



## A 'ratcatcher' in a regulated world

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# Tac Talks

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*The case for wriggle room within peacetime regulations that risk stifling the warrior spirit needed to prosecute victory and win the next peace.*

Peace is awesome; a worthy goal for any society. But peace brings a “long calm lee” (‘The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command’ by Andrew Gordon, Penguin, 2005) that can foster complacency, ignorance and apathy. Peace can lull society into a false sense of security, but it is inevitable that over a series of generations, recognition that peace must be earned and not merely inherited will wane. Peace does not enforce itself. Peace requires warriors, and the irony of peace is sometimes it requires violence to create it or enforce it. Aristotle has been attributed with the maxim “war must be for the sake of peace”.

The ‘ratcatcher’ notoriety of the Battle of Jutland, captured in lessons by then Admiral of the Fleet Sir Walter Cowan aboard HMS *Princess Royal* a century ago, remains pertinent. The RN found too few “ratcatchers” with an “instinct for war” willing to take the fight to the enemy and violently prosecute the military objective. Hence, a predicament of a peacetime Navy is generating sufficient ratcatchers to win the next war when our society is beholden to peacetime regulators and regulations. Except for the Al Faw peninsula in 2003, the Royal Australian Navy has not fired a shot in anger for several generations. This is not good for the warfighting business or a ratcatcher mind frame. The RAN must guard against apathy and strangulation by regulation, or we will fail to succeed in the next conflict, and fail to win the next peace. That cannot be permitted to happen. Our nation deserves more; whether they know it (yet) or not (see ‘The Navy and the Nation: Australia's Maritime Power in the 21st Century’, by Vice Admiral Tim Barrett, Melbourne University Publishing, 2017).



Vice Admiral Tim Barrett, AO, CSC, RAN (Ret'd) Photographer: Jay Cronan.

Order in society is essential. “Let’s face it: without rules there’s chaos,” said Seinfeld’s prescient neighbour Kramer. Regulations assure predictability, rule of law, and safety and security in society. Individual freedoms are given up to assure collective security, and liberty is invested to find predictability. Such is the nature of the social contract of a civilised society where the needs of the many are more important than the needs of the individual. But regulations should be values-based, not just rules-based. In the military, regulations should enhance capability and lethality, not inhibit. The policy is guidance, not dogma. Working within the rules takes judgment and inquiry to establish the intent of the regulation and make informed decisions, not just comply with a mantra.

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AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*HMAS Brisbane (II) alongside Dubai in 1991 during her deployment on Operation DAMASK, 1991. Image courtesy of the Australian War Memorial.*

In the sterilised environment of peace, it is tempting to create black and white from grey. This is not so pragmatic in military operations and real-world conflict. The space the military must operate in is the grey zone. We must be comfortable in chaos and imperfection. If it was predictable, Government would contract it out. The government needs the military to be able to create order from chaos, and work within broad intent of values, order and the rule of law; true to Australian community expectations. Some legislative demands, such as the Workplace Health and Safety Act, are the antithesis of combat, can seem to be inhibitive to tactical freedom of action, and not conducive to the ratcatcher mentality. But we must find a way.

The uniquely Australian way of fighting - encouraging the initiative to adapt, catching an adversary off balance, pushing boundaries to achieve the outcome - is worthy of reflection. The fifteen values of Australian character coined by Napier Waller, inscribed in the windows of the Hall of Memory at the Australian War Memorial, are relevant to the modern ratcatcher.

<i>Resource</i>	<i>Candour</i>	<i>Devotion</i>	<i>Curiosity</i>	<i>Independence</i>
<i>Comradeship</i>	<i>Ancestry</i>	<i>Patriotism</i>	<i>Chivalry</i>	<i>Loyalty</i>
<i>Coolness</i>	<i>Control</i>	<i>Audacity</i>	<i>Endurance</i>	<i>Decision</i>

A ratcatcher cannot be an anarchist or reckless. Recklessness is not what this is about. In modern military operations, options are needed that reflect a nation’s interests, a commander’s intent and direction, and a society’s values; and tactical circumstances. The modern ratcatcher must use operational risk management as an opportunity to exploit the vulnerabilities of the adversary and

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enhance the strengths of their force. The modern ratcatcher must understand the context of the regulations: what the rules were meant to protect or enhance. This is active thinking: appreciating the context permits the application of intent, even when not rigidly compliant.

This is not breaking the rules: this is working within the rules. To maintain our values and ethics in maritime warfare, rules must be applied in a practical and just manner: proportional, beneficial, and righteous. The oxymoron of the warrior-politician is that one can't be a scrupulously professional warrior and simultaneously a politician. A politician must compromise: a warrior chooses a side and ruthlessly prosecutes a righteous objective through violence, guile and persistence. In sea-going terms, this means navigating between clearing bearings, not seeking to rigidly remain on the planned track. In risk management terms, this requires the identification of hazards and articulating acceptable risk thresholds, then remaining above those thresholds. This requires sophisticated thinking, but demands simple plans: don't overthink it - accurately think it; unambiguous language, fight for answers, ensure the context is understood, and provide decisive clarity in orders.

I do not think we live in a binary world of war or peace. We live in a world of a logarithmic scale of confrontation and conflict, where the adversary is not easily identified and objectives are sometimes not easily articulated. Regulators have a role to play; to set boundaries that reflect contemporary societal expectations, values, and rules and requirements which enhance the operational effectiveness of the assigned force toward military objectives.



*HMA Ships Canberra and Adelaide in formation with amphibious landing crafts during Exercise SEA EXPLORER 2019. Photographer: LSIS Nicolas Gonzalez.*

As warriors and leaders in a lethal Task Group, distributed across a contested, volatile and complex theatre, we must be adaptive, innovative, motivated and informed. We must show tenacity for the information edge: trusted information from trusted sources using trusted systems, to gain an advantage over the adversary and exploit that advantage. We must fight for the right information to engineer the right solutions: we cannot wait for smoothly formulated solutions to arrive in our in-box. The ratcatcher must ruthlessly pursue the military objective,

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have the insight to appreciate the difference between rules and values and, in true Australian style, demonstrate boldness without recklessness and confidence in our mates. Our nation deserves it; whether they know it (yet) or not.

*"It's the military, not the reporter who has given us the freedom of the press. It's the military, not the poet, who has given us the freedom of speech. It's the military, not the politicians, that ensures our right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It's the Military who salutes the flag, serves beneath the flag, and whose coffin is draped by the flag."*

*- Commonly quoted, the author unattributed.*

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