

THE young Aboriginal man with a red headband walked along the line of police officers standing at the first row of steps outside Parliament House and within inches of each officer's face shouted: "Land rights now."

Not one officer flinched and all appeared not to have noticed. I'm sure they did notice and most would have liked to have done something about it.

The incidents impressed on me that the A.C.T. has a skilled and disciplined police force at hand.

It is needed at times and is one aspect of the difficult role that all police have to face. There are times when an officer just has to wear it and there is apparently no recourse.

There also have been times when this disciplined force has cracked and that, too, is reality. I am not needed to tell police officers that they are human and have among their ranks some people who should have chosen another career.

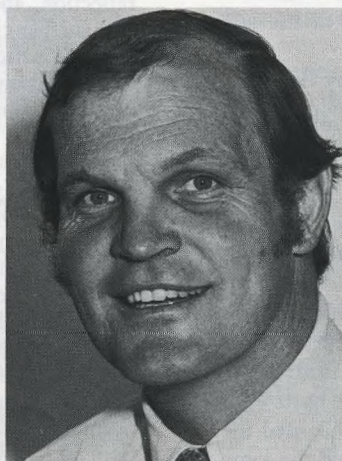
However, having covered nearly every major incident involving the Police in the A.C.T. over the past four years, I believe the people of the A.C.T. have much to be thankful for.

In spite of some growing pains with the creation of the Australian Federal Police in October 1979 with the amalgamation of the former A.C.T. Police, the Commonwealth Police and the Narcotics Bureau, the majority of officers serving the A.C.T. community have shown they are the right people for the job.

During what has been a difficult period of growth within the AFP, two things have happened to cause an enormous strain.

Firstly, Australia began to realise how much organised crime had grown in fraud, tax evasion, bottom-of-the-harbour schemes and illegal drug trafficking so that police resources were almost swamped.

- **PHILIP CASTLE** was for four years police-crime reporter with the *Canberra Times* and has written most of the major police stories in the A.C.T. and some of the national ones involving the AFP. Here he talks about the AFP and the Community as he found it.



Secondly, and almost unrelated, in late 1983 and into 1984, the A.C.T. saw a sudden crime wave which startled even crime-conditioned police officers.

In raw statistical terms, the A.C.T. had enjoyed, until then, a period of peace which in hindsight was a bit difficult to believe could last. In the three years before 1983, there had been one recorded murder. In the next 18 months, there were nine, including what probably is the A.C.T.'s worst murder in which six people died.

There was a series of rapes, serious assaults and the torture and near-murder of two young students at the Australian National University ... and the list grew almost weekly.

There was no ready explanation for the run of serious crimes. As the officer in charge of the A.C.T. Assistant Commis-

sioner Val McConaghy summed up: With a population of then over 230,000, the A.C.T. had come of age.

While 1984 was a bad year, the serious crime rate increased in the A.C.T. and the only healthy sign has been that Neighbourhood Watch has slowed the alarming rate of housebreaks.

This meant that Canberra's police were getting some pretty tough introductions to serious crimes. Canberra was losing its small-town image and with drug dealing reaching alarming proportions in the A.C.T. the local challenge combined with the national demands had caused stress on the growth of the AFP.

How did this affect A.C.T. policing? Thankfully, policing did cope. The reality, too, is that Governments continue to see the A.C.T. as somewhat pampered and police resources have been quite deliberately directed to national policing.

The present Commissioner, Major-General Ronald Grey has said that the policing of the A.C.T. has been maintained but it has had to become a fifth priority. The Special Minister for State responsible for the AFP, Mr Mick Young, has said the same. In all of this, the policing of the A.C.T. has continued, with some criticisms, but by and large, it has met the immediate demands.

From my viewpoint, the bumps and grinds of daily dealings have been mostly influenced by the build-up of mutual respect. The police-media relationship will always be slightly edgy and police are naturally suspicious of reporters. Both have their jobs to do and sometimes their aims will differ.

For those with experience on both sides, the task of meeting the Commissioner's requirements and those of the Editor can be satisfied. It is still true to say that integrity is the key and is an absolute.

The eyes and ears of the police are the community and through them most of its information is obtained. The police are primarily understood by the public by how they are reported in the media and that has not been fully understood by both sides.

Perhaps in the balance there is more in the relationship for the media — that is in good stories — than for the police. But the one-in-five occasions when the police need the media, such as in the identification of people, it is important that the trust is there.

Having stood for hours out in the cold at murder scenes or accidents, seen children extracted from wrecked cars or bodies carried away, felt the heat of a close bushfire, hung around The Cross with the dog squad, shared chips, hamburgers, jokes or personal problems, seen police punched and punch, under stress and relaxing socially, I, unlike the Aboriginal demonstrator at Parliament House, have realised two things: Police officers are human and have feelings; and secondly, like most of us, just occasionally like to be thanked. Thanks!