

# Divers turned boat builders take the pain out of navy inflatables



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Oct 7, 2019 — 12.00am

After more than 20 years of back-breaking service in the navy, Darren Schuback figured he could build a better boat.

As a clearance diver – the Australian navy's equivalent of special forces – Mr Schuback saw too many other sailors who had suffered injuries or been left with chronic pain from riding in rigid inflatable boats.



*Whiskey Project co-founders Ryan Carmichael and Darren Schuback have used their expertise as navy clearance divers to design a new landing watercraft they hope will be adopted by the Australia military.*

In particular, the "slamming load" – the impact when a boat thumps back onto the water after becoming airborne on waves – turned many into human shock absorbers.

Along with another ex-diver, Ryan Carmicheal, Mr Schuback set up the Whiskey Project (Whiskey being their phonetic call sign in their navy days) to design a more user friendly boat.

"What we've seen in the past is watercraft designed by boat builders, with little operator input," Mr Schuback said.

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"The rigid hull inflatable boat has been in use since 1991 and the technology has moved on a lot since then."

The Whiskey Alpha design, which Mr Schuback said will be comparably priced to others on the market, reduces slam loads by 40 per cent through angled chines on the bottom hull. These sharp changes in angles trap air and pressure, and disperse the energy outwards, easing the boat back into the water.

Their efforts will pay off on Tuesday when Defence Industry Minister Melissa Price officially launches their first boat, Whiskey Alpha, at the Pacific Maritime Expo in Sydney.

The biennial expo bills itself as the Indo-Pacific's most comprehensive maritime industry event, with hundreds of exhibitors across defence and commercial shipbuilding.

Attached to the three-day expo is the Royal Australia Navy's Seapower conference, with senior naval commanders from the US, Indonesia, India, Japan, France and the Pacific among representatives from 35 countries attending. Like so much of public policy, [China's rise](#) will be a dominant feature of discussions.

When the expo was held two years ago, it set the scene for a final flurry of lobbying over the [\\$35 billion frigate contract](#) and manoeuvring ahead of a looming decision on the offshore patrol vessels. The frigate contract was ultimately awarded to British defence giant BAE Systems.

This year's event lacks a blockbuster bidding war, with no major shipbuilding or acquisition decisions expected for several years.

Instead it will showcase the small and medium enterprise defence ecosystem emerging in Australia.

Government data shows that since December 2016, the Defence Innovation Hub has awarded 101 contracts to businesses, worth \$145 million, to develop advanced technology, such as autonomous vehicles, enhanced radars, cyber threat countermeasures and improving the accuracy and range of weapons.

Ms Price said 85 per cent of these contracts were with small businesses.

“We’re harnessing the innovative nature and entrepreneurial spirit of small business, and it’s starting to have a real impact on the world stage,” she said.

The Whiskey Project, which has been nominated for an innovation award, ticks a couple of boxes. It is a veteran-owned start-up and has received advice from the federal Centre for Defence Industry Capability on how to break into the industry.

The business, which plans to build boats at Morisset on NSW's Lake Macquarie, hopes the Morrison government's \$500 million downpayment to upgrade special forces equipment as part of Project Greyfin will open doors to supply the Australian military.

The navy's current inflatable boats have been involved in 13 capsizings and 19 near misses since 2003, necessitating operational restrictions on their use.

A study found 95 per cent of the US navy's special boat operators suffered an injury in its inflatable boats.

"You'd think 'You just need to toughen up' but injuries are avoidable if we had the right watercraft. We are fixing well-known problems," he said.

As well as military purposes, the ability to customise Whiskey Alpha means the boat could also be attractive to civilian operators, such as police and marine rescue services.

Despite the government's ambitions to make Australia a top 10 defence exporter, recent data shows it has slipped from 18th to 25th in rankings. And there is concern that obtaining defence export permits was taking too long.