

*Sydney*. This was a wonderful aircraft to fly, particularly for a young Sub-Lieutenant Da Costa, who couldn't believe he was being paid to do so after completing his Fighter Operational Flying School in 1956 (on 805 Squadron as it happened!). *Sydney* had ceased operating aircraft by that time, so I did not have an opportunity to carry out challenging straight-deck landings. The Sea Fury was a good weapons platform for its day, having a gyro gunsight, and was armed with 4 × 20-mm cannon, 3-inch rockets and free-fall bombs.

The arrival of HMAS *Melbourne* in 1955 saw the introduction of the Sea Venom FAW.53 (fighter, all-weather), crewed by a pilot and an observer radar operator, and powered by a de Havilland Ghost turbojet engine rated at 4,950-lb thrust. The night-fighter intercept business was a challenge on a dark night. With the navigation lights of the evading 'target' turned off, the 'fighter' pilot, guided by the observer's interpretation of the AI Mk.17 radar, had to fly the aircraft to a stabilised position at gun-firing range 200 yards astern of the target. The night deck landing afterwards was marginally more relaxing, but not noticeably! In the ground-attack role, the Sea Venom had 4 × 20-mm cannon, and 3-inch rockets. It had, however, unlike the Skyhawk, a gyro gunsight.

And so, the RAN came to the A-4G Skyhawk, powered by a Pratt & Whitney J52-P8A turbojet engine rated at 9,300-lb thrust. The aircraft could be armed with a range of bombs, rockets, 2 × 20-mm cannon and Sidewinder air-to-air missiles and was equipped with a pilot-operated ground-avoidance radar. I flew the Hawker Hunter swept-wing fighter in the RN's AWI training course at RN Air Station Lossiemouth. It was wonderful to fly – a classic jet aircraft – but it was very limited in its ground-attack capability. On the other hand, the Skyhawk looked like the very capable attack aircraft that it was. It was a delight to fly and a good deck-landing aircraft to boot. Who could ask for more? Well, I suppose a gyro gunsight would have improved things, but we coped. The USN had found it to be the most capable carrier-borne attack aircraft in its inventory throughout the war in Vietnam, and the RAN purchased our version in that same time period. We could not have chosen better for a light fleet carrier such as *Melbourne*, and this was demonstrated for a good many years.

*Sydney* carried out operations in Korea in the early 1950s, but *Melbourne* was never required to operate its fighter aircraft in a 'hot' war. However, throughout the ship's operational life, it was a visible and successful deterrent force in the Australian sphere of interest. This was particularly relevant during the worrying Indonesian Confrontation. There can be little doubt that 'peace' in South-East Asia was largely maintained because of the state of training and operational performance of *Melbourne's* attack and air-defence aircraft. This is the true value of naval flag-waving port visits.

Sadly, the Skyhawk era came to a premature end when our sole carrier was paid off without replacement. The 'powers that be' decided (incorrectly, in my view) there was not a role for the now land-based Skyhawks in support of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), and so the remaining, very capable, aircraft were passed over 'the Ditch' to the Royal New Zealand Air