

**SENATE FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE  
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**INQUIRY INTO RECRUITMENT & RETENTION  
OF DEFENCE PERSONNEL**

**SUBMISSION**

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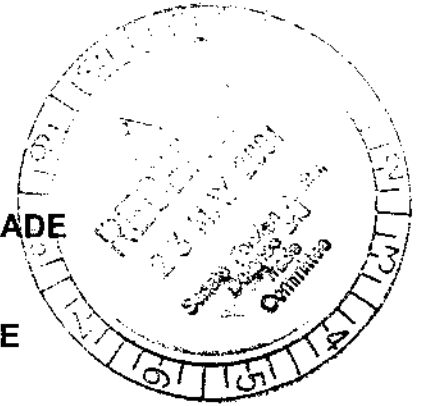
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**SUBMISSION TO THE  
SENATE FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE  
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**EFFECTIVENESS OF RECRUITMENT FOR THE  
AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE**

**By Commander R. E. Nelson RANR**

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**Abstract**

In recent years there have been significant changes to Australian Defence Force (ADF) recruiting procedures. The implementation of these changes has seen dramatic reductions in the effectiveness of ADF recruitment and as such a significant waste of resources. Whilst there are many factors that have played a part in this almost all can trace their origin to the Defence Reform Program (DRP). The DRP has resulted in a number of positive changes for the ADF but in some functions such as recruiting the outcome has been disappointing, to say the least.

Across the ADF, DRP set out to make enhancements in procedures and to facilitate cultural changes aimed at improving the way Defence personnel went about their business. In the most part it appeared that senior management was selected and indeed promoted on their devotion to DRP principles. Whilst this approach no doubt holds some advantages for implementation, the danger is that senior management will be blinded when it comes to recognising that some functions simply should not be implemented in accordance with their view on DRP. Unfortunately once senior management decides on and commences of a program of change there seems to be an all-pervading fear of revisiting or reviewing these changes. Those who are charged to set such changes in place are accused of being recalcitrant when implementation problems are raised with senior management and there is a complete refusal to reconsider the basic premises that underpin the program of change.

The sad fact is that ADF recruiting is in a state of turmoil and the program of change has actually caused a significant deterioration in the effectiveness of ADF recruiting activities. There appears to be little evidence of a willingness to look at why this situation has arisen, take responsibility for it and implement changes that will have to reverse some of the decisions made over the last few years.

**Background**

I was appointed as the Director of Navy Recruiting in February 1996 and held that position until it was disestablished in mid 1997. Prior to this I was the Officer in Charge of the ADF Recruiting Unit Melbourne and before this I was responsible for Navy's workforce planning.

I ceased full time service in April 1998 and commenced an appointment with the University of Newcastle where I am still employed. I completed a short period of reserve service in January and so my appreciation of the recruiting situation has been refreshed. I have an understanding of the problems being experienced in Navy

recruiting and consider that my observations and experiences are relevant to the resolution of the issues currently manifesting themselves.

This submission will concentrate almost exclusively on Navy recruiting, as this is my area of experience. However, the underlying principles of the arguments hold true for the rest of ADF recruiting.

### **Reality Check**

Traditionally Navy has had recruiting problems. However, in 1997 and most of 1998 Navy achieved full General Entry (GE) recruiting targets, stand fast a handful of musicians and one or two others. This was despite the hard to get categories having a higher target than was the case in previous years. The situation now is that significant shortfalls are being experienced in the hard to get categories and even in some of the categories where shortfalls were not normal pre 1997. Changes in the recruiting environment have not been sufficient to explain such a variation in Navy recruiting and any contention that the ADF was absent from advertising in the market place in previous years thus causing the down turn is pure nonsense. The down turn has resulted from management changes set in place.

The changes that have been set in place have resulted in a significant drop in recruitment, an equally significant increase in advertising spend and in my observation a collapse in the morale and effectiveness of recruiting staff. In the case of Navy, over a very short period recruiting has fallen to arguably the worst levels in my memory. This reduction in achievement has seen a very expensive advertising campaign that has clearly not increased recruiting levels. Even worse is the likelihood that the necessary link between advertising and field operations has been largely lost.

Recruiting relies strongly on the quality of recruiters, in January I was disappointed to learn that a recruiting vacancy in mid 2001 had not at that time attracted any volunteers. This speaks volumes for the perception of sailors towards recruiting. I sincerely hope this is a one off situation but I fear it is not. As part of my current duties with the University of Newcastle I attend a large number of careers markets. The morale of those I meet in general is quite low because they are unhappy with the concept of a commercialised recruiting organisation. An unhappy recruiter will not be effective.

The reality is that Navy recruiting is in a poor state and this has occurred since mid 1998. The changes in community attitudes or economic factors have not been sufficient to cause this sort of reversal, therefore, it must be as a result of changes in processes, management and approach. The current situation has been unintended but nonetheless was entirely avoidable. Perhaps it is opportune to take a fresh look at recruiting and start with question of what is recruiting?

### **What is recruiting?**

Recruiting is the process of raising awareness about Navy Careers and converting this interest into enlistments to meet both the needs of the Navy and the enlistee. The entire process clearly has to be integrated in that field recruiters must be able to cope with the number of inquiries they receive and advertising must be placed to ensure sufficient time is allowed for inquiries to be processed to meet enlistment dates. There is a danger that the sub processes can be seen as process in their own right and this is the manner in which DRP sought to reorganise the management of ADF recruiting. Instead of having someone responsible for Navy recruiting it was

decided to have someone responsible for advertising for all ADF recruiting thus allowing a breakdown in the overall management of the process.

The bottom line is if Navy recruiting is not a designated officer's job there is an inappropriate structure in place. Further this officer must appreciate that recruiting is the process as outlined above and feel they are charged with the management of the entire process.

## **Factors Affecting the Process**

### **The Recruiter**

Because the recruiting process is all about kindling an interest and developing commitment the field recruiter is the key to successful recruiting. DRP failed to recognise this and set in place processes and procedures that reduced and delayed an inquirers contact with a recruiter. The following are some aspects essential to the management of recruiters.

#### **Initial Contact**

There is a perception that a significant percentage of young Australians are keen to enlist in the Navy or one of the other services. This is simply not true. There are those who have made up their mind a tender young age to join the Navy and these people will actively seek out a recruiter and go through the process as soon as they can. However, in the majority of cases those who inquire are tentative, seeking almost reassurance and wanting to talk to someone in the Navy about the Navy. The system back in 1997 was that such an inquirer would make direct contact with a Navy recruiter and this recruiter would make an appointment on the spot for a face to face meeting. The recruiter could then spend some time with the applicant explaining life in the Navy. The inquirer now has a "friend" or "ally" in what they see to be the daunting, difficult and lengthy enlistment process.

Today young people contact a call centre and are sent information. Indeed they are followed up if they do not make contact again. This service is quite satisfactory for those with a penchant to enlist but those who are looking for and need the personal approach will be left wanting perhaps even alienated. This first encounter I fear may be detrimental for someone who is unsure of the demands of a career in the Navy. The Navy like the other services demands a commitment from their people and potential applicants understand this albeit their appreciation of exactly what such demands will encompass are still unclear. They in turn want to feel like the Navy wants them and getting through to a call centre will be seen for what it is an impersonal approach designed to simply get the information out. What should happen is that a valuable relationship must be developed and nurtured with an individual recruiter from the very first contact. This is not to say that call centre staff are not dedicated or are not professional. The simple fact is that they are not able to talk to young people about the Navy in a fashion expected by the inquirer and are unable to offer the personalised follow up that the local recruiter can.

#### **High Quality Personnel**

Recruiters need to be high quality people dedicated to recruiting and having a sound understanding of the processes involved. Recruiters must be properly screened and monitored. During my tenure as DNR it was the primary duty of the Deputy Director of Navy Recruiting to coordinate the selection of all recruiters. This selection process was discontinued, however, I understand that Navy is considering reintroducing it.

Recruiters need to be highly trained in their own specific service. This aspect of recruiting was being conducted well and I have no knowledge of this changing. Perhaps the committee would like to seek an assurance that recruiter training is still being conducted with a view to ensuring personnel develop presentational skills and that they are provided with a deep understanding of their service's unique requirements and job opportunities.

A common trap that recruiter's face is over emphasising the negatives. Often recruiters are criticised for painting too rosy a picture. When a recruiter is criticised it is always months after the event and the then inquirer, now often a recruit recollects what they feel the recruiter said. Inquirers do not usually understand what the Navy is and how it works, the impression they get is sketchy and based on a few short meetings. Recruiters then feel obliged to place additional emphasis on the negatives and no matter how well intentioned can easily be over estimated or misinterpreted by the inquirer or worse still seen as a "warning" by the recruiter. Whilst it is important to tell the full story it needs to be understood that sometimes recruiters can fall into the trap of seeing themselves as blockers and not assisters. The DRP changes have removed the management quality control measures that ensured this did not become a problem.

Essentially policy and management changes have resulted in a reduction in the quality control of recruiters and reduced ability to ensure recruiters focus on their primary purpose. They are not selected for recruiting duties by recruiters and have no Navy or brand reporting chain.

#### Empowerment

Recruiters need to be empowered to act as agents for the Navy, be pro active in their approach and appreciate their role as part of a broad team. Recruiters can be broadly split into two groups, field recruiters and processors. It is vitally important that field recruiters feel they are part of the broad team and that their role is critical to the success of Navy recruiting. The hierarchy of Navy recruiting must communicate face to face with a significant proportion of recruiters on a regular basis. In this way recruiters can be made aware of broader corporate strategies and how the organisation is performing overall.

Perhaps of even greater importance is the need to keep recruiters informed of the week to week success in meeting targets. During my tenure as DNR a computer-based system, GEMS, was developed that gave both a short and long-term perspective of target achievement. Prior to GEMS recruiting staff were not fully informed about progress towards meeting targets and call-ups were completed manually. Indeed senior management was not aware of the prognosis for intakes yet to be called up. With GEMS a forecast was available up to four months in advance and the status of applicants was given greater visibility. This meant that if an applicant was not going to be competitive for a particular category they could be advised and therefore had the opportunity to choose another category if they wished.

GEMS also provided other extremely beneficial information particularly for planning advertising campaigns, however, the system was discontinued in late 1998 and Navy recruiting reverted to the dated manual system.

#### Advertising

Advertising is an important aspect of recruiting. It must be targeted, controlled and planned. The advertisers often see their task completed once inquiries have been generated. In fact they tend to judge their success based on the number of inquiries they generate with scant regard to the actual outcome in terms of target achievement. GEMS in particular provided strategic intelligence at a time when advertising could be placed to achieve the desired outcome, however, as previously indicated this system has been discontinued.

It is worthwhile to think of recruiting as a process and that advertising produces the raw material. For example in a manufacturing process it would be regarded as gross stupidity to simply buy more raw materials and expect the output to increase. There are so many opportunities to increase the efficiency of the process and to ensure the process is working as it should. I fear that ADF recruiting has lost the capability to look at the recruiting process and make management decisions based on observed trends. Almost everyone is now an operator in the recruiting process with insufficient managers taking a broader strategic view.

There is a phenomenon in advertising that I call admiral ads. This is when the advertisement makers are too remote from the input of field recruiters and the target audience. The outcome is something that they, or the admirals, would like to hear and see. Phrases such as "if I won lotto I would still be there tomorrow" make the internal audience feel good. However, for someone who knows little about the service and is looking for a career they would more than likely see this as a bit over the top and even a turn off.

Advertising is one of the primary sources of inquiries, however, if too many inquiries are generated subsequent increased response times can be a real negative. People who respond to advertisements have friends and a poorly handled inquiry could well result in lost inquiries in future. In January the case load for recruiters was in the order of 600 this is more than three times the figure it should be. Also school visits and attendance at careers markets are arguably more effective in generating quality inquiries and must also take up a substantial proportion of a field recruiters time.

One of the important initiatives undertaken in 1996-7 was the analysis of advertising trends over the past five years. A number of issues became clear. TV advertising produces lots of inquiries, however the quality of these inquiries is poor and the subsequent conversion rate is very low. In early 1996 a television campaign was tried and found to provide less effective results overall despite the inquiry rate dramatically increasing. Another integrated strategy was introduced that actually improved the outcome and lead to the achievement of essentially full targets through 97 and 98.

This analysis or modelling of advertising also provided additional information such as if no advertising were to take place then the basic annual recruitment rate would still be somewhere between 950 to 1100. It also provided an insight into the effectiveness of certain media at different times of the year. Although the modelling was very broad and did not provide anything like exact answers it provided another dimension to help understand the advertising aspect of the overall recruiting process. This too has been discontinued and nothing set to work in its place to provide this sort of intelligence.

Again changes as a result of DRP have diluted the management of ADF recruiting to such a point that many of the important aspects of recruiting advertising can no longer be well controlled and monitored.

## **Recent Experience**

Since leaving the Navy I have had occasion to assist a number of young people in their attempts to enlist. In all cases there have been difficulties and delays that I consider have been excessive. A common thread in all situations has been the lack of assistance provided by recruiting staff or a lack of ownership of the process by recruiting staff. In fact in one instance the individual concerned was actively discouraged from making representations in respect of pursuing their plans for enlistment. Recruiters should see the inquirers as being the customer and thus have an obligation to assist them. It appeared to me in many instances that the organisation was only geared up to do processing and when the situation was other than standard, problems were encountered for which no one seemed to be willing to resolve.

Recently I had occasion to attend an enlistment ceremony. After the enlistment the new recruits were placed on a bus and sent the airport by themselves. One new recruit was given the mandatory paper work and they were left to their own devices to find the appropriate check in and get their boarding passes etc. This situation caused considerable unfavourable comment from parents and relatives of those just enlisted, which do doubt will reflect on their perception of the Navy and the message they pass on to others. It was considered that as the Navy had arranged transport and as the recruits were unaware of such arrangements it was inappropriate to expect these young people to be left to their own devices. To my mind it shows an organisation that is unable to meet some of what should be its fundamental obligations. There is either insufficient staff or poor management or as I would suspect, both.

## **The Way Ahead**

It is clear that Navy recruiting has regressed in the last few years. The fundamental reason can be sheeted home to the implementation of the DRP and the management changes resulting from this. It is now time to critically evaluate why this process has failed to deliver an effective recruiting organisation to the ADF. It is essential that that this evaluation does not become another excuse fest and identify the next attempt to overcome intrinsic problems in what is a defective concept.

The first thing that has to be done is to reinstate the individual directors of recruiting. These people are the brand managers as well as having operational control with a brief to manage all the different aspects of recruiting. If the performance of a function needs to be improved it makes absolutely no sense to have the various sub processes controlled by different managers. It is critical that all sub processes be integrated and coordinated to the greatest degree possible and that the management organisation be designed to facilitate this.

The policies underpinning recruiting must have some common threads and some of the most important features of an effective ADF recruiting are:

- a. Ensure the inquirer speaks with a uniformed recruiter at the first available opportunity.
- b. Ensure that recruiters are empowered and informed and staffed to carry out all the basic requirements of field recruiting. These include attending careers markets, schools visits and presenting at tertiary institutions.

- c. Develop or redevelop some key information systems able to provide a longer-range perspective on recruiting performance.
- d. Stop the Admiral ads and concentrate on a just enough and just in time approach to advertising, once sub paragraph c is set to work.
- e. Instigate a long-term workforce review process for recruiting. This process needs to assist in the implementation of the features described above and ultimately ensure a proper number of personnel to carry out the essential aspects of recruiting.

## **Conclusion**

The Navy recruiting organisation is far from healthy in stark contrast to the situation just a few years ago. Those making the decisions to embark on change had no experience with recruiting and paid little heed to the warnings given by those who did. In fact at times it seemed to me that the decisions were being taken in spite of the advice being given.

Surely it is now time to admit that these changes have failed and that a complete review of the recruiting process is needed. It is critical to include a plan for the implementation of all those factors listed above in such a review as a mere starting point. This does not mean that all aspects of the recent changes need to be reversed, centralised processing is an area, if set up with the basic principles of recruiting in mind, could work. I consider that aspects of the process are defective and that the management procedures are now hopelessly inadequate compared to what they were a few years ago.

It is difficult to touch on all the aspects of recruiting that I would like to. Unfortunately I have not been able to devote sufficient time to this submission due to pressures of my current employment. However, should further detail or information be required I will do what I can to provide it. Whilst the prose and structure of the submission may not be to standard I trust there is sufficient material to assist the committee in their deliberations

I would like to close with one thought. The most expensive recruiting organisation is one that does not work. By my rough calculations we must be spending significantly more on recruiting now than was the case pre DRP, and the main reason for DRP was to save money for distribution to the operational areas of the ADF. Now the operational areas have neither the money nor the recruits.

R. E. Nelson