

OCCASIONAL PAPER 27

Call the Hands

Issue No. 19

May 2018

Royal Naval House, 'Johnnies': Some Personal Reminisces

Royal Australian Naval House has always been known affectionately as 'Johnnies', although the origin of the name is hard to trace. From 1968 to 1970 a young Able Seaman Brian Love posted to HMAS Waterhen lived at Johnnies. These are his personal reminisces.

By CPOSV (Retd) Brian Love

I arrived at Central Station Sydney around eight thirty on a bright Monday morning in November 1968 in full uniform with my life's possessions jammed into my regulation Navy issue ugly yellow kit bag slung over my shoulder. Being a 17, almost 18 year old country boy from Gippsland Victoria not having ventured far from the land of coal mines beautiful hills and dense bush, being deposited right in the middle of the biggest city in Australia was almost more than I could take, rows and rows of trains all disgorging what appeared to be the populations of everywhere and this being what appeared to be a dead end for all trains stopped at a white picket fence where the rails ceased.

The trip up from Melbourne had been a sleepless night and my kit bag felt far heavier than it should. Here was a bunch of young sailors, a day earlier under the control of almost everyone at the place everyone wanted to get out of, HMAS Cerberus. We were out, proud in our uniforms and ready to take on the world. As to be expected, all were in a mood for celebration so the night up was one to remember. Virtually all of us were off to join ships at Garden Island as ordinary seaman ready to wash dishes mop floors clean toilets and basically be everyone's 'dogsbody'. However, I and a couple of others had left Recruit School and gone straight on to Supply School and had completed our category training. This was quite unusual as it was normal practice to go to sea first. I can only deduce that stores ratings were in short supply so we had to wait for another day to experience sea time. Anyway, foregoing the experience of being the master of the heads or scullery etc was a highlight of Naval life I could do without. Having the right arm rate proudly displayed in new shining gold gave me a real sense of 'I'm something' the majority of the sailors on the train had not yet achieved.

I was in awe as I wandered along pushing and shoving through a cacophony of people who did not speak or dip their lid to anyone at all least of all me. I was sure more than the population of all of Gippsland were fighting their way through this place. Central Station was bigger than any building I had been in or had seen, little newsagents big enough to fit one man in, pie shops, sandwich shops gift shops all under great swooping arches. I made my way to what looked like daylight and I figured this must be the exit. It was. I was out on an elevated ramp with taxi after taxi arriving and leaving with their passengers getting in and out at a great rush. Everything was like a huge bee hive with never ending comings and goings, a great buzz of cars, trucks, horns, engines and the first double decker buses I had ever seen. I dropped my kit bag down and tried to figure out my next move amongst all of this activity. I really had no idea. Here I was in the middle of a great sea of huge buildings and not recognising anything or anyone. I was on my way to HMAS Waterhen. All I knew was it was in Sydney somewhere. I was not sure about a taxi as I did not have a lot of money in my wallet and I did not know how far it was. What I did know was I had to be there by midday and it was now past 9am.

Off to my right and about 50 metres ahead I spotted a blue station wagon that I believed looked like a Navy vehicle, I grabbed my bag and headed for it, as I got closer out of the driver's seat jumped a sailor "G'day mate" he said 'where are you off to?'. It was so great to hear those words. Waterhen I replied. Throw your bag in the back I'll drop you off. What a beauty and soon after he had finished his business at the station we were off. I don't remember his name but he was a stoker and I think he came from HMAS Platypus I actually never saw him again but he was a life saver.

As we drove through the city he chatted away, I must have appeared pretty rude as, everything we were driving past and through was new. I had trouble concentrating on his words of wisdom. At one point he mentioned I would be living at "Johnnies" unless I was under 18 then I would probably be living at HMAS Penguin. I did not take this in too well as by this time we were on the Sydney Harbour Bridge. It cost us 5 cents for the privilege I could not believe I was actually on this huge structure I had only seen in pictures and had dismissed it as something other people would experience, not me. There were trains and buses everywhere, both double deckers. I had also only seen these in pictures.

We were so high up, I had never been that high before. I could see the harbour, what a sight. In no time we were off the bridge and into another city of huge buildings traffic lights more people and endless rows of cars, we turned off the main road we were crawling along and wound through hilly suburbs of mostly red brick houses and eventually came upon a park area called Balls Head Drive. We did a U turn down a slope and there it was, my first glimpse of HMAS Waterhen nestled under quite large cliffs with some sort of what looked like class rooms clinging to the top. At the foot of these blue grey cliffs was a flat area with buildings at either end with a cleared area between them and workshops along the water's edge. Two long jetties ran out from here with another wharf running along the water's edge to the north. I had previously learnt that this facility was the home base for mine sweepers and patrol boats. There were quite a few alongside at this time. Also secured alongside was a larger ship looking a bit bedraggled. This was the decommissioned ship [HMAS Culgoa](#) which was used as accommodation for duty watch. Waterhen did not have its own accommodation.



HMAS Waterhen, circa 1970, RAN Image

Without the help of my Navy driver and the much-needed lift to my new and first posting I really don't know how I would have found my way. I was extremely grateful.

Well, here I was at my first posting which was in a beautiful setting. Although pretty tired I felt pleased with my luck. This is where I stayed for the next eighteen months. After checking in with the gangway

staff and getting directions I made my way down the steep drive way to the Coxswains Office. When given my 'post in' card it was explained to me that I would be living at Johnnies. A bus would pick me up at 1600 and ferry me to Johnnies with everyone else, I think at most, forty. I did not ask any questions at that time, just agreed and remembered what the driver had told me, under eighteen you will live at Penguin. I considered that from the tone of the driver's voice Johnnies was the better choice so no mention was made of my age. I finally made it to my new workplace and met my work mates. Obviously, I was the new kid on the block but everyone was pretty good. I found the whole place so much more relaxed than the formality of HMAS Cerberus. I had been previously told "Waterhen" was a great posting.

By the completion of lunch, I had had the full run down on where I would be living and where it was and what Johnnies was all about. All afternoon I tried to impress but the shadows of a long previous night were not helping my judgement. At four o'clock on the dot, a red and white dull looking old tour bus pulled in adjacent to the volley ball court and all climbed aboard. In general, those that lived at Johnnies were young. The majority of the ships company either lived ashore in their own rented accommodation or were at home with parents or married and lived in their own homes or Navy provided housing. Off we went winding our way through the familiar red brick houses on to the freeway and back over the bridge this time being higher I was able to glimpse the harbour. It was a picture postcard with peak hour activity on the blue water with white churned water following all forms of water craft. It was not long before we slowed to turn left into Grosvenor Street a relatively short steep street running down to arguably the busiest street in Sydney, George Street. We alighted on to the wide asphalt foot path with my, by this time, unloved burden of yellow peril.



Royal Naval House Grosvenor Street, circa 1970. Image by Tim Collis-Bird, Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority

I stood there looking at my new home of dirty grey concrete, it was quite old, five floors high, from what I could see, with perhaps three little balconies on each floor out over the footpath. I grabbed my bag and went up the three large concrete steps in through the rather narrow entrance of heavy, green wooden doors. In front of me was a beautiful polished staircase sweeping to the right and the next level. To my left was the reception area. Again, the whole wall was polished wood with a little reception window and a glass windows either side. It looked old and worn.

Arriving at the window I was greeted by an old grey-haired man with glasses that made his eyes look like something out of a Boris Karloff movie. He looked much older than my old granddad who I considered to be a very old man. He mumbled 'what can I do for you' in an accent which I thought I recognised as something between Scottish and Irish at the same time dropping his false teeth and putting them back in place with a poke of his tongue. I soon learnt that a number of these very old gentlemen who looked very much like brothers, worked in shifts behind this window, 24 hours a day. Coping with drunks from all services and all countries looking for a cheap accommodation it's understandable that they all looked grey and old. He told me what floor I was on gave me a number which was my bunk and locker number and explained that a corresponding locker was provided on the lower floor.

It took me a while to work out his instructions. I was to supply my own locks which of course I did not have at that time. To the right of reception was a doorway which he explained led to the Cafeteria on the ground floor. With all this knowledge, off I went up to the first floor out onto a wide walkway with a railed fence surrounding an atrium, the two floors above were of the same design. Looking down over the railing to the sunken area below were tables, chairs and umbrellas advertising various types of rum. A number of people were sitting at tables and a few on stools at a bar. This I was soon to learn was the notorious "Snake Pit" one of the roughest bars in Sydney. The source of loud music below, I later discovered was a pretty good but well used and loud juke box. It blared away all day and a lot of the night and I am sure played the same four or five songs repeatedly.

I walked into a large dormitory area of bunks which was to be my accommodation for quite some time. Being a person that considered a good night's sleep to be essential and finding my allocated bunk was right at the entrance to the dormitory and close to the Snake Pit, action was required. Reviewing the alternatives, I picked a top bunk next to a window with the bottom bunk not in use and proceed down to see the old man with coke bottle glasses I had met earlier. I put my case. It was then that I had the first of many conflicts with these old gentlemen. Regardless of the matter, negotiations were always difficult. We eventually came to an agreement that the bunk I picked would be allocated. It turned out to be a good choice, apart from the "Gold Fields" sign that flashed off and on all night from on top of a large building down at Circular Quay. My window did not have a blind so I wore it. It was a little quieter and away from the entry point for the lads returning after a good night out. For the whole time I was there I did not have anyone within close proximity, maybe the old fellow looked after me after all.

After claiming my little bit of Johnnies, I went down to the dungeon to find the allocated locker. The room was basic, small and nothing more than lockers about six feet tall. As very few lockers had locks on them I came to the conclusion that the area was not well used. At least the lockers were twice the size of those in the dormitory. However, both were quite useless as they were designed for hanging clothes, no shelves at all. I invented shelves out of shoe boxes with the fronts cut out and stacked on top of each other. Anything that needed hanging went to the dungeon although I did fit a couple of shoe box's there as well.

On the lower level I discovered a small TV lounge. It had a big TV black and white (it was before colour TV) and big black arm chairs which were really quite comfortable. I did end up spending quite a bit of time in this room during my time at Johnnies. From memory, it was adjacent to the "Pit" as I came to know it. It did not have windows and was very quiet.

On my return I stopped off at the Pit and had a drink. No mention of my age. I had never had a problem with this as I had been six feet five from age fifteen. I enjoyed my first drink in my new home.

The Pit was a bit knocked around. The tables and chairs had seen better days, the floor was covered with ceramic tiles and the bar was regulation pub. All the umbrellas were old and a bit mouldy, from above they looked okay but underneath not so. By this time my stomach was growling so I went upstairs to look at the cafeteria, past the old fellows, onto the atrium decking across to the other side, turned right then left into what would be my place of piscatorial pleasure every day for the time Johnnies was home. It was nothing fancy, like an old-style cafe with booths to seat 4 or 6 at a squeeze around an off-white Laminex table. The seats were hard varnished wood. The kitchen at the rear was quite open except for a divider about 4.5 feet tall. You could see a lot activity and steam. The whole building experienced cooking smells regularly, some that made you feel hungry and some that compelled you to eat down at the Quay.

Overall, Johnnies provided a good introduction to Sydney. Everything was close, trains, buses, ferry's really you could walk to everything. As a place to live it was nothing like being in the Navy. We did not have rounds we did not have to clean anything, our beds, showers toilets and floors were all looked after. The food was generally good. It was amazing how often T-bone steaks were on the menu, bacon and eggs every morning all cooked by a team under the control of an Irish man who was known as "Paddie". He always seemed to be happy. I don't recall ever seeing an officer or senior sailor in uniform at any time.

We had a very good pool room next to our dormitory, two full sized tables for the exclusive use of Waterhen personnel. We all spent a lot of time sinking the balls.

Many experiences and events that added to my early Naval education occurred at Grosvenor Street. These included the following.

The flying Birdie

Whilst playing pool one evening we heard a lot of yelling. As this was a regular occurrence we thought another fight was going on in the Pit but on piling out onto the landing we discovered the noise was coming from the floor above. A man was balancing on the barrier looking into the Pit three floors below. Other people were grabbing at him, some laughing, others swearing or calling him back. All it seemed had a little too much of the amber fluid. Next thing the fellow jumped and performed a perfect swallow dive into the pit. All looked over the rail and followed him down. I know my legs went wobbly as I am sure did everyone who witnessed this event. I thought I was witnessing a death first hand. However, this fellow landed on an umbrella then a table and finally the tiled floor. He was moaning and groaning but was still very much alive. An ambulance soon came and took him away. I later learnt that he was on weekend leave from Air Force and had broken a shoulder and some ribs. A very lucky boy.

The Snake Pit

The Pit was not only used by Army, Navy and Air Force personnel, it was also used by some of Sydney's less savoury characters. Although not a regular user of the Pit being more of a social drinker I did, from time to time have a night out and learnt about some of these characters. Those that come to mind were "The Beast", a regular bar fly from another dive near Garden Island known as the Macquarie Hilton or as all sailors knew it, "Rockers". This big lady with more muscles and tattoos than a seasoned old salt was renowned for grabbing young sailors by the scruff of the neck and claiming them for the night.

There was also had a couple of ladies known as "Granny and Vivienne". Every time I saw them, Granny had bandages wrapped around her wrists. They may have been mother and daughter. Then there was Rachael and Rosa, two gay fellows who always sat on stools with their legs crossed. I once met them in the Brooklyn Hotel next door and had my bum pinched.

Next, was a big lady known as “Big Lou.” who worked at the stores complex at Randwick, she really had a thing for sailors. I regularly spoke to her by phone from Waterhen on work related matters. She was helpful and seemed very good at her job. I was fortunate to never meet her in person. Another lady was known as the “Sausage Machine,” her normal haunt was Rockers however she was also a regular at Johnnies.

The last that I can remember was a little dumpy fellow with thick glasses known as “Lenny the Loop”, almost a piece of naval folklore at this time. I have no idea the reason why he had this nick name. There were no doubt other ladies and gentlemen of note but these are the ones I recall.

HMAS Albatross Patrol

At one point during my stay at Johnnies uniformed personnel were posted at the entrance on weekends. They consisted of one Petty Officer and a couple of able seaman from HMAS Albatross. I am not sure what hours they kept or why this duty was required. They basically stood on the front steps and footpath in uniform, white gaiters and white belt. They did not seem to have a real purpose apart from a presence that maybe acted as a deterrent. Perhaps some trouble had occurred that I was unaware of, and the old gentlemen had requested security assistance.

Johnnies was a pretty rough place and fights were a regular occurrence. Many times, the police were called as they would be seen around the front entrance and at times in the Pit. However, I never witnessed anyone being taken away. The Albatross sailor’s presence continued for a few weekends only and stopped as quick as it started.

Cafeteria and Rum Session

The cafeteria was always busy on weekends with sailors, soldiers and airmen making use of the facility. Bunks in the transit dormitory above ours were available for visitors. Females were also catered for with a number of one bed cabins. The cost of a bed was about \$1.25 a day and meals in the cafeteria were normally under a dollar. It was really a cheap way of spending a weekend in the city.

Every Friday night the cafeteria put on a rum session where any service person could indulge in the black elixir provided at a dirt-cheap price. I suppose being the Royal Naval House, rum was a tradition. I can certainly attest to its power. On the occasions when I did attend this cheap night out, I did not rise for breakfast and had trouble stirring for lunch. At least I was not far from my bunk.

The Phantom bed wetter

At one time we had a phantom bed wetter. This particular person was an out and out alcoholic. Every night he would pile off the bus with the rest of us straight to the Pit where he stayed until closing time, stagger upstairs and prostrate himself on a bunk, any bunk. Early in the morning he would get up shower dress go down to breakfast. Each night he would follow the same routine with the exception of falling down on a different bunk. The rest I leave to your imagination. Needless to say, following an investigation the culprit was removed to HMAS Penguin.

Weekend Getaways

From time to time we fellows liked to get away from Johnnies for a weekend. As none of us had sleeping bags or any form of camping gear we ‘borrowed’ bedding from Johnnies. Walking out with a handful of blankets etc was a bit risky, the old fellows would go off the planet if they caught us. The alternative plan devised involved parking my car in Milson lane directly under my 2nd floor window. Pillows and blankets could be dropped straight into the boot. Blankets however went all over the place

as they fell. Over a period of time that bedding travelled to Palm Beach, The Entrance, Gosford, Wyong and the Blue Mountains. These weekends were great fun and a real break from Johnnies.

The Commonwealth Bank Agency

The reception desk was also a Commonwealth Bank agency. I know of no other place that had a bank agency open 24 hour a day. As many will recall, in the days of bank books prior to plastic cards and ATMs, if you missed the bank on a Friday there was no money for the weekend. Although the old men behind the desk were very conscientious and took forever to adjust the balance in a pass book to ensure no mistake was made, they provided an excellent service. Although Johnnies was close to everything the convenience of having a bank available any time we wanted was invaluable.

Johnnies Location in Sydney

For a young fellow not having been to sea and experiencing no other naval establishment other than Cerberus, HMAS Waterhen really was a posting that forced a naive country boy of 17-18 to grow up very quickly. The meals were good, we did not have to make our bunk or change our sheets. Everything was done for us. We came and went as we pleased, no short leave cards, no uniforms apart from when we were at work and no senior sailors or officers. It was very un-Navy like. I learnt to drink at Johnnies, taught by many seasoned, purple-nosed old salts who also taught me the pitfalls and good times to be had in the Far East, "up top" as all who had been there termed it. I was introduced to The Brooklyn Hotel where I met many of Sydney's less salubrious characters. The Pit had a back door which led to a back door of the Brooklyn. This allowed a flow of all types back and forth.

The position in Grosvenor Street, Sydney would have to have been hard to beat for any tourist let alone a sailor. A ten-minute walk from Circular Quay, Wynyard Station and short bus ride to Kings Cross. Every shop bank pub, cafe you could imagine was within an easy walk. To my knowledge, Johnnies was the accommodation for HMAS Waterhen personnel for a period of about 2 years, most of that two years I was a resident.

The names of fellow sailors I remember from Johnnies include;

Jack Spratt	ABSAV	Doc Soley	POSAV
Barry Liegh	ABSAV	Geoff Chilman	ABSAN
Alan Naughton	ABME	Dennis Booth	ABSAN
Pete Geoghan	ABME		

Those who served with me at HMAS Waterhen include;

Sid Hinkley	CPOSAV	Ron Sheay	ABSAV
Soapy Hudson	CPOSAV	Danny Ballock	ABSAN
Bluey Ashton	POSAV	Geoff Chilman	ABSAN
Wendell Howe	LSAV		

For all of us, the experience of living at or frequenting Johnnies, for better or worse, at a young, impressionable age was a significant ingredient in our development as sailors. Johnnies also helped shape naval culture over many a decade.

Further Reading

[History of 'Johnnies' – Royal Naval House 1876 – 1980s](#), published in the December 2003 edition of the Naval Historical Review (all rights reserved)

[Royal Naval House](#), Property NSW Government Website