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**HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES  
STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

**Reference: Indigenous employment**

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS**

**Monday, 11 September 2006**

**Members:** Mr Wakelin (*Chair*), Dr Lawrence (*Deputy Chair*), Ms Annette Ellis, Mr Garrett, Mr Laming, Mr Slipper, Mr Snowdon, Dr Southcott, Mr Tuckey and Mrs Vale

**Members in attendance:** Ms Annette Ellis, Dr Lawrence, Mr Snowdon, Mrs Vale and Mr Wakelin

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

Positive factors and examples amongst Indigenous communities and individuals, which have improved employment outcomes in both the public and private sectors; and

1. recommend to the government ways this can inform future policy development; and
2. assess what significant factors have contributed to those positive outcomes identified, including what contribution practical reconciliation\* has made.

\*The Committee has defined 'practical reconciliation' in this context to include all government services.

**WITNESSES**

**HARRIS, Ms Diane Julie, Director General, Fairness and Resolution Branch, Department of  
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**PARKER, Lieutenant Colonel Richard, Commanding Officer, NORFORCE, Department of  
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**SULLIVAN, Mr Peter James, Director General, Fairness and Resolution Branch, Department of  
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**Committee met at 11.22 am**

**HARRIS, Ms Diane Julie, Director General, Fairness and Resolution Branch, Department of Defence**

**McCRACKEN, Captain Cameron, Director, Defence Force Recruiting, Department of Defence**

**PARKER, Lieutenant Colonel Richard, Commanding Officer, NORFORCE, Department of Defence**

**SULLIVAN, Mr Peter James, Director General, Fairness and Resolution Branch, Department of Defence**

**CHAIR (Mr Wakelin)**—Welcome. I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs inquiry into Indigenous employment. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I need to advise you that these are proceedings of the parliament. I invite a member of the department to give us a short opening address. I do not think we have received a formal submission from Defence, but I am sure someone is ready to give us a brief opening comment.

**Lt Col. Parker**—I thank you all for the opportunity to brief you on the North West Mobile Force, or NORFORCE. The regiment was raised in 1981 to increase Army's presence in Northern Australia and to establish a means of maintaining situational awareness for the vast coastline and inland areas of the isolated north. This concept was based on using the remote Indigenous communities, sourcing our soldiers from these communities under the Army Reserve model and establishing a reporting network through these soldiers.

The concept was based on the operations of the North Australia Observer Unit from World War II which, again, established situational awareness and preparation for the likely Japanese invasion of 1942. This organisation recruited approximately 70 Indigenous soldiers from the isolated communities and incorporated them into the patrol groups to gain an understanding of the terrain and to establish a reporting network for potential enemy movements. The unit was disbanded in 1945 at the end of the Japanese threat.

NORFORCE's area of responsibility includes the entire Northern Territory and the Kimberley region of Western Australia. It equates to 1.8 million square kilometres, or a quarter of the Australian landmass. The regiment has force-of-arms squadrons headquartered in Darwin, Nhulunbuy, Broome and Alice Springs, with manned depots in Kununurra and Katherine and unmanned depots in Derby, Wadeye, Jabiru, Groote Eylandt, Borroloola and Tennant Creek. The regiment also has an operational support squadron, a training squadron and the regimental headquarters based in Darwin at Larrakeyah Barracks.

Our unit strength is 603, all ranks, which includes 77 regular staff and 270 Indigenous soldiers. NORFORCE's role is to provide reconnaissance and surveillance in support of a joint task force commander. Currently this commander is Commander Northern Command in support of the national surveillance plan. The regiment deploys patrols of six men into isolated regions to answer information requirements of the supported headquarters and utilises small boats and

modified surveillance vehicles to achieve this task. We are required to provide 80 patrol days per year to support this requirement, although we currently provide well in excess of this.

Our concept of operations is based on two pillars. The first is the regional surveillance patrols, as previously described. The second is to establish a 365-day reporting network through having the bulk of our soldiers living in the isolated communities. This method requires effective community engagement and gaining the trust of the people living in the isolated regions. By embedding into these communities, the regiment has unprecedented access to Indigenous land, opportunities for recruiting soldiers and a well-established information network.

Our Indigenous soldiers are recruited under the guidelines of Defence Instruction-Admin 173-8, the Regional Force Surveillance List, which gives me the flexibility to recruit soldiers who would not otherwise pass the entry standards required for service in the Australian Army. I am able to waive certain medical, education, fitness and criminal standards that would normally preclude service.

NORFORCE is well regarded by the communities in northern Australia as it provides an opportunity for military service from isolated locations and is seen as providing worthwhile employment for, in particular, Indigenous youth. The regiment's success can be attributed to a number of factors. Firstly, the regiment has a real role in the protection of traditional lands, currently seen as our involvement in the detection of illegal foreign fishing and providing information to Northern Command to have offenders apprehended. Secondly, the discipline and skills provided to soldiers as part of our normal training assist in the development of communities. This includes areas such as vehicle maintenance, small craft operation, health and hygiene, and leadership. Finally, the operations of NORFORCE have been conducted over 25 years. They demonstrate to the people of the region our long-term commitment to our area of operations. I would be happy to take any questions that you may have.

**CHAIR**—Thanks, Lieutenant Colonel Parker. Would anyone else like to make a statement?

**Mr Sullivan**—Yes, I would. In addition to the regional force surveillance units that Colonel Parker has just spoken about, Defence has a range of other initiatives for attracting and retaining Indigenous Australians. In addition to the whole-of-government programs that I believe you have heard about from the Public Service Commissioner, we have a National Indigenous Cadetship Project; Defence Indigenous study awards, which provide for full-time study; and a Graduate Development Program—both the APS-wide Indigenous graduate program and Defence's internal graduate program take Indigenous employees. We participate in long-term developmental programs for Indigenous employees, and we currently have people participating in the Leadership in the Australian Public Service—an Indigenous experience program. We offer land management traineeships, and we currently have eight rangers in training in that program. There is an ADF Cadet Indigenous Participation Project. Although I do not have responsibility for that project, I can provide you with a limited amount of information on it. We have a fairly significant contribution to National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee celebrations, NAIDOC Week, and we have our contract management traineeship program.

In conjunction with Defence Force Recruiting, earlier this year we developed a more strategic approach, trying to draw all our programs together to take a more strategic approach to Indigenous recruitment and retention. To that end, in late March, the Defence Committee senior



management approved a Defence Indigenous recruitment and retention strategy, which I would have to say is still very much in its infancy. It has five components: research, consultation with community, workforce planning, employment flexibility and long-term sustainability.

**Capt. McCracken**—I will be very short and sweet. The whole idea of Indigenous engagement is one of interest and we want to roll it out across the other microcommunities that exist within Australia. Obviously, because there is a fair amount of interest and traction in Indigenous communities, it gives us the opportunity to explore and do something. It is not just rural and remote that we are looking at; we are trying to roll the model out for other Indigenous communities, including the urbanised communities, so that we can provide more job opportunities. That in itself has an impediment: one of the problems that we encounter is the deployability of our Indigenous people. They tend to hang around their own home town and we cannot offer that sort guarantee in the permanent ADF. That is quite problematic for us.

The other big problem for us is that, while Lieutenant Colonel Parker has the discretion to waive a number of conditions, we do not quite have the same luxury in bringing people into the ADF permanent. That can form quite a problem for us, particularly with regard to health and education, in terms of recruiting against our standard ADF entry requirements. That is about all I have to add.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much, and it is much appreciated. My interest was provoked on a number of fronts in Mr Snowdon's electorate. We went to Nhulunbuy, I think it was, and we were aware of some of the issues that came to the fore there about the involvement of the Indigenous population in border protection, if you like. Through another parliamentary committee we became aware of the discussion from within the services about what a significant employer Defence had become, particularly in the northern zone of Australia, in terms of the Indigenous population. It seems worthwhile to talk about it and see what the opportunities are and what some of the issues are for the future to understand it a bit better. I think we have done that pretty well in the last few minutes.

I like the concept of flexibility, which we all know we need to have in terms of Indigenous employment, and, as you have stated, the ability to waive the conventional employment conditions. Can we talk a bit more about that. As a reasonably frequent visitor to the Tiwi Islands, particularly Bathurst Island, I am very aware of the first Japanese bombing and the connection with Nguiu and the Indigenous population in that event. I need to try and understand a little better what that flexibility gives you. As I understand it, there is a Defence involvement on Nguiu with some of the individuals there.

**Lt Col. Parker**—Yes, there is.

**CHAIR**—You mention a number of communities, and Mr Snowdon no doubt will have some comment about some of that as well. Can you talk about that flexibility: how you apply it and what that gives you.

**Lt Col. Parker**—The flexibility allows me to waive certain aspects for people applying for NORFORCE. It allows me to recruit soldiers that might be low or high on the body mass index—either they are too skinny or overweight. I do that because of the dietary situation within some of the communities. Once they come over to us, we find that that difference is much

reduced. They are fed proper meals. They are taught how to exercise and all that sort of thing. So we find that is not a terribly big issue for us and we train our people to do that. With regard to criminal records, I do not take people who are murderers and rapists and some of those high-level crimes, but many of the youth in the communities may have been convicted for things such as break and enters, and moving alcohol into an area that is alcohol free. As long as they have shown a period in which they have not offended, we will generally waive those types of requirements and bring them on board.

In areas such as education, we find that community education is for a purpose. There are not a lot of employment opportunities that would require people to go through the normal schooling that you would find in other places in Australia, so schooling is not a large priority for them. We generally waive education standards and teach the soldiers ourselves what they need to know to be an effective soldier. Those are generally the areas. It provides me with a lot more flexibility to bring in people from these communities. We generally look at their character and the recommendations from the elders of the community and from soldiers that we have serving in that area.

**CHAIR**—Regarding the mix of whitefellas and Indigenous people, how does that break down in terms of the general force?

**Lt Col. Parker**—It varies in locations. Each of my squadrons is remarkably different. I generally find that in places like Arnhem Squadron, based out of Nhulunbuy, the mix will be very heavily weighted in terms of Indigenous soldiers. You may have only one person within a particular patrol who is not Indigenous. Other patrols are entirely Indigenous. That particular area has predominantly Indigenous patrols. For Centre Squadron, based out of Alice Springs, the main population of Indigenous soldiers comes out of Borroloola. They now have 20 soldiers. There is a real big mix in the patrols that go out. The patrols could be anything from 50 per cent Indigenous and 50 per cent non-Indigenous right through to maybe having one or two members who are Indigenous.

**CHAIR**—Could you talk a little bit about the sustainability of involvement and how that shapes up?

**Lt Col. Parker**—I guess like all defence organisations we have a flow of people in and out. Service within the regiment is very highly regarded and we have a lot of people who stay for many years. I have some particular soldiers in Arnhem Land who have been with the regiment since its inception. It is a great commitment on their behalf. There are many young people wanting to join. We have enjoyed a heightened media profile. We have been recognised through the awarding of colours to the regiment this year. That has been seen in a positive light and a lot of people want to join.

**Dr LAWRENCE**—As you know, our terms of reference ask us to look to the extent to which Indigenous employment outcomes have improved in the public and private sectors. So my first question is: what is the trend line? What has been the change, I suppose, over the last 10 or 20 years in recruitment—in recruiting more Indigenous people, access to training, retention rates and advancement? Do you have any statistics on that or any sense of whether you are doing better or worse?

**Ms Harris**—I will respond initially and then I will hand over to Peter to talk about the details. The number of Indigenous employees in Defence has been dropping over the last three years. That is a trend line that we are not comfortable with, but at the same time I understand that that is reflected across the Public Service as well. What we are looking at now is recruitment, and our focus in the past has been on that. I think that too little effort or too little focus has been on retention. The same can be said about ADF as well, although the need to retain people is more recognised there. The strategy that we are working on at the moment is to come up with ways to not only get people into service with Defence, whether it is with the ADF or Defence APS, but also how we keep them. We will do a lot of work in that area. We have only just started but, clearly, that is a problem area that we have to address, perhaps more so than just the straight-out recruitment side of it. Peter could probably talk about actual statistics a bit more.

**Mr Sullivan**—Defence's employment of Indigenous people has declined, as Diane said, in the same way that it has declined right across the whole public sector. One of the reasons for that was the major outsourcing and downsizing that happened from 1997 onwards, because the majority of our Indigenous employees were engaged at the lower levels of the public sector and in support roles, and those jobs tended to be outsourced. I guess we have not really recovered from that yet. Having said that, the percentage of APS employees represented by Indigenous Australians is just half of one per cent, which is not good. That has declined from a peak of 1.8 per cent in 1993.

**Dr LAWRENCE**—Do you have the figures for the ADF?

**Mr Sullivan**—Across the ADF it is, again, half of one per cent. I do not have the figures for the individual services.

**Dr LAWRENCE**—That is all right.

**Mr Sullivan**—Numbers wise, there are 234 full-time ADF Indigenous members. In the reserves, which Dick mentioned, there are 270 in NORFORCE. If you include the other regional force surveillance units, there are 342. Army certainly is the major employer of Indigenous people; followed by Navy, which has a small number, and Air Force, which has even fewer.

**Dr LAWRENCE**—Part of our inquiry is to discover if there have been improvements and why. Maybe there are some elements in your recruitment training where you want to point to improvements. If you have not seen any improvements—and indeed what is suggested is a decline—what are the obstacles to employment, retention and advancement, all those things that we are interested in for Indigenous people, in both the force and the civilian arm?

**Ms Harris**—I think one of the first things that I would identify as an obstacle is the fact that we do not know really how many Indigenous employees we have because our statistics are drawn from people self-identifying on their paperwork. If they do not tick the box then we do not know that they are there. We actually suspect that that is the case in a number of cases, but we do not know how many. That is the first thing: if you are going to develop programs, you need to know clearly who you are developing them for.

I mentioned retention before. We have started talking to people, particularly in the private sector and particularly in Western Australia, about how they manage to keep their employees and

what strategies they use. We are hearing that their Indigenous employees require a lot more in the way of support in the form of mentoring. We do not routinely offer that to people in either the Defence APS or the ADF. That is an area that we are going to explore. Certainly in my mind, at this early stage, that is one of the big issues that I think we need to work on to find out how we might offer that sort of additional support.

We heard from a company last week who said that when they bring people in for training, they not only have a mentor for each person but they also have a mentor who attends the initial training with them. If they have new employees who do not turn up for work, they actually go out and get them and bring them to work, or find out what the problem is. It is very labour intensive. But clearly for them—and in the private sector, obviously, it is the bottom line that drives what they do—it is worth it for them to do that. If it is worth it for them, there must be something we can learn from that in terms of how we might provide support in the future as well.

**Mr Sullivan**—The issue of disclosure is interesting. People do not disclose their ethnic or Indigenous status, or their disabled status even, for a range of reasons—such as fear of being singled out or other reasons. One of the interesting things we found when we went to Kununurra—about this time last year in fact—was that some people said: ‘I’m not Indigenous; I’m Green,’ or ‘I’m Army.’ They identify with Army or they identify with their employer, not with their Indigenous status.

**Dr LAWRENCE**—And you can imagine why that might be so in many cases. In other cases, perhaps it is because they have overcome many of the obstacles. They do not confront them daily, so there is no need for them to identify.

**Mrs VALE**—Lieutenant Colonel, you referred to the elders of communities and their recommendations when you take on board young people for NORFORCE. How much do you rely on the advice or the recommendations of the elders?

**Lt Col. Parker**—We have a contact network with all of our communities, where we know the elders. The elders will give us a better understanding of where that person sits in the community and what their character is like. As I said before, although I can waive a lot of things to get people in, the one key element that we are looking for is character. We do not see ourselves as a correctional facility or anything like that. We are always trying to recruit the best quality of soldier that we can. The advice of the elders gives us an insight into the character of that particular candidate. So, yes, we take quite seriously what they tell us.

**Mrs VALE**—You mentioned that the training in NORFORCE improves their physical health because of all the training and the food and everything else. Do they receive training for occupations? When I met a group of NORFORCE soldiers, I was quite amazed by one of the young Aborigines who was the health man, if you like, for that unit. He was quite adept at showing me exactly what he did—for example, injecting. He seemed to be very switched on.

**Lt Col. Parker**—Yes, that is right.

**Mrs VALE**—He was very articulate and very proud of what he could do. Do you do focused training; is it structured?

**Lt Col. Parker**—Yes, it is. The regiment runs all its own courses, so from the day we recruit a soldier from the community we put them through our own induction course. We do not send them to Kapooka or to other Army training areas. We bring them in and we train them ourselves. We run all of our own courses, from that recruit course right up until I can promote them to warrant officer class 2. So all the career courses, all the specialist courses needed are run internally to the regiment. That allows us to train with means that are more applicable to the type of soldier we have. I mentioned literacy and numeracy before; we focus very heavily on manual skills and making sure that people are able to do the job that we require them to do. The medics, which you have just mentioned, is probably our most difficult course to get everybody through because there is quite a degree of study required for people to understand exactly what they need to do.

**Mrs VALE**—And a high level of literacy, I would imagine.

**Lt Col. Parker**—Yes, and so not every soldier we have is able to pass that course for a lot of those reasons, although we do provide a lot of training to bring people up to the required standard to get them through the course—so much so that we run a week of separate training prior to the course for those who think they may need some extra study. We prepare our soldiers for up to 12 months before they attend the course.

**Mrs VALE**—Mentoring was discussed in the general employment of Indigenous people across the broad base of Defence. It seems to me that there is a considerable amount of mentoring for the Indigenous people in NORFORCE, just by the structure of your particular organisation. From the mentoring that I observed, the way that the men in the particular unit I saw related to their sergeant, would you say that it is fair comment that there is de facto mentoring that just happens because of the structure of NORFORCE?

**Lt Col. Parker**—Yes, there is. But we also provide mentors for every soldier we recruit. We are currently running a recruit course. We have 54 recruits on that particular course. For every soldier that we bring in from a community a mentor has come from that community, who is one of our soldiers, to take the soldiers from that community through their initial employment course. So we are very focused on the fact that we need to provide that level of support.

The mentors we have are separate from the chain of command, so they are not involved in directing soldiers in what to do but they provide that point of contact and a backstop for them in case there is something they do not understand. They do provide that level of support all the way through.

**Mrs VALE**—There was obviously a great deal of mutual regard and respect in this particular unit I saw—I cannot remember the name of the sergeant.

**Lt Col. Parker**—It is Darren Rashleigh.

**Mrs VALE**—He was very impressive on his own, but the way in which he and the men related to each other showed that obviously they are used to operating in isolation as a very tight unit. What do you see, Lieutenant Colonel Parker, as the reason for the lack of retention if you are losing people from NORFORCE? With the amount of respect and pride that those

Indigenous people had in being a part of the unit I could not imagine any of them ever leaving at any time.

**Lt Col. Parker**—We do not actually have a retention issue within the regiment.

**Mrs VALE**—Is it across other areas of Defence?

**Lt Col. Parker**—Yes, it is across areas of Defence.

**Mrs VALE**—I just needed to clear that up. So NORFORCE is retaining its people?

**Lt Col. Parker**—Yes, we are.

**Mrs VALE**—That fits in with my observation. Is there any capacity within NORFORCE—probably not, because I would imagine you would have to have a special role—for the recruitment of young Indigenous women?

**Lt Col. Parker**—We have 10 Indigenous women within the regiment now. We use them on a variety of different tasks; not patrolling, because we see that as a war role.

**Mrs VALE**—Yes, it would be.

**Lt Col. Parker**—They are drivers and medics, and they work in orderly rooms in the Q stores. So there is certainly a role for them, and we do not bar anyone from joining the regiment based on gender.

**Mrs VALE**—Again, do you have recommendations from the elders to recruit young women?

**Lt Col. Parker**—Yes, we do.

**Mrs VALE**—Do they suggest who would be suitable?

**Lt Col. Parker**—Yes. Generally within the community there are two groups: there are the elders, but there is also a women's group. If a female candidate comes up, we will go and ask the women's group about that candidate.

**Mrs VALE**—Thank you.

**Mr SNOWDON**—Dick, this gives me the opportunity to say publicly what I say often—that is, what great work NORFORCE does.

**Mrs VALE**—Absolutely.

**Mr SNOWDON**—I have been associated with NORFORCE since 1987 in one way or another. I think the role that it plays within the community is understated and not understood, and the people responsible for running and administering NORFORCE need to be highly commended for the work they do. They are significant agents of change within communities,

and that is not properly understood. I know many soldiers who are in NORFORCE—a large number of them—and it is true that they take a great deal of pride in the work they do and they identify very strongly with the uniform and the unit. I think that is testimony to the strength and sustainability of the organisation, and I am surprised that Defence have not seen this a long time ago, frankly. It seems to me that Defence need to really look at themselves and say: ‘What can we learn out of this? What learnings are there?’—and there are significant numbers of them. It would not be too hard. We have significant numbers of Defence Force personnel in the Top End of Australia—they are not going anywhere—and I imagine there is a real opportunity. I just wanted to put that on record—and, Dick, I apologise for not making Borroloola a fortnight ago.

**Lt Col. Parker**—No worries.

**Mr SNOWDON**—I have been of the view for some time that there are learnings not only that Defence could take out of it but that other organisations and government agencies could take out of what NORFORCE does, including the way in which NORFORCE mentors and trains for particular skills which are then transferable. It seems to me that, as a committee, we need to be thinking about what the things are that NORFORCE does which flick the light on for learning for the individual soldier and the skill sets that they acquire and about whether that model can be used in other areas of the community.

I do not know whether I have mentioned it to Dick; I have certainly mentioned it to some of his predecessors. I think that model which has been developed in NORFORCE ought to be marketed outside the organisation. Perhaps NORFORCE, or some organisation which grows out of NORFORCE as a training arm, ought to be sponsored to investigate what breadth of training they can provide other people. For example, you talked about rangers. Every community across the Top End now has a ranger program. They all need small boat skills. They all need navigation skills. They have bush skills, but they all need the training which NORFORCE provides for its soldiers. They may say they do not need it, but significantly I think they do. The interoperability between what they do and Customs, Army, Defence generally and, indeed, the police is quite important. So it seems to me that there are some issues where we ought to be exploring the capacity to develop something out of the NORFORCE model which we apply more broadly to get people into other jobs, not just in NORFORCE. Dick, how many days do you get out of these guys? For 270, what is the average?

**Lt Col. Parker**—The average Indigenous soldier will provide in excess of 70 to 80 days a year.

**Mr SNOWDON**—Some would do 130 or 140?

**Lt Col. Parker**—I have quite a number who do up to 180, and I need the Chief of Army to approve me to take them that high.

**Mr SNOWDON**—So they are effectively full-time employees for that purpose?

**Lt Col. Parker**—Yes, they are.

**Mr SNOWDON**—That again is an indication of the sort of thing we can learn out of this. I know that a couple of the NORFORCE soldiers have been in it for long periods of time. I

imagine that by the time they have reached some rank, even corporal status, they will have improved their literacy skills quite significantly just by virtue of the training they have to do to get that position?

**Lt Col. Parker**—Yes, I think that is a fair assessment. When they reach certain ranks within our organisation, there is a degree of other requirements on them as part of that position they hold. We train them to achieve those outcomes. A lot of that is operating radios, where you need to understand what numbers are being punched in and what timings are required, and also giving orders, writing orders and sending reports. So there are elements of literacy and numeracy that go across the board just in their general employment.

**Mr SNOWDON**—Do you see any barriers? Apart from the ones you have identified which you can deal with at the entry level, are there significant barriers which become impediments to people advancing up the hierarchy?

**Lt Col. Parker**—We place no impediments on them. Often it is the soldier's desire to move further up through the ranks. As you would probably understand, as you move up through the ranks your responsibilities change and your opportunity to be out in the field, in the boats and doing what I would call all that 'good stuff' that soldiers join for is reduced because the requirements for administration et cetera become greater. A lot of soldiers join to do that sort of thing, so they generally like to stay within the patrols doing the patrolling tasks.

**Mr SNOWDON**—You mentioned that there are now 20 soldiers from Borrooloola. What were the drivers that got those 20 soldiers?

**Lt Col. Parker**—We have always had a strong commitment in Borrooloola. It has always been a great recruiting base for us. It is quite a large community; I think there are around 1,300 in that community. We have had some very strong characters come through who have remained with the regiment and have been quite influential within the community itself. I think the interaction that we have had there has kept the numbers continually flowing in. There are certainly more people there that we will recruit in the next round of recruiting. I think it is the longevity that we have had there, our demonstrated commitment to the place. Now that we have a depot there, we have actually demonstrated to the community that we are there for the long term and they all want to be part of that. I do not think we have had any bad examples come out of Borrooloola. I think it is still being held in very high esteem.

**Mr SNOWDON**—At the moment you have 603. What is your maximum manning?

**Lt Col. Parker**—My maximum manning by entitlement is 549, so I am slightly bucking the trend there across the rest of the Defence Force. Chief of Army has been very supportive in saying, 'Please recruit as many people as you want and just get out there and keep doing what you are doing.' It has been great having his support for it.

**Mr SNOWDON**—Have there been any examples of soldiers recruited through NORFORCE going into the mainstream areas of Army?

**Lt Col. Parker**—There are, but there are not very many. We have one at the moment. Sergeant Rashleigh will soon be coming across to the Australian Regular Army. We have a



number that we bring through who are not Indigenous—they may be employed out of Darwin—who have made the transfer across, but it is quite uncommon for us to have our Indigenous soldiers come across to the Regular Army.

**Mr SNOWDON**—I know a few of your non-Indigenous soldiers who have been there for a long time too. They stay there for the same reason, I suspect.

**Lt Col. Parker**—Yes, they do.

**Mr SNOWDON**—Where will Sergeant Rashleigh end up?

**Lt Col. Parker**—He has applied to go to Intelligence Corps, so it will depend upon what Intelligence Corps decide their placing requirement is. He is quite comfortable to go off and do that.

**Mrs VALE**—I thought he was in the Army.

**Mr SNOWDON**—He was—in NORFORCE.

**Lt Col. Parker**—Regular?

**Mrs VALE**—Yes.

**Lt Col. Parker**—No, he is a reservist. He is one of the ceremonial men from the Daly River community.

**Mrs VALE**—Miriam Baumann's son was actually in that unit.

**Lt Col. Parker**—Yes, that is right.

**Mrs VALE**—That is amazing.

**Mr SNOWDON**—He will enjoy that.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—I have a more general question. We can relate it to Borroloola or to other communities where Army has gone in—the house building, the community upgrading and so on. I have always been impressed by the need to capitalise as much as we can on the flow-on from that. When Army goes in with the expertise that it has—and I know at Borroloola some of this has happened already—the opportunity to train some of the younger ones, in particular, in the local community into the beginning of a trade is very evident. I assume that Army does that to some point, but what relationship, if any, do you have with other bits of government to follow up on that? I am trying to get a fuller picture of the degree to which we are able to harness that opportunity within Army and outside of it as well.

**Lt Col. Parker**—There have been two Army-Aboriginal community assistance projects run within my area over the last two years. The first one was in Fitzroy Crossing last year, and I do not think we really capitalised on some of the benefits that came out of that. There certainly was not the relationship with NORFORCE in that program that I think should have been there. We

did not make that same error this year. The Borooloola project was a very good one for NORFORCE but also for the local community. The local community has the McArthur River mine located just nearby, and McArthur River Mining itself is now employing the young people who were trained by that program through follow-on apprenticeships. We also put 12 soldiers from NORFORCE through that same program to give them some trade skills. I just hope they do not get poached by McArthur River Mining; it would take too much of their time. It was a very good program in that regard—skilling up the community to do those sorts of things.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—I do not wish to give the impression that it is up to Army to do all of this training; I do not think it is, really. There is a role, obviously, but there are also training mechanisms outside of the Defence Force. Is there a relationship that you build between what you are doing and across government—territory, state or Commonwealth authorities—in relation to what you have discovered and how far you have gone? When you leave an area, is there some follow-up that comes from outside of the Defence Force in terms of training and education? Does that happen at all or is there a need for that to happen?

**Lt Col. Parker**—I have not experienced that happening. Yes, there would be a certain benefit in doing that, particularly on the education side. Unfortunately our regiment is so busy with all the tasks that we have at the moment that it is putting our focus into the areas that we really are required to do, and that is training our soldiers for what they need and also doing our operational requirements. There is a lot of potential out there to do those sorts of things, particularly in Borooloola. When I was down there to open the depot the week before last, I was discussing with Batchelor College the opportunity for my soldiers to do some form of training with them prior to coming on their next round of courses and they are quite supportive of doing those sorts of things. I think there is the opportunity there to establish those agreements and I guess, over time, we should be able to get some of those programs up and going. A lot of that is dependent, though, on the personalities that are there.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Sure.

**Lt Col. Parker**—The actual administrator of that Batchelor College outpost is a very big supporter of the regiment and knows a lot of the soldiers that we have. He is particularly keen to get involved and do those sorts of things for us. I do not know whether we would have that same relationship in every location, but certainly if we did then we would look to exploit it.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—My observation would be that I have no doubt that the Army in this particular case has the right intention but it might be good for us to consider ways that we can encourage the other outside authorities to connect with you more and, from their initiative, to actually benefit from what you have done. I do not think the Army should become the educator of Indigenous people in remote communities but I think you are doing so much good work that we need to think about how we can encourage other authorities to actually come to you, frankly, and say: ‘You’re doing so much. Where can we pick up and go on from what you have done?’

**Lt Col. Parker**—Sure.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—That is the way I am looking at it. I have a question on the APS-ADF relationship. The numbers you gave before on the percentage of employment: is there a breakdown possible between the ADF and the APS aspect of Defence?

**Ms Harris**—As in numbers of Indigenous employees?

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Yes.

**Ms Harris**—We can give you those numbers.

**Mr Sullivan**—I think I mentioned those earlier.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—I am sorry.

**Mr Sullivan**—I will repeat them. There is a total of 667 across all of Defence: 234 Indigenous full-time ADF members, the majority of which are in Army; 342 Indigenous personnel serving as reservists, 270 of which are in NORFORCE and the others are in 51 Far North Queensland Regiment and the Pilbara Regiment; and 91 Indigenous APS employees. Those numbers may well be understated for the reasons of disclosure that we mentioned earlier.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—I understand that.

**Dr LAWRENCE**—That is a continuing problem, isn't it?

**Mr Sullivan**—Yes.

**Dr LAWRENCE**—It has not changed. Whatever that figure is, it has been the same for decades.

**Mr Sullivan**—Yes.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—On the employment strategies that are in place in terms of Indigenous people, what is the difference, if any, between APS and ADF in the approach?

**Ms Harris**—There is, in that—

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Can you explain that.

**Ms Harris**—Dick has already talked about the reserve model.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—Yes, absolutely. But within the APS itself, what is the strategy there?

**Ms Harris**—Peter can talk about the different strategies.

**Mr Sullivan**—I guess on the APS side we are focusing at a range of different levels; we have different strategies for different niche markets. For the tertiary educated, we offer cadetships; we offer scholarships for people who are already in Defence to undertake full-time study. For those who only have year 10 or year 12, we offer traineeships to improve literacy and to get them into employment in the first place where they can then start to make their mark.

As I mentioned before, we participate in the whole-of-government activities run under the auspices of the Australian Public Service Commission, such as their career development programs, career track workshops and different traineeship programs. We have one or two people participating in the contract management training program. We have a land management traineeship program. We do not have as many as we would like, but that will flow into the ranger program that was mentioned. We run a cross-cultural awareness program for people who are posted into largely Indigenous areas. We provide a week's induction for the member and their family when they get posted to Katherine, for example, and vice versa when an Anglo-Saxon is posted to a largely Indigenous unit. There is a range of strategies in place, but I would emphasise that the overall strategy for Defence is still in its infancy.

To pick up on the point that Mr Snowdon made, one of the reasons we could not meet with you last week was that, for the first time, we were having a meeting in Darwin of everyone in Defence who is involved with Indigenous recruitment, retention or projects. Lieutenant Colonel Parker and the other RFSUs were involved. We had cadets and we had Defence Force Recruiting, as well as us. We were looking at who is doing what, for whom and why to see how we can leverage off everybody else. One of the big messages to come out was that, because NORFORCE and the other RFSUs are so successful, we need to be careful that we do not upset the applecart with any additional initiatives that we put in place.

**CHAIR**—Lieutenant Colonel Parker, I think you hinted at the transfer to other employers two or three times, but maybe we can tighten it up a little. You touched on it in terms of the mining industry. What is your experience of bringing people through? It is a great thing, but what is the general move? This goes back to the sustainability argument and retaining the people you are looking to retain. But what about the opportunity this creates for the transfer to other employers? Is it an issue?

**Lt Col. Parker**—It generally is not an issue for me. There is a very low employment rate within the communities anyway. Certainly around the mining areas there are opportunities for people whom we train and identify as being of sound character, and they are picked up. We have an example of that in Borroloola. One of our Indigenous guys, Corporal Sean Evans, was picked up as a ranger on the back of what he had done with the regiment and how good a soldier he was. He now spends most of his time being a ranger instead of providing me all the days a year. That is terrific for him and probably not so good for us, but it is a good example of how we have picked up a guy, identified his potential and put him through our system, and he has again been identified, separate to that. It is not a big issue for us in that we still do have a flow of people coming in who we can use all the time. But I guess in a lot of the communities there are not those employment opportunities you are talking about.

**CHAIR**—Yes. It has to be a positive; I was just alluding to the way that you do it and that the way you do it does make a difference in someone's life by allowing them to pick up skills which then allow them to move on. It is a positive thing.

Does anyone have any comments about income support and welfare payments and that sort of thing? Does anyone have any comments about the way our system interacts with that but does not assist us particularly? I know there are particular organisations—I can think of the ILC as one—which include incentives for people to be part of our system. It is a tough issue; nevertheless, it is there.

**Lt Col. Parker**—It is, and I probably would not be able to talk external to my organisation. My soldiers are reserve soldiers, so their salaries are tax free and do not impact on anything else that they may receive. I guess it is not an issue for us in that regard.

**CHAIR**—Thank you. Are there any comments at all on the Aboriginal Assistance Program, which I have notes on in my brief here? I am not that familiar with it, but maybe I should be.

**Mr SNOWDON**—It is terrific, and they can all do it in the Northern Territory and forget about South Australia!

**Ms Harris**—Of course, the problem with supporting the ACAP is that the units that have the skills for those tasks are in high demand for deployments as well, so they are increasingly not available to do the same number of tasks they have done in the past.

**Mr SNOWDON**—Barry, I visited Borroloola. The work they have done is very important. They effectively provide a core-building team—in this case it was a building team.

**CHAIR**—We are talking about the long-running one that has been there for a few years. Is that what we call it these days?

**Mr SNOWDON**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—I have had it in my own electorate, so I am familiar with it. I did not know whether this was some new name that we had invented, but it is the same deal.

**Mr SNOWDON**—It is the same program.

**CHAIR**—On Palm Island.

**Mr SNOWDON**—Yarralin.

**Mrs VALE**—I was there at Yarralin with the 17th Construction Squadron from my electorate and 21 Construction Regiment for a week. It was just phenomenal. It was phenomenal to see the interaction, too, of the community with the task force that was putting in an airport, an airfield and roads and building houses and everything.

**CHAIR**—And that was the issue at Palm Island. They were doing great work. They were greatly welcomed. But it was the same competing for resources for the task of the Army as for the task of defence.

**Mr SNOWDON**—But the other observation to be made about this is the positive impact it has on community relationships.

**Mrs VALE**—Absolutely.

**Mr SNOWDON**—I am a critic of practical reconciliation, but, if you wanted an example of what practical reconciliation could actually be—

**Mrs VALE**—It is the ACAP.

**Mr SNOWDON**—it is how this program operates.

**Mrs VALE**—If I might boast, I was actually made an honorary sapper.

**Mr SNOWDON**—Good, we'll have to dig latrines later on!

**CHAIR**—But it probably goes back to this: it is not the Army role in its core business to be resolving the literacy and numeracy issues of the Indigenous population of Australia. It is the way you do it that is of interest to the rest of us.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—That is the point I was trying to make.

**CHAIR**—Exactly—a very good point.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—The Army does it very well, but we cannot all sit back and say, 'Okay, the Army can do it.'

**CHAIR**—No, it is what we might learn from the Army that is important to us as a nation.

**Ms ANNETTE ELLIS**—We can learn from what you are doing and link into it.

**Mrs VALE**—And apply it elsewhere.

**CHAIR**—I want to raise a slightly different issue: the specific issues around the match-up of Indigenous skills that we have—and I accept the points of the statistical basis—and the reality of what is there. Is there any comment that we might make about bushcraft, the connection with land and that type of thing? Is there any additional thing that we perhaps should think about? Clearly you people are getting together and thinking about it in a more comprehensive way. I think it would be fair to say, Peter, that what you did last week indicates that there is a slightly different focus.

**Mr Sullivan**—Yes, certainly. I cannot emphasise enough that we are still in our infancy here, and one of the things that we do not want is to be driven too hard, too quickly, on this. We want to put in place the building blocks so that this becomes self-sustaining, because we have tried some of these things in the past. They are great for three years, and then all of a sudden they fall over—and everyone says, 'What happened?'—because the building blocks were not there. What we are looking at at the moment is coming out of last week. The next steps are to identify, around Defence, what the critical trades are, what the areas are, what the locations are, and what infrastructure—whether it is finance, people, buildings or whatever—we need to put in place to start to plan for the recruitment of people into these areas. You mentioned flow-on effects to other employers. Defence is working as part of the Commonwealth-Northern Territory agreement on the healthy country, healthy life program, which no doubt you have heard about, looking at how we can get people employed in caring for land and all those sorts of things. So there are things happening on a little bit of an ad hoc basis that I think need to be drawn together. I would not want to say too much more than that at this stage.

**CHAIR**—No, that is a fair point. We are here to encourage, not to get in your road. Can I go back to Captain McCracken, on the 2,600 new positions that are coming along—it is part of the same question, I suppose. Would you like to make a comment? Without pushing the barriers excessively and dealing with all the other issues that we know are there, I guess it goes without saying that certainly our Indigenous people are going to be part of that, but is there anything you would like to add to that?

**Capt. McCracken**—Absolutely. In addition, I think we learnt a bit from NORFORCE with respect to the application of standards going back the other way. Whilst ‘relaxation’ is not quite the right word, we have widened our recruiting base on a few of the entry standards that previously were perhaps more rigidly applied. I think that is going to assist with acquiring this extra 2,600. I have a very strong and positive vibe about what we are trying to achieve. The Indigenous communities form one part of it. There are plenty of others that we may be able to tap into. Previously we have not tried particularly hard. We wait behind the desk and, hopefully, you will rock up. We are doing a lot more high-tech as well as low-tech solutions, not just engaging the communities but also looking to go to the candidate. In other words, we are spending a lot more time seeking out more technically savvy people through various means. We are spending a lot more time looking into internet based recruitment and attraction rather than just putting the ads in the paper and on the telly, as we used to do. So there are other wider things—and I think that feeds nicely into rural and remote communities, where the opening up of technology to those areas has been a positive thing. So it is not just rural, it is not just remote and it is not just Indigenous; we can access the whole swag. So I am very keen.

**Mrs VALE**—I am reading the interview from Peter Huskins that was put in our brief. It is absolutely phenomenal. You are probably aware of this anyway, Warren. We talk about high technology and the skills that we can share with Indigenous people, but they obviously have some phenomenal skills that they can share with us. This story by Peter Huskins, whom I can only assume was in charge of an Indigenous unit during the Second World War, is phenomenal—

**Lt Col. Parker**—Yes, he was part of the North Australia Observer Unit.

**Mrs VALE**—What he said this Aboriginal man can do is phenomenal. He said:

Because we didn’t have any maps, we had to do our own maps, and having sort of been a Boy Scout and done a bit in the army too, we’d sort of do maps as we went. And so I’d take forward bearings, back bearings, and check it all. And of a night-time, I’d say to Joshua—

one of his Indigenous soldiers—

“Where him, number-one boss sit down?” Like, “Where’s the platoon commander?”—

of course, they were tracking—

And we’d be miles and miles away. And he could turn around and say, “Number one boss, him sit down there.” I could put the compass on his shoulder, and check with my back bearings and things. And he was never more than two or three degrees out. And I challenge all white men to see if they can sort of pinpoint something within two or three degrees when they’re probably 30, 40 miles away.

That is a phenomenal skill.

**Mr SNOWDON**—We have mentioned the Regional Force Surveillance Units. I notice that you employ Indigenous-specific persons in Townsville in Darwin.

**Ms Harris**—That is the Indigenous liaison officers for the school cadet program.

**Mr SNOWDON**—I am interested in hearing how successful you think you are in addressing the urban Indigenous population in many of the regional communities who are not in the Regional Force Surveillance Unit but may be potential candidates.

**Capt. McCracken**—That is a great question. Earlier this year we engaged with an office in Mount Druitt near Blacktown—I forget the name of the place. That is where I first became aware of the urban Indigenous communities and their employment plight. That was one of the early meetings that we had. It is very much at the embryonic stage now. But something I pinged on to was that perhaps we are not doing very much at all in terms of targeting the urbanised Indigenous communities and, indeed, the more southerly Indigenous communities as—without being too mercenary—targets for recruitment.

**Mrs VALE**—I wonder if those southern Indigenous communities would have those particular talents that the northern Indigenous communities have? If you are living in Mount Druitt can you do that sort of orientation and navigation instinctively like that Indigenous man could do? Has living in our urban culture taken away that ability?

**Capt. McCracken**—I do not believe they can.

**Mr SNOWDON**—But I do not think that is the issue.

**Capt. McCracken**—The issue is actually giving them a job.

**Ms Harris**—I do not think we should overlook the difficulty that is posed by having a group of people who often do not want to leave the general area in which they live. Whereas the regional force surveillance units have been enormously successful, we cannot simply apply that model to the ADF, but we might be able to look at other things. I was talking to Dick only last week about what would be the prospects, for example, of a batch of Indigenous soldiers recruited from the north who might have to come south for their training but ultimately be recruited direct to a unit in the infantry battalion based in Darwin. There might be some capacity to do that, but at the moment when we recruit for the ADF generally they go to Kapooka, do their training and could end up in any corner of Australia. That is much less attractive, I suspect, to the sorts of people that we are looking at targeting here.

**CHAIR**—And just not within Australia, of course.

**Ms Harris**—Initially it is within Australia; then it could be anywhere.

**CHAIR**—It is just that I am conscious of the fact that one fellow said to us that the thought of going overseas was confronting.



**Ms Harris**—We need to look at that and at ways that we can make it more attractive.

**Mr SNOWDON**—Have you had any discussions with Vietnam vets who were Aboriginal soldiers?

**Ms Harris**—No. I do not know whether Dick has.

**Mr SNOWDON**—There is a bloke in Alice Springs called Geoffrey Shaw, who was a volunteer. He did two tours in Vietnam and went to Malaya. He came back and could not get into the RSL and all that sort of stuff, but he had a very positive experience in the Army. I am sure there would be a lot of guys like him who could probably give you some guidance if you talked to them.

**Ms Harris**—I think the difficulty, though, is recruiting in numbers. As Peter said, we need to start and to keep building and building. If we can be good at what we do, even on a small scale, we can build on that. We have not been good enough yet, I do not think, to retain the people.

**Mr SNOWDON**—My point is that we are building our strategy on a position of ignorance, because we do not know what has gone before. We have never spoken to people. My point is that, if you actually engage some of these guys—

**CHAIR**—I support that. I have an Aboriginal fellow in my electorate by the name of Ben O'Murray—I do not know whether he has passed on—who served in two wars. He actually turned 100. Of course, there is the famous Reg Saunders as well. There are a whole lot of issues in that in the way we encourage people. I will finish by quoting an Indigenous fellow we ran into at El Questro—and Mrs Vale might remember him. He said:

I was interested in the Army colours. When I was a kid I always wanted to join the Army. One day something just made me go to the office at Kununurra and I signed up. They told me to come back next year and start my training. I did that. I have been in the Army for two years now. Next year will make it three years.

The question came up about how the warrant officer at Kununurra had encouraged him. He said:

If a white person is racist, we Aborigines think that all white people are like that. It is the same if a white person sees one of our countrymen sleeping on the lawn and drinking, and they think all of us are like that. He tells us not to be racist, not to judge people. He tells you the real thing, not to be ignorant or anything like that. He encourages people, especially locals, to come and join the Army. He explains that if we help them look after the country we are looking after our own country because we are stopping them from coming in and doing this and that. That is how he encourages the Aborigines to go and work like that.

That is just the local language, encouraging people to come in and change their lives. This fellow was as bright as a button. He was up there and at them. He would have some challenges as well but, as a young Indigenous man, he was right there having a crack at it. Ladies and gentlemen, unless there is anything else, thank you for appearing today.

Resolved (on motion by **Ms Ellis**, seconded by **Mrs Vale**):

That this committee authorises publication of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

**Committee adjourned at 12.24 pm**