

TRACKER INSTRUCTIONAL AIRFRAMES

IN AUSTRALIA

by Ron Cuskelly

To support the introduction of the Grumman S-2 Tracker into R.A.N. service, two additional airframes were acquired as training aids. These airframes were:

S-2A Bu No 133160

S-2E Bu No 151646

The S-2A was a complete aircraft which was available to Chief Petty Officers Jock Collins and Arthur Sharland during their exchange duty with the U.S.N. at North Island Naval Air Station in San Diego where they spent thirteen months (1966-67) being trained as engineering instructors on the Tracker. The S-2A also served as a repository for various training aids acquired in San Diego.

The S-2E was obtained as an incomplete and damaged airframe, having been ditched into Long Island Sound during a pre-delivery test flight from the Grumman factory. The S-2E never flew again after this accident and it was acquired by the R.A.N. with the specific intention of dismantling it to provide components for training purposes.

On Monday 7 November 1966, the U.S. freighter *Australian Surf* arrived in Sydney with at least one and probably both Tracker instructional airframes as deck cargo. An Australian Government purchase order provides for the "dis-assembly, packaging and inland transport" of the stricken S-2E so evidently this aircraft was transported by road from the U.S. east coast to join the *Australian Surf* at San Diego. On Wednesday 9 November 1966, as the floating crane *Falcon* was lifting a Tracker from the Pyrmont wharf on to a lighter, a sling broke and the aircraft fell into Sydney Harbour. Navy divers later attached slings to the aircraft which was raised after spending four hours immersed. Contemporary press reports of the recovery depict a damaged and engineless Tracker which appears to be an S-2E. What can be stated definitely, however, is that the aircraft is NOT an S-2A. The damage to the underside of this aircraft is consistent with what might be expected on an aeroplane which had been ditched previously. Therefore, there can be no doubt that the "dunked" Tracker was the S-2E 151646. After its recovery, this aeroplane was offloaded on to the banks of the Parramatta River at Gladesville. On 23 March 1967, the S-2E was loaded on to the aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne* for transportation to Jervis Bay where it was offloaded on to a lighter on 2 April 1967, brought ashore and transported by road to Naval Air Station Nowra. Subsequently, the aircraft was dismantled to provide training aids with the centre section serving as an

undercarriage retraction train aid. The severed nose section of the S-2E resides with the Fleet Air Arm Museum at Nowra to this day. Given that this aeroplane was ditched prior to delivery and spent another four hours on the bottom of Sydney Harbour, it is noteworthy for probably having spent more time in the water than in the air!

A report in *Australian Air Log* of April 1967 states that a Tracker instructional airframe “at Bankstown airport under overhaul” is the same aircraft reported at Gladesville after having been recovered from Sydney Harbour. We now know that these were two different aircraft. That the reporter was led to assume that two different aircraft were one and the same, tends to support the belief that both instructional airframes arrived together on the *Australian Surf*.

More fortunate was the complete S-2A, which was successfully unloaded and transported to Hawker de Havilland at Bankstown where it was de-preserved and serviced under the supervision of Chief Petty Officer Arthur Sharland. Subsequently, the aeroplane was released for a one-off flight with the undercarriage locked down. The S-2A's one and only flight in Australia was under the command of U.S.N. exchange pilot Lieutenant Commander N.J. Saltz, with R.A.N. pilot Lieutenant Commander Ken Douglas acting as co-pilot and Chief Petty Officer Arthur Sharland occupying the observer's seat. So successful was the test flight that it did not return to Bankstown but terminated at Nowra, where Jock Collins witnessed the landing and confirmed that the aircraft was still in USN markings. In 2008, the late Windy Geale, then Curator of the Fleet Air Arm Museum at Nowra, inspected Ken Douglas' logbook which confirms that the aircraft was S-2A N12-133160 and that the date was 4 May 1967.

After its arrival at Nowra, the S-2A was used as a training aid for engine running and ground handling. To ensure that it would not be flown, Jock Collins cut a hole in the skin on the starboard side of the fuselage. This hole served the dual purpose of providing a viewing port for the radome and MAD operating mechanisms.

After the first batch of operational Trackers was delivered on HMAS *Melbourne* in November 1967, the S-2A must have outlived its usefulness at Nowra, for it was decided that it should go to HMAS *Nirimba*, a training station at Schofields near Sydney where it was to be used as a “Repair Procedure Fuselage”. In view of this planned role, together with the requirement that it be transported through the streets of Sydney, the S-2A had its wings, engines, tail group and internal systems removed at Nowra. The resultant hulk was then transported from Jervis Bay to Sydney on HMAS *Sydney*, during the period 4-6 February 1970. The S-2A was then trucked from Sydney to HMAS *Nirimba* where the Aviation Historical Society of Australia Journal reports its presence on 21 September 1970 having been “transferred recently from Nowra.”

Quite clearly, it was during the trip from Jervis Bay to Sydney that a dismembered S-2A carrying the side number “60” was photographed on the deck of HMAS *Sydney*, and not as previously assumed, during its delivery from the U.S. The non-standard side number was evidently derived from the Bureau Number 133160 and applied as an unofficial allocation during the aircraft’s time at Nowra.

The R.A.N. eventually disposed of the S-2A hulk to Gary Volkens who subsequently sold it to David Bussey who in turn donated it to the Queensland Air Museum. A QAM recovery crew departed for Schofields on 8 June 1990 and the aircraft was later trucked to Caloundra where it arrived on 16 June. There can be no doubt that the aeroplane in QAM’s possession is an S-2A, given that:

1. It has provision for the upper AN/APA-69 radome unique to the S-2A. (QAM has the pylon but not the radome).
2. It carries a ventral barrier hook unique to the S-2A.
3. It has only 8 sonobuoy ejector tubes in each engine nacelle whereas the S-2E has 16.

Furthermore, during an inspection by QAM members Nick Sayer and Martin Hooper, traces of the Bu No 133160 were found on the rear fuselage. Jock Collins (also a QAM member) confirms that the Tracker in QAM’s collection bears evidence of the hole he cut in the fuselage of the S-2A at Nowra.

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Trevor Boughton, Jock Collins, Ken Douglas, Bob “Windy” Geale, Martin Hooper,
John Hopton, Nick Sayer and Arthur Sharland.

It is hoped that much of the confusion which has surrounded these two aeroplanes, has now been resolved.

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