

Coastwatch improvement program strengthens detect and deter capacity

Saturday 10 April 1999 was a defining moment for Coastwatch, Australia's unique civil coastal surveillance service.

Rod Stone reports on progress with expanded operations to deter people-smuggling rackets and how a four-year \$124-million program to enhance Coastwatch's capabilities will benefit Australians.

That morning, a previously undetected 40-metre ship was found on the beach at Nambucca Heads, New South Wales, on Australia's east coast. The discovery, and the arrest of the illegal entrants who had been aboard it, served to crystallise government and community concerns about growing attempts to smuggle people into the country.

Concern about people smuggling had increased in March 1999 with the undetected landing of a boat containing illegal entrants near Cairns in north Queensland. Customs appointed retired Air Vice-Marshal Alan Heggen to conduct an inquiry into the landing.

After the April landing, which confirmed that the East Coast was a new target destination for illegal entrants, the Prime Minister, John Howard, set up a Task Force to investigate the landings and other coastal surveillance matters.

Chaired by the Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Max Moore-Wilton, it included representatives of the Attorney-General's Department, Customs, the Australian Federal Police, the Department of Defence and defence forces, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and the Office of National Assessments.

The Task Force took account of the findings of the Heggen report covering both landings. The report

concluded that neither Coastwatch nor its client agencies held any prior intelligence about the vessels. It said the relatively low intensity of Coastwatch strategic surveillance flying on the East Coast and the inherently low probability of detection of a single random target contributed to these breaches.

The result was a set of 18 recommendations from the Task Force, all adopted by the Government. They covered three broad areas:

- steps to detect and deter illegal boat arrivals before they arrive in Australia;
- strengthening coastal surveillance systems and improving procedures for dealing with illegal arrivals after they have reached Australia; and
- strengthening laws and penalties for people smuggling.

The Task Force recognised that for a coastline as large and as isolated as Australia's, no surveillance system could be foolproof. Trying to develop one would be unrealistic. But better intelligence, more effective coordination and communication, increased resources for aerial surveillance, and closer cooperation with source and transit countries could strengthen the effectiveness of Australia's capacity to detect and deter illegal arrivals.

- It found that illegal immigration was an increasing threat to Australia and a worldwide problem with more than four million people attempting illegal entry into various countries each



year. The report said the trade was worth more than \$10 billion a year to well organised people-smuggling syndicates.

- It noted that illegal immigration to Australia represented a processing cost of up to \$50 000 a person. In 1998-99, 771 people arrived illegally by boat and 1941 by aircraft. As well, the potential for importing exotic diseases by illegal boats could have devastating consequences for Australia's \$13.5 billion agricultural industry.

Against this background, the Task Force formulated a \$124-million, four-year program to strengthen Australia's capacity to detect and deter illegal arrivals.

For Customs, the Government's decisions will mean:

- Two additional Dash-8 aircraft, bringing the total to five, to extend the footprint and intensity of Coastwatch's aerial surveillance, particularly along the East Coast.
- An additional helicopter with all-weather, night-flying capability to be deployed in Torres Strait.
- A new National Surveillance Centre for Coastwatch in Canberra, with secure data links to a range of federal and state agencies including the Department of Defence and REEFCENTRE (the radar network covering the Torres Strait and Great Barrier Reef).
- Increased intelligence analysis capacity within the Surveillance Centre, which will improve surveillance mission planning.
- Coastwatch to be headed by a senior officer seconded from the Australian Defence Force as Director-General of Coastwatch, reporting to the Chief Executive Officer of Customs, Lionel Woodward.
- Coastwatch's participation in a high level committee chaired by the Office of National Assessments to coordinate intelligence on people smuggling.
- Strengthening Coastwatch liaison with the Australian Defence Force's Northern Command in Darwin and REEFCENTRE in Mackay.
- Attaching an officer from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to Coastwatch.
- Extending the range of powers available to Customs officers, such as by appointment as officers under the Fisheries Management Act, by legislating for powers of hot pursuit and constructive presence.

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*At left, from top:
A seized illegal entrant vessel is brought ashore, northern Australia. These illegal entrants were detained after their vessel ran aground in a crocodile infested area at Doughbouy River, Cape York.
Burning of seized fishing vessels, Willie Creek, north-western Australia.*



Customs vessel Roebuck Bay on patrol.

The new Dash 8s will be delivered in August 2000 and the helicopter is expected to start operations in January 2000. This will give Coastwatch a fleet of:

5 Bombardier De Havilland

Dash 8s, each capable of electronic search over 80,000 square nautical miles each sortie;

3 Reims F406s, each capable of electronic search over 60,000 square nautical miles each sortie;

6 Pilatus Britten-Norman

Islanders with visual search capacity over a 650 nautical mile track;

1 Aero Commander AC500 Shrike with visual search capacity over a 750 nautical mile track.

1 Bell 206 Longranger IV helicopter with visual search capacity day or night over a 250 nautical mile track.

1 Bell 412EP helicopter with electronic surveillance capacity and extended endurance.

The two new Dash 8s will be operated by five full crews. They will give an additional 4000 hours a year of electronic surveillance, increasing Coastwatch's aerial surveillance capability by 63 per cent in terms of coverage, or from 7000 to 11,000 hours a year. This will allow surveillance of the extended areas of risk to the north-east of Australia and along the East Coast. Added to this is the new helicopter with night-flying capability in the Torres Strait area. On the West Coast, coverage between Broome and Perth will also be increased.

The greater electronic surveillance capacity is in addition to the 7500 hours a year of visual surveillance by the other aircraft in the Coastwatch fleet.

Coastwatch helicopters perform a valuable role in the Torres Strait area.



As well, we will continue to have the Navy's patrol boats for 1800 sea days a year and use of the Air Force's P3C Orions for 250 hours a year.

The Customs Marine Fleet's response role will be made even more valuable for Coastwatch by the Government's decision to replace the existing fleet of six vessels with eight larger, longer range and more capable vessels. The new fleet will be fully operational in 2000 and will be able to provide 1200 sea days in a full year.

On the ground, Coastwatch will benefit from a significant increase in its ability to analyse intelligence, rather than, at present, being largely confined to acting on intelligence received. This means much more effective targeting of better defined search areas and the ability to be more proactive.

Although the new coverage on the East Coast has a primary focus on illegal entrants, an effect will be to benefit other Coastwatch clients with responsibilities in the area, because of the increased presence.

Onus on Coastwatch

But the very welcome enhancements will place a much greater onus on Coastwatch to come up with the results that these advances promise. After all, it is already covering an area of nine million square kilometres around Australia.

And, despite the heightened focus on illegal entrants, Coastwatch must continue to carry out its existing regular commitments for the other client agencies. These include the Australian Fisheries Management Authority, the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service and Environment Australia. Similarly, the intelligence-based activities for Customs and other aspects of work for the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs will remain as demanding.

The new arrangements mean not just the ability to spread our footprint over much expanded surveillance areas in the east. They will include more patrols on the west and south.

Big gains will come from the increased ability to use more and better intelligence, both in terms of sources and in the heightened strengths in analysis. In turn, these gains will lead to a kind of compounding effect

through greater utilisation of the aircraft.

The radar fitted to Coastwatch aircraft has proven to be very effective. But we work them hard and from time to time they become unserviceable. The decision to set up a radar maintenance facility in Australia means that this sophisticated equipment will no longer have to be sent back to the United States for

servicing. This will reduce the time taken to repair the equipment, reduce aircraft down time and increase time on task for surveillance.

As well as a small bonus for Australian employment, the final effect of these inter-related benefits will be to give Coastwatch the use of slightly more than the equivalent of two additional aircraft and a helicopter.

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Information is the key



The new Director-General Coastwatch, Rear-Admiral Russ Shalders, sees better management of a greater flow of information as the key to Coastwatch "getting ahead of the game - and staying ahead".

He said the new Coastwatch National

Surveillance Centre provided the means to make that happen.

"Surveillance intelligence, when developed in conjunction with other sources, will greatly strengthen our ability to deliver an expanded top-class service efficiently and effectively. Our priority is the optimal management of information that will enable us to better allocate our limited resources."

He said the recent Task Force's recommendations were an excellent blueprint on which to build a strategy for the introduction of the best available technology to serve Coastwatch requirements into the next century.

Rear-Admiral Shalders joined the Royal Australian Navy as a Cadet Midshipman in 1967. His first command, in 1975, was the Papua New Guinea Defence Force Attack Class patrol boat *Samarai*, based at Manus Island.

Other seagoing commands were the frigates *HMAS Sydney* and *HMAS Darwin* (during the Gulf War, for which he was awarded the Conspicuous Service Cross), and the guided missile destroyer, *HMAS Perth*.

Before joining Coastwatch, Admiral Shalders held the position of Commodore Flotillas, responsible to the Maritime Commander, Australia, for the operational readiness of all the Navy's ships, submarines and aircraft. He was promoted to the rank of Rear-Admiral and seconded to Customs in mid-July.



National Surveillance Centre

The Coastwatch National Surveillance Centre is a key ingredient in the package. Already in the design stage, it is being set up at Customs Canberra headquarters and is expected to be operating by December 1999. With its direct links to the intelligence community, the centre will close the intelligence gap recognised by the Task Force and Heggen. This analytical capacity will operate 24 hours every day.

Surveillance of the Australian coastline has been described as "...the 37,000 kilometre challenge". Add to this nine million square nautical kilometres of offshore

exclusive economic zone for the mainland and Tasmania, not to mention areas around our external territories, and you start to get an appreciation of how large the task is.

Coastwatch has proven time and again that, given timely access to intelligence pointing to a likely breach of the border or Australia's offshore sovereignty rights, we can position aircraft and vessels to prevent this from occurring. Information from the new National Surveillance Centre will be an advantage that we have not always enjoyed in the past.

Rod Stone is Coastwatch's Director of Operations.

Other key recommendations

Other key recommendations of the Task Force will see an additional seven Immigration officers placed overseas in key Asian, African and Middle East cities to detect and deter illegal immigration by boat and to strengthen information gathering.

Because illegal immigration by air far exceeds illegal boat arrivals, and some illegal boat arrivals begin their journey with a plane flight, another five Immigration officers will be placed in Bangkok, Denpasar, Dubai, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore.

People smuggling issues will also receive high priority in the work of Australia's overseas missions. Importance will be placed on concluding arrangements with source and transit countries and strengthening international cooperation in combating people smuggling.

Australia will seek the cooperation of Chinese officials to stop the departure of boats and expedite the speedy return of boat people.

Efforts will be made to extend the arrangements with Indonesia and Papua New Guinea on third country nationals attempting to enter Australia illegally and develop similar arrangements with New Zealand and the Solomon Islands with the objective of assisting with the removal of third country nationals from those transit nations before they enter Australia. These arrangements will also be developed, as appropriate, with other source and transit countries.

The Government is legislating to toughen maritime investigatory and enforcement powers and to complement legislation on stronger penalties against people smuggling.