

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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Australian Volunteer Coast Guard, VF18 Lakes Entrance

Mr Michael Smallwood, Flotilla Commander

Mr Wayne Barker, Deputy Flotilla Commander

Mr Jason Cheesley, Skipper

The CHAIR — This is an all-party parliamentary committee and it is hearing evidence today on 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 taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, but any comments you make outside this hearing will not be protected with that privilege. Can you state your full names and addresses, your positions within an organisation and whether you are appearing on behalf of that organisation.

Mr SMALLWOOD — I am Michael Smallwood of [REDACTED], the flotilla commander of the Lakes Entrance Coast Guard, and I am appearing on behalf of the Coast Guard.

Mr BARKER — I am Wayne Barker of [REDACTED], the deputy flotilla commander of the Lakes Entrance Coast Guard, and I am appearing for the Coast Guard.

Mr CHEESLEY — I am Jason Cheesley, [REDACTED], and I am appearing on behalf of the Lakes Entrance Coast Guard as a skipper.

The CHAIR — The evidence you give today will become part of the public record, and you need to bear that in mind when you give evidence. I invite you to give your oral submission.

Mr SMALLWOOD — I submitted a written submission, so I will raise a few points out of that. Lakes Entrance Coast Guard has not always been a Coast Guard flotilla. We started in 1967 as the Lakes Entrance Ocean Rescue Squad. This squad was formed out of a necessity to find a marine rescue service for Lakes Entrance that could operate to protect people in the Gippsland Lakes, along the bar and out into Bass Strait and the Tasman Sea. At the moment at Lakes Entrance we have got 20 active members in our flotilla. Not all of them are active on the boats; some are more active in the fundraising area.

You saw the vessels earlier down at our shed. We have worked long and hard to get what we have, but we always struggle to raise funds. As far as I am aware, there has never been a constant recurrent stream of government funding. When we were the ocean rescue squad, we were approached by the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard Association in 2004 to become a Coast Guard flotilla. The members of the ocean rescue squad voted in favour of that after certain statements were made by the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard Association about things they thought they would be able to achieve. That has not come to fruition, but I believe that is through no fault of the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard Association as a whole. Covering our insurance costs was one of the big drawcards for the ocean rescue squad becoming a Coast Guard flotilla. At the time they believed they would be able to cover our insurance bills and other running costs.

The CHAIR — That has not been the case?

Mr SMALLWOOD — No, it has not been the case. Our insurance bill is \$6600 a year, and we have to raise that \$6600 before we pay any other bills.

Mr RONALDS — Is that just Lakes Entrance?

Mr CHEESLEY — That is just our flotilla at Lakes Entrance.

Mr SMALLWOOD — That goes to state council.

The CHAIR — Is that the same for all flotillas?

Mr SMALLWOOD — The amounts vary depending on what equipment you have got.

Mr CHEESLEY — It depends on your assets.

Mr SMALLWOOD — The amounts do vary, and other flotillas in the west of the state have higher bills than us. Like I said, straightaway you are \$6600 behind the eight ball. You have got to raise \$6600 plus other running costs, which are your bills, water and all that sort of thing. That is where it becomes very difficult for us as volunteers. Like I said earlier, you can only cook so many sausages, run so many trivia nights, do so many raffles.

The CHAIR — That is a lot of sausages.

Mr SMALLWOOD — At \$2 a sausage it is a hell of a lot of sausages, yes.

The CHAIR — Are you charging \$2 a sausage?

Mr SMALLWOOD — Two dollars, yes.

The CHAIR — Write that down.

Mr RONALDS — It is done; \$3.50.

Mr SMALLWOOD — That is where we are at from the start. So from the first of the year we are \$6600 behind in insurance straightaway, and like I said, that is every flotilla. I have put it in my submission — if funding could come forward even to just cover that sort of thing for the flotillas. I am not sure how the independent rescue groups in Victoria fare at this stage, at the moment, like when we were ocean rescue. I am not sure how many are left or how they cope.

Mr RONALDS — There are quite a few of them still.

Mr SMALLWOOD — Yes, or how they cope. But the way I believe the insurance is set up is it comes down through the national board. The Australian Volunteer Coast Guard association around the country, all the flotillas, their assets are piled in, the insurance broker gets the premium and that is divvied out to each flotilla depending on their assets. Like I said, at Lakes Entrance we are \$6600 a year, which is very hard to raise and very hard to continue to raise. It only gets more so because the price of everything is going up.

Mr RONALDS — So in regards to your fundraising, the sausage sizzles or whatever, there are also grants for capital equipment?

Mr SMALLWOOD — Yes.

Mr RONALDS — Then in regards to rescues you do, you get reimbursed by police?

Mr CHEESLEY — For fuel costs.

Mr RONALDS — For fuel costs and so forth.

Mr SMALLWOOD — Yes.

Mr RONALDS — Is that working well?

Mr SMALLWOOD — That is working fine.

Mr CHEESLEY — Yes.

Mr SMALLWOOD — The fuel reimbursement is working really well, yes.

Mr RONALDS — And that covers the costs adequately?

Mr SMALLWOOD — It covers the cost of our fuel. Maintenance and all that, all the other sort of things on the vessels, servicing and all that, is paid for by us. We raise the money to cover all maintenance costs.

Mr RONALDS — So there is not much margin in that?

Mr SMALLWOOD — No. We get paid for the exact amount of fuel we use. If we use 50 litres of fuel, we get paid for 50 litres of fuel at \$1.70 a litre, which is what we pay for our fuel on the water.

The CHAIR — How do you go about claiming that? We have heard evidence from a range of flotillas. One has told us that it was compulsory that they did it by fax, others have told us it is compulsory they do it electronically, by email — all to the same group.

Mr SMALLWOOD — Right. When we do a marine incident we fill out an MIR form. I fax copies of the MIR form to Gippsland water police, Transport Safety Victoria and to Coast Guard headquarters in Sandringham.

The CHAIR — So yours is by fax?

Mr CHEESLEY — Yes.

Mr SMALLWOOD — Yes, we fax. Our administration officer does up the fuel claim for the hours on the water, fuel used and the reimbursement amount and that is sent electronically to Sandringham. That is handled by the financial — I cannot remember the exact title.

The CHAIR — Whoever they are.

Mr SMALLWOOD — Alan Hopkins at Sandringham handles the fuel claim. Money goes to him and then comes back to us.

The CHAIR — Is there any other means by which they can track the hours of your rescue?

Mr SMALLWOOD — No.

Mr RONALDS — So it is manually?

Mr SMALLWOOD — Our log books, the MIR forms and basically the Gippsland water police.

Mr CHEESLEY — We will confirm.

Mr SMALLWOOD — If our rescue took 2.5 hours, they allocate 2.5 hours to that rescue or to that assist for us. I was talking to you a bit earlier about the training, and Harry from Marlo touched on it earlier. Our qualifications — three of us here, Wayne has just about finished his certificate II, which is his coxswain ticket for Coast Guard. All he has got to do is his holistic, which is his practical test. Jason and myself have both got that qualification. That qualification, as far as I know, is not recognised by Transport Safety Victoria as a marine qualification. The changes coming through that are in the pipeline I do not fully understand, because we are not getting a lot of information about where we are going and where we have to be. It is a big concern that they are going to turn around one day when the date comes up and look at me and say, ‘You are not qualified to do what you have been doing for the last 10 years’.

The CHAIR — Mick, for the record, could you tell us the differences between the two courses and the differences between the two assessments?

Mr SMALLWOOD — As far as I understand it, the difference between the two courses is the basic course for a coxswain’s ticket and a Coast Guard coxswain’s ticket are exactly the same. They are exactly the same courses.

The CHAIR — Are they provided by the same people?

Mr SMALLWOOD — Mine is provided by the same people. I did my course at SEAMEC, the local TAFE. They do the course for the commercial coxswain’s qualifications as well. To become a Coast Guard coxswain on top of that you need to do an extra six units, which are all aimed at marine search and rescue.

Mr RONALDS — Just to clarify, you do all of the commercial elements?

Mr SMALLWOOD — Yes.

Mr CHEESLEY — Yes, that is right.

Mr SMALLWOOD — We do all of the commercial elements through the TAFE, and then through the Coast Guard we do extra search and rescue elements.

The CHAIR — So you do all that they do plus some?

Mr CHEESLEY — Yes.

Mr SMALLWOOD — Plus some, yes.

Mr BARKER — So your normal qualification for your commercial people, it would be the TDM07 qualification, which is what we do. We do it at the local TAFE; it is all exactly the same. But on top of that we do another six units of competency to actually get a Coast Guard qualification.

The CHAIR — And the TAFE-based course, how is yours examined and how are the commercial elements examined?

Mr SMALLWOOD — The final examination for Coast Guard, they call it a holistic examination. A task is set by the examiners. There are two examiners on the vessel. The skipper has his crew, two — —

The CHAIR — So this is actually on the vessel?

Mr SMALLWOOD — Yes, with two examiners. You start off the vessel. You have to plot a course on a chart — do your chart work, plot a course, use all the safe navigation rules, all that applies. Then you have to go out to the vessel, punch it into the electronics, put your waypoints into your GPS and basically do the task with your crew. You are assessed on how you communicate with your crew, how you cooperate, how your crew communicates with you and the outcome of the exercise, and that is the assessment for the Coast Guard coxswain. The commercial coxswain, I believe the assessment is an oral examination where you sit down with someone from I believe Transport Safety Victoria, and they ask you questions to test your knowledge.

The CHAIR — About the same sorts of things?

Mr CHEESLEY — The course, yes.

Mr SMALLWOOD — About the course you did, yes.

The CHAIR — Yes, but not in a practical sense, more in a theoretical sense?

Mr SMALLWOOD — Yes, that is right. They will ask you what a buoy means, what a set of lights at night means, if you saw another vessel what green-red-green means, where to find lead lights on a chart and things like that.

Mr RONALDS — Do you have those questions as well in the Coast Guard assessment?

Mr SMALLWOOD — Those questions, they are just covered as you — —

Mr RONALDS — But they are covered?

Mr SMALLWOOD — Yes.

Mr BARKER — All the same elements are covered.

The CHAIR — But you actually do it in practice.

Mr BARKER — We just have to display competency in all the elements of the qualification.

Mr RONALDS — It is more extensive.

Mr BARKER — We actually have to do it in a practical sense, rather than in an oral exam sense.

Mr RONALDS — But that qualification, if you have not done the commercial test, is not counted in a commercial sense?

Mr SMALLWOOD — No.

Mr BARKER — No.

Mr RONALDS — Why not just do both tests?

The CHAIR — You do not get the opportunity, do you?

Mr SMALLWOOD — No. Well, if the test was in Melbourne — —

The CHAIR — It is two separate courses.

Mr SMALLWOOD — Yes. Like I said too, I did what I needed to do to operate a Coast Guard vessel to my ability. I do not have a plan to become a commercial operator or run a charter boat or drive a fishing boat, so I did not see the need to sit two separate exams when I was only going to use the Coast Guard one. I did not see why I needed to be able to drive passengers.

The CHAIR — If I could summarise, your concern is that with the changes that are certainly being discussed you may reach a point where your qualification is not recognised for the purpose you want to use it for?

Mr SMALLWOOD — That is exactly right, yes. If they say the length of time since I have done my courses is 10 years now, what if they tell me I have to resit a four to six-week course? I cannot take time off work to do that, to go over the same ground again. We are all volunteers. I work full time, I have got a family. It is a big concern for myself and for our flotilla. Like I said, our skippers are all Coast Guard qualified. If the rules change or the line gets moved, I do not know what we will do.

Mr CHEESLEY — It means we will have no skippers to perform a rescue.

Mr SMALLWOOD — Yes.

Mr CHEESLEY — No qualified skippers in that sense.

Mr SMALLWOOD — Yes. No commercially qualified skippers, no. We have got Coast Guard – qualified skippers, yes.

The CHAIR — I appreciate very much that point. Would you like to continue?

Mr SMALLWOOD — Yes. Wayne, about the training, the new modules, you are more able to talk about it than I am.

Mr BARKER — One of the concerns we also have is with our training. It is difficult for us to run our own training because we just do not have people who are suitably qualified to run it and assess it within our flotilla, and because we are so far away from the metro environment it is really difficult for anybody from the Coast Guard organisation in the city to provide training for us because it is quite extensive and takes a long time. At the moment we go through our local TAFE, SEAMEC, which does an outstanding job of supplying us with training and qualifications, but that is at quite a high cost. We pay as anybody else would. It depends on whether you have ever done a course before or not as to whether you are going to get any discount.

The CHAIR — How much does that cost?

Mr BARKER — I cannot even remember what mine cost, and it was only a couple of years ago. It is thousands.

Mr CHEESLEY — It is \$3000-odd for a commercial coxswain.

Mr RONALDS — The same as a Coast Guard one?

Mr BARKER — No, for that course; that qualification. On that, we have quite a substantial cost to get our members qualified in any sort of way, shape or form, and the training they get they need to be able to perform their role. It is not that we do not need the training; we definitely need that training to perform the role we perform. On top of that, very recently all the qualifications have changed and we know nothing about them. They have gone from a distribution qualification to a marine qualification. The skills council is still the same, but it is a different qualification. A lot of the elements are still the same, but they are all different, so we do not even know where we are going to start with that.

Mr RONALDS — So you are talking about your coxswain's ticket that we have always historically talked about; that has now just changed.

Mr BARKER — The coxswain's ticket itself is a licence. It is like if you can go and do a course on warehousing; unless you go and get your forklift ticket, you are not licensed to drive a forklift. It is the same

with this. You can go and do all the training in the world, but unless you go and specifically get a commercial ticket you are not going to have a commercial ticket. We do not need a commercial ticket at this stage. That is what we are getting at. We do not need a commercial ticket; we only need our qualifications and we have to be able to prove that we have got those competencies in a hands-on way. We actually have to do the tasks and be assessed as we go on our competency before we get a tick in the box to be able to drive the boat. That is the only difference. We are not actually applying for some sort of commercial ticket for the purpose of running some sort of enterprise.

The CHAIR — For this you have to pay \$2000 or \$3000?

Mr BARKER — Yes.

Mr SMALLWOOD — Per member.

The CHAIR — To volunteer?

Mr BARKER — Yes.

Mr SMALLWOOD — There is just no money for training to fund it. Coast Guard does not have the funds to fund it. We at a local level do not have the funds to fund it; we have a \$6600 insurance bill to fund first. We train hard. We meet twice a week. We meet on Wednesday evenings for practical and skills training, which could be anything from tying knots to learning how to do a tow. Every Saturday morning we are out on the boats, and that is everything from practice towings, berthing and moorings to swimming and fitness training at Lakes Entrance. We do the lot.

We get our guys up to speed and get them as ready as we can to be on our boats and do the job we need to do, but as Wayne was just saying, without the funds we cannot put them through to get certificates because we just do not have the money to do it. We train our guts out down at Lakes Entrance — we really do — but without the funding we cannot end up with the qualifications and we cannot get our newer members the qualifications so that they can get ticked off and get their bit of paper that says they are a competent crew or an advanced crew. Wayne alluded to the fact that we do not have the trainers available. I do not even think they are really available in the Coast Guard system to help, especially in the regional areas.

Mr RONALDS — Is it a funding issue or a manpower issue?

Mr SMALLWOOD — I think it is both, to be honest with you. I think there is an issue in both areas. The Coast Guard, being a completely volunteer organisation, has no full-time people to help out the volunteers. The person who is doing the training is also a volunteer, so he has to come up with time as well as getting the volunteers together, and when you are 300 kilometres from Melbourne sometimes it does not quite gel.

Mr RONALDS — So your biggest issue here, though, in terms of Lakes Entrance, is the coxswain's issue in terms of, one, whether it is going to apply in the new regime.

Mr SMALLWOOD — Yes.

Mr RONALDS — That is part 1 of the issue. The second issue is in regard to the cost of that in terms of trying to get more people qualified.

Mr SMALLWOOD — Yes.

Mr RONALDS — The third issue you have is actually having people to help with just general training.

Mr SMALLWOOD — Yes, that is right.

Mr RONALDS — But are the first two issues the bigger issues?

Mr CHEESLEY — Yes.

Mr BARKER — Definitely.

Mr RONALDS — Because they help to fix the third issue, I would imagine.

Mr SMALLWOOD — Exactly.

Mr BARKER — On the third issue, even if we did get assistance to run training and things like that, the resources we would have available to us are nothing compared to what we have sitting right around the corner from us in that TAFE complex, which is dedicated to marine training.

Mr RONALDS — Yes, so it is good. The availability of training is there; it is just the cost of training.

Mr BARKER — The availability of training is such that we have access to the best training we can get in Victoria through our TAFE system here. It is a dedicated facility just for that.

The CHAIR — Continue.

Mr SMALLWOOD — I am nearly done, I think. I am sort of running out a little bit. From my point of view at Lakes Entrance they are our biggest concerns in order to keep the place going. It is the funding of our insurance and running costs to start with. We work harder and harder to raise the money just to cover costs, and we struggle to go forward. We are lucky enough that our vessel at the moment is only three years old, but we hung on to the one before that for 15 years. We are going to have to hold on to this one for 10 to 15 years as well because by the time you apply for your grant you have got to come up with a lot of money for your share of the grant. The grant system actually works quite well. If you have got a good strong case, you will get your funding. For the vessel we have there now, the *Pinky B*, I think our input was about \$80 000.

Mr RONALDS — Of a total cost of?

Mr SMALLWOOD — Three hundred and twenty thousand. That was our input, and we got some of that by selling the old vessel. The rest of it was just raised by hard work by the members.

The CHAIR — It is also worth repeating for the record what we saw on the visit to your club rooms. You detailed to us the amount of volunteer time that went into building that.

Mr SMALLWOOD — We finished an extension on the clubrooms about two and a half years ago now. That extension took two and a half years to complete. Each year the clubrooms were being extended there were in the vicinity of 3500 volunteer hours put in by members to build the facility. We received a grant that partly covered some of the materials, but it was completed just by the hard work of some of the members to get our building going and local tradesmen who donated time and did not charge us. The facility you saw, as Chris said, in over 40 years has gone from one small room. Then we added the boat room and then it got a bit bigger, but the facility now and the last extension two a half years ago were done by volunteers.

The CHAIR — Clearly your local community values the services you provide very highly. Congratulations on that.

Mr SMALLWOOD — We value the support of the local community down here too. We are not quite as bad as Harry up at Marlow. He has a much smaller community to draw on. Lakes is a bit bigger than Marlow as well, but the support we get from the community is what keeps you going. It is a shame that you are hitting the same people every year. Every year you send out the letter to the same business asking for a sponsorship, or you go around and ask someone to donate another prize for a raffle. You are hitting the same people year after year. In small communities there are so many other service clubs. You have the CFAs, you have all the other service clubs — —

The CHAIR — And the sporting clubs.

Mr SMALLWOOD — Yes, and they are all hitting the same people all the time, and without the community in places like Lakes Entrance, we would not be able to do the job we do, basically.

The CHAIR — Is that it, guys?

Mr BARKER — Just one other thing while we are still talking. With the changes that are coming up, we hear a lot of rumours that this is going to happen and that is going to happen. No-really knows or, if they do, they are not telling us. We spoke about getting commercial tickets for skippers and things like that. The thing that really worries me is, if we go down that track, what sorts of standards are then going to be put on the

vessels? Do the vessels then need to be in survey like commercial vessels? If so, that is going to put us out of business.

Mr RONALDS — So what is your vessel in now — 2C, isn't it?

Mr BARKER — We do not have to be in survey.

Mr SMALLWOOD — Our vessel is built to survey but is not in survey.

Mr BARKER — Not only do we then have to get it through survey; we then have to maintain that and get it assessed however many times they say it has to be assessed and keep it in survey, which is just another big cost on us. I do not know how that sort of thing would transition to volunteers like us. It is not just the big boat; we have the other vessels too, so what do we do with those?

Mr RONALDS — All built to survey, yes?

Mr SMALLWOOD — No.

Mr CHEESLEY — It is possible other people would not even meet survey requirements.

Mr SMALLWOOD — I am sure that under a certain length it does not have to be. I am not 100 per cent sure of the rules on smaller than — —

Mr BARKER — Or what the rules will be in the future.

Mr SMALLWOOD — Yes.

Mr BARKER — If we go down the line of having commercial qualifications or recognised qualifications for volunteers in rescue roles, what about the equipment that we use and the vessels? And what sort of standard will they have to be put at and maintained at? And how do we do that?

Mr RONALDS — And at whose cost?

Mr BARKER — Yes.

Mr SMALLWOOD — It is at our cost.

Mr RONALDS — That is a legitimate concern.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for both earlier today for showing us around and letting us look through your operation but also giving up your time and being here today and providing such fruitful information for us, because it is very important that we get a strong understanding of how you operate and what your challenges are. You have certainly detailed them well for us today. You will receive a copy of the transcript within about two weeks. Please feel free to point out any grammatical problems that you see, but please do not make any changes to the substance of the document. Thank you again for being here. We really do appreciate it.

Mr SMALLWOOD — No worries.

Witnesses withdrew.