

How good would we be in an emergency ?

"The Commonwealth Government encourages people around Australia to report unusual sightings such as unauthorised landings, matters of quarantine concern, foreign fishing vessels and any other matters which might be of interest to surveillance authorities" - a quotation from a recent press release by the public relations service of the Department of Transport, in the name of the Australian

Coastal Surveillance Organisation.

An accompanying pamphlet informs us that "YOU can assist the Coastal Surveillance Organisation by reporting:

- vessels which may be in difficulties
- oil pollution at sea
- unauthorised landings
- any matters of quarantine concern
- foreign fishing vessels
- any unusual activities which may be of interest to coastal surveillance authorities

People are invited to have a free STD or trunk call to the Centre in Canberra (062) 47 6666.

The Australian Coastal Surveillance Centre was formerly the Marine Operations Centre - which, for example, co-ordinated the search for the ill fated 'Blythe Star' - is part of the Commonwealth Department of Transport, and is manned 24 hours a day.

In the words of Minister for Transport Peter Nixon: "the new program reflects the Government's concern over increased evidence of smuggling, unauthorised landings, quarantine breaches and other illegal activities along Australia's northern coastline." This in itself should give us assurance that this increased surveillance capacity is not in anticipation of an imminent threat to our own shores, as remote as we are from the drug scene, the liklihood of Vietnamese

the drug scene, the likelihood of Vietnamese immigrants appearing on Porky Beach, or even the incidence of foot and mouth disease; nor, hopefully, is it a reaction to a call at the United Nations for unidentified flying objects to be added to the UN's 'list of concerns'. (Sir Eric Gairy, Prime Minister of Grenada, speaking before the General Assembly's special political committee two weeks ago, said the UFO incident off King Island "seemed a compelling reason to take a serious look at the UFO phenomenon".

Anachronistically, it is not the isolated nature of King Island in the event of an emergency, nor the permanent threat from the dangers of the sea which surrounds us, nor, indeed, the threat from UFOs which has forced a greater awareness on us recently, but, in fact, an announcement from the Director of Environment Control that Councils whose boundary forms part of the coastline should have nominated land supervisors trained in the method of shore clean up as part of a national plan to provide information necessary to combat pollution of the sea by oil.

According to retiring King Island Harbourmaster, Capt. Morven Fleming, who attended a familiarisation seminar in Hobart on behalf of the Marine Board, a very sophisticated organisation now exists to combat a problem of this nature.

Although a spillage of oil on the King Island coast is not expected, other than quickly evaporating fuel oil, should an emergency of this nature arise with which the Marine Board could not cope, 'in a matter of a very short time a Hercules transport would arrive at Currie airport with all the technical resources necessary to deal with the problem'.

It is interesting to ask if we are as well backed for an

resources necessary to deal with the problem.

Clearly it is tempting to ask, if we are so well backed for an emergency which is regarded as remote even under a refined contingency plan, how much more sophisticated are we today, twenty years later, in avoiding the tragedy in loss of life which occurred on the 'willwatch'?

Why weren't locally based aircraft, with knowledge of the locality, permitted to conduct a search after the reporting of lights in the Cape Wickham area, in preference for aircraft directed from the mainland which arrived some six hours after the local aircraft were available?

It does seem anachronistic that we are better equipped to deal with oil spillage on our beaches than the possible saving of lives at sea.

As an Island, and therefore more exposed to the consequences of an emergency of any sort, it appears that there may be serious gaps in our ability to meet such emergencies, particularly where we may need to be substantially self reliant in the light of our remote location. And that in view of this, the willingness of local pilots, as an example, to provide an immediate response are to be valued to pilots

unfamiliar with the terrain and situated at a distance.

Captain Fleming in fact sees our community as extremely well equipped, particularly in the availability of competent people. Captain Fleming is trained in the value of making decisions at a given point of time - the type of training which makes ships' Masters - on the basis that some decision is better than none.

The main difficulty that a co-ordinator in any emergency situation would have is that each of the

emergency situation would have is that each of the emergency resources available on the Island are unable to communicate to each other, other than by telephone; each service being allocated a separate and unco-ordinated receiving and transmitting wavelength - marine - fishing vessels - aircraft - police - fire services..

The State Emergency Service, as a co-ordinating instrument was established by legislation in 1976. One of its provisions is that each municipality is required to 'prepare a local counter disaster plan to deal with all counter disaster measures within its area'.

The Municipality does have a 'Municipal Fire Plan', and through purchase of mobile radio equipment has the ability to co-ordinate with members of the Aero Club for the purpose of locating possible danger points far in advance of the ground resources which would otherwise be available. The equipment has been tested and found to be in excellent operating condition. However the same facilities do not exist in the event of needing to co-ordinate maritime vessels, fishing vessels and aircraft in the event of tragedy at sea, and the Police Department which has prime responsibility in emergency events of any sort have no direct communication access to either air or sea craft.

The prospects of correcting this situation are fraught by the already over crowded radio frequencies which exist for transmitting myriads of items of information on a two-way basis - from heart palpitations to a base hospital to fish prices at Flemington.

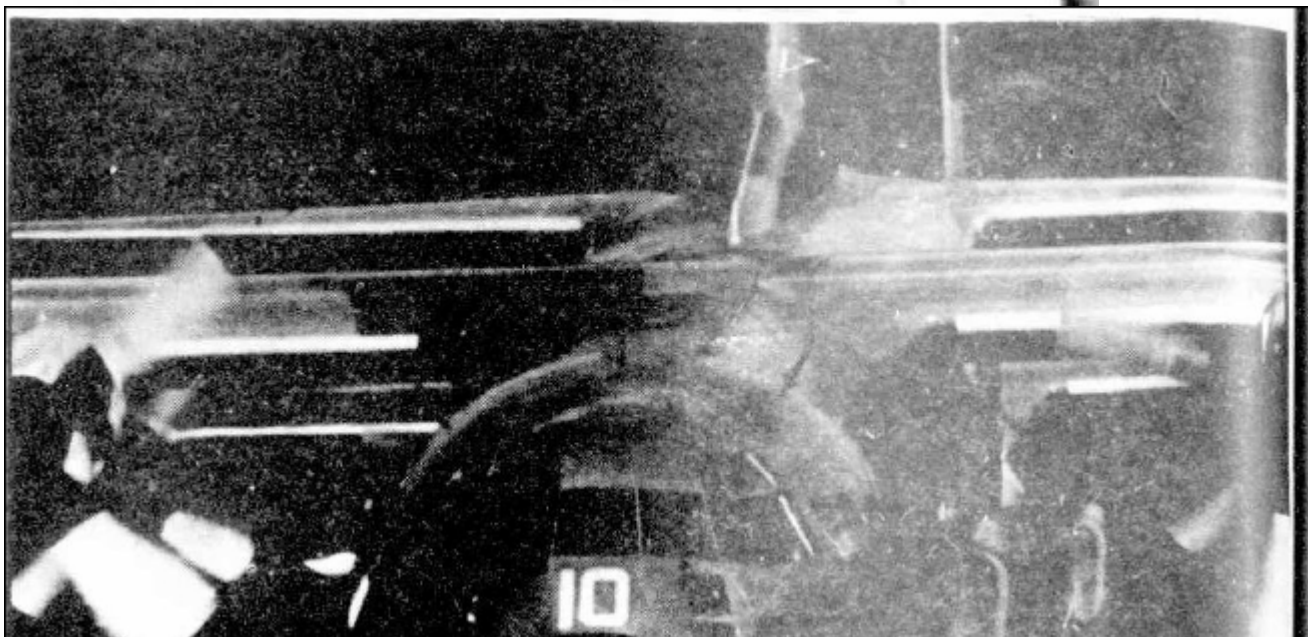
The Australian Coastal Surveillance Centre therefore appears to be a compromise, that atleast the best emergency equipment is available at a given point in time even if the application of those resources cannot be co-ordinated adequately with the

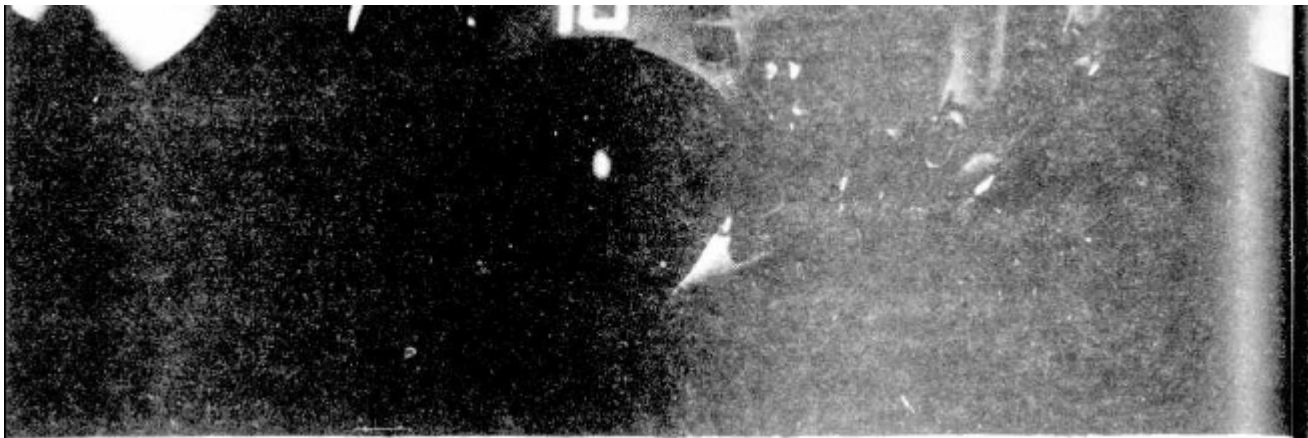
those resources cannot be co-ordinated adequately with the best human resources - those with the local knowledge, and the capacity to make decisions.

To quote from the handbook published by the Director of Emergency Services - **REMEMBER - ANY PLAN IS BETTER THAN NO PLAN!**



"all on different wavelengths"

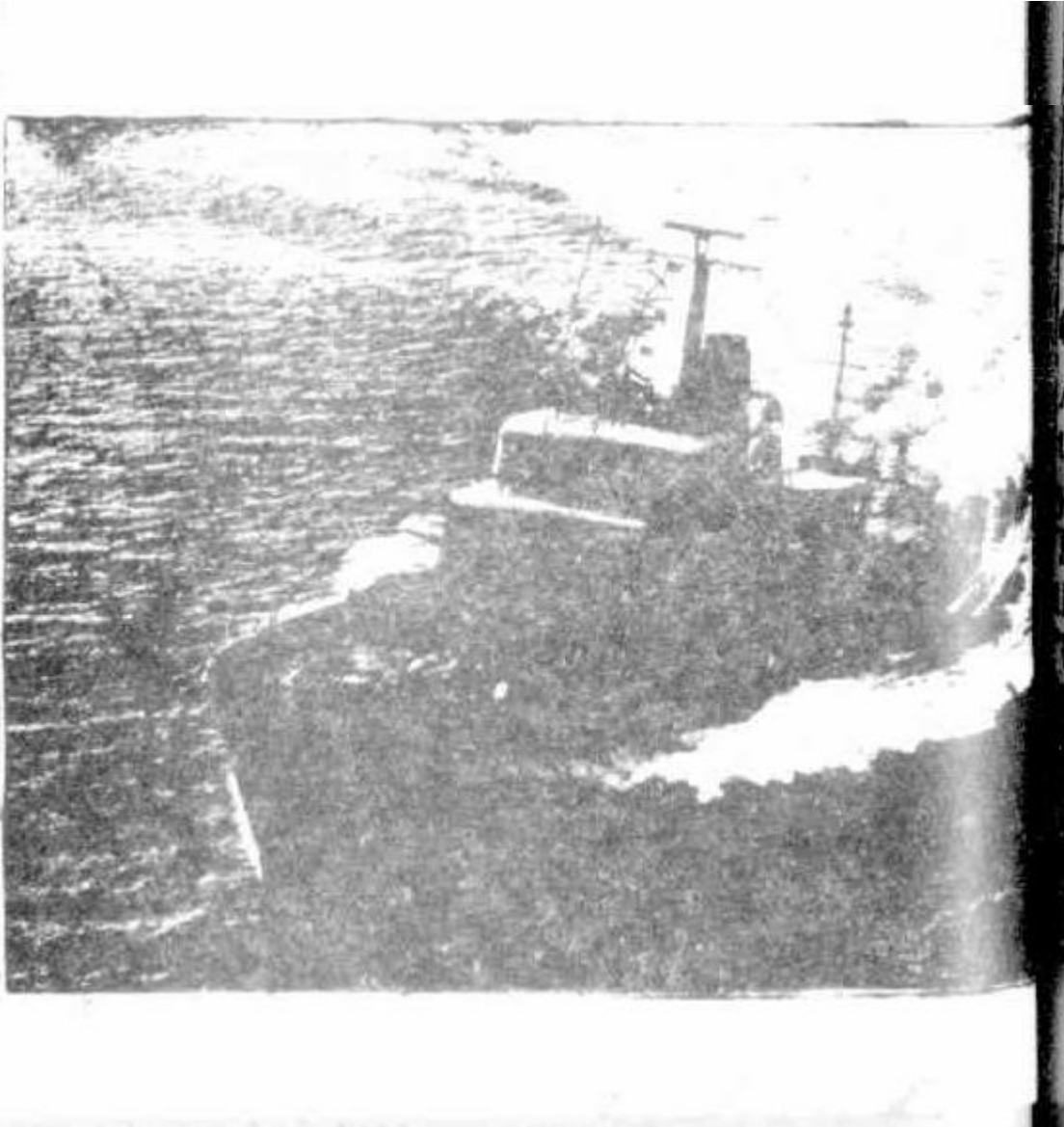




The latest edition of the Lockheed C130 Hercules aircraft is the latest edition to the RAAF fleet - Department of Defence photo.



Operations room, Australian Coastal Surveillance Centre, Canberra.



RAN patrol boat, HMAS Ardent, on coastal surveillance patrol.