

SOVEREIGN DEFENCE



NORTH WEST MOBILE FORCE

In 2005, more than 8000 foreign fishing vessels were sighted in the waters off Australia's northern coast. Official reports say that in the first half of the year alone, more than 100 illegal vessels were detected within sight of the coast. Worse still, the Northern Territory Government concedes that several foreign vessels have actually landed in remote areas and their crews have set up camp on Australian soil. These intrusions pose a far greater risk to Australia than the immediate damage to commercial fisheries and livelihoods, however – "When it comes to our biosecurity, these incursions are a major loophole in Australia's frontline defence," Kon Scrymgeour, NT's Acting Minister for Primary Industry and Fisheries, says. Domestic birds – even a monkey – have been discovered on foreign fishing boats in Australian waters. Given that the coastline of the Northern Territory alone spans about 10,000km, the ongoing challenges faced by federal and state border-patrol agencies in maintaining effective surveillance of our sovereign shores is significant...



A stingray glides placidly under our Zodiac patrol boat in the warm tropical shallows, without a worry in the world. Its unusual behaviour is enough to catch the attention of our Indigenous Bowman for a second, but his eyes are soon poised on the beach in front of us again.

The distant sound of another two Zodiacs coming to rest somewhere to our flank confirms our water operations patrol is ready to hit the beach.

An infantry headset crackles a few words in the ear of our coxswain, and our craft patters cautiously towards the landing point.

INTRO CONTACT STORY AND PICS: GUNNER SHARON JOYCE

For the aboriginal patrolmen travelling from across Arnhem Land for this Operation Resolute deployment – today feels like their D-Day. There are no opposing enemy on the beach, nor slaughterous lines of fire, but the weightiness they offer this landing can still be seen in their faces.

The specialist nature of their unit means they will never see a deployment to foreign soil, but the concept of protecting their sovereignty over northern Australia from foreign incursions, is an ideal they hold very highly.

Back in their home communities, wearing the Australian Army camouflage-patterned uniform attracts friendship and respect from complete strangers, because members of the North West Mobile Force (NORFORCE) are considered protectors of the land. Nowhere is the warrior ethos more engrained in the values and traditions of its soldiers, than in NORFORCE.

The Indigenous soldiers' connection with the land they're patrolling puts them at an instant advantage over any adversary, even before they have attended any military training. This is because a high proportion of NORFORCE patrolmen come from traditional-living backgrounds, where

English is their third or fourth language, and hunting consumes most of their days.

This particular deployment has a good mix of older, experienced hands with younger, newer soldiers. Two of our patrol members are fresh off their basic training course and seem to hide their anxiety about the deployment through tense stares.

The older more experienced members of this patrol though – like our bush medicine expert Private David Garambarker – have been doing this for years, and the enticement of fresh seafood rations weighs heavily on their minds.

"Crab is good – boiled or thrown in the fire," Private Garambarker yelled at me on the Caribou flight.

"Oysters are good too – straight off the rocks, you have them raw."

"Crayfish is best. They're harder to find but."

We haven't stormed the beach yet, but already Groote Eylandt sounds like a majestic place.

Tucked up against the left side of the Gulf of Carpentaria, the archipelago is steeped in aboriginal legend, achieving classification as an Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) in 2001.

A lot of the land, though, is off-limits to non-Indigenous persons and is protected by hefty fines, to preserve the sacred aboriginal sites peppered across the island.

Storning this revered Indigenous paradise with rifles at the shoulder and the military mind flicking past postcard beauty to the landscape's tactical values, might seem over-precautious and unnecessary to an outsider, but the tragedy of what could happen to this region ecologically, if left unchecked by a credible and efficient surveillance force, is of much greater concern.

In 2005, Coastwatch sighted 8000 illegal foreign fishing vessels (FFVs) in northern Australian waters. In 2006, the deterrence value of increased surveillance flights and the introduction of the Sea Rangers program



was evidenced by a drop of 40 per cent in FFV sightings – this is despite an anticipated increase, because of the extra eyes on the water.

The coordinated Border Protection Command's (BPC) surveillance and response strategies between Defence and Australian Customs authorities appear to be stemming the problem that has become significant over the past two years.

Headquarters Northern Command (HQNORCOM) manages the Defence response to the incursions and the NORFORCE soldiers operating under their control are continuing to do what they can on the ground to stem the problem.

"Go!" shouts our Bowman unexpectedly from the front of the Zodiac, leaping into the boat-deep surf and galloping up the shore, the prowess and proficiency in his drills evident in every move.

Before I have time to unwrap my camera, the patrol members have fanned-out from our Zodiac in a series of quick glances and field signals, to clear the beach for an observation post (OP).

Any doubts that these soldiers are somehow less professional in their methods of operation because of the stigma that's sometimes associated with a Regional Force Surveillance Unit (RFSU), are immediately allayed.

Our OP is concealed under some natural vegetation where the bush breaks out to the beach, providing a good view of any sea traffic that might travel through the region.

Intelligence received by HQNORCOM from the civilian reporting networks that exist in the remote Indigenous communities across northern Australia, has indicated the presence of an illegal foreign fish-poaching operation targeting reef fish, in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The purpose behind our observation task today is to watch and report on the movement of such suspected FFVs. Information relayed back to NORCOM will be processed by an operations room, where a coordinated response will be devised, involving Australian Customs and other Defence assets.

For the moment though, our observation lanes seem clear.

"Boats have been coming fishing in our water for a long time," explains Private Michael Wununugumurra at the OP.

"But that's not the worry – it's the big ones taking all the fish."

What Private Wununugumurra is talking about are iceboats that are capable of moving enormous quantities of fish. One day in July last year, the Australian Navy apprehended and escorted seven of these foreign iceboats into Darwin Harbour for

fishing illegally in our waters. A combined haul of 4.3 tonnes of reef fish was found on the vessels, the crews were detained and the ships were eventually destroyed, in line with Australian policy.

Sophisticated navigation and communications equipment found onboard the boats suggest such operations are very well organised.

In recent times, there has been an increase in the resistance of foreign fishing crews to apprehension by Australian authorities, with some situations escalating to potentially hazardous levels. In an attempt to deter Navy and Customs boarding parties from boarding their boats, some foreign fishing crews have used sharpened poles, concrete missiles and, in one instance, the Master of the boat threatened naval personnel with a Samurai sword.

Commander NORCOM Commodore Campbell Darby says that with the increase in resistance being experienced by Defence and Customs, the Australian Government has authorised the use of a range or more robust enforcement measures. These new measures will allow boarding parties to safely overcome those boats that resist apprehension.

The new powers follow the release of last year's Coastwatch figures that prove the co-ordinated strategies of the Indigenous



GROOTE EYLANDT

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communities and Australian authorities are having the desired effect.

"Hey bulla – good fishing up there," says Private Garambarker, returning to our position with the beach-clearing-patrol-cum-hunting-party.

"Lots and lots a stingray," he adds, indicating the abundance of the sacred aboriginal totem in the mouth of the nearby inlet.

The returning soldiers drop their buffet of seafood, which includes crab, crayfish and barramundi, on the sand. It was evident that the spears I saw tied to the sides of our Zodiacs earlier would be getting a good work-out this trip.

Seafood rations will provide the majority of sustenance for the patrols this deployment, allowing us to operate in the field with less stowage requirements. Living off the land also provides a patrol with an excellent degree of self-sufficiency, allowing them to remain deployed for extended periods, without a requirement for resupply.

The hunting methods the Indigenous soldier employs to gather rations – such as spear fishing – are techniques that can be picked up with a bit of practice. But reading the land to know where the best tucker is found, involves a good understanding of the subtleties in an environment. A skill one wouldn't expect to learn in a few days.

A transport corporal from the regular Army though, who knew nothing of

Indigenous cultures before he was posted to Arnhem Squadron in Nhulunbuy, is taking away with him a good insight into one of the world's oldest cultures.

"When you work with these guys for the first time, you're an outsider and you need to develop a level of trust before they will open up to you," Corporal Darren Dowsett says.

"Once that barrier is broken though, you will have an extended family like no other," he smiles.

Corporal Dowsett was adopted by Private Garambarker during his two-year posting to NORFORCE – a uniquely Aboriginal relationship he doesn't take lightly.

"My Aboriginal name is Cudurcow Gananeer, named after the Brolga bird.

"The adoption came about after I recognised the fault in a disciplinary matter that Private Garambarker didn't understand completely," Corporal Dowsett says.

"I think a lot of the guys respected that, and that's when I became lucky enough to be called their friend."

NORFORCE surveillance of our northern coastline is not just limited to the scope of water operations. A vehicle patrol of two modified landrovers has deployed to Groote Eylandt as well, with a diverse range of tasks that have taken them across the archipelago so far.

Our Zodiacs cut through a maze of estuaries towards an inland RV, where my mid-deployment transfer between the

patrols has been organised, for a little insight into vehicle operations.

Trying to navigate these waterways with a map doesn't work with anything less than absolute pin-point accuracy.

Local resident and NORFORCE patrolman Private Wayne Wurrawillya though, was raised on Groote – and his local knowledge is used to guide us speedily through an area occupied by a crocodile population.

Ahead of us on an estuary bank, a menacing shemagh-covered figure steps out from the mangroves – the lead scout for the vehicle patrol.

I jump out of the Zodiac unceremoniously into a boot-deep bog, and we both trudge up to higher ground, and towards the vehicle patrol's position.

A fading magenta sky makes it more and more difficult for the scout to track back along the path he came down, but a light, relaxed tone of chatter indicates we've arrived at the position.

"Night-time can be the most dangerous time," says Private Daryl Numaradi, a young, keen Aboriginal soldier with his sights set on getting to Iraq.

The darkness of night represents an ominous force in a lot of Indigenous cultures around the world, but Private Numaradi has a more practical reason for his warning.

"Water buffalo – they are hard to see with all the trees," he explains. "We found one in the position already this trip."

A CROCODILE LEAPT OUT FROM A MURKY ESTUARY TO TAKE PRIVATE GENGHI, DURING THE CLEARANCE OF A MANGROVE INLET



GROOTE EYLANDT



Wildlife is one of the most prevailing dangers for NORFORCE soldiers in northern Australia. Live ammunition is carried by all patrols in line with standard rules of engagement (ROE) protocol, but is more likely to be used for self defence against wildlife. One round has already been fired this deployment by the patrol commander, to neutralise the threat posed by wildlife to another patrol member.

"A croc nearly got Genghi yesterday," Private Numaradi says.

A crocodile leapt out from a murky estuary to take Private Genghi during the clearance of a mangrove inlet by foot. The patrol commander fired his rifle at the reptile, hitting it under the left eye and causing it to retreat, wounded, back into the water.

"We don't know if it's dead or just angry now," Private Numaradi says.

The next day we drive south to investigate a basic campsite on the beach, reported to the vehicle patrol yesterday by a community elder when the patrol stopped briefly at an outstation to give some local kids an up-close look at a NORFORCE soldier.

The campsite is not characteristic of the communities' residents on the island, and Groote is seldom affected by 4WD trespasses, unlike the mainland. One

possible explanation is that an FFV crew, active in the area, has come ashore recently.

As we near the coast and the campsite's location, an unusual foreign chatter starts to dance on our Pintail radio communications.

"We must be nearing them," explains our patrol commander 2nd Lieutenant Jamie Pitcher, "their radio signal is coming through on our sets."

Information from locals suggested the campsite we're moving to investigate would be empty – but could they have returned?

We stop short of the sand dunes where we're met by a cool sea breeze.

Dismounting our vehicles, the lead scout moves ahead with the patrol commander to conduct a quick reconnaissance of the beach. But there is no FFV.

The carcass of a rotting reef shark with its fins and tail cut off lies 300 metres up the beach.

"It sells for more than \$100 a kilo on the Asian market," Lieutenant Pitcher says, indicating to the missing fins.

"The body isn't worth the stowage on their vessel, so they just dump it overboard."

The campsite we set out to investigate is found a little further up the beach. An assortment of footprints around the site brings a conclusion from Corporal Norman Daymarringu.

"They been here today – not Aborigines," he says.

The nuances picked up by Corporal Daymarringu that reflect the footprints' age and ownership are lost on myself and the patrol commander, but foreign writing on burnt tin cans and wrappers in a makeshift fireplace support the corporal's assertion, and suggests the previous occupants may be Asian in origin.

A number of evidentiary items that could link the intruders to the campsite when they are eventually apprehended, are bagged, and our headquarters notified of the find.

The patrol commander relays his suspicion that the vessel is still in the area, and we push north, slowly, keeping eyes on the coast along the way.

come from that know first hand the good work being done.

The work of NORFORCE though, doesn't stop at military operations.

The surveillance unit fosters a very close relationship with Indigenous Australia, engaging remote communities through sports and fundraising, and providing a degree of social support where possible. The unit's positive influence on the children from Indigenous communities – where there's a shortage of male role models and where truancy is rife – is a welcomed role.

Unlike a regular Army unit, NORFORCE predominantly draws its manning from a range of communities in its AO, producing its own basic support network that involves teachers, school principles, medical

to live in the long grass in suburban areas, where they're exposed to alcohol abuse and any number of associated health problems.

Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Broad says he recognises the extent of the problems faced in Indigenous communities and believes Indigenous affairs in Australia are at a crossroads.

"Sadly, too many Indigenous Australians are not leading independent lives, trapped in an intergenerational cycle of dependency – a



Within hours, our imagery is being analysed on the big screen of the operations room at NORCOM and response vessels are being vectored to the area.

As a surveillance unit, NORFORCE operates on an information-gathering basis. They will not apprehend or arrest unless life is threatened, and will break contact if challenged by an adversary.

"We'll keep watch for the FFV to direct Customs or Navy onto their position," Lieutenant Pitcher says.

"The boys reckon they could be back tomorrow morning."

"There's nowhere to hide anymore," he says, with a beaming smile.

And he's right. Communities are identifying and reporting suspicious activity in their region, knowing NORFORCE will investigate.

While a lot of the specific operational tasks must remain classified and unshared, it's the communities that these soldiers

professionals, prominent community elders and even bus drivers in the Army Reserve – all well placed to use the unit's resources where they're needed most.

While the North West Mobile Force could be considered fairly young – raised in 1981 – parallels are often drawn to the unit's World War 2 uncle, the 2nd/1st Northern Australia Observation Unit (NAOU), where Indigenous Australians were used as trackers and guides.

NORFORCE still follows in the proud traditions of 2/1NAOU, but its Indigenous members now play a more active military role.

Getting to know some of these soldiers and learning about their lives at home, you can't help but wonder about where Arnhem Land and its communities will be in a decade or two from now.

A poor standard of basic services in Indigenous communities, and the way some are managed, is causing a migration to the city where a lack of support forces many

welfare trap that needs to be broken," he says.

"The government's blueprint [for Indigenous affairs] identifies three priority areas for special attention – early childhood intervention; safer communities; and building wealth, employment and entrepreneurial culture."

As the biggest employer of Indigenous Australians in the country, the North West Mobile Force recognises its responsibility to Indigenous Australia, both symbolically and practically.

For many Indigenous Australians, the North West Mobile Force is an opportunity to protect their country. While an income can be the main motivator in going to work – in anyone's book – to some NORFORCE soldiers, who receive mining royalties that many of us could only dream of, they're just giving their time back to the land.

It also offers a symbol of hope for a people and a culture undergoing a dramatic coming of age.