

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND OUTER SUBURBAN/INTERFACE SERVICES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into marine rescue services in Victoria

Port Fairy — 15 April 2014

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Australian Volunteer Coast Guard, VF16 Warrnambool

Ms Barbara Heazlewood, Deputy Flotilla Commander

Mr Steve Tippet, Administrative Officer

The ACTING CHAIR (Mr Ronalds) — Welcome to this hearing of the Economic Development, Infrastructure and Outer Suburban/Interface Services Committee's inquiry into marine rescue services in Victoria. All evidence taken at the hearing today is protected by parliamentary privilege, but comments you make outside the hearing are not afforded such privilege. Thank you very much for appearing before us this afternoon. Could you each state your full name and address and whether you are attending in a private capacity or representing an organisation, and if so, your position in that organisation.

Ms HEAZLEWOOD — My name is Barbara Heazlewood. I live at [REDACTED] I am the deputy flotilla commander of the Coast Guard, Warrnambool, VF16.

Mr TIPPET — I am Steve Tippet. I live at [REDACTED] I am also involved with the Warrnambool Coast Guard, VF16. I am the administration officer and also a coxswain.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you very much. The evidence taken today will be publicly available in the future. Please go ahead with your verbal submission.

Mr TIPPET — Just a bit of history: we were formed in January 2004 as a flotilla in formation. Barbara and I were on the initial committee that got it started — we got it set up. In a former life I was with Victoria Police, before I retired in 2009. There were certain tragedies that happened along the south-west coast which meant that a group of us saw the need to set up a marine rescue service, and hence we got involved with the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard, which we saw then as the committee with the best structure to assist with that cause. Subsequently, we got the sister vessel to Portland, VF17. It has exactly the same sized motors — the dynamics are the same. That was delivered to us in 2008. Since then, we have been training and raising money and funds to pay off our debt, which came with the vessel, unfortunately, of \$110 000. We are still paying that off: currently we owe \$23 000. We have had to raise all moneys for training and such things.

We made a submission, and we rely on that submission as well. I concur totally with the Port Fairy Marine Rescue Service, and I think VF17 and Michael Krause there have covered Portland very well. Our area of coverage is from Cape Otway through to Portland, and obviously seaward. Ours is an 11.9-metre Sabre Marine search and rescue aluminium vessel. Our biggest problem is finance — moneys for maintenance and moneys for fuel — which is currently covered by Warrnambool City Council through an agreement we have and have had for several years. That is ongoing. It is only one part of our huge expenses in maintaining and running a vessel.

The ACTING CHAIR — Sorry, just to clarify: what do they pay for?

Mr TIPPET — The diesel fuel for our vessel.

The ACTING CHAIR — Okay, so the diesel is paid for by the council.

Mr TIPPET — Warrnambool City Council covers those costs.

The ACTING CHAIR — And your other funds?

Mr TIPPET — We raise the other funds.

The ACTING CHAIR — How do you go about doing that?

Ms HEAZLEWOOD — Sausage sizzles.

The ACTING CHAIR — That is a lot of sausages!

Mr TIPPET — Sausage sizzles at Bunnings, which also promotes who we are, so that we have a bit of public exposure. We make applications to all the philanthropic trusts. We seek government grants through the various volunteer organisations and community funding through Pacific Hydro, which operates on the coastline here, and local businesses.

The ACTING CHAIR — What sort of budget do you fundraise?

Mr TIPPET — Currently we do not have that much in the bank. We look at a budget of our fuel costs of probably about \$6000 a year.

The ACTING CHAIR — So fuel is about \$6000?

Mr TIPPET — Which is covered.

The ACTING CHAIR — Which is covered. What about the rest of the operating expenses you have to raise?

Mr TIPPET — We have fuel for our Polaris towing vehicle. Our vessel is on what we call a swing mooring as against Portland, which is alongside a jetty.

The ACTING CHAIR — Why is that?

Mr TIPPET — That is because there are no facilities at Warrnambool to put it alongside. There is no marina as such; there is just a bay. It is not a designated safe haven, and it is not a designated safe harbour. The boat ramp is probably the worst in Victoria — without a doubt. Therefore we do not get the traffic that Portland gets as far as vessels going out to sea. But our costs include running the Polaris. We have to maintain the Polaris. We have to maintain the vessel, and all the maintenance costs are borne by us. We recently — well, last year — had to replace the batteries. There are nine of those, and they had to be replaced with deep cycle batteries, and it cost us just over \$2000 for that. It does not sound a lot in the scheme of things with a boat, but you have to raise it as a group of volunteers.

We do not get any recurring government funding at all. Unless we go begging and borrowing — we do not steal! — we just do not achieve anything. They are the sad, hard facts of the whole thing. The funding is the critical thing, because the time spent on making applications and the time spent on going and seeing people to raise funds negates your training time. For those persons who do the funding applications, it negates their training. I do a lot of the applications, and I spent 25 hours one week in March just making applications for the money. For one of those, we have been rejected. You put a lot of work and effort into things, and you might get some return, but it is demoralising at times.

The ACTING CHAIR — How many rescues have you done in the last 12 months?

Mr TIPPET — In the last 12 months we have probably done about six.

The ACTING CHAIR — And what have been the nature of those?

Mr TIPPET — Mostly mechanical breakdowns, mainly through lack of maintenance. One was fuel. The portable fuel tanks that go on some of these vessels have baffles in them; some people do not know how to fill them properly. If you put the fuel nozzle in and fill it up it clicks off. Some people think that it is full then, whereas in fact it is probably about a third to half full. So that is a bit of ignorance, but a lot of that can be corrected through education. Like, with that person it certainly will not happen again.

Mrs MILLAR — Just to take a slight step back there, what is your total annual budget approximately?

Mr TIPPET — That is a good question.

Mrs MILLAR — It was not covered specifically in the submission.

Mr TIPPET — No, I understand that. I really cannot give you a figure; that is not my area. I cannot recall, but if I can shed some light on this year: we have an out-of-water vessel survey in June, which will be done over here in the slip at Port Fairy. You have slip expenses of approximately \$200 a day, and it will be three days. We have twin turbo diesel jets. Those jets have to be serviced by people in Melbourne, so you have 7 hours driving time before we have expenses in relation to whatever might be required for the jets. I do not think we will get much change out of \$2000 or \$2500 with that. We have to replace all of the anodes — the engine and vessel anodes — the sacrificial anodes. They will cost approximately \$300 to \$400. We have to clean the hull — antifoul the hull — and there is probably another couple of hundred dollars there. We have to fit electronic equipment, which is a lot easier obviously on a slip than on a mooring, where the vessel is moving. So we have to fit all of these things in a three-day gap, an opening, but the expenses there could be several thousand dollars.

Mrs MILLAR — Would you know what your community fundraising target is, say, for last year?

Mr TIPPET — For the last year it would be \$12 000.

Mrs MILLAR — \$12 000.

Mr TIPPET — Yes, because we have to get our life raft serviced, and that is \$1000. We also have to replace the EPIRB on the vessel, and that is \$300 to \$400. It is just ongoing. The PFDs: we have to get them serviced, and there are at least eight of those because we are registered for eight people. It is just ongoing; it never ends.

The ACTING CHAIR — And your boat is in survey?

Mr TIPPET — Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — And is it certified in survey?

Mr TIPPET — Yes, it is. It is commercial.

The ACTING CHAIR — It is commercial certified in survey with a certificate?

Mr TIPPET — Yes. You do not actually get a certificate now.

The ACTING CHAIR — That would cost a significant amount of money. Sorry?

Mr TIPPET — You do not actually get a certificate now.

The ACTING CHAIR — Oh, right. Okay.

Mr TIPPET — I have not seen a certificate in relation to the survey for about four years.

The ACTING CHAIR — Okay, fair enough.

Mr EIDEH — Steve, your submission said that the harbour facilities should be upgraded throughout the state to accommodate rescue vessels. Could you explain to the committee what this would involve?

Mr TIPPET — As I said at the start, we are on a swing mooring, which means it is about 200 metres offshore. We have a storage shed where we have an IRB, which is our tender vessel, which is towed by the *Polaris*. We have to get the crew to arrive there, then we have to launch our tender vessel out to our vessel, *CG16*, before we even get started. If we had facilities like those at Portland or Port Fairy, where the vessel is alongside a jetty, wharf or enclosed safe area, your response time might be cut down by 20 minutes minimum.

Ms HEAZLEWOOD — You cannot moor along our breakwater because of the swells that come in. They just damage the boat. No-one can moor along the actual breakwater.

Mr TIPPET — The other factor is that the boat ramp at Warrnambool is very poor. I say that with as much respect as I can to the Warrnambool City Council, because they do assist and have assisted us greatly. At night it is exceptionally dangerous because of what we call the surge. I do not know if you have been to Warrnambool. You are going there tomorrow. I can explain it better when we are there. The surge comes around the tip of the breakwater wall, and it comes up the wall to the beach. That surge can be up to a metre. I have seen boats on the boat ramp being lifted sideways off the trailer and crashed into other boats. It is only a two-lane boat ramp.

It is quite dangerous at times. Local knowledge is good because you have to pick when that surge is coming and when it is not, to make it safe to not only launch but to retrieve your vessel as well. At night you cannot always see it because the lighting down there is not good. So you have these other factors you have to play with.

The ACTING CHAIR — Have you done night rescues?

Mr TIPPET — We have done night runs. On Good Friday two years ago we were called out to the yacht race that goes from Melbourne to Port Fairy. It was the one where a yacht sank off Port Campbell. We were actually out on our vessel awaiting the call to go out and assist. We probably would not have, to be honest,

because the seas were just horrendous. I do not think we could have been of any benefit to anybody had we gone out. The seas were huge. We stayed on the vessel until it was I think 1.00 am.

Ms HEAZLEWOOD — No, 5.30 — and we got there about midnight.

Mr TIPPET — Sorry. We got there at about 1.00 am. and we sat on the vessel all night.

The ACTING CHAIR — And your vessel is equipped similar to the Portland vessel, in terms of AIS tracking and all the rest?

Mr TIPPET — We have the Coast Guard tracking and we have our own.

The ACTING CHAIR — You do not have police or AIS?

Mr TIPPET — We do not have police and we do not have AIS, no.

The ACTING CHAIR — Why?

Mr TIPPET — I do not know. We have not been allocated an AIS number, as far as I know, and I think the police is just a different one to me. I have not heard of police tracking. I know quite a few of the blokes who work at the police boat squad, but I was not aware that we could have access to that tracking.

Mrs MILLAR — Your submission, which was written by Adrian Calderwood, of course, is very strong on one system, one service. Could you outline to us briefly what you see the principal advantages of that have been?

Mr TIPPET — Yes. I think it is the standardisation across the board. You have one system in place. There is one set of rules and one set of regulations. Everybody is or should be on the same page. I just think the benefits to everybody are enormous. It seems silly to me to have different organisations doing exactly the same jobs in a very, very harsh environment. I think if we standardised that it is just going to enhance everybody's ability to go out there and perform the rescues that we do with utmost safety and confidence. I do not think you can get anything better than that. The qualifications with whatever organisation they are with now must be carried across to whatever the body might be that ends up performing this task.

Mr EIDEH — Can you outline some of the lessons that emerged from your joint training exercise Operation Percy in 2012, and has Warrnambool Coast Guard been involved in any further joint training exercises?

Mr TIPPET — We have done joint training with the Port Fairy rescue service. We have also gone over to Portland. We are organising one now with the Warrnambool SES and the CFA incorporating the two rivers that come into the ocean at Warrnambool, having a combination of river and ocean, so that will be coming up. We will certainly look at doing a lot more exercises with Port Fairy and Portland. There are no problems there and we get to know each other. We get to know each other's capabilities and the personalities and so far it has all been good.

Ms HEAZLEWOOD — We do a lot of training with the HEMS 4 rescue helicopter that we have here as well — mainly for their benefit but for our benefit as well. They have to do something like an audit; if they get new paramedics or new pilots they have to be able to winch off a vessel. We do quite a lot with them, which is good for both parties.

Mr TIPPET — Having said that, any design of any vessels for the coastal regions would have to incorporate a decking area which is clear because when the helicopter ambulance comes down it has to have a clear deck area in which to offload the paramedics or pick up patients or both. We do that probably three or four times a year. We have invited Portland and Port Fairy to join us. It is a great experience. Obviously those on the HEMS 4, as they are called, the helicopter ambulance, enjoy it because their currency is included and updated with their paramedics throughout the state.

Mrs MILLAR — In your view, is there an undersupply of marine rescue services along the western coast of Victoria?

Mr TIPPET — There certainly is. I think in the south-west, where we are currently located, it is adequate, but under one body it would be even better. We have nothing from Warrnambool through to Apollo Bay, which has a similar unit to the one here at Port Fairy, and from Apollo Bay to Queenscliff, unless Lorne Surf Life Saving Club have something. Port Campbell have a RIB — I think they have nicknamed it the Pelican — which is a six— to —eight seater, and that can go out in pretty good seas, but that was funded through Woodside Petroleum and it is a good vessel. Whether they go out much I do not know, but there is nothing much from Warrnambool through to Port Phillip Bay.

The ACTING CHAIR — How do you find the coordination working? In the coordination of rescue, do you find your experiences have been good or could they be better?

Ms HEAZLEWOOD — As in with the water police and that type of thing do you mean?

The ACTING CHAIR — Correct, yes.

Mr TIPPET — Whilst at Portland they have good communications with the local police, with our lot they seem to lose the current contact details in relation to people. I know for a fact that they have them because I have handed them to them, but they seem to lose them. With the water police we have had different dealings with them. Most of the time they are very, very good.

The ACTING CHAIR — They do not have a presence down here, do they?

Mr TIPPET — No. The only time was 18 months ago, I think, when the paragliders went off just around Peterborough. I was invited to that personally. We searched for several hours and we retrieved one person from the water, deceased. The problem that we had was that the search was stopped but we were not notified and the two police on jet skis were not notified either. They did not notify their own people as well as us, so we did not feel so bad then. But I think that communications could be a lot better.

Ms HEAZLEWOOD — We have had issues with people dialling 000 as well. One man who was in trouble out here dialled 000 to try to contact us and they were told, no, they do not do that.

The ACTING CHAIR — Sorry? They were told they do not do that? They rang 000?

Ms HEAZLEWOOD — He rang 000 from his vessel.

The ACTING CHAIR — And 000 did not transfer it to police?

Ms HEAZLEWOOD — They just said, ‘No, we don’t handle that’. So he ended up getting onto Portland Coast Guard, who rang up. That is how it got there. So it took all that time to get through to us that there was a man in trouble out there.

The ACTING CHAIR — And when was that?

Ms HEAZLEWOOD — That was about 12 months ago, maybe less.

The ACTING CHAIR — And you ended up rescuing them?

Ms HEAZLEWOOD — Yes, we did.

Mrs MILLAR — And how did that come about? How did the message eventually get through to you?

Ms HEAZLEWOOD — He tried to ring the Coast Guard and could not get that either. He ended up getting Portland Coast Guard, who rang us because it was in our area, and that is how it happened. That is what happened to him when he rang 000.

Mrs MILLAR — That was on a mobile phone?

Ms HEAZLEWOOD — Yes.

Mr TIPPET — I think the problem with 000 is that you do not necessarily get an operator within your area, where you are ringing from, and that has been the case for some time. When I was with the force someone

would ring 000 from, say, here, and you would end up speaking to someone from Sydney. That is a bit of an issue. I do not know whether that is still the case, but it certainly was several years ago.

Mr EIDEH — Is that a one-off or — —

Mr TIPPET — A one-off in relation to marine rescue, but I have had numerous situations with 000 in a previous life, but that is not relevant here.

Mr EIDEH — Yes. That is something we could request.

Mrs MILLAR — I have just one more question concerning the marine rescue being recognised as an emergency service under the Emergency Management Act. That is one of the statements in your submission. Would you like to outline that for us?

Mr TIPPET — It is just not listed under the act at this stage. You have the SES, the CFA, and other agencies'. Let's list them. It is as simple as that. Anybody can go online and get the Acts of Parliament and read through them, but if it is not written there, what are these 'other agencies'? So I think it should be recognised. Then people might understand what we are about.

Mrs MILLAR — And what benefits do you think that would have for your organisation?

Mr TIPPET — I think just recognition that it is an emergency service.

Mrs MILLAR — Do you think that would assist with attracting volunteers to your organisation?

Mr TIPPET — Yes, I do. I think it would attract people if they knew 100 per cent that it is listed as an emergency service, because you do not see it in any documentation as such. You hear it internally, but you do not see it externally.

The ACTING CHAIR — In terms of volunteers, how do you find that? Are you finding you have plenty, that the ages are okay and things like that?

Ms HEAZLEWOOD — We have a good cross-section.

Mr TIPPET — We do now. We started off with some old salties and all that sort of stuff, as you do, and that is great because you hear some great stories and really good feedback from them. There are some great yarns and a lot of knowledge, which is most important, but recently we have had a great influx of mid-20s to 40s, which is — —

The ACTING CHAIR — Why do you think that is?

Mr TIPPET — I don't know. A lot of it was from Bunnings barbeques and just word of mouth from other people. We have people from the police, paramedics, an anaesthetist, a baker — —

Ms HEAZLEWOOD — A dentist.

Mr TIPPET — Yes, a dentist, and we have two builders. So you have a cross-section of the community involved, and most of them are involved with boats or surfing or have a real connection with the ocean. We all love the ocean and have that healthy respect for it. I think we all talk to people at barbeques or pubs, clubs or whatever, and that is how, in the last two years especially, we have built up a really good mix and a really good mob of people.

Mrs MILLAR — What is the total number of volunteers?

Mr TIPPET — We have 26, and out of that we have 4 coxswains, 1 master 4 and I think 13 competent crew and 9 advanced crew.

The ACTING CHAIR — In terms of training— I do not think I have asked you this – but do you think the coxswain training being commercial is okay? The first question I should ask is: are your coxswains commercially trained?

Mr TIPPET — Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — Do you think that is appropriate, or do you think the Coast Guard is enough, or should there be another form of qualification to run a boat in this sort of situation?

Mr TIPPET — Personally I think the coxswain is appropriate, absolutely. The Coast Guard training will actually get you to that level, in time.

The ACTING CHAIR — Yes, but our understanding from other witnesses is that the certificate is different.

Mr TIPPET — Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — So it cannot be used commercially.

Mr TIPPET — Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — But yours are commercially certified?

Mr TIPPET — Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — Okay. Are there any other questions we should have asked?

Mr TIPPET — Just one thing I would pick up on is the radios. Our radio coverage is pretty dismal from Warrnambool. It should be a repeater-type situation.

The ACTING CHAIR — Do you not have a repeater here?

Mr TIPPET — No. We have a station that goes through repeater channels 80 and 81, but even on Sunday our crew are out around 8 nautical miles, and we could barely hear them.

The ACTING CHAIR — At 8 miles?

Mr TIPPET — Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — On 81?

Mr TIPPET — Yes. That is on 16, which is the emergency channel, but it should repeat. We have reasonably good coverage to the east, but to the west, because of the location of the tower as against the cliffs, which I can show you tomorrow when it will become obvious, it negates the signal, and especially further west from Julia Percy, if it is in the way there, you have no hope.

Ms HEAZLEWOOD — The offshore fishing club has had a fishing competition over the last two weeks, and we helped them out with the radios — we do their radio schedules for them, which is done every 2 hours. There were five or six boats out on Sunday, and I could only contact two. The rest were out of range for us. We just could not get them at all, so that was really difficult as well. You do not know if they are in trouble or if they have a fault with their electronics. You just have to hope and wait that they come back in and contact you once they get in closer.

The ACTING CHAIR — Anything else?

Mr TIPPET — Not that I can think of.

Ms HEAZLEWOOD — We want money.

Mr TIPPET — Yes, we need that.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you both very much for coming in. In about a fortnight you will receive a transcript of today's proceedings, and if you have a look at that you can make any changes to typographical errors or the like but nothing to the substance. Once again, thank you for all that you do and thank you for coming and seeing us today.

Witnesses withdrew.