

HMAS Nirimba – An Apprentice Remembers.

Robert Rudkowsky

HMAS Nirimba was the training base for many Naval apprentices over the years. Some were locals and others came from the other side of Australia. Robert Rudkowsky was one such trainee from Perth. In 1999 he put together some memories as he travelled to a reunion in Canberra. The following article has been adapted from those memories.

I can remember when, just a few days after settling in at Nirimba, I was standing at the main noticeboard, looking at the class of '58 list. The list was 50 names long. A normal six monthly entry and the fourth since the school began in July 1956.

Just before I leave the main notice board another apprentice begins to read the same list of names out loud. After stumbling through the names he turns to me and pronounces, "Look at all the wog names, I bet you and I are the only 'Aussies' here. By the way, my name is Graham Archer, what's yours?" "I'm one of those wogs," I reply. From that moment on Graham and I were the best of friends.

Nirimba was modelled on the Royal Navy Apprentice Training School at HMS Fisgard in the south of England. All training carried out in the Royal Australian Navy at that time was modelled on the Royal Navy.

As I read the list (in 1999), the only names I can recognise are my colleagues from Western Australia. The five of us had left Perth on the 1st of January 1958 by train for Sydney. The trip took five days, as there were many train changes for the different rail widths across Australia. By the time we arrived in Sydney our friendships had been cemented.

I made many friends from our early days at Nirimba. We were all in the same boat, or as we learnt the Naval difference – ship. Our youth was the catalyst for endeavour. With the motto of HMAS Nirimba being "*Success From Endeavour*", it was our opportunity to learn a good trade.

My mind drifts back hopping from memory disc to memory disc and stops at what appeared to be constant 'doubling' or running everywhere. Skinny legs, navy blue shorts and berets, all intermingled with the excitement of Navy life. I can see our fresh faces, pimpled and newly shaved around the wide grins of youth.

It's finally the middle of December 1958 and the Western Australian apprentices were about to depart for Christmas leave. Because of the distance, we were entitled to 10 days travelling time. This had always been a sore point with the other apprentices and especially those from New South Wales who were not entitled to any travelling time at all.

Everybody was excited, one year of training completed. We were privately proud that we had survived some difficult moments and the occasional bout of homesickness. Our bags were packed. We boarded the Naval bus at the Regulating Office. Everything at Nirimba was controlled from the Regulating Office. We were inspected, as per regulations. Leave orders read out loud. "You will conduct yourselves as members of the Royal Australian Navy and will not forget that you represent the elite of Australian youth. Anyone breaking these rules will be punished in accordance with the Naval Board *Regulations and Instructions*." The dreaded RI's.

The RI's were more powerful than the Bible, but just as confusing. We grunted our confirmation that we had heard this solemn proclamation. However it had the lowest priority in our minds at that very moment. That moment was to enjoy. Long leave!! – Home!! – Christmas!! – There was no contest.

The Naval bus carrying us on our first leg to happiness, stopped at Blacktown railway station. All group travel was controlled by some type of patrol. This was an escort patrol only as far as Blacktown. From Blacktown we were on our own. Our normal procedure was to report to the Naval RTO at Sydney Central Railway. They issued real tickets in exchange for our travel warrants. For some reason, still not clear to me, Laurie Kelly and I did not deem the RTO as our most important destination, opting instead for the Town Hall Hotel, a favourite hotel for sailors in those days.

Laurie and I certainly enjoyed ourselves that afternoon or at least we must have since I couldn't remember much about it later. Through this cold haze I can remember only the salient points of the events that followed. We hurried to the RTO's office to get our tickets, raced for the interstate departure platform in time to see our train to Melbourne accelerating away. As we stared into the empty space where the train had been, the Duty Shore Patrol at Central Railway arrested us, their smiling faces in contrast to their actions.

A paddy wagon ride back to Nirimba, then the 'fronting' before the Officer of the Day (OOD). The gods must have been smiling on us that day. Despite our feeble excuses, the OOD considered this a 'one off'. We were instructed to fly, at our own expense, to Melbourne and join the train to Perth. "This Navy is not too bad after all." The unspoken words clear to us as we smiled at each other. "We always knew we were innocent."

The major problem of bookings was solved by a special charter, a Sydney to Melbourne flight carrying Russian refugees from China. There appeared to be room for two wayward Naval apprentices. We were finally on our way home!