

‘Magnificent seven’ almost done salvaging

JOHN HARVEY

Seven months after being tasked with salvaging 15 sunken vessels in Hout Bay harbour, a group of divers who turned their backs on abalone poaching are nearing completion of the job.

The men, who have come to be known as Hangberg’s “Magnificent Seven” (“Divers train to give job opportunities,” Sentinel, November 10 2017), officially qualified as professional divers in December and were hired by salvage firm Guerrini Marine Construction (GMC).

GMC and Gordon’s Bay-based dive school Jack’s Dive Chest trained the divers.

Only two more vessels – the Ellen Lees and Bellalaika – are still to be floated, with 13 already having been brought up.

Hangberg businessman Angelo Joseph, responsible for sourcing semi-skilled labour for the project, was thrilled with the results.

“Most of these boats were under water for between seven and 10 years, and to see how the guys have performed is incredible. Some of them only have Standard 4 or 5 (Grade 6 and 7) education, but this has given them a new chance in life. Now they want to explore the world,” he said.

The former abalone poachers were “finished with the game” as a result of the project, Mr Joseph said.

“That was the whole point of



■ Divers with a flotation device in the water.

this exercise: to change their mind-sets so that they could realise they could earn an existence legally. Some of these guys still have criminal records due to their past, so the next step will be to work with the authorities to see if we can get their records expunged so they can work overseas.”

He paid tribute to GMC owner Adrian Guerrini for “going the extra mile” for the divers and the Hangberg community.

“Whoever is awarded the next contract needs to equal or better what GMC has done. Most of the big companies don’t use local black partners when they come into an area, but Adrian has gone

out of his way to ensure the community was involved.

“It must be added that if it wasn’t for the policies of the national Department of Public Works, which stipulate that 38% of work needs to be awarded to local black business, this would not have happened.”

Once all the boats have been floated, the harbour will be dredged as part of the clean-up operation. A separate contract will be awarded for these purposes.

“We were responsible for floating the vessels and then breaking them up for scrap,” Mr Joseph said.

The fruits of the operation are in plain sight near the harbour



■ Businessman Angelo Joseph and his dog on top of the scrap pile in the harbour.

master’s offices. The sunken vessels which marred the harbour for so long now take the form of a huge pile of wood chips, waiting to be transported away to scrap yards.

Mr Joseph said the divers were an inspiration to the Hangberg community, and he had received many messages from residents asking how they could follow in their footsteps.

Diver Stephan Braaf was “extremely proud” that the dive team were scheduled to complete their task within the stipulated timeframe. “I am so proud to be from Hout Bay and to have done this. Thanks to the opportunity,

I will no longer have to run away from the cops,” he said. “We have shown our community that we have been able to clean up our harbour ourselves, using our own people.”

GMC owner Adrian Guerrini is pleased with how the operation has gone. “We’ve made all our targets so we’re pretty happy. I’m also very happy with the development of the divers. Initially we held their hands, but now they’re getting everything done themselves,” he said.

“There’s now a lot of scope for them to work outside Hout Bay, and hopefully with other contracts coming up we’ll be able to involve the community as well.”