

Senate, Monday 28 October 1996

COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Joint: Report

Senator MacGIBBON (Queensland) (4.23 p.m.) —I present the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade entitled *Defence Subcommittee Visit to Queensland and the Northern Territory, 5-8 August 1996*. I seek leave to move a motion in relation to the report.

Leave granted.

Senator MacGIBBON —I move:

That the Senate take note of the report.

The report I am tabling today is the record of a short tour of inspection which the Defence Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade undertook in August this year. The program of familiarisation visits, inspections and briefings encompassed key defence establishments in Brisbane, Townsville and Darwin.

The program placed appropriate emphasis on the subcommittee's interest in learning first hand of the activities of the ADF. Although short, the program of visits and meetings provided very useful information for members of the subcommittee, particularly those who joined the subcommittee during this parliament.

During the program we had many opportunities to discuss topical defence issues with commanding officers and service personnel. We gained invaluable insights into capabilities and requirements in the north. However, the report we have presented does not pretend to be an exhaustive discussion of all the topics raised with or by the subcommittee during the familiarisation program.

We were particularly interested in seeing what has been undertaken through the APIN project, the army presence in the north project, which has been developing mainly at Robertson Barracks in Darwin since 1989 and will continue until the final phase of the project in the year 2001. Fully realised, APIN will see the relocation of some 2,300 soldiers and 2,600 family members to Darwin. APIN represents a departure from the traditional home location of elements of the Australian Defence Force in southern capitals and towns, and emphasises instead the establishment of quick response operational units which are self-sufficient and trained for remote areas.

APIN represents a major commitment to increasing Australia's defence capabilities in the north as well as a considerable financial investment. It is a clear example of tailoring modern accommodation construction techniques to meet the demanding climate of the tropics. The overall cost of the project has been estimated at around \$500 million and there are significant flow-on effects for the Northern Territory economy.

We learned that defence is directly spending at present an average of \$2 million per week in the Northern Territory. With construction added, it would be closer to \$4 million per week not including construction and maintenance expenditure by the Defence Housing Authority. In eight years of operation in Darwin, the authority has injected \$27.3 million on average each year into the local economy. The relative effect of direct and indirect defence expenditure is expected to be maintained at around 10 per cent of the gross territory product from 1995 to 2001.

One of the features of APIN which impressed the subcommittee was the continued partnership with private industry in the design and construction of facilities and amenities and in the associated tendering processes which were designed to encourage the participation of small as well as large contractors.

The Defence Housing Authority has also participated in successful joint ventures with private sector developers. We attended the opening of Fairway Waters, the latest collaborative

project at Palmerston, south-east of Darwin. It provides high-quality housing for defence personnel as well as for private purchasers.

Another area of major interest to the subcommittee during the northern visits was the Army 21 review, the proposed blueprint for the army for the 21st century, which had been presented to the Minister for Defence (Mr McLachlan). This has now been overtaken by the Restructuring of the Army statement by the Minister for Defence in the last sitting week. However, given the significance of Army 21 as a paper for the future of Australia's defence as it was then, the subcommittee was surprised that the broad thrust of the proposals did not appear to be widely disseminated through the army's chain of command. Also there has been much media speculation in recent months about the new direction proposed for Australia's army of the future. The subcommittee has sought a briefing from the Minister for Defence on the restructuring proposals for the army and looks forward to receiving the briefing now that the minister made his defence policy statement in the parliament on 15 October.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Minister for Defence, and the military and civilian personnel who assisted in ensuring the success of the subcommittee's familiarisation program. I also thank the secretariat of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, who worked closely with defence personnel to develop a program of visits, briefings and inspections which has provided so much valuable information to subcommittee members about defence requirements and capabilities in northern Australia.

The central part of the visit was to see the development that has taken place in recent years of the presence of the Australian Defence Force in the north—the APIN or army presence in the north program. This is a very important program as well as being a very expensive one. The importance of it lies in the fact that it acclimatises troops who were formerly in Victoria and in the southern part of New South Wales to life in the tropics.

Since the prospective area of operations for Australian Defence Force troops will be either in the northern part of Australia or in South-East Asia, the acclimatisation of those troops is a matter that takes time and is a very important adjunct in their training and preparedness. At the same time it exposes their equipment and, to a certain degree, their doctrine, the way they operate, to the requirements of the climate as well. It tests them in a way that would not be possible to do at Holsworthy or Puckapunyal in the southern part of the continent.

Undeniably, it is a very high cost program because you are supporting a large establishment a long way from its source of supplies. The evidence given to the committee and recorded in this report from army was that, just off the top of their head, they estimated it was costing between \$15,000 and \$16,000 per soldier per annum as a consequence of the location.

Clearly, the original reason for the deployment to the north taken by the Labor government was wrong. It was based on the Dibb concept of defending Australia by lining the beaches with troops shoulder to shoulder—a philosophy which, sadly, still lives on, particularly in army today in many quarters. But there are some advantages in it.

Professor Dibb's basic philosophy is quite wrong. What is absolutely crucial is for the Australian Defence Force and the Australian nation to know what is going on in that area. It is also terribly important for us to demonstrate our sovereignty over the territorial areas that we claim as our own: on the land, in the air and at sea. If a nation does not demonstrate its sovereignty then people do not respect that sovereignty. We must know what is going on in and through the airspace, over and under the water and on the landmass there, but that does not mean that you put your armed combat force units in that area. Nevertheless, it has happened now. Whatever the reasons, we have got a major financial investment in the north that we simply cannot walk away from. We have got to make the most of it and use it as effectively as we can for the benefit of the Defence Force and for the benefit of the country. I will be very interested to read the report being prepared by the Australian National Audit Office into the cost of the army presence in the north. The ANAO has just started to prepare

the report. I say that because it is important in these times of restricted budgets for Defence that we know precisely what everything is costing us. I do not think that should be the sole determinant of what we do, what capabilities we should acquire or what force structures we should have—far from it. Defence is not a business: it is not something that presents a balance sheet and pays a dividend in a monetary sense every year. Its great dividend is the peace and security of this country, and that is a matter that cannot be quantified.

I do think it is important that we get a very accurate handle on this instead of making the assumptions that we have to make at the present time about the cost of the army presence in the north. I look forward to the audit office report being available to the parliament in a year or so.

Senator IAN MACDONALD (Queensland) (4.32 p.m.) —I wish to speak to the motion moved by Senator MacGibbon. Like all other residents of North Queensland, I am particularly proud of the Australian defence forces in the North Queensland area. I want to support my colleague Senator MacGibbon in his remarks on the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade entitled *Defence Sub-Committee Visit to Queensland and the Northern Territory, 5-8 August 1996* which was tabled today. Senator MacGibbon was, of course, the chairman of the Defence Subcommittee and was actually the leader of the group that completed this report. The work of the committee is very obvious. I am also a member of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, but unfortunately I was not able to be involved in this particular trip.

I am a North Queenslander and, like all others who live in the north, I am very proud of the army, navy and air force as they are established in North Queensland and the tremendous role they play in the community. The particular visit which this report records was organised to familiarise members of the Defence Subcommittee with a range of defence establishments in northern Australia. I want to confine my remarks to that area of northern Queensland with which I am most familiar.

The committee met with Brigadier Mike Smith AM, the commander of the 3rd Brigade, and his officers. Lavarack Barracks is the headquarters of the 3rd Brigade and incorporates two infantry battalions—1 RAR and 2 RAR. The capability of the brigade is enhanced by the Townsville based allocated units, which are the 5th Aviation Regiment, the 2nd Field Logistic Battalion, No. 35 Squadron RAAF and the Operational Support Group RAAF. The 3rd Brigade is held at the very highest degree of readiness for operations and is the major combat component of the Australian Defence Force's Ready Deployment Force. A large proportion of the brigade's exercise training schedule involves joint training with the RAN and the RAAF. It also participates in combined exercises with United States and Indonesian forces. These exercises are of value in gaining new skills and ideas and in developing teamwork and understanding between defence forces of neighbouring countries.

The army presence in Townsville contributes very significantly to the local community and the economy. I have to say that small business generally benefits greatly from the presence of the army at Lavarack Barracks in Townsville. The army provides an enormous amount towards employment in the northern city. As well, the defence forces play a major community role. Many of the soldiers and airmen in Townsville are fully integrated in a very significant way within the local community.

Importantly, the Defence Subcommittee raised in discussions the role of army community service in minimising the negative impacts of overseas service—as in the case of Somalia and Rwanda—on service personnel and families, the army's relations with the wider Townsville community, and the impact of the transfer program when service personnel and families are transferred either to or out of Townsville to other bases Australia-wide.

The committee also met with Wing Commander Graham O'Brien, Wing Commander Geoff Lydeamore and Wing Commander Richards at the Townsville RAAF Base. The RAAF Base

accommodates the Headquarters of the Operational Support Group, No. 84 Wing, 5th Aviation, the Combat Survival Training School and 323 Air Base Wing. Air Base Wing and No. 84 Wing are staffed by 390 service personnel and 33 civilian personnel and comprise a number of different units. The role of No. 84 Wing is to provide safe and effective short-range fixed-wing transport support to meet the requirements of the Australian defence forces.

The 5th Aviation Regiment was established as an army unit in 1987 and now operates more aircraft than any other operational ADF unit. It provides air mobility and battlefield support to 3rd Brigade and it works closely on training exercises with the SAS. Further, 5th Aviation Regiment gives community assistance in search and rescue and flood relief operations and in relation to most civilian calamities—particularly the cyclones that we experience all too often in the north. The regiment plays a major and very beneficial role in that regard.

The Townsville community was shaken by the Black Hawk accident at the high range training area in June this year. It affected all ranges of people across the Townsville community.

Within my office two of my staff—through family and close friends—knew of people who were either killed or seriously injured in that accident.

The Black Hawk helicopters were engaged on a Special Air Service Regiment training exercise when the accident occurred. Eighteen service personnel were killed and others were seriously injured. The army has taken action to counsel and support the service personnel and their families. Just this week, the inquiry into the Black Hawk helicopters crash is being convened in Townsville.

The Defence Subcommittee also learned about the levels of Black Hawk serviceability after the major maintenance problems experienced in 1995. The parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works was also in Townsville last week and it heard that maintenance costs would blow out to over the allocated \$1.4 million per aircraft unless action was taken quickly to correct the corrosion. Corrosion in those aircraft can seriously reduce the life of the helicopters. I understand that the government has announced that steps will be taken to properly house those helicopters so that the maintenance problems are minimised.

Also, the Defence Subcommittee visited the Jezzine barracks, the headquarters of the 11th Brigade, and were briefed by the brigade's commander, Brigadier Neil Weekes. Eleventh Brigade is the only reserve formation in an area which stretches from Thursday Island and within three kilometres of the Papua New Guinea border, west to the Queensland border and south to a line joining Mount Isa and Ingham. Although Townsville is the headquarters of the brigade, it does not actually lie within the brigade's tactical area of operations.

The brigade is an independent brigade group trained for protective operations. Its regional surveillance task is to examine and monitor civil infrastructure capabilities which would support military operations protecting vital assets. These vital assets include the port of Weipa and RAAF Scherger, Thursday Island, Horn Island, Mount Isa, Cairns, the port of Karumba, the Prince of Wales Channel, Endeavour Passage and the Carpentaria Mineral Province. The 11th Brigade has three army reserve battalions and support formations—31 Battalion RQR based in Townsville, 42 Battalion RQR based in Rockhampton, and 51 Battalion FNQR headquartered in Cairns but moving right up Cape York and into the Torres Strait islands—and it has a signals squadron, a field battery and brigade administrative support.

As well, the Commonwealth is currently involved in expenditure in the high range army area west of Townsville, where a lot of the training work for our defence forces takes place. It is interesting that the army have appointed senior level officers with appropriate qualifications to keep an eye on the environmental consequences of training in some parts of Queensland that are very environmentally sensitive. It is, indeed, pleasing to see that the army have, at high level, taken an interest in the environmental aspects of their training.

All in all, it was good to have the Defence Subcommittee visit the north to see what the defence forces do, and it raises again the tremendously good relationships which the defence

forces have with the local communities and gives us an opportunity to highlight the very effective and necessary work that our defence forces do in North Queensland.