



# My island home



**This month, in the lead up to NAIDOC Week, Sarah Oppenheim talks to EMQ Rescue Officer Patrick Martin about his love for the Torres Strait Islands and his vision for the future of Indigenous Australians.**

Some time in between trawling the waters of the Torres Strait for crayfish and taking groups of troubled teens on camping trips, Patrick Martin realised he wanted to be a helicopter rescue officer.

But it wasn't a decision that came quickly.

Patrick spent a number of years drifting between jobs and towns before a chance return to the island where he was born: beautiful and remote Thursday Island off the tip of Cape York, changed everything.

"I went home intending to visit for two weeks and I ended up staying for five years," he said.

"I felt like I had found my place again.

"I don't know what it is about the Straits. There's some sort of magnetism that just draws you there and keeps you," muses Patrick. "I think simplicity has a lot to do with it.

"Growing up down South, you're used to the speed of the place, but up in the Straits everything just comes to a grinding halt," he laughs.

"Things happen on 'island time', which sets the perfect pace to re-connect with your family and your people – and Islanders are really big on family."

While the waters of the Torres Strait are peppered with hundreds of tiny islands, Thursday Island remains the largest and most populated. Yet its entire perimeter can be walked in just over an hour.

"Torres Strait Islanders have a unique culture – a beautiful culture – and it's something that should never be hidden," he says. "Preserving Indigenous culture has to be up to the young kids. They need to take up a strong hold and walk forward."

But such determination and pride can take a while to nurture, as Patrick discovered in the hectic and enlightening years that followed him at the end of high school.

"I really wanted to get involved with kids and make a difference," he said.

"So one of the first jobs I got when I went back up to Thursday Island was

**"I felt like I had found my place again."**

working at the Youth Centre."

Although barely eighteen at the time, Patrick embraced the responsibility by taking groups of young teenagers – many of whom came from troubled backgrounds – out on camping trips to go fishing and diving. Working so closely with the youth of the Straits had an eye-opening effect on him.

"You always think you've had a 'tough life' but when you speak with some of the other kids out there, often you realise you haven't gone through anything," he admits.

It was the enormous potential of these young people that gave Patrick the most inspiration.

"There are so many talented kids up there on the Islands, and in Aboriginal communities all over Australia. Most of them just need that little bit of guidance, that extra help." >>





“I was always watching helicopters and thinking ‘Man, I’d love to do something like that,’ but I didn’t think anything of it. I was too busy looking at my feet when I should have been looking in the air!”



» But after giving all he could, Patrick remained undecided about his ultimate career. He swung from child care worker to builder’s labourer, from crayfisherman to teacher’s aide.

“I couldn’t sit still,” he said.

“I knew there was something out there for me, but I didn’t know what it was.

“And funnily enough, it was what was buzzing over the top of me that I was missing every time. I was always watching helicopters and thinking ‘Man, I’d love to do something like that,’ but I didn’t think anything of it. I was too busy looking at my feet when I should have been looking in the air!”

After volunteering to be part of a water winching exercise, Patrick was offered the chance to train with the former Torres Strait Rescue Helicopter as a Rescue Officer. Thoroughly dedicated to his new passion, he passed the rigorous physical and aptitude tests and eventually joined the Brisbane base of EMQ Rescue.

“I absolutely love this job,” he says with proud certainty. “We have the some of the best maintained helicopters in the country and the best part is that every day I come in to work not knowing what’s going to happen.

“I’m one of those lucky people who has always been in the right place at the right time. But there are so many Indigenous kids out there who don’t get those opportunities and probably have more to offer that what I do. They’re the ones who need a lucky break or someone to help unlock their hidden talents.

“I don’t want to hear that Indigenous kids are a step behind. Maybe we’re not all on an even playing field, but mate, you can certainly take steps to get up there. You just have to want it badly enough.”

July 2 to 9 is NAIDOC Week. Go to [www.naidoc.org.au](http://www.naidoc.org.au) to find out more. ■

