



PHOENIX RISING



When all but one of our thirteen Grumman Trackers were either damaged or destroyed in the “H” Hangar Fire in December of 1976, the RAN’s airborne Anti-Submarine Warfare and Surveillance capability was all but wiped out.

But out of the Ashes a new capability was built, with a greater number of more advanced aircraft – and in an astonishingly short time.

The story of how the RAN brought sixteen replacement aircraft to our shores in just four months is a remarkable one, as told by **Jack McCaffrie**.



Front Page: A Tracker S2-G at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. This was not one of the aircraft selected, although its sister-ship was. The above image was taken some years later so its state of disrepair was probably greater, but it gives an impression of what confronted the SST. (JetPhotos.net © Dutch). **Under:** one shot of the devastation that wiped out the Tracker fleet (Navy image).→



In October 1976 the RAN already had on order six "low mileage" S2-E Trackers from a storage facility in the United States, but the fire necessitated an increase to 16 aircraft to be procured as soon as possible.

Shortly before Christmas [1976] Admiral Synnot, the then Chief of Naval Staff, decided to send a team of Tracker specialists to the USA to choose the aircraft. The team was given the rather grandiose title of Replacement Tracker Aircraft Survey and Selection Team – fortunately soon abbreviated to SST – and its brief was to find 16 S2-E model aircraft to restore the Fleet Air Arm's ASW/Surveillance capability.

Commander Rob Partington, Commanding Officer of VS816 (HMAS *Melbourne's* Tracker Squadron) led the SST. Other members were Lieutenant (later Lieutenant Commander) Jack McCaffrie, Chief Petty Officer Doug Sutherland, CPO Lindsay Boyd and PO Louis Triebels, all of VS816; LCDR Bill Newton USN, the Air Engineering Officer of VC851 (Tracker Training Squadron); LEUT Jack Ryan of the Directorate of Naval Aircraft Engineering and Mr Gerry Hewish, Supply Manager Air.

Some skilful staff work within the Directorate of Naval Aviation Policy in Navy Office ensured that the SST was ready to leave for the USA early in January 1977.

The Military Aircraft Storage and Disposition Centre (MASDC)

Take more than 5,000 aircraft of about 75 different types, park them in the desert, build a fence around them, establish an organisation to preserve them or prepare them for flight and sell them, and you have MASDC. This unique 'used plant lot' is located at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Tucson, Arizona and is staffed by US Air Force, USN and civilian personnel. Although primarily a storage facility for military aircraft which

have been taken out of service or are in war reserve, MASDC also prepares hundreds of aircraft for flight every year. Some of the aircraft re-enter service while others are sold abroad.

When the SST arrived at MASDC on 17th January there were more than 300 Trackers of various models in storage. Some of the earlier models (and some of the S2-Es) had been there for more than eight years, while the latest arrivals, S2-Gs, had been there only since September 1976.

There had been some discussion about acquiring 'G' models as replacements instead of the original 'Es' – the airframe of the two versions was essentially the same, but the Gs had a better equipment fit. The idea had been vetoed by the CNS, however, probably because of the expected higher cost.

The SST therefore began its survey by inspecting S2-E aircraft documentation to get an idea of aircraft states, modifications incorporated and equipment fitted. Once this was complete physical inspections of the aircraft began. Before long inconsistencies between documentation and actual aircraft state led the SST to inspect all 29 S2-E offered as the six previously chosen by the RAN had been selected only on inspection of documentation.

Selection criteria for the aircraft had been decided by the Directorate of Naval Engineering and included sound airframes, freedom from corrosion and damage; aircraft build dates to be as recent as possible, and that the aircraft must be capable of entering RAN service with minimum overhaul costs. A condition of the deal with the Americans was that the aircraft had to be brought 'as is where is'. That meant any missing equipment not essential to safety of flight would not be provided, so the SST's task became one of finding suitable airframes suitably equipped.

Every evening a signal was raised to DEFNAV (Defence Navy), outlining the condition of the air-



Top. An airborne shot of H hangar after the fire. Nine aircraft were totally destroyed, three badly damaged and one escaped. Even as the SST started its work in the US, investigations into the cause of the fire continued. **Middle:** Davis-Monthan AF base, showing its location relative to San Diego. **Bottom:** The SST included (left to right) CPO Lindsay Boyd, LEUT (later LCDR) Jack McCaffrie, PO Louis Triebels, CMDR Robin Partington, CPO Doug Sutherland and LEUT Jack Ryan. Absent from the photograph are LCDR Bill Newton USN and Mr Gerry Hewish. (Navy image).→



craft inspected that day and offering a recommendation on each one. After a while – and particularly after the Team had begun to examine aircraft in poorer condition – it became clear there was a fair chance they would not find the required number of 'E' models. They weren't the only ones to figure this out – one morning a signal arrived from the CNS suggesting they were cooking the books so Navy could get 'Gs'. It was an unfair accusation but the Team continued to work through the available S2-E stock, reporting on corrosion (they knew where to find it), other damage or random modification states. By the evening of 21 January all 29 S2-Es had been surveyed and only seven found suitable.

USN authorities also made 51 additional S2-Es available for inspection but 30 were found to be far too old for consideration and seven were earmarked for other countries, leaving just 14 to be surveyed. Examination of these aircraft was completed on 28 January with only two considered suitable. This brought the total number of suitable S2-Es to nine, seven short of the requirement.

By this time the SST's output of paper was approaching the size of a Xavier Herbert novel. Meanwhile, Navy Office had to decide on the next step in view of the lack of suitable S2-Es. While the decision was being made, however, the SST began surveying the stockpile of S2-Gs at MASDC. The Team always considered the 'G' airframes were likely to be in better shape as they had been the ones originally selected by the USN for upgrading. This task was completed on 2 February and resulted in 23 suitable S2-Gs being found.

At this point, the Davis-Monthan US staff started making available lots of small-time spares and manuals which they would never use again, but which would be really useful for the RAN. These were taken by road by Bill Newton and others in several trips, and were stashed in the basement of Phil and Glenys Landon's house in Coronado – next to NAS North Island. Phil was the Tracker exchange officer on VS 41 at the time. Such opportunity was not to be wasted!

The team also received request from Navy Office asking if they could acquire a vertical and horizontal tail assembly and send it back to Australia. The Team Leader managed to sweet-talk the USN staff into taking one off a stock aircraft, and it was also taken by road to North Island. The Australian Embassy would not pay up-front for the hire of the truck, so one of the team paid out of his own pocket and was reimbursed later.

Problems

While the survey was progressing there were many other problems to be addressed, one of the main ones being how to place the replacement aircraft into service as soon as possible. Even before the SST left Australia the RAN had considered sending HMAS Melbourne to San Diego, California, to pick up the aircraft. The carrier's program was tight, as usual, and mid-March seemed the only time it could be in San Diego without seriously disrupting its schedule. This consideration prompted the next question. Could 16, or any lesser number of replacements be prepared and flown to San Diego by mid-March?

The answer is now known but in late January it was less than obvious. Administrative and financial procedures relating to the overseas purchase of defence equipment were intricate and time-consuming, and threatened to mire the project in debate and paperwork. By 2 February there was still no decision on the replacement type, and the chances of having even four aircraft being positioned at San Diego by March seemed remote.

Another significant problem was the ordering of spares needed to prepare the replacement aircraft for flight. Ideally this should have been done 30 days before work was due to begin but the delay in deciding between S2-Es and S2-Gs made it difficult. Fortunately the USAF and USN authorities at MASDC were willing to take risks.

On 4 February the SST received advice from Navy Office that the Government intended buying 16 S2-Gs. This was merely advance notice of the Government's plans, not an authority for work to begin on the aircraft. However, MASDC agreed to make a start, so at 1300 that day the first four of the RAN's replacement Trackers appears on the MASDC washrack.

MASDC's procedure for preparing Trackers for flight included removing the preservative coating, washing the aircraft, de-preserving and power checking the engines and functionally testing the hydraulics and necessary electrical and avionics systems. Teams of three or four men, USAF and civilians, were assigned to each aircraft under a crew chief, whilst specialist hydraulics and avionics sections dealt with those particular systems.

The first four S2-Gs were de-preserved and washed on 7 February. Then the serious part of preparing them for flight began. The members of the SST now became amateur psychologists –

they had to motivate the Americans to meet the deadline of mid-March. Once the crew chiefs became aware of the RAN's special needs and HMAS Melbourne's program no further motivation was needed. As an added incentive the SST leader offered cases of Australian beer to specially deserving crew chiefs.

Getting the Aussie beer proved a little problematic too, but once again persuasion and innovation came to the fore. The SST members had become very well known to the American Airlines counter staff at San Diego and Tucson, and so they warned those in San Diego they would probably be overweight going back one night. They put 14 dozen large cans of beer (from the Wardroom in Melbourne) into three flying clothing bags and fronted up for check-in. The staff member at the counter didn't even record the weight but just grabbed the handles of the top bag to lift it off – and promptly fell on top of it. The Team was amazed they appeared in Tucson untouched, but the beer went down very well on

the big day.

Work progressed slowly at first (or so it seemed) but as the aircraft completed various phases of preparation others were brought from the desert to replace them. The only major problem in the early stages was the requirement for a double engine change on one aircraft. Apart from situations such as this the SST had great difficulty in assessing the rate of progress of individual aircraft because as times 12 aircraft were being worked on simultaneously.

Officially the aircraft were to be bought 'as is', but the USN did allow the maintainers to do quite a bit of scrounging for electrical gear – generators in particular – to get the selected aircraft as common as possible. This was done at local level and not everyone was aware of the arrangement – the RAN team were apprehended by Security one day as they were stripping an unsuspecting aircraft.

Probably the best indication of progress was



Trackers being hoisted aboard HMAS Melbourne. The exercise only took two hours, unlike the frantic activity to select, prepare and deliver them to San Diego. (Image via Jack McCaffrie).✈

completion of work on the first aircraft on 18 February. The SST was unable to fly the aircraft, however, because the administrative processes were unable to keep pace with the MASDC. The way was cleared on 23 February when it became known that the Government's decision to buy S2-Gs would be formally announced the following day (25 February in Australia).

Test and Ferry Flying

At 1500 on 23 February S2-G 152809 lumbered into the air just like any other Tracker, and, to the delight of the suspicious crew, saw the test flight without incident. On the next day the second aircraft was successfully test flown and 152809 was uneventfully ferried to the Naval Air Station at North Island, San Diego. Well – almost uneventfully – the temperature was below freezing at 8,000 ft and the heater refused to work. Charts wrapped around the legs were no answer to the cold!

From then on the SST aircrew spent almost every day test flying, ferrying to San Diego and returning to Tucson. This made for long but satisfying

days, particularly as the line-up of S2-Gs at North Island grew. The shuttle service grew to two flights a day at one stage and this caused considerable puzzlement to the American Airlines staff at San Diego. No sane person, they reasoned, would fly to Tucson, then reappear the same day wanting to go to Tucson again.

The other SST members were busy too, helping MASDC personnel with aircraft preparation and most importantly, arranging the procurement of vital publications and ground support equipment.

Below: The aircraft were flown from Davis-Monthan to the Naval Air Station at San Diego, where they waited patiently in a growing line for the arrival of HMAS Melbourne. Nobody had expected that all 16 aircraft would be ready by the 12th of March when the ship docked, but by 1730 on that day the 15th Tracker had landed at the Air Station, and the last was flown in 36 hours later. It was then a simple matter of towing the aircraft to the quayside and loading them aboard. (Navy image).➔



As work progressed and more and more aircraft were flown even the most conservative individuals at MASDC began to concede the possibility of having all 16 S2-Gs at San Diego by mid-March. But to add to the challenge the runway at Davis-Monthan closed during the first weekend in March. This could have cost three days but on the Friday before ferrying an aircraft to San Diego, the SST test flew two aircraft and landed them at Tucson International Airport. The Air National Guard component there was only too happy to make its facilities available for the weekend ferries. On 6 March the eighth S2-G was added to the already quite impressive row of aircraft on the North Island transit line.

HMAS Melbourne arrived in San Diego on 12 March and sent two Tracker crews to help with ferrying. That afternoon saw the first three-plane Tracker formation in the RAN for some time – and the first beat up of Davis-Monthan Air Force base for some time. By 1730 after yet another uneventful ferry there were 15 S2-Gs at San Diego.

So much had happened so quickly that the SST was not really surprised to find the last aircraft ready to fly at 0900 on 14 March. Yet again the test flight was successful and signified the end of a period of fever pitch activity at MASDC. The fact that all 16 S2-Gs had been prepared and flown successfully in a matter of five weeks is proof of the quality of MASDC's work and the organisation's desire to do a good job. In a presentation ceremony at MASDC on the afternoon of 1 March, the Australia Naval Attache in Washington, Commodore R.G. Loosli, acknowledged the debt

Below. Melbourne departing San Diego. Aside from our aircraft she was also carrying USN airframes in protective covering (a Sea King, two Seasprites, a Sea Knight and a Tracker) for delivery to Oahu as a favour. The photo was taken on the afternoon of 16 Mar 77 from Wessex 823 flown by Phil Pinniger and crewed by LEUT Paul Folkes and PO Blue Quinn. Once in Hawaii the ship recovered half of HS817 Squadron (Sea Kings) who had been left behind to make room. (Image via Paul Folkes).➔



which the RAN owed MASDC and other organisations and individuals in the USAF and USN. At 1615 on 16 March S2-G 153580 left Davis-Monthan and three hours later completed the line up at North Island.

On the following morning all aircraft were towed to the wharf (North Island airfield is nearby) loaded by crane onto *Melbourne's* flight deck in a little over two hours. Together with the aircraft of the Carrier Air Group they filled the hangar deck and the flight deck aft of the forward lift. Melbourne looked like a carrier should!

The Passage To Australia

As soon as the aircraft were lashed down on board, a well planned maintenance program began. Ship and Squadron personnel began the huge task of preparing RAN documentation for the aircraft, inventories of equipment, list of individual aircraft defects, and of course defect rectification. Additionally the aircraft were sprayed with a light preservative oil to lessen the damaging effects of salt spray on the passage home.

During the three week passage routine maintenance and defect rectification were carried out to prepare the aircraft for their flights to Hawker de Havilland's Bankstown facility and the Naval Air Station Nowra. The S2-Gs in best condition were to enter squadron service immediately while the other 11 were to be flown to Bankstown for Progressive Aircraft Work (PAR) prior to entering squadron service.

Arrangements for flying the aircraft off the carrier were complicated by the dearth of 'current' Tracker aircrew. Only one S2-E had been flying since the fire and that had been given to VS816 so that some measure of carrier operating proficiency could be maintained. This resulted in six crews being available to fly the S2-Gs ashore.

Early on the morning of 5 April, just four months after the fire, 11 S2-Gs were catapulted from HMAS *Melbourne* in two waves for the short flight to Bankstown. Before the last had landed, work had begun on the first and so carried on the sense of urgency which had marked the project from the beginning. On the following day the last five aircraft were launched to the Naval Air Station, Nowra, to enter service with VC851, so ending a remarkable phase of the RAN's Replacement Tracker Project.

The best planned projects often have difficulty in meeting targets on time: this project wasn't planned – it simply emerged from a disaster. So the accomplishment of so much so quickly reflects very highly on many organisations and individuals. It also showed how quickly the Australian and US Governments could work together, and how the RAN and the USN co-operated to make the project a success. The Fleet Air Arm owes a huge debt of gratitude to the USN and USAF, and particularly MASDC, without whose absolute dedication and co-operation there would never have been 16 S2-Gs in Australia by March of 1977.

Clockwise, from bottom left: [1] One of the first jobs on landing at Nowra was to give the five 'new' Trackers a wash. Note they are still bearing some of their American markings.

[2] An excerpt from HMAS Melbourne's Record of Proceedings records how the Trackers were disembarked.

[3] The first PAR aircraft to be delivered back to Nowra, on 03 August 1977. Left to right: CPOATC 'Paddy' O'Rourke, SBLT Doug Jervis SBLT Keith Smith and LEUT Trevor Peck. (Navy News image).

[4] On a beautiful Autumn morning Tracker 152812 arrives at Bankstown to a small crowd, ready to start work on the aircraft. Hawker de Havilland did an amazing job – when the PAR aircraft arrived back at Nowra they looked almost like new aircraft. →

Postscript

All members of the SST had expected to return to Australia by air – we had return tickets. To save money, however, all but CMDR Partington, who was needed back in Canberra for the Carrier Project, returned in the Melbourne. This was not well received in the team, primarily because several were expecting to depart on the Jubilee Cruise to the UK shortly after returning and had expected the return air trip to provided a little more family time. The unhappiness was compounded by the fact that, unsurprisingly, we had no summer uniforms and the Supply Officer refused to issue a few sets of loan clothing to team members without clearance from Navy Office.

Another amusing episode involved the author. Soon after sailing from San Diego one of the Wardroom Leading Stewards asked me if I wasn't a LCDR now. I had no idea what he was on about. He disappeared and returned soon afterwards with a signal indicating that I had been promoted three weeks before. So, I needed more than short whites...and soon! →

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proximity of Coffs Harbour until 1630K that afternoon. One A4G remained unserviceable onboard on departure from the area.

5. After an overnight coastal passage MELBOURNE was positioned at 0600K on Tuesday 5th northeast of Sydney ready to execute the disembarkation plan for 11 Tracker aircraft to Hawker de Havilland at Bankstown. The closure of Bankstown airport by fog caused the first launch of six aircraft to be delayed by 70 minutes. After recovering aircrew from Bankstown by helicopter the second launch of five aircraft completed at 0908K. Thereafter MELBOURNE entered harbour to berth at the Fitting Out Wharf, Garden Island, at 1020K to be welcomed by a large number of Ship's Company families and friends.

6. With some 800 members of Ship's Company families embarked, MELBOURNE cast off at 1000K on Wednesday 6th and proceeded out of harbour. Once clear to the east of Sydney four S2G aircraft and the previously unserviceable A4G were landed to NAS Nowra at 1130K. A fifth S2G which suffered a wing locking problem was finally launched at 1246K, thus marking the completion of the ferry task. After an impressive aerial display by VF805 and VS816 for the benefit of embarked families MELBOURNE returned to harbour to berth at the Fitting Out Wharf at 1500K.

