

An identity crisis: Hawker Sea Fury FB11 VX730

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Abstract: *This paper looks at the role of original paint and other fabric in discovering the identity and history of the Memorial's Hawker Sea Fury aircraft.*

Introduction

Sea Fury number VX730 is held in the collection of the Australian War Memorial as a relic of the Korean War (1950-1953). However it appears to have had a stormy past, and we could say it is something of a dark horse. Close examination revealed that the aircraft had connections with two other aircraft, numbered TF925 and VW232. By careful rubbing back in critical areas, both of these numbers became visible on underlying sequential paint layers on the wings and fuselage. There will be more of that later.

First – a journey into history.



Figure 1. A Sea Fury aircraft on the deck of HMAS Sydney

Preliminary curatorial research, of apparently contradictory official records, indicated a varied service history for these three aircraft numbers. Records show TF925 being built in 1946 as a Mk. X, serving with the Royal Navy between 1948 and 1949. It was purchased by the Royal Australian Navy and shipped to Australia as a training airframe in 1949 after a 'hard landing'. It was authorized for conversion to spares in November of that year.



Figure 2. Sea Fury VW232, 8th July 1953.

VW232 was taken on charge in 1944 and designated as a training aid in 1951 after taking four cannon shells from an enthusiastic but errant wingman. It was then reduced to spares in 1953.

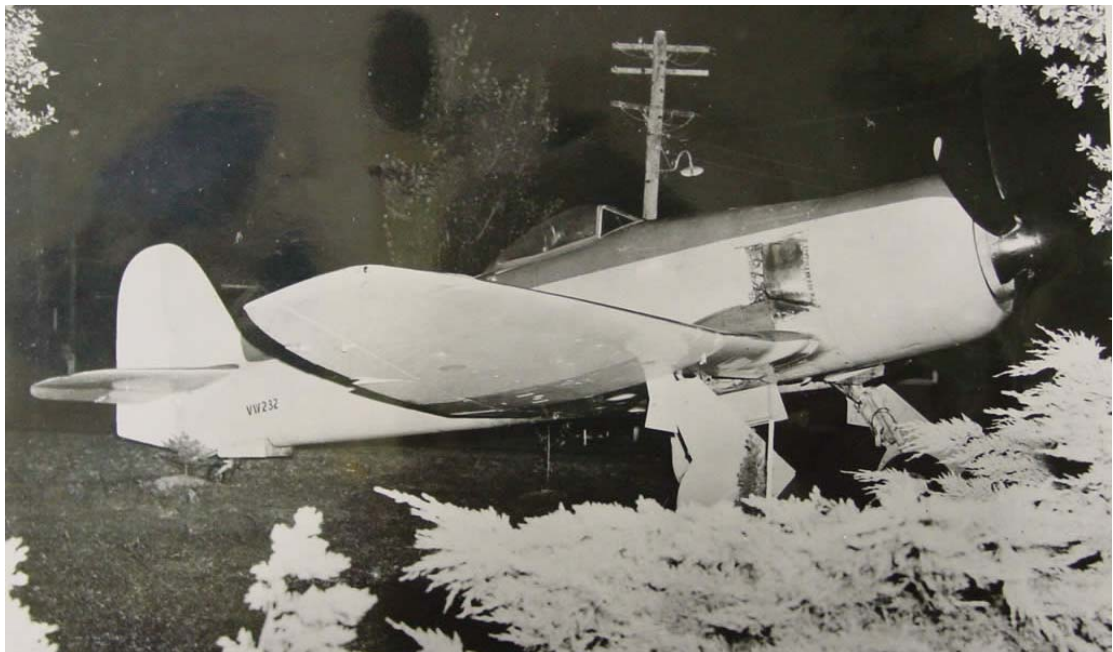


Figure 3. Gate guardian at Nowra (note dent in wing).

Note that while these aircraft had a wide service history, no records of either TF925 or VW232 indicate that they ever actively served in Korea. VX730 however, is first

referred to in the 21 Carrier Air Group on HMAS Sydney in 1950. It served in the Korean War and later suffered a forced landing in Australia due to engine failure in 1957. Further records indicate that the original VX730 was set aside for the NSW Department of Technical Education as a training airframe.



Figure 4. Sea Fury VX730 on truck

Anecdotal evidence indicates that this aircraft, with a long service record including active Korean service, was unfortunately cut up for scrap in error by a contractor when the navy was disposing of its Sea Fury aircraft around 1959. The same anecdotal evidence indicated that another aircraft (presumably TF925/VW232?) was hastily saved from the wreckers and the serial number overpainted with the number 'VX730'.



Figure 5. Sea Fury VX730 at Sydney Technical College.

Over the ensuing years VX730 oscillated between various venues - Sydney Technical College, the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, the Camden Museum of Aviation, the Australian War Memorial, RAAF Fairbairn, the RAN Historic Flight at Nowra, then back to the Australian War Memorial in 1993.

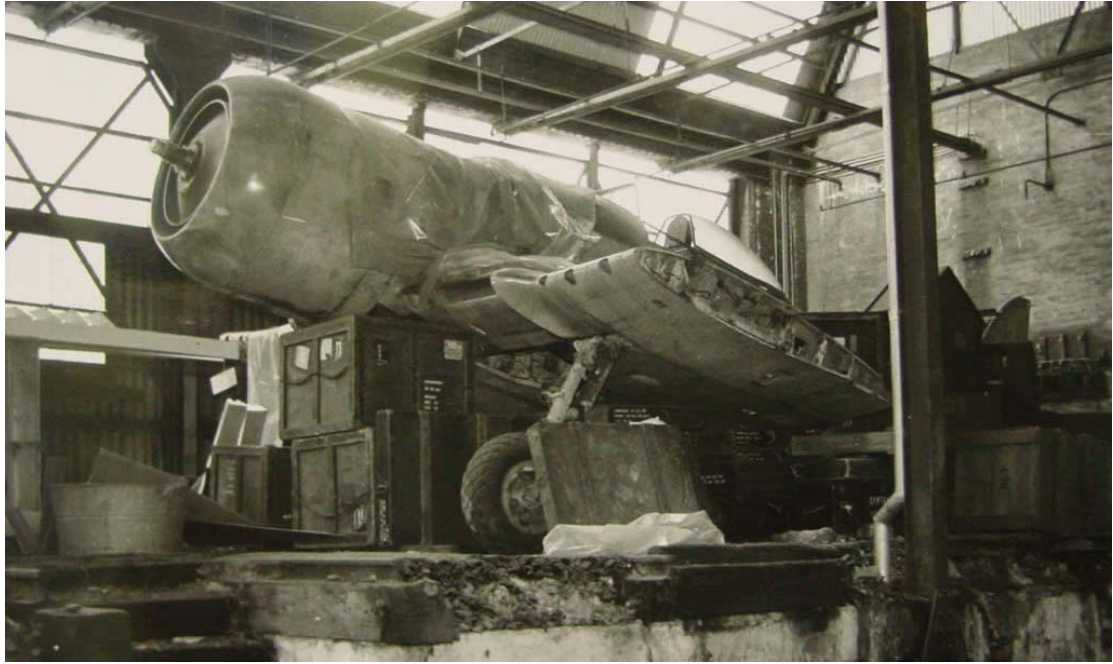


Figure 6. VX730 in less than ideal storage.

Further work by Memorial curatorial staff commenced in December 1998, with a review of two Sea Furys held in the collection, ie VX730 and WG630. This review was intended to determine which of the two aircraft was the most significant historically, taking into account suitability for treatment and the amount of work and resources necessary to achieve the best results. At the same time a parts audit was conducted to determine which components were needed from either airframe in order to obtain one complete aircraft for display.



Figure 7. VX730 in the workshop.

As a result of this audit, Sea Fury VX730 was chosen for treatment in the Memorial's Treloar large technology conservation workshop and subsequent display in Aircraft Hall, with WG630 acting as a source of the spares required for completing VX 730.

The conservation project commenced in January 1999 and extended for fourteen months.

Considering the confusing evidence available, any historical evidence actually on the aircraft would therefore be extremely useful in determining its true history. The conservation approach was one of minimum intervention in order to retain as much of the original painted surface finish as was possible for future research. This approach was balanced by the requirement to remedy many years of weathering, neglect, use and abuse, to have an object that would meet display requirements and portray the most authentic story for the public. Note that the Memorial endeavours to present relics as they appeared during a significant moment in their history or at the end of their active service. This may differ from other display practices that present objects restored to "as new" condition.

The aircraft initially was in a sad condition, reflecting a very chequered past. It was structurally sound though, with minimal corrosion. The major assembly, comprising the engine, fuselage and wing centre sections, was dirty and damaged. Many minor components and panels were missing. Twenty-one pallets of loose components and the two outer wing panels were on hand following the parts audit and subsequent scavenging from WG630, and it was anticipated that a reasonably complete and accurately presented aircraft would result from the treatment.



Figure 8. Port wing undersurface (note Hispano cannon).

Before any work was commenced, accurate tracings of all markings and stencils were taken. The aircraft was then completely dismantled into major components and thoroughly cleaned. Mechanical damage was repaired where either aesthetics or

safety required it. Non service handling damage was repaired either mechanically, or with standard automotive filling procedures where repair would unacceptably disrupt original material.



Figure 9. Starboard wing undersurface.

Similarly, missing components were replicated for visual or structural integrity. Such parts were suitably identified as replicas by stamping 'AWM 99' into them. No paint stripping was performed. Painted surfaces were solvent cleaned to remove a 'protective' varnish and then progressively evaluated. Preparation was limited to a light rubbing back to remove loose paint flakes, to provide a key for inpainting or to minimise colour variations due to weathering.

Most of the undersurface paint layer, other than the outer wing panels, was retained, with inpainting of damaged or weathered areas as necessary to achieve an integrated appearance.

Most of the top surfaces were lightly repainted as these were badly weathered or worn through by foot traffic. Colours were matched to traces actually found on the aircraft. Roundels and stencils were reapplied using either tracings of the originals, or photographic and printed references.

Particular care and detail went into the location and fitout of the cockpit instrumentation and controls as many of these were either badly weathered or missing. Curatorial acquisition and preparation of the necessary instrumentation had preceded the project for many years. Original instrument and cockpit surfaces were retained, with inpainting of missing paint areas as required. Four Hispano 20mm cannon previously shown, obtained via the police gun amnesty buyback scheme, were cleaned and stabilised and fitted to the aircraft.



Figure 10. Cockpit internals.

The contribution of local businesses and individuals in reproducing difficult missing components and providing other services is acknowledged. Replica fittings, hydraulic components, canopy rails, leather shrouds, light covers, decals, stencils, paint, screen printing of instrument panels, tyre fitting, donation of an original arrestor hook - the list goes on. Many of these services were performed free or at a discount. These skills and the accompanying willingness to help are gratefully recorded in the full treatment report.

But...

It was at this stage, eleven months into the project, that the necessity to preserve as much original material as is possible on historic objects was reinforced. Oblique lighting (provided by sunlight conveniently streaming through an opened large sliding workshop door) on the recoated surface of the fuselage, revealed very faint traces of at least twenty-one mission markings that were not originally visible, but showed up after the repaint as a slight thickening of the underlying paint.

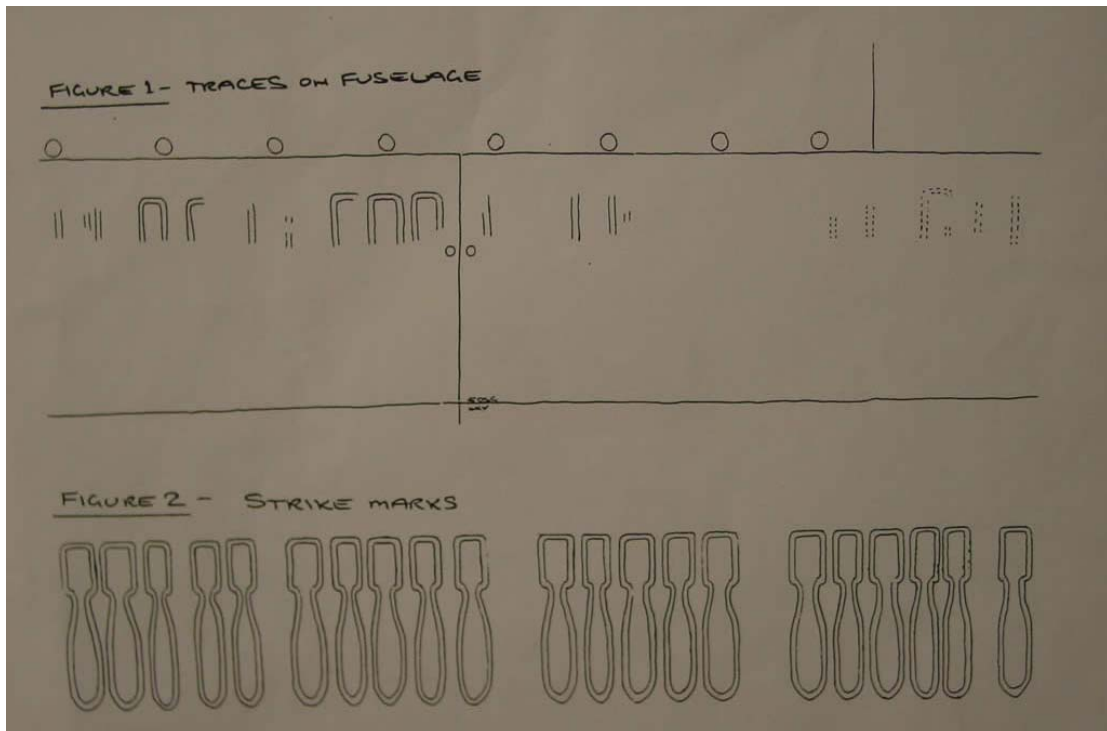


Figure 11. Mission marking traces located on side of aircraft.

These traces were too faint to photograph clearly, but here is a sketch of the markings.

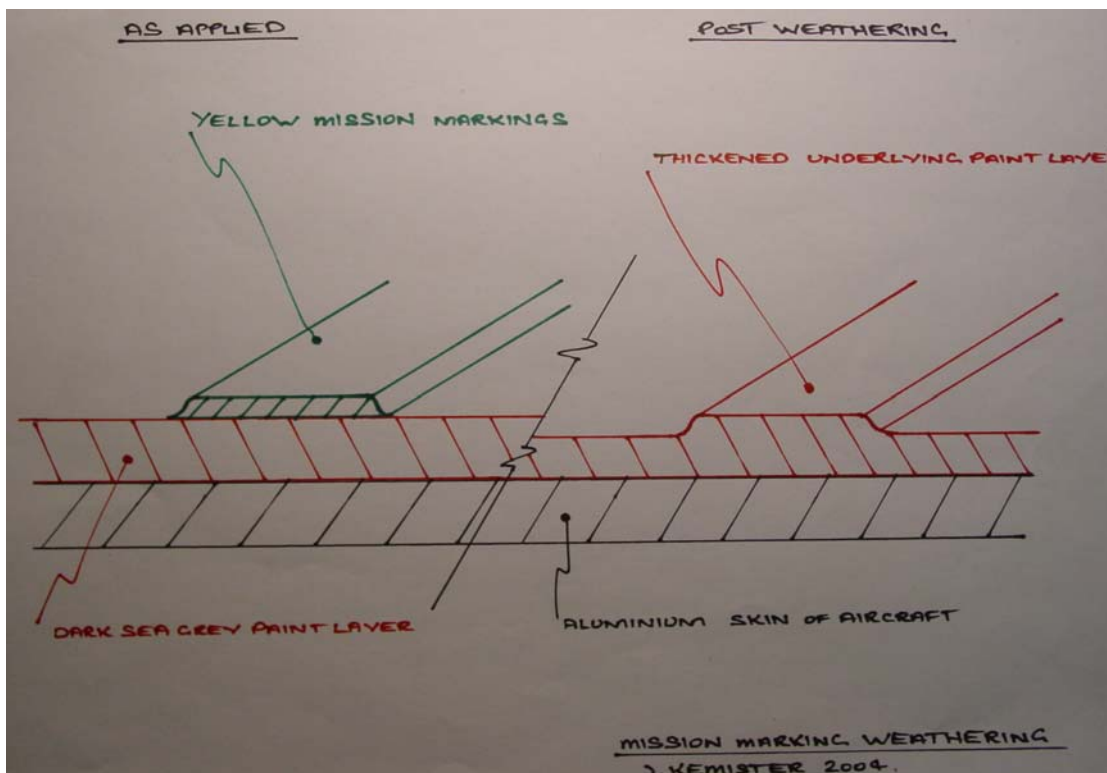


Figure 12. Weathering process.

This evidence, combined with possible battle damage at four locations, was a strong indication that the cockpit section performed active service in some theatre, even though no records confirmed this for either TF925 or VW232. The markings

correspond exactly (in size, layout and groups of five), with those on actual photographs of other active service Sea Fury aircraft.



Figure 13. Sea Fury group showing mission markings.



Figure 14. Markings on VX763.

It was initially believed that these markings were bomb tails, but subsequent discussion with pilots indicate that the markings shown are the tails of rockets, with the lower body and head obliterated by weathering.

At this stage, as a result of the scarcity of written active service records for the composite TF925/VW232, a decision was made to continue to represent the aircraft as the more historic VX730, as a complete active service record was available for this. It was hoped that this record, with representation of the aircraft as VX730, would most effectively convey information to the public on Sea Fury aircraft in Korea.

All markings specific to VX730, based on original photographs, were applied to the aircraft in an easily reversible medium, so that they could be removed should future evidence or research reveal more of the true service history of Sea Fury TF925/VW232.

To assist the investigation into the identity of this aircraft, local and interstate ex Sea Fury pilots took up the challenge, did some research, compared notes and recollections and kindly forwarded the results to the Memorial. A possibly more accurate history of the aircraft is presented below, based on both their information and on the evidence found on the aircraft.

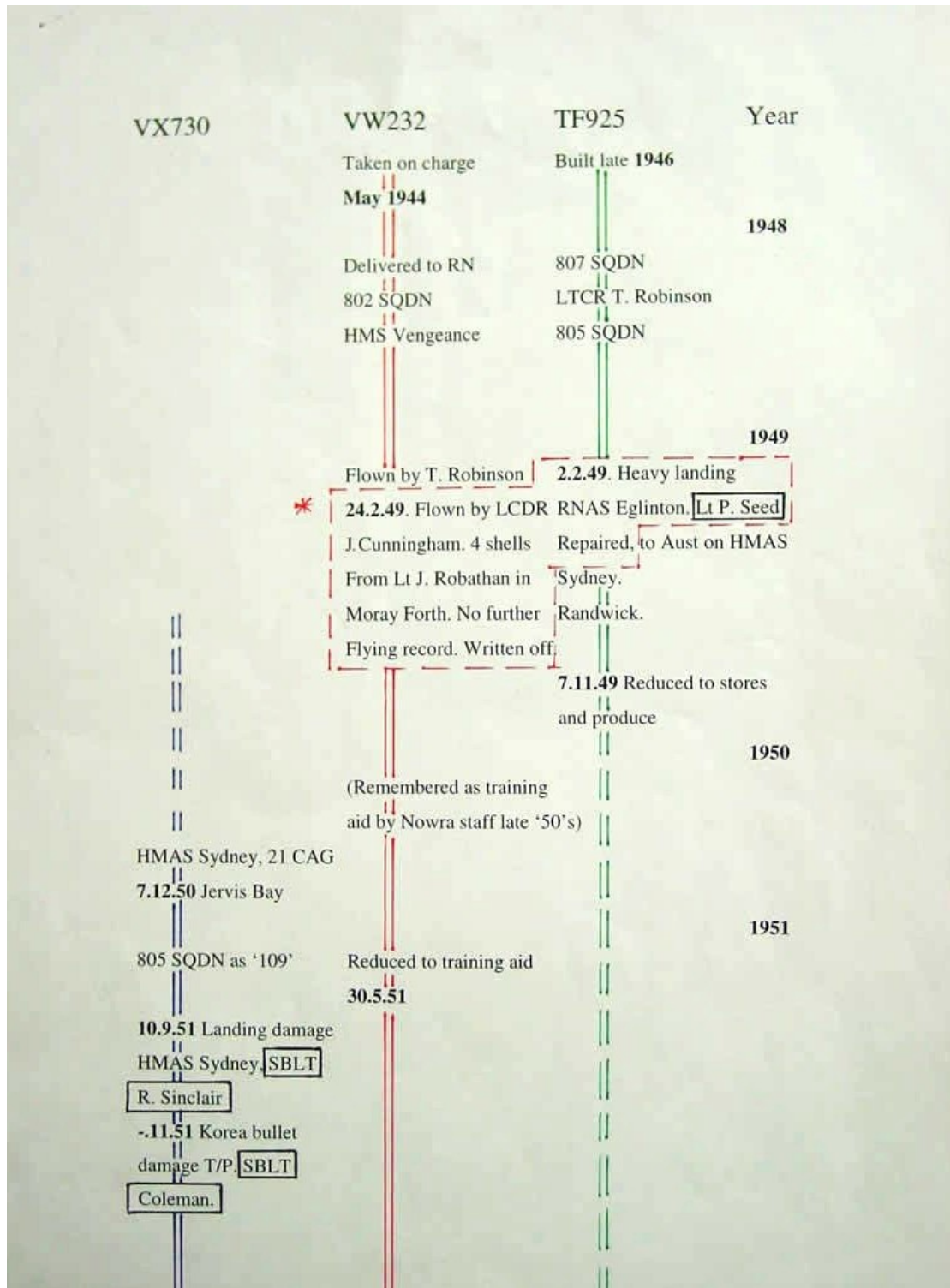


Figure 15. Timeline, slide 1.

The three numbers were originally three different aircraft. TF925 was extensively damaged in the 'hard landing' on 2 February 1949. VW232 suffered damage on the Starboard side from the four cannon shells mentioned during exercises on 24 February 1949, and was written off. Records exist of both aircraft coming to Australia on HMAS Sydney in November 1949.

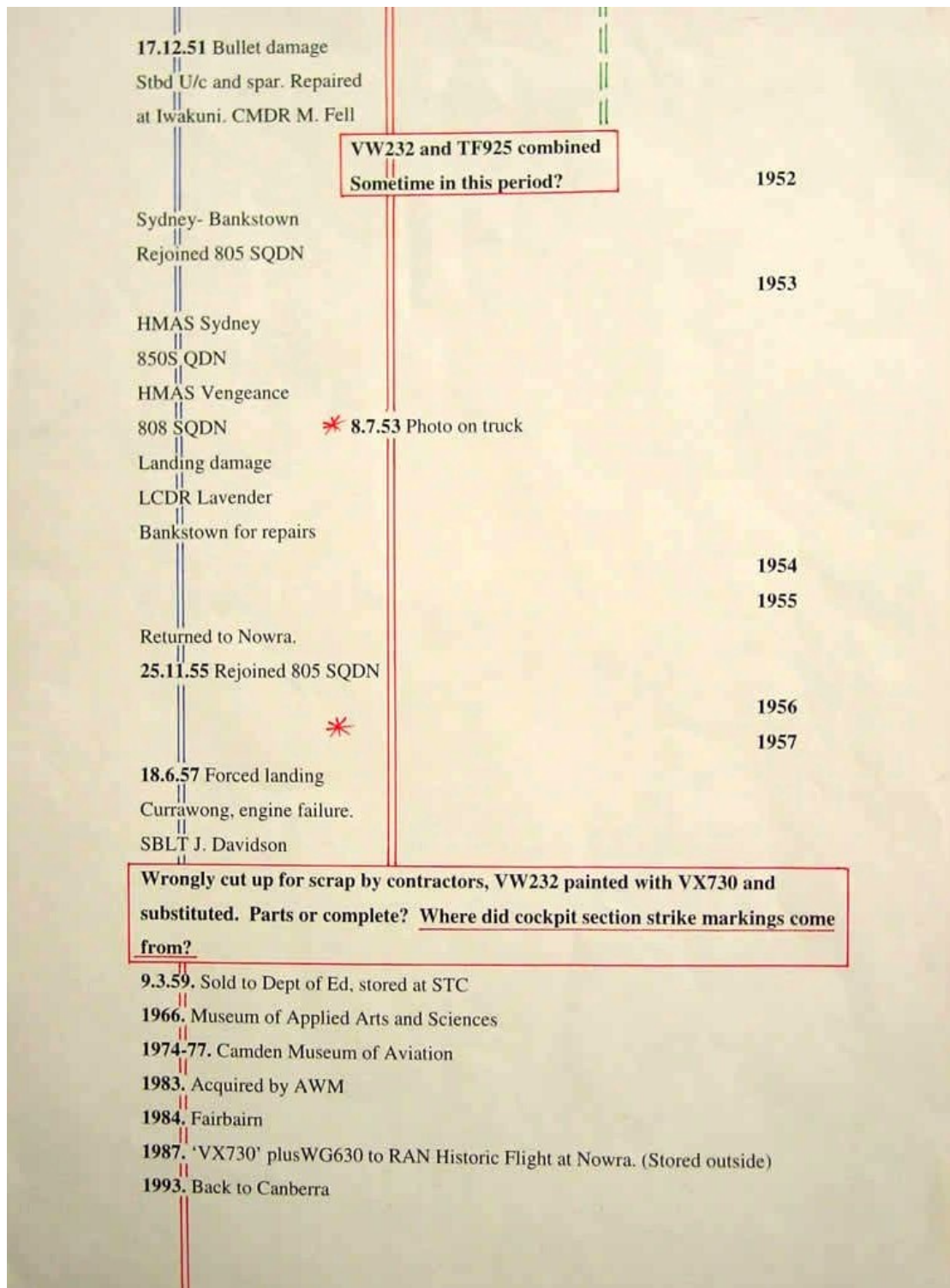


Figure 16. Timeline, slide 2.

Sometime after coming to Australia the wings and tail section of TF925 could have been used to repair VW232, accounting for the occurrence of both these numbers on the aircraft. This theory appears to be confirmed by the facts that the tail section has a different colour internal primer than the remainder of the fuselage, VW232 has been applied over TF925 on the tail fuselage section, and cannon damage to the Starboard wing leading edge does not match with the remainder of the TF925 wing. Note that

the real VX730 was having a well documented and parallel active Korean service during the period 1950 -57. At this stage it appeared true that the original VX730 was cut up for scrap and the composite TF925/VW232 renumbered as VX730.

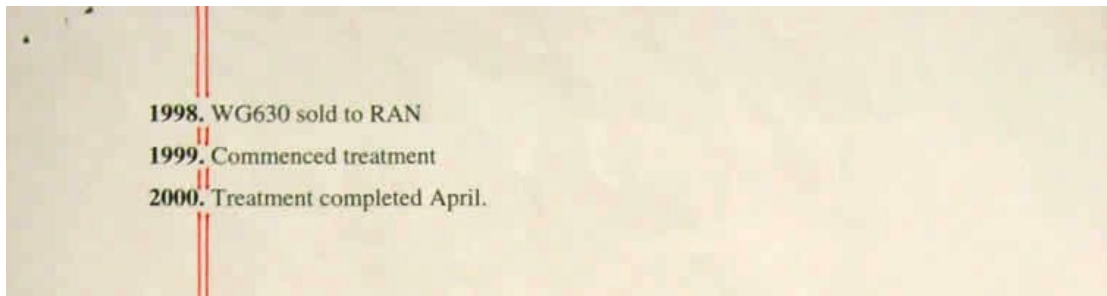


Figure 17. Timeline, slide 3

The burning question was - why do remnants of strike markings appear on the mid fuselage section? Are they spurious, put on sometime in the past as a dress up, or are they genuine? The latter appears more likely given the weathering pattern of the paint layers in the area of the markings.

It seems that the mid fuselage section came from an aircraft that actually did serve in Korea. Was it the original VX 730? Was the centre fuselage section, which includes the cockpit area, saved from the scrap metal merchant? This now appears most likely, but although we do have a clear Starboard image of VX 730 actually on the deck of HMAS Sydney in Korea...

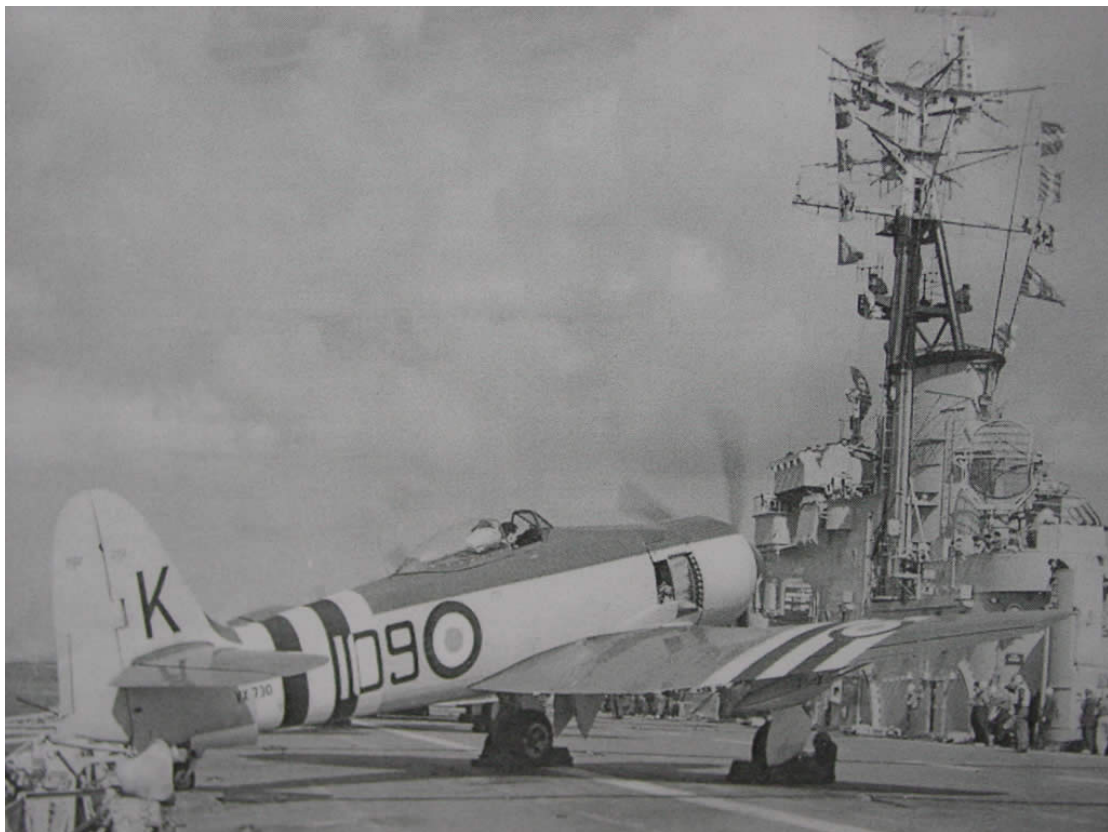


Figure 18. VX730 on HMAS Sydney.

we have no images showing the strike markings on the Port side to compare with those found and verify its identity. (Oh @\$#!)

The fully treated but still enigmatic aircraft can now be seen on display as part of 'Air Power in the Pacific' in Aircraft Hall.



Figure 19. Completed aircraft at rollout.

And that is the fascinating story of Hawker Sea Fury VX730.

Acknowledgements

The contributions are acknowledged of John White, Curator, Australian War Memorial, and Toz Dadswell, along with LCDR "Windy" Geale, Museum of Flight, Nowra, and Mr John Bennet, Florey, ACT for their work tracking down some of the history and the pilots who flew Sea Fury aircraft. The project would not have been completed on time without the generous assistance of the Treloar Technology Volunteer Team.