

Statement by Defence Minister Killen, 25 February 1982

Subject to negotiations of details the Government has decided that Australia is to purchase the aircraft carrier HMS *Invincible* from the United Kingdom to replace HMAS *Melbourne*. The plan is to take delivery of the ship in late 1983. On commissioning into the Royal Australian Navy, the ship will be renamed. The purchase price of the *Invincible* is £175m sterling, which at the August 1981 exchange rate was \$285m. This was quoted as a firm price not subject to escalation. The total project costs, including provision for spares, test and training equipment, necessary modifications and other support, but excluding missiles, is estimated at \$478m at August 1981 prices and exchange rates.

The acquisition of this ship will enhance our manifest capability to deter aggression in our neighbouring regions in the decades ahead. Air power is fundamental to maritime operations. This can be provided by either, or both, shore-based and sea-borne aircraft. The value of shore-based aircraft to Australia's maritime defence will remain of particular importance for as far ahead as one can see. The carrier will provide the Government of the day with additional options, particularly in areas further from our shores and remote from our military airfields. The importance of this cannot be over-emphasised for a country like Australia surrounded on three sides by vast oceans, and dependent for its very livelihood upon trade carried in ships. There is no single scenario or contingency for which this ship is being acquired. In fact our Defence Force as a whole is not structured to meet one particular threat. There is a wide variety of circumstances which could occur during the lifetime of this ship. Our manifest ability to deter threats from developing into a conflict, and, if necessary, our ability to win out in a conflict if it were to result must remain of prime importance to Government.

The importance of Australia being able to stand on its own feet and fend for itself in regional defence matters has been emphasised and generally accepted for some years now. There is nothing singular about this. It does however involve a heavier burden than earlier policies such as forward defence. The Government freely acknowledges this and believes it is a burden which we must be prepared to pay for in this unsettled world. The decision concerning this ship follows the decision taken in 1980, and announced by me in this House at the time, to acquire a purpose-built ship to replace HMAS *Melbourne*. I also announced that contracts would be let for funded studies of three designs—the Sea Control ship, the Italian *Garibaldi* class helicopter carrier and a variant of the US *Iwo Jima* class. The *Invincible* class design was not selected for further study because of its relatively high cost. However, following a British decision last year to retain only two of three *Invincible* class ships for the Royal Navy, the British Government offered HMS *Invincible* to Australia at a lower, and more than competitive, price.

The early availability of HMS *Invincible* will also allow the refit of HMAS *Melbourne*, scheduled for 1982-83, to be cancelled. The *Melbourne* will be paid off as soon as practicable to save refit and running costs. This will also enable retraining for the new ship's company. The acquisition of a purpose-designed ship provides a basis upon which to retain and further develop a core of skills which could be used in response to an emergency or a contingency; it provides both flexibility for response and a basis for expansion. Later options for expansion would not be confined to the acquisition of purpose-designed carriers, but could include the conversion of merchant ships for limited roles. This was done with good results in World War II.

The acquisition of the *Invincible* should not be seen as merely a replacement for *Melbourne*. The *Invincible* is a very modern ship with a wide range of capabilities quite beyond those now available to us. Firstly, the ship is particularly suited to operating and maintaining large anti-submarine helicopters. Investigations have shown that to counter a submarine threat a combination of weapon platforms is necessary. This combination includes land-based maritime aircraft, ASW helicopters and warships. There is no simple solution. While one or two anti-submarine helicopters can operate from a specialised destroyer, examinations have shown it is more cost-effective to group a number of helicopters together in a larger ship with centralised command and control, maintenance and support facilities.

Secondly, there is a need for a ship capable of planning, commanding and co-ordinating operations by a group of ships and aircraft. *Melbourne* is no longer adequate for this task and other ships lack the means. About 25 personnel will require living and working space for planning and control with extra communications and dedicated command displays. Thirdly the ship has the capacity to carry for a short period a Royal Marine commando—the equivalent of an Australian battalion group. This could be a very useful adjunct to our amphibious ship; HMAS *Tobruk*. Further the ship is capable of operating short take-off and vertical landing aircraft of the Harrier type, although at present it is intended only, I repeat only, to embark ASW helicopters. The ship is fitted with a ski jump to improve the performance of Sea Harrier types, but could not operate conventional carrier aircraft. The decision of whether to acquire this type of aircraft will be made at a later date.

I now turn to some details of the ship, the complement, including the air group, of about 950 men should be at least 300 fewer than the *Melbourne*. The precise number depends on the composition of the air groups. The ship is driven by Olympus gas turbine engines. These are not used elsewhere in the Defence Force but will be serviced in an existing facility for maintaining Olympus industrial engines in Victoria. Unlike steam propulsion systems, a defective gas turbine engine can be changed by ship's staff in about 48 hours. The *Invincible* is fitted with the Link 11 command data exchange system, it is fully compatible with that fitted to our guided-missile destroyers, our P3C Orion aircraft and planned for our guided-missile frigates. The ship is suitable for commanding an Australian task group and has already been proved in this role with United States and other Northern Atlantic Treaty Organisation forces in the Atlantic. A limit of cost of \$50m is to be allowed for RAN modifications. These will include adding 450 tonnes of fuel to increase the ship's operating range to meet our basic requirement. Whilst the living accommodation is of a very high standard and air-conditioned for tropical service, space, weight and power provisions exist to up-rate this accommodation within the modifications limit if tropical trials later this year should show this to be necessary. There will also be other minor changes, for example to communications equipment: to transfer some items from HMAS *Melbourne*; and the removal of unwanted items. The question of whether or not to retain the Sea Dart area air-defence missile system will be the subject of a special study.

I would now like to lay at rest some popular misconceptions about the ship and aircraft carriers in general. The alternative of getting a ship for operating conventional carrier aircraft, such as the FA18, now on order to replace the Mirage, is not an option for us. Modern aircraft of the weight of the FA 18 require a large deck with catapults and arresting gear. There is no ship available and even the smallest practicable would be far beyond our means both to acquire and man. Vulnerability is an oft quoted concern of many. I reject this. A ship of this nature normally operates as part of a group exploiting the principle of concentration of force. Such a group has an integrated and mutually supportive range of offensive and defensive systems. The precise

composition would depend on the perceived threat, but in any case would be very formidable. The ship itself, being purpose-built, has a good degree of system redundancy and water-tight integrity. The design has specifically addressed minimising the effects of battle damage.

It is often asked: is one carrier enough? In present circumstances the answer is yes. Our Defence Force must be properly balanced; one carrier is adequate for lower-level contingencies and, like the rest of our capabilities, would provide a sound basis for expansion. In a diverse maritime threat, for instance, shore-based air would be used where they could be most effective and our one carrier used further afield where its special capabilities were needed. Our Defence Force must be one coherent whole. I entirely reject the concepts sometimes espoused of all submarines or all patrol boats. Each weapon system has advantages and each its limitations.

This statement would be incomplete without mention of Australian industry participation. As the ship is already built, opportunities are naturally restricted. However, the United Kingdom Government has given an offset undertaking amounting to £17.5m. Australian industry will also be given opportunities to participate in ship support work to the value of 25 per cent of orders placed. I wish to assure the House that the costs of the carrier will not be at the expense of our programme for the development of the Defence Force, although it may be necessary to do some rescheduling. Taking all factors into account, this almost new ship—one of a class of three—is a very cost effective method of meeting Australia's defence needs.