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24th April 2000

The Secretary
Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600.

Dear Sir or Madam,

TOWARDS AN AUSTRALIAN COASTGUARD

I write in response to the call for submissions concerning Coastwatch and particularly in regard to the issue of the need for a specifically formed coastguard. These views come from my service in the RAN and RAN Reserve as a Clearance Diving Officer and specialist in mine warfare.

I first became actively engaged in my specialised operational service in 1959 and quickly became aware that, when an activity is low on a long list of other calls upon a bureaucracy's expenditure, inadequate funds are forthcoming, to even put lives at risk. Soon after I entered this world, the RAN both:

- purchased six "Ton" class minesweepers as the 16th Minesweeping Squadron, and
- committed to coastal patrol operations with the construction of two classes of patrol boat and formed these into at least two operating squadrons and the dedicated craft of an effective RANR.

What is relevant to today's consideration is that these demanding tasks, plus the operation of survey vessels and the Mobile Clearance Diving Team and its vessels were performed by the staff of HMAS Waterhen, which then comprised four officers, one senior public servant (the communications & operations officer) and about 20 sailors, many of whom were senior sailors. This structure was able to support, amongst many other tasks, the minesweepers deployment to clearance operations in PNG and to Malaysian Confrontation operations as well as a number of specialised operations by patrol boats.

It was at this time that I became convinced that there was a need for a specialised coastguard, for the effectiveness of that establishment was greatly superior to any other RAN command structure that I had experienced with its total emphasis on meeting operational needs.

Having watched the number of ships, squadrons and tasks reduce and the command bureaucracy expand exponentially in these areas of service, I am even more convinced of that need.

Naturally, the notion is rejected by a naval command structure, which sees strength in size, as do all Canberra based establishments. Further, the existence of the smaller vessels inherent in “green water” tactics and tasks gives a substantial command and control experience to people at early and intermediate stages of their careers. But the ultimate concern of all senior people in the navy is clearly that of “blue water” strategies and operations performed by the fleet and, quite properly, all considerations of policy start and end to the benefit of the fleet. It was once common practice, for instance, for patrol craft to exercise fleet formation drills, not a feature of their operational requirement.

Consider the following strategic issue. RAN mine countermeasures are based in Port Jackson which, because of its configuration and deep leaf mould and silt bottom, is a difficult mine countermeasures environment. Yet an analysis of port traffic clearly shows that Port Jackson is basically irrelevant to the survival of industry and commerce of New South Wales in time of threat. Rather, Botany Bay, with its hard sand bottom and through which passes all strategic cargoes will be desperate for a naval presence, especially in the form of security patrols and mine countermeasures in the face of any threat.

Whilst the fleet base is in Port Jackson, however, it cannot be expected that an argument to shift the patrolling and mine countermeasures functions to Botany Bay could prevail – this is the very nature of bureaucracy.

My proposition is, therefore, that if we as a nation want our inshore waters to be properly protected, we must provide a management structure which is dedicated to that purpose on a permanently unambiguous basis, i.e. where the career of all so engaged depends only upon the success of that task.

Considerable economies emerge from taking a firm and comprehensive approach to such a strategy -

- Patrol boats do not have to be miniature warships – the Icelanders successfully protected their fish stocks with trawlers (around 20 crew) facing state of the art frigates (around 300 crew). During Confrontation patrols, we found that a 2 inch rocket was our most useful armament and that it did not much matter which fitted weapons were used provided that all rounds were tracer.
- Crews do not have to change every two years – a hangover from the days of serving on distant stations from the UK. Indeed, why do individuals have to change at all if the service suits them?

- Two crews per vessel in the style of merchant vessel crewing can ensure the maximum availability of capital assets, whilst giving time for leave, individual initiative in career planning and training.
- There is no need for the depth of rank structure which the services have brought with them from the past – a career and flat rank structure appropriate to small vessels and perhaps resembling that of our police forces would be more appropriate. Similarly, retirement ages, family removals and other costly conditions of service might be more closely aligned to modern community standards.
- Training in maritime subjects can readily be provided from existing commercial sources. The only need for specialised training would be basic induction and weapons training with some specialised command training for those called upon to exercise responsibilities associated with the exercise of sovereignty.
- Specialised departmental authority issues can be managed if the officers of patrolling craft have, for the duration of their patrol, delegated authority to act as special constables; and,
- To cover the needs of response to a national emergency or threat to national sovereignty, members of this force should be contracted, in writing, to be available to be deployed as and when required to meet that crisis, during which occasion they forgo the normal employment protections to which they are otherwise entitled.

I emphasise that my long time thinking on this issue has given me the belief that a whole-hearted approach to forming such a command must be taken if it is to survive at all. In addition to the normal overseas examples of operating offshore sovereignty patrols, safety of life at sea and operating and maintaining navigational aids, Australians should take a comprehensive approach and place all “green water” activity, including naval hydrography and mine countermeasures and diving within this new command. Naturally, an integrated air wing must be included. The new structure must stand apart from all other departments on any but “arms- length” arrangements at least until it has formed its own culture and character.

Inevitably, within the bureaucracy, this proposition will not be argued on its merits but on issues relating to bureaucratic ownership and structure. Regrettably here my experience is of national commercial bodies where issues of this type are secondary to outcomes and I am therefore less able to comment on how the proposed department might be organised. I simplistically conceive of a small corporate centre, available to the minister responsible, with a situation reporting and modern communications capability connecting all forces and other interested parties. Future planning might be conducted on a rational basis such as by operations research – possibly using contracted outsourcing to offer the options available.

Otherwise, perhaps the organisation could be one of discrete geographic commands with one dominant command, (e.g. the north western command), also responsible for operational command and control, training and logistics. However organised, administrative overheads should not exceed those normal in Australian policing operations.

I personally see the RAN as benefiting from the ability to concentrate upon its main game by hiving off its ancillary operations. This is the experience of many modern organisations which have turned their backs on the previously popular strategy of diversification. I repeat that I do not imagine that those now in power will see it in that light.

We must, as a nation, be realistic about this and meet the demands of our time regardless of how things have been done back into antiquity and even in the recent past. I am reminded that much of the fighting tradition of the navy (which is still my passion) first came from two cavalry officers – Admirals Blake and Monk - who brought their skills and experience to re-establish and invigorate a declining force.

When a private citizen can purchase a Russian submarine in what seems to be reasonable condition to be an exhibit in a museum, who knows what resources are pitted against our laws. The “green water” tasks of a coastguard must be brought to the highest level of effectiveness by those whose future depends upon their success, as must the “blue water”, capital-intensive roles of the RAN.

And for once, let us find an Australian answer to this Australian problem and forgo the expense of sending a bunch of people to swan around the world, looking at other nation’s work, and finding fatal compromises thereby. We had the confidence to make our own decisions 100 years ago – on this occasion let us rediscover that resolve.

I trust that these thoughts contribute to your committee’s considerations.

Yours sincerely,

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Commander, RANR (Retd)