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Tug operator beats Darwin elements to land Australian first

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**Darwin-based Alicia Pollock has become one of only a handful of specialist female tug operators in Australia following a two-week accreditation that included docking during one of Darwin's renowned summer afternoon storms.**

**Alicia has been driving boats professionally for the past eight years and is now accredited to operate specialist Azimuth Stern Drive (ASD) tugs used by Serco Australia to assist Royal Australian Navy ship movements in ports and harbours around Australia.**

Highly manoeuvrable, ASD tugboats are small but extremely powerful watercraft and their handling takes considerable skill. The people who operate them require special training and accreditation.

The Level 1 Basic Tug Handling Training Programme takes two weeks to complete. This puts a reasonable amount of pressure on the driver to acquire the required skills in a short amount of time. Alicia was keen to give it a go. "I always wanted to drive the *Sprightly* our ASD tug in Darwin," Alicia said. "I was pretty excited to have the chance to do the training this time round."

Rob Hinton, a Serco Training Master based in the UK travelled to Australia for a couple of weeks to train Serco tug drivers around the country. Throughout the two weeks, the driver learns how to complete several different manoeuvres in the tug. This includes berthing on the wharf, nosing up to the wharf and walking the tugboat along the wharf.

"It was a real struggle initially," Alicia admitted. "The training was really hard and there was a lot of information to absorb."

"Most conventional boats have two engines and a steering wheel. But the *Sprightly* is a whole different concept and is completely different to operate," Alicia explained. "You use two pods at different angles and revs to control and steer the boat. It's pretty intense."

And while training is taking place, the day-to-day work of the port still had to be done. "We kept getting interrupted during training to go and do other jobs," Alicia said.

For the final assessment the trainee driver has to put all the manoeuvres together, completing a lap under a specified time limit. The trainer completes a lap, timing how long it takes an expert driver to complete all the manoeuvres one after another and sets the time to beat. To account for the different level of expertise the trainee driver has an additional 25 per cent time allowance on top of the trainer's lap time.

Rob's lap took 15 minutes and 40 seconds so Alicia's time limit was 19 minutes to complete the circuit. She smashed it, with her last two laps so close to Rob's time that he was 'blown away'.

"Alicia did an amazing job. I was so impressed with her progress from where she started at the beginning of the two weeks to what she was able to achieve in the final assessment," Rob said.

Darwin's strong tidal pull and changeable weather conditions present an additional test. During Alicia's assessment a storm rolled in causing reduced visibility and a large rain squall. Staying calm under pressure is a job requirement and Alicia was more than up to it.

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Since joining Serco in 2010, Alicia has learned how to drive many different boats. "As a trainee in Jervis Bay I gained my coxswain ticket after about a year. Starting out as a deckhand I worked my way up to driving. From there I learned how to drive a crane barge, works boat, and the conventional tug boat."

The first day after gaining her coxswain ticket, Alicia was tasked with picking up some para troopers who were jumping out of an aeroplane. She saw two people exit the plane, quickly followed by a large black crate. Then another couple of people jumped out, followed by another crate. Turns out they were a couple of unexpected inflatable boats. "I thought I was just picking up a couple of people but instead two boats fell out of the sky!" Alicia laughed.

It is the variety of life on the water that Alicia loves about her job. "Every day is different," she said. "One day I can be working on a crane barge, then refuelling a Navy ship from a fuel barge, or be working on a tugboat pushing a Navy ship around the harbour."

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