

SEMAPHORE

NEWSLETTER OF THE SEA POWER CENTRE - AUSTRALIA

ISSUE 3, JANUARY 2007

SEARCH AND RESCUE: A MIRACLE IN THE SOUTH

'Safety fears for missing yachting Bullimore' is typical of the headlines that swept across the international news wires in mid-November 2006 when contact was lost with adventurer and yachtsman Tony Bullimore aboard his 102-foot catamaran *Doha 2006*.¹ He was enroute from the Maldives to Hobart in Tasmania, from where he hoped to embark upon a solo round-the-world voyage in an attempt to break Dame Ellen Macarthur's 71-day record set in 2005. Fortunately this time *Doha 2006* had simply suffered a communications defect and arrived safely in Albany on 20 November before shaping course for Hobart. Turn back the clock ten years to January 1997, however, and it was a very different story, one that nearly ended in tragedy for the intrepid Englishman.

In November 1996, 16 competitors began the third *Vendée Globe* Yacht Race from the French port of Les Sables d'Olonne. Only six would finish the race. Unlike the *VELUX 5 Oceans Race* (formerly known as the *BOC Challenge* and *Around Alone*), in which competitors sail pre-determined legs between specific ports, the *Vendée Globe*, founded in 1989, is a single-handed round-the-world yacht race with no stops and no outside assistance allowed. The *Vendée Globe* route takes competitors down the Atlantic Ocean until they turn east beneath the Cape of Good Hope for the treacherous passage across the Southern Ocean as they navigate around the Antarctic south of Australia, before rounding Cape Horn for the final leg back to Les Sables d'Olonne.

As soon as the race began the competitors encountered heavy seas in the Bay of Biscay that forced two yachtsmen to retire early. The conditions compelled others to return to the starting point to effect repairs. Having overcome such obstacles, the competitors probably believed that their future journeys would be relatively smooth sailing. But they could not have foreseen the extreme weather that awaited them in the Southern Ocean. Sub-Antarctic waters are notoriously hazardous for smaller vessels, even in the summer months, as the weather is highly variable.²

The first *Vendée Globe* yacht to capsize in the Southern Ocean was *Algimouss*, skippered by Frenchman Raphaël Dinelli. On 26 December 1996 the Australian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) requested Australian Defence Force (ADF) assistance to search for Dinelli, estimated to be in a position 1100 nautical miles south-south-west of Perth. He was located later that day by a Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) P-3C Orion aircraft and observed to be clinging to the hull of his upturned yacht. He scrambled into an air-dropped life raft moments before *Algimouss* sank. Fellow competitor Pete Goss, in *Aqua Quorum*, diverted and guided by the crew of another Orion aircraft, successfully manoeuvred his yacht to effect a hazardous rescue of Dinelli the following day.³

In the early hours of 6 January 1997 a call came through from race officials reporting that multiple ARGUS beacons, belonging to Thierry Dubois (*Pour Amnesty International*) and Tony Bullimore (*Exide Challenger*), had been detected in the Southern Ocean some 1400 nautical miles south-south-west of Perth. The MRCC again called upon the ADF for assistance. As a signatory to the *International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, 1974*, and the *International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, 1979*, Australia is responsible for maritime search and rescue over a vast area of some 52.8 million square kilometres. Australia takes this obligation very seriously.

The Commanding Officer of HMAS *Adelaide*, Captain Raydon Gates, RAN, was awoken by a telephone call at 0100 (WST) on 6 January 1997 and ordered to prepare his ship to sail. *Adelaide* departed Fleet Base West (FBW), Fremantle at 1600 that afternoon, after storing ship, recalling crew, and embarking specialist personnel, which included a medical officer, a media contingent, and a chaplain. The ship's S-70B Seahawk helicopter embarked en route.

Being called upon to deploy to the southern climes at short notice was nothing new for the Royal Australian Navy (RAN).⁴ Two years earlier, on New Year's Day 1995, HMAS *Darwin* rescued lone yachtswoman Isabelle Autissier from her yacht *Ecureuil* 900 nautical miles south of Adelaide.

A RAAF Orion located Thierry Dubois in the water the same afternoon that *Adelaide* sailed from FBW and a few hours later a second Orion sighted the upturned hull of *Exide Challenger*. These aircraft not only provided information on the location of the yachts, but were able to provide immediate assistance by dropping Air Sea Rescue Kits to the distressed Dubois. Nothing could be seen of Bullimore.



Figure 1: The upturned hull of *Exide Challenger* (Defence)



Sea Power Centre - Australia
Department of Defence
CANBERRA ACT 2600
seapower.centre@defence.gov.au
www.navy.gov.au/spc



For *Adelaide* and her crew the passage south was in itself largely uneventful with opportunities taken to work-up the embarked helicopter flight. Time was the critical factor. The tanker HMAS *Westralia* sailed from FBW two days later and a Liberian registered tanker MV *Sanko Phoenix*, possessing a heavy lift capability, stood by to assist should the need arise to either salvage or hold *Exide Challenger* afloat.⁵

In the meantime, the RAAF continued to provide daylight coverage on station. Six flight crews from 10 and 11 Squadrons located at RAAF Base Edinburgh near Adelaide rotated through five Orion aircraft deployed from Perth. The aircraft flew for a total of 158 hours, providing a comforting presence for Thierry Dubois, monitoring his welfare and ensuring that he was regularly updated on the progress of the rescue operation.

Consideration was given to rescuing Dubois on the evening on 8 January; however, the plan was hindered by unsuitable weather conditions and the danger that the helicopter could be threatened by icing in low cloud. At 0433 on the morning of 9 January, *Adelaide* launched her Seahawk for what was then a 53 nautical mile flight to Thierry Dubois's life raft. He was winched to safety and the helicopter returned to *Adelaide*.



Figure 2: Dubois, Gates and Bullimore meet the press alongside HMAS *Adelaide* in Fremantle (RAN)

As *Adelaide* neared the stricken *Exide Challenger*, the Seahawk was again launched to conduct a photographic search of the hull, remaining in a low hover for approximately ten minutes. There was no response to the helicopter's presence. *Adelaide* then circled the *Exide Challenger*, sounding her siren – again no response.

With only one option left, Captain Gates ordered the seaboat be launched with the task of closely examining the hull of *Exide Challenger* prior to attempting to cut through the hull. To the surprise and relief of those there, Tony Bullimore responded to loud tapping on the hull, and appeared on the surface moments later. Leading Seaman Clearance Diver Alan Rub then proceeded to help Bullimore towards *Adelaide*'s seaboat, where he was hauled in by Chief Petty Officer Peter Wicker. Images of Bullimore kissing the unsuspecting, bearded Wicker were later seen around the world.

With *Adelaide* having now completed her primary task and bearing a slightly larger ship's company, course was set for Fremantle. *Westralia* still had a critical role to play, replenishing *Adelaide* at sea on 11 January and thereby

ensuring that the frigate could maintain full speed and return to the mainland with minimal delay.

Adelaide berthed in Fremantle on 13 January to a tumultuous welcome from the local populace and various dignitaries. Recovering both yachtsmen alive was a tribute to the concerted efforts of the RAN and RAAF, the search and rescue coordinators, the resilience of the two yachtsmen themselves and their sheer will to survive. Despite their trying ordeal they had coped with the onset of frostbite, hypothermia and in Bullimore's case, a partial amputation of one of his fingers.

In spite of the euphoria engendered from the success of what was a complex and demanding search and rescue operation, celebrations amongst the wider yachting fraternity were understandably tempered in the knowledge that race officials had lost contact with a fourth competitor. Canadian Gerry Roufs in *Groupe LG2*, was reported lost on 8 January 1997 approximately 1600 miles west of Cape Horn. He was never found. Six months later his yacht was sighted adrift 300 miles off the coast of Chile. In September 1998 wreckage was washed up in the Straits of Magellan.

One of the more important organisational changes implemented in the aftermath of the Southern Ocean rescues was the July 1997 amalgamation of Australia's search and rescue coordination centres into one centralised body called Australian Search and Rescue (AusSAR).⁶ The new organisation's baptism of fire came 18 months later during the 1998 Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race. Cyclonic weather wrought havoc amongst the fleet north-east of Bass Strait. Six sailors perished at sea and another 55 were winched to safety by rescue helicopters. The RAN regularly tasks helicopter-capable major fleet units as Operational Response Vessels, should they be called upon to discharge Australia's search and rescue responsibilities during these races.

Australia's search and rescue area is one of the largest in the world, covering Australia and vast tracts of the Indian, Pacific and Southern Oceans: about a tenth of the earth's surface.⁷ While AusSAR uses assets from the private sector, police and volunteer rescue groups for many rescues, it is often only the ADF that is able to undertake very long-range, short notice rescues in extremely demanding conditions.⁸ The capabilities inherent in naval warships and helicopters are multi-role in nature enabling navies to undertake these tasks while configured for warfighting.

¹ ABC News Online, 'Safety Fears for missing yachting Bullimore', <abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200611/s1788870.htm> (5 Dec 06), and Tony Bullimore's website, <teambullimore.com> (5 Dec 06).

² Royal Australian Navy, 'The Effects of Weather on RAN Operations in the Southern Ocean', *Semaphore* Newsletter, Issue 13, July 2006.

³ Pete Goss, *Close to the Wind*, Headline Book Publishing, London, 1998, pp. 221-30.

⁴ Royal Australian Navy, 'RAN Activities in the Southern Ocean', *Semaphore* Newsletter, Issue 18, October 2006.

⁵ Mark Mills, 'Great Southern Ocean Adventure: The Rescue of Thierry Dubois and Tony Bullimore', *Australia's Navy 1997*, Canberra, pp. 6-8.

⁶ The Australian Maritime Safety Authority is responsible for coordinating search and rescue through AusSAR, see 'Search & Rescue' <amsa.gov.au/search_and_rescue> (5 Dec 06).

⁷ Australian Maritime Safety Authority, *Australian Search and Rescue (AusSAR) Fact Sheet*, May 2005.

⁸ Royal Australian Navy, *Australian Maritime Doctrine*, Canberra, 2000, p. 70.

