**THIRTEEN YEAR OLD ENTERIES – AS POTENTIAL ADMIRALS**

**By John Smith**

When naval training establishments were first introduced on home soil the system of entry into the Royal Australian Navy closely followed Royal Naval traditions. From the first entry of officer cadets in 1913, with the exception of 1930, and up until 1955 the principal source of potential admirals in the Royal Australian Navy was thirteen year old boys entered into the Royal Australian Naval College (RANC) at its three different venues.

Insert photo: The First Entry 1913

Selection for the RANC involved various prerequisites where applicants had to pass an educational exam, a medical exam and an interview board. With minor variations, the interview board comprised the Captain, the Commander and the Director of Studies of the college, none of whom had received any professional training in assessing the potentialities of twelve and thirteen year old boys. There does not appear to have been any study into the success or otherwise of this empirical procedure.

How successful was this selection process and the subsequent training of these youngsters for naval careers? As some measure of success, how many of them became flag officers? Did cadets who were selected as leaders become flag officers or were late developers more likely to be promoted? This article attempts to address these issues.

During the period from 1913 to 1955 some 874 thirteen year old boys were entered into the RANC. There was a high attrition rate as from the initial entry 234 or 26.77% were withdrawn for various reasons principally educational, but also by request and for disciplinary (read lack of officer like qualities) causes. Regrettably, immediately after WWI, many were also withdrawn to meet a reduction in demand with a declining naval force. Two cadets died of illness in their second years.

This left a total of 638 graduates from the RANC. Of these, 52 were subsequently promoted to admiral (3), vice admiral (12) or rear admiral (37) representing a rate of 8.15%. However for a number of unfortunate reasons not all graduates could have been promoted. In particular, some of the officers killed in action during WWII showed great potential for promotion to flag rank. The reasons are shown as:

* Killed in action 45
* Died in service accidents 13
* Died in non service accidents 11
* Died from illness 20

Total 89

This left a total of 550 in the pool for promotion to flag rank. Thus the possibility rate for promotion increased to 9.45%.

Did any of these flag officers show their future attainment possibilities whilst at RANC? Approximating to the civilian school system of selecting prefects to assist in internal guidance and discipline, at the RANC staff selected cadet captains from the senior years. At least one of these was chosen as chief cadet captain each year. With the residential College being run on strict service lines, cadet captains exercised considerable powers of authority. It would therefore be expected that they would be a source of future admirals.

With respect to chief cadet captains, a total of 64 were selected from thirteen year old entries during the period from 1915 until 1958 and, in some years, more than one was selected. Of these 64, two were promoted to vice admiral and six to rear admiral that is 12.50%. This leaves 56 who did not achieve flag rank, although many may have retired before entering the senior officer promotion bracket.

Not as important as chief cadet captains but still exercising considerable authority were cadet captains. It would be expected that they had also shown superior ability and potential. There were 132 more that were chosen as cadet captains. Of these seven were promoted to flag rank, two of them being full admirals. The seven represents 5.30% of the group.

There was another possible indicator of future success in the navy whilst at RANC. The King’s/Queen’s Medal was presented each year to the senior graduate who, in the opinion of the Captain of the College, was most deserving of the honour. It was assessed on gentlemanly bearing, character, good influence among his fellows and officer like qualities, surely the stuff of potential admirals!

From 1916 to 1957 there were 41 King’s/Queen’s Medallists. Of these 30 were also chief cadet captains and should have had doubled their chances of becoming flag officers. In fact of the 41 medallists, only one was promoted to admiral, two to vice admiral and four to rear admiral. All of these flag officers had also been a chief cadet captain except for one who had only been a cadet captain and one, perhaps surprisingly the full admiral, who had not even been a cadet captain. The medallists success rate of 17.07% is thus well above that of chief cadet captains and cadet captains.

So what of the thirteen year old entry graduates who were not appointed chief cadet captain, cadet captain or who were not awarded the King’s/Queen’s Medal? These total 432 and produced 36 flag officers or 8.33%. The following table summarises the figures above showing the success rate of obtaining flag rank:

* Chief cadet captains, may also be KM/QM 12.50%
* Cadet captains, may also be KM/QM 5.30%
* King’s/Queen’s Medallist, may also be in above 17.10%
* Ordinary graduates 8.30%

While statistics alone can be misleading the table above shows that, as an indicator of future promotion to flag rank, a thirteen year old entry graduate’s chances were significantly better if they were a King’s/Queen’s Medallist or, failing that, if they were selected as chief cadet captain. The system of advancement at RANC therefore appears sound. As in addition to the above, one of the thirteen year graduates in the 1920s transferred to the RAAF, and eventually made Air Vice Marshall.

There are some obvious shortcomings in a small enclosed system such as has been described with a tendency to perpetuate both good and bad within the system. However this limited pool, especially from those with experienced gained in larger naval forces, has produced some excellent senior officers who have served our nation with distinction.

The primary sources used in this article, as listed below, indicates some inconsistencies between their records. This may follow through into some minor amendments being drawn into the conclusions of this article.

The author is a retired Naval Commander who entered the RANC in 1946.

**Bibliography**

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