

*Viarsa 1* under way in the Southern Ocean



## THE PURSUIT OF THE VIARSA 1

Montevideo

Operation Patonga, which resulted in the pursuit, boarding, and detention of the *Viarsa 1* in the southern oceans last year, is the longest maritime pursuit in Australia's history.

It saw Customs contingent leader Steve Duffy, along with six operations staff and 13 other crew, spend 48 days at sea.

And despite his 22 years in the Navy, where he captained ships and served overseas during both peace and wartime, Steve says Operation Patonga tops his list for extreme work.

The weather, he says, was furious and unrelenting.

"When we began the exercise our brief was to conduct a surveillance and presence patrol to demonstrate our capability to do so in the international sphere and to exercise our right to patrol the area," Steve said.

"We had no indications at that stage that there were any fishing vessels in the area and certainly not that the patrol would become the longest and, I would say, most extreme and dangerous maritime pursuit in Australia's history.

### EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

"Even if we had predicted intercepting another vessel, we could not have anticipated operating in the conditions we did. It was an exceptional situation.

"There is no doubt the conditions were the most testing and rugged I've ever experienced.

"The first night after intercepting the *Viarsa 1* and commencing hot pursuit, we experienced phenomenal seas. The waves



Customs contingent leader Steve Duffy on board the *Southern Supporter*.

were so huge that often we couldn't see the other vessel. Fortunately by using the radar we kept contact the whole time and we kept calling them on the radio.

"For the first few hours the *Viarsa 1* did not acknowledge our calls at all. It was bizarre as we were along side them for two hours and only about 100 metres apart, flags flying, making signals, calling them on the radio and they just did not answer us at all. The *Viarsa 1* crew were even walking around the deck looking at us, but still did not answer. It was very frustrating and I really needed a lot more information about the vessel before I could send any recommendations about further actions back to the Operation Commander.

"In an effort to illicit a response from the ship's master we decided to give the impression that we were preparing to mount a boarding party - even though we had no boarding team with us.

"The seas at that time were reasonably calm, and if we'd had a boarding team available we could have boarded the ship. So we approached the *Viarsa 1* in really good conditions - slight seas, very little wind.





"All our crew were on deck dressed in cold weather equipment, helmets, goggles, and with binoculars and we prepared to lower the pursuit tender into the water.

"At this stage the master of the *Viarsa 1* finally responded and said 'Southern Supporter, this is *Viarsa 1* you have no permission to board my vessel.'

"Fisheries officer Mike O'Dea immediately got on the radio and replied that we would not need to send a boarding party across - of course we didn't mention we had no boarding team, if they could provide the information we required.

"We asked them questions like, 'What is the name, callsign, registration number and Port of Registry of the vessel? How many people were onboard? What was the Captain's name and nationality? How much fish was onboard? Where had they caught the fish?' "When we got their response we were then able to provide the information required to Coastwatch and Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA)."

## JUST THE BEGINNING

But despite this seeming complicity, the chase had only just begun and a predicted change in weather set the scene for what was about to become another 32 days of demanding and extreme ocean patrol.

"On the day we finally got a radio response from the *Viarsa 1*, we had anticipated a bad weather front would be coming through," Steve said. "That front arrived just as expected and hit with such ferocity that I genuinely feared for the safety of our vessel.

"The waves were towering over our vessel and slamming into it. We'd be coasting down the back of a wave at about 12 knots and the next wave would hit us and stop the ship dead and the ship would shake and shudder."

But with assurances from the ship's master, Andy Codrington, that the *Southern Supporter* could handle the conditions, the pursuit continued.

"The ship's master, who was fantastic to work with and a real professional, advised us that the ship could handle the conditions but there would be damage sustained.

"At that point we had already lost deck plates from the walkway around the bridge. As the waves had come up underneath the bridge and slammed into the front of the ship, the force of the water ripped the walkway off and thrown it over the side. There were tonnes and tonnes of water and the force was incredible.

"Our major concern was the huge waves coming over the top and crashing into the front of the ship and the bridge windows. We thought if the bridge windows blew in we would have to give up the chase.

"There are emergency places you can steer the ship from if you lose the bridge, but you lose all operational capability - we would have had to turn back to Fremantle."

## UNCONVENTIONAL APPROACH

Although Steve had experienced conditions similar while working with the British Navy, the need for hot pursuit meant handling the conditions in an unconventional and at times



Despite encountering rough conditions, the *Viarsa 1* (above) continued to flee from the *Southern Supporter*.



perilous manner. "When I was serving on the British destroyer *HMS Glasgow* I'd spent time in similar seas in the northern oceans, but not for the duration that we had in the Southern Ocean," Steve said.

"In the North Sea a storm would blow up and then die down quite quickly, but in the Southern Ocean we had day after day after day of rolling fronts.

"A massive front would come through and we'd face 30-metre waves. Then it would die down to a stage when it was just rough and then suddenly go to super rough again.

"It was so constant and we were just pounding into these seas. Normally if you have a storm you put your ship into a position where the waves are coming over your rear deck where you can ride it out. You would not be punching straight into it.

"But the *Viarsa 1* was running away directly south and the storm was coming a little bit west of south. So the waves were coming straight at us and we were just smashing into them ..."

## HAZARDOUS CONDITIONS

As the *Viarsa 1* headed further west and then south, conditions changed and became even more hazardous.

"As we headed south we started to encounter floe ice, icebergs and pack ice - it became very dangerous," Steve said.

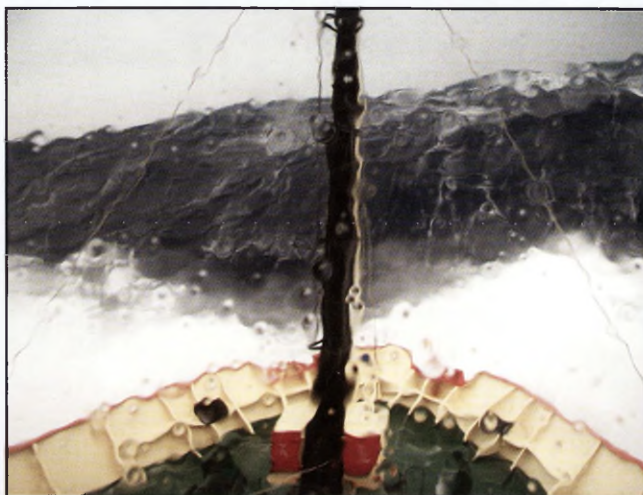
"I admit, I was worried about the capability of the hull to withstand the pressure of the ice. "Our ship went to the very limit and maybe beyond. I'm not experienced in ice navigation, but I believe it probably went past the limit it was rated for which is navigating 'new form ice'. We were actually getting into older form ice, ice that is about two-to-three-years old. You really need an icebreaker for that.

"As we continued to pursue the *Viarsa 1* we then began to go through ice that was closing behind us. There was a cold blasting wind from the south with frequent snow squalls and these big blocks of ice, which were about three to four metres in diameter and about two feet thick, were starting to freeze together because there was so much compression.

"That's when you get pack ice and you can't really push your way through unless you have an ice breaker. That was what the *Viarsa 1* had entered and we were genuinely concerned."

Adding to the physical demands of the patrol and escalating fatigue, Steve and the rest of the *Southern Supporter* crew were also facing huge physiological challenges.

"Psychologically, dealing with such extreme and uncertain conditions, is quite difficult," Steve said. "We were pushing through this unforgiving ice and it was grinding down the side of the ship.



During the course of the hot pursuit, the *Southern Supporter* encountered mountainous seas.

"My cabin was on waterline level and it sounded just like someone dragging their fingernails down the side of a chalkboard - it never seemed to stop. It was quite a disturbing noise and subliminally wearing, and I was a little concerned about how much of this ice-grinding we could sustain.

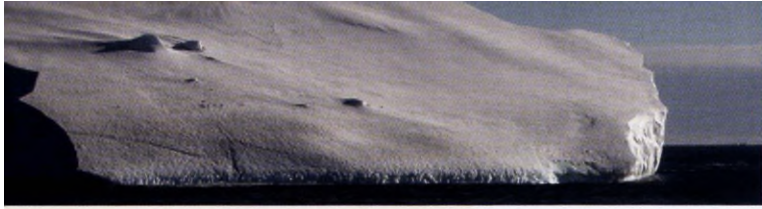
"Again the ship's master told us the *Southern Supporter* could cope - but not if the conditions got any worse. As we went on the conditions did deteriorate and we could not continue to pursue the *Viarsa 1* - she was heading into dangerous pack ice in a vessel that I believe was less capable than ours.

"I was annoyed that the master of the *Viarsa 1* was risking the lives of his crew plus himself in a vessel that was not equipped to go into those environments. He pressed his vessel and crew beyond the limits of their capability and I personally think they were very lucky to come out of there."

## HARD CALL

It was then that Steve had to make the hardest call of all. "The decision to leave the *Viarsa 1* in the ice in those treacherous conditions was a really hard one to make - I didn't want to leave it by itself.





"I was very concerned for the safety of the people on that ship. But it came a point where we had to ask ourselves, 'Do we risk our own lives to that extent or do we just let them go?' After we stopped pursuing the *Viarsa 1*, Andy Codrington and I spoke about what we needed to do should something drastic happen, should we need to mount a rescue mission when they were down in the ice by themselves.

"You've got to do what you can to assist another ship - regardless of the situation. That's the law of the sea and the obligation mariners have to each other.

"Fortunately, how far would we risk the safety of our own crew was a question we didn't have to answer. The master of the *Viarsa 1* was, in my opinion, a very imprudent man - I would not have liked to be one of his crew."

Once the *Southern Supporter* headed out of the ice, conditions were less intense. A small ice-free patch of sea was found



Ice-encrusted bow of the *Southern Supporter*.

near a point that Steve and Andy believed the *Viarsa 1* would eventually reappear. For six hours they circled waiting.

"After some calculations we headed to a point where we thought the *Viarsa 1* might come out. We turned out all our lights, found a little patch of water that was not frozen and just went round and round and round while we monitored things.

"At one stage, the radar indicated that we were separated from the *Viarsa 1* by about 30 miles. When she eventually came out she was within one mile of our estimate - not a bad effort we thought.

"As the *Viarsa 1* made her way towards us we turned on our lights and declared our presence. I believe they would have been surprised - I think they thought they'd lost us."

## HIDDEN ICEBERGS

Still, the *Viarsa 1* did not give up and the pursuit continued - this time with the threat of hidden icebergs.

"It was then that we began heading into the South Atlantic Ocean where there were innumerable old and weathered icebergs barely visible above the water line.

"In daylight we could see what we were approaching because the waves washed over their tops and created a bit of surf.

"But at night, travelling quickly through this area was really nerve-racking. It was dark, our radar could not detect the old icebergs as they were only just above water level, and we had no sonar.

"These icebergs are really dense, cores of old icebergs with at least 90 per cent of their bulk under the sea. And because of the turbulence around them they make a real growling sound - they are actually called growlers.

"There was one night when our officer on watch picked up one of these growlers and alerted *Viarsa 1* who was right ahead, on a direct collision course for the ice.

"We advised *Viarsa 1* that she was heading directly at an iceberg and all but begged her to stop or turn away. She didn't do either and we were alarmed. But barely a minute before hitting the iceberg the *Viarsa 1* made a massive alteration to port and went around the south of the iceberg. Meanwhile we had altered our course to starboard and went around the north of the iceberg. We met up on the other side."





*Southern Supporter* was under constant threat from icebergs.

## LOW ON FUEL

For Steve, after five weeks of demanding and at times treacherous conditions, to be unable to see the mission through to its conclusion would have been frustrating and demoralizing. But as the chase headed into its sixth week, the *Southern Supporter* began to get low on fuel and food and things began to look uncertain.

"As soon as we started the pursuit we began to calculate at what point we would have to turn back to Fremantle, at what point we may have to give up the chase and head for South Africa or Uruguay, and that type of thing," Steve said.

"Our fuel supplies were balanced very finely. When we passed the Fremantle refuel point, we began to calculate what would be the latest stage we could board the *Viarsa 1* and still get back to South Africa.

"When we finally did board, we had about only 18 hours more steaming time up our sleeve in order to make it back to Cape Town instead of continuing onto Montevideo. If the boarding had occurred after that we would have had to head to the Falkland Islands or Uruguay, and even then we would've been getting there on fumes.

"As it was, when we did arrive in South Africa we barely had two days' fuel and only a day of food left for everyone - but then, I suppose we did have a lot of fish. I was so glad to bring the pursuit to a conclusion. If I'd have had to let it go after all that time it would have been disappointing and a real anticlimax. To get a positive result was a good feeling.

"It was also great to work with the British and South African crews. Their help was really well received and they did a great job for us. The coordination that happened at short notice was amazing and, for me personally, to take charge of the services of two other countries as well as my own guys was a great feeling of professional achievement."

## EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCE

With the reassurance of hindsight, Steve says the experience was extraordinary and, in its own way, one not to be missed.

"The sights and the experiences I had and the support we received from Australia and many other countries was really fantastic," Steve said.

"The icebergs were spectacular. Some of them were about two miles long and 200 metres high - it was just a cliff face going straight down into the ocean. And think about it - if an iceberg is 200 metres high, it means there is 1.8 km of ice going down. Incredible!

"I estimate during a few days we would have passed more than 1500 icebergs. I didn't ever imagine there were that many icebergs in the world let alone in that one spot. It was fantastic really. I was hoping to get onto Heard Island - we had the permits to do so, but the pursuit of the *Viarsa 1* took priority.

"As a consequence we didn't see a great deal of wildlife - just one group of penguins sitting on a tiny ice flow and a Minke whale who poked its nose up at the ship one lunch time - that was pretty exciting. And of course lots of Antarctic birdlife."

And then there were the messages.



Calmer conditions allowed the crew of the *Southern Supporter* to attempt to clear the decks of built up ice.



"When we were told of the media interest in Operation Patonga, we just couldn't believe it," Steve said. Everyone was supporting us. There were letters, e-mails and calls coming to us through Coastwatch from Australia, Denmark, USA, UK, Germany, Finland, and Sweden - we were flabbergasted.

"We got postcards from people all over the world - I got one from Byron Bay that basically said 'Good on ya chaps, well done'. I've kept it as a special reminder of the support we got.

"It was a huge morale boost to all of us. It lifted our spirits like you would not believe - we'd been following the *Viarsa 1* through thick and thin for three weeks and we were wondering what was going to happen.

"Twelve days later when I came home, the messages were still coming in. I had calls from friends, family, Customs and Navy colleagues. I went to my kid's sports carnival and I had all these school children pat me on the back and say: 'Good one, Mr Duffy, that was really cool!' I would say, 'You'd better believe it!'

"It was absolutely freezing! The heating in the ship was only just managing to take the chill off the air. Even the guys in the engine room were wearing jumpers and beanies!

"Pipes froze and the top cabins had no water. One night a bunch of ice and krill jammed our engine water intakes and shut down all but one of the engines - and even that engine was only just ticking over.

"That night *Viarsa 1* almost got away from us. But the engineers worked really well to keep us going."

## ANOTHER PATROL

Steve says he'd do it all again and will take on another patrol.

"I am a firm believer in the role Customs performs by patrolling Australia's oceans. If we want to claim that territory we have to get down there and exercise our sovereign rights.

"Australia's rights were being usurped by poachers. Already the numbers of Patagonian toothfish have been depleted around the bottom of Argentina, Chile, the South Atlantic, the Falklands and South Georgia.

"South African territories have been pillaged of this resource and now poachers are working their way round to the Australian territories at the bottom of the Southern Ocean.

"The Patagonia toothfish will disappear all together if this continues, and this is not only wrong from an ecological viewpoint but also economically. This region could be a sustainable fisheries resource for Australia.

"I would really like to do another Southern Ocean patrol, but not for a while. Maybe I'll go in the Antarctic summer, the ice



The *Viarsa 1* escorted into Fremantle Harbour by the *Southern Supporter*.

will have receded a fair bit and the weather is meant to be a little bit better - but there's no guarantee!

"The only thing you can guarantee in the Southern Ocean is that it will be cold, rough, and a real challenge.

"Meanwhile I'm working on training our new recruits for future Southern Ocean patrols - there is a lot to learn!"