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WOMEN IN THE RAN: THE ROAD TO COMMAND AT SEA

The current mission of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) is 'to fight and win in the maritime environment...' ¹ This *Semaphore* Newsletter highlights the achievements and contributions by RAN women whilst ashore and at sea from World War II (WWII).

On 21 April 1941, a Navy Office letter to the Commodore-in-Charge, Sydney, authorised the entry of women into the Australian Navy as 'The Women's Royal Australian Naval Service' (WRANS). This initiative was in response to increased wartime demands for naval personnel. Hence, on 28 April 1941, 12 wireless telegraphists and two other telegraphists who had volunteered to serve as cooks, accompanied by their friend and mentor Florence McKenzie, ² arrived at the RAN Wireless/Transmitting (W/T) Station, Canberra. Kitted out in their hunting green Women's Emergency Signalling Corps uniforms they embarked on their watchkeeping careers. They represented the first wave of women in the RAN; and on 1 October 1942, they were sworn into the Navy as enlisted personnel. On 1 July 1943, the W/T station was commissioned as HMAS *Harman*.

By October 1942, 580 female volunteers had been recruited and enlisted, ³ and four months later the number had increased to 1000. ⁴ However, they were not permitted to serve at sea or overseas and were limited to 27 naval occupations. ⁵ By the end of WWII, the Australian Navy had more than 2500 serving WRANS in its ranks, which made up 10 per cent of the entire naval strength; and by 1945, a total of 3122 women had enlisted in the WRANS. ⁶ Post-war rationalisation led to the Service being disbanded and the last wartime WRANS were discharged in 1948. By 1951, however, the need for female sailors and officers was once again recognised and the Service was reconstituted. In 1984, the two separate women's services were abolished, the WRANS regulations repealed, and the WRANS were incorporated into the Permanent Naval Forces (PNF).

The WRANS served in all naval establishments performing the equivalent duties of their male counterparts, except that the WRANS were not permitted to serve at sea. The main fields of employment for the WRANS Officers were administration, training, recruiting, communications, supply and secretariat, medicine, dentistry and law. Conditions of service and employment opportunities (except for pay) for members of the WRANS were aligned as closely as possible with those of male naval personnel. Variations in the conditions of employment stemmed from Government policy of the day that Service women were not to be employed in combat duties. This policy effectively precluded members of the WRANS from seagoing employment. Nevertheless, some WRANS Officers volunteered for up to three weeks sea experience (whilst under training) in the RAN's then training ship, HMAS *Jervis Bay*.

Captain Joan Streeter, OBE, joined the WRANS in 1943 as a Writer, before enlisting in the second intake of Officers at HMAS *Cerberus*. She led the WRANS between 1958 and 1973, becoming known as 'Ma'am Wrans' throughout the Navy. She is best remembered for bringing about the changes in 1968 that allowed the retention of women in the RAN after marriage. ⁷ She spent a total of 23 years in the Service. Another prominent figure of that time was Captain Barbara McLeod, AM, who joined the WRANS as a Direct Entry Officer Candidate in 1953, at a time when the conditions of service for women in the Australian Navy were improving. She was the first WRANS Officer to be posted to the Staff of Flag Officer Commanding East Australia, becoming Commander of WRANS, HMAS *Kuttubul*, and she served in every establishment where the WRANS were posted, including Navy Office, Canberra. ⁸ In 1970, she also became the first woman in the RAN to have completed a senior management course at the Australian Administrative Staff College. After 25 years of service, Captain McLeod became the longest serving member of the WRANS to that time.

Quite independent of the WRANS, the RAN Nursing Service (RANNS) was inaugurated in October 1942, when 23 qualified nursing sisters began duty in RAN hospitals. Superintending Sister Annie Laidlaw commanded the RANNS from its formation until 1946, ⁹ and at its peak there were 56 nursing sisters in the RANNS working in RAN hospitals across Australia, as well as at Milne Bay in Papua New Guinea. Nurses entering the RANNS were registered with at least 12 months of nursing experience. They undertook familiarisation at the RAN Medical Training School at HMAS *Cerberus*. Upon completion of training they were initially posted to billets in RAN Hospitals in either HMAS *Penguin* in Sydney, or *Cerberus* in Victoria. In 1948, the RANNS were disbanded, however, the demand for nurses was too great, and the RANNS was subsequently re-formed in November 1964. In June 1984, the *Naval Forces (Women's Services) Regulations* were repealed, and the designation RANNS was abolished, leading to the nurses being incorporated within the Nursing Branch of the RAN. By this stage, qualified nurses wanting to join the RAN as nursing officers were enlisted with the rank of Sub-Lieutenant on probation, whilst undergoing training as Officers at HMAS *Creswell*.

By 1985, when the RAN first made billets available for women at sea, approximately five per cent of all RAN personnel were females. It was during this time that women first served in afloat support vessels. There were very few female role models, especially in the seaman branch or in high-ranking positions. Although all women recruited after 1984 were advised that they were eligible for service at sea, substantial numbers of women did not get to sea until the early 1990s. Since the mid-1980s,



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women in the RAN have held a number of key appointments. For example, in 1988 Commander Liz Cole was the first female Commanding Officer (CO) of a naval shore establishment. By 1990, the proportion of women in the RAN reached 12 per cent, and as Table 1 illustrates, the total number of women in the PNF has steadily increased since 1975.

Year	Female Officers	Total Women
1975	49	808
1985	146	1085
1995	507	2116
2005	543	2209

Table 1: Women in the PNF: 1975-2005¹⁰

Other prominent figures of this era include Commander Sue Jones who had an exceptional 30 year career, including command of the Harold E. Holt Naval Communications Station in Exmouth; and Captain Carolyn Brand who was the first female Commander of Australian Mine Warfare Forces and CO of HMAS *Waterhen*, from 1992-93. Another appointment of merit is Commander Allison Norris who is now Staff Officer to Chief of Navy. Her previous position was the Director of Navy Workplace Planning. She recalls when she joined the RAN in 1987 that 'women could not serve in combat related roles, and it was a big step to change this. There was a lot of debate leading up to the decision and a lot afterwards.'¹¹ Other developments include the deployment of women in combat related duties to the Middle East from 1990, and the introduction of female submariners in June 1998. Up until the 1990s, most of the female senior sailors onboard ships were voluntary, and it was not until then that women in the RAN had a sea going obligation. In 1992, HMAS *Sydney* was the first warship to permanently post women into the ship's company, followed by HMAS *Canberra* in 1994.

Today, women are employed as Directors and Deputy Directors of various departments within naval establishments, as Principal Warfare Officers (PWOs), Pilots, Observers, Engineers and Intelligence officers, as well as participating in information technology and systems related employment. By the end of 2005, for example, there were 21 qualified female PWOs in the RAN. Equally, women in the RAN have now reached the pinnacle of a sea going career – sea command – and have been able to shine in the glory of the title 'Captain'. One such appointee is Commander Jennifer Daetz, who became the first female to assume command at sea when she joined the survey vessel HMAS *Shepparton* in 1997, while holding the rank of lieutenant. In 2001, she was appointed as Executive Officer of Hydrographic Ship (HS) *White* crew, and in 2005 she was promoted to the rank of commander, assuming command of HS *Red* crew.¹² Through a rotational crewing program, Commander Daetz has been captain of both HMA Ships *Leeuwin* and *Melville*. After 20 years of service, Commander Daetz is still serving at sea, and in December 2006 she will take command of the shore establishment HMAS *Cairns*. The next milestone on the 'road to command at sea' is the appointment of the RAN's first female CO of a Major Fleet Unit, Commander Michele Miller, who will assume command of the *Anzac* class frigate HMAS *Perth* in mid 2007.

In 2005, Commodore Robyn Walker became the first female in the RAN to reach the rank of commodore. She qualified as a medical practitioner in 1982, and in 1991 she joined the RAN as a direct entry medical graduate with the intent of continuing her career in diving medicine. In January 1996 she assumed the position of Officer-in-Charge of the Submarine and Underwater Medicine Unit and remained there until promotion to commander in July 2000. She was then posted to Maritime Headquarters as the Deputy Fleet Medical Officer, where her duties included significant Sea Training Group responsibilities.

Apart from military operations, women in the RAN have also contributed to ongoing constabulary and diplomatic operations in Australia and across the globe. Over the last 65 years it is instructive to consider how far we have come in the Defence Force and the extent to which women have been integrated into the various positions and categories across the RAN. As the role of women in society continues to change, so will opportunities for women in the Australian Defence Force continue to increase. Women in the RAN are moving through the ranks, with many excelling in their chosen fields, and setting a fine example for other young women wanting to enter the Service. Women in the RAN now serve in almost every area of day to day naval operations at sea and ashore.¹³ Female officers now command RAN ships and establishments and many have seen active service abroad. There have also been considerable developments in naval personnel and training in the last decade that has further enabled women in the RAN to tread the 'road to command' ashore and at sea.

In conclusion, it is worth remembering how far the Australian Navy has come since WWII. Between 1941 and 1968 women were compelled to leave the Service on marriage, and it was only 30 years ago that women gained equal pay with their male counterparts.¹⁴ In 1979, just half of the military positions were open to women in competition with men. Today, the selection is wide and varied, and a path that leads to command at sea or ashore is increasingly well travelled.

¹ Royal Australian Navy, *Plan Green 2005-2015*, Canberra, 2005, paragraph 3.5.
² In 1924, Florence McKenzie, OBE (1892-1982), became Australia's first certificated woman radio telegraphist, and the only female member of the Wireless Institute of Australia. In 1939 she founded and directed the Women's Emergency Signalling Corps, which was the genesis of the WRANS. <womenaustralia.info/biogs/AWE0386b> (24 Nov 06).
³ D. Stevens, (ed), *The Royal Australian Navy in World War II*, 2nd edn, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005, p. 211.
⁴ S. Fenton-Huie, *Ships Belles: The Story of the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service in War and Peace 1941-1985*, Watermark Press, Sydney, 2000, pp. 67-70.
⁵ J. Beaumont, *Australian Defence: Sources and Statistics, The Australian Centenary History of Defence, Volume VI*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2001, p. 352.
⁶ Fenton-Huie, *Ships Belles*, p. 356.
⁷ Fenton-Huie, *Ships Belles*, p. 263.
⁸ Fenton-Huie, *Ships Belles*, p. 266.
⁹ P. C. Vines, 'Laidlaw, Annie Ina (1889-1978)', in G. P. Gilbert (ed), *Australian Naval Personalities: Lives from the Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Papers in Australian Maritime Affairs No. 17, Sea Power Centre - Australia, Canberra, pp. 123-124.
¹⁰ Data taken from past *Defence Annual Reports*.
¹¹ Personal communication, 23 Jun 06.
¹² The two RAN hydrographic ships, *Melville* and *Leeuwin* are operated by three ships' companies on a rotational basis; Royal Australian Navy, *The Navy Contribution to Australia Maritime Operations (RAN Doctrine 2)*, Defence Publishing Service, Canberra, 2005, p. 174.
¹³ The single exception is that women cannot become Clearance Divers.
¹⁴ K. Sourling and E. Greenhalgh, *Women in Uniform: Perceptions and Pathways*, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, 2000, p. 5.

