

# PORT CHATTER



SUMMER 2021  
DECEMBER

## MARINE RESCUE NSW PORT STEPHENS UNIT

*'Volunteers Saving Lives on the Water'*





## MARINE RESCUE NSW – PORT STEPHENS UNIT

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## VOLUNTEERS SAVING LIVES ON THE WATER

### UNIT APPOINTMENTS - DECEMBER 2021

<b>Patrons: Kate Washington MP, State Member Port Stephens</b> <b>Meryl Swanson MP, Federal Member Paterson</b> <b>Stephen Bromhead LLM MP, State Member Myall Lakes</b> <b>The Hon. Dr David Gillespie MP, Federal Member Lyne</b>		Public Relations/Social Media Vacant Editor Port Chatter Penelope Highland Assistant Editor Geoff Williams Fund Raising Officer Peter Young Social Media (Facebook) Murray O'Dea Social Committee: Lisa Lodding Webmaster Vacant Donation Boxes Angela Tilling
<b>Unit Commander Ben van der Wijngaart</b> <b>Welfare / Liaison Harold Gibson</b> Assistant Jenny Fitzsimons <b>Protocol Officer Harold Gibson</b>	<b>Deputy Unit Commander Colin Couper</b> Emergency Services Liaison Officer Colin Couper Data Management/Network/Comms Lee Ryman, Brian Richardson, Howard Faulks	<b>Corporate Services Administration Officer Jenni Fryer</b> <b>Assistant Krystyna Winslow</b> Clerical Assistance Erica Smith WH&S Officer Jenni Fryer Honours/Awards Krystyna Winslow Providedore Glenyce Lumsden & Bloss Cleary Unit Meeting Supply Jenny Fitzsimons, Deb Buckley Data / Stats Maureen Wheatley Supply Margaret & Andrew Morrison Membership Loris Webster, Erica Smith
<b>Operations</b> <b>Operations Officer Laurie Nolan</b> Assistant Operations Officer Sue Freeman Communications Centre Manager Nigel Eves Assistant Manager Dee Gilliland Rosters Manager Will Scott Assistant John Lee On Call Watch Officer: Neil Fraser, Frank Van Druten, Graeme Abberton, Stephen Harris Duty Callout Officers: Neil Fraser, Peter Dentrinos, Frank Van Druten, Julian Liddy-Meaney, Graeme Abberton Radio Club Manager Elizabeth Francis Boats Manager Mark Kelly Assistant Manager Vacant Ashes Scattering Coordinator Harold Gibson Chief Engineer Bill Haskell R.F.S. Liaison: Lower Hunter Ross Debenham Hunter Valley Colin Couper Coxswains Sue Freeman, Robert Johnson, Laurie Nolan, Brian Bibbing, Iain Blackadder, Mick Duggan, Ray McLeod (MR Master)	<b>Facilities</b> <b>Facilities Officer John Reid</b> Property Officer Vacant Asst PO/Projects Vacant Maintenance Steve Chauncy, Steve Spear, John Woodbridge, Alan Woodward Security John Smith Electrical Services Doug Craike Cleaning Contractor Mel White Cottage Manager Greg Walsh Curator Bronwen Rolfe Historian Paul Farnhill Rosters Alan Woodward Wedding Co-ordinator Jenni Fryer Team Bloss Cleary, Lynn Gibson, Greg Walsh Jenny Fitzsimons, Harold Gibson Tours Harold Gibson Tea Rooms Liaison John Reid	<b>Contributions</b> are most welcome from all members, advertisers, sponsors or other interested community members. They should be accompanied by the author's name, address and phone number, and can be emailed to the editor at <a href="mailto:editor.portstephens@marinerescuensw.com.au">editor.portstephens@marinerescuensw.com.au</a> Contributions are subject to review by the Executive Committee prior to publishing. <b>Advertising</b> enquiries are welcomed. Contact the editor at <a href="mailto:editor.portstephens@marinerescuensw.com.au">editor.portstephens@marinerescuensw.com.au</a> for more information. <b>Sponsors</b> can make <b>tax-deductible</b> donations to Marine Rescue NSW Port Stephens. All sponsorships will be acknowledged in <i>Port Chatter</i> if requested.
<b>Unit Training</b> <b>Unit Training Officer Ray McLeod</b> Assistant Training Officer Peter Dentrinos Training Systems Officer Angela O'Dea, Jennifer Dunn Rescue Vessels Training Officer Brian Bibbing Course Presenters: Paul Buckley, Colin Couper, Neil Fraser, Ray McLeod, Trevor Moxham, Ben van der Wijngaart First Aid Presenters: Peter Dentrinos, Lisa Lodding	<b>Finance</b> <b>Treasurer Adrian Hill</b> Assistant Vacant Grants Officer John Reid Gift Shop Manager Sandra Scheuber Gift Shop Bookkeeper Denise Olsen	
<b>Community Relations</b> <b>Community Relations Officer Will Scott</b>		

## OUR PRIMARY FOCUS

Saving lives at sea on open and closed waters in and around Port Stephens

### MARINE RESCUE NSW – PORT STEPHENS UNIT SERVICES PROVIDED



**Category One Marine Search and Rescue Co-ordination Centre (SARCC).** Located at the former Inner Light and now Heritage Site at Nelson Head, 32°42.632 S; 152°09.667 E (overlooking Shoal Bay and looking out through the entrance to Port Stephens). Accredited by the State Rescue Board.

**Communications Centre, Nelson Head - VMR217.** Operated by trained and qualified volunteers, 24 hours a day; 7 days a week; 365 days a year. Monitoring 27MHz, and VHF marine frequencies, emergency and calling channels. Open during each day to the visiting public.

Apart from radio coverage generally to the local boating community, the Communications Centre offers:

- Emergency support to vessels in trouble
- Emergency and routine after hours communications for Rural Fire Service operating in the Lower Hunter and Hunter Valley districts
- A Marine Radio Safety (MRS) service – Boat Register
- A checkpoint and radio coverage for recreational vessels transiting up and down the coastline adjacent to Port Stephens.
- Weather readings and local conditions observations and
- Current Bureau of Meteorology weather forecasts and tidal information. (These can be obtained by contacting the Comms Centre by phone or radio and are also offered in regular radio skeds).

**Accredited Rescue Vessels** Available on a 24 hr call-out basis, subject to Police tasking. (See 'Rescue Vessels' page).

**Weather recording facility** Accredited by the Bureau of Meteorology. Regular reports on local conditions are electronically communicated to the Bureau, as well as to Radio, TV and Print media outlets in the local area.

**Nelson Head Reserve and Heritage Inner Light Cottage.** The Nelson Bay Unit of Marine Rescue NSW is responsible to the State Government for upkeep of this heritage precinct, through its 'Nelson Head Lighthouse and Rescue Station Reserve Trust Management Sub-committee' (which includes a representative of the Port Stephens Historical Society).

A small museum is operated by volunteers and is open to the public, 7 days a week from 10am to 4pm.

A portion of the building is leased to a private operator for morning/afternoon teas/coffee and lunches.

Wedding Ceremonies. Bookings can be made to hold these in the grounds (see Lighthouse Weddings page).

Below the Comms Centre, on the ground floor, is a tourist Gift Shop operated by Marine Rescue Port Stephens. Without profits from the Gift Shop, together with support from the local community, clubs and businesses, the Unit would find it very difficult, if not near impossible, to operate.

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## UNIT COMMANDER

### UNIT COMMANDER



As we emerge from our Winter habitats like bears from hibernation, into the Spring and now Summer sunshine, we might be forgiven for wondering whether we woke too early! It's been a strange Spring. The usual Spring winds are persisting much longer with strong wind forecasts being followed by gale warnings

and thunderstorms and more strong wind warnings. This weekly standard persists as I write this in the rainy, blustery, fading days of November.

Very frustrating for boaters who have been a sharply rising demographic in the last year and who are keen to get out on the water after the restrictions of lock-down.

My own hours on watch in the Marine Rescue (MR) Port Stephens Communications Centre have only borne out the experience of my fellow Unit members. Lots of new and Winter-emerging boaters on the water in the prevailing conditions have led to a noticeable trend in the calls for assistance.

While we still have the normal number of engine and battery problems that lead to calls for assistance, the windy weather has been the predominant boater's devil these last months. A couple of examples will make my point.

**Case 1.** A 10-12m sailing vessel departs from a northern port in the State, heading south to Victoria. Solo sailor, no AIS, no EPIRB, didn't log on with Marine Rescue and with a week of head-on strong wind and gale warnings confronting him.

I convinced him to log on with us in mid-journey when we found he was somewhere near Seal Rocks trying to make Port Stephens in serious headwinds. The only reason we knew he was out there, was because he made a casual passing enquiry with MR Forster Tuncurry.

His stop-over plans changed from Port Stephens to Broughton Is. and then giving up and attempting a return to Seal Rocks for shelter by sunset. This plan also ultimately failed and he consequently stood out to sea overnight with no relief in the gale force winds. After that he became uncontactable.

Overdue vessel procedures swung into effect at dawn, resulting in the Water Police, MR Forster Tuncurry and Port Stephens each sending out SAR vessels to our north. Two days later he was eventually found by a search aircraft 120 nautical miles east of Port Kembla. That wasn't the end of the story, but provides sufficient lessons in safe seamanship to serve my purpose.

**Case 2.** Strong wind warnings still in effect days later and a 5-6m half cabin runabout is fishing off Broughton Is. It hadn't logged on with us, but the skipper saw the approaching thunderstorm and thought it wise to log on while he sought shelter before trying to get back to Port Stephens.

The contrast between Cases 1 and 2 is noteworthy. In Case 1 the skipper was ill-equipped for the voyage, even without the bad weather long forecast.

I heard someone seriously ask, 'Was it a suicide mission?' One could be forgiven the question, reminding me of the David Nobbs book, *'The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin'*! We would not even have been looking for him had we not taken the initiative to insist he log on with us.

Notably, the skipper quickly got himself in a position where it would be fair to assume unrelenting fatigue further clouded his judgement where he allowed himself to be taken out of range of shore-based VHF radio and mobile phone towers. He was lucky.

Case 2 on the other hand, whether it was a good idea to be out there with the prevailing forecast or not, the skipper had the common sense to assess the changing situation early, think ahead and reduce his risk and increase his safety margin by logging on with us. Smart move.

As climate change will continue to play increasing havoc with our weather expectations, I can only hope more boat owners think ahead, check what they're likely to encounter and make sober, fatigue-free decisions about whether they should go out or change their plans. And if they do, take all the equipment precautions available to them including logging on with Marine Rescue.

Nature doesn't comprehend dogged persistence and award extra points.

**Ben van der Wijngaart**



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## DEPUTY UNIT COMMANDER AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

### DEPUTY UNIT COMMANDER

At last, a reduction to Level 1 COVID restrictions has allowed for some easing of the regulations in the Communications Centre and on the Rescue Vessels. It has certainly been six months to remember but the members of Marine Rescue Port Stephens never missed a shift or an assist to the boating public.

Extra vigilance was required when logging vessels on to ensure that they were aware of State Health Regulations when travelling between LGAs or voyaging to Greater Sydney. As requested by the NSW Police, Marine Area Command (MAC) were made aware of vessels entering the Greater Sydney area. While skippers were told of the Health Orders they were never refused a logon. Our role is to keep people safe on the water and let the authorities decide compliance with COVID restrictions.

To our fellow members in the Gift Shop, the Cottage and the Maintenance team, the Comms Centre crew really did miss your happy presence while these areas and the Tea Rooms were closed. Its great to have all the crew at Nelson Head back on board.

Its also great to have our regular Members' Meetings back face to face, albeit in the larger CWA Hall to conform with social distancing requirements. Apart from once again partaking of the fine gastronomic fare supplied by Jenny and Deb, nothing beats chatting face to face and honouring awardees personally when compared to meeting via Zoom. We have been living in 'interesting times'.

We have installed and tested a new system of handing over our 24 hour Communications Centre to MR Sydney

using the ROIP (Radio Over Internet Protocol) capability of the Internet. While this has only been done once before in 2020 when a COVID scare in Port Stephens reduced the number of available Watchkeepers, the equipment has been updated at State Comms in Sydney and has given MRPS a chance to review our procedures should the need ever arise again.

A new version of the MRNSW Logon App is being tested by OPSO Laurie Nolan and IT guru Howard Faulks for the Apple version and myself for the Android based one. While still under Alpha testing, we can report that there are now improvements in ease of use and in app-based logic in the newer offerings to boaters that will make using their phone to logon more attractive. While a full conversation occurs when skippers logon via marine radio or a telephone call, a recent review of vessel logons showed that over 50% are now doing so by this method. It is expected to be released after Beta testing early in 2022.

Finally, a number of very worthy members have been awarded the newly created Unit Life Member status. Many hours of dedicated effort have been put into the Unit in the last 38 years, including the migration from RVCP to MRNSW. It is satisfying for the current member cohort to recognise the contribution those pioneers have made to the success of our Mission of Saving Lives on the Water and has been gratefully accepted by the recipients.

*Col Couper*



### COMMUNITY RELATIONS OFFICER

#### Back to the New Normal

With Summer just around the corner, the spirit of community is in full bloom. Marine Rescue Port Stephens has been the recipient of two major donations recently.

First, a very big thank you to the **Salamander Bay Rotary Club** for their generous donation of \$500. It is donations like these that keeps our radio base open and our vessels operating

**"saving lives on the water."**

Shown right is Deputy Unit Commander Colin Couper accepting the cheque from Rotary President Peter North and Rita Murray.

Many thanks also to the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, Salamander Bay Branch for their 2021 Community Donation cheque of \$500 to our unit. Shown far right is Unit



Commander Ben van der Wijngaart accepting the donation from Branch Manager Kasey Pollard.

Fundraising efforts are back in full swing. Fundraising Officer Peter Young has managed to secure a booth at the Tomaree Markets held at Rotary Park, Fly Point, on alternating

Sundays. He has also secured a position as sole food concessioner at the Australia Day Ceremony at Fly Point. These are considered to be major fundraising events like our Bunnings BBQs.

Thanks to all the hard work and generous spirit of our volunteers who make these events a success. Cooking, serving and promoting the message of safe boating to the community. Bravo – well done!

Stay safe everyone,

*Will Scott*

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# OPERATIONS

## OPERATIONS OFFICER

Following the freeing up of travel restrictions between NSW regions, and now also between states, we are expecting a “bumper summer” in terms of visitor activity in Port Stephens. Already we have reports from tourist businesses, restaurants and accommodation venues that their bookings are way out past February. This is fantastic for the local economy, but it will certainly put a strong load on the local service facilities. At Marine Rescue Port Stephens we are expecting record numbers of marine traffic – both for vessel Logons in our Communications Centre **and** for requests for on-water assistance by our Rescue Vessels.

This all means that the coming two or three months are going to be quite busy at MRPS.... but there are ways that the boating public can assist us and at the same time help themselves:.

- Boat owners should carry out a full check of their vessel before venturing out onto our beautiful Port Stephens waterways. With COVID restrictions, many boats will have been in extended storage so it is doubly important to make sure that all necessary engine servicing has been done – and that the fuel is fresh, the batteries charged, the safety equipment is current and quick at hand, etc.
- Logging on your vessel with the MRNSW Logon APP is the quickest and surest way of ensuring that your local MR base is aware that you are on the water. With the App, there is no waiting when you logon... just press a few buttons and away you go. The APP is available for both Apple and Android phones, and can be downloaded from the normal places – just search for “**Marine Rescue NSW**” and download the APP with the symbol shown here...
- Please remember to Log OFF when you return. If you fail to do so, or go overdue on the time you advised you'd return, then your local Marine Rescue base will commence proceedings to search for you. If you are in fact safe (thankfully!), then it will be a waste of our resources which could be diverting our attention away from other more needy cases.



Rescues (SARs). These can involve vessels broken down or missing in open waters off our coastline, or experiencing difficulties in bad weather conditions on the inside waters Port Stephens.

The most serious of these was a multi-agency search for a single sailor aboard a 10-metre sailing yacht, who had been missing for two days in rough conditions with strong winds and big seas off the Port Stephens coast. MRPS had alerted authorities when the vessel first went overdue, and the incident was rapidly escalated with Australian Maritime Search Authority (AMSA) commencing an airborne search. Port Stephens Water Police and one of MRPS Rescue Vessels also conducted a search of the area between Port Stephens and Seal Rocks. Fortunately the vessel was in fact located 120 nautical miles off Port Kembla after extensive search and rescue activity from three major agencies and dozens of people including air and sea resources. The Skipper was exhausted, but his yacht was in good shape, and



The 5-metre catamaran disabled at Broughton Island after hitting rocks entering Esmeralda Cove.

following some eager communications with the authorities, continued on its way south towards Victoria.

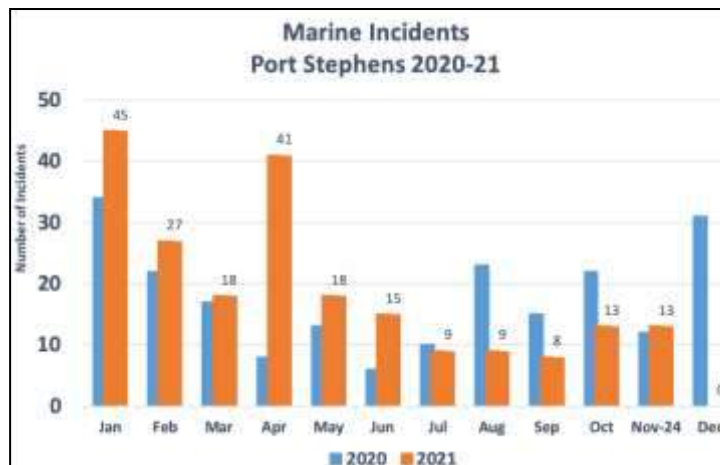
A second major off-shore incident involved a five-metre sailing catamaran which sank after hitting rocks on



Two of the crew who were very grateful for the assistance of MRPS crew who returned them to Nelson Bay.

## OPERATIONS

In the last couple of months, Marine Rescue Port Stephens has been involved in over 30 Marine Incidents, ranging from overdue vessels and simple requests for assistance due to engine or battery issues, all the way up to full-blown Search and



entering Esmeralda Cove at Broughton Island. The four people on board were assisted by members of the Broughton Island Preservation group (who manage the cottages on the island), who also secured the boat on shore. MRPS was tasked to pick up the four survivors and

*(Continued on page 11)*



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## OPERATIONS .....

(Continued from page 9)

their gear, and return them to safety at Nelson Bay. The vessel was left at the island due to severe damage which meant it could not be towed safely.

Two other major incidents involved vessels in trouble on the waters inside Port Stephens. The first was a small sailing dinghy with two young boys aboard, that had overturned in strong winds off the east end of Bagnall's Beach. A member of the public advised our Communications Centre who quickly sent out a SOLAS (Safety of Life at Sea) call to all boat crew. PS30 quickly responded and arrived on scene at the western end of Bagnall's Beach to find the two boys still with their capsized boat (a "Flying 11"), but rather tired from having to hang on for around 20 minutes in winds that were gusting to about 30 knots. The boys were not afraid, and handled themselves quite professionally. They were experienced sailors, being part of a well-respected International Yachting family, and advised that they had been sailing since they were three years old. Perhaps they should have questioned whether to go out sailing in such conditions, but were very relieved to receive the assistance from our crew.

The second was when a 10-metre yacht broke a mooring in Salamander Bay in a strong north westerly wind, and was blown into the very shallow waters at Roy Wood



The yacht hard aground at Salamander Bay, with PS31 approaching to throw the towline.

Reserve, Corlette. PS31 quickly responded to assist and skilfully manoeuvred close enough in very shallow water to throw a heaving line with towline attached, which the single POB on the yacht attached to his bow and was pulled to safety. The yacht was placed at safety on an Emergency Mooring, with the Skipper very grateful for assistance that prevented his beloved yacht from being left high and dry on the beach.

### OPERATIONAL READINESS

Recently we underwent our annual Operational Readiness Inspection, both at the Dock/Boats, and in the Communications Centre. The inspection was carried out by our Regional Operations Manager (ROM) Steve Raymond, accompanied by Sgt Tony Hogg of the PS Water Police. The very comprehensive inspection checks that we have all our "ducks lined up" to perform the very important job that we do.

On the Rescue Vessels, we must have an up-to-date Safety Management System in place, with all the Risks assessed and catered for, and every piece of our equipment is in good order and subject to regular maintenance. The requirements are dictated by AMSA in accordance with the Vessel Survey category.

In the Communications Centre, the State Rescue Board and our own MRNSW have guidelines for documentation standards and equipment suitability and availability.

I am very pleased to report that we **passed with flying colours.** ROM Steve Raymond had no hesitation in signing off the ORI,

and Sgt Tony Hogg commended MRPS on our obvious preparedness to assist with incidents on the waters of Port Stephens

**Laurie Nolan**



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## FACILITIES

### FACILITIES OFFICER

The COVID-19 lockdown presented us with a great opportunity to carry out a number of maintenance activities which had been outstanding for some time, including painting of the Cottage and cleaning out the Bunker. That still leaves a number of smaller projects which are being addressed each week by the maintenance team.

The facilities at Nelson Head are all back operating again albeit at slightly reduced capacity.

- **Tea Rooms** – back in full operation serving coffee and light meals to all visitors.
- **Cottage/Museum** – open to all visitors with some new and refurbished exhibits.
- **Light Room** – the refurbishment of this very important part of our museum is proceeding slowly and we are waiting on the final parts of the new lamps before we

open in mid-December in time for the start of the school holidays.

- **Command Centre** – further repairs are being carried out to the roof and ceiling panels in this building to bring it back to full operating capacity for training and Unit meetings.
- **150th Anniversary of the first light** – planning has commenced on the event to commemorate the lighting of the first light at Nelson Head which took place on 1 April 1872. A re-enactment of this event will be held on 1st April 2022 to celebrate this very historic event.
- We look forward to welcoming all visitors back to Nelson Head to enjoy the facilities we have to offer and, of course, the fantastic views.

Our best wishes to all for a very merry Christmas and a much happier year in 2022.

*John Reid*





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## JOHN COOK PRESENTATION

### AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL MEDAL

Recently Harold Gibson and Colin Couper were honoured to present to the family of one of our well respected past members John Cook, with the Australian National Medal. John passed away in May this year after a long battle with cancer. He was an active member in the Unit for 17 years and held the important position of Rosters Officer for many years. He was also the Chair of the Inner Lighthouse Trust Committee and was very proud to be part of this team and worked tirelessly in this position. Upon his retirement from Communications duties he would often be seen around the base helping out in the Gift Shop.



## HAPPENINGS AROUND THE BAY

**Foreshore Drive** from when the culvert failed during the heavy rain of 18 March. To 25 November 2021. It is expected the road will be open by early January.



**Little Beach Boat Ramp** The long wait for a safer and better boat ramp is finally over with the new \$2.2 million facility opening in time for the holidays. This boat ramp is one of the busiest in NSW.





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## BRAVERY AWARDS



### Star of Courage awarded to Laurie

**NOLAN** - who displayed conspicuous courage during the rescue attempt of a race yacht in treacherous seas off the coast near Port Stephens in New South Wales on 6 January 2016. Mr Nolan was one of seven crewman on-board rescue vessel Port Stephens 40 who volunteered to go into cyclonic seas to aid a racing yacht that was encountering treacherous conditions near Port Stephens. After battling exceptionally rough seas and strong winds in pitch darkness for five hours they caught-up with the distressed yacht. At 2am, the 32-tonne rescue vessel was hit by a wall of water which tipped the boat onto its port side, throwing the crew on deck off their feet, and causing the boat's propellers to lift out of the water. As the boat righted itself a second large wave hit, engulfing Mr Nolan in water and knocking him off his feet. He regained his footing and worked to prevent crew members from being further entangled in safety lines and dragged under water. He then went to the aid of a crewman who had sustained a shoulder injury by untangling the safety line and moving the injured man off the deck and into the safety of the cabin. Realising another crewman was pinned to the deck by tangled lines, Mr Nolan grabbed a knife from his belt, severed the line, and pulled his colleague to his feet and inside the cabin. A third large wave then struck the boat, knocking it over and causing one of its engines to stop. As the boat righted itself, Mr Nolan and the battered crew were able to restart the engine, clear ropes away from the propellers, and then begin the arduous five-hour journey back to Port Stephens while battling large waves, cyclone-like headwinds, injuries and severe sea sickness.

**Australian Bravery Medal awarded to - Ronald LIGHTON - Skipper, Ian DRUMMOND, Tom MILLER, Richard PIZZUTO, Michael SMITH and Paul SULLIVAN.**

These volunteers displayed considerable bravery during the rescue attempt of a race yacht crew in treacherous seas off the coast



near Port Stephens in New South Wales on 6 January 2016.

They were the seven crewman on-board rescue vessel Port Stephens 40 who volunteered to go into cyclonic seas to aid a racing yacht and its crew that were encountering treacherous conditions near Port Stephens. After battling exceptionally rough seas and strong winds in pitch darkness for five hours they caught-up with the distressed yacht. At 2am their rescue vessel was hit by a wall of water which tipped the boat onto its port side, throwing the crew on deck off their feet, and causing the boat's propellers to lift out of the water. As the boat righted itself, a second large wave hit and the crew on deck were again tossed off their feet with one sustaining a serious facial injury, another a dislocated shoulder, and a third was pinned to the deck by his safety line and debris. As another crew member went to the assistance of the men, a third large wave struck the boat, knocking it over and causing one of its engines to stop. As the boat righted itself the battered crew were able to restart the engine, clear ropes away from the propellers, and then begin the arduous journey back to Port Stephens while battling large waves, cyclone-like headwinds, injuries and severe sea sickness. The crew of the stricken race yacht later made it safely to shore in a life raft.

**The following members also received the Australian Bravery Medal (BM) to recognise their courage and service to the community.**

**Noel CORCORAN, Michael DUGGAN, Suzanne FREEMAN, David JACK, Kenneth JOHNSON, Peter MERLINO, John Eryl THOMAS and Mr Nigel WATERS,**

These volunteers displayed considerable bravery during the rescue of race yacht crews in treacherous seas off the coast near Port Stephens in New South Wales on 6 January 2016.

They were one of eight crew members on-board rescue vessel Port Stephens 40 tasked to search for a missing yachtsman who had been knocked off his boat by a wave in treacherous conditions near Port Stephens.

Before it could reach the search zone the boat took over a tow from a NSW Police rescue vessel of another disabled yacht that had issued a Mayday call for assistance. This enabled the faster police boat to search for the sailor. The crew battled the seas at the port entrance to deliver the disabled yacht to a safe mooring within the bay.

Later in the afternoon, the crew members, were asked to re-join the search for the missing yachtsman. Their vessel headed back out into the volatile strong winds and high waves. They were then tasked with bringing the missing sailor's disabled yacht through the treacherous conditions back to port.





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## BIRDS AROUND PORT STEPHENS

### BUTCHERBIRDS

Two species of butcherbirds are present in the Port Stephens area, the Grey Butcherbird and the Pied Butcherbird. The name butcherbird is derived from their habit of impaling large uneaten prey on a tree branch or thorn. Both birds are closely related to the Australian Magpie and Pied Currawong. A Grey Butcherbird is often seen perching on prominent tree branches around the base while looking for food scraps from café patrons.

The **Grey Butcherbird (*Cracticus torquatus*)** is 26-30 cm long and has a black crown and face and a grey back, with a thin white collar. The wings are grey, with large areas of white and the underparts are white. The bill is grey and black with a small hook at the



upper tip. The eye is dark brown and the legs and feet are dark grey. Both sexes are similar. Young birds resemble adults, but have black areas replaced with olive-brown and a buff wash on the white areas. It has a lovely, lilting song,

Grey Butcherbirds prey on small animals, including birds, lizards and insects, as well as some fruits and seeds. They are found in a range of wooded habitats, across much of Australia and have adapted well to suburban living. When nesting, the Grey Butcherbird becomes very aggressive, swooping at the face of intruders, accompanied by a loud, maniacal cackle. The nest is bowl-shaped, made of sticks and twigs, lined with grasses and other soft fibres, located within 10 m of the ground. The eggs are incubated by the female and the young birds are fed by both parents. Young will remain in the breeding territory for about a



year, and help the parents raise the young of the following season. The Grey Butcherbird is not threatened.

A cousin of the grey Butcherbird is the **Pied Butcherbird (*Cracticus nigrogularis*)**. It is 33-36 cm in length

and looks somewhat like a small magpie. It has a full black hood and bib, dark brown eye and long, hooked, grey and black bill. A broad white collar is present around its neck, the underparts are white and the legs are black. The upper parts are mostly black, with large patches of white on the wings and rump. Both sexes have identical plumage, but the male is slightly larger than the female. Young Pied Butcherbirds are generally duller than the adults with areas of black replaced with brown, and white areas washed with buff.

The Pied Butcherbird is found throughout the Australian mainland, with the exception of the southern and south-eastern coastline, more arid inland areas and Tasmania. It prefers to inhabit drier forests and woodlands and is often seen in parks, having adapted to urban living. They are known to attack unsuspecting people and dogs that approach their nests too closely. Pied Butcherbirds are very aggressive feeders and prey on small reptiles, mammals, frogs and birds, as well as large insects. The breeding season of the Pied Butcherbird varies throughout its large range. The female constructs the

nest and incubates the eggs alone, and is fed by the male and other members of the group. The nest is a bowl of sticks and twigs, lined with grasses and other finer material. It is usually built in an upright tree fork up to 5 m above the ground. More than one female may lay eggs in the same nest. The Pied Butcherbird is not threatened.

The Pied Butcherbird's call is a beautiful, melodious fluting, sometimes given as a duet or in turn by several individuals from a prominent perch. It is a good mimic and has been recorded reproducing the

sounds of a mobile phone, a car alarm, a barking dogs and the songs of other birds such as Crested Pigeon, Rainbow Lorikeet and Noisy Miner. See the following You Tube recordings:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVrLsGg6caw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlAb-ObjIH4>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMotkPv1eMw>

Several Australian and international composers and choreographers have been inspired by the Pied Butcherbird song to incorporate it into their music and dance. Study of the Pied Butcherbird's song reveals that it has some of the form and structural characteristics of human music and an aesthetic appreciation of sound may be present in its song.

**Neil Fraser  
Twitcher**



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## RFS LIAISON HUNTER VALLEY

**Marine Rescue Port Stephens takes over the communications role for Lower Hunter and Hunter Valley RFS nightly. From around 4.00pm until 9.00am the following morning all 000 fire calls for the region are directed to the MRPS Watchkeeper who pages and maintains radio and phone communications with RFS units, duty personnel and Fire and Rescue.**

### HUNTER VALLEY RFS

The table on page 24 reflects the incidents handled by MRPS for the Hunter Valley district:

As it has been more wet than dry over the last 3 months and especially in November. The Hunter Valley RFS supports their fellow volunteer service, the SES, when floods eventuate as a result of heavy upstream rainfall. For example, by posting warnings on the HV Facebook page, they alert their joint 'customers' on the land to drag up the pumps and prepare for livestock movement.

On a more practical level, crews from the HV district journeyed to Armidale to assist the SES with storm and tornado damage there in October. Statewide, RFS helicopters have been pre-positioned into key areas to assist where necessary the SES efforts.



Speaking of aircraft, HV RFS will have a **Fire Boss** water bomber based at Scone available for control of bush and grass fires.

With callsign **Bomber 219**, the aircraft will be stood up for Fire Rating days of Very High and above and will be called out by the State Air Desk. It will be available between the hours of 1000 and 1800. MRPS Watchkeepers may hear it on the RFS2 radio network (GRN029) but the Duty Officer will flank (communicate directly) to it for control of its operations.

Back on the ground, Edinglassie and Mangoola were called out by MRPS as Firecom to a car fire on Denman Road on 7 November.

Like all emergency services, the RFS is constantly training and upskilling their volunteers. The Howes Valley

brigade has been accredited for Road Crash Rescue which will assist with accidents on the notorious Putty Road. Watchkeepers have been alerted to the new entry for calling out this crew in the Predetermined Response folder.

*Colin Couper*

**Prepare Act Survive**





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## RFS LIAISON LOWER HUNTER AND GIFT SHOP

### LOWER HUNTER RFS LIAISON

About 0820 hours on a day earlier in this month, I was half day dreaming as I was reaching the end of my daily 8 kilometre stroll, when all of a sudden my peace was rudely disturbed by fire brigades hurtling down Soldiers Point Road under lights and sirens. I thought to myself, another false alarm at the Bowling Club, but no the appliances kept on going past the club. Upon reaching my shack I looked up “Fires Near Me” to find that there was a boat fire at Soldiers Point Marina, and that Fire Boat Delta was being activated. I decided to go down to the ramp to see if I could get a few pics of the fire boat. Here are a few snaps of Fire Boat Delta at the incident. Fortunately the vessel was not burnt to the water line, but the smell was pretty atrocious, so something

had to be on fire, internally. Fire and Rescue, Maritime and Water Police also attended.

**Ross Debenham**



Fire Boat Delta and Maritime at scene with the distressed vessel.

### The table below reflects the incidents received by MRPS from Lower Hunter and Hunter Valley Districts

Month		Bush/Grass	Structure	CFR	MVA	Car	AFA	Other	Total
Aug-21	LHRFS	44	2	11	6	6	1	16	86
Sep-21	LHRFS	47	5	11	6	8	2	17	96
Oct-21	LHRFS	24	2	14	10	6	3	18	77
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>LHRFS</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>259</b>
Aug-21	HVRFS	18	1	6	1	2	1	2	31
Sep-21	HVRFS	8	1	1	2	2	0	4	18
Oct-21	HVRFS	9	4	2	3	3	0	7	28
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>HVRFS</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>77</b>

## GIFT SHOP



The Gift Shop has finally re-opened, with the first week a little slow, but as the grapevine gathers momentum the locals and regular holiday makers are returning. More visitors in the Bay as the Christmas and holiday season approaches.

We are happy to present new and exciting items for sale and our returns are once again looking healthy. This being good news for the unit as these returns go toward fuel, repairs and maintenance for the rescue vessels, thus saving lives on the water.

Our small shop has a big heart as does it's staff, so pop in and say hello when passing.

The Gift Shop staff would like to wish everyone and their families a Happy and Safe Christmas and New Year.

**Sandra Scheuber**  
Manager



## THE EXCALIBUR

### THE EXCALIBUR TRAGEDY - PART 1

On the evening of Monday 16 September 2002, the yacht *Excalibur*, capsized about 40 nautical miles northeast of Port Stephens, resulting in the death of four crew. This account describes the events that led to the tragedy, the search and rescue operation, the role of Port Stephens Division of the Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol, the coronial enquiry and subsequent events.



### A tragedy unfolds

*Excalibur* was the dream of Alan Saunders, Vice Commodore of the Royal Melbourne Yacht Squadron. He wanted to build a fast ocean racing boat that would compete successfully in ocean races and be a contender to win the prestigious Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race. The yacht was designed by well-known Sydney marine architect David Lyons. It was 15.2 metres in length, had an aluminium alloy hull, a foam sandwich glass deck, a hydraulically adjustable stainless steel keel and incorporated a number of innovative engineering concepts. The name *Excalibur* was chosen for the yacht as being symbolic of a big, powerful, fast and strong opponent, like the knights of old. The four and one half metre carbon fibre bowsprit was likened to a knight's lance.

Alan Saunders met Alex Cittidini (right), the owner of an engineering company, when he was a club captain at Royal Melbourne



Yacht Squadron. Saunders contracted Cittidini's company, Applied Allied Yachts of Bayswater, Melbourne, to construct all the structural elements of the yacht; the hull, the keel, the rudder and the mast. The keel was the first item manufactured. It was made from 8 mm SAF stainless steel which has a high mechanical strength and a high resistance to stress corrosion cracking in chloride-bearing environments. The keel was designed to be constructed from two pieces of continuous steel, 3.4m long that were to be shaped and welded together, tapering towards the base. A bulb was attached at the base. It was to act as an underwater wing, and to be able to take all the loads, stresses and strains of sailing. Construction started in mid-2000 and the yacht was launched in April 2002. Saunders and some of his yacht squadron friends had done most of the fit out and non-structural work themselves. When completed, *Excalibur* looked very different from other contemporary racing yachts. Her colour scheme of blue and yellow hull and sails was radical at that time when most yachts in Victoria had white hulls and white sails. It had cost around \$1,000,000.

Alan Saunders selected his crew from trusted friends, people he knew well and had sailed with on many occasions. In May and June, the yacht undertook sea trials on Port Phillip Bay without incident. In mid-July *Excalibur* left Melbourne on a shakedown cruise and headed north to compete in the 386 nautical mile Sydney Gold Coast Yacht Race. Racing against legendary yachts such as *Wild Oats*, *Brindabella* and *Ragamuffin*, *Excalibur* performed poorly, finishing 44th on corrected time in a field of 60. The crew then sailed north to the Whitsunday's to compete in the Airlie Beach and Hamilton Island Race Week regattas. Hamilton Island Race Week is Australia's largest offshore keelboat regatta with spectators and competitors from around the globe. However, Saunders was again disappointed with the yacht's performance. *Excalibur* became known amongst competitors as "the pig of a boat with a flash paint job". Prior to departing for her return voyage to Melbourne, she was lifted from the water at Hamilton Island for modifications to the steering but the keel was not examined.

Following the disappointment of her initial race outings, the crew headed the yacht south again. Different crew had been rotated over the six week racing campaign depending on availability. The crew for the return voyage were Alan Saunders as skipper and John Rogers, Christopher Heyes, Peter McLeod, Anne-Maree Pope and Tracy Luke as crew. All were experienced ocean sailors. Saunders' partner Auriole was to have crewed on this leg but was replaced at the last moment by Tracey Luke due to an injury. The first leg of the return voyage to Mooloolaba however, took much longer than planned, and as Alan Saunders had business commitments in Melbourne, he asked his friend Brian McDermott to join

(Continued on page 26)

## THE EXCALIBUR

(Continued from page 25)



Anne-Maree Pope, Tracy Luke, Christopher Heyes and Peter McLeod.

the crew and skipper the yacht for the remainder of the voyage. McDermott had sailed as a member of crew on the yacht on several previous occasions.

Sailing conditions on the leg from Mooloolaba to Coffs Harbour were good and the boat sailed well, making good time.

After a brief stopover, the yacht left Coffs Harbour for Sydney early on the

morning of 16 September, and with the forecast of bad weather ahead, a contingency plan was put in place to divert to Port Stephens if deemed necessary. When off the NSW mid-north coast, the wind started to build, getting up to 30 and 40 knots, and the seas began to rise. Around this time, McDermott began to feel that the keel of *Excalibur* was moving. However, an inspection of the keel mechanism below deck did not reveal any problem. The boat handled the conditions well, surfing down the large swells. Realising that a storm front with forecast winds of 45 to 55 knots and seas of four to five metres was rapidly approaching, McDermott decided to put into Port Stephens. RVCP Port Stephens was contacted and advised of the vessel's ETA of 0030 hrs on 17 September.

Around 2030 hrs, McDermott, who was at the helm, decided to take down the head sail and replace it with a storm sail. Christopher Heyes and John Rogers went forward to pull down the sail as McDermott brought the boat up into the wind so that it was stationary. Tracy Luke remained below suffering from sea-sickness. Peter McLeod went below to start the engine. Just as they got the sail down there was a loud metallic bang below the yacht. McDermott yelled out "The keel's gone" and the yacht immediately started to heel over to the port side. Within a few seconds it lay flat in the water. McDermott, who was at the starboard wheel, dropped down into the water, unclipped his harness and inflated his Personal Floatation Device (PFD). The yacht then turned over on top of him, pinning him beneath with his PFD inflated. Initially he found himself in a pocket of air, but that was quickly lost along with all light as the batteries shorted out. Using his hands to feel the deck above his head, he made his way in total darkness towards the back of the

capsized yacht, where his PFD became tangled in the lifelines. He took the PFD off his head, pulled it free from the lifelines and then managed to surface from beneath the stern of the boat.

When the boat first went over, John Rogers managed to grab Ann Maree Pope and pull her out of the hatch. He then grabbed Peter McLeod and also managed to pull him out before the next wave hit. As the yacht continued to roll and the batteries shorted out, Rogers and other crew found themselves trapped below the deck in darkness, with their heads in a small pocket of air. This was quickly lost when the next wave came through the stern of the yacht. Attempting to extricate himself, Rogers

was unable to undo the clasp on his safety harness and had to cut himself free with his knife. He felt his way across the deck which was directly above his face until he reached the lifelines. He became briefly stuck before managing to push himself free and surfaced beside the yacht. He inflated his



John Rogers and Brian McDermott



PFD and shouted "Who's up, who's up?"

*Excalibur* was soon lost from sight of the two men as the wind rapidly carried them away from the capsized vessel. The wind was by then gusting up to 50 knots with seas up to five metres and cresting. There was 50 per cent cloud cover and a three quarter moon providing a little light, but the two were unable to see each other due to the large waves. Rogers activated a strobe light he was carrying allowing McDermott to eventually locate him. On reaching each other, the two men tied themselves closely together with the clips on their safety harnesses. They shouted the names of the other crew but quickly realised they were alone. Rogers activated an Electronic Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB). At that time, they were approximately 20 nautical miles east of Seal Rocks.

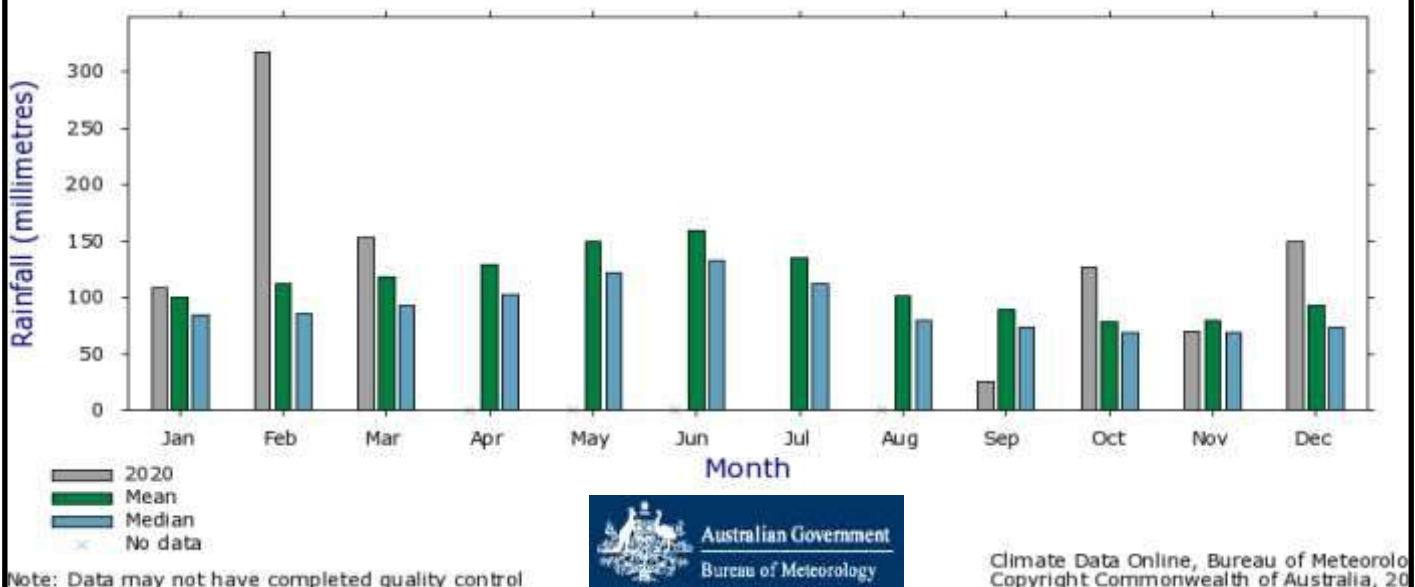
The account of the *Excalibur* tragedy will be continued in the next edition of Port Chatter when the search and rescue operation will be described.

**Neil Fraser**

## PORT STEPHENS WEATHER

Nelson Bay, NSW - October 2021					Nelson Bay, NSW - November 2021				
Date	Day	Temps °C		Rain	Date	Day	Temps °C		Rain
		Min	Max				Min	Max	
1	Fr	16.5	22	0	1	Mo	14.5	22.8	0
2	Sa	13.2	23.2	8	2	Tu	18.1	24.5	0
3	Su	16	25	0	3	We	16.9	22.7	0
4	Mo	16.9	26.8	0	4	Th	16.8	24.5	0
5	Tu	12.8	22.2	0	5	Fr	16.2	21.5	1.8
6	We	13.5	23.2	0	6	Sa	15.8	23.6	0
7	Th	12.5	28.5	0	7	Su		24.5	0
8	Fr	15.7	21.5	0	8	Mo	17.8	23.5	17.8
9	Sa	15.5	24	0	9	Tu	17.5	26	0
10	Su	16.7	31.4	0	10	We	19	24	0
11	Mo	14.1	16	22	11	Th		24.3	15.4
12	Tu	13	18	11	12	Fr	17.5	26	26.3
13	We	13.8	18.8	0	13	Sa	15.5	26.1	0.2
14	Th	14.9	22	2.8	14	Su	15	22.5	0
15	Fr	12.3	23.5	0.2	15	Mo	14		0
16	Sa	14	21	0	16	Tu		20.9	0
17	Su	14.4	27.9	0	17	We	16.5	23.9	0
18	Mo	13.2	24.7	0	18	Th	16	24	0
19	Tu	15.4	24.2	0	19	Fr	15.8	23.2	0
20	We	13.8	20.3	1.6	20	Sa	17.8	23.2	0.2
21	Th	14.4	24.6	0	21	Su	17	19	5.8
22	Fr	16.2	24.9	7.8	22	Mo	16	20.5	6.2
23	Sa	16.4	26	0	23	Tu	16.3	24.8	10.1
24	Su	17.9	21.5	0	24	We	19	24	1
25	Mo	15.5	23.9	0	25	Th		25.3	5.2
26	Tu	15.8	22.2	0	26	Fr	18.4	19.6	13.5
27	We	16.3	25.5	0	27	Sa	16.1	18.2	35.4
28	Th	17.8	27.8	0.1	28	Su	15.6	20.3	13
29	Fr	19.1	29.4	0	29	Mo	15.6	21.9	0.8
30	Sa	18.3	20.5	0	30	Tu	17.8		0
31	Su	14.6	22.5	0.2					
Statistics for October 2021					Statistics for November 2021				
Mean		15.2	23.6		Mean		16.6	23	
Lowest		12.3	16	0	Lowest		14.0	18.2	0.0
Highest		19.1	31.4	22	Highest		19.0	26.1	35.4
Total				53.7	Total				152.7

Nelson Bay (Nelson Head) (061054) 2020 Rainfall (millimetres)





# MARINE RESCUE PORT STEPHENS

*“Volunteers doing our jobs professionally”*



## **Our service to Port Stephens 2005-2020**

People saved/ assisted	6,300
Rescues and assists	2,718
Rescue Crew volunteer hours	62,658+
Radio Base volunteer hours	311,787+
Radio calls made/received	316,695
Telephone calls made/received	300,431

**Every day, Marine Rescue Port Stephens Members give more than 60 volunteer hours to serve our community**

**Volunteers saving lives on the water**

## MARINE RESCUE NSW PORT STEPHENS RESCUE VESSELS CURRENTLY IN SERVICE

The unit currently has two purpose built, specialised rescue vessels, crewed by motivated and trained volunteers who can be called upon at anytime, day or night, to head to the assistance of those who call.

A response time of 20 mins or less is estimated from alert to heading to sea. Our vessels boast a comprehensive inventory of the latest navigation, communication, safety and rescue technologies on board.

### PORT STEPHENS RESCUE VESSEL *PORT STEPHENS 31* *JOHN THOMPSON*



#### Specifications

Make / Model:	Steber International 38' - Category 3 SAR Vessel
Length:	11.46m (38ft)
Beam:	3.84m (12.6ft)
Displacement:	11.6 tonne
Draft:	1m
Fuel:	1350L
Engines:	Twin 420hp Yanmar diesel
Top Speed:	30kn
Crew:	Operational - normally 4
VHF:	Sailor 6222
Radar:	Raymarine Q24C Doppler
MFD's (Multifunction Display):	Raymarine Axiom 9 and 5 x Raymarine Axiom Pro 12 Hybrid Touch
AIS:	Raymarine AIS950
RDF:	Taiyo
27Mhz:	GME GX400B
DCN:	Tait TM9300

**Rescue Vessel Port Stephens 31 John Thompson** was built by Steber International, Taree, NSW and completed in May 2016. Her single hull is made of glass-reinforced plastic.

**Port Stephens 31** is fitted with state-of-the-art radar, direction finding and navigation equipment as well as forward looking infra red search equipment.

**John Thompson** has been prepared to Marine Rescue NSW specifications with minor customisation at the request of Port Stephens Unit and is capable of covering Port Stephens and anywhere along the coast for example Broughton Island, Seal Rocks and 30nm out to sea or further if tasked by MACSAR.

**PORT STEPHENS RESCUE VESSEL *PORT STEPHENS 30*  
*CODI-K II***



**Specifications:**

Make / Model:	Gemini WR-850
Type:	Rigid-Hull Inflatable (RHIB)
Length:	8.5m
Beam:	2.8m
Engines: -	2 x Suzuki four-stroke Outboards 200hp each (150kW)
Fuel Capacity:	2 x 200 litre tanks
Fuel Consumption:	Cruising speed - 50 litres / hour
Displacement:	3.2 tonnes
Survey:	2C
Crew:	4 operational
Speed:	Top speed around 40 knots. Cruising speed 25 to 30 knots.

**Rescue Vessel *Port Stephens 30 Codi-K II*** was manufactured in South Africa, prepared by Britton Marine of Taren Point NSW, and completed in February 2012. Her single hull is made of glass-reinforced plastic with alloy longitudinal keel reinforcement and her cabin is glass-reinforced plastic.

She boasts among her electronic equipment a Raymarine Radar/Plotter, Furuno AIS Class-A and FLIR Thermal Night Vision System.

***Codi-K II*** has been prepared to Port Stephens Unit specifications in consultation with Marine Rescue NSW, and is capable of covering all of the areas of Port Stephens; ie, the Myall River system, Karuah River, and the other shallow areas of our waterways, as well as outside waters as required.

## IN APPRECIATION....



**Contributors to this issue of *Port Chatter*:**

Colin Couper, Ross Debenham, Neil Fraser, Laurie Nolan, John Reid, Will Scott, Ben van der Wijngaart. You too can become a contributor and you will be most welcome. See inside front cover.

**Distributors of the *Port Chatter*:** This Monthly newsletter does not arrive in your letter-box via the tooth fairy.

The following people give of their time (and petrol) in making deliveries. Distribution Co-Ordinator: Ross Debenham, Maureen Wheatley, Peter Merlino, Elizabeth Francis, Marian Chappell, and Deb Nolan.

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Marina Ice Creamery	02 4984 1788	Bay Booking Office	02 4984 3843
Pacific Watercolours	02 4984 1922	Pacific Blue Charters	0407 817 157
The Wood Oven	02 4984 4800	Moonshadow TQC Cruises	02 4984 9388
Mavericks on the Bay	02 4984 1203		
R Marine Port Stephens	02 4984 2355		
Let's Go Adventures	02 4981 4331		
Hogs Breath Cafe	02 4984 2842		
Lime Mexican	02 4984 4403		
Blueys Restaurant and Bar	02 4006 5931		
Broughtons at the Bay	02 4981 0865		
Cafe on the Bay	02 4905 5092		
Mobile Marine Electrics	0422 782 863		
Mid North Marine Engineering	0448 492 221		
Zone Out	0419 735 995		

