

# Tropical smugglers caught in Northern Region net

By Philip Castle – Northern Region Media Liaison Officer



*“...But your cleverness was fortunately no match for the ingenuity of the Australian Federal Police and the Customs Service, who deserve commendation. You plainly had an enormous stake in this which you were determined to protect. But the tenacity and patience of the police surveillance fortunately brought you down.”*

– Justice de Jersey of the Queensland Supreme Court in sentencing one of the key offenders in Operation Sacht on June 3 1994.

THE sentencing of eight offenders on the afternoon of Friday June 3, 1994 in the Queensland Supreme Court in Brisbane by Justice de Jersey was the culmination of one of the best modern day thrillers seen in Australian northern tropical waters for many years.

The true story would match any writer's best imagination for plot, players, locations and a dramatic conclusion, with Operation Sacht ranking as one of Northern Region's most recent successful

combined drug operations. It began in March 1992 around Sanctuary Cove on the Gold Coast when the Australian Customs Service heard that a man was seeking a skipper to transfer a shipment of drugs from off-shore. Customs relayed the information to the AFP which then commenced inquiries.

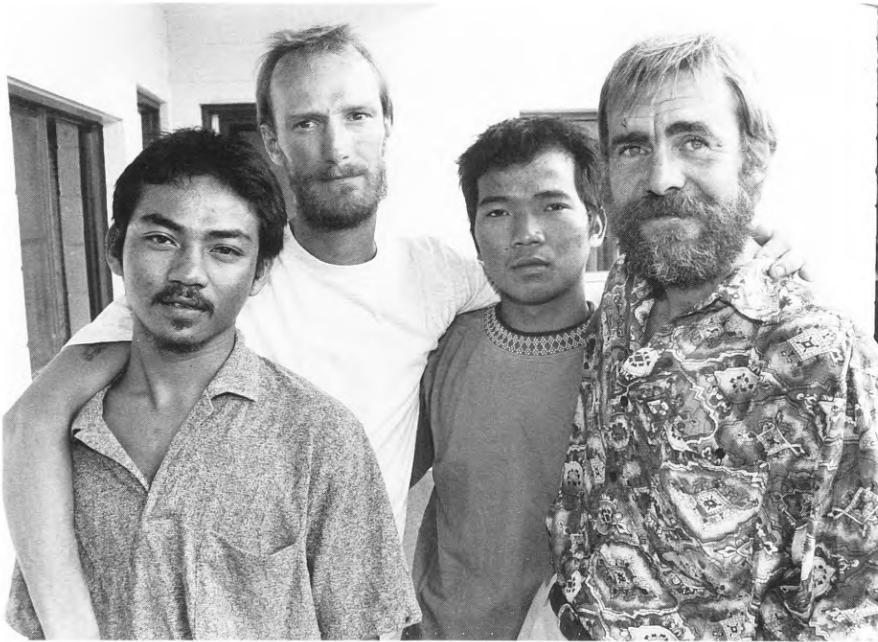
The man, whose real name was Paul Thomas Wiseman, 37, a cleaning supervisor from Newstead, Brisbane, had indicated that he was planning a massive importation of

*AFP divers recovered 1.273 tonnes of cannabis from a sunken vessel off Mackay.*

cannabis from Thailand using a 'mother' ship. It would need to be met at sea and the drugs brought to the mainland. Customs immediately began targeting possible vessels. The AFP team from Northern Region's Drug Operations Branch led by Detective Sergeant Ray Holder began its work.

It was rumoured that Wiseman may have been involved in an earlier attempt to import six tonnes of cannabis using a 24-metre yacht which sank off New Caledonia.

Wiseman had approached a local skipper, who became known as 'The Swashbuckler', who went to the authorities with his story and agreed to continue negotiations. Thus began a protracted series of meetings when in September



*The four crew members of the Spring Queen were rescued after 10 days at sea. It was found later by AFP divers that their vessel had been deliberately scuttled.*

Wiseman visited 'The Swashbuckler' to tell him the job was on in October. The plan began to take form with the drop off centred on Zodiac Cay, on Swains Reef, which is about 250km east of Mackay. 'The Swashbuckler' was told he would need to hire a suitable vessel for a rendezvous with the 'mother' ship or undertake a dive to recover the drugs if they were left submerged.

With an eye to the forthcoming cyclone/wet season which normally arrives in December, Wiseman wanted the delivery before then. 'The Swashbuckler' obtained a Brisbane boat, the *Yasawa Pearl*. In the meantime Wiseman was busy contacting other members of the international syndicate, particularly a key organiser, Neville Scouler, 45, a company director, of Byron Bay, NSW. A series of meetings were held at the famous Breakfast Creek Pub in Brisbane. By October \$16,800 was handed over to hire the *Yasawa Pearl*. The syndicate also provided a deckhand, Christopher Beirne, 38, unemployed of the Gold Coast.

A delay occurred which indicated that the Australian syndicate members had lost contact with the delivery vessel. The plan was that

about 1.6 tonnes of cannabis would be transferred at sea at Zodiac Cay or if a transfer was not possible the alternative plan would be that the drugs would be left submerged for recovery by divers. They all met again with 'The Swashbuckler' at the Breakfast Creek Pub in late November. Wiseman maintained that the plan would go head.

Finally in early December, the overseas contact arrived in Australia in the form of British resident in Thailand, Malcolm Sida, 43. He was picked up and taken to the next syndicate meeting by a newcomer to the syndicate, Robert Reading, 48, a plumber of Coolum, who then also joined the conspiracy. The delivery was definitely on with the AFP and Customs coming on to a full alert. Detective Sergeant Ray Holder said that Sida was the lynch pin between the Australian and overseas connections. Sida was an international drug smuggler who had in 1983 been convicted and jailed for five years in a Spanish prison.

On 21 December another meeting was held at the Breakfast Creek Pub with all using false names and using many tricks of the criminal trade. The importation was imminent.

On the Coastwatch front in late

December Customs became aware of a vessel, the *Spring Queen*, sailing south through the Barrier Reef, which then mysteriously sank east of Mackay. The subsequent rescue on December 22 of the four crew, two Swedes; Michael Blom and Eric Thoong and two Thais; Jalan Putpheng and Soamboen Yongram, attracted considerable media interest with a page one story appearing in *The Courier Mail*. They claimed the cement hull had split and its sudden sinking had not given them sufficient time to gather their papers.

Neither Sergeant Ray Holder nor Customs were fooled. When ACS Chief Inspector Rod Sykes was rung while on holidays at Coolum on the Sunshine Coast, he knew the job was now hot. The sunken cement hulled vessel lying about 30m under water was perfect for holding a submerged quantity of drugs.

Great care had to be taken not to alert the four crew members that their scheme was known. This became even more important later to protect 'The Swashbuckler' when he skippered the *Yasawa Pearl* to the sunken *Spring Queen*. The four rescued seamen came to Brisbane, where they were met by Ronald Thompson, 51, a US citizen. He had arrived in Brisbane from Norway on December 4 with his Dutch born wife, Marian Slooter, 33, a Dutch social worker. They were quickly introduced to the other syndicate members. At first Slooter thought she had come to Australia for a tropical holiday. However once told the full story she agreed to join the operation. 'The Swashbuckler' was told to be ready to sail within days. Arrangements were made to hire the appropriate diving equipment.

On 28 December the group met again at the Breakfast Creek Pub. It had been established that the landfall for the drugs was proposed at Thompsons Point on the Fitzroy River east of Rockhampton. AFP and Customs took the appropriate measures. Just after 10am in solid

rain on December 30, the party of 'The Swashbuckler', Beirne, Sida, Thompson and Slooter, left Brisbane's Deception Bay moorings on board the *Yasawa Pearl* for a 'recreational' tropical dive. The Customs vessel, the *Sir William Lyne*, also left Brisbane and monitored the movements of the *Yasawa Pearl*. In the meantime, the four rescued boat crew members left Australia with the last of them, the shipwrecked skipper, Eric Thoong, leaving on January 5, 1993.

The weather had cleared by January 3 when the *Yasawa Pearl* arrived at about 3am at Zodiac Cay. In what can only be described as a superhuman effort in about three days the syndicate divers; Sida, Thompson and Slooter, recovered 1.273 tonnes of cannabis from the sunken *Spring Queen*. The drugs were repacked into 108 Hong Kong type shopping bags. They threw about 400kg overboard which had become sea-soiled. Back in Brisbane, Reading and Christopher Barber, 46, unemployed of Donnybrook, hired a Hertz rental truck and travelled with it and a 4WD and trailer north to Rockhampton. At this point more than 100 law enforcement officers were involved.

The *Yasawa Pearl* left Zodiac Cay about midday on January 5 and arrived late in the evening on Wednesday January 6 at Thompsons Point, south of Yeppoon, but delayed landing because there appeared to be a number of holiday makers camped there. They anchored off-shore and early the next day, January 7, obtained a mooring at nearby Rosslyn Bay. They were met by Reading and Barber with the truck and the car. After dark, at about 9pm, they quickly loaded the drugs onto the truck. This was driven away by Reading and followed by Barber in the 4WD and they headed south through Rockhampton. The grateful syndicate members had given 'The Swashbuckler' a tip of 25kg of cannabis for his services.

The truck was followed. Just after 10pm on January 7, about 14km south of Rockhampton, Barber, who was travelling behind the truck, became suspicious. Both he and Reading were then stopped and arrested and the drugs seized. Those on board the *Yasawa Pearl* were then quickly arrested. Two others, Scouller and Evans, were arrested at Byron Bay, in NSW.

The Customs vessel, the *Sir William Lyne*, had also returned to

Yeppoon where it collected three AFP divers from ACT Region; Sergeant Ken Uren and Constables Joe Spooner and Alan Le Leivre. At Zodiac Cay the AFP divers spent three days searching the sunken *Spring Queen*, which had all its nameplates removed. They found that rather than having a split hull, the \$300,000 yacht had been deliberately sunk by removing the bung plugs. They found other evidence of the drug importation, including one unrecovered tin of sealed cannabis still in the vessel. The syndicate members had hauled the tins onto the *Yasawa Pearl*, hurriedly opened them, thrown the tins and the soiled cannabis overboard and repacked the remainder into shopping bags.

Of the nine people charged, only two, Scouller and Evans, pleaded not guilty. In the Queensland Supreme Court before Justice de Jersey in Brisbane in June 1994, Evans was found not guilty. Scouller was found guilty and was sentenced to 15 years jail to serve eight. Thompson, Slooter and Sida had been kept in custody since their arrest and Justice de Jersey said he took into account the 17 months already served when sentencing. Of those who pleaded guilty; Wiseman received 13 years to serve six years; Thompson, 10 to serve three; Slooter seven to serve one and a half; Sida 11 to serve three and a half; Beirne eight to serve three and a half and Barber and Reading both receiving eight to serve three and a half.

Justice de Jersey said during his sentencing remarks that this was an importation of enormous proportions. "This is an especially wicked and pernicious form of criminal conduct: it will be fostered rather than deterred, if the court's response is seen as soft or timid." and concluding said "...there ends a very unhappy chapter in the history of this State."

The AFP is continuing its inquiries including overseas in relation to the four crew from the sunken *Spring Queen*. □



Constable Ian Edwards inspects part of the haul of cannabis recovered from the *Spring Queen* which 'sank' near Zodiac Cay east of Mackay in December 1992.