

## CHAPTER 8

### CRACE'S ORDEAL: 7 MAY

When Fletcher sent Crace's Support Group westward at dawn on 7 May, he did something that both sides had assiduously avoided in six months of warfare in the South Pacific: operate warships within range of land-based enemy aircraft and without friendly air cover. The loss of HMS *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* to a force of Nells and Bettys in the South China Sea in December 1941 was still fresh in the minds of senior naval staff of both sides, so there had been no appetite for such risks since. Fletcher's initiative in risking Crace's force thus warrants further examination.

Vice Admiral John Gregory Crace was a Royal Navy officer who had been seconded to the RAN in 1939, his position being Rear Admiral Commanding, Australian Squadron (RACAS). At this time the young RAN was very closely entwined with the RN. This enabled the RAN to access training, experience and technical knowledge from the British service. Drawing on such resources meant high standards could be maintained that would have otherwise been unachievable for a small navy such as the RAN to attain by itself. Part of this relationship was the loan of very senior officers such as Crace to the RAN, given that home-grown naval officers had not yet reached that level of seniority: the first graduation year of the Australian Naval College at Jervis Bay had only been in 1916.

Crace, however, was no stranger to Australia. He had been born in the small country town of Gungahlin, New South Wales, in 1887 (his place of birth later became part of the Australian Capital Territory following establishment there of the federal capital, Canberra). At the age of 12 Crace had left for England and in 1902 was able to join the RN as a trainee officer, using a reserved vacancy for colonial cadets.

Crace subsequently embarked on a successful naval career, during which he saw a broad range of service with various warships and shore establishments. This service included opportunities to return to Australia. In 1908 he spent 18 months aboard RN cruisers operating in Australian waters. Five years later he was posted to the newly commissioned battlecruiser HMAS *Australia* (I) as Torpedo Lieutenant and was aboard this first flagship of the RAN when it made a grand entrance to Sydney Harbour in October 1913. In 1922 Crace had once again returned to Australia while serving as the Executive Officer of the cruiser HMAS *Danae*.

Crace twice commanded ships: a destroyer in the Mediterranean in the 1920s and a cruiser in the East Indies in the 1930s. However, most of his appointments had been technical or administrative. Promoted to Rear Admiral in August 1939, he was appointed as RACAS a month later – a job he took with relish. It was sea-going and also meant he could once again return to the land of his birth.

However, by 1941 several RAN warships were serving outside of Australian waters, such as in