

TRANSPORTATION TRAINING CENTRE**ROYAL AUSTRALIAN ENGINEERS**

Chowder Bay - 1945. By 1953 nothing had changed except an Officers Mess had been built at upper left

In 1951 I raised my age from 15 to 18 and registered for National Service and was not called up until Jan 53. During National Service training I transferred to the Regular Army. My first lesson in Army logic occurred when I was interviewed as to where I would like to serve. I wanted to go to the Infantry, the Major said that as I had been trained in 40mm Bofors, I would be going to the Artillery and I was duly allocated to the Engineer Corps. Completing a basic Field Engineer course at the school of Military engineering several of us were sent to Chowder Bay to assist in General Duties while unit members went on leave. I had asked as to what Water Transport people do and the only reply that made sense was that "they have some boats and collect all the garbage from units on the harbour and take it out to sea and dump it". They got the "garbage" right. I was allocated the duties of "Hygiene Man". I cleaned the grease traps, collected garbage, kept the boilers going and any other duties the RSM, John Toomey, could find for me. I began to like what I saw there and applied to become a trainee. This was granted and I became a seaman trainee. The course was a Lighterman Class III. (a year or two later I was to find that it was nothing more than a British course for training as crew on a dumb lighter. I was completely ignorant of the sea and knew nothing. My first query came on day 2 of the course. We were issued with two books, "Seaman's Pocket Book" and Admiralty Seamanship Vol II". I wanted to know why we were issued with Navy books and a foreign Navy at that. I was promptly told to shut up and do as I was told. We were taught, among other seamanship requirements, how to calculate the barge and tonnage capacity of a lock and a canal. I have never seen a Lock and the first canal I ever saw was the Rach Gia canal in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam some 16 years later and the principle used on that canal and other canals was that if there was a large amount of cargo to be shifted and there was only one or two LCU's/LCM8's to do it then they worked very hard and long - if there were multiple LCU's/LCM-8's then the work load was easier.

The entire course content came from either a British Royal Engineers text book or a British Admiralty manual. In retrospect why we were taught such mundane items as "Boat drill when coming alongside the Flagship " or the "design characteristics of dumb barges used by the Royal Engineers during WW2" is beyond me. The system would have achieved a lot more by teaching Seamanship from British Merchant Marine text books. At the time I knew nothing and accepted everything but it was not long before I began to wonder what was going on and so began a distrust of everything taught at Chowder Bay which lasted until the day I left the Army. There were two Warrant Officers within the "setup" at Chowder Bay that put the seed of Navigation in my head, They were Doug Iffla and "taffy" Maggs. Both became personal friends and from them I began to learn not only a basic overview but "how it was done , in depth" and "why it was done, in depth"

After returning from Japan I was sent to an RAAF course at East Sale AF base in Victoria and here the world of instruction was opened wide to me. I was only a L/Cpl and the course was for WO's of the Army and Airforce. Here, on all courses conducted, the content was pertinent to the aim of the course and the training aids and facilities available to the Instructors was first class. It made Chowder Bay look sick. One thing that I did learn was Aerial Photograph interpretation and this was used by me for the rest of my career, to a lesser degree on the Northern Territory coast but to a high degree when "running" around the New Guinea coast and particularly in the New Guinea rivers.

By 1957 I was a Seaman Class 2 and Navigator class 3 and was sent back to the "TARRA" as not only as a seaman but also as wireless operator. Wireless Communications was not taught at Chowder Bay but experience was gained during my time in Japan on the "KURANDA". I purchased a commercial text book in Brisbane regarding Antennae construction as the radio now fitted to the "TARRA" was an HF "AUSTRALPHONE" with a 5 watt transmitter output. The old radio which was on the "TARRA" in 54-55 was a 3BZ, which was used by Coastwatchers in New Guinea during WW2, and it was far superior to the modern "Australphone". I assumed that the new radio was as a result of the "lowest tender" principle. By cleaning/replacing all wiring and insulators and by various antenna configurations to get the highest output gain of the transmitter, was able to reach small ships radio stations in New Guinea from the Australian coast and vice versa. The transmitter was crystal controlled and only two crystals were fitted ie. 2182 MHz and 6280 MHz which, in those days, were the standard frequencies for the entire Australian coast and New Guinea coast small ship radio stations. Even if the Army in New Guinea had their own station we would not have been able to talk to them.

Coming back from the "TARRA" I found that I was posted to Darwin. By this time I had decided that I wanted to know as much as possible about the sea and navigation in particular. "Taffy", who was ex-British Merchant Marine from WW2, gave me the certificate requirements for the British "Master Home Trade" and "2nd Mate (Foreign going). I had no intention of becoming anything except that which I was - a Soldier.

Everything was fine in Darwin until the Commander of N.T. Command found that I was only a Class III Navigator and the posting was a Class II Navigator so I was sent back to Sydney to sit for the Class II examination. I also was taught by the Marine Engineering Wing to change injectors and reset them to gain maximum output of the GM diesel engine of the 40' W/Boat. At the completion of the examination which was passed I went into Angus & Robertsons and could not find any Australian publications that covered what was needed so purchased Nicholls Concise Guide, Nicholls Seamanship, Norries Tables, a text book on Trigonometry, Star Identifier and an old used Sextant.

Back in Darwin I studied at every opportunity as my next step was Celestial Navigation which required a deep knowledge of Spherical Trigonometry. By the time I left Darwin Celestial Navigation was no longer a problem but there were still areas of the Second Mate (foreign going) that I knew nothing about. Some of those requirements i.e. "Ships Business" I could never learn in the Army nor was it necessary as I had no intention of leaving the Army, but there were still areas that I had to learn such as Medical, Meteorology, Damage control, ship stability, use of radar at sea etc. At Chowder bay they no longer conducted Lighterman courses and the term "Lighterman" was replaced by "Seaman" and a new designation had appeared - "Stevedore". I guess that it meant that seamen would no longer have to load/unload the ships - it would be done by stevedores - It was just a passing thought.

In Tasmania, during the building of the ALC-50's access to the resident Naval Architect of the company was utilised to the fullest extent in regards to ship stability. In early 1963 I sat for the Army Navigator Class I certificate. In New Guinea with the "FERN" another requirement was obtained. The US Air Force was doing an Aerial survey of New Guinea and in support was a USNS LST822 "HARISS COUNTY" and from the Master I obtained a USN text book on Damage Control. If anyone had a deep knowledge of Damage Control then the US Navy did, considering the experiences they had in the Pacific during WW2.

In 1965 a posting to 32 Small Ship Squadron (LSM's) was received, but before being sent to a specific ship, went to Chowder Bay to as an instructor to conduct a Seaman Class III course. The course contained the same content as the course I had been a student on 11 years before, but with less time spent on each subject. With the arrival of the LSM's in Australia the "big ship philosophy" had arrived and the attitude was "they will pick it all up when they go to a LSM". Chowder Bay as a training centre for Seaman and Navigators was a joke. The students deserved better and longer training - they never got it. Not known to me at this time there were a few who were doing the same as what I was doing - teaching ourselves. One left the Army and continued in the civil area quite successfully.

There was nothing wrong with the quality of instruction - it was the content of the course and time duration that was the problem. In the case of the craft in New Guinea, Radio communications were of the utmost importance yet the only communications taught at Chowder Bay were Morse and Semaphore, basic medical procedure was not taught, Firefighting/Damage control was not taught, Radar introduction was not taught, Celestial Navigation was taught but a knowledge of Spherical Trigonometry was a definite requirement but how do you teach it to students that only have a basic or no knowledge of logarithms. In early 1971 I conducted a "Ships Mate" course at Chowder Bay and of the eight students only two passed. They were junior officers. I was called upon to explain why the enlisted students failed - the answer was obvious but it appeared that failure was not to be contemplated. The failure of the enlisted students was no disgrace - they deserved better and longer training -- we didn't give it to them. It was that little incident that prompted me to return to New Guinea where I could be useful as I was certainly not useful at Chowder Bay. In 1973 we lost the "TAROOKI" and very nearly lost the whole crew. The Watchkeeper at the time of grounding did not know how to navigate and did not know how to use radar. He was a "graduate" of Chowder Bay.

The origin of training enlisted ranks within Small Ships had its origin in a "long Transportation Course" for Junior officers in 1949 which gave officers an overview of all aspects of Transportation ie. Sea, rail and air. Road transportation within the Army was carried out by another Corps. The navigation content of that course was directly translated into Navigator Class 3,2 and 1 for the enlisted ranks and although the name changed with the advent of the LSM's to Ships Mate, the content did not. An enlisted person began his career by

attending a Seaman Class 3, Seaman Class 2 and then he could attend a Navigator Class 3

Course (none were ever run), then a Navigator Class 2 Course (none were ever run) and then a Navigator Class 1. The requirements for all classes of Navigator were disjointed and no logical progression was ever attained mainly due to the time constraint of six weeks. We taught students that had no prior experience in navigation, the British Admiralty method of tidal prediction ie. HD289 in 80 minutes, introduction to a sextant in 40 minutes, meridian altitude in 40 minutes, Chart corrections in 40 minutes, Longitude by chronometer in 40 minutes (if at all). In my last term as an instructor navigation in 1971 we had Education Corps people teaching students Logarithms and the following day I was teaching Marc St. Hilaire position line by formula. ie. $\text{Hav ZX} = \text{Hav LHA} \cos \text{lat.} \cos \text{dec.} + \text{Hav MZD}$.

After WW2 saw the formation of the "Australian Army Transportation Corps". Its life was short lived and I do not know what led to its demise soon after it formed. I feel sure that the fact that there were possibly only enough people in it to fill three platoons of an Infantry company may have been the problem. We then reverted to the Engineer Corps. As the years went by we wore the RAE insignia with pride even though we were a poor relation. Our Marine Engineers could move to and from mainstream Engineer units as the basis of their calling was the same, Movement personnel could do the same but NCO deckside personnel could not

The "big ship philosophy" had a lot to answer for

It was not until I served with a U.S. Army unit and had a good look at the training of their Warrant Officers that I realised that we were missing out on much. These were long term career men and put simply they were required to have a civil license and a military certificate. The very least we would have obtained was consistency.

The aim of any Training/Learning institution is to teach the rules of the particular "game" before allowing the students to play the "game". Small Ship/Landing Craft navigation is a skill (possibly an art) rather than a science and it is the smell of diesel and being drenched by stinging salt spray on a wild night that bookmark the chapters of true learning. It is confidence in one's own ability which is the start point for the navigator. Confidence born of good knowledge and attention to detail - confidence, on a wild night of being where you should be and your hand on the controls ready for any emergency.

Chowder Bay never taught the rules of the game

The careful text-books measure
(let all who build beware)
The load, the shock, the pressure
Material can bear.
So when the buckled
girder Lets down the
grinding span The
blame of loss, or murder
Is laid upon the man,
Not on the stuff ---- **the man.**

Rudyard Kipling