

Acquisition of the Charles F. Adams/Perth class destroyers, 1956-1970

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The views expressed in this paper represent those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of Defence.

This research aims to study a major fleet acquisition in the midst of Australia's complex and evolving strategic relationships during the Cold War. The research explores the factors that influenced the final decision to acquire US-built destroyers, and the impact this had on the RAN, and our major alliance partners.

In 1961, the Australian government announced its decision to acquire two US-built Charles F. Adams class destroyers. A third ship was added in 1963 and a fourth was proposed in 1964 but not supported by Federal Cabinet. HMAS Perth, Hobart and Brisbane were commissioned between 1965 and 1967. The Perth class destroyers brought new air defence and command and control capability to the RAN. These were ships of a different kind bringing modern surface to air missile capability as well as increasingly sophisticated computerised battle management systems.

I argue that the acquisition of US built destroyers was a key moment in the development of the Australian-US alliance - not a dramatic turning point but the specifics of the acquisition are very revealing of the changing Cold War strategic context. This moment in time provides important insights into the Australian but also the changing US and British situations. I also reflect on the role of overseas acquisition and its relationship to naval 'defence sovereignty'. Part of the challenge here is to understand exactly what is meant by the term 'sovereignty' in the defence context and I return to this briefly at the end of the paper.

Strategic context

The choice of the US built destroyers over the main rival, the UK-built County class destroyers, was a crucial moment in time. British standing and influence in what they called 'the Far East' was steadily diminishing as they withdrew 'East of Suez'. There was residual cultural preference for the Royal Navy but a growing acknowledgement in Australia of the strategic importance of the US alliance.

The acquisition of the Charles F. Adams class destroyers also occurred at a strategically significant moment for the US. The US was being challenged globally by an increasingly confident and aggressive Soviet Union. The US needed to balance competing commitments across multiple theatres and find effective and sustainable ways to support US Allies.

In 1957, Australia had announced its intention to focus on the US alliance. The 1959 Defence Review argued that Australia needed to act more independently especially in light of the declining role for the UK, and emerging challenge presented by Indonesia. The decision to purchase US-built went against the grain of a strong political preference for local shipbuilding that was in turn based on wartime experience where local shipbuilding had been significant in preserving Australian sovereignty.

RAN context

For the RAN, the decision was also highly significant. On coming to office, John Gorton, Minister for Navy (1959-1963), found a navy struggling with an ageing fleet, reduced budget allocations, and a

number of tragic accidents that undermined public confidence. The 1959 announcement that fixed wing aircraft would be withdrawn also reduced navy's prestige and firepower.

Perth class acquisition

The acquisition of the Perth class was a success for the RAN and for Australian defence capability more generally. We acquired a modern sophisticated missile carrying ship within five years of that class being commissioned into the USN. The time from the public announcement in 1961 to commissioning of HMAS *Perth* was only four years. Purchase of a US-built ship had benefits including a relatively short time frame, access to more sophisticated weaponry, and favourable financial terms. The US Tartar missiles, for example, were believed to be superior to the British Sea Slug, and within eighteen months, *Perth* was deployed to the Vietnam conflict.

By the early 1970s, the three DDG's along with the new six Oberon Class submarines and six upgraded River class frigates represented a highly capable fleet. RAN Carrier capability had returned too since changing policies over the aircraft carrier meant that HMAS *Melbourne* stayed on as a rotary platform and later aircraft acquisitions (again from the US) reinstated the fixed wing capability. This was a dramatic change from the situation in the late 1950s and the Perth class acquisition was a vital part of that transformation.

In summary then, the three Perth class destroyers were a successful acquisition that focused on new capability, speed of acquisition, alliance as well as financial benefits. The decision to acquire US built ships was a major departure from past practice which saw the RAN acquire ships built in the United Kingdom, or British designed ships built in Australia. The acquisition decision was indicative of wider changes in Australia's strategic relationships as we moved incrementally from a reliance on the Royal Navy to stronger engagement with the US. While 'defence sovereignty' is often conceived of as local ship building capacity, the exercise of sovereignty can also be seen in acquiring the best capability, in a short time frame, with attractive financial terms.