

Chief of Navy
Navy 115th Birthday Speech
1 March 2016
Navy Memorial - Anzac Parade

Salutations

I start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people. I acknowledge and respect their elders past and present and their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

This morning the Navy's largest Australian White Ensign is flying from the Flagstaff at Regatta Point because the RAN is celebrating its birthday at sea, in our shore establishments and here in the nation's capital.

Today is the 115th anniversary of creation of the Navy by the Federal Parliament on 1 March 1901

The legislation that enabled the Commonwealth Naval Force and the Commonwealth Military Forces, as defined in the constitution, was passed into law just eight weeks after the Federation had been proclaimed on 1 January 1901.

This year when the re-capitalization of the fleet is front and centre in our planning it is worth reflecting on our origins and on the challenges that attended the building of the First Fleet Unit just over a century ago.

In 1901 the new born Commonwealth inherited a small collection of obsolescent warships which the Australian colonies had bought for local defence. They were ready for disposal not for battle!

Men of vision, led by Prime Minister Alfred Deakin and Captain William Creswell campaigned, against considerable opposition, for the newly federated nation to have its own navy, the first for any of the King's dominions.

This would be a Navy under the command of the Australian government. Its task was to defend Australia, its trade and cities and also be available to assist the Imperial fleet if and when that primary national task in the Indo Pacific was done.

This was to be a small but well balanced and capable fleet to justify its new title: Royal Australian Navy, approved in 1911 by the sovereign.

The bestowal of the title 'Royal' reflected the progress made in the previous ten years in turning that collection of inherited vessels into a true fighting service able to project power at sea.

Perhaps as important in hindsight, however, was that the bringing to life of the new navy marked Australia's first major step towards nationhood on the world stage.

This arose from a recognition that defence of Australia's national interests could no longer be consigned to others. The decision to acquire a sea-going navy represented an assumption of national obligation of momentous proportion.

In just over a decade, by clear planning, foresight and the commitment of significant capital, the Commonwealth acquired and manned a fleet which in 1914 deterred an attack on Australia's maritime trade and cities by Germany's powerful East Asia Squadron based in China.

Detailed war plans existed to attack Australia's shipping and sever the commercial and communication links between Britain and Australia and New Zealand.

Until Australia acquired a modern well armed battle cruiser and escort ships, Imperial Germany was a direct threat to Australia and her interests.

In August 1914 it was RAN ships which were available as a powerful instrument of state, and when war came they were, “in all respects ready”.

When the new RAN cruiser HMAS *Sydney* went into action in November 1914 at Cocos Islands she defeated her opponent, SMS *Emden*, and in doing so defended thousands of young ANZACs in their vulnerable troopships heading for the Middle East.

Now I do not draw a direct parallel between the international circumstances which prevailed at the birth of Australia’s navy, at the start of the 20th century, and those which pertain today. That would be simplistic.

However I do draw from the history of our Navy’s origins the general principle that a maritime nation that seeks to safeguard peace, and maintain its freedom of action at sea, must have a fleet which is fit for purpose, modern and “in all respects ready” for the missions which the Government and people of Australia may require of it.

In every generation we need men and women of stature and vision who, like Alfred Deakin and William Creswell understand not only why a modern fleet is needed to preserve national security, but are planning the fleet that will be needed decades hence.

The future fleet that Australia will start building this decade will be a visionary project of national significance.

I am not sure that it is generally appreciated yet that the concept of continuous ship building will not just be a change of pace for Australian industry but a change of paradigm.

It will energise our national Research and Development into high end materials and digital technology, marine engineering, and all the sophisticated skills that contribute to fabricating new ships and submarines and the new port facilities which will support them.

Continuous warship building will transform our industrial landscape and generate employment not just for the next generation of Australians but indefinitely into the future, because when we start building our future fleet we will not stop! This is intergenerational work.

We will continue to produce the ships we need at a steady drumbeat down the decades. These will be Australian warships, built for this nation by its citizens, and crewed by men and women from every part of Australia.

In some decades our ships and sailors have operated across the world's oceans and in full spectrum of conflict and waged war, with our allies, in defence of liberty.

During peacetime we contribute with allies to the maintenance of regional security, deter adventurism, protect commercial shipping from piracy, intercept transnational criminals' cargoes, secure our maritime borders, assist with natural disasters and save life at sea.

We train for all these eventualities across the whole spectrum of naval operations so that, like our professional forebears, we are “in all respects ready.”

When the Navy celebrates its 125th birthday, a decade from today, my successor as Chief of Navy will be leading a more capable service within an enhanced and more integrated ADF.

The ships of that future fleet will be networked and in possession of the potential lethality required if they are to be credible across the operational spectrum. They will be using new sensors and weapons technologies which are still in the laboratory today.

Admiral Arleigh Burke, former Chief of Naval Operations, once said of the United States Navy:

“ The Navy has both a tradition and a future--and we can look with pride and confidence in both directions.”

The RAN is on the cusp of major material change. That is our future. But some things must and will remain, and foremost among those are the traditions of service to be found in the Navy's people whom I am, like all my predecessors, privileged to lead.

Honour, honesty, courage integrity and loyalty are their values. It is their dedication to duty and their resolution in the face of danger which is the thread which runs through our 115 year naval story.

Here, before our Navy's memorial, in the heart of our capital city, on this ceremonial parade, we remember those sailors for whom that thread turned from gold to crimson as they lost their lives in service to Australia their homeland, their shipmates, the navy and the just cause it was entrusted to defend.

We particularly remember that it was on this day in 1942 that Captain Hector Waller and the ship's company of the light cruiser HMAS *Perth*, in company with the USS *Houston* were engaged against overwhelming odds in the Battle of Sunda Strait.

Three hundred and fifty men including Waller still lie with their ship and of the 328 who survived only 214 came home from captivity.

On this anniversary each year, when we recall our origins and celebrate Navy's birthday, we will remember all our navy people who lost their lives on duty, wherever they lie, alone or with their ships, across the seas and oceans of the world.

They are not forgotten and they never will be because their legacy is our life long liberty.

Lest we Forget