Tribute to yachtyies who served

Royal Perth Yacht Club’s Anzac Day service preceded the annual Diggers Cup, with 90 boats taking part.

Commodore Bob Trotter, the national president of Submarines Association Australia, recounted the story of four young Australian yachtsmen who joined the British battlecruiser, HMS Hood, on January 23, 1941.

The German battleship, Bismarck, sank the Hood in the Atlantic on May 24 that year, killing 1415 crew including the four Australians.

Mr Trotter said those four were among about 500 who had joined the Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserve between 1940 and 1942, answering the call of a recruiting initiative known as the Dominion Yachtsmen Scheme.

This scheme had been introduced after an appeal by British Admiralty in June 1940 to urge gentlemen with yachting experience into service with the Royal Navy.

Mr Trotter said a parallel Australian scheme had trained several yachtsmen as anti-submarine officers at the HMAS Rushcutter naval base in Sydney, including a club member, the late Max Shean.

The men served on smaller ships on convoy duty in the Atlantic and Arctic oceans, in the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, working in Special Operations and in bomb disposal.

Many had been involved in the Normandy landings on D-Day, June 6 1944.

After four or more years away, the Yachtsman Scheme men returned to Australia in the throes of the final stages of the Pacific war.

Mr Trotter said they were the most highly decorated servicemen of World War II, with four George Crosses, 10 George Medals, 31 Distinguished Service Crosses, one Distinguished Service Medal, 34 mentioned-in-dispatches, three Orders of the British Empire, three Members of the British Empire and a Conspicuous Gallantry Medal, the only one ever awarded to an Australian.

“The George Cross is the second highest bravery award of the UK honour system and is awarded for gallantry ‘not in the face of the enemy’; while the George Medal is presented to those performing acts of bravery in, or meriting recognition by, the UK,” Mr Trotter said.

One of the four RPYC members in the scheme, Leon Goldsworthy, earnt both.

The other club members were “Chooky” Liggins, club commodore from 1955 to 1958, Bernard Bayley, Frank Boan, R.E. Moore and Patrick Rodriguez.

Mr Trotter said Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Louis Mountbatten, believing the Australians had special qualities, reputedly requested some of “those hot-shot Australians” for his destroyer flotilla and for combined operations.

“The heroism and glamour of war in the public perception of World War II through film and fictional accounts are rarely to be found in the men’s recollections,” Mr Trotter said.

“Most of their memories are frequently harrowing and emotionally disturbing.

“Moreover, because their involvement in the war at sea across the other side of the world and in the service of the imperial power has not sat comfortably with the perception of Australian identity post-war, the men have received little recognition of their service.

“This will be corrected on May 4, when, at a special service of remembrance, a plaque depicting their service will be unveiled and dedicated in the Captain Reg Saunders Courtyard of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.”

Mr Trotter said 36 men in the Yachtsmen Scheme had died in World War II.

As the Last Post sounded, people preparing boats for the race and others on the jetties stopped and stood for the minute’s silence until Reveille was sounded.