

'BEFORE THE MAST' IN *YOUNG ENDEAVOUR*

On 25 January 1988, the then British High Commissioner, His Excellency Sir John Leahy, representing the government of the United Kingdom, gifted the sail training ship *Young Endeavour* to the government and people of Australia in what was the nation's bicentennial year.

This unique present, from a nation steeped in maritime tradition, 'was a commitment to youth as well as recognition of the historical and maritime links between the two countries'.¹ *Young Endeavour* would spend her sea-going life voyaging around Australia, indeed the world, with young Australians, aged between 16 and 23, embarked, to learn both mariner and leadership skills.

As this inimitable vessel approaches her 24th year it is worth reflecting on the important role she plays in the lives of Australian youth.

Young Endeavour is crewed by personnel of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) on behalf of the Young Endeavour Youth Scheme (YEYS). The aim of the YEYS is to give adolescent Australians the opportunity for personal development through an 'adventure under sail'.² Each voyage is focused on developing teamwork and leadership skills, increasing self awareness and creating a strong sense of community responsibility. However, like the many moving parts of *Young Endeavour's* rigging, there are other facets to both the ship, her crew and the youth scheme that warrant further explanation.

To truly understand *Young Endeavour*, one must first experience a voyage in her. It was my good fortune to do just that when I was invited to join the ship in Brisbane for voyage 17/2011. That voyage saw me integrate fully with a youth crew (in spite of my mature age) and work alongside them as they sailed the ship over a ten day period between Brisbane and Sydney. I kept watches, 'turned to' in the middle of the night for tacking stations, participated in cleaning stations, climbed the 30 metre foremast and joined in with most of the activities set for them by the ship's staff. It proved to be a most challenging, rewarding and interesting experience.

Before embarking in *Young Endeavour*, all participants receive a comprehensive set of joining instructions including a handbook about the ship which proves invaluable throughout the experience. Within its pages is a glossary of sailing terms and orders, an overview of the ship's routines and a detailed set of diagrams of the ship, her sails and her rigging. Instructions concerning what to bring with you are included, along with a handsome back pack in which to place one's kit. Having digested all of this information I soon found myself looking forward to the prospect of getting back to sea.

I joined *Young Endeavour* at her berth alongside Bulimba Barracks, on the Brisbane River, during the afternoon of 4 October 2011. Classed as a brigantine, she is an impressive looking vessel and her Britannia blue and white paint scheme and imposing masts add to her stately appearance. On arrival I was greeted by the designated commanding officer for the voyage, Lieutenant

Commander Damien Munchenberg, RAN who immediately impressed me as a man of good humour and as someone with a great deal of passion for his job. Paramount in his mind was the safety of all on board and his personal aim to ensure that the experience was an enjoyable and challenging adventure for all concerned.

I was then shown to my small cabin before joining the youth crew, who, by then, had been invited on board with their families for the official 'meet and greet'.

With introductions and welcomes complete, the youth crew was allocated to one of three watches designated: red, white or blue. I was assigned to 'blue watch'. Each of the watches was supervised by a 'watch leader' who is a serving officer or sailor in the RAN. Blue watch's leader was 24 year old Lieutenant Kristy-Lee Robins, RAN who, although not much older than some of the youths herself, has considerable experience within the navy as a seaman officer. She proved to be a charismatic, cheerful and skillful youth leader throughout the voyage, taking little time to establish herself as both friend and mentor to all onboard.

On average *Young Endeavour* spends 240 days at sea each year and the demands on her RAN crew of nine are many and varied. A flexi-crewing system consisting of 15 personnel is employed to ensure that the ship is able to meet its sea-going commitments each year. Personnel are selected from volunteers who undergo a special selection process to ensure that they have both the ability and the temperament to be an effective crew member and youth leader. All of the crew positions, from the commanding officer to the chef, are fundamental to the efficient operation of the ship.

My first day in *Young Endeavour* was spent with Blue Watch participating in team building exercises designed to 'break the ice' and familiarising ourselves with the ship. This included receiving instruction in the use of safety equipment and harnesses which were required to be worn at all times when on watch and when proceeding aloft. That instruction was the precursor to scaling the foremast.

This was a daunting evolution for those not used to heights or climbing 'ratlines' and rigging. The climb was conducted under the close supervision of ship's staff and before long all had conquered this first major challenge. Although satisfied with my performance, I was all too aware that the evolution had been carried out alongside and in calm water. It would be a different story at sea and I was soon to gain great respect for those seafarers of old who routinely performed this evolution with no safety harness when rounding Cape Horn.

The preservation of 'good order and discipline' among the youth crew in *Young Endeavour* is fundamental to the success of any voyage and this is achieved through a blend of inclusiveness and good humour. No use is made of titles or rank onboard and all are addressed on a first name basis. Unlike naval training ships of old, such as HMAS *Tingira*, in which strict naval discipline was

enforced under the watchful eye of a Master at Arms; the principle of fun, underpinned by safety, is at the forefront of most evolutions. So successfully is this achieved that most of the time the youths are unaware of the continuous, guiding presence of discipline.

On Wednesday 5 October I was awoken not by the high-pitched shrill of a bosun's call, but by the rock band AC/DC's anthem *Thunderstruck*. That, accompanied by enthusiastic instructions from the sail-master announced over the ship's broadcast, soon had the youth crew mustered on deck ready to embrace their first day at sea. Breakfast followed and before long we were underway making our way up the Brisbane River and into the expanse of Moreton Bay. The weather was fine and it was the perfect start to the voyage.



The sun setting over the Glass House Mountains as Young Endeavour departs Moreton Bay.

All ships thrive on routine and the RAN crew of *Young Endeavour* wasted no time in settling the youth crew down into their respective watches. The next few days were focused on learning as much about the ship as possible which included receiving instruction in navigation, weather and the principles of sailing. Again, all of this was achieved in the midst of a liberal dose of fun.

The ultimate aim of this training was to prepare the youth crew for 'command day' when the ship's staff would hand the vessel over to them for a 24 hour period. Numerous strategies were employed to reach that objective, including an age old custom known as 'rope races'. This daily event saw all members of each watch compete in a contest to determine whose knowledge of the ship was greater. Under the watchful eye of the ship's engineer, the name of a fitting, or piece of rigging, was announced before competitors raced away to be the first to correctly locate it. Before long, all were familiar with belaying pins, stoppers, sheets, jibs, booms and myriad other nautical fixtures.

No ocean voyage would be complete without some reference to *mal de mer* (or sea sickness as it is more commonly known). The crew did not escape this unpleasant malady, with the majority onboard affected for a brief period as *Young Endeavour* cork-screwed her way south in an awkward 2-3 metre swell. Happily, with the onset of better weather, it became a passing memory for most.

The voyage south was punctuated with a number of overnight stops when the ship went to anchor. The first of these was at Trial Bay, South West Rocks, NSW. This picturesque setting allowed the youth crew to take some time for rest and recreation that included a swim and a trek ashore to visit an old colonial gaol that now serves as a tourist attraction.

The second stop was made in Broken Bay where the ship went to anchor in the vicinity of Cottage Point. The transit into Broken Bay was used by the captain to assess the sailing and safety drills of each of the three watches to ensure that they satisfied the criteria for 'command day'. All received his endorsement and that evening preparations to assume control of the ship began.

An important part of that process involved the youth crew selecting from within their number those who would assume the key roles that had hitherto been held by the regular RAN crew. Among those were the positions of captain, navigator and sail-master. A secret ballot was held and with a new 'master and commander' selected, the youth crew set about reorganising their watches to sail the ship south to Sydney.

The following day the ship was formally handed over to the 'new' captain along with his orders to meet certain objectives during the following 24 hours. These included safely sailing the ship out of Broken Bay, reaching a number of time critical way-points as well as completing a variety of other team oriented tasks. The culmination of the previous week's training was then put to the test as *Young Endeavour* weighed anchored and slowly made her way back out to sea.

The next 24 hours proved to be a challenging but rewarding time for all concerned. The RAN staff remained ever-present to ensure that safety was not compromised but the decision making processes relating to the passage of the ship were entirely in the hands of the youth crew. It soon became apparent to me just how much these young men and women had learned in a very short period of time. Before long, objectives were being met, way-points reached, obstacles overcome and an overwhelming sense of achievement began to permeate the ship. At the end of 'command day' all of the tasks set for the youth crew had been met and it was with no small amount of pride and satisfaction that the ship was handed back, intact, to Lieutenant Commander Munchenberg.

Before experiencing a voyage in *Young Endeavour* I did not fully appreciate the true value of this vessel or the significant part it continues to play in the development of those Australian youths who accept the challenge to go to sea in her and broaden their horizons. Those who do, undoubtedly come ashore as better people having embraced the ship and lived up to her Latin motto *carpe diem* (*seize the day*).

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¹ David Iggulden, *The Life and Times of Young Endeavour*, C Pierson, Publishers, Sydney, 1995, p.15.

² YEYS, *Young Endeavour Youth Scheme Voyage Handbook*, Sydney, 2011, p. 3.

