

CHAPTER 9

INTEGRATION OF WOMEN IN THE NAVY

TERM of REFERENCE 1 (h)

This Chapter examines the content and timing of directives from the Government in relation to integration of female personnel into the Navy with particular reference to sea-going appointments, and the actions taken by the Government relating to the Board of Inquiry.

Background

9.1 The Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS) was formed in April 1941 in order to fill vacancies created when the Navy's male wireless telegraphists were sent on war duties overseas. After the war, the possibility of making the WRANS a part of the Permanent Naval Force was discussed but the matter was not resolved and in July 1948, the last WRAN was discharged. In July 1950, Federal Cabinet adopted a decision to re-introduce the Womens' Services at the beginning of 1951. The reconstituted WRANS became part of the PNF in 1959. Nevertheless the WRANS was a separate Service: its members were only employed in jobs that were regarded as suitable for women according to the prevailing norms at the time.

9.2 The next government directive came in 1974 when, during preparations for International Women's Year in 1975, the Prime Minister requested the Minister for Defence to consider the possible liberalisation of Defence's employment policies for women. A Working Party established by the Chiefs of Staff Committee in response to the Government's request recommended that:

*"women should be permitted to serve on active service at home or abroad, but not in a combatant role. Women should also hold the same command and disciplinary powers and responsibilities as men."*¹

1 HQADF submission, Committee Hansard, p. 1325.

Employment of Women at Sea

9.3 The Government endorsed the recommendations of the Working Party and during 1977, the Air Force, Army and Navy each released a new policy relating to the employment of women, the Air Force proceeding immediately with the integration of women into the Royal Australian Air Force. The Royal Australian Army abolished its separate Women's Corps in 1979 and in 1980, training for sea service was offered to the WRANS for the first time in the Royal Australian Navy. There were few women in the Permanent Naval Force at that time. In 1982, women represented 6.6 per cent (1033 members) of the PNF.²

9.4 The *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* came into effect on 1 August 1984. Section 43 of the Act provided that discrimination against a woman on the grounds of sex was not unlawful in connection with employment, engagement or appointment in the Defence Force in a position involving the performance of combat duty or combat-related duties. A Joint Press Release was issued on the effect the Sex Discrimination Act would have on the employment of women in the Defence Force by the Minister for Defence, the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the Status of Women and the Attorney General on 2 August 1984. It announced that:

*"The Government has decided to open more positions in the Defence Force to women, consistent with maintaining combat preparedness."*³

The Ministers' statement went on to say that some 17000 positions within the Defence Force would be made available to women on merit *"over a period of time and priority will be given to suitable applicants who are already on the waiting lists"*. According to Navy's submission to the Committee, prior to 1984, *"very few females were sent to sea in RAN ships. In that year the first female officers began full training cruises"*.⁴ The separate Women's Service of the Navy was not abolished until 1985.

9.5 A direct effect of the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* was that women who joined the Navy after June 1985 could be requested at any time to go to sea. The Department of Defence Annual Report for 1986-87 reveals that a major review of all ADF positions

2 RAN submission, Committee Hansard, p. 192.

3 Commonwealth of Australia, Press Release No 146/84, 2 August 1984.

4 RAN submission, Committee Hansard, p. 192.

was conducted in late 1986 and resulted in an increase in the number of positions open to women⁵. The Minister for Defence, the Hon. Kim Beazley, MP, stated in a Press Release dated 11 June 1987 that:

"Individual Services continue to examine restricted categories with a view to expanding the employment opportunities for women. This recently resulted in the opening of three sea-going officers' positions in non-combat ships, which will eventually result in female officers being able to compete for command and second-in-command of non-combatant ships."

9.6 It was not until 1987, however, that female officers were posted to sea for the first time. This initiative occurred at a time when, according to the Government White Paper on Defence released during that year, another review was *"underway to expand employment opportunities available to women in the ADP"*.⁶ The proposals put forward by the review were initially rejected and in 1989, drafts of revamped proposals were put to the then Minister for Defence Personnel, the Hon. Ros Kelly, MP.

9.7 On 30 May 1990, the Minister for Defence Science and Personnel announced that women would be allowed to serve in some combat-related positions:

*"I have taken this decision on the advice of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. It follows reviews by the three Services which recognised the need to attract and retain talented women by providing them with quality career opportunities."*⁷

The statement added that the Services would no longer use the section 43 exemption from combat-related duties that they had been granted under the Sex Discrimination Act. The Chiefs of Staff Committee would review the decision annually until it carried out a policy review in June 1993.

5 Department of Defence, *Defence Report 1986-87*, Canberra, AGPS, 1987.

6 Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia 1987*, Canberra, AGPS, 1987.

7 Minister for Defence Science and Personnel, *Press Release*, 30 May 1990.

Women in the Navy - some statistics

9.8 When the decision to allow women to serve in combat related positions in April-May 1990, was announced, there were 33 women officers and sailors serving at sea. The numbers have increased rapidly since then so that, during 1991, 95 women served on Navy ships, 140 during 1992. The number reached 175 at the end of 1993. In 1982, women represented 6.6 percent of the Permanent Naval Force. This percentage had doubled in just over 10 years to 12.5 per cent of the PNF at the time of Navy's submission to the Committee in November 1993. Women can now apply for 99 per cent of available positions in Navy.⁸

Personnel Serving at Sea in May ⁹

YEAR	MALES	FEMALES	TOTAL
1990	4734	33	4767
1991	4494	95	4589
1992	4298	140	4438
1993	4386	175	4561

9.9 The decision to allow women to go to sea caused considerable concern among some serving members of the Navy. Consultations with senior sailors as part of *"Project Mainstay"*, a review of the role and aspirations of senior sailors in the RAN conducted in June 1990, revealed that the issue of women at sea was a major concern to senior sailors. The report of the review team included a chapter on *"Equal Opportunity and Women at Sea"* in order to address those concerns and it recommended a *"slow and steady as she goes approach to further implementation"* of the policy of employing women at sea¹⁰. However, the report found that there was

8 HQADF submission, Committee Hansard, p. 1327.

9 Minute dated 17 August 1994 from RADM C.J. Oxenbould to Committee Secretary.

10 Letter from CAPT B.Robertson to Committee Secretary 2 March 1994, (*Project Mainstay*) p. 176.

a perception that sea postings for females were not to be taken seriously and added that:

*"until such time as female billets at sea are increased, the credibility of employing women at sea will come under scrutiny."*¹¹

9.10 Navy told the Committee that *"Project Mainstay's recommendations relating to this chapter (chapter 2, 'Women at sea') were all implemented"*.¹² The Chief of Naval Staff released *"CNS Protocols on the Employment of Women in the RAN"* (15 February 1991) and an instruction that Mixed Gender Awareness training was to be incorporated in all leadership and management courses. In July 1991, a Defence Instruction entitled *"Sexual Assault"* (DI(N) PERS 40-15) was promulgated.

9.11 In December 1992, the Minister announced that, on the advice of the Chief of the Defence Force, a large number of combat positions would be opened to women. For the Navy, the decision meant that women became eligible to serve on every type of warship in peacetime, including submarines with suitable accommodation when they enter service after 1995. The time-table for the implementation of the policy was left to the individual Chiefs of Staff. In March 1994, the Minister for Defence acknowledged this when he said in answer to a question from Senator MacGibbon about the seagoing appointment of women members of the RAN, that:

*"No orders or instructions were given by me or Senator Faulkner."*¹³

9.12 In evidence to the Committee, Rear-Admiral Holthouse representing the RSL said that in relation to the integration of women in the Defence Force:

*"Mounting criticism from the media and other interest groups in society translated into political pressure to accelerate."*¹⁴

11 *ibid.*, p. 177.

12 Letter from CAPT B. Robertson to Committee Secretary, 2 March 1994.

13 Senator the Hon. R. Ray, Senate Hansard, 23 March 1994, p. 2130.

14 RADM D. Holthouse, Committee Hansard, p. 1193. RADM Holthouse was the Assistant Chief of Naval Staff - Personnel at the time the Project Mainstay study was undertaken.

9.13 This point of view seems to have had fairly wide currency. The Good Working Relationships (GWR) Project Team who found in their research and discussions with Service and civilian personnel within Navy that there was:

*"a perception of government interference and the imposition of community standards, particularly in relation to the increased participation of women into the broader spheres of NAVY life. There is a strong traditional belief that they, NAVY, are unique and therefore should be exempted from community norms."*¹⁵

9.14 The evidence from Department of Defence documents shows, however, that in opening up more Defence Force positions to women, the Chiefs of Staff Committee was not influenced only by government and community impatience. The recommendation to open combat-related positions to women was partly motivated by the difficult recruiting situation experienced by the Services at the end of the 1980's and into the 1990's. The then Chief of Naval Staff, Vice-Admiral Hudson acknowledged this in the protocols released to senior Navy staff in February 1991, stating that in addition to fulfilling a need to be fair and to benefit from the full potential of women employed by the Navy, the new policy would:

*"improve the current personnel situation at a time when recruitment is difficult and likely to get worse; and to help re-balance sea/shore ratios, particularly in categories in which the current situation is exacerbating already high wastage rates."*¹⁶

9.15 At the first of the Committee's public hearings, the Chief of Naval Staff at the time, Vice-Admiral MacDougall explained to the Committee that the RAN had *"no successful military models"* of women serving at sea to follow and it was not *"prepared to wait for one to be developed elsewhere"*.¹⁷ Navy therefore decided to adopt a process of learning by doing:

15 Triulzi Collins Solutions, submission, Committee Hansard, p. 626.

16 VADM M. Hudson, *Employment of Women*, CNS 82/91, 15 February 1991, p. 5.

17 VADM I. MacDougall, Committee Hansard, p. 551.

*"I am still convinced that we did the right thing in getting it started. If we had not started it, it would have meant a 10-to-15 year delay before women had the opportunity to go to sea."*¹⁸

In evidence to the Committee, Ms Triulzi commended the approach taken by Navy:

*"They have taken a risk management approach. Perhaps they could have planned that risk management approach a little more effectively but, without taking that risk management approach, they would not have learnt."*¹⁹

9.16 The Chief of Naval Staff's point of view that the best way to promote the integration of women at sea was to send them to sea was reinforced by the former Maritime Commander, Rear-Admiral Walls who told the Committee that:

*"the demonstration of professional competence by women at sea arkedly speeds up and enhances their recognition and acceptance. That has been particularly evident, I think, in the past year."*²⁰

9.17 The evidence placed before the Committee suggested that each of the Services was able to choose how and at what speed to proceed with the integration of females within its ranks. The pace of the integration of women into Navy ships was a matter for Navy to decide. The first female sea billets were taken up 13 years after the Government first requested the Chiefs of Staff to look at the possibility of opening more positions to women in the Defence Force. While this may appear to be an extremely slow pace to those who were anxious to see all Navy positions opened to women, it could equally be seen as rapid policy implementation in the context of thousands of years of naval history exclusive to men and starting from a base of less than 1000 female members of the Royal Australian Navy.

9.18 While the Committee accepts that Navy's decision to *"make it up as we went along"* was a valid approach in the circumstances, it finds it regrettable that Navy did not canvass the views of its female members, some of whom had been going to sea for short periods for about six years, before the first sailors were posted to sea billets.

18 RADM R. Walls, Committee Hansard, p. 559.

19 Ms S. Triulzi, Committee Hansard, p. 730.

20 RADM R. Walls, Committee Hansard, p. 573.

The Committee believes that a more consultative approach, inclusive of the views of the junior members of Navy (both male and female) may have assisted Navy in averting the situation that arose on HMAS SWAN in 1992.

Actions taken in relation to the Board of Inquiry

9.19 Dr Wheat's 25 November 1992 letter to the Minister for Defence Science and Personnel was received in the Minister's office on 2 December 1992. On 14 December 1992, the letter was forwarded to the Chief of Naval Staff. CNS reported back to the Minister on 17 December 1992 that all allegations and claims relating to Dr Wheat's postings, conditions of employment and personal support aspects would be investigated by the Assistant Chief of Naval Staff (Personnel) and that at the same time, Maritime Command would undertake an investigation of events on HMAS SWAN in 1992.

9.20 The Board of Inquiry into those matters was convened on 21 December 1992. The Minister was briefed by CNS on the progress of the inquiry's report on 1 March 1993 and the Board's report was issued (but not released publicly) on 8 March 1993. The Minister authorised release of the Board of Inquiry's report to Dr Wheat and her counsel on 19 April 1993, to Captain Mole on 24 May 1993 and to Lieutenant Bartlett and Chief Petty Officer Broad on 16 June 1993.²¹ On 29 July 1993, the Minister was advised of the proposed actions of the Chief of Naval Staff in relation to issuing censures to some crew members of HMAS SWAN. He endorsed those actions.²²

9.21 The Minister wrote to Dr Wheat on 19 August 1993, detailing Navy's actions following the Board of Inquiry. (Navy's actions following the Board of Inquiry's report to address the issue of sexual harassment within its ranks are dealt with in detail in Chapters 10 and 11 of this report.) The Minister again wrote to Dr Wheat on 26 August 1993, in response to a letter from her dated 29 July 1993. The letter acknowledged that Dr Wheat's lawyer, Mr P. Willee, QC had had discussions with Navy in relation to a

21 Ms Connelly, who had served on the SWAN as a Leading Seaman told the Committee that after numerous unsuccessful attempts at obtaining information about the findings of the Board of Inquiry, she first read its Report in the office of Mr P. Reith, MP. Ms Flannery told the Committee she first read the Report of the Board in the office of the naval legal officer in Canberra. Committee Hansard, (in camera-released). pp. 271, 305.

22 Senator the Hon. J. Faulkner, Minister for Defence Science and Personnel, Letter to CNS, 29 July 1993.

compensation claim for income lost and expressed the hope that the matter would be quickly resolved.

9.22 In September 1993, the report of the Board of Inquiry was leaked to the media and the Minister and Chief of Naval Staff held a press conference on 9 September 1993 at which the Minister said:

*"I obviously find the actions that took place on board HMAS SWAN during the deployment of concern, those actions are absolutely unacceptable to me as Minister, they are absolutely unacceptable to the Government, and every effort will be made and has been taken to ensure that there is no repeat of that behaviour and no recurrence will be tolerated."*²³

The Minister announced that the matter would be referred to the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade for investigation.

9.23 The Chief of Naval Staff said at the Press Conference that he was prepared to apologise publicly to Dr Wheat for the circumstances that occurred on board SWAN. On 29 October 1993, CNS wrote to Dr Wheat on 5 November 1993 and to the female sailors involved giving each an apology on behalf of the Royal Australian Navy. In its submission to the Committee, Navy said that in hindsight it saw the decision not to *"give this form of institutional apology earlier"* as a mistake.²⁴

9.24 On 16 September 1993, the Minister for Defence Science and Personnel wrote to Dr Wheat regarding the Terms of Reference of this Senate Committee inquiry and the legal assistance the Commonwealth was prepared to offer her in relation to her ongoing compensation claim and in relation to this Committee's inquiry.

23 Senator the Hon. J. Faulkner, Press Conference Transcript, 9 September 1993.

24 RAN submission, Committee Hansard p. 215.