

MONTE

BELLO

The Special Squadron for the Atomic Test in the Monte Bello Islands, started life in the precincts of the Admiralty citadel in the Summer of 1951 and gave birth to a mixture of ships: *Tracker* an L.S.T. (C), *Narvik* and *Zeebrugge* sister L.S.T. (3)'s, the frigate *Plym* and the aircraft transport *Campania*.

In February 1952 the advance party sailed loaded to capacity with a troop of Royal Engineers and their miscellaneous collection of equipment for building anything from roads to a small township. They arrived in the Monte Bello Isles in April, and were joined by four R.A.N. tenders to act as fleet train for stores and water and to provide transport to and from the nearest mainland port of Onslow, some 80 miles distant.

Uninhabited would be an apt description of the islands although some years ago they were used by pearling luggers. Here the luggers took shelter from the storms which are prevalent during the West Australian Summer months.

The isles are a curious mixture of limestone rock, sand and coral and covered in spinifex and a coarse grass. Wild flowers are found in abundance in season together with rats, wild cats, lizards and other small reptiles. The rats and the cats, of course, live and breed on different islands! The cats are really a wild version of the domestic feline which probably absconded from the pearling luggers. Turtles are abundant but one has to wait until these amphibious creatures decide to come ashore and lay their eggs in the sand. Regretfully this time was approaching when the Squadron departed.

The islands surround a lagoon and cover an area some ten miles by six.

*Tracker* and *Campania* which carried aircraft, scientific stores and the Ministry of Supply personnel with *Plym* in company arrived in the islands by early August.

The various islands had by this time been transformed by the Royal Engineers into a road studded colony. Canteens had been erected and pagahs for bathing on some of the islands. The pagahs were very necessary because of the sharks, sea snakes, sting rays, stone fish and other unpleasant sea monsters which live in those waters. The stone fish is worthy of particular mention, being comparatively small yet quite capable of

paralysing and poisoning a person to death.

As the day for the Test drew near the activity ashore grew more feverish and intense. Our inter-island communications consisted of a main station incorporating an M.S.O., and numerous minor stations at various sites in the islands. All landing craft and boats were fitted for inter-communication as indeed there was a veritable water bus service schedule every day.

On October 3rd a single code word announced to the world that the British had successfully tested an Atomic weapon. *Plym's* ship's company, now scattered around the Squadron, watched their vessel being "Vaporised". The explosion was an awe inspiring sight.

Afterwards there began the "Clearing Up" period and for most of us confinement to one's

ship because of the radio activity in the area. Fishing too was prohibited. So indeed it was with a sigh of relief that we bade farewell to Monte Bello after a unique and most interesting experience.