

INDIGENOUS NATION BUILDING: THE ARMY ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe spoke to the Army's Force Engineer, Colonel Steve Gliddon, about what until now has remained a largely untold story.



Though little known, the Australian Army has made a significant contribution to the development of Indigenous communities in Australia. Not only does the Army have the distinction of being the first equal opportunity employer of Indigenous Australians, but it also contributes, on an annual basis, substantial resources to improve infrastructure and living conditions in remote Indigenous communities. The Army Aboriginal

Community Assistance Programme, or AACAP, is a salient example of how the Australian Defence Force has committed itself to assisting remote Aboriginal communities. Now in its 19th year, since its inception the Commonwealth Government has spent an estimated \$120 million on the initiative, which has aided 40 Indigenous communities and seen around 5,000 Army personnel cycle through the programme. In an exclusive interview conducted in December 2014, **Serge DeSilva-Ranasinghe**

spoke to the Army's Force Engineer, **Colonel Steve Gliddon**, about what until now has remained a largely untold story.

Serge DeSilva-Ranasinghe: Steve, thanks for making yourself available. Could I start by asking you to explain how and why AACAP came into being?

Steve Gliddon: When the initiative was announced in October 1996, the three parties involved were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the Department of Health and Family Services, and the Army. It arose after a meeting between the members of the Council of Aboriginal Reconciliation and the Prime Minister, where concerns were raised about the poor health of Indigenous Australians. Out of that AACAP was born. The first project commenced in 1997 in a community called Bulla in the Northern Territory.

When it first commenced AACAP was focused on primary health and related infrastructure.

Generally when we're on the ground it's for a period of about four to five months. The contingent stays in the vicinity of the supported community; they'll set up a self-contained camp, they'll engage with the community, not only as part of their day to day activities, but also engage through things such as sports. There are often welcome and farewell ceremonies so it's, if you like, complete immersion in that local area. When it first commenced AACAP was focused on primary health and related infrastructure.

There have been five rounds of funding in AACAP's life so far. The first one, being rather modest, spanned three years and was around \$13 million. The funding allocated in subsequent rounds has been in the order of \$20 and \$40 million. Over the life of AACAP so far the aggregate financial contribution of the Commonwealth Government has been about \$120 million, a substantial commitment. AACAP is almost 20 years old and we have thus far assisted

about 40 Aboriginal communities. We've operated in Western Australia, Northern Territory, South Australia, and Queensland and we've got a good spread of individual projects across those States. It is no coincidence that's where the remote and disadvantaged communities are.

During the initial AACAP years we partnered with ATSIC and the Department of Health and Family Services, but around 2004 our partner changed. It became the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). At the time there was the National Aboriginal Health Strategy and AACAP's aims and objectives were aligned with that. Then in 2009, through agreement with our partner organisations, AACAP's scope was widened to include training, health, housing, and education initiatives. That was where we aligned with the "Closing the Gap" (COAG) initiative. Only a few years after that, and just last year again with government changes, our partner organisation changed from FaHCSIA to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C). This happened as a result of PM Abbott's election commitment that Indigenous Affairs would be moved out of FaHCSIA and into his Department.

Serge DeSilva-Ranasinghe: Can you describe how AACAP has changed over the last 19 years?

Steve Gliddon: There are two key areas. Initially our rate of effort was far too high. For example, in 1998 we assisted four communities in one year, and that was the point at which we identified that AACAP's rate of effort was unsustainable. Doing four projects, simultaneously, in different parts of the country was too much. At the time each project was in the order of about \$1–3 million. However, once we had determined what a sustainable rate of effort was, the funding available for a particular project has become, over a period of time, \$6 million.

Another specific change happened 10 years into AACAP after a review led to its scope being broadened to enable more flexibility on what we could do on the ground. For example, in the early days what we could deliver was tightly linked to

environmental health. What was delivered on the ground often meant that we were building houses, sealing roads, or waste water treatment systems, whereas now the scope is more open and we can build community centres, family and childcare centres, and so on.

Serge DeSilva-Ranasinghe: Tell us about the process of how an Aboriginal community is selected for AACAP?

Steve Gliddon: Ultimately the community is selected by the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, after some consultation with the Minister of Defence, and the priority goes to remote communities of significant need. Our partners in PM&C, and in particular the Infrastructure Branch and their state counterparts, are quite adept at identifying those communities. We look at going to communities that are the most disadvantaged, and would most benefit from the application of Defence resources. In order to do this, it is necessary for the Commonwealth Government to have the support of the state and territory governments and the selected Aboriginal community itself. The process of selection takes about six months. In that process there need to be submissions made to the Minister, but in terms of the entire process it is reasonably concise. And it is always done as a joint activity between ourselves and our partners in PM&C. When we deploy we try to coordinate with any existing programmes that are going on in a particular community, it's not a set template so we have to treat each community on a case by case basis. One of the things that we do look at when we plan is what else is going on, who else is operating there and what other programmes are being rolled out, so we capitalise on existing efficiencies and synergies.

In effect, we approach it in multiple stages. We try to identify what state or territory that we need to go into, then we try to identify the communities that are the most disadvantaged, and then we do a feasibility study by visiting the communities and seeing firsthand what the conditions are like and what their needs may be. From there we jointly put recommendations to the Minister for

Indigenous Affairs, and ultimately the Minister chooses the recipient community. We like to have sufficient lead time to set the activities up properly. If you are familiar with building a house or doing any construction yourself, you might be familiar with development or design approval processes. Similar sorts of things apply to us, particularly when we are building infrastructure. But because we are dealing with cultural heritage, we are often dealing with multiple stakeholders and trying to determine organisations to take on ownership and maintenance responsibilities for whatever we build on the ground. It can end up being quite complex. The lead time is important to work through all those issues, so when it comes time to actually have uniformed folk on the ground, all of those issues have been worked through, and the team can simply concentrate on delivering construction, training or health services.

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Serge DeSilva-Ranasinghe: Can you describe the typical organisation and composition of an AACAP task force?

Steve Gliddon: I wouldn't actually describe it as a task force as such. It might be best if I briefly describe my position. I am the Force Engineer. In the Army I am the lead advocate for engineering capabilities. I'm the lead interface if you like with our partners in PM&C. As the Force Engineer I follow the command chain, so I answer to a Brigade Commander who answers to the Forces Commander, who answers to the Chief of Army. In terms of the governance of AACAP there's a Steering Committee and I'm Army's representative. I have a counterpart in PM&C, who manages the Infrastructure Branch. The Steering Committee provides the strategic guidance for AACAP as a programme.

There's a distinction between my role and what the Army folk on the ground are doing. I work at the programme or strategic level. The folk on the

ground are very much at the coalface, at what we in the Army call the “Tactical Level.” Normally, the AACAP contingent commander is a Major. He is the lead guy on the ground and is focused on that particular task. In contrast, I’m not only focused on this year’s activity, I have a focus on making sure that last year’s activity is being closed-out successfully. In terms of the mechanics of a task for any given year, for what Army builds, we usually have what is called a “Defects Liability Period.” This means if things go wrong with the building and it’s due to our workmanship or something that we might have missed, then for 12 months after we’ve physically finished, we need to be prepared to go back and fix it. Those sorts of things are usually minimal. I’m responsible for closing out last year, about making sure that this year runs successfully, making sure the contingent is getting the support they need from wider organisations in the Army and Defence. And then I’m looking into future years, making sure they’re getting set up properly so they can be successful when it comes time for the contingent to again deploy on the ground.

Over the life of each AACAP project we have somewhere between 250 and 300 personnel participating.

When it comes to what sits beneath me on the Army side, there are two principle units that get involved with AACAP on the construction side. The first unit is the 19th Chief Engineer Works who are our design and project management experts. They get quite closely involved in what we call our “Inception Phase.” Once we’ve selected a community they do the detailed scoping of what we might do, which leads into the detailed design and planning for what we’re going to build. We also have another unit called the 6th Engineer Support Regiment from which most of the soldiers are drawn, who actually do the construction and deliver the other components of AACAP.

Around 70 percent of the AACAP contingent is made up of Army engineers. The other 30 percent are support personnel. Our support element

consists of cooks, medics, our logistics folk or storemen, communications people, and the training element. We bring the full spectrum of equipment that we might need to do the job. That might range from tents that the troops live in, to cooking equipment to feed and sustain the troops, to earth moving equipment that we might need to build a road: such as bulldozers and front-end loaders, to flatbed trucks and dump trucks to help us move soil and equipment around. With vehicles, you’re talking perhaps 50 Army vehicles of all different shapes and sizes, with about 50 percent being earthmoving vehicles of some description. On the health side we contribute doctors and nurses and they’ll bring their own clinical equipment. We also contribute a dental team to AACAP. The dental team will bring its own chair and dental equipment and we also contribute a vet for a number of weeks as part of the package. The vet will also bring their own clinical equipment.

If we think about what a contingent looks like from year to year, there are three key elements that the contingent has to deliver. The first one is construction, the second one is training and the third is health. Part and parcel of those three elements is engagement with the community, because we can’t really have AACAP being successful without community engagement. The detailed composition of a contingent, its construction, training, and health components, varies from year to year because no two AACAP activities are exactly alike. There’s certainly common themes; if you think about construction it’s usually housing. If you think about training then normally a common theme is practical skills, so we’ve done things like welding and engine maintenance and those sorts of things. If you think about health, again common themes include First Aid training, healthy living, healthy diets, sporting activities with school children being a key focus. That’s pretty much the sort of thing you’ll see delivered on the ground. If we reflect on the most recent AACAP activity in 2014, it had all of those three elements. It was quite a typical project in the way it conducted its business on the ground.

The most number of Army personnel on the ground at any one time was sitting at about 150

personnel. Over the life of each AACAP project we have somewhere between 250 and 300 personnel participating because some personnel cycle through at various stages of each deployment. Some of the people cycling through at a higher frequency, include our Army Reserves who might be medical specialists and can only give us two or three weeks at a time. In addition, we also bring in a small contingent of around 10 personnel from East Timor, Tonga, and Papua New Guinea. We don't have all three at once, but host one of those contingents at any one time, for around two to four weeks at a time.

What we try to get from each of those countries is a group of soldiers that are tradesmen: carpenters, plumbers, electricians, and blocklayers. They contribute to the infrastructure that we're building and work with us very well. That's a reflection of the levels of cooperation we've had with those countries over a number of years, which is designed to promote our interoperability with those Defence Forces.

Serge DeSilva-Ranasinghe: What are the inherent challenges of community engagement with remote Aboriginal settlements?

Steve Gliddon: There certainly are challenges. Community engagement is a key part of AACAP, right from the beginning. As soon as a community is selected then our designers and project managers from the 19th Chief Engineer Works engage the community to scope in detail their particular needs and what we're going to do. Similarly our health training officers engage with the communities to determine what will go into their programmes based around community needs. On the training side, we strive to provide training that will enhance their employment opportunities. Engagement is a constant throughout.

When we site our camp, again as part of the engagement process, we look for suitable areas. We're sensitive to cultural needs and we're receptive to the various stakeholders in the particular area, whether they be the community generally, traditional owners or pastoralists. When we identify an area, or a number of areas, we engage

with the relevant stakeholders so that we obtain their consent before using a particular site. When we go to a site, of course we will construct a camp so there'll be living and working accommodation, heavy vehicles, vehicle parks and so forth. It's quite a busy place while we're there. But after we leave, again this depends on the particular communities' wishes, we can leave, for example, a concrete slab that we might have poured as part of our kitchen facility or other minor things that might provide some sort of enhancement. Similarly, we can completely disassemble and remove everything that we've brought to site and reinstate the area so that in time, and generally this only takes a wet season, the area completely regenerates.

We're there to show them a way forward and particularly on the training and health side, give them some leadership and mentoring to help them realise their own potential.

What we also find in these communities is that English is a second language. I see that as a challenge, but not a hindrance, and one of the skills we are there to practise and refine. If we were to deploy overseas on an operation, for example, we're dealing with different cultures and languages other than English. AACAP is the perfect training ground to do that. When we engage with the communities it's done from quite an early stage, so it kicks off in earnest roughly 12 months before we see construction commencing on the ground. If the community members or the key interlocutors are not native English speakers, which typically they're not, we just have to adopt an approach where we can still communicate effectively, including through the use of interpreters.

Serge DeSilva-Ranasinghe: What do you believe is the real benefit of AACAP to the Aboriginal communities?

Steve Gliddon: I think fundamentally what we do for the communities is give them a hand up. We're certainly not there to do everything on their behalf. We're there to show them a way forward

and particularly on the training and health side, give them some leadership and mentoring to help them realise their own potential. I think that's quite consistent with what broader government programmes are trying to do, particularly the "Closing the Gap" initiative. But in terms of tangible examples, they are provision of critical infrastructure. What we see in many communities is that housing is overcrowded. For example, we might go into a community and build several houses to directly address that problem. In terms of health services we will go into a community and augment the local health clinic so that we can help that clinic get through a backlog of consultations. Our dental team comes in and they'll be able to see as many people as they can for as long as they're on the ground. If we think about training, particularly some of the accredited training we deliver, they'll get a recognised skill or qualification out of the training package.

We delivered some welding training and the particular community members involved received a certificate at the end of that and were able to manufacture bedframes and other furniture for their houses.

For example, in 2014 at Canteen Creek and Wutunugurra in the Northern Territory, we delivered some welding training and the particular community members involved received a certificate at the end of that and were able to manufacture bedframes and other furniture for their houses. They'd either have the equipment or we would bring it and give them the equipment as part of the overall package. In terms of non-accredited training, again reflecting on this year, we had our multimedia specialists assist the Barkly Women's Art Group develop their website. By encouraging them to take leadership of certain activities over the course of a particular deployment, when it comes time for us to go, they are able to carry on without our assistance.

Our Regional Force Surveillance Unit (RFSU) footprint can vary depending on the location. We generally get a couple of RFSU mentors to

help out on the training side of a particular project. Then depending on where the activity is being run, the RFSU can choose how to engage on a case by case basis. For example, when we operate close to an RFSU depot, there's great potential for some direct involvement on a high frequency basis, whereas if we're operating in a location that doesn't have any RFSU depots or members in the approximate area, the level or scale of involvement is often less. After AACAP leaves a community the lasting engagement with Army is through our RFSUs. When we operate in a community one of the opportunities is indigenous recruitment. What we can do is give them some exposure to the Army and, if they like that, then we have them link with our recruiting people who in turn can recruit them into one of the RFSUs. I don't have specific numbers but anecdotally the figures are ones and twos over the years; not large numbers.

Serge DeSilva-Ranasinghe: Once an AACAP project is completed what happens next?

Steve Gliddon: There's a connection for 12 months afterwards over the life of the Defects Liability Period for the infrastructure we build. We have two visits in that year, one at six months and one at 12 months, so if there are any issues with what Army has done in the community then that's the forum for them to be discussed. In terms of training and so forth, it's really over to the community to progress issues that may arise. Such issues would need to be progressed in a manner consistent with how other Indigenous support is progressed more generally. There'll be a number of programmes that they'll be able to access. If they want additional vocational training, for example, then all of the existing mechanisms would be available to gain access to that training.

Serge DeSilva-Ranasinghe: How transferable and useful is the Army's AACAP experience in the context of overseas ADF missions?

Steve Gliddon: The training value is tremendous. The sorts of things we're doing in AACAP, building things in remote locations, having to

engage with different cultures, is perfect training for operations. If I reflect in particular on Operation Slipper, where we were in Afghanistan for a number of years building infrastructure in remote locations, engaging with different cultures, dealing with people who are non-English speakers, training Afghans to build their capacity through a trade training school, there are many parallels with AACAP. To go out to a remote Indigenous community and have your junior non-commissioned officers put in charge of a particular task, and then have to complete that task, is perfect training. What we're doing in AACAP directly mirrored what we were doing on operations. One of the reasons that we were able to adapt quickly and perform well in Afghanistan, was the grounding we had given many of our soldiers in things like AACAP.

Serge DeSilva-Ranasinghe: How do you see AACAP evolving in the future?

Steve Gliddon: I think AACAP will continue to evolve. We look to learn from each experience to do things better. In conjunction with our partner, PM&C, we will continue to refine how AACAP is planned and executed. At this point I would

see evolution rather than revolution; but again we are responsive to our political masters and therefore what's happening politically may generate a significant change, depending on what the government of the day wants to do. At the moment I don't see anything like that on the horizon, and we will continue to keep doing AACAP into the future because at the moment that's precisely what government wants us to do. At the moment we are well poised for the future, as we have selected the communities for 2015 and 2016. This year the recipient community is Titjikala in the Northern Territory, which is about 100km south east of Alice Springs. Then in 2016 AACAP will assist Laura, which is north of Cairns.

Serge DeSilva-Ranasinghe: A very interesting insight. Thanks for the opportunity.



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