



On
patrol
in WA



Above: Customs Coastwatch Islander lands at Wallal.

Right above: Roaming off the beaten track.

If you've ever heard of Dampier in Western Australia's Pilbara region, you'd be well aware that this small town, synonymous with red dust, rocky terrain and intense heat, is in the middle of an industry boom. And, more importantly, as Helena Watts discovered, it is set to become home to Customs largest regional office in Australia, growing from 21 staff in 2005 to an estimated 46 staff by 2010.

The town was constructed 42 years ago by the Hammersley Iron mining company as a port and processing centre to meet the operational needs of the Tom Price and Paraburdoo mines. Three years later Dampier had outgrown its original plan and the population started to spill into the new town of Karratha about 20 kilometres down the road.

Since then Dampier Salt (now Rio Tinto Minerals), Australia's largest single salt producer, Woodside Ltd, operator of the North West Shelf Joint Venture Gas Plant, and Burrup Fertilisers, operators of the southern hemisphere's largest liquid ammonia plant, have moved in and established processing and export facilities.

Today, what appear to be several thousand white 4WDs make the daily trip along the North West Coastal Highway between Karratha and Dampier. The highway travels through harsh desert landscapes and alongside huge salt pans before branching off to mines, processing plants and, in

a roundabout way, to Customs House in Dampier where I, an officer with the Customs Media team in Canberra, had the privilege of meeting the Customs Dampier crew for what turned out to be a busy and fun-filled week.

Speak to any of the team in Dampier about what they do and you'll soon realise how versatile their job is. And when you consider the fact that they have an area of responsibility that extends 117,000 square kilometres (greater than the combined area of Denmark, Belgium and the Netherlands), it's no surprise that the team need to be jacks of all trades.

We kick Monday off to an early start with a morning brief by the whiteboard in the common area. By 8:30am the office was open and the team ready to take on the day, which included a vessel boarding and search at Port Walcott.

Port Walcott is about 55 minutes drive away from the office and the trip comes to a close

Left: Walking up the gangway after the vessel boarding and search at Port Walcott, WA.



Since it first premiered on Australian television in October 2004 to an audience of 1.2 million viewers, *Border Security: Australia's Frontline* has become a runaway ratings success.

On Tuesday morning we settle in to the common area with a cup of coffee in hand, ready for the morning brief. One thing an officer couldn't survive without in Dampier is a set of sea legs and possibly a fly swat. The morning brief brought with it the opportunity for another vessel boarding, only this time we would travel almost 20 kilometres from Port Dampier by boat to conduct face to passport and document checks on an incoming cargo vessel.

Even though the water was rough, it's certainly hard to beat being out in the fresh air and sunshine during work time. As we travel along the West Australian coastline you can see plenty of incoming and outgoing cargo vessels, conveyor belts dumping iron ore into cargo ships and the smoke stacks of the gas plants.

The rest of the week had four of us roaming off the beaten track for hours a day on remote area Hotline contact visits. The point of these patrols, besides giving officers an opportunity to put their remote area training to good use and familiarise themselves with the Pilbara, is to get to know those living on rural and remote properties in the area and promote Customs role in the area and the Customs Hotline program as well as investigate any reported suspicious activities, such as small aircraft landings.

After about six hours of driving, we finally reach an estate owned by a family of five. It turns out this family are regulars on the Customs patrol visit list, and we're invited up to the veranda for a cup

of tea, slice of cake and a chat. The view from their veranda is amazing and there are hills and red dust as far as the eye can see. We head out to their private runway to have a look around, stretch our legs and then pile back into the 4WDs and hit the road.

It's a long drive back to the office from here, the roads are dark and we come close to hitting a couple of kangaroos and cattle. We call it a day about three hours or so out of Dampier and set up camp by a creek under the stars.

Sitting around the campfire is an educational experience and you realise how much the officers in Dampier rely on the close team environment to help manage all sorts of weird and wonderful events that happen.

"It's something different every single day, there is little routine, the hours, tasks and work locations differ daily, with completely spontaneous events sparking major operations at the drop of a hat," says one of the officers about his job.

So many responsibilities are shared among the team, ranging from screening vessels coming into Dampier, boarding and searching incoming vessels day and night, investigating suspicious activity, managing Hotline and Frontline calls and conducting wharf and remote area patrols.

The following day, we continued the drive back to the office. This would be my last chance to take in the Pilbara.

Kilometre after kilometre of straight roads on the remote area patrol.