

Under the weather

A recent interception by Customs near Ashmore Islands of a boat carrying suspected illegal entrants is a story almost as dramatic as the Navy's rescue of several round-the-world yachties in the Southern Ocean in recent years.

The suspect vessel was first sighted by Coastwatch, pounding into heavy seas near Ashmore Islands. When intercepted by the Australian Customs Vessel *Botany Bay*, the 76 crew and passengers were happy to be escorted to the calmer waters in the lee of the reef system.

With a deep low to the south and a regenerating Cyclone Steve heading toward them, the masters of the *ACV Botany Bay* and *HMAS Gladstone* decided to tow the suspect boat and its passengers to Darwin. The weather worsened, and *HMAS Wollongong* was despatched to the area to assist if needed.

Still the weather deteriorated and a decision was made to transfer the women and children to the

Gladstone to get them to the safety of Darwin as soon as possible. The weather did not abate and with the very real risk of Cyclone Steve heading straight for them, the Customs and Navy skippers decided to transfer the remaining men to their two vessels, sink the suspect vessel and make a run, at maximum speed, for Darwin.

Wild seas made the transfer very difficult and it was a relieved contingent of Customs and Navy personnel, and suspected illegal entrants, who finally berthed at the Darwin Naval Base.

One more chapter to add to what is becoming a regular assignment in the waters off the Western Australian coast because of the spate of interceptions of suspected illegal entrants.

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