NAMING RAN SHIPS AND ESTABLISHMENTS & UNITS

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'His Majesty the King has been graciously pleased to approve of the Permanent Naval Forces of the Commonwealth being designated the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and of the ships of that Navy being designated His Majesty's Australian Ships.[i]

So begins Commonwealth Forces Navy Order number 77 of 1911, dated 5 October 1911. That order granted the title 'Royal' to Australia's existing naval forces and formalised the use of the prefix 'HMAS' for all warships and commissioned establishments of the RAN. Use of this prefix has changed only slightly from His Majesty's Australian Ship to Her Majesty's Australian ship when HM Queen Elizabeth II became Monarch.

But what of the hundreds of names that have followed this prefix and adorned the cap ribbons of our junior sailors at sea and ashore since 1911? How were these names selected and how are they selected in the 21st Century?

This Semaphore, a revision of my 2007 work, is aimed at answering these questions with a view to providing readers with a better understanding of the conventions used by the RAN today when naming its vessels, establishments, units and facilities.

In October 1911 the Australian Navy was granted the title 'Royal' and use of the prefix 'HMAS'

First Born of the RAN

The first ships constructed for the Commonwealth Naval Forces, and the first to require names, were three Torpedo Boat Destroyers (TBD) ordered by the Fisher Government in 1909. At that time the British Admiralty raised the question of naming the ships and suggested that they be given names of Australian rivers. However, Senator Pearce, who was involved in the ordering of the vessels recommended naming them after eminent early Australian navigators. Prime Minister Alfred Deakin decided against that and subsequently accepted the Admiralty's suggestion, with his Minster for Defence, Joseph Cook, the then member for Parramatta, announcing that the three vessels would be known as *Parramatta* (I), *Yarra* (I) and *Warrego* (I) after Australian rivers bearing indigenous names.[ii]

An HMAS Parramatta *(I) seaman poses proudly with his ship's name clearly visible on his cap ribbon. Parramatta is a name used by the Darug people who first settled along the upper reaches of the Parramatta River. It is an aboriginal word meaning the 'place where the eels lie down'.*

Deakin's and Cook's actions created for the RAN an enduring tradition of including indigenous names spread throughout successive RAN fleets, reflecting a distinct local identity.

The Origins of the Selection and Approval Process

The process of gaining approval for ships' names was adopted from policy established by the Royal Navy (RN) whereby proposed names were forwarded through the Admiralty to the King for his assent. It was accepted that proposed names for Australian ships should adhere to that process, mainly to prevent duplication of names within the navies of the Commonwealth.

In 1926, however, the Admiralty deviated from that policy when Australia sought to name two Australian 'O' Class submarines. This was one of the first occasions that names had been submitted for submarines as opposed to alpha numeric designations such as those given to the first Australian submarines *AE1* and *AE2*.

The Admiralty's perspective was that as submarines were not considered 'ships' it would not be necessary to gain Royal Assent, and approval for the 'boats' to be named HMAS *Oxley* (I) and HMAS *Otway* (I) was given.

On 22 June 1938 the Admiralty refined the naming policy, determining that only the names of fighting ships need be referred to His Majesty for approval. That policy was further revised on 7 February 1942 when the Admiralty instructed that only names for ships classed as frigates or larger should receive Royal assent.

This change came at a time when hundreds of ships and small craft were being requisitioned for service during World War II. It was during World War II that some of the RAN's more colourful names came into being with vessels such as *Ping Wo*, *Whang Pu* and *Blowfly* often raising people's eyebrows when mentioned.[iii]

By adopting Royal Navy naming principles the RAN continued the practice of naming large ships, such as aircraft carriers and cruisers, after major cities and small ships, such as destroyers and frigates, after towns, rivers and bays.

The first RAN ships to carry the names of Australian capital cities were the three World War I, *Chatham* class cruisers *Sydney* (I), *Melbourne* (I) and *Brisbane* (I) while the name of our vast continent was reserved for the *Indefatigable* class battle-cruiser, and first flagship of the RAN, HMAS *Australia* (I).

Another important naming principle adopted from the Royal Navy was the practice of reusing names in later generations of ships in order to build tradition and foster a sense of esprit de corps among ships' companies. Today, the RAN has in commission the fifth ship to proudly carry the name *Sydney* and the fourth to carry the names *Parramatta* and *Yarra*. When writing of these ships it is customary to distinguish which iteration one is referring to by including a numerical suffix such as HMAS *Sydney* (I) or HMAS *Sydney* (V).

Battle Honours and Campaign Awards

All vessels that inherit a name previously carried by a former RAN warship are permitted to carry forth the Battle Honours and Campaign Awards earnt by their Australian predecessors. Any such awards appear on ornately carved wooden honour boards normally displayed in the vicinity of a ship's gangway when secured alongside. This serves as a public display and representation of the legacy of service provided by successive ships of the same name.

Artisan Mr Richard Yates presents Captain John Stavridis with the first of two official battle honour boards earnt by successive ships named HMAS Hobart.

Throughout the Australian Navy's early history a number of ships were acquired from the Royal Navy that retained their original names. Some of those names have been used in later classes of Australian warships to perpetuate the deeds performed by the crews who served in them.

Among these are names such as *Vampire*, *Voyager*, *Vendetta*, *Supply* and *Stalwart;* to name a few.

HMA Ships *Supply* (II) and *Stalwart* (III) are good examples of names that originated in the Royal Navy but whose deeds over the last one hundred years have become more closely associated with service in the RAN and regional maritime security.

As warship design and capability has evolved, so too has the conventions for the allocation of names, and today the names of our capital cities may be found distributed among major fleet units such as amphibious assault ships, destroyers and frigates.

Contemporary Naming Conventions

Guidance on current RAN naming principles appears in Chapter 2 of Australian Naval Publication (ANP) 3001.

The process for naming ships is usually instigated by the Chief of Navy (CN) prior to, or shortly after an official announcement is made concerning the acquisition of a new capability. CN will usually confer with the RAN Senior Leadership Group before directing Naval History Section Staff, Sea Power Centre – Australia, to research and create a pool of potential names based on that guidance and current naming principles.

In general terms the naming principles applying to the RAN Fleet are:

- Surface combatants and submarines are named after Australian, cities, regions (including seas), rivers and naval personages;

- Afloat support ships carry names of previous support vessels;

- Patrol vessels are named after Australian towns and country regions;

- Mine warfare vessels are named after Australian rivers and bays;

- Tugs and minor yard craft carry the names of Australian flora and fauna;

Junior sailors serving in the Anzac *Class frigate HMAS* Arunta*, fall in against the prominent backdrop of the ship's name board.*

In the case of the Fleet Air Arm, its squadrons do not carry names but are assigned three digit numbers, and occasionally a suffix, to reflect the role of the squadron. Selection of those designations is often influenced by historical precedent.

Commissioned shore establishments carry an interesting variety of names reflecting links with the region in which they are located, historical personages and even mythical creatures such as *Cerberus*.

In 2019 the Secretary of the Department of Defence and the Chief of the Defence Force announced the Defence Department's intent to henceforth adopt dual naming principles for establishments and include Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language names in their titles. This decision forms a key plank of the Defence Reconciliation Action Plan.

Naval infrastructure within naval establishments can also be named to:

- recognise individuals who have made a significant contribution to the Navy; or

- commemorate naval actions, previous units or the function of the facility concerned.

The Process of Compiling Potential Names

When compiling potential names a primary aim is to promote links between the Navy and Australian communities, from which the Navy's lifeblood is recruited, using names that are readily recognisable as Australian.

Promoting Defence values, fostering a sense of esprit de corps, celebrating Australian Defence Force history, Australia's traditional owners and our national character are also key outcomes.

Achieving a balanced distribution of names among Australian states and territories is also a chief consideration as is reviewing the many representations received by the Minster for Defence and CN from civil communities and ex-service groups to have ships/establishments adopt a particular name. It is a truism that there will always be more names than available vessels but, in spite of that limitation, all submissions received are retained on file in the Naval History Section and brought to the attention of CN as an integral part of any naming process.

After considerable research, the Naval History staff will prepare a comprehensive brief for CN containing a list of potential names along with concise histories. The brief will always include names well in excess of the number required to afford CN with a variety of naming options. CN will then exercise the privilege of his/her position to select appropriate names or request additional names if considered necessary.

Practical considerations are also necessary and the names of commissioned units are normally confined to 12 characters due to the limited space available on unit badges and cap ribbons.

The distinction of having the longest name carried by an HMA Ship goes to the *Countess of Hopetoun* which served in the colonial, Commonwealth and Royal Australian Navies. Other long names to appear on junior sailor's cap ribbons include *Queenborough* and *Warrnambool*, whereas *Emu* was one of the shortest.

At just three letters 'Emu' *is believed to be the shortest name used by the RAN whereas* Queenborough *was one of the longest. The Countess of Hopetoun, at eighteen letters, holds the distinction of being the longest name yet used.*

The Approval Process

Once CN has selected the names, a recommendation is forwarded through the Chief of Defence Force, the Minister for Defence and the Prime Minister to His/Her Excellency the Governor General of Australia for final approval. Only then are new names officially announced.

Ships' Sponsors

It is customary in the contemporary RAN to select a sponsor to officially name a commissioned unit. In the case of ships and submarines this occurs either at the time at which its keel is laid or as part of a launching ceremony.

In the past this privilege was usually reserved for prominent women who traditionally performed the role of launching lady, however, in recent times the Navy has, in keeping with a progressive Australian society, broadened membership to include a diverse range of personages from varying backgrounds. Throughout the service of a commissioned RAN unit it is customary for the sponsor to maintain an ongoing relationship with the unit concerned.

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[i] Commonwealth Naval Order 77/1911.

[ii] Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representative, Hansard, 6 December 1909: House of Representatives, Debates, 6 December 1909 :: Historic Hansard

[iii] HMAS *Ping Wo* and *Whang Pu* were both former Chinese river steamers requisitioned for wartime service. HMAS *Blowfly* was a survey launch.