

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND OUTER SUBURBAN/INTERFACE SERVICES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Marine Rescue Services in Victoria

Inverloch — 9 April 2014

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Mr Terry Young

Mr William Knibbs

Mr Richard Burgess, Deputy Commander

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

Mr YOUNG — My name is Terry Young, and I live at [REDACTED] I am representing the Port Albert Coast Guard.

Mr KNIBBS — My name is William John Knibbs and I live at [REDACTED] I am also representing the Port Albert Coast Guard.

Mr R. BURGESS — My name is Richard Burgess, and I live at [REDACTED] I am here to represent the Port Albert flotilla.

The CHAIR — The evidence you give today will become part of a public evidence document. I now invite you to make your oral submissions.

Mr R. BURGESS — It looks like I am the speaker. The history of the Port Albert flotilla dates back some 40 years. They were originally a member of the Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol, which was primarily based in New South Wales. Over the years there was very little support from that organisation, mainly because of the distance — different states; different legislation. The Ernst & Young report that was commissioned by the Victorian Water Police and the then Marine Board of Victoria did a review of all organisations, and whilst I have not been privy to the full document there was a push from the water police in Gippsland to amalgamate independent units into one body. That is how they became chartered as flotillas under the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard Association.

Port Albert in particular was identified at that time as a flotilla that was not in a state that was able to send a vessel safely to sea to perform rescue. At the same time as the amalgamation there was the introduction of boat licensing, and that also allowed access to increased revenue. With a bit of a joint effort between Marine Safety Victoria, the water police and the various volunteer units we were able to rebuild that unit, increase the training standards and increase the standard of vessels, and today we have a flotilla that is capable of offshore rescue. The majority of work done by the flotilla is in offshore waters out to about 10 nautical miles to the east side of Wilsons Promontory to roughly Seaspray, which is normally our cut-off to the east.

The flotilla is reasonably active. Port Albert is a small town, so they do not have a large population to assist them with their operations, and individuals like me come from the Latrobe Valley to support that — —

The CHAIR — What is the population?

Mr R. BURGESS — It is in the order of 300 permanents.

The CHAIR — Growing to what in peak season?

Mr KNIBBS — Five thousand.

Mr R. BURGESS — It increases and there is no room left in town to park because of boats coming from all over the place, so there are some challenges.

One of the things that has benefited the unit coming under the Coast Guard banner is to get a better understanding of the operational costs for the unit, and that is done by way of annual KPMG audits that report back on a national level. I guess the story of Port Albert is no different to any other organisation performing rescue in that there is a need for recurrent revenue to pay for — just to name a few — general maintenance, fuel and insurances, and it is obviously forever an impediment to try and achieve good insurance cover for marine rescue organisations.

The CHAIR — What sort of insurance do you pay per year?

Mr R. BURGESS — I do have an annual report here, and I would have to make reference to it. Insurance for us I think is about \$6500 per year. That covers assets as well as public liability, personal indemnity

insurance and that sort of thing. It is a lot of money for a flotilla that is operating in such a small population. One of our main avenues of a revenue source was burnt down some four weeks ago. That was the Port Albert pub. It used to conduct raffles frequently there on the weekends.

The CHAIR — The Buchan one went today.

Mr R. BURGESS — Yes, I heard that. In a nutshell our story is no different to that of any other marine rescue unit. The volunteers have a small membership of about 15. We have to raise funds to pay for insurances, as stated before, and that is on top of the demand for training and keeping the vessel in survey. To keep compliant — what do we say? — for a volunteer it is a call beyond duty to expect them to do that. But again, as the previous organisation stated, this flotilla has been able to respond at the request of the water police 24/7, 365 days of the year.

Unlike Port Phillip and Western Port, the only backup flotilla that we have got in our vicinity is the Port Welshpool flotilla. We do not have water police — they are 160 kilometres away — so there is a fair bit of responsibility. The Coast Guard has had to work fairly hard to provide a communications network so that when these vessels do go to sea in Bass Strait they can indeed talk back to a limited coast radio station. That was achieved back in 2006. That is an important survey requirement, but it is equally important for a search and rescue organisation. I think I have pretty well covered what the members wanted to say. Is there anything else you want to add, guys?

Mr KNIBBS — Not really.

Mr YOUNG — I think you have covered everything.

The CHAIR — Are you required to keep your vessel in survey?

Mr R. BURGESS — That is correct, yes.

The CHAIR — That is yearly, is it?

Mr R. BURGESS — Yes, anything from having the compass assessor produce a deviation card to all the others.

The CHAIR — There is a survey audit done every year, is there?

Mr R. BURGESS — The marine safety officer, the transport safety surveyor, comes down, yes. They normally incorporate that program. There is a small fleet of commercial vessels at Port Albert, and they usually incorporate the survey checks as part of that.

The CHAIR — How do you get training, and what is it?

Mr R. BURGESS — It has varied. In the initial stages of the unit coming under the volunteer Coast Guard, it coincided at about the time that boat licensing and increased revenue was available. But I must say the level of funding available to flotillas like at Port Albert has decreased.

The CHAIR — Decreased?

Mr R. BURGESS — It has decreased. The availability of those funds has decreased over a 10-year period, and we find that it is fairly competitive to access funding when there is less than \$1 million for the state. That has taken its toll, particularly on Port Albert. Whilst the organisation is a registered training organisation, given that it is a coxswain level that our skippers have to attain, along with sea time and all the other fundraising activities, to complete the units of competency does take its toll on many members to the point where they just resign. It is too much to fit into their social lives.

The sea hours, off the top of my head, are about 260 hours; I could be corrected on that number. There have been changes in the national regulations recently, but it is in that order. Off the top of my head a sea day is 3.5 hours per day, so for a volunteer it is a heavy load, but it is also a standard that we must adhere to, particularly when we are sending vessels of the type that we have 15 nautical miles to sea and Bass Strait. You want to make sure that the coxswain who is taking that vessel to sea is obviously of a standard that they can risk

assess and make decisions on whether or not to go in some instances. That is very important not only from a due diligence point of view but also of course because our insurers like to know that our members are competent in delivering to the standard that we declare.

Mr EIDEH — Recent regulatory reforms have established a national system for commercial vessel regulation in Australia. As a result, new vessel standards came into effect in 2013, with grandfathering provisions for compliance of existing vessels until 2016. In your opinion, what are the main implications of the reforms for your organisation, marine safety and marine rescue in Victoria?

Mr R. BURGESS — For us it is early days. Our coxswains and vessels are already in survey, so we do not see any big changes, but of course in terms of compliance there is a cost to keep yourself in compliance. We are volunteers; it is time and funds that are required to do it. It is a subject that will be debated for many years when it comes to training standards, but ultimately, as long as the government is funding vessels that will be tasked by an authority such as the water police to go to sea, then those vessels have to be of a standard and of course the members have to be of a standard to operate those vessels.

I think it becomes a risk-based decision as to whether you modify training standards to suit marine search and rescue. In many instances local knowledge is a thing that is not really tested under the standards, but it is very important. As I said, our coxswains will take a vessel 15 nautical miles to sea. Does that mean they are capable of operating a vessel around the Rip and Port Phillip? I would suggest that time needs to be spent, so experience and local knowledge are a very important element of competency in the marine curriculum.

I am not able to give you a definite response to that. I think we are up to the challenges. My understanding of the new legislation is that it is somewhat more flexible. For example, on our 6 metre RIB we still have a steel bucket that has the word 'Fire' painted on it, and under the survey standards we keep updating it to make sure it is a shiny metal bucket. There are some standards that we could probably relax somewhat, and that might be an example of one. But I am all for — and I am sure the flotilla will back me on this — keeping a high standard for our operations.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. We really appreciate your time today and the evidence you have given. It will certainly contribute to the deliberations of the committee and therefore will probably contribute quite strongly to the recommendations that we make in our report. Thank you very much. Within about two weeks you will receive a transcript of today's proceedings. Please feel free to point out any grammatical errors, but there can be no change to the substance of the document. Thank you very much.

Mr R. BURGESS — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.