

COAST WATCH IN THE 1980s

On 4 June 2003, John Rogers spoke to Kimberley Society about his involvement in Coastwatch in the 1980s. John was a Royal Navy officer and pilot of anti-submarine fixed wing aircraft and Commando helicopters until 1969. He then took voluntary early retirement to emigrate to Australia. In 1983, his training and experience led to appointment to a Coastwatch position in the Federal Department of Transport. He was the Senior Surveillance Resource Officer in Broome, 1983–1988, and then moved to Darwin when Coastwatch came under the control of the Australian Customs Service. He remained with Coastwatch until 1992 when he became an Inspector of Diesel Fuel Rebate for the Northern Territory and Kimberley.

Before the 1970s, coastal surveillance was largely land-based, carried out by Customs, lighthouse keepers, stock inspectors, Aboriginal communities and the Navy. During the 1970s, refugee boats from Vietnam posed a quarantine risk so local aircraft were chartered to observe and photograph with Polaroid cameras anything suspicious. As they flew regular schedules and patrolled a limited length of coast they were easily avoided so they were replaced—first by Navy planes, then by company contracts.

The programme was known as “FOOTSTEPS IN THE SAND”, and indeed the steps were to prove the first sign of an illegal landing. A photograph of footprints was shown to the audience, but John forgot to say that they were later proved to be from a crocodile, thus providing evidence of the early mistakes in a rapid learning curve!

In 1983 Skywest won the Western Australian contract. They used Aero Commander A500 Shrike aircraft, which have twin engines and high wings, giving good visibility to the observers, and added safety when flying over the sea.

These planes had radar and a long-range navigation system based on triangulation from three points in Victoria, South Africa and Europe. This was periodically calibrated by flying over a known position point. They were also equipped with a hatch through which rescue equipment could be dropped. This came into its own during the rescue of a girl, and a man who had gone to her aid, when both were swept away from their yacht by the strong tide. They clung to a life ring all night and half the next day before a Coastwatch plane found them and dropped life jackets, spot on, and a life raft that enabled them to be rescued.

Another task undertaken by the aircraft from this remote area was, and even in these days of satellite imaging still is, to assist the Weather Bureau by sending regular weather reports. The first warnings of the 1987 cyclone that devastated the new Fitzroy Plain road works came from a Coastwatch aircraft.

John trained and monitored the crews who flew out of Broome. They had an extensive surveillance checklist of reportable instances, particularly unexplained aircraft activity, remote campsites, foreign fishing vessels, vessels in unusual locations, environmental damage and pollution, destruction of wildlife and so on. At the end of each flight they had to prepare a report and submit it during office hours. As they could not start searching until first light, their flying time was somewhat restricted. When Customs took over, Coastwatch became more efficient by starting in the morning darkness and flying to an agreed starting point before commencing surveillance at first light, or later in the day as ordered, to make search times less predictable.

As well as coastal surveillance, they checked offshore islands and reefs—the Montebellos, Rowley Shoals, Scott Reef, Ashmore and Cartier Reefs. Australia has a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Indonesia allowing fishermen to fish near Scott, Ashmore and Cartier Reefs in traditional boats without engines. The 1980s targets were mainly clams and trepang (sea cucumbers), which were dried on racks above the cabin.

These boats are labelled as Type 1 (with a single triangular sail), Type 2 (with a mainsail and jib) and Type 3 (various types of motorised vessel). The latter are not allowed in the MOU region or in the Australian fishing zone where the main target is shark fin. John told how the fins were cut cruelly from the living sharks, which were then returned helpless to the sea.

Fresh seabird eggs were collected from the islets of Ashmore Reef after all the eggs in the nest were broken so that the birds would lay again. Prohibition of landing on the sandy islets eventually stopped this. On the sand flats at Ashmore Reef there were also mysterious circles, of which John showed photographs. The mystery was eventually solved by the Fisheries Department who found they were made by turtles tethered to a stake in the centre of each circle. Taking turtles was also illegal.

Much of the coastal surveillance was directed at finding illegal trochus fishing boats on the coast among the mangroves. One was so well hidden that the only clue was a patch of unusually coloured mangroves. Close inspection found the boat had been covered with cut branches of mangroves, but the paler underside of the leaves gave them away. Trochus at this time was worth \$5000 per tonne, and the Indonesian boats were capable of carrying three tonnes on board.

The Navy and Customs sent all illegal fishing boats to Willie Creek near Broome where the skipper was arrested, the crew sent home, and the catch and boat confiscated. Because of quarantine concerns the boats were later burned.

Illegal migrants came first from Vietnam and later from China and Cambodia. The first of the larger numbers of Chinese were caught at sea near Montgomery Reef and, in about 1992, 57 Chinese immigrants landed on the Kimberley coast and were rounded up after a massive search organised from Customs Darwin. A series of small parties of Indians carrying suitcases landed all over Australia. Those people included a 1989 party that came in near Brunswick Bay after recording their voyage with holiday photos. The photos became an archive file and are now held for posterity as public records.

John enlivened his talk with many anecdotes of his time in the best job in the country. His aerial photographs were by courtesy of Skywest.

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