

Prodigal vessel returns 'home'

By Tim Spencer

Former second-in-charge, ACV Delphinus



A 22-metre Customs patrol vessel, the Delphinus built in 1991 in Geraldton, Western Australia, has returned to the West after seeing service in many areas all around Australia.

Delphinus began work as a fisheries patrol vessel for the Victorian Government. In July 1995 she was sold to the Australian Customs Service.

During her service with Customs, Delphinus worked waters from Ceduna in western South Australia to south of Tasmania, as far north as Daru in Papua New Guinea (during cross-border patrols with PNG Customs) and into the Gulf of Carpentaria

With the phasing-in of Customs new Bay class patrol vessels, the Delphinus was recently sold to the WA Police Service for use in its general operations and to assist in search and rescue.

Soon after Customs took possession, Delphinus was transferred from the Victorian to the Australian Register. This involved the completion of many modifications to comply with the more stringent survey requirements of the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA).

Having complied with AMSA's survey, she was sailed by a Customs delivery crew from Melbourne to the Sydney Marine Centre and a permanent crew was allocated to run her. They were Paul Hemmings (OIC), Tim Spencer (2IC), Ian Ball (3IC), Charlie Caiger, James Mannings and Ian Mansfield. Over time, just about any one who worked in Customs National Marine Unit (NMU) completed at least one patrol on her.

From Sydney she sailed south to work for a couple of years servicing the southern states.

Delphinus circumnavigated Tasmania several times experiencing all the weather one would expect in Tassie. But one day she also found herself 50 kilometres inland on the Gordon River meandering up towards the Franklin River Junction. Slowly rounding a bend Delphinus came face to face with a tourist floatplane taking off! It very quickly gained altitude. We still don't know who got the bigger shock.

But with the good came the bad - including attempting to secure a line to a 38-foot sloop in trouble off the north-eastern coast of Tasmania in winds gusting to 70 knots with the sea and swell at about seven to eight metres. Having eventually secured the sloop, we were half way back to port when the line parted and we had to repeat the exercise.

During her time with Customs, Delphinus completed several rescues, saving a number of lives and vessels along the length of the eastern seaboard.

In addition to servicing Customs own requirements, Delphinus also operated on behalf of many other Government agencies with a maritime focus. This afforded us a fantastic opportunity to work with many Federal and State Government departments, undertaking a very wide variety of tasks. Some of these included resupplying lighthouses, counting snake, sea lion, wallaby and seal colonies and searching for land-based sealing sites.

As time moved on so did Delphinus - northward. In 1998 she was involved in a major narcotic interception on the NSW coast. This was the seizure of nearly 400 kilograms of heroin near Port Macquarie - the third largest in the world to date. Delphinus played a pivotal role in the arrest of the mothership and 11 people.

During her latter months with Customs, Delphinus was based in Cairns, undertaking community visits to remote coastal communities and responding to urgent Customs duties when needed.