

“A fleeting opportunity to strike”: the combat experiences of Australians serving in RAF Coastal Command during the Second World War

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The experiences of Australians who served in Royal Air Force (RAF) Coastal Command during the Second World War remain largely unknown. Stories concerning Bomber and Fighter Commands are common in literature concerning the RAF, but Coastal Command is often rendered their defensive sister and relegated to third place in the scholarship. Despite this – and the misconceptions such labels have encouraged – the crews of Coastal Command have colourful and harrowing stories, and their service played a crucial role in the victory over European fascism in 1945.

Introduction

On 2 June 1943, the crew of Sunderland EJ134, or “N for Nuts” of No. 461 Squadron, Coastal Command, took off from Pembroke Dock to undertake standard anti-submarine reconnaissance over the Bay of Biscay. Scheduled to take off in the early morning, the Sunderland crew was delayed owing to poor weather. The aircraft finally took flight at 1330 hours. At 1900 hours, having flown six hours over the Bay of Biscay, a member of the crew spotted eight aircraft on the starboard beam of the Sunderland. The pilot, Flight Lieutenant Walker, attempted to take cloud cover to conceal their position. Unfortunately for the crew of N for Nuts, the eight aircraft were German Junker 88 fighter-bombers and they had spotted the Allied aircraft.¹

In the ensuing attack, Sunderland EJ134 received significant damage and the crew’s engineer, Pilot Officer Miles, was mortally wounded. After 45 minutes of aerial fighting, the remaining JU 88s abandoned their efforts and the Sunderland was free to turn for base; however, this meant getting 500 km back to base with a shaken

¹ ‘Pilot’s Control Wheel from Sunderland Aircraft EJ134’, Australian War Memorial, accessed 20 January 2018, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C147771>>.

crew and a severely damaged plane.² There was no guarantee that EJ134 would make their passage home; the crew were faced with the possibility of meeting further enemy aircraft, terrible weather, or even flak from U-boats.

Against all odds, the crew of N for Nuts landed their Sunderland on a public beach in Cornwall and were greeted with a hero's welcome. Interviewed by the BBC, they became well known around Pembroke Dock. Unfortunately, on 13 August of the same year, months later, the crew of N for Nuts were sent out on a patrol from which they never returned.³ A final distress signal was received from the crew, who had come up against another pack of JU 88s. The names of the men who perished on this plane are on the Runnymede Memorial, Surrey, alongside the names of 20,288 Allied casualties.⁴



Image 1: Three crew members who survived incident on 2 June 1943, along with Sgt Miles (RAF) killed on that flight; all surviving men later lost their lives on 13 August 1943 (left to right) Sgt Fuller, RAF, Sgt Ray Marston Goode, RAAF, Sgt Miles RAF, Sgt Phillip Kelvin Turner, RAAF. AWM SUK10578.

² 'Pilot's Control Wheel from Sunderland Aircraft EJ134', Australian War Memorial.

³ 'Wilbur Dowling', Australian War Memorial, accessed 20th January 2018, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C251488>>

⁴ 'Runnymede Memorial', Commonwealth War Graves Commission, accessed 20th January 2018, <<https://www.cwgc.org/find/find-cemeteries-and-memorials/109600/runnymede-memorial>>

The contribution made by Royal Air Force (RAF) Coastal Command to the Second World War is little understood. Similarly, the contributions made by Australians in this service are often unexplored. Relative to the stories of Bomber and Fighter Command, the war experiences of Coastal Command squadrons are largely untold, overlooked and under-represented. The literature specifically concerning Coastal Command was predominantly written in the decades following the war by those who served, and has since received little scholarly attention. This – coupled with the much deeper historical exploration of Bomber and Fighter Commands – has contributed to the sidelining of Coastal Command as one of the lesser-known air commands of the Second World War.⁵ Despite their historiographical under-representation, the efforts of Australians serving in Coastal Command proved vital to the Allied victory, and it is important to acknowledge and tell the stories of their contribution to the Second World War.

This paper challenges the key misconceptions of RAF Coastal Command by exploring the experiences of Australian aircrew serving in the battle of the Atlantic. It argues that despite the observable tendency to see the service of Australians in Coastal Command as a defensive, monotonous job lacking in danger or prestige, their roles were in fact arduous, disciplined, and vital. Specifically, those servicemen who have recorded their stories identify the weather, sortie length, and anticipatory fear as central to their experience of coastal combat.

While these three elements of aerial combat were experienced in some measure by airmen across all RAF Commands, they were especially strenuously felt by the men carrying out the unique demands of Coastal Command. They provide insight into what it was like to serve in Coastal Command, and challenge the misconceptions laid down by decades of under-representation and misunderstanding.

⁵ There were several other RAF commands operating during the Second World War that remain ripe for further research, including the little-known Balloon and Transport Commands.

Misconceptions associated with Coastal Command service

The rank and file of aircrew adopted the Bomber Command tradition of regarding Coastal Command flying as a more or less gentlemanly occupation for the old and toothless.

– J. H. W. Lawson, No. 455 Squadron⁶

Straddling the juncture between the air force and the navy, RAF Coastal Command was central to the Allied air war at sea. Despite this, there is a tendency for wartime publications and histories of the Second World War to present Coastal Command as a monotonous and unimportant cog in the larger machinery of war. In 1947, the British War Ministry noted that many in the service saw Coastal Command as “just an unimportant stooge job compared with Fighter and Bomber”.⁷ Despite recent attempts, such as Andrew Hendrie’s 2006 history of Coastal Command, a lack of engagement in the history of Coastal Command has prevailed in the post-war era.⁸ This has led to assumptions that Coastal Command squadrons were unsuccessful, unglamorous, and defensive.⁹

One cause of Coastal Command’s marginalisation in the wider historiography is the difficulty associated with quantifying success. Where the contribution of Fighter and Bomber Commands can be measured in tangible statistics, such as tonnage of bombs deployed and enemy aircraft shot down, a significant portion of Coastal Command’s role was centred upon offensive reconnaissance and naval support.¹⁰ Coastal Command was attributed with fewer U-boat kills than the Navy, or even Bomber Command, but their contribution was integral to the spotting of U-boats and the protection of Allied naval columns.¹¹ This lack of tangible success has

⁶ J.H.W. Lawson, *The Story of 455 (R.A.A.F) Squadron*, Wilke & Co Limited, Melbourne, 1954, p. 59.

⁷ Air Ministry, *Psychological Disorders in Flying Personnel of the Royal Air Force, 1939-1945*, His Majesty’s Stationery Office, London, 1947, p. 80.

⁸ Andrew Hendrie, *The Cinderella Service: RAF Coastal Command 1939-1945*, Pen & Sword Aviation, Barnsley, 2006.

⁹ Hendrie, *The Cinderella Service*, p. 46.

¹⁰ John Herrington, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 3 (Air): Volume III, Air War Against Germany and Italy*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1954, p. 455.

¹¹ John Herrington, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 3 (Air): Volume IV, Air Power Over Europe*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1963, p. 463.

led to the assumption that Coastal Command was unsuccessful in their sorties. In the Official History of Australia in the Second World War, for example, John Herrington noted on numerous occasions that Coastal Command's contribution was less quantifiable. He stated that Coastal Command's contribution was overlooked as "the eyes of the world were ... fixed on the Homeric air battles being waged over south-east England", while in the Bay of Biscay, "the greatest successes against U-boats were scored paradoxically not by the patient, trained anti-submarine units but by the anti-shipping strike units".¹²

Assumptions that Coastal Command enjoyed little offensive success are common in the literature surveyed. In 1983 K.C. Baff, *Maritime is Number Ten*, stated that Coastal Command's contributions were "not rewarded by positive action against the enemy" due to the persistence of the U-boats.¹³ The lack of U-boat kills led an Air Ministry report in 1947 to describe Coastal Command sorties as involving "monotonous reconnaissance with infrequent and uncertain reward".¹⁴ A newspaper article published in September 1940 on Coastal Command's progress in the war concluded, "It is one of the crews' regrets that thousands of hours' patrols have enabled them to find only two U-boats."¹⁵ The memorialisation of Coastal Command's contribution to the war effort as inextricably linked to the number of U-boats they sunk significantly detracts from their wider contribution.

The RAAF's 1954 official history of the Second World War described Coastal Command's contribution as being "purely defensive in character and supplementary to that of naval escort groups", which were "far more efficient in finding and destroying U-boats".¹⁶ Similarly, the RAF's official history asserts that "with the Allies' great superiority in naval resources, anything higher than third place for

¹² Herrington, *Australia in the War of 1939-45, Series 3 (Air): Volume III*, p. 41; Herrington, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 3 (Air): Volume IV*, p. 381.

¹³ K. C. Baff, *Maritime is Number Ten: The Sunderland Era, 1939-45*, Self-published: K. C. Baff, 1983, p. 342.

¹⁴ Air Ministry, *Psychological Disorders in Flying Personnel of the RAF.*, p. 78.

¹⁵ 'The Watch by Air and Sea: A Year's Work of the RAF Coastal Command', September 11 1940 in No. 10 Squadron Line Book, AWM Private Record PR82/083.

¹⁶ Herrington, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 3 (Air): Volume IV*, p. 377.

Coastal Command ... would have been utterly unwarranted".¹⁷ Coastal Command was clearly considered secondary to the Royal Navy within the waters of the Atlantic. Even the UK Ministry of Information's account of Coastal Command's role in the war – a 1942 work published in support of the Command – considered their main contribution as "to aid the Royal Navy".¹⁸

In the sky, Coastal Command was perceived as lacking "the glamour of other Commands" and therefore was reduced to third place behind "its two 'offensive' sisters, Fighter and Bomber Commands".¹⁹ During the war, British politician Archibald Sinclair described Coastal Command as being perceived as "unspectacular by comparison" to other commands.²⁰ A fictional 1944 publication aimed at members of the service openly spoke of how Coastal Command aircrew "dreamed of the death and glory life of Fighter boys", and how they considered flying Coastal aircraft as "the last thing ... [they] wanted to do".²¹ Such quotes suggest that Coastal Command was not an area of the RAF that one proudly aspired to serve in. By comparison with the "death and glory life of Fighter boys" – as well as Bomber boys – Coastal Command was perceived as an "apparently routine service" within which personnel "sought no limelight" and received little reward.²²

The misconceptions associated with Coastal Command are numerous, though not necessarily intentionally formulated. While there is a tendency in the historiography to see Coastal Command as unglamorous, and to focus on other air services, the Australians who served in Coastal Command have an important story to tell. Challenging the misconceptions associated with Coastal service brings a proud and colourful history comes to the fore. The volume and nature of the

¹⁷ Dennis Richards, *Royal Air Force, 1939-45: Volume I: The Fight at Odds*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1953, p. 55.

¹⁸ UK Ministry of Information, *Coastal Command: the Air Ministry Account of the part played by Coastal Command in the battle of the seas, 1939-1942*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1942, p. 142.

¹⁹ Hendrie, *The Cinderella Service*, p. 46.

²⁰ Letter from Archibald Sinclair to No. 10 Squadron, Historical Records No. 10 Squadron, AWM64 1/71

²¹ Frank Tilsley, *Boys of Coastal*, Cassell & Company, London, 1944, p. 9.

²² Tilsley, *Boys of Coastal*, p. 9; Herrington, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 3 (Air): Volume IV*, p. 384.

operational duties undertaken by Coastal Command personnel demonstrate that the air war at sea was “a very vicious war”, one of nerves, “the province of the highly trained specialist ... an acquired taste, a profession”.²³

The role of Coastal Command

Each U-boat Coastal Command keeps out of the Atlantic is one barb withdrawn from Britain's thorny crown.

– Flight Lieutenant Ivan Southall, No. 461 Squadron²⁴

Coastal Command was responsible for a wide array of duties during the Second World War. Their operational flights were conducted across large swathes of ocean and involved crew members from a range of Allied nations.²⁵ Though their efforts remain relatively unknown, the roles of Coastal Command squadrons were broad-ranging and essential for victory.

In 1942, the UK Ministry of Information's book *Coastal Command: the Air Ministry account of the part played by Coastal Command in the battle of the seas, 1939–1942*, detailed Coastal Command's contribution to the Allied war at sea. It described Coastal Command's role as assisting with naval operations by “frustrating the enemy's endeavour to blockade Great Britain”.²⁶ This role was realised through a variety of operational sorties including – but not limited to – escorting Allied shipping columns, anti-shipping and submarine patrols, transporting important passengers, delivering vital supplies to damaged aircraft, air-sea rescue, mine laying and destroying, photographic reconnaissance, meteorological monitoring and

²³ Laurence Richardson, *Australians at War* Film Archive, UNSW, 27:00-27:30, Part 3, accessed 18th January 2018, < [²⁴ Southall, *They Shall Not Pass Unseen*, p. 8.](http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1105-laurence-richardson?destination=aXRlbXNfcGVyX3BhZ2Uma2V5d29yZHM9bGF1cmVuY2UIMjByaWN0YXJk c29uJm9wPVNlYXJjaCZmb3JtX2J1aWxkX2lkPWZvcmt0OUVLZVBjR2pHeklISGpLRFINRTdsU2Vud E9wWGxpbS1JdUhNd24tSGdUayZmb3JtX2lkPXNlYXJjaF9ibG9ja19mb3Jt>”; Ivan Southall, <i>They Shall Not Pass Unseen</i>, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1956, p. 3.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

²⁵ Dennis Richards & Hilary St. George Saunders, *Royal Air Force 1939-45: Volume II: The Flight Avails*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1954, pp. 91-98.

²⁶ UK Ministry of Information, *Coastal Command*, p. 142.

assisting in preparations for D-Day.²⁷ These tasks were undertaken by squadrons across Coastal Command operating a variety of aircraft, from offensive aircraft retired from Bomber Command to the famous Short Sunderland flying boat.²⁸

These contributions to the Allied war effort should not be undervalued. The Atlantic shipping run, with vital war supplies brought to Britain from the United States, was considered “Britain’s lifeline” in the war against Nazi Germany, but was susceptible to German attack.²⁹ Between January and May 1941 alone, Nazi Germany was responsible for sinking two million tonnes of Allied shipping.³⁰ A further six million tonnes were lost in 1942.³¹ Winston Churchill later wrote that “the only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril”.³² While considered “*die glückliche Zeiten*”, or “fortunate times”, by the Germans, such unsustainable losses presented a harsh reality of the naval danger posed by Germany to the Allied war effort.³³ It was essential that the German Navy’s efforts were hindered by any means necessary.

Several Coastal Command squadrons were assigned to the job of locating, hampering, and destroying German attempts to attack the vital supply columns. Coastal Command was credited with sinking 366 German ships and 165 U-boats, and damaging a further 134 ships and 107 U-boats throughout the war.³⁴ As a result, Coastal Command aircraft accounted for the loss of over 1,000,000 tonnes of German shipping; their actions seriously damaged the German war effort.³⁵

²⁷ Richards & Saunders, *Royal Air Force 1939-45: Volume II*, pp. 91–98.

²⁸ For more on the aircraft operated by Coastal Command see: Chaz Bowyer, *Sunderland at War*, Ian Allen, London, 1976; Hendrie, *The Cinderella Service: RAF Coastal Command 1939-1945*; John McCarthy, *A Last Call of Empire: Australian Aircrew, Britain and the Empire Air Training Scheme*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1988; Roy C. Nesbit, *The Armed Rovers: Beauforts & Beaufighters over the Mediterranean*, Airlife Publishing, UK, 1995.

²⁹ Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, Pimlico, London, 2006, p. 38.

³⁰ Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, p. 32.

³¹ Norman Davies, *No Simple Victory: World War II in Europe, 1939–1945*, Penguin Books, London, 2006, p. 26.

³² Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: Volume II, Their Finest Hour*, Cassel & Co., London, 1949, 529.

³³ Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, p. 38.

³⁴ Hendrie, *The Cinderella Service*, pp. 230-1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

SUK14903

Image 2: Photograph taken from a reconnaissance aircraft of Allied shipping column crossing the Atlantic Ocean, November 1942, provided by Coastal Command. AWM SUK14903.

Coastal Command proved the effectiveness of its patrols over the Atlantic by forcing the German Navy to alter its tactics. From 1942, German U-boats had to be protected by the deployment of Junker 88 fighter-bomber aircraft.³⁶ German ships were also forced to change tactics regarding how, where and when they surfaced for air.³⁷ In May 1943, Coastal Command's aerial offensive led Admiral Karl Dönitz, Germany's *Befehlshaber der Unterseeboote* (Commander of the Submarines) to express his concern to Hitler that "the

³⁶ Hilary St. George Saunders, *Royal Air Force 1939-45: Volume III: The Fight is Won*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1954, p. 53.

³⁷ Baff, *Maritime is Number 10*, 294-5.

substantial increase of the enemy Air Force is the cause of the present crisis in submarine warfare".³⁸

Australians in Coastal Command

It will be remembered that the original RAAF Sunderland Squadron was the first of the Dominion services to embark for the United Kingdom after the outbreak of war, and its gallant deeds ... provide some of the finest epics in the history of the present conflict.

Extract from newspaper clipping, 'Annual Celebration of Original Members of Famous Australian Squadron'³⁹



Image 3: Twenty-one year old Sunderland captain Flight Lieutenant R. D. Lucas, No. 461 Squadron RAAF, in the doorway of his aircraft nicknamed 'the Hop-Along'. AWM SUK11729.

³⁸ Charles Messenger, 'The Influence of Technology on Airpower, 1919-45' in *Men, Machines, and War*, eds. Ronald Haycock & Keith Neilson, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Ontario, 1988, p. 111.

³⁹ 'Annual Celebration of Original Members of Famous Australian Squadron', Historical Records No. 10 Squadron, AWM64 1/71.

Australians served in a wide variety of squadrons and roles across RAF Coastal Command. It is difficult to calculate an exact number of Australians who served in Coastal Command, due to the fact that many Australian airmen passed through the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS) and served in principally British squadrons. There were, however, three Coastal Command squadrons that can be considered predominantly Australian in personnel. Squadrons Nos 10, 455 and 461 were well-known within the wider Command for their Australian origins.⁴⁰ Both Nos 10 and 461 were based in the south-west of the UK, operating out of Pembroke Dock, Wales, and Mount Batten in Plymouth.⁴¹

These two squadrons – 10 and 461 – were equipped with Short Sunderland flying boats and were primarily tasked with conducting anti-submarine patrols over the Bay of Biscay off the west coast of France.⁴² For this reason, alongside ample archival material on these squadrons, the experiences of the men of Nos 10 and 461 will provide the bulk of this paper's analysis. The aircrew of 455 Squadron were operating smaller aircraft designed for bombing, so their sorties were significantly shorter and more targeted than those of the Sunderland crews. While their operations differed significantly, their experiences will be quoted on occasion.

The Sunderlands were well-suited to anti-submarine patrols owing to their size and stamina. This particular aircraft could be airborne for upwards of ten hours at a time and patrol over hundreds of miles of ocean. This ensured the sorties of a Sunderland required patience, endurance and unwavering concentration; the crews spent approximately a dozen hours per trip searching for unknown targets. On top of the exceptionally long flying hours, the Sunderland took off and alighted on water, meaning that crew had to be escorted to and from their flying boats by

⁴⁰ For more information on these three squadrons see: Lawson, *The Story of 455 (RAAF) Squadron*; K. C. Baff, *Maritime is Number Ten: The Sunderland Era, 1939-45*; Southall, *They Shall Not Pass Unseen*.

⁴¹ Herrington, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 3 (Air): Volume IV*, pp. 360-362.

⁴² *Ibid.*

dinghy; this added up to an hour before and after each flight. The “buoy to buoy” length of a Sunderland sortie often amounted to upwards of 13 hours.⁴³



Image 4: A Sunderland flying boat of No. 10 Squadron RAAF moving back into the water at RAF Station Mount Batten, Plymouth, after maintenance from ground crew. AWM SUK 14699.

The crews of a Short Sunderland aircraft racked up impressive operational statistics throughout the war. Between September 1939 and February 1944, No. 10 Squadron alone flew over three million operational miles in no less than 23,669 hours.⁴⁴ This places No. 10's average operational sortie at just over 10 hours.⁴⁵ No. 461 Squadron was no less impressive: from its formation on Anzac Day 1942, to the

⁴³ Private Records of Sgt. G. C Hore, PR88/142 AWM File 419/48/98.

⁴⁴ Historical Records No. 10 Squadron Overseas H.Q., London, Public Relations, AWM64 1/71.

⁴⁵ Historical Records No. 10 Squadron, AWM64 1/71.

29th of February 1944, it conducted over 785 sorties.⁴⁶ In less than two years, the squadron had flown over a million operational miles, averaging 11 hours per flight.⁴⁷

While they flew for upwards of 10 hours an operation, a notable feature of Coastal Command's war experience is the relative infrequency with which they encountered the enemy. Flight Lieutenant Southall noted that despite the long flying hours and millions of miles covered, "it was the uneventful patrol which figured so largely in the individual logbook".⁴⁸ In a typical example, on 8 May 1944 Flying Officer Colin Gramp of No. 461 recorded in his diary: "took off on ops at 0400 hours on A/S [anti-submarine] patrol. Fairly rough in places down the bay ... Flew for 13 hours 45 minutes".⁴⁹ No enemy vessel was identified during this mission.

Conducting anti-submarine patrols for over 13 hours became commonplace for Gramp, who recorded two similar operations on 11 and 14 May 1944.⁵⁰ Such long, seemingly uneventful sorties were often punctuated by false-alarms: "took off on ops 0210 hours on A/S patrol that lasted 14 hours ... had a bit of a scare during the first hour, received sub sighting ... sub turned out to be our own 'Viking' on exercises".⁵¹ Crews faced long flights in constant anticipation of the sudden appearance of the enemy. Gramp's experience was not isolated.

The experiences of Coastal Command aircrew

Every day you're thinking you're going to be killed. Every time you go out, you can't be sure you're going home.

- Squadron Leader Russell Baird, No. 10 & 461 Squadron⁵²

⁴⁶ Historical Records No. 461 Squadron Overseas H.Q., London, Public Relations, AWM64 1/334.

⁴⁷ Historical Records No. 461 Squadron, AWM64 1/334

⁴⁸ Southall, *They Shall Not Pass Unseen*, p. 131.

⁴⁹ Norman Ashworth, *The ANZAC Squadron*, Hesperian Press, Western Australia, 1994, p. 195.

⁵⁰ Ashworth, *The ANZAC Squadron*, pp. 195-6.

⁵¹ Ashworth, *The ANZAC Squadron*, p. 196.

⁵² Russell Baird, Australians at War Film Archive, UNSW, 35:00-35:30, Part 2, accessed 25th January 2018, < <http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1143-russell-baird?destination=aXRlbXNfcGVyX3BhZ2Uma2V5d29yZHM9cnVzc2VsbCUyMGJhaXJkjm9wPVNlYXJjaCZmb3JtX2J1aWxkX2lkPWZvcn0tSIVKSjAyaVVxd3JJRmZKQjhsS2RfeTdFYjFLNU1wWkszajd>

In an interview in 2003, Flying Officer Laurence Richardson of No. 10 Squadron recalled a night of particularly foul weather when he was aboard his Sunderland on an anti-submarine patrol for Coastal Command.⁵³ Despite the violent weather, the search for U-boats continued. Richardson described the night as “the worst night I ever spent in my life”, going on to admit that he “hoped the damned thing crashed that’s how bad it was”.⁵⁴

The flights took their toll on the airmen’s wellbeing. For example, Flight Lieutenant Ivan Southall of No. 461 Squadron reminisced upon his time in Coastal Command during an interview in 2004.⁵⁵ He admitted having to seek medical attention in an effort to fight his flying fatigue. He self-medicated in order to “keep myself awake or alert for an operational patrol” which “could be anything up to 15 hours”.⁵⁶ Similarly, Warrant Officer William Darcey of No. 461 Squadron hallucinated on patrol as a result of the prolonged state of nervous anticipation.⁵⁷ He often saw “little men riding bicycles over the waves” alongside “tram cars travelling on the surface of the Atlantic”.⁵⁸

The experiences of these three men highlight some of the unique combat experiences of Coastal Command aircrew. The primary accounts of the aircrew of

pVEkza0VDVSZmb3JtX2lkPXNIYXJjaF9ibG9ja19mb3Jt>. To piece together the experiences of those who served in Coastal Command, a number of oral histories from UNSW’s Australians at War Film Archive have been used. While the author is aware of the limitations of oral histories taken a significant time after the period in question, these particular sources demonstrate very similar themes to those sources produced during, or immediately after, the Second World War. These oral histories will be used alongside additionally primary sources including – but not limited to – log books, unit diaries, letters, and newspaper articles.

⁵³ Richardson, Australians at War Film Archive, UNSW, 20:00-22:00, Part 5.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Southall, Australians at War Film Archive, UNSW, 35:00, Part 4, accessed 24th January 2018, < [⁵⁶ Southall, Australians at War Film Archive, UNSW, 35:00, Part 4.](http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1529-ivan-southall?destination=aXRlbXNfcGVyX3BhZ2Uma2V5d29yZHM9aXZhbiUyMHNvdXRoYWxsJm9wPVNIYXJjaCZmb3JtX2J1aWxkX2lkPWZvcmt0tTkpCbUxHdHMzOUNyM044SmVTS0NyMDc4V0RjUy1VV2pfZk96Tmo0dXRtQSZmb3JtX2lkPXNIYXJjaF9ibG9ja19mb3Jt>; Southall’s experiences are also recorded in his book <i>They shall not pass unseen</i>.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

⁵⁷ William Darcey, Australians at War Film Archive, UNSW, 00:30-01:30, Part 8, accessed 23rd January 2018, < [⁵⁸ Darcey, Australians at War Film Archive, UNSW, 00:30-01:30, Part 8.](http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1532-william-darcey?destination=aXRlbXNfcGVyX3BhZ2Uma2V5d29yZHM9d2lsbGlhbSUyMGRhcmNleSZvcD1TZWZyY2gmZm9ybV9idWlsZF9pZD1mb3JtLVZaNTBaQlhtZj1bEQ1SzVyUnVISIY1QlREbm11dUtuVmR4a3hBeGJNancmZm9ybV9pZD1zZWZyY2hfYmxvY2tfZm9ybQ>.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Coastal often contain descriptions of the vagaries of bad weather, lengthy operations, and prolonged anticipation of sudden enemy action. While these three elements of service were endured by servicemen in any number of roles in the war, they were exacerbated by the Coastal Command's exceptionally long flying hours, the fact that aircrew had to fly below the clouds in bad Atlantic weather, and because their enemy could appear at any minute in the form of air and sea attack.

"Weather is our enemy"

Weather played a significant role in the war experience of those who served in Coastal Command. Australians who served in No. 10 and 461 Squadrons identified the weather as one of their key enemies.⁵⁹ The weather dictated take-off and landing times, compromised the safety of the crew while airborne, and forced crews to spend countless additional hours with their aircraft to prevent damage during mooring.

The unique nature of the operational sorties undertaken by Coastal Command meant that weather particularly affected Coastal Command squadrons. When patrolling for German U-boats, the crews on board a Sunderland flying boat, for example, were operating at a height of between 1,200 and 5,000 feet above sea level,⁶⁰ the optimal height for effective U-boat spotting. Unfortunately, this height made for difficult flying conditions as weather fronts were unavoidable.⁶¹ Despite the size and endurance of the Sunderland, Flight Lieutenant Ivan Southall describes how it was "tossed like a toy" in the clouds: "one didn't hunt for U-boats at a height of ten thousand feet above the weather, one hunted for U-boats ... in the weather".⁶²

While aircrew from other RAF Commands also had to contend with turbulence, the crews of Sunderlands were uniquely exposed to turbulence created by operating through Atlantic weather fronts for hours on end. Where Bomber

⁵⁹ Southall, *They Shall Not Pass Unseen*, p. 46.

⁶⁰ Maritime is No. 10, 312; This was irrespective of an instruction handed down to all squadrons of the RAF in 1943 that the optimal operational altitude for aircraft was between 8,000 and 10,000ft. No. 10 Squadron did not abide by this instruction as they had found 3,000ft to be the maximum height for a Sunderland to remain effective in spotting and attacking U-boats before they submerged.

⁶¹ Southall, *They Shall Not Go Unseen*, p. 47.

⁶² Ibid.

Command pilots were permitted to search for “smoother air higher up”, in Coastal, “discipline and self-respect forbade it”.⁶³ The weather was therefore unavoidable. For Flying Officer Laurence Richardson, the weather “was the only thing you didn’t have any control over”.⁶⁴ Air Commodore E. B. Courtney described the weather as “hopeless”; it seemed “a miracle” to him that his crew “ever found England again, let alone our base”.⁶⁵

The turbulence produced by low operating altitudes intensified airsickness in Coastal crews. Flying Officer Gramp noted airsickness in several entries in his flying log. One said: “got sick as usual making dinner”, “as usual” suggesting such an experience was common for Gramp.⁶⁶ Similarly, Flying Officer Richardson spent one sortie severely airsick: “I’ve never been so sick in all my life,” he recalled. To assess and understand the airsickness experienced by aircrew of Coastal Command, squadron medical officers occasionally accompanied aircrews on their sorties.⁶⁷ In one such case, a medical officer attached to No. 10 Squadron spent 12 hours of the operational sortie vomiting his “soul out”, noting in the aftermath that he felt “faintly ridiculous”.⁶⁸ While embarrassing for the men, airsickness became a shared experience of those who served in Coastal Command.

The weather also affected the timeframe of Coastal Command operations; severe weather often led to the cancellation or postponement of flights. This made the already lengthy jobs of many Coastal Command aircrews even longer. The service diary of Flight Sergeant Allan Talbot records that unfavourable weather led to the postponement of a sortie by over eight hours.⁶⁹ After reporting for operations at 4 am, Talbot noted how it was “raining cats and dogs ... so take off [was] postponed for 2 hours”.⁷⁰ Talbot went back to bed briefly, but he couldn’t sleep. The

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Richardson, *Australians at War Film Archive*, UNSW, 20:00, Part 5.

⁶⁵ Baff, *Maritime is Number Ten*, p. 420.

⁶⁶ Ashworth, *The ANZAC Squadron*, p. 196.

⁶⁷ McCarthy, *A Last Call of Empire*, p. 113.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Service Diary of Allan B. Talbot, AWM Private Record PR00538.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

operation was postponed until 9 am, with all aircrew “rearing to go”.⁷¹ After a further postponement, Talbot’s crew were advised to “stand by the phone”, waiting for news. Finally, take off was scheduled for 12.30 pm.⁷²

In a similar instance, Flight Sergeant Edward Gallagher expressed his frustration:

This standing by is a nuisance. You can’t nip out of camp, nor can you wander about the station. You’ve got to keep in touch with flight office all the time and at night you’re liable to be yanked out of the land of dreams unceremoniously and told to dress in a hurry and make for the ship with all speed.⁷³

Coastal crews were forced to demonstrate patience and resilience while dealing with the weather. Unfortunately, postponement had to be tolerated, because of the danger of taking off into adverse weather conditions. Wing Commander Grant Lindeman of No. 455 Squadron noted how a group controller advised his crews to take off in groups of three to combat the weather.⁷⁴ Lindeman recorded his acerbic reaction: “presumably he [the group controller] thought it wouldn’t be so bad if they crashed in threes instead of all at once”.⁷⁵

Often adverse weather would alter the length or course of a sortie once it was underway, largely because of the conditions being unsuitable for landing. Unfortunately for aircrew, this situation was unpredictable; it led to many an anxious hour wondering what conditions would be like on return to base. In 1947, when RAF neurologists collated their findings on *Psychological disorders in flying personnel of the Royal Air Force*, one Coastal Command aircrew had identified a lack of predictability as affecting crew:

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Diary of Edward Bernard Gallagher, January 20 1942, AWM Private Record PR01041.

⁷⁴ ‘Appendix D: Wing Commander Lindeman’s Russian Diary’ in Lawson, *The Story of 455 (RAAF) Squadron*, p.168.

⁷⁵ Lawson, *The Story of 455 (RAAF) Squadron*, p.168.

If everyone knew when he went out that the weather would be fine when he came back all would be well. It's the fear of the weather that gets people down in our job.⁷⁶

Adverse landing conditions could not be predicted for these lengthy sorties, which often resulted in the crew being redirected. Flight Lieutenant Phil Edwards of No. 10 Squadron recalled a particular sortie in which the weather on approach to Mount Batten was so windy that he claimed the plane "flew backwards".⁷⁷ As a result, the crew was redirected to Pembroke Dock, extending their sortie to 15 hours, 11 minutes.⁷⁸ Once safe at base, the crews of a Sunderland had the responsibility of maintaining the aircraft while in port, adding to their hours of duty.

On top of their duties in the air, Sunderland crews were required to mind their moored aircraft in bad weather.⁷⁹ When poor weather hit the Coastal Command bases at Pembroke Dock or Mount Batten, crew members were tasked with taking turns to remain aboard the aircraft, which "bucked and twisted violently" in the waves.⁸⁰ For those on board during these encounters with the weather, "sleep was impossible" and "it was a wet and miserable group that came ashore" once the front had passed.⁸¹ On several occasions, Sunderlands broke free of their moorings and were torn apart by strong gales and nearby rocks. In one case at Mount Batten, aircrew aboard a moored Sunderland were saved from drowning after they were forced to abandon their aircraft, which had snapped its moorings and wrecked on nearby rocks.⁸²

"Long stretches of an unfriendly sea"

As the Sunderland had a large crew and was equipped with basic amenities, such as a small meal preparation area, some postwar literature suggests that their crews had

⁷⁶ Air Ministry, *Psychological Disorders in Flying Personnel of the RAF*, p. 73.

⁷⁷ Baff, *Maritime is Number 10*, p. 323.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Baff, *Maritime is Number 10*, p. 367.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 435-6.

a less arduous job than those of other commands.⁸³ For example, during the war, RAF neurologist J. Symonds conducted a study into levels of flying stress in aircrews, and the types of events that lead to such stress. Symonds attempted to explain the lead causes of flying stress on a pilot as certain tangible events: a “crash without injury to himself or others”, or perhaps a “similar crash with painful injury to himself or fatal injuries to others”.⁸⁴ Symonds’ analysis inadvertently favours the experiences of members of Bomber Command and Fighter Command, those exposed to immediate and significant danger.⁸⁵ The assessment, however, fails to take into account the sheer number of operational hours undertaken by squadrons operating in Coastal Command, and the strenuous and psychologically demanding nature of these sorties.

The missions of Coastal Command crews operating Sunderlands were often double to triple the length of most other aerial operations during the Second World War.⁸⁶ The aircraft would operate for up to 16 hours, and the RAF did not deem the tour of a Sunderland crew complete until they had undertaken 1,000 flying hours.⁸⁷ The second longest tour assigned to a Command of the RAF was 500 hours, assigned to select bomber squadrons.⁸⁸ Most fighter squadrons were required to fly 200 hours to complete a tour of duty.⁸⁹ The operational tour of Coastal Command crews, especially those operating Sunderlands, was significantly more demanding in terms of the sheer number of hours flown.

In addition to their extreme length, anti-submarine patrols over the Bay of Biscay entailed flying over “long stretches of an unfriendly sea”.⁹⁰ Ivan Southall described those operating Sunderlands as having to “nose for hour after hour

⁸³ Air Ministry, *Psychological Disorders in Flying Personnel of the RAF*, p. 75.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Hendrie, *The Cinderella Service*, p. 141.

⁸⁷ Air Ministry, *Psychological Disorders in Flying Personnel of the RAF*, p. 75; Though this was later shortened to 800 operational hours.

⁸⁸ Air Ministry, *Psychological Disorders in Flying Personnel of the RAF*, p. 75.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Lawson, *The Story of 455 (RAAF) Squadron*, p. 97.

through unending storm-clouds, chilled to the marrow".⁹¹ Sunderland crews faced long, gruelling flights during which the scenery seldom changed and yet they rarely encountered the enemy. Such operations did not make for necessarily eventful work for the aircrew, but this is not to suggest that their work was unimportant. It was vital for every member of a Coastal Command crew to be ready and alert for the duration of the entire sortie: crews were constantly poised for any enemy encounter, anticipating the unlikely possibility that they might eliminate one of their arch-enemies: *Unterseeboots*.⁹²

Frank Tilsley's book *Boys of Coastal* (1944) hints at the existence of an unfair assumption that Coastal Command work was boring or lacking in glory.⁹³ This fictional account of Coastal Command service was a form of wartime, based on the real experiences of Coastal Command aircrew, which follows a new crew in each chapter. The opening chapter follows Walter Burnett, a young man who aspires to fly in either Fighter or Bomber Command, but finds himself assigned to the crew of a Sunderland.⁹⁴ Initially Burnett takes the view that Coastal sorties are uneventful and lacking in glory. By the end of the chapter, Burnett's opinion has evolved to acknowledge the patience and discipline involved in flying hour upon hour with "nothing to show for it", demonstrating his newfound awe for Coastal Command.⁹⁵ This expresses the accepted view of many young men who joined Coastal Command, particularly through the Empire Air Training Scheme.

The UK Ministry of Information stated in 1942 that Coastal Command's "chief enemy is not the German Luftwaffe or the German Navy, but boredom".⁹⁶ The accounts of Australians who served in Coastal Command work to demystify this assumption. In the testimonies of Coastal aircrew boredom is seldom referred to, rather exhaustion and anxiety tended to dominate the emotional responses to sorties. Darcey contested the idea that Coastal sorties predominantly induced boredom: "[I

⁹¹ Southall, *They Shall Not Go Unseen*, p. 46.

⁹² Bowyer, *Sunderland at War*, p. 26.

⁹³ Tilsley, *Boys of Coastal*, p. 16.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1-40.

⁹⁵ Tilsley, *Boys of Coastal*, p. 16.

⁹⁶ UK Ministry of Information, *Coastal Command*, p. 28.

was] very tired, very cold. Not bored. I was never bored.”⁹⁷ The crews of a Sunderland did not have the opportunity to become bored by their work. More often than not, their loss of love for the job came with the deterioration of their nerves or sheer exhaustion, not from boredom brought on by lengthy sorties.

A number of private records highlight the long hours flown by Coastal Command as a reason for crew members – at times – to lose their nerve. Flight Lieutenant Walter Ives of No. 455 Squadron did not fly Sunderlands, but operated in Coastal Command as part of the “Anzac Strike Wing” attacking shipping convoys.⁹⁸ He flew on average approximately six hours per sortie. He notes, “To counter the effect of these six hour flights, I took up smoking to calm the nerves.”⁹⁹ Those who flew in Sunderlands admit that the job was not without anxiety. Squadron Leader Russell Baird of No. 10 Squadron was “dead scared all the time”; he was plagued by fear every time he prepared for a mission, but had to do his duty as “no matter how you felt you had to go on with it”.¹⁰⁰ Feelings of anxiety and fear tended to punctuate the sorties of Australians who served in Coastal Command due to the unique nature of their operations; this was often exacerbated by tremendous fatigue.

Many recorded in jest that a Coastal Command tour of duty was understood to have been completed only once aircrew “failed to return or were considered exhausted”.¹⁰¹ While this was written in a satirical vein, it held an element of truth. Those who completed their 800 to 1,000-hour tour recall being exhausted in body and mind. Darcey attests to the fact that he has “never been so exhausted”, as at the end of a Sunderland operation.¹⁰² This was exacerbated by the misconception that, unlike many other aircrews, Sunderland crews were less susceptible to exhaustion due to the fact that warm meals could be prepared on board and the crew were able

⁹⁷ Darcey, *Australians at War Film Archive*, UNSW, 01:30-02:30, Part 8.

⁹⁸ Sydney Region Aircrew Group, *The Spirit of Aircrew*, AWM MSS2047, p. 49.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Baird, *Australians at War Film Archives*, UNSW, 05:00, Part 3.

¹⁰¹ Roy Conyers Nesbit, *The Strike Wings: Special Anti-Shipping Squadrons 1942-5*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1995, p. 223.

¹⁰² Darcey, *Australians at War Film Archive*, UNSW, 41:30, Part 7.

to move around the aircraft.¹⁰³ This fails to take into account the mental exhaustion of operating for countless hours; a flight commander operating Sunderlands admitted to RAF neurologist J. Symonds that “at the end of 1,000 hours ... [you] find it very difficult to maintain the physical effort and mental concentration which is necessary to keep the job on the top line.”¹⁰⁴

Despite the nerves and exhaustion of long operational hours, Australians operating in Coastal Command took pride in the endurance of both their aircrew and aircraft. Flight Sergeant Colin Stewart Cameron wrote to his uncle in June 1943 about his posting to No. 10 Squadron.¹⁰⁵ His letter centres on his pride in being selected for No. 10, noting “the standard for this squadron is so high, I did not expect to make the grade”.¹⁰⁶ The Sunderland was regarded by No. 10 Squadron’s line book as “the world’s finest war flying-boat”.¹⁰⁷

“Suspense was agony”

John Herrington, the RAAF official historian, highlighted how the “vast majority” of Coastal Command patrols were “without incident, a period of twelve to eighteen hours of watchful anticipation for a fleeting opportunity to strike”.¹⁰⁸ As the war progressed, the number of obstacles faced by the crews of a Sunderland also grew, and the unknown whereabouts of enemy fighters, U-boats or ships added significant anticipatory fear to the sorties of Coastal crews. This anticipation was described as “agony”; the location of a Sunderland’s target was rarely definitely known and was transient in nature.¹⁰⁹ This ensured that anticipatory fear runs through the accounts of many of those serving in RAF Coastal Command.

While many sorties were uneventful, most Sunderland flying-boats “bore the scars of many a close shave”, demonstrating the need for aircrew to maintain high

¹⁰³ Air Ministry, *Psychological Disorders in Flying Personnel of the RAF*, p. 75.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁰⁵ Letter from Colin Stewart Cameron to his uncle, June 23 1943, Australian War Memorial Private Record PR04744.

¹⁰⁶ Colin Stewart Cameron, AWM PR04744.

¹⁰⁷ No. 10 Squadron Line Book, AWM PR82/083.

¹⁰⁸ Herrington, *Vol III*, 445.

¹⁰⁹ Southall, *They Shall Not Pass Unseen*, 131.

alert.¹¹⁰ Remaining vigilant proved especially important when the crews of a Sunderland encountered threats, as swift offensive action and superior flying skills were sometimes required to make it safely back to base. The infrequent nature of encounters with the enemy ensured that, when they did occur, the recollections of such confrontations are marked by the relief of survival. Flight Sergeant Edward Gallagher's diary encapsulates his sense of relief in multiple entries, demonstrating the fear associated with the unknown enemy and the capricious nature of Coastal sorties. The entry for the 28th of January 1942 reads: "Thankful to be in bed safe and sound tonight! The JUs are lovely looking kites ... [but] deadly as sin."¹¹¹ He wrote on July 26 1942: "Am I glad to be writing you up, Diary! I never thought I'd be seeing you again."¹¹²

While the operations of Bomber and Fighter Commands were undoubtedly dangerous, their encounters with the enemy were more predictable. Bomber Command crews, for example, knew with a fair degree of certainty when they would encounter enemy defences as they approached their target. For Coastal Command crews, targets were unknown and a Sunderland was "rarely lucky enough to sight a sub".¹¹³ The effects of this, coupled with the fear of encountering the enemy in one form or another, led many Coastal aircrew to comment upon the "recognition of *effort* in counteracting the effects of stress".¹¹⁴ Potentially on operations for 16 hours, sorties were described by Flight Lieutenant Gary Hazel as "a fair strain".¹¹⁵ Conducting anti-submarine patrols over a wide area and rarely seeing anything, and the resulting suspense and stress, was described as "killing for

¹¹⁰ Records of Sgt. G. C. Hore, AWM PR88/142.

¹¹¹ Diary of Edward Bernard Gallagher, January 28 1942, AWM Private Record PR01041.

¹¹² Diary of Edward Bernard Gallagher, July 26 1942, AWM Private Record PR01041.

¹¹³ Records of Sgt. G. C. Hore, AWM PR88/142.

¹¹⁴ Emphasis added by author; Air Ministry, *Psychological Disorders in Flying Personnel of the RAF*, p. 78.

¹¹⁵ Gary Hazel, Australians at War Film Archives, UNSW, 15:00, accessed 20th January 2018, <<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/527-gary-hazel?destination=aXRlbXNfcGVyX3BhZ2Uma2V5d29yZHM9Z2FyeSUyMGhhemVsJm9wPVNlYXJjaCZmb3JtX2J1aWxkX2lkPWZvcmt0tZUMzZk5ad1JkYkYm1zenRQdmEtTHpqY095YjdE4wc0ZsR3prcUNBSSZmb3JtX2lkPXNlYXJjaF9ibG9ja19mb3Jt>>.

morale”.¹¹⁶ In fact, the Air Ministry acknowledged that “it was very demoralising just looking for shipping and coming back with news”, and a high number of Coastal Command crew concluded their tours of duty with little recognition of their service.¹¹⁷

Despite the hardships associated with their wartime experience, the patience and endurance with which Coastal crew served, and their unique experiences, became a point of pride.¹¹⁸ The Historical Records of No. 10 Squadron make note of the airmen serving with laudable patience, and conducting their duties with “unsurpassed gallantry”.¹¹⁹ Aircrew serving in Coastal Command were also able to find humour in their unique experiences. Flight Lieutenant Southall joked that Coastal Command casualties were relatively light, “unless of course you died of old age in the course of finishing your tour.”¹²⁰

Those who undertook Coastal sorties recognised that operating long, exhausting hours on high alert was vitally important. In conceptualising the importance of Coastal Command during the Second World War, Warrant Officer Darcey emphasised that the anti-U-boat campaign was “terribly important for the whole of the war effort”.¹²¹ He went on to note that “Churchill said that it was the one battle they had to win otherwise they’d lose the war entirely.”¹²²

Conclusion

The relative anonymity of Coastal Command has contributed to a general lack of understanding about their role and misconceptions that their work was subsidiary

¹¹⁶ Southall, *They Shall Not Pass Unseen*, p. 131; Air Ministry, *Psychological Disorders in Flying Personnel of the RAF*, p. 78.

¹¹⁷ Air Ministry, *Psychological Disorders in Flying Personnel of the RAF*, pp. 79-80.

¹¹⁸ Southall, *Australians at War Film Archives*, UNSW, 24:00, Part 5.

¹¹⁹ Historical Records No. 10 Squadron Overseas, AWM64 1/71.

¹²⁰ Southall, *Australians at War Film Archives*, UNSW, 33:00-33:30, Part 4.

¹²¹ Darcey, *Australians at War Film Archives*, UNSW, 37:30-38:00, Part 6.

¹²² *Ibid.*

and secondary to the efforts of other Air Commands and the Royal Navy.¹²³ They were attributed with little success, undertaking “monotonous reconnaissance with infrequent and uncertain reward”.¹²⁴ These assumptions demonstrate an unfortunate understanding of the role of Australians who served within Coastal Command during the Second World War.

Close engagement with the accounts of Australian aircrew elucidates the roles and experiences of Coastal aircrew. For the most part, Australians serving in Coastal Command were forced to undertake sorties in difficult weather conditions for thousands of hours over “illimitable stretch[es] of sea”.¹²⁵ Undertaking such work was undoubtedly difficult, requiring stamina and patience of a “high order”, and the endurance of agonising suspense.¹²⁶ Despite this, those who served in RAF Coastal Command demonstrated considerable and justified pride in their service. The difficulties they endured and the particulars of their stories demonstrate “an extraordinary blend of misery, apprehension, and laughter”, for which history has failed to adequately account.¹²⁷

Wing Commander Tony Spooner of 59 Squadron RAF wrote a poem during the war that encapsulates the paradoxical nature of Coastal Command service. Spooner’s words present both the misconceptions ascribed to Coastal Command and the pride of serving in this vital arm of the RAF:

*‘Fighters or Bombers?’ his friends used to [say],
But when he said ‘Coastal’, they turned half away.*

*‘Fighters or Bombers?’ his friends used to ask,
‘Coastal’ he said, his face a tired mask,
Though not in the spotlight where others may bask,
We’ve a tough job to do and I’m proud of the task.¹²⁸*

¹²³ Herrington, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 3 (Air): Volume III*, p. 150-2.

¹²⁴ Air Ministry, *Psychological Disorders in Flying Personnel of the RAF*, p. 78.

¹²⁵ Bowman, *Deep Sea Hunters*, p. 140.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Southall, *They Shall Not Go Unseen*, p. 181.

¹²⁸ Hendrie, *The Cinderella Service*, p. 194.



Image 5: RAF Station Mount Batten, Plymouth, England. c. 1945-05. Maintenance crews of No. 10 Squadron RAAF work together to haul a Sunderland aircraft ashore up the slipway into a hangar for overhaul. AWM SUK 14698.