

Foreword

Few changes in naval warfare have been as all-embracing as the role played by the aircraft carrier. It is undoubtedly the most impressive and, at the same time, the most controversial manifestation of sea power. From experiments conducted by Britain before 1914, the aircraft carrier rose to pre-eminence during and after the Second World War following its eclipse of the battleship as the principal capital ship in the world's navies.

The Royal Australian Navy's dalliance with aircraft at sea dates as far back as 1917 when the light cruiser HMAS *Brisbane* embarked a Sopwith seaplane for use in the hunt for a German armed merchant cruiser in the Indian Ocean. Although the Australian Naval Board decided to construct a purpose-built seaplane carrier in 1925, the locally built HMAS *Albatross* was only destined to spend four years in RAN service. As a consequence of the Great Depression, *Albatross* was transferred to the Royal Navy, in part payment for the new cruiser HMAS *Hobart* in 1933. While its cruisers continued to operate seaplanes, this ended the RAN's first active participation in the arcane and stimulating art of operating aircraft from purpose-built ships.

Although Churchill made the offer of a light fleet carrier during the war in the Pacific in 1944, and the British Admiralty offered the RAN two light fleet carriers for the price of one in 1946, it was not until mid-1947 that a decision was finally taken to introduce carriers into the Australian Fleet. The acquisition of two light fleet carriers and the establishment of a Fleet Air Arm, as part of Australia's post-war Defence Plan, added a whole new dimension to the RAN's sea control capability. It was undoubtedly one of the most significant developments in the RAN's history.

From the arrival of HMAS *Sydney* in 1948, until 1983 when the Australian government finally decided not to replace HMAS *Melbourne*, the aircraft carrier formed the core component of the Australian Fleet. Its place in defence strategy and the force structure seemed relatively secure. But, as Commodore Donohue has argued, the significant decision to introduce naval air power was made without any real consideration of other force structure implications. This would ultimately distort the RAN force structure for more than three decades.

After the arrival of *Sydney*, the development of the RAN's naval aviation capabilities became the RAN's highest priority until the Korean

War intervened. The war waged by *Sydney* in Korean waters demonstrated the versatility of an aircraft carrier beyond the sea control role for which carriers had been acquired and involved the RAN in naval power projection operations. And significantly, the commitment of a carrier to the Korean War gave Australia the distinction of being the third nation, after the U.S. and Britain, to gain operational experience with aircraft carriers in the post-war period.

But, while the Korean War was being fought, naval aviation was undergoing fundamental changes, the operation of jet aircraft at sea being the most significant development. This was quickly followed by the introduction of three crucial devices by the Royal Navy – the steam catapult, the angled flight deck, and the mirror landing aid. This made it possible for light fleet carriers to operate modern high-performance jet aircraft. As a result, delivery of Australia's second carrier, HMAS *Melbourne*, was significantly delayed while these improvements in aircraft carrier design were incorporated.

It was not long, however, before this new centrepiece of the Australian Fleet was found to be unsustainable. As a result, the two-carrier plan was dropped to save money. By 1959, even the future of Australia's only remaining operational carrier, HMAS *Melbourne*, was looking bleak. Largely based on cost considerations, the Australian Government was actively considering phasing-out fixed wing naval aviation altogether. This thinking was, however, reversed not long afterwards. There was a growing concern that Australia needed a capability for independent operations in defence of Australian interests, at least until help from powerful friends arrived. The 1960s was consequently characterized by steady growth in Australia's independent maritime capability. This included the acquisition of new naval aircraft for *Melbourne* for sea control and power projection missions.

By the 1970s, the United States, like Britain before it, made it clear that Australia had to look after itself. The RAN argued that strategic guidance demanded credibility in the maintenance of a naval presence, the conduct of sustained naval operations, and a shift of force balance towards naval offensive capability. It saw the core of the required naval force based around two carriers. This was, however, at odds with the new Whitlam Labor Government's policy of minimizing defence expenditure and concentrating on defending continental Australia.

With a change of government in 1975, the new Fraser government reverted to a more outward looking defence policy. It was favourably disposed towards acquiring a new carrier to replace *Melbourne* which was rapidly nearing the end of her useful life. As a result, the decision was finally made to acquire a new purpose-designed helicopter carrier with

the potential to operate STOVL aircraft in a sea control role. (A Short Take-off and Vertical Landing aircraft is a fixed-wing plane that is able to take off from a short runway and land vertically.) This decision was, however, greeted by much resistance, and it stimulated detailed public enquiry, intense and prolonged parliamentary debate, and caustic inter-service rivalry.

This decision was reconsidered in mid-1981 following an offer from Britain to sell the new but surplus British STOVL carrier HMS *Invincible* to Australia at a substantially reduced price following British defence cuts. This offer was accepted by the Australian Government. The major refit planned for *Melbourne* was immediately cancelled. And she was paid-off into contingency reserve to free up personnel for *Invincible* which was planned to commission in 1983 and be renamed HMAS *Australia*.

Arrangements to take over *Invincible* had scarcely begun when the Falklands conflict occurred in the South Atlantic. By this time, the Australian government was facing significant budgetary woes. With some relief it offered to forego the purchase of *Invincible* if the Royal Navy wished to retain the ship. This offer was quickly accepted, and the sale was cancelled.

Following this unexpected setback, the search for a replacement for *Melbourne*, which languished in reserve, resumed. But politics finally intervened. One of the first moves of the new Hawke Labor Government in 1983, which firmly believed that the capability represented by an aircraft carrier was not needed, was to announce that *Melbourne* would not be replaced. This brought to an end an important era in the RAN's history and ended one of the most bitter and long-running debates on the structure of the Australian Defence Force.

In retrospect, the long battle to maintain a carrier force was always the victim of attempting to do too much with inadequate resources. But cost and resources alone can obscure the fundamental reordering of Australia's defence posture and strategic thinking which significantly contributed to the decision not to replace *Melbourne*. Following the painful loss of *Melbourne*, the RAN was forced to come to grips with effectively operating and developing a fleet without a carrier. This required shifting its emphasis from fixed wing aviation to helicopters operating predominantly from frigates and, more recently, versatile flat top amphibious assault ships, which are now substantially larger than the light fleet carriers covered in the pages of this highly commended book.

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