

Naval Writers Historical Records

Up to 1867, the Navy had never considered the idea of passing part of the clerical duties afloat to the rating. Civil clerks, including Samuel Pepys himself, had of course always been the backbone of naval administration ashore, but clerical work meant a degree of education far beyond that possessed by the 18th and early 19th century naval recruit. Inevitably, the pressure of an ever increasing volume of clerical work increased the need to employ more naval clerks, the majority of whom had very little chance of ever becoming Paymasters.

By 1867 the position had got so far out of hand, that the Admiralty decided to limit drastically the entry of Assistant Clerks to a fraction of the former intake, and to offset this reduction by establishing a new rating of Writer (Order-in-Council, 2nd February, 1867). These Writers were "to assist in Ships Offices and to mess with Seamen's Schoolmasters and Master-at-Arms". Three classes were provided for, paid at the rate of 2/-per day for a 3rd Class Writer, rising to 5/-per day for a Writer 1st Class after ten year's Service, and they were "to be eligible for pensions in the same way as other Petty Officers." Thus the beginning of the system which constitutes the Writer category of the modern Navy was established.

At first the introduction of Writer ratings did not provide the answer to the Admiralty's dilemma. Men with even the small amount of education necessary were hard to find, and few at the rates of pay offering were prepared to forsake the counting house or the merchant office stool for life in the Navy. In 1873 the Admiralty attempted to overcome this difficulty by introducing Boy Writers on board ship, with pay of 1/- per day, and "drawn principally from Greenwich School". At 18, these boys, trained in Navy methods, were eligible for advancement to 3rd Class Writers, ranking as Able Seamen, rising, to Petty Officer status after 5 years' service, and to Chief Petty Officer after ten years.

In 1889 (Order-in-Council No. 38) the designation of Writers as 1st, 2nd and 3rd Class was abolished and substituted by Chief Writer (C.P.O.), Second Writer (P.O.) and Third Writer. The following year Writers were given the familiar six-pointed Gold Star as a distinguishing badge. It was not, however, restricted to Writers, but was also issued to Schoolmasters and Stewards. In 1891 the Admiralty decided "in view of the considerable increase in the amount and the responsibility of the duties of Writers", that they be paid an extra shilling a day when serving in ships not allowed an Accounting Officer.

In 1909 Warrant Rank was established for Writers, along with Telegraphists, Ship's Stewards, Ship's Police and Ship's Cooks. The number in the RN was fixed at 12 (increased to 15 in August, 1911) with the title of Warrant Writer with pay of 7/- per day, rising to 8/6 per day after five years and 10/- per day after ten years.

Inauguration Of The Supply School 1947

Harry Bird wrote this article and was acknowledged by the curator of the HMAS Cerberus museum in October 2002.

The 'weakest link' segment starring SupplySchool instructors at the Reunion Dinner (2002) caused me to reflect on the fact that I was a member of the very first course. For reasons to follow I could be regarded as the first student.

I joined the RAN. on 6th March, 1947 as an ordinary seaman, (C.B.) On the successful completion of the Signal School course I applied to change my two year engagement term to twelve years. I failed the eyesight test and was given the option of a discharge or to transfer to a spectacle friendly branch. As I joined the Navy before 1/7/49, I became a Writer II as did an ex-stoker who joined the first class. The remainders of the class were called recruit writers. While I was in 'limbo' Warrant Writer Officer Alfred Bede Calder was appointed to set up and be the instructor of the SupplySchool. Because I was 'unemployed' and an experienced typist,

I became his offsider. Mr. Calder drafted the syllabus and lecture notes. I typed up his drafts and reproduced sufficient copies with the aid of a State of the Art Gestetner duplicator. We also had to have on hand every type of AS.form a writer would use in the ships office or Captains office. Starting from nothing, the setting up took from four to six weeks.

From 1/7/47, advancement rules were changed in that seniority for promotion was based on the date of passing professional exams. Writers who attended the first course would have had no difficulty in passing the professional exam for P.O. Wtr. Graduates of the course had a significant advantage in passing professional exams early and leap—frogging their contemporaries. No prizes for guessing where the test papers for these exams were compiled. Any similarity with the questions asked and learnt at the School, was purely coincidental. As a pre 1/7/47 entry I was not only 'educated' but was subject to shorter minimum time periods for advancement than the recruit writers in my class.

Thanks to the excellent memory of Tony Dellarmarta who attended the Reunion, I am able to mention the names of the original students.

Recruit Writers. Cecil Atkinson, John Bolton, George Carolan, Brian Cherry, Tony Dellarmarta, Milton A. Martin, Gordon Reinhardt, Brian Wren, Writer II's. Harry Bird and Rick Thompson. (ex—Stoker). John Bolton transferred to the Fleet Air Arm and following aircraft accidents, was invalided from the R.A.N. Brian Wren also transferred to the Fleet Air Arm and was killed while on flying duties.

When I graduated, I became the Commodores writer for Commodore Showers and Commodore Dalmeyer (R.N.,) The Commodores secretary was Lieutenant (S) Shinkfield. About six months later I was replaced by Miss Valda Grant (now Mrs. Harry Cole), a civilian stenographer. Not Only very competent, but much better looking. Assign of things to come. The Supply Officer was Commander (S) Blacklock. The pay office was under the control of Commissioned Writer Officer Darcy Tarrant. The officer in charge of the Signal School was Flag Lieutenant Commander R.J. Robertson, later Captain R.J. Robertson RAN.

The title MISTER was appropriate at the time for a Commissioned Warrant Officer (1/2 stripe) or a Warrant Officer (1/4 stripe.) Pay Branch Officers also wore a white stripe. Both ranks wore the standard officers cap badge.

Alfred (ALF) Bede Calders' History Of Writer Branch

Eight writers joined the Navy on 15th April, 1935. With passage of time one became a Captain and three became Commanders, two others were killed during the war. One was killed in an accident and one was discharged for reasons I cannot recall.

That so many of an entry of eight progressed to senior rank is remarkable. Probably, due to 1935 being one of the years of the Great Depression when civilian jobs were, to say the least, scarce, accounted for the high standard of entry. Most had their Leaving Certificates which in those days qualified for entry to university.

At this time (1935) Captain S. Trivett thought writer entries should be given some professional training before taking up practical work. He directed Petty Officer Writer John Oâ™Hare to this task and we were given some weeks of training in our jobs which gave us a better understanding of what was expected of us. I am not aware that other classes were given similar instruction. With the outbreak of war it became a case of learn on the job.

In 1946 I was promoted to Warrant Officer and posted to Cerberus as a/Sec. However, on arrival Captain (S) sent for me and said he wanted all new entry Writers to receive professional training before taking up postings and would I look around to find a suitable building which would provide the necessary classrooms. At that time, War having ended, there were plenty of spare buildings around which would suitably fill the purpose.

However, the best suited for our purposes were a block of classrooms, then redundant, and available for the setting up of a writer's training school. These were centrally placed in the vicinity of the Drill Hall and had enough spare room for the training of supply assistants as well as writers.

Captain (S.) took the necessary action to secure these rooms for our use and they became the Supply School. Chief C.P.O. Writer E. Rogers was posted to the school as instructor and together we secured the necessary furnishings, desks, blackboards, stationary etc to enable us to take our first new entry class.

Chief C.P.O. Rogers was an excellent instructor and together we worked out a training program. It was decided to keep the training as practical as possible and to this end ledgers were prepared as would happen at the Commissioning of a new ship from transfer lists. Ships Company were drafted in with their documents, both pay and certificates of service.

Hence pay and captain's offices were set up. Individuals were drafted in and out with the necessary documentation. Some were promoted, demoted, sent to cells and detention for punishment, and some died. In fact, practically anything that could reasonably happen did, and the necessary paper work prepared. We aimed that the training be as practical as possible so that on completion of course trainees would become useful members of ships or captains officers to which they were drafted. In practice we felt this aim was achieved.

Branch Records From The Museum At HMAS Cererus

The first record of Supply Department activities in HMAS CERBERUS is when the Naval Stores Building was erected in 1916.

Paymaster Lieutenant Commander R.C. Negus, RAN who had formerly served as the Staff Paymaster at the Williamstown Naval Depot was the first Supply Officer of HMAS CERBERUS, Westernport.

Prior to 1946, the training of Writer Sailors was not conducted formally as it is today. Training was confined to Recruits Clerical, who on completion of New Entry disciplinary training were categorized Probationary Writers. Then followed on the job training during which period it was intended that the trainees would be given elementary training lectures in their Ships and Establishments, complemented by some typing training.

Following World War 2, the first twelve drafts of New Entry Supply Recruits of the Writer category were posted to Ships and Establishments immediately after Recruit Training without the benefit of any professional Supply training whatsoever.

It was eventually realised that newly recruited Writer Sailors needed proper training in their professional duties before being posted to Ships and Establishments. This was needed to bring them into line with trainees of other Branches of the RAN and the training objectives were addressed along the lines of the curriculum of the newly formed RN Supply School HMS CERES. In November 1946, a formal Supply and Secretariat Training School was set up in HMAS CERBERUS.

The Supply School was set up in the old New Entry School building erected in 1925, now used by the School of Music and later transferred to the former New Entry School Academic Block. The Supply School remained in that building until it was relocated in the refurbished "A" Accommodation Block in 1979. Warrant Officer Alf B Calder, Commissioned Writer Officer was appointed to the School in 1946 for Instructional Duties. Alf Calder retired with the rank of Commander some twenty years later.

Most of the organisation for initial setting to work of the School fell on the broad shoulders of the popular Alf Calder. He supervised the fittings and accommodations for the new classrooms and the comprehensive notes he produced formed the basis for the professional training of Supply and Secretariat Sailors for many years.

During this time Harry Bird assisted Alf. Harry was an experienced typist, having been transferred out of the Communications Branch, on medical grounds – or as he put it - he was given the option of a discharge or transfer to a more "Spectacle Friendly" branch. His job was to type up his [Alf's] drafts and reproduce sufficient copies with the aid of a state of the art "Gestetner" duplicator. Starting from nothing, the setting up took from four to six weeks.

As from 1st July 1947, advancement rules were changed in that seniority for promotion was based on the date of passing professional exams. Writers who attended the first course would have no difficulty in passing the professional exam for PO Wtr. Graduates of the course had a significant advantage in passing professional exams early and leap frogging their contemporaries. No prizes for guessing where the test papers for these exams were compiled. Any similarity with the questions asked and learnt at the school, were purely coincidental.

Original Students from the first class were:

Recruit Writers: Cecil Atkinson, John Bolton, George Carolan, Brian Cherry, Tony Dellamarta, Milton A. Martin, Gordon Reinhardt, Brian Wren.

Writer II: Harry Bird [Ex Communicator], Rick Thompson [Ex Stoker]

John Bolton transferred to the Fleet Air Arm, and following aircraft accidents, was invalided from the RAN.

Brian Wren also transferred to the Fleet Air Arm and was killed while on Flying Duties.

Writer Sailors who, through promotion to Officer Rank, have carried out the duties of OIC Supply School include: CMDR L. G [aka Tug] Wilson, MBE, RAN, LCDR A. [Andy] L. Hamilton, RAN, CMDR Tom Lea, RAN, LCDR Ian Lee-Conway, RAN.

A Writer during Nelson's Time

CMDR Roland Van Geelen, RAN speaks about Writers many years ago

... During Nelson's time the WTR (or Captain's Clerk) had an office on the quarterdeck or upper deck. He held a high status, was paid the same rate as a MIDN, and had his own cabin in the gunroom.

In those days the Supply Officer was known as the Purser and held the rank of Warrant Officer (this was due to his character being considered suspect and therefore not worthy of being a fully commissioned officer). The regulations of the RN demanded that the SU Officer serve at least one year as a Captain's Clerk, so the WTR was often a young man working his way up to be a Purser or SO.

In a reflection of what is similar to the present day, the CO of a ship in Nelson's time had to present to Admiralty monthly at least 25 different books, forms and returns. Some were simple, others were more complex. All required the CO to rely heavily upon his WTR to collate information and present it to him for signature. Day to day events were also required to be documented and meant that the Captain's Clerk had to be right at the side of the CO. This often carried with it extreme danger. During the Battle of Trafalgar Nelson's WTR (PO Whipple) was shot in the chest and killed moments before Nelson himself was mortally wounded. Obviously the French sharpshooter was aiming for Lord Nelson, but got the Captain's Clerk first!

Apart from the Captain, the First LEUT in Nelson's day was also assigned a WTR due to the enormity of the job. When he secured the services of an efficient WTR he generally relegated to that individual everything concerning the internal administration of the ship. Watchbills, leave approvals, personal file entries, pay authorisations. The power was considerable and the influence of the WTR on Jack Tar's daily life immeasurable. The WTR was held in very high esteem. The following story from a warship appeared in a 19th century newspaper will give you an idea of what I mean:

A sailor turned to at the Ship's Office with an urgent personal issue wanting to see the ship's WTR. The WTR waived the sailor away saying he was too busy. The sailor went back on the upper decks and finding the OOW requested that he be allowed to see the First LEUT re a personal matter. The First LEUT was summoned at which point the sailor stated to the First LEUT that he wanted permission from him to see the CO regarding a very important personal matter. The First LEUT was surprised by the anxiety and urgency of the sailor's plea so agreed to his request and wheeled him in to the Captain's cabin. Upon being seen by the Captain the CO asked the sailor what the very important and personal

matter was. The sailor replied “...If you please Sir, I would like your permission to speak to the ship’s WTR...”