

UP NORTH WITH THE ARMY

Nation Building with Indigenous Communities

Now heading into its 20th year, the Australian Army's participation in the initiative dubbed "AACAP"—Army Aboriginal Community Assistance Programme—is a clear example of the ADF's unique involvement with the development of remote Aboriginal communities. The initiative, which has been operational since 1997, has undertaken development work in around 40 Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, Northern Territory, South Australia, and Queensland, with a cumulative spend of up to \$120 million. An insight into an AACAP project is here provided through the Army's most recent deployment to the communities of Wutunugurra and Canteen Creek, located around 300 kilometers from Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory.

Mission Preparation

In the most recent AACAP project, which concluded a few months ago, Major Henry Stimson, Officer Commanding the 17th Construction Squadron, 6th Engineer Support Regiment, was the Contingent Commander. "From Army's perspective AACAP is a mechanism for our own training benefit, but also it's a great vehicle for us to support the nation by assisting in the ongoing development in these remote communities," he said.

"Certainly appreciating the remoteness was a big one for me, away from the relative ease of life in larger cities where you have things at your fingertips like shops and services," explained Major Stimson. "Difficulties really stemmed from the remote and austere working conditions that we faced. The lead time for procurement and delivery of items was a big challenge, as well as the increased maintenance schedule for our equipment and plant."

In order to offset this long lead-time, management of water, building materials, and spare parts for vehicles had to be precise, and planned well in advance. Any miscalculations have the potential to cause lengthy delays in the construction programme, as it is difficult to procure such materials on site. "The 2014 project finished on time, which was a good measure of success for the soldiers that were involved in that process," said Major Stimson.

The AACAP 2014 contingent mostly came from the Holsworthy Barracks-based 17th Construction Squadron, 6th Engineer Support Regiment, which provided tradesmen, combat engineers, and operational support elements such as logistics, administrative, and catering troops. These forces were overseen by project management elements from the Army's 19th Chief Engineer Works, which set priorities and planned all engineering and construction work. In addition, there was the training team comprising soldiers with fabrication and welding skills, and a medical team composed of doctors, dentists, veterinarians,



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Elements of the 9th Force Support Battalion's 26th Transport Squadron were used to transport troops, supplies, and equipment from Sydney to central Northern Territory. Once in place, this force was assisted by the Centre Squadron of the North-West Mobile Force (NORFORCE), which provided AACAP with storage and logistics facilities in Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. In total, the force amounted to between 130 and 160 personnel for the duration of the task and its preparatory period, which together lasted for nearly one year.

Community Development

The primary element of AACAP is the construction programme, which usually focuses on improving housing, infrastructure, and access to utilities. This not only provides these often neglected communities with much needed infrastructure, but also allows the Army's engineers to practise skills that might be useful in future humanitarian and disaster relief operations.

During AACAP 2014, the 17th Construction Squadron was tasked with building a kilometre of sealed road in Canteen Creek, which reduced dust in the community, improved safety through better driving conditions, and increased accessibility during the wet season. In nearby Wutunugurra, the construction squadron built a new workshop and community center, complete with two large meeting rooms, offices, toilets, kitchenette and a large children's playground. Welding equipment and car ramps were later donated for the workshop, to allow local residents to maintain their vehicles. This work required multiple work teams operating graders, water trucks, bulldozers, dump trucks, and loaders that had to be transported into the community.

Another element of AACAP is the training programme, which seeks to transfer marketable skills and equipment to local community members. For instance in the 2014 programme, thirteen residents from two communities were enrolled in a Certificate in Basic Fabrication and Welding. A total of 84 bed frames were fabricated by the



students during the operation, and design packages were given to graduates to ensure that a wide range of furniture would continue to be produced after AACAP's departure.

"We're able to leave the community with people who not only have the certificate, but also with the prospect of running a small business," said Major Stimson. "To have it taken to that next step was a great success not only for the individual, but also for the community." The two communities also received assistance for their Indigenous art industries, with two multimedia technicians contributing their skills towards Internet advertising and catalogue production.

The third aspect of the programme is run by the medical component of the contingent. Whilst the primary role of the medical personnel is to ensure the health and wellbeing of those deployed, they also have a role to play in assisting the communities. Supplementing the work of civilian health authorities, AACAP provided extra resources to the Northern Territory government's Healthy School Age Kids Programme by delivering dental

work, conducting physical training sessions with residents, testing the quality of the town's water supply, and helping with pest eradication.

"Whilst the monetary value of the construction work is much higher than the health and training component, the benefits to the community of health and training are long term, and therefore quite significant," said Major Stimson. "We're really able to promote not only their health, but also healthy living, which really has a long lasting benefit to the community."

Community Relations

The relationship between the community and AACAP personnel throughout the operation was a positive one, with community engagement being one of the priorities. "They were very open and willing for us to be there, though there were a couple of areas which they asked us not to go to, which were their sacred areas," Major Stimson said.

Sports, traditional dances, a concert by local school children and art displays drew the community and the Army contingent together and





provided soldiers with a taste of Indigenous life. “The support given by the community was a great measure of the relationships formed during the project,” he affirmed.

Project Aftermath

Once the Army leaves the community at the end of the programme, a process is in place to ensure the gains are maintained. The majority of Defence’s work in the communities in the areas of health and training is designed to fit in with existing programmes, meaning that other government agencies take over after AACAP leaves. Detailed inspections are also performed by

the construction team immediately afterwards, and again after six and 12 months, with any repairs completed by the engineers.

In recounting his AACAP experience, Major Stimson elaborated: “AACAP provides great training outcomes for our soldiers, who really enjoy and take a lot of pride both in their work; and also the fact that they’re representing the Army in these environments.” With AACAP completed for 2014, the Army is now preparing for its next AACAP assignment: the small community of Titjikala, also in the Northern Territory, set to commence later in June.