

North Queensland Branch

PNG unrest adds to crime

ALONG with other crime, the trade in drugs in exchange for guns has blossomed in north Queensland over the past two years, according to the OIC of the North Queensland Branch, Detective Superintendent Dennis Witt.

The demand for firearms originates in PNG, created by the unrest in Bougainville, various tribal fights, the local Rascal gangs and the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM) operating on the Irian Jira border. "We and the PNG authorities continue to work hard to counter the trade," Superintendent Witt said.

"Marijuana grows almost wild in PNG and its hot, wet, climate provides ideal growing conditions. Its quality is second to none and has a very high THC level. Trafficking across the Torres Strait is difficult to detect. The Torres Strait Islanders have a traditional right to trade and move across the border. This tradition is now used for criminal purposes. Our whole area is affected by an increase in activity and its proximity to PNG, the Pacific rim and Asia.

"Gone are the days when Cairns used to have two international flights per week from PNG. There is no curfew on flights and the peak ar-



Some of the members and staff of the Townsville office

rival time is early morning. To meet the increase in international flights Customs have just increased their numbers by 16 to meet the increase in international flights. This will also require the AFP to increase its vigilance in this area," Superintendent Witt said.

"The rapid development in the area is reflected in the shipping movements with commercial container arrivals in the Region last year increasing to about 1270 with more expected this year. We have a very active tourist trade from Thursday

Island to the Whitsunday Passage Islands.

"The development of north Queensland has taken off in almost every way in the past decade and we see this also in the work of Northern Region.

"We no longer deal with minor fraud matters. These are now covered by the appropriate agencies. We look at the more complex and serious criminal matters. New legislative changes have dramatically increased our work load and our effectiveness.

The North Queensland Branch has two offices; the Cairns office with 14 members and Townsville with seven. Detective Superintendent Witt has been OIC for 15 months and has been with the AFP and former Commonwealth Police since 1972. The Branch's area of interest ranges north to the PNG border, west to the NT Border and south to Mackay.

About the area he said, "Not many people appreciate the remoteness of the area. Some distances look very small on a map but to travel them may take four days in a four wheel drive vehicle. Flights to the islands may take up to 24 hours.

"While it is generally an attractive area, particularly in the dry season, the wet season from November to



Some of the members and staff of the Cairns office



Detective Superintendent Dennis Witt

March is debilitating and the humidity can often rest well above 90 per cent. It is a tropical region that attracts exotic diseases such as Ross River Fever and Dengue Fever. These factors have to be taken into account during operations.

"Communication can be difficult also. At times we may be only 5km from the PNG border, but to communicate formally with the PNG authorities, we work through International Division in Canberra.

The Townsville Station is located in its own building at the airport. Detective Sergeant Barry Turner is the member in charge of the seven member Townsville Crime Section and has been there about 10 months. He has been with the AFP and the Commonwealth Police for 14 years.

About 50 per cent of their work dealt with drug investigation in which they worked closely with the other Federal and State authorities. There are a number of seaports in the Townsville area, which includes a main sea link to a number of overseas countries. This requires a continuing need for close attention by law enforcement authorities. Fraud investigations and referrals from other Government agencies formed the other main workload.

Townsville is an administrative centre and has a population of more than 250,000. The Branch's area includes other major centres such as Mackay, 70,000; Mount Isa 50,000 and the Whitsunday area which has in excess of 35,000 people. In addition the area is a prime tourist destination and attracted a transient working population.

Sergeant Turner said the staff were multi-skilled and quickly adapted to the nature of each inquiry. It is anticipated that in the near future the AFP office would be relocated in the city much closer to other government departments and the main business district.

Gold Coast Branch Integrated approach works on Gold Coast

THE Gold Coast area attracts a large number of people, tourists and new settlers from throughout Australia and overseas.

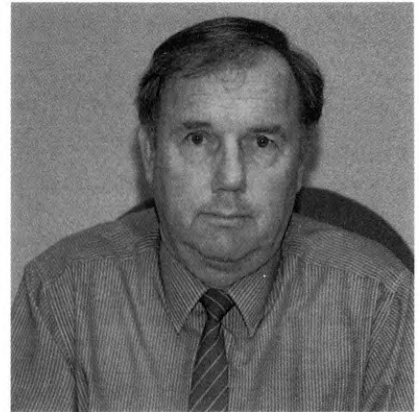
It has a life style and climate which also attracts its share of criminals. Some of these see the area as a place to settle and to continue their activities.

The AFP's Gold Coast Branch is located at Coolangatta on the Queensland side of the border with NSW.

The OIC of the Branch since June this year is Detective Superintendent Ken Curnow. He has been in law enforcement for thirty-five years in Australia and in the UK, including a two-year posting to Christmas Island.

Superintendent Curnow said recently, "I think I am typical of many in the AFP where I have had a wide range of experience from other police forces and other Regions within the AFP and can use these skills here.

"Because the Gold Coast Branch is a smaller group, there is a need to adopt an integrated approach to operations and from time to time we draw resources from other areas. There is a diversity of work ranging from the complex fraud to drug importations, intelligence gathering and the problems of han-



Detective Superintendent Ken Curnow

dling sensitive family law matters which regularly occur.

The Branch's ability to liaise with other law enforcement agencies was highlighted recently in court.

Judge Pratt of the Queensland District Court said, "I must say I cannot recall such a case which has demonstrated such co-operation among law enforcement agencies and such efficiency.

"For the Federal Police, the State Police and the CJC to have mounted such a long and detailed campaign is remarkable. The organisation behind it must have been excellent. All involved in the investigation and presentation of this matter should be commended by the Court and I do so now."



Some members and staff of the Gold Coast Branch