

Abandoned search for Tasmanian fishermen reveals impact of cost-cutting

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Joined by many working people across the Australian island state of Tasmania, the families and friends of three fishermen who drowned last month off Tasmania's north coast have condemned state and federal authorities for the inadequate search for the trio. The initial search for Ron Hill, Kimm Giles and Robert Kirkpatrick was abandoned only two days after they were reported missing on April 13.

Three weeks later, their boat's life raft and one body were found off Tasmania's north-east tip, almost exactly where local fishermen had predicted the trio's craft would have drifted, some 125 nautical miles east of the official search zone.

The three men had set off in their 10-metre boat, the *Margaret J*, on April 9 to do some fishing during Easter around Hunter Island, off Tasmania's north-west corner. In trying to locate them, the state police skimmed a wide area of the north-west seas and islands just three times. Inspector Ian Lindsay of Western District police then stated: "We have exhausted all avenues of search."

On the first day of the search, Lindsay said he had obtained drift patterns from Australian Search and Rescue (AusSAR), the national maritime rescue agency. This information—confirmed by local fishermen—indicated that the trio would have floated to the east, through the Bass Strait between Tasmania and the Australian mainland. According to Police Assistant Commissioner Jack Johnston, however, "it would have taken a hundred planes to search this area."

The police provided only 10 personnel, a light aircraft, a rescue helicopter and a few water vessels. These resources were so inadequate that just a day after their efforts were called off, the sunken *Margaret J* was spotted by a private plane doing a routine run.

When the boat was found on April 16 in the original search zone, submerged six metres under water, a justifiably angry Terry Giles, father of Kimm Giles,

criticised the police and authorities for cutting short their search. "They should have kept going until they found something... anything. When you talk to fishermen who attempted to go out when the *Margaret J* left, they will tell you conditions were extremely bad."

Flown to the scene, police divers found that one of the life rafts was missing. They also found no holes in the vessel. Police commanders concluded that it must have been swamped by waves and refused to conduct a search further east for signs of the life raft.

This indifference further inflamed public opinion. A local professional fisherman later told the local newspaper, the *Advocate*: "The tides run north to east and I rang MAST (Marine and Safety Tasmania) and the rescue people on April 19 and 20 to suggest they head toward Flinders Island. I suggested the men were on the life raft but my opinion was dismissed."

When the *Margaret J* was salvaged on April 29, two weeks after the search was called off, the salvage crew—local fishermen—found that the ropes which tie the life raft to the boat had been cut. This strongly supported the view that the missing men had launched the raft.

This finding prompted another search in the immediate vicinity but it was called off by the end of the day, despite renewed efforts by relatives and professional fishermen to prod the police, AusSAR and other services to look further east because of the prevailing wind and current patterns.

Several days later, a body and a life raft were discovered on Prime Seal Island, near Flinders Island, where the families had urged the authorities to search. Police spokesmen added to the families' anguish by first announcing that two bodies had been found and then altering the announcement.

Terry Giles redoubled his condemnation of the official response. He told the *Advocate* on May 3: "They did not take any notice of us or the fishermen. We tried to tell

them at the start where they would be—not just in the past few days. The police told us yesterday afternoon the life raft had been located and that one man was dead at the scene. They then rang back and said all three men had been found... What is going on? My wife is upset, my daughter is upset. We are not being told anything.”

The tragic discovery on Prime Seal Island and the confused police report forced the state Labor Party government to announce a coronial inquiry in an attempt to cool off the situation. Some local residents said they had become so frustrated that they wanted to form their own rescue team.

Anthony Wise, Kimm Giles' brother-in-law, accused the authorities of applying a double-standard—one for high-profile international yachting race competitors and another for ordinary people. “We're just normal Australian citizens. If you're someone like Tony Bullimore or the French woman who was rescued, they dragged the Navy out, spent \$6 million on each of them and don't worry about Australian citizens.”

The state and federal authorities blandly denied that cost-cutting was to blame. Police Assistant Commissioner Johnston declared: “I need to point out that cost has never been a consideration in this search”.

An examination of the funding arrangements for the search and rescue agencies, however, proves otherwise.

Although the Australian government helps finance AusSAR, state governments are expected to conduct most rescue operations. Brian Eldridge, chairman of the Marine Recreational Fishermen Advisory Council commented: “Unfortunately, of course, the Commonwealth leaves rescue of Australian citizens within the Commonwealth waters to the states and there's a limit to available equipment and all that sort of thing when you bring it back to the state level.”

State spending on emergency services is extremely limited. According to Tasmanian budget papers, 2000-01 funding for emergency services, including the State Emergency Service, stood at a mere \$1.4 million. Over the past four years, emergency services funding has stagnated, and now accounts for little more than 1 percent of the total Department of Police and Public Safety budget, which was \$106.5 million in 2000-01.

AusSAR was involved in the second search for the three fishermen, but only because it was looking for a missing pilot and his rented Cessna airplane in the region. States must formally request assistance from AusSAR. An AusSAR spokesman said it had met the initial state request, which was to “provide drift patterns”.

AusSAR, which covers 47 million square kilometres of the Indian, Pacific and Southern Oceans, operates under the auspices of the federal government's Australian Maritime Safety Authority. AMSA was created in 1990 to provide a “cost-effective service,” partly funded by a Marine Navigation Levy on shipping companies.

According to AMSA's web site, government funding to AMSA has risen in recent years, while the shipping levy has been reduced, leaving AMSA with a mounting operational deficit. “Consistent with AMSA's corporate objectives to improve financial performance to stakeholders, there have been a series of levy reductions in recent years,” the site states.

Since 1997-98, levy records show a decline of \$3-6 million each year. The latest reduction provides ship owners a saving of \$2.3 million, mostly applying to large vessels such as 20,000-tonne bulk carriers.

These cuts have reduced the funding available for AusSAR. Between 1998-99 and 1999-2000, the amount spent on AusSAR missions declined from \$4.1 million to \$2.7 million, despite an increasing workload. During 1999-2000, AusSAR processed 10,848 incidents, double the previous year. Of these, 423 required search activity.

Tasmanian Premier Jim Bacon has sought to assuage the outcry over the three fishermen by asking for a police report. “I'll be asking for a report from the Commissioner of Police about his views about the searches—both searches—and obviously if there's room for improvement then it's something that we should urgently pursue,” he stated.

However, nothing has been concretely proposed to improve the level of emergency services. Last week's budget barely increased their funding to \$1.6 million. Nor has the federal Howard government provided increased funds.

Despite attempted cover-ups by both state and federal administrations, the underlying truth of the Tasmanian fishing tragedy has begun to emerge. The financial records show that emergency services are being increasingly under-funded in order to meet the requirements of big business. The three fishermen appear to have paid with their lives.



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