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Patrol Boat in Record Arrest

November 15, 1999

"Burning papers streamed down on us, small children were being held over the side and everyone was screaming...it was an apocalyptic scene."

LEUT Lorrae Blunden the XO of HMAS DUBBO, said of the first minutes in which she led an operation to board a 100 tonne ferry containing 352 suspected illegal immigrants and five Indonesian crew found drifting in the Indian Ocean.



The Harapan Satu is escorted into Darwin.

"AB Nigel Williams scaled the 3.5 metre freeboard of the ferry and lowered a ladder for the rest of us to go aboard," LEUT Blunden said.

"And what an amazing scene it was. People lying everywhere. Reports of one woman having her baby. We had to sail north for 10 hours and they thought they were being taken back. It was not until we turned east towards Darwin did they calm down," LEUT Blunden said.

CO LCDR Heffey, LEUT Blunden, their ship's company of 22 and a fisheries inspector had made the largest arrest of suspected illegal immigrants in Australia history.

The arrest also became a humanitarian aid mission when the sailors found the people were living in squalid conditions on the 50 metre long craft, were badly dehydrated, had among their number two expectant mothers and were in need of protection from the sun because of limited overhead screens.

LCDR Heffey had to call in the Environment Australia vessel Aurelia 4 to help provide water to

the 357 who had left Benoa and been on the high seas for five days.

DUBBO was at anchor at Ashmore Reef on the night of November 1.

LEUT Blunden explained: "Around 7pm I detected a vessel on radar about seven miles away. I thought it was a yacht so not wanting to approach it with our sea boat loaded with armed sailors, I used the work boat from Aurelia 4 (a craft chartered by Environment Australia which spends much time at Ashmore.)

"By the time we arrived the craft had switched on its navigation lights. We saw it was a large wooden ferry with many people on board.

"It was stopped. We later found the engines sabotaged

"As we approached they started burning papers...personal papers we believe. Fire was coming down on us. I think they were burning the papers to make the point they did not want to return or to try to make it difficult for officials to process them.

"They were holding young children over the side or up in the air.

"Nigel Williams went up the side...It was quite a feat because the ferry had a 3.5 metre freeboard. He lowered a ladder and we went aboard."

While DUBBO towed the ferry to a safe anchorage LEUT Blunden and her sailors began to take inventory of those aboard. It was a task that took from 10pm to 5.30am the next day.

They were identified as 266 Iraqi men, nine Iraqi women, 43 Afghani men, one Afghani woman, two Algerian men, one Palestinian man, four Iranian men, 18 Iraqi boys, six Iraqi girls and two boys from Afghanistan.

The five Indonesian crew members of the ferry, a 50 metre long, 100 tonne teak vessel called Harapan Satu, were also apprehended.

In daylight DUBBO took the ferry in tow and took it to Darwin.

On the way HMAS CESSNOCK (LCDR R Swift RN) met up with DUBBO and provided escort.

LEUT Blunden commended the DUBBO ship's company for its actions, particularly ABs Jarrad Oliffe, Damian Keygan and Jason Marshall who followed AB Williams in the initial boarding.

After medical checks on board and at a holding centre in Darwin the group was flown to Port Hedland from where they were taken by bus to the Curtain RAAF base south of Derby in WA.

By Graham Davis

