

# CORRECTED VERSION

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND OUTER SUBURBAN/INTERFACE SERVICES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Marine Rescue Services in Victoria

Lakes Entrance — 8 April 2014

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#### Witness

Australian Volunteer Coast Guard

Mr Harry Ferrier, Flotilla Commander, VF21 Marlo

**The CHAIR** — This committee is an all-party parliamentary committee hearing evidence today in the inquiry into marine rescue services in Victoria. Welcome to the hearing of the Economic Development, Infrastructure and Outer Suburban/Interface Services Committee into marine rescue services in Victoria. All evidence given today is protected by parliamentary privilege, but any comments you make outside this hearing do not have the same privilege afforded to them. I ask you to state your full name and address and whether or not you are appearing on behalf of an organisation.

**Mr FERRIER** — My name is Harry Ferrier, residing at [REDACTED]. I am currently the commander of Marlo Coast Guard, flotilla 21, which I will be speaking about somewhat, being a volunteer member of the Marlo Coast Guard. But outside of that, being a fisherman for a large number of years right along the coast of Victoria, I think it is a good opportunity for me to speak perhaps for different areas, if we could do that.

**The CHAIR** — Sure. The evidence you give today will be taken down and become part of a public document. I invite you now to provide your verbal submission.

**Mr FERRIER** — My verbal submission, yes. I am fairly new at this caper, bear in mind, please. Marlo has undergone a lot of changes in regard to rescuing over the period of time. First-off it was Marlo Ocean Rescue, and it was that for a large number of years. It was formed back in the early 1970s. I think it was back in the 1990s that it came under the Coast Guard banner, which was a transition that many of my members felt was not the best way to go. But, as we have learned, it is the only way to go, because they have got more equipment, along with better infrastructure, than what we currently had.

Marlo has a population of about 480 people, and it grows in the summer months to about 5000 or 6000. A large number of the people bring boats into the area. Back then they felt the need for a volunteer rescue group, which started off as the Marlo Ocean Rescue. For a large number of years they housed the rescue boat and vehicles and other equipment in a small tin shed which was built with the help of the Orbest Secondary College woodworking department. That was until recent times — last year actually, when it all came to fruition in a joint venture with the Coast Guard and the CFA for the coastal brigade, bearing in mind now that the CFA are governed to fight fires on the water within 2 nautical miles to seaward. They have amalgamated right along the flotillas with the CFA banner.

It was during this period of transition that they were looking at getting a new building built at Marlo, and the powers that be felt that they would go ahead and get two buildings housing the two rescue groups — the CFA as well as the coastal brigade. It is a very unique facility. The CFA are on one side and the Coast Guard are on the other, and we facilitate between the two areas. The land was CFA and Coast Guard or ocean rescue property and large enough to put in a new meeting room, kitchen and turnout areas for both.

We do about 10 or 12 rescues a year on average, ranging from people who have lost their boats to vessels that have run out of fuel and require towing and other things. Most of our callouts come from the Victorian water police. They cover us very well and vice versa, if there is a need. Where they feel it is an urgent callout and we are in a position to assist, we will get our crew rallied together and we will go with whatever equipment is required, bearing in mind that the water police in East Gippsland are at least 2 hours car travel from where we are, or in the boat, depending on weather conditions, it could take them 3 or 4 hours to get there.

You have just seen today, ladies and gentlemen, the beautiful big yellow boat out the front. As flotilla commander, I am very honoured that the government has supported us to the extent of stepping out of the square. I say this literally, because with rescue vessels they seem to have this method of supplying a vessel that may suit different areas but 80 per cent of the time may not suit the appropriate areas. Marlo was in a bit of financial trouble as an ocean rescue organisation. When they came under the Coast Guard banner they were in debt to the tune of nearly \$25 000.

Through a lot of community fundraising and various means of getting ourselves out into the black, Marlo was in a position where it was stated by the Coast Guard fraternity — the hierarchies as I call them: Mr Ray Campbell, Alex Fowler, Wyn Bloomer and Alan Hopkins — that in a short space of time Marlo would be up for a new vessel, which has been an exciting transition. We chose a local vessel to be built locally at Mallacoota, which is up the coast about 80 nautical miles from where Marlo is, and it is in its final stages before we take delivery in about two weeks time.

The new vessel, I feel, along with others too, will take search and rescue in our area into the next 30 years with ease, if there is the manpower and ladypower around to continue with volunteer organisations. This, as I have learnt in a short space of time, is very difficult to address. With people's commitments — with life in general and family commitments — it is very tiresome and very hard to get a group of people who are prepared to come in and give their time for training and things like this. I feel that in any organisation if there is no position available for people to be trained in the young vintage, it is falling backwards in regards to manning vessels, whether it be on the shore or anywhere, for search and rescue, whether it be a volunteer organisation or not.

As was highlighted to me by some people further up the chain of events, we are an ageing population in the rescue industry, and who will pick up the slack, so to speak? Currently in our flotilla we have about 30 members, and of the 30 members probably 4 or 5 are dedicated to the organisation — on days like today we come and do various things. Others are just sleeping in the bush, so to speak, but if they are called upon, they will come and rally around.

We do a lot of fundraising around the local area, at raffles and so forth up the streets. We apply for different grants when they become available. In the last 10 years more grants have become available for different things, as you are aware, which is great and I hope continues to be the case and is ongoing.

We are classed at Marlo as a wet flotilla. In the last 18 months the Coast Guard in particular have selected the ports of Marlo and Lakes Entrance as places where the crew on the vessels and jet skis and rubber duckies have to wear full wetsuits, helmets and protective equipment, over and above their lifesaving life jacket. To me, this is a wonderful thing that has come out. No. 1, I hate getting wet and try to keep as dry as possible, but also, as you are aware, the weather can change very quickly.

In the last 30 or 40 years there has been the transition along the coastline right across Australia, and around the world for that matter, with the extinguishment of the light stations not being manned to the extent that they once were. There has been a big burden on the community. On the news the other evening, on *60 Minutes*, we saw how the drug cartels are bringing yachts right into Sydney harbour and things like this. I think it is like anything; if there are not the eyes around to see what is going on, no-one takes any interest. They have gone to automation and all the rest of it — wonderful attributes — but that equipment that was put there decades or centuries ago, surely they should look at reinstating some of them along the coast.

Communications with the maritime industry, the small fleet in particular, has changed immensely in the last 20 years, with the closing down of radio shore stations such as Adelaide, Perth, Melbourne Radio at Cape Schanck, which was manned 24/7 at a great expense to the taxpayer and so forth. During that transition vessels that got into distress were finding it difficult to communicate with rescue parties. We are all blessed that we go to sea now with a phone box in the boat. As soon as the mobile phone rings, 'Hello! We've got someone outside', and it could be anywhere — totally unheard of years ago. I think that really needs to be addressed.

**The CHAIR** — What needs to be addressed?

**Mr FERRIER** — The communication between vessels at sea, whether they are in distress or whether they are not, transitioning between interstate traffic so to speak. In New South Wales they have got this Ctrack, or things like that, where you call in to the various ports along the coast. The Coast Guard offers that facility once you enter Victoria, but a lot of the yachtsmen and people who are traversing between different states forget to log off. On a couple of occasions they have sent out rescue parties looking for the vessel and it has been tied up at Port Lincoln. It has travelled all through Victoria and no-one knew that it had gone into South Australia.

**Mr RONALDS** — So the system exists, but you are saying it is not utilised as much as it should be. Is that what you are saying, Harry?

**Mr FERRIER** — It is not highlighted to the boating fraternity how important it is. In the last 20 years we have preached to everyone, 'Wear a lifejacket', which is a good idea — do not get me wrong here. But over and above that, communications between those at sea and those on the land have fallen away immensely.

**Mr RONALDS** — So you are suggesting more communication about what is available in terms of that sort of land-sea communication?

**Mr FERRIER** — That is right, as well as educating the general public, because I think what I have learnt in particular in my area — and I have not been a commander for very long at Marlo — is that the general public seem to get frightened when you ring 000. I try to emphasise to various public people, anyone in the public generally, that it is not an embarrassment to ring 000. I, for one, would ring 000 if I got my knickers in a knot at sea, for the simple reason — —

**The CHAIR** — I think there has been some confusion with 000, because certainly when I was growing up 000 was absolutely only for emergencies. In fact you would be prosecuted if you used it for anything other than that, but it has changed dramatically since then. Now if you are going to report anything to the police, it is mandatory to go through 000 so they can get the statistics.

**Mr FERRIER** — That is exactly right.

**The CHAIR** — But that has not necessarily been communicated very well to the general public.

**Mr FERRIER** — No, it has not. Lots of times we have had call-outs where it has been word of mouth — they rang their mate, and their mate has rung the commander; it happens right throughout the flotillas. Do not get me wrong here — we are not special in any way, shape or form — but why do they not ring the appropriate channels to get the wheels in motion? It brings us back to base camp again on that one, sir, because when they do ring, the people who take the message — whether they be at Williamstown, Ballarat or wherever — do not know where we are for a start.

**The CHAIR** — I want to clarify something you said before. With the Ctrack program, you said they were logged on in New South Wales?

**Mr FERRIER** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — Is there a demarcation between being logged on in New South Wales Ctrack and being logged on in Victoria Ctrack?

**Mr FERRIER** — No. I think it is back to the people on the vessels who are getting confused. They think that they log in, say, at Ulladulla or wherever the case may be further up the coast, and they think that they are going to liaise — this is my opinion anyway, for what it is worth — further down the coast, like Paynesville. Even at Marlo we often get a call to say, ‘Can you check if this yacht has gone past?’. We have no idea — no idea at all. You could ring the Point Hicks lighthouse where there is a caretaker and he would not care less whether a yacht has gone past. To me, that is a big failure to be involved with an organisation in which we like to be seen to professional. That vessel shows up in Port Lincoln two or three weeks later and everyone in the paper trail, or the electronic method, gets jumbled up to think, ‘Hang on a minute! That boat’s last port was Eden, where it was noted — —

**Mr RONALDS** — But there has been no follow-on?

**Mr FERRIER** — There has been no follow-on, but if you log on up the coast — you pick up a yacht, say, at Bermagui, tell the people at Bermagui that you are traversing to Melbourne, you have got Eden to go past for a start, you have got Lakes Entrance and Paynesville, which do a good job — do not get me wrong here — and then you go into Port Phillip Bay and there are all the other flotillas there that get involved with it. People seem to get the impression that once you log on — —

If I just say to you, sir, that I am in Marlo now and I am going to Lakes Entrance in 20 minutes, and 20 minutes later you ring me and I am not there for whatever reason, that is where I think the system has failed in regard to that kind of a method. Years ago, with the coast radio stations — and it revolves around the fishing industry, too — the ports that had a fishing fleet, which are dwindling rapidly, had their own shore base stations, and throughout the course of the day, if you did not get your home base station you would get someone else further up the coast, and they would know if you had a problem or a dilemma. That has gone, been shelved, because of modern technology with transmitting messages — that is, mobile phones and stuff like that. To me, communications between people on the water — not the ships, but the smaller vessels — and the shore base areas is a long way down the scope than what it was 30 years ago.

Further up the coast, around Mallacoota, the government is putting in a lot of construction up there at Bastion Point. You may be aware of that. It has been under the microscope for 30 or 40 years. Unfortunately there have been a lot of deaths take place through the apathy of the general public, and probably ministers, prior to the ones who have taken the big bold step of getting an excavator on the shoreline to put in a breakwater or a seawall to build the ocean access ramp – which is what we deal with at Cape Conran – to launch a small vessel. They cannot be very big vessels for a start because you are in between a couple of big rocks and there are not many navigational aids there at all. If you blow it, you blow it big time. You will sink the boat and run it up on the rocks — very embarrassing. The government has taken over the role there now at Bastion Point and got rid of the protesters and started to put in the rocks — a great thing, trust me. I will be the first one down there to congratulate the chappie that cuts the ribbon.

Unfortunately at Mallacoota it is a vast waterway, very similar to this area, and current Coast Guards down there have three personnel on the books that I am aware of. They have a radio operator and a gentleman has recently just come on board with a coxswain certificate. They have no vessels to go out in, bar their own private vessels, in the event of someone getting into turmoil down there. It happened just after January this year when we had a call from the water police in Melbourne, Marlo was closest Coast Guard, and we were summoned to go there. It is a 2.5 hour drive, let alone taking in the traffic. I said to the gentleman on the other end of the phone, ‘Sir, they might be drowned by the time I get there, but leave it with me. I will ring a couple of my abalone mates’, and the chappie that built the new rescue boat actually went out and assisted the people who were in the water. One had passed away and two were rescued with a bit of hypothermia and shock.

It is all very well for me to sit here and preach to you guys, but I am in a pretty good position. We have got a new vessel, we have got a new shed and we have got a fairly well-trained crew, but further up the coast, 80 miles up the coast, they have got virtually nothing. I think that any organisation should look into that closely to say, ‘Can we assist in a better way?’. The water police have just got their new vessel down the coast here, down the track, which is very impressive; and obviously you have had a look at that.

**The CHAIR** — Yes.

**Mr RONALDS** — Very impressive.

**Mr FERRIER** — It is very impressive. Again, it has been a long while in the pipeline with the water police gentlemen down there at Paynesville. It is a very exciting time for them with the new vessel. She was summoned to go to sea the other night, up south-east of Mallacoota. Those are all things that are positive steps forward, but again, they can all come undone if you have not got the personnel to run them and the understanding of financing those ventures.

The Coast Guard, however, is a volunteer organisation. I think they should, somewhere along the line in the budget, in a government funding perhaps over and above the grant system — they are applying for a grant, as we did, to obtain some funding for the new vessel — it should be very similar to the CFA or SES or something like that, and be recognised within the government paper trail that, sure, they are volunteers, but they do have some expertise in the ranks.

**The CHAIR** — What are you suggesting with that?

**Mr FERRIER** — This is my opinion for what it is worth. In a small country town such as Marlo, and with an ageing population of volunteers — that is where I am drawing my figures from — who in the ranks are in the realms of possibility to fill the boots? That is throughout the whole organisation, both in the CFA, I guess, and also in SES with the changes to OH&S and with public liability things — it has put a lot of us in the corner where unless you are prepared to take a gamble and think, ‘Okay, there are three or four people who may be good enough, suitable enough in five years time to train them up’. The young ones in particular, because they do not seem to have any fear. Us, as we get older, seem to have a little bit more fear. I know I do. So I think that should really be looked at in regard to any rescue organisation.

**The CHAIR** — Just to clarify, are you suggesting that more funds should be invested in bringing new people into the system?

**Mr FERRIER** — Yes, as well as equipment for those people to use. As we know, technology has come a long way. That vessel you saw out the front today has got radar. I know for a fact that 80 per cent of my

members have never even looked at radar and they have no idea about it. There is ongoing training in that sense. They will feel over their heads when they turn it on and look at it, but, as many of us know, with modern navigation systems, radar is virtually foolproof.

To train up the old ones, one would like to think — and I am an advocate for this because I learnt the trade as a young boy in my family as a commercial fisherman and boat builder, at a very young age, and it has held me in good stead today — when you get to the point of trying to fill the shoes of volunteers or people who you can call on throughout the stormy night or whatever the case may be, it gets rather difficult to do.

You get a call from water police, you have got the rig and you need a minimum manning of three or four with the tickets. The gentleman at the lakes spoke about the dilemma we have got with qualifications in the channels, and it is just horrifying, it really is; it is unbelievable. I and my flotilla squadron leader, Chris Newman, are commercial operators but it is not recognised; it is the opposite. If we do not do the Coast Guard modules, we are shunned. Perhaps not shunned, but it makes one very sceptical about whether to become a volunteer in an organisation where they need ticketed personnel but the tickets that you might have do not relate further up the track in the paper trail.

In the transition between the states, where it is going national with Canberra, it is going to be interesting to see how that pans out in that regard and the likes of small boat operating licences and PWCs. In the last 18 months there have been several incidents where people have lost their lives on these things through poor operation or whatever the case may be, or just being too powerful. I think that needs to be examined further down the track.

**The CHAIR** — Do you mean licensing?

**Mr FERRIER** — Yes, licensing.

**Mr RONALDS** — In particular PWCs?

**Mr FERRIER** — Those vessels in particular, yes. I had never been on one until I joined the Coast Guard and we have got one at Marlo. We are one of two flotillas that have them, and one is at Lakes Entrance. You are right on the water, let me tell you. You are sitting right on the water and you are going along at, say, 40 or 50 kilometres an hour and things happen very quickly.

**The CHAIR** — They are very powerful.

**Mr FERRIER** — They are; they are good rescue tools, they are good for the surfies pulling the surfboards into the ships doing bluff waves and things like that, but again, in the wrong hands they are a deadly weapon.

**The CHAIR** — They can currently be operated by children as young as 12.

**Mr FERRIER** — That is the bizarre part about it, yes. On one side of the fence we are looking at this, and on the other side of the fence we are looking at what contributes to what we are all sitting here trying to debate and sort out. I think with regard to the volunteers you have along the coastline, they do a pretty good job. Bearing in mind that when things get nasty, naturally enough the water police get involved, but amongst the boating fraternity themselves, they seem to take on board, ‘My mate has broken down, he might need a gallon of fuel and I will take it out to him’.

That gets me back to the saying earlier on in this hearing that 000 seems to frighten everybody or to call out the rescue people. We did a rescue at Bemm River, which is a bit further up the coast from where we are. At 2.00 am we had a callout from the water police. There were two gentlemen in a little tinnie who got trapped on the other side of the lake system. It was a very windy and very choppy. The guy who called us out from the water police in Melbourne was trying to tell me what I was going to take. I said, ‘Sir, I will take what I want to take. Don’t you tell me what I am going to wear or whatever the case may be’. This was a time where the wetsuit came in handy, because there was only myself and my other crewman in the boat. We had Orbost police attend, and we were a crewman short. I said, ‘How about you come out?’. He said, ‘I’m not going out there’. It was dark, windy and the waves were high. We got ourselves into a position where, me being the youngest on board, I put the wetsuit on and had to swim 300 metres out to these people. Otherwise, hypothermia possibly could have got them. They did not ring 000 until well and truly too late in the evening. It was a hire boat and

they kept putting it off and putting it off. It could have been quite nasty and could have been the first one about which I could have been writing some serious notes.

It is a great thing you guys are trying to do, and I honour the fact that you have come around and talked to people for a start. It is all very well for us who are not very literate to send in pieces of paper left, right and centre that at the end of the day you could not make head or tail out of. It is good. That is basically it in a nutshell. If you can fathom what I am drawing out there, then you are a smart captain.

**The CHAIR** — Certainly. Thank you sincerely for both the information you provided for us earlier today and the evidence you have given us today. It is really enlightening and a fantastic opportunity for us to hear from somebody who is really doing the hard work on the ground. It also gives us the opportunity to see the changes over time that in your view clearly have created discrepancies and gaps in the system. That is really valuable for us, because when you look at the system you do not necessarily see all of those gaps, so we are very grateful for that.

Within about two weeks you will receive a copy of today's transcript. Feel free to let us know if you think there are any grammatical mistakes or anything like that. No changes can be made to the substance of the document. Thank you again for being here, and we do really appreciate your time.

**Mr FERRIER** — Thank you kindly.

**The CHAIR** — I take this opportunity to acknowledge Stephanie Anderson, an ABC journalist from Sale who is in the audience.

**Witness withdrew.**