

## SECTION 14. COMCARE

14.1 On 8 May 1998, Comcare (Mr Mark McCabe, General Manager Occupational Health and Safety Legislation General Division) wrote to the Board that it was conducting an investigation under the Occupational Health and Safety (Commonwealth Employment) Act 1991 following the fire onboard WESTRALIA and requested that the Board consider certain matters. Ms Meryl Stanton (Chief Executive Officer Comcare) wrote to Head Defence Personnel Executive on 11 May 1998, with a copy for the President of the Board, seeking assurance that the occupational health and safety issues identified by Comcare would be addressed.

14.2 The occupational health and safety matters raised by Comcare were considered by the Board, and outcomes of those considerations are reflected throughout this report. General questions have been raised by Comcare and while the answers are correspondingly general, they should be considered in the context of this report's coverage of the fire in WESTRALIA, in particular the 'system' weaknesses identified in Section 13 of the report.

*14.3 What steps had the Australian Defence Force (in particular the Royal Australian Navy) and the Department of Defence taken to provide and maintain plant that was safe and without risk to employees health and safety?*

14.4 The RAN requires that all plant supplied to it, meets or exceeds the relevant national or international standards where they exist. Where such standards do not exist safety aspects are called for in contract documentation as well as the requirements for maintenance aspects and training courses for operators of plant where none is in existence. The RAN has directed all managers who procure plant and machinery for the Navy to reference the requirements for safe supply and installation of such plant and machinery under the Occupational Health and Safety (Commonwealth Employment ) Act 1991.

*14.5 What steps had the Australian Defence Force (in particular the Royal Australian Navy) and the Department of Defence taken to provide and maintain a system of work that was safe for employees and without risk to their health?*

14.6 The Royal Australian Navy's safety program (NAVSAFE) provides the framework for the management of safety, at all levels, throughout the RAN. It describes that a sound maintenance program, frequent inspections and above all, the education of all personnel must be recognised as prerequisites to safety. NAVSAFE states that it is the responsibility of all persons regardless of rank or profession to observe and obey safety regulations and procedures but in particular, it is the responsibility of supervisors to ensure that every precaution is taken to minimise hazardous situations. NAVSAFE directs that each ship and establishment within the RAN is to have a safety team (OHS committee) which is to ensure:

- a. working environments are safe;
- b. the correct operating methods are specified, precautions and hazards are highlighted;
- c. only approved and properly maintained equipment and appliances are used;
- d. the responsibilities of supervisors and workers are known;

- e. all accidents and incidents are investigated and reported; and,
- f. a continuous program of safety publicity and education is maintained.

14.7 WESTRALIA has an active occupational health and safety organisation under the leadership of WO Baker.[T2389-2390]

14.8 As the Navy's safety manager, the Chief of Navy requires each member of the RAN to contribute to the achievement of a safe system of work and from time to time, issues appropriate instructions to achieve this.

*14.9 What steps had the Australian Defence Force (in particular the Royal Australian Navy) and the Department of Defence taken to ensure the health and, safety of employees and absence of risks at work in connection with the use of plant?*

14.10 Appropriate instruction, in the form of a defence instruction (Occupational Health and Safety – Management of Risks Associated with Plant: DI(G) PERS 19-11), has been promulgated to the Defence Forces and the Department of Defence. This instruction provides guidance to managers and supervisors on their responsibilities with respect to the 'plant regulations'. In particular, the RAN requires documented operating and maintenance procedures for all items of plant. Other documentation in the form of Australian Books of Reference and Ships Standing Orders provide detailed guidance for operating and maintaining plant safely. Within the RAN these aspects are audited, both ashore and afloat, at approximately 18 month intervals however, the redirection of effort and reduced resources which form part of the Defence Reform Program will, regrettably, detract from the number and quality of such audits in the future. Ironically, in response to its last audit, it was an attempt to improve the safety associated with operating the main machinery onboard WESTRALIA, which led to the fire.[E232]

*14.11 What steps had the Australian Defence Force (in particular the Royal Australian Navy) and the Department of Defence taken to provide information, instruction, training and supervision necessary for employees to enable them to perform their work in a manner that was safe and without risk to their health?*

14.12 The RAN provides significant resources to the training of its personnel. Approximately one third of its members are engaged in training at any one time. Much emphasis is placed on safety procedures in all professional courses undertaken by officers and sailors. In addition, all officers and sailors are required to undertake formal occupational health and safety training on entry to the Navy and prior to becoming supervisors and managers; such training will identify lessons learnt as a result of past accidents and incidents.

*14.13 What steps had the Australian Defence Force (in particular the Royal Australian Navy) and the Department of Defence taken to monitor the conditions of the workplace?*

14.14 RAN ship safety teams are directed to conduct safety inspections of the workplace every three months; the aim of these inspections is to detect hazards and unsafe acts. Additionally, audits by senior personnel are conducted at regular intervals. The RAN has introduced a system of openly reporting incorrect maintenance procedures, drill errors, hazards, near misses and mistakes arising out of activities conducted in the workplace.