

SEA FURIES & FIREFLIES

HMAS *Sydney*'s air group went to war in 1951, developing Australian naval aviation to combat capability in just four years.

BY KARL JAMES

Brakes off. Power on. And in milliseconds, the violent kick from the hydraulic catapult shot the Fairey Firefly along the aircraft carrier's flight deck. The two-seat aircraft was airborne. Suddenly, recalled the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) pilot Norm Lee, "there's nothing in front of you. It's all water." The young sub-lieutenant, still only 21, likened the catapult launch to "being kicked up the backside by an elephant".

The Australian *Majestic*-class light aircraft carrier HMAS *Sydney* (III) was some 80 kilometres off the west coast of North Korea. In excellent weather, Lee took off mid-morning on Saturday 6 October 1951, along with several other Fireflies, to bomb a series of road bridges spanning rivers around Chinnampo (today's Namp'o), south-west of the North Korean capital, Pyongyang. Hawker Sea Furies, single-seat fighter-bombers from *Sydney*, also conducted ground attack sorties. This was the second day of *Sydney*'s operations.

Lee's Firefly was an anti-submarine and reconnaissance aircraft, employed as a dive-bomber during the ensuing campaign. With its Rolls Royce Griffon

74 engine, the Firefly was armed with four 20-millimetre cannons and on this occasion two 5,000-pound bombs. In his first strike against the enemy, Lee and his observer, Petty Officer Keith Bunning, a Royal Navy transfer, recorded a hit on a bridge. "They're shooting at us, they're shooting at us," Bunning kept repeating during the dive. The Fireflies bombed other bridges before conducting reconnaissance flights over roads that produced "fruitful strafing targets". For the day's operations, *Sydney*'s air group recorded one span of a major road bridge knocked out, several buildings destroyed and others set on fire.

Returning to *Sydney*, Lee began his landing approach. To touch down successfully on a small flight deck, in a vast ocean, required intense concentration, skilful judgement and quick reactions. Lee likened landing on *Sydney*'s straight deck to an "art". Approaching down-wind at a steady 90 knots and at an angle of 90 degrees to the deck, he relied on the Deck Landing Control Officer – better known as the "batsman" – standing on the port quarter, to indicate with

two paddles and body language if the aircraft's height, turn rate and speed were correct. Approaching too high, too low, or too slowly could be disastrous. In the final moments of approach, the pilot glimpsed the deck as he executed a left turn; after that, his view of the flight deck disappeared beneath the nose of the aircraft. Once the batsman signalled "cut", the pilot cut his throttle to stall the engine. At the critical moment, Lee flared the Firefly, lifting its nose to achieve a zero rate of descent just above the deck. Done properly, he wrote, "you hooked a wire." With the wire engaged and brakes hard on, the aircraft came to a rest. Make a mistake, and the aircraft missed one of the ten arrestor wires and would be caught in the barrier; or worse, the aircraft went over the side. Within seconds, naval airmen were preparing to have the Firefly stowed before another aircraft touched down.

During the Korean autumn and winter of 1951–52, *Sydney* and its carrier air group operated mostly off the Korean peninsula's west coast, its Sea Furies and Fireflies waging an interdiction campaign against North Korean supply lines and lines of communications. ▶



Above: Hawker Sea Furies and Fairey Fireflies on HMAS *Sydney*'s flight deck, Jervis Bay, NSW, c. 1949. AWM 305425

Below: HMAS *Sydney* in Korea Strait during Typhoon Ruth, 14 October 1951. One aircraft was lost and several others were damaged during the storm. Alan White, AWM P05890.069

Sydney also weathered a Japanese typhoon, and its pilots and observers confronted formidable North Korean and Chinese anti-aircraft fire. Three Australian pilots died in operations, and another was wounded. There were many more lucky escapes.

Starting the air group

Sydney's air group earned a reputation for effectiveness and high performance. Yet the Australian government had only approved the establishment of a RAN Naval Aviation branch in 1947. The first Australian naval air squadrons and *Sydney* were raised and commissioned the following year. Articles in the Australian press, celebrating the training of these early naval aviators, described these pilots as "flat-top fledglings". *Sydney* and its air group were the Australian navy's newest and most expensive asset. How did the RAN develop naval aviation to a combat capability in four years?

In addition to the use of seaplanes and airships, the Royal Navy had pioneered the launch, recovery and tactical employment of aircraft from ships. In 1917, HMAS *Brisbane* took on board a Royal Navy seaplane during the hunt for the German raider *Wolf* in the Indian Ocean. The light cruiser was the first Australian warship to carry an aircraft for operational purposes. Other Australian cruisers subsequently carried British aircraft. This wartime experience, however, was limited.

During the interwar period in Australia, as in Britain, preference was given to the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) over the creation of a

possible naval air service. In the 1920s the RAAF trained a small number of naval pilots and observers. In 1929, the Australian-built seaplane carrier HMAS *Albatross* was commissioned. Its service was brief. Going into reserve in 1933, *Albatross* was transferred to the Royal Navy five years later. Pilot training ceased. A small number of observers and telegraphist/gunners remained, chiefly supplementing a RAAF fleet co-operation flight for naval reconnaissance and survey work.

During the 1930s, a trickle of RAN officers qualified as observers. One was Sub-Lieutenant (later Admiral Sir) Victor "VAT" Smith. He was involved in naval air planning for D-Day, and in 1950 he joined *Sydney* as its Executive Officer. Smith was instrumental in promoting naval aviation, and is considered the "father" of the RAN's Fleet Air Arm. In the Second World War, a small number of RAN and RAAF personnel were trained to work with the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm. RAAF personnel flew and maintained the amphibian aircraft on Australian war ships.

On 3 July 1947, the Australian government approved the establishment of a RAN naval aviation branch entirely controlled and operated by the RAN. Initial planning provided for the establishment of two light fleet carriers and the necessary shore facilities. This would include commissioning the air force base at Nowra, NSW, as the air shore station HMAS *Albatross*, and later a second shore station at Schofield. The new branch was forecast to have a strength of some 4,000, and was modelled on the Royal Navy's air arm.

Clockwise from right:

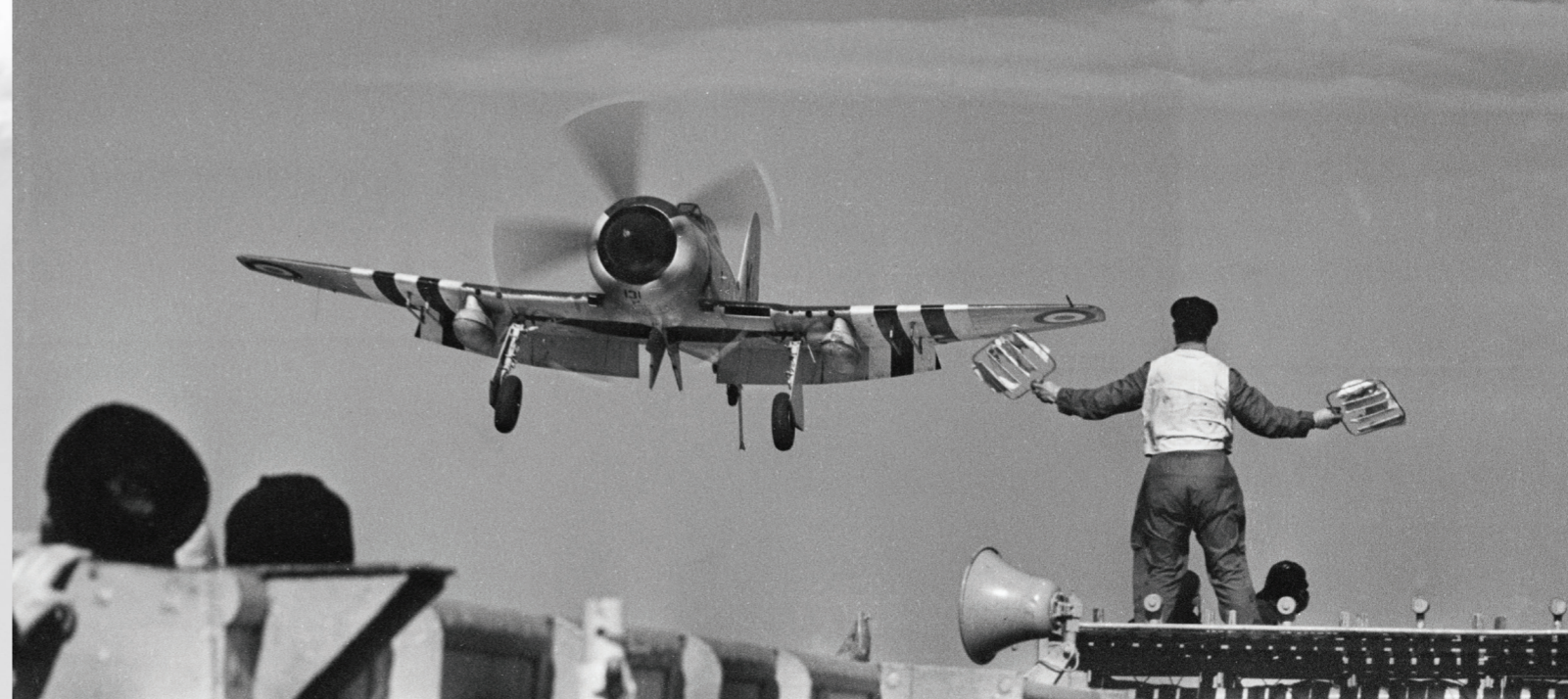
A batsman (air controller) signals to a Hawker Sea Fury FB.11 as it comes in to land on HMAS *Sydney*. Alan White, AWM P05890

A Hawker Sea Fury coming in to land on HMAS *Sydney*, Korean waters, 1951. Alan White AWM P05890.018

Aerial view of HMAS *Sydney*, 1949. *Argus* newspaper collection, State Library of Victoria.

Naval historians Anthony Wright and Rear Admiral James Goldrick, among others, have discussed at length the decision to develop an Australian aircraft carrier force. Australia would eventually operate three light aircraft carriers: *Sydney*; the *Colossus*-class HMAS *Vengeance* for a brief time; and the modernised *Majestic*-class HMAS *Melbourne* (II). David Hobbs has argued that *Sydney's* acquisition allowed the RAN "to become a Fleet again, capable of independent action, rather than a Squadron, limited to a supporting role in cooperation with other navies." This is an overly optimistic assessment. A new ship, *Sydney* was soon outdated and could not operate jet aircraft. But *Sydney* was certainly celebrated as a source of national pride.

It was also a hugely ambitious project. Even a brief discussion of *Sydney* conveys something of the scope of this undertaking. The carrier had been laid down and launched in Britain during the war as HMS *Terrible*, but construction work was not completed until ordered by the Australian government.



Sydney was commissioned on 16 December 1948 in Devonport, England. Its flight deck was 210 metres long, and its stern was 24 metres wide. It could accommodate 37 piston-engine aircraft. A single catapult was located on the port side of the forward flight deck, and two aircraft lifts connected the flight deck with the hangar below. Workshops and stores were on the lower deck. *Sydney* needed a complement of more than 1,100 men. Just consider some of the skills and trades that were required. There was the engineering department to maintain the Brown Curtis turbine engines, capable of achieving a speed of 24 knots; men whose stations were the 40-millimetre Bofors anti-aircraft guns; officers and ratings to operate and co-ordinate the six radars *Sydney* carried when first commissioned. There were workshop staff, armourers, air mechanics, naval airmen, and the flight deck crew, who operated the catapult, reset the arrestor wires, and manned the barriers. A small number of civilian canteen staff were aboard. Members of *Sydney's* company, officers and ratings, spent about a year in Britain in preparation for its commissioning and passage to Australia. Experience for Australians was also gained through the usual program of loans and training with the Royal Navy. Many served in other ships before coming to *Sydney*.

On 8 August 1948, 805 Squadron, equipped with Sea Furies, and 816 Squadron with Fireflies, were commissioned as RAN air squadrons at Eglinton, in Northern Ireland. They formed the 20th Carrier Air Group and embarked in *Sydney* for their

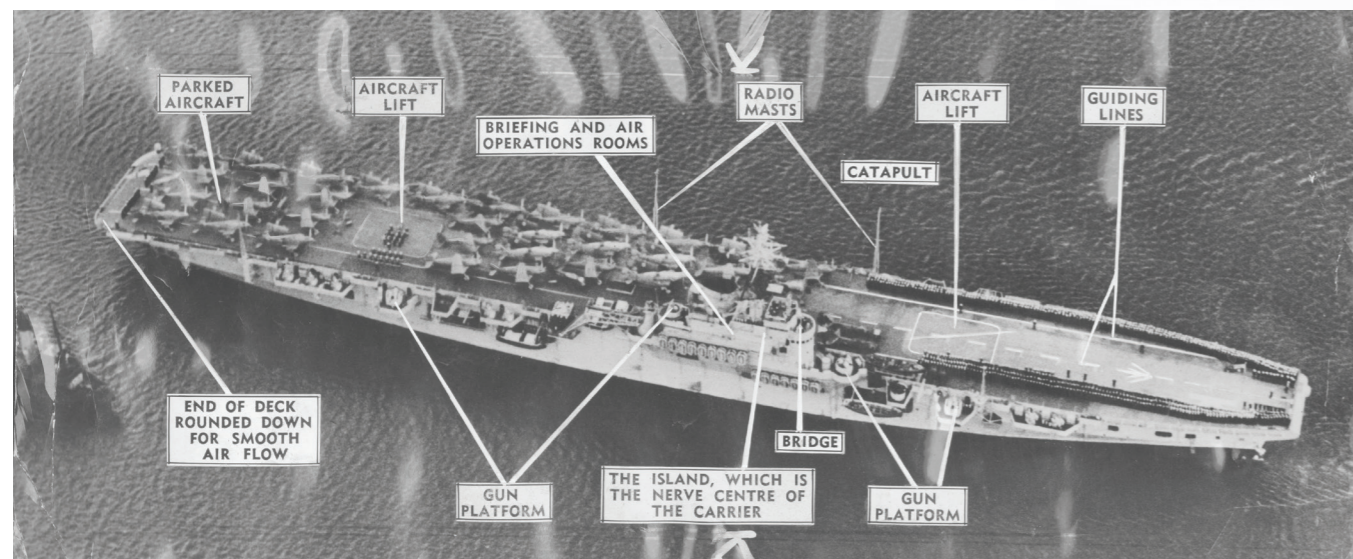


passage to Australia in 1949. So did at least 400 ex-Royal Navy personnel who transferred to the RAN, along with other British officers and ratings on loan. *Sydney* returned to Britain in 1950 to collect the 21st Carrier Air Group. Commissioned on Anzac Day at St Merryn, in Cornwall, England, this second group comprised 808 Squadron flying Sea Furies and 817 Squadron with Fireflies. Eight months later, in late August 1951, when the Australian carrier steamed for Korea, 805 Squadron and the 21st Carrier Air Group were embarked as the *Sydney* Air Group.

The men who flew

Individually and collectively, the pilots and observers of *Sydney's* air

group were a remarkable group. They came from England, Scotland, Wales and New Zealand, as well as Australia. The oldest was Lieutenant Commander (later Admiral Sir) Michael Fell, who commanded the air group. He was a highly experienced and decorated Royal Navy aviator and a brave leader. In April 1944, he had led Fleet Air Arm's second attack against the German battleship *Tirpitz*. Fell had his 34th birthday towards the end of *Sydney's* deployment in January 1952. The youngest was 21-year-old Sub-Lieutenant Noel Knappstein, from South Australia's well-known wine family. Shot down by flak on 26 October 1951, he crashed his Sea Fury and sold the wreck to Korean villager for 1,000 ►



won. This was a huge wad of cash. But the exchange rate only paid Knappstein one shilling and ninepence.

Twenty-five of the 37 pilots had served in the Second World War, and all seven of the commissioned observers were also veterans. They had served in the RAAF, the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm, the Royal Air Force, and had gone to sea with the RAN and Royal Navy. They were "a pretty tough old bunch", the comparatively young Sub-Lieutenant Lee recalled. Lieutenant Keith "Nails" Clarkson, 805 Squadron's senior pilot, for example, had 651 hours' flying time during the Second World War, including 360 hours in Spitfires and an hour in a German Messerschmitt Bf 109G. Lieutenant Brian "Snow" O'Connell, an observer with 817 Squadron, had been a navigator in four-engine Avro Lancaster heavy bombers. On 23 October 1944, he was shot down over Holland on his 28th operation. Although wounded in the leg, he evaded capture. His fellow crew members were killed or became prisoners of war.

It is not surprising that there was a such a high proportion of Second World War veterans. When the RAN began recruiting in 1947, there were thousands of recently demobilised airmen in Australia, Britain and the Dominions. The Navy had its pick. Initially they targeted fully qualified service pilots under the age of 26, as well as engineering graduates, to receive pilot training. Likewise, young men up to the age of 19 with high marks in their Intermediate Certificate could apply to become a pilot or undertake an aviation trade.

When the names of the first 24 pilots for Australia's future aircraft carriers were announced publicly in December 1947, all were war veterans. Five of those pilots would go on to serve in Korea. One of these was Walter "Jimmy" Bowles, who would command 805 Squadron. A New Zealander, he had served with Fleet Air Arm in the Atlantic and North Pacific. He had crashed or ditched his aircraft at sea four times during the war, and baled out from a Sea Fury during an early flight in Australia.

The initial pilot intake entered the RAN's Flinders Naval Depot, on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, before going to Britain for further training and service. The RAAF instructed subsequent pilot courses



Make a mistake, and the aircraft would be caught in the barrier; or worse, went over the side.

at Point Cook, near Melbourne, before they went to Britain. RAAF pilots' wings were considered provisional by the navy men: naval wings were only confirmed once pilots qualified for deck landings. In Britain, the intensive training schedule included compulsory Airfield Dummy Deck Landings. Pilots, waved down by a "batsman", practised landing on an airfield marked out like a landing deck. Only when dummy deck landings were adequately mastered were pilots permitted to conduct a landing on an actual aircraft carrier. In addition to skills and qualifications, substantial quantities of training aids and other equipment were brought back to Australia from various Royal Navy establishments.

Loans of Royal Navy personnel to the RAN transferred skills and experience. When the RAN air units were commissioned in Britain, Royal Navy officers were selected to command the

air groups and the squadrons. Loans were often for two and a half years. Consequently, when *Sydney* embarked the 21st Carrier Air Group for Korea, the group commander, Lieutenant Commander Fell, two "batsmen", and the commanding officers of 808 and 817 Squadrons, were all Royal Navy. There were also seven other Royal Navy junior officers. They, and the Australians who trained in Britain, helped pass on the skills and knowledge required to maintain high professional standards, workmanship and dedication to duty.

This approach proved to be effective. Through exposure, the procedures and attitudes of the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm were transferred to the Australian service and were accepted. 808 Squadron's Lieutenant Digby Johns later remarked, "We were basically just mirror images of what the RN were doing." A former Spitfire pilot who had flown over France and Holland in the earlier war, Johns was one of the first 24 selected for the RAN. *Sydney's* flight deck engineer, however, always thought he could identify Johns and other ex-RAAF pilots by their style of flying.

On patrol

From October 1951 to January 1952, *Sydney* conducted seven war patrols in Korean waters. On any given flying day, the air group conducted multiple "events" (i.e. a group of aircraft despatched on one or more missions at about the same time and usually returning together). There were armed reconnaissance flights, ground attack missions, rescue patrols, and defensive patrols around *Sydney* against a potential aircraft or submarine threat. Pilots generally flew only once or twice during the day, and there was no night flying.

Sydney maintained a cycle of about 14 days patrolling that usually included nine days of flying operations before the carrier returned to either Sasebo or Kure in Japan for replenishment. *Sydney* could stay at sea longer, but a break was found to be essential to rest aircrew and catch up on aircraft maintenance.

During its first patrol, *Sydney* set the record for a light fleet carrier when on 11 October it launched 89 sorties in a single day. This included "spotting" for the guns of the American battleship USS *New Jersey* and the British light cruiser HMS *Belfast*. The British Commander-in-Chief Far East Station congratulated *Sydney* with the following signal: ►



Left: Sub Lieutenant Ronald Coleman, 805 Squadron. AWM P11422.001

Above: Some of those who took over HMS *Terrible* when commissioned as HMAS *Sydney*, 1948. *Argus* newspaper collection, State Library of Victoria.

NAVY: KOREA

David Marshall, *Korean War rescue*, 1991. Fleet Air Arm Museum, Nowra.

“Your air effort in the last two days, unprecedented in quantity and high in quality, has been a magnificent achievement ... The spotters especially did a first class job and *New Jersey* ... said they were the best she has yet had. Eighty-nine sorties in one day is grand batting by any standards, particularly in the opening match.”

The Sea Fury and Firefly pilots dive-bombed, rocketed, and strafed with canon fire to destroy and damage bridges, rail tunnels, locomotives and rail trucks, roads, and buildings. Hundreds of sampans and junks were sunk; and close air support was provided for United Nations ground forces. Even individual ox carts, used by the North Koreans to transport ammunition and fuel, were destroyed. The intent was to halt or disrupt Communist movements. The aviators though were hesitant about the overall effectiveness of the approach. Sea Fury pilot Lieutenant Fred “Lofty” Lane later acknowledged that this strategy was “never successful”. The Communist transports moved at night and their camouflage was excellent. Bridges were quickly repaired or rebuilt, only to be bombed again: “Good targets were very few.”

Lieutenant Commander Bowles and 805 Squadron proved particularly aggressive. Bowles “was a pretty fearless sort of chap”, a fellow pilot remarked, “sort of stupid in some ways, but almost fearless.” Shot down once, Bowles returned to *Sydney* with his Sea Fury damaged on nine other occasions.

It was not Communist MiG jet fighters, but anti-aircraft fire that proved the greatest menace. Lieutenant Johns described seeing shells explode from heavy and medium anti-aircraft guns, but he thought the North Koreans never used tracer rounds in their smaller-calibre weapons. This “made life a little kinder” to the pilots, “but it may have been that we were living under false pretences because you wouldn’t know when they were firing at you.” Johns twice returned with his Sea Fury damaged.

Virtually all the Sea Fury pilots had their aircraft hit by flak or small-arms fire, as did nearly half of the Firefly pilots. Many were hit on multiple occasions. The most intense period occurred in mid-December, when



over 14 days there were 25 cases of flak damage, which resulted in the loss of five aircraft. This represented a rate of one aircraft damaged by enemy action in every 12 offensive sorties. An extract from a report of damaged aircraft read:

SHOT DOWN: Flak damage to rear fuselage; Bullet hole in rudder;

SHOT DOWN: Bullet hole in stbd [starboard] tank (bullet inside); Flak damage to port mainplane, engine cowling & fin;

SHOT DOWN: Flak damage – trimming controls shot away.

Sydney lost nine aircraft to enemy action. Pilots were shot down, forced to ditch in the ocean, or make emergency landings. The most daring rescue occurred on 26 October when Sub-Lieutenant Neil MacMillan and his observer, Chief Petty Officer Phillip Hancox, were shot down some 80 kilometres inside North Korean territory. They were saved by a United States Navy helicopter.

On 5 November 1951 Lieutenant Clarkson, and on 1 December Sub-Lieutenant Richard “Dick” Sinclair, died as a result of flak hitting their Sea Furies. A month later, on 2 January 1952, Sub-Lieutenant Ronald Coleman and his Sea Fury were lost, flying in bad weather. He was presumed to have crashed in the sea. Three days later, Lieutenant Peter Goldrick was wounded, hit in his right arm by a bullet that passed through his Sea Fury’s fuselage.

During the Australian carrier’s deployment in Korean waters, flying days were lost due to bad weather,

replenishment, or passage to and from Japan. *Sydney* had 42.8 full days of flying. Its air group flew 2,366 sorties, an average of 55.2 sorties for each full day’s flying. Korea has been described as the first challenge for Australian naval aviation. As Commodore Jack McCaffrie has remarked, the rapid progress of the RAN’s naval aviators to a highly efficient and effective operational entity was remarkable.

The development of Australian naval aviation from an ambition to a combat-ready capability was possible only with the wholehearted assistance of the Royal Navy’s Fleet Air Arm. Targeted recruitment; the adoption of common training, techniques and procedures; and the loan of officers and ratings, all created a shared aviation experience and culture. The closeness of the two aviation branches, where the senior trained and mentored the junior, was not unique. Rather it reflected the firm bond and the long-held interoperability that existed between the Royal Navy and the Royal Australian Navy.

In time the RAN’s Fleet Air Arm matured and developed its own character and traditions. The Korean War was only the beginning of their story. ●

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