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Call the Hands

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Bristol Sycamore HR50/51

This paper, first published by the Sea Power Centre - Australia provides an overview of the service history of the Bristol Sycamore rescue and training helicopter operated by the RAN Fleet Air Arm between 1953 and 1965.

The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) Fleet Air Arm was formed in 1948 and the first aircraft carrier HMAS *Sydney* commissioned in February 1949. A second carrier HMAS *Vengeance* was loaned to the RAN in March 1953 and served until March 1956; she was replaced by HMAS *Melbourne* when she arrived in Australia. The air sea rescue aircraft operated by the RAN in 1949 was a seaplane, the *Sea Otter*, which was less than suitable for use with the new aircraft carriers and a decision was made to obtain helicopters for the air-sea rescue task.

Following a lengthy review of suitable types, the RAN placed its first order for three Bristol Sycamores (HR.50 Model) from the United Kingdom in late 1951. These helicopters arrived in Australia, on board the aircraft carrier *Vengeance*, on 11 March 1953. They were then flown off to the Naval Air Station (HMAS *Albatross*) at Nowra and taken on charge by 723 Squadron; formed on 7 April 1952. Except for a short period during October 1956 – February 1957 when the Sycamores were part of 724 Squadron they were operated exclusively by 723 Squadron.

A total of 13 Sycamore helicopters (ten being the HR.51 Model) were acquired by the RAN, with two embarked in *Melbourne* during her delivery voyage to Australia, while the remainder were delivered to Australia as sea freight. Sycamores were to be deployed regularly on board the carriers *Sydney*, *Vengeance* and *Melbourne*, for air-sea rescue duties and general personnel and stores carrying tasks. During their service in the carriers the Sycamore helicopters operated throughout Australian waters, Southeast Asia and the western Pacific region. Routine maintenance was conducted at Nowra, or on board the carriers, while major overhaul and upgrades was contracted to Bristol Aviation Services at Bankstown Airport, Sydney.

In the early 1960's planning began to find a replacement for the Sycamore and in 1964 new Bell Iroquois helicopters, from the United States, were acquired. Of the 13 RAN Sycamores six crashed during service; this included two lost from HMAS *Melbourne* in 1957 and one from HMS *Hermes* in 1961. The three others were destroyed in crashes at Maitland (1956), Grafton (1958) and Nowra in 1962. The remaining RAN Sycamores were retired from service in June 1965 and sold to museums.



Left: A Sycamore helicopter about to land on HMAS Melbourne
Right: A Sycamore helicopter, in the later blue and white paint scheme, flies over the NSW south coast.



A Sycamore helicopter at the Naval Air Station at Nowra, NSW (HMAS Albatross) in the late 1950's.



Further Reading:

The full details of the career of each RAN Sycamore is available here <http://www.adf-serials.com.au/2a91.htm>

Source:

Sea Power Centre Australia: available at, <http://www.navy.gov.au/aircraft/bristol-sycamore-hr5051>