

Painting commemorates Customs first sea chase

When retired senior Customs officer Col Vassarotti read about the Customs hot pursuit of a suspect illegal fishing vessel, *Viarsa*, in the Southern Ocean in 2003, it reminded him of possibly the first Customs sea-going chase. This concerned a Customs cutter, *Flying Cloud*, which pursued several Macassan fishing boats in north Australian waters back in the late 19th century.

When Col was Collector of Customs (now called Regional Director) for the Northern Territory in 1972/73, he commissioned a painting of the *Flying Cloud* because the story of its illustrious endeavour intrigued him. The story is told in detail by historian David Day in his book, *Smugglers and Sailors, The Customs History of Australia 1788-1901*. Here is an extract from the book:

For perhaps hundreds of years, fishermen from the island of Macassar had sailed their praus south to Australia's northern shores to collect the highly sought beche-de-mer which was traded all the way to China as an aphrodisiac.

In March 1883, Alfred Searcy (newly appointed Port Darwin Customs officer) embarked in the government cutter, *Flying Cloud*, with Customs flag and pendant flying, to warn the Macassans as the season drew to a close that in future they would have to pay Customs duties on their stores of rice and spirits and also pay an annual licence fee for the privilege of fishing in Northern Territory waters.

He was accompanied by Edward Robinson as acting landing waiter and Paul Foelsche, police inspector and amateur photographer, of Palmerston. Their show of force was as much an assertion of sovereignty as it was an attempt to raise revenue. It brought a swift response from the Dutch Consul in Adelaide who protested on behalf of the Macassans about being taxed 'upon a trade that was in existence long before the settlement of the Australian colonies'.

With the opening of the following season in November 1883, Searcy Robinson and another officer, H. Pinder, again set off in the *Flying Cloud*, this time to enforce the Customs law on the Macassans. Coming across three of the Macassan vessels anchored in the Bowen Straits, a resplendent Searcy in his South Australian Customs uniform boarded the vessels to

collect the licence fee and calculate the duty payable on the ships' stores. If the South Australian uniform did not impress the Macassans with his authority, Searcy had more effective means in a polished leather holster strapped to his leg.

As Searcy continued to calculate the duty owing, one of the vessels began to make away. Searcy's reaction was immediate, 'pointing out, as well we were able, that we had not come there solely for the purpose of looking at his ugly phiz, and that before departing he must pay cash up'. When the Macassans continued with their preparations to hoist sail, Searcy and his two companions left no room for misunderstanding when they jumped on board and presented their revolvers at them. Searcy's bravado won the day but it was not without considerable risks. Not only were he and his companions outnumbered by the Macassans who were armed with knives and spears but the crew of the *Flying Cloud* could not necessarily be counted upon for assistance, being mainly Malay.

Smugglers and Sailors, The Customs History of Australia 1788-1901, by David Day, was published by the Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, in 1992.



Col Vassarotti with his painting of *Flying Cloud*