

Brief history of 723 Squadron

723 Squadron was originally formed in the RAN on April 7, 1952 at NAS Nowra under the auspices of Lieutenant J. A. Gledhill, DSC, RAN and was equipped with one Dakota, one Wirraway, two Sea Furies and one Sea Otter.

In the words of the squadron diarist of that time, "the squadron's role is to include co-operation with AJASS, Fleet Requirements, Communications, SAR, refresher flying, instrument flying training."

The first rotary wing aircraft, in fact the first helicopter to enter service in the RAN, the Bristol Sycamore, arrived in 723 squadron on March 11, 1953.

Within the first couple of months, several rescue missions were flown to assist fishermen in the Nowra area.

The largest effort took place during the Maitland floods of February-March 1956 when four helos. were involved.

From then until 1959, routine training was carried out, broken

training was carried out, followed by many varied search and rescue missions.

In all, during this period, about 50 people were rescued from various awkward positions.

Bizarre tasks in the Squadron's day-to-day routine included taxi work for visiting dignitaries, flood relief work, rescuing hikers, fishermen, pregnant women, injured lighthouse keepers, hospital cases and even occasionally, aviators.

A lesser known task of the squadron included the interception, tracking and reporting of a flying saucer or some such unidentified flying object.

The sighting by a Squadron Sea Fury on the night of August 31, 1954, was confirmed by radar at Nowra and it was later established that no other aircraft, RAAF or civil, was flying in that area at that time.

The identity or source of the object still remains a mystery.

During this period, the squadron aircraft strength had built up progressively to a peak strength when the squadron decommissioned in October 1956, of Sea Furies, Dakota, Wirraways, Sea Otter,

Dakota, Wirraways, Sea Otter,
Firefly, Firefly trainers, Vampire
Jet trainers and Sycamore Helos.

The squadron was recommissioned in February 1957 with the Sycamore Helicopter as the major aircraft.

Rotary wing pilot training was to be the main role although it still had four Firefly target tugs and two Auster communications aircraft on strength for Fleet co-operation.

Amongst its other tasks, the squadron assisted in the training of army officers as Helo. pilots so that they could form the nucleus of the new 16th Army Light Aircraft Squadron.

At the same time, helicopter training in the RAN was accelerated to build up the services' strength of trained Pilots awaiting the arrival of the Wessex.

The Firefly and Auster aircraft were transferred to 724 Squadron in November 1962 and the squadron settled down exclusively to helicopter pilot training.

In April 1963, the first of two

In April 1963, the first of two Scout aircraft arrived from the U.K. and joined the squadron ready for use on the new survey ship HMAS MORESBY then under construction.

Since then the helos. have accompanied MORESBY on all surveying cruises and have assisted considerably in the speed in which portable surveying equipment previously transferred ashore by boat, can now be landed in position and collected after use.

In May 1964, a new phase of helo. pilot training started in the RAN with the arrival of the first of six Bell UH-1B Iroquois (gas turbine helicopter) on the squadron.

As their numbers grew, the Sycamore, the work-horse of Navy Search and Rescue and training since 1953, were phased out of service and into retirement.

The squadron, now under the command of Lt. Cdr. G. McPhee, MBE, RAN, still has the combined role of SAR and training of pilots.

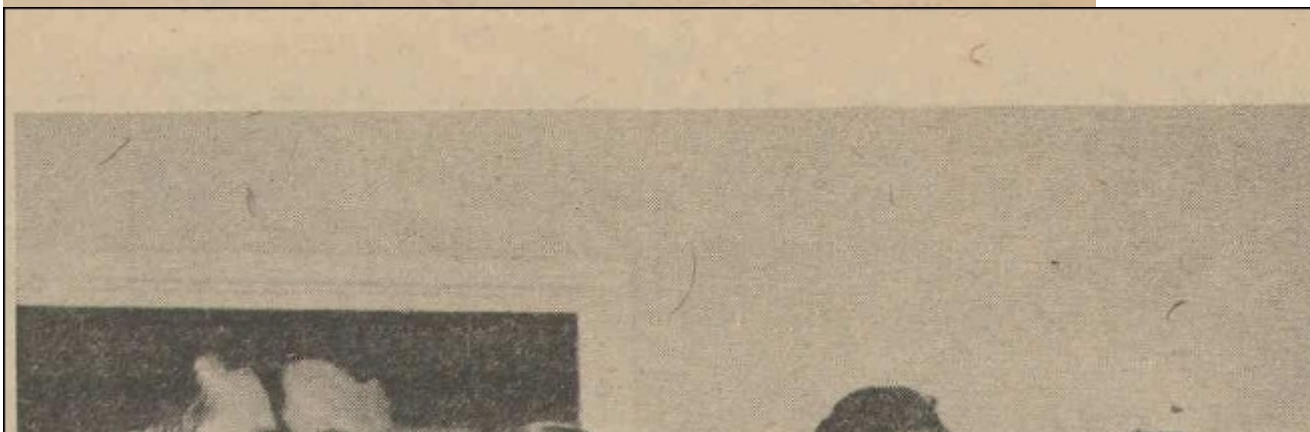
It is responsible now for the initial training of pilots who have just graduated from a fixed wing

just graduated from a fixed wing course with the RAAF and have never flown a helicopter before.

Besides this, one aircraft and crew is kept at instant readiness to take to the air in the event of any emergency.

In recent months, the squadron has assisted the civil police, carried out searches and shark patrols of the populous South Coast beaches and in 1965, several squadron members were decorated by the Queen for their part in the rescue of several badly injured bush walkers in difficult mountainous terrain, south of Nowra.

The new Iroquois has proven a popular and reliable aircraft for medical evacuation, communications and training and should be seen delivering the mail or transferring personnel around units of the Fleet for many years to come.







TIME FOR RELAXATION. Some of the R.A.N. Fleet Air Arm team which carried out search and rescue operations for survivors of the crew of the dredge W D. ATLAS last month, enjoy a beer in the wardroom mess at HMAS ALBATROSS after the search had been called off. From left to right are: Lt. Barrie Lovett (Iroquois helicopter pilot), Lt. Pat Vickers (Wessex helicopter pilot), Lt. Denis Churcher (air traffic controller), Lt. Joe Smith (Dakota pilot), Sub. Lt. Bob McNeill (Dakota observer); Lt. Graham King (Dakota pilot) and Lt. Ben Bathurst, RN (Wessex helicopter observer).