

The Christmas Island Story



Police duties on Christmas Island are as varied as in any other police force.

Hands up all those who know how Christmas Island got its name. You are a good exponent of general knowledge if you knew that the island was sighted on Christmas Day, 1643, by Captain William Mynors. Superintendent B. D. Matthews has generously provided Platypus with information about the island's history and about life on the island today. Christmas Island is 2,623 km north-west of Perth and 288 km south of Indonesia in the Indian Ocean. It is only 135 square kilometres in area and is actually the peak of a submarine mountain which rises steeply to a central plateau reaching heights of up to 357 metres. The island consists mainly of limestone interspersed by layers of volcanic rock. A tropical climate with seasonal rain between November and April encourages dense forest growth.

HISTORY

Although the island was first sighted in 1615 by a British East India Company vessel, its coast cliffs and lack of suitable anchorage discouraged landings for the next 200 years. In the mid-nineteenth

century members of the Clunies-Ross family, who were establishing a copra industry in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands 900 kms to the west, began using Christmas Island as a source of timber for boat building. Between 1900 and 1957 Christmas Island was administered from Singapore. After a brief period as a separate British Crown Colony, the island became a Territory of Australia on October 1, 1958.

GOVERNMENT

The Christmas Island Act 1958 is the basis of the Territory's legislative, administrative and judicial systems. An Administrator, appointed by the Governor-General and responsible to the Minister of Home Affairs, is the senior government representative on the island. He is assisted by staff recruited from mainland Australia, Malaysia and Singapore.

The Christmas Island Agreement of 1958 between Australia and New Zealand, and its associated Act, provide the legislative framework for mining activities, enabling the Christmas Island Phosphate Commission, through its managing

agents the British Phosphate Commissioners (BPC), to extract the island's minerals.

POPULATION AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS

About 3000 people live on the island but there is no indigenous population. Many of the 2500 Asian (Chinese, Malay and Indian) residents were born in the Territory or have arrived over the past 30 years and, under the provisions of the Christmas Island Act, most are Australian citizens.

The British Phosphate Commissioners are the major employers (about 1500) in the Territory. The Christmas Island Administration (which includes the Police Force, Post Office, Area School and Technical Centre) and a number of small private shops provide further employment. Employees do not pay tax and they receive substantial free or subsidised benefits including housing, education and public transport.

The population is housed in the residential areas of Settlement, Malay Kampong, Drumsite, Poon Saan and Silver City. Dwellings are mostly detached houses and unit-

style accommodation. General medical, dental and hospital services in the Territory are provided free to residents by the British Phosphate Commissioners and the Administration. The Area School provides education from pre-school level through to Year 10 (fourth form) secondary level. It has an Australian-oriented curriculum based on the West Australian model and is designed to provide an educational background for students who in future may move to the Australian mainland or to Malaysia or Singapore.

ECONOMY AND INDUSTRY

Highgrade commercial phosphate deposits are the basis of Christmas Island's economy. During the year ended June 30, 1979, the British Phosphate Commissioners shipped 1 256 930 tonnes of phosphate rock, 117 886 tonnes of phosphate dust and 10 780 tonnes of citraphos dust from the island in total exports to Australia and other countries.

There are no cash crops but a number of residents raise poultry, green leaf vegetables, bananas and paw paws for domestic use. Fishing for local consumption is undertaken on a small scale. All other materials are imported from the mainland. The largest retail outlet on the island is the British Phosphate Commissioners Trade Store which deals mainly in food items as well as other household and miscellaneous items.

SERVICES AND FACILITIES

The Territory's residents support a wide range of social, recreational and sporting clubs such as the Chinese Literary Association, an amateur radio club, scouts and youth clubs that concentrate on sports such as cricket, sailing, golf, tennis, water skiing and scuba diving. There is no television on the island. Postal services in the community are provided by the Administration and do not come under the authority of Australia Post. A radio communications station is owned and staffed by the BPC operating on fixed circuits which link the Territory with Perth and Singapore by radio teletype and overseas radio telephone. Australian aircraft services are provided on a fortnightly

basis from Perth. This service transports passengers, mail and cargo between Perth, Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Christmas Island. There is no passenger service by sea. Australian currency is the only legal tender in the Territory. The Bank of New South Wales provides full banking facilities including currency exchange.

CHRISTMAS ISLAND POLICE FORCE

As far as can be ascertained, the first police to be stationed on the island was a detachment of 24 Sikh police who remained until 1942. It is unlikely that any police remained during the Japanese occupation of 1942-45. After the war, the island became a Colony of Singapore and a detachment of Singapore police was sent to the island. Following the acquisition of the island by Aus-



tralia in October 1958, the Singapore Police remained on a contract basis until 1962 when legislation created the Christmas Island Police Force. A European Superintendent was seconded from the Commonwealth Police Force and members were recruited from the Singapore and Malaysian Police Forces. In late 1976, an additional two positions were created (filled also by members of the Commonwealth Police) of Inspector and Policewoman Sergeant. The establishment of the Force is 17 and the current strength consists of two officers, two Sergeants and eleven N.C.O.'s and Constables. This incorporated three Europeans (one female), five Chinese, four Indian, two Eurasian and one Malay member. Mobile

patrols and general duties are performed on a 24-hour shift basis. The Force utilises three police cars, two police land cruisers, a launch, dual-channel radio communications system, an armoury and a photographic section. The uniform consists of a pale blue shirt and navy shorts, long socks and the normal police cap with blue and white checkered band. Dress turbans are permitted to be worn by the Indian members. The police-women's uniform is a pale blue dress and two-tone blue hat with a checkered band.

Apart from performing general police functions, the Christmas Island Police Force is responsible in a variety of areas. They are active in the enforcement of a total of 45 Ordinances, the latest being the Motor Traffic Ordinance which is based on the A.C.T. Ordinance. Other duties include Customs and Immigration (air and sea). The Police are responsible for processing and controlling the inward and outward passengers to and from the island and the enforcement of Customs regulations in relations to personal baggage, shipping and other imports. All prosecutions in both the Magistrate's Court and District Court are conducted by the Superintendent or the Inspector of Police on behalf of the Crown Solicitor for the Commonwealth. Police also handle the Motor Vehicle Registration Section including the Registry itself and the Inspection station which is manned by two full-time Police mechanics. All testing and licensing of drivers, and the registering of motor vehicles comply with Australian mainland standards. Learner-drivers attend driver training lectures run by the Police. The bilingual and sometimes trilingual capabilities of the members of the Police Force are essential in a community such as that of Christmas Island where culture, practice and language varies greatly in a very small area. Understanding and diplomacy are necessary pre-requisites for the successful policing of such a community. The three Federal Police members serving on Christmas Island at present are Brian MATTHEWS (Superintendent of Police), Barry MEAD (Inspector of Police) and Aileen HOPE (Policewoman Sergeant).