The RAN Fleet Air Arm 1948 - 1957

By Kim Dunstan

AFTER YEARS OF USING BORROWED AIRCRAFT AND RELYING ON THE SUPPORT OF OTHER SERVICES, NAVAL AVIATION IN THE RAN WAS TO TAKE A DRAMATIC TURN IN POST-WAR YEARS.

THE BATTLE TO GET OUR OWN FLEET AIR ARM WAS FINALLY WON, AND THE ERA OF CARRIERS WITH MODERN HIGH PERFORMANCE AIRCRAFT HAD BEGUN.

From its beginning in 1911, the Royal Australian Navy was alert to the value of naval aviation. By 1912 the RAN supported a plan for an Army/Navy Flying School at Point Cook, and during WW1, Sopwith aircraft flew from RAN cruisers. But although the Navy attempted to form a Fleet Air Arm it was the RAAF that gained control of naval aviation in 1921, supplying aircraft, pilots and maintainers. The Navy's role was relegated to supplementing aircrew with Observers and Telegraphist/Gunners for the Seagull 111, V and Walrus amphibians deployed on our ships.

This policy continued until 1944 when the last seaplane was removed from RAN cruisers. Single, low-performance reconnaissance aircraft had become irrelevant. Radar assumed the gunnery-spotting role and, after additional guns and radar equipment made ships top-heavy, aviation facilities were removed. But by 1945, with the Allies gaining the upper hand in World War 2 and the value of significant organic air support at sea proven time and again, the RAN began post-war planning to have a fleet structured around a carrier force.

The Carrier Debate

Earlier in WW2, discussions had taken place with the British Admiralty about the RAN acquiring an aircraft carrier. The concept suited both nations, as Britain had too many ships in the water or under construction for the pool of manpower available, and Australia's fleet was small and of old ships.

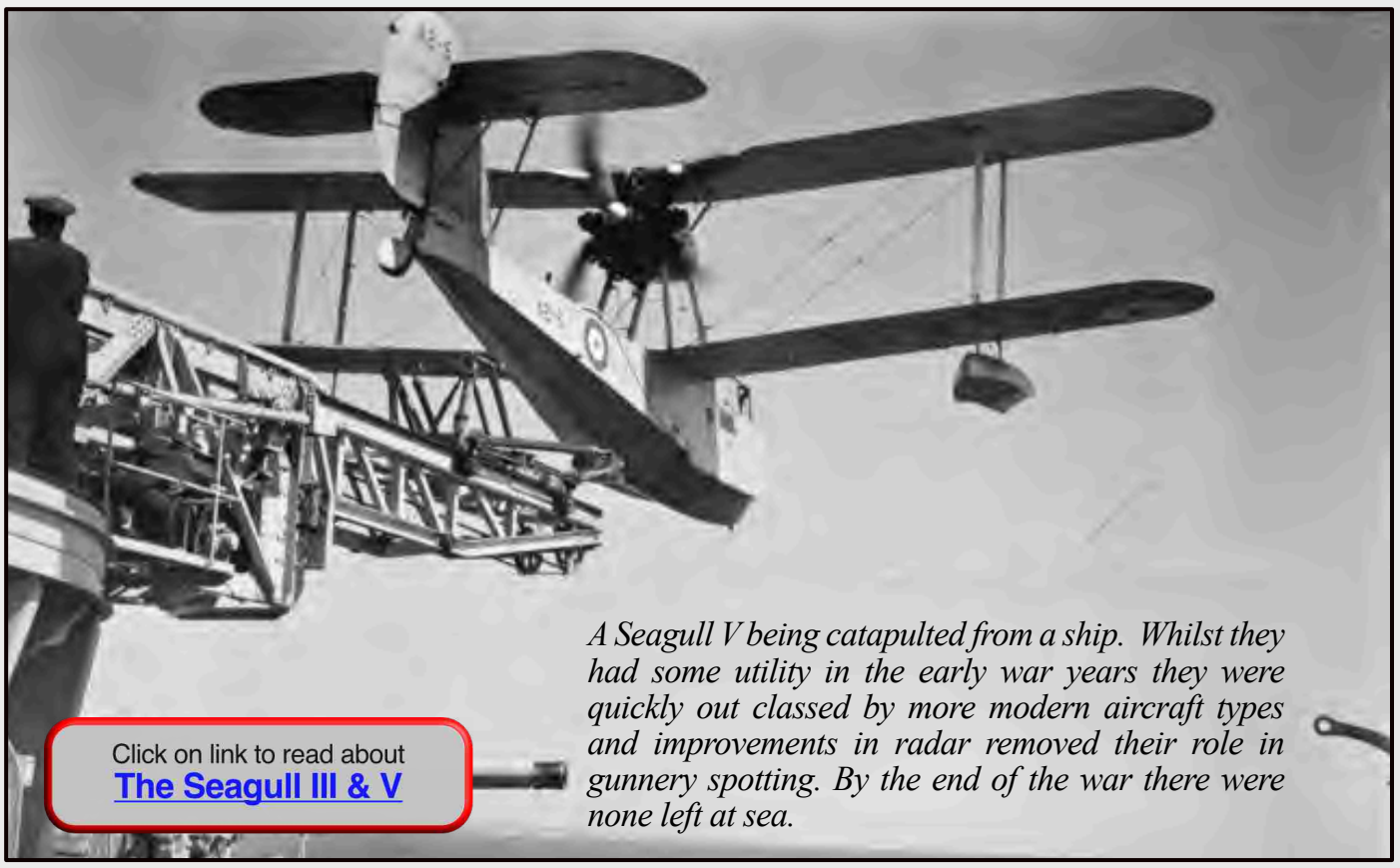
The response was favourable with a various proposals placed on the table including consecutive offers of HM Ships *Venerable* and *Ocean.* But despite this optimism the RAN had neither the capacity to man an aircraft carrier nor the expertise to operate one. There was also the question of payment, as the British Government had developed the view that Australia was well placed to pay for any ships. Meanwhile, in Australian defence circles the battle for resources raged and the squabble about naval aviation continued unabated – all of which caused the Government to delay any carrier decision until WW2 hostilities had ceased.

Below. HMAS Albatross, the Navy's first dedicated aircraft carrier, a Seagull III being hoisted, and a Seagull V being catapulted. Up to 1947, the Fleet had to rely on borrowed aircraft for its aviation capability. Typically supplied by the RAAF, Navy's role was relegated to providing the occasional Observer and Telegraphist/Gunner, and providing the facilities to operate aircraft aboard. By the middle of the war the old reconnaissance biplanes had shown themselves to be highly vulnerable to enemy fighters and were, in some theatres, more of a hinderance than a help. By the end of 1944 there were no aircraft embarked on RAN ships.

Developing The Fleet Air Arm Plan

The Pacific War comprehensively proved the value of the aircraft carrier. Prior to the Japanese surrender in 1945, Commander G. Gatacre, Director of Plans at Navy Office, tabled a proposal for the development of a post-war RAN fleet, which included strong recommendations for two light-fleet carriers together with two air groups and associated shore facilities. It was an ambitious plan but it received the encouragement of the Naval Board, as it laid out a sensible framework for the development of a post-war Navy.

As VJ Day approached, Gatacre tasked the then **Lt Cdr V.A.T. Smith** to prepare a first draft Fleet Air Arm (FAA) plan, which received in-principle endorsement subject to more detailed planning. In October 1945 Smith then joined the British Directorate of Air Organisation and Training, where he spent a year adding detail to the plan. In 1947 three senior RN FAA officers and Smith arrived in Melbourne to finalise it, ready for submission.



Click on link to read about
The Seagull III & V

A Seagull V being catapulted from a ship. Whilst they had some utility in the early war years they were quickly out classed by more modern aircraft types and improvements in radar removed their role in gunnery spotting. By the end of the war there were none left at sea.

The concept of acquiring Carriers had been made easier by a generous offer from the British Government. There were no fewer than ten Light Fleet Carriers in various stages of construction in the UK, and the British were aware they could never be operated in peacetime by a manpower-strapped Royal Navy. They would, however, be immensely useful in Commonwealth hands and a generous arrangement to get them there was far preferable to the the cost of completion, or even maintaining them in suspended RN reserve. In September 1946 the British Admiralty informed the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board:

"The building cost of a Majestic class carrier is approximately £2,750,00 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 of the cost of the carriers transferred to Australia, thus reducing the capital cost to the Commonwealth, if two carriers were transferred, by approx. £2,750,00 Sterling."[1]

1947: Cabinet Approval For Naval Aviation

Despite the generosity of the offer the Australian Government hesitated, mainly due the revelation that additional ongoing modification costs would be incurred. Options other than the purchase of two Majestic class carriers were investigated but after much debate it was decided that the offer would be accepted provided no modernisation program would be commenced within five years. In July 1947 Cabinet agreed.

The concern of modernisation was relevant, as the cost of refits and their propensity to blow-out was an unpalatable thought. The British Admiralty, on the other hand, was keen to see at least one of the two carriers modernised during construction to ensure a truly front-line ship was delivered. This could be done for £500,000 – a figure much cheaper than a stand-alone refit – and options were examined to see if this additional cost could be deferred. In the event, Australia agreed to cover the additional burden without deferring it, but the program only applied to the second carrier.

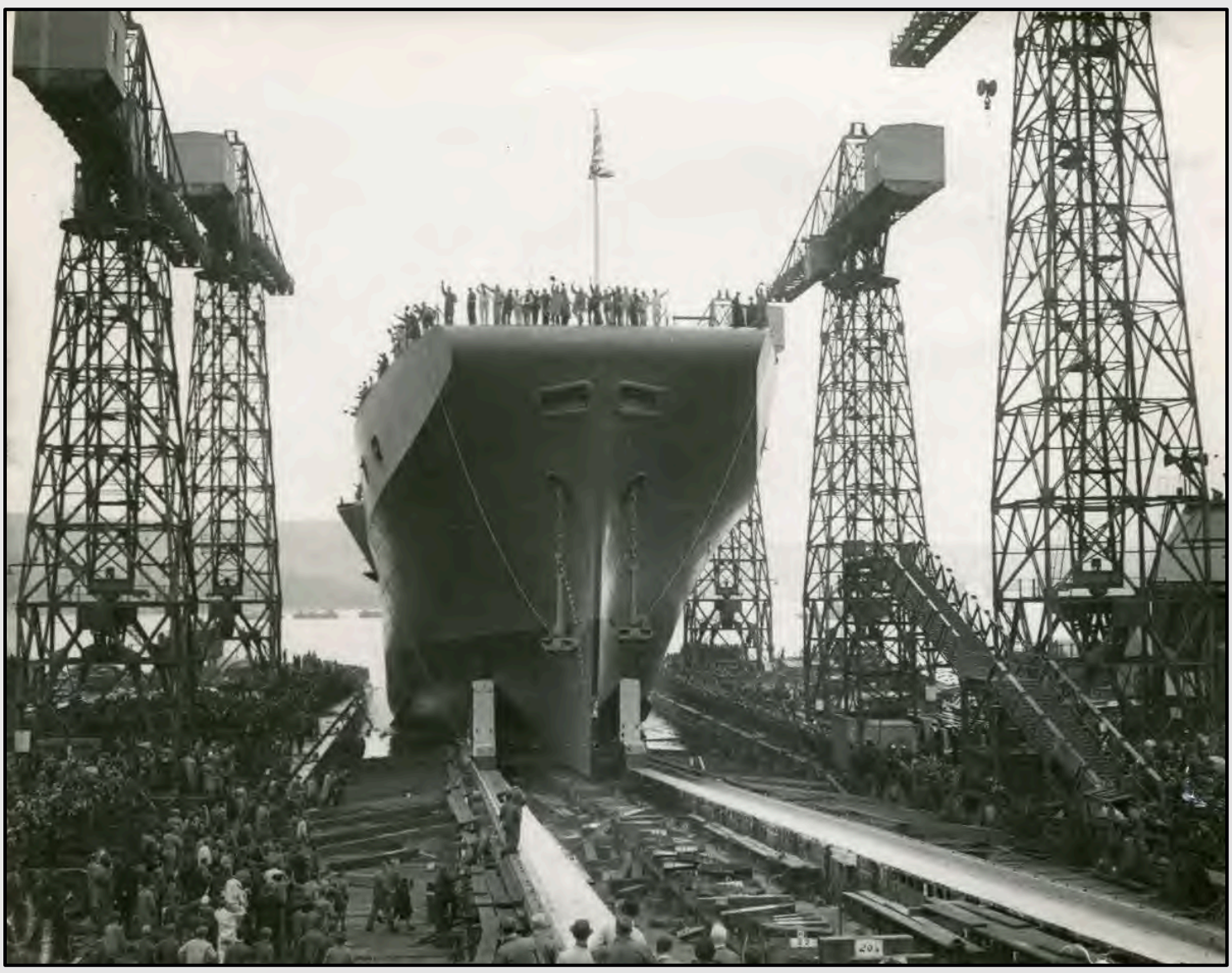
The first, HMAS *Sydney*, therefore had no provision for modernisation. Without it, she would not be able to operate jet aircraft and there was therefore no obvious growth path for her. It was a compromise the RAN was prepared to accept.

During the latter part of that year the Navy moved quickly to bring about the Government's decision. This included ordering the two *Majestic*-class carriers, the purchase of aircraft and associated equipment, securing two air bases and the recruitment and training of aircrew and maintainers. The first pilots course commenced on 7 December 1947, and the first draft of RAN sailors training for the FAA departed for the UK on 1 January 1948.

The Post-War Strategic Position

The 1947 plan for the RAN FAA was modelled on the Royal Navy's FAA, because a unified RAN/RN force was necessary to counter growing instability in South East Asia. Following the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the social, political, and economic turmoil in South East Asia was generating unrest which, together with communist aggression in the region, was of major concern. Furthermore, former European colonies were facing nationalist agitation, food shortages and war-damaged infrastructure.

Although Defence budgets were limited, the government allowed the RAN to order the aircraft carriers, indicating an awareness of the need for a stronger defence presence in the South-East Asia region, and to take greater responsibility for defence in areas of strategic importance. The ANZAM Pact, SEATO, the FESR, and ANZUS Treaty were responses to these concerns, where RAN would play an important role. *(Continued p.4).*



Left: *HMS Terrible being launched at Devonport, UK, on 30 September 1944. She was one of no less than ten aircraft carriers in various stages of construction during the latter years of the war, with little prospect of being used by the RN who was strapped for manpower. Their salvation lay in selling them to the Dominion, a strategy that the British Government pursued with vigour. Terrible was sold to the Royal Australian Navy to become HMAS Sydney, and a second carrier was also secured to become HMAS Melbourne (FAAM image).*

Next page: *A 1948 newspaper cutting describes early FAA training in the UK in somewhat flowery language. (Courtesy John Harrison.*

Carriers for the Commonwealth
A Detailed Look at the Debate

 (ADELAIDE NEWSPAPER)

Australia's First R.A.N. Carrier Crew Trains in England

YEOVIL, Somerset.—As Australian leaves tinge with the year's death, the apple trees in Somerset are afroth with spring's first blossom.

Haystacks glisten like pats of new-made butter in the green- hedged fields. Nesting rooks quarrel in the beeches and the oaks, and miles high in the frosty air the silver, pinhead cross of an aircraft spins out its endless white vapor trail.

Except for the aireraft, the scene is one of age-old peacefulness.

But to guard its peace, the theory and modes of war cannot be entirely laid aside. So it is that nearly 70 Australian naval ratings have come to train at HMS Heron, Yeovil's Royal Naval Air Station, in preparation for the commissioning of the Commonwealth's first aircraft carrier.

THE 500 officers and ratings leaving Australia soon in the troopship Kanimbla to help man the carrier will not be the vanguard of their mission.

Here at Yeovil, and at two or three other stations in England and Scotland, men from every State have already begun the advanced technical training courses designed to fit them for the task of maintaining the carrier's engines, armaments and aircraft.

The £3,000,000 carrier itself—the usually well informed declare it will be HMS Terrible, of the latest 14,000-ton Majestic class—is now receiving the builders' finishing touches at Devonport, where she was laid down in September, 1944.

No official announcement has yet been made, but RAN officers in England are working on the assumption that the vessel will be in their hands by November of this year.

Then, if authority and circumstances decree, Terrible—perhaps renamed after local Dominion tradition—may receive the honor of escorting the King and Queen in HMS Vanguard to open their tour of Australia and New Zealand.

★

At present, this is only a rather attractive dream in the minds of the younghters (most of them are under 22) training in Britain.

Their days are passed amid the scream and roar of aero engines, the intricate symbols of logarithmic tables in station classrooms, the cockpits and fuselages of every British naval aircraft from Barracoudas to Seafires.

Nor are the mysteries of the jet engine, the propulsive power of naval aviation's future, left unprobed. By the time they graduate, the Australians will have a pretty good grasp of the principles of the 600 m.p.h. naval jet machine that Hawker's are now developing for post-war carriers like Terrible.

These Yeovil lads have a superb training ground amid some of the loveliest, most historical country in England.

Two thousand years ago, Roman chariots whirled helmeted centurions along the great Fesse Way, which stretches from Axminster in Devon across the Yeovil marshes to Lincoln.

Today, the same road is used by naval cars and jeeps which take the ratings of HMS Heron on leave.

Long after the Romans, Somerset was the setting for the legendary tales of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, of the magic sword Excalibur, of Camelot, and of the Isle of Avalon.

In the mornings, when the Australians creep unwillingly from their bunks (not hammocks) at the bugle's cry, they can gaze across five miles of gentle green valleys to Cadbury Hill, the reputed site of Camelot. At the foot of the hill is the little village of Sutton Montis, and the spring of fresh water at which Arthur and his knights watered their horses.

Who knows but that Heron itself, which was certainly once a marsh, may not have been covered a thousand and more years ago by the very waters into which the knight Sir Bedevere is said to have hurled Excalibur as King Arthur lay dying at the lakeside?

Even the names of today's villages have a quaint ring and seem bound up with ancient times—Marston Magna, Chilten Cantelle, Courten Denham, Sutton Mentis, Lyte's Carey, Chilthorne Domer, Huish Episcopi . . . the countryside abounds with them.

For the ratings without much care for the charms of Somerset history, life is still good.

The day's routine begins at 6.30 a.m., ends at 4.20 p.m. All night leave is granted every night, except when a man is on watch—one night in four.

There's an immense concert hall on station, dances there three times a week, and in the township on almost every other night. In Yeovil Town, too, at one of the country's thousand or more Red Lions, the rating can buy the finest Somerset cider at 8d. a glass, or tenpenny jugs of "lousy"—wartime English ale with an alcoholic content, the ratings complain, of —009 degrees!

Darts with the locals till 10 or 11 at night in the Lion's taproom has a fascination all its own.

Food at Heron is better in quality and quantity than the ordinary Englishman enjoys.

"But they certainly lash us up with fish," the Australians complain.

For those at home who think their sons are half-starved, this typical week-day's menu for the general mess should be reassuring:—

Breakfast — Porridge, herrings in tomato sauce, fried bread, tea.

Dinner—Soup, steak and kidney pudding, creamed potatoes, peas; stewed peaches and custard.

Tea—Fancy cakes, tea.

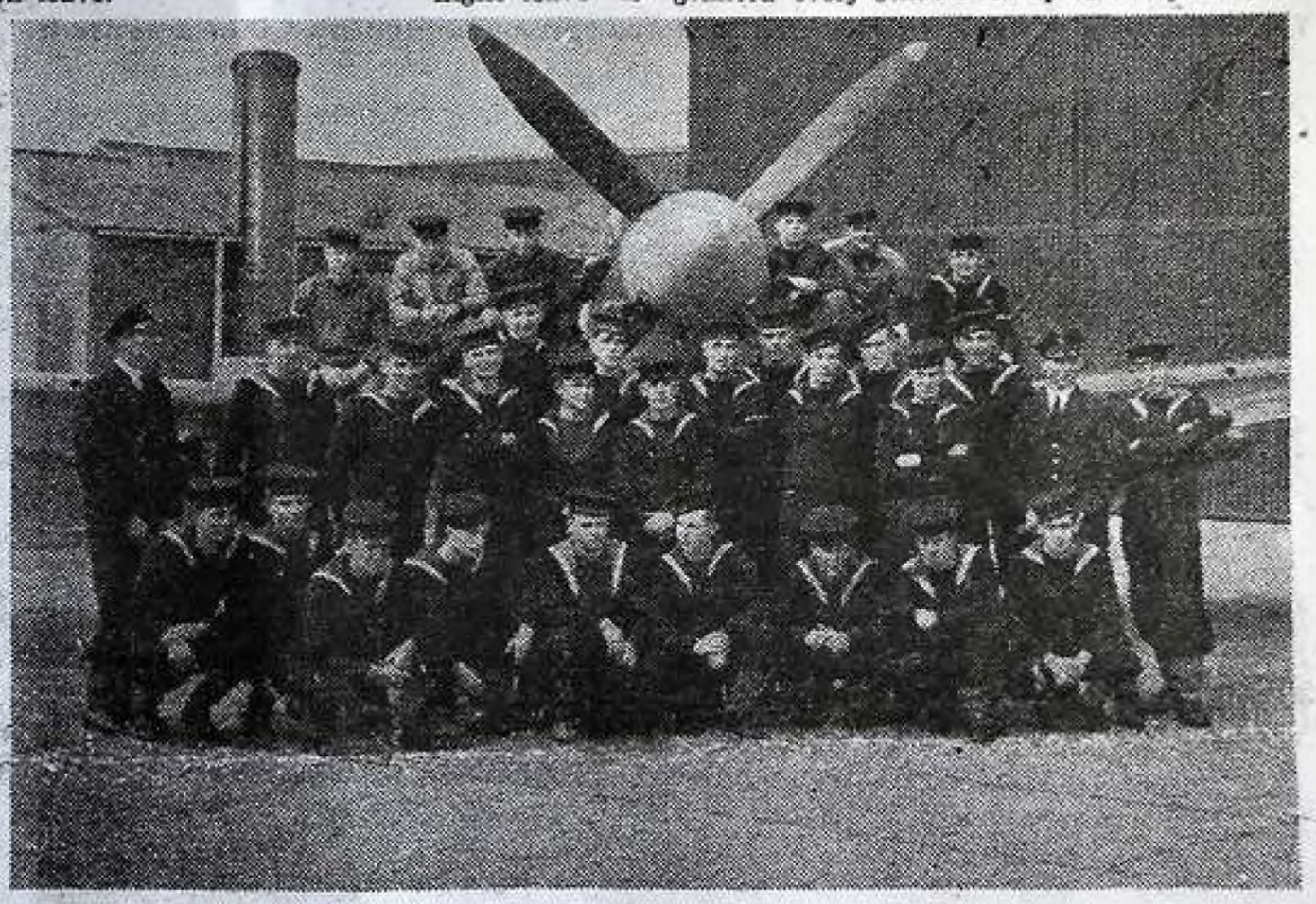
Supper—Soup, Durham cutlet, bubble and squeak, coffee.

That isn't all. Within a week of landing at Yeovil, at least a quarter of the Australians had established surreptitious liaison with friendly farmers on the outskirts of the station. Result eggs and milk, off ration, to augment the basic diet.

The fact that 1,500 English ratings had lived on the same station for up to two years previously without once (to official knowledge) tapping this delicious "pipeline" said much for English obedience to the law.

"But not much for their initiative," retort the unrepentant visitors.

A British commander who told me the story did so with gusto and a grin. Commander Cad unquestionably agreed with the Aussies. But one cannot resist the notion that perhaps the home team have long played the same game—but with just that shade more sophistication and subtlety.



The RAN contingent training at the Royal Naval Air Station, Yeovil, Somerset, to man Australia's first aircraft carrier. They are grouped round a Seafire naval fighter plane, one of the types on which they are at work.

***Above**. HMAS Sydney was commissioned on 16 Dec 1948 and, after acceptance trials, proceed to Glasgow dock (left) where she embarked 54 new Sea Fury and Firefly aircraft and miscellaneous stores, before shaping course for home.*

1948: HMAS *Sydney* (III)

The RAN's first 'flat-top' aircraft carrier, HMAS *Sydney*, was commissioned on 16 December 1948. She was the former HMS *Terrible*, one of six *Majestic*-class light-fleet carriers in British dockyards upon which work had been suspended in the closing stages of WW2. Although the light-fleet carriers did not carry the armour or guns of the larger Fleet carriers, experience gained in the Pacific War meant several improvements could be incorporated when dockyard work resumed – for example, better ventilation and the inclusion of a cafeteria system, which was a welcome change from general messing.

On 6 January 1949 *Sydney* sailed for full-power trials; with radio communication, radar and other trials completed during the month. On 3 February Captain Dowling signed and accepted the ship for RAN service. Flying trials commenced on 8 February with aircraft making arrested landings and catapult launches at various weights and speeds. On 13 February five Sea Furies from 805 Squadron and four Fireflies of 816 Squadron landed without mishap, aided by a 'bat man' to guide them on approach. HMAS *Sydney* did not have an angled deck so there was no opportunity to go-around. If an aircraft's arrester hook missed the wires it would crash into a mesh barrier, beyond which aircraft were parked. Aircraft were launched via *Sydney's* hydraulic catapult.

After lengthy exercises in the North and Irish Seas with Sea Furies and Fireflies and the 20th Carrier Air Group (CAG), ready and embalmed at RNAS Abbotsinch, *Sydney* proceeded up the Clyde River to KGV Dock in Glasgow, where she embarked 54 aircraft and stores before sailing to Devonport for more equipment. As the flight deck and hangars were crowded with aircraft and stores, flying was not possible. She departed for Australia on 12 April 1949, travelling via Aden, Fremantle, and Melbourne. On reaching Jervis Bay on 25 May the aircraft were disembarked to RANAS Nowra, and three days later *Sydney* berthed at Garden Island Dockyard.

Meanwhile, work had commenced in 1949 on the second carrier HMAS *Melbourne* (II), which encompassed the most recent modifications as previously discussed. These included an angled flight deck, a steam catapult and mirror landing sight, all of which were necessary for the operation of increasingly sophisticated jet aircraft. These changes significantly delayed her delivery and the First Naval Member of the Board was forced to ask Britain for a loan carrier to fill the gap. HMS *Vengeance* was thus provided as an interim replacement until *Melbourne* was commissioned in October 1955 (see later in this page).

Forming The Carrier Air Groups (CAG)

The piston-engine aircraft chosen for the RAN FAA's 20th and 21st Carrier Air Groups (CAG) were both well tested by the RN at sea. They were the Hawker Sea Fury FB11, a single seat fighter-bomber with an impressive performance, and the Fairey Firefly Mk 5 two-seat armed reconnaissance/strike aircraft. The 20th Carrier Air Group (CAG) had been formed at RNAS Eglington (in the UK) on 28 August 1948 and comprised 805 Squadron (Sea Furies) and 816 Squadron (Fireflies), both of which undertook significant training with the Royal Navy before embarking on HMAS *Sydney* for her maiden voyage to Australia.

In July 1950 *Sydney* returned to the UK to collect the 21st CAG consisting of 808 Squadron (Sea Furies) and 817 Squadron (Fireflies). After working-up exercises, *Sydney* sailed from Portsmouth for Australia on 26 October of that year. The delivery of the 21st CAG brought the RAN Fleet Air Arm to full strength, with its four Squadrons being front-line. They operated from HMAS *Sydney* at sea or from RANAS Nowra. Other Squadrons were commissioned for training aircrew.

***Below**: Laden with her new aircraft, HMAS Sydney departed the UK on 12 April 1949 for her maiden voyage to Australia. The passage was fast, with only brief stops in Aden, Fremantle and Melbourne before reaching her destination. Before entering Sydney on 25 May she unloaded her aircraft in Jervis Bay, where they were towed to the Air Station at Nowra.*

1948: RANAS Nowra – HMAS *Albatross*

The RAN Air Station at Nowra, on the South Coast of NSW some 20 km from Jervis Bay, is the home of the RAN Fleet Air Arm (FAA). The airfield was originally occupied by the RAAF during WW2 as a torpedo-bomber base, then by US Forces, and between 1944 and 1946 by the British Pacific Fleet (MONAB 1) as the Royal Navy base HMS *Nabbington.*

The air station was transferred to the RAN on 15 December 1947, and after renovation work it was commissioned as HMAS *Albatross* (RANAS Nowra) on 31 August 1948. Albatross became the shore base for the CAG squadrons when not at sea, and was also the training base for the second-line squadrons 723, 724,725; and later 850 and 851 front line.

In the early 1950s RANAS Nowra was a hive of activity with pilot and observer training, the building of hangars and workshops and maintainer training. With the commissioning of *Albatross* and the arrival of the CAGs, the RAN FAA was on a firm footing. The generous assistance of the Royal Navy in the formation of the squadrons, aircrew and maintainer training, both in the UK and at Nowra, was a significant factor in the successful establishment of the RAN FAA.

AJASS – RAN/RAAF ASW School

In December 1951 the Australian Joint Anti-Submarine School (AJASS) was formed at RANAS Nowra. It was an independent RAN/RAAF organisation which occupied office space at the air station on a 'lodger' basis. The aim of the school was to train RAN and RAAF officers in anti-submarine warfare, as the security situation in SE Asia and the growth of the Soviet submarine fleet were considered threats. In the event of hostilities, it was expected the main task for the RAN and RAAF would be directed against enemy submarines. AJASS planned and managed joint exercises on a regular basis involving aircraft and ships from allied nations, including visits to RANAS Nowra of Avro Shackleton, Lincoln, and Lockheed Neptune aircraft.

***Above**. Sydney was not suitably equipped to operate jet aircraft which were, in any case, only on the cusp of Naval Aviation operations and were prohibitively expensive. The RAN therefore chose the Fairey Firefly (upper) and the Hawker Sea Fury (lower) as the Fleet Air Arm's inaugural aircraft. It made perfect sense: the RN operated both types and was able to offer training and loan aircraft whilst the Australian machines were being built. Furthermore, much of the expertise in operating the RAN's first aircraft carrier came from Royal Navy personnel experienced in both aircraft.*

***Below.** HMAS Albatross in the early years. Although work was proceeding apace on aircraft hangarage, many of the hardstandings and taxiways were yet to be completed, and only part of one runway was sealed. The Married Quarter 'patch' can be seen in the centre, but many personnel were accommodated in the caravan parks at the top of the image, with some using aircraft packing cases to supplement their floor space. After the relative comfort of UK air stations it must have seemed like something out of the wild west to the ex-RN personnel and their wives.*

1950s: The Korean War

On 25 June 1950 North Korean troops attacked South Korea and on 27 June UN forces began fighting the invaders. HMAS *Bataan* and *Shoalhaven* were quickly deployed from Japan, with *Warramunga* and others joining later. Because *Sydney* was sailing to the UK to collect the 21st CAG she was not available, but in March of 1951 the British Admiralty (with carriers HMS Theseus*, Triumph,* and *Glory* in Korea) requested that HMAS *Sydney* relieve HMS *Glory,* as the latter was due for a refit in Australia.

In April 1951, 805 and 808 Squadron (Sea Furies) and 817 Squadron (Fireflies) were informed they would be deploying to Korea on HMAS *Sydney*. The Squadrons, each with 12 aircraft, immediately began work-up exercises. The normal practice until then was for the Sea Furies and Fireflies to do 'free take-offs' from her flight deck (unassisted by the catapult); but in Korea it was necessary to use the catapult as the aircraft were heavily laden with weapons, and the deck more crowded.

On 31 August 1951 HMAS *Sydney* departed Port Jackson for Korea with her Squadrons embarked, accompanied by HMAS *Tobruk*, where she undertook extensive operations on mainly the west coast in support of Operational Strangle – a strategy designed to deprive the North Koreans of transport, supply and infrastructure.

1953: HMAS *Sydney's* Second Korean Deployment

The Korean Armistice was signed on 27 July 1953, and shortly afterwards HMAS *Sydney* was deployed there for peace-keeping operations. In September, 850 and 805 Squadrons (Sea Furies) and 816 Squadron (Fireflies) embarked for work-up exercises.

On 19 October 1953 she sailed from Port Jackson for via Fremantle, Singapore and Hong Kong where she relieved HMS *Ocean,* embarking two 'Dragonfly' helicopters from that ship for SAR work. She departed Hong Kong on 12 November arriving at Sasebo, Japan on 16 November, where repair work was carried out on her aircraft catapult. Kure was reached on 20 November, and from there *Sydney* began her Korean operational patrols on 26 November 1953.

The Korean Peninsula patrols worked to a schedule, with Sea Fury and Firefly aircraft conducting flights along the cease-fire line and coast, interspersed with resupply calls at Kure and Sasebo. *Sydney* also visited several other Japanese ports and Hong Kong. This second tour was generally quiet, but marred by the death of two pilots from accidents, and the serious injury of an aircraft handler.

At the end of March 1954 *Sydney* completed her patrol duties and on 1 May collected 26 RN aircraft at Iwakuni for shipment to Singapore, calling via Hong Kong on the way. *Sydney* arrived at Singapore on 18 May where the RN aircraft were off-loaded, and six RAN Fireflies were collected. After calling at Fremantle and Melbourne *Sydney* arrived at Jervis Bay on 10 June where the squadrons flew off to RANAS Nowra. *Sydney* then berthed at Garden Island on 11 June 1954.

1954: Home Waters & SEATO Exercises

HMAS *Sydney* went into dry dock for a refit in June 1954, emerging in August and sailed for Jervis Bay to exercise with HMAS *Vengeance*, embarking 805 and 816 Squadrons and later 817. *Sydney* then steamed north to Hervey Bay, conducting exercises with fleet units, the Army and RAAF. After arriving at Manus Island on 3 October 1954 she exercised with SEATO forces, returning to Sydney following war games with the 4th Submarine Squadron and RAAF Lincolns and Canberra aircraft.

After replenishing at Sydney, she sailed for Melbourne – while passing Jervis Bay a Firefly from Nowra flew a sleeve target for gunnery practice. On 11 November flying exercises took place in Port Philip Bay, followed by a return to Sydney. On 18 and 25 November 1954, day-trip 'Shopwindows' were conducted outside Sydney Heads for press and VIP's with positive PR results.

***Above**. HMAS Sydney enduring a Korean winter during her first deployment to those waters. Although both the ship and the Carrier Air Group were new, she rapidly proved the professionalism of the fledgling Fleet Air Arm and won the respect of both the Royal Navy and the USN.*

1955: A Change for HMAS *Sydney*

On 22 April 1955, 805, 816 and 817 Squadrons disembarked to RANAS Nowra, heralding *Sydney's* change of role to a training ship. For the next 18 months she continued her training role in Australian waters, also calling on ports in SE Asia and New Zealand. On 13 March 1956 *Sydney* embarked 805 and 816 Squadrons for the last time, sailing to Hervey Bay for exercises before returning the squadrons to RANAS Nowra at the end of the month.

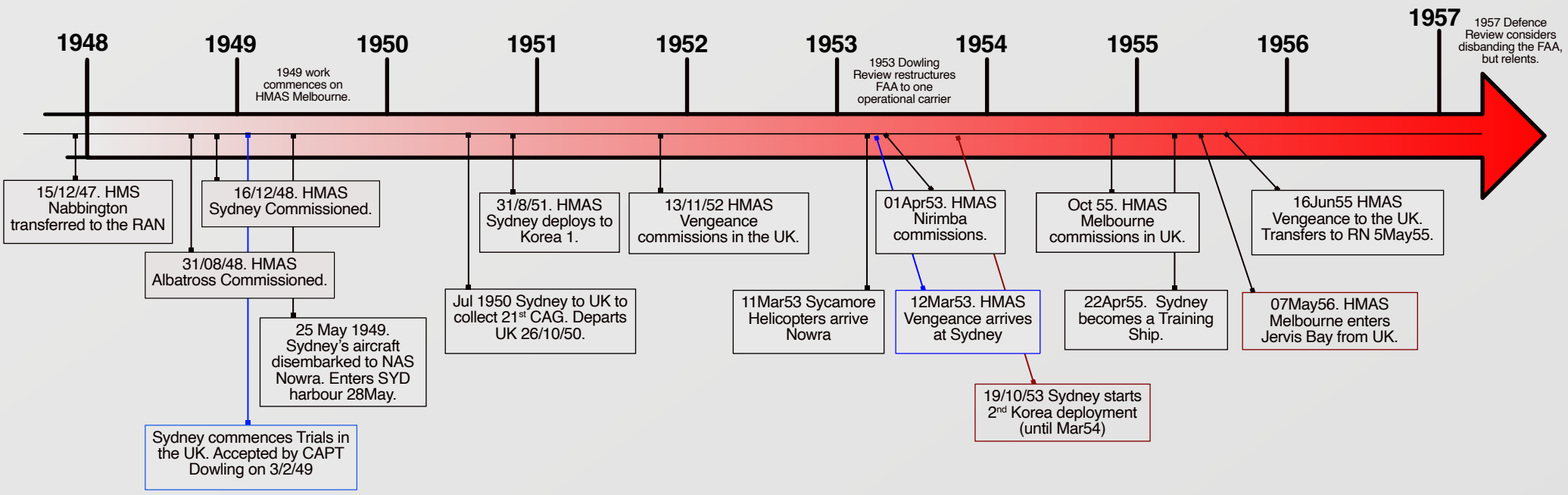
On 9 May 1956 HMAS *Melbourne* arrived in Australia; *Melbourne* replaced *Sydney* as Flagship three days later. For the next 12 months she remained in her training role, and in September 1956 participated in SEATO exercises off Singapore; then in December joined large scale exercises in the Timor Sea. During 1957 *Sydney* continued her training cruises until 30 May 1958, when she paid off into special reserve. In 1962, HMAS *Sydney* would resume service as a fast troop transport carrier for Vietnam.

1953-54: Restructuring the RAN FAA

In 1953, with the Korean War drawing to a close, the Australian government had called for cuts in Defence spending. To meet the RAN's budget, a committee led by Rear Admiral Dowling conducted a review, tabled in April 1953. The result was a plan that trimmed all parts of the RAN fleet, allowing it to contribute towards an Allied force but with its overall fleet reduced in size.

For the Fleet Air Arm, this meant cutting front-line squadrons from 48 to 40 aircraft and downsizing to one operational aircraft carrier; with 24 aircraft in peace time or 36 for a war complement. As the second carrier *Sydney* was to be downgraded to a (non-flying) training ship, so the need for two CAGs ended. The remaining CAG front-line squadrons would rotate between Nowra and HMAS *Melbourne*, which was due to arrive soon.

RAN Fleet Air Arm Timeline 1948-1957



Other cuts included abolishing the repair facilities at the second air base at Schofields, and cancelling the proposed modernisation of *Sydney* despite her achievements in Korea. The view was that with one carrier the FAA's priority should be anti-submarine work, a view expressed both in naval and political circles; so, in 1954 the FAA adopted a more focused ASW role.

While the cuts were a disappointment, the ongoing delays and mounting cost of modernising *Melbourne* troubled many in the RAN who objected to the FAA's claim on manpower and resources. Other problems arose from shortfalls in recruiting, rapid changes in technology, and huge advances in naval aviation, with bigger aircraft and carriers being the rule. The RAAF also exerted pressure, concerned that the RAN wanted to be 'a second air force'.

On the positive side *Melbourne* was being fitted with larger lifts, and angled flight deck, a mirror aided landing device, steam catapult and improved arrester wire system, making her 'state of the art'. Further, her forthcoming DH Sea Venom and Fairey Gannet aircraft would fit the anti-submarine role well. Meanwhile, on 18 June 1954, the RAN's first DH Vampire T22 jet trainer arrived at Nowra. The new concept of ASW helicopters with dunking sonar was also attracting attention.

RANAS Nowra & Schofields

In September 1951 construction work at HMAS *Albatross* (RANAS Nowra) suffered a setback when fierce winds wrecked 'H' hangar which was under construction. This was a time when *Albatross* – having gained much operational and training experience – was becoming an improved, fully-functional air station.

At Nowra, aside from the main Sea Fury and Firefly Squadrons, some of the early training aircraft included Tiger Moths, Wirraways, Winjeels, Austers, Dakotas, Sea Otters and for short time non-flying Spitfires and Vultee Vengeance for ground handling and fire-fighter training – then later dual-control Firefly trainers arrived.

In July 1951, the plan for the second Naval Air Station at Schofield NSW began taking shape, with an advance party arriving as the RAAF began to vacate the airfield. The RAN plan was to use Schofields as an aircraft storage area and maintenance yard; a technical training school; and a second airfield for one of the Carrier Air Groups. On 1 April 1953 Schofields was commissioned as HMAS *Nirimba,* but budget cuts meant the plan was never fully realised. The maintenance yard was short-lived, and with only one CAG there was no need for a second airfield. In 1955 *Nirimba* became the RAN Apprentice Training Establishment which trained some 13,000 personnel. It was subsequently decommissioned on 25 February 1994.

Jervis Bay Airfield & Bombing Range

Jervis Bay airfield is a satellite airfield about 26 km from RANAS Nowra. During WW2 it was used by the RAAF and the British Pacific Fleet, then transferred to the RAN in 1948. The FAA used it for emergency landings and aircrew training, but in later years the airstrip was used to operate pilotless target aircraft during fleet gunnery training.

On the northern side of Jervis Bay is the Beecroft Weapons Range (used by the Navy since the 1800s), where the FAA conducted live firing exercises. Sea Furies, Fairey Fireflies, Sea Venoms, and Gannets would fire 3-inch rockets, 20mm cannons (except Gannets), and the Sea Furies, Fireflies and Gannets would drop practice bombs. Observation huts accurately recorded the fall of shot. The 'Drum and Drumsticks', two small offshore stacks just off the coast, were another target.

1953: The Bristol Sycamore HR 50/51 Helicopters

The arrival of the Sycamore helicopters at Nowra on 11 March 1953 opened a new chapter for the FAA, becoming the starting point for the RAN's long and continuing engagement with helicopters. The first three Sycamores arrived on HMAS *Vengeance* and were delivered to 723 Squadron, replacing the Supermarine 309 Sea Otter amphibians used for search and rescue operations. Altogether the RAN purchased 13 Sycamores between 1953 and 1961, the last being deleted in 1965. Since then helicopters have played an increasingly important role in the RAN

The RAN Sycamores were fitted with a power winch and a stronger undercarriage. They were used for plane guard, Air Sea Rescue, utility duties, VIP transport; and to assist police and civil powers during natural disasters. Four RAN Sycamores were used during the 1955 Maitland floods, ranging as far afield as Walgett, Narrabri, and Dubbo, dropping supplies at isolated locations and rescuing many people. Unfortunately, one Sycamore crashed attempting to rescue two men from the roof of a flooded railway signal box. At sea the Sycamores served on HMAS *Vengeance*, *Sydney,* and *Melbourne;* their primary role being 'plane guard,' stationed near the carrier during landings and take-offs in case of an emergency; other duties included search and rescue tasks, photography, mail drops, and utility work. During the 1950s helicopters were still a novelty and the Sycamores attracted plenty of attention – one case during a rescue exercise in Fremantle Harbour *Melbourne* received an urgent call to cease as everyone on the docks had stopped work to watch the helicopter.

1953: HMAS *Vengeance* (1)

The 1947 RAN FAA plan called for two light-fleet carriers, the second being HMAS *Melbourne*, which was being modified in the UK. Because *Melbourne's* delivery date was delayed a loan Carrier, HMS *Vengeance*, was obtained from the RN and commissioned into the RAN as HMAS *Vengeance* (1), on 13 November 1952. She was a *Colossus* Class carrier that had served with the British Pacific Fleet in 1945, then with the home fleet and as an aircraft ferry and training ship. In 1949 *Vengeance* did trials in Arctic waters; returning to her aircraft ferry and training role. Then, in 1952, plans were made to transfer her to the RAN.

On 4 January 1953 the RAN crew readied *Vengeance* for sea to undertake arrester, catapult and crash barrier trials using Fairey Firefly and Grumman Avenger aircraft. On completion of the work-up and after embarking three Bristol Sycamore helicopters, the RAN's first, *Vengeance* sailed for the Irish Sea and the Clyde. At King George V Dock in Glasgow, she embarked 10 Sea Furies and 25 cocooned Fireflies together with 650 tons of freight.

On 21 January 1953, HMAS *Vengeance* sailed for Australia calling at Gibraltar, Malta, Aden, Colombo, Fremantle, and Melbourne. She un-

***Below**: Carrying the second batch of Sea Furies and Fireflies and over 650 tons of freight, HMAS Vengeance arrives at Fremantle in early 1953 on her journey from the UK. The ship was on loan from the Royal Navy whilst the RAN's second Majestic class carrier, HMAS Melbourne, was being completed.*

Originally earmarked for the second Korean deployment in mid 1953, Vengeance proved to be unsuitable for that role due to problems with her catapult. Aside from a brief period in the following year when she did escort duties for the 1954 Royal Tour, her service life in Australian waters was mainly as a training ship for General and National Service sailors. She was returned to the Royal Navy in August 1955, and was placed in Reserve before being sold to the Brazilian Navy. She had a long and illustrious career, taking the record as the longest-serving carrier in the world before she was finally decommissioned in 2001.

loaded her stores and aircraft at Jervis Bay on 10 March and sailed into Sydney the following day, ready for a three-month refit.

1954: Royal Escort & Return

In preparation for deployment to Korea *Vengeance* began exercises in June 1953 with 805 and 850 Squadron Sea Furies and 816 Squadron Fireflies, at Hervey Bay. While the work-up proceeded well it revealed several defects which made *Vengeance* unsuitable for front-line service in Korea – the most prominent being problems with the hydraulic catapult. In July 1953 it was announced that HMAS *Sydney* would do the second Korean deployment instead.

After *Vengeance* transferred her Squadrons to *Sydney* in September, she remained in Australian waters until assigned to escort the Royal Tour of Queen Elizabeth 11 and The Duke of Edinburgh, from February to April 1954.

In June 1954 *Vengeance* was reclassified as a training ship for National Service and General Service trainees. On 27 October she sailed for Iwakuni, Japan, where she embarked 24 aircraft from 77 Squadron RAAF for shipment to Australia. Departing on 19 November, she arrived at Sydney Harbour on 3 December, where she resumed her training role until May 1955, before completing a short refit ready for her return to the UK.

On 16 June 1955, *Vengeance* sailed from Sydney for the last time carrying the crew for *Melbourne.* She called in at Singapore and Malta to collect RN aircraft for the UK, and arrived in Plymouth on 5 August. Having ended her loan to the RAN, HMAS *Vengeance* reverted to HMS *Vengeance,* and was placed in reserve. Later she was sold to the Brazilian Navy, serving for many years as *Minas Gerais*. She was finally decommissioned in 2001 with the honour of being the oldest operational carrier in the world, and ended her days in an Indian shipbreaker's yard.

Praise for HMAS Albatross

On 9 April 1956, First Sea Lord, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten and Countess Mountbatten visited HMAS *Albatross*. On 11 April 1956, the Sydney 'Daily Telegraph' reported that 'Lord Mountbatten yesterday described the Naval Air Station HMAS *Albatross*, Nowra, as the smartest station he had had ever seen. "Of any type in any service, in any country," he said.' Of particular interest was that an RAN Gliding Club had been established at *Albatross* and both the Mountbattens enjoyed a ride in one of the gliders. At the time the air station was a hive of activity preparing for the arrival of the new de Havilland Sea Venoms and Fairey Gannet aircraft due in May 1956.

HMAS Melbourne (II)

On 28 October 1955, *Melbourne* was commissioned at Barrow-in-Furness; and in November she moved to Gladstone Dock, Liverpool, for a hull inspection. The next five months were spent carrying out acceptance trials on machinery and equipment; including flying-on and catapult trials with various aircraft in the English Channel and the Irish Sea. *Melbourne's* Carrier Air Group (CAG) had been formed at RNAS Culdrose earlier in the year, so 808 (Sea Venom FAW 53) and 816 and 817 (Fairey Gannet AS1) Squadrons spent time working-up with the ship.

To provide a break in its training routine HMAS *Melbourne* made a three-day visit to Le Havre, France on 20 January 1956. Sailing across the English Channel the ship encountered stormy weather which damaged two of the ship's motor cutters, requiring dockyard repairs. The trip was a rare visit to France by an Australian warship and was enjoyed by all – with excursions to Paris, the Normandy Beaches and other places, and over 1,300 French citizens visiting the ship. The HM Consul and Chairman of the French British Association rated the visit a tremendous success.

On 24 February 1956, at Portsmouth, HRH the Duke of Edinburgh landed a S-55 helicopter on *Melbourne's* flight deck, spending over three hours visiting the ship, addressing the crew, and taking a great interest in everything. Undoubtedly a highlight was his favourable comments about the 'internal appearance, cleanliness of the ship and smartness of its crew'.

1956: Melbourne Sails To Australia

On 8 March 1956, HMAS *Melbourne* entered the Clyde River, securing at King George V Dock in Glasgow. By 1700 on Friday 9 March 21 Gannets, 39 Sea Venoms, 2 Bristol Sycamore helicopters, one Avro 707 delta wing aircraft, one Gloster Meteor, eight Double Mamba (Gannet) engines and nine Ghost (Sea Venom) engines, together with a vast amount of freight had been embarked. This was achieved with the assistance of dockyard workers and RNAS *Abbotsinch* which had cocooned the aircraft for the voyage. On Sunday 11 March with all aircraft and freight loaded *Melbourne* slipped moorings and anchored downstream to secure the aircraft and stores. At 1100 on 12 March 1956 she sailed from the Clyde to begin her voyage to Australia.

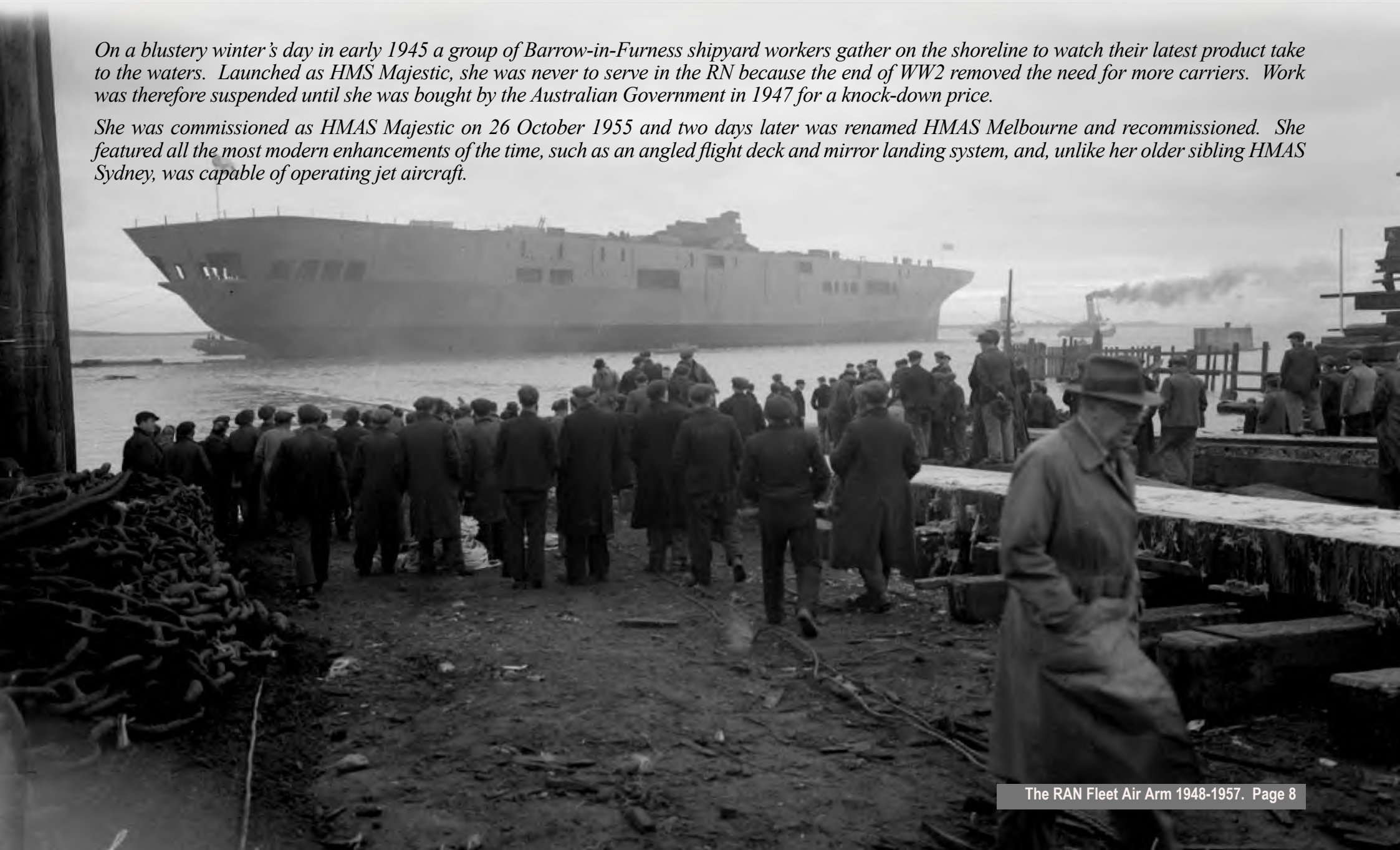
As all deck space was fully occupied flying was not possible. But *Melbourne* made calls at Gibraltar and Naples (where a group of 200 visited Rome and the Vatican including an audience with the Pope). Then Malta, Aden, Colombo, Fremantle and Melbourne.

Early on 7 May 1956 *Melbourne* anchored in Jervis Bay and at 0600 began the first phase of disembarking her aircraft for transportation to RANAS Nowra by road. This was the start of a new chapter for the RAN Fleet Air Arm as during the past year aircrew had undergone intensive training in Britain, and now was the time to bring all that hard work and the RAN's new carrier (the most modern of her class) into service. *Melbourne* arrived at Garden Island Dockyard, Sydney, on 9 May 1956.

On 14 May 1956, the Flag Officer Commanding the Australian Fleet (Rear Admiral HM Burrell CBE) transferred his flag from *Sydney* to *Melbourne.* On 24 May *Melbourne* entered Captain Cook Dock for a short refit where she remained until 13 June before moving to the Fitting Out Wharf at Garden Island.

On a blustery winter's day in early 1945 a group of Barrow-in-Furness shipyard workers gather on the shoreline to watch their latest product take to the waters. Launched as HMS Majestic, she was never to serve in the RN because the end of WW2 removed the need for more carriers. Work was therefore suspended until she was bought by the Australian Government in 1947 for a knock-down price.

She was commissioned as HMAS Majestic on 26 October 1955 and two days later was renamed HMAS Melbourne and recommissioned. She featured all the most modern enhancements of the time, such as an angled flight deck and mirror landing system, and, unlike her older sibling HMAS Sydney, was capable of operating jet aircraft.



Her decks crowded with Sea Venoms and Gannets, the brand new HMAS Melbourne transits through the Suez Canal in March of 1956 on her maiden voyage to Australia. By the time she arrived in Australia, she was the only operational carrier remaining in the RAN; Vengeance was back in Royal Navy hands, and Sydney had been reverted to a training ship.

The Sea Venoms & Gannets Arrive

As soon as the Sea Venom FAW 53s and Fairey Gannet AS1s were unloaded, the process of removing the cocooning material and preparing them for service began. These aircraft were the new front-line aircraft replacing the Sea Furies and Fireflies. The transition went smoothly as the Sea Venom and Gannet Squadrons had been commissioned in the UK in 1955 and were fully functional. With both aircraft types in service with the RN, they were a logical choice for the RAN FAA, being well suited to a light-fleet carrier such as *Melbourne* and meeting the RAN's operational needs at the time.

The de Havilland Sea Venom FAW 53 , was a jet-propelled, two-seat, day and night, all-weather, radar-equipped, interceptor/strike aircraft, with folding wings and strengthened undercarriage It had four 20mm cannons and could carry up to eight unguided air-to-surface rockets. The RAN acquired 39 Sea Venoms, serving with 808 and 805 the front-line squadrons and the training squadrons; they also formed the RAN's aerobatic team the 'Ramjets'. They remained in operational service until 1967, when they were replaced by the McDonnell-Douglas Skyhawks.

The Fairey Gannet AS1 was a hardy, radar equipped, anti-submarine/strike aircraft, with a Double Mamba turbo powerplant driving two contra-rotating propellers. The crew of pilot, observer/navigator and electronics operator had separate cockpits. Gannets could operate in adverse weather day or night. The bomb bay could carry Mk.30 homing torpedoes, other munitions, and sonar buoys. Wing stations carried bombs or up to 16 air-to-surface rockets. The RAN's 36 Gannets provided effective ASW service until replaced by the Westland Wessex and Grumman Tracker.

1956: Squadron Exercises & The Olympic Games

The immediate task for the Squadrons was to commence work-up exercises. On 23 July 1956, *Melbourne* sailed for Jervis Bay for an intensive day and night training program, with the her Air Group flying from Nowra for pre-embarkation practice. Exercises included touch-and-goes; arrested landings and flight deck drill; then catapult take-offs. This lengthy work-up period enabled pilots to re-qualify for deck landings. Also, to introduce new pilots to the mirror landing system, flight-deck drill, and the catapult. Two Bristol Sycamore helicopters embarked on *Melbourne* for plane guard duties and utility work.

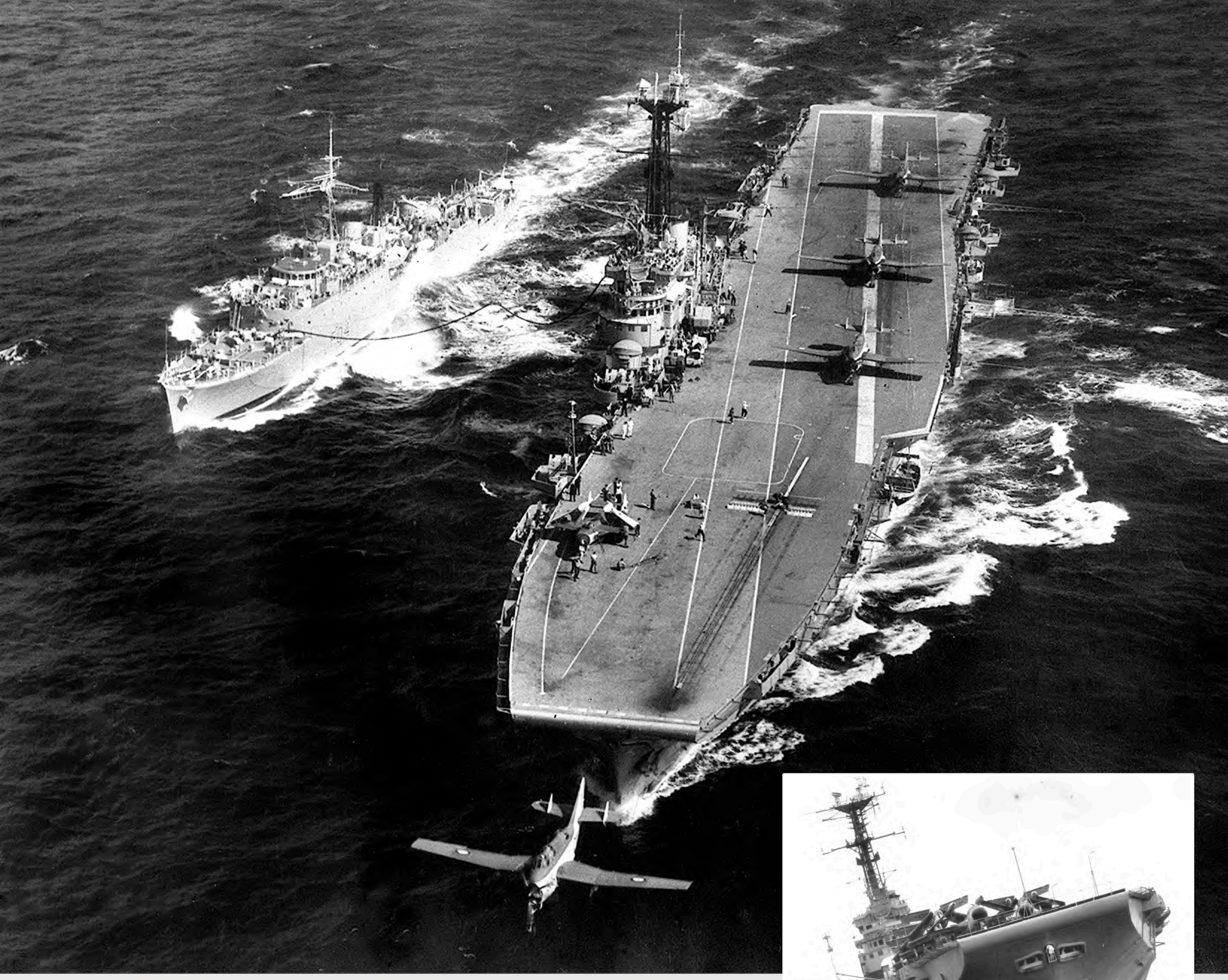
After the initial Jervis Bay program, the ship continued to Hervey Bay and the Whitsunday area for anti-submarine exercises. In September *Melbourne* sailed via Darwin to Singapore for SEATO exercises, including visits to Hong Kong and Manila, returning home via Rabaul and Brisbane to arrive home on 11 November 1956. After replenishing she proceeded south to Melbourne where she docked on 19 November. Here the ship's company assisted with marshalling and other duties during the Olympic Games, before departing on 7 December. Three days later she disembarked her squadrons to Nowra, then after full power trials, arrived at Sydney Harbour on the afternoon of the same day. *Melbourne* then went into dry dock for a month-long refit.

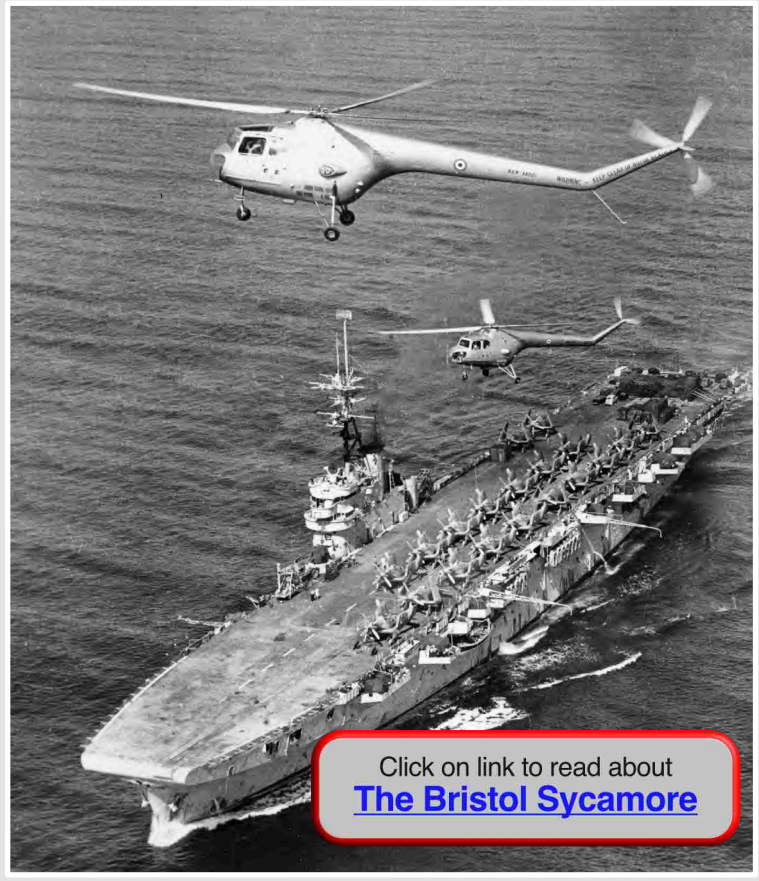
1957: HMAS *Melbourne* Sets The Pace

Melbourne sailed from Sydney on 29 January 1957 having completed her refit, replenishment and catapult loading trials. After proceeding to Jervis Bay on the 30th and 31st, she began an intensive flying program of touch and goes,

***Top**: The Royal Australian Navy chose the De Havilland Sea Venom (top) and the Fairey Gannet (**lower**) as its new front-line aircraft to replace the ageing Sea Fury and Firefly aircraft.*

This was a time when buying British was the norm, given the close relationship between the Royal Navy and RAN. The move to American hardware didn't occur until the next generation of aircraft, when the Grumman Tracker and Douglas Skyhawk got centre stage.





***Top**: HMAS Melbourne conducting flying operations whilst replenishing a frigate underway - an evolution that looked deceptively easy. A Gannet has just launched and a further three await their turn on the flight deck. Although it only had one catapult it was highly sophisticated, featuring loading chocks that had a set of rollers which centred the aircraft after it was stopped by the chocks. Once the strop and "holdback" were put in place by the handlers, the loading chocks were lowered and the aircraft allowed to roll forward until the holdback was restraining it but, while the catapult was being tensioned up a further set of "breakout" chocks prevented the aircraft rolling forward if the holdback broke prematurely. This arrangement allowed the Melbourne to launch aircraft as fast as most carriers with two catapults. **Middle**. The ship conducting heeling trials. **Lower**. Two Sycamore helicopters overfly the ship. The Sycamores were modest by today's standards, but launched the Fleet Air Arm into rotary wing operations, which ultimately became its future.*

arrested landing and catapult launchings. Wind conditions were ideal for the period and 808, 816 and 817 squadrons worked-up to the fullest. During the two-day day/night trials a total of 395 touch and goes and landings were completed.

On 1 February 1957 *Melbourne* with *Warramunga* as plane guard proceeded to Hobart for the Regatta. On route day and night flying exercises continued and at Hobart the Sycamore helicopter performed rescue demonstrations. On departure 11 Gannets and 6 Sea Venoms did a flypast over Hobart. *Melbourne* then set sail for New Zealand with *Quadrant* as plane guard and in fine weather the squadrons bombed and strafed a splash target. On 16 February the ship entered Milford Sound departing in the afternoon for night flying. After berthing at Otago on 18 February the ship was visited by more than 7,000 children from local schools and nurseries.

Exercises with HMNZS *Royalist* and other NZ fleet units were conducted together with the squadrons before and after visiting Wellington. Sailing for Auckland, greetings were exchanged with several passing USN destroyers. More rocket, strafing and bombing was to follow on the return to Jervis Bay where the Sea Venoms were disembarked for Nowra due to a structural fault. After replenishing at Sydney on 18 March, *Melbourne* deployed for a five-month journey, sailing via Adelaide and Fremantle to Singapore. In April 1957, while in SE Asian waters the ship participated in Operation Trade Wind and Astra, conducting further SEATO exercises in the Gulf of Thailand. During this time intensive ASW exercises were also undertake with other navies, including along the coast of North Borneo.

In May *Melbourne* visited Hong Kong for self-maintenance and replenishment returning for additional exercises in the South China Sea. It was at this time that Sycamore XL507 ditched due to an engine failure, with the crew rescued safely. After returning to Hong Kong in June, *Melbourne* began her return journey to Australia via Singapore, Darwin, Cairns and Brisbane arriving at Jervis Bay in 11 July to disembark the Gannets before berthing at Garden Island on 12 July 1957, ready for a lengthy refit. Three months later she departed Sydney Harbour for Jervis Bay where she re-embarked the Gannet squadrons and two Sea Venoms (the first Sea Venoms in seven months). Again, the aircraft began an intensive work-up before sailing for Adelaide and Melbourne with further ASW exercises including 'Shopwindow' demonstrations.

1957: Captain VAT Smith at RANAS Nowra

On 14 January 1957 Captain VAT Smith was appointed Commanding Officer of HMAS *Albatross*. This was of special interest as he had been involved in the 1944-46 RN British Pacific Fleet plan to use Nowra as an air base.

His three-year term at *Albatross* was busy with the new front-line squadrons, pilot training and helicopter instruction; including observer training in Dakotas converted to flying classrooms. A new control tower was on the drawing board; technical workshops were being installed, and maintainer training was in full swing. Captain Smith was well acquainted with FAA operations, bringing experience and energy to the task, boosting morale and esprit de corps. Friday afternoon gardening also improved the look of the station. After inspecting the base Rear Admiral D.H. Harrie said, '*Albatross* is a shining example of the service at its best.'

This was a time when the FAA was brimming with energy and confidence. Many of the RN FAA personnel on loan during formation of the FAA had transferred to the RAN permanently. The School of Aircraft Maintenance Engineering (SAME) was now producing a steady stream of Australian maintainers, and with aircrew training apace, there was an air of confidence and self-reliance. Yet, far reaching changes were about to alter the course of the FAA.

1957: Facing The Future

As the heat of the 'Cold War' subsided the FAA came under the scrutiny of the 1957 Defence Review which called for the abolition of the FAA. Fortunately, that idea was short-lived in favour of ordering Westland Wessex ASW helicopters. Beside SEATO and other commitments, the unstable strategic environment in SE Asia led the government to decide to modernise HMAS *Melbourne* and to replace the Sea Venoms and Gannets with Skyhawk and Tracker aircraft, thus enabling the RAN to retain its strike capability into the early 1980s. It was then that the hammer was to fall.

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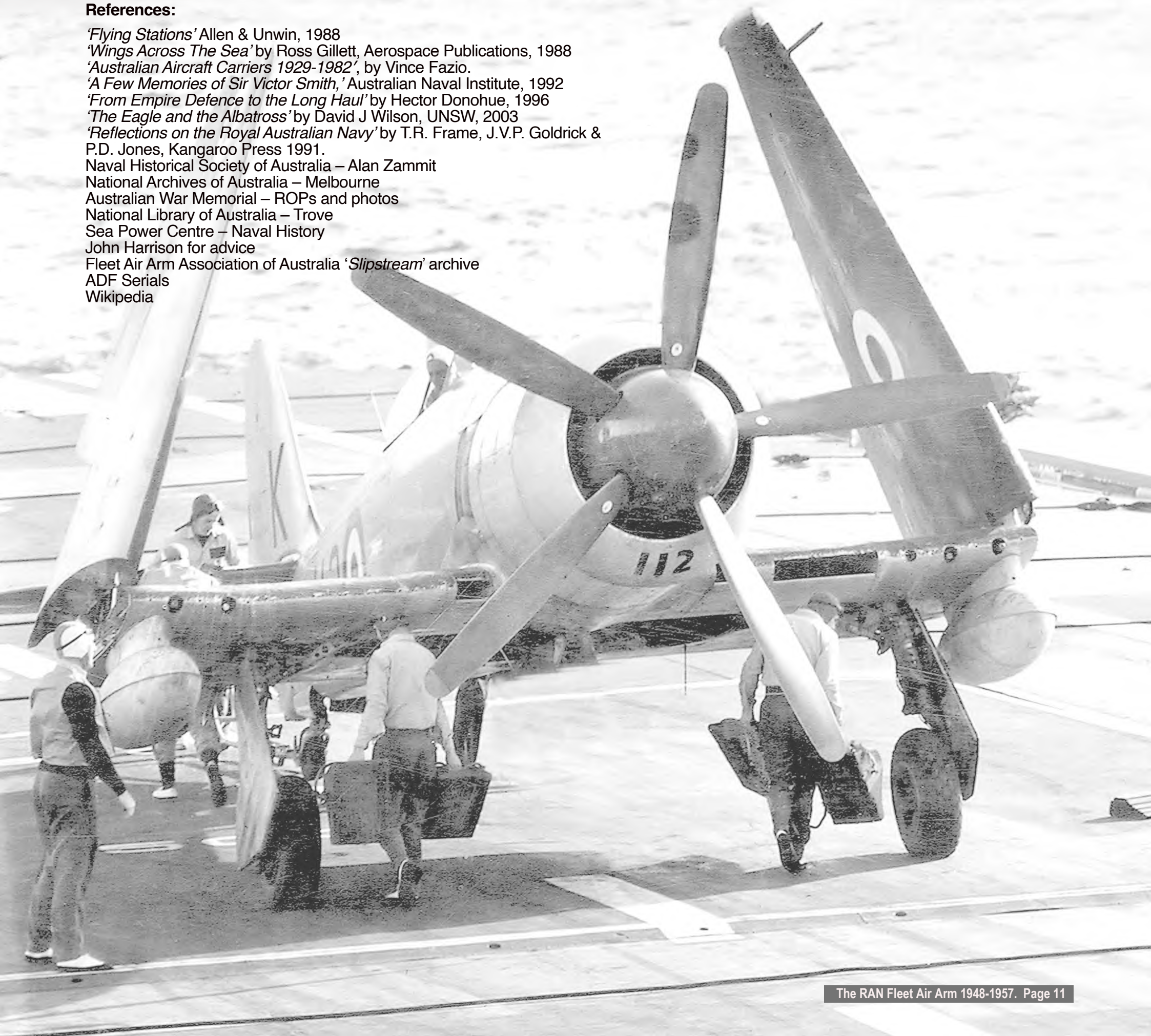
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