

## CHAPTER 3

### ACCOMMODATION ON HMAS SWAN

#### TERM of REFERENCE 1 (b)

This Chapter examines the adequacy of living conditions provided for female personnel on HMAS SWAN, including the sleeping and ablution areas.

3.1 In her letter of 25 November 1992 to the then Minister for Defence Science and Personnel, the Hon. Gordon Bilney MP, Dr Wheat stated that:

*"When I joined HMAS Swan on 24/5/1992 I was horrified at the living conditions. I had a single cabin which was amongst those of the male officers, but there were holes in the walls through which came light and cigarette smoke, and through which I could be watched. I was not aware of this until the neighbouring officer brought it to my attention.*

*I was quite upset about having to share the toilets with the male officers and so were some of them, as the urinal was placed in the communal part of the toilet block. The females downstairs used a single toilet next to the wardroom, which was also used by the men, and they told me that they were embarrassed about sharing with the men, particularly as the sanitary bin was in the communal area."*

### HMAS SWAN

3.2 HMAS SWAN, a River Class Destroyer Escort (DE), is 112.8 metres in length, 12.5 metres across the beam, 2 750 tonnes displacement and carries a crew of 250. The hull was designed in 1947, the internal configuration in 1953 and construction of the Class began in 1954. The River Class Destroyer Escorts, the Guided Missile Destroyers (DDGs) and the Oberon Class Submarines are the oldest warships in the RAN.

3.3 HMAS SWAN was launched in December 1967 and commissioned into the RAN in January 1970. At that time ships' companies were all male and crew comfort was not a high priority. *"The design of a modern warship is a series of compromises between conflicting requirements for space, weight and power"* <sup>1</sup> often to the detriment of aspects of daily life, such as privacy, which many of us take for granted. Personnel who serve on these vessels must accept and be prepared to adapt to these conditions.

3.4 The Committee inspected SWAN and its sister ship TORRENS, and experienced at first hand the cramped and basic living and working conditions onboard these vessels for all members of the crew.

### The 1992 Deployments

3.5 HMAS SWAN made two deployments in 1992 when female personnel were embarked:

- . the first was a six week deployment, in March-April, in Australian waters for Exercise Kangaroo 92;
- . the second was a four month deployment to Asia from late May to early October 1992.

3.6 In addition to its normal crew, SWAN also carried a specialist group on both deployments. Originally, this group was to have included one female but the number was increased to four at the request of Captain Mole who considered that a single female may have felt isolated. <sup>2</sup>

3.7 Dr Wheat joined SWAN for the Asia deployment. Captain Mole had requested a female doctor to boost the number of females on SWAN and to look after the female sailors. Two female officers under training also joined SWAN on 27 June 1992 in the Philippines. <sup>3</sup>

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1 Mr T. Brinkley, submission, p. 1.

2 CAPT D. Mole, submission, Committee Hansard, p. 3.

3 *ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

## Dr Wheat's Accommodation

3.8 No special arrangements were made for Dr Wheat as her accommodation was of normal officer standard. She was assigned a single berth cabin "*commensurate with her rank and status*"<sup>4</sup> that "*had previously been occupied the year before by a female doctor and there had not been a problem with it.*"<sup>5</sup> This cabin is 7 foot by 7 foot and fitted out with a single bunk, wash basin and desk. It is among the other single berth cabins for officers and in close proximity to the officers' ablutions facilities. Two other female doctors have occupied this same cabin and found it "*very comfortable, ... relatively spacious ... with ample storage space*"<sup>6</sup> and "*perfectly acceptable*"<sup>7</sup>.

3.9 The officers who occupied these cabins, including Dr Wheat, enjoyed a level of privacy that some other officers in shared cabins did not have. In several cases, two officers shared a cabin; up to six junior officers under training may share the same sleeping area.

3.10 In her evidence to the Committee, Dr Wheat acknowledged that she had not been prepared for that aspect of sea-going life:

*"When I first saw it I was shocked, I suppose. I soon got used to it, but it was just a shock to the system because I had never seen anything like that before."*<sup>8</sup>

3.11 The holes in her cabin walls are design requirements and similar holes are found in most of the other cabins. The holes under the wash basin allow the pipes to move with the motion of the ship while those next to the ceiling are for cabling. Dr

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4 BOI Report, p. 14.

5 RADM R. Walls, Committee Hansard, p. 1298.

6 Dr C. Moore, submission, p. 3.

7 LCDR A. MacLaren, submission, p. 3. The Committee notes that the cabin could not be locked in 1991 when Dr Moore occupied it, but that it had been repaired by the time LCDR MacLaren replaced Dr Wheat for the remainder of the 1992 deployment. The Committee also notes that Dr Moore felt it would have been "*inappropriate*" to have locked her cabin in case it was necessary for her "*to be woken ... to attend to patients.*"

8 Dr C. Wheat, Committee Hansard in-camera, p. 198.

Wheat said she felt obliged to dress on top of her bunk because of her concern that she may have been watched through these holes.

3.12 The Committee inspected Dr Wheat's cabin and concurs with the BOI comment *"that it would have needed a very determined effort by anyone to get into a position to peer through any of the holes"*. A number of Navy personnel have indicated that it is common practice to cover holes with pictures, posters or tape. The Committee agrees with the BOI conclusion that Dr Wheat *"could have overcome her perceived problem in a more practical manner than she chose."*<sup>9</sup>

### **The Other Females' Accommodation**

3.13 The two female officers under training shared the same sleeping area as the four female sailors which was an unusual arrangement as officers do not normally share facilities with enlisted personnel. The accommodation was located in the guidance control room for the Ikara Missiles that the Destroyer Escorts formerly carried and was installed by SWAN's crew as a self-help project. The room was fully air-conditioned, contained six bunks and was more spacious than the accommodation for the many of the male sailors. The female sailors acknowledged that the air-conditioning was a significant benefit, particularly in the tropics, not available to their male counterparts.

3.14 The male Junior Sailors' Mess, for example, accommodates fifty sailors in rows of bunks that are three along and three high. Each bunk has only a curtain around it for privacy. This Mess is directly above the water storage tanks and is adjacent to the vessel's engine room. Similarly, the Petty Officers' Mess is directly above the boiler room which is the hottest part of the vessel.

3.15 The toilet directly across from the female sailors' sleeping area was for the use of all the women onboard as well as officers of the Wardroom. The female sailors also shared the officers' toilets and showers, again an unusual arrangement in the Navy.<sup>10</sup> Although the officers' facilities are on the deck above the female sleeping area, these are private compared to the male sailors' facilities.

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9 BOI Report, p.14.

10 It was pointed out in one submission to the Committee that the toilet facilities at HMAS CEREBUS, where Dr Wheat worked before SWAN, were used by both sexes. LEUT J. Thomas, submission, p. 2.

3.16 The Committee has concluded that while some of the ablution and toilet facilities were inconvenient, there was an element of inconvenience for both the female sailors and the male officers. Most were able to accept the inconvenience as an unavoidable fact of life under the circumstances. The Committee accepts that the cost of converting all the older ships to provide top of the range facilities is not justified. Testimony from the junior female officers as well as some of the female sailors confirms that not all the women onboard were bothered by the existing arrangements. The Committee is confident that, without the other pressures that the female sailors were under at the time, and with the proper functioning of the Divisional System, any minor irritants would have assumed a lesser importance. For example while it would be preferable to have single sex toilets, under the circumstances this was not, in the Committee's view, practicable. The Committee concluded that the absence of the lock on the external door was not the problem that has been suggested. Had it been a serious problem the Committee finds it difficult to believe that an effective remedy could not have been found with a little initiative and perserverence.

3.17 The Committee agrees with the Board of Inquiry assessment that the four female sailors had accommodation and showering facilities superior to those of their male counterparts.

3.18 The female sailors, however, were disadvantaged by not having a dedicated recreation space. Two of the senior sailors made their work areas available for socialising which helped to alleviate the situation. <sup>11</sup>

## **Modifications to HMAS SWAN**

3.19 There were two sets of modifications made to HMAS SWAN during 1992:

- . the first was in preparation for the arrival of the four female sailors for the Exercise Kangaroo '92 deployment; and
- . the second was to enable HMAS SWAN to embark junior officers under training, including up to nine females.

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11 BOI Report, pp. 14-16.

3.20 In preparing for the four female sailors to join HMAS SWAN for the Exercise Kangaroo '92 deployment, Captain Mole considered that:

*"the most pressing problem was one of accommodation. The ship was of 1960's design and had no provision whatsoever for females onboard. I considered that there was a clear need to provide an adequate segregated messdeck for the females. I presented the problem to my heads of department along with my thoughts on a possible solution.*

*Modifications were made and a great deal of effort was taken by the ship's staff to complete alterations in time for the females to join the ship, bearing in mind the considerable financial constraints which I was working under. For example, I requested Maritime Headquarters approve the removal of six bunks and lockers from the former HMAS STUART for installation in The Guidance Equipment Room which I was having modified for female sleeping quarters. STUART was then a hulk in Western Australia. My request was denied with no alternative advice or guidance forthcoming."*<sup>12</sup>

3.21 These modifications and the efforts of his crew were a source of pride for Captain Mole who showed them to a variety of senior people, including the Maritime Commander and one of his senior deputies, the Commodore Flotillas as well as the Naval Officer Commanding Western Australia, Commodore Briggs.<sup>13</sup>

3.22 Navy representatives testified to the Committee that they found *"no notes, no signals and no letters ... [nor any] record in the ship"* of Captain Mole's request for lockers and bunks from STUART but *"the ship's engineer recalled the issue ... [and] said that they were readily made available and they were installed using ship's staff and FIMA - Fleet Intermediate Maintenance Authority - assistance."*<sup>14</sup>

3.23 The difference between these two accounts remains unresolved. What is cannot be disputed is that Captain Mole and SWAN's crew made a serious effort, in the absence of corporate guidelines, to prepare suitable accommodation for female sailors. Maritime Headquarters played no part in making this possible. Despite

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12 CAPT D. Mole, submission, Committee Hansard, pp. 7-8.

13 *ibid.*, p. 98.

14 CDRE C. Barrie, Committee Hansard, p.1297.

women having been posted to non-combatant ships since at least 1985 and the decision to allow women to serve at sea on all vessels being taken in April 1991, Navy was slow to meet its corporate responsibilities in this regard. It did not conduct a study to determine the appropriate standards of accommodation on its vessels until March 1992 and did not promulgate new guidelines until 30 October 1992. Navy acknowledges Captain Mole's efforts and maintains that the *"accommodation arrangements organised by SWAN were not the focus"* of its criticism of Captain Mole.<sup>15</sup>

3.24 The second set of modifications were proposed in response to Navy's decision that the Destroyer Escorts would also perform a seamanship training function. These were identified after SWAN had returned from the deployment to Asia and was towards the end of Captain Mole's posting as Commanding Officer, by which time Dr Wheat and the other female personnel had left the ship. SWAN requested \$3,500 to provide separate showers and proposed outfitting the former IKARA missile magazine as a dining, working and recreation area for junior officers under training. Ironically, this request was sent to Maritime Headquarters on 25 November 1992, the same day that Dr Wheat wrote to the Minister for Defence Science and Personnel.

3.25 In view of the criticism by some of the female sailors that they lacked a separate recreational area, it should be noted that Maritime Headquarters at first queried this request:

*"WRT [with regard to] showering arrangements requirement for females/ males is that privacy is preserved for both. Request confirmation that this work is essential to meet that requirement. Funding is particularly tight even for this relatively small amount.*

*Regret that funding of the magnitude necessary to complete the work envisaged at para 6 [fitting out the former Ikara missile magazine as a mess and recreation space] is not available."*<sup>16</sup>

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15 Maritime Commander minute AF 6/2/396 of 12 July 1993 to the Chief of Naval Staff, pp.7-8.

16 Signal from Maritime Headquarters to HMAS SWAN dated 27 November 1993, Enclosure 4 to Maritime Commander's minute AF 6/2/396 of 12 July 1993.

3.26 Captain Mole interpreted this response as a refusal. Maritime Headquarters accepted SWAN's justification for the separate showers on 18 December 1992, by which time Captain Mole had left the ship.

### Standards of Accommodation for Women at Sea

3.27 The Committee agreed with the following recommendations of the Board of Inquiry concerning postings and accommodation for women at sea:

- a) *Every effort should be made not to post females to sea in very small numbers.*
- b) *Facilities for female sailors should wherever possible be equivalent to the facilities for male sailors onboard the same vessel.*
- c) *If inferior facilities do exist for female sailors then it is imperative that arrangements be made which minimise the impact of those inferior facilities.*
- d) *There will be occasions where factors such as privacy do mean that females (or perhaps males if they are in the minority) will have better facilities than their opposite members. There must be valid and persuasive reasons to allow such differentials. They should be minimised, but not to the extent that they inhibit the opening of sea billets to females.*
- e) *Where facilities are shared by male and female sailors or officers specific arrangements must be made to ensure that the privacy of each sex is maintained."*<sup>17</sup>

3.28 These recommendations formed the basis of a directive issued on 3 June 1993 by the Maritime Commander that set out the standard of facilities to be provided for both men and women on Australian Naval vessels.<sup>18</sup>

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17 BOI Report, p. 101.

18 RAN, submission, Committee Hansard, p. 203.



3.29 Modifications to the accommodation in existing vessels can be expensive and must be balanced against other factors such as the remaining time in-service of the particular vessel. For instance, it is not possible to modify the Guided Missile Destroyers and the Oberon Class submarines because of their internal configurations so these will not carry female crew members.<sup>19</sup> Although the Destroyer Escorts have been modified to accommodate junior officers under training, including up to nine females each, these vessels will not remain in service past the turn of the century so it was not economic for these to be extensively modified.

3.30 The following ships have been modified to provide mixed gender accommodation, messing and recreation facilities:

COOK, JERVIS BAY, WESTRALIA, FLINDERS and DERWENT (DE) at a cost of \$6,000 each;

SWAN (DE)<sup>20</sup> at a cost of \$16,000;

SUCCESS and TORRENS (DE) at a cost of \$35,000 each; and

MORESBY at a cost of \$84,000.

These are modifications to HMAS SWAN that have been made since the 1992 deployments.

3.31 Conversely, the Guided Missile Frigates (FFGs), as the only warships currently in the RAN inventory programmed to continue in-service into the next century, have been or are being extensively modified.

HMAS SYDNEY, the first FFG to carry females as an integral part of its crew, was modified at a cost of \$350,000;

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19 VADM I. MacDougall, Committee Hansard, p. 554.

20 These modifications to SWAN were identified by processes initiated by CAPT Mole towards the end of his posting as Commanding Officer in response to a policy directive from Navy Office. CAPT Mole's successor sent the proposal to Navy Office on 8 February 1993 and it was approved by MHQ on 8 March 1993. The modifications were completed by 21 April 1993.

HMAS Darwin was modified at a cost of \$610,000. These modifications have incorporated improvements based on the experience with HMAS SYDNEY;

the remaining FFGs, ADELAIDE, MELBOURNE, CANBERRA and NEWCASTLE are programmed to complete the modifications by the end of 1994.<sup>21</sup>

3.32 The new generation vessels, the ANZAC frigates and Collins Class submarines, will have mixed gender accommodation incorporated during construction.

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21 CAPT B. Robertson letter N93/28736 NTGSI 41/94 of 2 March 1994.