

# **REPORT ON NOVEMBER MEETING**

## ***AUSTRALIAN AERIAL PATROL***

At our November meeting Harry Mitchell outlined the development of the Australian Aerial Patrol from its beginnings as the City of Greater Wollongong Aerial Patrol about 40 years ago to its present state as the Australian Aerial Patrol which carries out a variety of

functions over a large part of south eastern Australia, extending as far from the coast as Narrabri, Bourke, Dubbo, Wagga Wagga, Albury and Tocumwal.

In its early years it was specifically a local shark patrol, keeping an eye on the beaches in the Wollongong area between Windang and Stanwell Park, later extending to Kimna. The method of signalling the presence of sharks near beaches was by throwing out a roll of toilet paper to warn surfers and lifesavers. Today the shark patrol is still one of its functions but its range has been extended from Batemans Bay to South Head and Manly Warringah. Of course the method of signalling is vastly different too: warning sirens have replaced the toilet paper and radio is used to direct lifesavers in rubber duckies who drive the sharks from the beaches.

Back in 1957 the City of Greater Wollongong subsidised the Patrol to the extent of one beach-inspector's wages, then about \$1,000 in today's currency. Private planes were used with volunteer pilots and observers. Nowadays the Patrol owns its own planes, but all pilots and crew are still volunteers, albeit very professional in their approach and all highly trained. They even include several Police Rescue Service personnel

Pilots have to be qualified commercial pilots accustomed to instrument flying so they can operate safely 'm all kinds of weather, and have a transport licence as well. The Patrol maintains a 24-hour emergency service: there is always a pilot and two others on call, one of whom must be a dropmaster. The total pool of volunteers numbers about three dozen who rotate on a roster system.

Finances have always been a problem for the Patrol which almost closed down in 1991 when the decision was made to appoint a full-time manager. Finance comes from a number of sources, such as subsidies from local councils, sponsorships, donations and the annual art union. Local clubs provide sponsorship, Shell provides a \$5,000 donation towards an annual fuel bill approaching \$20,000, and WIN TV allows free advertising and promotion up to an agreed limit. These days there is also fee-for-service from government agencies. The Patrol now has Australian Government accreditation as a search-and-rescue organisation which attracts not only fee-for-service but also g of crews.

The beach patrol now requires two planes to cover this extended area, each plane manned by a pilot and two or three others, one of whom must be a dropmaster, trained in dropping rafts and supplies to people in difficulty.

The beach patrols keep an eye on all beach areas, not 'just the ones patrolled by life-savers, and keep lifesavers informed of what is happening beyond their view. An eye is also kept on boats for coastal patrol and fisheries.

During times of emergency like the 1968 bushfires and the recent disaster at g crews and transporting personnel and equipment to Thredbo. At all times any sign of bushfire is reported to firefighting services, with special vigilance during school holidays when camping and hiking are more popular. Search for missing hikers is often required, a task which can be rendered much easier if hiking parties carry a homing device, an item which should be just as necessary for them as it is for boats.

Search and rescue is now a large part of the Patrol's activities. For example they were involved in the search for the missing aircraft off Lord Howe Island a few years ago, and also an aircraft crash near Katoomba. Harry illustrated some of the search work with examples, such as the recent night search for a missing yacht from which only a weak call from a mobile phone had been made, when liaison with Telstra had enabled the search area to be defined.

Another function of the Patrol is to provide top cover for rescue helicopters such as Careflight, standing by in case anything goes wrong, in which case the plane can drop a raft and summon help. An example of this top cover was at a night operation when the helicopter had to descend between two masts to effect a rescue from the deck of a ship.

Recently the Patrol was commissioned to fly around Australia and photograph every beach for the Surf Lifesaving Service, and everywhere they landed there was someone who recognized the red and yellow aircraft and associated it with Wollongong.

In forty years of operation the Patrol has evolved from a very small beginning in the Wollongong area with only one purpose in mind until now it covers a large portion of south eastern Australia with a wide range of surveillance and search-and-rescue functions. However it still carries the City of Wollongong name.