



ENGAGEMENT AT VICE ADMIRAL DAVID LEACH FUNERAL

VADM David Leach

Vice Admiral David Leach AC, CBE, LVO served as our Chief of Naval Staff from 1982 to 1985.

A man of great command and leadership presence and a Chief to which those of us who knew and served with him, aspired.

David was, in fact, the Chief of Naval Staff when I began my naval career in 1984; and as was the recruiting practise of the day, I not only knew his name; but I had also learned much about his impressive career before my interview with then Captain Alan Beaumont and my subsequent acceptance into the Navy.

The Royal Australian Navy of today is vastly different from the one in which David entered in 1942. Still, under the influence of the Royal Navy, it would be many years before leaders such as David would begin to steer and shape the Navy into what we recognise today.

David Willoughby Leach was born on 17 July 1928 in Subiaco, Western Australia to John and Grace. Having been born into a service family with John being a First World War veteran, it is no surprise David shipped off to the Royal Australian Naval College during the Second World War in January 1942, aged 13.

A tall and charming young Officer, David soon made his mark as a Cadet Midshipman being appointed Chief Cadet Captain and awarded The King's Gold Medal for exemplary conduct.

With a great memory for names and armed with natural leadership ability, it was a feeling of inevitability amongst his peers that David would one day rise to the principle post.

David's initial service was in Royal Navy ships of the British Pacific Fleet before completing his Sub Lieutenant courses in the United Kingdom.

In 1955 David was posted as the Parade Training Officer at Whale Island, HMS Excellent in Portsmouth, United Kingdom. Overseeing the training of Royal Australian and Royal Navy Sub-Lieutenants.

On one specific passing out parade, the graduating class organised an elephant from a passing circus. The elephant aptly named Sub Lieutenant E. L. Phant was strategically hidden behind an adjacent building. The plan being to join the end of parade class march past.

Sub Lieutenant E. L. Phant did, in fact, make it on to the parade ground before the booming voice of Gunnery Officer Lieutenant Leach ordered the beast and it's accompanying Officers off the parade ground.

A significant career milestone for David was his Command of our destroyer HMAS Perth (II) during her

second deployment to the Vietnam War. Under his Command, Perth was an efficient and effective ship providing swift and accurate fire on enemy positions from the gunline.

On one occasion Perth was the target of 30 rounds of counter-battery fire from the North Vietnamese, thankfully none of the rounds found their target. The record attributes this to rapid ship handling and counter manoeuvres performed at the time by Command.

Perth's deployment earned a US Meritorious Unit Citation. David was personally recognised for his distinguished service and devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy, appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 1969.

Following David's Command of Perth, he served in several key leadership positions before being selected as the Naval Liaison Officer during the 1970 Royal visit to Australia by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, for which he was appointed a Lieutenant of the Royal Victorian Order.

Promoted to Commodore in 1975, David served in Navy Office - Canberra as the Director of Naval Plans, Director General of Naval Operational Requirements, providing invaluable consultation to senior officers. Peers attribute this period as the genesis of David's desire to drive our Navy towards the change he would later deliver as the Chief of Naval Staff.

On promotion to Rear Admiral in 1978, he held the key senior leadership positions of Assistant Chief of Naval Staff - Materiel, Flag Officer Commanding the Australian Fleet, and Assistant Chief of Naval Staff - Personnel.

In 1981 he was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO), for his service as Commander of the Australian Fleet.

On promotion to Vice Admiral in April 1982, he commenced his tenure as the Chief of Naval Staff.

During David's tenure as Chief of Naval Staff, he faced immense challenges. David famously remarked with his trademark gentlemanly humour "it was like coming into bat in the middle of a hat trick".

Despite the challenges he faced, David Commanded the Royal Australian Navy with the same professionalism that had shaped his impressive career.

David's legacy expands across many of the Royal Australian Navy's capabilities and can be seen as the catalyst that shaped our modern Navy.

David presided over the introduction of the Adelaide Class Frigates, Oberon Class Submarine upgrades and

the introduction of the new Seahawk combat Helicopters, alongside a host of minor capability projects his foresight set into motion the future introduction of the Anzac Class Frigates, and Collins Class Submarines.

David was recognised as an impressive strategist with a forward leaning vision for the Navy. His legacy will however forever be remembered for his fundamental leadership in the restructuring of the personnel space and in so doing, shaping the Navy of the past to the Navy we now know.

The disbandment of the Women's Royal Australian Navy and the introduction of women into sea-going roles cannot be underestimated. While initially, numbers were low – female sailor and officer participation would increase five-fold within the years following the decision as employment areas expanded.

Today we have females serving in all role both at sea and ashore, in senior leadership positions as well as in Command of Warships. David's vision of full equality was inspired and our Navy is richer for it.

While David's tenure as Chief of Naval Staff had the backdrop of compounding budget constraints and unpopular Government craftsmanship. He maintained a rigorous program of touring establishment and vessel ensuring morale was maintained. David once reflected "My biggest job was to accentuate the positive" "Ensuring people the role and need for a Navy was very strong and has never been diminished".

It can, therefore, be said that David's warm enthusiasm, support and leadership for Navy's people never waned and paved the way forward for his successors.

David's naval career concluded on his retirement in April 1985 after three years in command of the Royal Australian Navy.

Throughout his distinguished career, and later life, David gave selfless service to our Navy and our Nation.

During his 43 year career, he exemplified Navy values in peace and war and made major contributions to the modern Navy through his command and leadership at sea and ashore. This was recognised through his appointment as a Companion of the Order of Australia – 1984.

Following David's Naval career he continued to serve the interests of both the Nation and Service Personnel as a Member of the Council of the Australian War Memorial and Administrative Appeals Tribunal.

David also served as an Alderman and then Mayor of Woolhara, NSW. As Mayor, his councillors would remind him of his Naval pedigree by referring to him as 'His Warship' as opposed to 'His Worship'. A term of endearment I am sure.

David was a passionate Naval Officer and his devotion to service can be seen throughout his post-Naval career. As a long-time member of the Royal United Services Institute where he served as both councillor and President, he oversaw the Institute's input to the 2009 Defence White Paper.

Always maintaining a keen interest in Navy and Defence matters, David also served as the Patron of the National HMAS Perth Association, right until his passing.

During his stewardship as our Chief of Naval Staff, the Royal Australian Navy underwent an extensive transformation. Through these changes, the genesis of the modern Royal Australian Navy was born. The strength of character and stoic leadership he exemplified throughout this Command is an example to all current and future Naval Officers.

The Royal Australian Navy is as much a Family today as it was when David 'had the con' and his passing is felt far and wide across our Navy Family.

Pamela, Michael, Nikki and all members of your family – We share in your grief but equally celebrate the life and career of a true patriot, an accomplished Naval Officer and a proud Australian.

Thank you