

SHIPS NAMED CANBERRA

In the annals of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), two of its warships have proudly carried the name of Australia's capital city – Canberra. On 17 February 2011, a third ship, the first of two new amphibious ships (LHD) built for the RAN, was launched in Spain. She is currently forecast to enter service in 2014 following her official commissioning as HMAS *Canberra* (III). With this in mind, it is timely to review the history of the *Canberras*, examine their contribution to Australian maritime security and highlight the unique bonds forged between these ships and the citizens of our nation's land-locked capital.

The name Canberra is derived from the language of the Ngunnawal people who traditionally occupied the district now recognised as the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). The word means a 'meeting place' of either rivers, or of tribes joining together to feast on Bogong moths in mountains to the south of the region. Recognition of Canberra's indigenous heritage is also reflected in the coat of arms of the city which features two swans, representing both the aboriginal and European cultures that now share the region. That coat of arms forms the centrepiece of HMAS *Canberra*'s ship's badge.



The official badge of HMAS Canberra featuring the coat of arms of the city of Canberra

The first RAN ship named Canberra was one of two 10,000 ton *Kent* class heavy cruisers ordered by the Australian government in 1924. Built in the United Kingdom, *Canberra* commissioned at Clydebank on 9 July 1928, two months after her sister, HMAS *Australia* (II).

After five months working up in British waters, *Canberra* sailed from Portsmouth for Australia on 4 December 1928. En route, she visited Gibraltar, Las Palmas, the African ports of Sierra Leone, Takoradi, Lagos, Cape Town, Simonstown and Durban, before arriving at Fremantle on

25 January 1929. She then 'showed the flag' at Bunbury, Albany, Adelaide and Melbourne, finally arriving in her home port of Sydney on 16 February. In each port large crowds gathered to see the RAN's latest cruiser with its impressive main armament of eight, 8-inch guns.

For the next ten years *Canberra* operated on the Australian Station. Together with *Australia* she shared the role of flagship of the RAN Squadron and the two formed the backbone of the RAN during the lean years of the Great Depression. At that time *Canberra* made only occasional overseas visits to the nearby Dutch East Indies, New Caledonia and Fiji.

Following the outbreak of hostilities with Nazi Germany in September 1939, *Canberra* began her wartime career conducting patrols and escort duties in home waters under the command of Captain Wilfred R Patterson, CVO, RN. In June 1940 Australian-born Captain Harold B Farncomb, MVO, RAN, assumed command, and sailed the following month for service in the Indian Ocean. There the cruiser performed important convoy escort work between Fremantle, Colombo and Cape Town. In July she participated in an unsuccessful search for the German raider *Atlantis*, then actively disrupting Allied shipping routes from Africa to India and the Malay States. Later, in November 1940, *Canberra* rescued survivors from the merchant ship SS *Port Brisbane*, sunk by another German raider, *Pinguin*. With the aid of her amphibian aircraft, *Canberra* conducted a prolonged but ultimately fruitless search for *Port Brisbane*'s attacker which had by then melted into the vastness of the surrounding ocean.

In early 1941 *Canberra* resumed her Indian Ocean escort and patrol duties making further searches for enemy raiders including the German pocket-battleship *Admiral Scheer*. In March, while in company with HMNZS *Leander*, she intercepted the German supply ship *Coburg* and the tanker *Ketty Brovig*, a former Norwegian ship captured as a prize the previous month by *Atlantis*. The enemy ships were engaged and subsequently sunk when their crews set scuttling charges.

When war broke out with Japan on 7 December 1941, *Canberra* was berthed in Sydney Harbour having already steamed more than 175,000 miles on war service. Her next task involved escorting troop convoys to New Guinea, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies.

In May 1942 *Canberra* had a lucky escape when three Japanese midget submarines penetrated Sydney's harbour defences, launching a surprise attack on Allied ships lying at anchor. The depot ship HMAS *Kuttabul* was sunk during the raid and the harbour thrown into chaos.¹

The following month Captain Frank E Getting, RAN, assumed command and the cruiser was soon back at sea taking part in offensive sweeps into the Coral Sea as part of Task Force 44, which included US Ships *Chicago* and *Salt Lake City*.



HMAS Canberra (I)

In August 1942 *Canberra* was operating as a component of a large Allied naval force supporting US landings at Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. On 9 August a large Japanese cruiser force conducted a surprise night attack on the Allied ships in an action that became known as the Battle of Savo Island. *Canberra* became an early victim of the engagement receiving at least 24 shell hits in the first two minutes and suffering a number of torpedo strikes. Captain Getting was mortally wounded, fires took hold and power was lost, leaving *Canberra's* guns mute and the ship listing dangerously to starboard. A total of 84 of *Canberra's* crew were killed. The wounded and survivors were subsequently transferred to US Ships *Patterson* and *Blue*.

Unable to raise steam, *Canberra* was sunk by USS *Ellet* at approximately 0800 on 9 August 1942. Also lost in the action were the US cruisers: *Quincy*, *Vincennes* and *Astoria*.

To honour *Canberra*, the US Navy commissioned the *Baltimore* class heavy cruiser, USS *Canberra* in 1943. The only US Navy ship thus far to be named for a foreign capital.

The second RAN ship to be named *Canberra* was one of six *Adelaide* class guided missile frigates built to the design of the American *Oliver Hazard Perry* class. *Canberra's* keel was laid on 1 March 1978 and she was launched on 1 December 1978 by Lady Marjorie Tange, wife of Sir Arthur Tange, the then Secretary of Defence. She commissioned in Seattle on 21 March 1981 and following acceptance trials off the US west coast, she arrived in her home port of Sydney in March 1982.

As built, *Canberra* displaced 4100 tonnes. She was 135.6 metres in length with a beam of 13.7 metres. The hull length was increased to 138 metres during 1990-91 at which time her flight deck was strengthened to support Sikorsky S-70B-2 Seahawk helicopter operations. Two General Electric gas turbines saw her attain speeds in excess of 30 knots and her armament comprised one 76mm gun, Harpoon anti-ship missiles, standard surface-to-air missiles, a Phalanx close in weapons system and two triple mounted anti-submarine torpedo tubes. The frigate's usual complement was 186, however, this

increased to over 200 when helicopter flights were embarked. *Canberra's* roles included air defence, anti-submarine warfare, surveillance, interdiction and reconnaissance.

She travelled widely, exercising with regional navies and visiting ports throughout the Indian and Pacific oceans as well as the United States. In 1985 her crew got a taste of Cold War operations when she was directed to intercept and shadow a Soviet task group led by the cruiser *Frunze* which was detected transiting the South China Sea. More benign tasks followed, including Royal Yacht escort duty in 1988 during the Queen's state visit and participation in the 1988 Bicentennial Naval Salute in Sydney. *Canberra* later took part in the Royal Malaysian Navy's International Fleet Review held in 1990.



HMAS Canberra (II)

Between October 1992 and April 1993 *Canberra* deployed to the Red Sea in support of Operation DAMASK VI to support the enforcement of United Nations Security Council sanctions against Iraq. There she conducted interception and boarding operations to stop the flow of illegal oil out of Iraq. During that deployment *Canberra* provided anti-air cover for USS *Caron* during a Tomahawk cruise missile strike against land based targets in Iraq.

January 1996 saw *Canberra* home ported in Western Australia where she remained actively engaged in diplomatic and constabulary tasks.

In May 1998, she was one of a number of Australian warships placed on standby in case the evacuation of Australian citizens from Indonesia was necessary following the fall of the Suharto regime.

Illegal fishing activity in Australia's remote fisheries zone in the Southern Ocean twice saw *Canberra* tasked to assist the Australian Fisheries Management Authority. In



April 2001 she escorted the foreign fishing vessel *South Tomi* to Fremantle in support of Operation TEEBONE before deploying to the Solomon Islands where she operated in support of an International Peace Monitoring Team during Operation TREK.

In January 2002 *Canberra* returned to the Southern Ocean apprehending the Russian flagged vessels *Lena* and *Volga* – both were intercepted poaching Patagonian Tooth fish in the Heard and McDonald Island exclusive economic zone. The masters of the vessels were subsequently charged and convicted.

The high operational tempo continued unabated when *Canberra* deployed the following month for the Persian Gulf. There she joined HMA Ships *Newcastle* and *Manoora* on active service in support of Operation SLIPPER as part of the International Coalition against Terrorism.

In her twilight years *Canberra* patrolled Australia's northern approaches supporting Operation RELEX II, a whole of government initiative aimed at deterring people smuggling operations.

During 2005, *Canberra* conducted her final overseas deployment to Asia, visiting South Korea, China and Aichi, Japan (the host of the 2005 World Expo) and Malaysia.

On 12 November 2005, following 24 years of service and having travelled over 800,000 nautical miles *Canberra* decommissioned at Fleet Base West, HMAS *Stirling*, Western Australia.

Despite being based far from her namesake city, *Canberra* maintained strong linkages with the national capital. Hundreds of Canberra's citizens served in the frigate during her long commission and her main internal passage-way was proudly named Northbourne Avenue, in reference to one of Canberra city's main arterial roads. The ACT government subsequently presented the ship with a replica street sign to make it official. Additionally, the men and women of *Canberra* exercised their right of Freedom of Entry to the City of Canberra on four occasions; 1982, 1986, 1990 and 2000.

Following decommissioning, *Canberra* was stripped of all useful fittings and naval heritage items and gifted by the Australian Government to the state of Victoria for use as an artificial reef and recreational dive site. Her hulk was subsequently sunk in 28 metres of water off Ocean Grove, Victoria, on 4 October 2009.

The next RAN ship to be named *Canberra* is being built in collaboration between Navantia and BAE Systems - Maritime in Spain.

The *Canberra* class LHD will be bigger than Australia's former aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne* (II) displacing 27,500 tonnes. When completed they will be more than 230 metres long and 27.5 metres high.

Launched in Spain on 17 February 2011, *Canberra* is currently undergoing her internal fit out with the installation of a 40-bed hospital, storerooms and accommodation facilities.



HMAS Canberra (III)

The hull is to be transported via heavy lift-ship from Spain to Australia in July 2012 and is expected to arrive in Williamstown Shipyard, Victoria in August. There, work will begin to add the various superstructure and mast components to the hull.

When complete, each LHD will be capable of carrying a combined armed battle group of more than 1100 personnel, 100 armoured vehicles and 12 helicopters.

HMAS *Canberra* (III) will provide the RAN with a world-class expeditionary capability for decades to come and the citizens of Canberra will have much to be proud of when she commissions in early 2014.

HMAS *Canberra* (III) - Characteristics

Length:	230m
Beam:	32m
Masthead Height:	42m (TBC)
Draught (transit):	7.2m
Draught (docked):	10m
Maximum Speed:	20kts (contracted)
Endurance:	@15kn - 9000nm; @20kn - 6000nm
Displacement (transit):	27,831 tonnes
Displacement (docked down):	31,442 tonnes
Diesel Generation sets:	2 x MAN 7448 kW
Gas turbine:	1 x LM 2500 19,160 kW
Emergency Generator:	1 x Progener-Mitsubishi 1350 kW
Propulsion (Electric):	2 x Siemens azimuthing 11 MW Pods aft, 2 x 1.5 MW bow thrusters
Flight Deck:	4750m ² (202.3 x 32m) with 6 spots for medium sized helicopters, eg NRH 90, S70A – OR – 4 spots for CH 47 sized helicopters refuelling is available at all spots provided with one aircraft elevator (aft - 13.6 x 13.3m) and one multipurpose elevator (stbd side fwd – 11.2 x 17m) which access the hanger/light vehicle deck dedicated ammunition elevator between the magazine and flight deck

John Perryman

¹ Two of the midget submarines were destroyed during the raid while the third escaped. Its wreck was located in November 2006 off Sydney's northern beaches.

