

A PERSONAL VIEW OF REMOTE POLICING IN NORTHERN WA

On 6 August 2003, Inspector Martin Cope spoke to the Kimberley Society in place of Commander Lampard, who sent apologies for not being able to attend. Martin said he had been a Police Officer for 21 years but had not been stationed in the Kimberley. However he had served in a number of stations in the Pilbara and Goldfields where the circumstances were very similar. He cherished his time in the bush but, at present, he is in the NE Region Office in Perth where he is Project Manager of the Remote Service Delivery Project. The NE Region stretches from Esperance to Kalumburu and is the largest police jurisdiction in the world.

Many police find a northern lifestyle very attractive for themselves and family and never seek to return to offices in the metropolitan area. Those that avoid returning over many moves are considered to be members of the Norwest Club, which includes the Kimberley Club. Remote postings require police wives to be independent, sometimes acting as pseudo police, helping those who come to the door seeking assistance, providing meals for prisoners, etc. Martin has four children, two of whom were born in Port Hedland, one in Meekatharra (as was Martin's father) and finally one in Kalgoorlie. He was able to be present for every birth. All told, he has spent 15 years in the bush rather than the requisite two-year stint.

Martin recounted some anecdotes and mentioned that, in addition to policing, he had worked in Timor with the UN in connection with war crimes and general police duty. In one Australian incident, he and another officer were on Gary Highway in the Western Desert on their way to Kiwirrkurra when they camped at Elephant Junction. In the morning they found their battery was flat, all cells having collapsed, and they couldn't even get a message through. So they sat there for two days until headquarters sent a search plane beyond the place of their previous report and then arranged for a new battery to be sent out. To Martin's annoyance, when they got back he read an article in the newspaper headed "Two policemen lost in the bush". This was the first of various examples of misreporting he encountered in his career. He soon learned that, once printed, an article is seldom corrected.

On another occasion he took some German journalists with him on patrol to mine sites, stations, Aboriginal communities, desert, gorges, rivers etc. They were highly impressed and promised to send him a copy of their article when published. After many months a parcel finally arrived which Martin avidly opened only to find it was a copy of the German *Playboy*. He was somewhat relieved to find that he appeared in his uniform and that the article, once translated, was not sensational. At Marble Bar there was a feisty old man, a bit of a legend, who was always in some trouble or other—mainly fights—and spent a lot of his time in the lockup. When the

warrants on him built up, he would call on Martin's wife Sandra, before giving himself up, to see what was on the menu for the lock up.

Police work can be dangerous. When flying into remote communities, aircraft can't always carry enough fuel to proceed to an alternative landing strip if something prevents a landing. It is essential for pilots to receive sufficient notice of poor landing conditions so that the trip can be aborted. In 2001, four police officers died coming into Newman when their plane crashed and, when talking about servicing remote locations, we should always remember the sacrifice they made. There are peer support mechanisms in the Police Force to help officers cope with trauma. For police in remote stations, help is 6–8 hours away. There is no tactical response group, and no detectives, so officers have to learn to deal with problems as best they can.

The Gordon Inquiry recently looked into problems faced by Aboriginal people and recommended that permanent police be put into the larger communities such as Balgo, Kalumburu, Bidiyadanga, Warmun etc. The aim is to have most communities within a 200km radius of a police centre, enabling a faster response to problems and, through that, scope for improvements in health, education and the control of abuse of all kinds. Martin and another officer and administrative officer are working full time on this matter and will be placing 21 officers in the new positions. A total of 82 police volunteered for them—a response way beyond Martin's wildest dreams. This says a lot about the dedication of the police.

Most communities will have two officers but Warburton and the Dampier Peninsula will have four. Kintore will have three, with two of them being supplied by the NT. A whole range of logistical aspects has yet to be sorted out. These include dealing with the wet season, which is a challenge for remote communities such as Kalumburu.

In answering questions, Martin said that there would be no bar to female officers in the new positions. One female officer from Halls Creek is at Balgo at present dealing with an incident. He also mentioned that, although Aboriginal Police Liaison Officers have acted as mainstream police officers in the more remote areas in the past, the present police administration is changing that practise. The Scheme is being reviewed although the exact changes are not yet fully decided. In general, Aboriginal people in remote areas take police officers at face value. In one of the Kimberley towns, an Elder once said that the Police Sergeant makes the town.

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