

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: Seataalk Autumn 2005 LSPH Kaye Adams

Initial WTR Training in 2006 by CPOWTR MARK LANSDELL CIO-WTR

Greetings all from the staff here at WTR training, Supply & Health Faculty, HMAS CERBERUS. It has been a very busy year for the Writer Training Section. Staff have been involved in both instruction of our Initial Writers and in the process of

developing the new Work Experience Journal Part 1 (SMN - AB) and Part 2 (which replaces the old task book type training). Staff changeover has seen POWTR Michael Davis post out to NUSHIP PERTH, with myself joining as the new Course Implementation Officer. WTR training and POWTR Karyn Ravaillon join as the new Senior WTR Instructor. LSWTR Terri Langdon will depart at the end of the year, on promotion to POWTR, to HMAS ALBATROSS. Our thanks go to both Michael and Terri for the splendid job they have done and we wish them well in their future postings.

The Initial Writer course is currently 11 weeks in duration and comprises of three major components Captains Office (Personnel), Financial Conditions of Service (Accounts) and Pay. These three components currently remain as a WTR's core skills despite the introduction of computer technology and civilianisation.

Captains Office

This component comprises of personnel and covers topics such as Incoming/Outgoing Correspondence, Classified Mail, and Performance Appraisal Reports for Sailors, Security Markings, Privacy Markings, Discharges & Re-enlistments, Books of Reference and Promotions. Students also undertake on-line training in the use of DRMS (Document Records Management System) and PMKEYS, which is the new Tri-Service Human Resource Management system that replaced the old Navy specific personnel management system.

Financial Conditions of Service

This component covers both theory and practical components of Accounts. Trainees are presented with a number of scenarios for leave travel, duty travel and external traders accounts for completion of relevant documentation for payment. Trainees are also provided with ROMAN training to consolidate their theory and practical components to better gain an understanding of the payment processes. In addition we now include a component on the recently introduced Defence Travel Card (DTC) which is only used for 'Business' travel at this stage.

Pay

Although the majority of pay services are provided by civilians ashore, some establishments and all major fleet units still require WTR's to undertake ADFPAY processing. Students get to logon to the live ADFPAY system to view the various screens used. The school is attempting to set up an ADFPAY training database to enable students to input transactions and receive reports. If successful, this will add some realism to their practical training. Towards the end of the pay component, students and staff undertake a liaison visit to the Defence Force Pay

Accounting Centre (DEFPAC) in Melbourne.

The course culminates with the Rites of Passage which involves presentations on the history of a selected class of ship, team building exercises, customer service scenarios and the class cooking a BBQ lunch for staff and guests.

That is the Initial WTR training in a nutshell and as further developments in technology occur and Conditions of Service change, we update WTR training to

reflect those changes. This ensures those personnel who successfully complete Initial WTR training have the necessary skills to undertake the various functions required of WTRs in the Fleet.

Navy News item from the 3 September 1965 edition, What Is A Writer

A Writer is not, as the name implies, a writer, but is a person who sits all day typing and making lots of work out of pieces of paper. A Writer can sit in one of three places: Pay Office, Accounts Office, or Captain's Office. Some Writers are even capable of sitting in all three (though not at the one time), but these species are rare - they invariably stick to the one.

PAY OFFICE:- In this section, the Writer is trained to create payment queries, the answering of which keeps him busy for 13 days. Much time is spent by the Writer in this section in keeping stationary. Pay Office Writers have an air about them - generally conditioned.

A favourite expression used by the Pay Office Writer is "come back tomorrow, we're putting up pay", when in actual fact, **THEY ARE CREATING STILL MORE PAYMENT QUERIES.**

Careful training in the Supply School enables this type of Writer to appear busy at all times. This impression is created by the duty writer each morning. He attends the office early and carefully places folders, pencils, sheets of paper, rulers, rubbers and payment queries in position. When the rest of the staff arrive, they are busy straight away - clearing it all away again.

The Bible of the Pay Office Writer is the pocket size ready reckoner. This is used to calculate pocket size payments.

ACCOUNTS OFFICE:- This type of Writer is a lonely type. He is chosen for his ability to remain seated for long periods in an air conditioned office with one or two Supply Officers.

Apart from this duty, the Accounts Office Writer keeps the travelling expense records travelling. Because of this continual travelling (from office to office, for signature and checking, and back again for more signatures and more checking) this type of Writer's favourite expression is "come back three months from tomorrow, your expenses haven't traveled far enough yet."

CAPTAIN'S OFFICE:- The main duty of this type of Writer is to see that the notation of swimming test passes is not recorded on the rating's service certificate. A lesser duty (but still of importance) is the duty of confusionalisation. All the Writer does in answer to questions regarding advancement, removal requests etc., is to quote Commonwealth Navy Order numbers, correspondence file numbers, Advancement Regulations article numbers etc., with such rapidity that the listener leaves the office confused.

NOTA BENE:-

Writers are assured that no slight is offered on this page. No-one works better. No-one works longer. No-one works harder than a Writer.

(Well, it must be remembered that Writers do carry out the duty of drafting, so a good word must appear somewhere. Perish the thought of another 12 months in MELBOURNE!)