

V.I.P. Protection

The Federal Government's decision late last year that the AFP should provide a national witness protection service on a user-pays basis, officially confirmed the AFP's standing in this field of operations.

The protection role, covering both VIP and witness subjects, has been with the AFP since its inception.

The role involves members of the Protection Division in looking after, on the one hand, VIPs who generally attract public attention, and, on the other, witnesses who could be the target of the criminal element.

Basic approaches are the same, but methods adopted have changed dramatically with the growth of terrorism and organised crime.

Members of the Witness Protection Branch spend years learning the skills of keeping their subjects under secure cover while VIP Protection Branch members perfect the ability to provide protection without restricting the public access to their charges.

Under the new arrangements, Witness Protection members look after witnesses who could be involved in any number of Federal, State, NCA or Joint Task Force investigations and the volume of work is growing.

Special qualities

"Generally, we tend to get everyone's most difficult 'children'," Detective Superintendent Peter Scott, head of the Branch for the past four years, says.

"Witness protectors are called on to make a great many unusual decisions during days and weeks locked up in 'safe house' accommodation with their subjects," he said. "They need to possess special qualities, to be very flexible and to be prepared for such problems as serious illnesses, pregnancy and even marriage involving their clients."

In one case, AFP members were involved with one witness continually for



The Papal tour of November 1986. The visit by Pope John Paul II to Australia involved one of the tightest security operations seen in this country. Members of the AFP VIP Protection Branch and teams of police from each of the States maintained a 24-hour operation.

four years, working two shifts a day.

"Our aim is to provide a reliable service and give our witnesses a good chance of survival and the opportunity for re-entry into the community," he said.

Difficulties arise in the fact that there is no legislation to support the protectors. There are administrative arrangements with other departments but the AFP has to rely on co-operation in such areas as providing new identities for clients and help in re-establishing in new locations.

Harm's way

The protection of VIPs also has become a more specialised operation in the past ten years. The growth of global terrorism has caused Australia to reassess the security risks posed by a number of overseas groups.

Former head of VIP Protection for four years, Detective Superintendent John Cooper, has very strong views on the role.

"We have to treat overseas VIPs as if they were in their own countries, because that is where the perceived threat usually originates," he said.

"The VIP Protection Squad members have to be non-indoctrinated, non-typical police officers. They need to be very much the hit-and-run type."

This, too, is in contradiction to the training of conventional police officers who are encouraged to perfect the 'hands on collar' attitude and grab the offender straight away.

"The protection squad member, on

the other hand, must concentrate on getting his VIP out of harm's way and leave the offender to other AFP or State police members," he said.

Royal tour

Within Australia, special attention is given to full-time protection of the Prime Minister, the Governor-General and Israeli and Turkish ambassadors.

Special conditions apply with such notable visits as those of heads of state, royal tours and papal visits. In these cases, special attention must be paid to both protection and protocol.

During the visit of the Pope in November 1986, a unique arrangement between AFP and State Police forces was brought into operation to ensure the safety of the Papal visitor. For the first time, a highly-trained composite unit took over close protection from the moment the Pope stepped onto Australian soil.

The unit comprised three members from each of the AFP VIP Protection Branch and the other Territory and State Police forces — a total of 24, all trained in VIP protection work.

At any particular moment, the Pope was under the close protection of 12 men, while a second team of 12 was involved in a leapfrog operation, moving from the previous location to the next. State police were responsible for overall safety, crowd control, general security and traffic arrangements in their own Territory or State.

The system worked well and has become a pattern for future such tours. ■