

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND OUTER SUBURBAN/INTERFACE SERVICES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Marine Rescue Services in Victoria

Port Fairy — 15 April 2014

Members

Mr N. Burgess

Mr K. Eideh

Mr F. McGuire

Mrs A. Millar

Mr A. Ronalds

Chair: Mr N. Burgess

Deputy Chair: Mr F. McGuire

Staff

Executive Officer: Mr N. Bunt

Research Officer: Mr M. Newington

Witness

Port Fairy Yacht Club

Mr Bill Morgan, Rear Commodore

The ACTING CHAIR (Mr Ronalds)— Thank you, Bill, for coming before us. This is the hearing of the Economic Development, Infrastructure and Outer Suburban/Interface Services Committee’s inquiry into marine rescue services in Victoria. All evidence taken at this hearing this afternoon is protected by parliamentary privilege. Any comments you make outside the hearing will not be afforded such privilege. The evidence taken down will become public evidence in due course. Please state your full name and address and whether you are attending in a private capacity or representing an organisation. If you are representing an organisation, please state your position in it.

Mr MORGAN — My name is Bill Morgan. I am the current rear commodore and treasurer of the Port Fairy Yacht Club. I am representing the club today. I will also include my personal comments, which come from 30 years of ocean racing.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you, Bill. Please go ahead and make your verbal submission.

Mr MORGAN — I will start by apologising for not having a formal presentation for you. I returned from sailing not long ago to find out this was coming up. Many of the points I think are pertinent to consider have already been raised by the volunteer organisations. The Port Fairy Yacht Club’s comments address many of the same issues but from a different perspective. We are fundamentally potential recipients of the rescue services, but part of the culture in yacht racing — at least since 1998 — is that we are responsible for our own safety. Many of our efforts, both with individual boats and also within the club structures of sailing, are about addressing our own safety, really, so that we are not going to need to call on Russell or the Coast Guard. I can say that in my 30 years of sailing I am happy to talk to them on the radio when things are going well and that I have not yet had to call upon their assistance.

In our consideration I think we also need to split the activities of sailing into yacht racing, which is now very well organised and has a culture of safety, and cruising, which is not that well organised and is really quite ad hoc. From recent experience I think they need to be considered very differently. Within ocean racing — and I understand you have already had a submission from Ray Shaw from ORCV — —

The ACTING CHAIR — Yes.

Mr MORGAN — there has been a lot of training and a lot of time spent considering the safety of vessels when under way and when racing. There is a considerable amount of time spent, and there are now requirements for training of skippers and crew. There are requirements placed on the vessels in their structure and on the equipment they carry — all to address safety at sea.

We are now coming up to the second anniversary of the sinking of the *Inception*, which personally is one of the momentous events in ocean racing. There is a requirement now, as there was then, that 50 per cent of the sailing crew, including the skipper, have participated in a safety at sea survival course, which are organised through a number of different organisations. They are excellent, but they come at a cost, and that causes some resistance. But if you are going to go ocean racing, that is part of the game, so it is an important thing.

It is also a fact that within ocean racing we have clubs, and with clubs you get camaraderie and communication, which tends to engender a safety culture. I think that is very good. But bearing in mind that once we get racing the adrenaline hits our heads and knowing when to back off is something you have to learn, when that is the situation we then call on the rescue services. But I do not go around Cape Otway with the expectation that any rescue vessel will ever meet me if I needed it, because I do not think they will be there. Certainly with the *Inception* incident, despite the intentions, conditions and distance from the ports, there was not going to be a rescue vessel there; the rescue was always going to be made by another racing yacht.

The ACTING CHAIR — Is that appropriate in your opinion?

Mr MORGAN — It is appropriate, and that is why we do our training. We set ourselves up. We are there. We are setting ourselves up — our boats up — not to sink. The racing vessel is going to be the closest vessel to you. If you fall off your boat, the boat you fell off is the boat that should come and rescue you. It is the closest one there. I would not survive if I am waiting for Warrnambool to get in their boat in 20 minutes time, so I think it is appropriate. Throughout the world, racing communities have adopted that approach. We rescue ourselves, but we are prepared not to be rescued. That is important.

There was a question about whether there were sufficient rescue assets along the Victorian coast. There are not. Some of it is geographic. I battle to see how we could get a vessel launched along the coast between Port Campbell and Apollo Bay. You get in Apollo Bay, and maybe there are one or two beaches at which a small craft could get off. Port Campbell has excellent vessels, but they are not suitable for heavy seas or for big distances, so there is a geographical challenge there.

The ACTING CHAIR — What is the answer?

Mr MORGAN — As I said, my point of view is I come around Cape Otway with the expectation that I have to look after myself and that maybe a commercial ship might be there.

The ACTING CHAIR — So you are saying they are inadequate, but there is no practical answer?

Mr MORGAN — There are no easy answers with the likely funding for something to be suddenly launched and get to me at Moonlight Head.

The ACTING CHAIR — Okay. So it is about your designated — —

Mr MORGAN — I would have to ask the Coast Guard how long it would take them to get to from Warrnambool to Moonlight Head, but it would be hours.

Mr TIPPET — Yes.

Mr MORGAN — It would literally be hours. So in racing conditions, if I am near Moonlight Head, another yacht will be pretty close by, and that is the rescue vessel I would like to see. That is where it makes a difference between cruising and racing. Cruising boats coming along this part of the coast tend to travel on their own. They are not necessarily structurally sufficient compared to modern racing yachts if things are getting tough, but they are probably more heavily constructed. But then it comes down to the people who are on board. There is less likely to be a full complement of crew; it might be two or three or four people who have not a lot of experience, and their navigational aid might be that — an iPhone. It is just inadequate. There does need to be some training and transference of information to people who are cruising on yachts that it is not just the same as a caravan that you hitch up and get onto a voyage. It surprises me that people would go to sea in the Southern Ocean with that attitude, but that is the case.

Also a question was raised about the radio network along the coast. While it is great to have the repeater stations, it is good in spots and there are times and places where it just does not get through. Some of that is going to be environmental conditions. Sometimes it is just straight distance. It is true to say that around Portland it is excellent, but heading east it is more variable.

The ACTING CHAIR — Typically where do you race — how far around?

Mr MORGAN — Port Fairy Yacht Club's races — the majority are within the bay of Port Fairy. We do have half a dozen races in the ocean, which will be between Warrnambool and Portland.

The ACTING CHAIR — Do you go as far as the shelf, or is it all further in?

Mr MORGAN — Not on those races, but we also participate in the Ocean Racing Club of Victoria's races, which will be anywhere in Bass Strait. There might be a Melbourne to Hobart, a Melbourne to Port Fairy — which is this coming weekend — or a Melbourne to Portland, which we do earlier in the year, plus we are often travelling to South Australia and New South Wales for other events. They are delivery trips, but still we need to be on the radio network.

Historically there was an excellent network of volunteers who had volunteer HF radio stations. You could start off a journey in Western Australia and be handed through the HF network to your arrival in Sydney. They knew you were coming, and if you did not show up on the grid, they started calling for you.

The ACTING CHAIR — Why did that stop?

Mr MORGAN — The volunteers got old. They got bored. They got sick. They died. They did not have funding. Times changed. We still have some very good volunteers along the Australian coastline who provide

that service, and currently the two best — in my opinion the best — are on American River, Kangaroo Island, and Mary Kaye at Smithton. They will listen out for you. Their radio sets are excellently set up. On the HF channel we have great range, but over the years we have had Tamar Sea Rescue, which was brilliant, and Loch Sport in Gippsland, who would listen to us even if we were at the south end of Tasmania. They just listen out. They would know your boat.

The ACTING CHAIR — We have heard evidence that Tamar and Paynesville are still operating.

Mr MORGAN — They are, but the reliability of them and getting through and whether they are manned — these volunteers are sitting next to a radio for a lot of the time. That radio network, when it works, is brilliant, because there is a personal connection and on the HF system we have fantastic range. When it comes to HF equipment, though, it is going to cost you, I would say, \$4000 to get a boat kitted out with the gear. The listening station would be at least that, if not more, and as I mentioned, somebody has to sit there and listen to it for it to be a functional network.

The ACTING CHAIR — And the range of HF?

Mr MORGAN — I have communicated with boats in the Antarctic and the north Pacific from Port Fairy, so depending on the frequency and depending on the atmospheric conditions, it is hundreds if not thousands of kilometres, but it is expensive equipment. Internationally it has been disregarded in preference of satellite telephone contact, but still it is a good thing. In coastal waters the VHF network is present. It is manned. We just hope we can get through.

One of the other issues with communication which was raised and has become much more of an issue through the tuna season is radio chatter — sitting there listening on one of the repeater channels or on 16, and people are having a discussion about football and fishing and all sorts of other things. It does not take a lot of signal to disrupt the ability to listen out for emergency responses. That is an issue. It is an educational issue, and usually there are some loud, stern words from someone who can get through that they should change channels or shut up, but it is more and more of an issue.

In cruising yachts, again, the mobile phone may be a primary source of communication, and that is just not acceptable or appropriate along a coastline. They are not going to get through. We have enough trouble getting good signal on land, let alone on the water, but the range of the phones is certainly getting better.

There were a couple of comments made from the rescue services about the age of the people in the group. It is true to say that there is a lot of energy and a lot of experience in the older members of the clubs, and they are great and bring the services together, but I could ask any of them whether they could recover me out of the water if I am unconscious and I have my sailing kit on — I would be 120 kilograms, fully kitted out, plus water. They are not going to be able to get me on the boat, and I do not think the boat is particularly well set up for that form of personal recovery. I would like to be involved in some of the rescue exercises, and we do this as wet drills on the yachts — actually placing a big person in the water, and they volunteer to be helpless.

The ACTING CHAIR — They probably have great fun doing that, actually!

Mr MORGAN — I am quite happy to put myself in that position, but having tried to put people on board yachts in those exercises in benign conditions, it is a really big ask for strong, fit people. Max, if he is there — there is a challenge for you! Going back to racing, Yachting Australia and the ORCV have fantastic programs. They are not compulsory to participate in, but people participate at a pretty high level, and to go ocean racing we do have a requirement that some people — a majority of people — have some training.

The ACTING CHAIR — Have you ever have worked together with the local VMRs?

Mr MORGAN — The Port Fairy Yacht Club has a space available for the Port Fairy rescue service in our facilities. Half a dozen of our club members are now active participants. Yes, we have a fair bit of contact. We have known Michael for quite a few years. The marine network is pretty tight.

Mrs MILLAR — Presumably within your club you have both racing and cruising members.

Mr MORGAN — Correct.

Mrs MILLAR — Are you undertaking training? Having highlighted the issues you have around the cruising members, are you undertaking training within the club to assist with skill development?

Mr MORGAN — Within our club the majority of people who are cruising are in fact retired racers, so we have club members at the moment in the north Pacific, in Asia and in South America. Twenty years ago they were racing hard; now they are cruising. So they have that experience. They have that culture.

We have very few members in the club who are inexperienced, untrained cruisers. We have had people join the club to gain experience to go cruising, but if we look at the people on boats that visit Port Fairy cruising, probably two-thirds of them have gone aboard a boat and then gone sailing, so it is a different type of connection. Within our club membership, yes, we have ongoing training. We get people who have done an ocean voyage — one of these retired racers — to come back and tell us about what they did and what they saw. We get to see fantastic photos of Patagonia and things like that, so it brings the club together. But there is a part of the sailing community that we do not touch because they are not part of the sailing framework. I suppose that is a challenge. One thing we do have is that a couple of our members loiter around the riverside a lot, and they do welcome in these visiting cruisers and bring them up to the club to welcome them in. So we have some contact, but it is only as much as their visit.

Mrs MILLAR — Some of the other organisations referred to some of the pre-prepared materials that they are getting from other sources. Is that something that you have access to?

Mr MORGAN — Historically, when it was Marine Safety Victoria, we got a lot of materials. We had materials through Yachting Australia and the ORCV on access. Most of our materials now are probably really looking at training opportunities for the skill of racing, the competitive part of racing. Since the transition to Transport Safety Victoria we have not had the same contact for those sorts of materials.

The ACTING CHAIR — Do you think the organisation is not as proactive, or what do you think?

Mr MORGAN — I think the focus is a little bit different.

The ACTING CHAIR — Explain.

Mr MORGAN — There were personnel within Marine Safety Victoria with whom we had a history, so, because of that contact, materials would flow, and information would flow. In the change of the department that connection did not occur. If the connection is not there, the information does not flow.

Mr EIDEH — Bill, as a consumer of services provided by marine search and rescue organisations, in your opinion are those provided in the Port Fairy area fit for purpose?

Mr MORGAN — I am very proud of what I have seen the local services perform. As I mentioned, we have not had to call on them for our yachting events, with the exception of the sinking of the *Inception*. I think with the quality of the assets that they have got, the personnel they have got and the conditions they operate in they do a good job. There is plenty of enthusiasm. We are on the edge of Bass Strait — it is a pretty severe bit of water, and on a couple of occasions the assets and personnel just were not suitable for going out. More people would have died. If we had a wish list, having rescue vessels of the quality of the British volunteer rescue service would be wonderful, but I do not see that being something that turns up very soon.

The ACTING CHAIR — What do they have?

Mr MORGAN — They have just got the most amazing vessels that can go out in anything.

Mrs MILLAR — And a lot less coastline.

Mr MORGAN — A lot more people. Some of the weather conditions and the geographic conditions are similar, but they have got all-weather vessels, a lot more financial support for it and a much bigger population to service.

Mr EIDEH — What marine search and rescue services does the Port Fairy Yacht Club provide its members during its events and competitions? Do you believe these are adequate?

Mr MORGAN — So the question is: are the services we get for the yacht racing adequate?

Mr EIDEH — Yes. Do you believe these are adequate?

Mr MORGAN — So long as we continue to have a culture where the yacht racers are looking after their own safety, yes, I think we do. Having the relationship we have with the rescue services certainly helps. With the exception of the *Inception*, we have not faced the need for rescue of a racing vessel in severe circumstances at long distance yet. If that happened, or the weather conditions were like Easter two years ago, I do not think there is a rescue service in Australia that could provide that — not on the water — and there are limits to what can be offered from the air.

Mrs MILLAR — The lack of coordination which other witnesses have referred to today, is that something which your club has any experience of?

Mr MORGAN — Yes, but our contact is much less frequent, and we are seen as being outsiders by the rescue community rather than intrinsic participants. Certainly with Easter two years ago — and I was actually working with the Port Fairy rescue service on that night — the communication within the rescue network, and particularly what was being coordinated out of Canberra, seemed excellent. The information coming from the rescue services back to the local rescue services did not seem to occur with any coherence. But we have very limited contact.

Mrs MILLAR — Just finally, how would you see that type of scenario being improved?

Mr MORGAN — I think if you use the examples that have come from, say, fire management or other emergency management, there are protocols and there are systems to make sure the information trickles through with the right level of authority. Useful information can be distributed without causing confusion or adding to the burden of command. Communication should not be that big an issue for us, and the coordination between different organisations, again, should not be that hard. It just seems that there are some jurisdictions that do not work together so well.

Mrs MILLAR — Would your club be in favour of a single service or single system?

Mr MORGAN — From our point of view, so long as if we needed help we received it, it would not really matter who provided it. For the environment we are sailing in it is probably going to be coming from us anyway. I do not think that matters; I think that the communication pathways being streamlined and single point is probably the important part for us. We are not dealing with the organisation and the administration of the rescue process.

The ACTING CHAIR — Are there any questions we should have asked that we have not? You have heard me ask that question now three times.

Mr MORGAN — Certainly the point of the coordination of the different groups, I think that is a very important one to address. There are other examples, other emergency circumstances, where that can be made to work with essentially the same agencies, so a water rescue should not be that much different. I think certainly the distribution of the assets and the access to certain parts is something that needs to be looked at. Considering the geography, that is a very big challenge, but it has got to be looked at if we are going to have a safe coast. It does need to be this extension of the safety culture to the non-club participants, and that goes to other recreational boaters. Maybe it does come down to our club or the rescue services having seminars on different communication types.

Just talking with Russell, there is a big difference in VHF transmission ability of someone who is sitting in a little tinnie with cheap batteries in their unit to someone who has got a better radio unit and is standing up to my boat that transmits at 25 watts, 15 metres off the water. Just people understanding that a mobile phone could be really cool but is not going to keep you alive in the water. But, saying that, the only reason that the people on the *Inception* are alive is because one of the Port Fairy Yacht Club members had his phone on him and rang me. For that event no mayday was ever heard on a radio transmission. We were just lucky that Doug got through to that phone. We should not underplay it, but we should not put too much reliance on it — and they do not swim. Essentially I suppose some public education needs to be done in that regard.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you, Bill, for your time and for coming in to talk to us. In the next fortnight you will receive a transcript of today's proceedings. You can have a look at that and make any typographical changes but nothing to the substance. Thank you once again; enjoy your sailing.

Committee adjourned.