

AFP's INLAND 'NAVY'



On the shores of Lake Burley Griffin, with an enticing view of moored pleasure craft and the National Capital skyline, stands the water police station.

Outside appearances give a false impression of peace and quiet because inside, hard at work, is an elite group of men continually training to react spontaneously to emergency calls for assistance.

As 'platypus' was compiling notes for this article, such an emergency took place, when a near-exhausted sailsurfer was rescued from the choppy lake waters.

This branch of AFP is divided into two components — water police and divers. The latter, while not attached full-time to water police, can be released at short notice from various sections/branches to attend training and emergencies.

Fitness is an essential quality of water police and diving members. Every day commences the same way; first a 5 km run followed by a 400 m swim in the chilly lake waters.

Members not involved in cruising the 25 km of lake foreshores regularly throughout the day are within the precincts of the station for instruction on life saving techniques or maintaining and checking ancillary equipment.

Water police have seven inboard, outboard and jet-powered craft to maintain. Each member must be qualified in first-aid, life saving and have knowledge of ropes, knots and boatmanship, and the operation of oxygen resuscitation kits.

A large yachting fraternity use the lake so the water police are continually on the job — righting capsized crafts, towing becalmed craft back to moorings and checking the security of moored yachts at the various marinas.

During the summer months when families and groups converge on the lake the demand for water police assistance increases dramatically. The OIC of water police, Sergeant A. Holland said: 'People are very careless in appreciating the dangers of sailing and swimming in the lake'.

WATER — THE GRIM REAPER

Over the past ten years, water has been the second biggest reaper of lives through accidents in Australia following motor vehicle and related fatalities.

Within the A.C.T., to take one small area, statistics provided by the water police and the underwater recovery unit, reveal the grim realities associated with the pursuit of fun in the water.

Since 1970, water police have:

- Rescued 2469 persons from the water
- Recovered 28 bodies
- Assisted 5810 sailcraft in distress, value of craft given as \$1,000,00

As well, during the same period police divers have:

- Located and recovered 29 motor vehicles from the lake
- Recovered 789 items of property (mostly stolen) from the lake.

'The lake's waters can be extremely cold or sudden winds can develop. The coldness can cause swimmers to get into difficulties very quickly.'

'One cannot stress enough the need for parents to continually monitor the activity of their children. One minute they are frolicking in the water the next, panic, when they cannot be seen.'

To back up this sombre note of warning, Sergeant Holland produced file after file of water fatalities that have occurred in lakes and rivers of the A.C.T. over the past ten years.

Water police and divers are often called upon by the C.I.B. Branch in their inquiries to assist in locating stolen property such as safes, weapons or motor vehicles that are dumped in Lake Burley Griffin or in Lake Ginninderra, in Canberra's northern suburbs.

Sergeant Holland also pointed out that people who hired pedal-powered water craft and carelessly approached the memorial fountain did not appreciate that when in full operation two to three tonnes of water are emitted every few moments and craft can be swamped and the fully clothed occupants left struggling in the water.

Recently, eight members of the ten member diving squad underwent intensive training, in co-operation with the RAAF, in jumping with full kit from helicopters into the waters of Burrinjuck Dam.

As a prelude to this exercise, the members attended the Canberra Olympic Pool where they practised jumping off the 10 metre tower to test the effects of having air tanks strapped to their backs. It is believed that this was a first in Australia with divers in full kit jumping from such heights, in particular from helicopters.

The jumps provided divers with the opportunity to perfect new methods of water entry: by slightly angling the feet (with flippers) penetration did not jar the legs and helped each diver to maintain a hold of his face mask and air tank to prevent them being ripped off.

continued next page

The speed with which a diver can be put into action at the site of an emergency is greatly increased by the use of helicopters. An exercise of a diver drop-and-pick-up using a helicopter to recover a 'victim' was all completed within one and a half minutes.

As in the past, when the need arises, the RAAF co-operated fully with police in providing helicopters for search-and-rescue operations. Flight Lieutenant Mike Hudson of RAAF Fairbairn and the crews of the three helicopters used in the diver-training exercise, can feel justly proud of the service they provided.

The diving squad undertakes many dangerous and hazardous tasks. These include clearing storm water sumps of objects blatantly discarded by the public, or making safe popular swimming resorts on the Murrumbidgee River by clearing bottles, cans, wire and junk indiscriminately thrown into local streams.

Several divers have suffered ill-effects and infection following dives to clear blocked storm water outlets.

Police divers utilise the facilities of the following organisations to accomplish the high degree of professionalism required of them — Royal Australian Navy, NSW Police Force, St John Ambulance Association, Australian Underwater Federation, Federation of Australian Underwater Instructors, Royal Life Saving Society of Australia, Australian National University, Royal Prince Henry Hospital, Sydney, University of NSW and the Water Safety Council of NSW.

Last year the squad was presented with a Community Service Award by the Royal Life Saving Society for their service to the community of the A.C.T. It is the first time this award has been presented to a group in Australia.

The high standard achieved by the squad has an additional significance — much of their training is done by members in their own time.

