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**REPORT ON THE VISIT OF
THE DEFENCE SUB-COMMITTEE**

of the

**JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
DEFENCE AND TRADE**

to

NORTH QUEENSLAND AND THE TORRES STRAIT

AUGUST 1991

The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

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Senator D J MacGibbon

Mr R G Halverson, OBE, MP

Rt Hon I McC Sinclair, MP

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
<i>MEMBERSHIP</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>PARTICIPANTS</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>PROGRAM</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>TOWNSVILLE</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>CAIRNS</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>THURSDAY ISLAND</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>TORRES STRAIT</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>WEIPA</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>ISSUES AND ACTIVITIES</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>TOWNSVILLE</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>11 BRIGADE</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Area of Operations</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Training</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Exercise Kangaroo 89</i>	<i>9</i>

	<i>Page</i>		<i>Page</i>
<i>Operational Readiness</i>	10	<i>CAIRNS</i>	15
<i>Equipment</i>	10	<i>HMAS CAIRNS</i>	15
<i>Resources</i>	11	<i>Patrol Boat Fleet</i>	15
<i>31 Battalion Royal Queensland Regiment</i>	11	<i>Other Roles</i>	16
 		<i>Future Expansion of the Base</i>	17
<i>3 BRIGADE</i>	11	<i>Vulnerability to Cyclones</i>	17
<i>Training</i>	12	<i>Royal Australian Naval Reserve (RANR)</i>	18
<i>Facilities</i>	12	 	
<i>1 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment</i>	13	51 BATTALION THE FAR NORTH QUEENSLAND REGIMENT	19
<i>Exercise Puk Puk</i>	13	 	
 		<i>AUSTRALIAN CUSTOMS SERVICE CAIRNS</i>	19
<i>RAAF TOWNSVILLE</i>	14	<i>Surveillance of the Torres Strait</i>	19
<i>5 Aviation Regiment</i>	14	<i>Coastwatch</i>	19
<i>Capability</i>	14	 	
<i>Operational Support Group</i>	14	THURSDAY ISLAND	20
		<i>C Coy 51 FNQR Depot</i>	20
		<i>Royal Australian Naval Reserve (RANR)</i>	21
		<i>Meeting with Mr Getano Lui (Jnr)</i>	21

	<i>Page</i>
TORRES STRAIT	22
<i>Meeting with Mr Donald Banu, Boigu Island</i>	22
<i>Meeting with Mr Terry Waia, Saibai Island</i>	23
<i>Yorke Island</i>	23
<i>Bamaga</i>	24
WEIPA	24
<i>COMALCO</i>	24
<i>B Coy 51 FNQR Depot</i>	24
<i>RAAF Scherger</i>	26

INTRODUCTION

In August 1991 the Defence Sub-Committee of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade conducted an inspection of defence facilities in northern Queensland and the Torres Strait. This tour is significant because it is the first time since its inception in 1973 that the Defence Sub-Committee has visited this strategically important region.

Inspections by the Defence Sub-Committee have historically been considered a vital part of the Committee's activities. Such visits have served to keep Members attuned to current defence issues, provide an avenue through which 'Parliament can be taken to the people' and enhance Members' comprehension of issues raised in formal inquiries referred to the Committee. This particular visit was no exception. Indeed, it proved to be an invaluable adjunct to the Sub-Committee's present inquiry into the Australian Defence Force Reserves. The extent to which local briefings and informal discussions complemented the formal evidence taken in public hearings and submissions cannot be over-estimated.

The decision to tour northern Queensland and Torres Strait on this occasion reflects the recent focus of defence planners on the north. Along with Darwin, Thursday Island and the Torres Strait have long been in the purview of strategic analysts and have featured prominently in successive colonial, imperial and national defence proposals since the early days of European settlement in Australia.

Present defence policy accords Reservists a specific role in protecting vital assets across the northern part of our continent. In view of the inquiry into Reserves, the Sub-Committee was interested to monitor at first-hand recent progress in establishing and expanding the Reserve force in the Cape York area. As part of its inspection therefore, the Sub-Committee visited 11 Brigade which is the Australian Army Reserve Brigade responsible for the defence of vital assets in North Queensland. 11 Brigade's area of operations extends across Queensland from Gladstone to the Torres Strait and includes a vital asset - the bauxite mine - at Weipa.

In line with the wider educational value of familiarisation visits, the Sub-Committee availed itself of the opportunity to inspect the Australian Army's only formation held at a high degree of readiness for operations. Hence, the program included visits to 3 Brigade, 5 Aviation Regiment and Operational Support Group at RAAF Townsville which are components of the Operational Deployment Force. The Sub-Committee also visited HMAS Cairns and the Australian Customs Service Cairns.

Whilst in the Torres Strait region the Members of the Sub-Committee were privileged to meet the Chairman of the Torres Strait Island Coordinating Council, Mr Getano Lui (Jnr) and the Chairmen of Boigu and Saibai Islands, Mr Donald Banu and Mr Terry Waia respectively. Regrettably too little time was available for a more comprehensive inspection of the islands.

The Sub-Committee is indebted to a number of people who contributed to the success of this trip. In particular, the Sub-Committee is grateful to the Minister for Defence for making available the aircraft which transported the Sub-Committee for most of the tour and to the crew for their cheerful cooperation and assistance.

The Sub-Committee was very impressed by the briefings provided throughout the tour.

The Sub-Committee appreciated the generosity of Mr Grant Thorne, Managing Director of Comalco, and his staff and their spouses for the time and trouble they took to inform Members during the visit to Weipa and also their hospitality.

PROGRAM

The aim of the tour was to enhance Members' appreciation of:

- the operation of an Army Reserve formation in our northern region;
- a regular force which is held on a high degree of operational readiness to meet contingencies which might arise with little or no warning;
- other units of the Australian Defence Force in the North Queensland region.

To achieve the first of these aims, the Sub-Committee inspected 11 Brigade which is the only Army Reserve Land Command Formation in north Queensland. 11 Brigade, headquartered in Townsville, has three Army Reserve battalions, namely, 31 Battalion Royal Queensland Regiment (31 RQR), 42 Battalion Royal Queensland Regiment (42 RQR) and 51 Battalion The Far North Queensland Regiment (51 FNQR). 31 RQR and 42 RQR are standard Infantry Battalions which are headquartered in Townsville and Rockhampton respectively. 51 FNQR, which has its headquarters in Cairns, is one of the Australian Army's three Regional Force Surveillance Units (RFSU). 51 FNQR has units and sub-units dispersed widely throughout North Queensland.

Members took the opportunity to visit 51 FNQR Depots at Weipa and Thursday Island. Valuable perspectives on the Reserves were gained through informal discussions on Boigu, Saibai and Yorke Islands in the Torres Strait.

The surveillance function of 51 FNQR is complemented by the Patrol Boat Fleet based at Cairns and a number of civilian organisations. One of these is Coastwatch which is an independent program of the Australian Customs Service (ACS). The itinerary therefore included briefings by both HMAS Cairns and the Australian Customs Service.

The second aim was satisfied by briefings from 3 Brigade, 5 Aviation Regiment and Operational Support Group (OSG) at RAAF Townsville and by the opportunity for Members of the Sub-Committee to participate as observers in an Air Mobile Assault and live-firing exercise

at High Range which was organised by 1 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR).

The Defence Sub-Committee's program of visits took place over four days as follows:

Monday 5 August 1991

TOWNSVILLE

0800-0900 hours	Briefings/discussions at 11 Brigade
0915-1000 hours	Briefings/discussions at 3 Brigade
1010-1320 hours	Briefing at 1RAR, participation as observers in <i>Exercise Puk Puk</i> at High Range, and lunch in the field
1320-1345 hours	Return to RAAF Townsville by Caribou
1350-1505 hours	Briefing/tour of 5 Aviation Regiment
1510-1615 hours	Briefing/tour of RAAF Townsville OSG
1615-1715 hours	Informal discussions at RAAF Townsville Officers Mess
1730 hours	Depart Townsville for Cairns by Caribou

Tuesday 6 August 1991

CAIRNS

0845-0945 hours	Briefing/inspection of HMAS Cairns
1000-1045 hours	Briefing at HQ 51 FNQR including background on sub-units at Weipa and Thursday Island

1100-1200 hours Briefing by Australian Customs Service/Coastwatch

1215 hours Depart Cairns for Horn Island by Caribou

1545 hours Transfer to Thursday Island by motor launch

THURSDAY ISLAND

1800 hours	Informal discussions at C Company (C Coy) 51 FNQR Depot
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Wednesday 7 August 1991

0745-0800 hours	Tour of Thursday Island, including fort
0800-0900 hours	Briefing/discussions at C Coy 51 FNQR Depot with Officer Commanding C Coy and Resident Naval Officer Thursday Island (RNOTI)
0900-1000 hours	Meeting with Chairman of Island Co-ordinating Council Mr Getano Lui (Jnr)
1030-1100 hours	Transfer to Horn Island

TORRES STRAIT

1130-1600 hours	Visits to Boigu, Saibai and Yorke Islands, overfly Torres Strait
1630 hours	Depart Horn Island for Bamaga
1500 hours	Visit Bamaga en route to Weipa

WEIPA

2000 hours Dinner/Informal discussions with General Manager Comalco and staff and Officer Commanding B Coy 51 FNQR

Thursday 8 August 1991

0830-0900 hours Briefing/discussions with Officer Commanding B Coy 51 FNQR

0900-1030 hours Tour of Comalco operations

1030-1200 hours Briefing/discussions with General Manager Comalco

1300 hours Depart Weipa, overfly RAAF Scherger en route to Cairns and Townsville

ISSUES AND ACTIVITIES

The following comments and observations make no attempt to be a definitive account of the findings. They are indicative of the briefings presented to the Sub-Committee and the experiences and impressions gained by participants in the tour.

TOWNSVILLE

11 BRIGADE

The Sub-Committee visited the headquarters of 11 Brigade in Townsville where briefings on the Brigade's operations had been arranged by the Commander 11 Brigade, Colonel John Crocker, AM.

11 Brigade is the only Army Reserve Land Command Formation in an area which stretches from the Australian-Papua-New Guinea border in the north, the Queensland-Northern Territory border in the west to Gladstone in the south. Its area of operations lies adjacent to two international borders.

The role of 11 Brigade is to train for the conduct of land operations within Australia. The Brigade has been tasked for regional surveillance and the protection of vital assets in north Queensland.

11 Brigade has three Army Reserve Battalions and other supporting elements:

- 31 Battalion, Royal Queensland Regiment - a standard Army Reserve Infantry Battalion - was raised in late 1986 from 31 Independent Rifle Company. 31 Battalion is headquartered in Townsville;
- 42 Battalion, Royal Queensland Regiment - also a standard Army Reserve Infantry Battalion - has its headquarters in Rockhampton;

51 Battalion, The Far North Queensland Regiment (FNQR) - one of the Australian Army's three Regional Force Surveillance Units (RFSU) - is headquartered in Cairns.

Other units of 11 Brigade include combat and logistic support units.

At the time of the Sub-Committee's visit the Brigade had an authorised strength of 1991 with an actual personnel strength of 1872 (including 101 Regular Army).

11 Brigade personnel are widely dispersed over north Queensland.

Area of Operations

The vastness and remoteness of the region and the geography of the area for which 11 Brigade is responsible present challenges for the operations of the Brigade.

The remoteness and geography of the region also contribute to the inadequacy of the civil infrastructure of 11 Brigade's area of operations. Apart from the Bruce and Flinders Highways and the railways along the same route, the roads are inadequate and few airfields in the area can be used for sustained operations. Moreover the wet season affects the work of the Brigade for 5 months of the year.

Flying over Cape York peninsula by Caribou and over the Torres Strait in an Islander aircraft provided the Members of the Sub-Committee with an excellent opportunity to assess the nature of the area in which units of the Brigade operate.

Training

Training for operational readiness, given the constraints of civilian employment, is a significant issue raised by the inquiry into Reserves. Members were therefore interested to ascertain how this problem affects 11 Brigade.

The primary task of 11 Brigade is to conduct, within the limitations of time and resources, individual training and collective training to sub-

unit (company) level. Most soldiers in the Brigade participate in an average of 30 days training each year - a combination of Tuesday night parades, weekend activities and two weeks continuous training on a field exercise or training course.

The Commander of 11 Brigade told the Sub-Committee that, ideally, Reservists should have at least 55 training days per annum. Indeed, the time available for training is considered to be the critical factor. He also observed that full-time courses are more effective than longer part-time courses.

The Brigade conducts two camps a year as part of the training program: at Shoalwater Bay in April/May and in Townsville in November/December. The RFSU conducts its own courses at camps at Cowley Beach twice a year.

Discussions included the issue of attendance rates at exercises. The Sub-Committee was told that attendance is contingent upon how Reservists are able to use training days. Generally, training days are used for the annual field exercise. This exercise usually attracts a 50 to 75 per cent attendance rate. Again, given the constraints of civilian employment, an attendance rate of 60 per cent is considered good. In assessing the attendance rate of the annual field exercise account should be taken of the election of some Reservists to participate in other available courses at particular stages in the training cycle which takes place over three years.

Each year 11 Brigade conducts a military skills competition to test and assess the standard of individual training and to enhance the value and responsibilities of junior leaders. The Brigade places emphasis on junior leadership, weapon handling and battlecraft skills.

Exercise Kangaroo 89

Approximately 650 members of 11 Brigade participated in *Exercise Kangaroo 89 (K89)* in the Cape York/Torres Strait area. The RFSU conducted area and close surveillance while the remainder of the Brigade protected the vital asset at Weipa.

Exercise Kangaroo 89 provided the Brigade with the opportunity to practise the battle procedure and deployment of elements of the Brigade to and from the Cape York area, to practise the command, control and communications procedures within the Brigade, practise and improve Brigade capability to conduct low level operations in and around a major vital asset with minimal support, familiarise Reservists with the difficulties of conducting limited operations in the Cape York area and practise the collection, analysis and distribution of intelligence.

The Brigade operated under very severe manpower and equipment limitations. Nonetheless, *Exercise Kangaroo 89* was a very successful training exercise for the Brigade.

Operational Readiness

Operational readiness is an issue of some concern to the Sub-Committee. While 51 FNQR/RFSU is at 28 days readiness, the rest of the Brigade requires 120 days (6 months from call-out). The Commander of 11 Brigade seeks to achieve a 90 day readiness limit to provide a challenge to Reservists. It should be noted, however, that this is purely an internal decision for motivational purposes.

Equipment

Units of the Brigade are authorised to hold about 10 per cent of their war entitlement of equipment. Most of the equipment is therefore not held by units but borrowed from 'loan pools' when required. The Commander of 11 Brigade told the Sub-Committee that the quality and quantity of loan pool equipment is inadequate and the situation needs attention. It should be noted, however, that the General Officer Commanding Logistics Command is currently looking at ways of improving this situation.

The Brigade is deficient in significant major equipments from its full time entitlement. Deficiencies are to be found in vehicles, rifles and radios. Moreover, there are severe shortages of some types of ammunition, particularly mortar bombs and grenades. Stocks are insufficient for both the initial training and the continuation training of soldiers.

Resources

The activities and capabilities of 11 Brigade are very dependent on the allocation of resources such as air support hours, travel and subsistence finance and Army Reserve Training Days. Regardless of 11 Brigade's expansion over recent years, its allocation of resources has not grown and has in fact declined in some areas. With the exception of RFSUs, the training day allocation will permit only 29 days per man in 1991/92. The briefing stated that the reduction will affect retention, morale and capability.

31 Battalion Royal Queensland Regiment

31 Battalion is an Army Reserve Infantry Battalion which has a standard infantry role. The authorised strength of 31 Battalion is 505. At the time of the visit the personnel strength was 421 which includes a Regular Army component of 19 men.

The role of 31 Battalion in *Exercise Kangaroo 89* had two elements: firstly, a defensive role which involved defending Weipa and, secondly, an offensive role which was to force the enemy to engage in action.

3 BRIGADE

3 Brigade is the major combat component of the Australian Defence Force's Operational Deployment Force (ODF) which is the ADF's *ready reaction* force. The Brigade is based at Lavarack Barracks in Townsville. At Lavarack Barracks Members were briefed on the role of 3 Brigade and the ODF's capability objectives which revolve around operational contingencies. Accordingly, the Brigade is required to be capable of rapid strategic deployment. In May 1987, for example, it had to be at evacuation readiness for possible action during the Fiji emergency and subsequently for the crises in Port Vila and Bougainville.

Training

Training is focused at battalion level. Although they have not been involved in any action, the soldiers are trained to maintain a high level of readiness for operations. The key challenge is keeping the motivation of the soldiers commensurate with their state of readiness.

The briefing stated that emphasis is placed on strategic and tactical mobility by air. 3 Brigade therefore participates in training exercises with both 5 Aviation Regiment and the RAAF. During October 1991 3 Brigade will be involved in training exercise *Suman Warrior* in which it will participate in combined exercises with elements of defence forces from a number of Asian countries.

Facilities

At 30 June 1991 personnel strength of 3 Brigade was 3169. Most of the Brigade is accommodated on base at Lavarack Barracks. There are 36 blocks at the Barracks, each of which accommodates 40 soldiers. All but five of the 33 blocks approved for upgrading have been refurbished. Refurbishing has progressed ahead of schedule and the last five blocks will be completed by March 1992.

In response to Members' questions, the Commander 3 Brigade told the Sub-Committee that single accommodation is highly satisfactory. The blocks are set in landscaped grounds and each floor of the blocks has a common room. The improved accommodation has attracted soldiers to live on the base.

The Sub-Committee was informed that there is, however, a shortfall of 30-50 rooms - a problem which could be eased by the establishment of demountables. Demountables are the preferred short-term option but the living out allowance has to be costed against the cost of installing and maintaining demountables.

1 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR)

The Sub-Committee inspected 1RAR which alternates with 2/4 RAR as the Infantry Battalion maintained at a high degree of operational readiness on short notice. Each of these Infantry Battalions has a complement of 700 personnel.

At full strength 1RAR operates four rifle companies, each with 100 men. These are supported by an Assault Pioneer Platoon equipped with mines, construction equipment, amphibious craft and communications, a reconnaissance platoon of four five-man patrols, battalion headquarters, an administration company including a transport platoon with 40 light vehicles and 10 trucks, a catering platoon, a medical platoon and a supply platoon.

During the inspection of 1RAR, soldiers of a rifle platoon demonstrated the items of equipment which they are required to carry. Members thereby had the opportunity to inspect closely the new AUSTEYR F88 rifle which has been issued to 1RAR.

Members were also briefed on the skills required by the sniper sections. Each sniper section consists of three sniper pairs and a supervisor.

Exercise Puk Puk

The Defence Sub-Committee is indebted to Brigadier Keating, Commander 3 Brigade, for enabling Members to participate as observers in a live-firing exercise - *Exercise Puk Puk* - at High Range.

The Members were carried with the combat soldiers by Black Hawk assault helicopters to High Range where a platoon attack was made on a section post. Members witnessed at close quarters the various stages of the live firing attack. The training is designed to inculcate in soldiers a trust in each other's abilities. Members were impressed by the high level of skills demonstrated by the soldiers engaged in the exercise.

The Sub-Committee then joined the soldiers for lunch in the field. This provided an opportunity for informal discussions and inspections of weapons and ration packs before returning to RAAF Townsville by a Caribou aircraft.

RAAF TOWNSVILLE

5 Aviation Regiment

5 Aviation Regiment is a lodger unit at RAAF Townsville from where it provides tactical support to the ODF. The role of 5 Aviation Regiment is to provide air mobility and battlefield support, that is, to use assault helicopters to carry soldiers into combat and to sustain them while they are fighting. Although the Regiment is under the direct command and control of Land Command (Sydney), for administrative convenience it has been placed under the command of Headquarters 3 Brigade.

To perform its role 5 Aviation Regiment has been structured with two flying squadrons: an Airmobile Squadron and Airmobile Support Squadron. Between them they will operate 30 of the Australian Defence Force's Black Hawk assault helicopters and probably six Iroquois gunships. At the time of the visit the operational Black Hawk fleet consisted of 23 aircraft with a manning strength of 380 personnel.

Capability

By the end of 1992 the Regiment will have the capability to carry an infantry battalion in one lift. The Sub-Committee was briefed on the ability of the Black Hawk to perform other functions, for example, retrieving an Iroquois helicopter or lifting a vehicle containing a computer unit. The full capacity of the Black Hawk helicopter is still being explored.

5 Aviation Regiment has provided valuable assistance to the civil community in search and rescue and flood relief activities. In addition, it is required to support counter-terrorist operations.

Operational Support Group (OSG)

The Sub-Committee was briefed at RAAF Townsville on the Operational Support Group's responsibility as the Air Force component of the ODF. As with 3 Brigade OSG is on the same short degree of notice to move.

The Operational Support Group, formed earlier this year, is one of five functional air command groups. Its mission is to provide fixed-wing short range transport and operational and local support for designated RAAF, Joint and Combined Forces.

To meet its roles, namely, tactical air support, combat logistics support, vital asset protection and search and survivor assistance, the Group operates as three Wings. They are Operational Support Wing, Base Support Wing Townsville and No 84 Wing, of which No 35 Squadron is based at Townsville.

The Sub-Committee was impressed with the capabilities of the Caribou aircraft provided by No 35 Squadron over the four days of the tour. The Caribou fleet which has been in RAAF service for over 25 years is to be reduced. As a result of the Force Structure Review, the 21 Caribou aircraft in operation will be reduced to 14 aircraft. These will be located in one squadron instead of the present two squadrons.

Members pursued questions relating to the impact of civilianisation on RAAF Townsville, particularly in relation to overtime payments to civilian staff, round-the-clock catering and shadow deployment to bare bases.

CAIRNS

HMAS CAIRNS

HMAS Cairns comprises the Main Base and Oil Fuel Installation on Trinity Inlet, five outstations including accommodation facilities, personnel services offices and the explosives magazine at Queerah. The Sub-Committee was briefed at the Main Base by the Naval Officer-in-Charge, Commander R G Thomas.

Patrol Boat Fleet

A fleet of five Fremantle Class patrol boats is based at HMAS Cairns for surveillance of the area extending from the Queensland-New South Wales border to the Queensland-Northern Territory border. Patrol boat

activities primarily involve surveillance operations, with fisheries surveillance being the most common peace-time activity. Most foreign fishing boats in Australian waters are licensed. They are boarded only for routine monitoring. From time to time illegal foreign fishing boats are apprehended.

Following apprehension of an illegal fishing vessel, the patrol boats - which do not carry a fisheries inspector - are required to take the offender to the nearest Australian port where it becomes the responsibility of other Government agencies.

Members of the Sub-Committee asked about possible health risks to the crews of the patrol boats involved in the surveillance of fisheries. They were informed that RAN personnel are routinely inoculated to guard against potential disease.

Other Roles

Besides providing facilities for Cairns-based fleet units, HMAS Cairns provides headquarters for the Naval Officer-in-Charge Cairns and Commander Patrol Boat Forces, communications support for ships in the Queensland area, facilities and support for the Cairns Royal Australian Naval Reserve and administration and support for the Resident Naval Officer Thursday Island.

Among its roles are intermediate level ship maintenance, logistic support, berthing and dockside services, administration and accommodation for base and ship personnel, base support services, medical/dental services and assistance/liaison to visiting RAN and foreign ships.

The complement of personnel on the base is 185 including personnel of lodger units. An additional 235 personnel man the fleet of 11 ships which, as well as the five Fremantle Class Patrol Boats, consists of one Landing Craft Heavy, one Medium Hydrographic Ship and four Survey Motor Launches.

Hydrographic survey of the Torres Strait, the Great Barrier Reef, Gulf of Papua and the Coral Sea is an important function carried out from HMAS Cairns. HMAS *Flinders* which carries a crew of 40 has hitherto been the only vessel employed in this activity. Last year four smaller

Survey Motor Launches, each of which carry a crew of 11, were commissioned to perform survey work. *Flinders* recently deployed to the Gulf of Papua to support Papua-New Guinea by surveying shipping routes to new commercial ports.

Regional activities also include joint exercises between the patrol boats from HMAS Cairns and Pacific patrol boats. These exercises which allow for the transfer of expertise are organised through the Maritime Commander in Sydney.

Future Expansion of the Base

HMAS Cairns is a busy front-line base which is expected to expand with the possible relocation of the Navy's Hydrographic School to Cairns. The base, however, is seriously constrained by neighbouring developments which will impede expansion. The berthing area, for example, requires considerable extension to accommodate both increasing numbers of ships utilising the base and the next generation of surveillance ships which are likely to be larger than the existing vessels.

Expansion of the base will increase pressure on existing accommodation facilities. Personnel are currently accommodated in two motels which have been purchased by the Navy.

Vulnerability to Cyclones

The base at HMAS Cairns has been built to withstand cyclones. Consequently, the recent *Cyclone Joy* caused only minor damage to Naval facilities. The Sub-Committee was told that when, as a result of the cyclone, the town water was turned off, the air conditioning at the base was affected. This in turn rendered the communications equipment inactive. Alternative communication options were, however, available.

In addition to their cooperative role with respect to fisheries, patrol boat activities are closely coordinated with Coastwatch and include support for Health/Quarantine, National Parks and Wildlife and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.

Royal Australian Naval Reserve (RANR)

The Cairns RANR division which was established in July 1988 has attracted some 60 Reservists. Recruitment continues towards a ceiling of 140.

51 BATTALION THE FAR NORTH QUEENSLAND REGIMENT

The role of 51 FNQR is to conduct reconnaissance and surveillance in Northern Queensland from Cardwell across the Gulf Country and Cape York to within three kilometres of the Papua-New Guinea border.

The briefing stated that the soldiers of 51 FNQR regard themselves as the 'eyes and ears of the north'. They are tasked to obtain infrastructure information which may be used to support the planning and conduct of operations by the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

To perform their task, they are organised into patrols. A patrol is a six man group which is commanded by a sergeant. Other members are a corporal, a signaller, a medic and two patrolmen who may be cross-trained as drivers and small-craft handlers, particularly in the Torres Strait Island Patrols.

The briefing stated that recruiting patrolmen is not difficult. Problems are experienced, however, in attracting people into specialist positions.

The patrols are faced with a particularly difficult task, given the nature of the area in which they operate. In that area there is one major road - the gravel surfaced Northern Development Road - which covers a distance of 762 kilometres from Cairns to Bamaga. There is an absence of lateral routes. During the wet season, when the Jardine, Archer and Wenlock Rivers flood, movement north ceases at Lakeland Downs and the coastal communities' links to the Development Road are cut.

The briefing stated that, in addition to limited mobility in the wet season and limited air support, 51 FNQR suffers from an inexperienced Officer/NCO base and equipment shortfalls. In particular there is a shortage of boats, vehicles and HF radios. These problems are however being addressed.

AUSTRALIAN CUSTOMS SERVICE CAIRNS

Surveillance of the northern regions of Australia is not limited to the Defence Force. Accordingly, the Defence Sub-Committee obtained a briefing from the Australian Customs Service in Cairns. The briefing was provided by Mr Peter Gerry, Assistant Collector North Queensland.

Surveillance of the Torres Strait

Australian Customs Service barrier control activities focus on ensuring that all commercial shipping and Australian and international yachts which call at Thursday Island enter through the customs area.

The six Australian Customs Service officers located on Thursday Island play a major role in the administration of the Torres Strait Treaty. The Treaty permits free cross-border movement of Torres Strait Islanders and coastal Papua-New Guineans in the Torres Strait Protected Zone for traditional activities.

Because these movements are irregular, there are difficulties in surveillance of the region for illegal activities such as trade in cannabis and weapons and in detecting illegal immigrants.

Coastwatch

Surveillance is carried out by Coastwatch. Operating from its sub-centre at Thursday Island, Coastwatch has successfully detected a number of foreign fishing incursions in northern waters and has been directly involved in the detection of illegal immigrants and persons claiming refugee status in the Torres Strait region. In cooperation with Queensland Police Fauna Squad, there have also been some prosecutions over the export of native fauna in the last 18 months.

The Sub-Committee was very interested in the adequacy of equipment available to Coastwatch and the compatibility of equipment used by all aircraft with a surveillance role.

The work of Coastwatch is complemented by civil aircraft which monitor and report to Coastwatch any unidentified aircraft in the area.

Coastwatch receives a significantly large number of such reports from civilian pilots.

Airstrips in the region are risk rated according to the likelihood of illegal usage. There is greater surveillance by Coastwatch of those classified as high risk.

Aboriginal communities, barge operators and local fishermen also voluntarily assist in surveillance. Because of the size of the area, Coastwatch is very dependent upon reliable contacts in the civilian community.

Coastwatch enjoys a cooperative relationship with 51 FNQR through joint patrols and exchange of information. The Royal Australian Navy Patrol Boats provide the primary offshore surface surveillance and response capability for the Coastwatch civil surveillance program to the extent of 1800 patrol boat days per annum.

An Australian Defence Force Liaison Officer has been appointed to Coastwatch Operational Headquarters in Canberra to facilitate operational planning and decision making.

THURSDAY ISLAND

C Coy 51 FNQR Depot

The Sub-Committee inspected the Depot which C Coy 51 FNQR shares with the Resident Naval Officer Thursday Island. The Depot is a newly erected permanent structure with briefing rooms, a conference room, offices and accommodation. A Shark Cat twin-engined launch has been provided for surveillance activities.

The Officer Commanding C Coy, Major Brett Caldwell, briefed the Sub-Committee on the features of the area of operations of C Coy. C Coy has patrols on 11 of the major island communities and a number of patrols in the mainland community of Bamaga. The patrols report back any unusual sightings to a supervisor at Thursday Island so that the information can be relayed to higher authorities.

In organising training exercises in the Torres Strait region, Reservists are conscious of not putting pressure on civilian infrastructure which is designed to meet the needs of the existing population. Having exercises on the islands puts pressure on potable water supplies and the airstrips. Consideration has to be given to traditional island cultures, problems of isolation especially during the wet season, lack of water storage and the distribution of the population throughout the Torres Strait.

From time to time reservists based in the Torres Strait region participate in intensive training at Bamaga to acquire military skills. In addition, Reservists may be sent to Cairns once or twice a year for training.

Discussion at the briefing focused on the value of an Army presence on the islands of the Torres Strait. Given the mobility of people from one island to another and between Papua-New Guinea and the Torres Strait islands, it is considered important that a Defence presence is evident.

Royal Australian Naval Reserve (RANR)

Lieutenant Commander Paul Radford, Resident Naval Officer Thursday Island, briefed Members on the establishment of a sub-unit of the Cairns RANR on Thursday Island in November 1989. Three officers and three sailors have enlisted to date. Army recruiting has been far more extensive than Navy and this has had a noticeable effect on Navy recruitment. Consideration is being given to combining Naval and Army Reserves by Defence recruiting authorities.

The Resident Naval Officer Thursday Island has been allocated a 35 foot launch to facilitate inter-island surveillance and local training and to assist in the recruitment of Reserves in the islands.

Meeting with Mr Getano Lui (Jnr) Chairman, Island Co-ordinating Council

The Members of the Sub-Committee met Mr Getano Lui (Jnr). The Sub-Committee was particularly concerned to ensure the success of C Coy and sought Mr Lui's perceptions on how this might be achieved.

Issues raised at the meeting concerned the value of a community awareness program on the role of Reserves and visible contributions that Reservists could make to their communities. For example, it was suggested that they could be tasked to upgrade airstrips or build dams. It was recognised, however, that Army involvement in such tasks could encroach upon work which might otherwise be available for locals and thereby create union problems.

A further suggestion was that Army Reservists could be taken to the mainland for training in a particular trade which would serve to benefit the island communities.

Mr Lui expressed his view that Army authorities should be more proactive in informing islanders of their activities.

TORRES STRAIT

Meeting with Mr Donald Banu Chairman, Boigu Island

Boigu Island is situated within four kilometres of the Papua-New Guinea coast. It is a low-lying alluvial island with a clay/grass airstrip. The population of Boigu Island at the time of the Sub-Committee's visit was approximately 350 persons.

Upon arrival at Boigu Island the Sub-Committee was met by 4 Reservists currently serving on Boigu. Members were then escorted by the patrol to a meeting with Mr Banu.

Mr Banu told the Sub-Committee that some time again ago rumours had circulated that 'Raskols' had left Port Moresby with the intention of visiting Boigu and causing strife. Consequently, he had armed himself and the community to meet this perceived danger.

Boigu's proximity to Papua-New Guinea is a significant factor in local perceptions that a Defence presence is needed on the island. Because of this, Mr Banu told the Sub-Committee that he would like more

consultation from Defence Reserve authorities. In addition, he would like more visits by Defence personnel to Boigu Island.

Meeting with Mr Terry Waia Chairman, Saibai Island

Saibai is a mangrove tidal mud island. The village is located on a narrow clay embankment on the northern shore, only three to four kilometres from the Papua-New Guinea coast.

Mr Waia shared Mr Banu's concerns about the need for a Defence presence on the island because of fear of incursions by 'Raskols' from Papua-New Guinea. He was also concerned about the possibility of drugs entering the island.

The Sub-Committee sought Mr Waia's views on how recruitment might proceed. Mr Waia supported the idea that Army officers address the Island Co-ordinating Council. He favoured a more visible Defence presence on the island which could be achieved by organising training exercises there. He would also like more consultation by Army.

The population of Saibai Island is about 440. Of these, six Saibai Islanders have joined the Army Reserve.

Yorke Island

The Sub-Committee included Yorke Island in its tour because an exercise was being held there for Reservists. Members therefore had an opportunity to speak directly with Reservists about their activities in the Reserve.

The training exercise was tailored to the prime role of 51 FNQR, namely surveillance, to which the Islanders are particularly well suited. Some battlecraft training, however, had been undertaken during the exercise.

At the time of the Sub-Committee's visit, Regular Army personnel from 4 Field Survey Squadron in Adelaide were deployed on Yorke Island.

Their task was to map sections of the region. This enabled patrols to see progress in mapping the area for which they are responsible.

Bamaga

The Sub-Committee was unable to visit Bamaga Depot because of time constraints. However, discussions were held at the Bamaga airport with personnel from 7 Signals Regiment on conditions of service in the Bamaga area. Members were informed about some of the problems of keeping the communications station at Bamaga permanently manned.

The Reserve Force at Bamaga has a strength of 12-15 Reservists.

WEIPA

COMALCO

The Sub-Committee's tour of the bauxite mine at Weipa and briefing by Comalco's General Manager, Mr Grant Thorne, assisted the Members' appreciation of the task of protecting a vital asset in Australia's sparsely populated north.

B Coy 51 FNQR Depot

The Sub-Committee was briefed by Lieutenant Vic Seedwell, Officer Commanding B Coy on the role of B Coy and the nature of surveillance activities in the more remote regions. B Coy maintains a Depot at Weipa.

B Coy has a complement of 52 Reservists, 19 of whom (all Comalco employees) are based in Weipa. Sub-units of B Coy are located at Aurukun, Prince Edward River, Kowanyama and Lockhart River.

The Sub-Committee was told that the strength of the Reserve Force at Weipa is very much conditioned by employment factors at Comalco. For example, recent staff reductions at Comalco have affected recruiting for Army Reservists and the current strength is somewhat lower than

would normally be the case. Moreover, overtime requirements also have an effect on the training schedule.

In support of the Reserves Comalco provides up to 10 training days a year. Procedures have been introduced which allow Reservists to coordinate training schedules with their work. For example, notification of forthcoming patrols is given early and this enables soldiers to arrange to take annual leave in order to participate in the patrols. Also, Comalco schedules Rostered Days Off which are often used by Reservists.

The Depot at Weipa is a modern permanent structure which more than meets the requirements of personnel at Weipa.

Training courses are regularly conducted at the Depot. The grounds at the Depot are large enough to accommodate participants under tentage.

B Coy enjoys good relations with a substantial number of outlying cattle stations. This is fostered by the patrols advising stations when they are to be in their particular areas. In turn, the stations report any sightings of unfamiliar activities to 51 Battalion.

The Officer Commanding B Coy confirmed the view put to the Sub-Committee on other occasions that the most valued training exercises are those which involve 'real' tasks. For example, it fell to patrols from B Coy to assist in the search for the F/A-18 which had disappeared. To this end the Company mounted 24 hour searches into very difficult terrain. Patrols also cooperate with other organisations.

A significant problem faced by B Coy operations is the lack of infrastructure for rapid travel between sub-units. Consequently, the costs of travelling, for example, from Aurukun to Kowanyama, are very high. Also, the time which is required to travel from one sub-unit to another is a significant factor in the organisation of training exercises.

RAAF Scherger

The Sub-Committee inspected by air the proposed site of RAAF Scherger. RAAF Scherger will be a deployment airfield or 'bare base'. It will complete a chain of airfields across northern Australia and will fill the gap between Townsville and Darwin/Tindal. Moreover, it will add to the infrastructure necessary to support Defence Force operations in the north and north-east of Australia.

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