

## CHAPTER 4

### BEHAVIOUR OF OFFICERS ASHORE TERM of REFERENCE 1 (c)

This Chapter examines the behaviour of officers from HMAS Swan while ashore during deployments in South East Asia in 1992.

4.1 According to popular perception sailors head directly for the nearest bar and brothel as soon as their ships have docked. They have a reputation for hard-drinking, womanising and generally raucous behaviour. Such pursuits have been justified on the basis that they relieve stress after the rigours of being at sea. The Board of Inquiry concluded that *"the Navy climate has appeared in the past to condone, if not encourage uncouth behaviour, liberal use of alcohol and a degree of misogyny"*. Although the Board drew parallels to all-male university colleges, it found that, unlike the Navy, the males in these colleges "outgrew" this environment when they graduated.<sup>1</sup>

4.2 While such in-port pursuits in the past were not uncommon, according to Rear-Admiral Walls, *"the patterns of life for and interests of [RAN] sailors have changed ... quite remarkably over the last twenty years or so."*<sup>2</sup> Navy recruits now are generally older with higher levels of education than previously and this is reflected in the younger generation of sailors having a broad range of interests including cultural and sporting activities. These changing attitudes also reflect community attitudes towards healthy living and physical fitness. Comments by several witnesses suggest that male sailors are being influenced in their choice of activities by their female counterparts.

4.2 Attitudes to alcohol are also changing. Alcohol can be a contributing factor to unacceptable behaviour or criminal offences both in the Navy and the general community. Navy has acknowledged the detrimental effect alcohol can have in the workplace and has in the last decade instituted programs to educate its personnel about the dangers of alcohol abuse.

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1 BOI Report, p. 29.

2 RADM R. Walls, Committee Hansard, p. 582.

4.4 The use of alcohol at sea is controlled through the "beer issue" which limits consumption to two cans of beer per person per day. The allocation is non-transferable and the cans are opened when they are collected. It is a privilege, not a right, and is issued at the Commanding Officer's discretion.

4.3 Once a ship is alongside and personnel are ashore, Navy cannot exercise the same control on the use of alcohol. Captain Mole indicated that "almost all the problems [he] had in [his] time on SWAN could be related to alcohol"<sup>3</sup> and took measures to control its use. He banned alcohol on SWAN for a "few months" after there "was an incident of excessive and illegal drinking going on at sea"<sup>4</sup> during the Exercise Kangaroo 92 deployment. "Later in the deployment there was another incident of illegal drinking at sea, so [Captain Mole] banned alcohol for the rest of the time [he] was in command."<sup>5</sup> Captain Mole "applied a policy in all three of [his] commands that the officers' bar on board did not open before the cocktail party began"<sup>6</sup> in order to minimise the potential for unacceptable behaviour.

4.6 Alcohol was not, however, judged to be a factor in the behaviour which led to the general complaints by Dr Wheat and former Leading Seamen Connelly and Flannery. It was a factor in the incident that led to the court-martial.

4.7 There were some incidents during the 1992 deployment where individual officers from HMAS SWAN behaved inappropriately, usually after consumption of alcohol, but only one where officers from HMAS SWAN, as a group, were poorly behaved. This was during a function at a restaurant on Lamma Island in Hong Kong. The function was arranged by the Royal Navy and attended by officers from HMAS WESTRALIA and the Royal Navy as well as HMAS SWAN. Dr Wheat was on HMAS WESTRALIA at this point in the deployment and rejoined HMAS SWAN after the events on Lamma Island.

4.8 During the course of the evening food and napkins were thrown into the overhead fans with the result that these were sprayed over some of the patrons. A similar function the year before had also ended in a food fight and this was well-

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3 CAPT D. Mole, Committee Hansard in-camera, p. 105.

4 *ibid.*, p. 115.

5 *ibid.*, p. 115.

6 *ibid.*, p. 115.

known, at least among the members of HMAS SWAN's Wardroom. There were no other patrons in the restaurant and some of the staff aided and abetted the participants.

4.9 Neither the Commanding Officer of SWAN nor the Commanding Officer of WESTRALIA was present at the function. The Commanding Officer of WESTRALIA, when informed of the proceedings, felt obliged as the senior RAN officer, to apologise to the senior Royal Navy officer in Hong Kong on behalf of both ships.

4.10 When the senior Royal Navy officer was later asked about the behaviour of SWAN personnel during that visit, he felt that *"they were a credit to their country ... [and was] confident that behaviour was totally acceptable, lively and fun but certainly not uncivilised"*.<sup>7</sup>

4.11 The Committee accepts the finding of the Board of Inquiry that this was *"a marginal case ... [that] was close to the borderline of social acceptability"*<sup>8</sup> and that the crew of HMAS SWAN were generally well-behaved while ashore. This assessment is supported by activities such as fund raising for the MITHRA Charity in India. Reports from the Australian Defence representatives in most of the countries which HMAS SWAN visited commented favourably on the behaviour of its crew. These reports are contained in Annex 13.8 to the RAN's submission.

4.12 The Committee recognises that many RAN personnel who visit other countries are still young; the majority of the crew of HMAS SWAN during the 1992 deployment were aged between 18 and 25 years; and may become over-exuberant when in port. All the personnel on Australian naval vessels must be made aware that they are representing Australia when they are abroad and must maintain an appropriate standard of behaviour. The Committee recognises that being able to strike this balance is a matter of judgement and experience as well as education. It is incumbent on the senior members of RAN vessels, both officers and sailors, to set the example for their junior colleagues to follow.

4.13 These visits also provide the opportunity to expose a group of mostly young Australians to other peoples and cultures with the consequent broadening of mind and experience. The Committee congratulates the Navy for being selective about the ports

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7 RAN, submission, Committee Hansard, Annex 13.8, p. 308.

8 BOI Report, p. 30.

its ships visit and for "pay[ing] more attention ... to ... the facilities available onshore for people to enjoy their recreation or pursue their particular interests".<sup>9</sup>

**4.14 Recommendation Three:** The Committee recommends that Navy pay greater attention to the in-port activities of its personnel to gain the maximum benefit from these visits while minimising the potential for unacceptable behaviour. The Committee recommends that ships' officers, in conjunction with the Australian Defence or diplomatic representatives in the countries to be visited, identify possible suitable cultural, sporting and social in-port activities and make the arrangements for interested crew members to participate. This function could best be undertaken by officers, such as doctors and chaplains, who are responsible for the health and well-being of the crew.

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9 RADM R. Walls, Committee Hansard, pp. 580-581.