

RAN AVIATION AND AIR COMBAT – FIRST AND LAST?

HMA Fleet is strategically impotent and tactically inefficient owing to ... [the] absence of a Deep Sea Naval Flying Organisation without which no naval force can be tactically efficient, particularly on a station of a very large area, where intelligence on the whereabouts of an enemy force is more than usually important.¹

- Commodore J.S. Dumaresq, RN, 11 February 1921

The tactical advantages of possessing organic aviation at sea have long been recognised by the world's major navies. In the Royal Australian Navy's (RAN) case, attempts to establish an aviation policy began as early as 1913 and, although there have been occasional setbacks, organic air power continues to play an indispensable role in maritime operations. The helicopters of today's Fleet Air Arm (FAA) operate as an integral component of the parent ship's weapon and sensor suite, providing surveillance, reconnaissance, anti-submarine and surface warfare, maritime utility support, search and rescue, disaster relief and training support. One capability no longer included in the list is anti-air warfare, this being provided by a combination of ship-launched guided weapons and, when geography allows, friendly shore-based aircraft. Yet anyone with a passing knowledge of naval history will be aware that the Australian Navy has on occasion operated high-performance fighter aircraft. Less well known is that the RAN has achieved some memorable milestones in Australian air combat.

For instance, on 1 June 1918 a Sopwith 2-F1 Camel fighter from the light cruiser HMAS *Sydney* (I) destroyed a German fixed-wing reconnaissance machine, the first time in the history of air warfare that a ship-launched aircraft had achieved such a feat.² The Camel's pilot, Lieutenant A.C. (Cyril) Sharwood, Royal Air Force (formerly Flight Lieutenant, Royal Naval Air Service), was rewarded with a Mention-in-Despatches,³ but some credit must also go to the foresight of *Sydney's* commanding officer, Captain J.S. Dumaresq, RN. An Australian by birth, Dumaresq had long advocated the use of aircraft from light cruisers to counter German aerial reconnaissance – a case strengthened when *Sydney* fought an inconclusive duel with the Zeppelin *L43* in May 1917.⁴

During *Sydney's* next refit Dumaresq arranged for the cruiser to receive a rotating flying-off platform just aft of her forward 6-inch gun. He not only supervised the fitting of the platform, but also was able to offer suggestions for its improved operation. Successful trials were carried out with a Sopwith Pup in December 1917, the machine becoming airborne after a run of little more than four metres.⁵ Encouraged by the results, Dumaresq pushed for the permanent allocation of an aircraft, and in February 1918 received on loan a Camel specifically designed for shipboard operations. Thereafter flying operations were conducted on a regular basis to gain experience, and by June 1918 four out of the five ships in *Sydney's* Second Light Cruiser Squadron (including HMAS *Melbourne* (I)) each had an aircraft.

Sharwood's victory came during an anti-minelaying sweep into the Heligoland Bight by elements of the British Grand

Fleet. The Second Light Cruiser Squadron formed part of the supporting force, together with two aircraft carriers and the First Battle Cruiser Squadron. At 0933 on 1 June 1918, the force was closing its objective when three German reconnaissance aircraft passed over the cruiser screen and dropped five bombs among the battle cruisers. For such an emergency, Australia's official history records, Dumaresq had long since prepared:

Sydney's pilot was continuously on duty close to his aeroplane, a bugle-call summoned the despatching crew, and the machine could be away within two minutes (*Melbourne* of course had similar arrangements). So when the German aeroplanes returned, the machines from both Australian cruisers were in the air, climbing rapidly to intercept them.⁶



HMAS Sydney's Sopwith Camel ready for launch (RAN)

Melbourne's pilot lost sight of his quarry as he passed through the scattered cloud, but Lieutenant Sharwood maintained contact and pursued what he later identified as a single-seater seaplane. Climbing to 10,000 feet he eventually reached a firing position on the enemy's tail. After several bursts of machine gun fire Sharwood saw the German machine shudder and then enter a spinning nose-dive. While following it down he was 'bounced' by another German aircraft, which he engaged until one of his guns jammed and the other ran out of ammunition. With no choice but to break off the action, Sharwood endeavoured to return to *Sydney*, now more than 70 miles away. After a long and unsuccessful search he was almost out of fuel when he sighted several British cruisers and destroyers. A few rounds of anti-aircraft fire were directed at Sharwood's Camel before it was recognised, but thereafter he managed to ditch safely some 500 yards from HMS *Sharpshooter*. After another 20 minutes spent clinging to the Camel's handgrips he was rescued by the destroyer's sea-boat. The cruiser HMS *Canterbury* recovered the aircraft. Sharwood returned to *Sydney*, where Dumaresq's continued support led to some improvements in the administration and operational control of the squadron's aircraft. Following a promotion Sharwood became commander of the flight of four Camels and designated Senior Naval Flying Officer Second Light Cruiser Squadron.

The Australian cruisers retained their flying-off platforms on their return from European waters, but without suitable aircraft, these facilities were soon removed. Subsequently, the requirements of naval aviation became a casualty of the acrimonious debate surrounding the distribution of limited funding between the three Australian Services. Between 1921 and 1944 the only aircraft operated from sea were Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) amphibians, whose primary tasks were reconnaissance and gunnery spotting. A revived naval air combat capability had to await the 1948 formation of the FAA, centred on the acquisition of two *Majestic* class light fleet aircraft carriers.

The first of these vessels, HMAS *Sydney* (III), arrived in Australian waters in 1949. Just two years later the carrier and her air group were on active service during the Korean War. Although acquired to provide fighter protection for the fleet, *Sydney's* Hawker Sea Furies performed more than creditably in the ground support and interdiction roles in Korea. No opportunity arose to confront enemy aircraft during the war, but this was probably fortunate as the piston-engined Sea Furies would have likely been outclassed by the MiG 15 jets flown by the enemy. With aviation technology changing so rapidly the Sea Fury remained in front-line RAN service only until 1955, when it was replaced by the de Havilland Sea Venom. Nevertheless, the aircraft had one further opportunity to cement its reputation as an air interceptor, for in that year two Sea Furies became the last Australian fighters to shoot down another aircraft.

This incident began on the morning of 30 August 1955 at Bankstown airport, when an Auster light aircraft suffered an engine failure while on a practice circuit. Safely landing the aircraft in the middle of the airstrip, the pilot climbed out and attempted to restart the engine by swinging the propeller by hand. The engine sprang to life, but the brake failed to hold, and without its pilot the Auster began gathering speed. Already well-trimmed the aircraft took off and began climbing. A series of circuits followed with the Auster gradually gaining height and drifting in a north-easterly direction over Sydney's suburbs. Fearing where it might crash, aviation authorities broadcast a general alarm to all aircraft as well as the Defence forces, police and emergency services.

One of those alerted was an RAN Auster on its way to Naval Air Station (NAS) Schofields. The naval aircraft made contact with its civilian sister at around 0900 and, having confirmed that it was unoccupied, remained in pursuit as it passed over the city centre. An hour later the runway Auster was at 5000 feet and passing over Vaucluse, but no armed aircraft was yet available to bring it down. Finally, at 1020 a Wirraway trainer from RAAF Base Richmond made contact some two and a half miles offshore. But even then it was ordered not to open fire until the target had doubled this distance. Another 25 minutes passed, by which time the Auster had climbed to more than 10,000 feet. Using a hand-held Bren from the open rear cockpit the Wirraway made two firing passes without noticeable effect. A further attempt proved impossible as the -5°C air temperature meant that the gunner could not change the magazine as his hands were sticking to the gun.

The Wirraway and RAN Auster returned to their respective bases, but not before the arrival of a

Meteor jet fighter from RAAF Base Williamstown. The Meteor managed just a few rounds, however, before both its cannons jammed. The RAAF called in two more Meteors, but these were beaten to the scene by a pair of Sea Furies from 805 Naval Air Squadron based at NAS Nowra. The first Sea Fury approached from astern and fired a short four-cannon burst, while the second made a beam-on attack. The Auster erupted into flame and 90 seconds later came down in the sea off Broken Bay. The incident may not have involved a determined enemy, but unsurprisingly it raised many questions about contemporary Defence readiness. Fifty-two years later, with memories of 11 September 2001 still fresh, the requirement to quickly intercept a rogue aircraft still resonates.



The pilots of the two Sea Furies, Lieutenants J.R.T. Bluett and P.F. McNay replay their victory for the camera (RAN)

Navy operated and maintained fixed-wing aviation is no longer part of the Australian Defence Force's (ADF) force structure. Future naval aerospace capability will nevertheless deliver greater operational flexibility and enhanced battlespace awareness to the maritime task force commander. In particular, developments in uninhabited aerial vehicles (UAVs) are likely to provide increased time on task and greater stand-off range from the task force without risk to aircrew. With advances in force-networking there is no special reason why the ADF's maritime UAVs could not also act as carriers for a wide variety of munitions. Given the pace and scale of UAV development perhaps we have not yet seen the last of air combat in the RAN.

¹ Cited in D. Stevens (ed), *In Search of a Maritime Strategy*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 119, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University, Canberra, 1997, p. 173.

² On 21 August 1917, a Sopwith Pup launched from HMS *Yarmouth* brought down the German Zeppelin L23.

³ *London Gazette*, 20 September 1918.

⁴ The airship was able to rise out of range of the warship's guns, while the cruiser proved too manoeuvrable a target. The engagement ended with both opponents having expended all their ammunition.

⁵ Recovery was more problematic, with the aircraft either forced to ditch or land at the nearest friendly aerodrome.

⁶ A.W. Jose, *The Royal Australian Navy*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1928, p. 305.

