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## COMMEMORATIVE ESSAY

# *The Royal Australian Naval College Centenary*

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1 March 2013 marked the centenary of the official opening of the Royal Australian Naval College (RANC) at its interim site at Osborne House, Geelong. Fittingly, the Chief of Navy, political and civic leaders, and a large naval contingent were present to commemorate this important event.

Vice-Admiral Sir William Creswell, the inaugural Chief of the Naval Staff, viewed a naval college to provide *ab initio* training for officers as an essential element of the creation of the new navy. The RANC was modelled on the Royal Naval Colleges (RNCs), with elements such as the 13-year-age entry and four years of initial training. The RANC, however, would prove to be a unique institution that left an indelible mark on the culture of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN).

The most important attribute of the RANC model was that, unlike the Royal Navy practice of requiring parents to pay for uniforms and tuition, the Australian Government would pay. This opened the RANC to boys from all classes and was to have a profound effect not only on the officer corps but the Navy itself. At the opening of the college, the Governor-General, Lord Denman, said to the 28 new 13-year-old cadet-midshipmen: "You cannot all be Admirals. You can all do your best to become efficient officers of the Royal Australian Navy. You are a picked lot of lads from every State of the Commonwealth and some day I hope you will be joined by comrades from New Zealand."<sup>2</sup>

The first entry of cadet-midshipmen would be known as the Pioneer Class. Their commanding officer was Captain Bertram Chambers, RN, who fully embraced the egalitarian approach and declared that he would "guarantee that after six months at the college it would be impossible to tell that the lad had lacked any social advantage" (Elridge 1949: 35). The other key figure in establishing the training regime and culture of the college was Lieutenant-Commander Duncan Grant, RN, a specialist in physical training.

The government established a quota system to ensure a rough representation of suitably qualified boys from each state on the basis of its population. C. E. W. Bean wrote of the RANC training system: "It will be a matter of fascinating interest to watch it develop. It is an attempt to obtain the best ability from the people, wherever it lies. The State realises that, for the sake of efficiency, it must catch young those who are to fill its higher posts." (Bean 1913: 303)

Other discernible differences with the RNCs were the greater emphasis on sport and more humane approach to

discipline. The RANC had Chambers and Grant to thank for this. In particular, Chambers' approach was in part due to his own experiences in 1881 at *Britannia* Naval College where he was beaten so often that he and some fellow midshipmen regularly hid in an old boat shed (Chambers 1927: 37).

The college experience for the cadet-midshipmen was intense and it well prepared the boys for the rigours of sea life. During the latter half of World War I, the boys served with the Grand Fleet in the North Sea and were present in the Battle of Heligoland Bight. Tragically, chief cadet Captain Frank Larkins and Ernest Cunningham lost their lives in submarines.

The Pioneer class made major contributions to preparing the Navy for the looming war. The most famous of the class, John Collins, conceived the idea and was the driving force behind the corvettes that were to contribute so much to the protection of our merchant ships. James Esdaile played a major part in developing our nascent anti-submarine capabilities. Jack Newman had a similar role in developing naval communications and the interception of enemy signal traffic; and became regarded as the 'father of the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service'. Rupert Long's overhaul of Navy's intelligence organisation was a major strategic contribution to our nation's defence.

At the beginning of World War II, RANC graduates commanded most of the cruisers and destroyers that would contribute so much to our nation's defence. John Collins gained international fame when he commanded HMAS *Sydney* in the sinking of the Italian cruiser *Bartolemeo Colleoni*. Of the 1914 Entry, Hec Waller, after his brilliant service with the Scrap Iron Flotilla, would heroically lose his life with so many in the *Perth*. Collins and classmate Harold Farncomb by war's end would each have commanded the Australian Naval Squadron. Collins was on the deck of the USS *Missouri* for the Japanese surrender.

The Pioneer Class and the classes that followed more than fulfilled the hopes, not only of those dignitaries that gathered at Geelong on 1 March 1913 for the opening of the new RANC, but also of a young nation then building its new Navy.

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<sup>2</sup>Vice-Admiral B. M. Chambers confidential report ADM 196-88, p. 8.