

Tattoos in the Australian Defence Force

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TATTOOS HAVE BEEN AROUND for nearly as long as humans have, and tattooing is one of the oldest forms of body art. The art of tattooing has been practised among many cultures, including the Egyptians, Celts, Native Americans, Eskimos, Japanese, south-east Asians and Pacific Islanders. The earliest form of tattoo has been found on the European "Iceman", dated about 5300 years old.

The impetus to decorate and adorn is essentially a human characteristic and is something that people have always done. The designs and symbols of adornment can hold great meaning. Similar designs can be found across cultures, but their meaning can be significantly different. Tattoos are more serious than other adornments as they are more or less permanent marks on the body.



tattooing themselves onboard using gunpowder and needles. Designs were simple stars, hearts and initials. Over time, flags, anchors, palm trees, ships, Neptune and mermaids became popular. Tattoos were seen as charms, which would ward off storms, shipwreck, shark attack and the evil eye, as well as protecting from drowning, plague and venereal disease. Images such as hearts, hula girls slinkily curled around palm trees, and Buddhas, and words such as "sweetheart" and "mum", are a few of the images that continue to adorn arms, chests, legs and other parts of the body.

Some tattoos maybe offensive to members of the public or colleagues, or invite provocation. They may be rude, racist, sexist, homophobic, violent or intimidating, or may display unacceptable attitudes towards a section of the

There are many reasons why people choose to have a tattoo, including:

- cultural reasons (coming of age or rites of passage)
- to express individuality
- to indicate membership of a particular group or way of life
- to make a statement
- to establish a permanent reminder of an event, such as the death of a loved one
- to reclaim the body after an event (eg, a sexual assault)
- to make the body more pleasing to the eye.

It seems that getting a tattoo can make someone look like an individual or a conformist, depending on your view.

In Samoa, the word *tatau* means appropriate, balanced and fitting, and tattoos show that a person is ready for life, for adulthood and to be of service to the community. In Western culture, tattoos are often associated with people on the edge of society. In the early 19th century, tattooing became very popular with criminals and the working class in the United Kingdom and the United States. Tattooing retained this negative image until its recent revival as a mainstream symbol of individuality as well as defiance.

Tattoos have long been a traditional part of the life of the seafarer. The word "tattoo" entered the English language after Captain Cook's voyages to Tahiti. James Cook reported on the *tatau* (which became tattoo in the English language) among the Pacific Islanders. Cook's own crewmen and subsequent English crews started getting tattooed. Sailors adopted the practice eagerly,



community.

Although more people these days seem to have tattoos, getting one still carries some risks. As stated in *Defence Instruction (Navy) Personnel 31-18*: "although a traditional mark of the seafarer, tattoos can present serious hazards to health".¹ Tattooing involves puncturing the skin with a needle to insert coloured pigment or dyes under the epidermis, leaving a permanent or semi-permanent dye or image. Tattooists and tattoo parlours vary in their hygiene standards, and the recipient runs the risk of infection to the tattoo site if strict aseptic techniques are not practised. After getting a tattoo, apart from producing a suppurating wound, the recipient may be at risk of serious health complications. Some of these are:

- viral infections such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C or HIV (which are passed on via infected blood or other body fluids) or tetanus
- skin infections such as impetigo ("school sores")
- dermatitis
- allergic reactions

- thick scars, especially for people with dark skin (called keloid scars)
- distress due to regret after the procedure
- flare-up of existing eczema.

Each Service has a dress code policy for serving members, and a philosophy with regard to the recruitment of people with tattoos.¹⁻⁴ Royal Australian Navy policy is that any tattoos on the scalp, face, ears, or neck that will be visible

when the candidate is wearing any variation of the service uniform will be precluded from joining the RAN. Consequently, RAN personnel are not permitted to have tattoos on their face, scalp, ears or neck that would be visible when wearing a round neck, standard T-shirt, as the displaying of tattoos brings undue attention on the member, and subsequently the RAN. In addition, they may undermine the dignity and authority of command. If for religious and cultural reasons personnel are required to obtain tattoos on the face, scalp, ears, or neck, written permission is to be sought through the relevant authority.

Visible tattoos on the face, neck, ears, scalp or neck may also make personnel ineligible for representational duties such as in Australia's Federation Guard.

Many Australian Defence Force personnel have gained tattoos, only to decide as they mature that their tattoos are no longer the "in thing" to have. In addition, people have been known to get tattoos as an impulsive act, perhaps when they were intoxicated, and come to regard it as an embarrassing disfigurement. Complete removal of a tattoo is virtually impossible, short of plastic surgery and extensive skin grafts. Once a tattoo is removed — at great cost and pain — many people find that they have a scar worse than the tattoo.

Commanding Officers, Divisional Officers and Medical Officers have a responsibility to ensure personnel are fully conversant with the risks of tattoos, and positive steps should be taken to discourage the practice of tattooing. ADF

personnel should take heed of the placement and content of a tattoo before subjecting themselves to its permanency.

Uniformed members of the ADF remain a professional force, with a requirement to maintain a professional appearance, including a requirement to be well groomed. Nevertheless, tattoos are still common in the ADF, especially the RAN, as in times past.



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1. Defence Instruction (Navy) Personnel 31-18. Tattoos and body piercing in the Royal Australian Navy.
2. Defence Instruction (Air Force) Personnel 29-32. Tattoos, branding, body piercing and bead implantation in the Royal Australian Air Force.
3. Australian Book of Reference 81. Uniform instructions for the Royal Australian Navy.
4. Army Standing Orders for Dress. Vol. 1. 2000. □



Thanks to the reviewers

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