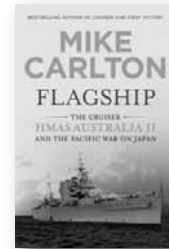


## BOOK REVIEW:

# *Flagship: the cruiser HMAS Australia II and the Pacific War on Japan*

by Mike Carlton

William Heinemann: North Sydney; 642 pp.; ISBN 9780857987778 (hardback); RRP \$49.99  
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Mike Carlton's knack for tapping into the heart of Australian naval history is notable, and his latest book *Flagship* is no exception. This four-part, 642-page volume covers the history of HMAS *Australia II*, which steamed more miles and saw more action (receiving eight battle honours) than any other Royal Australian Naval (RAN) ship during World War II. The first part documents an ominous build-up to war. In subsequent chapters, Carlton's writing is evocative and engaging, carrying a kinetic momentum of both the stimulating narrative and the restrained accuracy of an historical account.

Carlton's attention to *Australia II*'s service in the Pacific theatre is dominant and thorough. Following American intelligence of an imminent Japanese invasion of Port Moresby, *Australia II* fought in the first sea offensive to blockade the advance of the Japanese in the Pacific in the Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942. Perhaps even more gripping is the account of her participation in the Battle of Leyte Gulf off The Philippines in October 1944 – the historic first instance where an Allied warship was struck by a Japanese *kamikaze* pilot. This brutal suicide attack resulted in the death of *Australia II*'s captain, Dechaineux, and 28 crew. Carlton retells the event in horrifying yet mesmerising detail – capturing the shock and confusion of crew who lived to recount the attack. Yet so effectively, within the antithetical narrative, Carlton sets an even more chilling – albeit peacefully calm – image via the morning ritual of six Zero fighters of the *Shikishima* squadron of the *Tokkotai* suicide unit preparing for their final flights and “a splendid opportunity to die” (p. 469). This balance is continued in the subtle attention to the stories of some of the Japanese admirals and commanders and their families.

Carlton not only gives a compelling account of *Australia II*'s service, but also of her namesake, providing a greater commentary on the life of Australian society at the time. Carlton's histories are often interwoven with the narratives of smaller, but nonetheless fascinating, players and vignettes of contextually-relevant British-Australian history. For example, as mentioned in the author's note, the history of *Australia* cannot be separated from that of her sister ships *Canberra* and *Shropshire*, so as a result these vessels also feature heavily in this book. Personalities, whether integral or peripheral, are also an engaging feature of the narrative, including characters such as William Francis Forbes Sempill and Frederick Rutland 'of Jutland', both spies for Japan and traitors to Britain. Further, we see the development and acknowledgement of other heroic figures of Australian naval history –

Collins, Crace, Dechaineux, Farncomb and Rankin. While Carlton himself notes that these additional deviations from the crux of the topic may not appeal to some less liberal readers, it widens the appeal of his books in that it allows a greater accessibility for the audience than just military history enthusiasts. This approach may be due to Carlton's background as a journalist and broadcaster rather than an historian, but this journalistic perspective also allows for a well-paced and exciting, but detailed, read. Carlton does not 'go overboard' with creative licence like some contemporaries, referencing all facts, quotes and sources accurately and fastidiously.

The early narrative provides a telling glimpse into the origins of the Royal Australian Navy itself, with Carlton claiming, “for all its pretensions to be a navy in its own right, the RAN in these formative years was little more than a branch office of its Britannic parent” (p. 7). He continues that this was of course effective for the highest training standards, but also resulted in a “lack of independence and a festering discontent at the notion – sometimes real, sometimes imagined – that British-born men were preferred for promotion ahead of the Australians” (p. 7). With the continuation of *Australia II*'s story, we see the RAN itself coming out from the shadow of the Royal Navy and carving its own spirit and history.

The picture of the scuttling of the original flagship, *Australia I*, in April 1924 is a particularly poignant one. Carlton makes beautiful use of the sentiment of the time, quoting from *The Sydney Morning Herald*'s reports, highlighting the pride, patriotism and sense of nationhood invoked by such a powerful example of seapower.

The depth to which Carlton has uncovered the story of *Australia II* is evidenced in but one shocking exposé – the witness of a disturbing murder aboard the ship in 1942, surrounding the possibility of a scandalous love-triangle – for which two sailors were court-martialled and sentenced to hanging.

It is clear that Carlton has a genuine passion for naval history, with an obvious respect for those who served and continue to serve. This meticulously-researched account is cleverly-structured and totally fascinating – and certainly not written for naval or military history buffs exclusively. Carlton concludes by comparing the modern-day RAN fleet to that of the Pacific War era, stating “the RAN has never commissioned another *Australia* and probably never will” (p. 562). If this is the case, then even more reason to know the story of the last of the warships carrying the name of our nation.

**Dominique Spoelder**