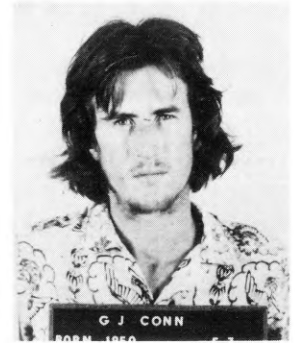
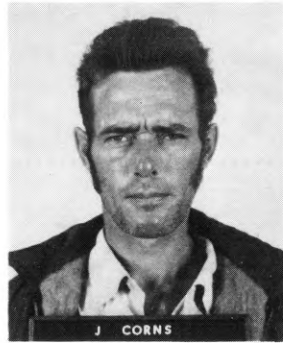
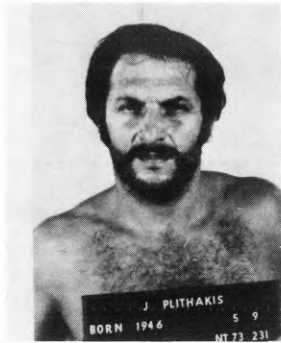


# Operation Nero



The four men charged with and convicted of various drug offences as a result of Operation Nero.

**One of the early major Australian drug operations was Operation Nero, in 1973. It is still regarded by many as one of the most important drug interceptions in this country, involving the combined resources of Customs, police and the defence forces.**

It resulted in the seizure of the 16-metre trawler *Mariana*, more than 30kg of cannabis, and the arrest of five men.

Commander Ray Phillips, head of Eastern Region Intelligence Branch in Sydney, took part in it as Narcotics Bureau Commander.

He recalls the details:

"The operation was the forerunner to many future operations and set a format which has remained little changed since," he said.

"It began in February when Senior Narcotics Agent Bob Peers noticed unusual activity on *Mariana* berthed in Darwin Harbour. Over a period, large quantities of fuel and provisions were loaded aboard, obviously for a long voyage. He gathered as much technical information on the craft as possible and relayed it to me to enable us to build up a profile of the vessel," Phillips said.

On 15 February, *Mariana* left Darwin with Peers following in a small Customs launch until it cleared coastal waters.

"After talking with Bureau head Harvey Bates, Peers hired an aircraft and tracked *Mariana* to the Timor Coast where the aircraft turned back, still unseen," Phillips said.

"Although its destination was unknown, we believed *Mariana* couldn't return to Darwin in under five days. We began moving agents to Darwin from Sydney and Brisbane, while Bates conferred with

Defence officers. The RAAF offered an Orion and a helicopter, while the Navy provided HMAS *Attack*, a fast patrol boat."

Within days the Orion began sweeping the sea for the returning vessel. *Attack* also put to sea with agents aboard and immediately ran into a tropical storm which damaged communications equipment and had Phillips, Peers and Agents Brian Bennett (now AFP Eastern Region), John Adams and Bob Drane wishing they'd never set foot on deck. After repairs, they took up position along *Mariana*'s return route.

The Customs launch, manned by Agents Steve Polden (now AFP Bangkok) and Barry Campbell moved along the coast.

## Customs flag

"The waiting was nerve-wracking," said Phillips. "But late in the afternoon the Orion sighted the vessel heading south-east towards Darwin."

The position was radioed to *Attack* which rendezvoused with the Customs launch and began shadowing *Mariana*.

"We raised the Customs flag on *Attack*, giving her wide powers of interception under Customs legislation which dates back to the days of sail off the coast of England," Phillips said.

Meanwhile, Bates and Agents Denis Gray (now AFP Eastern Region) and Ken Bishop took off in the helicopter.

"The operation was reaching a critical stage with *Mariana* running for shallow waters," he said. "As *Attack* closed, with her crew manning the forward Bofors gun and machineguns on the bridge, our Smith and Wesson revolvers seemed very insignificant.

"The Customs launch was struggling

to intercept. Firing a warning shot at the trawler was discussed but abandoned as the helicopter appeared.

"The vessel was signalled to heave to but the request was ignored. There was frantic activity on deck, then bags and suitcases suddenly appeared in the sea. One man was seen hosing down the decks.

"With *Attack* bearing down, *Mariana* suddenly stopped. A boarding party was sent aboard, while the Commander of *Attack* confirmed the position as being one mile within the three-mile limit. This was an important point in later legal exchanges," Phillips said.

Five men on board were later identified as Joseph Corns, 39, captain of *Mariana*, John Plithakis, 27, of Gold Coast, Queensland, Gregory Conn, 23, of Tweed Heads, NSW, John Wholagan, of Sorrento, Western Australia, and Barry Bull, 20, of Randwick, NSW.

"Bull later became better known as an associate of Bruce (Snapper) Cornwell and his alleged drug empire," Phillips said. "Today, few recall that Bull did his apprenticeship to the drug trade aboard *Mariana*."

The boarding party found cannabis on the deck and rigging, while the Customs launch recovered 31kg of the drug from the sea.

After an extensive legal battle which finally went to the High Court, four of the five were convicted on various charges relating to the importation of drugs. Charges against Wholagan subsequently were dropped.

"The shipment was worth an estimated \$250,000 on the market, a big amount in those days," Phillips said. ■