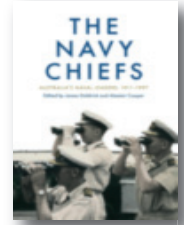


The Navy Chiefs; Australia's Naval leaders, 1911-1997

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Senior Service officers, having spent many years learning, practising and perfecting the art of war, must find promotion into a world governed by the parliamentary cycle, political expediency and continuity provided by senior public servants with their fiefdoms and interests to advance, highly disorientating.

This book describes how the 24 Chiefs of the Naval Staff (CNS) between 1911 and 1997 fared in making the case for the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) to the political leaders of the day while caring for the men and women under their command. The minister - for the Navy and later Defence - they reported to and advised were a mixed bag, some showing little interest in their portfolio. The separation of Service offices in Melbourne from Parliament after its move to Canberra in 1927 made communication between CNS and his Minister difficult; this was not rectified until 1959.

However, there were Navy, Defence, and even Prime Ministers who took a great and personal interest in the portfolio, receiving advice from their CNS and giving it too, greatly assisting the passage of naval proposals through the parliamentary and public service maze. That the RAN had any ships at all in the early 1930s was due to the persuasiveness of Admiral Allan Everett (1921-23) on Prime Minister Stanley Bruce. Vice Admiral Henry Burrell had his arm very efficiently twisted in 1960 by Navy Minister John Gorton, not only saving the carrier *Melbourne* but procuring US destroyers in preference to an inferior British offer.

Founded in 1911, the RAN began as a navy within a navy. Its first CNS, Admiral William Creswell RAN, oversaw development of the 'Australian Fleet Unit' of the Royal Navy (RN). Lacking officers of seniority and experience, with one exception the RAN was then led by nine British admirals until 1948. Their experience within the Admiralty system was valuable in improving the performance of Navy Office, as well as giving them authority when discussing matters with Australian parliamentarians. These links with a larger, more experienced Service were also immensely valuable to a young RAN and, after Admiral Francis Hyde RAN (1931-37) set the Navy on its path towards its sterling WW2 performance, RN Admirals Ragnar Colvin and Guy Royle steered the RAN through the war. The era of RN command ended with Admiral Louis Hamilton.

Then, until 1997 when the office became 'Chief of Navy', the RAN was led by 14 Australians. Sir John Collins (1948-55) performed well, with his character, personality, war record and native shrewdness all on display. His successors were not all as successful, usually hampered by the lack of an agreed coordinated plan for the Australian Army, Navy and Air Force as the nation's strategic situation changed. Admiral Burrell's success in securing funding for submarines, mine warfare vessels and the US destroyers laid the foundations of a modern RAN into the 1980s, but also revealed deficiencies in training, logistics and maintenance which his successors had to deal with as links with the RN dwindled.

Australia's Vietnam involvement from 1965 put great pressure on Admiral McNicoll and his successor to deliver the required naval resources, while the RAN hoisted its new Australian White Ensign in ships and shore establishments from 1967, and in 1969, *Melbourne* embarked her new complement of US-sourced fighters and ASW aircraft. However, the 1970s saw two changes of Government and a push by the Defence bureaucracy to strip

Service commanders of some prerogatives. Service departments and portfolios were abolished and equipment proposals were evaluated against strategic criteria developed by Defence. Its benign view of Australia's strategic circumstances was erroneous, but CNS Richard Peek was powerless to prevent cancellation of important naval procurement projects.

His successor, David Stevenson, now sole commander of the RAN, reported to the Chief of Defence Force Staff. Former Naval Board members were 'dual-hatted'. Civilian-staffed Defence agencies ruled on the appropriateness of Navy's proposals while committees directed the work of the Defence Force. With Stevenson's calm acceptance of inevitable change the RAN adjusted well. During Admiral Tony Synnot's term the strategic concept of a 'core force' to protect Australia's interests and a basis for further expansion gained currency. International exercises replaced operational deployments for the RAN, while the Navy's command and strategic planning arrangements were modernised, along with its capacity for supporting new Fleet additions.

Admiral Jim Willis oversaw the introduction of several new ship classes and capabilities but the continuation of RAN air power was his principal concern. He left office after the Government announced its intention to buy HMS *Invincible* to replace *Melbourne*. His successor, David Leach, was blind-sided by the incoming Labor government's decision to terminate the carrier project. The flow-on effects absorbed most of Leach's attention, particularly in personnel areas.

Admiral Mike Hudson commanded the RAN from April 1985 for nearly seven years, with the tasks of constructing a carrier-less RAN and rebuilding Navy's morale. He benefitted greatly from having Kim Beazley as Minister for Defence, while the 1987 *Defence of Australia* White Paper supported Navy's case for new capabilities - more ships, new submarines, better helicopters, more Fleet support and the commissioning of Fleet Base West. The RAN's good performance in the Gulf War 1990-91 showcased his success. However, during his and his successors' tenure major reassignments of responsibilities within the ADF and Defence impinged heavily on their authority and responsibility. The transition of Army, Navy and Air Force into a joint force was a period of enormous change and challenges.

Admiral Ian MacDougall presided over a striking revival of naval ship construction in Australia and sought to resolve the issues concerning the roles of women in the ADF, handing over in 1994 to Admiral Rod Taylor. Oversight and delivery of the full order book of ship construction projects became complicated by a new Defence Acquisition and Logistics Program while reforms standardising and formalising authority in a joint service environment were distractions from what Taylor believed were his principal responsibilities. His title was changed to Chief of Navy (CN) in February 1997, and he now acted on directives from the Chief of Defence Force.

In the concluding chapter, a later CN, Chris Ritchie (2002-05) summarises the factors, innovations and developments that shaped, guided and constrained the actions of the naval leaders featured. The book is highly recommended for those interested in the evolution of the RAN and especially for those contemplating a career as its Chief!

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