
THE ROYAL VOLUNTEER COASTAL PATROL

a talk given to the Society on 6 June 2002 by

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The idea of a rescue service for small boats in the Sydney area was first hatched by Harold Nobbs who was given a motor cruiser for his 21st birthday in 1929 by his father.

Harold had observed - and no doubt assisted - a similar motor cruiser which had broken down while he was travelling from Sydney Harbour to Broken Bay and realised that only passing traffic would be in a position to provide help in such a situation.

He approached the motor yacht club in Broken Bay (of which he was a member) with this idea, but was informed that if people were going to break down while at sea they should employ a professional boatman to rectify such breakdowns rather than rely on others.

He later was working in the New Guinea region when he noticed the number of foreign vessels seeming to be doing survey work in that area and was a party to the development of the coastwatch system there.

In 1937, back in Sydney, he still talked of a rescue service and tied this together with the idea of a coastwatch group as it had become apparent that there might be another war in the offing and Sydney - in fact Australia - had no such system of looking after its major ports.

Because of the contacts he had made in New Guinea through the Coastwatch organisation he was able to talk to the Navy hierarchy and they told him that if he could get at least a dozen volunteers they would undertake to train them and support their activities. Obviously then, the Navy people were thinking along the same lines. It did take Harold no time in getting the required dozen men and so training began.

In 1937 the Navy appointed a Senior Captain to handle their training - one Captain Maurice Blackwood DSO, RN - who continued to do this well into 1939 when the war had started and the group had grown to 150 men.

Harold himself was appointed to take over in 1939 which he continued until 1941.

As the war progressed more and more of his members were moved into the Navy. Nevertheless the organisation grew very quickly with hundreds of older yachtsmen joining up.

Known as the Naval Auxiliary Patrol they were given the job of patrolling the harbours at night to maintain ship security from the sea side. Before long they were engaged in 14 ports in NSW, Vic and Q'ld.

Having been organised and trained by the Navy the organisation adopted the naval system of ranks with positions by appointment - not by democratic election - and this system continues to this day.

The full membership elects a governing board of directors who appoint the Officer Commanding and he or she appoints the other officers who then collectively manage the operational side of the Patrol. I say 'she' because while so far no lady has been an OC they have filled and currently fill almost every other level of appointment since first being admitted to full membership some fifteen years ago.

Probably the most important action achieved by the Patrol during the war was the manning of the boomgate across Sydney Harbour and it was a member of the Volunteer group who first realised that something was trapped in the net. This of course was the Japanese midget submarine which had been following a larger vessel through the open boom gate.

As the official patrol in the harbours members were sworn in as special constables with the power of arrest. This led to the Patrol being given the right to fly the Water Police ensign - their Nemesis flag - and soon after they were given the right to fly the official NSW State flag instead of the general Australian ensign.

By 1941 the Patrol had grown to over 4,000 members and 500 boats of which many craft were taken over by the Navy for the period of the war and happily returned to their original owners when the war had ended.

Wollongong had a division of the Patrol during the war numbering about fifty members with the responsibility for looking after Port Kembla. Fortunately nothing untoward happened here, but they were there just in case and at the time of course, with the history of what happened in Sydney, who was to know that it might not happen here with the steelworks so close to the sea.

In Sydney the Patrol looked after Rose Bay with its Catalinas and Sunderlands, Woolloomooloo with its warships, Athol Bight where the two Queens; Mary and Elizabeth, would moor, Bantry Bay with its huge armament depot and west of the Bridge several large oil depots. All in all the Patrol had a huge responsibility in Sydney Harbour alone.

Being allocated the night shift members were on patrol from 6 pm till 6 am next day, after which they had to report at their usual place of work. Most of them, we were told, only worked for three days a week in order to catch up on sleep. Remember that these were men too old to join the military service and a large number had significant jobs and positions in commerce and industry. Therefore they must be remembered with gratitude. In return for this they were paid breakfast money each day - the sum of ninepence - the equivalent of seven and a half cents!

As an example of the role they played - in the calendar period 19th October 1942 to 19th October 1943 - they carried out 2,080 separate patrols in Sydney Harbour alone covering 39,089 miles. It took 24,443 man hours on patrol with 95,140 man hours on duty during this one twelve month period.

When the war ended most members drifted away very quickly, but Nobbs and his mates stayed and concentrated on his first love - sea rescue for all of the boats which were soon to appear in and around the harbour. This developed into education of the boating public and the Sydney Sun newspaper began a series of sponsored Safe Boating classes for which it supplied all the necessary notes, films and so on.

By now the Maritime Services Board regularly called on the Patrol to assist with the management of harbour events such as the Queen's visits, the opening of the Sydney Opera House, the Great Ferry Races and so on.

In 1969 some local businessmen reformed the Wollongong Division of the Patrol and immediately began to push for a water Police presence as well.

In those days members provided their own boats, but to survive the organisation also needed people who did not own a boat but were willing to help by crewing others' boats.

The Illawarra Mercury - being a protege of the Sydney Sun at that time - began sponsoring the free Safe Boating Classes which had been so successful in Sydney and for several years they were very helpful in this way, but at one stage they indicated that if their sponsorship of these classes were to continue we would have to charge the participants and pay the Mercury for its participation.

This virtually killed the concept of "Free Safe Boating Classes" which had been the Sun's catchcry and gradually they faded out which, I believe, was a real tragedy for the Wollongong area.

In 1974 the then new cheap radios in the 27 MegaHertz or citizen's band became available and many boat owners quickly bought these. The Wollongong base was equipped with the same radios and very soon a monitoring system was established where boat owners called in to give their details which were recorded at the base. In the event of them not calling back to say that they returned safe the Patrol could go out and look for them at their last recorded position. Since 1974 over 2000 boat owners have signed up for this service.

This service turned out to be very effective and over the many years since then the area has averaged 150 calls per year for assistance with up to 5 per week during the summer.

With the introduction of boating regulations and the compulsory use of transceivers the Illawarra coast has become safer in many respects, but we still have too many people who venture out to sea in unsuitable boats but luckily manage to get back safely.

Most calls for help are for motors that won't start or boats that have run out of fuel.

New South Wales now has 26 Volunteer Coastal Patrol bases, Victoria has 3 and Tasmania 5 with 1 in South Australia. Local bases are situated at Botany Bay, Wollongong, Jervis Bay, Shoalhaven, Sussex Inlet, Kialoa and Ulladulla.

Last year (2001) in NSW some 1,102 vessels were assisted, 2,880 people helped with a vessel value of \$37,000,000. Sixty-seven vessels were over 12m in length, 166 were 9-12m, 287 were 6-9m while the rest were under 6 metres.

Man hours on duty, as recorded in NSW, totalled 386,585 and I know from experience that many duty hours go unrecorded because people - being people - forget to sign on.

In the past few years things have changed with the introduction of a scheme where a portion of the fees raised by boat registration and boat driver licences has been provided by way of a subsidy or grant to the various rescue services around the state. This, together with other vigorous fund raising activities, has led to the purchase of twelve RNLI vessels from Britain which are now strategically placed along the NSW coast.

This makes a significant change from the days in which all of the vessels used were privately owned by the members. The cost of maintaining and fuelling these new vessels is very high and continuous fund raising has to be undertaken to maintain their viability.

My thirty years as a member have been most rewarding and I am proud to have been a member of "The Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol" from which I retired from active duty only this year.

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