

AUSTRALIAN COASTGUARD

A PROPOSAL

by William H. Watson

1. Introduction

I originally suggested the formation of a fully operational Australian Coastguard along the lines of the semi-military United States Coast Guard in a letter published by *The Australian* newspaper about thirty years ago during the Vietnam moratorium demonstrations when the youth of the nation clashed with the Government's policy of support for the war and, in particular, with its use of conscripts.

It was my contention then, as it is now, that a properly armed and equipped Coastguard would be more acceptable to the public as an avenue for training of volunteers who would otherwise remain on unemployment lists and for conscription in times of conflict. It would also provide a disciplinary basis for youth which would stand them in good stead throughout life.

A properly organised Coastguard is not only a maritime police force, it also serves as an air-sea rescue service and from that aspect alone it is a very desirable instrumentality. The present locally-funded rescue services perform an admirable task, but their resources are plainly not up to the increasing demands placed upon them by our expanding population.

A country with a coastline of 37,000 Kms needs adequate protection against smugglers, illegal immigrants and any potential foe. That protection has been lacking throughout Australia's history, as evidenced recently by the influx of "boat people" which I believe Coastwatch and the Navy are hard-pressed to stem. As we approach the nation's centenary and enter a new millennium, now is the time to establish a suitable maritime perimeter protector force and rescue service.

2. Management

During peacetime I envisage our Coastguard being under the supervision of the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department through the Minister for Justice and Customs as the enforcement arm of the Australian Customs Service and, as required, of the Department of Immigration. In times of armed conflict its control would be seconded to the Defence Department.

I have recommended elsewhere the formation of an Australian Commission on Public Security ("ACOPS") comprising a panel of Commissioners to oversee such agencies as the Australian Federal Police, Australian Protective Service, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, Australian Customs Service and a proposed national Highway Patrol - all of which could be combined under a single departmental banner. A peacetime Australian Coastguard logically would fall into the same category. The Commissioners would include the heads of the instrumentalities involved and a half and half mix of Federal and State politicians, the chairman being the Commonwealth Attorney-General or Minister for Justice.

The Coastguard would be a combined maritime/aviation service and, as such, should have its own unique internal hierarchical structure, avoiding military titles as much as possible. The following ten-rank scheme is suggested: Superintendent (*ex officio* an ACOPS Commissioner), Commandant, Chief Officer, First Officer, Observer/Pilot Officer (maritime/aviation), Warrant Officer, Quartermaster, Sub-Officer, Mariner/Airguard (maritime/aviation) 1st class, Mariner/Airguard (maritime/aviation) 2nd class. Commodore and Captain could be used for the top echelon but I favour a totally different terminology from that used in other services.

3. Co-operation

It is expected that the Coastguard will work in close conjunction with all State and Federal law enforcement bodies and military forces, and that they will render every assistance to each other for their mutual benefit in protecting the Australian community, including shared use of facilities where appropriate.

4. Hardware

a. Transportation

Large fast armed patrol cutters - probably best designated as "Corvettes" - with ocean-going capability would be based strategically around the coastline - not necessarily just in capital city ports but also at rapid response bases in such places as Derby, Exmouth, Geraldton, Esperance, Port Lincoln, Georgetown, Jervis Bay, Port Macquarie, Mackay, Cooktown and Weipa. They would be supplemented by modern fixed-wing reconnaissance aircraft and high-speed turbo-helicopters with both attack and rescue capability operating from land stations distributed similarly to the suggested maritime bases.

It is recommended that one or two helicopter carriers be acquired to facilitate long distance missions. A complement of twenty vessels plus a similar number of helicopters and a dozen fixed-wing aircraft is considered necessary for the service to be effective.

b. Armament

Corvettes, carriers and all aircraft should be armed with heavy calibre rapid-fire machine guns (rotary barrel "Gatling" type should be considered) with anti-aircraft/ship-to-ship missile-mounting capability in case of future need. Corvettes and helicopter carriers should also be equipped with light anti-ship guns, say around 75mm calibre.

5. Uniforms & Insignia

Light tan uniforms with blue caps (and ties for dress wear) and green insignia to clearly differentiate the Coastguard from the military services are recommended. Rank insignia could be in nautical/air force style as follows: Superintendent - broad ring; Commandant - 3 medium rings; Chief Officer - 2 medium rings, narrow ring between; First Officer - 2 medium rings; Observer/Pilot Officer - medium ring; Warrant Officer - narrow ring; Quartermaster - coat-of-arms in wattle wreath; Sub-Officer - coat-of-arms; Mariner/Airguard 1st class - chevron.

6. Personnel

Initially officers will need to be transferred from the Navy and the Air Force to get the Coastguard “up and running”, but I believe that many unemployed people and others likely to reject the idea of military service will be willing to sign on for the Coastguard - especially if it can be demonstrated that it will serve as a humanitarian rescue service as well as a maritime interdiction “police force”. A complement of several hundred personnel is regarded as sufficient to run the organisation efficiently.

7. Conclusion

I sincerely hope and trust that the Australian Government will realise that an Australian Coastguard is a necessity to protect our country’s coastline and its inhabitants and that such a service will be instigated as soon as possible as a matter of urgency.

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