



“N.Z.3” FIRST JOINT EXERCISE FOR THE RAAF

Australia's three armed services are supposed to have come quite late to the idea of conducting regular joint exercises to strengthen and extend their collective ability to deal with a defence emergency. It has been said that, despite the experience of World War II, the Services paid little attention to joint operations for nearly 30 years after 1945. Not until the first in the biennial “Kangaroo” series of exercises, conducted in June 1974, did the Australian Defence Force seriously concern itself with joint training.

This being the case, it is surprising and especially interesting that the first large-scale joint exercise in this country actually took place six months *before* the start of World War II. While the Royal Australian Air Force had provided assistance to army and navy training from the 1920s, in nearly all cases this involved little more than contributing an air dimension to what remained single-service activity. The “NZ” exercises mounted in the early months of 1939 also began as low-level affairs, but the third in the series culminated in a intensive strategic maritime trade protection exercise.

Although relatively short in duration (17-19 April), “N.Z.3” was heralded in the Press as the largest naval exercise in Australian waters since World War I, designed “to test the ability of the existing sea and air forces to keep open Australia's trade shipping routes.” Taking part were nine ships of the Royal Australian Navy: cruisers *Canberra*, *Sydney*, *Hobart* and *Adelaide*; destroyers *Vendetta*, *Vampire* and *Voyager*; plus the sloops *Swan* and *Yarra*. Also participating was the British cruiser *Leander*, then on loan to New Zealand. *Leander* and *Adelaide*, with an unidentified merchantman representing a “disguised raider”, were the enemy Blue Force.

A total of 46 RAAF aircraft were involved. These were drawn from four squadrons based at Richmond, New South Wales – 9, 3, 22 and 6 (the last a composite of aircraft and crews from 23 Squadron as well) – and four squadrons from Laverton, Victoria – 1, 2, 12 and 21. Apart from the Seagull V amphibians of 9 Squadron (a fleet co-operation unit), all the rest of these aircraft were Anson coastal reconnaissance bombers or Demon fighter-bombers. The Ansons were to work in conjunction with the defending ships of ‘Redland’ in locating the enemy vessels, while the Demons provided an aerial strike force to assist in notionally eliminating the threat they posed.

Exercise hostilities took place in the focal area of south-east Australia, extending south from Port Stephens, New South Wales, to Cape Otway in Victoria, and all commercial ships passing through coastal waters became participants in the exercise, either wittingly or not. The exercise scenario required aircraft to conduct reconnaissance in the sea lanes and report by radio the details of all shipping that was sighted. For the purpose of the exercise a control room was set up at Laverton, where there was a huge coastal and sea map.

While the Seagull amphibians moved to Mallacoota, just inside the Victorian border near Cape Howe, a striking force of Demons from 3 (Army Co-operation) Squadron was stationed at Canberra along with the Anson detachment from 6 Squadron, with camp facilities being provided by the Royal Military College, Duntroon. Another striking force was formed from Demons of Laverton-based 1 (Bomber) Squadron. An Advanced Landing Ground (ALG) was also established at Yanakie, near Wilsons Promontory, Victoria, as an operational base



Seagull V



Anson



Demon

for 12 Squadron's Ansons, along with three Demons that provided local protection of the ALG from air attack.

Flying a series of parallel track, square and diverging searches, the reconnaissance patrols enjoyed some early successes. By the end of the first day one of the 'enemy' cruisers had been theoretically sunk and the other damaged, though not before six merchant ships had also supposedly been captured or sunk. During the second day a great many merchantmen were sighted and reported, but none of the enemy vessels were located. Finally, on the last day, the armed merchantman operating as a disguised raider was picked up and shadowed; a bombing attack was launched but failed to sink it. Among the Red casualties notionally suffered during the enemy attacks on shipping was the liner RMS *Strathnaver*, which had been 'sunk' as it rounded Cape Otway.

While it appears that no new major lessons of earth-shattering importance emerged from the exercise, at least on the air side, the aircrews undoubtedly received some valuable practice. The Anson had only begun entering RAAF service in numbers during 1937, and although it was not particularly suitable for maritime reconnaissance work it was the best type Australia possessed for performing the role. Moreover, many of the squadrons taking part were operating with scratch crews, so – as the post-exercise report submitted by 12 Squadron noted – “considering the inexperience of personnel the resultant flying and operational work was all that could be expected.” The RAAF was also given a lesson (if it had been inclined to accept it) about properly preparing an ALG. The 12 Squadron report noted that the failure to provide accommodation at Yanakie meant that personnel were forced to spend long hours on duty without rest, and “under trying circumstances owing to adverse weather conditions.”

The most significant area requiring attention that emerged from the exercise concerned the communication arrangements. As spelt out in a pre-exercise memorandum, the arrangements “for the general direction of Trade Defence operations off the S.E. of Australia ... [were] as yet untried.” What emerged as a result of N.Z.3 was that the RAAF was still not ready for handling actual operations of this kind. The reporting procedures used produced excessive radio traffic which quickly swamped the capacity of the signals staff at the operations room. So cluttered did the airwaves become that many aircraft were

unable to report sightings until after they had landed. (Although technology has improved communications facilities extensively, the lack of bandwidth is still a 'choke-point' in the dissemination of information in conflict.) In this situation it was inevitable that essential intelligence would be lost, as occurred on at least one occasion. During the second day of the exercise a freighter was supposedly sunk off Westernport before dawn, but the first knowledge that the RAAF at Laverton had of this came when an official bulletin appeared in Melbourne newspapers late that afternoon.

Considering that Australia had to contend during World War II with the activities of several German merchant raiders in and around its waters (*Pinguin*, *Komet* and *Orion* in 1940, and *Kormoran* in 1941), not to mention the Japanese submarine campaign waged off Australia's east coast during 1942-43, the participation of the RAN and RAAF in joint training in trade protection was absolutely appropriate and necessary at the time.

- “N.Z.3” was the first large-scale joint (and combined) training exercise involving the RAAF, and took place six months before World War II
- Important for testing and refining untried operational procedures for trade protection in local waters
- Proved invaluable for smoothing the transition to actual operations required to secure control in the sea-air gap surrounding Australia

The experience gained in these exercises was invaluable and it allowed an easy transition from the peace-time exercises to the war-time operations for the protection of shipping convoys.

E.R. Hall (1978), A Saga of Achievement



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