



# COMMITMENT TO SERVICE

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Past student and former Head of the Defence Centre, Sydney, Commodore Alan Thompson's extraordinary commitment to the service of Australia has spanned close to three decades. At the height of his career, he was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia on 26 January, 1993 for his outstanding commitment to Defence Force personnel policy development. Alan speaks humbly about his impact on the Australian Defence Force, and the moment on College grounds 54 years ago that became the turning point in understanding that the ability to alter attitudes and habits is within us all.

*Alan, thank you for your time. It's a pleasure to see you again.*

*Entering the Royal Australian Navy in 1972, you ascended the ranks to eventually be promoted to Commodore in 1991. You were appointed chief lawyer for the Defence Force in 1993, before becoming Head of the Defence Centre, Sydney, in 1994. In your time in this position, you became a member of the 2000 Sydney Olympics Security Committee. Retiring from the Navy in January 1998, you accepted an appointment as a Senior Member of the Veterans' Review Board. You retired from this appointment in 2008. It's clear you've had an illustrious career, and there's so much I'd like us to talk about.*

**Let's start with the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Why did you join the Navy?**

After qualifying, I worked as a solicitor for a short time. I was mainly undertaking commercial and matrimonial work. It was dull.

I thought I would eventually go to the Bar, but decided I would do something different for a time, and joined the Navy for four years. I was given significant sea time in my first years. Every day was different and the camaraderie was genuine. I loved it. Lawyers were new to the Navy at that time, and I could see the potential for a strong and diverse career. I stayed for a working lifetime, which allowed me to travel to most parts of the world.

As a sideline, I just want to add that at the time I was chief lawyer for the Navy, Group Captain Peter Birtles was the chief lawyer for the Royal Australian Air Force. Peter and I had been classmates at Salesian College, and he was my closest friend at University. I have always liked the symmetry of two Salesian Old Boys arriving at the same place at the same time.

**I couldn't agree more; a great connection.**

**How has the ADF changed from the time you started, to when you finished?**

I'll focus on the Navy, but in general there was little difference between the Services.

I was required to obtain the permission of my commanding officer to marry (I was aged 29 at the time!). As in any formal letter to a superior, my request concluded with the words, "I have the honour to be, Sir, your obedient servant". All of the best and most useful traditions have been retained, but those no longer appropriate have gone.

There were many changes to the Navy during my time. Apart from important capability changes to the fleet, the most significant relate to the employment of women, workplace behaviour and the place of international law in naval planning and operations.

When I joined, women were excluded from seagoing employment. They did not receive the same pay as their male counterparts. They represented about 5% of the Navy. At the time I retired in 1998, the path to full integration was well developed, and the Service was genuinely committed to increasing the participation of women. Women were serving at sea, including in submarines, and were piloting naval aircraft. There were certainly problems, including entrenched discriminatory attitudes and a number of scandals. Today, there are no gender restrictions, and all employment categories are open to women. Women command major warships and occupy some of the most senior positions in the Service. Despite this, women still represent only about 20% of the Navy. There remains an obvious need to place a greater emphasis on recruiting women.





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At the time I joined the Navy, the Service valued fairness and decent behaviour, but in a robust sense. The focus was on rank and command. This meant that there were unacceptable systemic, cultural and attitudinal behaviours embedded in the Service. At this time, there was no preventative strategy for addressing unacceptable behaviour, and the notion of equity and diversity was an utterly foreign concept. In the early 1990s, due to internal scandals and external pressure, change began. The Navy as a whole began to understand more clearly what is good and right. It has taken time, but today the Navy has a sophisticated grasp of equity and diversity, and has a solid foundation in implementing acceptable workplace behaviour.

**International laws are interesting dynamics. I assume that element came into play?**

Absolutely. As a newly joined lawyer, it was apparent to me that my superiors thought that the most significant part of my work would involve appearing before courts-martial. They had little understanding of the influence of international law on sea power. It was not until the early 1980s that senior naval officers began to grasp the relationship between naval operations and international law. This led also to higher learning opportunities for naval lawyers in this discipline. I was fortunate to spend some time in Italy as a student at the International Institute for Humanitarian law. At the time of my retirement, naval lawyers played an integral part in operational planning, and were routinely deployed on major operations.

**You were integral to Personnel Policy development. What did this involve?**

I was positioned within the Headquarters of the ADF, and reported on some matters to the Chief of Personnel and on others to the Chief of the Defence Force. My role principally involved developing policies across the ADF relating to drugs, alcohol, sexuality, sex discrimination, assisting Defence families, redress of grievances, honours and awards, education and training and non-financial conditions of service. It was a broad portfolio.

**In regards to the political climate during your years of service and 24 years on, how would you describe it?**

There are many layers to this question, but overall I don't think it changed much at all during my service. Successive governments maintained self-reliance as the main tenet of defence policy. At a working level, there were always tensions between Government and Defence, and within Defence. The Defence organisation is massive, and difficult for Government to control. The Services always diverged in their fight for a share of the defence budget, for capabilities such as submarines and fighter aircraft. At the same time, the wishes of Government were implemented faithfully. A significant illustration of this principle occurred in 1983. The new Labor Government cancelled the plan to replace the Navy's sole aircraft carrier. This decision tore at the fabric and soul of the Service. With no aircraft carrier, the structure and concept of operations of the Navy had to change. The Service just got on with it.

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All that was necessary to carry out the will of Government was done.

I do recall one political ripple in which I had some minor involvement. In the early 1980s I was Secretary to the Admiral commanding the Fleet. In an interview with the press he observed critically that the amount of steaming time for the fleet had been limited because of government budget restraints. His superiors made known to him their displeasure, and, as a result, he prepared his resignation for immediate despatch. I decided to take a risk and kept it in my desk overnight. The following morning he agreed it was a good decision. It was. He became Chief of Navy.

**That was a courageous decision; I'm glad it paid off.**

**How has the Australian public attitude towards the ADF changed over time?**

There has been some gradual change. At the time I joined, there appeared to me to be a simple public view that the Defence Force had an honourable history of service and was an important national asset. At the time I retired, I think Defence remained in high regard, but the community view was slightly more sophisticated. Some incidents and episodes did not match the public expectations of Defence,

and this disappointment was widely expressed. At the same time, the public seemed to think that the ADF, with its specialised capabilities, had a greater role to play in domestic tasks. This included contributing security at significant domestic events and playing a greater role in State emergency response events.

**You were awarded a Member of the Order of Australia on 26 January 1993 for your exceptional service to Defence Force personnel policy development. What did this moment mean to you?**

It was an unexpected award. I felt some personal satisfaction and pride, but mainly I enjoyed the pleasure it gave my family.

**They must have been so proud.**

**Going back to school days, you describe an Assembly in 1962 as a turning point.**

**Can you explain what happened and what impact this had on you?**

I was an undisciplined student in my early years. My results were very poor. The turning point came for me in 1962. Father Rector (Alan McDonald) addressed the students at morning assembly.



We were told that we could work hard now and have an easy life, or have an easy life now and work hard forever. In particular, I recall that he mentioned that there were unlimited openings for street sweepers. Of course, Father McDonald's message was not fully accurate, but it had a profound effect on my young mind. I became a serious student.

**You mention that you changed your attitude and habits, post this Assembly experience. What advice can you give to students wanting to do the same?**

Well, I hope my experience encourages those young men now at the College who may be struggling. A poor start need not define the future. A change in attitude and habits is within us all.

**Beautifully said. I think that applies to us all.**

**Alan, you credit your Mum as "the most profound influence for good in your life", as well as Fr Bill Edwards, who identified your potential. Explain the significance of these people in your life.**

My mother is profoundly Catholic. Her faith burns strongly and radiates to all of her family. Her example of the daily living of Catholic values affects my behaviour every day. I lost my wife, Darian, to breast cancer three years ago. My mother was a tender reminder to me at that time of the spiritual dimension involved in coping with grief.

I remember Father Bill Edwards with great affection. Even in my early years as a very poor student, I felt that he saw something in me.



This was probably his gift, recognising the talents of each and every student. I particularly recall his gentle warnings on the dangers of alcohol. In later years, I thought of him when I was asked, as a non-alcoholic, to use some of my skills in assisting Alcoholics Anonymous. I also thought that he might be pleased that I was for a time National Chairman of that wonderful organisation.

**You were so lucky to have them in your life.**

**Don Bosco said that "our boys must not only be loved, but know that they are loved." How did you experience this at Salesian College Chadstone?**

All of my teachers were kindly and gentle. They could be firm in the classroom, as they often needed to be, but I most remember their presence during recreation periods. They would join in our games, or we would gather around them to listen to their jokes and stories. Sometimes it was just a simple one on one chat. It was a wonderful friendly atmosphere, and leads me now to think of them all with great affection.

**Alan, thank you for taking the time to share your story.**



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