

CHAPTER 15 - Fleet Communications Officer - The Final Chapter

I took up my appointment of Staff Officer (Communications) 2 June 1987. The Commodore Auckland (Commodore JG Peddie, RNZN) was the operational commander of the RNZN and Maritime Commander of Air (LRMP) and Naval assets. His staff consisted of Commanders and Lieutenant Commanders. What was a Warrant Officer Radio Supervisor doing as a Staff Officer? Well, in those days, if you commissioned from the lower deck and weren't going to be a Seaman Officer, you became a Branch List Officer (Administration). Had I taken a commission I would not have been able to be SO(C). As a Comms WO, I could hold an operational, communications position and in this case, responsible for all communications within the Fleet - ships, all shore radio stations, main signal offices and communication centres, but as a Lieutenant (Admin) the only communications postings I could expect would be Communications Training Officer or a desk job in Wellington. The other alternative would be to go out of branch and be an administrator. I was pigheaded and wanted to stay in communications. I could see the way that the RNZN was heading and it wasn't going to suit me, so I gave 12 months notice.

I settled into the job and immediately given a TOP SECRET EXCLUSIVE NZ EYES ONLY security clearance. Sounds very impressive but it meant that I was the only one who could encrypt and decrypt those messages. I would take the plain language copies of the messages to Staff Officer (Security) who was Lt Cdr Derek Swann. Derek and I would be part of the Commodore's ship and establishment inspection teams.

I was given the task of preparing the High Frequency section of the Communications Plan for an exercise to be held in Southeast Asia involving the countries of the Five Power Defence Arrangement - Australia, Britain, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore. This involved working out groundwave and skywave frequency predictions where communications would be over seawater and jungle terrain. Great stuff!

At the end of August, I was posted to the Australian Joint Warfare Establishment, Williamtown, NSW to attend the Joint Communication Course 1/87. Why was I being sent on a comms course when I was retiring in March? Anyway, on arriving at Auckland International Airport, I saw three other military personnel who would be going with me. One I recognised straight away and that was S/Sgt Neville Lockwood. There was also a Sgt Bootsma and an Airforce sergeant, whose name escapes me. Arrived Sydney and transferred to a 12-seater aircraft for our flight to Williamtown.

Williamtown airport was both civilian and military. The RAAF base had Mirage 111 and F18 squadrons based there. The AJWE had a joint staff of instructors and who should be the naval rep, but one Lt Cdr Gary Houghton (Kips Kingdon) RAN! We had a chat about the old days and what he had been doing since he left the RNZN.

The Communications Course was predominantly about Joint Force Communications and the staff knew in advance that I was the RNZN Frequency Manager and were keen to see what I had to say. There were three RAN communicators on the course - a Lt(W), a WORS and a CPORS. The CPORS was going to attend the RFM Course in Biloxi at the beginning of 1988 and I passed on as much information about the course that I could. The final week of the course was dedicated to a Joint Force scenario and the class was divided into four syndicates, which had to prepare the Communication Plan and then a spokesperson (a few females on course) gave his/her offering. I was the spokesperson for the syndicate that I was in.

The class were taken on two visits during the course. The first one was to the Base Operations Centre, where they were in the process of following a dogfight on radar between Mirage and F18 aircraft. The Mirage aircraft were red triangles on the screen and the F18s were blue. This was actually taking place out at sea. The base wasn't far from the coast and the OPCEN was surrounded by sand. The Operations Officer came up to me and said "Mr Dell, we have a problem that we are hoping you could help us out with!" They were unable to communicate successfully with RAN ships when their aircraft were tasked to simulate attacks on them. He took me and the RAN WORS outside to look at their HF aerial system. It was a horizontal half wave dipole sitting directly above the sand. There were two problems:

1. Due to all that sand below the aerial and between them and the coast, groundwave propagation was not the answer as the signal would be quickly absorbed. They were correct in using a horizontal aerial for short skywave. Unfortunately, the sand was absorbing the reflected wave - I suggested that they put a counterpoise of copper wire just above the sand to aid take-off and reduce losses.
2. RAN ships only had vertical upright whip aerials meaning that part of the groundwave signal would propagate over water but be absorbed by the sand. I told him that the RAN had emergency wire aerials which, when hoisted to a yardarm, became aerials that had compromised antenna characteristics - radiated both horizontally and vertically. I suggested to him and the WORS that the Eastern Australian Exercise Program should have a note added to the serials about using the emergency wire aerial when a ship was to work Williamstown for aircraft attack serials.

Never did find out the outcome of that.

On the morning of our second visit, the AJWE Commandant, Captain Martin, RAN, came into the classroom and announced that he had received a signal from the Commodore Auckland that I had been awarded the New Zealand Meritorious Service Medal. Amidst congratulations from staff and class members I wondered what the NZMSM was and why had I been awarded it. I had never heard of that medal before. Anyway, we visited an Australian Army Signals unit further down the coast to see what equipment they had. This unit was right on the coast and even had their own beach! Lovely spot - a posting there for two years would have been ideal. The Sigs unit opened the mess up after the tour and it cost me a small fortune in shouts.

The New Zealand Meritorious Service Medal was awarded between 1898 and 2013. This medal was originally instituted by British Royal Warrant on 28 April 1898 for award to Warrant Officers and Senior Non-Commissioned Officers of the Army. A New Zealand Royal Warrant was authorised in 1985 and the award was extended to include Warrant Officers and Senior Non-Commissioned Officers of the Royal New Zealand Navy and the Royal New Zealand Air Force.

Between 1985 and October 2013, the New Zealand Meritorious Service Medal was awarded for meritorious service of twenty-one years or more and recipients must have already held a long service and good conduct medal.

At the time of my award, only two serving members of the RNZN could be recipients and WO Medical Assistant Neil Macintosh and I both received medals on the same day.

The day before we were due to fly back to Sydney, Kips and Diane took us NZers to their place for a BBQ and drinks. They had a terrific place near the water, the sun was out and not a breath of wind.

My final act as SO(C) was to do an inspection of HMNZS Irirangi. After the inspection, I was dined out at a farewell dinner held at the Sports and Social Club and I said my final goodbyes.

1st March 1988, I walked out of the Philomel Main Gates, a Lieutenant Commander having taken over as SO(C). I had enjoyed my time in the RNZN and the two things that I would miss the most was the camaraderie and my career as a communicator.

Lt Bob Cook had asked me to call in at the Comms School on my home. The school had put on morning tea and Bob presented me with an old hand morse key, sitting on a wooden base with an inscribed plaque. He also told me that the MSM was for the work I had done on the Joint RFM Course. Bob has since passed away but every time I use the key for amateur radio work, I am reminded of him, of all the others that have crossed the bar and the good times that have been.

THE END

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