

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RAN AIRCRAFT

(Part 4: Westland Wessex Mk 31A/B)

Since the RAN Fleet Air Arm was formally constituted in 1948, hundreds of aircraft have been operated by RAN aircrews. Whilst most of these aircraft survived their military service only to end their 'lives' as scrap or as training aids on fire grounds, some regrettably were lost in accidents. Over several issues of TOUCHDOWN (commencing with issue 4/98), I am attempting to trace the fate of all these aircraft.

Contributed by CMDR John Crawley RAN (Rtd)

THE Wessex helicopter was developed from the US Sikorsky S-58 by the UK firm Westlands at Yeovil, Somerset. As such, it was the first helicopter ordered by the Royal Navy for the antisubmarine role and deliveries to that Service commenced in 1960. Soon after, just when it seemed as though the RAN Fleet Air Arm was about to be wound up by the then Liberal government, 27 Wessex Mk 31A helicopters were ordered for the RAN.

A relatively small team of aviators and technicians departed for the UK in 1962 to train on the Wessex. I was fortunate enough to be one of the 'crystal crackers' so despatched and I still find it a little humorous today. I was posted as a leading sailor to more or less back up my CPO – Dave Edwards; however, the system saw fit to promote me to Petty Officer shortly before boarding the

plane. Now, in those days a brand new Petty Officer was made an acting PO and consequently I had to wear my sailor's rig for 12 months until confirmed in rank. (A cost-saving measure in case they had to bust you back in rank during that time.) As a single sailor living in the PO's Mess at the then HMS ARIEL (later Daedalus and more recently decommissioned), the 'real' POs there, as well as the training staff, gave me a hard time over my uniform. If I was a sailor I should be down with the troops, if a Petty Officer I should dress like one!

Back to the story. The first flight of an RAN Wessex (WA-200) took place at Yeovil on 6 Sep 62. The aircraft was test flown by LCDR (P) John Salthouse and subsequently accepted by the RAN.

Following test flying in UK, each aircraft was partially dismantled and transported by sea and road to NAS



RAN Wessex helicopters retained a standard colour scheme throughout their service: Royal Navy Oxford blue and white

Nowra in a large pine crate, wrapped up in huge quantities of green plastic sheeting and locally re-assembled. (I remember the timber, of fairly good quality, being forever pirated off for whatever purpose.) The helicopters arrived at NAS Nowra at the rate of about three per month.

WA-200 and WA-201 arrived at NAS Nowra on 11 Nov 62. Following re-assembly and ground testing, WA-200 was test flown on 22 Nov 62. From memory, I recall WA-200 being piloted on this occasion by LCDR John Simmonds, the CO of 725 Squadron. The first handover to 725 Squadron occurred a few days later on 26 Nov 62.

By Aug 63, 725 Squadron had nine Wessex and the newly constituted 817 Squadron, 10 aircraft. At about this time the first Wessex embarked aboard the flagship HMAS MELBOURNE.

Wessex helos go swimming

By late 1963 the RAN had received most of its new Wessex Mk 31A ASW helicopters. The following year, 1964, the RAN and 725 Squadron lost its first two Wessex, WA-207 and WA-206 on 14 Sep and 24 Nov respectively, when both aircraft ditched after suffering power losses – thought to be associated with problems with the fuel control unit (FCU). On both occasions the aircraft were captained by a USN exchange pilot, LCDR 'Chuck' Smiley. Chuck was an affable officer as well as an experienced and capable pilot. He was most undeserving of a Sydney tabloid's editorial at the end of his stay in Australia, which, after commenting briefly on the two ditchings and his imminent return to the US Navy, signed off the editorial with '*Bon voyage LCDR Smiley, nice to have met you, but we really couldn't afford you!*' The copilot of the second ditched Wessex (WA-206) was SBLT Peter Ward. Peter was later to tragically lose his life, along with POACM Doug Sanderson and NAMAE Ross Smith, when a 723 Squadron Bell Iroquois helicopter (N9-881) crashed during a Beecroft Range clearance sortie on 5 Jun 68.

Wessex helicopters from Nowra assisted in the rescue of survivors following the collision of HMAS MELBOURNE and the Daring class destroyer HMAS VOYAGER some 19 miles out to sea from Jervis Bay on 10 Feb 64. Sorties were flown throughout the night locating dozens of survivors and included several actual rescues. (Not all Wessex aircraft at the time were fitted with SAR winching equipment.)

In mid-67, four Wessex were detached to the fast troop transport HMAS SYDNEY for her voyage to South Vietnam. The following year, a program was commenced converting the Wessex 31A to a model 31B. Two helicopters were modified in the UK to incorporate an increased load-carrying capacity, improved sonar system, communications and navigational aids and a more powerful engine. Subsequently, 21 other Wessex were converted by Hawker de Havilland (Australia), the first flying in mid-68. The major distinguishing features of

WESTLAND WESSEX MK 31A/B

Description: Carrier-borne ASW and Utility helicopter. Ordered July 1961, number delivered 27.

Manufacturer: Westland Aircraft Ltd, Yeovil, Somerset, UK.

Powerplant: One 1 175 shp Napier Gazelle Mk 162 free-turbine engine (Mk 31A); 1 600 shp Mk 165 (Mk 31B).

Performance: Initial rate of climb 1 540 fpm; ceiling 14 100 ft; maximum speed 117 kts; operational range 263 nm.

Weights: Basic empty 3 927 kg (8 657 lb); MTOW 6 120 kg (13 500 lb).

Dimensions: Main rotor diameter 17.07 m (56 ft), overall length 20.03 m (65 ft 9 in), height 4.93 m (16 ft 2 in).

Accommodation: Typical crew of two pilots, one observer and an aircrewman. In utility role, 16 passengers or eight litters.

Armament: Two homing torpedoes or depth bombs.

Ships embarked: HMAS MELBOURNE, SYDNEY, STALWART, TOBRUK.

the updated Wessex were the main transmission platform, the *Hudat* radar antenna positioned above the cockpit, and the sonar funnel housing the submersible hydrophone protruding beneath the fuselage.

In 1974, Wessex aircraft were embarked on board HMAS MELBOURNE and the ship despatched to Darwin in record time to provide assistance in the aftermath of Cyclone *Tracy*.

The aircraft type continued to give good service until superseded by the Westland Sea King Mk 50 in the ASW role. Thus in 1975 it was decided that HT 725 would disband and HT 723 would become a composite squadron: Wessex (minus its ASW suite), UH-1B Iroquois and Kiowa helicopters. HS 817 duly re-equipped with Sea Kings in early 76.

Surplus Wessex helicopters were placed in storage for conversion to twin-engined utility helicopters. However, this plan never eventuated, possibly for reasons of cost and airframe age.

On 9 Feb 84, HU 816 Squadron reformed, having previously been the RAN's front-line fixed-wing ASW squadron and operating S-2E/G Tracker aircraft. Wessex helicopters were transferred from HC 723. HU 816's 10 Wessex supported the Army with amphibious operations from HMAS TOBRUK and land-based troop carrying. In addition, the squadron also provided utility tasking and SAR for the fleet.

The last Wessex aircraft were retired from service at the end of 1989. The type had served for 27 years with the RAN, flying with HC 723, HT 725, HU 816 and HS 817 squadrons. During their RAN service the Wessex fleet underwent a numbering change from WA- to N7-.

Some 15 of the 27 Wessex were either severely damaged or lost in RAN flying accidents. Nevertheless, from a crew/passenger perspective, despite its single-engine the helicopter proved to be a relatively safe aircraft to fly

RAN IN-SERVICE AIRCRAFT HISTORY: WESTLAND WESSEX Mk 31A/B

<i>Aircraft</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Damage</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-200			Survived, withdrawn from service 31 Dec 89
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-201 (HC 725)	23 Nov 70	Cat 5	Engine failure during cable hover, aircraft ditched in sea, sank. Crew (LEUT (P) J. Wilkie, SBLT (P) G. Snell, LEUT (O) C. Linsell, RN, and LSUC J. McCracken) rescued uninjured, Shoalhaven Bight, NSW
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-202 (HU 816)	27 Jul 89	Cat 5	Ground resonance on board ship, nil injuries. Crew LEUT (P) White plus 2. Donated to Darwin Museum. HMAS SUCCESS, 140 nm NE Darwin, NT
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-203			Survived, withdrawn from service 31 Dec 89
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-204			Survived, withdrawn from service 31 Dec 89
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-205			Survived, withdrawn from service 31 Dec 88
Wessex Mk 31A	WA-206 (N7-206) (725 SQN)	24 Nov 64	Cat 5	Power loss in hover, aircraft ditched in sea, sank. Crew (LCDR (P) C. Smiley USN, LEUT (P) Bronson USN) rescued. Near Nowra, NSW
Wessex Mk 31A	WA-207 (N7-207) (725 SQN)	14 Sep 64	Cat 5	Power loss, aircraft ditched in sea, sank. Crew (LCDR (P) C. Smiley USN, SBLT (P) P. Ward, POUC (A) Barnes, LAUC Sanderson) rescued. Shoalhaven Bight, NSW
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-208 (HS 817)	19 Nov 74	Cat 5	Engine failure, aircraft ditched in sea, sank. Crew (LEUT (P) Davidson, SBLT (P) Jackson, SBLT (O) Jones, LSA Payne) rescued uninjured. Beecroft Head, NSW
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-209 (HU 816)	26 May 87	Cat 4/5	Engine failure, ditched in sea. Aircraft later recovered. Crew (LCDR (P) K. Alderman, LCDR (P) Kinross, POA Harpord, LSA Brown) rescued uninjured. Aircraft now a training aid at the fire ground NAS Nowra 1 nm E North Bondi, NSW
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-210			Survived, withdrawn from service 31 Dec 89
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-211 (HU 725)	13 Nov 89	Cat 5	Winch wire snapped and entered rotor head, aircraft ditched, sank. Crew (LEUT(P) M. Buckett, SBLT (P) Rieck, LEUT Cooke-Priest, RN, LACM Barnes, pax CDR Philimore, RN) rescued. Near Nowra, NSW
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-212 (HS 817)	22 Jan 78	Cat 5	Engine failure, ditched in sea near shore. Crew (LEUT (P) D. Anderson, LSA P. Cummings, ABAVN T. Wilkinson) uninjured, swam to shore. Near Murray's Beach, Jervis Bay, NSW
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-213 (HC 723)	13 Jul 77	Cat 5	Engine failure after take-off, ditched in sea. Crew (SBLT (P) Pinniger, LSA Cummings, ABATA Stafford) rescued uninjured. Operating from HMAS MELBOURNE
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-214			Survived, withdrawn from service 31 Dec 89
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-215 (HC 723)	04 Dec 83	Cat 5	Aircraft ditched in sea following fatigue failure of input bevel gear to MRGB. Of 8 POB, SBLT (P) M. Henschke, ABATA B. Beauchamp, (RAN); and FLTLT K. McMahon, SGTs R. Turner, W. Tejcek and G. Dries (RAAF), escaped with various minor injuries. LSA G. Macey (RAN) and CPL J. Campbell (RAAF) killed. 1.5 nm S Golden Beach (Bass Strait), Vic
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-216			Survived, withdrawn from service 1989
Wessex Mk 31A	N7-217			Survived, withdrawn from service 31 Dec 89
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-218 (HC 723)	30 Oct 89	Cat 5	Ditched after crew possibly misdiagnosed engine failure. Crew (LEUTs (P) A. Lister and A. Hill, LSA B. Knowles, and 2 pax PORS A. Mcleish, SWRRO M. Jones) rescued uninjured. Aircraft recovered. Operating from HMAS STALWART, Java Sea, approximately 180 nm NW Surabaya

RAN IN-SERVICE AIRCRAFT HISTORY: WESTLAND WESSEX Mk 31A/B (Cont)

<i>Aircraft</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Damage</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-219 (HS 817)	16 Jun 70	Cat 5	Smoke/flames from jet pipe, engine failure, aircraft ditched in sea. Crew ((SBLTs (P) Bainbridge and Lawson, SBLT (O) G. Wong, LACM Smith) rescued. Aircraft recovered. Operating from HMAS MELBOURNE
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-220 (HS 816)	03 Nov 85	Cat 4	Engine failure during cruising flight at 500 ft/60 kts, aircraft landed heavily in paddock. Crew (LEUT (P) G. Sydney, POACM R. Culliey uninjured; swimmer LSATWL A. Fields slightly injured. 7 nm E Nowra, NSW
Wessex Mk 31A	WA-221 (N7-221) (817 SQN)	05 May 67	Cat 4	Engine failure during launch planeguard duties, ditched in sea. Aircraft recovered by HMAS MELBOURNE, repaired. Crew (LEUT (P) G. Dalgleish, LEUT (P) Bayliss, LACM Burke) rescued. HMAS MELBOURNE, en route Sydney-Rabaul
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-222			Survived, withdrawn from service 31 Dec 89
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-223			Survived, withdrawn from service 31 Dec 89
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-224			Survived, withdrawn from service 31 Dec 89
Wessex Mk 31A	WA-225 (N7-225) (817 SQN)	06 Mar 67	Cat 5	Gradual engine failure in hover, aircraft ditched in sea, sank. Crew (SBLT (P) A. Hill, SBLT (O) R. Ray, LACMs Yellema, McClure) rescued uninjured. Near Nowra, NSW
Wessex Mk 31B	N7-226			Survived, withdrawn from service 31 Dec 89

in. During the many thousands of flying hours of the type, there was just the one fatal accident. On 4 Dec 83, HC 723 Wessex N7-215 ditched in Bass Strait 1.5 nm south of Golden Beach (Near Sale) following a fatigue failure of the input bevel gear to the main rotor gear box. In this tragic accident the aircrewman and a RAAF corporal were killed.

Nine Wessex helicopters were ditched at sea and totalled. As best known, the fate of the surviving 18 helicopters (or damaged airframes) that survived their RAN service is outlined in the table below.

N7-200:	Poor condition ANAM, awaiting disposal
N7-202:	Darwin Air Museum
N7-203:	Whereabouts uncertain
N7-204:	Moorabbin Air Museum, Melbourne
N7-205:	Sold to a Victorian Air Museum
N7-209:	Training aid, fire ground, NAS Nowra
N7-210:	Poor condition ANAM, awaiting disposal
N7-214:	Whereabouts uncertain
N7-216:	Maritime Museum, Sydney
N7-217:	Display ANAM, NAS Nowra
N7-218:	Poor condition ANAM, awaiting disposal
N7-219:	Whereabouts uncertain
N7-220:	Scrapped
N7-221:	Display ANAM, NAS Nowra
N7-222:	Apprentice School, RAAF Wagga, NSW
N7-223:	Whereabouts uncertain
N7-224:	South Australian Air Museum
N7-226:	Training Aid, RAAF Williamtown

Disposal of Surviving Wessex helicopters following their RAN service.

Much of the above information was obtained from surviving RAN Fleet Air Arm records and various published sources. But I want to especially thank the assistance freely given by LCDR Bob (Windy) Geale RAN (Rtd), the curator at the Australian Naval Aviation Museum (ANAM) at NAS Nowra. Bob is a tower of strength when it comes to unearthing little-known information on RAN aircraft. Thank you Windy. ©



WINNER

The \$100 prize for this issue goes to LEUT Alison Thomas, Medical Centre, NAS Nowra, for her article: *Thermal Stress*.

LEUT Thomas, your \$100 prize awaits, please contact CMDR Ted Walsh, RAN (DSM-N) on (02) 6265 5039 to arrange collection.

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