

How a young woman used the Navy to build her character and find the job of her dreams

By ARCHIE BAYVEL

“Professionally, I’m at the pinnacle of my career.” Fiona Freeman says, “I am one of the Navy’s senior officers and the first female to fill the position of Hydrographer of Australia.

“My military title is Director General of Hydrography, Meteorology and Oceanography. That job carries the rank of Commodore – just one step below admiral – but it’s the job not the rank that I’ve always wanted.



As the Hydrographer, Fiona is responsible for providing the nautical charts, electronic navigational charts and nautical information which is used by every ship navigating in Australia’s area of charting responsibility. This is a massive responsibility covering an area of about an eighth of the world’s ocean area and extending from the Antarctic, almost to the equator, including Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

“There’s a sense of true fulfilment in being at the peak of my profession. I feel really privileged because I have done lots of different things in the Navy on my way to this role, and I’ve never been disappointed.

It’s not just producing charts. Fiona is also Australia’s delegate to the International Hydrographic Organization. This is where the technical matters and standards to do with hydrographic surveying and charting are decided. It also gets political when it comes to demarcation between areas of national charting responsibility.

She has a military role too, responsible for providing marine geospatial information, meteorology, and oceanography to support Navy operations.

“I’ve travelled heaps in the Navy. Last year to India, where I visited its hydrographic school and spent two weeks in Goa. I’ve always been fascinated by India and I enjoy travelling; of course, it is always great to return home to Australia.

“As a junior officer, I was a watchkeeper on the sail training ship *Young Endeavour*. Usually it does short training voyages around the coast of Australia but I spent 12 months with her in 1992, and we joined the Tall Ships Fleet in Genoa and crossed the Atlantic Ocean under sail, to reprise Europeans’ first voyage to America.

“It was an amazing experience. I was only 23, fit and not scared of heights, so enjoyed working aloft. “

“I’m 50 now and have been 31 years in the Navy, 15 of them at sea, including time in command of two vessels.

“Nowadays I’m a surveyor by specialisation but one of my first junior jobs was as a navigator on a survey ship. It was here I watched and helped the surveyors.

“After I left school I was doing a teaching degree in Brisbane but decided I needed something more exciting. So I went into the local Defence recruiting office and they were interested in me. My father was rather taken aback when I announced what I had done but a few months later I was in the Navy.

“Being a female in the Navy was a character-building event for me. I’d become part of an organisation very much bigger than I could have imagined which, at the time, itself was trying to introduce and manage significant change to its workforce. Somewhat naively I just viewed myself the same as the guys I trained

and worked with and, generally, I was treated equally. It was early in my career though that I realised it was not always as simple as that.

As a newly qualified watchkeeper I joined a ship and naturally, as the most junior watchkeeper and 'new kid on deck' found myself assigned to the 'guts' watch – midnight 'til 0400 each night. After six nights of the Commanding Officer coming up and 'visiting' the bridge during my watch, I asked one of the other officers why he would be up and around at that time every night. I learned it was the first occasion he had worked with a female at sea and was struggling with 'trusting his ship' to me without supervision. I am happy to say though, that after raising my concern directly to him and talking through the issue and reassuring him I was trained as well as any other watchkeeper, he was able to enjoy some uninterrupted sleep at night in the following weeks.

"Women in the RAN were only first posted to seagoing positions in 1986, so I was in one of the first waves to join and undertake the full training programme. The concept was very new and until the 1990s we could serve only on auxiliary or survey vessels.

The Navy has certainly moved forward on equality since then, with women now serving in warfare roles and even submarines.

"It's a very different Navy today from when I first joined. Females can serve anywhere now and we form about 20 per cent of the workforce."

"I guess a lot of my character had already been built by my mother's death when I was only 10. Dad re-married quite quickly and that naturally brought challenges to me and also to my stepmother, who had inherited an instant family.

"But we all worked it out very well.

"My schooling was at San Sisto, then a small all-girls college run by Dominican nuns in Brisbane that gave me the foundations on which to build a good career.

"People can go to the best school and have a bad experience, others can go to nondescript schools and turn out great. A headmistress who is a role model and sets expectations makes a difference in those formative years – that is what I had.

"It was supportive and encouraged us to participate in sport and other activities and engage with learning. All of which I believe are the foundations of doing well, and I look back on San Sisto with

gratitude."

"Playing sport has always been an important part of my life, so at 50 I'm still playing for a competitive hockey team – Queanbeyan United. We're not a Navy team but I enjoy the competition and the camaraderie of a group outside of the workplace. It's a great physical and mental outlet."

Asked about the defining moments of her working life, Fiona doesn't hesitate:

- "Joining the Navy,
- Deciding to specialise in hydrographic surveying. Hydrographers like James Cook and Mathew Flinders did amazing work and the fact we produce vital and tangible products made it attractive to me.
- Whilst in command of HMAS *Benalla* realising my father was watching on the wharf as I conned the ship onto its berth in my hometown of Brisbane.

"I think I was a pretty reasonable ship handler, but I was really nervous when I saw Dad watching me."

"I could see that he was so proud of me. Looking back, it was an important time because Dad had recently been diagnosed with cancer, from which he died three years later."

So, what next for Commodore Freeman?

"When you become the Hydrographer, you take on a persona," she says. "It's a position that people have a general understanding of, and they most certainly have expectations of the person filling the role. It's definitely not about the rank, although the holder of this specialised role has to be recognised and empowered.

"There are five other female commodores and a couple of rear-admirals in other branches of Australia's Navy but I have no expectations of becoming an admiral because this is the job I always wanted and I hope to continue in for a while yet.

"Life is about being content. Success is intangible and open to perception – Money? Position? Achievement? I have no doubt these can contribute but none of these things really matter if you are not content. I consider myself successful because I feel content.

"People who have the ability to pause when under pressure or stress, tend to achieve the best outcomes. There can be great value in pausing – it can result in quite different outcomes."

In private life, Commodore Freeman is married to Jeremy, a lieutenant-colonel communications specialist in the Australian Army. She cheerfully points out that whilst the Navy is our senior service, there is certainly no such demarcation at home.

"Jeremy and I never got around to having any children," she says, "but my family includes a younger brother Stephen, who is an assistant commissioner with Queensland Fire and Emergency Services."

So where will Fiona be in 20 years? "By then I will have lived longer than my parents; and Jeremy and I will be enjoying ourselves living close to a nice beach in Queensland. We have a lovely border collie dog but he is already 11, so we will be accompanied by his successor." ▲

