

Boat answer fails to cut any ice 7-7

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By DIANE STORMONT

The Public Accounts Committee was highly critical yesterday of Marine Department explanations for bungling a \$650,000 patrol boat order.

"The whole thing is a screw up," committee member Allen Lee thundered. "If anything, the Director of Audit was a little mild."

The Director of Audit, Mr Norman Stalker, had slammed the Marine Department's 1978 order for four water jet-propelled patrol boats as ill-researched, causing unnecessary expense because they later had to be modified so they could be operated in shallow waters and polluted harbours.

The Director of Marine, Mr Peter Chan, was yesterday called before the committee to explain why a former Director of Marine had authorised the choice of water jet-propelled boats for harbour and typhoon shelter patrols when police experience had already revealed teething problems with water jets.

The Marine Department boats proved unable to cope with litter in Hongkong waters which caused the engines to choke, necessitating lengthy and expensive repairs.

After two years of service, the boats were converted to conventional propeller drive.

The wrong choice cost taxpayers an additional \$500,000 in conversion charges, continual water-jet repair bills and extra maintenance, Mr Stalker estimated in his Report of the Accounts of the Hongkong Government.

Mr Stalker also criticised the Marine Department for its tardiness in recruiting and training crew to man the boats. The boats lay semi-idle for 11 to 15 months due to insufficient crew.

In defence of the Marine Department, Mr Chan argued the police experience was not totally relevant because they used larger boats equipped with an earlier water-jet model in the relatively cleaner waters of outlying areas, such as Deep Bay.

He said the teething problems on the police boats were considered and the Marine Department had ordered slightly different water jets with certain modifications.

Unfortunately, the contractor refused to make the modifications as they would affect the guarantee on the equipment.

But Mr Chan admitted there were no Marine Department records of studies on water jet reactions to harbour pollution.

However, he noted pollution in the patrol boat planning days tended to consist of large debris, such as planks and LPG tanks, which damaged propellers but left water-jets intact.

However, by 1979 to



Mr Lee

1980, plastic bags and polystyrene cups made an appearance in Hongkong waters and these smaller objects eventually caused the downfall of the water-jet engines.

The engines operated successfully outside the typhoon shelters — and in planning days only one typhoon shelter existed at Shaukiwan.

Asked if the boat chosen was the wrong one for the job, Mr Chan said "for part of the operation, I agree. They were not capable of operating in the typhoon shelter".

Mr Chan attributed the delays in recruiting sailors for the boats to difficulties in finding crew willing to work for the public sector in those days when the economy was booming and the Government could not match higher private sector wages.

He also blamed administrative delays.

The additional crew were requested between one and three months in advance of the June 1979 boat delivery dates, Mr Chan said.

But the Finance Committee did not approve the application until the following October and refused to make the necessary funds available until January 1980.

The Marine Department could not find the sailors overnight, he said.

Replying to criticism from Mr Stephen Cheong that the Government could not be expected to come up with funds for new crew in as short a period as one to three months, Mr Chan said it was difficult to gauge delivery dates — the boats had been due in the spring of 1979, but it was cheaper to keep boats waiting for crew than crew waiting for boats.

But Mr Lee was unimpressed with the entire submission, which also revealed the delivery delays and installation of faulty equipment, including unsatisfactory injection pumps, jet propulsion units and steering plate.

Mr Chan's report also indicated the Marine Department had not invoked the financial default clauses for late delivery and sub-standard parts.