SEMAPHORE

AUSTRALIA'S NAVY: 106 YEARS YOUNG

How old is Australia's Navy? This might seem a simple enough question, but over the years some confusion has arisen from the varied timings of the Navy's birthday celebrations. Readers who recall the RAN's 75th anniversary festivities in 1986, for example, might wonder how it is that just 21 years later the Navy claims to be 106! Indeed, although the Navy now accepts 1 March 1901 as its official birthday there are several other dates still deserving some form of continuing recognition by both the Navy and the wider Australian nation.

The legal basis for the Navy's creation comes from Section 51 of the Australian Constitution, which gives Parliament the power to make laws with respect to the naval and military defence of the Commonwealth. At Federation on 1 January 1901 the Governor-General, the Earl of Hopetoun, became Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, but not until 1 March did the six former self-governing colonies transfer their existing naval and military forces and everyone employed in their connection to the Federal Government. Although this marks the birth of the Australian Navy, much had yet to be accomplished. Initially the four states that had maintained maritime forces through to 1901 - Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia - retained their old colonial nomenclature and each possessed a naval commandant who reported individually to the Defence Minister. Progress was tentative, but in May 1902 the Federal bureaucracy adopted the collective title Commonwealth Naval Forces (CNF) for the Navy while the Army became known as the Commonwealth Military Forces (CMF).

Australia's pre-Federation ships were intended solely for local defence and were prohibited from operating outside the three mile coastal limit. Those vessels inherited by the nascent national navy were tired, old and inadequate even for training. Moreover, with only 239 men on the CNF's books and a 1901-02 budget of just £67,000 there was little hope for early improvement. The CMF by contrast, possessed almost 17,000 men and had access to a budget of £638,000.[1] But despite the disparity, a dilapidated local navy was not a major national concern if the Royal Navy (RN) would continue to provide maritime protection by maintaining up to 24 vessels on the Australian Station. Successive British naval commanders provided this reassurance, and the Commonwealth's payment of a subsidy towards maintaining RN vessels in Australia reinforced the idea that issues of naval policy were best left with the British Admiralty.

Watching the growth of foreign naval power in the Pacific, local naval authorities were far less confident. Led by Queensland's Captain (later Vice Admiral Sir) William Creswell, they feared the withdrawal of British forces under the exigencies of a global war. Australia, they argued, lying at the extreme end of world's sea routes and possessing no land frontier was open to attack only by sea. If communications were cut, industrial paralysis and economic devastation would follow. As Creswell observed caustically in a 1902 parliamentary report:

> The spectacle of some 5,000,000 Australians, with an Army splendidly equipped, unable to prevent the burning of a cargo of wool in sight of Sydney Heads, is only the ordinary consequence of a policy of naval impotence.[2]

Deep issues of maritime strategy exercised only a handful of Australian minds, but the idea of a more capable navy, locally manned, and under the Commonwealth's executive direction, gradually gathered support. Following the proclamation of the *Defence Act 1903* and the constitution of Boards of Administration for the CNF and CMF, Creswell became the first Director of Naval Forces. Notwithstanding the restricted budget, he immediately embarked on a program designed to breathe new life into the CNF's operations, bringing several of the gunboats and torpedo boats back into commission and instituting regular training exercises to improve readiness.

Captain Creswell observes the CNF's 1905 Easter manoeuvres from the torpedo boat HMAS Countess of Hopetoun *(RAN)*

The greater visibility and renewed activity of the CNF confirmed the quality of Australian naval men and

managed to ignite more general public interest, but the service could not long survive without the replacement of its ancient vessels. Fortunately, Creswell found an ally in the new Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin, who, like his Naval Director, preferred active cooperation to subsidies. In December 1907, Deakin announced the CNF's acquisition of a flotilla of submarines and destroyers. A year later Australia's naval representative in London requested tenders for the first three vessels, the torpedo boat destroyers *Parramatta*, *Yarra* and *Warrego*.

Assembled in Australia to kick-start a local defence industry, *Warrego* was not launched until April 1911. *Parramatta* and *Yarra*, however, were completed in the United Kingdom and by the end of 1910 were already in Australian waters. Still appreciating the value of public recognition, Creswell ordered the destroyers to begin a busy program of port visits to introduce ordinary Australians to their growing Navy. Sailing from Melbourne in March 1911, *Parramatta* and *Yarra* then spent several months calling in at communities all along the east coast, reaching as far north as Cairns.

HMA Ships Parramatta *and* Yarra *during their May 1911 visit to Coffs Harbour. At this period the Commonwealth Blue Ensign was still flown at the stern (RAN)*

Australian authorities expected the CNF's destroyer flotilla to take full responsibility for coastal defence, but by the time of *Parramatta* and *Yarra*'s arrival Australian naval policy had made an even greater advance. Finding itself hard pressed to maintain global naval supremacy the RN decided to support a more substantial Australian contribution towards regional defence. At the 1909 Imperial Conference the Admiralty's First Sea Lord, Sir John Fisher, suggested that the CNF expand to include a 'fleet unit' based around one of his revolutionary battlecruisers and several light cruisers. The self-contained package represented an ideal force structure; small enough to be managed by Australia in times of peace, but in war capable of effective combined action with Imperial forces. Federal Cabinet gave provisional endorsement in September 1909 and orders were soon placed in British and Australian shipyards for the additional ships. Just as important, the passing of the *Naval Defence Act 1910* provided the clear legislative authority for a navy that would in future be free to roam the world's oceans. The difference between the naval and military forces of the Commonwealth was now striking. With an Army compelled by law to serve only on local soil, Australia had to raise a separate volunteer expeditionary force to serve overseas in 1914.

Since 1904 CNF warships had been designated as His Majesty's Australian Ship (HMAS), but this title had never received the King's sanction. During their visit to London

for the coronation of King George V, Australian ministers made known their desire to have the prefix 'Royal' attached to the Australian Navy's title. On 10 July 1911 King George approved the request 'with great satisfaction'. The decision was promulgated to the CNF on 5 October,[3] which officially became the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), while the Citizen Naval Forces became the Royal Australian Naval Reserve (RANR). At the stern of Australian ships, the RN's White Ensign replaced the Commonwealth Blue Ensign and the Commonwealth flag thereafter took the place of the Union flag at the bow.

The new 'fleet unit' took time to build, but on 4 October 1913 its core strength entered Sydney Harbour for the first time. Leading the three light cruisers (*Melbourne*, *Sydney* and *Encounter*) and three destroyers, the battlecruiser HMAS *Australia* passed through the Heads to be greeted by thousands of cheering citizens lining the foreshores. Sydney was no stranger to imperial and foreign warships, but these vessels, both majestic and forbidding at the same time, were something different. They were the embodiment of the Commonwealth's own sea power and unquestionably superior to every other European fleet then in the Pacific. Comparing the significance of the fleet unit's arrival to James Cook's exploration of the east coast 140 years before, the Defence Minister, Edward Millen, noted:

> As the former marked the birth of Australia, so the latter announces its coming of age, its recognition of the growing responsibilities of nationhood, and its resolve to accept and discharge them…

The fleet, Millen continued, did not merely represent force, but was an expression of 'Australia's resolve to pursue, in freedom, its national ideals' and hand down 'unimpaired and unsullied' its heritage to future generations.[4]

It should be clear from this discussion that the Australian Navy did not just suddenly appear either in October 1913 or in 1911 with the granting of the 'Royal' title. Both these events are significant milestones, but for more than a decade the country had already possessed a unified naval force. In truth, since 1901 there had been a continuing process of revitalisation and development which eventually turned Australia's Navy from a motley collection of obsolescent vessels into a professional and world-class fighting service. It had been a difficult path, but the foresight of men like Creswell and Deakin was amply rewarded in 1914 when the powerful German East Asiatic Squadron was decisively deterred from carrying out its plans for cruiser warfare in the Pacific. But for the Navy, wartime Prime Minister W.M. 'Billy' Hughes later declared, 'the great cities of Australia would have been reduced to ruins, coastwise shipping sunk, and communications with the outside world cut off'.[5] One would be hard pressed to find more appropriate words to mark more than 106 years of service by Australian sailors.

1 D.M. Stevens, 'The Commonwealth Naval Forces: Australia's Navy - 100 years of service to the nation', *Journal of the Australian Naval Institute*, Summer 2000-01, p. 18.
2 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers*, 7 February 1902, p. 149.
3 Navy Order No. 77, 1911.
4 Brochure to commemorate the arrival of the Australian Fleet, 4 October 1913.
5 W.M. Hughes, 'A Policy for the Times', *Navy, Army and Air Force Journal*, 1 September 1933, p. 3.