1913 - AUSTRALIA'S FIRST BLUE-WATER FLEET

Australia celebrates 1 March 1901, the day all existing naval forces passed from state to Commonwealth government control, as the birth of the newly federated nation's navy. Since Charles Bean first published his stories of the Anzac landings, Australians have also understood that 'In no unreal sense it was on the 25th of April 1915 that the consciousness of Australian nationhood was born.'[1] However, eighteen months before Gallipoli, on 4 October 1913, an event took place that was described in very similar terms, representing not only the 'promise of Federation' but also the nation's 'coming of age'.[2] On that day, directly following its ceremonial entry into Sydney Harbour, the newly arrived Australian 'Fleet Unit' officially assumed responsibility for the defence of Australian interests in Australian waters.

The new RAN flagship, HMAS Australia*, leads the Fleet Unit into Sydney Harbour on 4 October 1913.* (Percy Spence - Courtesy of the Bridgeman Art Library)

The Royal Navy of the early 20th century was the world's pre-eminent maritime force, and by 1913 had been the foundation of Australia's defence for 125 years. By the late-19th century maritime strategists viewed the Empire's security as being guaranteed by an unrivalled battlefleet based in Europe. Any potential enemy would be defeated in a decisive naval battle in northern waters, leaving little scope to deploy any real power against Britain's overseas dependencies. The only credible threat against the outer empire would come from raiding cruisers operating independently against British sea lines of communication. To deal with this possibility, the Admiralty had developed a global system of naval stations fielding modest, detached squadrons of warships. The Australian Station had been defended by one such squadron since 1859.

In essence, the British Admiralty believed in the indivisibility of the oceans and therefore saw the key to its continued dominion as a single, world-wide imperial navy controlled from London. There seemed little point in purely defensive sea-going forces, and for some years the British had actively discouraged any Australian colonial desire to acquire their own warships. It was feared that such forces would become a financial drain, neither suited for a global strategy, nor maintained at British standards of efficiency. Moreover, not only would independent ships be practically useless in war, but a colonial gunboat might easily precipitate an unwanted crisis through being viewed as a representative of the Imperial government.

As Australian trade and wealth increased, doubts among its citizens began to surface. What would happen in an emergency if the warships of the Royal Navy's Australian Squadron were deployed away from Australian waters? Would local cities and vital trade be left exposed to danger? Australian participation in naval affairs began in the 1860s with the creation of small colonial defence forces for coastal and harbour defence. But, as the Admiralty had warned, local authorities found it difficult to keep the ships fully effective.

Following an 1887 agreement between the colonial and imperial governments, Australia and New Zealand also began paying a subsidy towards the maintenance of a second modest Royal Navy force, known as the Auxiliary Squadron, which would be employed exclusively in Australasian waters. However, any semblance of local control over these assets ended with another formal agreement, signed in 1903, which saw the Auxiliary and Australian squadrons combined, and expected to reinforce the China and East Indies stations in wartime.

It was at this point that the new Australian nation's political aspirations began to match the advocacy of Australia's navalists. Led by men such as Captain William Creswell, calls grew louder for the creation of a substantial Australian manned and controlled naval force, capable of future expansion. But although the idea of an independent and effective Australian navy gained greater political acceptance, six changes of government between Federation and 1909 made policy formulation difficult.

Nevertheless, on 5 February 1909, Prime Minister Andrew Fisher took an important first step by ordering two River class torpedo boat destroyers from British shipyards. A third destroyer was also ordered, but on completion it was to be deconstructed and shipped to Australia. Reassembled at Cockatoo Island Dockyard in Sydney, the experience gained was expected to greatly assist in establishing a local shipbuilding capability. The three destroyers were intended to be the first members of a larger coastal defence flotilla, but it was at this point that external events re-directed Australian attention.

In March 1909, it became public knowledge that Germany's battleship building program had placed British supremacy in the North Sea under significant threat. Imperial sentiment was strong, and New Zealand offered to fund the immediate construction of a battleship for the Royal Navy, and a second if considered necessary. New South Wales and Victoria offered their own contribution if Australian did not match the New Zealand offer. Canada too, sought to help. The confusion of schemes resulted in a hastily convened imperial defence conference held in London during July and August.

To save costs, and allow for its own strategic concentration in the North Sea, the Admiralty had already been gradually modifying its opinion on the value of dominion navies. At the imperial conference, the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John 'Jackie' Fisher presented a coordinated naval scheme that no one had expected. Plans for small self-contained coastal forces, he deemed, would lead nowhere. Instead, he tabled a proposal for what he termed a 'Fleet Unit', suited particularly to match Australian aspirations, but applicable to most other dominions as well.

Fisher defined the Fleet Unit as being the smallest composition of warships manageable in peacetime, but still capable of use in its component parts in time of war. It would be a microcosm of a traditional fleet, consisting of a balanced selection of small-, medium- and large-sized warships and their supporting auxiliaries. As a tactical formation, the Fleet Unit would be centred on a new type of fast, heavily-armed, but lightly-armoured capital ship of Fisher's design that came to be known as a battlecruiser. Not intended for the line of battle, the battlecruiser was well suited to defending trade in the outer empire; able to either outrun or outgun any opponent likely to be fielded by an enemy.

The Fleet Unit's other warfighting components would comprise three light cruisers to act as scouts and a flotilla of six destroyers to provide both coastal defence and screen the larger units when necessary. A flotilla of three submarines rounded off the force structure, offering the ability to conduct torpedo attacks on a stronger enemy during the day, while the destroyers filled a similar function at night.

Such a force represented a far more ambitious undertaking than any previous Australian proposals. Instead of supporting the existing British squadron, it would essentially supplant it. By itself, an Australian Fleet Unit would be able to patrol the trade routes far from local shores and field sufficient inherent strength, to defeat or deter any detached enemy squadrons that might threaten local commerce. Furthermore, either the entire unit or any of its components could combine with other Royal Navy or dominion units to form a powerful Imperial Pacific Fleet.

Successful integration with the Royal Navy would require high standards of personnel efficiency and the Fleet Unit also commended itself to this end, providing Australians with the full range of experience in blue-water naval operations. Just as important, it offered the progression through different ship types necessary to offer a long-term career and achieve professional competence. Training opportunities abroad with the Royal Navy, for both ships and individuals, would also ensure that both personnel and materiel were maintained at an identical standard, thus mitigating previous concerns regarding the creation of second-rate navies. In essence, the Fleet Unit concept provided the blueprint for an effective ocean-going navy; a navy that could be entrusted with both the defence of Australian waters, and offer a valuable contribution to the collective defence of the empire.

No other dominion would follow its lead, but on 19 September 1909 the Australian Cabinet agreed to adopt the Admiralty's proposal. The foundations had been laid, and just four years later the practical results of the Australian program, made their first public appearance in Sydney. On the morning of 4 October 1913, tens of thousands of citizens flocked to the harbour foreshores to witness the ceremonial entry. The starred blue ensign flying from each foremast of the seven ships attested to Australian ownership and encouraged reflection on the great sea power the nation now possessed and the responsibilities that this entailed.

Leading the newly arrived ships was the *Indefatigable* class battlecruiser *Australia*. She was followed by the two *Chatham* class light cruisers *Melbourne* and *Sydney*, and the older cruiser, *Encounter*, on loan from the Royal Navy pending the local construction of *Brisbane*. Last in line were the first three River class destroyers, *Parramatta*, *Yarra* and the Australian-assembled *Warrego*. Construction of the three remaining destroyers was already underway at Cockatoo Island Dockyard. Furthermore, still building in Britain were the submarines *AE1* and *AE2*, with more expected to be ordered shortly.

The Fleet Unit moored in Sydney Harbour, 4 October 1913. (RAN 75th Anniversary Collection)

Upon the outbreak of World War I, in August 1914, the RAN was arguably the most modern and capable small navy in the world, and the fleet proceeded to achieve everything expected of it. The only significant threat to local waters came from Germany's East Asia Cruiser Squadron. Fortunately, the presence of A*ustralia*, larger, faster and better armed than any of his ships prompted the German commander to abandon plans to attack Australian maritime interests.

Thereafter, the possession of an effective navy allowed Australia to rapidly occupy German possessions in New Guinea. More important to the future conduct of the war, it also ensured a sufficient degree of sea control to allow the safe convoy of Australian and New Zealand forces to the Middle East and European theatre of war. The destruction of the German cruiser *Emden*, by one of the convoy escorts, *Sydney*, demonstrated just how far the Australian navy had come, and offered final proof that its sailors were every bit as capable as their British counterparts.

Petty Officer Peter Cannon

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1   Charles Bean, *The Story of Anzac*, Vol 2, Angus & Robertson, Sydney 1944, p. 910.
2   George Macandie, *Genesis of the Royal Australian Navy*, Government Printer, Sydney, 1949, p. 288.