

# A History of Australian Navy Health Sailor Uniforms and Ranks (Part 1)

Commander Neil Westphalen, Royal Australian Navy Reserve

## Purpose

Mariners have been identifiable by their clothing for centuries. This reflects their ongoing need for attire that allows free movement for negotiating ladders, doorways and hatches, and performing physically demanding tasks such as hauling lines on cluttered decks and moving heavy weights. In the past, their garments also had to permit climbing masts and yards, and manning windlasses and capstans. More recent requirements include facilitating fighting fires, floods and toxic hazards, and preventing vector-borne disease. All these tasks have been performed in climates ranging from tropical to polar, in winds up to 300 km/h, and despite sea states ranging from flat calm to 'phenomenal'.<sup>1</sup>

More than a century after its establishment, many Royal Australian Navy (RAN) uniforms and ranks still reflect those used by the (British) Royal Navy (RN). This first of a three-part article describes the history of Navy sailor uniforms or 'rigs' since 1509. The second explains the development of male and female Navy health sailor uniforms since 1879, while the third describes the evolution of Navy medical and dental sailor rank and rate badges since 1827.

A subsequent article will do likewise for RAN health officers.

## Background

During the five centuries after the 1066 Norman conquest,<sup>2</sup> English maritime power was mostly limited to the North Sea and English Channel. It was used for trade with northern Europe, transporting armies and providing their logistic support, countering (and sometimes engaging in) piracy, and defence against the French after most of the English-ruled territory within France was lost in 1453.<sup>3</sup>

Even so, it was not until 1509 that Henry VIII founded the Royal Navy in its current form, as a force of state-owned dedicated warships with their own shore-based infrastructure. Until then, the term 'navy' referred to ships of all sizes and types throughout

the realm, whether they were owned by the monarch (if he had any), or his merchant subjects. The monarch would hire his ships out to the merchants for trade, and could 'arrest' their ships and crews for his own purposes when required. The same ships were therefore used for both warlike and peacetime purposes.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, there were no dedicated English shipyards until the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. Rather, ships were built and maintained anywhere where temporary iron foundries could be built, with access to deep water and suitable timber supplies. Although a Clerk of the King's Ships provided administrative support for all royal and 'arrested' ships, this only entailed managing the finances.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, medieval and early Reformation English mariners were employed interchangeably between their monarch and private merchants. They performed their duties in accordance with the *Laws (also Rules or Rolls) of Oléron*<sup>6</sup> and the *Black Book of the Admiralty*,<sup>7</sup> which applied to all English ships irrespective of who owned them.

## Sailor Uniforms

The *Laws of Oléron* and the *Black Book of the Admiralty* did not require shipmasters to provide clothing for their crews. They also gave mariners the right to choose their captain, which endured until the 1870s.<sup>8</sup>

Although these conditions of service mattered little while voyages lasted for only a few days, they became problematic after 1415, when Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal<sup>9</sup> began sponsoring a series of long-duration voyages along the West African coast. The ensuing Age of Exploration led to voyages by Bartholomew Diaz to the Cape of Good Hope in 1487-88,<sup>10</sup> Vasco da Gama to India in 1497-99,<sup>11</sup> Christopher Columbus to America in 1492-1504,<sup>12</sup> and Ferdinand Magellan's world circumnavigation in 1519-22.<sup>13</sup>

England followed suit from the 1490s, with voyages to North America by John Cabot<sup>14</sup> and his son

Sebastian,<sup>15</sup> to Russia by Sir Hugh Willoughby,<sup>16</sup> and to West Africa and the Americas by luminaries including John Hawkins<sup>17</sup>, Francis Drake<sup>18</sup>, Martin Frobisher,<sup>19</sup> and Walter Raleigh.<sup>20</sup>

Many of these voyages led to the near or total annihilation of their crews, often from a range of shipboard medical conditions.<sup>21</sup> These included cold injuries such as frostbite, hypothermia and non-freezing cold injuries caused by inadequate clothing,<sup>22</sup> and typhus<sup>23</sup> caused by the crews bringing fleas and lice on board via their apparel.<sup>24</sup> Yet the latter danger was first documented by English physician Gilbertus Anglicus, whose *Compendium Medicinæ* (written between 1230 and 1250), noted that 'frequent changes of clothing will palliate the annoyance of fleas and pediculi' when at sea.<sup>25</sup>

Henry VIII had approved a uniform for men from the Cinque Ports prior to his death in 1547, albeit more for ceremonial than hygiene purposes.<sup>26</sup> In 1595, Richard Hawkins was one of very few commanders who provided clothing for his ship's company,<sup>27</sup> while other ship's companies were issued with Arctic attire in 1602.<sup>28</sup> Otherwise, clothing for Elizabethan and early Stuart sailors was only provided on an ad hoc basis, by the occasional Admiralty official as a for-profit personal speculation.<sup>29</sup>

While successful in preventing a Spanish invasion, England's Armada campaign from July to September 1588 ended with multiple logistic shortfalls. These included clothing, resulting in high rates of illness and death. The fleet commander, Lord Howard of Effingham, wrote (to no avail):

'My Lords, I would think it a marvellous good way that there were a thousand pounds' worth... of hose, doublet, shirts, shoes and such like sent down... for else in very short time I look to see most of the mariners go naked'.<sup>30</sup>

Thirty years later, English operations in the Mediterranean against Algerian corsairs in 1620-21,<sup>31</sup> the 1625 attack on Cadiz,<sup>32</sup> and the operations against the French at La Rochelle in 1627-28<sup>33</sup> all failed, largely because of disease outbreaks. In 1627 Sir Henry Mervyn, Admiral of the Narrow Seas, wrote:

'The more than miserable condition of the men, who have neither shoes, stockings, nor rags to cover their nakedness... all the ships are so infectious that I fear if we hold the sea one month we shall not bring men enough home to moor the ships.'<sup>34</sup>

Although 'slop' clothing was made available from that year,<sup>35</sup> its effectiveness as a preventive hygiene measure was generally negated by financial considerations. The ongoing occupational mobility between private merchantmen and the King's ships meant that entrants joining the latter were ineligible for new clothing during their first month aboard.<sup>36</sup> This was extended to two months in 1663, but was cancelled a year later because of its adverse health effects.<sup>37</sup>

Even then, sailors had the cost of their slops deducted from their wages on discharge from their ship.<sup>38</sup> The clothing provided was also poor quality yet expensive: in 1628 seamen were paid 15 shillings a month,<sup>39</sup> while one full suit officially cost 1 pound 7 shillings (nearly two months' wages),<sup>40</sup> plus a 10% commission to the supplier, and 5% each to the paymaster and the purser. These expenses did not include various unofficial and often illicit charges.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, the provision of slop clothing from multiple suppliers meant it was not standardised. By comparison, the first British Army uniforms were introduced with the return of King Charles II to the throne in 1660,<sup>42</sup> and for Navy officers in 1748.<sup>43</sup>

The itinerant nature of British sailors' employment meant this situation remained extant for nearly 250 years. Yet in 1704, Surgeon Patrick Campbell was the first of a succession of Navy medical officers who, among a range of other hygiene improvements, recommended the free issue of uniforms.<sup>44</sup>

Meanwhile high levels of shipboard morbidity and mortality continued. This culminated in the loss of 1300 out of 2000 men during Commodore George Anson's circumnavigation in 1740-44, only four of whom were killed in action. While this deployment had one of the worst death rates from scurvy ever recorded, typhus and cold injuries caused by inadequate clothing also played their part.<sup>45</sup>

However, in 1757 the Admiralty approved a uniform for hospital patients ashore, albeit less of a hygiene measure than to prevent desertion. In 1781, it also introduced harbour-based 'slop ships' to receive new entrants, who were issued new clothing prior to joining their ship. A major hygiene initiative saw soap being issued from 1796, although in 1815 the quantities were still considered inadequate.<sup>46</sup>

The century following Anson's voyage also saw the gradual evolution of approved patterns for winter and summer attire, which began to resemble the present junior sailors' 'square rig' dress uniforms from the 1830s. However, this did not prevent aberrations: in

the 1830s the Captain of HMS *Blazer* dressed his boat's crew in striped jackets, while as late as 1853, Captain Wilmott of HMS *Harlequin* paid for his boat's crew to be dressed as harlequins.<sup>47</sup>

Even before the 1853-56 Crimean War, the Royal Navy had a manning crisis, caused by a lack of volunteers, the end of forced recruitment (press gangs) at the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, and in particular, the inability to retain sailors between the end of their ships' commission and the beginning of the next.<sup>48</sup> There was no trained reserve to get additional ships to sea, while the lack of a shore-based recruiting organisation meant captains still had to find their own crews.<sup>49</sup> For example, in 1857 the new battleship HMS *Renown* required 860 men,<sup>50</sup> yet despite waiting 172 days she still sailed 62 men (7%) short.<sup>51</sup>

Among other responses, continuous service with ten-year engagements was introduced in 1853.<sup>52</sup> Although it did not completely displace non-continuous service until the 1870s,<sup>53</sup> this initiative finally overcame the financial objections to free uniforms from 1857. These took two forms: one had a short open-front 'bluejacket' (not very dissimilar to the current 'battledress' jacket, apart from the latter's pockets), the other with a loose 'frock' jumper-like top that tucked into the trousers.<sup>54</sup> In 1890 the 'bluejacket' was abolished, while the 'frock' top was replaced by a tight-fitting jumper worn outside the trousers, which became the current dress uniform worn by RAN junior sailors.<sup>55</sup>

These uniforms generally reflected the seagoing workplace requirements of the time. They lacked pockets, to prevent men from carrying objects that could fall out when working aloft. For the same reason, clasp knives for cutting lines in an emergency were secured with lanyards, as were bosun's calls (pipes) used for signalling orders though the ship.

Contrary to popular belief, blue jean collars were not worn to protect sailor's clothing from the tar used for their pigtailed during the Napoleonic Wars. Rather, they were introduced in the 1830s for ornamental purposes, after pigtailed were no longer worn. The collars initially had a rounded edge similar to contemporary fashion ashore but were later cut square, so seamen could make their own more easily. The three white collar stripes likewise do not represent Nelson's victories over the French, but are simply decorative.<sup>56</sup>

Bell-bottom trousers or 'bells' allowed rolling the legs up for swabbing decks and working aloft. Rather than a button-up fly, they had a wide 'piss flap' at

the front that buttoned up the trouser sides. In order to make best use of limited messdeck storage space, the trousers were turned inside out and folded vertically at hands-breadth intervals, and taped into a rectangular block. The number of folds did not represent the seven seas but varied from five or more, depending on the wearer's height.<sup>57</sup>

Sailor caps lacked peaks, to enable looking up when working aloft and for watching the wind on the sails when steering the ship. Wide-brimmed 'sennet' straw hats were worn in the tropics for sun protection until 1921. Officer and sailor caps both had blue and white covers for winter and summer wear, with the latter being used all year round from 1953.<sup>58</sup>

Sailors often painted the name of their ship on their caps from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century until the introduction of 'cap tally' ribbons in 1857. For security reasons, ship names were omitted during both World Wars, leaving only 'HMS' (or 'HMAS' for Australian personnel).<sup>59</sup>

Although boots were worn ashore, most men at sea went barefoot until sometime before the First World War.

Double-breasted jackets, ties and peaked caps, which became known as 'fore-and-aft rig', were introduced for all Chief Petty Officers in 1879,<sup>60</sup> and were extended to all 'civil branch' (non-seaman) junior sailors in 1890.<sup>61</sup> 'Fore-and-aft' rigs will be described in Parts Two and Three of this article.



English seaman, 1597<sup>62</sup>.



Seaman's slop clothing, 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>63</sup>.



Seaman's clothing, 1833.<sup>66</sup> Note the straw hat, blue jean collar, black neckerchief and short 'bluejacket'.



Seaman's slop clothing, early 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>64</sup> Note the bare feet.



Sailor uniform worn by the Prince of Wales, c1846.<sup>67</sup> Note the collar, tucked-in 'frock' jumper, and bell-bottom trousers with front 'piss flap' rather than a fly.



Seaman's slop clothing, late 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>65</sup>. Note the short blue jacket and black neckerchief.



Seaman uniform with short 'bluejacket', 1857-1890.<sup>68</sup> Note the blue jean collar, silk neckerchief and 'piss flap' trousers.



Seaman tropical uniform, c1879.<sup>69</sup> Note the blue jean collar, tucked-in frock jumper, and 'piss flap' trousers.



Recruit graduation parade, HMAS *Cerberus*, 2017<sup>69</sup> Note the blue jean collars, black neckerchiefs, lanyards, and jumpers outside the trousers.

## RAN Sailor Uniforms

The uniforms for the Australian colonial naval forces from 1865 to 1901, the Australian Commonwealth Naval Forces from 1901 to 1911, and the RAN from 1911 to 1966, were all generally similar to their RN counterparts. RAN sailors in particular were distinguished only by RAN-specific buttons, and the 'HMAS' on their cap tally ribbons.<sup>70</sup> Bell-bottom trousers were worn in the RAN until the 1990s.

The use of the current dress uniform in combat was modified during the First World War, by adding anti-flash hoods and gloves to protect personnel from burning cordite,<sup>71</sup> and anti-gas respirators in response to the use of chemical weapons on the Western Front.<sup>72</sup>

Khaki uniforms for Navy personnel were first worn ashore by the Victorian and NSW contingents to the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900-01. They were reintroduced for RAN officers at the end of 1942, and

for RAN sailors two months later, to prevent vector-borne disease.<sup>73</sup> This became the blue Action Working Dress for all male RAN personnel from 1948.<sup>74</sup>

Action Working Dress were replaced for both male and female personnel by one-piece grey overalls from 1992. These had 'Proban'® anti-flash fire protection treatment, in response to high rates of burn injuries during the 1982 Falklands War.<sup>75</sup> The 'Proban'® overalls also had reflective tape on the upper arms, to improve the ability to see 'man overboard' victims.<sup>76</sup>

'Probands' were replaced by the current two-piece Disruptive Pattern Naval Uniform (DPNU) from 2009. These used the same 'stealth bunny rabbit' camouflage pattern as the contemporary Army field uniform, albeit in grey, blue and green colours consistent with the maritime environment.

DPNUs will be replaced by the Maritime Multi-cam Pattern Uniform (MMPU) from 2018. DPNUs and MMPUs are both intended for daily wear in non-office Navy workplaces, and in joint workplaces as for Army and RAAF personnel.<sup>77</sup>



Pre-1891 RN button for petty officers (shown by the plain rim), with 'St Edward's' crown<sup>78</sup>.



1901 Royal Navy button for senior sailors, with 'Tudor' crown<sup>79</sup>.



1913 RAN 'lazy anchor' button for senior sailors<sup>80</sup>.



1928 RAN button for senior sailors<sup>81</sup>.



1953 RAN button for senior sailors, with updated St Edward's crown<sup>82</sup>



Sailors, Her Majesty's Victorian Ship (HMVS) *Cerberus*, c1900.<sup>83</sup> Apart from their 'HMVS' cap tallies, their uniforms are essentially identical to the RN.



Gun drill, HMAS *Melbourne I*, 1916.<sup>84</sup> This photograph highlights how the current dress uniform was intended for everyday wear, including in combat.



Gun drill, HMAS *Sydney I*, 1919.<sup>85</sup> Note the addition of anti-flash hoods and gloves, and anti-gas respirators.



Gun's crew, RAN Tribal class destroyer, 1943.<sup>86</sup> Note the tin helmets, khaki tropical uniforms and anti-flash.



Action Working Dress, HMAS Perth II, 1969<sup>87</sup>.



Grey Proban® overalls, HMAS Parramatta IV, 2008<sup>88</sup> Note the reflective tape on the sleeves, and the camouflaged shoulder rank slides.



Two-piece Disruptive Pattern Navy Uniform (DPNU), HMAS Sydney III, 2013<sup>89</sup> Note the RAN badge on the right side of the chest and the name tag on the left.



Maritime Multi-cam Pattern Uniform (MMPU), 2017.<sup>90</sup> Note the different camouflage pattern (but same colours) compared to DNPUs, the rank slide on the front of the chest, the loss of the DPNU RAN badge on the left chest, and the name tag moved to the right.

## Conclusion

Despite a history extending over more than 500 years, RN sailors had no standard uniform until the 1850s. For much of this period, high levels of preventable deaths were frequently caused by sailors bringing typhus-carrying fleas and lice on board, while other deaths resulted from cold injuries caused by inadequate clothing. Despite the frequently disastrous impact on operational capability, this continued to occur for predominantly financial reasons, which were only resolved by addressing personnel conditions of service.

Notwithstanding the vast enhancements to shipboard and personal hygiene since, the requirement to ensure access to suitable apparel to protect RAN members from shipboard hazards and vector-borne disease remains extant. This is particularly relevant for personnel engaged in littoral and other maritime operations in southeast Asia, the southwest Pacific and the southern Indian Ocean.

*Dr Neil Westphalen graduated from Adelaide University in 1985, and joined the RAN in 1987. He is a RAN Staff Course graduate, and a Fellow of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, the Australasian College of Aerospace Medicine, and the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine. He also has a Diploma of Aviation Medicine and a Master of Public Health.*

*His seagoing service includes HMA Ships SWAN, STALWART, SUCCESS, SYDNEY, PERTH and CHOULES. Deployments include DAMASK VII, RIMPAC 96, TANAGER, RELEX II, GEMSBOK,*

TALISMAN SABRE 07, RENDERSAFE 14, SEA RAIDER 15, KAKADU 16 and SEA HORIZON 17. His service ashore includes clinical roles at CERBERUS, PENGUIN, KUTTABUL, ALBATROSS and STIRLING, and staff positions as J07 (Director Health) at the then HQAST, Director Navy Occupational and Environmental Health, Director of Navy Health, Joint Health Command SO1 MEC Advisory and Review Services, and Fleet Medical Officer.

Commander Westphalen transferred to the Active Reserve in 2016.

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### Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article are the author's, and do not necessarily reflect those of the RAN, or any of the other organisations mentioned.

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Corresponding author: Commander Neil Westphalen, [neil.westphalen@bigpond.com](mailto:neil.westphalen@bigpond.com)

Authors: N Westphalen<sup>1,2</sup>

Author Affiliations:

1 Royal Australian Navy Reserve

2 Navy Health Service - C/O Director Navy Health

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- 76 34% of all UK shipboard casualties during the Falklands War were burns cases, compared to 14% of UK casualties overall. See McLean, AD, Burns and Military Clothing, J R Army Med Corps 2001; 147: 97-106, available from <http://jramc.bmj.com/content/jramc/147/1/97.full.pdf>: this reference indicates that, although there is no contemporaneous medical literature, thermoplastic materials such as nylon did *not* cause any difficulties in the management of military burns.
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