Armstrong, John Malet
ASC 1912-13
"Jock"

A long navy career spanning the two World Wars. As such, one of the few Old Boys with this record. Retired with high rank after his distinguished service. Detailed and interesting newspaper cutting at end of this dossier. His awards included MID, CBE and U.S. Navy Cross.

OLD BOY'S NOTES.

We have received news of Jock Armstrong, who is now at the Royal Naval College, Jervis Bay. His work there is proceeding very favourably, and he has won his honour cap for football. His training at the College comes to a termination in 1917.

J. Armstrong, who graduated from the Royal Australian Naval College in 1917, was present at the memorable scene when the German High Seas Fleet surrendered under the terms of the Armistice. What a story he will have to tell when he returns!

Bathurstian Dec.16, P.989

I suppose Sydney has not been bombarded yet, a rumour reached us that heavy firing had been heard off the heads but I hope it was only the forts practising.

Cadet Midshipman John 'Jock' Armstrong, age 14. RAN College, 7 August 1914

From; "In All Respects Ready Australia's Navy in World War One." David Stevens, Oxford University Press 2014.

MOBILISATION

The Board had meanwhile begun the RAN's mobilisation. Reflecting the prevailing opinion that any major war was likely to be short, perhaps of only six to twelve months duration, bringing ships up to their expanded wartime complement and filling billets at Navy Office initial overrode longer-term considerations of sustainment. Stripping training establishments such as the Williamstown Naval Depot at Melbourne and the RAN College at Geelong offers an immediate source of senior sailors and officers but, as Cadet Midshipman John 'Jock' Armstrong wrote home, imposed a high degree of uncertainty:

Mr Monk [Engineer Lieutenant Commander William Monk] received an appointment on the 'Australia' so we have only Mr Boddie [Engineer Lieutenant Ronald Boddie] left for Engineering. Mr Elwell [Lieutenant Commander Charles Elwell] and Mr Pope [Lieutenant Cuthbert Pope] will leave on Tuesday morning for Melbourne as they have all got appointments. Mr Hall [Chief Naval Instructor Reverend William Hall] and Mr Wheatley [Senior Naval Instructor Frederick Wheatley] the Physics Instructor had to go to the Naval Office Melbourne to act as interpreters so the College will be left without most of its officers. The Commander [Commander Duncan Grant] hopes to get an appointment and in that case the College may close down ...

Stevens op cit.
United Kingdom: Scotland, Firth of Forth Dec 1918.

A group of nine midshipmen studying on board HMAS Australia in the presence of their Instructor Lieutenant Commander Charles Reed Franklin, RAN (standing). Midshipmen identified left to right: Midshipman Ross Valdar Wheatley, RAN; Midshipman Peter Corsar Anderson, RAN; Midshipman Francis Hoddinett Vail, RAN; Midshipman John Malet Armstrong, RAN (hidden at rear.)

Bathrustian Dec.16, P.989
The documents below are difficult to read. They are, nevertheless, included as they give an insight into the diversity of various postings, during Armstrong’s long career.
Captain John Malet Armstrong and Commander Harley Chamberlain Wright DSC aboard HMAS Australia in New York harbour. The heavy cruiser was diverted to the United States in May 1945 to undergo a major refit en route to the United Kingdom. New York 20/6/45.
Edwin Nurse served as Inspector of Naval Ordnance, Frank Getting was lost commanding *Canberra* at the Battle of Savo Island and John Armstrong commanded *Australia* (II) at Lingayen Gulf. Harry Showers, perhaps the RAN’s most accomplished wartime cruiser captain, commanded *Adelaide, Hobart* and *Shropshire*, and in 1944 became the first college graduate to become a member of the Naval Board. The highest naval achievements, however, belong to John Collins. In 1940, when in command of *Sydney* (II), he was responsible for the sinking of one Italian cruiser, *Bartolomeo Colleoni*, and damaging a second, thereby providing a worthy addition to the battle honours attached to the most famous name ever carried by an Australian warship. In 1944, he became the first Australian-trained officer to command the squadron, and four years later he was also the first to hold the appointment of First Naval Member. When he retired as a vice admiral in 1955 Collins might not have been the last World War I veteran still serving in the RAN, but he was undoubtedly the most senior.57

Stevens op. cit.

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We were pleased to hear from J. M. Armstrong, who is still serving as a Commodore in the R.A.N. Commodore Armstrong has a very long and distinguished record in the Navy, dating back to February 1914. He writes as follows:—’I have always had a soft spot for the school, but I am afraid I have not done much about it, as we of the old school rather lost touch when the original building was closed down. However, I receive the ‘Bathurstian’ regularly enough.’

Bathurstian circa WW11
Hero helped rescue nine airmen in Atlantic gale

Captain J.M. Armstrong, C.B.E., D.S.O. and U.S. Navy Cross died peacefully on December 30, 1988 at Jersey in the Channel Islands. He was 88 and had been in failing health during the past eight years.

In January 1945 as Commanding Officer of HMAS AUSTRALIA at the landings at Lingayen Gulf, Luzon, in the Philippines, he gained a reputation for coolness and bravery when his ship suffered five Kamikaze hits but finished her bombardment schedule.

He was known to his fellow officers and nicknamed “Black Jack” by the sailors.

He was to be the first Commanding Officer of the RAN’s first true aircraft carrier, to be the Aircraft Carrier “OCEAN”.

In May 1945 HMAS AUSTRALIA, under the command of Captain Armstrong, sailed for England with the ship’s company for the new carrier.

Before Captain Armstrong arrived in England the War Cabinet postponed the plan for the RAN to operate a wartime aircraft carrier.

Captain Armstrong left England for the Pacific to take command of the Escort Carrier HMS RULER followed by HMS VINDICTIVE.

This was for Captain Armstrong to gain experience in carriers as it was planned he would be appointed Commanding Officer of the RAN’s first postwar carrier.

HIGHLIGHTS

Other highlights of his career were being appointed Chief Cadet Captain at the R.A.N.C. in 1937; serving in the Battle Cruiser HMAS AUSTRALIA in 1938 and being Gunnery Officer in the HMAS AUSTRALIA in 1950.

In 1939 he was appointed Executive Officer of HMAS AUSTRALIA and in 1940 took part in the daring rescue of one airmen from the crew of a Sunderland Flying boat forced down in an Atlantic gale.

The Sunderland was sighted two miles ahead on the port bow, at 2.35 p.m., using fire control signals, (scream) and flashing “Hurry” by Aldis lamps.

As the cruiser approached, the flying boat capsized.

For a time two of the airmen hung to the sinking aircraft’s upturned keel and the rest bailed about in the raging, freezing sea.

The “AUSTRALIA’s” upper deck amidships was normally about 28 feet above the water line.

However, with the roll of the ship and the state of the sea, at times the troughs of the waves were over 50 feet below the upper deck level exposing over eight feet of hull and damaged coated anti-torpedo bulges and a bilge keel which could take a man to his death as the ship rolled.

Commander “Black Jack” Armstrong, then 40 years old, with a dozen of the “Aussie’s” crew in bowls, went over the side into the

Death of CAPT J.M. Armstrong

(By Alan Zemke)

being North Atlantic sea and rescued, with securing lines, nine of the aircraft’s crew of 13 from certain death in the icy water.

The remaining four perished.

COMMANDS

During 1942 he commanded HMAS MANOORA and later HMAS WESTFALIA.

For a year he was N.O.I.C. New Guinea.

In 1946 Naval Medical Officers classified Captain Armstrong unfit for sea service and thus ended his chances of becoming an Admiral.

During the postwar years he held important Naval appointments in Australia including 2nd Naval Member with the rank of Commodore and overseas posts in London and Washington.

For outstanding zeal and devotion to duty he was mentioned in Despatches while serving in HMAS AUSTRALIA in 1941 as Executive Officer.

Four years later while in command of HMAS AUSTRALIA he was awarded the D.S.O. for gallantry, skill and devotion to duty at Lingayen Gulf.

The United States of America awarded him the Navy Cross for distinguishing himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity in action during the capture of Lingayen Gulf in 1945.

Although his ship was heavily hit suffering heavy casualties and the disablement of a large portion of her anti-aircraft guns and radar systems, Captain Armstrong maintained his assigned station and the AUSTRALIA carried out her bombardment missions.