

Empowering women in the maritime community - Navy leading the way

By COMMODORE ROD NAIRN AM (retired)

IMO World Maritime Day is celebrated on 26 September. This year's theme is Empowering Women in the Maritime Community, I have been impressed by the way that the Royal Australia Navy has led the way, in Australia at least, towards achieving gender equality in its sea-going workforce.

It is about time that the Royal Australian Navy received some well-deserved credit for the amazingly positive steps that it has taken towards achieving gender equality. In the last 30 years, the RAN has transformed its seagoing workforce from a bastion of blokes, to gender equality in almost every role.

The Navy embarked on the journey of equal opportunity out of necessity. Even in the 1980s, it was clear that as an employer trying to attract thousands of seafarers to work some demanding routines (what could be categorised as 'fly in fly out without the out') they could no longer ignore half the population of Australia. Women had served in the Navy for years, they just hadn't been allowed to serve at sea, and in an organisation all about sending ships and men to sea, that immediately classified women as second-class support staff. But things were about to change.

The strategic decision was made to send women to sea in non-combat vessels, in the mid-1980s. It took a few years to implement, new ships could be designed to accommodate both sexes, but existing ships would need to be modified.

In 1985, I was serving as executive officer in HMAS *Flinders*, responsible for the management and efficient survey operations of a small 50 metre survey ship, based in Cairns, with a crew of 45. In these pre-GPS days, to achieve the accurate positioning for surveying, required radio transmitters to be set up at multiple locations ashore. Setting up these stations was a tough job, carrying loads of heavy equipment, through tropical scrub to the top of the highest peak: batteries, antenna, 45 kilogram gas bottles and gas generators, transmitters and of course, ground clearing equipment. For each station I would use a team of six or eight men, each carrying about 30 or 35 kilograms, and we could have three teams ashore at once, and still keep the ship

operating safely.

Introducing women into this environment would be a challenge. On average, they physically could not carry the same amount of weight, so we would have to send more people on each team, take longer to establish shore control and reduce the ship's operational efficiency. The alternative would be to send the men ashore to do the heavy lifting and keep the women onboard to operate the ship. But this would create a two-class structure. I was NOT a fan.

Female officers were first posted to sea in 1987. The first female junior sailors were posted to the inshore survey vessels HMA Ships *Paluma* and *Mermaid*.

It seems that timing is everything, and serendipitously, technology changes aligned perfectly with the posting of females to sea. By the late 1980s GPS had replaced radio fixing systems and there was no longer a requirement for multiple shore stations. Ship deployable, bottom mounted tide gauges further reduced the need for burley blokes heavy lifting. The operational argument against women at sea had vanished and the scene was set for change.

I returned to HMAS *Flinders* as commanding officer in 1993 and three of our officers were female, unfortunately limitations in the ship's design couldn't accommodate females in the other ranks. By then the inshore survey vessels HMA Ships *Paluma* and *Mermaid* had proven that the closer to 50/50 the gender mix of the crew, the more smoothly the ship operates, and the less gender related difficulties experienced.

After the successful introduction of mixed crewing in survey ships, Navy moved quickly to remove barriers and expand female career opportunities. Females were posted to patrol boats and major surface combatants. Then in 1998 the door opened to females serving in submarines.

20 years - Women in submarines

In 1998, the Royal Australian Navy became the fourth Navy in the world to permit women to serve on board submarines. The first female submariners began their training in June 1998, with the first qualifying mid-1999.

For most people in the Submarine Branch today, women have simply always been a part of submarine service. The contribution of women has been overwhelmingly positive: they have served at sea and ashore; as sailors, engineers, warfare officers and technicians, and this year marks 20 years since the first female received her 'dolphins'.

There have been many achievements to date, from both sailors and officers alike, with two of the most recent being the first ever female executive officer of a Royal Australian Navy submarine, who was awarded the Conspicuous Service Medal as part of the Australia Day 2018 Honours List. Maritime Warfare Officer, Submarines Commander Susan Harris, was recognised for exceptional leadership, dedication and professional knowledge, as both a workforce specialist and submariner.

In addition to Commander Harris'

achievement, Petty Officer Kerry Cousins was a finalist in the Women in Defence Awards 2019. A highly motivated, inspirational Senior Sailor dedicated to the advancement of the interests of the submarine enterprise, PO Cousins is a pioneer female in the submarine community. As one of the first women serving in Australia's strategic deterrent, Kerry has been inspirational to other women considering a career in submarines.

The last bastion of male domination is now about to be breached. As this edition goes to print Navy has opened the doors to females to enter the clearance diver category – those that are first in harm's way – responsible for bomb disposal and Navy's feeder category for the elite Special Air Service.

The Royal Australian Navy doesn't need to blow its own trumpet over promoting women in the maritime, it is now business as usual. If you ask a woman serving in the



For the RAN, discrimination in employment roles for males and females is consigned to history

Navy what it is like to be a female serving at sea, they will probably wonder why you are asking. ▲