



### WHY THE RED CENTRE VANISHED

On 26 June 1942, a Catalina flying boat of 11 Squadron RAAF was about to alight on Havannah Bay, New Hebrides (now Vanuatu), to refuel. The 'Cat' had called in there on its way to bomb Tulagi in the Solomon Islands, and was then on the return flight to Noumea having completed its mission. Despite its presence being expected, the American ground control at Havannah Bay had, as a precautionary measure, ordered a US Marine Wildcat fighter into the air to identify the incoming aircraft.

Geoff Pentland, in his book *RAAF Camouflage & Markings 1939–45 – Vol. 1*, takes up the story:

*This the US pilot did, but though the shape of the Catalina was no doubt disturbingly familiar, the red in the upper wing roundels [national insignia] seemed to him so distinct—as he later said—that he mistook them for Japanese markings and immediately attacked. Bullets passed through the Catalina's main crew compartment, fuel tanks, and ailerons, but fortunately no one was hurt and the aircraft was able to land safely.*

Flying Officer Robert Seymour and his crew were undoubtedly shaken by this close call, but the incident had a more far-reaching consequence. It was decided that operational and second-line RAAF aircraft were henceforth to have the large red centres of their upper-wing roundels painted out in white. This was formalised in Aircraft General Instruction C11, Issue 4, dated 31 July 1942. Within a few months, the order was extended to all roundels on all RAAF aircraft.

Ironically, the Americans had already foreseen the problem. Firstly, prior to Pearl Harbor and again in 1943, the US national insignia was deleted from

the upper right and lower left wing surfaces in a similar attempt to differentiate its aircraft from Japanese (the latter displaying the red *Hinomaru* disc on all four wing surfaces). It was believed that the position of a marking could be the first indicator of friend or foe.



*A RAAF Catalina post-July 1942, with blue and white roundels*

However, in practice, colour appears to have been the more important signifier. From a distance, red can be seen more easily than other colours—often, in fact, before other details of a marking can be made out. Cases of mistaken identity led, in March 1942, to the red disc inside the US national star being deleted. On 27 March the operations diary for 13 Squadron RAAF reported:

*Orders issued by the US Air Staff to the effect that the red circle in the American insignia on all United States aircraft was to be immediately painted white to avoid mistakes in recognition, particularly by ground troops.*

Considering the above, one might ask why red was still in use on RAAF aircraft six months into the Pacific War. Perhaps the RAAF was simply reluctant to distinguish its roundel from that of the RAF. The British red, white and blue roundel had been used on Australian Flying Corps aircraft

during World War I, and the adoption 'without difference' of the RAF Ensign (which included the roundel) for the RAAF had been recommended by the RAF Chief of Air Staff and accepted in 1922. This decision presumably had some bearing on the fact that the roundel was still in use when World War II began.



*Proposal for a RAAF Ensign submitted by Wing Commander Richard Williams to the Air Board on 21 July 1921. The superimposed southern cross was not adopted, although the Southern Cross later re-emerged in the present Ensign, which also replaced the red centre with the kangaroo motif.*

However, even after the red centre had been removed, American aircrew continued to have trouble identifying RAAF aircraft. A year after the Catalina incident, a US Navy Liberator bomber based at Guadalcanal shot down a RAAF Beaufort, a type that was 'out of home waters' in the Solomons area. The US crew had earlier sighted what they believed to be a Japanese Betty bomber. The Beaufort then appeared and, at just 100 feet above the sea, reportedly turned towards them before both aircraft began firing at 1000 yards. The Beaufort was hit from the Liberator's upper and bow turrets, and soon ditched in the sea. It was only when crewmen emerged that the Liberator crew realised they were 'white men' (whom they assumed to also be Americans), and dropped a life raft and supplies. On closer examination, they thought the floating Beaufort to be a Mosquito. Tragically, the crew subsequently perished in a storm.



*Tracers from a US Naval vessel strike a RAAF Beaufort at Arawe, New Britain, in December 1943, after it had been misidentified as Japanese.*

With the war's end, the reason for deleting the red centre no longer existed, and it saw a brief return. During the Korean War, RAAF and RAN aircraft went into action with red-centred roundels.

Then, on 2 July 1956, Australia followed the lead of Canada and South Africa in replacing the red centre with a national emblem. Designs submitted for consideration included the Southern Cross, a boomerang, and a sprig of wattle. It was decided that the 'kangaroo in motion' was the most distinctively Australian symbol.

As an aside, Qantas aircraft had sported the red kangaroo as depicted on the penny coin since World War II, and even the present RAAF kangaroo roundel had seen an earlier incarnation: as an unofficial unit insignia on the Mosquito night fighters of 456 Squadron RAAF in Europe.

***The whole question of aircraft recognition was in fact one of the more unfortunate problems of the Pacific War and was never finally resolved until the Allies had undisputed aerial supremacy within their grasp.***

- Author Geoffrey Pentland (1980).



**Air Power Development Centre**  
Level 3, 205 Anketell Street  
TUGGERANONG ACT 2900

Ph: 02 6266 1355 Fax: 02 6266 1041  
Email: [airpower@defence.gov.au](mailto:airpower@defence.gov.au)  
Web: [www.aaaf.gov.au/airpower](http://www.aaaf.gov.au/airpower)

