

# Operation C

*Operation Calculate culminated with the seizure of eight tonnes of cannabis resin imported on a yacht in Queensland in December 1996.*

*Eighteen people were arrested.*

*In February 1998 in the Queensland Supreme Court, 13 pleaded guilty and were sentenced to prison terms ranging from eight to 14 years. Another five accused were awaiting trial as Manifest went to press.*

*GREG CORRIGAN, TRACEY*

*EMERY and JOHN TOLMAN tell the story.*

In August 1996, Gerry Hunt and Tracey Emery from Customs Border Operations in Brisbane received information that an American registered sloop named *Highlander* was involved in an expected importation of a large quantity of cannabis resin into Queensland. For their colleague, John Tolman, the first task was to confirm this information.

The resulting Operation Calculate produced not only law-enforcement results, but through extensive combined operations between Customs and federal and state police forces, provided a wealth of cross-experience which will greatly benefit all three agencies.

Initial checks in Australia could not identify the existence of any such vessel, but dispatches were sent to selected overseas agencies and one proved fruitful.



*Customs officers on board the Highlander after seizure.*

Tuvalu Customs identified an 18-metre sloop named *Highlander* in Funafuti which was about to depart for the east coast of Australia. An alert was raised. Things were looking interesting.

The *Highlander* was sighted in open ocean by Coastwatch aircraft as it approached the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef and its movements were covertly monitored as it headed for landfall. Many yachts choose to sail south of the Great Barrier Reef rather than risking navigation through its treacherous channels and waters. Many yachts, even some equipped with the most sophisticated navigation equipment, have come to grief on the countless coral outcrops that lie beneath the surface of the gleaming seas. These yachts call into Bundaberg for Customs clearance before cruising north in the protected and often tranquil

# calculate

## INTER-AGENCY COOPERATION UNDERScores SUCCESS

waters that lie between the Reef and the Australian mainland.

The *Highlander* eventually sailed through the Burnett Heads and presented itself for Customs clearance at Bundaberg on 18 October 1996. The sugar town of Bundaberg, famous for its rum, has two Customs officers whose primary role during the peak yachting season is boarding and clearing of overseas yachts. Anticipating the arrival of the *Highlander*, a search team was assembled with assistance from staff from the nearby Gladstone District Office.

But the two who went on board the yacht established that there was no sign of a shipment of drugs. Customs interest was heightened because the size and austere fitout of the vessel indicated it was purpose-built for a specific task. It was ideal for the transport of multi-tonne cargo. The master of the *Highlander* applied for and was given a Customs cruise permit to spend six months cruising the tropical waters and islands along the Great Barrier Reef.

### True intentions revealed

The master's genuine intentions were soon revealed. On 23 October 1996 the *Highlander* sailed out of Burnett Heads. But instead of 'turning left' and heading north for perhaps, Lady Musgrave or Lady Elliot islands, to enable the crew to haul in Spanish mackerel or enjoy whale watching, the yacht continued straight out to sea. This immediate breach of the conditions of a cruise permit provided even more of an insight into upcoming events.

On 29 October 1996, information from overseas passed to the joint Customs-Australian Federal Police investigative team

advised of a small, unknown merchant vessel heading towards Melanesia with a huge consignment of cannabis for the Australian and North American markets. Coincidence and hypothesis soon had this vessel linked with the *Highlander*. Further overseas investigative work would hopefully confirm this.

After a three-week stint in Pacific international waters, the *Highlander* was again located offshore on 20 November 1996 by Coastwatch and covertly observed until it reached Mooloolaba Yacht Club, on the popular Sunshine Coast. Combined Customs and AFP surveillance teams were dispatched to monitor the yacht and crew movements to identify the status of any importation.

During one episode, two Customs officers and the suspects were the only people in a particular area. The Customs officers' cover was to sit inconspicuously

*Continued over page*



*Drugs seized from the Highlander.*

under a cafe verandah like a couple of relaxed tourists. At this early hour, the only food the cafe could provide was coffee and sausage rolls - which in normal circumstances was better than nothing. Unfortunately in this case it meant enduring the worst coffee and microwave-heated sausage rolls ever served. After some time, the targets left the area and, with great relief, the surveillance team could get away. The female member, roped in at the last minute and compelled to eat sausage rolls, then informed her colleagues she was a vegetarian - that's commitment!

The crew of the *Highlander* reprovisioned and effected minor repairs to damage suffered during unfavourable weather and sea conditions experienced during their recent voyage. Surveillance confirmed that no drugs were on board but it appeared they were getting ready for something. On 26 November 1996 the vessel sailed out of Mooloolaba and again headed towards the open sea. A breach of Section 58 of the Customs Act is serious, especially on two counts, but it was suspected that something bigger was planned.

Meanwhile, the Customs and AFP team identified a number of land-based suspects who might be involved in unloading and transporting cargo from the *Highlander*, if and when the suspected importation finally took place. The net was being cast and the catch was looking bountiful.

During one early reconnaissance episode involving a remote property, a Customs and an AFP officer were sedately driving in their unmarked car when another vehicle came speeding across a hill in front of them stirring a mini dust storm. The driver waved and the traditional country greeting was returned. The surveillance team was surprised when they recognised one of the principal suspects in a hire car, obviously on urgent business. The next day the two surveillance operatives were investigating details through the hire car company about the target's booking when the target rang the company to make some changes. Talk about being in the right place at the right time! Knowing the target's plan made surveillance easier.

On 10 December 1996, Coastwatch aircraft again identified the *Highlander* well offshore approaching the mainland. Other Coastwatch aircraft and Customs launches *Delphinus*, *Sir William Lyne* and *H.M. Robinson*, were mobilised into the area in anticipation of an importation. The combined investigative team was confident that the drug transfer had taken place and that the *Highlander* was loaded with several tonnes of illicit cargo.

## Well-chosen rendezvous

The location for the proposed off-loading of cargo inside the Great Sandy Strait had been well chosen by the syndicate. It was obviously selected for its remoteness and the numerous bays and inlets and dense vegetation offered concealment from unwanted attention and prying eyes. Advantage points were identified by reconnaissance missions to track the movements of the *Highlander* and other associated craft and vehicles. This prepared Customs and AFP land parties as they covertly moved into the area for surveillance and to be ready to intercept. Digging in to concealed observation posts in the sand hills and dense vegetation meant coping with torrential downpours, leeches, ticks, mosquitoes and sand flies, but at least they were company in the long hours that followed.

Coastwatch aircraft carried out continuous 24-hour surveillance of the *Highlander* following the initial offshore sighting. The yacht had no contact with any other vessels and was tracked all of the way by radar as it crossed the Wide Bay Bar at last light at about 7pm on Thursday 12 December 1996. As the *Highlander* crossed Wide Bay Bar, those on board were obviously unaware they had been under constant surveillance by Coastwatch for the last two days and that one group of campers near the bar were Customs officers. They had a box seat from which to call the yacht's progress. Nor were the suspects aware of the *Delphinus* and *Sir William Lyne*, both out of sight some distance away in the dark, ready to cut off any escape.

Rain squalls followed the vessel in and the moonless night made for tricky navigation in limited visibility as the vessel negotiated the sand bars and beacons that dot the waterways of the Great Sandy Strait. The *Highlander* became stationary, indicating to the Coastwatch crew overhead that it had dropped anchor. The aircraft remained circling some distance away, unable to be heard, and virtually invisible as its radar enabled the Coastwatch crew to monitor the movement of smaller vessels moving between the *Highlander* and the shore. With the new fleet of Coastwatch aircraft, this was one of the first opportunities to test



Packaged drugs from the yacht.

the radar in operational circumstances. It certainly exceeded all expectations.

The Coastwatch eye-in-the-sky relayed messages to Customs, AFP and Queensland Police land parties who moved in on the small punts used to ferry the illicit cargo ashore. Early field estimates were that each punt was carrying about one tonne of cannabis resin.

## Successful conclusion

The interception was wrapped up by 4am on Friday 13 December 1996. Thirteen people were apprehended and eight tonnes of cannabis resin seized. Ultimately 18 arrests were made in a series of coordinated raids across South-East Queensland. A further 6000 cannabis plants and numerous firearms were seized at a remote rural property used by one of the people arrested at the camp-site.

This was Queensland's largest seizure of a single importation of hashish and was the culmination of a five-month joint operation between Customs, Australian Federal Police and the Queensland Police.

The United States Drug Enforcement Agency later intercepted a further 17 tonnes of cannabis resin destined for North America. This had been unloaded from the same mother-ship that met the *Highlander* and was seized in a series of controlled deliveries to the US and Canada. Altogether, a major international cannabis supply and importing network had been decimated.

The successful operation was the result of total commitment displayed by so many different groups. Coastwatch flight crews were in the air over the yacht giving coverage until only their mandatory fuel reserves were left. Customs and police observation groups operated in a variety of difficult situations. Customs technical support groups had to set up radio repeaters to monitor certain radio frequencies expected to be used by the offenders. Customs Marine Group had been shuffling the fleet of 20-metre boats over several months to support the different phases of the operation together with the inherent disturbance to crew rosters. And it was apparent that no major operation like this could succeed without a great deal of support from other programs lending their resources.

Passenger Processing staff were tasked on many occasions to conduct baggage searches which uncovered vital information, and Regional Intelligence Unit Information Cell in Brisbane provided a continual response to the hundreds of requests for information which arose during the course of the investigation.

*Greg Corrigan is Customs Assistant Director Border Intelligence in Canberra. Tracey Emery and John Tolman are Border Intelligence officers in Brisbane.*

## Jail terms for 13

On 4 February 1998, 13 of the 18 men charged in connection with the plan to import eight tonnes of cannabis resin received sentences ranging from eight to 14 years when they pleaded guilty in the Queensland Supreme Court to knowingly being concerned with the importation of prohibited imports.

Those sentenced were:

John Alexander Roy	14 years, seven non-parole
Brian Norman May	10 years, five non-parole
Ronald Brown (US citizen)	10 years, five non-parole (deportation on release)
John Fowles	nine years, four non-parole
John Heaps Roy	nine years, four non-parole
John Eric Ramen	nine years, four non-parole
Graham Eaton	eight years, three years six months non-parole
Gregory Hudson	eight years, three years six months non-parole
Brent Hillier (NZ citizen)	eight years, three non-parole (deportation on release)
Jacobus Vanderlelie	eight years, three years six months non-parole
Stephen Cronin	eight years, three non-parole
John Mills	eight years, three non-parole
Richard Hughes	eight years, three non-parole

At time of publication the remaining five accused were awaiting trial.