

# I Joined the Navy

John Westwood

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## I JOINED THE NAVY

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It was Thursday night, early in the evening. Imagine yourself, eighteen years of age, walking the streets of Kings Cross in Sydney with your two best mates. Lights were ablaze, cars were roaring up and down Oxford Street, the girls were out. What more could a young man want?

A difficult question at eighteen but one that all three of us were willing to explore. We headed off to Rushcutters Bay, somewhat of a seedy suburb in those days, April 1965. Low and behold, we were confronted with a bunch of well-lit barracks right on Sydney harbour. Gathered outside the barracks were a heap of young men, all about our age and appearing to have a good time. Maybe it was a pub or a party? We had to explore.

Well, life has many surprises, and as it turned out this was going to be a beauty. There were literally hundreds of young men milling about with dozens of what appeared to be officials, milling in the background. We soon found out that our discovery was a naval depot full of prospective sailors and recruiting officers. In we bound, there must be booze and a party here, for sure.

We were wrong of course. Some twenty metres away, wearing a black uniform with white peaked cap, came a booming voice, *Mr Westwood, front and centre.*

And so, my life changed forever. Lieutenant Commander Galbraith, a very fit and amiable man, brought the crowd to silence and marched directly toward me, and my mates. Shit, I said, looking at my mates who just wanted to run in any direction other than forward but found themselves nailed to the tarmac by some unexplainable force.

Expecting to hear gun shots I was startled when Galbraith yelled at me, *how are you old mate, where is your Dad?* By this time, I was almost in tears with fear and trauma, I did not know who was going to kill me first, the approaching threat, or my mates.

Frank Galbraith ended up being my mentor for many years, as he had been mentored by my father since the Second World War. He also looked after my mates, that is what sailors do. Yes, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1965 all three of us joined the Royal Australian Navy Reserve.



When I joined the Sydney Port Division of the R.A.N.R there was a total crew of eighty-three men. My first official duty happened three days later when I proudly marched in the Anzac Day parade with my brother, Leading Seaman Rick Westwood, and my father, former Chief Petty Officer Bill Westwood, down Martin Place, flanked by the very brave survivors of HMAS Yarra II, sunk in the Java Sea in 1942. There are one or two days in your life when you feel twelve feet tall. This was one of those that I shall never forget.

So, the real story begins. The Navy Reserves are exactly that, reserves in case of conflict. We were trained to a standard that could supplement the regular service at short notice, as happened in all conflicts, particularly World War II, where over 90% of those serving were Reserves. In for the duration.

Well, as it happened, the Vietnam War was raging and within twelve months of our joining the RANR the government introduced conscription. Twelve months later, in 1966, the Reserve force had built up to over four thousand personnel. The choice was to join the Army and go to Vietnam for two years or join a military reserve for six years. As you can imagine, existing members enjoyed rapid promotion simply to manage the intake.



Reserve members needed to maintain their regular job, I worked in a Bank. I enjoyed this, forty hours a week of banking and upwards of twenty hours R.A.N.R. service. I got paid by both and the Reserves were tax free. For me, sitting in between was social and community work, and I was very much into photography, particularly film production. It was quite logical that I would meld my Bank career and Navy service, so I got myself a job with the Navy making documentaries. The Navy supplied all the equipment I needed. The Bank seconded me to the position of photographic editor with Bank Notes, its national publication.

The highlight of my service was to enjoy special gigs such as flying to North Queensland with bags full of money, joining major American warships, R&R from Vietnam, exchanging US dollars for Australian currency as I sailed back in aircraft carriers or battle cruises to Sydney. The Bank sponsors my trip north and the US Navy pays my way back. All I get is double pay and a heap of friends for life.

Service in the armed forces is not without risk. Navy training was intensified during this period with the Vietnam War and community outrage in conflict. This necessitated my frequent travel to HMAS Cerberus, south of Melbourne, firstly to learn specific combat training, and a little later as a gunnery officer.

In Melbourne, I was involved in a serious training accident where a 4.5" gun misfired killing one of the loaders and ripping a hole in my arm. Fortunately for me, the wound was attended to quickly and eventually repaired without a mark. And this was only practice.

After receiving a commission my special duties included escorting USN Officers on tours of Sydney, in particular the Blue Mountains. Like all tourists, well cashed up, the officers were willing to spend copious amounts of money on entertainment, women, booze, and travel. In the late 60's they would think nothing of paying \$US200 for a one-way trip to Katoomba. Locals, particularly taxi drivers, could not tell American officers from their Australian counterparts and it was almost funny to see their expression when they asked for \$500 fare to a local destination, only to hear my Australian voice, and know they were sprung. The result was a free fare to avoid any confrontation. They slowly learned.

As time went on my duties changed. The late 60's saw my status alter as I spent more time away from banking, with a greater contribution to special service duties with the Navy.



It is worth mentioning that my boss at the Bank, was also the commanding officer of Sydney Port Division. He oversaw my job appointments and it could be said that maintaining good relations with him also carried favour. For three years in a row I was appointed gun captain for the start of the Sydney to Hobart yacht race. This meant I got to fire the 40mm bofors gun that saw the Hobart fleet on its way. On two occasions this was a formality, but the third occasion was rather traumatic, and our gun misfired. Fortunately, it made the usual bang but in fact the blank round exploded on leaving the muzzle, covering three very senior officers, the saluting party, regaled in their fine white (No.1s) summer uniforms, black on the backside and white facing forward. These blank rounds contained a black sooty powder for effect.

I spent some time in Vietnam with the Jindalee project, the over horizon radar. The second was a trip to the USA, San Francisco, to pick up aircraft for our carrier. Both were reasonably short trips but not without excitement and some trepidation.

I was young and had some special qualities. My hearing was spot on with some exceptional qualities. I could hear a range of tones and frequencies which were unusual, such as the guttural throbbing of ship engines beyond the horizon. I also had 20:20 vision that picked up fine movement of ships in the distance, again, ships sailing below the horizon with just the head of their mast exposed.

Technology in the 1960's was basic, and sailors relied on what they could see and hear. The development of over-the-horizon radar was essential to safety at sea, particularly in times of conflict. Hence my involvement in the Jindalee project to develop radar that could see around the earth's curvature. Of course, this was later replaced by GPS and now, instead of relying on weapons with line of sight we can fire missiles accurately at targets many thousands of kilometres distant.



There was no danger in my trip to the west coast of the US. It was, however, memorable and an experience to see jet aircraft replace World War II propeller driven planes, the norm for that period.

The latter 1960's and early seventies were changing times. We were only five years from colour television in this country and somehow life was a little more formal. Some of our freedoms were diminishing but Navy life did not change all that much. I transferred onto patrol boats, basic compared to today's fleet, but with a degree of freedom not experienced in capital ships.

My Navy career had taken me on many ships and to depots all around Australia. The experiences I had and the men I met were second to none in character, and even today there's a camaraderie with those who survive and remember.

Two events come to mind, the first was a short cruise to Coffs Harbour in New South Wales on a fact-finding mission. We needed to discover how many fish you could catch with one hand grenade. Using our sonar to find the fish, and tremendous speed, we dropped the grenade over the transom, circled around with a large boarding net and gathered the bounty. Ninety-six fish, unconscious, found their way onboard and eventually ended up in the freezer. It really took the interest out of fishing for me.

The second event was more historical. We were coming back from the barrier reef on our patrol boat in early April 1971, heading for Sydney. Just north of Moreton Bay we ran into a series of four cyclones and we needed to decide whether we should continue south. Our attempts were futile with water submerging the bridge and entering the funnel. It took more than forty kilometres to turn about and after many hours we came alongside Tangalooma, in the lee of the storms.



As fate would have it, the crew were invited ashore, including myself, and were milling with guests at the local bar. Although the weather was terrible the company was brilliant and in true fairy-tale style, I met Jennifer to whom I have been married nearly fifty years.

In effect, that cruise also marked the end of my formal Navy career. I continued in the R.A.N Volunteer Reserve for another three years and participated in several specialised activities. From there my life focussed on family and community responsibilities.

Nine years of my life I will never regret, and an experience from which I have learnt so much.