



International border patrol Bridging the strait

Words and pictures by
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We were about 100m from shore. I don't know why I had expected to step out on dry land but, when I heard the words 'we have to walk from here', my heart sank. Visions of the dugong we just passed swimming below did not worry me; the idea of crocodiles lurking in the shallows did.

I slid over the side of the boat, preparing for unknown depths. Feeling the ground only a metre or so below the water's surface I let go. It was mud. I slowly sank deeper. Thoughts of drowning by death roll weighed heavily on my mind. I wondered what thigh-high sludge and predatory reptiles could possibly have to do with patrolling the border between two neighboring countries. I waded tentatively toward the shore.

As I drew closer I could see traditional outrigger boats resting on the beach, huts covered in palm leaves, woven mats on the ground and spears resting against bamboo walls. Young children ran up to see who we were, women shyly smiled and waved while the older men approached, hands outstretched to welcome us to their village.

We had reached Sigabadaru in Papua New

Guinea, the first of many villages I would be visiting over the next ten days with Customs and police delegates from Australia and PNG on a joint cross-border patrol as part of border-security measures.

Two days earlier I had travelled to Thursday Island in the Torres Strait to join the Customs Marine Unit crew on board the Australian Customs vessel *Hervey Bay*.

I met Marshall Kaye, Team Leader of Border Operations for Australian Customs, on Thursday Island. Marshall has been with Customs for 11 years and has been in charge of planning cross-border patrols for 18 months.

"Cross-border patrols are a chance for Customs and law enforcement officers from Australia and PNG to familiarise themselves with the villages of the Western Province of PNG and with the Kiwai people of this region, as well as with the 14 Torres Strait Island communities that lie within the area of the Torres Strait Treaty zone - the region monitored on these patrols. It also displays a united and visible presence by law-enforcement agencies from both countries," said Marshall.

"The patrols help PNG Customs and police manage law-enforcement activities in the

top: The author departing from
Sui in the Fly River delta.

Western Province, and let us, the Australian agencies, gather intelligence for the management of risk at the Australian border in the Torres Strait."

George Nona, Customs officer with the Border Operations Team, was to take Marshall's place on the vessel later in the patrol. Detective Senior Constable Paul Austin, with the Criminal Investigations Branch of the Queensland Police, also joined the patrol at Thursday Island. Federal Agent Garry Chaston, of the Australian Federal Police, joined us at Daru, the administrative centre of PNG's Western Province.

Yorke Island, Australia, was our anchorage for the first night. The *Hervey Bay* departed for Daru, where three PNG delegates were to join us early on the second day. Passports were checked and departure/arrival cards filled out - we became accustomed to filling out these cards over the next ten days, as it had to be done each time we crossed the border.

Les Ture, Papua New Guinea Internal Revenue Commission officer, is a strong advocate for close cooperation between agencies internationally.

"The relationship we have with each other is excellent," said Les. "Now with satellite communication we only have to

pick up the phone to have a chat and swap information."

Sabila Haono, with the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary, said: "Because we can swap information so easily, if I am following someone's movement in PNG and they suddenly go into the Torres Strait, I can quickly pass this information along to Australia."

Sabila said he can see that drugs and guns have brought crime to PNG and are destroying lives. He is a father of three; one son and twin five-year-old girls. He knows that police work in PNG is dangerous, but he loves his country.

"I can't swim, but if I need to I will chase the law-breakers without a life jacket."

Kally Pamuan, also with the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary, who has been involved in every joint patrol since day one, agreed. "The flow of



information is now an everyday thing and there has been huge success in the reduction of cross-border crime," said Kally. "The cooperation we get from Customs, AFP and Queensland Police on Thursday Island is really good.

"We learn from each other. We learn what [Australia] can and can not do on its side. We are given an opportunity to get to the Torres Strait and familiarise ourselves with the way of life on their side, while allowing us to do our investigations on our own side."

"We don't have the same resources that Australia has," said Sabila, "but even if PNG does get money for resources I hope that the cooperation between our countries continues forever as it's a very good thing."

Sabila and Kally Pamuan both live at the police barracks in Daru. They are work partners and best friends.

Kally was very grateful to the Customs Marine crews - without whom these patrols could not take place - for their assistance over the years.

"They are first class; everyone is so helpful," said Kally. "The whole marine group contributes one way or another in its support to allow us to do our job."



top: Marshall Kaye, Team Leader of Customs Border Operations in the Torres Strait, gathering information from a villager in Mabaduan.

bottom: Children of the village of Jarai pause for a photograph in between playing with their new Customs basketball.



The itinerary for the days ahead involved visits to villages across a vast area of the PNG coastline - from close to the Indonesian border in the west to the Fly River in the east of the PNG Western Province.

Marshall and Paul, both residents of Thursday Island and both very aware of prospective problems in the region, believe in joint patrols for education and law enforcement.

"The patrols shape public perceptions of cooperation between law-enforcement agencies in the regions," Paul said.

The patrols are also preventive: they are a contributing factor to the reduction of cannabis smuggling in the Torres Strait.

"Cannabis, grown in the highlands of PNG, is transported through the country's gulf province, down the Fly River or overland to the coastal Western Province villages. Attempts are then made to take the drugs by boat along the coastline to trade over the border into Australia," said Marshall.

"We combine intelligence not only to thwart attempts to smuggle marijuana, but also to tackle the other issues such as attempted gun smuggling from Australia into PNG and attempts at illegally entering Australia."

The *Hervey Bay* departed Daru for the next point of anchor off Australia's Saibai Island. From there we travelled by tender to Sigabadaru on the PNG mainland.

Sigabadaru

The delegates split into two groups. Marshall, Garry, Les and Kally travelled to Bula and Kunji villages. Paul, Sabila and I had waded to shore at Sigabadaru.

The village turned out to greet us. The chairman of Sigabadaru council was away, so the former village chairman, Gao Waraia, welcomed us. The villagers formed a rough circle around us on the ground.

A variety of issues were generally covered at each of the meetings we held at each of the villages. Concerns differed depending on the village and the messages of the delegates enforced what

they believed important for that region. On some visits, meetings were not held at all when intelligence suggested that operational activities, such as intelligence gathering via speaking individually with villagers, would be more beneficial.

At Sigabadaru, one of the main concerns was with traders coming from the highlands and passing by their village to trade in the Torres Strait. Sabila and Paul explained to the people that this contravened the Torres Strait Treaty (the 1985 treaty between Australia and PNG concerning sovereignty and maritime boundaries in the Torres Strait, and related matters).

"The treaty ... protects you and the traditional people of the Torres Strait," said Sabila.

"The treaty says how the sea may be used and it allows you to travel freely, without passport or visa, to Australia for activities such as hunting, fishing, ceremonies and, in this case, for trade," said Paul. "But only Torres Strait Islanders and people who live in villages along the coastline of PNG can use it."

"It does not apply to villagers from the highlands. By reporting this to us, we can try to put a stop to this illegal activity," Sabila said.



top left: The children of Jarai welcomed us with waves and smiles into their idyllic beach village.

above: Sabila Haono, officer with the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary, chats to two villagers in Tais, gathering information and making contacts.

right: George Nona, Customs officer on Thursday Island, at the village meeting in Sui about the rules of the Torres Strait Treaty.

At each village, after community meetings, the villagers showed us around and identified the resources each village had. Sigabadaru had a radio, school, nurse and water tanks funded by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID).

On departure, Sabila thanked the villagers for their cooperation.

All the same, Sabila made one arrest in Sigabadaru, charging a man with a cannabis trafficking offence. Sabila issued the man with a notice to appear in court, which he said the man would honour. "He has nowhere else to go and he knows I will come back for him if he doesn't appear in court," said Sabila. Sabila had recognised the suspect from a Customs intelligence photograph he had studied before leaving that morning.

Tais

Our welcome to the village of Tais was thrilling. Dressed in traditional war attire, the locals ran at us aiming arrows, waving spears and bellowing war cries. We were frozen to the spot. Then Marshall emerged from behind some huts holding his sides with laughter. He had set up this dramatic greeting.

We had flown to Tais, 4km inland from the coastline, by Customs Coastwatch helicopter. It was an incredible ride. Andy, our pilot, was able to drop down to point out wildlife along the way or rise above the clouds to show us the views.

We again had to travel in two groups. Marshall, Kally, Les, Garry departed first by tender to the helipad on Saibai. Paul, Sabila and I waited until the Bell Longranger helicopter returned.

Tais is a village with an excellent record. Gary often referred to Tais at other villages, as an example of the good cooperation with the authorities. "Have you heard of the three Vietnamese men that arrived in Tais on a journey to Australia earlier this year?" Gary would ask. "The villagers of Tais supplied this information to us and the men were captured and are now in prison in Daru for six months."

For this information, Garry and

Marshall had brought with them a small gift, which they presented to the village chairperson, Singa Suku.

Marshall and Garry often impressed on the villagers that issues raised are recorded in the patrol reports and the reports bring positive things to the village. Quite often, requests are made at these meetings for equipment, or issues are raised that are not in the realm of Customs or the police, in which



case the matter is noted and followed up with the correct agency such as Immigration, Foreign Affairs or Fisheries Management, after the patrol. Garry would say: "These reports are the reason you have water because these reports go to AusAID and then you get the tanks."

After the village meeting, the first group of delegates took off in the helicopter for Jarai, 120km from our starting point of Saibai. We had a two-hour wait for its return. Singai Suku and the village school teacher, Sissy, showed me around while Paul and Sabila joined in a game of volleyball.

Jarai

The village of Jarai is on an idyllic beach with dugouts resting on the sand and palm trees swaying in the breeze. The village magistrate, Philip Amboi, and the elders welcomed us. This village meeting outlined different concerns - Indonesian fishing vessels, regularly seen in the waters off Jarai, might be depleting the fish stock.

With a population of about 200, Jarai has limited water supply. They

have no doctor and no transport to take the sick to medical facilities. An AusAID water project was under way but it had not been completed. There was a kindergarten teacher, but when the children reached primary school age they had to walk to the next village to continue their education.

We had another two-hour wait for the helicopter so I wandered around the village, witnessing turtles being killed for

food, being shown the carcasses of other culinary delights such as boar and playing catch with the children - Marshall travelled to each village equipped with a basketball as a gift. We were hot, sweaty, dirty and tired as we trudged back to the tender from the helipad on Saibai for a ride back to the Hervey Bay.

Buji

We journeyed to Buji, approximately 60km from Saibai, by tender at high speed - travelling at about 40 nautical miles per hour (one nautical mile is 1.85 kilometres). At Buji Les, Sabila and I held a meeting with the village elders.

"This is our 13th patrol," Les told them. "By now the people of Buji should be aware of what is right and what is wrong. We come here now to gather information. Give us names of law-breakers; we are the law enforcement."

And they did. The leaders of the village were honest, the magistrate saying: "We have suspects here; smugglers."



While Les and Sabila were busy gathering information, a villager named Jag escorted me to the inland part of the village. I discovered Buji was very well set up; they had a good school, a radio and transport.

Saibai

We then made our return passage back home to the *Hervey Bay* at Saibai. The trip took four hours - at first it was blisteringly hot. Then, as the waves grew and the wind picked up, we became very wet and cold. The thrill of riding in a tender had faded. That evening Paul, supported by Garry and Marshall, executed two search warrants and seized weapons. Later, I experienced the thrill of guiding the tender by spotlight on a night ride back to the *Hervey Bay*.

Mabaduan

Mabaduan is the largest village in the Western Province, with a population of around 1800. To gain access to Mabaduan, we had to trek through mangroves. I kept a more careful watch for crocodiles on our trek back, as the villagers warned of their presence in the swamps.

No meeting was undertaken at Mabaduan. Instead Marshall, Garry, Sabila and Kally spoke with villagers individually, gathering information, while Paul and I were shown around the village.

Sabila and Kally were busy investigating a serious assault: they interviewed the alleged offender, victim and witnesses and indicated a charge of attempted murder would be laid at a

later date. They also charged a man with the import of a prohibited import (a crossbow had been seized during the previous patrol).

Two men were arrested and charged with drug possession offences. Kally and Sabila uncovered a small quantity of cannabis and an implement for its use.

Marshall said later that the visit had been a great success: "Going into Mabaduan today and talking to suspects about information I had previously obtained on Saibai Island, I was able to identify a dealer in Mabaduan, a supplier in Daru and a recipient in the Torres Strait," said Marshall. "I was able



top left: The villagers of Kulalae stand on the edge of the Pahoturi River to greet the delegates and Customs Marine crew on arrival by tender. From left: Customs Border Operations Team Leader Marshall Kaye, Federal Agent Garry Chaston, Queensland Police Detective Senior Constable Paul Austin, Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary officer Kally Pamuan and Customs Marine Unit crew Tony Burke and Sana Mills.

above: Three girls in Tais who loved the flash of the camera.

top left: A woman from the village of Parama, with her pet Cus Cus.

to establish all the links in this particular cannabis-supply chain."

Kulalae

We travelled up the Pahoturi River to Kulalae. The elders requested that the village be provided with water tanks. At present they collect fresh water from a well more than 2km away.

We returned to the *Hervey Bay* to find that swarms of bees had covered the vessel for a time while we were away. The next day George Nona took Marshall's place before we lifted anchor for Daru.

Sui

The original plan was to anchor off Parama but, as we no longer had a PNG Customs representative on board (Les had left us), the decision was taken to anchor off Daru and go to the Fly River region by tender for easier Customs and Quarantine clearances.

I collected my boots from the engine room the previous evening, where I often placed them to dry in the heat of the generator, to find them white with salt: I had forgotten to rinse them after walking through sea water. A quick polish and they were ready for the next day's visit.

The village meeting at Sui was a

grand affair. We were seated at a large table on a platform and the villagers sat on woven mats.

George indicated to the villagers that, even if they only spoke Pidgin or broken English, they could talk to him about anything. 'Esso,' George would say when suggestions were made. The word, meaning 'thank you', has been adopted by most of the 700 dialects in PNG. He would then continue in Creole, the language commonly spoken by Torres Strait Islanders.

A lot of the people from Sui have family ties with the people on Yorke Island. George used this as a reason to do the right thing.

"Everyone is happy here - people are smiling," George said. "But if the adults do something bad, it will affect the kids. My family is from Badu and I like to travel to see them. If the adults do anything bad in the villages it will stop their kids from being able to travel to Torres Strait to keep ties with traditional families.

"If we find guns or cannabis on you during your traditional visits, your rights to travel will be stopped. The same with bringing people to the Torres Strait - your traditional visitation rights will be taken away. People may try to pay you many kina [PNG currency] to take them to Australia. Don't take them. Report this to us, to report it to the Australian Government. If you take them, we will be there to arrest you, the skipper who owns the boat will be arrested and the boat will be seized.

"The treaty is a precious thing. Only people on the border have it. If too many people don't do the right thing, our governments will say it's too much trouble and finish it." Kally concentrated on another problem facing the people of Sui - illegal alcohol made from coconuts.

Parama

Many of the issues raised by the delegates at Sui were spoken of again at Parama, a village on Parama Island at the southern end of the Fly Delta.

It was obvious that many of the villagers wanted to work with the authorities to find solutions. One point

raised was about the need for a checkpoint at Parama to police movements along the Fly River. "You will never stop [illegal activity] because there are no check points here," one elder said. Gary replied: "Until this can be done, you must work with us to look after your community."

There were also concerns among the villagers that government officials were involved in the cannabis and firearms trade. George said that if the locals know of any officials breaking the law, then to let them know their names and they will pass the information on to someone who will investigate.

"I wear a uniform! If people with my surname - my own blood - take drugs across border, I will still arrest them, because I wear this uniform and I will do my job!"

Daru

Sebastian, a Daru Customs officer, met us at the Daru wharf on the morning of our ninth day.

He had Sabila and Kally with him; they had both left the ship the previous evening to return to their homes on Daru. We all piled into the back of Sebastian's ute and were given a tour of the island including the police station and the Customs headquarters which consists of one room for four officers.

The island of Daru is fascinating - crowded streets, the main mode of transport by foot, supermarkets with human security cameras - people perched on high chairs, barred windows, concrete floors and locals outside selling wares.

We stopped at the crocodile farm. We entered a fenced paddock containing shoulder high grass and caged crocodiles. One of the cages had a hole nearly one metre in diameter. I questioned the hole and was told not to worry because if they spotted any crocs on the wrong side of the fence they would kill them and feed them back to



the others. I wanted to escape the long grass and practically ran out of the fenced paddock to the safety of the ute, nearly stepping on a few dead, skinned crocodiles ready for eating.

The markets sold meat products like deer, cus cus (possum) and dugong, which can be hunted legally under the traditional rights of the Torres Strait Treaty. There were people selling plastic bags in which to put the meat you had bought, beetle-nut, sold with mustard and lime (crushed coral), which are chewed by many locals, as well as other items such as wooden carvings, clothing and woven mats. I stumbled on logs that were actually deer legs discarded from a stall.

We sailed to Thursday Island the following day. For me, the journey had come to an end. For Marshall, George, Paul, Garry, Kally, Sabila and Les, reports needed to be submitted as arrests had been made involving weapons importation and cannabis exportation and a large amount of intelligence had been collected that would be followed up on. Inquiries would be conducted and further action would be taken as a result of the 13th joint cross-border patrol.