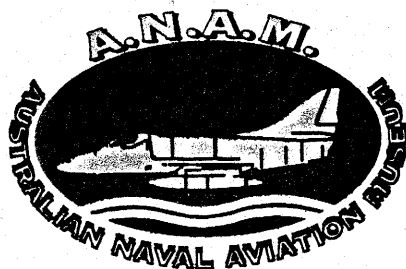


EAA Reunion

28 October - 3 November 1998



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HISTORY OF NAVAL AVIATION

In 1910 shipborne aviation commenced with a civilian pilot: Eugene Ely who launched from USS *Birmingham* – he touched the water but kept going.

In 1911 he recorded the first deck landing on USS *Pennsylvania*. He used a crude arrestor system of 22 wires with sandbags attached. The ship was supposed to have been underway but the harbour (San Francisco) was too crowded.

By 1912 the French, Japanese and Italians had converted ships for naval aviation. The Germans stuck to balloons! – ZEPPELINS.

Britain had called for volunteers to fly – among which were Australians – the most famous of these was Arthur Longmore from Sydney.

HMS *Africa* was converted in 1912 and the Royal Naval Air Service was in business by mid 1912.

Henry Busteed – an Australian joined the RNAS and developed the early aircraft carrier arrestor system.

Naval aviation developed rapidly during WWI with float planes – lowered over the side or catapulted off ships fitted with ramps – hoisted back on board on completion. Unfortunately, performance was poor and although excellent surveillance aircraft they were not effective as fighters. Additionally, they were dependant on calm seas to operate.

Trials were conducted with wheeled aircraft mounted and platforms erected over revolving gun turrets. Aircraft ditched near a friendly ship at the end of operations. Performance was vastly improved but aircraft replacements were hard to come by when the ship was at sea. Sopwith Baby, Pup and Camel and 1.5 stutters were some of the aircraft used.

The Seaplane gradually took over seaborne operations – mainly surveillance.

HMS *Furious* was converted with a flush deck forward of the bridge in mid 1917, which was not successful. Commander Earnest Dunning lost his life attempting to land.

HMS *Argus* a converted liner joined the Fleet in 1918. HMS *Hermes* was the first British purpose built carrier.

HMAS *Australia* was the first RAN ship to launch an aircraft from her deck (FLT Fox) on 18 December 1917. She tested the first gun turret platforms in early 1918 – she normally carried two aircraft – forward and midships.

FLT Cyril Sharwood may have been the first and only pilot to down an enemy aircraft from an Australian cruiser in June 1918. He could not confirm the kill.

At the end of WWI the Royal Navy were the undisputed leaders in Naval aviation but because of/despite this the RN lost its aviation arm to the newly formed RAF – culminating bitter disputes at staff level and rivalry that rages today. The RAF was formed on 1 April 1918.

The RAAF was formed on 31 March 1921 and the revival of any form of an Australian Naval Air Arm was squashed.

Despite this the RAN obtained approval to purchase 6 Fairey IIIDs in the early 1920's, albeit flown by the RAAF to operate from ships.

In April 1926 HMAS *Albatross*, a seaplane carrier was laid down at Cockatoo Island in Sydney. A British design, it was proposed to use the Fairey IIID embarked but they were phased out of RAAF service before the ship was operational.

Seagull 3's were ordered and because they were not stressed for catapult operations one was not fitted to the ship until much later on. The depression saw the ship laid up in 1933. Recommissioned to an unremarkable career, she was laid up before the aircraft specifically designed for her – the Seagull V (Walrus) – was delivered to the RAAF.

However, detachments of this aircraft from 101 Squadron RAAF were to serve the RAN cruiser force from 1938, when *Albatross* was traded in to the RN in part payment for HMS *Apollo* (HMAS *Hobart*), to almost throughout WWII. (Our book 'HMAS ALBATROSS – A Collection of Memories' covers the history of the ship and ALBATROSS the base, written to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Air Station).

The role of aircraft carriers and air groups was well established during WWII with the battles of Taranto, Pearl Harbour, Coral Sea, Midway, North Atlantic and many other clashes, and operational advances in this mode of warfare were phenomenal.

The first documented move by the RAN to acquire a fixed wing carrier force was in 1944 when the then CNS presented his submission to the War Council. He was after a gift of aircraft carriers from the Royal Navy.

Towards the end of WWII the Royal Navy established a number of airfield facilities throughout Australia – called MONAB's – Mobile Naval Air Bases. There were 11 in all, of which HMS NABBINGTON was the most significant. Later to be commissioned HMAS ALBATROSS, the Royal Navy used the base for carrier work up training and significantly, aerial torpedo training in Jervis Bay – hence the BTU road from the base to the highway south (British Torpedo Unit).

Nowra airfield was originally designated as a civilian facility to service the South Coast NSW in 1937. It was taken over by the RAAF at the outbreak of WWII and transferred to the Royal Navy in mid 1944.

The RN departed in early 1946 after the cessation of Japanese hostilities.

In the meantime (October 1945) the carrier acquisition debate had increased to the extent that a project officer was to be sent to England to evaluate the RAN Naval air requirements for a Fleet Air Arm and to propose a plan based on the then current RN organisation. That officer was VAT Smith – then a LCDR.

The naval aviation plan submitted by VAT required 2 ex British Light Fleet Carriers, 3 Carrier Air Groups and 2 Naval Air Stations. Recruitment was to be achieved by volunteers from General Service, civilians and experienced FAA personnel from the RN. In effect, the early FAA consisted of almost 50% of ex RN personnel. The plan was approved in August 1947. *Majestic* and *Terrible* were acquired, to be renamed *Melbourne* and *Sydney* and two CAG's (only) were formed – 20th and 21st – in the UK. Two Naval Air Bases were identified, Nowra and Schofields, for support and training. Initial technical and aircrew training courses were carried out in the UK – it was only later when the USN quoted their charges for training that the full value of RN low cost training was appreciated.

These initial crews were to man the carriers on their maiden voyage to Australia and form the nucleus of experience in the fledgling RAN FAA.

As it was the initial units commissioned in 1948:

- 20th CAG (805 Squadron, Sea Furies and 816 Squadron Fireflies), 28 August in Northern Ireland
- HMAS ALBATROSS, 31 August at Nowra NSW
- HMAS SYDNEY, 16 December in Devonport UK

HMAS *Melbourne* was delayed until 1956 to have modifications carried out. The 21st CAG was commissioned in the UK in April 1950 as originally planned, with 808 Squadron (Sea Furies) and 817 Squadron (Fireflies).

Sydney arrived in Jervis Bay 25 May 1949 with her deck cargo of 54 aircraft, stores, and squadron personnel to be offloaded by lighter and transported by road to ALBATROSS which was hastily being prepared for their arrival. The two Sea Otters were lowered over the side and flew off to Nowra and were, therefore, the first RAN aircraft to operate from Nowra.

The 20th CAG embarked operationally for the first time in August 1949 – a remarkable achievement, considering the mammoth task of setting up a FAA from nothing.

The 21st CAG commissioned in early 1950 and embarked as deck cargo on *Sydney* which had been sent back to the UK for this purpose – despite ominous war cries from Indo China.

Sydney arrived back in Jervis Bay in December 1950 and repeated the disembarkation exercise – it took just 24 hours to disembark 58 Sea Furies and Fireflies by lighter.

In the meantime the Korean War had commenced and the RN carriers were being worn out and badly in need of replacements. *Sydney* eventually sailed for Korea, 31 August 1951, and 8 days later relieved HMS *Glory* at Kure.

The Korean War is a subject all of its own, but suffice to say that *Sydney* broke all records and significantly her air group helped to 'strangle' the lower airspace over Korea.

In Australia the single carrier operating deficiencies had created the argument for a loan carrier, pending *Melbourne's* arrival.

With the war over *Sydney* returned to relative mundane training operations Schofields was proving difficult to acquire as the RAAF were not keen to lose it. It finally commissioned as the technical training base HMAS NIRIMBA on 1 April 1953.

HMS *Vengeance* was eventually loaned to the RAN and arrived in Australia in March 1953 with a cargo of cocooned Fireflies, Sea Furies and three Sycamore helicopters. The helicopters were to play a significant SAR role in saving lives during the 1950's floods. *Vengeance* was to fulfill the role of the Aviation Training Ship.

Replacement aircraft acquisitions were already being considered in the early 1950's, as the RN were ordering the Gannet and Venom. *Melbourne* was to be equipped with this new suite of aircraft on commissioning.

In 1953 jet fighters were the darlings of the Admirals and politicians – especially after the successful USN experience in Korea – and they were a must for the new FAA.

Vengeance handed over the training role to *Sydney* and sailed for England to be returned to the RN in May 1955, with a ships company that was to be transferred to commission *Melbourne*.

Melbourne set sail for Australia with her three squadrons (808 – Venoms, 816 and 817 Gannets) as the first operational carrier in the world to have a steam catapult, angled deck and mirror landing system fitted – she arrived in Sydney amid considerable fanfare in May 1956, having first disembarked most of her air group of 39 Venoms and 37 Gannets in Jervis Bay.

Melbourne embarked her Air Group in August 1956 and she began a career that was not without its controversy but she also enjoyed a great professional reputation throughout the worlds FAA fraternity. Fixed wing carrier operations reached a crossroads in 1959 when there was serious talk of disbandment, planned for 1963, when a major and expensive upgrade was required. Decisions were being made to reduce the FAA to a helicopter ASW force, with the planned acquisition of 27 Wessex helicopters in 1961. There followed an unsettled four year period of uncertainty. However, *Melbourne* continued to operate successfully in major international exercises across the world and achieved her 20,000 deck landing in April 1963. It was about this time that a carrier borne fixed wing reprieve was in sight and through supreme

hard work and lobbying by central staffs it was to survive numerous crisis, and was the main core of Australia's Defence structure for a further 20 years.

At 2056 Monday 10 February 1964 during a night flying training exercise *Melbourne* and *Voyager* collided. It was a disaster of monumental proportions.

In 1965 HMAS *Sydney* was converted to a troop carrying role and was to be used during the Vietnam conflict with great affect.

Replacement aircraft was debated at length and the decision was made to move away from traditional British acquisition to procurement from the US.

HMAS *Melbourne* collected the new suite of aircraft, Trackers and Skyhawks, in November 1967 – the A4's being decanted off by lighter in Jervis Bay in a repeat of previous routines and the Trackers were offloaded in Sydney. So commenced a new era of operations under the NATOPS principles, adopted and perfected by the very professional USN.

The Vietnam war involved the FAA when in October 1967 the first of four 12 month contingents of the 'Helicopter Flight – Vietnam' was formed and integrated into the US Army 135 Assault Helicopter Company, based ashore in South Vietnam. It was a harrowing experience for aircrew and groundcrew alike with many fatalities and wounded in operations that were extremely close up to the enemy lines and in permanent hostile environments. The RAN Helicopter Flight Vietnam was disbanded in June 1970 ending a remarkable RAN FAA chapter.

HMAS *Sydney* carried out 24 deployments to South Vietnam over the period. Meanwhile *Melbourne* was working up her new Air Group – 805 Squadron (Skyhawks), 816 Squadron (Trackers) and 817 Squadron (Wessex), which had embarked in April 1969, and continued her peace time training in major exercises through SE Asia.

At 3.15am 2 June 1969 *Melbourne* and the USS *Frank E Evans* collided in another major disaster which 74 American sailors lost their lives. *Melbourne* was now being called a jinx ship.

In the late 60's early 70's HS 748's replaced the ageing Dakotas, Sea Kings were ordered to replace the Wessex in the ASW role and the Bell 206 was acquired to replace the Scout in the surveying support role on HMAS *Moresby*. The Macchi trainer relieved the Vampire and Sea Venom as a basic jet trainer.

In 1973 *Sydney* carried out her last Vung Tau Ferry run and it was decided to pay her off with no replacement.

The Christmas leave period 1974 was significantly uninterrupted when Cyclone Tracy struck Darwin and the Fleet and Squadrons were called out to assist. What transpired was an extraordinary feat of support by *Melbourne* and her helicopters, and fixed wing aircraft from Nowra. They combined to keep the city alive during the recovery of a devastated city.

In the mid 70's the debate to replace *Melbourne* gained momentum and in an extraordinary events of twists and turns it was finally decided that she was to go, without replacement and fixed wing carrier borne operations were to cease in 1982. The squadrons continued operations from Nowra until 805, 724, and 851 were finally disbanded in August 1984.

The FAA began a new phase of predominantly helicopter operations from small ships and the continuation of peace keeping duties abroad. The HS 748 remained for ECM training. In 1984 Seahawk helicopters were ordered and delivered in 1989. Just in time to take a prominent part in Australia's commitment to the Gulf War.

In early 1990 the RAN Task Force arrived in the Gulf of Oman and commenced operations to impose a trade embargo of Iraqi ports.

The Squirrel and Seahawk helicopters embarked in *Success* and FFG's were thrust into a war environment ill prepared (the Seahawk was still being evaluated), and used the hostilities to perfect operational techniques and evaluate newly acquired weapons. As part of the Midway battle group, valuable lessons were learned operating the Seahawk/FFG combination.

Elsewhere RAN helicopters were making headlines carrying out daring rescue missions an assisting in flood relief in one extreme, to bush fires in another.

In January 1997 the Kaman Super Seasprite and Penguin air to surface missile system was ordered for the ANZAC Frigate, entering the RAN into yet another era of helicopter operations.

Today the RAN is complemented with three squadrons:

816 Squadron with 16 ASW Seahawk helicopters primarily to embark on FFG's;

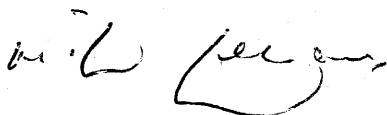
817 Squadron with 8 Sea Kings now converted to the medium lift utility role and;

723 Squadron with a mixture of 6 Squirrel helicopters for training, 5 Bell 206's for Survey duties and training and, 2 HS 748's for ECM training.

Additionally, at HMAS ALBATROSS is No 2 Squadron, a RNZAF Skyhawk Unit on contract to the ADF for Fleet Support and Air Defence training duties and;

Pel Air, a civil contractor operating Lear Jets also on contact for Fleet Support duties.

The Fleet Air Arm is alive and well.



Mike Lehan
Museum Director

28 April 1998