

Commander Maurice Samuel Batterham OBE RANVR

By Hector Donohue

Maurice Samuel Batterham was born on 3 February 1906 in Williamstown, Victoria the fourth of eight children to William and Emily Batterham. Known affectionately as 'Batts' Maurice Batterham was the father of clearance diving in the RAN. Following Army service, his father, William, became the groundskeeper at Geelong Grammar and the family lived adjacent to the school, near Corio Bay which was where Maurice developed his love for diving. As a boy of 10 he dived in Corio Bay with a helmet fashioned from a kerosene tin, his brother John using a car pump to provide air down a garden hose. After attending Geelong Grammar, Maurice trained as an electrical and mechanical engineer with General Motors-Holden's Limited.

In March 1933, he and two of his brothers won a Bronze Medal bravery award from the Royal Humane Society of Australasia for rowing out in a dinghy in Port Phillip Bay and rescuing the crew of an overturned fishing vessel in heavy seas on 11 December 1932. In 1936 he married Marjorie Kate Earle and they had two sons and a daughter, living in Melbourne's bayside suburbs. His younger son, Robin John, became a leading scientist and was Chief Scientist of Australia from 1999 to 2006.

At the outbreak of World War II in 1939 Batterham volunteered to join the RAN but was rejected because he was in an essential job with General Motors in Melbourne. Batterham ultimately joined the Special Branch of the RANVR as a Sub Lieutenant in August 1942. He was assigned to the M (mining) specialisation which covered controlled mines and bomb and mine disposal and qualified in bomb disposal at the Amy Base at Bonegilla in October 1942. He joined HMAS *Melville* in Darwin in December 1942 for diving and bomb and mine disposal duties and was promoted to Lieutenant in January 1943. He qualified as a Diver II at HMAS *Penguin*, Sydney in October 1943 and returned to Darwin where he was involved in salvaging materials from sunken ships as a result of the Japanese bombings and rendering bombs safe as well as several Japanese mines washed ashore.



Japanese JA mine being inspected by Lieutenant Sidney Arnold and Lieutenant Maurice Batterham near Darwin June 1943.

In October 1944 he was sent on exchange service with the RN and joined HMS *Vernon* (D) at Brixham, home of the Port Clearance Parties. These had been established in the Royal Navy (RN) in late 1943 and following the D Day invasion, Naval parties were deployed to clear the ports and harbours of Northern Europe of German mines and ordnance.



Lieutenant M Batterham circa 1943

Batterham was described by *Vernon* (D) First Lieutenant, Lieutenant Commander LM Bates RNVR: 'as a tall, loose-limbed Australian who should have been a Texas ranger and not a diver. He was popular with everybody'.

In November 1944 Batterham was sent to relieve Lieutenant W Baily RNVR in command of party 1574 at Flushing in Holland. They uncovered the first German antennae mine and a cleverly contrived booby trap consisting of waterproofed Teller (anti-tank) mines. Training regarding booby traps paid off and the team's strict rules of procedure ensured constant vigilance by all team members. They also recovered many ground mines ashore. When conditions were unsuitable for diving, they carried out bomb disposal duties, dealing with many charges and unexploded bombs.

The team returned to Brixham late December and Batterham remained in command undertaking refresher training and practice in the use of the *Vernon* mine-recovery suit. In the new year he took the team to the Thames Estuary searching for abandoned German mines and missing British controlled mines. He handed over to Lieutenant PRF Britnell RNVR in February 1945.

In May 1945 Lieutenant Commander HJ Horan RNVR took sick as the team was at Lekhaven, in the port of Rotterdam and Batterham was rushed from *Vernon* (D) to take his place in command of P Party 1572. Some German divers had recovered several German S mines but of those known to have been laid one was missing. After an extensive two day search the missing mine was located. The team also found and buoyed a German midget submarine. Batterham then took the Party to Hamburg where no mines were found but many wrecks were located.

In June the Party joined the other five P Parties in Bremen and together with Party 1575 they found and buoyed four mines which were countermined. They continued at Bremen until late July and returned to Brixham. His final report from *Vernon* (D) by Commander AR Alton RN stated: 'A very trustworthy and thoroughly efficient officer with a quiet confident manner. He has given excellent service as Commanding Officer of Naval Parties employed on the clearance of enemy captured ports of mines and obstructions ... under difficult and dangerous conditions. He is an experienced diver with a thorough knowledge of mine and bomb disposal. He has a marked ability in taking charge and looking after the welfare and safety of his men...'



Batterham dressed in Mine Recovery Suit 1945

He returned to Australia in January 1946 joining the Torpedo School at HMAS *Cerberus* for mine disposal instruction duties. He was advised he would be deploying to Rabaul to assist Lieutenant Commander Chas Croft and a team of seven sailors to undertake bomb and mine disposal activities in the Rabaul area. He arranged for the BMD personnel and equipment to embark in HMAS *Kanimbla* for passage to Rabaul and then flew to join Croft there at the end of September, as an acting Lieutenant Commander. The team initially focussed on the land clearance, being the higher priority and numerous bombs and mines were located in their role as beach defences and booby traps. Batterham devised a gas mask diving system giving the freedom of movement they needed underwater, and the team recovered and disposed of over 150 mines and other ordnance.

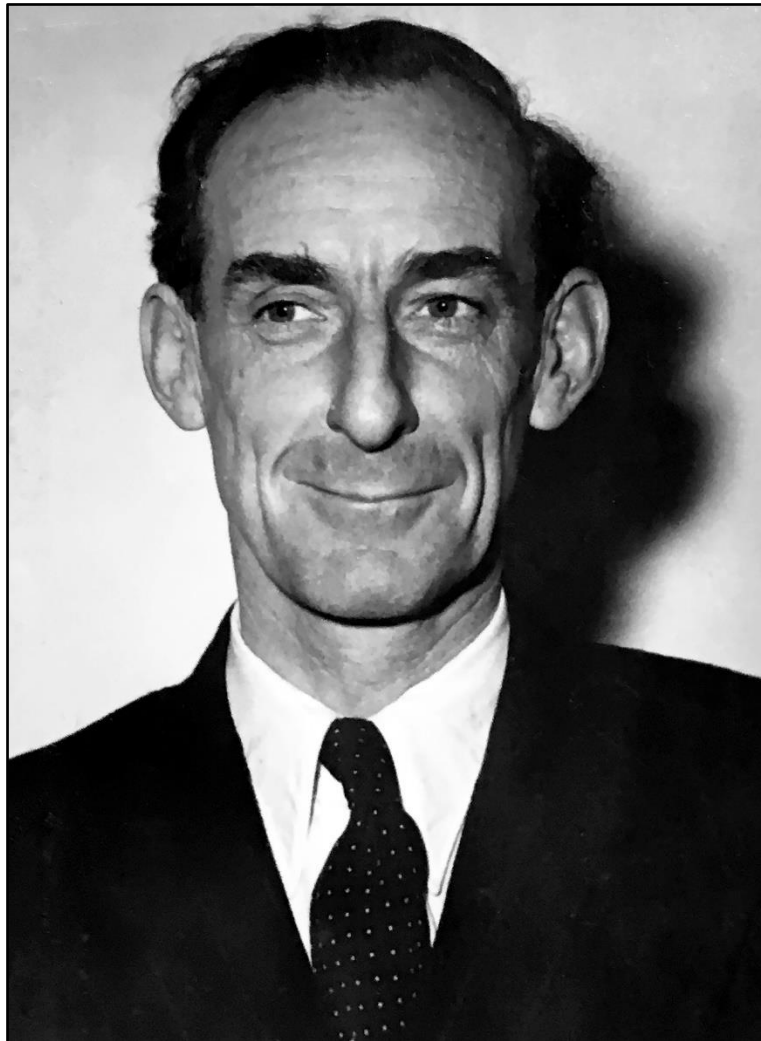
Batterham returned to *Cerberus* in July 1947 and received a Naval Board Commendation which stated: 'the Board expresses their appreciation of the outstanding zeal and devotion to duty shown by you in carrying out rendering mines safe duties at Rabaul under difficult, dangerous and trying climate conditions.'

In October 1947 and again in May 1948 he dived from HMAS *Swan* on the wreck of the minesweeper *Warrnambool* to recover the confidential books from the Commanding Officer's cabin. As reported by the Senior officer 20th Minesweeping Flotilla and Commanding Officer *Swan*, Captain RV Wheatley RAN: 'Full credit is due to Lieutenant Commander Batterham RANVR for the successful carrying out of this arduous and hazardous operation which he organised and in which he

played an important part underwater, setting a fine example for the rest of the team'. He and his seven team members subsequently received Naval Board Commendations.

Batterham's Naval Board Commendation stated: 'The success achieved in this hazardous operation was due in a large measure to the completeness of your organisation and to the splendid example personally shown by you to the team of divers particularly so in the underwater operations. The zeal, energy and enthusiasm of all members of your diving team was most commendable and, in a large measure, were a reflection of the leadership shown by you.'

The Admiralty also expressed their appreciation to the Naval Board of the recovery of the documents which ensured they remained free from compromise.



Lieutenant Commander MS Batterham circa 1951

He was appointed to Navy Office on the staff of the Director of Ordnance and Underwater Weapons in July 1948 and on 30 June 1951 was promoted Lieutenant Commander. The Royal Navy introduced Clearance Diving in 1948 and Batterham initiated the requirement to establish a similar organisation in the RAN in January 1951. The concept was endorsed within Navy Office and the specialist qualification of Clearance Diver was introduced in the RAN on 21 June 1951.

After overseeing the first clearance diving course in 1955 he continued to serve in Navy Office guiding the evolution of clearance diving and mine countermeasures. He was responsible for introducing the Australian designed Porpoise single hose compressed air breathing apparatus and the Hookah surface supplied breathing apparatus which were superior to any other available at the time.

He was awarded the OBE for 'sustained courage and devotion to duty' in the Queen's Birthday Honours List in June 1952. His citation noted that: 'Since 1943 he has been engaged intermittently on mine clearance and other duties of a hazardous nature. His duties included the clearance of former enemy-held ports in Europe and RMS duties in Rabaul after the Japanese surrender. By his skill, courage and leadership he was an outstanding example to his subordinates'. He was promoted to Commander on 30 June 1956.



Commander MS Batterham circa 1960

In 1961 he planned and supervised a deep diving operation in support of the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electricity Authority to clear a diversion tunnel. Diving was conducted to 285 feet over four months. This was the deepest diving operation on air ever undertaken and its success was attributed to Batterham's expertise and resourcefulness.

He remained in Navy Office and was the driving force behind most of the policy decisions relating to clearance diving even though his Directorate was only responsible for equipment procurement and research and development into mine countermeasures.

On retiring on 2 February 1966, his Director, Acting Captain GL Fowle DSC RAN, Director of Weapons and Electrical Engineering wrote: 'A most loyal and able officer whose experience in all matters relating to diving and explosives has been of the utmost value to the RAN.' Maurice Batterham, or Batts as he was known, was well respected by superiors and highly regarded by subordinates.

Leadership was natural for him and his quiet self-assured manner instilled confidence in those working under him.

On retiring from the RAN, Batterham became a director and consulting engineer with Australian Divers (Spiro) Pty Ltd, and remained there until 1969 when he retired to Phillip Island. He died at Cowes, Victoria on 20 August 1996, aged 90.



Lieutenant Commander Batterham and family on receiving his OBE 1962