

# DEFENCE AND INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS: AN UNTOLD STORY

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe** speaks to **Lisa Phelps**, head of the Department of Defence's Directorate of Indigenous Affairs

While the ADF has long engaged with Australia's Indigenous community, especially in Australia's remote northerly recesses, the advent of a distinctive official policy to involve the nation's Indigenous people is a noticeably recent initiative. As of February this year, Indigenous Australians comprised 1.1% of the regular ADF, or 622 personnel; 1.7% of the active reserve, or 421 personnel; and 0.9% of public servants in the Department of Defence (or 183 personnel). In March 2014, **Lisa Phelps**, head of the Department of Defence's Directorate of Indigenous Affairs (DIA), spoke to **Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe** in an exclusive interview. Among the topics discussed were why the DIA was founded, the impact Indigenous Australians have had on Defence, complexities inherent in Defence Indigenous recruitment, details of the DIA's programs, the challenges of outreach and implementation, and the directorate's future objectives.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** Could you give me an overview of when and why this directorate was formed?

**Lisa Phelps:** The directorate came into existence in July 2008, and its role is to provide leadership and direction on Indigenous issues. There are also four Indigenous Recruitment Advisors (IRAs), one each in Sydney, Cairns, Darwin and Perth. Their role is to advice recruitment centres on Indigenous applicants, and mentor and support the applicants going through the process. These

Indigenous recruiters keep track of the Indigenous candidates, help put together the paperwork, make sure the applicants think about what jobs they want to do, and encourage them to turn up to the next session. Recruiters are also responsible for referring applicants to the additional support programs we run.

There were two genesis areas that led to an amalgamation following our first Reconciliation Action Plan 2007–09. Defence Force Recruiting, the main recruiting organisation for the ADF, was starting to think about the diversity of the organisation and the benefits of a diverse workforce. It was at a time when the ADF was working hard to attract recruits. It could no longer rely on the traditional pool of applicants. The timing also coincided with a government-led change in focus with the official apology by Kevin Rudd in 2008.

In addition, preliminary work had been done leading up to the 2009 white paper about programs that might help the DIA recruit from the Indigenous workforce. One of the initiatives out of the white paper was the Defence Indigenous Development Program (DIDP), a program we still run (although further developed).



**Lisa Phelps** is the head of the Department of Defence's Directorate of Indigenous Affairs.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** How does the DIA coordinate with the three services on Indigenous recruits?

**Lisa Phelps:** It's more like a partnership than the services following the DIA. The three service chiefs have the clear responsibility to raise, train and sustain their workforce. The DIA steers and influences what the three are doing. They do develop their own Indigenous programs, policies and approaches but they do so in consultation with us.

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**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** Where do you think Indigenous Australians have made their mark in Defence?

**Lisa Phelps:** Indigenous people working with us has built a significant capability improvement across the northern half of Australia. There are also examples of improvements through bush medicines, first aid, and safety at sea (where we have used local knowledge to improve the doctrine and training systems, and therefore, improve the capability of all DIA people). There's a huge contribution to culture change, so having Indigenous people work with us in any capacity has an impact on the rest of the Defence workforce's view of the wider Australia, particularly Indigenous Australia. As far as a way of promulgating the softer side of 'Close the Gap,' which is recognition, understanding and reconciliation, having Indigenous people in Defence has helped in keeping the thinking of the organisation contemporary.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** What are the unique challenges of recruiting Indigenous Australians compared to the rest of Australian society?

**Lisa Phelps:** The most important element of a successful relationship with Indigenous communities, Torres Strait Islander or Aboriginal people, is ongoing respect, trust and confidence. The challenges we now face are the length of the effort and the immediacy of our impact. We sow

a seed that has a harvest in many years' time. It's more about relationship building than recruitment. We have to focus our efforts on communities and the community influencers: the elders (the people involved with health care in that particular community or region) and the state players and governments (which have carriage of impacting the community's ability to form a trusted relationship with us). In all our programs, we run cultural sessions that line up with Defence values, and navigate 'Walking in Two Worlds,' which is delivered by a senior Indigenous Army warrant officer. This officer talks about how as part of joining Defence, you're joining a family and being part of the Defence family. Any prior cultural issues have to be left at the door. These cultural sessions segue into a lesson about Defence values, integrity, professionalism and loyalty. We look at how culture fits within Defence, its traditions and history. We spend quite some time on the idea of recruits joining a Defence family.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** Are there any notable differences in engaging with Torres Strait Islander communities as opposed to Aboriginal communities?

**Lisa Phelps:** I've been to Thursday Island and met the mayor of the Torres Shire—and I haven't noticed any differences. Yes, there are cultural differences, but our engagement is not necessarily different by a division of geography. There are some preferences, though. For example, it is more likely that the Torres Strait people will be interested in the Navy because the skills they've grown up with match the skills the Navy needs. But there is also a strong history in the Torres Strait of the Army—they were the first whole community to stand together in World War II.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** Tell us about the Defence Indigenous Development Program (DIDP) and how it, and other programs, have evolved since first initiated?

**Lisa Phelps:** North-West Mobile Force (NORFORCE), an infantry regiment of the Australian Army Reserve, was integral to the foundation of the DIDP. It started as a seven-

month program to provide existing soldiers language, literacy and numeracy support so they could be promoted in NORFORCE. The DIDP also aimed to build up new recruits to a minimum standard of language literacy and numeracy. That was the genesis. Now it has been split into two separate courses.

One is a five-month DIDP for new Defence recruits in the Northern Territory to give them a military experience (we also run one in Cairns specific to the Navy). We take prospective recruits out on the field and run drills, we provide physical training, we teach life skills, and at the end, they walk away with a certificate II or III from TAFE, or from another tertiary organisation. The certificate is dependent on their capacity. The aim of this course is to prepare interested people to join the ADF, not just into the top end of the NORFORCE or 51 Far North Queensland Regiment (51FNQR) but also into the full-time regular ADF across Australia. Participants not successful in joining the ADF gain skills useful in getting other employment.

The second is a two-month language, literacy and numeracy (navigation and maths) course for existing Regional Force Surveillance Unit (RFSU) soldiers to prepare them for the next level of promotional courses.

Following on the success of the DIDP, Defence introduced a six-week Indigenous Pre-Recruitment Course (IPRC) in 2008 to provide an introduction to military life, including physical fitness demands. We develop leadership skills and an understanding of Defence values, and also confirm the participants' academic levels. A minimum Year 10 standard is needed to join the ADF. We have a partnership with TAFE Southwest Sydney Institute, who evaluate their academic abilities. Approximately 30 students are attending each IPRC. We conducted two in 2013 and will conduct four this year. The first one was in 2008 and we have conducted at least 12 since. We participate in the cadetships, traineeships and graduates pathways program run by Australian Public Service Commission (APSC), and a development program/traineeship for a Certificate IV or diploma through the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** Cultural awareness training is a fundamental component of what the DIA does within Defence. Tell us more about how this is being implemented.

**Lisa Phelps:** We are responsible for building the cultural competence of the Defence. In November last year, we launched an e-learning package on cultural awareness. It includes an overview of Indigenous contributions throughout Defence history. There is also an overview of the government agenda and background on NAIDOC, and a reconciliation week. It is a foundation level of knowledge for the entire Defence. We're also trying to target particular areas to introduce cultural awareness as part of promotional courses and the ADF curriculum.

Our next step is to integrate Indigenous components in our mainstream activities such as ANZAC Day

We run the National Reconciliation Week and NAIDOC Week events within Defence using a layered approach. There is usually a large Canberra-based event involving senior leaders—the Chief of the Defence Force, for example, gives a speech during NAIDOC week at a War Memorial ceremony for serving Indigenous members from all three services. We also run regional events such as lunchtime sessions for networking in regional locations. We are very excited about this year's NAIDOC theme of 'Serving Country: Centenary and Beyond,' and will be conducting a range of events leading up to, and including, NAIDOC Week.

Our next step is to integrate Indigenous components in our mainstream activities such as ANZAC Day rather than, or as well as, holding a NAIDOC Week event. We would also like to have some involvement in every dawn service in the country. We are starting to engage through our Indigenous cultural advisory group, which was established with the RSL and Veterans' Affairs, to say to them, 'It would be ideal if we could involve some sort of Indigenous ceremony and reflect the Indigenous service in all the events

that are important to Defence.’ That also leads to Gallipoli in 2015.

Students come from across Australia and get a taste of military life. The idea is to spark an interest in joining the ADF and choosing a trade, or applying for the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA).

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** Why was the Defence Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Network (DATSIN) created?

**Lisa Phelps:** The DATSIN has three main purposes. The first is as a networking opportunity to meet and develop relationships with other Indigenous members of the Australian Public Service (APS) and Defence. The second purpose is to provide members an opportunity to influence the future direction of Indigenous Affairs policy, programs and strategy. DATSIN members have a strong voice in everything we do. Finally, the network also performs an ambassadorial role—DATSIN members talk with their workplaces and communities about Defence, and the focus on Indigenous affairs within Defence. They are well informed about all the programs we have. They get together annually in a formal sense, but more informally through electronic means. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can be part of the DATSIN. To date, we haven’t screened attendees; however, it is marketed as a conference for Indigenous staff or those involved in Indigenous programs. An annual DATSIN conference is also held. Last year it was held in August in Canberra on the HMAS *Harman*. We fly in any APS or ADF Indigenous or interested people into one location. We discuss all the things on our radar, and things of interest to them as well. But in the network, any interested people can be involved more broadly. For example, Victoria has a Victorian DATSIN, where they’ve recently met to discuss Victorian issues and contact Victorian communities and elders. Also the APSC facilitates the network across the entire APS, and we have a conduit into that as well.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** What about the Jawun program? What is it intended to achieve?

**Lisa Phelps:** Jawun means ‘meeting place.’ Jawun is a not-for-profit organisation that brokers secondments from the government and corporate sectors to a range of Indigenous organisations across Australia. The APS is a partner in Jawun. Through Jawun, we provide people for secondments to share their skills and experience. Jawun operates in six regions: the Kimberley in Western Australia; Cape York and Arnhem Land in Queensland; the Goulburn Valley in the Shepparton region of Victoria; La Perouse in Sydney; and the Central Coast. Executive level staff in the public service can volunteer for a Jawun secondment and are chosen by matching skills with the projects the regions are considering. But the interesting thing about the Jawun program is that while it helps the region, there’s also a big flow-on effect in the work area for returning APS employees. These can be life-changing secondments. Defence also benefits from the cultural awareness, understanding and appreciation that come from living in the communities for six weeks.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** What is the rationale behind Indigenous student study tours?

**Lisa Phelps:** Students come from across Australia and get a taste of military life. The idea is to spark an interest in joining the ADF and choosing a trade, or applying for the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA). There are about 25 students in each tour. We take them to Duntroon, the ADFA, Defence Force Recruiting, and the Australian War Memorial; we even do a bit of physical training. We teach them drill, and we give them a weeklong ‘life in the ADF’ experience. In the March study tour, Indigenous high school students visited the RAAF base in Wagga to look at all the Defence trade schools in that area. We conducted two tours in Canberra last year focusing on officer careers.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** Which DIA program with Defence would you describe as being the most successful?

**Lisa Phelps:** Well, noting the fair bit of difference in their outcomes, I would say the Indigenous Pre-Recruitment Course. For example, in December 2013, 23 participants graduated, and by the end of the course 10 participants had already started the process to join Defence. That's a good outcome. So, even though it's not a pass or fail on the course, we try to get 100% to graduate from each course, but in terms of how many decide to move onto an ADF career, some decide Defence is not for them, while others choose a public service career in Defence.

**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** Conversely, as with anything, there will always be challenges. What are some of the impediments the DIA has encountered in engaging with Indigenous communities?

**Lisa Phelps:** It's a relationship built on trust, and it's built over time. So we can't just fly into an area and expect to get ADF recruits or APS employees out of a community with only one visit of one day. We have to have recurring contact and need to keep in touch with the communities we are recruiting from. Families and elders and other members in Indigenous communities have a lot of influence over whether their young men and women will join Defence. A lot of it is about reputation, trust and perception of Defence. Sectors such as the NORFORCE or the 51FNQR are based in the community, and it is easier because they're there constantly. But in other areas it's not as easy to maintain that contact, and so we have to work harder at it. That's why most of my staff are not based in Canberra but out in regional areas so they can maintain a presence in their local communities. We have to always be very mindful of our reputation because any damage to it can affect Defence's recruiting ability.

However, we do have some work to do in some areas. Our latest Defence Indigenous Employment Strategy 2012–17 has moved Defence's focus from predominately engaging with remote communities to also building relationships with regional and urban communities. What I've come across when I've been out in the community is that communities

are concerned about their young people, and want employment opportunities for them. They're also looking for role models for their young people, and that's what Defence has to offer. Once we're able to get the message out there and reinforce it on a regular basis, there will be a lot of interest in what Defence offers.

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**Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe:** What DIA's future objectives are within Defence and how they are likely to be achieved?

**Lisa Phelps:** Our main aim is to integrate Indigenous Affairs into everybody's area of concern. The ADF has committed to an Indigenous composition of 2.7% within Defence, which is in line with what we're aiming for on the public service side as well. It stems from the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreement. Integration means there would be a cultural awareness piece in every training package continuum that is developed. If you're becoming a commanding officer, and you're doing the commanding officer courses, you will get a component of cultural awareness training. If you are doing security vetting for security clearances, you will be made aware of the challenges in gathering paperwork and the history of where you've lived if you are an Indigenous person, because you may have a complicated background. These really are the basics for understanding diversity and being inclusive, not just about Indigenous people. Basically, everyone in the organisation will be much more aware of the complexities in our Indigenous workforce, and will make decisions in line with our objectives. That's our long-term aim. It will take us some time to get there, but in the year that I have been here I can say that there has been a marked improvement in awareness.