

# Toxic gas inquiry on dead sailor

Ian McPhedran  
Defence Writer

THE mother of a dead navy sailor waited in vain at Cairns airport for her son to arrive home on Tuesday for his 28th birthday.

Seaman Cook Jay "Wilks" Wilkie had died in Darwin earlier that day after he was found barely breathing by his shipmates at 5am in his bunk on board the Armidale Class patrol boat HMAS Launceston.

It is understood Seaman Wilkie, who lived in Cairns, had interrupted his leave to fill a crew vacancy with the stretched fleet.

The Launceston had returned to the HMAS Coonawarra Navy

base in Darwin early on Sunday after a boat people patrol under the government's border protection mission Operation Relex.

Seaman Wilkie went into town for some birthday drinks on Monday evening before he was due to fly home for "compassionate leave" on Tuesday to celebrate his 28th birthday.

"They couldn't find his mum because she was at the airport waiting for him," a source said.

After he was found unconscious his shipmates attempted to revive him without success and called paramedics.

The Navy would not comment on the death, which is being investigated by NT Police. The

results of an autopsy are expected within 48 hours.

It is understood the Armidale Class boats' history of toxic gas problems will form part of the investigation. The boats have encountered near fatal gasings in the so-called "austere accommodation" area, built for asylum seekers or other passengers.

The area can only be entered by two crew members carrying a hydrogen dioxide detector and reporting in every minute.

There have also been gas problems caused by the sewage treatment system.

A sailor was overcome by fumes in the toilets of a patrol boat last year.

# Happy Trails Sun rises on bush ingenuity



Then: The Parkes to Wellington mail coach in 1910

HORSES and camels powered the Cobb and Co trail's original traffic but at the historic route's starting point in Bathurst, waits a very 21st-century traveller.

It looks like a ute and you expect the roar of an engine with plenty of grunt — typical farm equipment.

Instead it purrs — a result of its unusual power source — the sun.

Wool producer Michael Inwood has developed what is believed to be the world's first solar-powered farm vehicle, equipped with a drill seeder to plant crops.

The ute, which is battery operated, is charged by plugging into a power point in his "electric station" garage, which draws energy from solar panels.

"Farmers are concerned about the environment and this could definitely be part of the future of farming," Mr Inwood told *The Daily Telegraph* yesterday.

Story: Samantha Townsend  
Photographs: Nathan Edwards

"It is a true zero-emission vehicle and it could arguably be described as the most environmentally friendly vehicle in the world today."

The third-generation farmer uses the 4WD ute in the everyday running of his property Tuolon — a mixed farm with sheep and crops on the outskirts of Bathurst in the state's Central West.

He and his family also use it to run errands into Bathurst, which is a 22km round trip.

Mr Inwood said to run the solar-powered ute it costs \$4 for every 80km.

The same distance with a diesel would cost well over \$10.

"It does exactly what a normal diesel ute does but at less than half the cost, we have worked out it can do about eight hours work straight but if you plug it in during lunch it will go again," he said.

"It might not suit all farms because of the vast distances some farmers have to travel but it certainly does the job here."

While the entire conversion was costly — totalling about \$80,000 — Mr Inwood said the vehicle required little ongoing maintenance.

He said, with technology improving every day, the cost would eventually be pushed down if the sun-powered ute was rolled out into the marketplace.

He came up with the idea after attending a Central West Catchments Authority forum on best environmental

farm practices more than a year ago.

From there, Mitsubishi supplied the Triton GLX-R ute which he converted to electric power.

In the tray there are 42 battery cells as well as a power cord, while inside the ute's cab is a gauge that monitors energy levels.

The Cobb and Co Heritage trail roughly follows the Mitchell Highway, but the Rockley-O'Connell loop around Bathurst takes you along some roads that have changed little since the route's heyday 140 years ago.

Keep an eye out for signs noting spots of historical significance.

Heritage Trail booklets are available from tourist information centres between Bathurst and Bourke.

This is an occasional series.  
Next stop: Molong



And now: Bathurst farmer Michael Inwood with his solar-powered ute



Bushies: Cobb and Co workers

# Toughest mailmen in West

Samantha Townsend

IN ITS working days, travellers on the Cobb and Co trail braved Australia's harsh conditions, isolation and even bushranger attacks.

Today the 556km route — which starts in Bathurst and finishes in Bourke — has been made tourist friendly and it's the perfect way to step back in time and explore a vibrant piece of NSW history.

Cobb and Co was the name of a transport company — considered the biggest and best of its time, from 1862 to about 1885 — that delivered mail and people by horse or camel-drawn coaches in the Outback.

The trail's harsh scenery has been captured in bush ballads and paintings to tell the story of its pioneers.

In this six-part series *The Daily Telegraph* travels along the route, through unique landscapes that changed every 50km. On the way we found some amazing personalities who had great stories to tell over a cup of tea.

We went through towns with a meagre population of 30 because of years of drought and population shift, to others with thousands of people because of tourism and industry growth.

Today we are in Bathurst, where James Rutherford brought Cobb and Co to establish its NSW headquarters in 1862, when they built vehicles tough enough to travel Australia's rugged terrain.

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