

AUSTRALIA NORTH WEST CAPE

by S.F.B.

There are probably not many Communicators who have been lucky enough recently to circumnavigate the Western half of Australia in an American Navy Dakota and in particular to see the first stages in construction of a VLF station and of a new town in the empty North of Australia. Such was my good fortune early this year. Having been to Adelaide, across the Great Australian Bight to Albany, then to Perth and Geraldton, we arrived at North West Cape at the beginning of March. Here, in this lonely corner of Australia 900 miles north of Perth, in a desolate area of red dirt and scrub where only sheep and kangaroos have hitherto lived, and even they at a rate of only one sheep to every 10 acres, a major engineering feat is under way. The sixth and final link in a world wide chain of US Navy VLF Stations is under construction.

Work began on the site in 1963 and is due to be completed next year, by which time £33 million (Australian) will have been spent. The base will comprise the VLF transmitter station and aerial array, a HF transmitter and an HF Receiver Station, a new town, a new jetty and all necessary supporting services. Everything structural has been

designed to withstand the 140 knot winds to be expected from the occasional cyclones which spiral down from the Indian Ocean to the North. When we were there, there was only a gentle breeze, with the blue green waters of the ocean lazily lapping on to the silver sands round the new jetty. It was difficult to imagine that some months before, a cyclone had stirred up the shore line to leave it some fifty yards further out to sea along the jetty than it had been before. It was also difficult to believe that this limpid green sea was full of sharks, sting rays and water snakes.

The VLF aerial system is going to be supported by thirteen guyed steel towers,—Tower Zero in the centre will be 1,300 feet high. We flew over the spot at 1,300 feet and it looked a very long way down to the ground, as it will to those who ultimately will travel up the mast in a lift to service fittings at the top. Rather than me; I was glad I was airborne and not lift borne. Twelve 1,100 feet towers will stand in two hexagonal circles, of diameter nearly two miles, to carry the aerial array to Tower Zero, which will be the most heavily loaded tower of its kind in the world. At the moment all that is in

position are the enormous concrete anchor blocks from which the towers will be guyed by steel cables up to nearly four inches thick.

There are 99 of these vast blocks which look like howitzer emplacements about to fire in all directions at once. Near the jetty, red and white tower sections lie like huge Meccano pieces waiting to be assembled and elsewhere are great drums on which are coiled the steel cables.

The concrete transmitter station under Tower Zero is beginning to take shape and will be 224 feet long, 110 feet wide and 51 feet high. The power station is also beginning to rise from its foundations and five miles to the south the new town of Exmouth is starting to take shape. The red earth has been scraped flat for houses and roads where, by the time it is finished, 2,000 people will be housed. Already there are families of workers living in caravans with little gardens beginning to sprout from the red soil which, like most of the rest of Australia, will grow almost anything if watered. 200 miles away on Shark Bay, where the explorer Dirk Hartzog first discovered Australia, lies the nearest town to the South, Carnarvon. To the East, some 100 miles across Exmouth Gulf lies the small trading port of Onslow, which allegedly keeps itself busy by being destroyed by a cyclone almost as soon as its inhabitants have finished rebuilding it after the previous one. Between Carnarvon and Onslow there is nothing, repeat nothing, except dry scrub and a few homesteads, occupying properties which could be half a million acres and yet carry only 20,000 sheep. Now there will be the new town Exmouth, occupied by US Naval personnel and families and by Australian civilians.

The problem of maintaining an adequate work force, currently 600, is a twofold one. Not only are conditions at the construction camp bleak, with the barest of amenities, but this type of job attracts the itinerant worker, the man who drifts from the Ord scheme, to the Snowy, to the Cape, and the worker who wants to make fast money and then get out.

The turnover of labour is given officially as 50 per cent a year, but this seems a conservative figure. Administration men and foremen stay; for craftsmen and labourers three to six months work, ten hours a day, six days a week, in perpetual heat and an occasional cyclone is enough.

Workers who stay six months have their air fare from Perth provided. After six months the fare is paid both ways and a year's service earns fares plus four weeks' holiday.

The American site supervisor says of the Australian worker "Rub him up the wrong way and he's a tough sonofabitch. Otherwise he's a gentleman".

The "gentlemen" pour off the trucks at five in the evening and sprint for the canteen. Six o'clock swill, North West Cape. It looks like a Cecil B. de Mille crowd scene, with the extras chosen for their villainous or bizarre appearance.

Beards are in. Every beard from Robinson Crusoe to Henry VIII. Length of beard indicates length of

service. Beards, hair, body and shorts smothered in fine red dust, they queue in the gloomy barn-like canteen for beer, the universal answer to a universal problem - dehydration. Jugs of draught beer in one queue, cans in the other. It is hushed. These are heat exhausted men. The few benches round the bare walls soon fill. Then they sit on the floor. A man of gross girth walks by, gulping beer from a jug. A sack of mail arrives and interest quickens. "Did you get a 'dear John'?", a voice roars.

Now they revive. Voices and bursts of laughter. Pure Strine,* New Strine, English and Irish voices; the non-Strine in small groups, as if to preserve some sort of identity in an alien wilderness.

Alcohol dissolves the suspicion of a stranger. "My daughter is in Perth, going through medical school", says an Englishman. "I can clear £40 a week here. I'll give it about a year". But this is his first day and he sounds doubtful.

"I was on telly in Perth the other day. My brother won a third share of £300,000 in the pools. He says he'll come out for a visit". A man with great expectations.

A polite spokesman for three soft voiced Irish straight from the ship tries to suppress horror and homesickness. He becomes questioner. Is all Australia like this?

At six the canteen closes until seven and the men troop over to the big communal dining hall opposite. Food is good and plentiful. At one end of the hall is a section partitioned off for US Navy and key personnel. They eat the same food.

To western Australians the whole project seems like the beginning of the opening of the North West. As we flew along much further to the East we saw surveys being made for the port and other installations which must be built by late next year to start the iron ore exports rolling to Japan from the vast deposits which have just been discovered. From these mines, iron ore trains, each train pulled by four enormous diesels with only one crew and carrying 12,000 tons of ore, will load the iron into 100,000 tons ore-carrying ships. But as yet there are no ports, no railways, nothing to be seen except scrub

Still further to the East we flew over fjords where tidal power could generate electric power on a scale immeasurably greater than Snowy River scheme. The rise and fall of the tide in these areas is some 30 to 35 feet and nature has designed these great inlets with very narrow entrances.

The North West of Australia is on the move after centuries of slumber. The potential natural resources are terrific but the area is vast and enormous amounts of capital will be needed to develop it. But it must be a source of satisfaction that the communicators, albeit mostly American and Australian, but in which we Brits will be able to participate, are in the vanguard of the development of this part of the world.

* Strine is Australian for Australian.