

A treacherous voyage

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In the pre-dawn hours of Tuesday 8 November 2005 Federal and State police in Victoria and New South Wales were executing a series of warrants in connection with a major counter-terrorism operation. At the same time, across the country, Federal Agent Justine Adamek and Ms Kylie Pratt watched as the Panamanian registered vessel *MV Furness Karumba* slipped in to berth at Kwinana, south of Perth.

Standing alongside the AFP members were teams from Australian Customs Service, the Department of Immigration, Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, West Australian Police, and Fire and Emergency Services, as well as various personnel associated with the Port Authority.

A report had been received from the ships' Captain, Mr Rodolfo Escoton that on 3 November, following mid-voyage checks of cargo having endured very rough seas, two stowaways had been discovered locked in a cargo hold. The two men from Africa had covertly boarded the ship while it was docked in Laayoune, Morocco, in the company of two other African men, immediately prior to it departing for Australia loaded with 40,050 tonnes of phosphate and pot ash.

After 27 days at sea, enduring – for the most part – force eight and nine gale conditions, the two men had been able to alert the crew of their location, locked inside the hold with a load of phosphate. Unfortunately, it was too late for their companions, who died at sea.

When the ship docked, Customs and Immigration officers boarded and conducted a full stowaway search. The two African men were attended to by a nurse before being carefully removed from the ship. While they were able to walk, it was a slow and painful course they made to the waiting vehicles, leaning heavily on the Immigration officers accompanying them. It was obvious that they had suffered greatly by their emaciated and drawn appearances, their eyes wide with bewilderment at the sight of the crowd of officials and emergency services, waiting their turn to do their jobs.

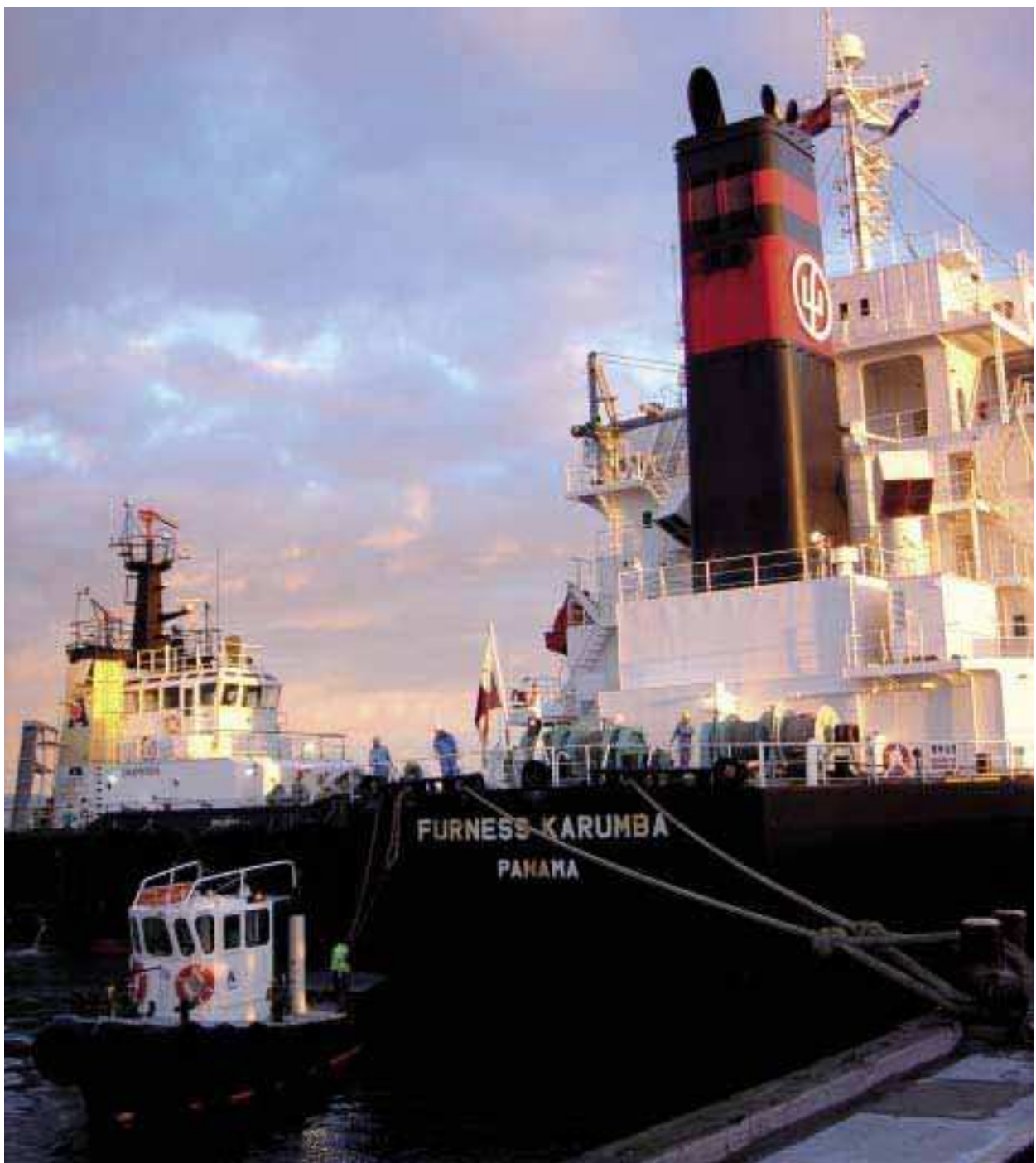
The site of their companions' deaths was a large hold, measuring approx 28.5m by 32.1m with a depth of 15.6m. The 9,875 tonnes of phosphate stored in this hold filled approximately two thirds of the available space. The phosphate was very light and powdery, presenting a potential sinking hazard for any of the officers tasked with the examination of the crime scene and the recovery of the deceased.

Fire and Emergency Services (FESA) officers went in to the hold in full Hazmat suits and self-contained breathing apparatus. They were able to determine there were no hazardous gases present, but because of the fine nature of the dust, they recommended all personnel wear sealed overalls, gloves and boots, and a full-face filtration system. Anyone entering the site was also attached to a safety harness, manned by FESA officers from the deck above the hold.

The crime scene was processed by officers attached to the West Australian Police Crime Scene Unit. The deceased men were retrieved and brought to the deck using a litter and the ships' crane system. They were then taken to the mortuary for an autopsy and further investigation as required by the State Coroner.

From information supplied by the ships' captain and crew, the hold was loaded and sealed before a stowaway check was conducted prior to the ship departing Morocco on 7 October. The course of the ship was a direct route south along the West African coastline, taking a left turn at the Republic of South Africa, crossing the Indian Ocean to Western Australia.

The ship began to experience rough seas when it rounded the Cape of Good Hope which continued for 23 days. When it was safe to do so, the crew maintained a cargo check, to ensure no damage or water seepage had occurred. It was at this point crew were alerted to the surviving stowaways when they heard muffled voices and scratching on the metal hull. The crime scene clearly showed evidence that the men had moved across the powdery surface of the phosphate mound and scratched and tried to climb along some areas of the walls on the edges of the hold. They had even attempted to



Photos by Justine Adamek

light a small fire on the mound, possibly in an attempt to shed light in what would have been a completely dark, disorienting and vast cavern.

The men disclosed they had decided to board the ship with only enough food and water for several days, hoping to be able to sneak off when the ship docked at the next port they thought would be in Europe.

During the crime scene examination, a quantity of food including legumes, nuts and dates were found, enough for several more days, but all the plastic water bottles discovered were empty. Without enough liquid sustenance, the quartet faced a doomed voyage.

Sadly, it spelled the end for two of the adventurers. The two survivors have been repatriated.

