

Aussie superpower



Educational Airlines

My trip to marry up with Melbourne in Africa was 'interesting' in its own way.

About 15 hours in the air ex Sydney saw me land in Dubai, where I caught a connection on Ethiopian Airways for two stops in Africa.

Now, I don't know if it's just me, but I always worry about the cabin bag I take on planes. It's not huge but it does weigh about twice the 7kg allowance, because of the very heavy, very expensive cameras I never trust to checked baggage.

Checking in at the Ethiopian Airways desk, with my usual carry-bag worry, I wonder how in the hell all these people in front of me can seriously expect to get on a plane with the virtual suitcases they are lugging. But, they all check in, all get through security and then the gate lounge, past the boarding-pass scan and down the air bridge – only to be stopped almost at the plane door by a man with a shopping trolley full of luggage tags.

The ensuing arguments were almost as comical as they were worrisome at the door of a modern airliner! But many large bags were confiscated at this very late stage and sent to the belly of the plane.

Anyway, longer story short – those people who argued about their large bags obviously knew something I didn't. My checked bag did not arrive at the same port I arrived at – at least not at the same time.

I also heard later that it's a common occurrence in this part of the world. And when your bags are eventually found, there's a nice, fat service charge to be paid!

Anyway, thanks Ethiopian Airways for another of life's memorable learning experiences.

I tell this story by way of explanation that I spent the bulk of my time onboard HMAS Melbourne dressed like a native – in blue cams, that is.

Once upon a time, I visited Garden Island in Sydney when an American aircraft-carrier group was in port. The USS Constellation (now-retired supercarrier, for those who don't know) was just gob-smackingly impressive in every way.

So too was the Aegis-class frigate parked in front of her – and behind an Aussie ship of similar proportions.

Now, I can't remember the name of either the Aussie or the US frigates, but what I do remember is thinking at the time that the American ship looked 'way serious' compared to the Aussie one. Its darker-grey paint job (with no rust trickles here and there) looked more serious. The forest of antenna of various shapes and sizes sticking out at every conceivable angle all over her, looked serious. And the weapons – just the ones I could see, mind you – were seriously impressive too.

And the Aussie ship up stream from her – well I'm sorry to say, looked a bit 'ordinary' by comparison.

Unfortunately for the Royal Australian Navy, that perception stuck with me for a long time. And now I know it's a very unfair perception – at least in the case of HMAS

Melbourne upon which I recently had the very great pleasure of sailing from a port in northern Africa to Dubai.

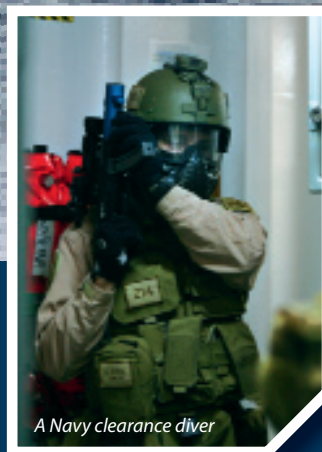
That was a journey of about 3300km (according to my rough Google Earth track calculation) over the course of seven or so days. I am actually a bit vague on the exact duration because I very quickly lost all sense of time or days or dates – I even went for two whole days without seeing daylight at one stage.

Now before you read on, let me just say that this story is an account of my education on HMAS Melbourne and the Royal Australian Navy generally, and not a story about pirate patrols in the Middle East Area of Operations – because, while that was the ship's mission when I was aboard, and they had several encounters in the weeks leading up to my visit, nothing of much note happened in that regard while I was there.

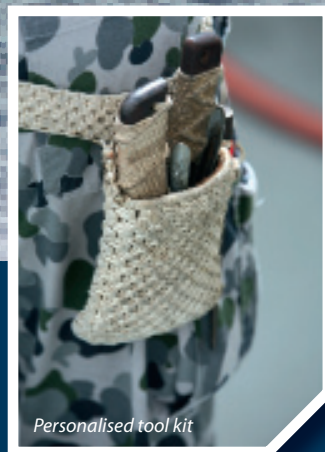
I honestly wasn't disappointed about that though, because the op tempo was such that I was able to enjoy my first encounter with the RAN as a general learning experience – and, let's face it, you've all seen heaps of photos showing sailors climbing onto dhows.



Able Seaman James Walker



A Navy clearance diver



Personalised tool kit

No – the headline is not a cliché.

HMAS Melbourne really is a superpowered superpower. Packing two jet engines for a total of 41,000 shaft horsepower, and a suite of weapons I could barely believe, everything about Melbourne is impressive, from top to bottom and most of the bits in between, some of which I'm not allowed to tell you about.

But first, let me rewind a bit...