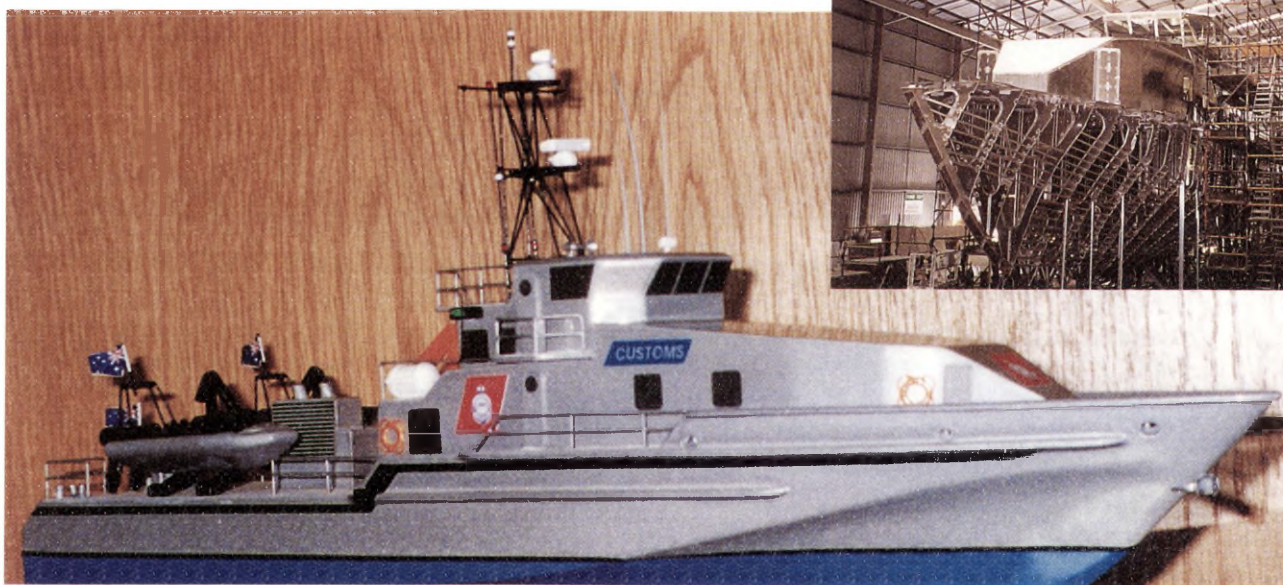


Enhanced M

Customs is poised to enter the new millennium with an enhanced marine fleet to patrol Australia's 37 000 kilometres of coastline.



Scale model of the new Bay Class series. Inset: The Roebuck Bay under construction.

This follows the awarding in May this year of a \$58.4 million contract to a ship builder in Western Australia to construct and maintain a new class of sea-going vessels to replace the current Minister Class patrol boats.

The first of eight 35-metre vessels being built near Fremantle by Austal Ships Pty Ltd will come on line in February next year, with the final vessel scheduled for delivery in February 2001.

The aluminium-hulled vessels, with a range of 1000 nautical miles at a speed of 20 knots, will be capable of transporting, for extended periods, up to one tonne of equipment and eight people in addition to a crew of up to nine Customs officers.

To be known as the Bay Class series, the vessels will be named after bays around the Australian coastline with the first vessel being the Roebuck Bay to commemorate Roebuck Bay at Broome which has had a Customs presence since 1889.

As part of the Coastwatch Branch in Customs, the marine fleet provides an effective national civil surveillance surface response capability around the coastline and out to the limits of the Australian Exclusive Economic Zone (AEEZ).

Since the mid-1970s, Customs has managed a fleet of sea-going vessels of various types and sizes to respond to actual and suspected breaches of Australian laws.

marine fleet

The National Manager of Coastwatch, Peter Naylor, said the new Bay Class vessels will add to Coastwatch's surveillance and response capabilities, and enable current tasking levels from client agencies to be met more effectively and efficiently.

The location of these vessels around the coast is determined by a range of factors including coastal demographics, international marine activity levels, and past history of illegal activities, which are used to assess likely future risks.

The fleet is located to provide quick response in areas of greatest risk to the border.



History

The decision to build and operate the new class of sea-going vessels as part of the marine fleet is the latest chapter in the fleet's long history.

Customs vessels, with the Sydney Harbour-based HM Customs No 1 being the first, have established a proud record since the Federal Government took responsibility for collecting customs revenue in 1901.

While some vessels were built specifically for Customs in the first 50 years, many were existing vessels acquired and converted for special harbour and coastal tasks.

One of the most famous patrol boats was the 30 metre PV Vigilant, built for Customs in Sydney in 1938 and stationed in Townsville. With a crew of 10, the Vigilant covered an area of thousands of kilometres around northern Australia until commandeered by the Royal Australian Navy in 1940 to run clandestine patrols between Darwin and Timor during World War II.

In the post-war years a number of specially commissioned vessels were added to the fleet.

These included the 13.9 metre J Class, operating up to 100 nautical miles (nm) from the coast; the 12.9 metre Comptroller-General Class, operating up to 30 nm from a safe haven; the 6.99 metre Collector Class 'trailerable' vessels, operating up to 15 nautical miles (nm) off the coast or 30 nm from a safe haven; and other small craft, less than 7 metres, for in-port and estuary operations.

Since the mid-1970s Customs has operated a fleet of sea-going vessels of various types and sizes with four 20 metre Minister Class vessels being the mainstay of the current fleet. They operate up to 200 nm off the coast and are supported by the fleet's two newest vessels, the 23 metre Delphinus and the 25 metre Wauri, both of which have a range of 1000 nm.

Management and Role

As part of the Coastwatch Branch in Customs, the marine fleet is managed by the National Marine Unit (NMU) to provide an effective national civil surveillance surface response capability.

This involves the planning, tasking and deployment of the vessels based on bids submitted from a range of Federal and State agencies.

All bids for the strategic use of the sea-going vessels are approved through the Coastwatch civil surveillance planning process, which takes account of the needs of all client agencies.

This linkage to the Coastwatch planning machinery allows for a greater strategic and tactical approach to tasking and deployment and uses the fleet more effectively.

Taskings are prepared taking into consideration the needs of Customs and the various client agencies with an emphasis on multi-tasked patrols. The role of the fleet is to:

- provide a surface response capability to known or suspected breaches of the Australian border
- permit Customs to maintain a presence in areas of operational interest along the coastline, and
- operate as part of Customs strategic intelligence net, gathering information for use in assessing the risk rating of each section of the coastline.

The key functions of the fleet to support its role are to:

- assist in the establishment and maintenance of an effective compliance environment over people and vessels entering the coastal border
- support Customs and other Commonwealth and State client agencies in the enforcement of a range of legislation
- support the Customs Coastal Risk Management Program, and
- support Customs community participation programs.



Customs marine fleet officers search mangroves around an island in King Sound for signs of illegal activities.

Marine Fleet Results

In the past 18 months marine fleet vessels have been involved in more than 30 operations on behalf of Customs and other Commonwealth and State agencies.

These include:

- detection and apprehension of 16 Australian fishing vessels for offences under Commonwealth and State fisheries laws
- detection and apprehension of seven foreign fishing vessels for offences under Commonwealth fisheries laws
- the interception of three vessels allegedly carrying illegal entrants – Customs and Royal Australian Navy vessels combined to escort two of them through the Torres Strait and into international waters – the third, a Chinese vessel carrying 139 people, which ran aground in Torres Strait, was escorted by the Wauri to Thursday Island where the crew and passengers were handed over to Australian government officials
- the apprehension of 10 foreigners at Ashmore Reef – on instructions from Coastwatch, the Andrew Fisher apprehended an Indonesian fishing vessel, transferred the people from their unseaworthy vessel to the Andrew Fisher, and took them to Broome where other government officials took responsibility for them
- narcotic seizures exceeding 18 tonnes - in December 1996, the Delphinus, Sir William Lyne and HM Robinson were involved in surveillance and boarding operations which resulted in the seizure of eight tonnes of cannabis resin found on board the yacht Highlander in Queensland - in December 1997 the Sir William Lyne and Delphinus were involved in the surveillance and interception of a fishing vessel found to be carrying 10 tonnes of cannabis resin transferred from a foreign freighter to it about 200 nm off the central New South Wales coast; and
- four search and rescue operations - two disabled yachts, one in heavy seas off the Tasmanian coast, and the other at Ashmore Reef off the north-west coast of Western Australia; an Australian fishing

vessel which called for assistance with mechanical problems was towed into Kuri Bay in Western Australia; and a small disabled boat in Torres Strait which activated an electronic help signal was located and towed to Yam Island.

Government agencies assisted by the marine fleet included Customs, Australian Fisheries Management Authority, Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, Environment Australia, the Australian Federal Police and various State agencies and police forces.



The 25 metre Wauri patrolling the Torres Strait.