

L.A. POST FOR KAREN BECK

by Peter Kowalick

WHEN Senior Sergeant Karen Beck flew into Los Angeles in January to take up the post as Overseas Liaison Officer there, it was an event of double importance to her. It was the biggest step she had yet taken in her police career, and it marked the appointment of the first female AFP officer to an overseas liaison post.

Karen began her two-year posting on 24 January. I talked to her just before she left Canberra about the excitement of going to a new job and a different lifestyle.

She had no misconceptions about the task ahead.

"Having been born in Bowral, NSW, where my father was a school teacher and living 25 years in Canberra, I know it will be different," she said. "But I'm really looking forward to it."

Karen joined the police ranks in the ACT in 1973. It was not her first choice. After leaving school, she worked for a time with a finance company but found it didn't suit her.

"I had no special qualifications or knowledge for police work but I did feel it was perhaps the best job a female could ever do," she said. "It was work that was so completely different from anything else I could think of. "It was a decision which caused shock and horror in the family home for a time. But my parents came to terms very quickly with the idea when they realised I was not going out into the street to get myself killed. Now I'm number one person, although with my three brothers living in New Guinea and now me going to the United States, there will be only my parents to uphold the traditions of the family," she said. Karen took with her a lot of experience gained the hard way when she left for the U.S.

"I've been around a bit," she said. "Seven years in the Drug Squad, with periods in Uniform and General Duties, Drug Operations, Internal Investigations Division and as an instructor in Recruit Training have given me the opportunity to build a fairly extensive background in police work. In 1983 I worked in the Medifraud Task Force and, while stationed in Headquarters, spent considerable time on inquiries in Brisbane, Sydney, Wollongong and Melbourne."

It was a logical conclusion that having worked hard to reach the rank of Senior Sergeant she should look around for further experience. "I decided to put in for the Los Angeles post because it was the only one available at the time at my rank level," she said. Other posts interested her but she felt that there was a need for female officers to be realistic about the countries in which they should seek postings.



"Asian countries are hardly suitable for a female police officer to work in given their widely different cultural approach to women in the workforce," she said. "It's a fact of life and it makes common sense that a female officer just cannot contribute fully to the image of the AFP is she can't carry out her job to the best of her ability. "It would be a waste of manpower if a female officer called on to relieve her senior officer is not able to deal with all the local law enforcement people as required," she added.

But generally, Karen believes overseas postings should be available to any female officer who has the qualifications and the rank required, particularly where English-speaking countries are concerned.

Karen expects to become deeply involved in the general liaison work she is being called on to do in Los Angeles.

"I would hope to play my part in maintaining the good liaison that has already been set up at the post," she said. This involves working with a wide range of U.S. law enforcement agencies.

"It has a lot to do with personal contact and it is this aspect of the work which excites me considerably. My experience with Americans during two holiday visits has shown they are very pleasant and

very helpful. Their interest in Australia has grown enormously in recent years."

But probably Karen's biggest reservation over her next two years involves the task of getting used to the need for personal security.

"In Canberra, it's still possible to sleep with windows open and to go for a quiet stroll in the evening," she said. "That's not possible in Los Angeles." Karen is working with Chief Inspector Dick Downing, who took up the post last year. She replaced Senior Sergeant Gary Wills, now in Sydney.

How will she make out as the first female AFP officer to take up an overseas posting?

"I'm very excited and enthusiastic," she said. Then, hesitantly: "I hope I don't mess it up!"

But her enthusiasm is obviously catching. The word spread around early in Los Angeles that she was coming.

"A number of female police officers in the city have already rung the post and asked: 'When can we meet her?'," Karen said.

With such a welcome on arrival, what more is needed to boost an officer's confidence?