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## BOOK REVIEW

# *The forgotten cruiser: HMAS Melbourne 1913–1928*

by Andrew Kilsby and Greg Swinden

Longueville Media: Sydney; 2013; 164 pp.; ISBN 9781920681838; RRP \$55



A sibling who always steals the limelight and, despite how hard one tries, retains it can be irritating, as demonstrated in this interesting and timely book on Australia's first cruiser, HMAS *Melbourne*. Built at Birkenhead, England, she was the first of two laid down but the second launched because of construction delays. *Sydney* had beaten her to that honour, but she was the first to commission and to sail for her new home, leaving Devonport, auspiciously, on Australia Day 1913. *Melbourne's* progress on passage was avidly reported upon and her arrival greeted with pomp, ceremony and much curiosity. This was the first truly modern warship that Australians had ever seen – and they were her proud owners.

Kilsby and Swinden have provided a 'warts and all' account of the career of this most capable ship. Conditions on board were not ideal and provoked much comment and dissension, particularly from the lower deck. The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) was very young and naval life a new experience for most of her complement. The judicial consequences of many 'runs ashore' by some of her crew provide an interesting commentary on the development of relations between Australians and their Navy and of the internal discipline so necessary in warships. For all that, the cruiser created a very positive image for herself and the Navy in showing the flag before the outbreak of World War I.

*Melbourne's* wartime exploits vividly illustrate the old adage that war is 95 per cent boredom and 5 per cent sheer terror. She had three lively months to begin with, escorting the New Zealand expedition to capture German Samoa, then off to destroy the German wireless station on Nauru, operations in support of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force in New Guinea and finally in escorting the first convoy of Anzac troops to the Middle East. On 9 November Captain Silver RN made the correct but highly frustrating decision that he could not leave the convoy for which he was responsible and must detach *Sydney* to respond to a SOS from the Cocos Island wireless station. The outcome is well known and to the chagrin of her ship's company and probably the entire population of the city, it was not to be *Melbourne's* image and name plastered across packets of flour used by generations of Australian housewives.

She had little time to dwell on this. On arrival in Colombo, *Melbourne* was sent via Malta to the West Indies to join the British force protecting the Caribbean and western Atlantic from German raiders and preventing German merchant shipping breaking out for

home. The duty was hot and dull, the boredom relieved by short visits to Kingston in Jamaica and the base in Bermuda, with occasional forays to Halifax, Nova Scotia. The colder northern weather was a relief to the ship's company, but there was none from the boredom. It seemed a long way from the war for officers and sailors, some of whom had relatives fighting with the army in France.

In June 1916, she was sent to join the Grand Fleet in the North Sea. This promised more excitement but delivered little. Efforts to coax the German fleet into action were unsuccessful, with the task of escorting convoys from Bergen in Norway providing the only breaks in a dull routine. Both *Melbourne* and *Sydney* were in the forefront of aviation developments with a platform fitted to their forward guns from which Sopwith fighters could be launched to attack German aircraft operating over the North Sea. Even there, it was *Sydney's* aircraft which scored a success; *Melbourne's* fighter had no luck.

With the war over, *Melbourne* led the German light cruisers into captivity and then returned home in company with the tanker *Karumba*, collecting the six Australian destroyers at Malta en route. After calling at Darwin the flotilla reached Sydney on 21 May 1919: *Melbourne* had been overseas for over four years.

In contrast to her wartime career, *Melbourne's* remaining time in commission was much more interesting and varied, and she was the flagship from 1920 until her exchange with the Mediterranean Fleet in 1925-26. Her dramatic rescue of the crew of an American schooner off New Zealand in January 1922, even drew the attention of the White House. However, with naval reductions in vogue and two new heavy cruisers to be manned at the end of the decade, her fate was sealed. Stripped of useful equipment, she sailed to Britain and paid off on 23 April 1928. She was broken up the following year – at Birkenhead.

The authors have taken some trouble to place the ship and her company in the social and political environment in which *Melbourne* operated. For those interested in what life was really like aboard the warships of the early 'Wallaby Navy', *The Forgotten Cruiser* will provide insights not found in other work. Her veterans must have drawn tremendous pride and satisfaction when her name was bestowed on the RAN's most powerful warship, the aircraft carrier *Melbourne*, while *Sydney's* namesake ended her days carrying troops and military supplies to and from Vietnam.

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