



Keeping Watch

A history of the Navy League of Australia (1895-2015)

by Malcolm Longstaff

Synopsis

For Britain's Royal Navy, 19th-century was book-ended by two significant events: at the start by Nelson's triumph at the Battle of Trafalgar; and at the end by growing public concern that the strength of the Navy was declining in the face of increasing naval power being developed by some of its neighbouring Continental European countries and, further afield, for example by Japan. One initiative which responded to this concern was the formation in 1895 of the Navy League of Great Britain. Its policy was to encourage recognition by Government and Parliament and the public generally of the crucial importance of Britain maintaining command of the sea along with the capacity to defend the Empire's far-flung possessions and protect its trade routes.

The League soon commenced forming Branches overseas. The first Branch in Australia was established at Launceston (Tasmania) in 1900. In 1902, to underpin the strategy, London headquarters sent one of its secretaries on a world lecture tour. His arrival in Australia coincided with spirited ongoing public debate in the newly-federated nation as to whether the country should continue to rely significantly for its naval defence on the existing presence of the Royal Navy or work towards eventually establishing its own Navy. As public opinion was tending towards the latter option, there was only minimal interest shown in the objects of the Navy League of Great Britain and any Branches which were established were not sustainable.

From 1915 onwards, however, in the wake of the Royal Australian Navy having been formed and moreover acquitting itself with distinction in battle in World War I, some of these dormant Branches were successfully rejuvenated and gave support to both the Royal Australian Navy and to the Royal Navy.

Ultimately the Navy League in Australia was represented in all States and Territories and in 1920, following the example of its British parent, it commenced forming units of the sea cadets, known as the Navy League Sea Cadet Corps.

In 1950, with the support and encouragement of London headquarters, the various Australian Branches were reconstituted as an autonomous national body known as The Navy League of Australia with each State and Territory Division having representation on its Federal Council.

In 1973, by mutual agreement, the Royal Australian Navy assumed full responsibility for the sea cadet organisation now known as the Australian Navy Cadets, although the League continues to provide support at both Federal and State levels. For many years, it has also been seen as an active and respected public commentator on naval and defence issues. Its quarterly national magazine *The Navy* has been published continuously since 1938.

Keeping Watch recounts the history of an organisation, always substantially run by volunteers, which has maintained its relevance in a changing defence environment and earned a rightful place in the narrative of Australian naval history.

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