Submission by Burdekin Shire Council
Defence White Paper 2015

The Burdekin Shire is situated on the Pacific coastline, centred 80km south of Townsville, North Queensland. The Shire is in excess of 5000 square kilometres and home to an estimated 17,784 people. Queensland Treasury forecasts the region’s population will reach approximately 19,500 by 2031.

The Burdekin region is centred on the rich Burdekin River Delta. Abundant water supplies, fertile soils and an average of 300 days of sunshine per year have resulted in the Burdekin becoming one of the strongest agricultural regions in Australia. The dominant crop is sugar cane, where the region produces over one quarter of the nation’s harvest. However, the Burdekin also boasts multimillion dollar horticulture and beef cattle industries.

I applaud the Federal Government for inviting the public to voice their opinions on the future direction of Defence and I submit the following information as input towards the Defence White Paper 2015.

What are the main threats to, and opportunities for, Australia’s security?

The Bruce Highway has one two lane bridge crossing on each of the Burdekin and Haughton Rivers. Both rivers respond annually to heavy rainfall runoff with various flooding issues caused principally by cyclonic influence across respective stream catchments.

The Burdekin River in particular, is traversed by bridges on both the Bruce Highway between towns of Ayr and Home Hill and to the west at Macrossan on the Flinders Highway. Both bridges identify respective threats to Australian Defence Force mobility within the Northern Australia Region, either side of the Great Dividing Mountain Range.

Our submission suggests there is an opportunity for Defence to consider Commonwealth Governments immediate and urgent involvement toward ensuring any mobility threat is not compromised by a natural or other disaster in the future because of inadequate logistic focus.

Strategic Australian Defence Force logistics would no doubt be aware of load width and height limitations of the Burdekin River Bridge, built in 1957, between the coastal towns of Ayr and Home Hill (Burdekin Shire). This bridge is a vital link between coastal north and south, a recognised engineering feat. It is without footing of basement rock, and is supported at the site in some 30metres of sedimentary alluvial sand, representative of the expansive delta of a river which has altered its course many times in the past. Historically, it is regarded as the bridge which ‘opened up the North’ and supports local industries such as sugar, horticulture and mining, and the state-wide movement of freight on the national highway. A second crossing to service increased traffic on the Bruce Highway has been under consideration for many decades without final determination.
Therefore, risk assessment for an ‘alternate route’ of the Bruce Highway across the Lower Burdekin Delta for ‘heavy and wide load’ capability must place urgency on a new bridge at the rivers gap in Stokes Range where river bed level basement rock will ensure no change in the course of the river and provide the assets structural stability at capital engineering cost well below that required to build in shifting sands.

The Burdekin River Bridge also provides a vital link for the Australian Defence Force with their training being undertaken at the Shoalwater Bay training area. If access to the training area, via the Burdekin River Bridge is ever obstructed due to a natural or other disaster in the future, this will cause significant problems for the Australian Defence Force.

**How should Defence invest in its people, and how should it continue to enhance its culture?**

Culture is viewed as relevant to both points mentioned above. Are these idealistic thoughts spoken around Anzac Day?

“The ultimate defence of our nation does not lie in the power and strength of weapons or even in the economy, but is in the hearts of our people and the purity of their intentions. Australia is as strong as the strength of its people and the spirit of character of the citizens of this country are its greatest resource. Central to that character are qualities like integrity, fidelity, honesty, dignity and perseverance. Values which cannot be learned because they have to be earned and no nation is strong without them.”

People are aware of increased shipping activity under surveillance technology and being monitored around the Australian coastline. On the Great Barrier Reef Coast we continue to see action taken against foreign ships for entering sensitive zones and after the event, questioning how often is such activity really occurring when no physical presence is deterring trespass in the first instance.

No doubt, ‘Operation Resolute’ responds effectively to provide the necessary commitment in trade lanes and zones identified as most at risk! Unfortunately, more coastal maritime activity is what we can expect, and a view for consideration may be the development of more maritime bases at strategic port cities around Australia’s coastline to share the presence.

Our nearest port city is Townsville and such a permanent base presence will promote recruitment, training, home base pride, and public awareness of the Australian Defence Force (Navy). Furthermore, the consideration of a ‘Coast Guard style initial training model’ as entry into the Australian Defence Force offers diversity to prospective personnel and a pool of like minded trained people for more occupations other than uniform service. Supporting Port capabilities, services and supply not only brings economic development, but widens industry interest in defence and gives community reassurance that their own play a positive role. Our youth is thirsty for disciplined employment opportunities tempered by experience and rewarded with educational opportunities for continuous earned learning for life.

Building positive relationships helps with our island Nation neighbours who have common interests and will also benefit regional co-operation under the same principles, as they maintain their respective independent sovereignty.
Most importantly, Defence should certainly invest in developing those qualities of character mentioned, to enhance a culture and capability for our people to aspire to and encourage others as our greatest resource!

**Defence personnel:**
Also raised at the recent public round table consultation was the opportunity for defence personnel to reside in nearby townships within reasonable distance from their base. With growing concern Australia wide in relation to tourism attacks, the location of Defence Force personnel in a distributed format around a central base would serve not only to improve security, but would provide an economic boost to regional towns, many of which are struggling due to the current economic climate.

Burdekin Shire offers a relaxed coastal country lifestyle, a great tropical climate, a wealth of natural resources and an easy pace of life. The friendly and close knit communities of Ayr, Home Hill, Giru and Brandon offer people family support, quality schooling and safety, which are also important aspects to people when deciding where to live. We welcome the opportunity to give service personnel assistance. On advice, we have noted that Base Commanding Officer regulates this policy, and our intention is to now seek local clarification.

**Threats:** This segment of the forum raised awareness of the emerging Super Powers to our immediate north, international use of sea lanes in the Indian and Pacific Ocean, as well as Border Security 21st century style. How fuel supply to the multitude forms of military equipment is sourced and how reserves are held for access. No doubt better informed people are aware that these are all very important issues to consider. We may see future defence budgets considering commitment by our Commonwealth Government to nuclear propulsion and energy. For example, the replacement of 6 Collins Class Submarines with the most up to date nuclear capacity and technology would provide Australia a shield of protection in parallel with our closest long term ally USA.

Improving technology to clearly detect and identify strategic surface installations does not preserve our defence capability, whereas below sea surface readiness remains relatively undetected outside the coastal submarine protection shield.

I wish to give consent to the Department of Defence to publish my submission in its entirety on the Defence website and publish whole or part of the submission in other Defence products, including the Defence White Paper, with attribution to the author.

We sincerely appreciate the opportunity to be part of the public consultation process. Thank you for your time in considering this information and the Burdekin Shire looks forward to working with the Federal Government to build a strong, capable and sustainable Australian Defence Force.

Bill Lowis
MAYOR