



OCCASIONAL PAPER 16

October 2017

The Naval Historical Society of Australia

HMAS Australia and Atlantic rescue of Coastal Command Sunderland -1940

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On Monday 28th October 1940. I was serving as an eighteen year old Midshipman in HMAS "Australia", an 8 inch gun cruiser. At that time, we had arrived on the Clyde at Greenock, Scotland, only two days earlier, after passage from Gibraltar. What a contrast we found the weather from our recent time in the tropics; cold days and even colder nights, and rough Atlantic weather to cope with at sea.

We were ordered to sea that afternoon, to join a search for a German merchant raider, reported operating against our shipping, keeping open the life line from the United States. The convoys were necessary for Britain's survival, bringing food, oil, etc., to allow the continued struggle against Germany by Britain and her dominions, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. In 1940, this small group alone represented the free world against the might of the Third Reich.

The "*Australia*" and her crew were here to play our own small part in those very dark days. Notwithstanding the growing U Boat menace, and the wide geographic area covered by German aircraft, our merchant ships and those of many neutral countries were still at sea; many ships survived to arrive at their destinations on the West coast of the United Kingdom.

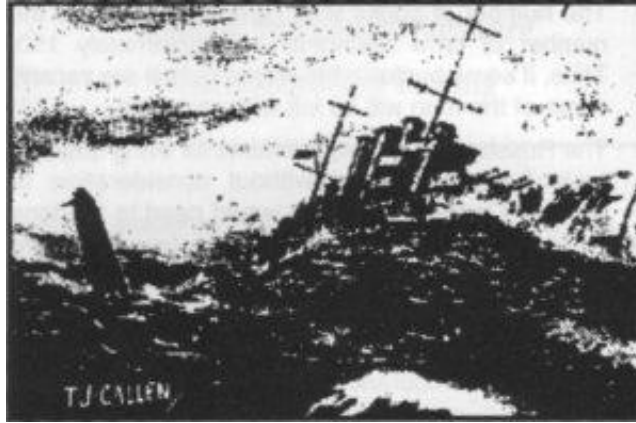
As Tuesday dawned, we learned of a coastal command Sunderland flying boat which had made a forced landing in the Atlantic Ocean West of the Hebrides. Our task was to try and locate this R.A.F. aircraft. There was a gale blowing, the barometer had fallen, visibility was poor, and finding the Sunderland in such adverse conditions appeared difficult, if not unlikely. The ship was running with an extremely rough sea, rolling heavily. During the afternoon, the flying boat kept up transmissions on her radio so that we could use our direction finding equipment to locate her, and then search along this D/F bearing. Just after noon we received a message from the flying boat: "*Hurry up – am breaking up*".

As we approached closer to her estimated position we made smoke at intervals, hoping the crew could spot us.

Visibility was now very low, and we had increased speed to 26 knots in an attempt to arrive before it was too late – but the ship was making very heavy weather of the prevailing conditions. A huge sea was running and our heavy cruiser, which picked up on the crest of each wave then surfed down it the next trough, and the wind was blowing a gale.

At 1435 the Sunderland was sighted ahead, her tail occasionally visible above the huge waves – a crew member constantly operating a flashing light to guide us. When only half a mile from the boat, one of her floats dropped off; a moment later, an enormous wave picked the Sunderland and flipped it completely over on it's back. We could see only one crew member perched on the upturned boat.

We now approached from upwind drifting down onto the wreckage, ropes having been prepared over our starboard side. Scrambling nets, and jumping ladders were also placed over the starboard side. We suddenly sighted a group of airmen in the water with life jackets on – the ship drifted towards them and rescue ropes were passed.



Artist's rendering of the mid-Atlantic rescue

However, the rough and icy Atlantic prevented the airmen from securing a rope to themselves – they were too exhausted to tie a knot – salvation at hand, but were the elements going to win after all? “Australia” was rolling heavily, one minute the starboard side would be feet under water, then a heavy roll would reverse to port, and the starboard side would be well clear of the water. Given the force of the wind, and the state of the sea the only way to pluck the survivors from the Atlantic was to send several officers and sailors over the side with bowlines to secure to the airmen. These were led and encouraged by the Commander J.M. (“Jamie” or “Black Jack”) Armstrong RAN. One by one they had to be hauled on board, With the ship rolling heavily, the airmen’s heavy water-logged gear made for a long and difficult task. Persistence and sheer bravery from those over the side securing each airman finally triumphed. Nine of the crew of thirteen were finally on board, suffering from exposure, but they would be safe after time spent in the sick bay.

The remaining four of the crew drifted out of reach past the “Australia”. I can still recall the utter frustration of seamen trying to reach this group with heaving lines, but the wind force made it totally impossible to cast a line – it merely blew back in one’s face before achieving its objective – to reach the doomed four. At 1725 we were forced to abandon our rescue attempts, altered course to the South and proceeded at only 9 knots into the face of the storm.

The Sunderland had left its base at 1700 on Monday evening, sent out to escort a convoy. The poor visibility prevented them finding their convoy, and the weather was too bad to enable the crew to obtain a D/F bearing of their base. The high winds caused more petrol to be used than normal, and so at 0700 next morning they ran out of fuel and were forced to attempt a landing in the Atlantic Ocean. It was a magnificent feat of airmanship for the pilot to put his flying boat down into this raging sea without capsizing it. The Sunderland had survived seven and a half hours in a howling Atlantic gale before their luck ran out, and the boat was overturned. The airmen were all sea sick and very weak from this ordeal. Although this rescue took place over fifty six years ago, I can still visualise the joy on the faces of those rescued, and remember the anger and the sadness we all experienced at having to leave the remaining four to face a certain death.

About the Author:

Lieutenant Commander Mackenzie ‘Mac’ Jesse Gregory joined the Royal Australian Naval College at HMAS Cerberus in January 1936 as a 13 year old Cadet Midshipman.

During World War II he served aboard HMAS Canberra and then HMAS Australia. He served in Australia in the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic Oceans as well as the Mediterranean Sea. He retired in 1954 after a distinguished career. Late in his life he received news that a project initiated by him to erect a statue of a sailor with his kitbag at the end of Station Pier, Melbourne in memory of the thousands of navy personnel who embarked there for service in WWII would be fully funded and be realized. The statue was unveiled by Chief of Navy in 2016. Mac Gregory died on 27th August 2014.

Originally published in March 1997 edition of the Naval Historical Review (all rights reserved)

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