



MEDIA RELEASE

2025 ANI Vernon Parker Oration and McNeil Prize Winner

At the Australian Naval Institute's (ANI) Annual Dinner held in Canberra on 7 May 2025, the Chief of the Defence Force, Admiral David Johnston AC RAN delivered the 2025 Vernon Parker Oration on the theme of National Defence. First delivered in 1989, the annual Oration is named in honour of the first ANI President, the late Commodore Vernon Parker who formed the ANI in 1975. The Institute was particularly honoured that Admiral Johnston was the Vernon Parker Orator in the ANI's 50th anniversary year.

In a wide-ranging address, Admiral Johnston discussed the challenges facing Australia and the direction of Defence policy to meet these challenges. This includes programs to increase the lethality of the RAN, the increasing littoral capability of the Australian Army, the introduction of new missile systems and the challenges associated with sovereign supply of these weapons systems. He also briefly discussed the recent circumnavigation of Australia by the PRC Navy, advising that, despite public commentary to the contrary, the Australian Government was aware at all times of the location and activities of these ships, noting that there are significantly different responses between peacetime and wartime engagements, and that the Australian response was proportionate and appropriate.

At the dinner, Admiral Johnston announced the winner of the tenth ANI McNeil Prize as **Dr Robert Dane**, the founder and CEO of Ocius Technologies.

The McNeil Prize is awarded annually to an individual from Australian industry and academia who has made an outstanding contribution to the capabilities of the Royal Australian Navy. The 2025 Prize was sponsored by Synergy Group. The McNeil Prize is named in honour of Rear Admiral Percival McNeil CB RAN (1883-1951). He was one of the great champions of Australian shipbuilding. McNeil played a pivotal role in the design and construction of the famed Bathurst class corvettes as well as helping to maintain a local warship construction capability in the post-war period.

In 1996 Robert Dane's passion as a sailor and environmentalist led him to design and patent the 'solarsailor' prototype which won the Advanced Technology Boat Race in Canberra. In 1999 he started Solar sailor (renamed Ocius), to exploit solarsail technology. He then designed and built commercial ferries with boat builder Kanga Birtles, combining solar and diesel technologies that use half the fuel of similar ferries.

In 2007, Robert started designing Autonomous Uncrewed Surface Vessel that could go to sea for months, utilising wind, solar and wave energy while capable of carrying different payloads. Funding support to develop the *Bluebottle* has included \$3m from Defence Science & Technology Organisation to develop ASW USVs in 2015, and a Spitfire Memorial Defence Fellowship provided funding in 2017 to adapt the *Bluebottle* to carry a keel winch to house a Thales thin-line towed array sonar. Ocius *Bluebottles* have participated in Autonomous Warrior exercises each year since 2018 and in 2022 Ocius was awarded a RAN contract for five *Bluebottles* and extended in 2024 to 15 *Bluebottle* operations in 2025. Two have been leased to the RNZN and US company ThayerMahan has also procured six *Bluebottles* as well as teaming to integrate their 'Outpost' maritime monitoring system.



“Robert as the founder and CEO of Ocuis is a true innovator – he has dealt with initial scepticism, and now triumphant in providing the Navy with a world leading capability with many opportunities yet to be realised”, said Commodore Melinda Barnes, Vice President of the ANI. “He is a most worthy recipient of the 2025 McNeil Prize.

Two other presentations were made by Admiral Johnston at the ANI Annual Dinner:

- Dr Tom Lewis OAM received the award as the winner of the 2024 ANI Sam Bateman Book Prize for his book *The Sinking of HMAS Sydney*; and
- Vice Admiral Peter Jones AO DSC was awarded Honorary Life Membership of the ANI.

Peter became the ANI President in 2015 and was its longest-serving President at the time he stepped down from the position in 2024. Peter entered the Navy in 1974 as a cadet midshipman and joined the ANI on 27 October 1976 (one of only three junior officers at the time) and as such has been an ANI member for most of the Institute’s existence. He has served on the ANI council three times, including as the editor of the Journal of the Australian Naval Institute and as Vice President.

ANI President Commodore Pete Leavy said that under Peter’s watch, the ANI modernised and expanded its range of activities significantly including reinstituting publication of a contemporary journal, the *Australian Naval Review*, implementation of a very popular weekly e-newsletter.

In addition, Peter oversaw the introduction of new activities including the Sam Bateman Book Prize, the Saltwater Strategist Podcast and an annual series of themed dinners which bring together senior defence members, academics and ANI sponsors for a facilitated discussion on a current maritime theme over dinner”, Commodore Leavy said.

In closing remarks Commodore Leavy reminded the audience of the upcoming 50th Anniversary Cocktail Party on Wednesday 18 June 2025 to which all ANI Members are invited and the 2025 ANI Goldrick Seminar with the theme ‘*Action Stations: Australia’s Fighting Navy in 2030*’ to be held at the Hotel Realm in Canberra on 2 October 2025.

For further information, contact Sue Hart, ANI Business Manager on 0419 995 724.

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