

*Policing in the RAN circa 1969-1983 - A Personal Perspective by  
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**Note: This is my personal perspective based on my own experience of that era, the views and opinions contained herein are my own personal views and opinions and they may clash with views and opinions held by others. In presenting this perspective I do not intend to cause offence to any person.**

I recently attended a JRTE reunion of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> intakes at HMAS Leeuwin, 1963, where naturally discussion took place relative to how things had evolved in the RAN from our era to the present day.

At this reunion I read a recent Navy News in which a certain item captured my interest and as I read it I was not particularly enamored with what I was reading.

The particular article which raised some angst referred to the creation of the position of Ships Warrant Officer, Peter Haggarty also raised the topic in a recent Guest Book contribution, we both seem to agree that this position usurps the role of the *Coxswain* as the principle member of the ship's company, the link between the upper and lower decks and the key disciplinarian.

Now why might you ask does this particular issue raise such angst?

Please let me go back to *circa* 1969 and years before.

During that era there were three notable forms of policing/regulating/discipline in the RAN, they were,

The Regulating Branch  
Coxswains  
Naval Dockyard Police

The first two were of more importance to sailors of that era as they regulated the day to day activities of naval life.

The Naval Dockyard Police, to us, were more concerned with security, particularly at the Dockyard gates, and on the gangways at Leeuwin and Moreton. Of course if one was tempted to "rabbit" a few stores or have excessive amounts of cigarettes in one's possession then these eagle eyed stalwarts would pounce. This is where the other two agencies came into the picture.

The principle branch concerned with the general policing and discipline of sailors in the RAN was the Regulating Branch, members of this branch were posted to all establishments and major warships, (the two carriers and HMAS Stalwart).

Coxswains were found in the "warries".

A Chief Petty Officer in the Regulating Branch was called the Master at Arms; this title was handed down from the days of sail, in which the Master at Arms was the deliverer of the lash and the cat of nine tails. In the era I am discussing he carried a sword on ceremonial occasions, in fact he was the only enlisted man permitted that privilege.

Petty Officers were called Regulating Petty Officers and Leading Hands were Leading Patrolmen. The right arm rate badge was a crown. Commissioned Officers were Regulating Officers.

During that era there were no Leading Coxswains. Petty Officer Coxswains were found in minor war vessels and held various shore billets. In some instances when Petty Officer Coxswains were posted to a sea billet they were promoted provisional CPOCOX and reverted to POCOX when returning ashore, this was prevalent in the Survey Navy.

Substantive Chief Coxswains were posted to the warships, frigates and above, plus several other important ships, HMAS Supply immediately comes to mind. The Coxswain, known affectionally as the "Swain" was the "Man". He ran the ships company, he was responsible for welfare and discipline and he answered directly to the Executive Officer, a good Coxswain was usually the indicator of a happy ship, a bad one, usually indicated some tough times for the "lads".

In his realm, the Master at Arms and his staff reigned supreme. The Regulating Branch had specific powers under Section 45 of the Naval Discipline Act; in essence, Leading Patrolmen could give directions to Chief Petty Officers. In shore establishments Leading Patrolmen were accommodated and messed with Petty Officers.

In the carriers, Leading Patrolmen had their own mess even though they ate with the troops. It is fair to mention that the Regulating Branch was perhaps the least popular branch in the RAN, unless of course you were a member.

Members of the Regulating Branch were usually referred to as Crushers, the Master at Arms was the Jaunty or Joss Man, (these are the printable names). In the late 1960's the RAN in its infinite wisdom decided to merge the Coxswains into the Regulating Branch, but unlike the RN and the RNZN, the bigger branch merged with the smaller branch. Sound familiar?

Regulators became Coxswains, Leading Patrolmen, now Leading Coxswains were to go to sea in the position formerly known as Coxswain's writers.

When this occurred, the Naval Dockyard Police became the Naval Police.

I joined the Regulating Branch as a Leading Patrolman in January 1969; my course was the last Patrolmen's Course. On completion of course I was posted to HMAS Nirimba, part of my duties was Apprentices Discipline which entailed investigation of minor offences, preparing and framing of charges and generally being outrageously unpopular amongst the Apprentices.

Situated amongst the factories was the Factory Chief, a CPOCOX whose responsibilities included general discipline in the factories. He used to liaise with me on a daily basis regarding disciplinary matters and advice on charges; (I used to advise him).

My principle supervisor was the Master at Arms. This particular Master was a fire brand and suffered fools lightly. I can recall one specific incident with the Chaplain who dared interfere in a disciplinary matter, he told the chaplain that it might have been his job to get the little darlings into heaven but in the mean time it was his, (Master) to get them into hell.

In July of that year the branches merged. Those who had less than two years of service remaining could remain in the branch as Regulators until they paid off or transfer to the new Naval Police. The rest of us that had light years ahead of us had the option of becoming Coxswains or reverting to our former branch.

We then saw an ever increasing Naval Police presence, particularly as they assumed responsibility for all investigations, (save for very minor ones). There was I must say a certain amount of friction between the branches, particularly with the older ex Regulating Branch Coxswains that saw all of their former responsibilities being eroded. There were some interesting exchanges between these more senior members and ex members who became Naval Police investigators.

As it was determined that Coxswains would be posted to patrol boats, mine sweepers and other minor war vessels it was decided that as part of our conversion we would be sent on navigation and in-depth first aid courses which would include suturing and administering injections. The culmination of this course was a period at sea as Second Officer of the Watch. I had the good fortune of being attached to HMAS Supply, (Fleet Oiler) and was at sea to replenish HMAS Melbourne when she was forcibly broken out of Cockatoo Dockyard.

My Master of Arms subsequently paid off replaced by the Factory CPOCOX as my boss who was later joined by a Sub Lieutenant Regulating Officer. Not long after I was posted, (evicted, shafted, under a big cloud), to the Naval Shore Patrol.

Curiously, the Naval Police at that stage did not take over the Shore Patrol until well into the seventies as Area Car 4. The Sydney Shore Patrol at that time was headed by a LCDR REG and assisted by a Master at Arms.

Unfortunately these affable old salts were in their career's *departure lounge* and I believe had they chose to remain they would have had a very positive influence on the new Coxswain Branch.

Each shift consisting of 24 hours duration comprised 1 POCOX, 2 LCOX, a Stocker as a driver and a mess man. Our duties entailed general policing and dress and conduct patrols and, the apprehension of absentees. Indeed all absentees were vigorously pursued.

Each vehicle was fitted with a Police radio so therefore we enjoyed an excellent liaison with the New South Wales Police. Victoria had a similar arrangement.

1970 saw the height of the Vietnam War US R&R activities in Australia. In NSW the Naval Shore Patrol was responsible for all US Servicemen on R&R. This was a particularly interesting era; this is where we were initially exposed to drugs on a large scale. Almost all R&R absentees or other US offenders that we took into custody were in possession of some type of drug.

We were also responsible for the safe custody and transporting all US R&R offenders for dispatch by air to the United States. I can recall several instances of having to return to the airport after an offender had caused disruption to a flight forcing it to return.

Once particular instance I can vividly recall is taking into custody an extremely large African American Marine who quite loudly and menacingly proclaimed that he was not getting into any *ve-hicle* with any "*Swab Jockey*".

Shore Patrol was a good posting; we were housed in the Gunnery Instructional Centre in Cowper Wharf Road Woolloomooloo. Immediately to the rear of the building was the Tilbury Hotel, one block towards the city was the Woolloomooloo Bay Hotel, the famous "Rockers", and we were minutes from the 'Cross'.

Every morning we attended the main Police cells to ascertain if any sailors were held and advised their ships accordingly, often the Police would release them into our custody to return them to their ships thus minimising the risk of them further offending.

Later that year I was moved, (routinely), to the HMAS Kuttabul Police Office under the control of a tremendous old salt of a Chief Coxswain who delighted in telling junior officers who offended him that he had more ships sunk from under him than they had served in.

I joined HMAS Anzac in 1971 as a Leading Coxswain and later promoted to Petty Officer then joining the “*Vung Tau Ferry*”, then HMAS Creswell and finally HMAS Melbourne. During those years, 1971-1975 I witnessed the maturing of the Coxswain Branch, a lot of new fresh faces entered the Branch, a younger and keener group of men, the memories of the “Crushers” faded.

The Branch was accepted as the key administrative and disciplinary branch and was widely respected. The Naval Police rightly assumed the role as **the** Police agency for the Navy and it provided the Navy with a high level of protection and professional general policing.

During this time many changes to the RAN took place, we lost HMAS Sydney, and the future of the Fleet Arm looked far from healthy. We saw the reintroduction of the Warrant Officer Rank. Amongst the first of the new warrant officers were several Coxswains thus reflecting the importance of the branch to the RAN.

Warrant Officers of certain categories continued to go to sea in destroyers and escorts; however, the fundamental aspect that rigidly and steadfastly remained was that the **Chief Coxswain was the leader of the lower deck.**

This tradition goes back to the birth of the RAN and even further in it's parent, the Royal Navy.

In January 1975 I transferred to the Naval Police thus leaving behind six years of perhaps not the happiest of my career. I immediately enjoyed every aspect of my new branch; I served in mundane security postings at out of the way establishments that I never heard of in the fleet, and the Garden Island Dock Gates, the hub of Naval Police activity, there was always something happening at the gates.

I really enjoyed service at RAAF Kingswood where Naval Police were responsible for security and general policing of the RAAF establishment. This is where I learnt what **RAAF** really meant: - **Rarely Active After Four!**

However until being promoted to Sergeant I served mainly in all of the mobile patrols, save for a short period of time I worked in day work investigations as a constable. Area Car 2, the Investigation car was the predominant vehicle I served in both as the driver and as i/c.

The Naval Police Investigation Branch was my targeted objective. It was at the time very cliquy and hard to get into, but with good reason. The Branch was an extremely good branch with experienced and dedicated investigators, many of the investigations carried out within the Branch would have been conducted by seasoned senior detectives if conducted in a civilian arena.

The Branch exuded professionalism, capability and confidence and was well respected by state and federal counterparts and agencies. To support this supposition please consider that all major investigations requiring in-depth and specialist expertise any where, either within Australia or overseas were conducted by East Australia Area (Naval Support Command) investigators.

Not only sailors were in the sphere of this branch, civilians and officers were also part and parcel of the scope of this branch, and not on an irregular basis. (Perhaps this was the reason for their ultimate demise).

Our powers of search and arrest were remarkable and the envy of many state and federal agencies not to mention the other two services. One would think that in today's current climate with heightened security and threat such powers would be invaluable.

Having officers of our own branch who were Naval Policemen themselves seemed to thwart in most instances outside interference from the "White Hat" Navy. However, the extent of such "*thwarting*" will never be known and how far they themselves were prepared to push is a matter of conjecture.

In the 'big picture' we were there with a strong presence, very capable and we provided the RAN with an extremely high level of protection. It is my view that we were under utilized in many areas, this was either through politics or people with influence not knowing about us.

I achieved my objective in 1980 upon being promoted Sergeant. Not long after this I was in Canberra, the Supply Officer Cash at Navy Office had cashed up his safe and absconded with over \$50000, he also left a trail of fraudulent false accounting, forgery and other matters totaling over \$30000.

The Warrant Officer in charge of the Investigation Branch was a man of vision, he saw that the investigation of drug offences was fragmented, too many people were involved thus resulting in many trends and directions being missed.

He sought and received approval to establish a dedicated drug squad, Christmas arrived early for me that year, I was chosen to set up and manage this squad which I did for over two years.

Over the period of time that I was in the branch or attached to it as part of the Investigation Car team I observed a genuine respect from other areas of the RAN, both service and civilian for the Branch. It was very pleasing when calling upon a Commanding Officer of either a ship or establishment to be received with genuine respect and interest.

Commanding Officers would cordially receive us, explain to us what the problem was or listened to us with our requests with interest and respect; they welcomed our advice and guidance in matters and afforded maximum cooperation. Woe betides some junior officer down the chain of command who dared interfere.

On the other hand some civilians, particularly in the more senior areas away from Garden Island were slightly cooler towards us, ostensibly I think because they resented our powers and didn't like us mere sailors, (that's what we really were), encroaching upon their bureaucratic turf. But on the whole they were ok.

One particular investigation that comes to mind in this respect was at the Naval Stores Centre at Zetland. We received information concerning the trafficking of drugs by civilians working therein and also involving tow truck operators. This seemed to us as a natural part of our patch of dirt and we also looked forward to working with the NSW Police which would have been a natural process.

However the Area Secretary, the Admirals civilian equivalent, had other ideas and despite our protestations directed that we hand the matter over to the Federal Police, when we did so they accepted the investigation with the minimum of enthusiasm. After all they were concerned with importation and the big fish.

Soon after, mainly because of lack of attention by the AFP, as I said our matter was not a priority for them, the investigation went pear shape and informants compromised, therefore we managed to wrest the investigation back, but with strict limitations on the surveillance of civilian residences.

The best result we could obtain, and it was not a good result was six civilians were arrested, two by the NSW Police and four by Naval Police. We could not really get to the heart of the matter due to the many onerous restrictions placed upon us.

It is perhaps now timely to make mention of some of the more serious investigations that were on our books during that era, of course I cannot remember all of them and there were many more I was not privileged to know about.

However here are a few samples,

- The investigation into the explosion at RANAD Newington resulting in the death of two civilians,
- The Arson at HMAS Albatross,
- The HMAS Adroit piracy investigation,
- The Navy Office Cash Office theft and fraud,
- The HMAS Moreton living out allowance fraud,
- The HMAS Kuttabul clothing store theft and fraud,
- The theft, use and supply of cocaine, pethedine and morphine by the Senior Medical Officer at HMAS Albatross,

- The theft of large quantities of boat repair stores and equipment by senior Dockyard Officers.
- We also assisted the Homicide Squad in their investigations into the murder of the Greek Consul. In this matter there were distinct naval connections, albeit a foreign navy.

Some of those investigations were conducted in conjunction with State, ACT, or Federal Police namely the RANAD explosion, the Arson at Albatross and the Cash Office theft, but neither agency was subordinate to any other.

In relation to the Drug Squad, we enjoyed a pleasing level of success and obtained some very good results. Our investigations were not limited to small amounts of cannabis but a wide range of material. LSD, amphetamines, cocaine, hashish, some heroin, mescaline and of course prescribed and licit drugs.

The theft and supply of licit cocaine, pethedine and morphine by a senior medical officer caused quite a bit of concern. This doctor, a LCDR, was the Senior Medical Officer at the HMAS Albatross Hospital. He obtained these drugs from a licit supply prescribed for a terminally ill patient under his care and he shared them with his girlfriend, nearly half his age.

When the patient died, earlier than expected, the doctor panicked and to make up the shortfall in cocaine that he was required to return to stores he adulterated the remainder to the extent of 70% rock salt. This would have been fatal to anyone else who was administered it.

We in the Drug Squad traveled extensively, Albatross, Creswell, Canberra, Adelaide (city not ship) and worked under cover in Cairns. We also sent investigators to RAAF Butterworth in Malaysia.

We became used to knocking on doors around 0430 in company with state police in possession of search warrants obtained on our behalf, and we also went with them in raids and visits to some of the more notorious night spots in and around Sydney and Canberra.

By working with state police we increased our expertise and liaison. Many, indeed most, of our investigations resulted in the mutual exchange of information and we were able to pass on reliable intelligence to them, in turn they were happy to share information with us.

I would like to think that we gave them a few ideas as well; I can recall pointing out to a junior NSW Police officer the importance of photo albums. Quite often when we questioned a sailor about his/her involvement with drugs they would deny it, however when we grabbed their photo album, which usually occupied pride of place, there they were, all smiles, puffing, sucking smoking away to their little hearts content. Photo albums usually opened up further directions of inquiries.

Often we conducted joint operations which resulted in Naval personnel being handled in-house thus negating the issue of criminal records for our sailors. In these instances the civil police handled the civilians involved and we looked after our own.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of our powers of search under NER 101 is that we would arrive on a ship or establishment at any time of the day, collect the suspect(s)/target(s) and commence an immediate search. This often produced very good results and caught the suspects off guard. We hit hard and often and invariably left them bewildered.

It should be pointed out that in most of those instances Commanding Officers were aware that some form of action was imminent as they originally requested the investigation. However under certain circumstances this was not possible, but we seldom wore any flack, most Commanding Officers understood.

These raids were not confined to Naval Personnel, many were conducted in and upon non commissioned establishments and office blocks and in those instances we rarely informed those responsible for the area until after we acted.

I make no secret of the fact that NER 101 was the most useful working tool that we had at our disposal. It usually nullified immediately, any form of obstruction we were confronted with, no matter from where it came from.

Perhaps the most distasteful event of that era, in my opinion, was the relegation of Constables to the Junior Sailors Mess. Regrettably the strongest push in this direction seemed to come from within the Branch.

There may have been other issues behind this, such as the amalgamation of the Chief Petty Officers Mess with the Petty Officers Mess; coincidentally this was about the same time.

However when the Regulating Branch merged with the Coxswains Branch, Leading Coxswains messed in accordance with their rank, however they were an integral part of the Ship's Company and we fitted in.

In my view the situation with Constables was entirely different, they were never integral parts of a Ship's Company, except in certain circumstances, particularly at Garden Island, and they should have been kept separate.

There was a suggestion of a Naval Police Mess utilizing the former Petty Officers Mess at HMAS Kuttabul. This suggestion never got off the ground.

At this time the President of the Petty Officers Mess was a Senior Constable and he was castigated when he expended the mess funds within the mess prior to its amalgamation with the CPO's Mess. However it should be remembered that the majority of the mess membership were Naval Police and living in Naval Police, predominately Constables, were significant contributors to mess funds.

One of the most positive decisions of that era was the recruitment of fifty recruits from the United Kingdom. With very few exceptions they were a great bunch of blokes, they fitted in well and made significant contributions to the Branch. Many good friendships were made and remain.

In early 1983 I could see the writing on the wall, in less than 18 months I would have been in the promotion zone for Warrant Officer and it was indicated to me that shift work Station Warrant Officer was probably the future for me.

In July of that year I was gone. From about October 1983, when I got up and started to seriously look for work until April 1985 I did not have any worthwhile employment, I tried to sell Real Estate, failed miserably, worked as a chauffer/gofer/minder for the PNG Consulate, bad move, and in 1984 I joined the Army Reserve.

For the next eight and a half years I was a member of the 1<sup>st</sup> Military Police Company, a Regular Army Field Force unit that supported the Brigades, that is the "*arse in the grass*" fighting men in the front line, not the starched polyester MP'S that drive around in smart cars.

It was in that MP Company that I did the DFDA Course. To say I was astounded is an under-statement.

After the course I had a long discussion with the RSM (Regimental Sergeant – WO1), who delivered the course. He attended preliminary meetings and instructions with members of the other services; he recalled some very interesting exchanges between Naval Police Warrant Officers and the Legal Officers that were responsible for the implementation of this legislation. Following that I got onto the phone to one of those Warrant Officers.

Now, then and there it appeared to me that those behind the implementation of this new act either had no knowledge of the powers of Naval Police, or deliberately chose to ignore them. To the Naval Police, in my view, this legislation was insulting and it undermined all that we had previously done and achieved, and I believe that was an integral intention, a hidden agenda, of those behind the implementation of the legislation; to put us in our place.

What about NER 101? The rules of Statutory Interpretation state that under the doctrine of precedence the older Act has precedence over following acts unless they are revoked or altered by statute. From what I understand, this has not happened and NER 101 should be still in force, is it?

This is about the end of my perspective for this era. It would seem to me that the Navy of today has moved 180° from that direction, it appears that the RAN does not want policing or enforcement it wants administration closely controlled, and if that's what they want in modern times, so be it.

Finally, looking back on that era, there was nothing that I did prior to 1975 that I could fall back on to equip me for future meaningful employment. After I joined the Naval Police and particularly after I became an investigator the situation changed.

My experience as a senior naval police investigator became a very strong factor in gaining employment as the Queensland Security Manager for David Jones Limited, a position I held for eleven and a half years. It also stood me in good stead for future high level security management employment.

Additionally, Griffith University granted me fifty credit points for my degree in Criminology and Criminal Justice based on courses and experience in the ***Naval Police***. This also opened the door for me to be admitted as a Student at Law with the Barristers Board of Queensland. (Unfortunately a series of strokes I suffered in 1999 ended my academic progression).

To say I am indebted to the Naval Police would be an under statement. This service was the best eight years of my twenty and in comparing my experience with the Army the professionalism of the Naval Police, of that era, is unequalled.

#### **FOOTNOTE**

I have not made mention of females in this perspective, I had very little contact with ladies in the Regulating Branch, WRAN Regulators, and from memory I only worked with a female POCOX on one short occasion.

I apologise if I have offended any female policeman/Coxswain/NPC.