

Writers Branch in the top end - By Ex WOWTR Jeannie Roberts

To answer the question “Are there still Writers in Darwin?” the answer is an emphatic “YES”. Although there have been a lot of changes over the years – the star with a “W” is still well represented in Darwin.

History

On 19 February 1942 the Japanese Navy launched a bombing attack on the Australian mainland, striking the tiny township of Darwin on Australia’s far north coast. It was a devastating attack rendered more effective by the inadequate defences based in Darwin at the time. (Do you really need this?)

On Christmas Eve 1974 Darwin was blown apart by one of the worst natural disasters in Australian history, Cyclone Tracy. Along with most of the city, HMAS MELVILLE was lost.

12 months post Cyclone Tracy, my history with Darwin started, As a fresh faced, baby Writer of 18 years of age (just old enough to go to the Wets) I was posted to Darwin, a flat city which had just started getting back on its feet after Cyclone Tracy. The Navy reconstruction teams were still helping the city to rebuild, often in difficult, distasteful and sometimes dangerous work

I settled in to the WRANS Quarters, where I shared a cabin with three other girls, there was no air-conditioning and we were required to stand rounds on week nights at 1900. My posting was to the Shoal Bay Receiving Station (SBRS) as the only Writer amongst the “spies” doing typing on a manual typewriter and filing as necessary. Luckily I had a good CPOWTR at HMAS COONAWARRA who went in to bat for me so I could work at the Pay Office to get through my task book two days a week. This kept me up-to-date with the branch and stopped me from going brain dead in my non-core job. I dined in the Junior Sailors Café, where I was to keep my one night in four duties washing dishes.

In 1975 the Navy’s presence was four Attack Class Patrol Boats operating out of Darwin, the main base at Berrimah, HMAS COONAWARRA and its outstations. Writers were employed in the pay, personnel, accounts and registry duties at COONAWARRA as well as positions at NOCNAs office and my position at SBRS. There were other Supply Branch personnel including Stewards manning the Wardroom, Victuallers ordering the food and looking after the clothing store and Cooks working in the three Messes. The Naval Stores staff supplied stores and logistics support.

In 1982, Darwin Naval Base (DNB) was opened at Larrakeyah Cove (within the boundaries of Larrakeyah Barracks) at a cost of \$25 million, by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. The base was designed to help protect vessels and equipment from cyclones, with lessons having been learnt from the devastation of Cyclone Tracy in 1974. Major work included general site excavation, the construction of two

breakwaters forming an enclosed harbour, a patrol boat maintenance shed, workshop and stores complex.

1989 was to be my second posting to Darwin as the CO's Secretary/Personnel Officer in the rank of CPOWTR. By then the Navy Communication Station (NAVCOMSTA) was well and truly up and running and COONAWARRA had at least 500 uniform personnel ashore to administer. As the senior Writer, I was also the Writers job coordinator and endeavoured to rotate all of the Junior Sailors around during their postings so they could be cross trained in pay, accounts, registry and personnel duties. At that time we had about 3 Senior Sailors and at least 12 Junior Sailors in the branch including jobs in the Personnel Services Organisation.

In the 1990s civilians took over a lot of the admin jobs from Supply personnel ashore under the Defence Commercial Support Program (CSP).

Throughout 2002, COONAWARRA gradually saw the Naval presence at Berrimah decrease and the presence in DNB, increase. This was a result of NAVCOMSTA Darwin closure, and an increase in the Australian Defence Force's (ADF) level of operations at DNB. COONAWARRA then moved to its location to within Larrakeyah Barracks, on the waters edge, to encompass DNB. The shift of focus for COONAWARRA allowed the establishment to focus more closely on its core business - provision of logistics and maintenance support to the Darwin-based minor war vessels (MWVs), as well as visiting MWVs and major fleet units.

Now Darwin is a now a lush, tropical metropolis with multi-story buildings surrounding the city and a casual atmosphere all year round. Darwin is a vitally important Navy port - a gateway to our northern neighbours and the centre from which we conduct Operation RESOLUTE, the ADF's role in border integrity operations. Twelve fleet units are home-ported at Darwin Naval Base, which is now referred to as HMAS COONAWARRA Darwin also plays host to major RAN and multi-national exercises and operations involving around 100 visiting Australian and foreign major warships each year.

The base which was HMAS COONAWARRA at Berrimah became Defence Establishment Berrimah (DEB) and is occupied by mostly Australian Public Servant (APS) staff working for Defence in support roles. For Navy there is no NAVCOMSTA in Darwin and SBRS has lost almost all the uniform billets. Support roles for the Writers positions in accounts, registry and the Personnel Services Organisation were lost to civilian positions. The WRANS Quarters (which later became the Senior Sailors Mess) is a tri-service transit single cabin accommodation for uniform NCOs and civilian equivalents.

There are no Stewards or Victuallers (except one POSTD at Food Services at the old DNB). The limited number of shore billets of Cooks work out of the Officer's Mess at Larrakeyah or the Food Services area. The patch houses at DEB are mostly occupied by Army personnel and their families and the Junior Sailors accommodation is single cabins, with 4 rooms sharing one communal living and abolition area. Near the Junior Sailors blocks on DEB is the Darwin Detention

Centre which has been housing illegal fishermen in demountable, air conditioned accommodation better than I lived in as a Junior Sailor.

At sea the Armidale Class Patrol Boats (ACPB) have replaced the Fremantle Class Patrol Boat (FCPB). The only Supply sailors in the Ships Company on the ACPB are the Cooks. But unlike the FCPB, there are two Cooks per crew and the vessels are multi-crewed. ACPBs are home ported in Darwin as well as Cairns.

Writers in Darwin 2007

Writer billets in Darwin have civilianised over the years and include registry and accounts positions. Luckily, reviews over the time have identified the need to keep white uniform Writers in the Top End. Current billets include:

Commanding Officer Secretary HMAS COONAWARRA – POWTR: Providing executive support to the CO.

Personnel Office – CPOWTR, LSWTR & ABWTR: Providing personnel support to Navy personnel and families in Darwin, including ACPB crews and support personnel. Assist visiting ships in the area.

Pay Office – LSWTR & ABWTR. Process pay transitions under the supervision of CSP staff. Provide Support for Navy personnel in Darwin, including ACPB crews and support personnel. Assist visiting ships in the area.

Patrol Boat Force Element Group (PBFEG) – LSWTR: Secretary to the Senior Naval Officer North Australia/COMAUSPBFEG and registry duties at the PBFEG.
Northern Command (NORCOM) – LSWTR & ABWTR: Provide administration duties in a tri-service environment.

A few other Reserve Writers have been occupying “any branch” billets in recent years and occasionally an old salt will come back from oblivion and volunteer to serve in an out of branch position, just to experience the tropical lifestyle and the enjoyment of learning new skills.

Darwin has been bombed and blown away over the years but has always been able to rebuild and come back better than before because of the spirit of the people and the assistance from the many Defence personnel who live and work in the community.

Sources: Seatalk Autumn 2005 LSPH Kaye Adams