



united service club

history & heritage notes

Commodore Sir James RAMSAY KCMG, KCVO, CBE, DSC

[1916-1986]



Sir James was Patron of the Club from 1977 to 1984

Sir James was elected to Life Membership of the Club in 1985.

We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed. They are intended as casual reading for the benefit of Members, who are encouraged to advise of any inaccuracies in the material.

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Sir James Maxwell Ramsay, naval officer and Governor, was born on 27 August 1916 in Hobart, fifth of six surviving children of William Ramsay, a Brisbane-born accountant and later manager of Tattersall's lotteries, and his second wife Mary Jane (née Laurie) who was born in Scotland.

Educated at the Macquarie Street State School and The Hutchins School, James entered the Royal Australian Naval College at Jervis Bay in January 1930. He became a Cadet Captain, attained colours for rugby and achieved excellent results in academic and professional subjects. After time at sea (1934-36) as a midshipman, he undertook a Sub-Lieutenant courses in Britain. Late in 1937 he returned to Australia. He gained further experience at sea and was promoted to Lieutenant with seniority of May 1938.

When World War II began, Ramsay served (1939-40) in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea in HMAS Hobart. He was officer-of-the-watch in HMS *King George V* during the engagement on 27 May 1941 in the Atlantic that resulted in the sinking of the German battleship *Bismarck*, and he was navigator of HMS *Danae* when, in the morning of 28 February 1942, she left the Java Sea via the Sunda Strait, narrowly avoiding the powerful Japanese force that sank HMAS *Perth* that night. In 1942-45 he served in the Pacific and Indian Oceans in HMA Ships *Bungaree*, *Warramunga*, *Napier* and *Australia*. He was made an acting Lieutenant Commander in 1944 (substantive in 1946).

In 1945 Ramsay was sent to the Royal Naval Staff College, Greenwich, England. On 24 November that year at the parish church in Denham, Buckinghamshire, he married a Red Cross welfare officer Janet Grace Burley, daughter of Frederick Burley. Back in Australia in 1946, Ramsay was posted as Staff Officer (operations and intelligence) to the Squadron Commander. He returned to Britain in 1948 for specialist navigation training and then joined the aircraft-carrier HMAS *Sydney* as navigation and aircraft direction officer. While serving at Navy Office, Melbourne, in 1950-51, he was promoted to Commander (1950).

Appointed commanding officer of the destroyer HMAS *Warramunga* in October 1951, Ramsay saw action in Korean waters in February-July 1952. On one occasion *Warramunga* dashed inshore, firing her guns, making smoke, and deliberately drawing fire from enemy shore batteries, to protect two beleaguered American minesweepers. For his leadership, judgement and coolness under fire in the Korean War, Ramsay was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross (1952) and was appointed an officer of the United States of America's Legion of Merit (1955).

He commanded HMAS *Arunta* in 1952-53, served on exchange in 1953-55 as staff navigator at the Admiralty, and attended the US Armed Forces Staff College before returning to Australia early in 1956 to become Director of Plans at Navy Office, Melbourne. Promoted to Captain in December that year, he commanded the RANC in 1959-60 and the destroyer-leader HMAS *Vendetta* in 1961-62.

In 1963 Ramsay completed the one-year course at the Imperial Defence College, London. Appointed a Commodore, he was the Australian Naval Representative, United Kingdom, in 1964-65. His responsibilities included some supervision of personnel training in Britain for the RAN's re-established submarine branch and oversight of the construction of new Oberon-class boats in Scotland. He was also an Honorary Aide-de-Camp to Queen Elizabeth II.

In 1966-67 he served as Director General of Fighting Equipment at Navy Office, Canberra. He was appointed CBE in 1966. In 1968 he became Naval Officer-in-Charge, Western Australia, and commanding officer of the Junior Recruit Training Establishment, Fremantle. He retired from the RAN on 26 February 1972 and settled in Perth.

Ramsay devoted much time to community organisations, including the Australian Red Cross Society and the Australia-Britain Society. In June 1974 he was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Western Australia. From September 1974 to November 1975 he acted almost continuously as Administrator; he was knighted (1976) for his services.

On 22 April 1977 he was sworn in as Governor of Queensland. His diligent attention to his duties and easy manner made him popular and he was generally regarded as affable and commanding. He encouraged others and had the admirable qualities of a first-class naval officer of his day - abundant courage, strong leadership and sound management. He was appointed KCMG in 1978 and KCVO in 1982.

In May 1985 he visited the University of Queensland to receive an honorary Doctor of Laws. Several thousand people, demonstrating against a concurrent award to the premier, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen (who did not attend), jostled and embarrassed the Governor and official party and disturbed the ceremony.

Ramsay's term ended on 21 July 1985 and he retired to the Gold Coast.

He died of myocardial infarction on 1 May 1986 at Cypress Gardens and, following a state funeral, was cremated. Lady Ramsay (d.2003) survived him, as did their son David, who became a captain in the RAN, and three daughters.

Sources included:

- ***Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 18, (MUP), 2012***
- Various web pages
- <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/ramsay-sir-james-maxwell-14286>
- *United Service Club, Queensland: The First Century, 1892-1992* by Flight Lieutenant Murray Adams and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Charlton
- Club Meeting Minutes, Annual Reports and sundry documents