

25th Anniversary — 1st Australian Contingent

AFP's PEACE MEN

On a hot Mediterranean morning in 1964, 40 Australian police officers stepped onto the island of Cyprus in a history-making event which became part of one of the most successful United Nations operations yet.

They were the First Australian Police Contingent of the United Nations Peace-Keeping Force in Cyprus. Their task was to help keep the peace between the island's two conflicting peoples — the Greek and the Turkish Cypriots. Their dedication, and that of subsequent contingent members, has made the operation a milestone in Australian and international policing history.

Thursday, 25 May 1989 marks the 25th Anniversary of their arrival on Cyprus.

WHEN Sergeant Laurie Connolly and Senior Constable John Vandenberg, of the Australian Commonwealth Police, landed at Nicosia Airport in mid-May, 1964, they had no idea just what new ground they would be breaking in the name of Australian policing.

They were the advance party for the first Australian contingent to the United Nations Civilian Police (UNCIVPOL) in Cyprus.

"It was like walking into a military zone," said Laurie Connolly last week, recalling the day clearly. "We landed almost unannounced and spent the first couple of hours finding out where we were supposed to be.

"Our nearest official Australian contact was the Charges d'Affaires at our Athens Embassy. But we finally got settled into temporary lodgings to begin our main task of making contact with other police groups."

Today, the 20 members of the 29th Contingent are carrying on the work that began with that first Contingent; work which over the years has earned the Australians the reputation of being the most popular and effective group of United Nations representatives involved in the Cyprus peace-keeping operation.

"The members of the first contingent landed at Cyprus at 6.50 am on 25 May," Laurie said. "They walked off the plane and were taken to their initial accommodation to begin what was to become a new experience for most of them.

"We were well-respected from the start," he said. "The respect of the Turks for Australians goes back to the First World War, when the 'Diggers' and Turkish troops met in the bitter Gallipoli landing. The respect which grew out of that battle remains to this day.



The Prime Minister, Mr Hawke, is introduced to members of the 26th Contingent by Commander Alan Bird, during a visit to Cyprus in January 1987. From left, are: Sergeants Ken Baker and Peter DeBritte, Superintendent Bill Kirk and Sergeant John Davies.

"The Greeks felt an affinity to us because so many Greek relatives have migrated to Australia and settled happily," he added.

"It made our job so much easier, although there were still some very tense times.

"We mainly supported the Irish Army contingent and got along famously with them. Our main duty was to inquire into and try to settle disputes between the two sides. We had no power of arrest. We always found we were able to negotiate a solution to all disputes we came across."

Commander Bob "Doc" Gillespie, of AFP Brisbane, was one of those who made up the first contingent.

"As the plane flew over Cyprus, I remembered thinking it was an island in the middle of the ocean," he said. "Summer was coming on and it was all very dry.

"For a time it was a live and learn experience for us. We were equipped with a fleet of old British Mark 1 LandRovers which had been mothballed since Libya had gained its independence."

In the early 1960s, few Australians knew Cyprus as anything more than an island that offered visitors a taste of simple Mediterranean culture and holiday living.

But Christmas, 1963, saw the island's population on the brink of war; a war over culture and territory.

It was the time of ENOSIS, when Greek Cypriots who comprised just over three-quarters of the island's population sought union with Greece, a move resisted by the Turkish Cypriots who made up just under a fifth of the total population.

The Cyprus Government appealed to the UN for assistance and in March 1964 the UN Force in Cyprus

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(UNFICYP) began military operations to dampen down the fighting between Greeks and Turks.

The two communities were segregated along specified lines, but it was quickly realised that military components weren't equipped for the job of liaising with the communities, keeping the peace between Cyprus and Turkish Police Forces, and investigating deaths and crime. A United Nations police presence was considered to be the best solution.

UNCIVPOL was the result of an appeal for UN member countries to provide civilian police to carry out a purely liaison and observer role in the tense situation.

The Australian Government decided to make 40 police available. In the interests of sharing the commitment and avoiding depletion of the small Commonwealth Police Force, the States were approached to contribute.

New South Wales and Victoria each agreed to supply 10 members, including an officer, South Australia five, including an officer, the Commonwealth three, including an officer, Queensland five, Western Australia three, Tasmania two, and the A.C.T. and Northern Territory each one. Each member was to be appointed Special Constable under the Commonwealth Police Act.

The urgency of the operation was indicated by the fact that selections were made, passports issued and health formalities completed within four weeks. Members received instruction in the social and cultural problems which they were likely to encounter and were briefed on their UN role. At Canberra's Duntroon Military College they were shown how to handle booby traps and explosives, and trained in pistol shooting and driving four-wheel drive vehicles.

Dressed in blue serge uniforms carrying Commonwealth Police flashes, the group, led by Inspector Jim Hamilton, of the Commonwealth Police, supported by Inspector Frank Holland, of the Victoria Police, flew out of Australia aboard the first Qantas 707 flight to land on Cyprus.

The NSW members were headed by Inspector Bill Hansen, and the South Australians by Inspector Harry Breuer.

They arrived at Nicosia, closely followed by a Danish contingent, amid an atmosphere of uncertainty and



Sergeants Terry Parker and Gary Wood on a routine patrol in the Greek Sector.

tension; finding their 'home' for the next 12 months was no small feat. An Austrian contingent had already been in operation since 14 April, with a Swedish team arriving on 5 May. New Zealand's contribution to the force had landed five days before.

The Australian UNCIVPOL had been allocated the Famagusta and Larnaca Districts as its area of responsibility, almost one-third of the island in all. One compensation was that the area contained some of the island's most modern hotels, and these provided very agreeable accommodation for members.

Versatility

As Inspector Hamilton later wrote: "Upon the arrival of UN civilian police there was no precedent and a quick degree of adaptability was necessary. The Australian Police moved into this situation very well and quickly showed their versatility in carrying out investigations."

In the first six months of duty, UNCIVPOL throughout Cyprus conducted 44 major inquiries into incidents, including 20 cases of homicide and attempted homicide. There were 17 cases of shooting from passing vehicles.

"... As police officers we have no powers of authority similar to that exercised at home," Jim Hamilton wrote. "We merely act as observers,

investigators and reporters and it is necessary to carry out these functions within the limits of diplomacy and tact

At first, UNCIVPOL insisted that all members should be armed on duty. The Australian contingent recognised early that their .38 calibre revolvers were of little help in their work and preferred not to wear them.

"We wore arms for the first few weeks and then decided to give them away," Doc Gillespie said. "After all, the combatants were wandering around with submachine guns. We felt outgunned by everyone else."

Their stand was justified by a later official decision to delegate firearms policy to contingent commanders.

As Jim Hamilton wrote: "We have relaxed the original instruction for the compulsory carriage of weapons while on duty. This is left to the individual and to the Commander. The relaxation is not practised by other police elements to the same extent as the Australians, but no Australian Policeman has been confronted with a situation requiring the use of his personal arms to overcome. We feel in many instances that unarmed policemen travelling in distinguishable vehicles (painted white with UN markings) known to opposing factions, tend to relax tension in villages and areas more so than having armed military personnel patrol with a continued show of force."

Tension was growing as the possibility of an invasion of the island by

both Greek and Turkish forces loomed and the work of the mediators became difficult.

Laurie Connolly's diary of January 1965 lists some typical incidents:

"Turks let flocks graze in fields."
"Greeks prevented from cultivating fields near Turkish fortifications."
"Greeks had shot up a Turkish village."

"Both Turkish and Greek Cypriots were very poor and very hard-working," Laurie said. "There were no problems from either side with any of the UN forces, although a British Major and his driver disappeared and no trace of them or their vehicle was ever found. An extremist group was suspected."

New Issue

The weather, too, warmed up as the members began to feel the effects of the July and August heat — the island's hottest months.

"Our navy-blue serge trousers and black boots were totally unsuited to the hot, dusty terrain," said Doc Gillespie. "We waited about four months before being issued with grey slacks and desert boots. We mostly went about in shorts until then."

Doc was involved in the first UN police action against a Cypriot for an offence committed against a person from the opposing race on the island. It occurred soon after arrival when he was attached to the Larnaca District.

"On 3 July, with Detective Senior Constable Ernie White, of Victoria Police, I was assigned to investigate the case of a missing Turkish Cypriot shepherd and his 60 sheep," Doc said. "Investigations revealed that he had been shot by Greek Cypriots near the village of Livadhea. His body was located in a well, and an autopsy revealed that he had been shot twice through the head."

"Further inquiries revealed that the two offenders were Greek Cypriots."

"As UN personnel had no power of arrest, the result of my investigations was forwarded to the Cyprus Police and both offenders were arrested on warrant on 5 July, two days after the investigation began," Doc said.

"The successful prosecution was opportune. It came at a time when public opinion demanded that every effort be made to track down any

criminals and bring them to justice."

But in spite of the early tension, Cyprus settled down to the routine of UN civilian police helping citizens of both communities overcome the problems of 'no-go' zones, restricted activity and 'farming only' areas.

In 1975, the 12th Contingent numbers were reduced to 16. It was the last time police from the States were involved in the peace-keeping role. The following year the Contingent again consisted of 16 members, but this time from the Commonwealth Police only.

With the formation of the AFP in 1979, the tradition continued with its officers serving in Cyprus.

The change set the pattern for the next few years, although numbers varied from 20 to 22.

Superintendent Dick Allatson, whose introduction to Cyprus came with the British Army forces during the 1957-59 EOKA period, has had three terms as Commander AUST-CIVPOL. He believes Australia's

contribution in the provision of some 30 contingents involving service by close to 700 police officers is a remarkable achievement.

"I believe that most members who served in Cyprus learned a lot about policing, living in and dealing with communities who have experienced upheavals generally beyond an Australian's recognition or understanding," he said. "If nothing else it taught them to have compassion for people who, far worse off than many of us have ever been or are ever likely to be, can continue with life in a cheerful, uncomplaining manner."

"In the early years, members of AUSTCIVPOL worked in an atmosphere of open hostility between ethnic groups and attended many incidents of a violent nature. On many occasions they too met with hostility and sometimes physical assault and verbal abuse. It is a tribute to their professionalism, tact and discretion that such incidents did not escalate and were in most cases quickly defused and settled amicably," he said.



HIGH COMMISSION OF THE REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS
CANBERRA

No. 673

Dear Sir

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the participation of Australian police in the United Nations Civilian Police in Cyprus, it gives me great pleasure, and it is indeed an honour to address my present letter to you. A letter of sincere thanks and deep appreciation for the important and vital work performed by the Australian police contingent in Cyprus during the last 25 years.

The conscientious and highly effective manner with which all Australians performed their duties in Cyprus has not only been a positive contribution to the U.N. effort in Cyprus but has also been an additional strong link in the traditionally friendly relations between Cyprus and Australia. I can without any reservation say that Australia can feel proud of all its officers that have served in Cyprus.

All Cypriots know and deeply appreciate the work of the Australian contingent in Cyprus. How could one ever forget, just to mention one case, the courageous Australian officer who with complete disregard for his personal safety walked through a minefield to bring back to safety an injured farmer who had set of a mine with his tractor. Such instances of courage abound in the 25 year old history of the Australian police contingent in Cyprus. It would in fact require a very large book just to be able to enumerate them.

In concluding I would like once again to extend our most heartfelt thanks and appreciation for your contribution to Cyprus and its people and to wish you and your families every personal and professional success and happiness.

Yours sincerely

Petros EPCYBIOTIS
Acting High Commissioner

11 May 1989