



Bench and Bar meet the Royal Australian Navy

By Kate Traill

It was going to be about ships, helicopters, big guns and strong men in uniform – and dramatic court scenes à la *A Few Good Men* and *Jag*.

Why not join the navy and serve my country? I thought magnanimously.

In October 2007, after an arduous administrative and physical regime, which mainly consisted of filling out forms, filling out forms and filling out more forms, I was selected by the Australian Defence Force (ADF) Board to be part of the NSW Reserve Naval Legal Panel. I had no idea what was in store.

To ensure that new recruits commence their first two week Reserve Officer Entry Course (REOC) with a modicum of physical fitness, they are required to pass a 'beep test'. Having never heard of a 'beep test' (which seemed well known to all who play competitive sports, rugby or just attended a boys' school), I was not concerned until my first attempt saw me achieve level three on the 'beep test' scale. Without being technical, low numbers are bad, higher numbers are good. The minimum requirement was 6.1 on said nebulous scale.

Clearly the only course of action open to me was to hire a personal trainer, and one who was in the army, at that. For two gruelling hours, every day for eight weeks, (who said there is no time for exercise in a busy practice at the Bar!) to the commands of 'CHANGE, CHANGE' this martinet pushed me to the limits of physical endurance. Imagine my joy when I passed the beep test the day before the course started. As a newly appointed lieutenant in the Royal Australian Navy, I duly reported to my divisional officer at HMAS *Creswell* in Jervis Bay for my first two weeks of officer training, known as 'Phase 1'.

The first order of business was to be kitted out. The uniforms include navy whites, navy blues and winter rig, boiler suits, combat boots, black shoes, white shoes – in fact a different uniform for every occasion. The next order of business was to learn how to march correctly in the said uniforms. Navy tradition dictates that land-based bases are treated as ships, so marching on the quarterdeck did not mean stomping about on a grey metal deck in the middle of Jervis Bay, but in fact meant marching to-and-fro on a beautiful grassy area in front of a clock tower overlooking the bay, dodging kangaroos. Or, more accurately, kangaroo poo. Sword drill to the chant of 'Hats ON', Hats OFF' and the lexicon of various marching commands, became my constant companions, as we recruits – who included orthopaedic surgeons, anaesthetists, dentists, intelligence officers and lawyers from all over Australia – took it in turns to be the squad or division leader.

The mornings began at 5.30 a.m. with the somewhat prosaically titled 'early morning training' or EMT. In keeping with its somewhat unimaginative title, it consisted of an hour-long run around the base and along beautiful Hyams Beach. Mornings were varied by the inclusion of a 4.30 a.m. fire drill. The academic side of the course included classes on everything from the more basic dress-wearing protocol and drill salutes to the intricacies of the Defence Force Discipline Act, Rules of Armed Conflict, defence writing and naval history.

One of the most difficult parts of the course, for those of us who had not picked up an iron for 20 years, and believed in outsourcing anything which vaguely smacked of laundry, was the daily ritual of



Kate Traill, Jodi Steele, Justice Dennis Cowdroy OAM, Mark Hayes

'rounds'. 'Rounds' required rendering one's room identical to that of one's neighbours – right down to ensuring the smiley faces on socks faced the same way! I had to form more than a nodding acquaintance with a steam iron and starch, learned to fold socks – properly, and can now make a bed with hospital corners. Once I had mastered polishing my shoes, I finally looked the part.

My next hurdle was to stop looking around elsewhere when someone said 'Ma'am', saluted me, and looked to me as if I should know what I was doing!

After having to come to grips with an iron, I now had to come to grips with some rather more serious hardware, as I learned how to dismantle and rebuild a 9mm semi-automatic weapon within 10 seconds, and how to fire it. After a day of theory: 'Get to Know Your Weapon' and walking around with a gun holster strapped around my thigh, my fellow recruits and I went out on the rifle range where we were allowed to shoot a real target.

That evening I sent the following text message to my husband:

'Hi Hon. Great day. Pistol shooting 9mm semi-automatics. I can take apart and put together my gun in 10 seconds'.

He text messaged me the only appropriate response:

'I love you'.

He was a bit concerned however when I came home with photographs of my successful day on the range showing that nearly all of my rounds had hit the groin area of the male target.

Two particularly gruelling exercises are now firmly lodged in my memory as the somewhat exotically named 'Coral Sea' and 'Sunda Strait'. 'Coral Sea' began with us having to inflate eight life rafts, into which we then embarked. My life raft had a hole strategically placed in the aft section (that's the back end) causing it to start sinking as we paddled across Jervis Bay. Somewhat unsurprisingly, this exercise was



designed to test how we would cope with a sinking life raft. The CO decided that the best way to cope was to make me, as the smallest of the group, clamber over everyone to reach the front of the eight life rafts. After only several hours of paddling across Jervis Bay we then had to march – dripping wet – for 15km carrying stretchers bearing patients with broken legs.

Upon my group's triumphant arrival at the HMAS *Creswell* airfield, we had no time to celebrate, but immediately returned to base for flying fox exercises, and then frogmarched back down to the wharf. To our unconfined elation we were given four barrels, assorted planks and rope with which to make a raft to again traverse the bay. I am proud to say that we are only the second group in the history of those exercises to have made a raft that didn't fall apart. Jodi Steele, commanding officer in the exercise, and I were rowed in state across Jervis Bay.

Each night in 'red sea rig' – yet another of our many uniforms – we new recruits attended the wardroom for dinner. At the culmination of our two weeks in October was a hilariously funny mess dinner: each recruit was required to recount an amusing anecdote from their time and travails during the course. Sadly most of those anecdotes are too rude to relay to the gentle readers of this publication. Suffice to say, I now understand the origins and meaning of the phrase 'language that would make a sailor blush'.

So ended Phase 1.

In April 2008, I returned to the picturesque HMAS *Creswell* in beautiful Jervis Bay, for Phase 3 (Phase 2 consists of written exams and assignments), delightfully (and appropriately as it turns out) nicknamed: 'Gassing, Burning and Drowning'. The Combat Survivability course included being tear-gassed, being thrown into a burning ship and stopping leaks on another. Also participating were fellow panel members Justice Dennis Cowdroy OAM and Jodi Steele. Mark Hayes, another recent recruit, was also on base as he was completing his final stages of the New Entry Officers Course or NEOC. As mess president, he hosted our group one night in the Gunnery.

I barely had time to renew my friendships with the members of the

Phase 1 group I had not seen since we parted in October when we had to don orange life preserving suits – yet another uniform variant – for survival at sea. Said suits were – in theory – not supposed to allow any water in, but as they were used for training, such regular use had rendered them full of holes. When it came to buddying-up for the exercise I, with determined practicality, headed straight for the biggest doctor I could find, as I thought him the most likely able to save me if anything untoward happened in the course of jumping off the ship, inflating the life vest, being dunked under water, or swimming to the life raft.

The life raft had rations of chocolate, biscuits, water, cards and a fishing line. As it was a beautiful sunny day I took the opportunity to sunbake while waiting to be 'rescued'. Rescuing normally consisted of being winched out of the water by a helicopter some eight hours later.

The next major exercise was: 'Stop, Leak and Repair' (a pattern was starting to emerge, in clues for chosen titles). In a ship simulator with water pouring in through various holes and bulkheads (walls), the Phase 3 recruits broke up into groups to shore up bulkheads and stop leaks, such repair work to be done using oxy torches and compressor guns. Failure to properly stop the leaks or shore up the bulkheads would result in the water going over our heads: as the shortest in the group, this was of grave concern to me. I am pleased to report that my group did not drown. One low note came in the course when learning how to repair leaking pipes. After watching me with the hammer, my instructor decided that I should not be allowed to progress to a chisel. My disappointment was short-lived however, as I was allowed to take control of the dramatically flaming and hissing oxy torch and compressor gun!

Next came 'Burning'. Again in a ship simulator, the galley and engine room were set on fire. Into thick black smoke we were sent in a chain – hanging on to the person in front, while the person behind clung onto you like grim death! Once was clearly not enough: again we ran in, this time with overalls on, holding writhing but rock-hard fire hoses, fierce torrents of water staunchly storming out of them. The force of water was phenomenal: trainers stood behind us, supporting us to ensure we didn't propel backwards! Then for good measure, we donned 25 kilos of breathing apparatus and helmets, and went in to an even bigger conflagration. It was a lot of fun and, of course, we had to sit more exams. We also studied nuclear, chemical and biological decontamination.

To complete the trio: 'Gassing'. Unsurprisingly, we donned gas masks, entered a chamber, and were tear-gassed. What more can I say?

I survived.

My experience as a reservist in the navy to date – while extremely physically and mentally draining – has been amazing. I have met some fantastic people, all of whom are willing to use their skills and serve their country. They are my heroes. It has definitely taken me outside my comfort zone. However, I am looking forward to my next deployment, this time on a ship. (Oh yes and also doing some legal work).

It is an honour and privilege to be part of the NSW Reserve Naval Legal Panel.