THE RAAF AT SEA BEFORE WORLD WAR II

In the 1920s, when the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) came into being, the concept of the Australian government’s national defence was based predominantly on a maritime strategy led by Navy. Not only did the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) have the largest proportion of permanent full-time personnel but it also commanded the largest share of Australia’s total defence budget, despite expenditure cut-backs which inevitably followed the end of World War I. Doctrinally the RAN was tuned to operate in close concert with the Royal Navy within an imperial defence construct. The Singapore naval base, which served as the lynchpin of Britain’s (and hence Australia’s) plans for the defence of the empire east of the Suez Canal from the 1920s until 1942, was equally part of a maritime strategy.

The RAAF was formed in March 1921 on the explicit basis of maintaining the capability to support both the RAN and the Australian Army. This injunction was, no doubt, intended as unifying balm after a protracted and bruising battle between Army and Navy to win endorsement for their competing post-war air schemes. Their debate ended with the government’s decision in 1919 to have one separate Air Force serving the needs of both. Viewing the outcome purely in these terms, however, risks obscuring the fact that, from its earliest days, the RAAF had an underlying but rarely-articulated mission to assist the Navy in pursuing a maritime strategy for the defence of Australia.

Among the aircraft on the RAAF inventory in 1921 were six Fairey IIID floatplanes acquired from Britain to equip one of two planned seaplane squadrons under the initial organisational structure of the new service. The units failed to materialise after the planned scheme was curtailed for financial reasons, but the floatplanes remained in periodic use at Point Cook, where they proved useful for conducting surveys over coastal waters, including the famous first flight around Australia in 1924. Although a training course for naval observers was started at Point Cook in 1923, it was realised that Air Force had no aircraft that could operate from the Navy’s main warships. Since the Fairey IIID was too large and heavy to fit into the limited space available, efforts were soon underway to find a more suitable aircraft type to replace it.

The Supermarine Seagull III amphibious flying boats that entered RAAF service in 1926 were actually little better than the Fairey IIID in both size and performance, but they were better suited to the task of assisting the Navy’s program for surveying the Great Barrier Reef—which became the main form of naval cooperation required of the RAAF for the next three years. The purchase of these aircraft was overtaken shortly afterwards by a government decision to also acquire for the RAN a 6000-ton seaplane tender, HMAS Albatross, with a surprise for the RAAF when it learnt that it was required to supply the aircraft and operating personnel to put on board the new vessel. Putting the Seagull III into Albatross was an expedient which lasted from February 1929 until the ship was paid off from the RAN as an economy measure in 1933. During these years, however, Australia at least had the capability to conduct reconnaissance at sea, gunnery direction, torpedo spotting and survey work, all for the first time.

When first told in 1926 that it would be required to provide the aircraft for Albatross, Air Force set about drafting a specification for a new type of catapult-launched boat amphibian, but this failed to attract a manufacturer interested in building it—at least initially. By 1931, however, the Vickers Company in...
Britain had developed a design and asked the RAAF for a commitment to purchase. Although lacking any such authority, the Air Force chief gave the go-ahead and the result was that the RAAF received the first of 24 Seagull Vs in 1935. This aircraft (the first used by the RAAF with an enclosed cabin) proved useful not just for sea rescue work, but also carried bombs or depth charges, and soon won Vickers additional large orders from the RAF (which named the type the Walrus).

The Seagull V and Walrus aircraft, which the RAAF’s No 9 Squadron operated off the RAN’s cruisers, gave distinguished if unspectacular service until the squadron was disbanded in 1944. It was a sad statistic of the war that whenever the Navy lost one of its cruisers, it usually lost the RAAF detachment carried on board. The RAAF took casualties when HMAS Sydney was sunk in a clash with the German raider Kormoran in November 1941, when HMAS Perth encountered a Japanese invasion force in the Sunda Strait in March 1942, and when HMAS Canberra went down in the battle of Savo Island in August 1942. HMAS Australia also lost its Walrus and crew while attacking Vichy French naval forces at Dakar (in Senegal, West Africa) in September 1940. At least fifteen of 9 Squadron’s fatal wartime losses occurred during embarked action with the Navy.

In the preparations of the rearmament period before war began in 1939, the RAAF was also taking major new steps to strengthen its capacity to undertake long-range maritime patrols using land-based forces. From 1927 this role had been carried out mainly by two giant Supermarine Southampton flying boats based at Point Cook, but by the mid-1930s these were well and truly obsolescent. On the eve of World War II, the RAAF was in the process of raising a new maritime patrol unit (No 10 Squadron) equipped with giant long-range Short S25 Sunderland flying boats, to operate from a new seaplane base at Rathmines, on Lake Macquarie, NSW. Steps were in train to take delivery of the new aircraft as war began, causing the government to leave the squadron in England to fight alongside the RAF in Coastal Command.

Elsewhere within the RAAF, the Service had begun taking delivery from late 1936 of Avro Anson GR1 aircraft purchased from Britain. These twin-engine low-wing monoplanes, armed with bombs or depth charges, were considered suitable for coastal reconnaissance and had been adopted by RAF Coastal Command. Ultimately the RAAF would have over 1000 of these aircraft, though most were acquired for training rather than operational purposes. Late in 1938 the government had also approved the purchase of Bristol Beaufort aircraft, also from Britain, also for coastal patrol work, although none entered service before 1941.

The needs of fleet or naval cooperation, and the capacity to exert control over sea lanes and lines of approach to Australia, had demonstrably featured prominently in development plans for the RAAF virtually throughout its first two decades. This is exactly what might be expected of a Service required to participate in implementing the maritime strategy which underpinned planning for the defence of Australia between the world wars.

Seagull V launch from HMAS Australia

• During the inter-war period the RAAF helped pursue a maritime strategy for the defence of Australia

• Technical limitations hindered efforts to operate from warships, but in 1929-33 RAAF aircraft were embarked in a RAN seaplane carrier

• Navy’s cruisers carried Seagull V amphibians in 1935-44, meaning many RAN combats resulted in RAAF casualties

The full power of the Commonwealth Defence Force can only be developed if all its parts act in close co-operation one with the other. A portion of the proposed Air Force is, therefore, designed for co-operation with the Naval Forces and portion for co-operation with the Military Forces.

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Air Power Development Centre
TCC3, Department of Defence
CANBERRA ACT 2600
Ph: 02 6266 1355 Fax: 02 6266 1041
Email: airpower@defence.gov.au
Web: http://airpower.airforce.gov.au

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