



# AIR FORCE TECHNICAL APPLICATIONS CENTER

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## Commander travels ‘Down Under’ to observe seismic work

*By Susan A. Romano, AFTAC Public Affairs*

**PATRICK AIR FORCE BASE, Fla.** – The commander of the Air Force Technical Applications Center and her command chief master sergeant visited the center’s most far-reaching detachment located in Australia’s Northern Territory Dec. 14-18.

Col. Jennifer P. Sovada and Chief Master Sgt. Neil Jones made the 10,200-mile journey to get an up-close view of the seismic work being conducted by AFTAC personnel at Detachment 421 in Alice Springs, a small outpost in the center of the Australian outback. The duo also wanted to see the steps the detachment has taken to improve the living conditions for the assigned Airmen.



AFTAC, the Department of Defense’s sole nuclear treaty monitoring center, has nine detachments, six operating locations and more than 60 unmanned equipment locations worldwide and on every continent that monitor and record natural and man-made seismic disturbances in support of AFTAC’s long range nuclear detection mission.

Det 421 is an integral part of the U.S. Atomic Energy Detection System and has a seismic array that includes 22 detectors buried 30 meters deep, covering an area of approximately 80 kilometers. The assigned Airmen operate and maintain the seismic equipment to ensure it delivers accurate geologic data to analysts here at the center.

Prior to the visit, AFTAC leadership encouraged the detachment commander, Maj. Jesse Foster, to figure out ways to improve the quality of life for his 5-person unit, using innovation as his driving force, while also seeking out better methods to do business.

Foster knew one of the biggest challenges his Airmen consistently faced was the accessibility to decent housing. So for the past several months, he worked with Air Force forces at the embassy to secure contracted housing for assigned detachment members.

“Over the course of various assignments, AFTAC Airmen have had to live in housing areas that weren’t always consistent with security standards recommended by the U.S. Embassy in Canberra for federal employees living overseas, especially in a remote area like Alice Springs,” said Foster. “So we engaged Col. Sovada and AFTAC’s chief of International Affairs, Robert McLaughlin, to hammer out an agreement with Air Force Materiel Command to alleviate the burden newly-assigned Airmen and their families face when they are searching for clean, safe and affordable housing areas in the Alice Springs community. Through this agreement, AFMC will now provide government-managed, fully-furnished housing for all eligible detachment personnel. It’s a huge victory for Det 421.”

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During their stay in Alice Springs, the visitors toured AFMC's contracted living quarters and neighborhoods, and were impressed with what they saw.

"Caring for our Air Force families is an extremely high priority for me," said Jones. "Providing dependents adequate places to live allows our Airmen to focus on the mission, and this partnership with AFMC does just that. It's definitely a win-win in every aspect."

Sovada and Jones also sat down with two members of the Alice Springs Police Force – Superintendent Peter Gordon (chief of police) and Sgt. Terry Simpson, Operation and Field Intelligence officer, to learn more about their operations.

The law enforcement officers had nothing but praise for the American Airmen living in their territory.

"Your troops and their families are an integral part of our community," said Gordon, "and they are very law-abiding citizens. Alice Springs is like any small town – we have our share of petty issues, but it's a safe community and a great little village to grow your family. Quite frankly, with our population of about 26,000, it's one of the safest places in all of Australia."

In addition to visiting detachment personnel and facilities, Sovada met with the U.S. Ambassador to Australia, the Honorable John Berry, who's served at the embassy in Canberra since September 2013. The meeting gave the commander the opportunity to thank the ambassador for his continued support of the work being accomplished at the detachment and discuss the ongoing networking between the diplomat and the detachment.

"The work your Airmen are conducting is so important to our government," Berry told Sovada, "and it's literally being conducted in the middle of nowhere, oftentimes in 100-degree conditions. Many people don't realize that being assigned to the Northern Territory is extremely austere and quite a hardship, and your folks are doing great work for both the U.S. and our allies here in Australia. You should be quite proud of them."

The Northern Territory is the country's least populated state, with an estimated population of about 230,000, covering 549,000 miles. And while the continent is geographically the same size as the continental United States, Australia has about the same number of people as the entire state of Texas.

The colonel also carved out time to visit the Australian War Memorial, similar to Arlington National Cemetery's Tomb of the Unknowns. The site combines a shrine, a world-class museum and an extensive archive that is open to the public and commemorates the sacrifices of the nation's fallen military members. Sovada and Foster were given the honor of laying a wreath at the memorial's Pool of Reflection for the museum's Last Post Ceremony to honor the 102,000 Australians who gave their lives in service to their country over the past century.

"I am extremely impressed with the level of professionalism and scope of work being undertaken at Det 421," said Sovada. "These skilled Airmen are performing a vital international mission and have built solid, long-lasting relationships with all our partners across Australia. As Ambassador Berry aptly said, I am very proud of their accomplishments."

