

A decade of offshore maritime patrol and response



On 14 September 2000, as millions were watching the Sydney Olympics opening ceremony, Customs officer John Casley died on board the Australian Customs Vessel (ACV) *Corio Bay* off the NSW coast. John, a former marine officer, was on the *Corio Bay* as a volunteer to lend a hand with operations in support of the Olympics. The Casley family has since established an annual award in John's honour, presented to a member of the Marine Unit who best exemplifies the qualities that John Casley stood for during his time with Customs.

Over the past 10 years, the Customs National Marine Unit has evolved into a major player in the field of blue water maritime border protection. The original fleet of sheltered waters vessels and inshore and offshore patrol vessels, managed separately by regional staff, has been rationalised, centralised, enlarged and upgraded. Crews and vessels have been armed, the Unit has been given a wider role including international patrols and training has been upgraded. Significant acts of bravery have been recognised. This article traces the history of the Unit.

The concept

A centralised Customs marine unit was first raised in 1994 when the Report of the Review into the Australian Customs Service made recommendations relating to the future management of the Customs seagoing fleet.

The Government directed that a review of Customs marine functions be conducted by an interdepartmental committee, convened by Customs. (The convenor, Brian Hurrell, later took over management responsibility for maritime operations as National Manager Enforcement Operations.)

To ensure full and effective utilisation of the seagoing fleet, the committee recommended, *inter alia*, that management of the fleet be centred in Canberra. The Minister for Small Business, Customs and Construction approved these recommendations on 17 February 1995.

A meeting of regional and central office marine managers was convened in Canberra where it was agreed that new operating arrangements would take effect from July 1995. Thereafter, seagoing vessels were funded and allocated tasks by a central coordinating body, known as the National Marine Unit.

The start

In December 1995, the Unit's Central Office structure was established with the creation of eight positions split into two functional areas: Marine Operations and Marine Resources.

Marine Operations was responsible for client liaison (ie, other agencies such as Immigration, Quarantine and Fisheries), tasking and deployment of the seagoing fleet. Marine Resources was responsible for crew training,

competency assessment and acquisition and maintenance of the seagoing fleet.

Regional Marine Officers from across Australia were invited in December 1995 to briefings on the new structure of maritime operations. All officers were offered positions in the new unit.

In January 1996, Regional Officers who elected to join the Unit's seagoing fleet became outposted Central Office staff under new conditions of service specific to their functions, negotiated by Customs with crew and the staff association.

At this time, the Customs seagoing fleet comprised four 20m Minister-class vessels - *Charles Kingston*, *Andrew Fisher*, *Sir Austin Chapman* and *Sir William Lyne* - plus the 22m *Delphinus* (formerly a Victorian Fisheries patrol vessel).

Responsibility for maintaining these vessels fell to the Marine Resources Manager, John Simmons, Customs principal adviser on all marine technical matters. He had played a major role in the design of the Minister-class vessels.

To assist the Marine Resources Section in developing standard operating procedures and technical policy, the Unit cycled a number of commanding officers through Central Office.

First expansion

In August 1996, Customs acquired patrol vessel *Wauri* from the Australian Fisheries Management Authority. *Wauri* was based at Thursday Island and conducted most of her patrols in the Torres Strait in support of Australian Fisheries Management Authority tasks.

John Simmons retired in 1997 after 22 years of service. Greg Hellesey joined the Unit in November 1997 as Director Engineering.

While initially responsible for the overseeing and conduct of preventive and breakdown maintenance of the Minister-class fleet, Greg Hellesey's section would, in time, expand to incorporate responsibility for the development of technical policy and standards, contract management, infrastructure development and support, particularly in regard to the replacement fleet.

Drug taskings

Throughout 1998-99, Customs was involved in joint-agency drug operations on the East Coast with Minister-class



ACV *Botany Bay* boarding foreign fishing vessels in northern Australia.

vessels playing major roles. Despite considerable operational shortcomings (mainly because these vessels were built for offshore work in limited circumstances), seagoing crew got the best from these hulls and achieved successes.

Of particular note were the efforts of seagoing crew in *Delphinus* and *Sir William Lyne* when apprehending a mothership, MV *Uniana*, off Grants Beach, near Port Macquarie, in October 1998. The *Uniana* had been fitted with a fast speedboat hidden from aerial view. The speedboat was launched in the early hours from 24 nautical miles offshore. When it finally reached the beach in rough sea conditions, it was met by police who seized 400kg of heroin.

While awaiting the return of the speedboat, *Uniana* strayed into Australian territorial waters. The commanding officer on *Sir William Lyne* instructed the master of the *Uniana* to stop. Boarded and secured by a police tactical response team, *Uniana* was escorted to Sydney by both Customs vessels.

Two months later, *Wauri* and *Sir William Lyne* were tasked to engage in another drug operation. This time a foreign yacht was reportedly heading to Coffs Harbour with drugs concealed on board. The *Maeve Chique* was seized when a search in port found 225kg of cocaine concealed in her tender.

Anti-people smuggling

A trend developing in the late 1990s was the use of steel-hulled vessels to smuggle people to Australia's east coast.

Once again Customs vessels filled an important interdiction role. In May 1999, *Delphinus* assisted in the escort of *Kayuén* after it was intercepted off Wollongong with suspected unlawful non-citizens (SUNCS) on board.

Then, on 4 June 1999, *Ji Chong Lee*, after being detected by authorities transporting a large number of SUNCS, was intercepted by *Delphinus* off Broken Bay, NSW.

International cooperation

In November 1997, the Government announced a National Illicit Drug Strategy, which included measures aimed at improving Australia's law-enforcement capacity in the Torres Strait. This included instituting joint border patrols with Papua New Guinea.

The first 10-day patrol was conducted in 1998. *Wauri* transported representatives from Customs, the Australian Federal Police, the Queensland Police, the PNG Internal Revenue Service and the Royal PNG Constabulary to coastal villages in PNG's Western Province Region and to island communities on the Australian side of the border in the Torres Strait.

In May 2000, *Wauri* was redeployed from the Torres Strait to Ashmore Islands to protect the environmental integrity of the Marine Nature Reserve from illegal fishing activity. *Delphinus* then replaced *Wauri* as the primary response platform in North Queensland.

While operating at Ashmore Islands, *Wauri's* crew played a significant role in border protection by responding to unauthorised boat arrivals.

Between July 2000 and December 2001 about 36 suspect illegal entry vessels were boarded near Ashmore Islands.

In August 2005, Singapore hosted a proliferation security initiative exercise known as Exercise Deep Sabre. It involved maritime law-enforcement agencies from various countries including the Singapore Navy, the Royal Navy, the US Navy, the US Coast Guard, the New Zealand Air Force and the Japanese Coastguard.

Customs participation in this exercise included a return passage from Darwin to Singapore, via Benoa, of more than 4000 nautical miles.

The upgrade

During the 1990s, it became increasingly evident that the now ageing fleet of Minister-class vessels was not going to be able to cope with the expanding roles of Customs in support of facilitation of trade, movement of people and compliance with Australian laws in our offshore areas of jurisdictional responsibility.

The fleet needed to conduct complex maritime operations out to, and sometimes beyond, the 200-nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around Australia's 36,000km of mainland coastline and some offshore territories.

In early 1997, funding for such a replacement fleet was approved and went out to tender in September. Tenders closed in November.

In 1999 the arrival of the first of the new fleet of Customs vessels was heralded. ACV *Roebuck Bay* was the first of the new fleet of eight Bay-class vessels accepted into service. Later that year, ACV *Botany Bay* and ACV *Holdfast Bay* were commissioned.

In mid-1999, Customs created a new position with responsibility for the overall effective administration and operation of the National Marine Unit. Keith Johnson, a former Royal Australian Navy captain, joined Customs as Marine Superintendent.

Two further Bay-class ACVs were commissioned in March 2000 - *Hervey Bay* and *Corio Bay*.

Crew strength increased, as did Central Office numbers, organised into three sections: Operations, Engineering and the Marine Standards Section.

While Australia was winning Olympic gold in Sydney, MV *Samson Explorer* entered service with Customs on a two-year contract to transport suspected unlawful non-citizens from a point of interception - usually Ashmore Islands - to the Australian mainland.

Shortly after entering service, responsibility for managing all aspects of *Samson Explorer's* tenure with Customs, including the provision of onboard security officers, was passed to the Marine Unit.

ACV *Storm Bay* was commissioned in November 2000 and ACV *Dame Roma Mitchell* in December 2000.

In a first, *Storm Bay* made passage to New Zealand in February 2001. During its four-week deployment, *Storm*

Bay circumnavigated both islands of New Zealand. And, despite experiencing uncomfortable sea conditions, completed a number of wildlife conservation and fisheries tasks in support of New Zealand's law-enforcement agencies.

Although entering service in September 2000, the last Bay-class vessel, *Arnhem Bay*, was not commissioned until March 2001. It marked the end of a 37-month project from inception of the Bay-class fleet to the last hull formally entering service.

Around this time, marine engineering staff were being kept busy coordinating the construction of a dedicated and purpose-built wharf at Neutral Bay, Sydney, as well as negotiating berthing agreements at Cairns and Melbourne.

Now the Unit needed sufficient crew to operate each of the eight vessels for about 150 sea days a year or 1200 sea days a year for the entire fleet - not full capacity, but requirement at that time.

The Unit's seagoing strength reached a level of 90 by mid-2001.

The ACV replacement project informed the Navy's Armidale-class patrol boat project. Unit officers helped the Navy avoid some significant potential pitfalls with the implementation of its project.

MV *Tampa*, with people rescued from the sea onboard, arrived off Christmas Island in August 2001.

Although ACVs were not involved in the *Tampa* incident, it did have a significant flow-on effect for the Unit. Soon after, Customs received additional budget funding and additional seagoing crew were recruited.

The growth responsibilities associated with managing this many crew warranted the establishment of a fourth section. The Marine Crew Operations Section was established in March 2002.

The increased capability at sea resulting from the arming of the fleet meant yet another increase in seagoing crew numbers. The most recent intake of Unit recruits began their training at Canberra in early 2006.

Use-of-force

In 1999, after a review of risks associated with conducting constabulary operations far offshore, Customs introduced use-of-force training for all seagoing crew.

The first contingent began a six-week course with the AFP

in Canberra in January 2000. All seagoing officers would now carry firearms and associated accoutrements for personal protection and for the protection of others facing an immediate threat of violence.

With a need to use force becoming more commonplace when attempting to board vessels at sea, in mid-2005 the Government approved additional expenditure to enable Customs to fit deck-mounted weapons on its Bay-class fleet.

The 7.62mm FN Herstal MAG 58 general support machine-gun was settled on. *Corio Bay* was the first to be fitted in July 2005, the remaining vessels fitted by December. During this period, all seagoing crew were trained in the operation of this weapon system.

Professionalism and bravery

The Unit's history is steeped in examples of officers demonstrating professionalism, commitment and bravery. Nothing illustrates this more notably than the efforts of nine crew onboard *Arnhem Bay* during a safety of life at sea incident, involving a vessel in distress near Ashmore Islands.

Late in the afternoon on 8 November 2001, *Arnhem Bay* assisted in the recovery of more than 160 people from a blazing Indonesian fishing vessel. Crew from the ACV, using the vessel's tenders, recovered most of the people from the sea.

This rescue included taking a 10-day old baby directly from the burning vessel and one seagoing crewmember leaving the safety of his own tender to rescue a small child from the sea. These were among a number of selfless acts performed by Customs officers in extreme circumstances.

Arnhem Bay's crew members demonstrated the highest degree of tenacity, compassion, seamanship and devotion to the task at hand. Courage and professionalism earned them a commendation from the Deputy Chief Executive Officer in 2002. The following year crew efforts were further acknowledged when they were presented with the Chief Executive Officer's award.

Southern Oceans spinoff

In March 2003, at the direction of the Government, the Unit trained and deployed an armed boarding party as part of the first Customs-led armed Southern Ocean patrol on MV *Aurora Australis*.

This operation was the precursor to the establishment of the Southern Oceans Marine Patrol and Response Unit, which now operates patrol vessel *Oceanic Viking*.

The record

In just over 10 years, the Unit has conducted strategic and tactical maritime response tasks for 27 Commonwealth and State government client agencies. In the process ACVs have:

- boarded over 2040 foreign fishing vessels
- conducted more than 330 legislative forfeitures where gear and catch have been removed and forfeited under fisheries legislation
- apprehended some 400 vessels detected operating illegally inside the AEEZ
- detained about 57 suspect illegal entrant vessels
- played major roles in several multi-agency drug operations
- boarded and/or identified over 1751 other vessels, including merchant vessels, yachts and recreational smallcraft of interest to Australian law-enforcement agencies
- transported and accommodated over 1000 passengers on overnight voyages
- hosted in excess of 10,000 visitors during vessel open days, promoting Customs community participation program, Hotline.

The future

With such a huge coastline and vast Exclusive Economic Zone, Australia faces an increasingly daunting challenge in protecting and policing our borders and undersea resources.

Customs, as an agency responsible for managing the security and integrity of Australia's borders, will continue to require a seagoing fleet capable of undertaking law-enforcement responsibilities in a maritime environment.

Customs is now planning the capabilities for a replacement fleet to meet the challenges of the future - the ever-changing demands needed to protect and police our borders and undersea resources as well as emergent sovereignty and border protection threats.



ACV *Arnhem Bay* intercepting foreign fishing vessel north of Wessel Islands.