

Sea Duty

By Peter Kowalick

How do you provide a full-time sea surveillance service around an island country that has nearly 5 per cent of the world's coastline and less than 0.5 per cent of its population to provide the where-with-all?

Add the fact that thousands of foreign nationals would give their gold teeth to get a foothold in Australia, not to mention a share of the huge profits to be made in smuggling drugs into the country, and it becomes an alarming prospect.

In March 1984, even the most astute minds at AFP Headquarters in Canberra must have experienced a tinge of that alarm, amid elation, when the whole problem of coastal protection was handed over to them, lock, stock and drifting barrel.

Previously, the AFP had a small role in providing response and enforcement in the protection of Fisheries and quarantine officers during their investigations in remote areas, and maintaining its drug enforcement activities taken over from the Narcotics Bureau.

For nine years, the coastal surveillance job had been carried on by an unusual mixture of interested instrumentalities and personnel. The decision to call in the AFP was prompted by a review by Minister Assisting on Defence, Kim Beazley of the country's coastal security system. He recommended that the AFP take over control with the defence forces continuing to maintain their vital sea and air roles.

"It was a huge task to face," recalls Commander Dick Dixon, the man who, with Assistant Commissioner Alan Watt, had the job of gathering up the running lines on that busy day.

No precedent

"In fact, the first thing we had to do was to come to terms with the enormity of it," he said. "For instance, did you know that if you left on Monday morning to do a coastal air patrol from Cairns in Queensland to Karatha in WA, checking



Shrike Aero Commanders of the type used by Skywest Aviation for the Coastwatch service during a littoral patrol in Northern Australia. Such patrols recorded more than 10,000 flying hours during a year's operations.

every inlet and bay, river and creek likely to be used by smugglers, and resting on Saturday and Sunday in Darwin, it would take you 14 days to complete the mission?

"And that's where we were at the start. It was a completely new role, there was no expertise in this type of operation within the AFP and we had no precedent on which to draw."

Why, then, was the AFP singled out for Coastwatch?

"Perhaps one of the underlying reasons why we got it was because the AFP didn't seek the job," Mr Dixon said. "The role of coastal surveillance had become highly political, to the detriment of the service. Vested departmental interests were rife. Strong people were needed to run things because it was obvious the committee system previously in force was proving unworkable."

Plans upset

And so the AFP's Coastwatch was born under the Coastal Protection Unit.

"We had reasonable co-operation from the States," he said. "The role had come to the AFP from the Department of Transport and some of the people involved had come with it. They brought with them extensive knowledge and experience; people like Kevin Gascoigne, who had been with coastal surveillance almost since its inception.

"We held one training course in 1984, covering all aspects of Coastwatch. Those who completed the course formed the basis of the training program from then on."

With Broome, Cairns and Darwin as

the three CPU bases, the job of building up an infrastructure to run Coastwatch had begun.

As a result of a Government directive, the Australian Customs Service made available its resources to assist the CPU in responding to calls. This provided access to Customs infrastructure in remote districts and upgraded both the law enforcement and surveillance capacity of Coastwatch.

Customs and Defence personnel also worked with AFP officers in the CPU surveillance centre in Canberra. Support services and communications facilities were provided by personnel of the Federal Sea Safety and Surveillance Centre of the Department of Transport.

But for the Coastwatch senior officers, there was plenty to upset plans.

"At one time, there were 24 Government departments and instrumentalities having an input into, or an active interest in, Coastwatch," Mr Dixon said.

Any particular operation could have ramifications for many departments. For instance, notification was needed by Foreign Affairs when contact was made with foreign nationals, in case there were implications for Australia in diplomatic relationships; Health (responsible for Quarantine until 1986) needed to know to prevent the spread of disease; Primary Industry, in relation to Quarantine after 1986 and its role in fishing conservation; Arts, Heritage and Environment, for protection of the environment and unauthorised dumping at sea, historic shipwrecks legislation and Great Barrier Reef protection; Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, controlling entry of non-Australian citizens; Australian Customs Service, control of imported, exported and

excisable goods, revenue evasion and prohibited imports and exports such as narcotics and fauna; Resources and Energy, onshore and offshore resource exploration and development; Australian Institute of Marine Science and CSIRO, both of which have interests in marine activities; Bureau of Meteorology, maintenance of automatic weather stations around the coast and offshore islands and reefs, and gathering of weather information during surveillance activities; Territories, responsible for island territories; Transport and Communications, for its Marine Search and Rescue Service and Australian ship reporting system, anti-oil pollution measures, ship routing zones and control and disposal of wrecks; Defence, a major provider of surveillance resources, RAN patrol boats and RAAF long-range patrol aircraft.

Funding problem

Funding for the various activities also was a continuing problem. For instance, the littoral aerial surveillance was funded by the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, while Great Barrier Reef surveillance by the GBR Marine Park Authority was financed jointly with the Australian Fisheries Service and the Department of Transport and Communications. Support services provided by DOTC were primarily funded by that Department, along with the Quarantine and Fisheries services.

Mr Dixon points to the problems caused by such widespread interests as being one of the reasons why Cabinet decided in August last year, after a review by Mr Hugh Hudson, then retiring Chairman of the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission, to hand Coastwatch over to the Australian Customs Service.

"If we had got what we wanted we would have been able to run a very efficient Coastwatch Service," Mr Dixon said. "In the last 12 months before we handed over to Customs, the detection of numbers of Indonesian vessels in our seas showed that we had succeeded in our efforts. The system, with its limitations, was working. We had become a professional organisation.

Public program

"We had built up an extensive public awareness program which included publications, audio-video presentations and a general acceptance of the importance of people in remote areas to the

How long is Australia's vulnerable coastline?

It's not possible to give an accurate answer because the coastline has never been fully surveyed.

Resorting to statistics is of little help. In 1979, the year the Government declared a 200 nautical mile fishing zone in Australian waters, figures quoted for the country's coastline were many and varied. The Year Book of Australia said 36,735km. The Australian Handbook put it at 19,320km. Some estimates included Tasmania, others did not. Some included other islands, others didn't.

A study by the Division of Land Use Research, CSIRO, released the same year, came to the conclusion that the total length for the mainland, plus all islands greater than 12 hectares, ranged from 24,330km to 69,630km, depending on whether you use a 1:250,000 scale map, with 100km intercepts, or 1:250,000 scale with 0.1km intercepts.

One thing they all did agree on was that Australia has far more coast per head of population than any other continent. ■



An Indonesian fishing vessel lies hidden in mangroves in an attempt to evade capture during an illegal fishing operation within Australian waters.

success of the coastal surveillance role. The co-operation we had from people in the outback areas was tremendous," he said.

"The CPU continued to monitor and assess new developments in surveillance hardware right up to the handover to Customs. We also developed a number of new operational trends which had enhanced the role. CPU field operations with the Army, in particular, had proved very useful. For example, Norforce operations in the North-West had become more orientated towards the detection of intrusions into the area from the sea."

Although Coastwatch was with the AFP for only four years, Mr Dixon sees

those years as a foundation period for the service.

"It has come a long way since coastal surveillance had its beginnings in 1967 when the declared fishing zone covered up to 12 nautical miles from the coast and the RAAF and RAN began fisheries patrols."

Today, Coastwatch is an important link in Australia's security chain. And AFP personnel who played a vital part in forging that link consider their work has not been in vain.

As Mr Dixon puts it: "It's just another example of the versatility and professionalism that goes to make up the profile of the AFP." ■