

THE NORTHERN TERRITORY POLICE

Aboriginal coast-watching proposal

A LARGE network of tribal Aboriginals acting as coast watchers is a weapon the Northern Territory Police Force may introduce to fight drug runners.

It's an idea the Territory's new Police Commissioner, Peter McAulay, is investigating in an attempt to stem the flow of illicit drugs into Australia.

He believes the tribal Aboriginals' powers of observations — as evident in the Aboriginal tracker — could add strength to the modern day surveillance resources of radar and tracker aircraft.

He says a relatively small number of these so-called, "primitive people" with their highly developed senses of sight, smell and hearing, could be more valuable than an army of white men.

"The problem is to relate their observations in the terms of their own culture to a problem which exists within the culture of the white community", he says.

He says Aboriginal concepts of time and distance have different meanings to those of the European.

If Mr McAulay's plan is born it would be paradoxical that the united sophisticated resources of the

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Customs Bureau, RAN, RAAF, Narcotics Bureau and police relied heavily on an intelligence network built on the natural resources of the Aboriginal.

The problem of drug smuggling and drug running on a large scale and possibly backed by organised crime is one that many have only come to face in the past 12 months. Although police and customs officers say it is not a new problem, it has reached the public eye only recently.

The scale of the problem was brought to public notice in January when a RAAF Hercules aircraft forced to ground a light aircraft flying into Australia.

It was found on a routine RAAF radar check and when the pilot refused to identify himself the Hercules was sent to investigate.

The aircraft was flown by Donald Tait, 45, who was later sentenced to six years and eight months jail for smuggling drugs.

The Tait incident resulted in numerous reports of unidentified aircraft.

"It is like UFO reports", says one customs officer. "After Tait, we received dozens of reports of strange aircraft. How many were genuine or had some significance

genuine or had some significance we will never know".

This is the second of three articles by Chris Brice, in Adelaide, who has just completed an extensive tour of the Northern Territory.

However, if some reports may be baseless there is considerable interest being taken by officials in a number of reports about unidentified aircraft being received in recent weeks from the Gulf area.

The Bureau of Customs, based in Darwin, covers about 1.5m. square kilometres and 8000 kilometres of coastline.

The area is within easy light aircraft range of known overseas drug sources and its boundaries are on recognised shipping lanes. It also contains hundreds of unmanned but useable airstrips in remote areas and supports a large private small craft and fishing fleet.

Its coastline and ports are visited by many overseas yachts which make Darwin their first or final port of call in Australia due to its closeness to Indonesia.

Commissioner McAulay, the former CIB chief of the SA Police Force concedes that the Territory may be the gateway to Australia used by a large proportion of drug smugglers.

His obvious concern is seen in the recent increase of the NT

Police drug squad from three to 10 men. This makes the squad proportionately the biggest drug squad in Australia. There are only about 500 officers in the NT Police Force.

It was announced recently the SA Police Force, with about 3000 officers, planned to increase its drug squad to 30 men.

Mr McAulay says the NT Police Force has a certain responsibility to the rest of Australia in trying to curtail drug smugglers.

"We can't afford to be selfish", he says, "It is certainly possible the Northern coastline, extending from Broome in WA to Cairns in Queensland is the gateway to much of the drug smuggling in Australia.

"Every now and again we find evidence of drug trafficking and there is some speculation as to whether or not it is the tip of the iceberg.

"Of course we have certain preventative measures which are more effective than they may appear on the surface. But naturally I am not in a position to say what these are because any revelation would tend to minimise their effectiveness".

Mr McAuley says that it is because of speculation about the involvement of organised crime in drug smuggling into Australia that he decided to upgrade his drug

he decided to upgrade his drug squad and extend his intelligence network.

"I am not prepared to say how big or how well organised these drug operations are until we have investigated the problem more closely", he says.

"We will have to start at the bottom, with the user, and then through the peddlers, to the importers and to the manufacturers.

"This is not always appreciated by the public who tend to see our operations being confined to small scale users that are perhaps injuring nobody but themselves.

"The thrust of our policy is at import, manufacture and distribution".

Drug squad chief, Detective Sergeant Terry O'Brien, says: "the drug user is not going to like the pressure we will have to put on him. But we must start from the bottom to get to the top.

"I believe that the next 12 months will see us gradually building up a more complete picture than we have had on the extent of drug smuggling in the north of Australia.

"But the people we are dealing with believe the risks are worth the effort because of the huge amounts of money they can get. The more sophisticated we become, the more sophisticated the drug smuggler will become"

will become".

Drug smuggling is not the only concern of the police — a great part of its effort is directed against the drug peddler, manufacturer and user within the Australian community. But smuggling is virtually the only concern of the Customs and Narcotics Bureaus.

About 80 of these men cover the area — by land, sea and air — from Broome in WA to the Queensland coast.

Combined with the RAN and RAAF — which have a defence role to play in coastal protection — the customs, narcotics agents and police provide a unique anti-crime force.

Although separate groups they have formed a common pool of information and intelligence which covers all the problems of coastal protection from illegal fishing and Indo-Chinese refugees to drug smuggling.

Pictures of the Northern Territory police force appear on the next page.
