

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS

Crew of the *Margaret J*

3.1 The Committee notes that the conclusions of the Coroner in relation to the estimated time of death of the crew of the *Margaret J*.

3.2 The Committee recognises the anguish experienced by the family and friends during the search for the *Margaret J* and extends its deepest sympathy for their loss.

3.3 The Committee's findings are informed by a commitment to strengthening the effectiveness of AusSAR's performance and maintaining community confidence in the national search and rescue agency.

Responses to AusSAR's identified deficiencies

3.4 The Committee's primary source of concern stems from the issues - raised by the Coroner and in evidence to the Committee - relating to the effectiveness of AusSAR's systems for guiding the conduct of search and rescue operations. Principally, these relate to:

- (a) The relationship between AusSAR and state authorities;
- (b) Protocols for officially transferring search and rescue responsibilities from state police to AusSAR; and
- (c) The accurate recording of information gathered by AusSAR.

3.5 These issues were addressed by the Coroner in making the following recommendations and comments:

8. *There needs to be a closer working relationship between those officers in Tasmania Police who are involved in Search and Rescue and those employed by AusSAR.*

This should include meetings or conference on at least an annual basis when ideas, techniques and all matters relevant to search and rescue could be discussed, and would have the added advantage of ensuring that each organisation and its members can appreciate the role of the other, which, in my view, would lead to an improved system.

...

- 14 *Need to ensure that information is accurately recorded.*

... criticism of AusSAR would be in relation to their failure to accurately record information supplied and accurately convey such information to senior officers who are required to endorse actions to be undertaken.

...

17. *There should be adopted a standard form to be used for the transfer of responsibility.*

There is little doubt, if a standard form had been readily available and had formed part of the manual, either the Police Manual or the National Manual, transfer of responsibility for the search of the life raft and the crew would have been passed to AusSAR at an earlier date...¹

Relationship with state authorities

3.6 In response to Recommendation 8 in the Coroner's report, AMSA emphasised ongoing efforts to improve AusSAR's working relationships with state authorities via various meetings, debriefing sessions and workshops. The Committee was advised that AMSA and Tasmanian authorities had met in Launceston for a joint workshop in April 2002 to discuss improved operational protocols, followed by regular meetings and debriefings after particular search and rescue incidents.² While welcoming evidence of the April 2002 workshop, the Committee is concerned that not all state and Commonwealth officers responsible for important decisions on the conduct for the search of the *Margaret J*, including decisions about the transfer of responsibility for search and rescue coordination, participated.

3.7 In evidence to the Committee, AMSA indicated that coordination processes between AusSAR and state authorities had been defined in greater detail in the National Search and Rescue Manual ('the Manual').³

3.8 Section 1.3.14 of the Manual firmly encourages overreached authorities to request early assistance, warning that delay "may lead to reduced chances of survival and/or significant increase in the size of the search area".⁴

3.9 The Committee also notes section 1.3.29 of the Manual. This outlines the information sharing procedures that must be undertaken between multiple search and rescue authorities, where full coordination responsibility has not been transferred, but where certain functions have been passed to another authority. For example, this may occur where assistance when an air search is requested of AusSAR by a state authority. These procedures include:

- (a) Initial consultation with all participating authorities;
- (b) Frequent reviews by mission coordinators; and

1 Coroner's Report, 26 August 2002, pp. 56-60

2 AMSA, Submission 1, p. 10

3 Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee, Response to question on notice, Canberra, 19 September 2002, p. 12

4 http://natsar.amsa.gov.au/Manuals/Search_and_Rescue_Manual/Chapter_1.pdf, as at 22 July 2004

(c) The production of overall situation reports at regular intervals.⁵

3.10 The Committee is of the opinion that the Manual presently provides appropriate guidance as to the coordinating roles and responsibilities of authorities jointly assisting in a search and rescue operation. However, the Committee recognises that inadequate understanding of the protocols by state and/or Commonwealth officers negates their effectiveness and, in some circumstances, may impede the effective coordination of search and rescue activities and put lives at risk.

3.11 The Committee is not satisfied that Tasmania Police or AusSAR demonstrated effective understanding of the protocols related to the transfer of coordination responsibility during the search for the *Margaret J*.

Accurate recording of information

3.12 Internal operational protocols contained in the AusSAR procedures manual were updated (particularly section 3.4.2.4).⁶ This section stipulates the manner in which information is to be recorded when it is received.

3.13 The Committee notes, however, that the protocols for recording incident information existing in April 2001 should have provided sufficient guidance to AusSAR officers involved with the search.⁷ Section 3.4.2.4, stipulating the manner in which incident information is to be kept, appears not to have been observed in particular instances during AusSAR's communication with Tasmania Police.

Formalising the transfer of responsibility

3.14 The completion of a standard form is now a compulsory requirement for the transfer of search and rescue responsibility. This is included in section 1.3.7(d) of the current version of the Manual.⁸ The Committee also notes the protocols specified in section 1.3.7, including the requirements for consultation between the mission coordinators of each authority before a transfer, and for the documentation and passing of all details of action already taken to the authority taking over.⁹

5 http://natsar.amsa.gov.au/Manuals/Search_and_Rescue_Manual/Chapter_1.pdf, as at 22 July 2004

6 Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee, Response to question on notice, Canberra, 19 September 2002, p. 12

7 AusSAR Procedures Manual as at April 2001, section 3.4.2.4

8 http://natsar.amsa.gov.au/Manuals/Search_and_Rescue_Manual/Chapter_1.pdf, as at 22 July 2004

9 http://natsar.amsa.gov.au/Manuals/Search_and_Rescue_Manual/Chapter_1.pdf, as at 22 July 2004

Conclusion

3.15 The Committee finds it cannot conclude whether more effective coordination of the search for the *Margaret J* would have yielded a positive outcome. This finding does not ameliorate the Committee's concern about ineffective communication between AusSAR and the Tasmanian authorities and the absence of appropriate record keeping by AusSAR officers during the search for the *Margaret J*.

3.16 Although the Committee is satisfied with the protocols for the coordination of search and rescue operations now accessible through 'the Manual', the Committee is of the view that a more formal arrangement utilising clearly written and accessible protocols would have been of considerable value at the time the search for the *Margaret J* and its crew was being undertaken.

3.17 The Committee concurs with the Coroner's finding that the Tasmanian officers were not confident or assured in their dealings with AusSAR, and that more assistance in guiding these officers through the process would have been beneficial.¹⁰ Clear operational protocols available to state authorities would have assisted this occurring. The Committee urges AMSA to ensure AusSAR officers adhere to these protocols at all times when communicating with and assisting other search and rescue authorities.

Senator the Hon. Bill Heffernan
Chair