

MEMORIES OF ARMY SMALL SHIPS

1953-1976

INTRODUCTION

(The following Narrative was initiated as something for my Children and Grandchildren to read and have an insight as to the Trials, Tribulations, Successes and Failures of their Father and Grandfather. It has been compiled from notes maintained during my service which in turn 'jogged' my memory as to names, events and places. It is also a tribute to my wife, Suzanne, who has stood by me over those years and from the time we were married in Darwin in 1960 and until I resigned in 1976 we had spent 109 months out of a total of 188 separated because of service requirements.)

Small Ships within the Australian Army was erased at the end of WW2 and although this was understandable it was unforgivable that the Doctrine of Operations, Training methods, knowledge and experience of WW2 Small Ships were also erased. The same happened again in 1974 but whereas the Training Doctrine as applied to Deck Crew was not a loss but a godsend, the loss of knowledge and experience relating to Small Craft Long Range Operations was a fatal loss. There was so much knowledge and experience to pass on but History, once again, repeated itself. Since the Army Small Ships MkIII is now resident it is hoped that there are men of vision who will never again relegate Army Small Ships to the 'Port of no return'.

My era began just before my sixteenth birthday by raising my age to 18 and registering with National service and during National Service transferred to the ARA and arrived at Chowder Bay in 1953 with a few others such as Ken Duncan, Jim McMahon, Eric Hale, "Junior" Aitken, Barry Blythe, Joe McDowell, Peter Cheffins and a few others, the names of whom I have forgotten over the years. Of those already there when I arrived and were ex-WW2 Small Ships were Jim Laughlin, Jim McFarlane, "Sepp" Newberry, Ron Tanner, Norm Stark, Doug Pike, Ray Cowie, Dick Vincent, Frank Thorne, Brownie Taylor, Jim Fletcher, Bill Allen, Reg Cullen, Brick Bradford, Harry Amundsen, Tommy Connell, Blue Richter's, Kev Keegan, Doug Algeo, Chris Crasswaller, Doug Wooten, Ian Craig, Keith Stewart and a few others who were serving with CMF units in Brisbane and in Perth. Some were ex-WW2 who had joined in 1947 such as Norm Holdsworth (ex-2/4th Battalion), Doug Iffla (ex Midshipman HMAS "Westralia"), "Taffy" Maggs (ex-British Merchant Marine) and Laurie Graham. Some of those who followed us were Phil Cannane, Reg Foote, Les Dennis, Alan Parry and Jim Wright.

I was part of Army Small Ships but more importantly Army Small Ships became part of me. Personal ambition never arose during my career and my ambition of seeing the concept of "Long Range Operations with Army Smallcraft" with a career structure for WO's and Junior Officers become a reality never materialised as "Game, Set and Match" was over long before I was in a position where I could be listened to. If I could have my time over again it would be exactly as before complete with all the failures as failure is the greatest teacher of all.

When returning to Chowder Bay from a posting, I could not help but feel, as I entered the Orderly Room, that someone would be "onto" Canberra immediately to find a posting that was as far away from Chowder Bay as possible that I could be sent to. It was either that or I had a Fairy Godmother. The postings I had were what one dreams of by way of challenge, knowledge and experience. I never left the world of "little ships" or "big ships" and apart from

a posting as WO Instructor and a second posting as Senior Instructor (Navigation) at Chowder Bay my entire service was Operational.

The early days as a deckhand on the "TARRA" in New Guinea will never be forgotten and the memory of, as Wireless Operator on the "TARRA", (1957) asking Norm Stark for a position to be sent to VIG Port Moresby when crossing the Papuan Gulf, placing his hand on the chart and covering about 300 square miles and saying "There".

Of Japan and Korea, where as a 20 year old, learning a system of Craft Control which was tried and true, and never ever seeing it in use anywhere else and having responsibility for more Army Craft than were in the Army on Continental Australia.

Of the Northern Territory Coastline which was my 'learning curve' in Long Range Operations. Of Darwin and, on a fishing trip North of the Vernon Islands and close to Melville Island, a very senior officer pulling in a large "Red" and a very young Lt. remarking "I think it's a female, Sir!" and the very senior officer saying "Shut up - I want to eat it, not sleep with it!".

Of being attached to Shipbuilding Company in Tasmania for the building of the ALC- 50's and learning about "political shipbuilding" and the term "Lowest Tenderer" and "favoured tenderer". At the launching of the ALC-50 and looking at the finished vessel and cursing the fools who designed it and those who built it. Of the ALC-50 during "Operation Blowdown" in 1962 on Cape York and learning the "responsibility of Command"; if you believe and know you are right then never waiver from your decision. You may win all the battles but you will lose the war.

Of the "FERN" in New Guinea where calculated risk became the normal and not the exception and where everything learned in the Northern Territory was put to use very effectively. Of, as a result of a few beers, accepting a bet that I could not travel around New Guinea, day and night, using a Shell Road Map of PNG, going from Port Moresby to Madang(750 miles) using the road map, a radio and a 4" compass as "technology" and winning the bet and the two "bettors" never again asking me what I can do with the "FERN" and myself vowing never again to open my mouth as to what I can and cannot do with the "FERN".

Of my time on the "big ships" (LSM's, 1965-1969) and in Vietnam in 1966 and 1968 and with no disrespect to the crews of the LSM's, coming to the realisation that "big ships" were not the way to go but "little ships" were. Some 90% of our cargoes in Vietnam were for the US Army between Danang in the North and Bin Thuy in the Mekong Delta. The only Australian cargoes that we carried of note were the shifting of Australian PX "goodies" from Saigon to Vung Tau and in 1968 the disgusting affair of lifting the Centurion tanks from Cam Ranh Bay to Baria as the "asshole" crew of "Jeparit" would not travel from Vung Tau to Saigon to be unloaded. We would have better served the Task Force with a Troop of LCM-8's.

Of Vietnam ,serving with a US Army unit, in 1969, on an LCM-8 in the Rach Gia canal and watching and waiting to be 'Hit' and hoping that if it did happen then it would be the LCM ahead or astern that 'got' it and those ahead or astern hoping the same thing. Also in Vietnam with the US Army on a LCU doing ammunition drops to Fire Bases on the Mekong River near the Cambodian border, watching in horror as a Vietnamese LCM-8, loaded with ARVN troops, about a mile ahead, burst into flames and exploded after being hit by RPG's and MG fire, and we could not offer assistance as we were carrying just on 100 tons of ammunition.

Of New Guinea (1971-1975) running multiple tasks over an area of 3000 square miles and going from one craft to the other checking each one. Of running between Madang and Vanimo in 1965 and being the only one aboard that had a navigating capability and sleeping an hour or so at night but not sleeping at all and being nudged by one of the watch saying "Skipper, some pela sumting, e buggerup!" and jumping up from the Wheelhouse deck where I was laying behind the Helmsman to find the Helmsman standing, rigidly holding the wheel and fast asleep and the ALC50 going in a wide circle. Of the same situation when asked "how long has he been asleep" the duty watch answered "about 20 minutes" - "why the hell didn't you wake me as I'm right behind him on the deck" and he replied "you said to wake you in one hour and the hour is up".

"THAT--TO ME WAS SMALL SHIPS"

At about 0600 on the 1st June 1976 I left Chowder Bay to drive to Cooktown where my family were now settled - or very nearly. As I came down the stairs of the Officers Mess I stopped for a moment at the bar and was instantly taken back to 1954 when the Officers Mess was opened by the then Governor General - Field Marshal Slim. Most of the Spr's in the unit were "drink stewards" for the night serving cocktails to the guests and drinking the unused cocktails outside the kitchen. Looking at the security mesh at the rear of the bar my memory went back to "Davey" Swain who had put his hand through the mesh and was trying to grab any bottle on the shelf and the Mess Steward, Peter Small, pushing the hand back and covering the scene with his body so no one could see. When I walked out to the car I had a last look around and the memories came flooding back. The old Pine tree at the head of the Parade Ground. The Boiler House where I stoked the Boiler, the grease traps that I had to clean twice a day, The OR's mess which was now the Library, The small Sgts Mess and I could almost smell the aroma of Rhum Negrita considering the amount that was consumed there over the years, the very small office that was occupied by the RSM - John Toomey where we were put into the picture about the difference between right and wrong. Also on "C" deck where the old OR's Canteen used to be and the model railway in the room next to it, the Phone box where after one made a call and if you pressed the "A" and "B" buttons at the same time you not only got the money back from your call but any other money that was in the box., on "D" Deck where Peter Cooper ran his Rigging Loft and the Volley Ball court where we played so often, the Wharfmasters Office where Norm Holdsworth, "Bluey" Richters and Ray Cowie would stand in stunned silence as Joe McDowell and myself and a few others would argue violently as to who would be the Duty Coxswain the following week and the decision being made by the Wharfmaster and the unlucky ones saying "It's not fair" and the Wharfmaster saying "What's fair is this - You'll get a thump in the ear if you say another word".

I then realised that no matter where we went to or came from, Chowder Bay was the Hub of the wheel relating to Small Ships. Like the place or not, there were too many memories for anybody to forget it. As I drove off a tremendous feeling of emptiness came over me and I could not understand it. We were after all, just a small cog in a wheel that was then connected to a very large wheel. What we had achieved was rather creditable and I should be feeling pride and eagerness to face the future but I kept looking back. I was then reminded of an old Quotation (I had become addicted to these quotations in PNG)

“Whenever a thing changes and quits its proper limits this change is at once the death of that which was before” LUCRETIUS (1st Century B.C.)

The Second Dynasty of Small Ships was over.

The people that were Small Ships, long or short term, good and bad, young and old, Regular or National Serviceman, Black or White, each contributed to an organisation that, in my humble and biased opinion, was the best in the Australian Army and from everyone that I met I learned something.

All of the people named above and including those who are not named were the "2nd Small Ships Dynasty" and as such became a very powerful and useful tool for the Army. Unfortunately the Army never learnt how to use it. As will be mentioned later - "Canberra had their eyes open but could not see - - we had a voice that could not be heard".

What did I get out of it all? - Commendation certificates from the 159th Bn. (US Army), a Commendation certificate from the PNGDF and in 1975 I was awarded the Order of Australia. I Received the AM from Queen Elizabeth II in Canberra in March 1977. The citation as read at that ceremony said "... for Leadership and devotion to duty in the Australian Army....." All of it pales into insignificance when alongside the fact that for 23 years I was a soldier in Small Ships. Of that I am extremely proud.

All of the content of the Narrative is my own experience and is not intended as a History of Post WW2 Small Ships. It is hoped in time to come that somebody, far better versed than I, could write an authoritative History of Small Ships based on "Who were we, Where have we been, Where did we go and why did we have to die twice !"

If there is ever a history of Post WW2 Small Ships written then the following quote from "TAIM BILONG MASTA" (Hank Nelson - 1982) would apply.

"Make sure you tell it properly, as for many of us, the memories are all we've got"

Peter J.
Bayliss

Cairns 1992