

# HI INTERVIEWS CDR JENNY DAETZ AND CDR FIONA SMITH, ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY

## Women in Command

Commander Jenny Daetz is one of the commanding officers on Australia's two ocean-going Leeuwin-class surveying ships, the largest surveying ships in the Royal Australian Navy. As commanding officer of HS-RED crew she will be relieved in January 2007 by Commander Fiona Smith. Three rotating crews, HS-RED, HS-WHITE and HS-BLUE man the two survey ships HMAS Leeuwin and HMAS Melville. Few, if any, navies have appointed two female commanders of surveying ships, and similar appointments in the private sector seem unlikely. We talked to the two about their achievements and their lives as hydrographic surveyors, and how it was to be commanding officer (CO) of a survey ship.

HI to both: Could you please introduce yourselves to readers, and give a brief outline of your hydrographic career?

**CDR Daetz:** I joined the Navy in 1986. In 1987, policy was amended to allow women to go to sea as seaman officers. I fell into hydrography as a result of these ships being the first to offer up sea billets and the prospect of a career in the branch. In 1990 I completed the RAN Hydrographic Officers Course, and in 1994 the Long Hydrographic Course in the UK. My sea postings have been in HMAS Moresby as an assistant surveyor, then on the Survey Motor Launch (SML) HMAS Shepparton as executive officer (XO) in 1992 and as CO in 1997, XO HS-White in 2001 and CO HS-Red in 2005 until the present. In between these postings I have worked ashore at the Hydrographic School and in the Australian Hydrographic Office.

**CDR Smith:** I joined the Navy from Brisbane, Queensland in 1988. Over the course of the intervening nineteen years I have enjoyed a wide variety of mostly seagoing jobs, and for the last eleven years I have been a specialist hydrographic surveyor. My postings in the hydrographic branch have included seagoing jobs as assistant surveyor in HMAS Moresby and XO in HMAS Paluma (SML). My shore-based jobs have been at the Australian Hydrographic Office, most recently as OIC of the RAN Hydrographic School. I completed my Category-A training in the UK. Without doubt the highlight of my hydrographic career to date has been my two years since 2002 as commanding officer of HMAS Benalla (SML). I have been in charge of surveys conducted in Torres Strait, Van Dieman Gulf, and the Gladstone area, as well as survey work in Papua New Guinea.

HI to CDR Daetz: In October 1997 you became the first woman to command a Royal Australian Navy Ship. What are the positive, and negative, aspects of being in this position?

**CDR Daetz:** The main positive for me was not the fact that I was the first female but that as a seaman officer I had achieved my goal to command a ship. The main negative was the perceived pressure that I assume is felt by all women choosing a career in a traditionally male domain.

HI to CDR Daetz: You have been the first female to hold various positions in the Australian Navy. When you started your nautical career did you ever think of commanding the largest survey vessels in the Royal Australian Navy?

**CDR Daetz:** No, although my goal was to command a ship, this was originally only a survey motor launch; but having achieved that goal, and with the new hydrographic ships entering service at the time, I then set a further goal to command a Leeuwin-class survey ship. I am pleased to say I achieved that goal too.

HI to both: Can you tell us something of your decisions when you arrived at crossroads in your naval career? Anything you regret?

**CDR Daetz:** I think I am at a crossroad now. It is highly unlikely I will have the opportunity to return to sea and I am about to embark on my first commanding officer's position ashore, command of the naval base at Cairns.

**CDR Smith:** I certainly have no regrets about anything I have done in my naval career. I guess like many people, though, I have found myself at crossroads along the way. In fact, I was at a crossroad when I made the decision to become a hydrographic surveyor. At that point in my career I was already a reasonably experienced officer of the watch and many people expected me to pursue my interest in navigation. It was my posting as navigator in the survey ship HMAS Flinders that exposed me to the work and opportunities available to a hydrographic surveyor and prompted me to change my career path. Another recent crossroads point was when I was offered my next job as commanding officer of a Leeuwin-class hydrographic ship. Having spent the previous two years ashore I questioned whether I wanted to go back to sea and assume all the responsibility, and stress, that comes with such a job. I have recently married and my husband is in the Army and cannot be employed in Cairns, which is the ship's base port, so my dilemma was increased by the fact that I will have to live away from him for the duration of my appointment. After much deliberation, and with the full support of my husband, I know that this opportunity represents a pinnacle in my career and is the accomplishment of a goal towards which I have worked for so long. If I were to turn it down I would possibly regret it later and would be left wondering 'what if...'

HI to CDR Daetz: At the end of 2000 you went to Antarctica to complete a hydrographic survey of Boat Harbour, its approaches and the anchorage in Commonwealth Bay. What were the difficulties you encountered in surveying under these harsh conditions?

**CDR Daetz:** In addition to the obvious weather restrictions in the official 'windiest place on the face of the earth' I found the isolation and lack of readily available specialist support the most challenging. In the navy we rely on teamwork and good communications; but fortunately the assistance provided by the owners of MV Sir Hubert Wilkins, and the crew, who were all volunteers, and even the adventure passengers, were key to me achieving a successful survey.

HI to CDR Smith: What do you expect from your appointment when you take over from CDR Daetz?

**CDR Smith:** More than anything, I am expecting to be very busy. I also have no doubt that I will be confronted with many and varied challenges during the course of my command. But, as I said earlier, it is what I have aimed for and I am looking forward to getting started.

HI to CDR Smith: In your current employment you are officer in charge (OIC) of the Hydrographic School. What are the positive, and negative, aspects of being in this position?

**CDR Smith:** Being OIC of the Hydrographic School has been a very rewarding job. It has enabled me to stay within my area of expertise but to step away from the day-to-day operational aspects of the job, get involved with training and focus on the people who are the future of the hydrographic branch. Although numbers being trained are not as high as we would like, the calibre of personnel joining the hydrographic branch is very high and it has been a great opportunity to be involved with these people at the formative stage.

HI to both: Looking at present-day vacancies, surveyors seem to be in short supply. Next month's issue of Hydro International focuses on Human Resources, including the shortage of personnel. How do you think we can interest (female) students in becoming hydrographic surveyors?

**CDR Daetz:** I had never heard of hydrography until I joined the navy. Although surveying is a good career path with excellent opportunities, the hydrographic field is not very well known, even within the navy. I often need to explain what it is that a hydrographic surveyor does. Since I have been in command I have taken every opportunity to invite young people to sea to experience the surveying life. Any job or career is what you make of it, but I have found that this job and especially my career to date have been both challenging and very rewarding.

**CDR Smith:** To be honest, I had not even heard of hydrographic surveying until I was posted to a survey ship. We certainly need to heighten our profile to make more people aware of what we actually do. Hydrographic surveyors contribute to and create tangible products for the use of all mariners. This practical application was a reason I specialised in the field and I am sure it would influence others to do the same.

HI to both: Although you have both achieved the position of commanding officer in the navy, we do not see many women in hydrography in general, especially climbing to the position of commanding officer, which is even more special. What is your opinion on this?

**CDR Daetz:** The climb to any position requires dedication and some sacrifice; I have not had any children yet, which is a choice I made in favour of career goals. However, with a well thought-out plan, who knows? Anything is possible.

**CDR Smith:** For anyone to reach the equivalent position to that of commanding officer in any career requires considerable time and commitment. It is a reality that in the midst of striving for and reaching career milestones most women are confronted with the additional challenge of deciding whether to have a family or not. I realise there are many successful career women who have also raised families and I have the utmost respect for them and their accomplishments. They are, however, in the minority, and I believe that due to the demanding nature of both pursuing a career and raising a family the number of females in top positions is unlikely to change significantly.

HI to both: And finally, do you have any particular message for women entering the hydrographic industry or for hydrographic surveyors in general?

**CDR Daetz:** Although I cannot speak about the wider hydrographic community, I can confirm that being a hydrographic officer in the Royal Australian Navy is not only challenging and rewarding but it has offered me unique and rewarding opportunities to develop skills in both

management and the maritime industry.

CDR Smith: Hydrographic surveying is an extremely interesting, challenging and rewarding career. It provides opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge, use modern equipment and technology and be involved in practical fieldwork. Additionally, within the framework of the navy the opportunities for employment are diverse. I would recommend the career choice to anyone.

---

<https://www.hydro-international.com/content/article/women-in-command>

---