

'The principal difficulty faced by our coastal surveillance system is the sheer enormity of the task. Australia has a vast coastline with the area at most risk (certainly in regards to the animal and plant quarantine threat) also the least inhabited part of our coastline'. — The Hon. Mick Young, former Special Minister of State, now Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs.

COASTWATCH HAS POLICE, FEDERAL AND STATE, COMMUNITY CO-OPERATION

by Irene Hartsuyker and Brian McNamara

AT 1510 hours Central Time on 19 February 1987 a resident of Australia's far north was flying his light aircraft towards Batchelor. Unaware of any other aircraft in the vicinity — he had heard no radio transmissions — he noticed near the mouth of the Daly River 'a Cessna-type aircraft at about 1000 feet and on a heading of 040 degrees'.

He reported this to Flight Services, Darwin. FS Darwin had no flight plan for any flight in that area, so immediately reported the matter to Coastwatch.

The message reached Canberra through the Department of Aviation communications network. The telex was received by Department of Transport communications staff and delivered to CPU — the Coastal Protection Unit of the AFP.

At about the same time a mission in the region telephoned 008 193116, the Coastwatch free number for the Northern Territory, and reported an unidentified aircraft.

CPU immediately informed the NT police, the Australian Customs Service in Darwin, CPU Darwin, and the Department of Defence in Canberra.

'At this stage', said Acting Chief Superintendent Alex Bunt, currently in charge of the CPU, 'we did not know whether this was going to be a quarantine matter, drugs smuggling, illegal immigrants, or an offence against local fishing laws involving barramundi.'

Had CPU Darwin been involved, available there are a Sergeant, two Senior Constables, a First Constable, and a Clerical Assistant. There is much the same set-up at Broome and Cairns regional co-ordination centres, an Inspector being in charge at Cairns.

Back in Canberra, the Chief Super has two Chief Inspectors to run the Operations Branch, where one Senior Sergeant and two Sergeants rotate shifts on the surveillance desk. Constables working shifts complete the operations team.

'If we've done our job well and informed the proper authorities, then they can quickly undertake their normal functions such as identifying the plane, interviewing the pilot, or planning further action,' said Alex Bunt. 'In this case the matter was simple. Someone failed to lodge a flight plan.'

Backing up these operations is a Support Branch of nine public servants. Their functions include provision of policy advice, ministerial liaison and briefings, development of the annual budget and financial estimates, and secretariat work for the State and Commonwealth consultative committees which co-ordinate Coastwatch activities.

In addition to the State authorities with their particular responsibilities, interested Commonwealth departments are Customs, Primary Industry (for quarantine and fisheries),

Defence, Arts Heritage and Environment (for the Great Barrier Reef Authority and the National Parks and Wildlife Service), Transport and Immigration and Ethnic Affairs.

With all those people involved, how did the AFP get the job of running the CPU?

A review conducted by Mr Kim Beazley, at the time Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence, concluded that the AFP should take responsibility for Coastwatch to counter offences against Commonwealth law. It did so on 30 March 1984.

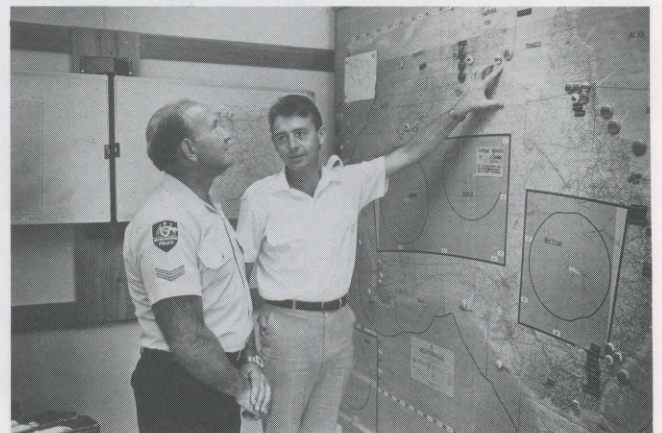
Each month a Chief Inspector of the CPU chairs a Program Planning Group Meeting, at which departments submit their surveillance needs and compile a program of air and surface patrols. This program is considered in the Operations and Programs Committee, who also discuss reports and analyses of the previous month's surveillance operations, problems of the identification of areas where the Coastwatch system can be improved, and the co-ordination of the annual budget.

An important function of the CPU is its public awareness campaign. Coastal protection depends heavily on voluntary reporting of incidents. Through presentations, displays and leaflets, communities in our sparsely-populated regions are encouraged to ring the Darwin number given earlier or 008 011911 for other places in the north. Elsewhere, a free call to 062 476666 can be made.

Air surveillance is provided by private contractors, as well as by voluntary reporters. RAAF aircraft and RAN vessels are available for surveillance and response.

In April 1984, the government announced that the Australian Customs Service was to use its resources to assist the CPU in responding to calls. This has provided access to the extensive infrastructure of Customs in remote districts and has upgraded both the law enforcement and surveillance capacity of Coastwatch. Customs officers now work with AFP officers in the CPU surveillance centre in Canberra.

There, too, are the people of the Federal Sea Safety and Surveillance Centre of the Department of Transport providing support services and communications facilities. This co-location and co-operation has enormously improved relationships between the organizations responsible for ensuring Australians' safety and security. ●



Senior Constable Brian Baggot and Mr Ross Gibb, Surveillance Operations Officer of the Department of Transport, discuss a Coastwatch operation at the Coastal Protection Unit in Canberra.