

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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Australian Volunteer Coast Guard, VF20 Port Welshpool

Mr Rocco Maruzza, Commander

Mr Anthony Cook, Section Officer/Planner

Mr Darren McAinch, Deputy Commander

The CHAIR — This is an all-party parliamentary committee 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 inquiry into marine rescue services in Victoria. All evidence taken today will be protected by parliamentary privilege, but any comments you make outside this forum will not have the same privilege. Can you all state your full names, addresses and whether you are appearing on behalf of an organisation.

Mr McAINCH — Darren McAinch, [REDACTED], on behalf of Port Welshpool Coast Guard.

Mr COOK — Anthony Cook, [REDACTED], appearing on behalf of VF20 Port Welshpool Coast Guard.

Mr MARUZZA — My name is Rocco Maruzza. I am flotilla commander at Port Welshpool Coast Guard, VF20, and I live at [REDACTED]

The CHAIR — You are all appearing on behalf of that flotilla.

Mr MARUZZA — We are.

The CHAIR — Excellent. The evidence you give today will become part of a public document, so your evidence will be public. I invite you to make your oral submission.

Mr MARUZZA — I would first like to thank the members of the committee for coming down this far, and I apologise for one getting lost — but that is fine. I have got the reference I submitted here, but I would also like to give a brief introduction into who we are and what we have done. I will also unpack some of those comments that were in the terms of reference.

Good afternoon, Mr Burgess, and members of the Economic Development, Infrastructure and Outer Suburban/Interface Services Committee, associated parliamentary staff, members, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Rocco Maruzza, and I am currently flotilla commander at Port Welshpool Coast Guard, VF20. I have been commander at Welshpool since November 2012, and my experience also includes a previous term as commander at Warrnambool. I have held various other ranks. My expertise comes from 30 years on the oceans of southern Australia as a professional fisherman, and I have attained a skippers grade 2, master 5, MED 3. I recently graduated from Deakin University with a Bachelor of Environmental Science, and late last year with another one of my members we did a Training and Assessment Certificate IV in training members.

I am currently a committee member of the Port Welshpool Working Group, the Welshpool Recreation Reserve Committee and the Port Welshpool Maritime Museum. Over the past 15 to 20 years I have been a member of the South Gippsland Agricultural Steering Committee, of the Gippsland Aquaculture Industry Network, the Gippsland Agribusiness Forum and the Victorian Aquaculture Council.

To my right is Darren McAinch, a commercial boat operator, coxswain and Yanakie beef farmer, who operates Prom Coastal Charters down at the Prom, takes out fishing parties on sightseeing trips to Wilsons Promontory and over many years has had a lot of experience in our area. Next to him on my right is Anthony Cook, who is a surveyor at Bass Coast Council and has just come on board recently. He is a great addition in helping us with a new building prospect.

At this time I would like to mention that there are a few different items I would like to present. I am just going to read through a basic bit of history of what Port Welshpool came from. In 1982 members of the Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol organised some members who lived in Latrobe Valley to man a base and become a division of Coastal Patrol at Port Welshpool. That is how we started. That is what happened about 36 years ago. It has been there ever since. In 2002 a new vessel called *Kemsley Street* was built for Coastal Patrol. It was a 7.4-metre Bass Strait boat. Marine Safety Victoria paid 80 per cent of the cost, and I believe the other 20 per cent was a combination of coastal patrol and local council. TSV made some design changes which made the vessel somewhat awkward to handle when planing. Furthermore, several years later, they introduced other changes and decreased the stability of the vessel.

The CHAIR — What sorts of changes, Rocco?

Mr MARUZZA — The original one was that they lifted the floor 8 inches from the basic design it was originally designed from.

The CHAIR — Why was that?

Mr MARUZZA — Because TSV said that all commercial boats [decks] needed to be a certain height above the waterline.

Mr McAINCH — Where you actually stand in the boat has to be a certain height above water level.

The CHAIR — Regardless of what that does to the — —

Mr McAINCH — Handling of the boat.

Mr MARUZZA — They have now, I think, rescinded that, but that is 12 years later. Another piece was that they enclosed the back of it, so it took more weight up top and made it more unstable.

— What happened was that we updated motors, and they wanted to do another stability test on it. Through their wisdom they made us fill the back of the cabin in, which was a good idea in theory. It kept us nice and warm but created more weight up high and made the vessel very tender and lively to handle — not very stable.

Mr MARUZZA — Following on, in 2005 the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard Association approached the Port Welshpool Volunteer Coastal Patrol to join the organisation. In 2007 a charter of operations was granted to Victorian Flotilla 20, Port Welshpool. In 2008 the Victoria Coast Guard signed an MOU with the Country Fire Authority, the CFA, and Coast Guard brigades were created. So we formed under the auspices of CFA and the CFA act of 1958. Our brigade number is 9373. We actually have dual roles; if a fire occurs, we also have to perform a duty there.

Here we are in 2014. Not only do we need a new vessel; we also need a building to be replaced. If Coast Guard has to survive down where we are at Welshpool, it needs to be addressed very soon. There has been a very informal arrangement or association over the past 30 years between council and the unit down there.

The CHAIR — What sort of arrangement?

Mr MARUZZA — We have operated out of where we are. We are on Crown land, with a building where there is no title. Nothing. There are no plans. There is no information.

Mr McAINCH — No building permits.

Mr MARUZZA — No building permits — nothing. We have been there for a long time. It is something I am addressing at the moment with council. We are going through a stage where we can get some clarification. They administer the boat ramp there. Our main constituents are the people using the boat ramps. Over the past three or four years this has really increased dramatically — the amount of people who use it. A lot of people from Melbourne and the Latrobe Valley use it — not so many locals, because there are not many locals. Our population is only about 174.

The CHAIR — What does it go up to in peak?

Mr MARUZZA — Population wise? I would not have a clue.

Mr McAINCH — On any given Saturday or Sunday, weather permitting, there could be anything up to 350 trailer boats operating out of Port Welshpool.

Mr MARUZZA — I have collected some data, but I have not collated it, over the last few years. It is just raw data.

The CHAIR — What about the increase in personal craft?

Mr MARUZZA — We have noticed more of an increase in kayaks, actually. We are starting to do more kayak rescues. People get out in the middle of Corner Inlet. They hire the kayak, they go out and then they

cannot get back. They have been out in 30-knot winds, and then who has to go and rescue them? Us. We get put in adverse conditions quite regularly.

The CHAIR — What would you say their level of preparation is?

Mr MARUZZA — Not very good.

The CHAIR — Do they take a GPS or anything?

Mr McAINCH — Some do.

Mr MARUZZA — Yes, we had one kayaker whose club told him to take their EPIRB, and he took it. He fell out of his boat in the middle of Singapore Deep and could not get back on. After 40 or 50 minutes he started to panic and pressed the button. A Barry Beach boat happened to be going past. They [AMSA] did not even see him; he was only 300 metres away in his kayak in the water. Because they are on AIS we were able to say to them, ‘Could you please pick him up?’, and then we turned up 5, 10 or 15 minutes later, or whatever it was, and took them off him. He said to us he had practised at the beach how to get in and out, but when you are out in the middle of something like that with waves coming from every different direction, it is not like on a surf beach. It is totally different, with how the tide and the wind act.

The CHAIR — And panic.

Mr MARUZZA — I will not refer to any more. I am sure that the Victorian state council has delivered a fairly large, comprehensive account on how many registered boats there are and the data they have collected over the years.

As for us, so far this year we have performed 23 MIRs, which you might not think is a lot, but our average time for them is approximately 2 hours or more because of the actual time it takes us to launch, which is about half an hour or 20 minutes — 20 minutes if we are flat out, if we are right there. If we have to drive down, it takes half an hour. To go anywhere in Corner Inlet, it is a fair way. The Prom is quite big; our waters are right down to the bottom of the Prom. Right inside Corner Inlet it is 27 miles long. It is a large body of water. It is open water as soon as you leave the long jetty. I do not know if you understand that. Open water means that you are like being out at sea; it gets quite rough, even in close where we come out of Lewis Channel, our main channel from Port Welshpool. It is called Singapore Deep. It is quite treacherous; the tide runs very hard. That is a bit of history of us. I do not know if you want me to read out this.

The CHAIR — No, we have read that.

Mr MARUZZA — You have got it?

The CHAIR — Yes. There is a question I have for you. What sorts of black spots exist in communications?

Mr MARUZZA — Down along the Prom on the east side and the very bottom there are lots of black spots, either by radio or by telephone — —

The CHAIR — There are phone black spots there as well, are there?

Mr MARUZZA — Yes, lots of them. In fact once you get off the coast south-east of the Prom, once you go out about 10 or 15 miles, there is no phone. You have to wait until you go another 15 or 20 miles, and then you will get it from Tasmania, so there is a big black spot there. Regarding the radios, right at the bottom of the Prom and in close there are a lot of communication problems there. There is a prime example. We were doing a rescue last Sunday and I called Melbourne. The Melbourne Coast Guard radio could not pick us up, my own local station could not pick us up, I could not get anyone on the phone and then finally when we got to a certain spot we could. But what if you are in trouble, if your GPS drops out on your AIS while you are going along because there are too many mountains down there and they cover the way? We both went on the repeater stations 81, 22 and channel 16, and there were problems on all of them. There is a black spot there — there are a lot of black spots down there on the communications side of things. I have asked for an HF set, which Coast Guard is in the throes of providing. I believe that will help with being able to be picked up by our base, but probably a satellite phone is a more modern way of communicating.

The CHAIR — Is that the extent of your evidence, Rocco?

Mr MARUZZA — No, I have plenty. I have a few things in my submission that I want to unpack. You have my comments, but they are just broad comments; there is no information. For example, term of reference (b) is ‘Outline the current structure of marine rescue service provision in Victoria’. We do not have any funding; there is no recurrent funding. Richard spoke earlier about the fact that flotillas have a hard time down this way. Our population is really little. Most of our customers come from the Latrobe Valley or from Melbourne so you cannot draw from any funding locally; the same people get hit all the time and all the groups everywhere else hit the same few people. All our funding comes from undertaking raffles, sausage sizzles, community events and donations. That is how we survive. I have been running some larger events to make some money. When you look at our bottom line we might turn over \$20 000 or \$30 000, but most of it goes on costs.

The CHAIR — How many members?

Mr MARUZZA — About 36, and they stretch from Werribee — I have members from all over Victoria — from — —

Mr McAINCH — Gembrook.

Mr MARUZZA — Gembrook, Pakenham, Leongatha, Yarram, Morwell, Waratah, Foster, Toora, Welshpool and Port Welshpool, so on.

The CHAIR — The Werribee one must take a while for a turnout.

Mr MARUZZA — No, I am very good at standing on their toes and not letting them go. When I need help I ask people for an hour, because an hour is better than not having an hour at all.

The CHAIR — Sure.

Mr MARUZZA — Basically this last year we have probably done over 5000 hours of activities. That includes training, fundraising and admin. I do pretty well the lot from being the CEO to being the cleaner and everything in between, including writing grants — you name it. I am out on the rescues; it is only Darren and I who are the skippers. We are both just commercially qualified. I have another couple of commercial guys; one is in Morwell and he is the original. His name is Sid Hurley. He started the coastal patrol 30-something years ago and he is still an active member. Not that much, but — —

The CHAIR — You just do not let them go, do you, Rocco?

Mr MARUZZA — No, something like that.

Mr COOK — Can I just say that Sid Hurley and people at that time basically put that base together. That is my understanding. They built the steel shed that houses the boat and the towing truck and the transportable buildings. They used whatever means were available to them or got those transportable buildings and got them on site at that time.

The CHAIR — It is probably where the relationship came from between the council and your building, I would say.

Mr MARUZZA — It was different back then. The amalgamation has not helped the South Gippsland region, especially us down here on the end. When they looked at it and crossed the line on the map they said, ‘You have that bit, you have that bit and you have that bit’. They did not really look at the demographic or at the physical topographical area of the region, which is a bit sad, but that is another story.

The CHAIR — What is your insurance per year?

Mr MARUZZA — Ours is probably close to the same as Port Albert. It is about \$6500. Sometimes the state council will pay 40 per cent when they run a scratchie raffle thing, but it is still a lot of money. I am actually behind and probably owe them a few thousand at the moment. I have a few other thousand-dollar bills, and I only have X amount of money in the bank.

The CHAIR — Do you know how the insurance is calculated?

Mr MARUZZA — I am not exactly sure, no.

The CHAIR — It seems to be regardless of the size of the flotilla. Everyone comes up with the same figure.

Mr MARUZZA — Yes, maybe that is what it is. They keep telling me that usually if you have a bigger or more expensive boat, that you pay more.

The CHAIR — I have heard that, but no-one has come up with a different figure yet.

Mr MARUZZA — That is good, because I have been told otherwise.

Mr McAINCH — That flies in the face of — Port Albert's boat is valued at \$250 000 or \$300 000, I would be guessing, and ours would be about \$100 000 or less.

Mr EIDEH — I was going to ask if there is a shortfall in the funding.

Mr MARUZZA — There is a lot more than that. We are not treated the same as, say, an SES or a CFA that are enacted. That is one of the things that should be done; we should be enacted. I would just like to read this stuff, and then you can hit me with it after.

The CHAIR — Sure.

Mr MARUZZA — Port Welshpool volunteers perform a plethora of rescues and duties. These include locating vessels and towing them back to port; securing personnel on said vessels; searching for missing persons both in water and along the shoreline; searching for kayaks and rescuing persons with them; and collecting injured hikers off Wilsons Promontory. Port Welshpool Coast Guard members are also Coast Guard brigade members of the CFA.

Mr McAINCH — Just on that, at any given time on a busy weekend down at the prom there could be up to 600 hikers spread around the southern end. We did plenty of evacuations when they had the recent fires down there. It was all seamless, it all happens and all gets done professionally. They say that the only other one was Cyclone Tracy — —

Mr MARUZZA — Pre the 2005 fires down at the prom, that was one of the biggest evacuations in Australia since Cyclone Tracy. It was overrun by the big fires and floods in 2009. But no-one had even heard about it — no-one in government, no-one anywhere. That is another thing when you say, 'Not heard'. If I do a rescue in the middle of the night, unless they are famous and you get the television cameras down there, no-one knows about it.

Mr McAINCH — No-one knows.

Mr MARUZZA — It is not like we are firefighters or the SES when you hear sirens and people see it everywhere; the papers can turn up as well as the radio news. But they cannot do that with us; we are sort of the poor cousin in that. We fight fires on vessels and jetties. We have put out the long jetty twice.

The CHAIR — Have you?

Mr MARUZZA — Yes, we helped to put that out twice after unusual circumstances.

The CHAIR — What sort of unusual circumstances? Don't go there?

Mr McAINCH — People fishing on it. They might have been having a fag on a hot, windy day and that butts go down between the — —

Mr MARUZZA — No, I do not think that is really one. I do not really want to speak about that — —

The CHAIR — That is okay.

Mr MARUZZA — It is not for us to comment on it here. Members participated as security at the Yarram fire staging grounds during the recent fires. I do not know if anyone knows about that. We promote ourselves at events and festivals, fundraise through raffles and sausage sizzles, lobby the local council for funds, and talk to local, state and federal members on issues. We plead with the state council squadron about receiving a replacement vessel, and propose the redevelopment and construction of a new base at Port Welshpool.

Mr COOK — We are inviting quotations from a number of architectural firms for design work for a new base and a costing on the design so we have something to work with. At the moment it is very difficult to come up with a figure. We need some conceptual plans that we can present to people. The buildings are there, as Rocco alluded to before. They have been there for a very long time. They were transportable buildings at the end of their lives when they were relocated to Port Welshpool. They had served their purpose whatever they had been used for before in some construction areas. They have been used for another 30-odd years as a base at Port Welshpool.

Mr MARUZZA — They are a bit dangerous.

Mr COOK — They have well and truly reached the end of their useful lives. To rebuild the base is really a high priority. The vessel is high priority, but for us to have a place that we can train in, meet in and carry out our functions into the future it really needs to be rebuilt.

Mr MARUZZA — We sort of have an 8-foot by 20-foot area. If you put 19 people in there when you are training, you are very intimate.

Our area of operation is vast, and most of it is classed as open water. The tidal effect and wind patterns in the region have a detrimental effect on rescues. Adverse weather conditions play an integral role in how rescues are carried out. Local knowledge is an important aspect of leadership during the decision process regarding positive rescue results, as Richard alluded to earlier. Vessel acquisition, design and construction require input from all parties involved.

From a local perspective, it is imperative that the local adverse weather conditions, geographical topography and specialised equipment are taken into consideration when a building or vessel is modified for a particular region as the coastline has its own characteristics.

To unpack that a little bit, if you were to send a helicopter down the bottom of the Prom to rescue somebody up against the rocks, there is no way they could do it. There are quite a lot of places around the Prom that they cannot get into because it is sheer cliff, and if they got close the updrafts would put them into the side of the mountain, so there is a lot of that. There is a lot of deep water on the edges as well, so you just cannot have any little boat; you need something that is substantial that you can have as a mother ship, and then use an IRB to rescue the person and bring them back to the mother ship.

Keeping volunteers interested in Coast Guard is very difficult because of the lack of support to the organisation in the form of vessels and buildings. Most people take a look at what is on offer and the quality and quantity of the equipment and shake their heads in disbelief, and off they go — you do not see them again. You only bring them down to the shed once, and that is it. If I have not nailed their foot to the floor, it is really hard.

Fuel is another sore point. We cannot get anyone to understand that using a truck to launch a vessel during a rescue is a cost to performing said rescue. This should also include maintenance. The MFB, CFA and SES are fully funded for fuel. If we use the truck to take the vessel from the shed to the ramp, we are not reimbursed for that fuel, let alone whenever we drive up and get fuel for the boat. We are not reimbursed for that.

Mr EIDEH — Is it a long distance?

Mr MARUZZA — No, it is not, but over time when you are a little flotilla, every dollar counts.

Mr McAINCH — Nathan was there today, and we showed him that there are three brand-new batteries sitting on the bench. We blew a battery on the last rescue we did. It dropped a cell, so all the batteries went in together, so replace, and if one is gone, the next lot are coming. There was \$500 worth of batteries, and we got them at cost through some good local help, but it is still \$500 that we have got to find from flipping burgers and sausages and harassing people at pubs for donations. It is hard work.

Mr MARUZZA — We have given you a lot of negative stuff. Now I would like to give you a bit of positive stuff, looking at help for where we can go. I have been informed that all the vessel registrations tally 170 000 in 2012 from local figures; I cannot quote that exactly, but I got it out of the Coast Guard business plan — go directly into general revenue. This is not boat licences; this is boat registrations, which trails into general revenue. The new authority being established should take this into consideration when creating a funding model. A levy should be imposed on boat users who rely on the service that we give and be administered through the vessel registration, not just fishing licences but also trailer registrations — whatever. If it is costing the state, then the people using the service should be paying for it.

Mr McAINCH — If you want to have a user-pays system, hit the people who are using us — that is, the boaties. It is simple.

Mr MARUZZA — Here we go. Will I read this last one?

Mr McAINCH — Keep going.

Mr MARUZZA — There needs to be a change from the old boys' club to inclusiveness. By that I mean at the moment 51 per cent of the population is female, but in the Coast Guard you are lucky to see one or two women here and there. I believe we are missing out on a lot of help from that sector.

The CHAIR — Why do you think that is?

Mr McAINCH — There is perception that it is a male-dominated area.

Mr MARUZZA — No room for them.

Mr McAINCH — Yes.

Mr MARUZZA — That is the way we have been brought up — for example, 'throw like a girl', coined by an Australian woman back in the seventies. If you do not let people expand when they are growing up and girls get pushed back into a box, then they do not reach their full potential. The example of 'throw like a girl' is off *MythBusters*. They did one where they got people to throw with their normal hand and then made them all throw left-handed, and there was no difference. Then they showed a girl who was trained from very young to throw a ball like a man, and she threw even better than him. There needs to be some sort of change in how we approach it, or we are not going to survive. It becomes a blokes' world — it is run by blokes for blokes.

Mr McAINCH — It has got to change.

Mr MARUZZA — It has got to change. We have also started a group process. One of my members, who is also 2IC in SES up at Yarram, successfully put a program together for the Yarram group, and now he is doing it for us. He has been asked by SES to do a 10-week program for the state.

The CHAIR — What is the program?

Mr MARUZZA — Group Processes. I have just been on it myself.

Mr McAINCH — Mark calls it 'How to Learn and Play Friendly Together'. It is inclusive — how we interact with each other and stuff like that.

Mr MARUZZA — I have not got enough information here to give you exactly.

Mr McAINCH — It is Mark's baby. We are just along for the ride, and we are learning plenty out of the two sessions we have done so far. It has been terrific.

The CHAIR — That is good.

Mr MARUZZA — They have taken their group from being an all-boys club of 5 or 6 that nearly imploded to now having 20 members — 50 per cent female and 50 per cent male. They just had an induction of 15 members last week.

Mr McAINCH — Another half female, half male.

The CHAIR — That is good.

Mr MARUZZA — So they are doing something right.

The CHAIR — They are.

Mr MARUZZA — The administration side of Coast Guard has a lot to be desired. The amount of paperwork that goes missing is frustrating and is a major problem for all units. We are all just volunteers, so I am not really hard on that, but it is hard to move forward. Even I do not get all my paperwork in, but how much can you do? If you look at the hours I do down there — I am on a pension now because I have got damaged legs from work-related stuff — I feel like I work harder now than I ever have in my whole life, as a volunteer.

Mr McAINCH — To expand on the amount of hours that Rocco puts in, so much of it is in doing grant work, fundraising and stuff like that. If we can get half of that time back and put that into more training and stuff like that, the whole organisation would be so much better, but his time is tied up in so much red tape, chasing money to try and survive. It is just wrong.

Mr MARUZZA — I thank you for taking into account all these comments and hope something comes of it.

The CHAIR — It was an absolute pleasure.

Mr MARUZZA — Sorry for taking up so much time.

The CHAIR — Not at all. Thank you very much, Rocco, for the time you spent with Nathan today, for the time you have spent with us today, for your patience and for the information you have given us — the updated information and the added information that you have given in your oral submission. It is obviously information that is critical to our deliberations. Even though we have sat and listened to many people in many different places, we are getting more information and refining that information each time, so that is really important. There is an age-old adage that you do not know what you do not know, and even when you are told something, sometimes you do not know it until you keep hearing it and you start to understand what it means. Hearing this information from you is very helpful to us, and we are very grateful to you for being here.

You will receive a transcript of today's proceedings within the next couple of weeks. Please feel free to point out where you believe there are any grammatical errors, but please do not make any changes to the substance of the document.

Mr MARUZZA — I might add that I gave Nathan some rough photos of a couple of vessels that we are interested in.

The CHAIR — Okay, thank you very much.

Mr COOK — Wish list.

The CHAIR — Thank you for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.