

Field Operations afloat on the Spirit of Tasmania

Usually land-based officers from the ACMA's Field Operations Team took a break from their important duties in June to spend an afternoon discovering the extensive range of radiocommunications equipment on board the Spirit of Tasmania II. Here, the team reflects on what proved to be an insightful and interesting visit.

Our team inspected the Spirit of Tasmania II in June while it was docked at Station Pier in Port Melbourne. The visit provided an excellent opportunity for stakeholder engagement and gave us a chance to inspect and audit a broad range of radio communications equipment.

Operated by Tasmanian-based TT Line, the Spirit of Tasmania I and II are almost identical ships. They have a displacement of almost 30,000 tonnes and are nearly 200 metres in length. With a capacity for more than 1,000 passengers, they are some of the largest passenger-carrying vessels in Australia. Providing a vital transportation link between Tasmania and the mainland, the vessels cross Bass Strait daily in opposite directions and take around 10 hours to complete the 429-kilometre voyage from Melbourne to Devonport.

On arrival at Station Pier, we were warmly welcomed by TT Line's Safety Superintendent for Marine Operations, Agnel Caesar. We donned our brightly coloured safety vests and boarded the ship through the main vehicle carrying level, and then into the lift to take us up five levels to the bridge.

The bridge of the Spirit of Tasmania II is extremely spacious and is equipped with all the communications, navigation and electronic equipment that you would expect to see in a modern ocean-going vessel of its size. Satisfying all the requirements of the Global Marine Distress and Safety System (GMDSS), the Spirit has dual fixed VHF and HF marine transceivers, numerous portable VHF marine transceivers and search and rescue transponders (SARTS).

The vessel also participates in AUSREP, the Australian Ship Reporting System, which automatically reports the ship's position to the Australian Search and Rescue Coordination Centre (AusSAR) in Canberra using the Inmarsat C satellite communications system. This system assists the Australian Maritime Safety Authority to divert the closest resources to anyone in need during an emergency.

During our visit, Mr Caesar explained that the Spirit of Tasmania had assisted in responding to distress calls on several occasions over the years. Both ships participate in search and rescue exercises with police and other emergency services. VHF aeronautical band radios in the bridge assist with the coordination of aviation and maritime assets during an emergency.



TT line's Safety Superintendent for Marine Operations, Agnel Caesar, talking to, from left to right, Joe Abiad, Bruce Williams and John Rickard.

Many years ago, vessels of this size had a dedicated radio officer. With the advent of GMDSS at the end of the last century, keeping a watch on the variety of emergency radio channels is now mainly achieved automatically. The ship's officers are now responsible for the operation of marine radio equipment.

After visiting the bridge, we went out on the deck to identify the large array of antennas. HF, VHF, marine and aeronautical bands, UHF land mobile, Inmarsat, radar, GPS, television, 3G—the Spirit of Tasmania has the lot.

In addition to this comprehensive array of radio communications equipment, the ship is also equipped with two onboard UHF land mobile repeaters. This allows for reliable communications between the 70-odd crew members, no matter where they are stationed on the vessel. The travelling passengers are also catered for, with onboard cell extenders providing ATM and EFTPOS access as well as 3G high-speed internet and mobile phone coverage.

Our visit culminated in a climb down stairs and passageways deep into the bowels of the Spirit to arrive at its heart, the engine room. This is home to four turbo-charged diesel engines, each delivering 10,560 kilowatts of power, pushing the ship along at an average speed of 27 knots. It was certainly an impressive end to our comprehensive inspection of the Spirit of Tasmania.

The visit gave field officers a greater understanding and appreciation of the complex communications systems on board large vessels. It also helped to educate TT Line staff about the role of ACMA officers in compliance activities. ☎



The Field Operations Team discussing the various antennas aboard the Spirit of Tasmania II.



ACMA staff in the Spirit of Tasmania's engine control room.



At Station Pier in Port Melbourne, preparing to board the ship.