HMAS *Cootamundra* – J316/M186

Namesake: Town of Cootamundra, NSW	Class & type: Bathurst-class corvette
Builder: Poole & Steel	Displacement: 650 tons standard
Laid down: 26 February 1942	1,025 tons full load
Launched: 3 December 1942	Length: 186 ft 2 in (56.74 m)
Commissioned: 30 April 1943	Beam: 31 ft (9.4 m)
Decommissioned: 26 November 1945	Draught: 8 ft 3 in (2.51 m)
Recommissioned: 12 December 1951	Propulsion: triple expansion engine,
Decommissioned: 8 June 1959	
Reclassified: Training ship (1951)	2 shafts, 2,000 hp
Motto: "Service"	Speed: 15.5 knots
	(28.7 km/h; 17.8 mph)
Battle honours:	Complement: 85
Darwin 1943	Armament: 1 × 4-inch gun
Pacific 1943–45	1 × 40 mm Bofors
New Guinea 1944	
Fate: Sold for scrap in 1962	

HMAS *Cootamundra* was laid down at Poole & Steel Ltd, Sydney, NSW on 26 February 1942. She was launched on 3 December 1942 by Lady Davidson, wife of the General Manager, Bank of New South Wales and was the first RAN warship to carry the name of the town in the South West Slopes region of New South Wales.

Cootamundra commissioned at Sydney on 30 April 1943 under the command of Lieutenant George Alfred Johns RANR(S).
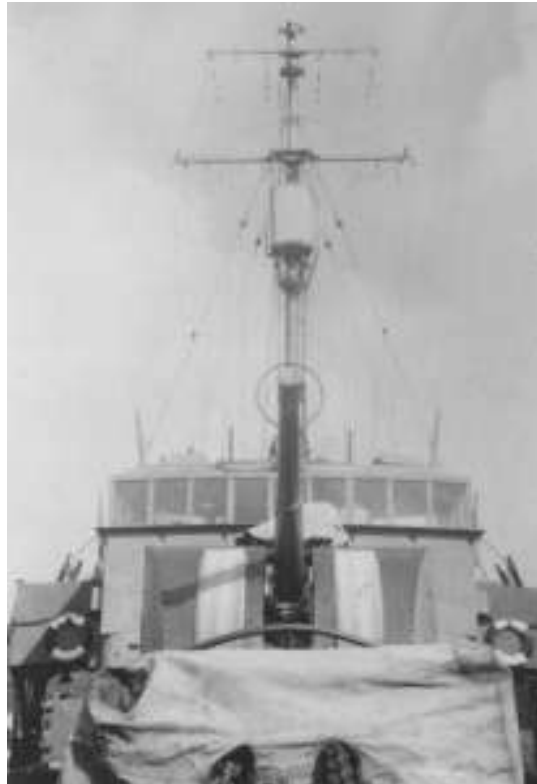
View of HMAS *Cootamundra* from the forecastle.

Following a period of trials and working up in the Sydney area, *Cootamundra* began her wartime career at the close of May 1943, operating as an escort vessel to convoys on the Australian east coast. Japanese submarines were active in these waters, five merchant ships having been sunk in April, and two during May, including the hospital ship AHS *Centaur*.

On 15 June 1943 *Cootamundra* proceeded to sea in company with of her sister ships *Warrnambool*, *Kalgoorlie*, *Bundaberg* and *Deloraine* to escort a Brisbane bound convoy of thirteen ships. En route off Smoky Cape, New South Wales, the convoy was attacked by Japanese submarines of the 3rd Squadron then operating in Australian waters.

Two ships were torpedoed; the *Portmar*, a United States Army Transport (5551 tons) and a United States Navy Landing Ship Tank, LST 469. The *Portmar* sank in ten minutes with the loss of two lives, but LST 469, though suffering heavy casualties (26 were killed and many wounded), remained afloat and was later towed to port.

On 6 July 1943 *Cootamundra* reached Thursday Island and from there proceeded to Darwin as escort to the merchant ship *Aroor*. Arriving on 17 July, she began a period protecting the shipping proceeding between that Darwin and Thursday Island. It proved in the main uneventful though arduous duty in the tropical conditions.

On 6 August 1943 *Cootamundra* was escorting SS *Macumba* to Darwin when two Japanese aircraft attacked at low level and in spite of anti-aircraft fire from both ships, scored a direct hit on *Macumba's* engine room. Attempts to tow the damaged vessel failed and when later the same day it became obvious that *Macumba* was about to founder, the survivors were taken aboard *Cootamundra*.

Ship's company of HMAS Cootamundra undertaking haircuts at sea.

In April 1944 *Cootamundra* proceeded to Sydney for refit having steamed more than 20,000 miles on escort duty in northern Australian waters and some 28,000 miles since commissioning. The refit was completed on 31 May. On 3 June *Cootamundra* proceeded to Darwin where for a brief period she resumed the role of escort vessel. On 28 June she sailed from Darwin escorting SS River Clarence, her last duty as a vessel attached to the Darwin Command.

On 1 July, at Thursday Island, she transferred to the administrative and operational control of the Naval Officer-in-Charge, New Guinea. On 5 July she arrived at Milne Bay to begin duty in the forward areas which lasted until the end of hostilities. On 16 July 1944 she sailed from Langemak in company with HMA Ships *Rockhampton* and *Bunbury*, escorting her first New Guinea convoy of the war. It was bound for the newly won base at Hollandia.

Left: Engine room artificers working on a main engine bearing. (AWM 109338) Centre: An electrician checking gear in the main control room. (AWM 109337) Right: Naval ratings cleaning internal boiler fittings. (AWM 109339)

Convoy escort duty continued through August, and at Aitape on 7 August, her crew witnessed their first bombing of Japanese positions ashore. During the month she visited Mios Woendi, Noemfoor and the recently captured islands of Biak and Wakde.

On 6 September *Cootamundra* and HMAS *Gladstone* relieved two American frigates as anti-submarine patrol vessels in the Sansapor area, a duty which kept both ships occupied until the close of the month. In October 1944 *Cootamundra* spent a period boiler cleaning at Madang.

Mid-month she proceeded to Biak where she spent a few days patrolling the approaches. On 25 October she sailed from Biak escorting two ships to Morotai and on arrival assumed anti-submarine patrol. On 31 October, being relieved on patrol by HMAS *Strahan*, she was lying in the inner anchorage when five enemy aircraft attacked shipping and shore installations. *Cootamundra* added her quota to the anti-aircraft (500 rounds were expended) and one aircraft was shot down. She was hit once by machine gun fire from the enemy planes, but suffered only superficial damage and no casualties.

HMAS *Cootamundra* circa 1944.

In November she returned briefly to Australia after escort duty during the first half of the month. Ten days were spent at Cairns and on 3 December she returned to New Guinea where she resumed escort and patrol duty. Christmas Day 1944 found *Cootamundra* at sea escorting a convoy en route for Morotai. On 30 December, in company of two American Torpedo Boats, she carried out her first bombardment of the war when she shelled Japanese positions on Galela Bay, Northern Halmahera.

In 1945, with the successful landings in the Philippines completed, the tempo of operations in the New Guinea area slowed down. Nevertheless the flow of shipping had to be protected against possible submarine or air attack, so *Cootamundra* was kept busy on escort duty. She steamed on average 2800 miles per month in New Guinea waters from January 1945 to the close of hostilities in August. On VJ Day (15 August 1945) she had steamed 74,609 miles on operational war service.

One hundred and sixty four ex-prisoners of war of the Japanese, survivors of Gull Force, 2/21st Infantry Battalion and attached troops, were evacuated from Ambon in the Ceram Sea and brought to Morotai by RAN corvettes for hospitalisation at 1st Australian prisoner of war reception group camp. Left: Private BJ White being assisted down the gangway of HMAS Cootamundra. (AWM 115782). Centre: The camp interpreter of the Ambon POW camp, Ike Ouchi, was also brought back to Morotai. He is shown disembarking Cootamundra. (AWM 115777). Left: Ike Ouchi standing with members of the 1st Australian Armoured Division Provost Company shortly after disembarking from HMAS Cootamundra. (AWM 115780)

Checking the Boiler Tubes

On 8 September 1945, in company with HMA Ships Glenelg, Junee and Latrobe, she proceeded to Ambon and embarked Australian, American and Dutch prisoners of war and one Japanese prisoner for passage to Morotai. Later the same month she transported occupation troops to Ambon and took part in the surrender ceremony.

On 26 September 1945, with her paying off pennant flying, she sailed from Morotai towing HMAS *Leilani* en route for Melbourne where she paid off into Reserve on 26 November 1945, having steamed 81,181.2 miles.

Arrival Melbourne flying paying off Pennant

Riverine Herald (Echuca) Fri 4 Jan 1946:

Australian Corvettes.—Having been decommissioned, the Australian corvettes HMAS Wagga, Cootamundra and Castlemaine, now at South Wharf, Melbourne will become "sheerhulks" in Corio Bay from today onwards. Wagga will lay up in Corio Bay, followed by Cootamundra and Castlemaine.

Cootamundra recommissioned at Williamstown on 12 December 1951 under the command of Lieutenant Commander Cecil J Cochran RAN. In the post war period she operated chiefly as a training ship in Australian waters. She visited New Zealand in 1954, and in 1957 spent a period in northern waters operating as the supervising vessel to the Japanese Pearling Fleet. In her post war commission she steamed 105,805.6 miles.

HMAS "COOTAMUNDRA" IN SERVICE AGAIN

The corvette, HMAS "Cootamundra" was re-commissioned at Williamstown Naval Dockyard yesterday. A sister ship, HMAS "Wagga." was recommissioned at the same time.

These ships will be used as training ships for National Service trainees. They are fitted out to train men in all phases of seamanship, minesweeping and anti-submarine drill.

Cootamundra Herald Fri 14 Dec 1951

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Some of HMAS Cootamundra's crew members opening their mail from home.

*HMAS Cootamundra in her post war role as a training ship.*

HMAS *Cootamundra* leaving Sydney with trainees embarked.

Courier Mail (Brisbane) Fri 4 June 1954:

Navy to the rescue

Navy minesweepers are speeding through rain on 'mercy' errands off the Queensland coast. At 9.30 am the minesweeper HMAS *Cootamundra* was ordered from Sydney to assist a 75ft Civil Aviation Department launch disabled at Gladstone 311 miles north of Brisbane.
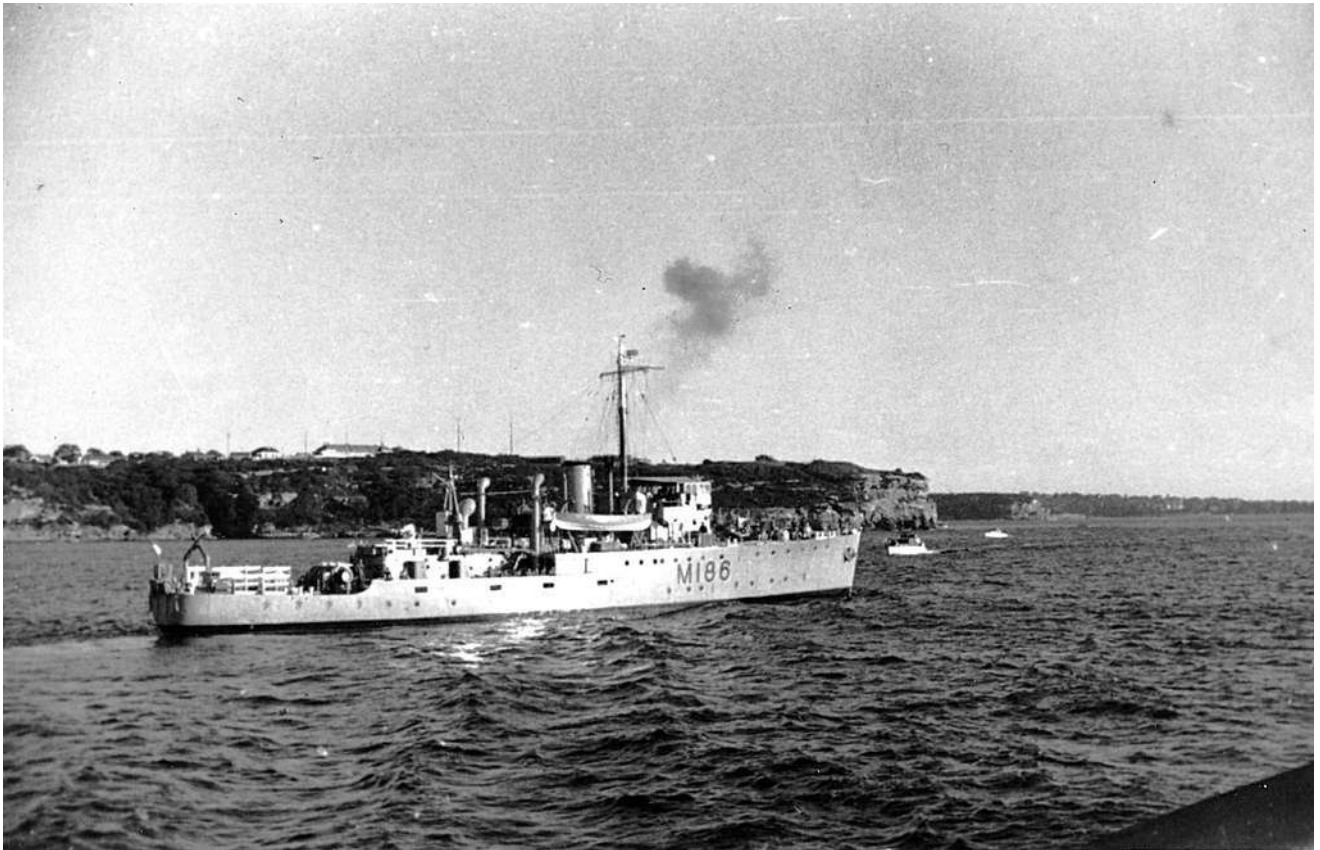
Aerial views of HMAS Cootamundra alongside.

HMAS Cootamundra 1955

HMAS Cootamundra 1955

Cootamundra finally paid off on 8 June 1959. Declared for disposal on 27 September 1961, she was sold to Banks Bros & Street on 28 March 1962. Broken up (believed by Sydney Slipway, Waterview Bay).