

Wally Cowin

When Wally Cowin was discharged from the Navy in 1969, having been caught having sex with a mate, he was devastated. His five-year career was gone, and with it the work that he loved. He was told that his war service would be wiped, and he would receive no pension. He would never get a government job. It seemed as though everything had been taken away from him. What made this worse, perhaps, was that he had not started with that much and it looked as though years of effort were being undone. Wally's story reveals the many sexual opportunities for gay or bisexual men serving in the Navy in the 1960s and early 1970s, as long as they were discreet. His narrative also shows the ways that changing regulations around homosexuality were shaping new Defence methods to deal with suspected homosexuals, marking the end of a period of potential tolerance. In an era when homosexuality was still not accepted or even legal in Australia, the stigma of being kicked out of the Navy for homosexual acts could have ramifications for years.

Wally was born in 1948 in Tenterfield in northern New South Wales, a town now associated with the international performer Peter Allen. They 'shared the same kidney dish', as Wally puts it, having been delivered by the same doctor in the same hospital. Wally's father served in the Army during the Second World War and had become a policeman afterward. He took the family to Queensland, Currumbin on the Gold Coast and then, in 1955, to Mount Gravatt. Back then, Mount Gravatt was on the far outskirts of Brisbane, one of the new post-war working-class suburbs built to accommodate the war generation and their boom of babies. It was a pretty wild place. Even the tram did not run out that far when Wally's family arrived. There was plenty of bushland, and a creek across the road, kangaroos in the streets and koalas and snakes in the yard. The school house was built for 200, but to Wally it seemed like there were thousands who turned up on the first day. Then there was the scout hall acquired from the Holland Park Army Base in the dead of night.

Life for the kids of the area was pretty free-range. Wally learned to cut down trees and build tents, to live off the land, roaming with friends through the forests, which are only remnants now. He discovered an aptitude for leadership. Wally really wanted to travel to Brisbane to participate in the Scouts Gang Show, but his parents would not permit him to take the long tram ride into the West End alone. Instead, Wally organised his own troupe of performers in the backyard using a schoolbook full of plays, and an old blanket on the clothesline as a backdrop and curtain to stage public performances.

This early developed habit, of knowing what he wanted and being determined to get it, carried into his school life. At the age of 12, Wally decided that he wanted to do Home Science (cooking) rather than woodwork, metalwork and trade drawing. The trouble was, cooking was for girls – it was part of their homecraft training, designed to make them good housewives. Even the sympathetic teachers could not do much against the declared policy of the Education Department. Wally dropped a subject and took to just sitting in on the cooking classes, quietly down the back of the classroom, watching and learning. Whenever an opportunity to cook presented itself, he would grab it. When his mates at scouts were competing in knot-tying competitions and the like, he would turn up with a Christmas cake – fruit cakes were his specialty. When the scouts were camping in the bush, Wally would collect the money and do all of the troupe's shopping and cooking.

His sexuality was as free-ranging as the rest of his childhood. There were plenty of boys and girls willing to join him exploring and experimenting with their bodies. Wally was bisexual in his preferences and always had girlfriends as well as boys. There were plenty of opportunities: camping in the bush with the scouts, swimming in the dam with friends. Wally states, 'Everybody played with everybody around here in those days. Age was not a problem.' He had developed an awareness of what was going on around him: 'The gaydar was certainly working for me by the time I was 15. I knew that look or whatever it is to some people. I knew what a man ... whether he's looking at me or ... I just knew'. Wally was careful, of course; he and a few friends would talk about what they were up to, but he knew not to be too open about sex. He remarks, 'I knew not to talk about it. I didn't feel bad about it. No, I was interested in all of it. It was how it all worked, how everybody's body worked.'

It all seems rather idyllic, but Wally was not really happy, either at home or at school. Wally was not much of a student (though he remembers getting 100 per cent in a Navy maths test once) and he failed the last year of primary school because of his English: 'I couldn't spell. I had trouble writing.' Punctuation was a challenge but he knew he had to learn and he set about reading more and more until he got it. Wally repeated the final year of primary school and was then admitted to Mount Gravatt High School. After two years he was ready to leave school and get a job. There seems to have been no doubt in Wally's mind that the way out was the military – and the Navy, in particular.

His father's Second World War service was not a factor encouraging Wally in his decision. He comments: 'There is no bloody way I wanted to put up with what my father saw in the islands ... I didn't want to go through what I'd seen him go through and the post traumatic stuff that he went through ... He had a bad time. The strength of character for him got him through it. I saw that'. What Wally did get from his father was practical advice: that if you have to fight for your country, you can do it more easily in the Navy than the Army. Then there was 'the travel thing ... I could see the world, which I wanted to. Travelling and seeing the world for me was everything'. There was also, of course, sex: 'By that time, I was very much aware of my sexuality, both in my context at scouts and dare I say the police, with my context of what I wanted to do and what did I want sexually, so I was very much aware.' Wally knew of Winston Churchill's famous line that the traditions of the Navy were rum, sodomy and the lash. At least one older man recommended the Navy to Wally on exactly these grounds. Wally recalls 'a scout master who was in the Navy as well, and he said, "Mate you'd love that"'. As if that were not enough, Wally learned that he could do his apprenticeship as a chef through the Navy, bringing his love of cooking to his working life. In January 1965, at the age of 16, Wally Cowin signed up for the Royal Australian Navy.

His plans began to go awry almost immediately. There was a war on in Vietnam and the Navy did not need cooks as much as it did seamen. Its cooking schools were closed down, and rather than being based at Nirimba in New South Wales as an apprentice chef, Wally was signed up as a Junior Recruit and shipped off to HMAS **Leeuwin** in Western Australia. Once there, the recruits were enrolled in another year of

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Creswell
Cerberus
Watson
Penguin
Leeuwin
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Harman

basic education, alongside learning seamanship and military discipline and skills. He knew how to shoot from his younger days, but the .303 rifles were new to him. His intake was a group of about 212 men, lads brought together from all over Australia. Some, like Wally, looked to get away from home, some to escape the boredom of farm or rural life. Some were effectively sentenced to military service by judges looking to get some discipline instilled into young tearaways: if you do not join up, you are going to gaol.

HMAS Leeuwin has attained some infamy in recent years as a result of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. In June 2016, the Royal Commission specifically examined the Australian Defence Force (ADF) with attention focused on responses to child sexual abuse involving minors such as the Cadets. HMAS Leeuwin featured prominently among the historical cases, with the Royal Commission examining abuse cases there during the period 1960–1980. The Defence submission and testimony of the Vice Chief of the Defence Force, Vice Admiral Ray Griggs, was candid about the institution’s significant knowledge and mishandling of abuse claims at Leeuwin.

Indeed, in 1971, when an allegation of physical bullying and abuse reached the press, the Minister of State for the Navy commissioned Judge Trevor Rapke to ‘undertake an investigation into allegations of initiation practices, physical violence, or bullying at HMAS Leeuwin’. The internal Rapke Report interviewed 467 witnesses from staff and junior recruits and described numerous examples of physical, sexual and mental abuse, normally perpetrated by junior recruits as a form of bullying and hazing. Yet, Rapke concluded: ‘In the light of the large body of evidence which I accept of bullying and violence, it is necessary to stress that LEEUWIN has been the scene for unorganised and repetitive acts of bullying, violence, degradation and petty crime during most of the years of its existence.’¹ The ADF submission to the Royal Commission acknowledged that the Rapke Report had downplayed the systematic nature of abuse and cover-ups, and Vice Admiral Griggs acknowledged that the ADF had failed these young people. In his testimony, Griggs issued the following apology to survivors of sexual abuse: ‘People and systems have failed you and they have put others at risk and that is simply not good enough. I am deeply sorry for what has happened to you.’²

Notwithstanding this significant historical context, Wally did not report experiencing or witnessing any abuse, mainly because early on, accidentally and unexpectedly, he found himself in the Junior Recruit Drum and Bugle Band. Sitting in the dining room one day, drumming his knife and fork on the table, a bloke asked him whether he could drum properly. Before he knew what was what, that very same day, Wally was whisked off into the band. This meant no more seamanship, no more pointless marching in the rain, and he was fortunately insulated from the widespread abuse. Wally would never have to carry a rifle again. The band would play for the Junior Recruits in the morning and at events all over the state.

Here, too, Wally found his ambition kicking in. As he put it, for some unknown reason the ‘Maharajah of fucking [somewhere]’ had donated to the band a ‘fucking great huge lion skin’. Wally decided that he was going to claw his way to the top of the drumming tree and wear that lion skin. Because someone told him that he would ‘never have that on’, he was determined to do so within six months. Wally remembers: ‘I then learned all percussion and the beat and the time and how to ... and I learned all that with the side drum and the tenor drum and the base drum, cymbals, the triangle’. Sure enough, come the band’s performance at the Perth opening of *The Sound of Music*, there was Wally in the lion skin, leading the band’s rendition of ‘Sixteen Going on Seventeen’. As they marched through the streets of Perth, Wally knew he had achieved his ambition and that his next move was back to cooking. The band was ‘full, fabulous theatre’, but it was not serious.

The band had other benefits for Wally. He and the reservists and the band members would travel the state performing. It was a big team.

...the wind and the percussion ... the tenors. We were the tenor drums and kettle drums. They had the lead kettle drum in the middle and the two behind. Then we had to fill up with six other kettle drums, two tenor drums and then ten buglers and then they’d have the rest of the trombones and the trumpets.

In their dress whites they all looked pretty ‘schmick’. The band attracted attention and, as Wally, remembers, ‘The trousers left nothing to the imagination in those days. Underwear certainly wasn’t a prerequisite getting dressed.’ Sexual opportunities

abounded – within the band, or at parties, or even with whomever was driving the band around.

Wally's gaydar, which he had developed by the age of 15 or so, stood him in good stead. What he could detect was men who were interested, who might be up for a bit of sexual action. It did not matter much whether they were homosexual or not; there were men who at any given moment might, if approached, be willing to perform sexual acts. This was to become increasingly obvious later in his career in Sydney. In the meantime, his confidence meant that he could try it on with someone who seemed likely to respond, and if he got knocked back, well, 'There's another bus any minute.'

After 12 months at Leeuwin, Wally transferred to the ship HMAS *Sydney*. There was still no chef's apprenticeship for him, but at least he was cooking – and on a huge scale. There were five galleys, 40 to 50 cooks and chefs, including bakers and butchers; there were about 3500 sailors to feed. This being the military, there was a hierarchy to account for because feeding different ranks attracted different status. Many years later, Wally was chef on the officers' kitchen on the HMAS *Supply*, which served ten or 12 officers, including on one occasion the Admiral of the Fleet on a trip to New Zealand. At sea, kitchens ran 24 hours a day, but even on shore-bases there was a three-watch system, with shifts beginning at four in the morning for breakfasts. Between shifts, kitchen staff would look after their clothes, read, sit in the sun, and occasionally have sex.

The *Sydney* was a light aircraft carrier which had operated between 1948 until 1958, when it was placed in reserve as surplus to requirements. Recommissioned in 1962, the ship was used to transport soldiers and equipment to Vung Tau, a port in South Vietnam and base for the 1st Australian Logistics Support Group. The *Sydney* undertook 25 such trips, earning the nickname the Vung Tau Ferry. Wally was on four of those trips in 1966, 1967 and 1968, spending two or three weeks each way, with a maximum 48 hours in port. He was a kitchen-hand, which kept him close to his interest in cooking: 'We were on washing up and veggies and that sort of thing, standing there and braising the mince while someone else would ... "You just stir that while I ... this is what you do. Keep it moving"'. He never went ashore in these visits, but his work in the warzone was sufficient to ensure war service credit on his service record.

In port, the main activity for the *Sydney* and its crew was loading and unloading equipment – tanks and personnel carriers off-lifted from the flight deck by cranes and barges and chinook helicopters. There were also the soldiers to be offloaded. For some, this was not an adventure, but an ordeal. ~~Although national servicemen could be sent to Vietnam, the practice was, generally, not to force someone to go whose opposition might be a danger to themselves and their fellow soldiers.~~ Even if those being offloaded at Vung Tau had ~~volunteered for service~~wanted to deploy to Vietnam, the reality as it loomed closer, was frightening. Such was Wally’s experience: ‘The soldiers were nervous. “I was just 17”, as the song goes. I can remember hearing the mess at night, the Army messes at night, and there’d be a lot of men who would be crying. I helped console some of them too ... the best fashion that I knew how’, he laughs. Reflecting upon the widely believed story from the Second World War that many servicemen could be persuaded to engage in sexual activity on the basis that they might be dead at any time, Wally says that this worked for him too: ‘I had used that line on some of them too because ... sometimes it worked. “You have never had your cock sucked by a man and you’re going to war? We’ll fix that for you right here and now”’.

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Apart from offering consolation to anxious soldiers going ashore, the highlight of these trips for Wally was the stopover in Hong Kong, with ‘its promises of mad chemists and sexual dalliance with anything and everything you want’. The sexual economy was booming and young men like Wally were promised the world.

We were told ... older sailors had said, ‘Oh, you will see women that will be able to do this. You’ll see men who can suck their own cock.’ ... I wasn’t let down. I was taken to places where men would suck their own cock and for a smaller fee they’d even do yours, especially if you were in a sailor’s uniform. They were only too happy to ... so for me it was a fabulous world, needless to say.

~~Sex~~ onboard the *Sydney* took many forms. There was, for example, an initiation into the secret world of onboard sodomy via the Golden Rivet. The Golden Rivet is a piece of maritime legend: a claim that the last rivet hammered into a ship during construction was a commemorative one made of gold. It is a well-established practice on the ships of many countries to trick new sailors into looking for it. Wally remembers a somewhat different version in which new sailors, whose interest in homosex had been determined (‘the

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chosen ones, the ones that one knew weren't going to mind'), were invited by an older sailor to come and see the Golden Rivet. Somewhere in the depths of the ship, it would become clear that the Rivet did not exist, but by that point the two men were in a quiet, private place where they could enjoy each other's bodies. The Golden Rivet that Wally later bought for ten dollars at the Brisbane Maritime Museum during the 1988 World Expo has a meaning for him that it does not, presumably, have for most others. There was also a degree of privacy available in the rostering of sailors and their living in three-berth cabins. Wally shared with two other cooks. Their rosters were well known, and if the others were at work and Wally was rostered off, interested men would drop by to visit him. He makes the point that the visitors initiated such encounters – it worked both ways when it came to seeking out sex on the ship.

Finally, in mid 1966, Wally was granted leave from the Sydney to do his chef's training at HMAS Cerberus, a training base southeast of Melbourne on Western Port Bay, and the site of ~~basic training~~recruit school for most enlisted sailors. A lecturer and others from Melbourne's William Angliss Food Trades School conducted the course, which specialised in training in cooking and associated skills. It was combination of classroom and practical training. Wally recalls: 'There was a course and every day we would do a three-course meal for eight. We'd do a soup and veggies and soups and curries and we'd be given the thing and we'd go and we'd have to do it.' After six months, Wally was done and it was time to move again.

Next stop was a 12-month stint as a chef at HMAS Creswell, a naval base at Jervis Bay on the south coast of New South Wales and the location of the Navy's Officer Training School. Wally was working in the junior officers' kitchen in an environment that allowed for plenty of free time and leisure activities: shooting, art, painting and golf. It was here that he got to know Rod Stringer, then working at a bar in Nowra, later to be a significant player in the creation of Sydney's Kings Cross/Oxford Street gay commercial scene. Wally jokingly says that Stringer was 'probably the only older man at the time that I never slept with'. From there, it was back to the *Sydney* for his third and fourth tours to Vung Tau (1967, 1968).

Next, Wally served at HMAS Penguin on the shores of Sydney Harbour, the Navy's main hospital base. There, working in the hospital kitchen, his skills were extended to the study of nutrition and the application of new research to treat hepatitis through diet. After four months he transferred in June 1968 to the HMAS *Supply*, an oil tanker, working in the officers' kitchen. Wally's career was looking good, although he was subjected to a certain level of harassment by the radio operator who would regularly play and dedicate a song to Wally – Tiny Tim's flamboyantly camp 'Tiptoe Through the Tulips'. When Wally found out about this, he let the radio operator know in no uncertain terms what he thought of this: 'fish wife language', he says, 'screaming like a banshee'. The entire ship got to hear the exchange when the radio operator left the microphone turned on. This, Wally says, is when it dawned on him that there were no secrets on the ship.

Wally's final posting (though he did not know that at the time) was to HMAS Watson in Sydney in 1969. Here he met a special friend, Robbie, but he also made an enemy. His connection to these two men was to result in a disastrous turn of events. The enemy was a cook who took an instant dislike to Wally. The man called Wally a 'poofter' and thumped him early on. Maybe the man disliked Wally because he was after a promotion and thought that standing up for the regulations would get him noticed.

One night Wally was working in the kitchen for a dinner for the chiefs, officers and staff. Robbie was assisting – bringing the goods and ingredients for Wally's cooking from the victualling (stores) office. While the diners were eating the main course, Wally went into the victualling office to see whether Robbie was getting ready for dessert. Robbie was on the phone but got Wally to sit on the bench and wait for him. As Wally admired the lovely night view over the Bay, 'He [Robbie] starts to undo my fly and play with me while he's on the phone.' What they neglected to notice was that the lights were on in the office, and outside on the bank all of the off-duty sailors who were sitting there had a perfect view through the window. Wally recollects, 'Then they sort of watched and watched and watched and watched, right to the very, very end. As we were sort of tidying up and getting ... then the phone rang again. It was somebody we both knew. "What? What?" ... Then we both sort of turned around and everyone ... "Ha, ha"'. Any number of people had seen Wally and Robbie engaging in sex.

Within a couple of days word had spread. Everywhere they went it was ‘Hi, Wally. Hi, Robbie.’ As Wally describes it: ‘And it was ... and it was ... [whistling]. We both thought, yes, that’s right. Everyone could see and everyone has told everyone’. It ~~seems~~ is striking that no one seemed particularly offended by all this – except Wally’s enemy. It seems that for the commander, having had Wally and Robbie’s behaviour reported to him by the man who disliked Wally, turning a blind eye was not an option. Wally and Robbie were now expecting to be court martialled.

The Navy’s regulations regarding homosexuality were unambiguous. In July 1966, a ‘Confidential Australian Navy Order’ had been circulated to captains and commanding officers throughout the Navy. There was no chance of anyone in authority being unaware of the rules. In 13 ½ pages, the document spelled out legal and medical approaches to the disciplining of ‘Unnatural Offences’. The intention, according to the document, was to ‘stamp out this evil. The Royal Australian Navy cannot afford, and does not want, to retain homosexuals in its ranks’. There were procedures supposedly to protect the rights of those accused (including restrictions on searching their kit, protection of doctor-patient confidentiality), and a detailed setting out of the kinds of offences that constituted unnatural immorality. Seven of these were also crimes in the civilian world, the eighth (disgraceful conduct of an indecent kind) being a purely military offence. While the document indicated that it was ‘most desirable as a rule’ that the matter be brought before a Naval Board, there remained the option that Commanding Officers might find it preferable to apply to have the offender discharged SNLR (Services No Longer Required).

This 1966 document was one of a series of orders that evolved over the period until 1974, as the Navy developed an explicit, coherent and consistent approach against homosexuality. In February 1969, a new order was issued on ‘Abnormal Sexual Behaviour’. Although it superseded the instructions of July 1966, it was much briefer – a mere three pages. The new order placed greater emphasis on the role of the psychiatrist, whose job it was to provide an opinion in cases where a serviceman (always presumed to be a man) had confessed to the offence of committing ‘unnatural acts’. The Commanding Officer would consider the psychiatrist’s report and referred through his Administrative Authority, recommending for Administrative Discharge SNLR or Administrative

Discharge UNSUITABLE. The key difference between the SNLR and the UNSUITABLE dismissals was whether an offence was known to have been committed (in which case SNLR) or merely suspected (UNSUITABLE).

It was under this latter set of procedures that Wally came to be dismissed. The visit to the Navy psychiatrist was a remarkable moment, indicative of the way in which the formal procedures and the dictates of what might be called common sense played out. The Commanding Officer was keen to avoid the court martial and was within his rights to do so. But the psychiatric consultation had a slightly farcical air to it. A friend cued up Wally for the interview, suggesting: “Well, what you have got to do is put ... go and get what’s her name to cut your hair and get your nails done”, because always he will ask about your personal grooming and he’ll [the psychiatrist] want to see your fingernails and these sorts of things’. That is exactly what Wally did: ‘I went and had a pedicure and clear nail polish.’ It worked a treat. This is the exchange in which Wally describes what happened next.

Interviewer: So you went to the psychiatrist?

Wally: Yeah, only for him to say, ‘Yeah, you’re gay, fuck off.’

Wally’s informant had told him that the psychiatrist was, himself, homosexual. Nonetheless, theirs was a ‘strictly professional’ encounter until ‘right at the end of it he did say to me, “Yes, you know, Flossie [someone they both knew]” ... “Yeah. Aren’t you...?” “Mm-hmm” – in a knowing purse-lipped camp kind of moue.

In later years, Wally was able to pass on his wisdom to others seeking to escape the services because they were gay or bisexual, or because they thought they could carry this off. Indeed, the whole purpose of meeting with the psychiatrist or, in some instances, other officers, was to determine the ‘confirmed homosexuals’, as opposed to those who either had just been experimenting with homosex or who were claiming to be gay to force a discharge. One of those Wally later tutored was his own brother. Oddly enough, a year or so after Wally’s discharge, the Draft Resisters Union in Australia were circulating a flyer called ‘How Not to Join the Army’. In it the authors urged those trying to avoid being conscripted to:

BE GAY: Play the homosexual bit ... Wear white slacks, have your hair cut rather camp, wear a charm. Visit a couple of camp pubs and study homosexuals. Learn the gestures, the wrist movements. And the delicate body movements, how to touch the fellow you're talking to suggestively, how to smoke a cigarette. Be a little pathetic, talk melodically, act embarrassed in front of the other inductees when you undress. Ask your girlfriend to show [you] how.

It concluded with the injunction 'don't overact'. In due course, on 3 October 1969, Wally's discharge papers were presented to him: services no longer required.

It is striking that, for many years, Wally's sexual escapades went unnoticed – or at least unchallenged. There must have been a certain amount of turning a blind eye to goings on that, in a stricter environment, might have met with disciplinary action. Oral history interviews with other Navy ex-servicemen who served in the late 1960s also report widespread knowledge about homosexual activity. They suggest that discretion was most important, and it was only those who flaunted their homosexual activities who challenged an unspoken code and faced disciplinary action. Wally had discovered after his verbal shredding of the radio operator on the *Supply* that 'there were no secrets on the ship'. He remembers an Army figure, a regimental sergeant major, who was a real screamer (a flamboyant homosexual) who was posted to the *Sydney* because all of the hierarchy knew he was 'a queen'. The thinking was that unlike a lot of Army men, the regimental sergeant major would get on well with the sailors.

Sometimes, there were near misses, where things got close but the offenders managed to wheedle their way out of trouble. One such episode happened at Leeuwin. Wally was lying on a bed in his dorm with two other sailors. He cannot remember if they had just done it or were about to, but it was pretty suspicious behaviour. Wally explained that he was teaching the younger men 'Cat's cradle', an old naval pastime played by making patterns with string on the fingers: "I was just showing the boys how do a cat's cradle, Sir." ... "Were you learning how to do cat's cradle?" "Yes, Sir." "Were you learning how to do—?" "Yes." As long as those under questioning held their nerve, there was not much investigators could turn up.

After the Watson incident, with his sexual behaviour now publicly known and with discharge looming, Wally needed to sort things out with his family. He knew he was not going back to Brisbane. Wally remarks, 'I certainly wasn't the same person I left as five years ago, needless to say, and I had to work and I had to go out.' Even so, Wally needed to talk to the family. He rang his father: "The shit's hit the fan down here." He said, "What happened?" I said, "A bloke went down on me while he was on the phone in front of a few hundred people." "Oh...". It got worse for a while, Wally says, but at least his father knew now, and when they talked again later, things had settled down. In fact, his father seems to have used his military background and his police connection to intervene and make sure there was no court martial. Wally reports that his father 'said to this young officer, "Look, Son, there will be no court martial, okay... This sort of happened and if we court martialled all of them there [in the Second World War] ... we would have lost"'. Wally wrote to his mother, but his father intercepted the letter and failed to pass it on. Wally also wrote to his girlfriend, Marilyn, who worked with his mother, and the news got to her.

Yes, all this time Wally still had a girlfriend in Brisbane. But he was becoming 'more and more gay and less and less bi and I hadn't had sex with [any other] woman for years'. The rupture with the Navy seems to have made up his mind. Marilyn visited Sydney over Easter 1969. Wally had been intending to ask her to marry him when she came down, but now he was clear that was not going to happen. They had ~~had~~ a nice weekend together, but the relationship was over. Today Wally regrets a little that he did not marry someone and have kids: 'because I do miss probably having children and a different sort of family than what I've got. I don't dwell on it. I thought, oh, that would have been nice at the time and some blokes that had kids and still went on and ... it makes no difference'. Asked what that might have meant for his homosexual sex life, he notes only that 'I don't know how that was going to work'.

As Wally has observed, he was not the person he had been five years before. He had seen parts of the world; he was a qualified chef and good at his job; he had developed a confidence in his own judgement. He would offer improvements on how things were done in the kitchens and they invariably worked out. He had an active sex life and an ever wider and more diverse circle of friends. Based in Sydney, at Garden Island, he was just

down the road from Kings Cross, then the throbbing heart of sin city: drugs, gambling, strip clubs, sly grogging, sex workers (female and male), night clubs and coffee shops, US servicemen on rest and relaxation from Vietnam, cops clutching brown paper bags full of cash. Kings Cross had it all, and among this nestled Sydney's camp world ('Camp' was the word almost universally used by homosexuals to describe themselves until 'gay' arrived from the United States in 1972). Wally participated in all of this even while he was still in the Navy, and he was not alone. The Navy authorities would warn their young charges against the temptations and threats of the flesh: 'Homosexuals were lurking at the gates, as it were, we would be warned about them...' Perhaps some were successfully warned off; Wally was not one of them.

The Rex Hotel – the downstairs bar especially – welcomed a camp clientele and offered safety, privacy and a chance for men and their friends to let their hair down. It also provided a place where sailors, short of cash, might get a feed, a few drinks and maybe a head job – with luck, even a taxi fare home. There were locals who were well known among 'straight' sailors for being obliging hosts or a good root. The roster system on the *Sydney* meant that Wally worked mornings and had the rest of the day off. He could get to the Cross during the day sometimes and see another side of the place. He discovered drag bars and local celebrities that he came to like. He says, 'There's real gay people doing theatre and magic and all those witty conversations and all that sort of stuff.'

After his discharge, Wally was well placed to tap into his network of friends to find work and rebuild his life. Through his friendships with the 'hustlers and bustlers', he got a job in the downstairs bar at the Chevron. When the barmaid did not report for work one day, he was put in charge. He had never poured a beer, but he worked it out. Then the keg ran dry – and he sorted out how to tap the next one. Luckily, he says, it was a Monday and most of the customers did not turn up until later in the morning. Wally is a man who could turn his hand to anything.

After a brief stint at Walton's department store in the kitchenware section, Wally landed a job – again through his camp friends – on the Southern Aurora, the train that ran

the overnight route between Sydney and Melbourne. The railways were filled with mutual connections which spilled over from work to living arrangements.✚

I knew all the queens that worked in the train catering service on the Southern Aurora particularly. There was other gays, cooks and stewards on there, and within the train catering service and particularly with the sleeping cars ... There was a lot of gay people ... Then I'd lived with ... in a lot of share houses with those same conductors and people ... in the Strathfield push, they were called in the days. I was living in Burwood, Strathfield with these people and working on the trains.

Working on the Southern Aurora, Wally soon joined the Railways Union, quickly becoming the union representative for the catering service workers and ending up as chairman of his branch. Later in life he returned to Mount Gravatt, to the very house he had grown up in where, starting in 1991, he produced a long-running *Queensland Pride* magazine out of his basement.

Wally lived through the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. Reflecting on the devastating effects of the epidemic, he remarks: 'I'm probably about the only one of a whole 30, 40, 50 sailors that I knew in Sydney that got out at the same time that ... The rest of them ... died some dreadful deaths in all sorts of ways'. While data does not exist ~~about~~ [the AIDS epidemic and Australia's ex-service community](#), it is known that AIDS hit American ex-servicemen, especially those from the Vietnam generation, quite hard. Randy Shilts even goes so far as to argue that by 1987, the biggest provider of AIDS care was the US Veterans' Administration with more than 1500 patients.³ We will never know how many Australian service people died in the AIDS epidemic and whether these men identified as gay, bisexual, or heterosexual but enjoyed having sex with men. The immense toll AIDS took on the gay community makes the voices of survivors such as Wally even more important to understand gay life before the 1980s in the services and civilian Australia.

While Wally's Navy service ended abruptly, the experiences and training it provided set him up in ways that his civilian education did not. It turned out that Wally had not lost his war service pension when he was discharged, despite this he is still working today. Among other interests, he is a travel writer – seeing the world just as he

had always intended. Almost 50 years later, those original motivations to join up continue to push Wally into new adventures.

¹ Rapke Report, Part 2, 6 May 1971, exhibit 40-0006 for Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

² Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Public Hearing - Case Study 40 (Day 197), 30 June 2016, 3.

³ Randy Shilts, *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays & Lesbians in the U.S. Military* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 575.