

THE GROWTH OF POLICING IN THE A.C.T.



*By Assistant Commissioner
Val McConaghy,
A.C.T. Command*

IN 1949, Canberra was home for 21,386 people. Its police force numbered less than 60, with two patrol cars and two motorcycles to help provide the police services the steadily-growing community expected.

They were times of big changes, both in way of life and thinking for the post-war community.

Canberra's only police station in that year — my first with the A.C.T. Police — shared timber buildings on a block of land bounded by Alinga Street, Rudd Street and Northbourne Avenue, with the Court House, the Commonwealth Census Office and a public weighbridge.

It was perhaps symbolic in those days of new-found freedom that the scales of justice and the measure of the community's everyday living needs should dwell side-by-side.

The city's chief policeman was known as the "Chief Officer"; a post held at the time by Mr Robert Reid. There were no mobile patrols as we know them, except for night shifts. Foot and bicycle patrols were the order of the day and the beats were Civic, Kingston and Manuka. The beat constable boarded the bus at Civic for Kingston and Manuka and returned the same way.

As a former divisional motorcyclist at Bondi, I joined four other members in initiating the A.C.T.'s first solo motorcycles — Triumph Thunderbirds — in 1950.

It was in the sixties that the local police began to change from a town to a city police force, reflecting the sudden growth and sophistication of the capital city. The Chief Officer had become 'Commissioner' — first Mr Ted Richards then Mr Len Powley.

The old buildings housing the A.C.T. Police were replaced by a City Station and A.C.T. Region Headquarters a few hundred yards away in London Circuit.

In 1966, Commissioner Roy Wilson was appointed to lead the Force and he immediately began a program of education and modern police methodology. Examinations were re-introduced and the principles of management were studied at the Technical College where members were required to gain a management certificate for promotion to the rank of Sergeant.

Pressure was placed on members to perform for promotion or miss out. The examination to Inspector was stringent. A significant number of men left the Force.

At the same time, the community was undergoing changes. It was the time of large demonstrations — the anti-Vietnam, anti-Springbok, and anti-anything demonstrations were common in Canberra, as elsewhere. As a consequence, police methods and tactics changed.

The Police Emergency Squad (now called Special Operations Team) was formed and its first instructor was Sergeant (now Deputy Commissioner) Barney Ross, of the New South Wales Police. The principles set down for use of the Squad stand today.

Management changes in the Force reflected Mr Wilson's philosophy that a police force can operate effectively only:

- as an integral part of the community; and
- when it is well-trained and officered to ensure all ranks are accountable, responsible and adequately supervised.

There was a greater emphasis on training and an increase in supervisory ranks. Previously, recruit training took place with either the Victoria or the New South Wales Police Forces. Mr Wilson instituted local recruit training at Woden Police Station, and, subsequently, in-service training such as that for detectives. In short, the A.C.T. Police Force was standing on its own feet.

Involvement in community matters, such as the Boys Club, and school lecturing grew. It was the beginning of the popular 'Police 7' television program.

The demonstrations continued. A 'Day of Rage' was perpetrated by some 7,000 university students who camped on the showground and rampaged through Canberra. There were over 300 arrests that day, culminating in students attempting to lay siege to the City Station. They were dissuaded by a baton charge from within.

It was obvious and heartening that the police received tremendous community backing at those times, and, on reflection, the 'Wilson method' was working.

A further change at that time was the growth and importance of the Traffic Branch which was keenly fostered by Commissioner Wilson. It saw motorcycle and high speed driving reach new heights of excellence under the expert tuition of Sergeant Jack Morris, and eventually the building of the Police Driver Training Establishment at Sutton Road. The Police Service Centre at Weston also came on line.

Commissioner Reg Kennedy succeeded Roy Wilson and led the Force on the same concepts. There was still that great community atmosphere; I recall Mr Kennedy proudly leading a large group of marching police around London Circuit preceded by police motorcycles and the New South Wales Police Band on Canberra Day in 1977.

Two years later came the formation of the Australian Federal Police and that associated amalgamation under the guidance of Commissioner Sir Colin Woods. The appointment of Major-General Ron Grey as Commissioner brought a new approach to the war against crime. The subsequent growth of the AFP did not significantly affect the A.C.T. policing. There was for many, however, a great opportunity for promotion into the national policing areas and to positions overseas.

The AFP brought changes not only in the areas of employment for members, but in the association with the former Federal Narcotics Bureau and Commonwealth Police members who brought additional skills to the Force.

Suddenly, Australia, and certainly the A.C.T., was plagued by the importation of drugs, by unemployment and by an escalation in crime — particularly break and enter and stealing offences practised by so many people dependent on their drug habit.

As a consequence of this new environment, we have seen the growth of the local drug squad, whose members make daily arrests, and the formation of Neighbourhood Watch in an effort to stem the rising crime rate.

It is fortunate that we have gained the support of the public in Canberra through Neighbourhood Watch. Perhaps it has been obtained because of those early seeds of community policing being sown by men like Robert Reid, Len Powley, Ted Richards, Roy Wilson and Reg Kennedy.