

Chief of Navy Essay Competition
The Youth Division (MacDougall Prize)

Civilians: The Fulcrum for a Modern Fleet

“We need to think differently [...] by reviewing our basic operating concepts, reimagining the way that Navy should view itself in the twenty-first century, re-examining our assumptions and, most importantly, re-engineering our *modus operandi*...”¹

– Vice Admiral Tim Barrett AO CSC RAN

On 3rd September 1939 Australia declared war on Germany and by 1941 was seeking innovative ways to sustain the war effort at sea. This need served as the genesis of two important augmentations to the Royal Australian Navy (RAN): the Women’s Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS) in April² and the Naval Auxiliary Patrol (NAP) that June³. This essay will briefly identify the role played by the aforementioned services in supplementing an RAN stretched for resources before identifying similar challenges in the Navy of today. It will then explore the possibility of rectifying this by increasing the use of civilian support across the RAN, such as through the introduction of a modern Australian Fleet Auxiliary.

Spread across the globe, the RAN realised it would need to do everything it could to maximise the availability of her sailors and warships while continuing to maintain a suitable presence on the home front. For this reason, both the WRANS and NAP would target those not eligible to serve in conflict at sea. Officer Commanding Sydney Naval Establishments Commodore Muirhead-Gould was quoted by the *Sydney Morning Herald* on the 4th November 1941 as saying the NAP “would not release any member from any other kind of service under the laws of the Commonwealth” and that, while “applications for enrolment were being received from unmarried men under 35 [...] these men could be enrolled in the patrol only if they were in reserve occupations or medically unfit”⁴. An article in Hobart’s *The Mercury* dated 19th November 1941 described the duties of the NAP to be “somewhat similar to those carried out by the Coast Guard Reserve in the United States of America”, including but not limited to “enforcing the Federal laws and other regulations pertaining to navigation [and] guarding against acts of or attempts at sabotage”⁵. The NAP would grow in strength to over 3000 reserves before it was decided in early 1944 that they would no longer need such numbers due to a reduced threat to Australian waters⁶.

The WRANS’ early recruits were drawn from the Women’s Emergency Signal Corps, a civilian and self-funded organisation that allowed women to “actively participate in the war effort”⁷. While a similar concept had already been introduced via the Australian Woman’s Armed Service (August 1940) and the Women’s Auxiliary Australian Air Force (March 1941), the WRANS expanded languidly until 24th July 1942, over a year since their inception, where they were instructed by the Navy Office to recruit 580 women to “help with increased wartime demands for naval personnel”⁸. It was thus that those initial wireless telegraph

¹ VADM T. Barrett, *The Navy and the Nation*, Melbourne; Melbourne University Press, 2017, p. 4.

² Australian War Memorial, *The Royal Australian Navy: Women’s Royal Australian Naval Service*, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/understanding-military-structure/ran/wrans>> [accessed 05 July 2019].

³ Royal Australian Navy, *The Naval Auxiliary Patrol*, <<http://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/naval-auxiliary-patrol>> [accessed 05 July 2019].

⁴ ‘Naval Auxiliary Patrol’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 04 November 1941, p. 9.

⁵ ‘Naval Auxiliary Patrol: Meeting at Hobart’, *The Mercury*, 19 November 1941, p. 2.

⁶ Royal Australian Navy, *The Naval Auxiliary Patrol*.

⁷ K. Christopherson, “The Women’s Royal Australian Naval Service”, *Australian Maritime Issues 2010 SPC-A Annual*, 2011, p. 68.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 69.

operators would find the WRANS grow to incorporate jobs as varied as cooks, despatch riders, draughtswomen, photographers, sick-bay attendants and salvage workers⁹. Such was their importance in sustaining the efforts of the RAN, the WRANS would continue to fill auxiliary roles until 1985 when it was incorporated into the permanent naval force¹⁰.

Today the Australian Navy is undergoing its largest expansion in military capability since World War Two. To support this, officers and sailors are being recruited in considerable quantities. This is perhaps most evident in New Entry Officer Course (NEOC) 60 graduating 164 officers - the largest NEOC in history and almost double the number of NEOC 48 graduates just six years prior. This has been combined with a new focus on retaining the trained force, with initiatives such as the 2019 'Royal Australian Navy: Retention Incentive Payment'. The Defence Force Remuneration Tribunal Decision states "the numbers of members leaving the Navy, or being unwilling to return to sea after their initial obligation period, has resulted in workforce 'hollowness' in the mid-ranks which is now threatening the ability of Navy to meet government tasking and delivery of capability"¹¹. Rear Admiral Mark Hammond RAN, Deputy Chief of Navy, is quoted in the aforementioned decision as having stated in reference to retention "the only way you're going to be able to do that is [...] by having enough people in the system to allow people to take time out, to be able to go and pursue professional development options, to be able to acquit the leave to which they're entitled"¹². It is therefore evident that the Navy of today has a problem with its available depth of personnel, and like the RAN of 1941 is being prompted to search for new and innovative ways to sustain her efforts at sea.

In determining what form these efforts should take, and thus where the RAN's finite manpower should be concentrated, its maxim offers a good starting point: *To Fight and Win at Sea*. Vice Admiral Tim Barrett AO CSC RAN argues in *The Navy and The Nation* that when it comes to waging war "the defining element is lethality"¹³ and thus "lethality at sea is the business of the Navy"¹⁴. With this in mind, the Australian Navy has been actively maximising its capacity to deliver such lethality by investing in ultra-modern warfighting assets such as LHDs, DDGs and future Hunter class FFGs and Attack class SSGs. Yet throughout the course of this expansion it has continued to retain a presence in domestic constabulary and auxiliary support roles, with Arafura class OPVs and Supply class AORs due soon into service. Vice Admiral Barrett quotes Vice Admiral Stansfield Turner's paper in the 1974 March-April edition *The Naval War College Review*, wherein he argues the need to "take stock of [their] purpose in life in order to allocate the diminishing resources available to use in the best possible way"¹⁵, a task "no less relevant today than it was forty years ago"¹⁶. As one of the RAN's most important resources in the modern context is personnel which, while not diminishing, is not growing at a rate suitable to match requirement, it may now be necessary to redistribute that which it has available.

If the RAN is short of the manpower required to fulfil its purpose of fighting and winning at sea, the considerable investment it continues to place by way of trained personnel in areas that do not directly contribute to lethality should be investigated. For example, HMAS *Perth*, a definition blue-water asset and proponent of lethality, sits unused at Henderson due in large part to the unavailability of a crew while hundreds of personnel are utilised to perform taskings under Operation Resolute. This operation covers approximately ten percent of the world's surface with a whole-of-ADF response supplemented by a

⁹ D. Collett Wadge (ed.), *Women in Uniform*, London; Imperial War Museum Department of Printed Books, 2003, p. 239.

¹⁰ Christopherson, p. 82.

¹¹ I. Asbury et. al., *Decision: Royal Australian Navy: Retention Incentive Payment*, Canberra; Australian Government Defence Force Remuneration Tribunal, 06 May 2019, p. 2.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Barrett, p. 27.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

maritime element of the Australian Border Force (ABF)¹⁷. That is not to say domestic constabulary and auxiliary roles are any less important – indeed they are integral to meeting the Commonwealth Government’s policy and wider Australian Defence Force’s logistical requirements. While this essay is not able to offer the process by which such a transition would take place, it will suggest that should there be a way to gradually transfer the entirety of such operations to an entity like the ABF, RAN sailors and officers would be freed to serve in other parts of the fleet. Instead, the new Arafura class OPVs require more sailors than their predecessors and will, for the foreseeable future, still perform much the same roles¹⁸. The argument thus exists for more of these jobs to be performed, vessels to be crewed - and therefore such objectives met - by a civilian workforce.

The Royal Navy (RN) is a key example of this in the support they garner from the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, a “uniformed civilian branch [...] staffed by UK merchant sailors”¹⁹. These crews are then augmented by RN sailors and officers when specialist military functionality is demanded. Their fleet consists of ships such as oil tankers and solid support ships, and even the amphibious Bay class from which HMAS *Choules* was acquired. Yet though the RFA continue to operate their Bay class with crews numbering less than 100 merchant mariners, HMAS *Choules* will rarely be found at sea with less than 160 full-time RAN sailors and officers embarked. This is not a fault of the RAN, but rather a product of an organisation that has developed a single force to meet requirements ranging from border protection and humanitarian assistance to modern blue-water warfighting. The RFA works the way it does because they are, akin to the Royal Marines and Fleet Air Arm, a separate entity to the Surface Fleet, despite all ultimately falling under the RN banner²⁰. Therefore, it can be argued that these organisational shortfalls in manpower placement cannot be fixed within the current structure of the RAN and instead require an alternative, permanent solution.

While the RAN has been supported in the past by entities such as the NAP and the WRANS, modern, contracted organisations already free up a considerable amount of manpower. Most bases are cleaned, catered and even guarded by civilians, while trainee Maritime Warfare Officers are instructed and assessed by ex-Navy civilians at the HMAS *Watson Bridge Simulator*. When ships need maintenance or undergo considerable upgrades much of the labour force is drawn from civilian companies such as Atlantic and Peninsular and such projects are often undertaken in Garden Island’s Thales-managed Captain Cook Graving Dock – the largest of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere²¹. The somewhat modular nature of a base permits this as the ships remain the distinct property of their officers and sailors while much of the additional - often more tedious - manpower requirements are outsourced; to emulate this at sea would require a more holistic solution.

An Australian Fleet Auxiliary could prove an effective answer to the RAN’s manpower problem by recognising that ships which do not directly contribute to lethality do not need to be crewed by officers and sailors trained for such situations. Vessels such as ABFC *Ocean Shield* and ADV *Ocean Protector* functioned in many ways as a proof-of-concept when they were brought into service to bridge the RAN’s strategic lift capability prior to the acquisition of the LHDs. HMAS *Choules*, MV *Sycamore* and, when they come online, *Supply* and *Stalwart*, could form the core of a new fleet auxiliary that recognises the contribution of such vessels yet appreciates that they do not carry the weaponry to fight modern, over-the-horizon engagements and rarely encounter situations that would place them at risk. *Choules*, for example, has no organic self-defence capability, her highest calibre weapon the 7.62mm

¹⁷ Australian Government: Department of Defence, *Operation Resolute*, <<http://www.defence.gov.au/Operations/BorderProtection/>> [accessed 06 July 2019].

¹⁸ Royal Australian Navy, *Arafura Class OPV*, <<http://www.navy.gov.au/fleet/ships-boats-craft/future/opv>> [accessed 06 July 2019].

¹⁹ Royal Navy, *Royal Fleet Auxiliary*, <<https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/our-organisation/the-fighting-arms/royal-fleet-auxiliary>> [accessed 06 July 2019]

²⁰ Royal Navy, *Our Organisation*, <<https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/our-organisation>> [accessed 07 July 2019]

²¹ S. Ebsworth and Paroz, D., *Operational Tanker Visits Sydney*, Navy Daily, 16 May 2014, Available at <<http://news.navy.gov.au/en/May2014/Fleet/1059/Operational-tanker-visits-Sydney.html>> [accessed 08 July 2019].

MAG58 - this forces her to rely entirely on other ships when operating in conflict as part of a task group. She, like HMAS *Sirius*, was designed for and began life with a civilian crew and therefore does not need Navy manpower to deliver what suitably trained merchant mariners already have.

Furthermore, formally establishing a fleet auxiliary would allow access to a pool of mariners who may not currently be eligible for RAN service. In the RFA model, applicants are presently required to meet merchant mariner medical standards and acquire an ENG1 Medical Certificate²² in contrast to the military standards set by the RN. If Australia mimicked this, it would increase the number of applicants eligible for service and permit those deemed unsuitable by the permanent force another chance to contribute while also providing an alternative avenue of service for certain members of the RAN being medically separated. Thus, a fleet auxiliary would offer a framework that could allow for service that would not necessitate being trained and qualified as a seagoing member of the RAN.

In conclusion, this is not the first time the RAN has found itself struggling to generate and retain the manpower required to sustain its operations. In World War Two, civilian resources were tapped via organisations such as the NAP and WRANS to undertake largely non-combatant roles. The RN continues to set an example by supplementing itself with the RFA, and the RAN has already demonstrated interoperability with the ABF. It is thus time to meet the requirements of the future by learning from the Navy of the past and recognise that much of what we continue to do with a permanent naval force could be altogether replaced or at least augmented by civilian entities such as the ABF or an Australian Fleet Auxiliary.

²² Royal Navy, *How to Join the RFA*, <<https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/careers/rfa/how-to-join>> [accessed 08 July 2019]

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