

All the way with the USA? How Darwin received its US troops

Justin Tutty from [BaseWatch](#) writes:

It's almost a year since the public learned of an agreement between Australia and the US to base an 'enduring presence' of US Marines in Darwin. The first tranche of around 200 Marines have been and gone in a six-month stint of well-honed PR activity, and the Americans are floating the idea of raising their number even beyond the full company of 2500 announced last year. So how has Darwin welcomed the influx?

At first glance, this week's [revelations](#) of last minute 'cold feet' over the US Base announcement might seem misplaced. There is a lot of local goodwill towards the USA, in no small part because of our shared military history. Locals recognise a cultural affinity, and a significant local ADF presence means the town knows a thing or two about the military, which sets us up well.

But our diverse, harmonious town shouldn't be presumed to go all the way with the USA. Darwin does also have a strong peace tendency – see the large marches against the invasion of Iraq. We also have links to regional neighbours who've borne the burden of US bases, including local ethnic communities.

Darwin has some limited experience of hosting foreign forces for joint training or R&R trips. On a good week, that can mean a bit more coin for certain small businesses, in particular our small but busy strip of late night drinking holes. But locals remember the occasional offence, including sexual assault, committed by visiting servicemen in the past. Concerns that an 'enduring presence' of Marines could bring an increased risk of similar incidents are backed by a recent [ADF report](#) that identified sexual assault as one of only two issues with a significant risk rating. (The other was unrealistic expectations of economic benefit.) Activists say the [Status of Forces Agreement](#), a 50 year old treaty that purports to delineate jurisdictional rights over US troops in Australia, has flaws that have allowed offenders to evade justice in the past, and should be formally reviewed.

The treaty didn't need dusting off this year. The first rotation of US troops was a tightly scripted diplomatic mission, that left the soldier / ambassadors with little opportunity to take a step out of place. (Apparently one fella got a speeding fine.) Personnel partnered with community sector organisations like Red Cross and St Vincent de Paul, to take part in some well publicised charity work. I saw two particularly glum young men in full uniform, sitting behind a stall in a shopping centre, soliciting donations for kids with SIDS - the fellas donating blood at least had better smiles for the cameras.

The Marines literally hit the ground running, with most of them participating in the Darwin long distance running championship within days of their arrival. The media got some good [images](#), but other participants were not surprised that a few of the recent arrivals weren't thrilled to be pushed so hard - things are pretty hot and sticky in our subtropical climate at that time of year, and most of us have long distance running pretty low on the list of things to do in the middle of an April day. During their stay, a few of them got involved with the Clontarf foundation, who run Football Academies that encompass mentoring for young people going through school and onto employment. By the time they were about to leave in September, the troops were acclimatised, and the weather more amenable. They put on a show of strength as they completed a (considerably less gruelling) [fun run](#) days before departure, and the Chief Minister Terry Mills tellingly congratulated them on their tour, saying:

"The mission was to put out a good impression, and they did that very well"

The Forces say we can expect a similar well-managed tour next year, while the following

rotation will have larger numbers, bring their own hardware, and concentrate on objectives beyond community relations. The ADF have produced a report weighing up likely impacts of next year's visit of 250 Marines. This week, the local paper [reported](#) that the US will be looking to raise numbers even beyond that, and it is now understood that discussions last year considered a presence of [as many as 7500](#).

While both governments appear to have expertly managed the innovation of a six month rotation of 200 Marines, selling an enduring presence of thousands will be a tougher task.

The initial agreement was strategically [leaked](#) on Remembrance Day, 11/11/11. Unveiled as it was on a day devoted to the memory of all war dead, the story was accompanied in the mainstream media by a general endorsement of our two nations' military alliance. By the time the US President landed in our little town, just six days later, any dissent was drowned out by the squeals of excited fans. The media converged on our city to cover the stop-over. The local paper (known for [editorials](#) lifted from the internet and front page articles about [crocodile sightings](#)) refused to run a classified ad expressing opposition to the US base, but did print a double page spread that folded into a [souvenir Obama hat](#). Grown adults wore it. In public.

However, increasing the emerging presence from an initial 200 to 2500 – or more – won't be so easily glossed over. Whether the US troop numbers stop at the announced 2500, or grow to the 7500, the permanent presence is going to have an impact on our town.

There are some big questions to be answered about mitigating social impacts, about what sort of equipment and activities we'll tolerate, and about how to balance our independent regional relationships. So far, any concerns raised by the community have been uniformly met with emphatic assurances of shared expectations. Clearly, more effort is needed to codify those shared expectations, manage risk beyond public relations, and to prepare contingencies for likely impacts.

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