Carriers for the Commonwealth

By RADM James Goldrick, AO CSC RAN (Ret'd)

By war's end the value of organic Naval Air Power had been proven and any modern fleet was built around a Carrier force. Britain was keen to see her Dominions equipped with Carriers and Australia was enthusiastic, for the right price. After a couple of years of haggling a deal was struck and the Government committed to two Light Fleet Carriers and the aircraft to equip them.

The long story of the creation of an Australian carrier force began in early 1944 when the crisis of the maritime war past, the Commonwealth navies were beginning to look to their future in the postwar world. Ironically, the services were well aware that there remained enormous and highly complex problems to face in the process of ending the war.

For the Royal Navy, such difficulties could be summarised in one word: manpower. There were too many ships, particularly escorts and amphibious units, for the pool of trained personnel to man efficiently, yet the Battle of the Atlantic, the impending invasion of Europe, the continuing war in the Mediterranean and the Far East conflict all made their demands. So critical was the situation that in the first months of 1944 several useful but elderly and manpower-intensive units were paid off into reserve[1] while a number of large ships under refit or repair were accorded a low priority and left in dockyard hands.[2] The problem was all the more acute because 1944 saw a stream of new ships joining from builders, fruits of the war emergency programmes, which were more sophisticated and took more skilled personnel than their predecessors.

Conversely, the Royal Australian Navy was realising itself to be in a poor way as regards ships, although there was no shortage (in 1944 terms) of officers or ratings. Having entered the war with 6 cruisers and 5 destroyers, as well as smaller units, there were in 1944 only 4 cruisers – one at least of which was old and very small – and 10 destroyers, 6 of which were in fact if not name British units with Australian crews. Within the next year, this small force could look forward to the addition of a single Tribal class destroyer.[3]

About the Author

James Goldrick AO, CSC joined the Royal Australian Navy as a 15 year old Cadet-Midshipman in 1974 and retired in 2012 as a two-star Rear Admiral.

He was a graduate of the RAN College, the Harvard Business School Advanced Management Program, the University of NSW (BA) and the University of New England (Master of Letters), and a Doctor of Letters honoris causa of UNSW. He saw extensive sea service with the RAN, RN and USN. He commanded HMA Ships *Cessnock* and *Sydney* (twice), the RAN task group and the multinational maritime interception force in the Persian Gulf (2002) and the Australian Defence Force Academy (2003-2006). As a Rear Admiral, he led Australia's Border Protection Command (2006-2008) and then commanded the Australian Defence College (2008-2011). August 2011 to March 2012 saw him acting in command of ADFA again. He was a Visiting Fellow of the Sea Power Centre-Australia, a Non-Resident Fellow of the Lowy Institute for International Policy, an Adjunct Professor of UNSW at ADFA and a Professorial Fellow of the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security at the University of Wollongong.

RADM Goldrick died in Canberra in March 2023 after a brief battle with cancer. He was only 64.

There were numerous frigates and minesweepers in service, with more on the way, but these were not the type of ships on which to base a postwar fleet, let alone contribute in a politically significant fashion to the war against Japan. To the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board (ACNB) a carrier task group with accompanying cruisers and destroyers seemed the logical way ahead and the means by which Australia could assist in Commonwealth defence in the widest sense while maintaining an independent naval capability.

It was thus inevitable that the ACNB should be seeking to acquire new cruisers and one or more carriers. Given the continuing links of Australia with Britain, and particularly, of the RAN with the RN, it was equally inevitable that such ships should come from Britain.

It should be explained at this point that the relationship of the ACNB with the British Admiralty was a curious one, which to a large extent ignored national boundaries and considerations. A number of RAN ships were under Admiralty operational control for the duration of the war, while many British ships carried Australians on exchange or on loan. In return, the Royal Navy provided many officers and ratings to assist the RAN, not least among whom was the officer who served as First Naval Member of the ACNB and Chief of Naval Staff. Although such personnel did their best to take an Australian line, their presence, the amount of time which RAN personnel spent under training and at sea with the Royal Navy and the fact that the RAN was consciously and almost wholly modelled upon the British service meant that the relationship between the navies was very close. In particular, it meant that negotiations could be conducted in the breast between the two naval staffs to lay the groundwork on matters which were properly the decision of the Cabinet of each government.

The existence of this private channel of communication was to cause the Royal Australian Navy much grief in the short term because it was in at least partial contravention of the Australian Government's policy that exchanges should be conducted only through established inter-government means.

The organisation of the Australian administration of the war was a critical element. The place of the Defence Department was central and Sir Paul Hasluck has described it as "in some respects the supreme component of the machinery for the higher direction of the war". [4]

John Curtin as Prime Minister was also the Minister for Defence; the War Cabinet and the Advisory War Council's secretariats were provided by the Department of Defence, while the higher defence committees, notably the Chiefs of Staff Committee, were included within it. It is particularly important to note that, although there were separate departments for each fighting service and that these had access to the War Cabinet for questions directly concerning their own services, the Department of Defence was responsible for co-ordination of their activities, notably in the matter of what is now termed "force development".

On 18 January 1944 the Prime Minister directed the Defence Committee, which consisted of the Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of the Department, Sir Frederick Shedden, to commence planning for the size and constitution of the armed forces after the war. This was followed a month afterwards by an instruction to review the overall war effort of the services.

Matters in the short and long term were not going to be easy. Manpower requirements had already been cut to meet rural-industrial requirements and the Air Force and Army were pressing hard to maintain and even increase force levels for the proposed invasion of Japan. The RAN, whether it realised it or not, was in a particularly uneasy position because the Australian government had asked the Royal Navy in October 1943 for the gradual return to Australia of 3,000 personnel serving on loan. Perhaps understandably, the British had been dragging their feet and no formal answer had yet been received in Australia. For its part, it does not appear that the RAN made these Australian manpower problems clear to the Royal Navy when negotiations for the transfer of ships "commenced in a quiet unofficial way" at the beginning of 1944.[5]

Apart from the pressing manpower shortage in Britain, what the naval staffs saw as the key to agreement was that the decision to send a British fleet to the Pacific in the near future would allow the Admiralty to satisfy the requirement of the Australian government – understandable in the wake of the fall of Singapore – that major units manned by the Australians should be employed against Japan, even if they were to remain under Admiralty control. The light fleet carriers and modern light cruisers which the RAN was interested in were in any case allocated to the nascent British Pacific Fleet.

In these circumstances the British were prepared to offer a light fleet carrier and two newly built Tiger class cruisers to the Royal Australian Navy. They would be transferred on loan, but would be manned and administered as Australian ships.

Admiral Sir Guy Royle (pictured below left), First Naval Member of the ACNB and Chief of Naval Staff, announced the proposal for transferring these ships at a meeting of the Advisory War Council on 21 March 1944. He had given no-one at the meeting prior warning of the scheme. Royle spoke further on the matter to a meeting of the Defence Committee later the same day. He made much of the dominant role of naval forces in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans and was able to cite not only the impending arrival of the British Pacific Fleet but also General Douglas MacArthur's standing demand for more warships to assist his South-West Pacific campaigns.

Royle's argument enlarged on the theme of increasing naval requirements with the establishment of advanced bases nearer Japan and consequent longer lines of communication. Royle said that he believed that the manpower-starved Royal Navy would release a carrier, two cruisers and a flotilla of destroyers for service in the RAN. He was able to cite the example of the Canadians, who had received two escort carriers, several destroyers and the promise of a pair of cruisers in the previous 12 months, the latter to be outright gifts.[6]

As Curtin was about to visit the United Kingdom, the timing of Royle's move is obvious but the Prime Minister insisted that the proposal should be treated in the context of the overall review of the requirements of the three services, although he had no doubt that there was merit in the idea.

It has to be said that Royle probably lost his campaign by the manner he began it. He caused offence at least to Sir Frederick Shedden and probably to the other Chiefs of Staff by, as Shedden put it, "making a break ahead." [7] Shedden told Curtin that he agreed that such a decision could only be made in the context of other activities. The Chiefs of Staff were already having difficulties agreeing about force levels and it is clear that Shedden not only expected to have to make a judgment of Solomon, he believed it his duty to do so. He told the Prime Minister:

It has been the traditional attitude of successive generations of Chiefs of Staff for them to fail to agree to any adjustments in the strength of the Forces where they result in reductions of the strength of their own particular Service. This is, of course, understandable. The differences can only be resolved by the Minister for Defence, after considering the advice of the Permanent Head of his Department.[8]

Shedden's advice had its desired effect. Royle was brought back into line with a reminder to follow the proper channels in future. But there was a hint of more. Shedden, whose personal relations with the RAN had

***Left**: Admiral Sir Guy Royle (left) , First Naval member of the Australian Naval Commonwealth Board and Chief of Naval Staff.*

***Right**. Prime Minister Curtin (right) with Sir Fredrick Shedden, Secretary of the Department of Defence. It was said of him "…the Prime Minister may have driven the [Defence] Department, but the engine was the Secretary, Shedden. A meticulous, indefatigable man, with a huge capacity for work, Shedden was a stickler for correctness and accuracy".*

never been ideal, had once been in the way of a navalist, probably due to the influence of the historian and strategist Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond during his year at the Imperial Defence College.[9] But he pointed out to the Prime Minister that the RAAF would be the best service to develop after the war. It is hard to believe that this change of attitude was motivated so much by technological developments (which could, in any case, be said to have done as much for sea-borne as shore based air power) as the trauma of the fall of Singapore and the failure of the British Empire's system of co-operative defence upon which the RAN was still very much founded.

Shortly afterwards, Shedden summarised his views on Australian defence in a paper for the War Cabinet. Although he accepted the need for co-operative naval power, he was far more interested in "Local Defence" and noted that "the aeroplane is a weapon which can compensate for the deficiency in manpower to defend the island Commonwealth and the approaches to it".[10] Royle did his best to get Shedden on side and asked Curtin that he keep an open mind on the subject, perhaps with a view to raising it in London. It seems that Curtin (who had "promised" Shedden that he would not commit himself to the proposal) at least agreed to this. [11]

Curtin left Australia on 5 April 1944, accompanied by Shedden and General Sir Thomas Blamey. It was a team under-represented on the naval side, as Admiral Sir Ragnar Colvin, former First Naval Member and currently RAN Adviser in London, commented: TB [Blamey] seems to me to be rather dangerous and is no friend of the RAN – I think that he aspires to command all three services and Curtin, I think, leans on him a great deal." [12]

In the Prime Minister's absence, the First Naval Member and the Minister for the Navy, Norman Makin, continued to press the RAN's case, particularly in having the navy's allocation of manpower, which was limited to 150 a month to cover wastage, increased. Between 4,000 and 5,000 men would be needed to man the new ships. Considering that the army were getting 1,475 and the RAAF 3,375 a month the navy had a point.[13] The War Cabinet allowed a limited increase to the RAN, with approval to recruit 1,600 men by the end of 1944. This had to be subject to Curtin's approval, which was eventually given, despite an attempt by the army to have Blarney intercede. [14]

Royle continued to battle for the transfer scheme, throwing up every argument he could find, including those of the need for an RAN presence in the invasion of Japan, the requirements of the postwar Navy and the morale of the service.[15] Without Curtin and Shedden, the War Cabinet seems to have been more sympathetic, taking note of the advantages inherent in the RAN receiving the free gift of modern ships with significant capabilities.[16]

In London, Curtin went into negotiation with Prime Minister Churchill and the Admiralty's First Sea Lord, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew Cunningham. The major problem was manpower. Although it could promise that it would move all Australian-manned ships to the Pacific as soon as possible, the Admiralty was in no position to lose the 3,400 RAN personnel serving on loan. By the end of 1945, some 675,000 personnel would be in Australia. Over 100,000 of these would be involved in base support operations alone. The British were hoping that Australia could provide at least 17,000 men in this area. [17]

Such grandiose figures were shortly to be reduced as the Japanese capacity for resistance diminished throughout 1944, but they must have given Curtin pause for thought in view of the shortages already faced by Australia.

Admiral Cunningham offered Curtin the light carrier Venerable, which was scheduled to commission at the end of 1944, and two new 6-inch gun cruisers, the Defence and Blake, which were to be completed in September-October1945. The RN had already done some research on the manning issue; since the RAN had no organised aircraft maintenance and handling personnel they would be provided by the RN, drawn where possible from Australians already serving in the RN Fleet Air Arm.[18]

Curtin indicated that he would think about it. But he was greatly annoyed to discover that Royle was in direct communication with the Admiralty over the matter and that the latter knew of the War Cabinet's most recent meetings and their outcome – notably that the War Cabinet had favoured Royle's scheme in Curtin's absence. The Prime Minister directed Francis Forde, acting in his absence from Australia, to prevent further breaches of the instruction that communications on policy should be government to government. Royle had again erred in his tactics. [19]

But the British were clearly keen to push the proposal as far as possible. On 27 May Churchill wrote personally to Curtin, offering, should Australia wish to man any RN units, a light fleet carrier of the Colossus class and two cruisers of the Tiger class. [20]

Curtin would not move further than returning the proposal to the Defence Committee for review, along with all the military aspects of the war effort. The naval staff did its best to press the case and began to develop the theme of the carrier's place in postwar navies. The key phrase was "strategical ubiquity" and the idea was that the carrier was a mobile air base, capable of providing fighter protection for naval forces, anti-submarine operations and anti-ship and anti-shore striking power.

The Defence Committee accepted the paper submitted by the ACNB and agreed that two carriers with a Fleet Air Arm organisation were the desirable peacetime force for the RAN: "provision should be made for one carrier and…consideration should be given to the provision of a second carrier."[21]

Curtin continued to defer the scheme. He was absolutely convinced that it and other proposals which required extensive reallocation of manpower had to wait until the entire manpower situation and the general war effort could be reviewed in total This could not happen until the "Review of the Industrial War Effort" had been completed by the Production Executive. Exclusive of arrangements for British forces – and Curtin had committed Australia to "complete co-operation" in providing facilities for the British Pacific Fleet – the country's manpower shortage for 1944-45 was just under 50,000.[22]

This forced a further review of manpower, with acute pressure coming on the services to reduce their requirements by 40,000. Royle fought very hard for the RAN. He had a strong case, since there were only three front-line cruisers in commission in 1945 as opposed to five in 1939. The RAN had more personnel than in 1939 but it was by any measure less capable as a fighting force.

In retrospect, however, Royle's arguments assumed too much about naval forces and had the element of "we want cruisers because we've always had cruisers" about them. There was little strategic analysis and less attention to the likely postwar situation. [23] For their part, the Army and the RAAF struck back with their need to represent Australia in the final joint military effort against Japan, the army threatening the loss of one of the six operational military divisions.

As presiding judge, Shedden took this point and the implications which it carried for the international perception of Australia's war effort. The navy had to satisfy itself with an increase to 600 entered a month, 200 of whom were to be available for manning the new ships. That the RAN got so many was perhaps due, notwithstanding MacArthur's insistence that he could employ all Australians available, to a popular perception that the army and RAAF were not very active. In Royle's words: "AIF Divisions were not being used, and…there was a huge surplus of air crew in the country who were complaining of their inactivity'.[24]

Furthermore, the RAN was now the centre of more public attention than it had enjoyed for several years. The Australian Squadron had done very well in the Philippines campaign. The cruiser Australia had with-

stood no less than five Kamikaze attacks and suffered heavy casualties. On 10 February 1945, major units of the British Pacific Fleet arrived in Sydney to an enormous welcome.

That the War Cabinet decided to reopen negotiations on 9 February can hardly be coincidence, particularly as Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser, the C-in-C British Pacific Fleet, was already in Australia and proving a "resounding personal success". [25] Royle was a little bitter when he wrote to the Naval Liaison Officer in London that the government had "wasted a whole year trying to make up their minds".[26]

Curtin finally cabled to Churchill on 14 February 1945, asking for the transfer of a carrier and one or two cruisers without payment. It is significant that the Australian Prime Minister mentioned the need to establish a foundation for the postwar navy, as well as the more time honoured argument of the need for Australia to be fully represented in the final operations against Japan. Royle had made his point. [27]

But by now the position in Britain had changed. It was clear to all concerned – and indeed viewed as highly desirable – that the new ships were to be transferred as much as the basis of the postwar RAN as for war purposes. In which case, who was to pay for them?

The fact was that the British government now felt that Australia was doing very well out of the war. The Chancellor of the Exchequer noted that: "Australia's Sterling balance at the end of March 1945 was 150 millions. This compares with a pre-war average of 35 millions."[28]

Comparing the £10 million cost of the 10 ships going to Canada with the £9 million of the Australian units, the Chancellor went on to say: "The essential difference between the Canadian and the Australian position is that Canada has given us substantial assistance by way of Mutual Aid and has been extremely forthcoming in meeting the full costs of her forces in the field under our operational control. Australia has dealt with us on a cash basis throughout and has certainly not overpaid in respect of the cost of equipment and maintenance of her forces In view of the generosity with which Canada has approached financial questions with us, it would be quite inappropriate to drive any sort of hard bargain…But the same could hardly be said of Australia ." Even the Canadians did not at first get their light fleet carriers free. Although the destroyers lent to the RCN had already followed the cruisers in being transferred as outright gifts, the carriers were to be loans, with the option of later purchase.[29]

The sticking point was that the Australian government was attempting to charge Britain for the greater part of the facilities being provided in Australia for the British Pacific Fleet. As Royle wrote in May 1945, the figure was considerable, approaching £26 million, although the British were more concerned with the £14 million being expended upon works.[30] Curtin had even been so tactless as to mention the point in his telegram to Churchill of 14 February. Churchill was, however, at first inclined to take a soft approach, noting that: "My own inclination would be to give the ships free. Perhaps we should get more consideration that way than by a money payment. I am sure that our friends in Australia will always see that this kind of action by the mother country was not forgotten." [31]

The British War Cabinet took a less sanguine view when it met on 30 April with the German surrender imminent. The ships were to be paid for, if not directly then in exchange for work on the facilities for the British Pacific Fleet.[32]

The naval staffs and the Liaison Officer in London had been doing their best to speed matters along, but the British decision would be a difficult one to manage. Royle declared on 23 May: "I have an uneasy feeling that if the Australian Government could see an easy way out without loss of face, they would welcome it". [33]

The British War Cabinet's decision was passed on to Australia by a telegram from the Dominions Office on 5 May.[34] All concerned had attempted to sweeten the pill, especially in the suggested offset against the facilities for the fleet, and a separate message was sent to Vice Admiral Daniel, Vice Admiral (Q) for the BPF and responsible for support of the force, to warn him of what was going on.[35] The telegram included the information that Ocean, a Colossus class carrier, was available in July 1945, but that construction of the Tiger class cruisers had fallen behind. Modernised Town or Colony class cruisers would have to be offered in the interim. They were, in any case, rather more modern than anything the RAN had.

Gently phrased as this message was, it was not well received in Australia. Despite Royle's attempts to convince the Australian War Cabinet, feeling was against the expenditure on ships built outside Australia. The Australian Labor Party had always felt that cruisers, in particular, could very well be built at home.

Royle may have over-reached himself in his campaign. Shedden accused the First Naval Member of dissembling over the dispatch of the damaged cruiser Australia to refit in a British port. This would, of course, mean that the majority of her crew would be available to man the new ships.[36][37] The presence of Australia and her crew in Britain would make the convenient excuse for refusing the ships awkwardly transparent.

But Royle was not dismayed and he enlisted the services of Fraser. The two visited the dying Curtin and explained their concern for the postwar RAN and the uncertainty felt by the navy's people about their future. They heard the Prime Minister declare that he thought that the postwar navy should be enlarged.

Nevertheless, on 16 June 1945, the Acting Prime Minister finally sent a reply to Churchill, declaring that the manpower situation meant that the RAN could not man the carrier and the two cruisers until after the end of the war.[38]

Negotiations within the War Cabinet had not been simple. Makin suggested that the purchase of the carrier be made but that money for new British-built cruisers should not take priority over the destroyer building program in Australia. He felt that the British might be willing to offer cruisers after the war for a reduced price – a reasonable suggestion. Treasury was absolutely opposed to any cash payments, manpower was a major issue and, despite the age of the cruisers already in service, Cabinet believed that there were several years left in them yet. The Advisory War Council and the Cabinet were agreed that the proposal should be deferred until after the war's end. [39]

The British did not believe the manpower argument and an Admiralty minute commented waspishly: "Even if Australia had taken over manning of Ocean, we should have had to provide all the Air Maintenance Ratings, about 350 men". [40]

The British decision was to let matters rest, Cunningham closing the Admiralty's discussions with the remark, "in my opinion the Australian Govt have shown themselves most unreasonable".[41] Fortunately, and perhaps due to Makin's and Royle's efforts, the Australian government had left its options open in the declaration that postwar policy was under review but that Australia: "would be glad to have an opportunity of raising the matter again when further progress has been made in the formation of post war defence policy".[42]

Despite the First Sea Lord's irritation, the British reply was judicious, reflecting the Admiralty's desire to create an RAN carrier force: "No doubt the Defence Committee in considering the nature, strength and organisation of post war defence forces will take into consideration the prominent part which aircraft carriers play in the modern balanced Fleet, especially in the waters of the Pacific Ocean".[43]

It was a setback, but more temporary than must have appeared to the RAN. Royle was relieved as First Naval Member by Admiral Sir Louis Hamilton later in 1945. Before he went out to Australia, Hamilton was briefed on the subject of the carriers in the Admiralty and told the RAN Liaison Officer that he was "…determined to revive the matter of light fleet carriers, of which he was convinced the RAN needed at least two". [44]

Determined Hamilton was, for a study by Lieu-

ant Commander V.A.T. Smith DSC, RAN was soon in hand to determine the composition of a naval air arm and the naval staff also embarked on the preparation of a long-range postwar naval plan, the outline of which was completed in November 1945. In retrospect, this was far too ambitious, including no less than 3 light carriers, 6 cruisers, 32 destroyers and 50 escorts, with the presumption that some 50% would be operational, with the remainder in refit or reserve.[45] Nevertheless, some of the goals were practicable in the postwar environment.

The government had commissioned a study of the postwar defence forces from the Joint Planning Committee which worked at Chiefs of Staff level in conjunction with the secretary. The JPC had some difficulty ascertaining how much money was likely to be available for defence. In consequence, they were unsure of the force levels they proposed. The Navy, however, was successful in including the requirement that its force be "A balanced Task Force, including aircraft carriers, supported by a fleet train, as a contribution to Empire Security. [46]

Hamilton explained the situation:

Before Royle left COS put in a paper which outlined in broad terms the post-war focus for the three Services and asked how much money the Government would put up. The Government replied that the COS were to put up their ideas in an agreed paper, then the Government would think about the money. My post-war force has been in print for nearly two months, but Army and RAAF cannot make up their minds, so there the matter rests.[47]

If the Navy were being over-ambitious, matters were even worse in the other services. The Air Member for Personnel later complained that the Chief of the Air Staff "started with a recommendation for an air force of around 72,000, later stepping down and changing this figure progressively to 59,000, 34,000 and 29,000, and vacillated so often that neither I nor anyone else was able to guess on what figure we should plan and operate".[48]

It has to be said that the RAN would have been in a poor tactical position without what must have been the tacit support of Shedden. Hamilton summed up his method very early: "I have made a start with Shedden and hope that I shall be able to work him round into an ally. My method of approach is quite simple – simply to feed out of his hand ! If by so doing, we may get the requisite Naval Air Branch, all is well".[49]

The First Naval Member also did some work on the new Prime Minister, Chifley, noting that Australia could not expect Britain to carry the same relative burden of defence as had been the case in 1939 and that a two-carrier force was capable of both defending itself and acting as an independent unit. "He hoisted in the argument".[50]

Hamilton continued to keep in private contact with the Admiralty, ironically having to fight off a still-dissatisfied First Sea Lord: "Andrew Cunningham wrote and suggested it might be a good thing to tell the Australians where they got off. I demurred at the time." [51]

By April 1946, Hamilton's efforts were rewarded. He was given approval to initiate planning with the Admiralty provided that no formal financial commitments were made. The other question which was deferred for decision was the objection raised by the Chief of the Air Staff to a naval manned air branch. Air Vice Marshal Jones was determined to fight the idea.[52]

Much of the groundwork for the transfer of ships on special conditions had already been laid by the RAN Liaison Officer in his discussions with members of the British naval staff. Cunningham had originally suggested that the RAN might care to take over some Battle class destroyers which were surplus to requirements for the cost of completing them, but the Liaison Officer was quick to explain Australia's desire to build its own destroyers. He pointed out, however, that the RAN was still interested in carriers and an offer of cheap ships might turn the scale.

Matters were confused by a serious suggestion that the RAN man a British carrier to bring war brides out from England. The Australian government was temporarily charmed by the idea but was disillusioned when the navy pointed out that the entire operational Australian Squadron would have to be paid off to man such a ship, whether or not she was suitable for such a cargo.[53]

Apart from heavy carriers, there were no fewer than 10 light fleet carriers of the Majestic and larger Hermes classes in various stages of construction or suspension. The British were well aware that so many ships could never be operated in peacetime by the Royal Navy but that they could be immensely useful in Commonwealth hands.[54] The cost of completing the ships, or even of maintaining them in suspended reserve, were such that the British Treasury would not object to a generous arrangement. In September, the Admiralty informed the ACNB:

The building cost of a Majestic class carrier is approximately £2,750,000 Sterling. In order to assist the RAN in establishing a naval air arm, to which great importance is attached, the Admiralty is prepared to bear half the cost of the carriers transferred to Australia, thus reducing the initial capital cost to the Commonwealth, if two carriers were transferred, by approximately £2,750,000 Sterling.[55]

The Australian government was at first unwilling to move until all the financial implications inherent in a naval air arm had been worked out, but by the middle of 1947 Hamilton had finally secured provisional acceptance of the two-carrier scheme, which was to be a fundamental part of the government's new Five Year Defence Plan. He had also, over protests, managed to settle the question as to whether the air component should be RAN or RAAF. The Minister for Air insisted that the exclusion of the RAAF was "not in the best interests of defence"[56] but, "…the Prime Minister summed up shortly and the matter was decided in favour of the navy without any reservations."[57] The navy's air arm would be in naval uniform, under naval control and with naval shore stations and facilities.

With the two carriers at half price at £2,750,000 Sterling and two outfits of armament and stores at £450,000 each, the total appropriation would be £3,650,000. The Admiralty and the ACNB could congratulate themselves on having devised an economical and workable scheme.

Matters, however, soon became more complicated. The difficulty was that money was limited and the government had accepted the naval air proposals as part of the Five Year Plan very much on the basis that there would be no costs greater than those described. The Admiralty made a major error in failing to appreciate the importance of every pound to the Australians. This was understandable, in view of the Royal Navy's much larger budget, but it was surprising because Australian financial problems had been the repeated cause of difficulties in earlier years.

By September 1947 the Admiralty was admitting that the carriers would cost £3million. To make matters worse, there also entered the question of modernisation, which would be required "within three years" and which would cost in the region of £500,000 for each ship. Even with such work, after 1955 "their operational capability will be limited if future aircraft have increased weight".[58]

Hamilton found himself in trouble. As he explained to the First Sea Lord in November 1947, he had worked out his original estimates as £15.75 million per year for five years, but had been allowed £15 million as the upper limit, a limit the Prime Minister would not alter. The latter had given the First Naval Member the impression that he believed that Hamilton, "and/or the Admiralty had led him up the garden path by underestimating the costs."[59]

Hamilton could see no other way for the establishment of an Australian naval air arm to proceed than for the Admiralty to make a further gesture. The increases in costs involved a great deal of money in Australian terms and the news of the operational limitations likely for the Majestic class had not been well received in Canberra. Hamilton remarked:

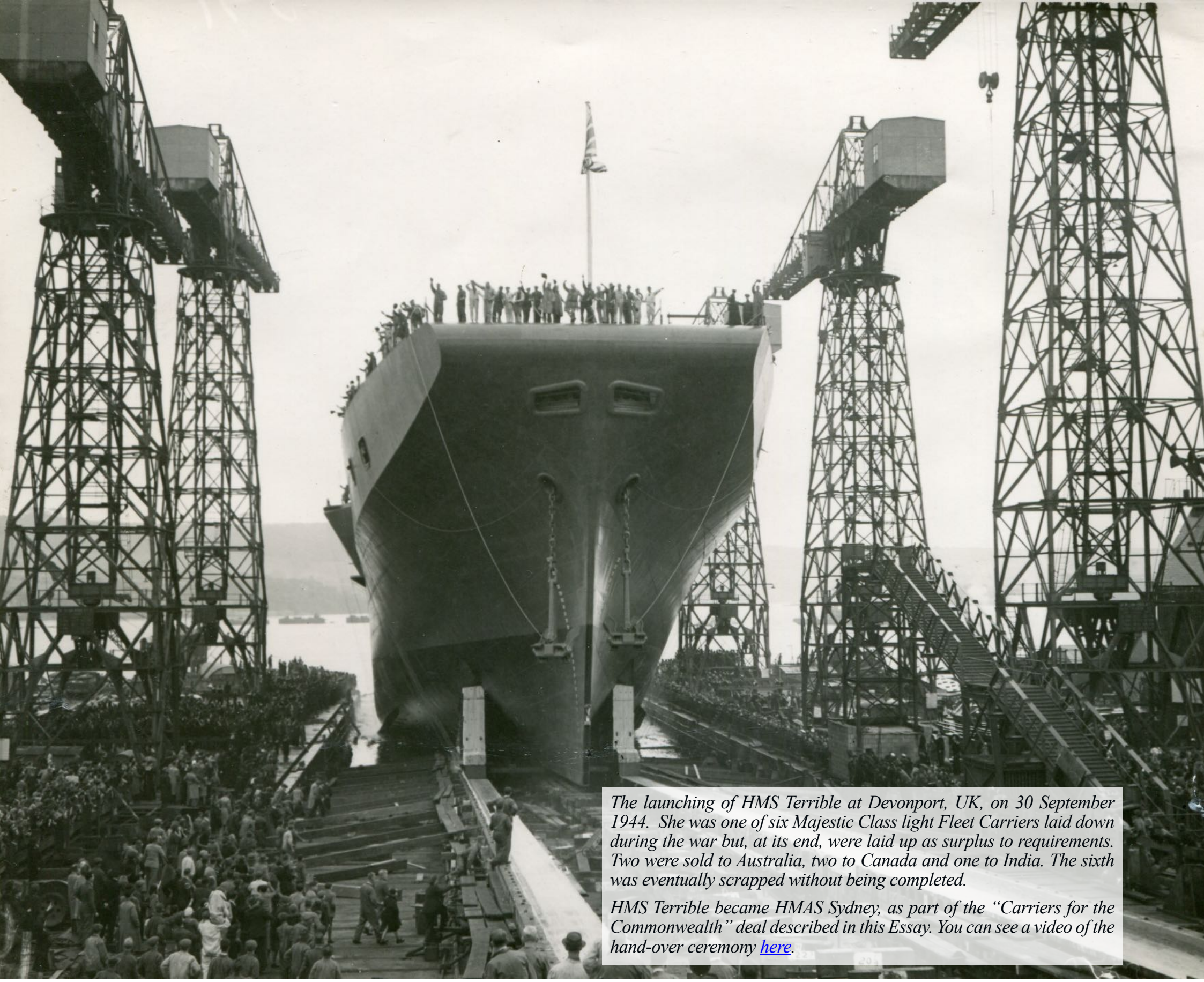
I have had an instinctive feeling for some weeks that old Chifley, having enjoyed the propaganda from the 5-year Defence Plan and bolstered up by the much published alleged statement by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff that there would be no war for fifteen years, is putting the brake on expenditure to have funds available for some spectacular election concession to voters. Alternatively, to put the matter in its best light, Chifley is intent on driving a real hard bargain with the United Kingdom and is prepared to hamstring the Naval Plan on the excuse that the Admiralty misinformed him over costs.[60]

Hamilton was being less than honest. Chifley was justified in his criticisms, particularly over the question of modernisation. He was surprised (and incredulous) that the requirement for modernisation had not been foreseen. Even if the Admiralty had not formally raised the subject until August 1947, the officers involved in planning in Australia could have made some provision or at least some mention of the need for modernisation in view of the wholly apparent tendency of new aircraft weights and landing/launch speeds to increase.[61]

The proposals suggested by Hamilton as the Admiralty's "gesture", which included the offer of one or more carriers on loan rather than by sale, caused a great deal of soul searching in Britain. Treasury had strong objections to the concept of "loans", especially of new or newly refitted ships, and was in any case out of sympathy with Australia because of a dispute over the sale of wheat – Australia allegedly having met British requests for a reduction in price by raising it.[62] The Admiralty itself was not in favour of loans because they placed the financial responsibility for the ships solely in RN hands, in which case, "we should have nothing (repeat) nothing to spend on ourselves".[63]

There is some evidence that this was one situation in which the Australian government was only too happy for private navy to navy communications to be made. Shedden advised the Minister that it would be better if the British were to raise the loan scheme of their own accord. This would mean that the Australian government did not appear to be "welching" on its share of the joint defence effort. How this was to be managed, Shedden did not indicate. The inference, however, is obvious.[64]

After a great deal of discussion within the Admiralty, the First Lord proposed a scheme by which only one Majestic would be completed and sold and one Colossus – already in service and, in reality, surplus to requirements – transferred on loan but modernised at Australian ex-



The launching of HMS Terrible at Devonport, UK, on 30 September 1944. She was one of six Majestic Class light Fleet Carriers laid down during the war but, at its end, were laid up as surplus to requirements. Two were sold to Australia, two to Canada and one to India. The sixth was eventually scrapped without being completed.

HMS Terrible became HMAS Sydney, as part of the "Carriers for the Commonwealth" deal described in this Essay. You can see a video of the hand-over ceremony here.

pense. Should Australia want a larger ship, a Hermes could be transferred in exchange for the Majestic and £250,000 when the time came (1953 or 1954).[65]

In the debate which ensued, the Admiralty was quick to emphasise the importance of the Royal Australian Navy to the overall defence of the Commonwealth. The Admiralty also noted the fact that, once absolutely committed to naval aviation, the Australian government would have to take a much more flexible attitude to increased costs.

There was a third element in the proceedings, as demonstrated by the brief for the First Sea Lord on the subject:

If the Australian plan runs into trouble, the Australian Air Force may fish in the troubled waters. This in turn will hardly fail to have repercussions between the two Services in this country, a result which would be particularly inappropriate at the present moment, when there are already sufficient subjects of inter service controversy.[66] Still the Treasury demurred, suggesting that the Colossus class carrier in question (which was the Warrior) should be purchased by Australia, even if only for a nominal sum. The opposition, however, was eventually worn down by the Admiralty and its offer eventually made its way to Australia. There was one omission, the offer of a Hermes in the future. Although there is little reference in the First Sea Lord's files to this change, it is likely that it must have come as a result of the Royal Navy's realisation that at least two of the fleet carriers, Indefatigable and Implacable were not practical candidates for modernisation due to the inadequate height of the hangars with which they were fitted. The Hermes class could not be spared.[67]

In the event, time intervened on the side of the RAN, for it now became obvious that the state of British industry was such that the completion of the second carrier and the modernisation of either – even if the latter were to be modernised before commissioning- would fall outside the scope of the 1947-52 Five Year Plan and thus under different budgetary provisions. Furthermore, there were £427,000 available from the Replacement Fund set up by public subscription after the loss in 1941 of the cruiser Sydney. Legislation could transfer this money to a new carrier, the more easily if she were to be Sydney herself. On 30 March 1948, just after Hamilton was relieved as First Naval Member by Rear Admiral J.A. Collins, CB, RAN, the Australian government telegraphed: "it has been decided to proceed with the proposal for the purchase of two Majestic class light fleet carriers on the understanding that no modernisation will be commenced nor expenses incurred, until after the end of the five years' programme".[68]

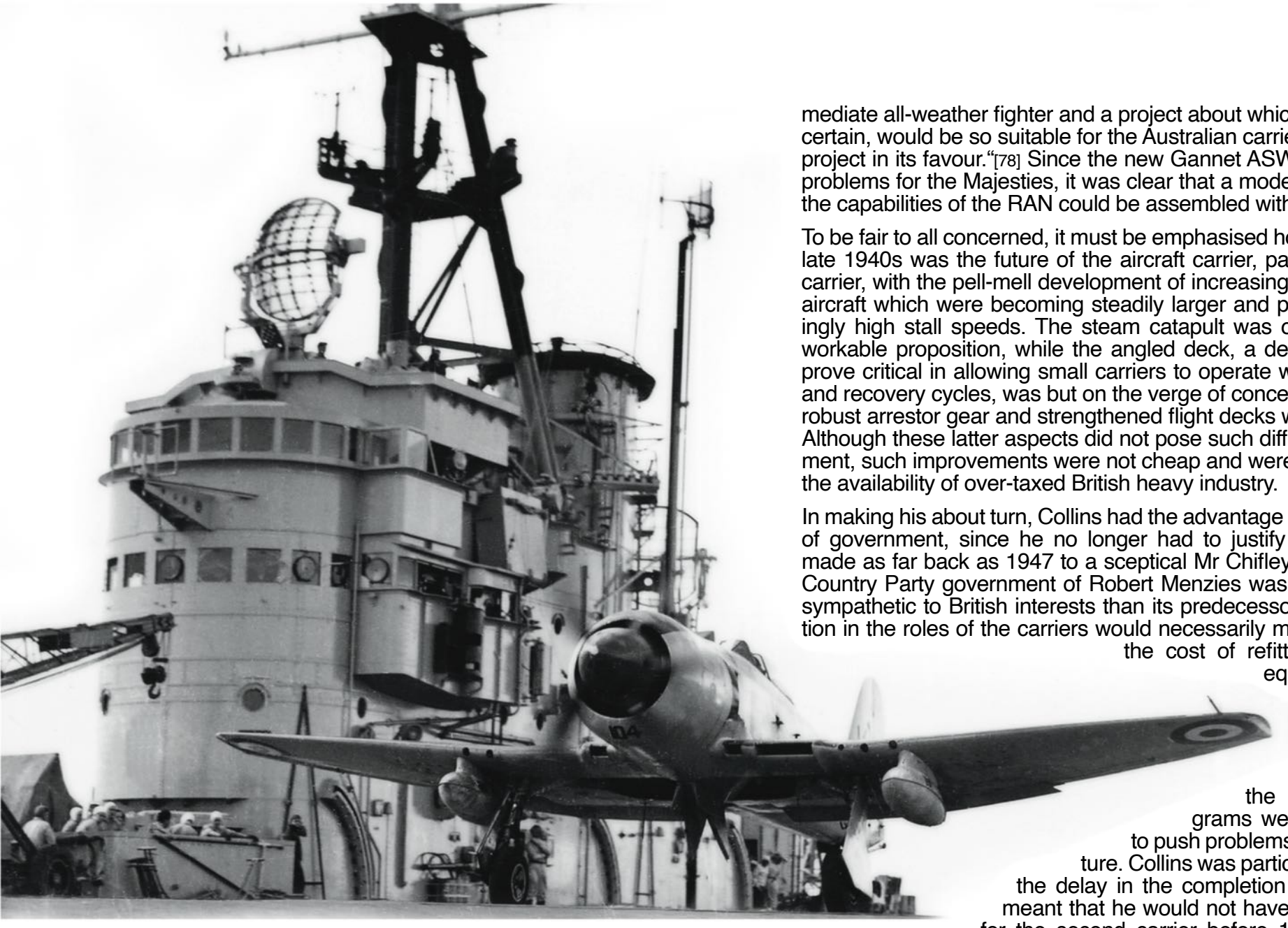
Protracted negotiations followed. The Admiralty was keen that the second carrier be modernised while building. This would not only produce a truly front line ship sooner but would be cheaper than a separate refit. The Admiralty would do the job for £500,000 Sterling. It proposed a variety of mechanisms to allow the additional costs of the carrier program to be carried past the Five Year Defence Plan period.

Chifley was sufficiently happy with Australia's financial state to allow modernisation charges to be paid as soon as they arose for the second carrier. The critical point, however, was that there was no formal provision for the modernisation of the first, the Sydney.[69]

The First Naval Member continued to watch the development programs of the Royal Navy anxiously, since the future capabilities of light fleet carriers remained uncertain. In September 1948, Collins received a bad fright when an Admiralty Fleet Order made reference to the fact that the Majesties would be able to operate only trade protection aircraft. The First Sea Lord was able to reassure him that this was a mistake.[70]

In early 1949, however, before a visit to Britain, Collins learnt for the first time that steam catapults were essential for the operation of the new types of jet fighters but that it was not intended that British light fleet carriers should receive them. The First Sea Lord had to apologise for not keeping the ACNB fully informed. The difficulty at this time was that the Admiralty was becoming increasingly aware that the promises made in 1947 and 1948 concerning the operation of modern aircraft from the Majesties were incapable of fulfilment, but that outright admission could have grave implications for the Australian program.[71]

The particular difficulty was the fact that the projected night fighter, an



aircraft which eventually emerged as the Sea Vixen, could never be operated from the light fleets, while even smaller types, such as the Sea Hawk and the Attacker and Scimitar would require extensive refits, taking upwards of three years.[72] It was also doubtful whether such work would allow operation of some of the latter types, notably the Scimitar, because of problems with the shortened steam catapult being designed for the Majesties and the high stresses which would be imposed on the aircraft on launching.[73]

The Admiralty waited until Collins' arrival in England before explaining the situation to him in detail. At a meeting in Greenwich on 26 April 1949, Collins accepted that the British were doing their best and, indeed, the Admiralty files reveal how anxious the senior officers concerned were to do what they could for the Australian naval air arm. [74] The Secretary to the First Sea Lord reported afterwards:

Admiral Collins…asked that action might not be taken to bring this matter to the notice of either of the Governments. He accepted the fact that the British light fleet carriers would be in exactly the same position but he felt that if the Australian Government became aware that there was any hitch with regard to these Carriers -a hitch which he felt might be resolved eventually – the Australian Government might feel disinclined to purchase the second carrier…he personally would accept, on behalf of the RAN, any disabilities in the supply of modern aircraft. [75]

Over the next year, the Admiralty and the ACNB continued to watch developments. They held, however, little hope for the light fleet carriers as front-line units, because the various aircraft projects continued to display an alarming tendency to increase in size and in cost. One ray of light was that the steam catapult had proved a success and its installation in small carriers practicable. Work on the completion of the second carrier started in 1949 and he was allocated a steam catapult from the Royal Navy's production run.

After some hesitation, Collins finally cut the Gordian knot when he wrote to the First Sea Lord in March 1950:

Although, up to date, I have maintained that our carriers should be capable of operating the latest jet fighters, I am now beginning to have my doubts whether this ideal is practicable. In the old days we bought Australia and Canberra, two trade protection cruisers, and accepted that they were not fitted with 15-inch guns and armour. Is it not logical for us to provide now two Majestic class carriers and accept that they are not fleet carriers, not even Hermes class? …their primary role would be trade protection in which A/S operations play a major part and for which they are well suited…If our carriers were to be employed in an area within radius of fast enemy shore based aircraft, the Carriers would have to form part of a force with other Carriers armed with the appropriate fighters.[76]

The Admiralty's Director of Plans sounded a relieved note when he wrote, "This memorandum…expresses the policy of the Australian Naval Board for the first time in a manner which can be said to be a practicable one."[77] The Fifth Sea Lord agreed wholeheartedly and was able to point out that a navalised version of the Venom, an intermediate all-weather fighter and a project about which he had been uncertain, would be so suitable for the Australian carriers as "to sway the project in its favour."[78] Since the new Gannet ASW aircraft posed no problems for the Majesties, it was clear that a modern air group within the capabilities of the RAN could be assembled without difficulty.

To be fair to all concerned, it must be emphasised how uncertain in the late 1940s was the future of the aircraft carrier, particularly the small carrier, with the pell-mell development of increasingly sophisticated jet aircraft which were becoming steadily larger and possessed increasingly high stall speeds. The steam catapult was only just proving a workable proposition, while the angled deck, a device which was to prove critical in allowing small carriers to operate workable launching and recovery cycles, was but on the verge of conception. Heavier lifts, robust arrestor gear and strengthened flight decks were also required. Although these latter aspects did not pose such difficulties in development, such improvements were not cheap and were always subject to the availability of over-taxed British heavy industry.

In making his about turn, Collins had the advantage of a recent change of government, since he no longer had to justify the commitments made as far back as 1947 to a sceptical Mr Chifley. The new Liberal-Country Party government of Robert Menzies was in any case more sympathetic to British interests than its predecessor. Finally, a reduction in the roles of the carriers would necessarily mean a reduction in the cost of refitting them and re-equipping their air groups.

The continuing delays in both the British and the Australian programs were also combining to push problems further into the future. Collins was particularly relieved that the delay in the completion of the Melbourne meant that he would not have to provide a crew for the second carrier before 1953.[79] Nevertheless, as her completion moved even further into the future, the First Naval Member was forced to ask for a carrier on loan.[80] Collins was in a stronger position than he realised because his request had crossed with a letter from the First Sea Lord. With a commitment to provide a carrier on station off the Korean coast, the British were hard pressed. In a disarmingly artless manner, Lord Fraser wrote: "Do you think in September it might be possible to send up Sydney for about 2 or 3 months operational flying if the Korean business is still going. It would be invaluable to the cause and might be useful experience for her."[81]

Australia made no difficulties about the proposal and in due course Sydney deployed to Korea. In such an atmosphere the arrangements for the loan of a stop-gap carrier were made without difficulty, first Theseus and then Vengeance being selected. The latter was commissioned into the RAN in November 1952 and took out to Australia additional Sea Fury and Firefly aircraft. Because of the conclusion of the Korean War in 1953, however, Vengeance did not deploy there and her operational life in the RAN was brief. By August 1955, Vengeance was back in Britain, carrying the nucleus of the crew for Melbourne, which was to commission at Barrow-in-Furness in October that year.

The end of the war in the Far East meant that there was renewed pressure on the defence budget in Australia. Despite Collins' efforts to the contrary, the Liberal-Country Party government initiated a series of economies which meant the effective end of any hopes for a two-carrier force in the Navy. Sydney was reduced to a training role in 1954 and never received the modernisation she required to operate jet aircraft. The Sea Venom and Gannet purchases were reduced in scale. The future RAN would be constituted around a single carrier.

In retrospect, the long battle to create an Australian naval air arm was always the victim of a tendency to attempt too much with inadequate finances. With the exception of the years of the Korean emergency, no Australian government was willing to devote the resources which the ACNB and the Admiralty knew to be necessary to create a fully effective carrier force. Yet the extraordinarily close relationship of the two naval authorities meant that they were able to achieve a great deal, despite the lack of funds. The contribution of the RAN to the Korean War and to Far Eastern operations over the next 20 years would have been neither as significant nor as useful had Australia not possessed an operational carrier. For this reason the transfer of the Sydney and the Melbourne was as good a bargain for the Royal Navy as it was for the RAN.

Footnotes:

[1] Typical amongst these was the battleship Malaya, which soon had to recommission to act as the substitute for the bombardment units damaged in the invasion of Europe.

[2] Such as the cruiser Liverpool, which did not recommission until the end of the war.

[3] Cruisers: Australia, Shropshire, Hobart and Adelaide. Destroyers: Arunta, Waramunga, Napier, Nonnan, Nizam, Nepal, Stuart,

Vendetta, Quiberon and Quickmatch, Bataan (ex-Kurnai) being under construction.

[4] Paul Hasluck, Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 4 Vol. I, The Government and the People 1939-1941 (Canberra,1952), p.443.

[5] “Selections from the Memoirs and Correspondence of Captain James Bernard Foley, CBE, RAN (1896-1974)”. The Naval Miscellany, Volume V (London, 1984), p. 522 (Hereafter cited as Foley, Miscellany).

[6] Anthony Wright, Australian Carrier Decisions: Three Descriptive Analyses, Part II, The Decision Not to Purchase a Light Fleet Carrier – 6June 1945, (Canberra,1978), p20.

[7] Hermon Gill, Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 2 Vol. II, Royal Australian Navy 1942-1945 (Canberra, 1968), p. 471.

[8] Shedden (Secretary, Department of Defence) to Curtin (Prime Minister), Minute dated 23 March 1944, Quoted in Wright, Carrier Decisions , Part II, p. 24

[9] J.P. Buckley, “Sir Federick Shedden KCMG, OBE“, Australian Defence Force Journal, No. 50, January/February 1985, p. 24.

[10] Shedden, “The Empire and Australian Defence“, paper dated 11 May 1944, in Quoted Wright, Part II, p. 30.

[11] Wright, Part II, p. 29.

[12] Colvin (RAN Adviser in London) to Foley (Secretary to First Naval Member), letter dated 9 May 1944. Papers of Captain(S) J.B. Foley CBE, RAN (Hereafter cited as: Foley Papers).

[13] Gill, p. 471.

[14] Wright, Part II, p. 35.

[15] Ibid., pp. 36-40.

[16] Ibid., p. 39.

[17] I bid., pp. 41-42.

[18] Public Record Office ADM 1/18150 Director of Manning file note dated 2 July 1945.

[19] Wright, Part II, p. 46.

[20] Churchill to Curtin letter dated 27 May 1944, quoted in Wright, Part II, p. 40 from the text of a later letter from Curtin to Forde (acting Prime Minister in Australia). No copy appears to be available in PRO Admiralty files, although there are repeated references to it in ADM 1/18140.

[21] Australian Defence Committee Meeting 269/44 dated 18 August 1944. Quoted in Wright, Part II, p. 51.

[22] Wright, Part II, p. 54.

[23] Both Wright’s narrative and Royle’s letters to Foley, who became the Naval Liaison Officer in London in 1944 and who was closely involved in the negotiations, reflect this.

[24] Royle to Foley letters dated 22 March 1945 and 1 May 1945. Foley Papers. Royle to Foley, letter dated 1 March 1945. Foley: Miscellany, p. 522.

[25] Richard Humble, Fraser of North Cape. The Life of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fraser (1888-1981) {London,1983), p. 261. See also Royle to Foley letter dated 28 December 1944, Foley Papers.

[26] Royle to Foley letter dated 1 March 1945, Foley: The Naval Miscellany, p.522.

[27] ADM 1/19051, Curtin to Churchill, telegram No. 40, dated 14 February 1945.

[28] ADM 1/19051, Chancellor of Exchequer to Prime Minister, minute dated 11 April 1945.

[29] Stuart Soward, “Canadian Naval Aviation 1915-69”, The RCN in Retrospect, James A. Boutilier (ed.) (Vancouver,1982), p. 274.

[30] Royle to Foley letter dated 1 May1945, Foley: Miscellany, p. 523. Royle in fact gives a figure of £21 million but Wright, Part II, p. 60, gives a more accurate summary.

[31] ADM 1/19051, Churchill to Alexander (First Lord) minute M 218/5 dated 17 March 1945.

[32] ADM 1/19051, Dominions Office to Australian government telegram No. 150, dated 2040Z 5 May 1945.

[33] Royle to Foley letter dated 23 May 1945, Foley: Miscellany, p. 524.

[34] ADM 1/19051, telegram No. 150 dated 2040Z 5 May 1945.

[35] ADM 1/18140, Admiralty to Vice Admiral (Q) British Pacific Fleet signal dated 1640B 1 May 1945.

[36] Foley made a reference to this in another part of his incomplete Memoirs which does not appear in The Naval Miscellany.

[37] Wright, Part II, p. 70. This call is also referred to in a letter from Royle to Foley dated 20 January 1945. Foley Papers.

[38] ADM 1/18140, Chifley (acting Prime Minister) to Churchill, telegram No. 157 dated 200oz 16 June 1945.

[39] Wright, Part II, p. 74.

[40] ADM 1/18140 Director of Manning, file note dated 10 July 1945.

[41] ADM 1/1814140 First Sea Lord, file note dated 10 July ADM.

[42] 1/18140 Telegram No.157, dated 2000Z 16 June 1945.

[43] ADM 1/18140 Dominions Office telegram (unregistered draft in Admiralty files) No. 262 dated 5 August 1945. See also Wright, Part II, p. 74.

[44] Foley: Miscellany, p. 525.

[45] The final result was the RAN Postwar Plan: 1947-1960 completed in October 1946. See: Anthony Wright, Australian Carrier Decisions: Three Descriptive Analyses, Part III: The Decision to Purchase Two Light Fleet Carriers – 2 June 1947 (Canberra, 1978 (?)), p. 43. See also, Admiral Sir Victor Smith letter to the author dated 6 April 1985.

[46] Wright, Part III, p.43.

[47] Hamilton to Foley letter dated 3 February 1946, Foley Papers.

[48] Hamilton to Foley letter dated 3 February 1946, Foley Papers.

[49] Hamilton to Foley letter dated 24 October 1946, Foley Papers.

[50] Hamilton to Foley letter dated 3 February 1946, Foley Papers.

[51] First Naval Member (Hamilton) to First Sea Lord (Admiral of the Fleet Sir John Cunningham) letter dated 27 November 1947, Foley Papers.

[52] ibid.

[53] ibid.

[54] Eric J. Grove, Vanguard to Trident (Annapolis, 1987), p. 13.

[55] Wright, Part III, p. 39.

[56] For a discussion of the arguments to and fro see Ibid., pp. 53-55.

[57] Hamilton to Foley letter dated 16 July 1947, Foley Papers.

[58] ADM 1/27063, ACNB to Admiralty signal dated 09002 13 November 1947.

[59] Hamilton to Cunningham letter dated 22 November 1947, Foley Papers.

[60] Ibid.

[61] The first intimation of any modernisation problems seems to have come in a discussion on 5 August 1947 between the Fifth Sea Lord (Vice Admiral Sir Philip Vian) and Foley. See Foley to Hamilton letter dated 6 August 1947, Foley Papers ; and see also Wright, Part III, p. 62.

[62] ADM 1/27063, USF minute M 01401/47 dated 29 December 1947.

[63] ADM 1/27063 minute M 01401/47 undated (probably early December 1947).

[64] Wright, Part III, p. 63.

[65] ADM 1/27063, First Lord's meeting dated 13 December 1947.

[66] ADM 205/69 which includes First Sea Lord papers and minutes not covered by ADM 1/27063.

[67] ADM 205/64 "Types of Aircraft" dated 30 December 1945. See also Grove, Vanguard to Trident, pp. 16-17 for a comprehensive explanation of the RN's problems and an explanatory table.

[68] ADM 1/27063 Prime Minister (Chifley) to Prime Minister (Attlee) telegram No. 70 dated 30 March 1948.

[69] ADM 1/27063 Australian government to Secretary of State for Commonwealth telegram, no. 266 dated 11 October 1948.

[70] ADM 205/69 First Naval Member to First Sea Lord, letter dated 22 September 1948 and reply.

[71] ADM 1/27063 has continual references to this problem in a succession of minutes. See Head of Military Branch minute PBCM/MA/CBII dated 3 September 1947.

[72] ADM 1/27063 Director of Plans minutes HGD/PJMB/IDM dated 4 September 1947 and HGD/IDM dated 11 September 1947.

[73] ADM 205/72 minutes of a meeting between the First Naval Member, RAN, and the Board of Admiralty at Royal Naval College, Greenwich, dated 27 April 1949. This was a particularly important meeting. Present were: Collins (First Naval Member). Farncomb (Commanding HM Australian Fleet), Fraser (First Sea Lord), Edelsten (Vice Chief of Naval Staff), Harcourt (Second Sea Lord), Daniel (Third Sea Lord), Creasy (Fifth Sea Lord), Grantham (Flag Officer Submarines) and several other senior staff officers.

[74] ADM 205/72 and see especially Item 3: "Modernisation of RN Light Fleet Carriers".

[75] ADM 205/72 Secretary (Captain(s) J.R. Allfrey) to First Sea Lord to First Lord's Private Office minute No. 1912/89C, dated 27 April 1949. It is of considerable interest that this statement was not mentioned even in the "Admiralty only" full minutes of the meeting on the previous day. All concerned must have been well aware of the potential for embarrassment for Collins (and the Admiralty) if it got out.

[76] ADM 205/74 First Naval Member to First Sea Lord letter dated 27 March 1950.

[77] ADM 205/74.

[78] Ibid.

[79] ADM 205/72 meeting of 26 April 1949. See Item 7:" Program of (Australian) Five Year Plan and Development after 1952″.

[80] ADM 205/76 First Naval Member to First Sea Lord, letter dated 8 March 1951.

[81] ADM 205/76 First Sea Lord to First Naval Member, letter dated 3 April 1951.