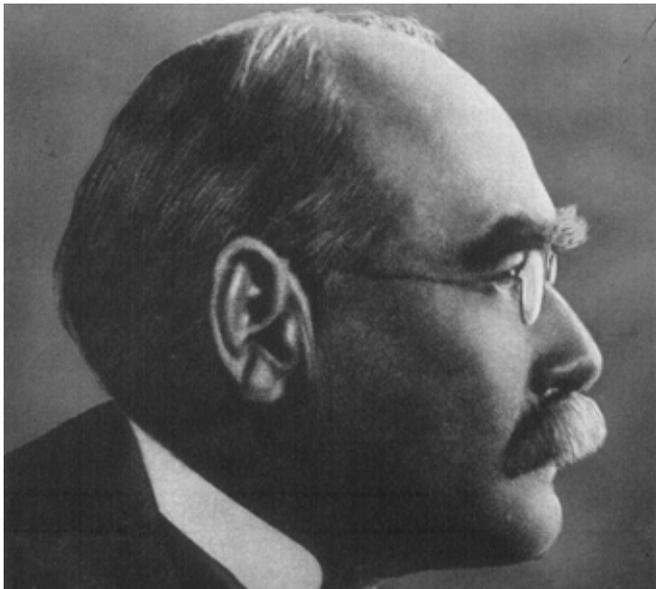


THE SPIRIT OF THE NAVY

In October 1908 Rudyard Kipling gave a speech at a naval club in which he made some enduring points concerning sea power, the importance of navy people, and the poor public knowledge of naval matters.¹ Although the speech reflects the situation and attitudes of the time, Kipling's words still offer substantial food for thought:



Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) (RAN)

They say in the Navy, I believe, that a man is often influenced throughout the whole of his career by the events of his first commission. The circumstances of my early training happened to throw me among disciplined men of action - men who belonged to one or other of the Indian Services - men who were therefore accustomed to act under orders, and to live under authority, as the good of their Service required.

My business being to write, I wrote about them and their lives. I did not realise, then, what I realised later, that the men who belong to the Services - disciplined men of action, living under authority - constitute a very small portion of our world, and do not attract much of its attention or its interest. I did not realise then that where men of all ranks work together for aims and objects which are not for their own personal advantage, there arises among them a spirit, a tradition, and an unwritten law, which it is not very easy for the world at large to understand, or to sympathise with.

For instance, I belonged then to a Service where the unwritten law was that if you gave a man twice as much work to do in a day as he could do, he would do it; but if you only gave him as much as he could do, he wouldn't do half of it. This in itself made me sympathise with the tradition of other Services who have the same unwritten law, and with the spirit which underlies every service on land and sea - specially on the sea.

But as you yourselves know well, Gentlemen, the spirit of the Navy is too old, too varied, and too subtle, to be adequately interpreted by any outsider, no matter how keen his interest, or how deep his affection. He may paint a more or less truthful picture of externals; he may utter faithfully all that has

been given him to say, but the essential soul of the machine - the spirit that makes the Service - will, and must, always elude him. How can it well be otherwise? The life out of which this spirit is born has always been a life more lonely, more apart than any life there is. The forces that mould that life have been forces beyond man's control; the men who live that life do not, as a rule, discuss the risks that they face every day in the execution of their duty, any more than they talk of that immense and final risk which they are preparing themselves to face at the Day of Armageddon. Even if they did, the world would not believe - would not understand.

So the Navy has been as a rule both inarticulate and unfashionable. Till very recently - till just the other day in fact - when a fleet disappeared under the skyline, it went out into empty space - absolute isolation - with no means visible or invisible of communicating with the shore. It is of course different since Marconi came in, but the tradition of the Navy's aloofness and separation from the tax-payer world at large still remains.

Isn't it possible that the very thoroughness with which the Navy has protected the nation in the past may constitute a source of weakness both for the Navy and the nation? We have been safe for so long, and during all these generations have been so free to follow our own devices, that we tax-payers as a body to-day are utterly ignorant of the facts and the forces on which England depends for her existence. But instead of leaving the Navy alone, as our ancestors did, some of us are now trying to think. And thinking is a highly dangerous performance for amateurs. Some of us are like the monkeys in Brazil. We have sat so long upon the branch that we honestly think we can saw it off and still sit where we were. Some of us think that the Navy does not much matter one way or the other; some of us honestly regard it as a brutal and bloodthirsty anachronism, which if it can't be openly abolished, ought to be secretly crippled as soon as possible. Such views are not shocking or surprising. After four generations of peace and party politics they are inevitable; but the passengers holding these views need not be encouraged to talk too much to the man at the wheel.

There remain now a few - comparatively very few - of us tax-payers who take an interest in the Navy; but here again our immense ignorance, our utter divorce from the actualities of the Navy or any other Service, handicaps us. Some of us honestly think that navies depend altogether on guns, armour, and machinery, and if we have these better or worse than anyone else, we are mathematically better or worse than anyone else. The battle of Tsushima - in the Sea of Japan - has rather upset the calculations; but you know how they are worked out.² Multiply the calibre of a ship's primary armament by the thickness of her average plating in millimetres; add the indicated horse-power of the forward bilge-pumps, and divide it by the temperature of the cordite magazines. Then reduce the result to decimals and point out that what the country needs is more Incredibles or Insuffortables or whatever the latest fancy pattern of war-canoë happens to be. Now nobody wants to undervalue machinery, but surely, Gentlemen, guns and machinery and armour are only ironmongery after all. They may be the best ironmongery in the world, and we must have them, but if talking, and arguing, and recriminating, and taking sides about them is going to react unfavourably on the men who

have to handle the guns and sleep behind the armour, and run the machinery, why then, the less talk we have on Service matters outside the Service, the better all round. Silence is what we want.

Isn't the morale of a Service a thousandfold more important than its material? Can't we scratch up a fleet of Impossibles or Undockables in a few years for a few millions; but hasn't it taken thirty generations to develop the spirit of the Navy? And is anything except that spirit going to save the nation in the dark days ahead of us?

I don't know what has happened since the days of Trafalgar to make us think otherwise. The Navy may bulk larger on paper - or in the papers - than it did in Nelson's time, but it is more separated from the life of the nation than it was then - for the simple reason that it is more specialised and scientific. In peace it exists under conditions which it takes years of training to understand; in war it will be subjected to mental and physical strains three days of which would make the mere sea-fight of Trafalgar a pleasant change and rest. We have no data to guide us for the future, but in judging by our thousand-year-old past, we can believe, and thank: God for it, that whatever man may do, or neglect to do, the spirit of the Navy, which is man-made, but which no body of men can kill, will rise to meet and overcome every burden and every disability that may be imposed upon it - from without or within...

The context for Kipling's speech was the continuing importance of sea power to Britain. As an island nation and the centre of a global Empire, Britain relied heavily on seaborne trade for both economic power and sustenance.³ The Royal Navy was instrumental in protecting this trade, maintaining good order at sea, and transporting the British Army where needed. But there was growing unease that British sea supremacy was slowly being challenged, not least by the naval shipbuilding plans of Germany in the lead up to what became World War I. For Australia in a contemporary setting, there are similar concerns over changing power relationships in the Asia-Pacific region. Notwithstanding a level of protection provided by the *Pax Americana* in the Pacific Ocean, successive Australian governments have adopted a self-reliant posture, with the new White Paper foreshadowing a stronger Royal Australian Navy (RAN) to protect Australia's maritime interests and seaborne trade in an uncertain Asia-Pacific.⁴

Kipling devotes a significant proportion of his speech to the importance of people to the development of naval capabilities, decrying the traditional focus on equipment. Manpower (as it then was) and people (today) are a critical factor in naval power but too often they have been ignored or their importance downplayed. Historically this may have been due to ready acceptance of class status and notions of duty. But today with volunteer professional forces, much greater effort is required to recruit and retain people. As Kipling notes, life at sea is uncomfortable and inherently risky, and it is no longer enough to accept a situation simply because 'it has always been done this way'.

Over the past few years, the RAN has introduced a range of initiatives under the Sea Change program to improve general conditions for its people at sea and for them and their families ashore. The RAN has taken advantage of the Gap Year, whereby school leavers can spend a year with the Australian Defence Force (ADF), and many have then signed up on completion. Furthermore, the RAN has also altered its training continuum to get recruits to sea as soon as possible allowing them to make an early assessment of their own suitability for life at sea. From July 2009, the RAN under its

New Generation Navy program will also be restructured to better focus on its raise, train, sustain role, with a greater emphasis on personnel than there may have been in the past. Implicit in these changes are a priority focus on leadership and cultural behaviour to reinforce the importance of people to the RAN.

Where there has been a major change since the era of Kipling's speech is the role of women in a navy. It is only relatively recently that navies have 'allowed' women to go to sea. The implementation of such a policy has not always been easy and navies have grappled with messing and accommodation arrangements and some did not give enough consideration to overcoming long-held cultural attitudes of a traditionally all male working environment. In the RAN's case, these problems have long been overcome. Women assume an equal place at sea and the fact that a Commanding Officer is female is no longer remarkable.⁵

Kipling further noted the isolation when fleets deploy, and notwithstanding the range of technologies currently available, such as mobile phones, satellite communications and the internet, many restrictions on communication still apply. There is also no avoiding the fact that lengthy deployments still mean long absences from family and friends.

While these remain difficult issues, there are a number of long running programs that help inform people about life at sea and give them a better understanding of the RAN. Under the *Young Endeavour* Youth Scheme, Australians aged between 16 and 23 undertake an 11-day voyage to learn both self reliance and teamwork skills, while also experiencing life under sail.⁶ Meanwhile, as part of the ADF Parliamentary Program, many members of parliament have been attached to a variety of warships to not only gain an understanding of that ship's mission and role, but to also experience service life and gain a greater appreciation of naval capabilities, personnel and management issues.

The more contentious aspects of Kipling's speech relate to the general lack of knowledge and understanding of naval matters at that time, leading to an uninformed, and in his mind, dangerous debate about the need for the Royal Navy; his solution was to suggest there be no debate. Fortunately, today it is recognised that informed public debate on defence is not only constructive but an important part of the democratic process. As a demonstration of this public debate, the development of the last two defence white papers included extensive public consultation. This is also one reason why the Sea Power Centre - Australia exists; to research, analyse and publish on naval and maritime issues. The increased maritime focus in defence policy outlined in the recently released *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030* is hopefully an indicator of a better understanding of naval issues and the importance of sea power and the Royal Australian Navy to Australia.

- 1 R Kipling, *A Book of Words: Selections from Speeches and Addresses Delivered between 1906 and 1927*, MacMillan, London, 1928, pp. 55-9.
- 2 At Tsushima in 1905 the Imperial Japanese Navy destroyed most of Russia's Second Pacific Squadron.
- 3 During the late 19th century, food became a major British import.
- 4 Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030*, Canberra, 2009.
- 5 See 'Women in the RAN: The Road to Command at Sea', *Semaphore*, Issue 19, November 2006.
- 6 'Building skills onboard STS Young Endeavour', *Defence Magazine*, Issue 2, 2008-09, pp. 12-13.

