



Patrolling the Southern

Ocean

In seas of more than 10 metres, with winds often exceeding 100 kilometres per hour and snow covering the deck, a contingent of 26 officers from Customs National Marine Unit (NMU), Customs Coastwatch, the Australian Fisheries Management Authority, and the Department of Defence recently undertook the first armed patrol of the Southern Ocean.



Their role at sea was to conduct surveillance to deter illegal fishing in the sub-Antarctic southern ocean around Australia's Heard Island and McDonald Island Exclusive Economic Zone.

The 21 Customs officers, experienced sailors well accustomed to rough weather and extended periods at sea, agreed the 40-day patrol was a challenge.

As the team headed south into the Antarctic convergence zone, the ship's barometer plummeted, the inclinometer, measuring the ship's roll, rocked wildly, visibility worsened and officers agreed

that the extreme conditions had exceeded their expectations.

But the crew had been well trained for the patrol—before departure they undertook an intensive 30-day training course that included cold water survival techniques, medical trauma training, ship securing and crowd control procedures.

Boarding and tactical training were also undertaken and armed boarding skills were refined with extensive 'use of force' training which included using rifles, pistols, handcuffs, capsicum spray and batons.

Under the operational command of the Director General of Coastwatch, Rear-Admiral Max Hancock, the team was selected from a group of 54 officers who responded to a call for volunteers from within the NMU fleet.

In addition to relevant experience and qualifications, a key requirement for selection was physical fitness. The arduous and potentially dangerous nature of the patrol, and the environment in which it occurred, meant officers had to achieve a level of physical fitness exceeding the already high standards required of NMU officers.

top: On one of the rare calm days during the 40-day patrol, six of the 21 NMU officers left the icebreaker *Aurora Australis* to practice their handling and boarding skills.

The 6,574 tonne icebreaker *Aurora Australis*, a commercially chartered vessel specifically designed to throw waves away from the bow in heavy seas, was used for the patrol. But despite its design, the harsh conditions saw rough seas regularly cover the ship's bow, causing heavy pounding and shuddering as *Aurora Australis* fell from the crest of one wave into the wall of water of the next wave. Sleepless nights were frequent and, on occasions, the ship had to alter its course to 'ride-out' the worst of the weather.

The Boarding Group Commander, Superintendent NMU Keith Johnson, said, "Mother Nature rules in the furious fifties of the Southern Ocean, and we experienced the best and worst of it."

Amid the extreme conditions, the key role of Customs officers was to board and secure any 'Illegal Unregulated Unreported' (IUU) fishing vessels found inside Australian waters to provide fisheries officers with a safe environment in which to conduct investigations.

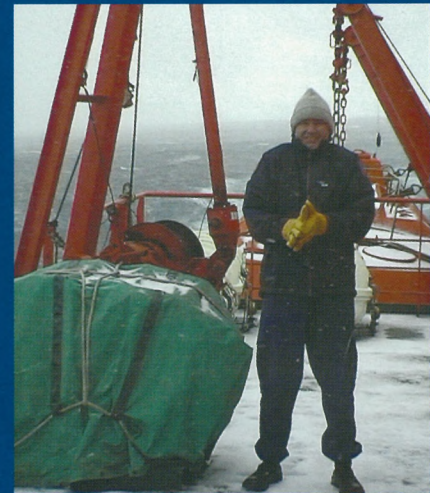
On this patrol, no IUU fishing vessels were detected operating in

Australian waters. Officers were kept busy testing onboard detection systems as well as refining their skills at operating small boats for boarding operations in such a hostile environment.

Codenamed *Operation Rushcutter*, the patrol is a key part of the Government's broader strategy to stop illegal fishing of the Patagonian Toothfish in Australia's waters around Heard and McDonald Islands—one of the main habitats for this commercially lucrative fish.

The Exclusive Economic Zone around Heard and McDonald Islands is also home to other valuable fish resources. Future surveillance patrols to combat illegal fishing in the Southern Oceans aim to protect such valuable resources as well as the legitimate fishing industry this supports.

Commitment to this program was reflected in the 2003-2004 Federal Budget with an allocation of approximately \$12 million for future water enforcement patrols.



above: Superintendent National Marine Unit Keith Johnson on board the *Aurora Australis*.

bottom: Customs National Marine Unit officers on deck the *Aurora Australis* during Operation Rushcutter.

