10 days
with a Customs Marine crew

By Catherine McDonald

Meet Derek, PJ, Ray G, Ray W, Sam, Mel, Sana and Tony; the National Marine Unit crew of the Australian Customs Vessel *Hervey Bay*. I joined the crew on patrol to learn about life in Customs Marine. By the end of the journey, I had altered my sleeping patterns, my vocabulary and my perspective of life on the high seas.

top: Australian Customs Vessel *Hervey Bay* sailing through the Torres Strait.

inset: Author Catherine McDonald on assignment.

Marine crew can work anywhere around Australia: this patrol was a joint cross-border patrol between Australia and Papua New Guinea. Without the dedication of the crew, the law-enforcement representatives staying on board during the patrol would not succeed in their mission. The crew ensure everything is ship shape so the onboard visitors can best do their job.

A job at sea means expeditions away from loved ones for three-week periods totalling six months of the year, irregular shift work and weekend work. It also means being involved in operations of national importance while travelling around Australia and having an 'office' in the fresh air and sunshine.

Marine life means donning many hats: navigator, deck hand, cook, cleaner and mechanic, to name a few. Each member of the crew has a specialised role on board the vessels, such as engineer, but all the crew are multi-skilled and if, as a member of a crew, you wish to learn more about the skills that other crew members have, you can get that knowledge each day on board.

When I joined the *Hervey Bay* at Thursday Island in the Torres Strait, the crew was already full swing into operations, long before we left the wharf: Derek checking that the hand-drawn navigational plans correlated with the passage plans on the computer, PJ carrying out pre-departure checks on communication systems, Ray W performing propulsion tests and Ray G overseeing the stocking of the vessel.

The *Hervey Bay* is one of eight 38-metre Bay-class vessels in the Customs fleet, built in Western Australia and commissioned in Hervey Bay, Queensland, in March 2000.

The Torres Strait is a beautiful region of Australia and, when underway, the best views are from the bridge. During the trip I followed each member of the crew around, trying to learn what each gadget did and how everything worked - from PJ and Sam showing me how to operate the tenders to Mel and Tony showing me how to do an oil change. When I first arrived on the bridge, I was bedazzled by the technology.

PJ and Tony were on first watch my first day on board, so PJ gave me a rundown on all the instruments on the 'dash'. The global positioning system, forward-scanning and depth-sounder sonars, anemometer, radar, electronic chart display, distress panel, autopilot, steering systems, revs and gear controls, emergency signals and horn controls and the fuel-management system.

Then Tony took over, explaining all the buttons and display panels on the engineer's console. From his chair on the bridge, Ray W, the engineer can monitor every system in the engine room including the emergency generator, fuel and water tank levels, hydraulics, fire indicators, lighting, air conditioning - the list seemed endless.

Because all monitoring of systems can be done from the bridge, the engine room itself is considered unmanned. However, Ray W spent a lot of time below, and gave me a tour of the engine and plant rooms a few days after Tony's brief.

Ray looks after all the equipment in these rooms, which include twin MTU 1050kW diesel engines, desalination plants for water production, a biological sewage-treatment plant, generators, hydraulics, pumps, powerboards, fins, rudders and propellers. He is the only member of the crew who requires his own workroom, which is hidden away in the bowels of the vessel. The engine and associated rooms are heat and sound proof. The engine room was not only hot and noisy, but also contained numerous steel pipes on which to bump my head and scrape my shins. I admired Ray for his difficult job - but it was a job that he said he wouldn't change for the world.

Tony continued with his rundown on the bridge by outlining the vessel's impressive communications systems; UHF, VHF and HF radios, global marine distress and safety systems, satellite phone and international maritime satellite system, secure and encryption transmission equipment. I was told that all signals are sent on Zulu time, the universal time coordinate that standardises all marine communications to Greenwich Mean Time.

There are four wool-covered comfortable seats on the bridge (from left to right sits the engineer, commanding officer, the helmsman or officer at watch and navigator). These prime seating spots are highly sort after between the eight members of crew, so after an hour of discussing the controls, I vacated my seat so someone who actually knew what to do could sit down. Besides, nausea was gaining a hold so I went to my rack (bed) for a 'lima lima delta' (little lie down).

Note; you are only one of the crew when you stop speaking like a land-lubber and start speaking like a true mariner. There is terminology for all the various parts of the vessel - so much so that a phrase book would be a good option for guests. Some terms can be worked out but I am still wondering why the toilet is called the head. I had already been shown my cabin before departure. It's the 'forward port side', said Sam. I found it - last door on the left.

As I watched some dolphins feed and frolic under the lights off the aft on my first evening, I pondered the lessons I had learned in just one day on board: do not attempt to enter the galley if feeling unwell - the enclosed space plays havoc with queasiness; do not attempt to shower while the vessel is moving if at all possible - if unavoidable, make it a fast balancing act and the captain of the heads (the poor individual whose job it is to clean the toilets) has, when rostered, the worst task on the ship.

During my first night I was aware that Sana, my room mate, was scheduled for night watch beginning in the early hours of the morning so I was proud of how quietly I retired to my top rack. I discovered over the next ten days that a combination of sheer exhaustion and personal programming meant Sana could sleep through a hurricane with the lights on and still wake up on time for her shift.

Shift work is required on board to

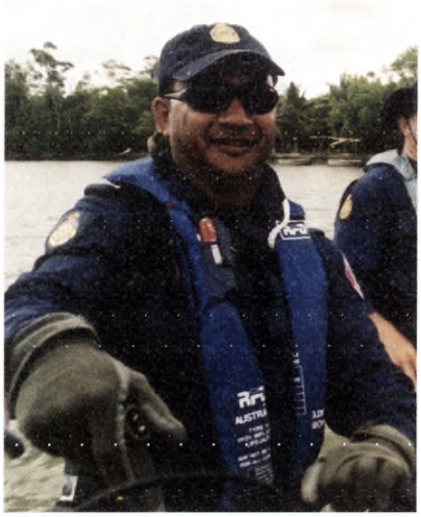
top: Second in Command Peter Weller (PJ) and Crew Member Mel Weitzmann on a tender in the waters that divide Australia's Dauan and Saibai Islands from Sigabadaru, PNG.

bottom: Commanding Officer Derek Bevan (right) and Third in Command Ray Graham breathe the sea air from the port bridge wing of the *Hervey Bay*.

maintain a lookout and to conduct radar, chart, navigation and vessel checks. There are two day watches of six hours either side of midday, two three-hour shifts starting at six in the evening leading up to the graveyard shift, midnight to three. The last three-hour stint runs until six in the morning.

During one night watch, Sana showed me how to do the rounds. We followed the path routinely walked every hour during the night by the officer on watch, checking the integrity of bilges from the forward void to the tiller at the stern, making sure there were no alarms or indicators signalling anything wrong with the generators or hydraulics in the engine room. We peered overboard with a torch to make sure water was being discharged. Sana logged our movements.

On the nights that I did not join Sana on shift, I generally woke anyway when her alarm went off at 2.15am,



then when she left at 3am, then again when she came in at 6am. The excitement each day kept me going - visiting interesting places and learning new things about the vessel. However, by the end of the trip I was exhausted and on the last day I, for the first time that trip, had to rely on my alarm to wake. No wonder the crew need three weeks break to recover.

Breakfast each day was whatever you wished - eggs and bacon, cereal and yoghurt or just coffee and toast. At no stage was I hungry. The crew sustained a lunch and dinner roster that kept us all very well fed with a huge variety of meals. Each crew member seemed also to be a talent in the galley.

The first two days of our journey were spent motoring through the Torres Strait to PNG. By the third day we had reached our destination. Over the coming days I accompanied the Customs and police representatives to villages on the PNG mainland. These visits would not have been possible without the assistance of the crew. We travelled every day by tender - each Bay-class vessel has two 6.4m aluminium high-speed ready-response tenders with twin 67kw outboard motors operated by members of the marine crew.

Ray G operated the tender on our first village visit and then accompanied us to shore. He maintained radio contact with Ray W, who was manning the tender in our absence, about tides and general requirements of the representatives, and he maintained communication with the *Hervey Bay* about our movements. My first tender ride was thoroughly enjoyable; well worth full fare had it been a theme park ride. However, operating the tenders is not taken lightly by the crew. They ensured our safety on board, maintained the tenders - engines, petrol and water, navigated the reefs with global positioning systems that they had programmed the evening before, kept an eye on the security of the tenders during visits and, while the delegates visited the villages, the crew often stayed on board the tenders, waiting for hours in the heat, to make sure the tenders were ready for the trip back to the *Hervey Bay*.

Living on board naturally means the crew can not be working 24 hours seven days a week. Relaxation time is necessary, whether watching a DVD or throwing a fishing line off the back of the vessel. However, time is not wasted and the camaraderie of the crew was wonderful to see. In one of his breaks, Sam helped Sana with some revision in preparation for a test she would be taking soon. All members of the crew shared this ethos - very willing to assist their shipmates in skills development.

Relaxing on the bridge with a 'brew' of coffee one evening, I could see the glow of lights from Australia to my left and PNG to my right. It was a wonderful feeling - awaiting the thrill of an adventure that greeted me each morning and the tranquil rocking on the ocean lulling me to sleep each night. 'Life as a mariner,' I thought to myself, 'this is the life'.

top left: Second in Command Peter Weller (PJ) manoeuvres the tender away from the duckboard off the rear of the Hervey Bay while Crew Member Tony Burke rides as support up front, providing passage for Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary Officer Kally Pamuan.

above: Inside the Harvey Bay's engine room, or 'office' for Engineer Ray Watson (left), Crew Member Sana Mills checks integrity of bilges during her shift as designated officer-on-watch.

bottom right: Crew Member Sam Summers at the helm.