a civilian, Mr Cowie, who would take up permanent residence as administrator and wireless operator when the station functioned.

#### Canton Island in 1942

As soon as possible we embarked our navy personnel and plotted a southwesterly course for 856 miles to Canton Island in the Phoenix Group, landing another portable wireless station to be manned by one telegraphist, an officer and two seamen.

Captain Glennie's report on

Canton Island in August 1936 must have indicated BOAC flyingboat-base possibilities worth further investigation, for we watched our motorboat towing a lengthy flagpole to shore. Stepping -the already rigged mast, they slowly worked it erect with blocks and tackle, tautened all stays and hoisted the Union Jack. Tents, freshwater kegs, stores, books and furnishings went ashore to the uninhabited atoll, sufficient to maintain our 'colony' for its internationally-required month. Canton's horseshoe-shaped low-lying coral outcrops encircled an expansive lagoon over which our Walrus flew continually, surveying and plotting anything liable to hinder future airliners alighting or taking off at Canton's proposed fuelling base. Britain's flag flew and was officially recorded, as would be our scheduled morse contacts throughout the required period.

It being the northernmost island in the Phoenix Group, we steamed slowly through a night to Hull Island, the most southerly, another circular coral protuberance enclosing a large lagoon but differing from Canton in its prolific coconut growth, and its population of one shipwrecked sailor and four dozen islanders who enriched their economy each time a copra boat arrived from Suva. Hull was charted by Captain Wilkes in 1840, a mast and British flag were erected in 1889, and now on 6 August 1937 our motorboat towed a mast replacement ashore to be erected with appropriate ceremony.

Almost 300 miles south of Hull, Nukunono lay beneath its white halo of early morning mist, an atoll in the Tokelaus, first seen by Captain Edwards in 1791, and also annexed by British mast and flag in 1889. Its British history dated back to 1889 and, its flagpole being still in good condition, a couple of new flags sufficed.

So Achilles concluded a memorable voyage through the past; cleaning, repainting, and replacing neglected monuments along trails marked by Captains Cook, Edwards, and Wilkes, from Cook's last New Zealand anchorage at Ship Cove, Queen Charlotte Sound, before he sailed through the Pacific to meet his fate at 'Karakakooa'; through the Kermadec, Samoan, Cook, Line, and Hawaiian Groups on our way north; the Phoenix, Tokelau, and Fiji Groups when returning south.

We photographed Fijian traffic cops, Fijian Government House guards, Fijian firewalkers, and the Fijian Military Band; played and beat Fiji's rugby XV; rode out along coast roads on hired pushbikes and finished in the Club Hotel, drinking beer and slings before attending that night's dance for Achilles.



Next day being Sunday, I took my South Island telegraphist cobbler Athol Johnston along with me to an invitation aboard my dance partner's father's keeler. There I lost my dream-girl, who fell hook line and sinker for Athol, so I mooned about the yacht's foredeck watching sharks and whistling melancholy tunes on the homeward moonlit voyage. On top of

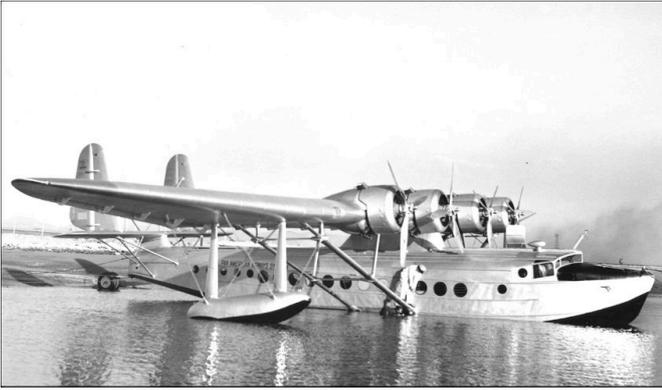
my temporary heartache, several ratings had left for courses at Flinders Navy School, Melbourne, and I had altered the name on one of their handed-in liberty cards so that Athol could use it to get ashore out of watch, on Sunday's yacht trip. The Crusher had been more meticulous than usual, discovered me as the culprit, and when we returned aboard, put me up for forgery - Oh man! What fate can do!

We arrived back in Auckland on 26 August 1937, the day before my 21st birthday, with me doing in two weeks leave and pay. From the bridge, where I was polishing brasswork as part of my punishment, I watched Romeo going ashore on my 21st. It would be several more days before I dressed for shore.... Also from the bridge I could see the name-ship of our cruiser's class, Leander[Left], recently arrived from England in place of Dunedin to make New Zealand the proud possessor of two modern-vintage cruisers on loan. Contests at various sports saw teams hard at training, but Leander beat us for the Blackwood Rugby Shield, while our soccer team beat them for the Cole Cup and then went on to trounce Philomel for the Horne Soccer Cup semifinal. We joined Eden Park's record crowd of 58,000 to watch the Springboks beating New Zealand's 1937 All Blacks 17-6.



Five days later the Diomedea Cup sailing race around Waiheke ended in tragedy when Achilles' second cutter capsized during squally gusts whilst crossing Tamaki Bay, and Auckland RNVR's whaler pulled out of the race to rescue its crew. Leander's galley took the lead, pulled away out of sight, and also capsized with no other boat near by. When boats eventually arrived they found three of the galley's crew missing in the high seas, Leading Seaman Forbes, Able Seaman Paterson, and Ordinary Seaman Tasker. Their bodies were not found until after two to three weeks of continued search. Men die; chaplains eulogise their past deeds; and life goes on without pause.

During one of our Auckland weekends some of us queued in the throng making for Mechanics Bay to see Britain's multi-engined Centaurus[Left] flying boat moored at a safe distance from America's huge Sikorsky Clipper. The reasons for our atoll surveys and island-claiming were here before us, riding at anchor almost side by side for a week; powerful airliners which later thundered along the Waitemata Harbour past Rotten Row to leave great white scars slowly healing as they lifted off Orakei and winged away overseas on 2000-mile leaps. A new era of travel had, been born but it was far from manhood; within a fortnight, on its return inauguration flight to New Zealand, the big Clipper crashed only 14 miles from Pago, killing all its crew and VIP guests.



PanAmerican Sikorsky S-42 aircraft [below] later named Samoan Clipper was piloted by the legendary Captain Ed Musik famous for opening up the Pacific to flying boat services. In his memory the coastal radio station at the mouth of the Tamaki River used by merchant shipping all over the Pacific until the 1980s was named after him.

Achilles celebrated Christmas in Auckland, saw the old year out and ushered 1938 in. Her siren remained silent but not her wardroom or messdecks; and prominent among

merrymakers dancing in Queen Street fronting the illuminated GPO, were many white caps bearing Achilles cap tallies.

1937 may have been a year of peace for Britain, but peace at a price, with Hitler shouting ever more loudly in western Europe, Mussolini's jaw jutting ever farther while his chest continued to inflate; Tojo's Japanese troops were beheading Chinese for newsmen's cameras; and Prime Minister Chamberlain was pussyfooting about, busily losing most of our Empire's prestige. Our naval leaders shared little of his idealism, fought hard to have the navy estimates increased, but found it impossible to wake Britain's political lion, and could only advocate more and more inter-Dominion naval exercises.

We came back from annual leave to find Achilles prepared for sea, sailed for Australia on 20 January 1938, carried out a full-callbre shoot en route and berthed on Saturday at Woolloomooloo for two weeks alongside during Sydney's sesquicentennial celebrations. Of nights, I think everybody from our ship could be seen with a bronzed lissom figure on his arm, joining laughing crowds to watch Venetian carnivals, searchlight displays and fireworks over the harbour filled with illuminated merchant vessels and warships. Colourful processions passed along sunlit streets crowded with goodwill. And then came perversity - a marine disturbance caused a tidal wave which rolled In across Bondi Beach to drown 22 bathers while 200 more had to be assisted from the water.