Prior to 1939 the Aborigines Department controlled all aborigines. The Chief Medical Officer was Chief Protector and was head of this Department. All police were protectors of aborigines. Their main duties comprised issuing of weekly rations — flour, tea and sugar, and yearly issue of a blanket. On the cattle stations, where most of the aborigines lived with their dependents and found employment, rations comprised beef, damper, tea, sugar and tobacco, and clothing to employees and dependents. No wages were paid, no medicines kept for their treatment and no housing provided.

The policy was one of negative protection.

In 1939 the department controlling the aborigines became the Native Affairs Branch of the N.T. Administration and a Director of Native Affairs was appointed, Mr. E.W.P. Chinnery — who had had experience in the Papua-New Guinea Administration. The policy changed from negative protection to the more positive welfare. The first field officers (Patrol Officers) were appointed — Mr. T.G. Strehlow for the Southern Division and myself for the Northern Division. Later Mr. W.E. Harney was appointed a “Temporary” Patrol Officer; he did not want to be a full officer of the department. The change from negative protection to positive welfare policy was the first major development for the aborigines in the N.T. The onset of the war prevented any further development of policy until 1946.

Army Control Camps

Following the bombing of Darwin (February 19th, 1942) and the exit of most of the white population to the South, employment opportunities for aborigines in the towns and settlements of the Darwin-Alice Springs road and environs, ceased and groups of aborigines collected at centres along the road. About 200 aborigines were at Katherine.

Mr. Harney who was in Katherine at the time conceived the idea of forming a work group: of the able bodied and suggested to the Army authorities in Katherine that they employ and ration them. The Army agreed.

Following the Darwin bombing there were fears of a Japanese invasion and the Defence authorities were concerned about the number of aborigines wandering about in the contact areas of the overland road who might be used by Japanese invaders. The Officer in Charge of Administration in Darwin — Brig. Dollery- was sympathetic to the aborigines and the Army had the resources in their staging and other camps on the North-South road. Thus developed the “Army Control Camps” within all the major army camps on the North-South road. An N.C.O. was put in charge of each “control camp” and an inspecting officer kept the camps up to standard.

Aborigines in the control camps were rationed, clothed and housed according to army standards; there were regular medical parades and hospitalization for sick cases. Able bodied natives were employed and paid a small wage. One to two thousand aborigines passed thro these control camps during the war.

The Army Control Camps was the second major development for the aborigines in the N.T.
Leper Patients, Channel Island.

Following the Darwin bombing (February 19th, 1942) the Leper Station on Channel Island, under the control of the Health Department, was considered unsafe. The superintendent and his wife were moved to Darwin and the stores opened to the leper patients. Under the leadership of an intelligent part-aborigine patient Gregory Howard they moved to the mainland.

In May/June I made a patrol of the mainland adjacent to Channel Island but was unable to find any ex-patients from the Leper Station. In August while in Katherine I received a letter from Gregory Howard indicating where some of the patients were. We located a group of seven patients in the Daly River area opposite Edith River. Three of their original number had died. We brought the seven aboriginal patients into the railway and the Health authorities sent the "Leper Van", kept only for transporting leper patients, to the nearest railway siding and they were returned to Darwin and handed over to the Naval doctor stationed there. He was showing an interest in the leper patients and was opening up Channel Island again. A few of the original patients had returned to the island.

Law & Order on the Reserves

Prior to the War aborigines on Reserves received little attention from the Law and Order authorities in Darwin. Only crimes involving the killing of whites were investigated by the police. Under the Native Affairs Branch a new policy developed. All killings by and of aborigines were investigated by a police officer accompanied by a N.A.B. patrol officer. The following incident (about 1949) illustrates this co-operation:

A measles epidemic in 1949 on Coburg Peninsula had resulted in the death of several aborigines and the aborigines in the area were worried. Aborigines can understand death by drowning or physical violence but not from internal sickness. Their explanation is "witchcraft" or black magic. In this case the aborigines believed that an evil magician had caused the deaths and he must be found and got rid of before he caused more deaths. Suspicion fell on an aborigine who had recently visited Darwin and was reported to have had contacts with "magic" in Darwin. Sentence was passed on this aborigine and it was decided he must be killed before he caused more deaths. A young native named Bobby was ordered by the "old men" to spear the suspect and a spear was given him by one of the old men. Bobby objected, although he was of a different tribe, he had no quarrel with him. The "old men" had ways of enforcing their will and Bobby was compelled to spear the suspected magician.

When the report of the killing reached Darwin a police officer was sent out to investigate and arrest the guilty man. I accompanied the police officer to look after the aborigines interests. When we reached the camp, all of the aborigines were in the camp and the police officer soon had the whole story of the killing. Bobby was in the camp. Normally the "killer" will flee for his life and to escape vengeance from relatives of the dead man. In this case however the killing was the result of a community verdict and Bobby had simply carried out the sentence of the community and had no say, at that time, of any reprisals. Bobby was brought to Darwin and in the Darwin Courts charged and found guilty of murder. A government solicitor, briefed by N.A.B., appeared for the defence. We were able to bring out the whole story before the judge and especially the evidence that Bobby had been residing in the camp after the killing, and the part the "old men" had played. Bobby received a light sentence.
The old man who gave Bobby the spear for the killing was charged as an accessory to the killing but was found not guilty by the Court.

Child Endowment Payments to Aborigines

Soon after the war legislation was passed by the Federal Government enabling the payment of Child Endowment to white families; aborigines were not included in the legislation.

Mr Chinnery, the Director of Native Affairs, went to Canberra and persuaded the Government to make the payments available to aborigines. Child Endowment was paid to Mission Stations on the basis of the average number of children on the station each week. Aborigines on Mission stations were considered to be living under settled conditions.

The Missions working in isolated areas received a small Government subsidy while they had heavy expenses for the purchase and transport of supplies, movement and maintenance of staff, etc. They were understaffed and lacking in facilities for development.

The payment of Child Endowment with increased subsidies gave them the finance they needed. The Missions were able to employ trained nurses and teachers, mother and child clinics were opened, the Health Department co-operated in supplying more medicines and nutritional supplies, and tillage implements were purchased for the growing of food crops. The Federal Government taking note of the large sums now being paid to the Missions for Child Endowment instructed that all of the Missions were to be inspected each year to ensure that the money was being spent in the interest of mothers and children. In the early 1950s regular inspections were made of all Mission Stations each year; inspections were made by hire plane. As District Superintendent this responsibility fell to me.

The Pastoral Industry Regulations 1949

The next major development of policy in the interest of the aborigines was the passing of the 1949 Aboriginal Pastoral Industry Regulations. The Regulations laid down employment conditions for aborigines employed on pastoral properties, a scale of rations, clothing and housing were laid down, a list of medicines to be kept on the station for the aboriginal employees and their dependents and a small wage was to be paid to all employed aborigines. Regular inspections were made of the pastoral properties by Native Affairs Branch Patrol Officers to implement the Regulations. The station owners resisted the regulations especially on the large cattle stations where managers were on the stations with head offices in Sydney or London. On the smaller stations where the owner lived on the property we had more co-operation. In the case of the large stations under managers, we wrote letters to their head office stating the aboriginal conditions on their stations and requesting their co-operation. Gradually conditions for the aborigines on the stations improved and there was a general improvement in rations, housing and working conditions.

Government Settlements

In the early 1950s more finance was made available to the Native Affairs which enabled us to open Government Settlements in areas of need not serviced by the Missions, who worked mainly on the Aboriginal Reserves.
An example of how the new Government Settlements were able to help the aborigines was in the extensive desert area north west of Alice Springs, occupied by the Wailbrri tribe. Aborigines were being drawn into and exploited by cattle stations to the north and south and to the east.

A settlement opened at Hooker Creek (1949/50) just south of Wave Hill to serve as a home for the Northern Wailbrri and to prevent their exploitation by the large cattle stations to the north. A Settlement was opened at Yuendumu, on Rock Hill Bore, in 1946 as a home for the Southern Wailbrri and as a buffer to the cattle stations to the south. To the east a settlement was opened at Warrabri in 1956/57, 100 miles south of Tennant Creek. We had difficulty in finding an adequate water supply for the settlement.

**Education**

Prior to 1950 education was only available to white children and children of part aborigines. Part aborigines had been given full citizenship rights under legislation passed in 1949 but there had been a school for them in Darwin and Alice Springs since the late 1930s. In 1950 and the following years the Commonwealth Office of Education opened special schools for aborigines. A special curriculum was developed which included apart from English and arithmetic – social studies, art, handicrafts and sport. Teachers were given special training and good salaries were offered to encourage enlistments. Schools were well equipped and opportunities were given for aboriginal children to travel to other parts of the Northern Territory and visit other schools and areas.

Aboriginal schools were opened in Darwin and Alice Springs and on all Government Settlements and later on the larger cattle stations who would co-operate. Officers of the C.O.E. inspected all schools on the Missions, supplied them with equipment and kept them up to standard. By the end of the 1950s education of a good standard was available to the great majority of aboriginal children in the Territory. Aboriginal assistants were trained and employed in all of these schools.

**Northern Territory Health Department**

After the war as the N.T. Administration began to function again, the N.T. Health Department were taking a greater interest in and accepting more responsibility for the health of the aborigines. Prior to the war Missions alone provided health services for the aborigines, during the war the Army Control Camps also provided these services.

In the early 1950s medical officers inspected all Missions and Government Settlements and also the larger cattle stations, free medical supplies and nutritional helps were supplied and the medical plane was available for transporting urgent cases to Darwin. There was significant development of Health Services for aborigines under Dr. Watsford as Director of Health. He appointed Dr. R. Brock to full time work for aborigines in the field. Dr. Watsford initiated schools for Hygiene and Camp sanitation for selected natives from the Missions. (1954-1955). The schools were held in Darwin and were under the control of the Chief Health Officer. The aboriginal trainees returned to their stations as Hygiene Officers and were paid a wage by the Health Dept. Hospitals on Missions and Settlements trained native assistants and used them in their services.
Government and Mission Conferences

Conferences between the Government and Missions were initiated in 1948 and 1954. Representatives of Mission staff met with Health Dept. and Administration officers and policies were explained and discussed and problems worked out. More finance was made available for development. Finance for capital works provided for schools, hospitals and power stations.

Native Affairs Branch becomes the Welfare Branch of the N.T. Administration.

In 1954 the Native Affairs Branch became the Welfare Branch of the N.T. Administration with a major development in policy. Mr H.C. Giese was appointed Director of Welfare. Under the new Welfare Ordinance aborigines obtained full citizenship rights, they received all social service payments available to the white population and employed aborigines received full award rates. In theory now all legislation applied equally to whites and aborigines.


Prior to the war the aborigines were considered a dying race. By the end of the 1950s with improved nutrition and health services on Missions and Government Settlements the aboriginal population was increasing.