

THE DUST OF TITJIKALA

In a remote desert township located around 120km southeast of Alice Springs, I was embedded with a 170-strong Army contingent.

Reflections on AACAP 2015

After researching and publishing several pieces on the Army Aboriginal Community Assistance Programme (AACAP), I was eager to see an ongoing AACAP project in action. In early July 2015 I got my chance, departing from Perth to the remote desert township of Titjikala, located around 120km southeast of Alice Springs. Given five days at the site, I was embedded with a 150-strong Army contingent. Here is my assessment.

Arrival in the Red Centre

My first taste of the Red Centre was gained as my plane approached the airport at Alice Springs, providing me a panorama of large salt pans, and maze-like chocolate-coloured hills amidst the rugged desert scenery. A series of bright white spheres nestled amongst this ancient terrain caught my eye, contrasting their modernity - the once controversial Pine Gap satellite communications and interception facility.

Upon arrival in Alice Springs I was whisked away by my guide, the Force Engineer, Colonel Steve Gliddon, down to Titjikala in a four-wheel drive. The road to the town was made of unsealed, corrugated dirt, which was a bumpy ride for the most part. The surrounding countryside was semi-arid scrubland, with hills arrayed along the horizon. I could feel the chill of winter in the desert, with the day time temperature often averaging between 12-17 degrees Celsius.

After two hours on the road we arrived at the Army's Camp, around 5km from the town along the boundary of the Maryvale Station. This was

where the AACAP contingent had set up their field headquarters and accommodation, comprised of a large tent city and numerous portables. An old car bonnet was emblazoned with the name Camp Birt, in memory of a fallen engineer who was killed in Afghanistan.

The Army contingent consisted of the 6th Engineer Support Brigade, supported by the 17th Combat Service Support Brigade. Responsibility for the AACAP in Titjikala was more diffuse, with the Army partnering with the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Northern Territory Government, Catholic Care, and the MacDonnell Shire Council.

I soon gathered in my interactions with Army personnel that quite a number of the Army personnel that were present had previously been on multiple AACAP missions, some as many as 10 or more.



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As I unpacked and settled into life at Camp Birt, I couldn't help but notice the fine red dust that encapsulates this area. It permeated nearly everything, as gusts of wind blew dust into our tents, onto our clothes and food. It wouldn't be long before my dark skin took on a reddish ochre-like complexion.

Field Research

After a brief respite in the Camp, I was then escorted by my guide, Colonel Gliddon, to Titjikala, a 15 minute drive away. I was told that the name Titjikala means 'eagle from the clay pan' in the local Arrente language, although at various times the town has also been known as Tapatjatjaka and Maryvale (due to its proximity to the Maryvale cattle station).

Situated in the Simpson about 8km from the long defunct Old Ghan railway line, Titjikala was a noticeably clean and sleepy town. It was somewhat apparent that the Lutheran church had a strong following, as the wider region had come under the influence of German settlers and missionaries.

Being a small town Titjikala consists of about 50 buildings, mostly dwellings, and also includes council offices, a health clinic, general store, art centre, aged care home, women's centre, primary and secondary school, childcare centre, laundry

facility and basketball court. Aside from the Army presence, I was struck by how quiet it was, with hardly a soul in sight.

The initial tour of the town also provided me with an opportunity to view the Army Engineers in action at the construction sites of the new buildings. These were to comprise of two new duplexes and a large waste management facility. At the latter site I noted over a dozen pieces of heavy construction and earth moving equipment, indicative of the scale of the effort.

Aside from the significant construction effort, the Army was also involved in supporting training programs, with the intention of providing practical skills that could be of use in a remote Aboriginal community. These included courses in catering, first aid, multimedia and welding. For example, the Certificate I in Business Studies provided training in multimedia, and rudiments of small business management. The candidates were taught photography, graphic design and video production so they could use these skills to obtain possible employment with local enterprises such as the Arts Centre. Similarly, the Certificate II in Rural Studies focused on welding. Aside from being more employable, a qualified welder could also undertake maintenance of local amenities, such as

manufacturing bed frames and repairing fences, without the need for outside assistance.

Whilst mingling with the locals a few days later I ran into the middle-aged man who was the Army's eyes and ears on the ground in Titjikala. This was Private Ernest Warrior, an Aboriginal man of mixed Afghan Cameleer heritage from Coober Pedy. Private Warrior acted as the Indigenous Liaison Officer for Norforce's Centre squadron, benefitting from his strong family ties to the region and ability to speak five of the local dialects. The role proved to be more than necessary, as distrust of outsiders was palpable at times.

To overcome these barriers and build bridges with the townsfolk, the Army used sport and the Army band to good effect. For example, an Aussie rules footy match was organised with the local team, who were strong supporters of the Hawthorn Football Club (interestingly because of the hawk, which is endemic to this region, has connection to the dreaming of the Arrente people), but defeat was resounding for the Army. The local team showed a high level of skill and team work that was impressive for all to see.

The peak of these outreach efforts was the provision of a free barbeque and concert for NAIDOC Week, which was celebrated in the town's outdoor basketball court. Most of the AACAP contingent attended the event, as did many of the town's population. Among the highlights of the evening was singer, John Schumann of Redgum fame, renowned for his Vietnam War ballad, 'I Was Only 19'. He presented a song on the unacknowledged contribution and sacrifice of Indigenous Australians to Australia's wars overseas, which had been commissioned by former Army chief General David Morrison.

Another highlight of the evening was the Central Australian Women's Choir, who had performed in Germany previously. The concert was the final activity for me in Titjikala, after which I departed to the airport the following morning. I was later informed that the concert had marked a major turning point in building trust between the Army and the people of Titjikala.

Indeed, as an indicator of the community's sentiment, when the AACAP contingent completed its mandate and transitioned out by December

last year, one AACAP official noted that, "The community held a farewell function for the Army before we left, where the whole community attended. The ladies from the Art Centre provided gifts to us in the form of prints and etching as a token of their gratitude".

Having seen the way the Army operated first-hand, and the high-level of professionalism that was displayed at all times, I was convinced that the sentiment displayed by the townsfolk was genuine. Titjikala had much to be thankful for, with the two new duplexes helping to manage the widespread housing shortfall experienced by the community. The construction of the sewerage plant ended a major and longstanding issue that impacted on the community's public health. The Army also built sports change rooms at the community's football oval and a makeshift gym, also leaving behind exercise equipment for the community. Moreover, the temporary presence of a full-time doctor, dentist and veterinarian was a major service that was widely appreciated. In all, AACAP officials told me that in addition to the \$6 million in funding allocated by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Army also provides approximately \$6 million in funding to cover its operational costs for each AACAP project.

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The Challenge for Titjikala

With the conclusion of AACAP activities and the attention the community has received, which included a visit from the then Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Nigel Scullion, conversations with community officials indicate a sense of upliftment. While it is evident the Army completed their tasks to the satisfaction of the townsfolk, the stark challenge ahead for Titjikala remains undiminished. With AACAP now over, and amenities vastly improved, the issue now falls back on the Northern Territory Government, MacDonnell Shire and the people of Titjikala to augur much needed social and economic development.

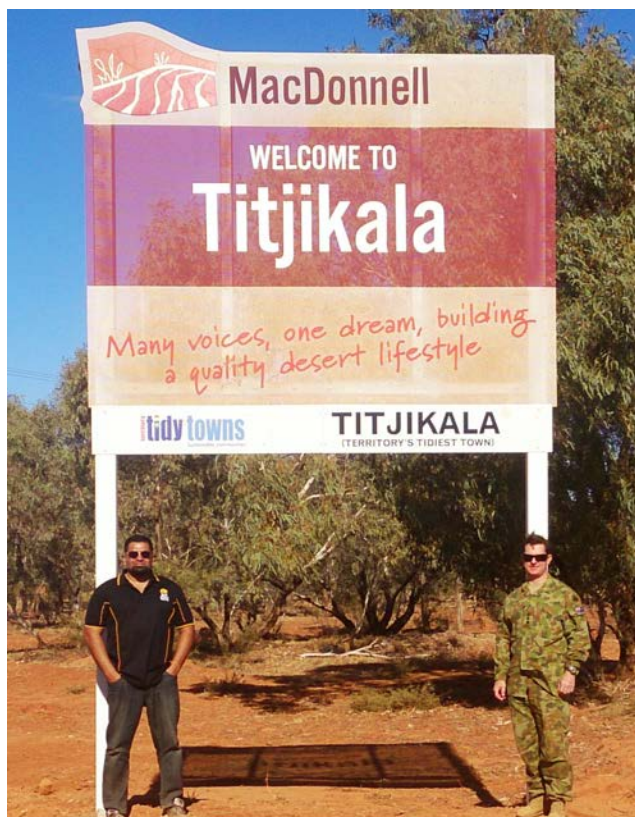
This is particularly relevant for the younger generation of Aboriginal youth, who remain disconnected and disillusioned about their future. Substance abuse continues to be a matter of concern for this group. Even though Titjikala since 2014 has been classified as a ‘dry community’, and has established an Alcohol Reference Group, the issue remains an ongoing challenge. Children, especially boys, often tend to leave school by age 14. One can already discern the impact this will have in the near future. “It’s the older generation that learned how to work that are the ones that apply. When we do get a young person, they usually don’t last”, lamented the MacDonnell Shire’s Operations Manager, David McGregor.

According to its website, the MacDonnell Shire Council employs 421 staff, mostly part-time and casual, of which 80% are Indigenous. A Shire official remarked that only 50 people are employed in Titjikala, however another 80 people in the age group 15 to 25 remain unemployed. “There are no jobs in the community, you have to wait for someone to leave in order to take their place,” he said. Unsurprisingly, with limited access to employment, Titjikala’s median weekly income is

very low. According to the ABS, based on the 2011 Census data, Titjikala’s median weekly income is only \$276.

One of the bright spots in the local economy is the town’s Arts Centre, which is the main tourist attraction for the community and a source of income. It has a proactive approach to its work, hosting visiting school groups from Adelaide, conducting workshops in Alice Springs for tourists, and displaying its work at exhibitions throughout Australia. The Centre’s Manager, Jane Easton, said: “It’s not just about putting money into the Arts Centre as 60% of our sales income goes to the artists and the remaining 40% comes back to the Centre to pay for materials.”

What would certainly help the situation would be improved cooperation between the community and the owners of the Maryvale Station. Relations between the townsfolk and the Station go as far back as the 1940s, but since the 1970’s, as told by several locals, ties have been strained when Aboriginal stockmen went on strike in support of better conditions. It was a matter of regret that I did not have the time to explore this further with the Maryvale station.



Conversely, one cannot be entirely pessimistic either. Despite the significant challenges that Titjikala faces, it has some advantages compared to other remote communities in the region. “There is a certain homogeneity here, as they are not a mixed up mob,” says David Lodge, the township’s Primary Health Care Manager. The community had one Aboriginal woman who was undertaking a nursing degree at Deakin University, making her the first Aboriginal person from Titjikala to have a tertiary education.

Another possible cause for optimism is the imminent development of a nearby mine, touted to be the first underground rock salt mine in central Australia. Tellus Holdings has secured seven exploration licences covering a 817km² area, with a projected mine life of 29 years. The Tellus Holdings website emphasises that hundreds of millions of dollars will be invested and implies that hundreds of jobs may be created, “including opportunities for the employment and training of Aboriginal people at the mine or with land management and rehabilitation projects”, and is seeking to offer a “community benefits package with traditional owners”. Given the scale of this project the Titjikala

community are hopeful that the operation will in fact provide tangible employment prospects, but it is open to question as to what actual economic impact the mine will have on Titjikala.

My experience in Titjikala provided a revealing insight into the predicament faced by remote Indigenous communities, both in social and economic terms. The provision of support by AACAP has clearly brought a much-needed boost in tangible outcomes for the community, and some hope for the future. Yet, ongoing challenges remain.

Responsibility will continue to lie with Federal, regional and community stakeholders in devising more effective policies, successfully and efficiently implementing them, and finding ways and means for the township to rally for social and economic change. One community official adamantly believes that the community could reach a high degree of economic self-sustainment if funds could be provided to build maintenance and mechanics workshops, a recycling centre and develop the local tourism industry. Evidently, in the years that follow, Titjikala will serve as an interesting case study to ascertain the long-term effectiveness of the AACAP on remote Indigenous communities.

